

The Truman Show **Analysis**

Symbols: some representations of freedom and confinement

The symbols of confinement within *The Truman Show* seem endless. Truman is literally confined in this fake world that he is led to believe is real. The “sea” is the main symbol of both confinement and freedom. It represents confinement as it is so vast, so broad, and Truman can not go over, above or in it. It represents freedom as that is the way “out”. It’s an escape, a way to vanish from this world. Freedom is further represented through Truman’s dreams as a youth to be an explorer, and despite Christof’s manipulations, this dreams never appears to die. The recreation of Sylvia’s face, through surreptitiously tearing pieces out of magazines, illustrates that Truman another example of Truman’s ability to evade Christof’s attempts at total control. Seahaven Island, itself, is also hugely symbolic. The island is by itself, separated from other places, including reality. The revolving door at Truman’s office is a symbol, as well. It represents being stuck in one place, yet it also has a glimpse at escape, when he walks back through that door. Bridges represent the way out, but their length and being over water represents confinement - they offer only a long and difficult escape route. Other bridges are simply a dead end – offering no escape at all. Truman is confined by innumerable picket fences, martial images of boots and snarling, vicious dogs which suggest entrapment. He is trapped by guilt through his mother and his wife Meryl, who treats him as though she were his mother. Her words, and those spoken by the other actors, also serve as symbols of confinement. Marlon, Truman’s best friend, at one point says about *The Truman Show* that “It’s all truth. It’s all real. Nothing here is fake. Nothing you see, on this show, is fake. It’s merely controlled.” That in itself shows confinement. Truman is confined in this fake world that is created by someone else to be what they want it to be. A shot of Truman in a convex mirror suggests a fish confined in a bowl.

Motifs: recurring images or ideas within The Truman Show

In the *Truman Show* we are constantly brought back to see expressions through eyes. We often see what Truman’s eyes are focussed on. We can see his lost look, and we can see his emotion through the eyes. We can see, through his eyes, when he’s feeling confused, when he’s skeptical when someone says something, when he’s happy, and when he’s angry. His eyes, for the most part, show his lack of knowledge of what is happening around him. We can see his lost look, and his innocence. Through Meryl’s eyes we see can see her being fake and “scripted”, especially when she is telling Truman about a product. We can see her actress side through her eyes. For Lauren (or Sylvia, the friend from school who was taken away) her eyes are often brought into the picture. We can see her deep concern for his safety, and we can see her desire to let him know the truth. Through her eyes we can interpret a desire to tell him the truth, and to set him free. Many of the actors see Truman close-up, but Sylvia is the only one to truly “see” him. Eyes are the mirrors of the soul – Sylvia is the only one “alive”

– the rest are empty acting vessels. Externally, Truman always has eyes upon him – those of Christof, his production team, the other actors, and, of course, the viewers.

Aside from the human eyes, camera eyes are everywhere – part of the architectural design of Seahaven Island.

The audience sees much through mirrors, as well. The many reflected images and use of mirrors might suggest illusion. It is important to note that Truman is often reflected in mirrors, but those can't be trusted – they are only his reflection, not his true self. For Truman, mirror represents self-reflection. Through a mirror a person can discover a great deal. A person can look right into a mirror and stare deeply into himself, looking for answers. The mirrors represent self-reflection and discovery. Discovery is something that is needed for Truman to get out. And discovery is something that is eventually realized.

Were you able to find a place on Seahaven Island NOT marked with an X? They are ubiquitous –everywhere and ever-present: Truman's front door, the picket fences, the magazine stand, most of the sidewalks and windows were covered with X's. X's are a huge part of the architectural design on Seahaven Island., suggesting a constructed, fixed, and rigid world. They are further symbols of Truman's confinement, of being held back from the real world.

Film Features:

How were camera shots used?

Camera shots were used effectively throughout the entire movie. Camera shots were taken from all angles and all levels. There would be a camera in a mirror, which focused directly on the face of Truman. There would be a button camera, which focused from someone's button up to Truman. We would get camera shots from above, we would get camera shots from below, and we would get camera shots from straight on. These camera shots were used to increase the feeling of Truman's confinement within the show. At certain parts the audience is eye-level with Truman; we could see his emotions, and we would feel connected to him. At other times, we would be looking up at him, seeing his character from an entirely different angle. We would sometimes be down on him, showing his weakness and his lack of knowledge. At times, the director would have a close up of Truman, only to quickly pull away. The TV audience gets caught up in Truman's story, only to have it artificially refocused.

How was music used?

For the most part, the music within the *Truman Show* was classical and instrumental. By using classical music, more than one emotion could be conveyed at once. In the mornings, there would be a lively upbeat tune which signified the "beginning of the morning". In emotional parts, the music would be deep, sad, and thoughtful. The music was used very effectively to create mood and reflect Truman's emotions. It could be sorrowful and melancholy, or light-hearted and cartoonish. It could even suggest tension.

How was lighting used?

Lighting is used very effectively through this movie. The sunlight was perfect for setting a happy atmosphere. In Truman's world, almost everything was very well lit. The sun lit his days, and at night there were lights in his house. In other parts, however, emotional parts, there was little light. For instance, when he was reminiscing about when his father drowned, it was dark, only a little light from the moon and the lighthouse were illuminating him. Another example is when he was struggling with Meryl, when he finally grabbed the shears from her and pulled her into another room. Through this part it was dark, making Truman appear shadowy, seeming as though he was very angry and depressed. Another good example is the lighting used when Truman and his friend were looking at the sunset. They were staring out, being "inspired"; dreaming of better things - and the light was beautiful. At all times, however, the lighting was strong, whether it was suggesting brightness or darkness, adding an unreal, cartoon-like "wash" to the movie. And, of course, Truman's life was like living in a cartoon - everyone was stereotyped, and, "on a loop".

Opening Credits:

What is the first viewing of Truman like?

Our first viewing of Truman Burbank is an unusual first glimpse at this character with whom the audience learns to empathize. The movie starts out in a different fashion than most movies tend to begin. We see the producer talking about this show, and we get an image of the main character, Truman himself. We see Truman as a young man in his late 20s, and he appears to be a bit eccentric. He's in his bathroom staring at the mirror, carrying on this little pretend world in his mind. What we become aware of immediately, is that we are watching a TV show, but this man, Truman, thinks that it is his life. Everyone but Truman knows that his life is one gigantic fishbowl. We even learn that there are approximately 5000 cameras on the Island, all trained on Truman.

What visual tools are used by the director in the beginning?

There are many different visual tools used by the director to portray Truman throughout the entire movie, but the beginning especially stands out. We see this image on another television screen at first. We can tell that this camera is in the mirror, and we are looking directly at Truman himself. We can see it is daylight and the whole setting around Truman gives us an idea about his lifestyle and the people around him. There are four succeeding levels of frames around Truman's face that depict the degree of his captivity. We see Truman as viewed through a lens; we view his interactions with others through a lens. Christof's character resembles a priest in his clothing and in his name, and this sets a powerful religious context. In fact, at the end of the movie, when speaking directly to Truman, Christof even refers to himself as "the Creator . . . of a TV show."

Truman Unaware:

How can we tell that Truman is in a contrived reality?

There are many blatant clues that Truman's reality is contrived – the twins who speak to him every morning push him closer to a camera and a print ad, in order to get the best camera angle. A heavy camera light falls from the sky, his radio malfunctions and we hear about “extras”. During a rain “storm”, the rain is localized only on Truman, and not very effectively at first. Frames within frames are used to suggest entrapment. The many reflected images and use of mirrors might suggest illusion. The obvious manipulation of Truman for product placement in advertising hints that this is not reality but a television show. The images shown by the hidden cameras suggest surveillance. The eyes of the characters give away when they are acting and when they are experiencing real emotions.

How is conflict introduced?

The first clue that Truman is experiencing a conflict is when we see him ripping eyes out of an advertisement in a magazine. He is hiding the fact that he is doing this from his co-workers. This makes the audience wonder why someone would hide such actions – what is so wrong with tearing an ad out of a magazine? Almost immediately after this, Truman is sent out on a short business trip, where he has to leave Seahaven Island on a ferry. He is deathly afraid of water, and we learn that his father drowned while boating in a storm with Truman, when Truman was only eight years old. Truman is later positive that he sees this “dead” father, who is, of course, briskly whisked away from him. We also learn that the eyes form a composite of Sylvia, the girl he longs for. He thinks if he could only go to Fiji he could find her. These incidents set up the fact that Truman is unhappy with his job and the island. He wants to leave, but his wife pressures him about mortgage payments and starting a family.

Truman Becoming Aware

What did Truman begin to do to manipulate his “world”?

Truman does many things to manipulate his “world” in order to discover his real situation. He upsets his regular work routine and stops cars that are moving on the street. He tries entering another building and sees people behind an elevator – how is it possible to be *behind* an elevator? He tries to delay his wife from going to work, and then follows her there, to see if she really is a nurse. He watches the people around him, and notices that those outside in his neighbourhood are on a “loop”. When he makes up his mind to leave the island, he is told by a travel agent that there are no flights available for a month! He then tries a bus, but the driver grinds the gears so badly that everyone is forced to get off. When he drives, a “traffic jam” is instantly created, cutting off his escape route. When he does manage to get out of his neighbourhood, he first has to navigate the bridge, only to face a “fire” at the other end of it, followed by a road block, due to a convenient leak at the nuclear plant. Truman realizes that there just aren't that many coincidences in the world.

What does Truman's name represent?

When examined, we see the name Truman Burbank has a deep meaning. His first name, Truman, is basically a play on words, meaning True Man. This represents that he is not an actor, but really just a "regular guy". His last name, Burbank, is the name of the studio/corporation which legally adopted him. Burbank, California, suggests Hollywood, plastic, fake, movies, etc. So his last name is signifying that this is just another television name. He is a "true man" in a fake surrounding.

What do bridges with no end suggest?

The bridges with no end suggest that Truman is trapped, in his world or his own reality. He has many dead end roads, and he is often searching beyond the end of the bridge. They suggest to Truman that there is no escape from the island; they confine him to his tiny world.

How is Truman trapped?

Truman is trapped physically by the confines of his world. He is trapped mentally and emotionally, as no one in his world is real. He cannot trust anyone – not his wife, his mother, or his best friend. He feels like everyone is "in on it". He is being manipulated in his world and he knows it. And every avenue of escape bangs shut with a loud clang.

How are we trapped?

We are trapped in situations of our own design. Perhaps we are living for our job, or to please a significant other. We may be trapped into conforming to meet the standards of society. We may be trapped by marketing and the media. Perhaps we are unable to see past the routines of our own reality and realize that there is something else out there for us.

When does Truman decide to break free, and how does he begin to do this?

Truman decides to break free from his contrived reality once he looks at the photo album with a magnifying glass and sees his wife's fingers crossed. From that moment on, he decides to find a way out, although at first he doesn't know exactly what he is getting out of. He realizes that Meryl has been lying to him, and he then realizes all the strangeness happening around him. After unsuccessfully using mass transit, and even his car, to leave, Truman knows he has to devise some other means of escape. We soon see him in his bathroom, drawing a spacesuit helmet in soap around his reflection, playing at being an astronaut, landing on some-far off planet. He dubs the planet, "Trumania" and tells his "reflection" – "that one's for free". In hindsight, this is Truman's good-bye to his audience, and to this "world" that he has inhabited his entire life. Meryl moves out of their house, he moves to the basement, and then orchestrates his escape by digging out – disguised as gardening!

What are the people watching Truman like?

Truman's viewing audience includes a wide variety of people. All the viewers are watching him so faithfully because they can relate to his being trapped, his not

knowing and his incapability to know everything that is happening to him. Viewers can relate to his being “lost” as it were, and they can connect with his so-called real life. His viewers are a cross-section of society - a man in a bathtub, regulars in a “Truman Bar”, two men who work at a parkade, two old ladies at home, a Japanese family and a mother and daughter. All of these people connect with him in that he is a real person, and he faces real-life problems. All of us like television better when we can relate to it, and these people are rooting for Truman. They know him almost as well as he knows himself. They watch faithfully as they have been drawn into the drama of this life – “trapped” into this obsession.

To what extent is our world manipulated like Truman's?

We are lied to by politicians and the media. Subtle and subliminal advertising bombards us constantly. Society pressures us to conform and “keep up with the Joneses”. Whom can we trust? Who is “real”?

Why does Truman not initially escape?

Truman is not aware that there is any other kind of life. The world he lives in is in some ways idyllic - safe, perfect. Perhaps he prefers this “cell”, as to leave for the unknown is terrifying.

What does the producer of the show, Christof, suggest about our situation with what he says?

Christof's words “If he was determined to find the truth, there is no way we could prevent it,” suggests that if we really want to find out everything that is going on and if we really want to take control of our own lives, it is possible. If we are really determined, we can stop people from trying to take control of us. We can stop listening to others and following others and we can stop being lead by others. But, like Truman, do we prefer our safe, perfect, “known” cells?

Truman Breaking Free:

What are the contrived and real obstacles that have prevented Truman from escaping?

There have been many obstacles which try to prevent Truman from escaping. First, he has been set on an island, surrounded by water, of which he has been made terribly afraid. The actors and extras on *The Truman Show* are paid to keep him there – in fact, their jobs depend on it!! When he decides to physically leave the island, this becomes impossible, whether by plane, bus, or car. He also has to conquer his own fear of leaving his safe, perfect world, for the great unknown. This is a fear which paralyzes many of us!

The rising action brings us to Truman confronting his "Creator." Describe this power struggle and the connections/allusions you can make.

There was a major power struggle between Truman and Christof, his “Creator”. Christof did not want Truman to leave. If Truman leaves, Christof's masterpiece, this show, is over. His ratings no longer will be there, he will no longer be this “creator” of Truman. Truman, on the other hand, wants out. He doesn't know for

sure what he is getting out of, but he wants to leave. When Christof turns the weather system on dangerously, he is playing God; he wants to show Truman who is in control and who has the power. The sailboat on the water suggests that Truman is trying to conquer his terror of the water. If he can be freed of this stumbling block, he can be freed of this world that has confined him his entire life. Tying himself to the boat suggests that this life has nothing left for him - if he can't leave, he is willing to die. He is not letting his fear of water hold him back, so he is not going to let Christof hold him back from seeing the truth. When Christof's storm nearly drowns him, Truman yells, "Is that the best you can do? You're going to have to kill me!" This alludes to Biblical stories of epic struggles between God and man.

What symbols and images of freedom, confinement and new beginnings can you find?

Truman is trapped by the weather, the rope, the waves. Ironically, he is also confined by the sky and by roads and bridges that go nowhere. He is confined by his fears, and he needs to confront his greatest fear - of water - in order to find freedom. The *Santa Maria* (the name, coincidentally given to one of Christopher Columbus' ships which explored "the new world") represents exploration and finding a new world of freedom. As the weather calms, the sun breaks through the clouds, and Truman experiences a gentle, cleansing rain. Truman's coming out of the water suggests a rebirth (baptism?) into freedom. The artificial sky is like the shell of an egg that Truman must break out of in order to be reborn, and the door that he leaves by suggests a new opportunity and freedom as well as stepping out into the unknown.

Truman hits the wall of his known world. Why is this a powerful ending to the story? Describe the symbolic elements of this ending and Truman's decision to bow like an actor at the end of his performance and exit to the dark back stage of the real world.

The wall is a metaphor for the world that has trapped Truman since birth, and he has now been reborn into the "real world". The wall confined him, trapped him, but through inner strength and conquering a great fear, he is able to find a way out. Then Christof speaks, in an attempt to keep Truman on the island.

"I'm the creator . . . of a TV show that gives hope and joy and inspiration to millions."

"Then who am I?"

"You're the star."

"Was nothing real?"

"You . . . were real. That's what made you so good to watch. Listen to me, Truman. There's no more truth out there . . . than there is in the world I created for you. The same lies, and the same deceit, but in my world, you have nothing to fear. I know you better than you know yourself."

"You never had a camera in my head!"

"You're afraid. That's why you can't leave. It's OK. I understand. I've been watching your whole life . . . you can't leave, Truman. You belong here . . . with me."

At this point it is obvious that Christof needs Truman far more than Truman needs him. Truman simply states his ever popular manta, recited when leaving for work,

"In case I don't see ya, good afternoon, good evening, and good night. Yup."

Then he chuckles, bows, and heads out to the unknown.

With those words and that bow, Truman has said good-bye to his creator and to his audience and left the stage. He heads out into the dark, the unknown, but into the real world.

Why does Truman's audience cheer at the end?

Deep down, the audience has been longing for Truman to find his freedom. They have acknowledged a great performance – a performance of a lifetime! Like Truman, they have been set free – the show is over – and they can get back to their “real” lives. However, there's always another show. The men in the parkade are instantly looking for the *TV Guide*. Ironic moment. 😊

What do these words mean to YOU and YOUR viewing habits?

*"We've become bored with watching actors give us phoney emotions. We're tired of pyrotechnics and special effects. While the world he inhabits is, in some respects, counterfeit, there is nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts. No cue cards. It isn't always Shakespeare, but it's genuine. It's a life." - Christof, during the opening credits of *The Truman Show**

How much are we manipulated by reality TV? Viewers' lives revolved around *The Truman Show*. How much do our lives revolve around the latest episode of *Survivor*, or *American Idol*, or whichever reality show it is that has drawn us in? How much do *our* lives revolve around TV, film, media and the messages presented therein?