
Comparison Of The Great Gatsby And Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf

In both *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and *The Great Gatsby* the authors, Edward Albee and F. Scott Fitzgerald (respectively) explore the concept of disillusionment. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is set in 1962, in the midst of the Cold War, the tensions affect George and Martha's personal battles, they create a mutually thought-out illusion to cope with George's failing career and Martha's infertility. In *The Great Gatsby*, America is recovering from The Great War; hedonism and mass-consumerism were common escapist activities as people tried to prove their presence in a disillusioned commodity culture. Disillusionment leads to shattered illusions and death in both texts, George recognises Martha is going to destroy her mind if she continues living their illusion, despite the cruelty of killing their fabrication, his interest truly lies in saving what remains of their marriage. Gatsby is unable to control the end of his illusion, Daisy steals his dreams of their life together and his plans to simulate their past by retreating to the security that Tom provides. It is through the presentation of the characters who live without illusions that the authors express their personal views. Honey and Nick live amid other people's illusions yet they manage to hold on to reality, proving that despite the challenges, facing-up to the truth has less devastating consequences.

Both *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Great Gatsby* portrays post-war disillusionment, revealing how American society created illusions to cope with the aftermath of conflict-related trauma. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is set in 1962, an age that gave rise to the pervading feeling of existential angst. The global political situation provides a backdrop of uncertainty and fear. The Second World War had ended only 17 years earlier in 1945; America and The Soviet Union were in the midst of the Cold War where relations were strained and the threat of nuclear war loomed large. This culminated with The Cuban Missile Crisis towards the end of 1962, a tense political stand-off between America and The Soviet Union, who had installed nuclear missiles on the island of Cuba, 90 miles from the US mainland. The world was unstable and its future hung in the balance. Consequently, our two protagonists, George and Martha, turn to illusions and self-deception to maintain their existence. The Cold War is directly referenced when George questions if Martha is willing to escalate their feud to "Total War?", and all that that would imply, she accepts the challenge by responding with "Total.". Previously, George and Martha had an unspoken agreement that their illusion was off-limits and protected from their fighting. However, George takes their battle one step further, threatening to shatter the illusion leaving the couple with nothing to bargain with, as Walter A. Davis observes "To wage total war, a couple must come to the point where they are willing to go after the Other's unconscious." This makes them mutually vulnerable and dependant, George, and Martha are the superpowers, saving themselves only through the threat of mutually assured destruction. This declaration comes just before Act 3, The Exorcism - meaning to rid oneself of an evil spirit, this foreshadows George's decision to end Martha's reliance on their illusion. For an educated 1960's audience, the play would have conjured the ever-present fear of nuclear annihilation.

In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald presents The Roaring Twenties as an era of lost moral values and rebellion, the result of America's wide-spread sentiment of disillusionment following The First World War. Gertrude Stein's *The Lost Generation* were world-weary and yearned for their idealistic past. Americans had marched into war with inspired patriotism, but the individual

effort was revealed as futile as they witnessed the death of around 4,000,000 fellow soldiers. The disillusionment that stemmed from The Great War provided the catalyst for modernist literature. War destroyed the illusion that living righteously led to a civilised world. Modernist authors felt betrayed by institutions that they previously had faith in and, without these as guidance for the meaning of life people turned to themselves for answers, encouraging illusions as a coping mechanism. Gatsby's ornate parties were huge displays of riches and grandeur, masking the moral degeneration and post-war feeling of aimlessness. "In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars." Fitzgerald uses the rule of three to create rhythm and reflect excessive luxury. Blue is associated with Gatsby, representing deeply romantic dreams of unreality, tinged with sadness. People are drawn to Gatsby like moths to bright light, a trivial desire to be amongst extravagance and wealth in an attempt to seek happiness in this shared illusion. The simile implies society had no future aspirations, as with George and Martha. "I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others - poor young clerks who loitered in front of windows waiting until it was time for a solitary restaurant dinner...wasting the most poignant moments of night and life." Nick's narration is influenced by war as he is conscious of his mortality, he projects his feelings of being on the outside onto those around him, with an element of self-dramatisation. He perceives New York as a magnification of Gatsby's parties, the emotions of isolation and loneliness are present but hidden beneath the illusion of their lifestyle. Nick feels lonely in the high society of East Egg because the characters are superficial and incapable of forming meaningful relationships because they have lost themselves. Quotes

Both texts depict how an individual can be almost unknowingly controlled and obsessed with their life of illusion, that they can't separate themselves from it. George and Martha haven't faced reality in 20 years, as their imaginary son reaches adulthood George acknowledges the enormity of their illusion and that the solution to saving their marriage is honesty. George enters Act 3, The Exorcism with a bouquet of snapdragons which symbolises the beginning of the end of Martha's illusions. George throws the snapdragons at Martha yelling "SNAP", which is George's plea for Martha to stop losing touch with reality as the illusion will destroy her life. Albee uses The Theatre of the Absurd to make the audience question and consider the structure of their own lives. The situation Martha and George have created for themselves is absurd, but it helps them find meaning and comfort in the absurdity of life. The fabrication of a child makes sense to them, they do not feel the need to justify it. Mathew Roudane perceived that "The world of the Albee play is undeniably saturated with death...Albee has long argued that it is only through the hurly-burly process of immersing oneself fully, dangerously, and honestly in daily experience that the individual may sculpt a 'better self government'" George and Martha need to realise the life they have without a child can still be positive, fulfilling and affirmative.

Gatsby's death proves idealism can't survive in the modern world. Nick deduced that Gatsby "must have looked up at the unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is." Reality feels foreign having lived an illusion for the majority of his life. The grotesqueness of the rose is an extended metaphor for Gatsby's illusion that once blossomed, of Daisy being worthy of his devotion. It is now a withering flower, representing the corrupt American Dream of wealth and materialism, as Nick describes it, an "old island...that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes --a fresh, green breast of the new world." This represents what Gatsby first saw in Daisy, a vision that is now distant and unrecoverable. Pure America and its promises and possibilities were destroyed by greed. The imagery of Myrtle's breast, hanging loose after she is hit by Gatsby's car, her death, along with Gatsby's symbolises the

death of the American Dream. In a postcolonial reading of *The Great Gatsby* by Dan Melvin, Fitzgerald deconstructs the “time-honoured myth of America” by revealing that Columbus was not the “first European explorer to discover” America and his voyage was a “profit-making and exploitative colonial project”. If the origins of the American Dream and its romantic idealism were “inauthentic” and *Gatsby* embodies the American Dream, then his illusion was destined to fail. If Columbus didn’t discover the New World, then his inspiration to achieve the dream was based on an illusion he crafted.

Despite the belief that existence can’t coincide without fantasy, both texts suggest the alternative view that a lifestyle stripped of illusion leads to an honest life with integrity, even though the reality is difficult to accept. Virginia Woolf, writing in the 20th century was renowned for demonstrating the stream of consciousness. Albee confirmed that *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* stands for “who’s afraid of living without false illusions”, Woolf represents truth-telling and understanding a character’s interior monologue. Honey certainly lies and deceives about her ability and desire to give birth, giving off the illusion that this is what she wants. However she is not disillusioned, she knows her mind; her efforts to prevent pregnancy were always conscious decisions. Through the portrayal of Honey, Albee shows how American Society was obsessed with pretence and keeping up appearances. Honey, “apologetically” reveals to George that she likes to “peel labels” off brandy bottles. This is symbolic of Honey’s desire to admit her concealed fear of childbirth. Honey can’t admit this within their marriage because Nick’s proposal was based on an illusion, an illusion crafted by Honey that they were having a baby. The bottle of alcohol is a metaphor, Honey can’t come to terms with her situation so drinking is her method of easing pain and avoiding reality. George replies “We all peel labels, sweetie; and when you get through the skin, all three layers, through the muscle, slosh aside the organs... and get down to bone...” extending the metaphor to include the physical layers of a person, delving deeper into internal thoughts where illusions mask the core of reality. Honey is attempting to diagnose her problems with Nick, by tearing away the thin and flimsy paper of the label which represents the fragile illusion the couple’s marriage is based on. George and Martha foreshadow what Nick and Honey will become if they choose to build fantasies and illusions instead of communicating.

Nick Carraway is one of the novels' few characters who lives without illusions,

he and Honey are outsiders, their lives surrounded by dreams and illusions. As the narrator, his level-headed insight reveals how the disillusioned protagonists fail to achieve the (corrupted) American Dream. QUOTE Nick is not disillusioned by the horrors he witnessed at war, on the contrary, he “enjoyed the counter-raid so thoroughly that [he] came back restless.” Many men had an aspiration to start over with a new life after the war, in a hope to restore their feeling of lost masculinity. Nick is drawn to New York’s fast-paced life, he realises he can’t utilise his education and make his fortune in the Midwest and he has a yearning to escape its tedium. It is important to recognise that Nick has ambitions and dreams that form his purpose, however, he is practical and realistic, conscious that some dreams have to be abandoned, unlike *Gatsby*. QUOTE Tom invites Nick to Myrtle’s party in New York which encapsulates their secret world, Nick simultaneously becomes a participant and observer, leaving him feeling “within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.” Fitzgerald’s uses cinematic and paradoxical language to emphasise how Nick was originally thrilled by their revelry but is now repulsed by their moral emptiness, having realised they are a “rotten crowd” disguised behind an illusion of wealth and fake unity. After witnessing *Gatsby*’s dream deteriorate followed by his tragic demise, the East was “haunted” for Nick, it had been

“distorted beyond [my] eyes’ power of correction. So when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air...I decided to come back home.” The “blue smoke” of New York symbolises a city polluted by the illusion of the American Dream that causes Nick to return to Minnesota, rejecting a dishonest lifestyle for one structured by traditional moral values. QUOTE

The location of the Valley of Ashes, home to George Wilson’s gas station and garage, reminiscent of the landscape in *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. In the Valley of Ashes, George and his fellow men “move dimly...crumbling through the powdery air”, while in the wasteland the “unreal city” is “under the brown fog of a winter dawn”. The bleak tone represents the lack of hope for the wastelanders, unable to see beyond the air and fog shatters the illusion that men like George can fulfill their ambition of the American Dream, they are condemned to their aimless lives by old money, privilege, and the establishment. George bought into the American Dream and tried to achieve success realistically and conventionally by working hard to earn a living, unlike his wife Myrtle who became disillusioned by Tom Buchanan’s lifestyle. Myrtle married George because he convinced her “he was a gentleman...[who] knew something about breeding”. However, this facade collapsed when Myrtle discovered that his wedding suit, which gave the illusion George was wealthy and could provide Myrtle with the materialistic possessions she desired, was in fact “borrowed”. This suggests that the couple’s marriage was doomed, George’s some-what innocent illusion of a first-impression could never last.

Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf and *The Great Gatsby* are set more than 40 years apart, yet upon conclusion they both convey how war destroys society’s hope for a better future. War undeniably causes people to believe their days are over because they can no longer see the purpose of life, but it is through George and Martha’s illusion that they can carry on. Inevitably, this can only temporarily simulate the feeling of living, before the illusion shatters with more devastating impacts than accepting life and its harsh realities would have caused initially. In *The Great Gatsby*, there is a universal feeling that immersing oneself in society’s shared illusions can prolong the feeling of a meaningful life. The reason the characters believe that losing their illusions commences the end of their days is because they overlook the importance of keeping one’s morals while living out their pipe-dreams.