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The Sense of Loss in Edward Albee's A Delicate Balance (1966)

During the years 1945 – 1955 Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams were America's most prominent playwrights. They enriched the American theatre for a decade: Williams, with his poetic naturalism, presented an image of the American South, whereas Miller contributed his well-timed social criticism (Debuscher 5). However, the American theatre had been suffering from a certain decline by the time Albee's first play, *The Zoo Story* (1959), appeared: "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).

During the early 1960's, Edward Albee seemed to be the dramatist in whom America could put its faith. Whereas *The Zoo Story*, produced first in Berlin in 1959 and Off-Broadway in 1960, introduced Edward Albee as America's promising playwright, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) achieved a great success on Broadway and received two awards: the New York Drama Critics' Award and the Tony Award as the best play in the 1962-1963 season. 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 and childlessness in an Albee play highlight the bankruptcy of the American way of life. Albee, as he remarks in his preface to *The American Dream*, is mainly interested in condemning the substitution of the artificial for the authentic in human relationships. His drama shows, again as he himself 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). However, he is not as pessimistic as the European absurdist dramatists because he calls mainly for man to rid himself of illusions, to open his eyes in order to see clearly his imperfection and to accept the human situation as it really is with courage and love which needs to be renewed continually

The purpose of this paper is to examine modern man's sense of loss as dramatised by Albee in his play *A Delicate Balance*. It becomes clear from the dramatic action of the play that it is not possible for Tobias and Agnes, the main characters of the play, to attain some sort of redemption and salvation, for they willfully prefer withdrawal. In *All Over* (1971), an Albee later play, the picture becomes gloomier, because it is only physical and spiritual death that is left for man at the end of the play. In Albee humanity "undergoes anxiety and terrible barrenness 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" (Baxanda 85). Tobias' family and their friends in *A Delicate Balance* are overwhelmed by frustration, melancholy and the decay of love.

Albee, defining his thematic concern 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). Accordingly, *A Delicate Balance* can be seen as a dramatization of Albee's view that modern man is denied any kind of redemption. Metaphorically, Albee has Agnes point out how it becomes *too late* for modern man to be redeemed: "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 his 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. Nevertheless, in lieu of confronting the inanity which they become aware of during the course of the play, the characters retreat willingly once more into their illusions.

Thus, in *A Delicate Balance* as well as in *All Over*, in Bigsby's words, "the individual cannot find definition through resistance, society [can] no longer be redeemed by individuals restored to a sense of their own responsibility to one another and to the real" (Bigsby 144). These plays vividly record man's sense of deprivation as well as the hopelessness of the individual to attain any sense of contentment and self-fulfillment.

Theatrically, the diminishing hopes, sense of loss and the emotional bankruptcy of the characters are 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 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" (McCarthy 80) in modern man's life.

Artistically, *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 livingroom, [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 dramatise 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 waste 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 a 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 was not satisfied and returned 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 visualised 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 as a childless couple have been alienated from each other for a lifetime, and the senselessness of their familial life almost suffocates them at their empty house: "Edna and I ... there's ... 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. We don't ... 'like.' ... I've always been a little shy -- gruff, you know, and ... shy. And Edna isn't ... happy" (158-159). 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 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 their recognition of the meaningless destruction of their life that has frightened and shocked them into an awareness of the futility of their existence. Death frightens the lonely 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 deteriorating 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, pinpoint 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 except for betraying their wives with the same woman presumably Claire herself.

Friendship is valueless and Harry and Edna have come to realise 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 realise 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 realise 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 realises 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 recognising 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, after the death of his son Teddy, Tobias stops sleeping with his wife. 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, like George, becomes averse to the physical world.

In his detachment Tobias anticipates also The Son in *All Over*. The Son has similarly withdrawn from vital participation in life and takes instead to the habit of his unimportant job at the Best Friend's office. Although the Son does not like his job or 'feel part of it', he finds in it his escape: "It's a way of getting through from ten to six, and avoiding all I know I'd be doing if I didn't have it ... (*smiles a bit*) those demons of mine" (*All Over* 60). Like Tobias, the Son, as an Albee male-figure, leads a spiritually moribund life. He is emotionally emasculated and despite his shock by the death of his father, it is too late for him to be redeemed.

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 criticises 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 crisis 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 externalise 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. This reductive process in the family reaches its peak in *All Over* where the characters gather together as Wife, Daughter, Son, Mistress and Best Friend only to witness the death of their important man, a process of dying which highlights their own death-in-life existence.

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 tranquillity, 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.

Julia seeks refuge from the threat of her fearful human reality in her childhood. Time and again she 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" (Bigsby 168). at her parents' house. Because the family are held together only by blood ties without any genuine affection or love, they become alienated from one another.

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?" (Bigsby 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 symbolised by Harry and Edna, and, therefore, with her eternal sense of alienation and disorientation. She is still unable to belong, to regain what is hers. Therefore, she must fight for her room, which symbolises 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 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 disorientation, 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 stability 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 wilfully 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 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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Abstract

The Sense of Loss in Edward Albee's A Delicate Balance (1966)

This paper focuses on studying modern man's sense of loss as dramatised by Edward Albee in his play *A Delicate Balance* (1966). It becomes clear from the dramatic action of the play that it is not possible for the characters of the play to attain self-fulfillment and contentment for they willfully prefer escape. In *All Over* (1971), a later play, Albee gives us, as an audience, a gloomier picture of the human reality; nothing left for modern man except physical and spiritual death as the end of the play suggests.

The dramatic action of *A Delicate Balance* concerns Tobias and Agnes, an upper-middle-class couple in their late fifties or early sixties, living in a comfortable suburban house. Agnes' sister, Claire, lives too with them permanently. These three are disturbed by the coming of Julia, Tobias and Agnes' often-divorced daughter, and the couple, Harry and Edna, the family's childless friends who vaguely frightened at their own home. The dramatic event revolves, thus, around the coming of these intruders, who threaten the delicate balance of Tobias' family.

Although the delicate stability of the family is shaken, and although they come to realize the vacuity of their existence, it becomes impossible for them to make a fresh beginning. Rather, they retreat restoring their tenuous stability, preferring the surface of their situation. Consequently, there is no hope of attaining a sense of release from their fears. The human situation, thus as suggested by the play, is circular and escape mechanism is being continually renewed.

ملخص البحث

"الشعور بالضيق في مسرحية إدوارد ألبى "التوازن الدقيق" ١٩٦٦م

تدرس هذه المقالة شعور الانسان فى العصر الحديث بالضيق كما جاء فى مسرحية "التوازن الدقيق" التى كتبها الكاتب المسرحى ادوارد ألبى فى ١٩٦٦م حيث يرى الكاتب فى هذه المسرحية استحالة تحقيق الذات أو الشعور بالرضا لدى شخصياته الذين يختاروا اراديا التقهقر والهرب بدلا من المواجهة، وفى مسرحية لاحقة لمسرحية "التوازن الدقيق" والتى كتبها نفس الكاتب فى ١٩٧١م بعنوان "انتهى كل شىء" يعرض لنا ألبى بصورة أكثر قتامة كيف أن الانسان فى العصر الحديث لم يتبقى له مجازا سوى الموات المعنوى والمحسوس بلغة نهاية المسرحية.

تدور أحداث مسرحية "التوازن الدقيق" حول شخصية توبايز وزوجته أجنس من الطبقة الوسطى وفى آخر الخمسينيات أو أوائل الستينيات من عمرهما ويسكنان بأحد الضواحي الراقية. تقيم معهما أيضا وبصفة دائمة أخت الزوجه كبير، ثم تقتحم حياة هؤلاء الأشخاص الثلاث والمتخفين من مخاوف وقلق حيواتهم وراء روتينية الحياة اليومية وبعض الأئنة الأخرى بنتهما جوليا كثيرة الطلاق من أزواجه وكثيرة العودة لمنزل طفولتها، ويأتى أيضا هرى وزوجته ادنا أصدقاء الأسرة الذين لم ينجبا أطفالا والذين انتابهما شىء من الهلع والخوف الغير مفسر فى منزلهما الخاص بهما، فيتركانه لمنزل أصدقائهم. ويعتبر مجيء هؤلاء الثلاث لمنزل توبايز مركز الحدث المسرحى حيث يؤثر ذلك سلبيا على التوازن الهش لحياة هؤلاء الأشخاص المتخفين من متاعب حياتهم وراء غللات رقيقة من التنكر والهرب، ورغم سقوط بعض الأئنة ورغم ادراك الشخصيات لعبثية وعدم جدوى حياتهم إلا أنه كان سقوطا مؤقتا حيث لم يستطع أى من الشخصيات مواجهة أو قبول واقعهم الإنسانى المرير لكى ينتقلوا ربما لواقع أفضل وربما بداية جديدة، بل تفضل الشخصيات الإنسحاب واستعادة أئنة الهرب التى إعتادوها فى روتينية الحياة اليومية، ويعتبر الواقع الإنسانى هكذا وكما يفهم من نهاية المسرحية دائريا مكررا دائما بدون تطور أو تقدم للأفضل حيث أليات الهرب تجدد دوما.