

AGEING AND THE SENSE OF LOSS IN EDWARD ALBEE'S *A DELICATE BALANCE* (1966)

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Abstract

This paper examines ageing and the sense of loss as dramatized by Albee in A Delicate Balance (1966). Ageing is a product of imagination that threatens the young as well as the middle-aged because of their fear of old age which is a period of life-course man undergoes, and which is associated with rottenness, decay, fragility, senility and death. Man moves without clear recognition throughout different life-stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age; or rather throughout different courses of one's lifetime of education, work, marriage, parenthood and retirement. Because there is no preparatory training for retirement, some people have problem facing their retire life. For them it becomes a time of emptiness, closure and fixedness.

It becomes clear from the dramatic action of the play that the characters come to know that it is not possible for them to attain at this age self-fulfillment and contentment, consequently they willfully prefer escape. It is actually a gloomy picture of the human reality; nothing is left for modern man except physical and spiritual death as the end of the play suggests. The human situation, thus as suggested by the play, is circular and escape mechanism is being continually renewed.

By the time Albee's first play, *The Zoo Story* (1959) appeared the American theatre had been suffering from a certain decline: "O'Neill was dead Arthur Miller seemed to have lost interest in the theatre So the situation was desperate, and America was looking with some urgency for a new dramatist in whom it could place its faith" (in Bigsby (ed.), *Edward Albee: Twentieth Century Views* 4). Consequently, Edward Albee "was unanimously hailed

as the successor to Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill" (roycecarlton.com).

During the early 1960's, Edward Albee seemed to be the dramatist in whom America could put its faith. Albee, whose "early popular one-acts, including *The Zoo Story* (1959), established him as a critic of American values," received Pulitzer Prize for *A Delicate Balance* (1966) (Biography website). He also received two awards for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962): the New York Drama Critics' Award and the Tony Award as the best play in the 1962-1963 season (Biography website). Subsequently, Albee was regarded as America's greatest dramatist of the decade. Gerald Weales remarks in Bigsby (ed.), *Edward Albee: Twentieth Century Views*, that: "Edward Albee is inescapably the American playwright of the 1960s" (in Bigsby ed. 10). He had the lead at the very beginning of his dramatic career, because, as Bigsby states in *Confrontation and Commitment* "in three years Edward Albee took the American theatre by storm" (Bigsby 71). In all, Albee "does not accept the American way of doing things, does not assume the American optimism, the sense of virility and dynamism of their society" (Lumly 327-328).

Theatrically, sterility, ageing and childlessness in an Albee play highlight the bankruptcy as well as the deformity of the twentieth century American way of life. Albee, himself, finds his dramatic career as "an examination of the American Scene ... a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity, a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen" (Kennedy-center website). Albee is mainly interested in condemning the substitution of the artificial for the authentic in human relationships.

His drama shows, as he himself again states in Bigsby ed. *Edward Albee: Twentieth Century Views*, a sense of loss which "becomes an image, firstly, of the loss by America of the principles which had been invoked by its founders, and, secondly, of the inevitable process of deprivation which is the basis of individual existence" (in Bigsby 7-8).

The purpose of this paper is to examine ageing and the sense of loss as dramatized by Albee in his play *A Delicate Balance* (1966). Ageing is a product of imagination that threatens the young as well as the middle-aged because of their fear of old age which is a period of life-course man undergoes, and which is associated with rottenness, decay, fragility, senility and death (Sontag 72). Man moves without clear recognition throughout different life-stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age; or rather throughout different courses of one's lifetime of education, work, marriage, parenthood and retirement (Butler 384). Because there is no preparatory training for retirement, some people have problem facing their retire life. For them it becomes a time of emptiness, closure and fixedness. Ageing inflicts pain on the couple in the home area; for husbands, who enter old age and retire, home becomes an unfamiliar space and they become displaced as a result. Older people get fewer choices when it comes to changing the pattern of their lives.

In Albee, humanity in general undergoes anxiety and terrible sense of loss: "The generations move away from practicality towards emasculation; away from the energetic but amoral use of power toward an amoral but inoperative use of power" (Baxandall 85).

Albee, defining man's sense of loss in *A Delicate Balance*, states that the basic assumption of the play is "the perpetuation of the illusion that freedom of choice remains after a certain time. The point of the play was we lose ... we develop a kind of arthritis of the mind, of the morality, and change becomes impossible finally" (in Rutenberg 25-26). Metaphorically, Albee has Agnes point out how people get through life or rather how people waste their lives, and how it becomes too late for man to be redeemed. Many people do not pay much attention to their life; and when they start to pay attention it is usually too late: "Everything becomes ... too late, finally. You know it's going on ... up on the hill; you can see the dust, and hear the cries, and steel ... but you wait; and time happens. When you do go, sword, shield ... finally ... there's nothing there ... save rust; bones; and the wind" (164). This battle-metaphor helps to stage Albee's thematic concern in *A Delicate Balance*: the characters realize too late the meaninglessness of their existence, the nothingness of their familial relationships, as well as the emptiness of friendship.

Albee, in fact, concerns himself with the broken and distorted modern human relationships because of the prevailing materialism and the loss of valuable human values of love and hospitality. Family members, in such a society, long for love and a sense of contentment; however, they experience, instead, the bareness of their marriages and familial relationships. They suffer from rejection, fear, indifference, wasted opportunities and an acute sense of loss. Albee has Harry support his conviction stating: "There is ... so much ... over the dam, so many ... disappointments, evasions, I guess, lies maybe ... so much we remember we wanted, once ... so little that we've ... settled for ... we talk sometimes, but mostly ... no" (86). The deceptive nature of ambition results in broken human relationships. Fear is the main problem of all the characters in the play. What they all share is their common silent conspiracy to do nothing, to defer decisions and to avoid commitment. Julia's fear, for instance, is of maturity; Agnes' fear is of madness, old age and death; Harry's and Edna's fear is of nothingness and emptiness; and Tobias' fear is of risk, pain, responsibility and life.

Consequently the characters in the play willingly choose the state of inaction in their life. When, for example, Claire suggests the idea that Tobias may take all the family away from their "regulated grey life, dwindling before him" and may move to another city, Tobias replies: "it's ... it's too late, or something" (60). He does not give a chance to himself or to his family for a change. He does not choose to do something to help himself or his family. The characters are, thus, devoid of any will to modify or better their life. They maybe believe in the futility of action. They think that they can do nothing to stop their suffering; instead, they choose the passive state of withdrawal from life. However, even when one is not an active subject in life, one is still responsible for one's attitude; and that is why Albee's characters do not find relief.

Handling especially friendship and familial relationships, Albee exposes to what extents human relationships have been distorted, and how people cannot cope with each other. Gerry McCarthy comments: "Albee has the claims of friendship and family conflict and suggests that neither rests upon a secure moral base" (McCarthy 81). The characters in *A Delicate Balance* have lost sincere human relationships. They are, thus, isolated in their

separate shells rather than sincerely communicating with one other. Agnes and Tobias, for example, do not get pleasure from each other's company or discourse. Early in the play, sitting together and having glasses of drink, they seem to talk to each other; yet, they do not communicate anything at all. Tobias becomes uncomfortable and moves to another chair; the thing which irritates Agnes:

Agnes: Why are you moving?

Tobias: It's getting uncomfortable.

Agnes: Things get hot, move off, huh? Yes? (21)

Though they have been living together for more than thirty years; however, they are cold towards each other.

The sense of loss, the diminishing hopes, and the emotional bankruptcy of the characters are, theatrically, highlighted very early in *A Delicate Balance* by words and gestures such as: "tiny hint of a smile," "a small ... laugh," "little laugh," "small smile," "silence: then stony, firm," "paranoia," "schizophrenia" (3-4). Likewise, the first speech between Tobias and Agnes is about the probability of Agnes's madness. Again, their sense of frustration, ageing and withering away is verbalized by Agnes' remark to Tobias: "You have hope, only, of growing even older than you are in the company of your steady wife, your alcoholic sister-in-law and occasional visits ... from our melancholy Julia. (*A little sad*) That is what you have, my dear Tobias" (12). Albee depicts the human condition in *A Delicate Balance* as diminishing and degenerating. There is a sense of loss and deterioration running underneath the apparent security of the characters' life in their comfortable suburban house: Agnes meditates madness, Tobias is detached, Claire is alcoholic and Julia breaks her marital life on schedule once every three years. Therefore, "erosion is a basic process Albee develops in modern man's life" (McCarthy 80) .

A Delicate Balance is basically realistic in form, for Albee observes the unities of place, time and action. Moreover, it is conventionally divided into three acts and the action builds towards a climax then is resolved. The dramatic action concerns Tobias and Agnes, an upper-middle-class couple in their late fifties or early sixties, living in a comfortable suburban house. Agnes' alcoholic sister, Claire, lives with them as a permanent guest. These three people are disturbed by the coming of Julia, Agnes and Tobias' often-divorced daughter, and the couple, Harry and Edna, the family's childless friends who are inexplicably frightened at their own home. The dramatic question revolves thus around the coming of these intruders, who challenge the delicate balance of the family, and it is conventionally resolved at the end when they leave and the family regain their tenuous stability.

However, the play has a non-conventional dimension of representation. Brown notes that "*A Delicate Balance* appears realistic, and, indeed, is realistic in the beginning minutes, but, as the play progresses, the level of reality subtly changes and the spectator, although he may not realize it, begins to accept symbolic drama as realistic" (Brown 59-60). To begin with, the play, despite its surface realism, can be seen as an allegory presenting man's sense of existential loneliness and alienation from an authentically human life as well as the dead-end to which the family institution comes. The unnamed terror, which frightens Harry and Edna and disturbs the tenuous balance of Tobias' family, can be seen as a symbol of modern

man's painful sense of alienation and loss. This terror is referred to in the play as a disease or plague, to which nobody is immune.

In addition, the seemingly realistic setting has a metaphorical touch. Vos observes that "although [the play is] set in an Ibsenian living room, [it] is far more symbolic than the portrayal of the illusion of reality" (Vos 26). It is true that the setting of the play (the living room of a large and well-appointed suburban house) suggests the illusion of Realism; yet terror and inexplicable fear lurk under this surface realism. Moreover, there is no specific location stated for the play and the characters are known only by their first names, indicating their rootlessness in life. Weales feels that the family live "in a mansion in the suburbs of hell, that existential present so dear to contemporary writers in which life is measured in terms of loss, love by its failure, connection by its absence" (Weales 52). Although Agnes believes that her life and her marriage constitute a pleasant and safe emotional environment, a sense of loss and the failure of love are hidden under her appearance of stability.

Albee depends theatrically on language to dramatize his characters' plight. In other words, the dramatic event is reduced to an inactive presentation, a strategy which correlates with the thematic concern of the play, the diminishing hopes of humanity and the sense of loss and vacuity. Reinforcing this point Bigsby states that Albee's "subject -- the substitution of language for experience-- is equally his theatrical method. It is in and through language that his characters must find whatever salvation they can" (Bigsby 135). Cohn feels that "death lurks in the dialogue" (Cohn 157) of the characters while they discuss their predicament. Agnes speaks about becoming an aged person waiting for death: "Agnes Sit-by-the-fire, her mouth full of ribbons, her mind aloft, adrift; nothing to do with the poor old thing but put her in a bin somewhere" (4). At one point in the play Claire delineates by words a vivid picture of death: "Your insides are all green, and stink, and mixed up, and your eyes hurt and you're half deaf and your brain keeps turning off" (23). Tobias had his cat killed when it stopped liking him, and Claire suggests Tobias kill them all. Thus, the dialogue of the characters throws light on their sense of frustration, loss and meaninglessness in life. The characters are cut off from one another as well as from any meaningful human existence. They are exposed "on a lost weekend in declining and decaying October. Like autumn leaves, they celebrate drift, for they have forgotten how to cling" (Vos 26). The different members of Tobias' family suffer from a lack of self-achievement and they forget how to belong.

Rather than facing up to their deteriorating human reality the characters in *A Delicate Balance*, find their escape avenues from the plague that blights their lives in the apparently balanced habits of their day-to-day activities such as liquor, clubs, going to town, learning a foreign language or needle work. Yet, their sense of loss and defeat attacks and shocks them into seeing their disturbing human situation as it really is. Nevertheless, Tobias' family retreat willfully into their well-appointed house and illusions.

To begin with, Claire is a lost person who looks in vain for belonging. She does not have a home or a family of her own. Though not diagnosed as alcoholic, Claire resorts to Alcoholic Anonymous, seeking belonging and togetherness. However, she is not satisfied

and returns to stay with her sister and brother-in-law. She is hopeless and homeless but she is honest and perceptive of the whole situation.

Having been frustrated in life, Claire resorts to alcohol and perhaps promiscuity. She chooses the margins of human experience, becoming an objective observer in an attempt to make life easier. Claire's aversion to life is deliberate: "what I did not have in common with those people [A. A.] was that they were alcoholics, and I was not. That I was just drunk. That they could not help it; I could, and wouldn't. That they were sick, and I was merely ... willful" (26). Having been alienated from a genuine human life and denied a stable family, Claire hates almost everything including life and herself. Hers is an incurable state of frustration. Her bathing suit story, as well as the stage business of an accordion, pinpoint her need for recognition and togetherness.

Theatrically, Claire can be visualized as a chorus figure whom Albee employs "periodically as a quasi-narrator, sardonically commenting on the action" (Rutenberg 144). The use of a narrator helps to distance the audience from the dramatic event and thus to violate the illusion of Realism. For example, Claire laughingly remarks to Tobias during the critical moment of the family's dilemma of trying to decide whether or not to accept their friends: "The family cycle? Julia standing there ... *asserting*; perpetual brat, and maybe ready to pull a Claire. And poor Claire! Not much help there either, is there? And lookit Agnes, talky Agnes ruler of the roost, and maitre d', and licensed wife-silent. All cozy, coffee, thinking of the menu for the week, planning. Poor Toe" (149-150). Claire's verbal wit and comment help alienate the audience from an emotional identification with the dramatic event.

Harry and Edna, the family's friends, portray "the free-floating anxieties of the modern upper-middle class. They are aimless and tremulous and move everyone else out of their comfort zones" (Saratsiotis). As a childless couple Harry and Edna have been alienated from each other for a lifetime, and the senselessness of their familial life almost suffocates them at their empty house where they experience disappointment, evasions and maybe lies. As an Albee couple, Harry and Edna have lost genuine human communication and they have led an empty marital life. It seems that Harry, like Tobias, used to betray Edna with other women, and their sterile marital life becomes so void of mutual warmth that it becomes too fearful to remain in their house. They have "no past to sustain them or future to which they aspire. ... It is as if they were survivors of some devastation of the moral order. ... They hardly know to what universe or society they belong, the old having been so decimated that their memory apart from ache and disgust has become fragmentary, leaving them without sufficient energy to reconstruct anything new" (Clurman XX-XXI). Like the autumn leaves, Harry and Edna forgot how to belong to each other or to the rest of humanity.

Besides the emptiness of their marital life which frighteningly closes in on them, Harry and Edna are threatened by existential meaninglessness in their life. The unnamed terror which attacks them is probably their fear of ageing and the approach of death, for Harry has the "shortness of breath again", and he "can't breathe sometimes ... for just a bit" (39). Thus, it is arguably that their recognition of the meaningless destruction of their life has frightened and shocked them into an awareness of the futility of their existence. Death frightens the lonely ageing couple just as darkness terrifies a lost young boy, as Harry remarks. Harry and

Edna's terror, in Post's words, "is a vague, incommunicable kind of feeling. Perhaps, it symbolizes all the unspeakable fears of modern man, and especially man's fear of being alone and of being unable to communicate basically with any other living creature" (Post 164).

Owing to their sense of loneliness and alienation, Harry and Edna resort to the habits of their everyday life such as frequenting clubs, doing needle work or learning French, as an escape mechanism from their frightening human reality. However, 'terror' breaks into their falsely secure domain to terrify them: "We were ... sitting home It was all very quiet, and we were all alone ... and then ... nothing happened, but ... WE GOT ... FRIGHTENED ... we got scared. ... We couldn't stay there, and so we came here. You're our very best friends" (43 - 47). The inanity of Harry's and Edna's lives is staged by the pauses which Harry makes while he is relating what has happened at home. The silences during this scene are telling, and the use of hesitation as well as Edna's tears and distress, underline their sense of fear as well as the vacuity of their existence.

It could be that Albee wants to indicate that friendship is as meaningless as the family experience in modern America. Edna remarks that "Friendship *is* something like a marriage, is it not, Tobias? For better and for worse?" (117). Having been attacked by the unnamed terror which violates their defence mechanisms, Harry and Edna resort to friendship, seeking surroundings of love, relief and secure togetherness with their closest friends, Tobias and Agnes. Friendship, however, becomes superficial and no more than a meaningless label between the two couples. The insignificance of friendship is indicated by Claire, who, responding to Tobias' remark that Harry and Edna are "just ... passing through", comments "as they have been ... all these years" (88). There has not been a genuine, deep bond of love between the two family units. Once more Claire shows that Tobias and Harry have nothing in common, perhaps, except for betraying their wives with the same woman presumably Claire herself.

Harry and Edna are unwelcomed in the home of Tobias and Agnes. When they suddenly appear Agnes questions the reason why they came; wondering if they have been to the club or maybe they are having a party (42-43). When Harry told them that they were scared at home so they came to their "very best friends," Agnes states that they did the right thing, trying to keep herself under control with "a deep breath" (46). The visit of the very best friends becomes a problem for the family; their dinner is spoiled for them, as Agnes states: "If any of you have a stomach for it" (65). The friends are, moreover, rejected in the family: Tobias tries to dismiss them from his house though unwillingly and indirectly. It turns out that their forty-year-old friendship means nothing. It has no value in itself. They will possibly go on gathering together in clubs or in parties; yet when they face a serious problem or when they need help, they will not be supported by their friends. They do not care for each other's agonies. They do not bother themselves with the problems of other people, even the closest relatives or friends.

Friendship is valueless and Harry and Edna have come to realize that their problem cannot be solved by intruding into their friends' house. Subsequently, they decide to leave,

for they themselves would not accept Tobias and Agnes if the situation was reversed. It becomes too late, moreover, for Harry and Edna to lessen their sense of loss and lonesomeness for, in Albee's words, "as time keeps happening options grow less. Freedom of choice vanishes. One is left within illusion of choice" (in Rutenberg 163). Despite man's fear of "looking in a mirror", Harry and Edna come to realize that they have "come to the end of it [life]the one body you've wrapped your arms around ... the only skin you've ever known ... is your own -- and that it's dry ... and not warm" (163-164). They realize that their options are diminishing, and that they cannot have a breakthrough from their solitary skins. As a result they prefer to withdraw once more to the daily routine of their vacuous life.

However, the intrusion of Harry and Edna into Tobias' house challenges the delicate stability of the seemingly secure suburban house, to which the family retreat as a shelter from the terror of their age. Because Harry and Edna are "very much like Agnes and Tobias", as Albee remarks in his *dramatis personae*, because the lives of the two couples are so similar, and because no one in this family is immune, Tobias' family are most likely to be infected by their friends' vague but powerful malaise: their sense of existential loneliness and alienation from a significant human life. Agnes realizes that "it is not Edna and Harry who have come to us -- our friends, it is a disease," and adds "you either are immune to it ... or you fight it. If you are immune you, you wade right in, you treat the patient until he either lives or dies of it" (151). The advent of the friends with their 'disease', helps to shock the Tobias family into recognizing their death-in-life existence, as well as the destruction of their familial relationships such as parent-child and husband-wife. Subsequently, they are to choose either to face up to and accept their life as it really is or to retreat once more to their escape mechanisms.

In fact, Tobias has withdrawn from any commitment or engagement in meaningful experience. He chooses to coexist, not to participate actively, with others, and to escape when things get uncomfortable. For instance, with the early loss of his only son Tobias terminates any sense of intimacy with his wife and withdraws his masculine power from home. He deserts her bedroom and takes to sleeping in a separate room. Thus, Tobias is emotionally and physically isolated even from his family members. It is important to note that it is he who chooses his own emasculation, as Agnes reminisces: "When Teddy died? (pause) We *could* have had another son; we could have tried. But no ... those months -- or was it a year --? ... I think it was a year, when you spilled yourself on my belly, sir? 'Please? Please, Tobias?' No, you wouldn't even say it out: I don't want another child, another loss. 'Please? Please, Tobias?' And guiding you, *trying* to hold you in? " (137). Having been shocked by Teddy's death, the ultimate end of life, Tobias becomes averse to the physical world.

In her concern about her husband-wife relationship with Tobias as well as over the father-daughter bond within her family, Agnes is portrayed as a sympathetic wife and mother. For example, she blames Tobias for their failed sexual life, but Tobias is not only determined to quit his responsibility as a husband but also as a father. Again, Agnes criticizes him for his retreat from his responsibility towards Julia: "Each time that Julia comes ... do you send her back? Do you tell her, 'Julia, go home to your husband, try it again? Do you?"

No, you let it ... slip. It's your decision sir" (136). Agnes shows thus how she is ready to quit her role as a domineering, destructive Albee mother. Rutenberg notes that "It is the first time in an Albee play that the blame for whatever mess the American family is in, is placed with the father. Mom is not the usurper she was in the early plays; she has simply responded all these years out of a sense of duty, filling a position that has been vacated" (Rutenberg 159). Agnes becomes, in fact, the dominant partner only because of Tobias' deliberate withdrawal from this role.

Tobias is uninterested in his daughter or her marital problems. For example, he does not know whether or not Julia has another divorce. He has been cut off from his daughter for a lifetime because as with the passage of time, his emotional emasculation has turned him into a "cipher, and you've stayed there, I'm afraid -- very nice but ineffectual, essential, but not-really-thought-of, gray ... non-eminence" (63-64). Tobias' reluctance to engage himself in a vital father-daughter relationship is underscored by gesture and speech-pattern: "*(Not rising from his chair, talks more or less to himself)*: If I saw some point to it, I might ... break through to her, and say, 'Julia...', but then what would I say? 'Julia ...' Then, nothing" (33). Thus, the emptiness of Tobias' parent-child relationship is highlighted by his pauses and unfinished sentences.

Theatrically, the emotional sense of loss of the family is presented by the use of a parable. Tobias' cat story indicates aesthetically the violation of the fundamentally illusory conventions of Realism and thematically the failure of love among the characters. Tobias once had a cat, which after living some years with him stopped liking him. He tried to regain its love but in vain. Consequently, he hated it and had it killed. Now he regrets his act and feels guilty because he might have tried longer to win back its love. Tobias fails to reconcile himself with the animal and, instead, retreats from the experience. In other words, rather than being shocked into awareness of the human condition and into an acceptance of the animal by attaining contact with it, Tobias rids himself of his cat, preferring complete isolation and loss.

The death of the cat suggests the loss of love in Tobias' world. Tobias' failure to maintain a proper, successful husband-wife or father-daughter relationship is underlined by his inability to maintain the love of his pet animal. Roudane notes that "symbolically the story of the cat correlates to the lack of love in Tobias' world, for just as the cat responded indifferently to him, so Tobias responded indifferently to Agnes and Julia" (Roudane 113). Thus, the cat story helps, as a non-conventional device, to externalize the inner dimension of Tobias. The sense of loss and the failure of love in the family provoke Tobias' sense of guilt, for he feels that he did not try hard enough with the cat, or, by implication, with Agnes and Julia. Thus, his failure as a husband and a father can be accounted for by his self-imposed detachment, and by the gradual fading of emotion as Agnes puts it.

Agnes is central to the delicate balance prevailing in the family. Because Tobias has withdrawn from his responsibility as the patriarchal head of the family and because she cannot maintain an authentically human or family life, Agnes resorts to the superficial, tenuous stability of her family. She is seen at the very beginning of the play contemplating madness, yet she endeavors to remain sane in order not to destroy the family's fragile

balance. Agnes is concerned with the seemingly secure life of her family, and thus, she finds a shelter, albeit false, from the absurdity of the human condition: "when we keep something in shape, we maintain its shape -- whether we are proud of that shape, or not, is another matter -- we keep *it* from falling apart. We do not attempt the impossible. We maintain. We hold" (80). Agnes is not willing to attempt the impossible by confronting and accepting the absurdities of her life.

Theatrically, the delicate balance of the family, a balance which is challenged from beneath, is introduced to the audience by the comfortable mood of Agnes and Tobias' opening speech, which is disturbed by certain gestures as well as the topic they discuss. She "*speaks usually softly, with a tiny hint of a smile on her face,*" and he "*speaks somewhat the same way*" (3). Although the couple speak softly, they have only a tiny hint of a smile, which may mirror an inner sense of instability and lack of psychological tranquility, for the play "addresses the fear which lies behind the assurance of civility and the confident urgencies of daily routine" (Bigsby 140). The family is apparently secure but it is, in fact, suffering from a sense of loss and decay.

Challenged, perhaps, by the threat of ageing, Julia seeks refuge into her childhood. Her sense of displacement pinpoints the pain of ageing for a woman out of her gender role and hence out of place. Julia is a divorced woman without a home of her own to define her identity: for women, the home must come first (Saegert 96). Consequently, Julia must fight for a place to resettle. A woman who cannot conform to her conventionally designated gender role; namely as a wife and a mother, becomes displaced. Julia has lost her marital status which means that she has lost her assigned spatial boundary. What is worse for her is the uneasiness she feels over her unmarried aunt Claire who is doomed to be confined in a home that never belongs to her.

Time and again Julia breaks out of a marriage and returns to her parents' house. Like Harry and Edna, who are in need of a sense of belonging, Julia looks for "a special room with a night light, or the door ajar so you can look down the hall from the bed and see that Mommy's door is open" (Bigsby 92). Having broken her fourth marriage with Doug, who is thoroughly negative in his attitudes, Julia comes home seeking the comfort of her parents. However, the emotionally arid family establishment cannot lessen Julia's sense of loneliness. Her childhood room has been already usurped by the intrusion of Harry and Edna, and in lieu of comfort and contentment she "has taken to drinking in the morning" at her parents' house (Bigsby 168).

Because the family are held together only by blood ties without any genuine affection or love, they become alienated from one another. Albee makes Claire verbalize this sense of love-loss within the family when she tells Tobias: "Love is not the problem. You love Agnes and Agnes loves Julia and Julia loves me and I love you. We all love each other " (40). Ironically, Claire means that they do not actually love one another, they do not even care for one another. Moreover, love is replaced by hatred: Claire at one point remarks that she hates herself and everybody else. Agnes perhaps hates Claire; possibly she senses her sister's infidelity.

Julia's sense of deprivation, which has accompanied her for a lifetime, started early in her life, probably after the birth of her brother, Teddy. At that time she felt that she lost her parents' love. Agnes reminiscences: "Teddy's birth, and how she felt unwanted, tricked ... All the schools we sent her to, and did she fail in them through hate ... or love?" (109-110). Moreover, like her parents, Julia's four husbands have neglected her. Having been felt unwanted, Julia as a little girl attempted to regain her parents' attention and love by suffering minor injury, or even by failing school intentionally, and as a mature woman by breaking her marriage regularly in order to come back home looking, in vain, for parental love and contentment. Hence, Julia has been tortured by a sense of alienation and loss for a long time.

Having returned home after breaking her fourth marriage, Julia discovers that she is dispossessed by Harry and Edna who are already accommodated in her former room. Julia has thus come face to face with the intense existential anxiety symbolized by Harry and Edna, and, therefore, with her eternal sense of alienation and displacement. She is still unable to belong, to regain what is hers. Therefore, she must fight for her room, which symbolizes her need for contentment and belonging. McCarthy feels that Albee's play "is a battle for the home," (McCarthy 81) which is, in fact, no more than an illusion, a lost dream. Julia fights to prevent Harry from getting the family's liquor on the sideboard, and later on she appears with her father's pistol threatening the intruders, and screaming hysterically, "getthemoutofheregetthemoutofhere-Getthemoutofhere-Getthemoutofheregetthemoutofher"(113). She appeals to her parents, firstly to Mother and secondly to Daddy, to help her defend what is hers. However, they offer her little help. Tobias, for example, declares that Harry and Edna are their friends who have the right to belong in their home.

Theatrically, Julia's plight and the failure of love is highlighted by role-playing and sex reversal, the dramatic devices which disturb the surface realism of the play, and which help stage the hidden imbalances within the family. In the second act, on the Saturday night, at which the hidden sordid realities of the family are ritualistically staged. The objective observer, Claire remarks that "this is going to be a festive night -- from the smell of it, and sister Claire wants to do her part" (84). To do her part, Claire introduces the audience to this festive occasion in the family with her accordion. During this night, Julia's displacement, especially at her parents' home, is underlined by the sex-reversal of her parents, for Agnes becomes Tobias and Tobias becomes Agnes who says: "I shall try to hear you out, but if I feel my voice changing in the middle of your ... rant, you will have to forgive my male prerogative", and when Tobias comes in, she tells Julia "your mother has arrived. Talk to him! " (58-59). Theatrically, this underlines Julia's failure to belong as well as the chaotic family life of her parents. Likewise, the disruption of the family is presented by confusing the identities of the two couples: Harry becomes Tobias and makes Agnes a drink, while Edna slaps Julia out of her sense of duty as her godmother. This again underscores Julia's sense of loss and failure to find her need for love and belonging. This device of the shifting roles challenges the tenuous balance of the family, for it helps them to shed the superficial signs of their identities. In fact, Agnes and Tobias are only nominally Julia's parents and they are not effectual enough to provide her with actual parental love and guidance. Their identities as

true parents are decaying and theatrically reversed into the identities of their lonely, terrified friends.

Thus, the advent of Harry and Edna, as well as Julia, challenges the tenuous balance of the family and brings to the surface the hidden absurdities of their life. However, they choose not to confront or accept the sordid reality of their condition. It is true that Tobias has gained an insight because he is able to “sit and watch. ... can have ... so clear a picture, [and] see everybody moving through his own jungle ... an insight into all the reasons;” nevertheless, “when the daylight comes [and] the pressures will be on ... all the insight won’t be worth a damn” (Bigsby *Edward Albee* 128). Unlike Jerry in *The Zoo Story* or George in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, who are able to face up to the absurdities of their human experience, Tobias and Agnes are not willing to transcend their stagnant way of life. Moreover, it becomes too late for them to have a more authentic human life. In Albee’s words, “by the time Tobias is able to take a stand and make a choice and say ‘yes, and come live with us’, the opportunity, the options have been removed from him. He can’t do it ... and so the terror in the play is about waste, yes, waste” (in Roudane 10).

Although Tobias begs Harry and Edna to stay, he does not do it out of love or genuine friendship, but rather in order not to feel guilty once more as happened before with the cat. Again, the cat parable can be used theatrically to underline Tobias’ inner feelings. He confesses that he does not love them, yet he asks them to stay out of his recognition that they have the right to. Through his adherence to the empty frame of friendship, Tobias wants to escape the nothingness of this relationship with his friends. In all, his desperate attempt to keep Harry and Edna is not motivated by love or by his immunity to their acute spiritual malaise, an immunity which would have enabled him to extend curative assistance to them. On the contrary, his attempt is motivated by his need for a mask of illusion and a delicately balanced relationship, false as it is, to hide from a painful sense of disorientation and loss. Thus, he willfully chooses detachment and retreat. His tearful pleading with his friends, theatrically underscores his need for the illusory comfort of false life-rituals: “BY GOD ... YOU STAY!! (Pause) STAY! (Softer) Stay! (soft, tears) Stay. Please? Stay? (Pause) Stay? Please? Stay?” (162).

The characters in *A Delicate Balance* are not likely to rid themselves of their fears or their sense of defeat. It is noteworthy that Tobias’ recognition of his family’s absurd situation happens at night. However, “when the daylight comes again ... comes order with it” (170). With the rise of the day the momentarily expelled demon comes once more, and the family returns to its precarious state of stability. Consequently, there is no hope of attaining a sense of release of their fears. The family’s situation is circular and their escape mechanism is being continually renewed.

Bigsby feels that “Agnes’ expansive welcome of the returning day is clearly Albee’s ironical comment on the ease with which the individual rejects new insight” (Bigsby *Edward Albee* 104-105). The day-to-day monotony of life is the form of sanctuary for which the family opts. Thus, the rising day, is an ironical gesture of the family’s retreat into the illusory security of their daily habits. This irony is reinforced at the end of the play by the gesture of their early morning drinking. Likewise, the conventional, linear time movement from Friday

to Sunday morning arguably alludes to Jesus' resurrection. Yet, it is also another irony since there is no hope of rebirth for the family who are all determined to escape to the delicate balance of their family life and will soon forget any other reality, because with the daylight they invariably restore the surface order of their situation.

Although the delicate stability of the family is shaken, and although they come to realise the vacuity of their existence, it becomes too late for them to make a fresh start. Accordingly, "the image of the new dawn bringing enlightenment and grace had become merely parodic, one more convenient illusion, one more metaphor behind which to shelter" (Bigsby 135). Thus, the possibility of an optimistic future which the couple are allowed in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* diminishes in *A Delicate Balance* with the family's wilful retreat.

Albee, thus, in *A Delicate Balance* draws in his drama a picture of the family as a dying institution. His play *All Over* (1971), whose dramatic action concerns the dying process of the Father-Husband-Lover-Friend, underscores the continuous erosion of the human values of love and compassion. It shows, also, the dead-end at which the family arrives. Death, either physical or metaphorical, stands in the play as a stage image for the loss of contentment and belonging in modern America as Albee visualizes it. Bigsby feels that "the dying that concerns Albee has less to do with physical extinction than the decay of passion, commitment, meaning. *All Over* is an elegy for lost innocence," (Bigsby 143) in modern man's reality.

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