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REVIEW ARTICLE

**ABSURDITY IN A DELICATE BALANCE BY
EDWARD ALBEE**

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Absurdity in a Delicate Balance by Edward Albee

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Albee's play which deals with the troubled and hollow family ties, is *A Delicate Balance*. This play concerns with the family of four – a passive husband, an imperious wife, an alcoholic sister-in-law and a much divorced daughter – their problems are exacerbated when they are visited by their friends (a couple named Harry and Edna), who have experienced a nameless terror. The balance of security, happiness and comfort is so delicate, in this family, that it gets upset when the friends move in the family with their terror because terror, for them, is infectious like plague. The play is set in the living room of a suburban house, and the action is centered on six characters. C.W.E. Bigsby comments, "These characters are linked either by familial ties or by the familiarity of long association, which they falsely confuse with "love". Against this setting they act out a ritual which, like those in Eliot's play and Albee's own earlier work, forces them to face the specters of their own fears".

The relationships in this play, too, are not based on emotions and love, but on need. Agnes and Tobias (the central couple) are approaching sixty, and they have evolved a workable relationship. This relationship has left them fundamentally estranged from one-another; while protecting them from loneliness and solitude Agnes's sister, Claire, also lives in their house. Claire is another reason of the frustration in the family. She is alcoholic and once upon a time, she and Tobias were having sexual intimacy. Agnes comments on this in the very beginning of the play: "the one thing sharper than a serpent's tooth is a sister's ingratitude". In order to upset this "delicately" balanced home, Julian – the daughter of the house – intrudes because she is "having another divorce" and "it is come home time". She is coming home after the failure of her fourth marriage and Claire remarks "Right on schedule, once every three years." Julian, unable to manage her life and marriage bonds, gives various futile reasons for these troubled marriages, which Claire shares with us:

Philip loved to gamble.

Charlie loved the boys,

Tom went after women,

Douglas . . .

Agnes and Tobias's son, Teddy, had died in childhood. After the death of this son, and facing this "unreal time, Tobias was so frustrated and scared that he ceased to have sexual relations with his wife. Tobias with fear of responsibility and potential loss of another child, moved into a separate room.

Agnes is living with this sudden diminution of their marriage, which left her bitter and cold. Tobias made a series of passive choices – literal withdrawal during sex and, eventually, withdrawal into another bedroom. Agnes, in the beginning, was unable to voice those pleas but after thirty years she claims: "We could have had another son; we could have tried. But no . . ." (DB 101). This utterance of unfulfilled desires brings in our mind Lady Brett Ashley's words which she says to Jake Barnes in the taxi during their last meeting: "We could have had such a good time together" (Hemingway, *Sun Also Rises* 247). But Jake's response that "It would be pretty to think so" (247) makes it clear that once the time is gone then it is very difficult to bring those moments back. If Agnes could have asked for what she is demanding now thirty years back then the situation would have been much better. Agnes now says, "Don't leave me then, like that. Not again, Tobias. Please? I can take care of it: we won't have another child, but please don't . . . leave me like that." Such . . . silent . . . sad, disgusted . . . love" (DB 101).

Tobias and Agnes' marriage is facing a psychological problem, as both of them are repressing their desires and are feeling an unnamed fear. Due to this fear they are unable to take any initiative to fix their problematic marriage. This is why they first stop interaction with one another, and finally move to separate rooms and deny having sexual relation. This denial of action imbalances the delicate balance of their marriage. From the psychological point-of-view sex is not only important as a physical need but is an emotional fulfillment too. Rollo May gives a

psychological interpretation of the value of sex in human life and remarks:

Sex in our day is often used in the service of security: it is the readiest way to overcome your own apathy and isolation. The titillation of the sexual partner is not only an output for nervous tension, but demonstrates one's own significance; if a man is able to arouse such feelings in the other, he proves he is alive himself. (42)

Thus, the denial of sexual relations from Tobias' side made Agnes feel that she is unable to arouse feelings in the other significant and thus, from psychological point-of-view, she ceases to exist.

Thus, in this play, too, son plays an important role as he seems to be the root-cause of their crumbling family. Actually the son is only a medium to culminate their already frustrated and imbalanced marriage which has been broken since the very beginning. John M. Clum remarks:

So at the heart of this marriage, as in so many Albee marriages, is a dead or missing son. The parents in *The American Dream* dismember their son, then seek a replacement who will be physically perfect, but passive. The new son is as spiritually damaged as his twin was physically maimed. The son in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* is non-existent, which is a blessing since George and Martha no doubt would physically destroy him long before his twenty first birthday. A mother's rejection of her gay son is the crucial action in *Three Tall Women*. Would Teddy – a son – have kept Agnes and Tobias's marriage alive? (pp. 66-67)

The simple and honest answer to this question is "no" because the bond between Agnes and Tobias is so weak that if this would have not been the reason of their "separate bedrooms", there would have been another reason for the gap.

Arrival of their "best friends" Harry and Edna, who are "very frightful people" (DB 82), forces Tobias back into bed with Agnes, but there is no talk, no sex. The husband and wife feel strange in presence of each other:

AGNES. There was a stranger in my room last night.

TOBIAS. Who?

AGNES. You.

TOBIAS. Ah.

AGNES. It was nice to have you there.

TOBIAS. (Slight Smile)

AGNES. *Le Temps Perdu*. I've never understand 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! Oh, what a splendid cocoon that was . But last night – what a shame, what sadness – you were a stranger, and I stayed awake. (DB 92)

Tobias also felt the same kind of strangeness and said:

TOBIAS. [. . .] I almost went into my room . . . by habit . . . by mistake rather, but then I realized that your room is my room because my room is Julian's because Julian's room is . . . (DB 93)

This type of crumbling marriage leads to many compromises, many evasions and various lies.

In this house the roles of the husband and wife are imbalanced. Agnes puts the light upon the roles of man and woman in a family. She says: "We follow. We let ours . . . men decide the moral issues [. . .] whatever you decide . . . I'll make it work; I'll run it for you so you'll never know there's been a change in anything" (DB 97). She wants to be alone with her husband, and desires for a contented life but when her husband takes no initiative she gets frustrated. As she contemplates the few remaining years of her marriage, the situation becomes mentally and physically unlivable and she feels as if she will "lose" her mind "one day". She has been kind and understanding too long and let the things go as they are supposed to. But ultimately she wants Tobias to do something, she makes him understand how Julian comes back home every time from a failed marriage and he, being a father, should have suggested her to try. She makes him realize that his "house is not in order, sir. It's full to bursting" (DB 96). She, also, points out to Julian that for men there are only two problems in life – money and death – even though there are so many things in this world to have their attention. Tobias, a successful businessman during the years he spent in the city, was non-committal on the home front; and the death of his son bothered him so much that he just ignored the home. Thus, this play which "is a drama about marriage" has "little shouting and no breaking of bottles – just a modicum of hysterics" (Stenz 71). But in a healthy husband-wife relationship a little shouting and breaking of bottles is required. Tobias and Agnes' incapability to complaint, to fight turns their relationship tasteless and this passivity becomes the root cause of their problematic familial ties.

Tobias, is in the center of the circle formed by his family and friends in which everyone appeals to him for something which he finds himself inadequate to provide them. Julia wants her room back, Agnes desires to maintain the stability in her household, Claire appeals for the love they once shared, and his "best-friends" (Harry and Edna) want "comfort". Tobias' helplessness is the basic reason of the frustration. Gilbert M. Porter points out:

Since every appeal can be granted only at the expense of some other appeal, and since Tobias

genuinely desires not to hurt anyone, or to be unfair, he practices his characteristic habit of circumspection. His house is full, a crisis is building, he is unable to avert it, but he thinks he at least can defer it, hoping that somehow everything will resolve itself miraculously. (173)

But this inaction makes the situation worst.

This is why when Harry and Edna - their "frightened friends" - come for comfort and security, Tobias is unable to ask them anything and these "intruders" enter in the house. With their arrival the terror threatens to destroy Agnes and Tobias's world. Later on the frightened couple explains the reason of being terrified:

HARRY (Looks at Edna). I . . . I don't know quite what happened then; we . . . we were . . . it was all very quite, and we were all alone . . .

[. . .] and then . . . nothing happened but, but . . .

[. . .] . . . nothing at all happened , but . . .

EDNA (Open weeping, loud). WE GOT . . . FRIGHTENED.

(Open sobbing no one moves)

HARRY (Quiet wonder. Confusion). We got scared.

EDNA (Through her sobbing). WE WERE . . . FRIGHTENED.

HARRY. There was nothing . . . but we were very scared. [. . .]

EDNA. We . . . were. . . terrified. (DB46)

What this explains is crucial to understand playwright's overall intention. The terror which Harry and Edna drag with them into Tobias and Agnes's house is a "plague" because having disturbed their own placidity, now they are disturbing others' life. It is the failure of love and fear of isolation which is disturbing them. Harry and Edna's emphasis on "nothing" depicts the emptiness that is pervading in their relationships and household. John M. Clum says: "The 'nothing' that terrifies Harry and Edna is in great part their marriage, the spiritually empty household, the result of their failed marriage" (69). It seems as if, in the journey of their lives, these two characters are face to face with the absurdity and the hollowness of the world they have created around themselves. Harry's heart-attack is imminent, and we know that the death and separation is close. So, now they have nothing to look forward, nothing to hope for, and in this situation they break-out. Under the logo of "best friends" they enter the house of Tobias and Agnes, because they just

need a family which can support them in the hour of need. But no one is able to support others, as Tobias has failed to provide this to Agnes, Agnes to her sister, Tobias and Agnes to their daughter and now to their friends as well.

In spite of getting any security and support at Agnes and Tobias' house the entry of these "frightened", "scared" and "terrified" friends also threaten the delicate balance of Tobias and Agnes's house, and disturbs their "sense of well-being". First of all their much "misunderstood" daughter, who has also returned to her house for security and warmth after leaving her fourth husband, wants her womb like room back from these "intruders". The room symbolizes comfort and warmth, as from this room Mommy's room is visible which gives a comfort to the dweller. Claire puts what they want in the following words:

CLAIRE. Comfort

(Sees JULIA doesn't understand)

Warmth. A special room with a night light, or door ajar so you can look down the hall from the bed and see that Mommy's door is open. (DB 74)

Albee depicts loneliness which has perturbed Harry and Edna, and also shows Julian's mental disturbance who has just come after leaving her fourth husband. Thus alienation, Albee believes, creates a vacuum in the lives of people which petrifies everyone. Before Harry and Edna's intrusion at least some balance was there in Tobias and Agnes' place, but this couple brought with them not peace, but a terrifying alienation which imbalances the life of Tobias and Agnes. Harry and Edna seem to be a hopeless couple which takes us back to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, as for them whole life seems to be absurd, and poses the question about their existence. The problem is when you live in alienation for a long time you are disturbed with the unexpected arrival of anyone who threatens the alienation and creates a strange kind of calm which is unendurable. Thus two couples and a divorced girl suffer from the futility of existence and try to find some comfort in each other's physical presence which, according to Albee, is in vain. The physical presence cannot help to stable the mental disturbance. This mystery can only be solved by the mind itself, as the loneliness is the creation of mind not body. Milton rightly wrote:

One who brings

A mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time.

The mind is its own place, and in itself

Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.
(*Paradise Lost* 12)

For psychological comfort, Julian wants her cave like room back and the "intruders" are not leaving it. She wants Tobias to do something about it and asks him to "Get them out of here" (DB 87). But her father, as usual, is incapable of taking an action because of his indecisiveness, so Julia starts fighting with the guests and asks them "HAVE YOU COME TO STAY FOR.

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