**‘‘Baby’ – George and Martha’s imaginary son – must be regarded as both an exploration of many of the plays themes & also the catalyst for a change in their relationship?’**

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the above statement?**

George and Martha’s son becomes an ominous figure in the play through George’s imploring foreshadow: ‘just don’t start on the bit about the kid’ before the guests have arrived. Albee, instantly establishes the child as a source of dispute and eludes to the themes of truth and illusion and games and gamesmanship with the suggestion that the child is ‘a bit’ or a sketch. It is also necessary to note that, though the child represents a sense of distance between them, he also serves to ultimately bring them together in the end. Baby’s role in the play is on one level to rip open George and Martha’s relationship so that it can be ‘exorcised’ – as it were – and build back up from the rubble. This concept shall be dealt with later in this essay. However, it is important to first look at Albee’s use of the child to explore many of the stories themes.

For example, the theme of Truth and illusion is a major part of the play. Moreover, the child is George and Martha’s first overt favouring of lie over reality. Though, it is one of many devices that George and Martha use to hide from reality. Other shields being the ‘rubbing’ alcohol they scoff with ‘ice’ made from their ‘tears’ and the sexual games – ‘hump the hostess’ – which’s only purpose are to shadow the couple’s lack of intimacy and to inspire jealousy. However, arguably the most potent and cynical wall that they build is the child. Martha’s incessant need for the child to exist and to be involved in the action appears to hide a deep seeded desire within Martha. Martha herself suggests ‘truth or illusion…either way’ as if the line between both was irrelevant. This ‘reality’ is compounded with Martha’s speech which recalls her son’s life with ‘animal crackers, the bow and arrow’ and Saturday’s ‘Banana Boats’. The depth with which Martha descends into this world of illusion and fantasy would seem to intensify the relationship further. Therefore, it could be clearly suggested that the child blurs the lines between truth and illusion – at least in Martha’s head. I would argue that Martha’s need for the child to exist – which comes to a head at the end of the play with her brokenly pleading with George ‘YOU CAN’T’ – hides a truth about Martha and relates to another of the play’s themes that of infertility and impotence.

Albee peppers the play with references to impotency from the simple humour in Nick’s sexual impotence to the allusion to the salted fields of Carthage, referenced through the town’s title ‘New Carthage’. However, arguably the strongest symbol of infertility is the imaginary child of George & Martha in the play. The child represents – ultimately – Martha’s infertility that she struggles to accept. The closing scene of the play when Martha reacts with pain filled hysteria transcends the ‘game’ of the child. We can see at the end of the onslaught by George, about the child, Martha’s angrily suggests: ‘YOU CAN’T DO THAT.’ Therefore, I believe that it must be stated that Martha regards the son as worth more than just a game. In many ways the son could be regarded as a representation of Martha’s infertility and her desperate, deep seeded desires to have a child. However, it is interesting how this inward loss within Martha is externalised in the form of violence and ridicule.

He serves not only to distance George from Martha, but he is also used as a weapon for George and Martha to ridicule each other in front of the guests. He serves to strengthen Martha’s attack on George for being unlovable & Martha’s reputation as a ‘sexually aggressive ‘‘earth mother’’ is further compounded with George’s accusations of Martha’s perversions towards their son. Moreover, throughout the play Martha takes on the role of the ‘flagellator’ and George assumes the position of whipping boy. The dynamics of this power relationship and the true victim and aggressor are all multi-faceted areas that fall outside the scope of this essay. However, what is clear is that when George rips Martha’s world apart she ‘leap[s] at George…ineffectual[ly]’ showing that in the face of true destruction Martha abandons both her anger and her aggression.

There is a clear irony here because the son becomes Martha’s symbol of hope, as she suggests he is ‘the one light in all this hopeless…*dark*ness our SON.’ However, it is ironic that the opposite would seem to be the case. Instead of the son being the light of their lives, he is one of many elements that causes a rift between the characters and is used by George & Martha to facilitate further verbal sparring. In Martha’s reaction to the son’s death we see Martha briefly cross the line from pagan goddess to animal in her ‘howl’ of ‘NO…’ ‘which weakens into a moan.’ There is a clear transformation occurring here. Although, it isn’t possible to argue that the transformation is strictly negative and representative to Martha’s downfall.

It seems much more likely that the child’s death destroys Martha, so that she and George can re-build the pieces of their failed relationship. Martha, like in other scenes of the play, is reduced to a child at the end. She is comforted by George who is left singing her a lullaby. It seems that after all the anger, the aggression and the anguish, we see a gentle, loving relationship between the two. It is also a scene in which Martha questions George about getting rid of the son suggesting ‘Just…us?’ to which George re-assures; ‘It will be better’.

In conclusion, the relationship is only allowed to recover when they remove the child who is symbolic of much of the problems between the characters. He represents their infertility, which they cover with illusions, and when his name is raised, a particularly harsh streak relays the theme of violence repetitively. Moreover, when George finally forces Martha to expel the child then only at this point can they re-build their relationship.