



Available online at <http://jgu.garmian.edu.krd>



Journal of University of Garmian

<https://doi.org/10.24271/garmian.207016>

Illusion and Reality in Oedipus the King and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Bukhari Abdullah Rasool
Tara Dabbagh
Salahaddin University _College of Languages,

Article Info

Received: October , 2020

Revised: November ,2020

Accepted: December ,2020

Keywords

parentage and filiation, fate and free will, American Dream.

Corresponding Author

tara.dabbagh@su.edu.krd

Abstract

The ongoing universality of the theme of illusion and reality allows for it to be discussed afresh and to be reinterpreted according to the outlook of the time. This theme forms a link between Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. One is a Greek tragedy showing the helplessness of man in the face of celestial powers that are too strong for him, and the other is an American twentieth century play showing the ineffectiveness of man in an absurd world. Through the study of the conveyance of illusion and reality in both plays, this paper aims to show how this theme connects the two plays, and yet how it still stands as a sign of their different times. Sophocles' play delivers the message that order could be restored when man acknowledges the reality of his limits rather than taking a hubristic delusionary path. Albee's play shows that human compassion could be attained through admitting one's reality instead of adopting a deluded life. The resolution to face reality requires bravery in the difficult

worlds of the two plays, but submission to it is shown to be the only way ultimately offered man. Both plays end on a melancholic note due to the harsh reality with which the characters finally come face to face.

1-Introduction

Parentage and filiation are central to the theme of illusion and reality as portrayed in *Oedipus the King* (430-426 B.C) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). They are actual in *Oedipus the King* but lead to delusionary hubristic actions, whereas they are imaginary in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and are used symbolically. The other manifestations of the encompassing theme of illusion and reality, namely, familial relations, search for identity, private and public lives, and faith and agnosticism, are all strongly linked with and all lead back to parentage and filiation.

1. Illusion and Reality in the Two Plays

1.1. Illusion and Reality in *Oedipus the King*

The whole action of *Oedipus the King* is a dramatic presentation of the gradual deciphering and realization of Apollo's

oracle of Delphi which tells Laius and Jocasta, king and queen of Thebes, that their son Oedipus will grow to kill his father and marry his mother. Apollo holds his peace when they give their baby son away to be killed when confronted with this divination. Additionally, he lets Oedipus believe, for many years, that he is the biological son of Polybus and Merope, king and queen of Corinth to whose care he is brought as a baby. Oedipus approaches the oracle when he starts having doubts about his familial descent and the oracle unequivocally voices his destiny as earlier told his parents, but it does not address his original question about the true identity of his parents. Afflicted with this prophecy, and misguided by his human illusions in interpreting divinity, Oedipus takes the oracle as a warning for him to leave Corinth to avoid fulfilling it,

and begins his journey of self-discovery by going to Thebes where, ironically, his real parents are. There he finally fulfills the oracle in unknowingly killing his father and marrying his mother, the widowed queen Jocasta, whereupon Apollo lays his punishing plague on Thebes. The Thebans turn to Oedipus to get them out of this difficulty as the patriarchal figure, their current king who has already, on his first arrival at the city, seemingly freed them of the merciless Sphynx's control and "quit [them] of the toll" (Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* 58) of the riddle it had imposed on Thebes. Consequently, Thebans perceive him as the "greatest of men" (Sophocles 58) and as their "Saviour" (Sophocles 59) in being the only man capable of solving this riddle (Sophocles 67, 74). Thinking of himself and of Jocasta as the rightful sovereigns and oblivious to his having fulfilled the oracle being the cause of the miasma, Oedipus obligingly tries to get at

the reason behind it. His investigations prove to him that his hubristic actions in defiance of Apollo are in themselves a proof that reality as foretold by the oracle is inescapable. The play thus shows how Oedipus finds out the tragic truth of his situation which shatters all his illusions of success, opening his eyes to his helplessness in confrontation with divinity.

1.2. Illusion and reality in *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? portrays a night in the life of George and Martha, an American middle-aged husband and wife. The little affection that they had felt for each other is overpowered by their material interests in the marriage. George mainly marries Martha because she is the daughter of the president of the New England university where he teaches, and Martha marries him in the hope that he would one day take the position of her father on the latter's retirement (Albee, *Who's Afraid of*

Virginia Woolf? 53-55; act 1) which would sustain her prestigious position. She eventually comes to realize that her expectations in George are incompatible to his personality (Albee 56; act 1, 95; act 2) as he even fails to become head of his own history department (Albee 30, 36, 44, 55: act 1) let alone the whole university. Martha cannot bring herself to overlook his inadequacies and George, on his part, cannot tolerate her offenses either. Still, perversely, they stay in their marriage which makes it a kind of compulsive prison for them. To alleviate this sense of imprisonment they resort to games, night parties, excessive drinking, adultery, and the creation of an imaginary son, all in the attempt at delusionary escapes from their frustration with their life. Their need for these illusions is so strong that they allow them to develop into a complementary illusory life blurring their real existence, even unto having an imaginary son. Fusing honesty and

falsehood in the games that they play, they inadvertently uncover ugly details about themselves and their relationship. At the end of the play, however, they do give up the illusion of the son and accept each other for what they are.

2. Manifestations of Illusion and Reality in Both Plays

The following sections link the main points of illusion and reality in the two plays.

2.1. Dysfunctional Families

At the outset, the marriages of Oedipus and Jocasta on one hand, and George and Martha on the other, seem to be good prospects. Oedipus, to all appearances, is an ideal husband for the widowed queen Jocasta. He is royal, brave, strong, and, above all, is thought to have saved Thebes from the riddle of the Sphinx. Oedipus is thus expected to be an able and suitable replacement for Laius both as king of Thebes and as husband to Jocasta, regardless of their age difference. Martha too is older

than George (Albee 54; act 1, 127; act 3), a fact that they also dismiss and get married in the hope that George, who also shows promise in being “young [and] intelligent” (Albee 54; act 1), will eventually replace Martha’s father as president of the university, which would qualify him as a replacement for her father in her heart and admiration as well. The confusion of the parental/filial and the marital in both plays can already be seen.

Both couples thus rush into their marriages and deceive themselves by the illusion of their suitability for each other. This is seen in Nick and Honey too, George and Martha’s guests for the night. Their newness at the university, their youth, and Nick’s scientific specialty of biology (Albee 29, 30, 36, 43; act 1), as opposed to George’s specialty of history, proffer them as “the wave of the future” (Albee 47; act 1, 68; act 2) and at first give the impression of their being foils to George and Martha.

However, as the play progresses, the grounds of their marriage are revealed to be as self-serving as those of the older couple. Honey and Nick had got married because of Honey’s false pregnancy (Albee 60, 62-3, 67, 89; act 2), with Nick having the further motive of her father’s wealth (Albee 65-6, 68-9, 87, 88; act 2). Even after their marriage Honey continues to have fake pains and vomits repeatedly (Albee 24, 57; act 1, 60, 89-90, 96, 97, 105, 106, 108; act 2, 110; act 3) and Nick’s inconsideration of her shows in his readiness to sleep with Martha as part of his intention of sleeping his way to professional advancement (Albee 71, 72; act 2, 115; act 3). Their apparently satisfactory marriage proves to be deceptive.

In both plays the couples’ premarital expectations are thwarted by their reality. So deep and firm is Oedipus and Jocasta’s hubristic belief of having defeated the oracle that they do not hesitate to get married. Otherwise, as Lear argues, Oedipus would

have avoided killing any man old enough to be his father and having a physical relation with any woman old enough to be his mother (194). The signs of the oracle are lost on him and Jocasta as they hasten into marriage, thinking it best for them and for Thebes. Likewise, George and Martha are ruled by self-oriented interests and hence do not take the trouble to acquaint themselves with each other's character before marriage. Martha, as an older mother figure, rather than providing comfort and encouragement for her husband, lashes out at him in her dismay because he fails both to replace the father figure in her heart and to fulfill her womanly yearning for motherhood. The initial impression of suitability is proven to be false.

Another point of similarity is that both Oedipus and George's history with their parents is unnatural, for George too may have killed his parents. This issue is left unresolved as it is never clarified whether

this occurrence is of George's own past life or not. As he recounts the incident to Nick he claims that it happened to one of his friends, "a boy of fifteen [who] had killed his mother with a shotgun some years before" (Albee 61; act 2). But then he asserts that he himself has "no doubt, no doubt at all" that the boy had killed his mother "accidentally-completely accidentally, without even an unconscious motivation" (Albee 61; act 2). George's vehement assertion of the shooting being an accident casts doubts about his truthfulness as to the identity of the young boy and gives the impression that he is in fact talking about himself. Furthermore, George's blending of different time periods in the story envelops it with ambiguity and casts doubts about its validity and reliability. In what can only be described as an Absurdist feature of uncertainty, here that of time, George first says that the incident happened during the Punic Wars, only to say later that it

happened in the time of “the Great Experiment, or Prohibition, as it is more frequently called” (Albee 61; act 2). As a result, the uncertainty transcends to the incident itself and engulfs its actual occurrence with doubts.

George then goes on to say that “the following summer, on a country road,” the same boy “swerved the car, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a large tree,” thus killing his father too (Albee 62; act 2), also accidentally. That George claims the incident to have happened “thirty years ago” (Albee 62; act 2) further supports the possibility of the boy being George himself because that would place him at the fitting age now. He had told Nick that he was sixteen (Albee 61; act 2) at the time of these happenings, and earlier still he had told Nick that he is now “forty-something” (Albee 28; act 1). The play does, arguably, provide stronger indications of this episode being part of George’s own past life than

otherwise. While recounting the story George says that his friend, who supposedly mistakenly killed his parents, once mistook the word “bergin” for brandy (Albee 61; act 2). As part of her ridicule of him, Martha mentions that George “used to drink bergin” at which George “sharp[ly]” tells her to “shut up” (Albee 76; act 2). Martha, typically, does not “shut up” and continues in humiliating him by recounting the same episode of the accidental killings as “something funny in [George’s] past [...] which [he had] turned into a novel” (Albee 81; act 2) that he wanted to publish. When her father, shocked by its content, forbade George from publishing it, George had responded, “this isn’t a novel at all ... this is the truth ... this really happened ... TO ME” (Albee 82-3; act 2). George’s passionate and violent reaction to Martha’s account of the matter in trying to strangle her is a tell-tale sign of his own personal involvement in this past event, furthered by Martha later

saying to him that she was going to hurt him so badly that he would wish that he “d died in that automobile” (Albee 93; act 2), in reference to the aforementioned car accident. George does not even try to refute what she says and simply takes it as part of the conversation and as a given fact. Even Nick reaches the conclusion that it must have been George himself who had accidentally killed his parents when he asks George if he had sailed “past Majorca” (Albee 118; act 3), as George claims to have done, after he had killed his parents, which George, again, does not try to refute.

The above circumstance of Nick’s question could, on the other hand, be seen as an indication of his disbelief of the whole story of the accidental killings as that of his disbelief of George’s having ever sailed in the Mediterranean, which he sums up in “I don’t know when you people are lying, or what” (Albee 118; act 3). His confusion of illusion and reality here is shared by the

audience who is left uncertain about how much of the story that George and Martha recount is true. Indeed, the related story of the parents and their death could be imaginary like the imaginary son that George and Martha create and George finally kills, also in imagination. Reporting the imaginary son’s death to Martha he claims that their son was driving “on a country road, [...] he swerved, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a ... [...] large tree” (Albee 135; act 3). It can thus be seen that George’s manner of killing the imaginary child is the same as that of the killing of the father in his recounting to Nick, which could not but raise doubts about the credibility of his whole story.

The story also comes close to that of Oedipus in the repeated mention of the “country road,” as Oedipus too encounters his father on a crossroads (Sophocles 76) “on the countryside/ Of Thebes” (Sophocles 60) and kills him without recognizing him as

his father. In other words, Oedipus too, like the boy in George's story, kills his father accidentally on a country road. Moreover, Martha's father's threat to expel George from his academic institution should he publish his aforementioned novel (Albee 82; act 2) means that publishing the truth about his parents' death, as he claims, would lead to his loss of life as he knows it, like Oedipus does when he makes his truth with his parents known. Moreover, that both George's father and imaginary son die similarly in car accidents on country roads rounds up their stories as being inescapably cursed to die thus, akin to the oracle of Oedipus and his parents. What is more, Oedipus too, like the boy in Georg's story, would have killed his mother had he had the chance to do so on finally finding out the shocking truth. He rushes to kill her considering her equally responsible for what happens as he is, only to find that she,

unable to face the final reality, has already killed herself (Sophocles 86-7).

Before the final revelation of the truth of their situation, Jocasta is confident in her belief of being safe from the prophecy. She tries to reassure Oedipus too when his doubts about his ancestry are renewed during his investigations into the cause of the miasma. She tells him how she and her late husband had supposedly defeated an oracle which foretold that Laius "should die/ Some day, slain by a son of him and [her]" (Sophocles 74) by casting the child "to die on the barren hills" (Sophocles 74). She concludes by saying that "on soothsaying/ Nothing depends" (Sophocles 74). However, when she too begins to suspect the truth and to fear the inevitable result of Oedipus' continuous probing, she urges him to refrain from further fact-finding in an attempt to maintain the status quo (Sophocles 82). The more imminent the truth, the weaker and more powerless

she gets in the face of Oedipus' determination to learn the reality. Martha too seems the more prominent of the two in the marriage which can be seen in her insults, attacks, and mockery of George both in private and in public. She constantly reminds him of his failures and is open in her sexual advances to Nick. Most importantly, she ignores George's desire to keep the matter of their son to themselves and mentions him to Honey (Albee 33, 48; act 1, 137; act 3). In retaliation, George takes charge and kills off the son, supposedly in a car accident (Albee 135; act 3), in spite of Martha's admonitions and pleas to the contrary, forcing her to face their reality like Oedipus' authority and relentless search for the truth finally force Jocasta to face reality too. Contrary to the women, both men pursue the truth despite their knowledge of how painful it is.

So painful is the truth that Oedipus even curses the Herdsman who took pity on

him as an infant and spared his life rather than killing him as he was instructed by Oedipus' parents (Sophocles 74, 84). This sentiment is reflected by the imaginary son in Albee's play who, in George's words, is "deep in his gut, sorry to have been born" (Albee 132; act 3) as, like Oedipus, he is born into a harsh reality. Moreover, Laius and Jocasta's attempt to kill their son shows that their defiance of the oracle goes beyond only trying to avoid it into trying to reverse it; instead of the son killing the father, the father tries to kill the son, like George kills his imaginary son. In the latter's case, however, we are made to suspect that a son, George, has already killed his parents as mentioned in his story.

In one of their arguments George and Martha each try to present a unified front with the imaginary child against the other parent, of whom the child is supposed to be ashamed (Albee 130-1, 132; act 3). Shame does not spare the children of Oedipus and

Jocasta either whose actuality as offspring is questionable. They are not children in the normal sense of the word for they are also grandchildren to Jocasta, and siblings to Oedipus. Given this complex biological make-up, they are the illusion of normal offspring before the realization of the truth about their parents. Seen from this perspective, they are not different from George and Martha's illusion of a son, which renders Oedipus and Jocasta's marriage sterile too.

The two plays thus denying the portrayed families happiness, functionality, and normality, the married couples look for them in the self-deceptive illusions to which they resort.

2.2. Quest for Identity

Oedipus' quest for identity starts as early as his being described as a "bastard" by a drunk in Corinth (Sophocles 75). Reassured, falsely, by Merope and Polybus that he is their rightful son (Sophocles 75), he leaves

them to escape the oracle and to establish a new identity for himself. In Thebes, Oedipus' character develops into an entangled web of fake identities. He is perceived as the savior of Thebes in having solved the riddle of the Sphinx, whereas, in fact, he is the cause of the curse on the city. Chosen by the people of Thebes, he becomes their new king, a protective patriarchal figure, while on the contrary he is the killer of the previous king. Marrying Jocasta he becomes a husband, but then he is also son to his own wife. Moreover, in due course, he fathers his own brothers and sisters.

Jocasta's familial situation is just as complex as Oedipus'. She is, on one hand, a bereaved widow, on the other, she becomes wife to the killer of her husband who is her and her late husband's son. She thus becomes wife to her own son, mother and grandmother to the same children.

In his *Poetics* Aristotle famously uses *Oedipus the King* as an example of tragedy where recognition is concurrent with reversal of fortune (41). Going through the process of recognition and discovery of the tragic reality, Oedipus and Jocasta realize that their crisis of identity stems from their attempt to change the identity set for them by the oracle, and that the truth of their identity can only be found in the truth of their familial situation. As they go through their reversal of fortune they set illusions aside, which George and Martha also do at the end of Albee's play.

In the course of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* George and Martha fail in their attempts to achieve the identities they aspire to. George fails to become head of the university and Martha is disappointed in her hope to continue her privileged position by transforming it from being the daughter to the wife of the university president. In their quest for identity and to consolidate their

uncertain characters George and Martha turn to contrivances such as drinking and partying, adultery, and absurd discourses. Indeed, George and Martha's search for identity is seen even in the games that they play, which are also tricks for them to set the personalities that they desire to assume. Moreover, their fake parentage is an outcome of their desire to be identified as parents expressed, for example, in Martha saying "And I had wanted a child...oh, I had wanted a child" (Albee 127; act 3). They want to give meaning to their existence in life and to anchor it through parentage. Failing to do so realistically, they resort to imaginary parentage to attain fake emotional affiliation, contentment, and identity. However, like Oedipus and Jocasta, they too are eventually resigned to the reality of their identities and existence.

2.3. The Public and the Private

Typical of tragedy the closely knit relation between the private and the public in

Oedipus' life is shown by Sophocles to reflect on his whole community. The plague laid on Thebes is Apollo's punishment for Oedipus' private sins of patricide and incest, a fact which comes to light as Oedipus looks for the cause of the plague owing to his concern for his people. This public concern turns into a personal examination of his own familial background and actions which culminates in ending his apparent happiness and ensuing private tragedy. Sophocles thus meets the requirement of tragedy that the tragic hero must suffer in order for the positive values of society to be reaffirmed, and for a peaceful prosperous public life to be established. Oedipus' end is calamitous on the private level but favorable on the public level.

If George and Martha are seen, as much argued, as Founding Father and first American president George Washington and his wife Martha Washington, then the pattern of the public and private in Albee's

play is the same as that of *Oedipus the King* for then they would be initiators of the national criterion of the American Dream. As depicted in the play this criterion has failed the American people whom it has shaped and motivated by its promises of unlimited possibilities and contentment, leaving them with nothing but a barren life of fear and anxieties. The resulting public distress is equivalent to the plague in *Oedipus the King* in being the outcome of the rulers' course of action.

Thus seen as historical public figures who founded the American nation, George and Martha's socially dysfunctional and biologically sterile home stands for the failure, barrenness and impotence brought about by the American Dream. The play shows that its ideals lead to the opposite desired effects because they are impotent in their impracticality and in their pressure of success on the whole nation. Indeed, the power struggles and the deceptions in the

marriages stand for such conflicts nationwide, and the sterility of the marriages indicates the sterility of the pursuance of the American Dream. Thus, the imaginary son, besides being George and Martha's means of escape from their sterile reality, is also symbolic of the futility of the general American preoccupation with impossible dreams and wishes. In other words, these public goals, being neglectful of the humane side of life, merely offer illusions of happiness.

This leads to George and Martha also being seen as a realistic and ordinary American husband and wife, in which case *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* reverses the pattern of the public and the private of *Oedipus the King*, for then it is the couple's preoccupation with the ideals of the national American Dream that reflects negatively on their marriage. Thus it would be the public which reflects on the private.

Attempting to conform to the expectations set by the American Dream in its general rendering of financial success and upward social mobility, the married couples in the play set materialism as their concern in their marriages. George hopes to take over control of the university after his father-in-law's retirement (Albee 53-55; act 1) like Oedipus takes over the rule of Thebes after the death of his father the previous king and his marriage to the widowed queen. In fact, Martha's father himself had married an older woman for her money (Albee 69; act 2) and apparently has passed on his materialism to his admiring daughter Martha who, in her turn, wants to continue in her esteemed position like Jocasta does in her convenient marriage to the new king Oedipus. Depicting the other married couple in the play as much younger than George and Martha reflects the continuity of the negative influence of the American Dream as their reasons for their marriage are as

equally depraved. The egocentric marriages encompassing the young, the middle-aged, and the older generation, are shown to lead to failure and impotence on different levels, and to a lack of warmth and romance reflective of the influence of the American Dream as perceived in the play.

The families thus demonstrate how society is driven by ideals set by the Founding Fathers with the beginning of the American nation. The ideals that are promised to be within the grasp of all Americans are shown to be tantalizingly elusive, hence unrealistic, and the pursuit of materialistic gain is shown to be a dead-end delusionary path fatal to the soul. The promised progression and assured advancement of the American Dream are absent from the play both professionally and domestically.

Martha, highly influenced by her successful workaholic father who drives the professors of his university so hard that

some of them die as a result (Albee 31; act 1), looks for the same characteristics in the promising George. George however, despite his academic proficiency, does not advance in the university's hierarchy though married to the daughter of its president. Martha attributes his failure to his not having the "*stuff*" it takes for such advancement (Albee 56; act 1) as he does not function socially well at the university events and celebrations (Albee 56; act 1, 95; act 2). This complaint by Martha about her husband shows that it is not knowledge or academia that guarantee advancement in the university of Martha's father, an example of success by the standards of the American Dream, but correct social behavior to the right people. Nick, on the other hand, is certain to advance (Albee 36; act 1) because he is willing to do whatever it takes for advancement, including sexual relations with the right women on campus. George and Martha thinking that he might even take

over the history department (Albee 44; act 1) although his field is biology, is further proof that the standard for advancement and success is not competence as much as it is hypocrisy and lack of morality.

The difference in George and Nick's personalities is also reflected in their specialties. George, the historian, dreads the future promised by biologists. He fears that their eugenics will eventually produce fair blue-eyed virile men who will not only be indistinguishable in appearance but in character as well. They will all be much like the well-built virile Nick himself, the promise of the future (Albee 45-7; act 1) and the kind of character who would succeed in a world ordained by the American Dream. This notion is also reflected in the imaginary son who is also described as being fair (Albee 127; act 3) and having blue or green eyes (Albee 49, 50; act 1) which strengthens his depiction as a symbol of sought-after success. George is equating the effects of

physical eugenics of biology with the menacing effects of the American Dream in unifying the nation in the pursuit of success at the expense of individuality and humanity. If one fails to fit the set pattern he is marginalized as George and Martha feel that they are marginalized and hence their resort to illusions. In further criticism of the American Dream, the virility of the apparently physically fit Nick turns out to be another illusion as he fails to perform sexually with Martha (Albee 111; act 3), which is also indicative of the impotence of the Dream.

Finally, George decides to tear down illusions and face reality courageously in what is referred to as the "exorcism" in the play. He kills off the illusionary son (Albee 107-8; act 2, 135; act 3) and thus exorcises himself and his wife from this symbol of promised fulfillment, forcing himself and Martha to come to terms with the difficult bare reality of disappointments. These two

Americans finally admit the falsity of the Dream having suffered its consequences, and deal with it as a hallucination that needs to be exorcised. Only thus could they come to terms with their reality and finally find companionship and compassion in each other after two decades of marriage (Albee 92,94; act 2). In this sense Roudane finds the ending of Albee's play to be cathartic as its exorcism offers this "spiritual regeneration" (44), like the catharsis of Sophocles' tragedy reaffirms divine values. In neither play is the catharsis a guarantee for peace of mind as anxiety and fear are not wiped out.

It is thus seen that the marriages in both plays prove to be a disappointment on both the private and public levels. Rather than fulfilling the illusion of being the perfect match for Thebes, Oedipus and Jocasta's union completes the curse on the city, which only ends with the tragic end of the marriage. George and Martha, failing to achieve and maintain personal and social

success, find their only outlet in illusions. They are seen as victims of the power of the American Dream, like Oedipus and Jocasta are the victims of fate. However, George and Martha can also be representative of their namesakes George and Martha Washington in which case they go beyond only being victims of the American Dream to being party to its very inception, just as Oedipus and Jocasta are not mere victims of their fate for it is basically the result of their hubris. The promise of the marriages in both plays comes to nothing.

2.4. The Presence Versus the Absence of Divinity

Both Sophocles and Albee show truth to be a power that man cannot stand against; as a result, man is forced to embrace it. However, because of the difference in genre and times, truth is presented differently in the two plays.

In the Greek tragedy of *Oedipus the King*, truth is absolute and transcendental,

because truth is the divine Apollo. Once divinity's role and plan are revealed, the whole truth comes to light and no uncertainty remains. Apollo conveys to humans their imminent destiny allowing them no alternative but to accept it. In fact, Bushnell maintains, the vainness of human efforts to undo fate in the play reflects the Greek creed that the only free will humans have is to be exercised in choosing to submit to what is destined for them and in their acceptance that they cannot do anything outside the context of divine will (100, 102), not even "the All-Famous Oedipus'!" (Sophocles 58).

The play thus shows the reality of fate and its ironic fulfillment in the very attempt to exercise free will, the latter thus proven to be illusory. However, what the play presents is not the actions of hubristic free will, but the painful process of retribution. As acted on the stage, the tragedy of Oedipus lies in the discovery of

the guilt and of the true nature of his crimes of patricide and incest which, plainly, have been committed before the play actually begins. Sophocles wants his audience to retain the images of retribution even after the play's end, hence he makes them watch the working out of Nemesis' inescapable power as part of the religious message of the tragedy.

An image that is certain to remain in the audience's psyche is Oedipus blinding himself at the end (Sophocles 87) in self-inflicted punishment for his failure to make use of his power of sight in being blind to the truth of the certainty and inevitability of the oracle. As pointed out by Mulready, Oedipus' physical sight and lack of insight form a dominant motif in the play (40) which is boosted by the physically blind Teiresias, Apollo's human agent, being endowed with the blissful sight of truth. His inner sightedness stems from his knowledge of and connection with Apollo (Sophocles

64-5, 66, 68), and in his having segregated himself from the purely physical human senses. It is he who pinpoints Oedipus' lack of insight: "Thou hast taunted me for blind,/ Thou, who hast eyes and dost not see the ill/ Thou standest in, the ill that shares thy house" (Sophocles 67). In himself, on the other hand, "the truth [...] is strong" (Sophocles 66). Depriving himself of his physical power of sight, Oedipus' blindness at the end of his life graces him with prophethood and wisdom, bringing him closer to an ecclesiastic like Teiresias (Grelka 24-5; Michalek 2; Winnington-Ingram 178).

Thus the major message of *Oedipus the King* is that man, despite his intellectual and physical abilities, should not disregard the transcendental authority that governs the universe and should recognize his smallness in relation to it. This applies especially to a man like Oedipus, because, true to the characteristics of a traditional tragic hero,

his personal destiny would reflect on his whole community, hence the riddle and the plague imposed on all the people of Thebes. They are punishments for their king's hubris, the gravest sin of all. His interference in the metaphysical and transcendental scheme of life which is far beyond human reach and knowledge, is a prescription for tragedy.

By contrast, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* no divinity is shown to be involved, and truth is relative and human-based. If in Sophocles' play truth is one whole unit that is determined and announced by divine powers, in Albee's play, truth is fragmentary and subject to the diversity of human perspectives, intentions, and actions. The audience never gets to know, for example, whether George had actually killed his parents or not, a testimony to the want of absolutes and to the want of characters in whom truth is strong. George's "There are few things in the world that I *am* sure of"

(Albee 49; act 1), and “all truth [is] relative” (Albee 130; act 3), are indicative of modern agnosticism and skepticism, not dissimilar to Pilate’s questioning truth in response to Jesus’ proclamation that he has “come into the world, to bear witness to the truth” (*New International Version*, John. 18. 37-38). The want of certitudes in the play is also reflected in the characters’ very power of sight, an example of which is seen in their inability to tell the color of Martha’s and of her father’s eyes. Nick thinks that Martha’s eyes are brown (Albee 50; act 1) to which she replies that they are green but only “look brown,” and later says that they are “more hazel” than brown (Albee 51; act 1). She then says that her father’s eyes are green too which George emphatically denies (Albee 51; act 1). The indecisiveness of the characters’ power of sight is also seen in George coming home with snapdragons claiming that he stole them in a garden under a shining moon (Albee 115-18; act 3).

When Martha points out that “the moon went down,” George replies “the moon may very well have gone down ... but it came back up” (Albee 117; act 3). Which one of them is right is left uncertain for them and for the audience, showing that the characters’ ability of sight is not reliable or trustworthy, and that it too is relative.

This ambivalence is connected with the genre of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* which is not so straightforward as that of *Oedipus the King*. The date of its writing places it at a time when Modernism, mainly heralded by the arrival of Realism on the scene, was giving way to what later came to be known as Postmodernism. True enough, although the play offers a realistic presentation of a slice of life of recent times, it still borders on Absurdism which, as phrased by Bolick, “permeated” Postmodernism (1). In fact, the play’s realistic depiction can be viewed as ironic, reality itself being shown as the issue.

Reality is blurred because of illusions, and relative because of the mundaneness and multiplicity of its perception.

Contrary to the divine oracle denoting tragedy in *Oedipus the King*, the American Dream, the worldly power to which Albee's characters have succumbed, promises happiness and security generally interpreted in materialistic terms. The play exposes the falsity of this promise and the hollowness and lack of spirituality that it leads to. Unattained, it leaves its pursuers empty and bitter, a disappointment which they try to cover up by self-deception. While Oedipus and Jocasta are forced by the unbending power of the oracle to accept the will of the gods, George and Martha exercise free will in finally admitting the unattainability of the American Dream and in denouncing its principles. This enables them to come to terms with their limitations and failures and to accept themselves and each other as the human beings that they are,

and not as mere followers of a pattern of pre-designed behavior, dreams and ambitions. Paradoxically, it is when they accept their weakness that they portray human strength in acknowledging and accepting a world which, in accordance with Absurdist notions, is stripped of all sources of comfort and reassurance, a world of the bare truth of the spiritual void which modern man has brought on himself.

The play thus shakes off the preconceived value of the American Dream as Postmodernism shakes off and questions all preconceptions. The promise of happiness and fulfillment of the American Dream proves to be an illusory power which shatters on impact with reality, whereas in *Oedipus the King* the doom denoted by the power of the oracle proves to be reality itself. In Albee's play the characters' attempt to reach and attain the mundane power of the American Dream results in their suffering, whereas in Sophocles' play

the characters' attempt to escape the transcendental power of the oracle results in their suffering. The power of truth, as conceived in each play, finally becomes evident.

Conclusion

The theme of illusion and reality which *Oedipus the King* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* share is conveyed in the two plays through analogous points presented in accordance with each play's individual requirements.

Failing to locate their own identities, the characters of both plays fail, in turn, to achieve positive and meaningful communication with each other. The ensuing absence of recognition and appreciation result in dysfunctional families whose lives are suffused with illusions. In Sophocles' play *Oedipus*, Jocasta, and Laius' belief that they have defeated the will of the gods is so strong that their hubristic notions are unconsciously delusional, so

firm is their faith in their free will. This goes to explain their presumptuous and audacious behavior and actions before the revelation of the truth of their identities and familial relations. On the other hand, in Albee's play *George and Martha* consciously delude themselves in their resort to pretense as a refuge from the harsh reality of their barren lives.

Parentage and filiation is central to the theme of illusion and reality in the two plays. Despite their attempts otherwise Laius and Jocasta fail to undo their destiny as their son survives their attempts to kill him without their knowledge and comes back into their lives with the prophesied patricide and incest. Martha and George's attempt to mitigate the dreadful reality of their impotent lives by the creation of an imaginary son also fails. The characters in both plays try to create another life for themselves as an alternative for reality. The alternative for Laius and Jocasta is to kill

their son, but for George and Martha it is to imagine a son. The son coming back to life in *Oedipus the King* ends delusion, and the son going out of life in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* ends delusion.

Both plays portray powers beyond the control of their characters. In *Oedipus the King* it is divine hence the characters are absolutely helpless against it, and their freewill is proven to be illusory in confrontation with fate. They are allowed no other option at the end but to accept the reality of fate as they are enclosed by divine retribution for their defiance of Apollo's oracle. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the portrayed power is the worldly power of the American Dream hence the characters do have the advantage of free will against it, which its two main characters ultimately employ. The portrayed powers are concerns relevant to each play's time. As a Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King* is a celebration of religious observance. As a twentieth century

American play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* reflects a contemporary world devoid of spirituality and in struggle with more immediate mundane issues.

At the end of both plays the bitter truth, shunned for years, is finally reinstated. However, the two plays, being of different genres and times, and being written for different kinds of audiences, present the effect of this painful truth on their characters differently. In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus and Jocasta inflict physical pain on themselves to express and atone for their guilt and shame, because that is the kind of spectacle that was expected and appreciated at the end of a Greek tragedy. As part of the religious purpose and teaching, such spectacle would also strengthen and magnify the religious message of the play. There is no corresponding physical violence in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as its modern audience's subconscious would instantly perceive and relate to the potency and might

of the painful truth. A pitiful and scared Martha is shown, stripped of illusions and of the fantasy of her son, telling her equally apprehensive and uneasy husband, that she is afraid of the life that lies ahead. Accepting reality is not an easy prospect but it is a brave stance seen in George and Martha's ultimate choice of it despite its difficulty, and in Oedipus' perseverance to find it at the risk of his personal tragedy. The characters of both plays are entrapped in a kind of life that does not allow for happiness, hence the melancholic tone of both plays.

Works Cited

Albee, Edward. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Penguin Books Ltd, 1965.

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Edited and translated by S. H. Butcher, Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1898, *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/poeticstranslate00arisuoft/page/36

Bolick, Elizabeth, L. "Absurdism in Post-Modern Art: Examining the

Interplay between 'Waiting for Godot' and 'Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close'." *Inquiries Journal: Social Sciences, Art & Humanities*, 2009, *Inquiriesjournal.com*, www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/36/absurdism-in-post-modern-art-examining-the-interplay-between-waiting-for-godot-and-extremely-loud-and-incredibly-close

Bushnell, Rebecca W. "Speech and Silence: Oedipus the King." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Sophocles' Oedipus Rex*. Edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea-Infobase, 2007, pp.91-105, *issuu.com*, issuu.com/ovidiutite/docs/bloom_s_modern_critical_interpretations_-_oedipus_/244

Grelka, Maciej. "On the Question of Knowledge and Blindness in Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus." *Symbolae Philologorum Posnaniensium Graecae et Latinae*, vol. XXIII, 2013, pp. 19-33, *repozytorium.amu.edu.pl*, repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/bitstream/10593/1

[2180/1/Grelka_Symbolae_Philologorum_Po
snaniensium_2013_1.pdf](#)

Lear, Jonathan. "Knowingness and Abandonment: An Oedipus for Our Time."

Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations:

Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. Edited by Harold

Bloom, Chelsea-Infobase, 2007, pp. 183-

205, *citeseerx*,

citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi

[=10.1.1.452.1683&rep=rep1&type=pdf](http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi)

Michalek, Jakub. "Truth or Happiness?."

jmi.czweb.org/nove/data/111.pdf

Mulready, Sharon. "Oedipus the King: Imagism and Humanism." *Journal of the*

Classical Association of Victoria, vols. 16-

17, 2003, pp. 40-45, *Classical Association of*

Victoria,

classicsvic.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/mul

[readyvol1617.pdf](http://classicsvic.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/mul)

Roudane, Matthew. "Who's Afraid of

Virginia Woolf?: Toward the Marrow." *The*

Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee.

Edited by Stephen Bottoms, Cambridge

University Press, 2005, pp. 39-59.

Sophocles. *Oedipus the King*. Translated by J. T. Sheppard. *Eight Great Tragedies*.

Edited by Sylvan Barnet et al., New American Library, 1957, pp. 57-93.

The Holy Bible: New International Version.

Bible Gateway,

www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jo

[hn+18%3A37-38&version=NIV](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jo)

Winnington-Ingram, R. P. *Sophocles: An*

Introduction. Cambridge University Press,

1998,

Is.muni.cz,
[is.muni.cz/el/1421/jaro2013/DVH042/Winninto
n-Ingram_-_Sophocles-An_Intepretation.pdf](http://is.muni.cz/el/1421/jaro2013/DVH042/Winnington-Ingram_-_Sophocles-An_Intepretation.pdf)