

Embracing the Absurd of a Meaningless Life: Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*

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Abstract

The passing of time, the development of technologies and services and the emancipation of women are just some of the elements that have brought their contribution to the shaping of the new American family. In the modern American family, everything has suffered immense transformations, starting with the role reversal between the husband and wife and ending with the altered relationships with the other members of the family.

*The American home has become just a simple house, a space in which love, affection, mutual respect, comfort, and security are no longer its attributes. The home is not a shelter anymore, but a hiding place; a place in which the spouses, who have grown so accustomed to each other that they have nothing else to talk about, choose to live their meaningless lives, waiting for the final moment of existence – death. One such couple, who fears and denies reality and tries to escape into the comfortable world of illusion, is the one Edward Albee presents in *A Delicate Balance*.*

The present paper aims at awakening the readers' consciousness regarding their condition as human beings "trapped" in an absurd world, the purpose being that of bringing forth the social function of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Key words: American cultural studies, American family, Modern American drama, social function, Theatre of the Absurd.

A Delicate Balance opens with the two main characters, Agnes and Tobias, who spend their time indoors, in their library-living room. They are approaching sixty and they live with Claire, Agnes's sister, with whom Tobias once had an affair. They drink and discuss about Claire's drinking problems and about the possibility of Agnes going mad someday.

They seem to live a calm, monotonous, and balanced life. However, the balance of their home is soon ruined by three arrivals, by people whom they perceive as disturbing elements. First, there is Claire, then comes Julia, their daughter, who returns "from the latest of her marital failures" (Bigsby 1968: 224). The last who come to their house are Edna and Harry, the so-called best friends. All these characters come "in search of comfort, hoping to find some refuge from

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the sudden crisis in their own lives" (Bigsby 1968: 224). However, these arrivals do nothing more than to temporarily disturb the balance Agnes always says has to be maintained, no matter the price. In order to keep this balance, to which Agnes and Tobias have grown accustomed over the years, they ignore Claire who, once categorized as an alcoholic, can easily be left aside. As for Julia, they prefer not to discuss too much about her fourth failed marriage.

Instead, what they cannot do is ignore Edna and Harry, who have become frightened and have come to spend the night at their house. The fabricated, unnatural equilibrium of the house is ruined by their simple arrival. Not being used to having guests in the house, Agnes starts acting strangely when it seems to her that some things have been placed somewhere else in the room. However, she is relieved when Edna tells her that the things are still in the room, but placed in a different position.

The presence of Edna and Harry in their house does much more damage than Agnes and Tobias could have imagined. Their arrival makes them realize how estranged have they become in time. Living separate lives, each of them having a room of one's own, Agnes considers her husband a stranger in her bedroom:

Le temps perdu. I've never understood that; *perdu* means lost, not merely... past, but it was nice to have you there, though I remember, when it was a constancy, how easily I would fall asleep, pace my breathing to your breathing, and if we were touching! ah, what a splendid cocoon that was. But last night - what a shame, what a sadness - you were a stranger, and I stayed awake (Albee 2008: 92).

Second of all, Harry and Edna bring with themselves that fright, that terror, the "nothingness itself" (Vos 1973: 83). Driven by the "emptiness of their own relationship" (Sykes 1973: 453), the two hurry to their best friends' house, where they are perceived as intruders. Even though Tobias admits that their "forty-year friendship may have grown to love" (Kingsley 1973: 78), he still does not want them in because, he too, in his turn, has withdrawn from the real life, especially after his son's death. However, the situation forces the sixty-year-old couple to receive their "twins". Not being used to having other people in the house, Agnes and Tobias feel uncomfortable and confused, even if they try to be calm.

Pushed by his wife, who considers that men must deal with the moral problems, Tobias must decide whether or not to let them stay, "knowing that the 'disease' they carry is contagious and that infection in the household will likely upset the balance" (Weales 2005: 32). As the man of the house, he must at least try to push away "the plagues", as Agnes calls Harry and Edna's arrival, especially since Agnes seems to realize that the two friends resemble too much with her and her husband.

In *A Delicate Balance*, all characters are cheaters; all of them try one way or another to escape the reality of their lives. Claire finds comfort in alcohol – which has always been a “solution” for many people – Julia runs back home, just like a scared child, trying to find comfort in her parents’ arms, and Edna and Harry leave the threatening atmosphere that has installed in their home only to face it again, this time, in the house of Agnes and Tobias, in the shape of an invisible mirror that stands between the two couples. They all try to escape “the anesthesia of contemporary life” (Bigsby 1968: 224), escape which Agnes sees possible in her speculation of the possibility of going mad. This “protective schizophrenia” (Bigsby 1968: 226) is her last resort.

Nonetheless, even though scared by the reality she sees in others, Agnes does not abandon her ship, but continues to be the “brave sailor” who knows that when the night is over, and the nightmare is gone, things go back to how they were before the unfortunate “event”. “And when the daylight comes again... comes order to it” (Albee 2008: 122), the exact order that she has so desperately tried to maintain, the so much desired balance.

The recollection of their past, the inability to fall asleep next to the man she has chosen as husband prove that their spiritual connection does not exist anymore. The blessing of the intimate companionship no longer characterizes this couple. The idea of growing old together fades away for Agnes and Tobias. Failing to give and receive love, they remain bitter and choose to lie to themselves, believing their life is perfect as it is.

As we can see, the “home” of the modern American family of the twentieth century is but an empty shell; a space devoid of meaning and feelings, a faded image of what once has been a comforting and nurturing shelter for all the members of the family.

Through *A Delicate Balance*, Edward Albee does much more than to present dysfunctional families, in which love is the love of undisturbed routine and where comfort is the one offered by the alcoholic drinks; through his play, the American playwright draws our attention to the fact that human relationships desperately need to be reestablished. “In this sense, the Theatre of the Absurd is the true theatre of our time” (Esslin 1960: 6).

Acting like a mirror placed between the audience and the stage, the play, through its apparent “nonsensical” exposure of the situation, succeeds in making the public think outside the box, think about what *is* going on, not about what *happens*; it succeeds in making them question everything they see and hear on the stage, hoping that this will raise their awareness towards their own condition, that of modern human beings, “trapped” in an “absurd society”. Once the public arrive to this conclusion, once they identify the absurd in their own existence, only then they can choose to react against it or not, as the end of *A Delicate Balance* points out. Whatever this choice might be, we can be sure that it is a *conscious* one.

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