A Delicate Balance: A Play Study Guide

A Delicate Balance: A Play by Edward Albee

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Introduction

In 1994, after enduring a lull in his theatrical career, Edward Albee won his third Pulitzer Prize for drama. In 1996, Edward Albee's play, *A Delicate Balance*, celebrating its thirtieth birthday on Broadway, won a Tony Award for the best revival play of the year. Together, these awards mark the enduring qualities of both the playwright and his play.

A Delicate Balance was first produced at the Martin Beck Theatre on Broadway on September 12, 1966. It came four years after Albee's other huge Broadway hit *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). Both of these plays deal with a recurring theme of Albee's, which entails a sense of missed opportunity and loss. Both plays also deal with dysfunctional relationships. Both were commercial successes, more easily understood and appreciated by general audiences than Albee's previous and intermediate plays that leaned toward the absurd. One main difference between the two plays is that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is known as the play that almost won the Pulitzer (it was nominated, but one of the Pulitzer committee members deemed its language and subject matter too crude), whereas *A Delicate Balance* did win the coveted prize.

Albee's career took a slight downturn after the success of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, at least in reference to audience appeal and critical approval. It wasn't until the production of *A Delicate Balance* that Albee would again enjoy popular, critical, and financial success. Although *A Delicate Balance* won Albee his first Pulitzer Prize, most critics at the time considered the play, as Steven Drukman writes in *American Theatre*, to be one of Albee's "last gasps." Although it would not be Albee's last gasp, Albee would have to wait almost ten years before he would win his second Pulitzer (for *Seascape* [1975]) and then again almost another twenty years before he would again claim the prize for his *Three Tall Women* (1994).

Despite his erratic successes, Albee has had an extremely significant impact on American theater. His play *A Delicate Balance* has often been credited with creating an archetype for American drama with its classic study of the American family, albeit a quite dysfunctional one. The play looks into the confusion that erupts in a modern family's attempt to avoid pain and discomfort, which, as Albee demonstrates, only creates more pain and discomfort. The play's major themes are denial of emotions (and often reality itself), loss of opportunities and potential, and regret over paths not taken as reflected in the lives of a very well-to-do suburban couple who have retired but find their long-sought freedom about to collapse. In the period of one weekend, their home comes under attack by emotionally wounded family members and friends, who, in the end, expose the couple's own emotional insecurities. The scenes are not easy for audiences to take, but, as Albee states in an interview with Richard Farr in *The Progressive:*

If I wrote plays about everyone getting along terribly well, I don't think anyone would want to see them. . . . You have to show people things that aren't working well . . . in the hope that people will make them work better.

Author Biography

Edward Albee was adopted in Washington, D.C., two weeks after his birth on March 12, 1928, by Reed A. Albee (who, after retiring from his father's theatre business, raised horses) and Frances (Cotter) Albee (who once worked as a live mannequin for the upscale Bergdorf department stores). His adopted grandfather, Edward Franklin Albee, for whom he was named, was part owner of the Keith-Albee Theatre Circuit, a coast-to-coast chain of over two hundred vaudeville theaters. As stated in Richard E. Amacher's book *Edward Albee*, upon his adoption, Albee was immediately taken to a "sprawling Tudor stucco house in Westchester [New York]" where he lived out his early years in a "world of servants, tutors, riding lessons." As a child, Albee spent his time in New York during the summers and in Miami or Palm Beach during the winters. Albee's mother is quoted as saying (in Amacher's book) that "there was a Rolls to bring him . . . to matinees in the city" and that he had at his disposal "a St. Bernard to pull his sleigh in the wintertime." At the age of twelve, Albee wrote his first play, a three-act sex-farce.

Albee's education was marked by several dramatic departures from school. He was expelled from Lawrenceville Preparatory School (New Jersey) and Valley Forge Military Academy (Pennsylvania). Later he graduated from the private high school Choate Rosemary Hall (Connecticut) but then was dismissed from Trinity College "in his sophomore year, reportedly for failure to attend Chapel and certain classes," writes Amacher.

Due to family tensions, especially between Albee and his mother, Albee left home at the age of twenty. It was at this time, with the aid of a family trust from his grandmother, that Albee moved to Greenwich Village and took on a series of odd jobs. It would not be until ten years later, right before Albee turned thirty, that he would write his first hugely successful play *The Zoo Story*. From there, according to Richard Farr writing in the *Progressive*, "Albee went on to write a series of chilling attacks on the American domestic verities." His first full-length play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) is one such play as is *A Delicate Balance* (1966), which was to become Albee's first experience in winning the Pulitzer Prize (1967). Albee would eventually capture two more Pulitzer Prizes with his plays Seascape (1975) and Three Tall Women (1994). It should be noted that both *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *A Delicate Balance* were made into successful movies, with Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf? wining five Academy Awards.

In Albee's plays, he often wrestles "with the obsessive influence of his adoptive mother," relates Lawrence DeVine in his review of Mel Gussow's *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography*. This theme is partly played out in *A Delicate Balance* but does not seem to have been put to rest until Albee "was nearly 65 years old," states De Vine. After a tailspin in his theatrical career, which lasted almost twenty-five years, Albee wrote and saw successfully produced his play *Three Tall Women* (which won him his third Pulitzer). Albee admits that this is a play that describes three different stages of his mother's life (she was, in fact, six feet two inches tall). With this play, writes De Vine, Albee psychologically "took off his hair shirt," and professionally achieved renewed

success "after enduring a long period of critical neglect and abuse." He was also successful, at this time in his life, in overcoming a long bout with alcoholism.

In 1996, President Clinton presented Albee with a Kennedy Center Lifetime Achievement Award, honoring him for his lifetime's contribution to the nation's culture. In his article "A Question of Identity," Robert Brustein quotes Clinton as saying that Albee's first play, *Zoo Story*, was "a play that took the American theater by storm and changed it forever." Clinton then added, "In your rebellion, the American theater was reborn." Over his professional career, many critics have made similar statements and have hailed Albee as the successor to such acclaimed playwrights as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O'Neill. Albee is also credited with inspiring a new generation of dramatists and remains one of America's most celebrated playwrights.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Friday Night

The play opens with Agnes, the female lead and a "handsome woman in her late 50's," discussing the possibility of suddenly and quite easily losing her mind. She speaks in a soft voice with a "hint of a smile on her face," suggesting a state of peace, despite the subject matter of her conversation. Her husband, Tobias, responds to her by reminding her that "there is no saner woman on earth" than herself. Tobias, as he speaks, seems to have nothing more important on his mind than deciding what kind of drink he wants to make for himself.

When Tobias reassures Agnes that "we will all go mad before you," Agnes admits that she could not really go mad because she needs to take care of him. But this does not stop her from discussing the topic. At one point, she refers to her musings of potential madness as "theoretically healthy fear," but she quickly catches herself and corrects her definition to "healthy speculation."

The couple is sitting together enjoying their drinks, when, somewhat disjointedly, Agnes brings up the topic of her sister Claire. Agnes exclaims that although she is astonished by her own thoughts of madness, it is her sister who astonishes her the most. But when asked by Tobias to explain her statement, Agnes declares that she doesn't want to "use an unkind word" at the moment because the couple is being "cozy." However, this does not stop her degrading remarks about Claire. When Agnes begins negatively criticizing her sister, Tobias stands up and moves to another chair, stating his reason as "It's getting uncomfortable." Agnes comes back with the remark, "Things get hot, move off, huh?"

Agnes continues to discredit her sister, and Tobias continually tries to discourage her, to the point of telling her that he thinks she should apologize to Claire. Agnes becomes a bit ruffled at the suggestion and then returns to her subject of possibly going mad but decides that she never could do such a thing because she is so stable. "There are no mountains in my life . . . nor chasms. It is a rolling, pleasant land," she says. To which Tobias asserts, "We do what we can." Agnes then declares their life's motto.

Claire appears in the room and apologizes to Agnes. This catches Agnes off guard, and she asks Claire what she is apologizing for. Claire responds, "that my nature is such to bring out in you the full force of your brutality." This brings out a long diatribe from Agnes concerning Claire's lifestyle. At this point, Agnes leaves to telephone her daughter, Julia, and Tobias and Claire share a conversation and another drink.

Claire senses that Tobias and Agnes's daughter Julia might be going through yet another divorce and predicts that Julia will be coming home shortly. Then Claire suggests that when Julia does arrive, Tobias should shoot Julia, Agnes, and then herself. Tobias says that the only way he could commit such an act would be if he were

in a high state of passion, which Claire laughs at, unable to see him outraged by anything.

As Claire drinks, Tobias suggests that she rejoin Alcoholics Anonymous. Claire, in turn, asks Tobias what he has in common with his very best friend, except for "the coincidence of having cheated on your wives in the same summer with the same woman."

Agnes reenters the room, announcing that Julia is coming home. Tobias then tells the story of a cat that he once had. He and the cat pleasantly tolerated each other until one day Tobias realized that the cat had been totally ignoring him. After several attempts to make the cat pay attention to him, Tobias ends up slapping the cat in the head. He says that he found he hated the cat because he felt as if she were accusing him of something, and shortly after this incident, Tobias took the cat to the pound and had it put to sleep. Claire and Agnes both assure him that he did the best he could. "You probably did the right *thing*," Claire says. "Distasteful alternatives the less . . . ugly choice."

There is a knock on the door, and Harry and Edna (Agnes and Tobias's best friends) ask if they can stay there. They have been frightened by something intangible and do not want to return to their own home.

Act 2, Scene 1, Early Saturday Evening

Act 2 opens with Agnes and her daughter Julia discussing the fact that Harry and Edna are occupying Julia's old bedroom. Agnes insists that Julia accept the situation. She does not want to discuss anything. She does not know how long Harry and Edna are planning on staying and is not really clear why they are there. Harry and Edna have spent the entire day in their room, not coming out even for meals.

Tobias then enters, and Agnes departs, leaving Tobias and Julia throwing insults at one another. Julia whines about not having her room and the fact that no one seems to know why Harry and Edna are there or how long they are planning on staying. Tobias then discredits Julia for all the broken marriages that she has accumulated. There is mention of Julia's brother who died while still young. During this conversation, Tobias fixes himself a drink.

Claire enters and chides Julia about her new divorce and about constantly returning home. Julia teases Claire about her drinking. Agnes arrives to announce that dinner is ready. She makes the statement, "It's one of those days when everything's underneath." When asked if she knows what is going on with Harry and Edna, Agnes tells them that she knocked on the door but was too embarrassed, irritated, and apprehensive to pursue the matter. After asking Tobias for a drink, she announces that "there is no point in pressing" the issue of Harry and Edna. At the end of scene 1, Harry and Edna appear with their coats over their arms. They announce they are going home but will return with their suitcases.

Act 2, Scene 2, Later That Night

Scene 2 opens with Julia and Agnes in the room alone after dinner. Julia is disgusted with her mother's desire to control everyone's conversations and emotions. Agnes's response is, "When we are dealing with children . . ." She then tells Julia that she will do what she must to keep the family in shape. Agnes then adds, when Tobias enters the room, "There is a balance to be maintained . . . and I must be the fulcrum."

Julia returns to her insistence that she wants her room back. To this end, Agnes tells Julia to go up to the room, while Harry and Edna are gone, and barricade herself there. She also suggests that Julia "take Tobias' pistol while you're at it!"

Claire enters the room, and a heated discussion ensues, ending with the topic of what they should do about Harry and Edna. Claire says, "You've only got two choices, Sis. You take 'em in, or you throw 'em out." When Agnes and Tobias leave to help Harry and Edna (who have returned) unload their suitcases from their car, Julia asks Claire what she thinks Harry and Edna want. Claire responds, "Comfort." When Julia states that this is her home, Claire says, "We're not a communal nation, dear, giving, but not sharing, outgoing, but not friendly. We submerge our truths and have our sunsets on untroubled waters."

When Edna enters, she and Julia argue. Edna, in essence, tells Julia that it is time for her to grow up. Julia reminds Edna that she is a guest in the house, to which Edna responds that she and Harry are Agnes and Tobias's best friends. When Harry enters the room, he goes to fix everyone a drink at the bar, but Julia stands in front of the bar and insists that he stay away from it. Julia becomes emotionally frustrated and starts yelling, "THEY WANT." Then she changes her statement to, "I want" and then "I WANT . . . WHAT IS MINE!!" Julia leaves the room, and Agnes reminisces about the death of her son, "an unreal time." She says that she suspects that Tobias has been "unfaithful," and she asks Harry and Claire to confirm it, but they both deny it.

After Tobias announces that Julia is in hysterics, Julia then appears in the room with a gun in her hand. She insists that Harry and Edna leave. She eventually gives the gun to Tobias, and Agnes says, "How dare you come into this room like that! How dare you embarrass me and your father!" Edna then begins to criticize Julia, to which Julia responds that Edna has no right to tell her what to do. Edna comes back with the statement, "We have rights here. We belong." Edna then declares that she and Harry are staying there forever, "if need be."

Act 3, Early Sunday Morning

Act 3 begins with a conversation between Agnes and Tobias. Tobias has stayed up all night, having given up his room to his daughter and not feeling quite comfortable enough to sleep with his wife in her room. Agnes confesses that she saw Tobias standing in her room in the night and refers to him as a stranger. They ask one another if either has had a clear thought on what to do about Harry and Edna. Agnes defers to

Tobias, telling him that it is his role to make all the decisions. Tobias tells her that she is copping out. There is also a brief discussion between Tobias and Agnes about their sexual relationship. Agnes reminds Tobias of the times when he "spilled" himself on her "belly," preventing Agnes from getting pregnant after the death of their son.

Near the end of act 3, Claire, Julia, Tobias, and Agnes all discuss their versions of why Harry and Edna are there and what they should do about it. Then Harry and Edna join them, and everyone in the room is drinking, despite the early hour of the morning. Edna announces that Harry wants to talk to Tobias alone, and the women leave the room. Harry tells Tobias that if the circumstances were reversed, he and Edna don't think they would allow Tobias and Agnes to live at their house, in spite of the fact that they are best friends. Then Harry asks Tobias, "You don't want us, do you, Toby?"

Tobias then delivers what the author refers to in the script notes as Tobias's "aria." It ends with Tobias answering that he does not really want Harry and Edna to stay there but that because they are friends, Harry and Edna have the right to be there. Agnes then talks with Edna as Tobias goes with Harry to get the suitcases and put them in the car. Agnes states, "Everything becomes . . . too late, finally." The play ends on Agnes's thought that people sleep at night because they are afraid of the darkness. "They say we sleep to let the demons out—to let the mind go raving mad. . . . A nd when the daylight comes again . . . comes order with it."

Act 1, Friday Night

Act 1, Friday Night Summary

The play opens in the comfortably appointed suburban living room of Agnes and Tobias, a married couple. She is in her late 50's, and he is a little older. Agnes is thinking aloud about what it would be like to go mad. She believes that if one can entertain the idea of it, there is probably not any danger of going over the edge. She thinks that if she should go mad though, she would find it to be freeing to lift away from everything. Tobias assures her that she is the sanest person he knows and will be the last to plunge into any depths.

Agnes concedes that she could never go adrift for fear of what would happen to him. Tobias jokingly tells her that he will have her committed, sell everything, and move to Tucson where it's sunny all the time. She is mildly amused and confesses that greater than her obsession with madness is her uncertainty about her sister, Claire. Claire is an alcoholic who is staying with them. Tobias tries to defend the woman but Agnes won't have it. All the while, the two are sipping their cognac and anisette.

Claire comes into the room, having overheard much of what Agnes has been saying about her. She apologizes to Agnes for bringing out such venom in her. Agnes counters that it is not brutality but ruined love and lost chances that make her lash out at her sister. She leaves the room to call their daughter, Julia, while Tobias offers Claire a forbidden drink.

Tobias asks Claire why she doesn't go back to Alcoholics Anonymous. She tells him that she can't stand the people and changes the subject to his life. She asks him why he no longer has any friends, not even his business associates or golf partners. In fact, the only thing he has in common with his very best friend is that they both cheated on their wives with the same woman one summer. He tries to hush her up but she launches into a monologue about what it's like to be an alcoholic. Tobias is saddened by the unfulfilled promise that is her life.

Agnes comes back into the room and chastises Tobias for giving alcohol to Claire. However, she is actually angry with her sister for wasting her life and for being so selfish. Their conversation falls into a mean-spirited, sarcastic tone with which they have become comfortable.

Agnes changes the subject to announce that Julia will be coming home again, as her fourth marriage is crumbling. Agnes bemoans the fact, not only for her daughter's sake, but also for the sake of her own marriage; it's been so long since she and Tobias were alone together. She asks Tobias to speak to Julia and perhaps to Douglas, her husband, to see if there's any possibility of altering the course of their decision.

Tobias wonders what he can possibly say and is reminded of a cat that he used to own that stopped loving him. As hard as he tried, he could not force that cat to love him as it used to. He cared for the cat, but it repaid him with unshakable indifference. He admits to having the vet kill the cat, and he wonders if he should have tried harder or longer. Claire responds that he did the right thing, that death is preferable to loss of love.

Edna and Harry, their best friends, who have arrived unannounced, and who seem unnerved by something they can't explain, interrupt Tobias and Claire. Finally, they admit to having been frightened by something at home and this is the only place they could think of to come. Agnes shows them to Julia's room, where they can spend the night. Claire wonders aloud when it would begin and Tobias doesn't know what she means and she tells him that he will.

Act 1, Friday Night Analysis

Agnes and Tobias are caught in that nowhere place of having been married too long and unable to remember why they married. They have a comfortable life and the luxury of whining about their declines as if that is the topic in vogue with all their friends. Added to the mix is Claire, and it is an unhappy household with no one brave enough to put a stop to the sense of worthlessness.

Their daughter, Julia, is returning home from a fourth failed marriage and, while she is welcome in her parents' home, Agnes really doesn't want to look at the failure and to recognize that she may have had a part in Julia's poor decisions. Tobias is noncommittal and weary of unreciprocated love, yet can't voice his needs. The closest he can come to sharing his feelings is relating the story of the cat that stopped loving him, and had been killed for it. Perhaps he is afraid to shatter the surface of the life they have created because he fears that his response would alter more than he's willing to risk.

Act 2, Scene 1, Early Saturday Evening

Act 2, Scene 1, Early Saturday Evening Summary

Julia doesn't understand why her mother has given her room to Harry and Edna when she knew that she was coming home. She feels that their presence doesn't make any sense and that they haven't even offered any real explanation for their sudden appearance at the house. They have shut themselves up in the bedroom, coming out only once to request sandwiches from the kitchen staff.

Agnes leaves to check on dinner. Julia picks little fights with Tobias over some perceived slights. He warns her to watch herself, as her parents are not simply her parents, but Agnes and Tobias, real people with real emotions and limits. He tells her that she can't keep showing up at the house dragging another failed marriage as if it were a rag doll. She counters by telling him that she used to think he was the whole world, but now she sees that he is inessential.

Her father ignores her cruelty and offers to speak to Doug, her estranged husband, but she tells him that it would be pointless. Doug is against everything, even Tobias. Agnes returns and vows that she will get the full story from Julia later on when they are alone. Harry and Edna appear, wearing their coats. The countenances of those in the room lift with the sight of the pair preparing to leave. Goodbyes are said all round, but then Harry and Edna reveal that they will be back within a couple hours, as they are simply going home to get a few things.

Act 2, Scene 1, Early Saturday Evening Analysis

Julia's petulance has pushed Tobias to his limits in a household already crowded with self-absorption. She wants her father to rescue her the way that he did when she was a girl, but at 36, she needs take responsibility for her own issues and life choices. When he tries to get her to understand this, she reverts to childish, cruel behavior, hurting the one person who is her real ally. Even though she is currently vulnerable, she should take more care with her core relationships. Then, true to form, Tobias offers to speak to her estranged husband in an attempt to rescue her from herself and another failure. Tobias seems to be the only steady one in this group of neurotics. It will be only a matter of time before his veneer cracks under all the pressure.

Act 2, Scene 2, Later That Night

Act 2, Scene 2, Later That Night Summary

Tobias, Agnes and Julia are back in the living room after dinner. Julia announces that it was the ugliest dinner she has ever survived, as her parents having essentially taken on the role of drill sergeants. Agnes very resolutely announces that she will keep the family intact and if being a drill sergeant is what it takes, then that is what she will be. If she has to shout over Julia's sulking, she'll do that too. She feels that she is the only one in the family who can see a situation objectively while involved in it, and there is a delicate balance to seeing the facts and their implications at the same time.

Julia launches into her petulance again about losing her room to Harry and Edna. Claire appears in the room wearing an accordion, which breaks the tension a bit. Harry and Edna return. Julia and Edna verbally spar over their guest status in the house and who has first rights on the coveted bedroom. Julia finally leaves in hysterics. Tobias, who has been out of the room, reenters and wants to know why his daughter is so upset. Agnes tells him that she will consider Julia's distress later; she has suffered more with each one of Julia's traumas, growing a little older each time.

Julia, hair and clothes disheveled, returns to the living room holding a pistol, although she does not point it at anyone. She implores her father to get rid of Harry and Edna. Agnes is appalled at Julia's discourtesy. Edna reproaches her not only for this indiscretion but also for failing at four marriages and returning home each time. Edna announces that they have first rights to the bedroom because they are her parents' best friends. Further, she says, they are moving in. Agnes accepts the information with resignation and removes Julia from the room before there is any further confrontation.

Act 2, Scene 2, Later That Night Analysis

Now it seems as if Agnes is the one with the sane perspective. Although Tobias doesn't scream or raise his voice, Agnes is the one who sees that a delicate balance is necessary to keep the family, and this situation, in check. Although she resents that her sister is living in her home, she quite graciously accepts each new intrusion on her privacy in the forms of Julia, Harry and Edna. Each of them is in a crisis of some kind and she coolly manages them, knowing that the sense of immediacy will die down and things will return to as close to normal as possible.

Act 3, Early Sunday Morning

Act 3, Early Sunday Morning Summary

Agnes finds Tobias in the living room, where he has been for a few hours considering the situation that has plunged his household into chaos. Agnes tells him that it was odd, but nice, to have had him in her bed last night. She didn't sleep well because of his unfamiliar presence, but coyly tells him that she could get used to it. He admits that he didn't sleep at all. She hopes he will decide to continue to sleep there but he is overwhelmed from the events of the previous night and doesn't commit.

He has considered the sadness of each person still asleep in his house, and wonders about his responsibility for each. He pleads with Agnes, but she will not tell him what to do; it is his house and his decision. A woman accepts responsibility for many things throughout a marriage - children, food, clean linens and plans - that will see the marriage through to the end but she does not decide the route. She believes that a man's responsibility is to determine the moral route and the woman will make it work.

Julia awakens and apologizes to her father for last night's behavior. She offers to make coffee even though she is disappointed that her father has not apologized to her. Tobias is perturbed by her ingratitude. Agnes tells him that it is his fault that Julia behaves this way; he has never reprimanded her for her irresponsible behavior or sent her back to her crippled marriages to make them work. All Agnes can do is stand by and watch her chances of becoming a grandmother diminish with each of Julia's failures.

Agnes launches into the topic of Tobias' refusal to have another child after the death of their son. Tobias is mortified by her graphic description of how their intimate life disintegrated and they left each other for separate bedrooms. Agnes acquiesced with his decision on that topic and is now resigned to his decision on the current dilemma.

Claire joins them, realizes that she has walked in on an argument, and leaves to help Julia in the kitchen. Tobias again pleads with Agnes to tell him what he should do about Harry and Edna. Julia and Claire return, Julia baiting Claire to have vodka in her orange juice. They bicker, and Claire pours Julia's glass of juice onto the floor.

Tobias has reached his breaking point and demands that they be quiet and listen to him. He is concerned about Harry and Edna and wonders if he should ask them to leave. Julia contends that they are intruders and she will leave for good if they remain. Tobias is unmoved; Harry and Edna have been their best friends for 40 years and he owes them some consideration. Agnes interjects that Harry and Edna have brought plague into their home and wonders if any of them is immune to it.

Harry and Edna awaken, and ask if Harry can speak to Tobias privately. The women all exit to the kitchen. Harry tells Tobias that he and Edna are leaving. Harry and Edna have discussed the situation during the night and realized they would not have taken in

Tobias and Agnes had the situation been reversed. The dam of emotions bursts for Tobias, and he launches into a monologue about the imbalance of their relationship and his disbelief that Harry can admit this to him after he had opened his home to him, with no questions asked.

The outburst seems to have cleared the air. Edna admits to the women that when she and her husband talked during the night, they wondered if Tobias and Agnes really loved them. They concluded that they probably loved them as much as they loved the two of them. Agnes refuses Edna's invitation for shopping next week and the couple leaves.

The women console Tobias that he did the best he could in the situation. Agnes goes a little further by saying that, aside from wondering when and how she will lose her mind, she is in awe of daylight. She says that people must sleep because they fear the darkness of night; and daylight brings sanity and order once more. They feel a moment of sadness for Harry and Edna but are happy to begin their own new day.

Act 3, Early Sunday Morning Analysis

Agnes tries to force Tobias into taking some responsibility for the patterns and history of their lives, all the while knowing that she steered their direction. However, his passivity is a decision because not deciding is also a choice. They have fallen into their own rhythm and will continue to live the way they have. The intrusion of Harry and Edna has brought them a little too close to the flame of their own vulnerabilities; they are all too happy to have them removed from their home in the end. Even though they are best friends, Harry and Edna's lives have started to crack, and it is much too close for comfort for Tobias and Agnes to watch at such short range.

Characters

Agnes

Agnes is the main female character of the play. She is woman in her fifties, well off, and married to Tobias. She is also the mother of Julia and the sister of Claire. Agnes believes herself to be the fulcrum of the family, keeping everyone in balance. She often maintains this balance, or order, by not confronting issues, not taking a stand, and not processing emotions. She tries to keep the peace by not dealing with anything that might upset it.

On the surface, Agnes is completely supportive of her husband, Tobias. She looks to him to confirm her thoughts, and, likewise, she confirms his. It is not until near the end of the play that she brings up issues that show cracks in her relationship with her husband. When the memory of the death of her son is brought to the surface of her thoughts, she reminisces about how difficult a time that was for her, a time when she questioned everything, including her husband's love and faithfulness to her.

Although she feels as if she is the fulcrum, Agnes begins and ends the play on her musings of insanity. She wonders if she could just suddenly slip off into madness and what that would be like. She wonders what her husband would do if that happened. Would she be an embarrassment to him? Embarrassment is a very large issue with Agnes. She is easily embarrassed by her sister Claire, who Agnes believes has wasted her life and her potential. When Claire insists that she is not an alcoholic, Agnes states sarcastically, "that's very nice." Then she lists all the times that Claire has vomited, fallen down, and called from the club to have someone come and get her. She concludes this commentary with the words: "If we change for the worse with drink, we are an alcoholic."

Agnes's relationship with her daughter, Julia, does not fare much better. Julia also embarrasses her mother. When Julia becomes hysterical, Tobias asks Agnes to go talk to their daughter. Agnes's response is, "I haven't the time." Instead of empathizing with Julia, Agnes becomes more self-absorbed. She tells her husband that she has suffered far more than her daughter. This same self-absorption is apparent in all of Agnes's relationships. She easily becomes lost in self-pity and at the same time believes herself to be above everyone around her. If she is the fulcrum of the balance in the family, Albee portrays her as a very unstable one. Albee has admitted that the character of Agnes is based on his real-life adopted mother.

Claire

Claire is Agnes's younger sister. She claims that she is not an alcoholic but rather a willful drinker. Of all the characters in the play, whether it is due to the alcohol or not,

Claire has the loosest tongue. She speaks her mind and is the least affected by social politeness.

Claire lives with Agnes and Tobias and appears to have no means of support except for them. Her main role in life seems to be to annoy and embarrass her sister. She is everything that Agnes dislikes. Claire makes the statement, after telling Tobias that he would be better off if he killed Claire, Julia, and herself, that she will never know whether she wants to live until Agnes is dead. With this statement, Albee makes it sound as if Claire holds Agnes up as a role model, a model that she has never been able to reach. And instead of trying to reach it, she has done everything to live her life in a diametrically opposed manner.

Claire's relationship with Julia is closer than her relationship with anyone else. She and Julia identify with one another in their roles as the "other"—people on the periphery of Tobias's and Agnes's lives. Claire and Julia are the rebels, the failures, the embarrassments that must be tolerated. When Julia arrives home, Claire greets her more honestly, more warmly than do Julia's parents.

Despite Claire's open disdain for her sister, she has never told Agnes about Tobias's affair. It is not clear if she does this out of love or out of spite. She keeps the affair a secret, almost as if she has a hidden weapon that she protects in case she may have to use it one day. When Agnes comes right out and asks Claire to confirm her suspicions about Tobias, Claire's answer is, "Ya got me, Sis." Shortly after this exchange, Agnes describes Claire in this way: "Claire could tell us so much if she cared to . . . Claire, who watches from the sidelines, has seen so very much, has seen us all so clearly . . . You were not named for nothing." Claire is said to closely resemble Albee's aunt Jane, an alcoholic and frequent visitor to the Albee home.

Edna

Edna is Harry's wife. It is not clear if she is really Agnes's friend or if she and Agnes know one another only because their husbands are friends. Edna arrives one day at the door of Agnes and Tobias's home. She takes it for granted that they will let her and Harry stay there for however long it takes them to get over their unnamed fear.

Despite the fact that the relationship between Edna and Agnes is not clear (their names are very similar), Edna sometimes takes on the role of mother to Julia. Although Edna's manner is dissimilar, her sentiments are comparable to Agnes's. Edna is not afraid to voice her opinions. Edna tells Julia that she is no longer a child and should take more responsibility for her life. She also declares that Julia no longer has rights in her parents' house.

Edna also confronts Agnes and tells her to stop making fun of her and her husband, Harry. Although Edna may not be able to name the fear that has driven her out of her own house, she appears to be quite capable of naming the things that other people are doing wrong in their lives.

But then again, it is Edna, in the end, who realizes that there are boundaries, even between friends. She understands that there are some boundaries that should not be pushed, some things that "we may not do . . . not ask, for fear of looking in a mirror." And it is also through her reflection that the play resolves. Edna has looked into that mirror at the end of the play and has decided that if the tables were turned, if Agnes and Tobias had come to her, she would not have allowed them to stay at her house.

Harry

Harry is Edna's husband and Tobias's best friend. At one point in the past, Harry and Tobias, coincidently, had an extra-marital affair with the same young woman. Besides both having been businessmen and meeting at the same club, it is unclear what else Harry and Tobias have in common except that they have known one another for a long time and neither sleeps with his wife. Harry is something of a reflection of Tobias, but he is even more reserved. Of all the characters in this play, Harry speaks the least. And when he does speak, he is a man of few words with lots of pauses around each one. He prefers to talk around things rather than going at them straight on. He also avoids questions, as when Agnes tries to find out why he and his wife have come to their home. Instead of giving Agnes an answer, he compliments the furnishings in Agnes's home. He also has the tendency to repeat himself; at one point he repeats the same line four times when he tries to explain how fear has driven his wife and him out of their home. It is Harry, in the end, who tells Tobias that he and Edna have decided to leave. Although Harry prompted the discussion with Edna about resolving the issue of staying at their friends' house, it is implied that Edna made the decision and that Harry just delivered the message.

Julia

Julia is the thirty-something daughter of Agnes and Tobias. She has just recently been divorced for the fourth time and has returned home. Her father calls her a whiner, and her mother has little time for her. Julia, based on a relative of Albee's, his cousin Barbara, has set a pattern in her life of marrying for the wrong reasons and then divorcing and returning home. Her parents welcome her, although they make it clear that they wish she would establish an independent life of her own.

Julia is the catalyst of the play. While the other characters either hide their emotions in alcohol or avoid confrontations by smothering their feelings in banal social sweet talk, Julia brings matters to the forefront. She has wants, and she demands that they be at least heard, if not satisfied. The most obvious thing that she wants in this play is her bedroom in her parent's home. However, upon her return, she discovers that her room is being occupied by Edna and Harry, her parents' so-called best friends. In her attempts to regain control of her bedroom, Julia makes everyone confront the issues of the play, namely, defining relationships, wants, needs, and rights. At one point, Julia forces the issue first by having an emotional tantrum, then by upsetting the furniture and all the clothes in her bedroom, and finally by threatening everyone with a gun.

Julia tends to put down her mother and commiserate with her mother's sister Claire. Julia acts as if she is Claire's friend, until Claire points her finger at Julia and lets her know that Julia is as much a visitor in her parents' home as Harry and Edna are.

Julia, Claire, Harry, and Edna are portrayed as invaders in the lives of Agnes and Tobias. They all have their own reasons for needing to be there: none of them is able to make it alone in the outside world. Julia falls back on her childhood to claim her spot, even though she is nearing middle age. She has little empathy for the others who are also seeking comfort in the same house.

Tobias

Tobias is Agnes's husband and the father of Julia. He is a well-to-do, retired businessman. Although he is tolerant of people around him, he, like his wife, tends to avoid emotional topics. His tolerance toward his sister-in-law Claire is shown in his nonjudgmental attitude toward her drinking. Although he encourages her to return to Alcoholics Anonymous at one point in the play, he does not berate her for drinking. In some ways, he even encourages it or at least does not discourage it. There are a few subtle insinuations that Claire and Tobias might have at one time had an affair, but this is initially only alluded to by script directions that have Claire open her arms to Tobias in a "casual invitation." Later in the play, Agnes asks Tobias (when he cannot sleep) if he went to Claire.

Whether Tobias had an affair with Claire is not certain; however, his infidelity is. Claire knows about an affair that Tobias had with a young woman, but she has never told Agnes about it. Claire only uses the information to taunt Tobias. Some critics have suggested that the young anonymous woman with whom Tobias had the affair was actually Claire. Despite all this, Tobias appears secure in his marriage with Agnes, even though they have not shared the same bed for many years. Their marriage seems to have become something of a habit. Tobias shows very little affection to his wife except in the way that he reinforces her thoughts, giving her assurances, for instance, that she, of all people, should not worry about going mad.

Tobias appears to be closer to his daughter than Agnes is. However, the degree of intimacy is not considerably greater. Tobias is the more concerned parent when Julia becomes hysterical, although he does nothing but ask Agnes to console her. It is Tobias who takes the gun away from his daughter, and it is Tobias to whom Julia apologizes for her outburst.

If Agnes is the fulcrum, then Tobias is the energy behind the fulcrum that works at keeping a balance in this dysfunctional family. He is constantly asking people to talk more kindly about one another. Or, in the least, it is Tobias who keeps silent while fury flares around him. It is also Tobias who serves everyone drinks, as if trying to soften the edges of their grievances with alcohol.

It is Tobias's friend Harry (and his wife, Edna) who bring the play to its conclusion, forcing Tobias to define what friendship is all about. In the end, Tobias proclaims that friendship is not about wants but rather about rights. Tobias's friend Harry has the right to move into Tobias's house even if that is not what Tobias, or the rest of his family, wants. Contradicting this conclusion is the story concerning his cat that Tobias tells in the middle of the play. In this case, the cat wanted to be left alone. Tobias was uncomfortable with the cat's noncompliance, and eventually he hits the cat and then has the cat put to sleep. But disregarding the cat, Tobias seems true to his definition of friendship. He has, after all, allowed his sister-in-law to live off him. He allows his thirty-something daughter to continually move in and out of his house, and he tolerates his wife. He also tolerates his friend Harry's moving into his house uninvited. At the end of the play, Tobias questions Harry's efforts at friendship and honesty. Then he apologizes. Albee admits that the character of Tobias is based on his adopted father.

Themes

Loss

There are many different kinds and levels of loss in Albee's play *A Delicate Balance*. Most obvious is the loss of balance that has been precariously maintained by Agnes, the main character in the play and mistress of the house in which the play takes place. Agnes begins the play musing about sanity, a condition, at least in Agnes's mind, that can easily be lost. Agnes wonders what would happen if she were to lose her sense of the rational. Who would take care of things? The way in which Agnes maintains the delicate balance in her home, as well as the delicate balance of her sanity, is to lose contact with her own emotional reality. She also tries to convince everyone else to supress his or her emotions. Agnes believes that by saying that the emotions are gone, circumstances will return to some condition that resembles normalcy.

A loss of opportunity is another kind of loss that is represented in Albee's play. Agnes has lost the opportunities of youth, of having another child. Agnes's sister Claire has lost her opportunity at married life, having children, doing something with her life other than getting drunk. Julia, Agnes and Tobias's daughter, has lost several marriages and the opportunity to have children. She has also lost her room, symbolic of having lost her childhood. Julia has also lost a brother, who died in his youth. This loss Agnes mourns as a loss of love. After the death of the child, Tobias and Agnes no longer attempted to have more children. This eventually lead to the loss of their sexual life together.

There is also the overall loss of privacy and peace when Agnes and Tobias are invaded by Claire, Julia, Harry, and Edna, who all want to live with them. The crowding of the house, the battles for space and understanding, the irritations and frustrations of trying to compromise, all eventually lead to the ultimate loss of balance. Where patience and social sensibility once were the rule, chaos and emotionalism reign. And the play ends with Agnes once again contemplating the loss of her sanity.

Escape from Reality

Reality in this Albee play is something that most of its characters try to escape. The most obvious escape route is through alcohol. Its presence is so entwined in the dialogue that it becomes almost a character itself. Every scene revolves around the bar and decanters of brandy, cognac, anisette, and gin. Claire is alcohol's most wounded victim, but she is also the one who, although she has the most trouble dealing with reality, sees reality the clearest. Tobias is not as ruled by alcohol but uses it to calm himself enough to maintain his patience and usual silence.

Agnes, on the other hand, has a preprogrammed script in her head that contains all the social rules of conduct. She is easily embarrassed and uses most of her energies attempting to keep others from saying or doing things that go against her rules. In other

words, she escapes the nasty or difficult parts of life by defining them as taboo subjects. Agnes hides from reality behind the rules. If the rules do not offer shelter, she then escapes reality through pure avoidance. She does not want to talk about things that are unpleasant, unless, of course, she is discussing her sister's poor excuse for a life. She avoids her daughter's temper tantrum, assuming that her daughter will eventually work things out on her own. Agnes, in the meantime, does not have time to deal with all those emotions. Even though she suspects that her husband had an affair, she only asks the people whom she knows will not confirm her suspicions.

Julia escapes from reality by marrying men on a whim and then abandoning them when things do not work out. She then runs home and wants to crawl back into the womb. She has not evolved into a mature woman although she is in her mid-thirties, she would rather go home to her parents and reclaim the room in which she grew up. Her energies are used in fighting for her right to return home rather than in fighting for a life of her own.

Harry and Edna are the most obvious escapees as they run from their own home and set up camp in the home of Agnes and Tobias. They run from a general sense of fear or dread, not even knowing what they are afraid of. All they want to do is escape by hiding, all day if they must, in a bedroom in their friends' home.

Fear

Fear could easily be argued as another character in Albee's play. It is an unnamed fear that moves Harry and Edna out of their house and into the middle of the chaos in the home of Agnes and Tobias. As Harry and Edna explain it: "WE GOT . . . FRIGHTENED." "We got scared." We . . . were . . . terrified." The fear is described as darkness, as when Agnes says: "I wonder if that's why we sleep at night, because the darkness still . . . frightens us?" Agnes also labels fear as "the terror. Or the plague," and she states that Harry and Edna have brought the plague with them. And she claims that the only solution is isolation.

There is also Agnes's fear of going insane and her fear of confrontation; Tobias's fear of having another child; Julia's fear of growing up and her fear of being displaced in her parents' lives; and Claire's fear of life and her fear of love, the one thing that she desperately wants.

Style

Setting

The entire play takes place in one room, "the living room of a large and well-appointed suburban house." In that room is a bar, which is well stocked with bottles of liquor. Time changes from Friday night to Saturday evening, then later the same Saturday, and eventually to early Sunday morning, but the setting remains the same. This one room is the focal point of the house, where all the characters can meet to argue about the living arrangements in the other rooms of the house.

Dialogue

In this play, there are very few dialogue passages that are written without script directions (written in italics inside parentheses before the actual printed dialogue). Although it is common practice for playwrights to supply some interpretation of how the dialogue should be delivered, Albee supplies these directions quite liberally and quite specifically. For instance, in the opening scene, he directs Agnes's first lines with these directions: *"(Speaks usually softly, with a tiny hint of a smile on her face: not sardonic, not sad . . . wistful, maybe)."* In a later line for Tobias, Albee directs the actor to deliver it in this way: *(Very nice, but there is steel underneath)*. For one of Claire's lines, Albee suggests that the actor speak, *"(to Agnes' back, a rehearsed speech, gone through but hated)."*

Albee's directing almost every line of dialogue demonstrates that he has very specific psychological meanings behind his words. He is aware of the characters' thoughts and the emotions behind their words and wants to make sure that the actors understand them. He is not willing to allow the actors to interpret the play on their own. He uses terms like "quiet despair," "surprised delight," "slight schoolteacher tone," and "the way a nurse speaks to a disturbed patient." He often writes directions about how the actors should hold their hands, turn their heads, or change their facial expressions to include a narrowing of their eyes. The longest script notation that Albee writes occurs toward the end of act 3, before a monologue delivered by the character Tobias. Albee's directions read:

(This next is an aria. It must have in its performance all the horror and exuberance of a man who has kept his emotions under control too long. Tobias will be carried to the edge of hysteria, and he will find himself laughing, sometimes, while he cries from sheer release. All in all, it is genuine and bravura at the same time, one prolonging the other. I shall try to notate it somewhat).

It should be noted that he does.

Dilemma

The central concept around which this play is built is the dilemma of what to do with Harry and Edna. Their situation is the focal point for all the characters, including Harry and Edna themselves. Albee uses this dilemma to cause emotions to rise. As his characters try to figure out what to do about the Harry and Edna, they have a series of discussions or debates that slowly rise in emotional temperature. Each character has his or her definition of what the dilemma is, as well as a means for resolving it. The tension in the play rises with the rise of emotions as the characters move toward a climax or a moment of truth. This moment is played out most specifically by Tobias and Harry in the conversation that defines their friendship: one that is built on rights and responsibilities rather than love and affection. In the end, Harry and Edna decide to go back home, thus solving (or at least releasing some of the tension of) the dilemma.

Historical Context

The tone of Albee's play *A Delicate Balance* reflects the overall social setting of the late 1950s. The postwar era was a time, in American culture, of very mixed messages. The older generation was caught up in putting on a good, social face while the younger generation was practicing drills at school on how to protect themselves from the radioactive fallout of atomic bombs. It was a time when parents (mostly mothers) were still greatly influenced by Emily Post, a socialite writer whose very name was an icon for social grace. Her books, such as *101 Common Mistakes in Etiquette and How To Avoid Them, Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics, and at Home*, and *The Secret of Keeping Friends*, defined success in life in terms of charm, proper social graces, and elegant and considerate speech. Television, which was impacting American society for the first time, aired shows like *Ozzie and Harriet, Leave It to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best*, all of which depicted idealized families that lived in properly kept homes, whose members neither raised their voices nor stepped outside of the perimeters of their prescribed roles. In other words, these television families lived according to Emily Post's standards. With these role models, parents, generally speaking, taught their children to hide their emotions, to control their tongues, and to avoid confrontation. The socially correct behavior was to acquiesce rather than to make a scene.

In the meantime, Americans had grown increasingly more aware of the realities of war, more leery of the conformist mentality that had allowed the spread of Nazism in Germany, and of the paranoia of Senator McCarthy's anti-Communism crusade. And the younger generation began experimenting with drastic change. Even if the majority of teenagers could not put their fingers on what was bothering them, there was a growing number of writers and artists who could. One of them was British playwright John Osborne, whose first play *Look Back in Anger* impacted British theatre in a similar way that Albee's first play *Zoo Story* impacted American theatre. Osborne was referred to as one of the Angry Young Men, a term applied to English writers of the 1950s who expressed social alienation and rejected outmoded bourgeois values. In Osborne's plays there existed no rules and no social etiquette, and this shocked the older generation of theatergoers and influenced many American writers.

Around this same period, in the United States a group of writers were being referred to as the Beat Generation. Their works critiqued the conformism of the 1950s. One of the techniques used by Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, two of the more famous members of the Beat Generation, was to explore different forms of language and its expression, as they tried to put down in print an impression of spontaneity.

Another type of theatre that became popular during the 1940s and 1950s was referred to as Absurdist Theatre. French playwright Eugene Ionesco was famous for his absurdist plays and his style was transported to American theatre. Young actors and playwrights began off-Broadway productions in which they were able to perform new and experimental plays. By keeping production costs down and by using unknown casts instead of star performers, producers were able to offer interesting theatre at low prices. This fit in well with playwrights who wrote in the absurdist mode, either in all of its

manifest forms or at least in part of them, sometimes even including incomprehensible language. In absurdist plays there is a loss of causal relationships, and everything becomes senseless. Albee's early plays, including his *Zoo Story*, are considered absurdist plays because of their illogical or irrational elements. Harold Pinter, a contemporary of Albee's, is also defined as an absurdist, as is Samuel Beckett, one of Albee's role models.

Somewhere in between a romantic or an idealized view and the irrational absurdist view is the realist. In the 1950s and early 1960s, plays that leaned more toward realism were more likely to meet with commercial success, which is exactly what happened with two of Albee's plays at that time, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *A Delicate Balance*. By definition, a realist play is one that is concerned with the ordinary elements of life with a focus on present, specific action. A realist employs simple, direct prose with an emphasis on the characters' inner selves. It is through Albee's direct prose that the psychology of his characters is exposed, even as the characters try to hide it either from the other characters or from themselves. For Albee, this form offered a vehicle to deal with his unpleasant and sometimes debilitating relationship with his mother, who is a reoccurring character in Albee's plays, such as Agnes in *A Delicate Balance*.

Critical Overview

A Delicate Balance is one of Albee's most longlived plays, enjoying receptive audiences and reviews both in the 1960s, when it was first produced, and more recently in the 1990s and 2000s, when it experienced a revival. Although not every review has been positive toward Albee and his work, most acknowledge his impact on American drama, with *A Delicate Balance* being credited as one of his more influential plays. As Harold Clurman in his 1966 *New York Times* article writes, "Albee seems to excite everyone to a defiant admiration or to a determined denunciation." Clurman goes on to declare, "Albee is a master of stage speech," which he says is "extremely studied and remarkably euphonious." He also states that *A Delicate Balance*

comes closest . . . to a synthesis of Albee's traits and talents. Though still somewhat withheld by the mask of comedy and vindictive humor, it voices his particular ache in the most genuinely compassionate tone of which he is now capable.

Another 1960s reviewer, this time Walter Kerr in the *New York Times*, believed that the main theme of *A Delicate Balance* was hollowness, and that Albee, Kerr states in a somewhat sarcastic tone, did a good job in presenting it as it is, "offered to us on an elegantly lacquered empty platter the moment the curtain goes up." Kerr then goes on to question how a playwright might offer hollowness. He states that Harold Pinter, a British playwright in Albee's time, did it through suggestion. Pinter never used "the word 'fright'; he simply frightens us. Mr. Albee, on the other hand, plays out his hand all too readily, revealing that there is so little in it." Kerr felt that Albee, rather than making the audience feel frightened, only allowed the audience to listen to the details of other people's fright. He then goes on to liken the images that Albee presents to "chocolate Easter bunnies that crack wide open at the very first bit [sic]."

In a book published in 1987, giving the critic a more distanced view on Albee's works, Gerry Mc-Carthy in his book *Edward Albee* writes that *A Delicate Balance* "is a remarkably clear and deft piece of work." McCarthy believes that at the time Albee wrote this play, he had eased into a more comfortable relationship with his writing and because of this *A Delicate Balance* reflects a new sense of "coolness." McCarthy continues, "His style allows the structure of the play to be more carefully arranged," and the way he defines the central concern of this play "is meticulously controlled through a disciplined, highly articulate prose."

On April 21, 1996, Albee's play was revived and presented at Lincoln Center in New York. Vincent Canby, writing a review of this revival production in the *New York Times*, tells his readers, "This production has the impact of entirely new work." Canby's claim is backed up later when the play wins a Tony Award for best revival. Canby adds that audiences should expect "an evening of theatrical fireworks that prompt astonished oohs and ahs, genuine laughter and a certain amount of delicious unease."

Since the 1996 revival, Albee's play has enjoyed new productions around the globe. A press release from the Circle Theatre in Dallas, Texas, describes Albee's play as being

"filled with shades of meaning, subtleties, and whole paragraphs of brilliant dialogueue," which has made it "classic theater." In a review in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* in January 2001, theatre critic Joe Adcock states that Albee has "expanded" Jean-Paul Sartre's (a French existentialist writer's) theory of hell. In Albee's play, "hell is still other people. But now there are six of them. They spread themselves out over three acts. Their damnation lasts nearly three hours." Adcock continues by stating that Albee also "expands the dimensions of hell," as hell not only exists on the stage but "spills out into the auditorium . . . and his characters and his story torture the audience." Writing during the same week, only this time in the *Seattle Times*, critic Misha Berson describes the play and the playwright in more flattering terms. "What Albee brings to the subject [of extinction] . . . is a scalding wit and . . . a gift for poetic reverie and a rare 'delicate balance' of social satire and compassionate absurdity."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing and is a freelance editor and published writer. In this essay, she examines the character Tobias and the story of his cat and then uses the story as Albee's metaphor for Tobias's inability to love or make contact with his wife.

In the book *Conversations with Edward Albee* (edited by Phillip C. Kolin), Albee articulates one of the motivating forces behind the actions of the characters in his play *A Delicate Balance*. He states, "The [delicate balance] is between what we should be doing and what we ultimately decide we need to do to protect ourselves." Throughout *A Delicate Balance*, Albee demonstrates various ways in which his characters create barriers between themselves and others in order to avoid facing one another and their fears. These fears run a whole gamut of emotions and are displayed in idiosyncratic ways depending on which character is involved, what a character's relationship is with the other characters, and, for some, what lessons they have learned from the past. In terms of lessons learned, Tobias's story of his cat illuminates some of his fears and can be used to help understand the decisions he makes as he, like all the other characters, desperately tries to maintain that delicate balance.

In the first act of *A Delicate Balance*, in the middle of an awkward battle of insults between his wife, Agnes, and his sister-in-law, Claire, Tobias falls back into a reflection of his relationship with a cat that once lived with him. The fact that he remembers this cat while sitting in his parlor with two women fighting cues the reader that there is more than memory going on here. Thoughts are recalled by association, so there should be a connection between what Tobias is witnessing in the present and what he suddenly finds himself remembering.

Tobias's relationship with his cat develops over several years. He'd had the cat since he was a child, so he was famialiar with the cat's mannerisms. The cat didn't like people, in general, but seemed only to tolerate them. However, Tobias believed that the cat liked him, or, as he says, "rather, when I was alone with her I could see she was content; she'd sit on my lap. I don't know if she was happy, but she was content." Relating this part of the cat story while listening to his wife argue might make the reader wonder if this is a comment about Tobias's feelings for his wife. Throughout the play, there is little observable evidence of Tobias's affections for his wife or, for that matter, of Agnes's love for Tobias. They are not sleeping together, nor do they even share a bedroom. Their conversations with one another are cordial but demonstrate only surface emotional content unless they touch on subjects that are almost too painful to bear. So there remains the question of whether Tobias really loves his wife or, like the cat, merely tolerates her. Or, turning this statement in another direction, does the cat represent Agnes? Is Tobias looking at Agnes as he looked at his cat? Does Tobias feel that Agnes doesn't really like people but that she feels, if not happy, at least content living with Tobias? It is interesting to note that at the end of this part of the cat story, Tobias pauses, allowing Agnes to reflect on the portion of the story that Tobias has related so

far and to respond to his commentary, which she does. As soon as Tobias mouths the words "she was content," Agnes replies: "Yes."

Tobias then continues with his cat story, stopping to correct himself when he states that he suddenly realized one day that the cat no longer loved him. Tobias says: "No, that's not right; one day I realized she must have stopped liking me some time before." The fascinating point that is being made here is that Agnes and Tobias's relationship compares quite consistently with this observation. Whether Tobias is aware of this on a rational level or is bringing up the memory of the cat in reaction to a subconscious realization is not clear. However, it can be quite successfully argued that Albee is aware of the connection. Later in the play, Albee exposes two incidents that occurred much earlier in the marriage of Agnes and Tobias, either of which could have caused Agnes to have "stopped liking" Tobias "some time before."

It is unclear which incident happened first, but the one that is mentioned first in the play is Tobias's alleged infidelity. The woman who was involved in this extramarital affair is never named, but some critics have analyzed the play and concluded that the woman was none other than Agnes's sister Claire. There are a few clues provided by Albee that support this claim, such as the fact that Claire is aware of the affair to the point of complete certainty. Albee also suggests in his script directions that Claire *"raises her two arms* . . . [in a] *casual invitation."* The tone of the conversations between Tobias and Claire are also much more relaxed and more openly honest than Tobias's exchanges with Agnes. In addition, toward the end of the play when Tobias tells Agnes that he had trouble sleeping one night, she asks if he went to Claire.

The other event that marred the couple's affections for one another and could have been the cause of Agnes's no longer liking Tobias happened upon the death of their son, Teddy. Through guilt or fear of loss, Tobias, at that point, refused to have any more children. "I think it was a year, when you spilled yourself on my belly, sir?" Agnes says to Tobias in act 3. And then "you took to your own sweet room. . . . And I must *suffer* for it. . . . And I have made the best of it. Have lived with it." Either of these incidents, the alleged affair or the death of the child and subsequent loss of sexual contact, could be cause for Agnes to have stopped liking Tobias.

Tobias continues his story about the cat with the comment that he suddenly realized that his cat was no longer in the room with him, reflecting, perhaps, on the observation that even though Agnes's physical self is present, he senses that on the emotional level, she removed herself from him a long time ago. It is through the cat's absence that Tobias finally realizes a new pattern in the cat's life, a pattern that Tobias interprets as "she didn't like me any more. It was that simple."

When he comprehended his cat's new behavior, Tobias relates, "I tried to force myself on her." After hearing this comment, Agnes cannot contain herself and responds: "Whatever do you mean?" From this point of the story on, Tobias confesses that he became somewhat obsessed with trying to make his cat like him again. When the cat gives him no sign of returning his attempts at affection (she wouldn't purr when he petted her, for instance), Tobias became irritated, shook her, and when the cat

responded by biting him, Tobias slapped her across the head. "I . . . I *hated* her!" he says. Eventually Tobias had the cat euthanized.

Fascinating correlations exist even in this part of the story. Although Agnes is still alive, therefore contradicting the end of Tobias's cat story, there is a sort of playful and ironic conversation between Claire and Tobias in which Claire suggests that Tobias should kill Agnes (as well as his daughter and Claire herself). The only emotional response Tobias has to this suggestion happens when Claire also tells him that he should kill Agnes before he kills her. "But it would have to be an act of passion—out of my head, and all that," he says. He does not question whether or not he could kill his wife, only that he could not kill her unless he was in a state of "passion." As a matter of fact, the only question he posits in this exchange is to ask Claire: "Do you really want me to shoot you?" Since Tobias was in a state of "passion" when he had the cat killed, there still remains, at least on a speculative level, a connection between his cat and his wife. There could also be the claim that on a psychological level Tobias has killed his wife since her emotions for him have been buried, at least the more passionate, pleasant ones.

There are moments when Agnes's emotions do rise to the surface. However, these emotions usually are followed by accusation. She often insinuates to Tobias that she knows that he had an affair with her sister. She blames Tobias for not being strong in his relationship with their daughter, therefore encouraging Julia's many divorces. In the third act of the play when Agnes recalls Tobias's refusal to make sexual contact with her following the death of their son, she, on one hand, absolves Tobias by stating that he did not want to create any more children because he was "racked with guilt." On the other hand, she then adds the word "stupidly," referring to his guilt, and adds: "and I must *suffer* for it."

Agnes's accusation fits well into Tobias's story of his cat when he adds another interesting element to his tale while summarizing his emotional response to the cat story:

I had *lived* with her; I had done . . . *everything*. And . . . and if there was a, any responsibility I'd failed in . . . well . . . there was nothing I could *do. And, and I was being accused.*

The key words in this statement are "responsibility" and "accused." The first of these words, "responsibility," is a theme that is either overtly expressed or subtly suggested throughout the play. Agnes refers to Tobias, at one point, as a man who provides a good home for her and her sister Claire. In other words, he is responsible for the welfare of two middle-aged women, giving them food and shelter as any responsible man would do. Tobias, at the end of the play, also mentions responsibility in reference to his friend Harry, who has come to stay in Tobias's house. Tobias feels more responsibility than friendship toward Harry. In the same way, Tobias feels responsible for Agnes, even though the emotions between them have died. The other key word, "accused," fits Agnes's overall tone, as mentioned previously.

In concluding his story about his cat, Tobias makes the statement, "I had her killed." Immediately following his words, Agnes tries to soften the impact of these words by simplifying the act: "You had her put to sleep. She was old. You had her put to sleep." In reaction, Tobias restates that he had the cat killed. He even raises his voice and repeats his statement, taking full responsibility for the cat's death. At this, Agnes again tries to ease Tobias's guilt. "What else could you have done?" This time, Tobias reflects on his actions. He wonders about other things that he might have done to avoid destroying the cat completely.

It is through these reflections that the audience becomes aware of the workings of Tobias's mind. Tobias's contemplations on what other actions he could have taken with his cat also provide hints as to how he has resolved his relationship with Agnes:

I might have tried longer. I might have gone on, as long as cats live, the same way. I might have worn a hair shirt, locked myself in the house with her, done penance. For *something*. For *what*. God knows.

If Tobias has learned anything from his experience with his cat, it is that he must build up tolerance and patience. He has learned to live with his wife. He does not force her to love him and has found ways to maintain his sense of responsibility toward her and their marriage. His conclusions may not be psychologically healthy (he stills seems to hold on to guilt and a need for punishment), but it could be noted that he has not killed Agnes. That, at least, is some improvement.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *A Delicate Balance*, in *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following interview, Albee discusses the social and political background and content of his work.

Despite wealthy adoptive parents who sent him to exclusive schools like Choate, Valley Forge, and Trinity College, playwright Edward Albee didn't have an easy start. He was expelled from most of the schools, or expelled himself. At eighteen he expelled himself from his parents' home and spent a decade drifting in and out of casual jobs.

He was a messenger for Western Union when, at twenty-nine, he wrote an angry, deeply disturbing one-act play called *The Zoo Story*, in which a businessman on a park bench is coerced into stabbing a vagrant.

The play was a sensation, the critics hailed it as the first work of a hugely original talent, and Albee went on to write a series of chilling attacks on the American domestic verities, most notably *The American Dream* (1961), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), and *A Delicate Balance* (1966)—which won Albee his first Pulitzer prize.

Albee said from the start that he hated the commercial values of Broadway, and he was one of the founders of the Off-Broadway movement. Perhaps the critics decided that the very successful Angry Young Man needed a lesson in humility. After 1966 his reputation went into a quarter-century tailspin, as each new offering "failed" to live up to the promise of the early work. Albee continued to produce original drama at the rate of one play per year. Critics responded by dismissing nearly all of it as willfully experimental and obscure, and Albee responded to their criticism by dismissing the most powerful New York critics, by name, as knownothings.

Albee has always been an experimentalist, and he seems not to have cared that some of his work has not been well received. So there was some irony in the relief critics expressed in 1992, when he won another Pulitzer for *Three Tall Women*. "Albee has done it again," was the cry, as if the entire theater community had been waiting thirty years to see if the old dog could jump through the hoop one more time. Albee is a name to reckon with again. *A Delicate Balance* has just celebrated its thirtieth birthday on Broadway by winning three Tony awards, including Best Revival.

Albee travels constantly, teaching and lecturing, but in New York he can be found in a cavernous TriBeCa loft, an abandoned cheese warehouse he bought eighteen years ago in the days before cavernous TriBeCa lofts were fashionable. Despite the gray hair, he doesn't look close to his sixty-eight years. We sit on black leather couches in the middle of his extraordinary art collection. A Dogon granary door is propped up just behind the author, a Picasso sketch stands in a frame on a desk, and a Japanese grain-threshing device sits on the floor nearby. An Australian aboriginal war axe lies dangerously on the table between us.

Q: Your plays don't express very overtly political sentiments. Is that because you don't want to seem to be getting up on a soapbox?

Albee: I do think that all of my plays are socially involved, but sometimes very subtly and very indirectly. Certainly *The American Dream* was socially involved. It's about the way we treat old people, the way we destroy our children, the way we don't communicate with each other. *The Death of Bessie Smith* was a highly political play. Sometimes it's subtle and sometimes it's fairly obvious.

Q: It has been suggested that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is "really" about two gay couples.

Albee: If I had wanted to write a play about two gay couples, I would have done it. I've had to close down a number of productions that tried to do that play with four men. It doesn't make any sense; it completely distorts the play. Changing a man into a woman is more than interpretation: It's f—ing around with what the playwright intended.

Q: Do you try to exercise strong control over how your plays are produced?

Albee: I always tell actors and directors— whether I'm working with them or not—do whatever you like so long as you end up with the play that I wrote. There's more than one way to skin a cat, lots of different interpretations. The only time I really complain is if, either through intention or inattention, the director distorts my play.

Q: Many of your plays are about families, especially about family dysfunction.

Albee: This has been going on ever since drama was invented. *Oedipus Rex* is about family and family dysfunction; *King Lear* is about family and family dysfunction. Nothing new about it. If I wrote plays about everyone getting along terribly well, I don't think anyone would want to see them. All serious theater is corrective. You have to show people things that aren't working well, and why they're not working well, in the hope that people will make them work better.

Q: But some playwrights don't focus on the family so much.

Albee: Which ones? Brecht maybe. But the atomic family is such a central part of human society. You can't get away from it.

Q: What is your attitude to marriage and the traditional family?

Albee: As with all things: When it works, it's fine. When it doesn't, do away with it.

Q: Is the legalization of gay marriage an important issue?

Albee: Why do you ask? Look, one day I'll write a play about a dysfunctional gay marriage. OK?

Q: Are you working on a play now?

Albee: I have two plays, one that I'm writing now called *The Play About the Baby*—that's the title of it—which I'm halfway into, and there's another one floating around in my head called *The Goat*, which very much wants to be written down.

Q: Do you write every day?

Albee: If writing is thinking about writing then I'm writing all the time. There isn't a day that goes by when I'm not thinking about a new play. But the literal writing down of a play—I seldom do that more than three or four months out of the year. That happens only after the play is fully formed in my mind: I wait until I can't do anything else but write it down. I never make notes because I make the assumption that anything I can't remember doesn't belong there in the first place.

Q: Do you do much rewriting?

Albee: I may, in my head, before I write things down. A lot of the writing is in the unconscious. I do very little rewriting once I write a play down on paper, very little.

Q: What's the role of comedy in drama?

Albee: I've found that any play which isn't close to laughter in the dark is very tedious. And conversely, even the purest comedy, if it isn't just telling jokes, has got to be tied to reality in some way. I think a play should do one of two things, and ideally both: It should change our perceptions about ourselves and about consciousness, and it should also broaden the possibilities of drama. If it can do both, that's wonderful. But it's certainly got to do one of the two.

Q: Does the artist have a duty not to preach politics in his work?

Albee: Most serious drama is trying to change people, trying to change their perceptions of consciousness and themselves and their position as sentient animals. Sometimes it's very overtly political and sometimes very subtly so. The way we vote, the way we function as a society, is determined by our sense of ourselves and our consciousness, and to the extent that you can keep people on the edge, alive, alert, and reexamining their values, then they will deal more responsibly with the particular issues. But didacticism belongs in essays.

Q: Isn't there any good art that's didactic? Dickens? Goya?

Albee: In the second half of the twentieth century things get more complex and it's harder to think of examples. David Hare does write didactic plays: *Racing Demon*, for instance, which I have retitled, not unaffectionately, *Raging Didacticism*. When there's too much didacticism going on I start sighing. I say: I know this stuff—dramatize it for me!

Q: You have always opposed the commercial pressures and values associated with Broadway. Do you feel uncomfortable with the success that *A Delicate Balance* is enjoying there now?

Albee: I never feel bad about getting awards; if they're giving out awards, I'd like to have them. But I don't care. They don't matter. The plays that seemed to matter on Broadway this year were very different from what usually wins. None of them originated on Broadway. So maybe something better is happening, though I think it's a little strange.

Q: You have taught at various institutions. Do you make any conscious effort to radicalize your students?

Albee: I do, yes. I probably shouldn't because I'll probably get thrown out—we're talking about Texas, where I teach now. I don't give them grades on how radical they've become, but I do talk a lot about their responsibilities. And I do often mention right at the beginning that there isn't a single creative artist whose work I respect who has been anything other than a liberal.

Q: Ezra Pound?

Albee: Well . . . there are exceptions.

Q: Have your students changed, politically?

Albee: Even back in the "activist" sixties and seventies I would talk to a lot of students and most of them couldn't argue dialectics for more than thirty seconds. They had an emotional involvement and they had a few slogans but they were not informed. Anyway, I teach aspiring writers, almost all of whom are liberal because they realize that anything that is not liberal is not going to respect their freedom of speech, freedom of activity. So quite selfishly, they are liberal, though how they will vote when they make it I have no idea. Some of them will get rich, go to Hollywood, and start voting Republican. Even in a democracy, things like that happen!

Q: In 1961, you said that we were ruled by "artificial values," and you spoke with contempt of the view "that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy keen." Have we slipped further into "artificial values"?

Albee: I think we've slipped a lot further. We have to go back to the fundamental responsibilities of democracy. Democracy is fragile and it must be made to work, which demands an awful lot of effort on everybody's part. I find the real and planned incursions against our civil liberties frightening and dangerous. The so-called religious right of the Republican Party—the Christian right, they call themselves, although in my view they are neither Christian nor right—is after a totalitarian state. But none of these things would be allowed to happen if we had a population a) that bothered to vote; b) that informed itself of the issues; and c) that understood that democracy is a participatory governmental system. We don't live up to our responsibilities to democracy.

Q: Would you describe yourself as a capital-D Democrat?

Albee: The first time I ever voted was in a New York City mayoral election. There were three candidates: a Democrat who was perfectly OK but a hack; a Republican who was probably not as terrible as all Republicans are these days; and a candidate for the

American Labor Party who everyone said was a Communist. He was actually a leftwing socialist, and he was the only person who a sensible person could have voted for. But the whole question of what is leftwing has shifted so. My God, Nelson Rockefeller would be considered leftwing now. I not only voted for the American Labor Party once, I also voted Republican once—no, twice—to get Javits reelected. But yes, I'm a Democrat, though I'm afraid I'm much more of an unreconstructed New Deal Democrat than most, perhaps because that was when I first had some political consciousness.

Q: People are criticizing Clinton for being too conservative.

Albee: Clinton needs a lot of criticism, but don't let's criticize him so much that Dole gets elected. Wait until he gets his second term, if he gets it. Then you'll find a much more liberal President because he won't be up for reelection.

Q: What's it like, in these conservative times, to work on NEA grant committees?

Albee: I don't get asked as much as I did. I'm a troublemaker. The pressures that were put on us occasionally to find as many worthwhile sculptors in North Dakota as there were in Brooklyn—well, I'm in favor of populism within rational limits, but . . . I also served for a while on the New York State Council for the Arts, but I was equally vocal there, and I'm not invited to do those things too much now.

Q: Did you enjoy them?

Albee: Yes, I considered it a civic responsibility. You know, in the thirties there was a huge arts program, for the visual arts especially, where a great generation of abstract painters was put to work decorating public buildings. And a lot of writers was put to work in schools. But nobody remembers that. They all think the National Endowment was the first time anyone had thought of using creative artists for the public good. We spend about thirty-eight cents per person per year on support of the arts in this country. In Germany it's five or six bucks. All the howling that's taking place in the fens of ignorant Republicanism attacking these supposedly huge grants is preposterous, it seems to me—sinister and cynical and totally fallacious. This is less money per year than you pay for one pack of cigarettes. If you don't want to educate yourself, you have a responsibility to educate other people, educate your children; this is part of the responsibilities of democratic life.

Q: However, there's a widespread sense that art is really just entertainment for highbrows.

Albee: Not only that! Art is dangerous. It's obscene. It's anti-god. And these arguments that the philistines come up with wouldn't work if people were educated to want art.

Q: You helped to create the Off-Broadway movement in the early 1960s, which seems to have been a period when anything was possible in the arts. Why have things gone from there to here?

Albee: A combination of fear and greed. I remember a time, I can't give you a date, but all of a sudden college students were informed—I don't know by whom—that what you did was graduate, get a cushy job, and vanish into society. I see it more and more. Mind you, my playwriting students haven't figured it all out yet. They still think that individuality has some virtue; they still think that their responsibility, if they possibly can, is to change the way people think.

Q: So, despite the slough of cultural-conservative despond, you see grounds for optimism?

Albee: How old are we, as a country? Two hundred years? I think we'll survive Gingrich and Dole.

Q: What's best in contemporary American theater?

Albee: I don't make lists. I always leave somebody good out. We have so many good playwrights in America now, a whole new generation.

Q: Is there any dominant theme or style emerging?

Albee: We have great diversity of style. I do find that the more naturalistic a play is, the more popular it tends to be.

Q: Is that a criticism?

Albee: Yes.

Q: Why is naturalism a problem artistically?

Albee: Theater audiences have been trained towards naturalism. The critics don't like experimental plays generally, and they steer audiences away from them. It's part of the fear of the intellectual in American culture. A big problem in this country.

Q: Do you have an aversion to musicals, in general?

Albee: I think it's a bastard art form. The music isn't usually very good. I used to like junk musicals when Rodgers and Hart wrote them, and Cole Porter, but then they didn't have any pretense. The stuff that's on now is supposed to be serious music writing and serious theater, but it's just pretentious, middle-brow junk. I dislike it a lot. The last musical I liked a lot was *Evita*, because it was politically interesting.

Q: I notice that one of the theater reference books lists your religion as Christian. For an Absurdist playwright that seems odd.

Albee: That may just be a weird oversimplification of something I said at one time. I'm a great admirer of the revolutionary leftist politics of Jesus Christ, and I am a Christian in the sense that I admire him a great deal. But I don't have any truck with the divinity or

with God, or any of that stuff. I just think he's an interesting revolutionary social thinker—and that makes me a Christian, does it not?

Q: Many of your plays seem to be about the maintenance or collapse of illusions. As if the goal is to live life without illusions.

Albee: I don't think there's any problem with having false illusions. The problem is with kidding yourself that they're not false. O'Neill said, in that extraordinary play that nobody does, *The Iceman Cometh*, that we have to have pipe dreams. I think *Virginia Woolf* was in part a response to that; it's better to live without false illusions, but if you must have them, know that they are false. It's part of the responsibility of the playwright to help us see when they're false.

Q: There seem to be Chekhov-like and Beckettlike elements in your plays. Are you influenced by other playwrights?

Albee: I certainly hope so. You learn from people who've come before you and who have done wonderful things. The trick is to take the influences and make them so completely you that nobody realizes that you're doing anything else but your own work.

Source: Richard Farr, Interview with Edward Albee, in *Progressive*, Vol. 60, No. 8, August 1996, pp. 39-41.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, the author analyzes Albee's A Delicate Balance *not in terms of personal relationships, as it is usually discussed, but in terms of its politics, which, he writes, makes the focus of the play "a moral and intellectual one."*

W. H. Auden in The Dyer's Hand lists six functions of a critic, the fourth being: "Give a 'reading' of a work which increases my understanding of it." In giving a new reading of Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*, I hope to increase the reader's understanding of this play by making him more aware of its ambiguities and by pointing out to him new associations within it. Although no one reading of *A Delicate Balance*, however careful, can reveal or distil or explain its full meaning simply because no work of art can ever finally be fully understood, a new reading does provide a new focus which changes the play's perspective.

My reading of *A Delicate Balance* is new because I do not think its primary focus is on the responsibilities of friendship. This is present but secondary. The primary focus is rather political, making the focus both a more moral and intellectual one. In friendship the emphasis is on the rights of the friend, in politics on the rights of the individual or self, in this case Tobias. To substantiate this reading, I shall examine three aspects of *A Delicate Balance* which to my mind require further attention: the significance of the characters' names, the surprising permutations of the characters, and finally the parable of Tobias and the cat.

Critical Essay #4

Names have many resonances for Albee: biblical (Jerry and Peter in *Zoo Story*), historical (George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*), sexual (*Tiny Alice*). "The Players" in *A Delicate Balance* are no exception. (Notice that we have players instead of a cast because this is to be a contest.) Agnes, lamb of God, is also a third century saint, a virgin martyr who was decapitated because her body refused to burn at the stake. Agnes, a transliteration of the Greek . . . (pronounced hagnós), means "pure" and "chaste." Tobias means "God is good." In *The Book of Tobit* Tobias cures his father's blindness with the help of the archangel Raphael, his guardian. Edna also appears in *The Book of Tobit* as Tobias' mother-in-law. Harry is the diminutive of Henry, a name which evolved from the Old German words for "house," or "home," and "ruler."

Julia is the feminine form of Julius. "The Romans supposed the name to be derived from Greek . . . 'downy,' but there is no good evidence for this." Downy means "feathery" or "fluffy," but it is also slang for "wide awake" or "knowing." Claire of course means "to make clear" as Agnes observes: "Claire, who watches from the sidelines, has seen so very much, has seen us all so clearly, have you not, Claire. You were not named for nothing." Lastly, there is Teddy. Teddy, the dead son of Agnes and Tobias, is the diminutive of Edward, an Old English compound meaning "rich," "happy," and "ward," "guardian," and of Theodore, Greek for "god's gift." Edward and Theodore are both saints; Edward is also a king and martyr.

The resonances are various and conflicting, though always pertinent and never deceptive. Agnes, more wolf than lamb (". . . I am grimly serious. Yes?"), far from saintly ("We do not attempt the impossible," and "I'm not a fool," both saintly imperatives), more sacrificing than sacrificed (to Claire: "If you are not an alcoholic, you are beyond forgiveness," and to Julia: "How dare you embarrass me and your father!" [notice the "me" first]), is neither pure nor chaste in either the physical or spiritual sense (Claire to Julia: "Your mommy got her pudenda scuffed a couple of times herself 'fore she met old Toby," and Agnes to Tobias: "We must always envy someone we should not, be jealous of those who have so much less. You and Claire make so much sense together, talk so well").

Although Agnes considers herself blessed in a qualified way (". . . it is simply that I am the one member of this . . . reasonably happy family blessed and burdened with the ability to view a situation objectively while I am in it," and "There are many things a woman does: she bears the children—if there *is* that blessing. . ."), she also jokingly calls herself a "harridan," *e.g.*, a hag (". . . rid yourself of the harridan. Then you can run your mission and take out sainthood papers"). Ironically this last is addressed to Tobias, the only member of her family who is foolish enough to attempt the impossible.

Instead of having a blind father as in the apocrypha, this Tobias has a blind wife. Agnes is *not* the one member of her family who can view a situation objectively while in it. Claire does this much better: "Harry wants to tell you, Sis." If Agnes weren't so afraid of silence, Harry would have explained his presence sooner. Moreover Agnes' remark to

Julia, ". . . nobody. . .really wants to talk about your latest . . . marital disorder. . . ," is simply untrue. Claire does: "I have been trying, without very much success, to find out why Miss Julie here is come home." Agnes can't even see herself properly:

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

TOBIAS. Who?

AGNES. You.

TOBIAS. Ah.

It doesn't occur to Agnes, as Tobias' "Who?" suggests it does to him, that she herself is the stranger.

Even Harry and Edna are sufficiently selfaware to recognize that in a similar situation they would not grant sanctuary to Tobias and Agnes. Julia also questions her mother with new insight: "I must discover, sometime, who you think you are." Agnes' "icy" reply is significant: "You will learn . . . one day." We all learn by the end of the play: Agnes thinks of herself as guardian, but she is in fact mad. So she does "lose her head" because she refuses to be burned, one method of inoculation against the plague, the play's chief metaphor.

Although Tobias begins drinking anisette, he switches to brandy—Claire's drink. Brandy burns. It is brandy that Tobias later offers to Harry at the end of Act III, but he refuses: "No, oh, God no." Harry has been burned enough for one week-end. Like Tobias, he was foolish enough to attempt the impossible and failed. That's why he leaves. Tobias has no place else to go. Although his house is not a home as Agnes uncomfortably reminds him: "Well, my darling, . . . you do not live at home," it is *his*: "I have built this house!" He is therefore free to exclaim to Harry: "I want your plague! . . . Bring it in!" But Agnes does not want it, and because she is nanny and drill sergeant (her drink is cognac: "It is suppose to be healthy") and *not* saint and martyr, Harry and Edna leave. Tobias remains to join Claire and Julia, "the walking wounded" (a deft description of sanity—and sainthood?), in another drink, while Agnes, the "steady wife," plans for them another day.

Harry and Edna return to their house where Harry can again be the ruler. The terror is still there, but they don't seem so overwhelmed by it. Their support of one another which at their entrance comes across as awkward and impersonal has mellowed. A tenderness has entered their relationship— Edna: "I let him think I . . . wanted to make love"— which coupled with the quiet acceptance of their failure—Edna: "We *shouldn't* have come. . . For our own sake; our own . . . lack"—lends a grace to their endurance which is not available to Tobias and Agnes who are locked in their separate worlds. Their lives may be the same, as Edna observes, but their responses are not. Harry and Edna at least have the vitality to feel, act, and see. Therefore the ramifications of their departure, which is final,

EDNA. I'm going into town on Thursday, Agnes. Would you like to come?

[A longer pause than necessary, CLAIRE and JULIA look at AGNES]

AGNES. [Just a trifle awkward] Well . . . no, I don't think so, Edna; I've . . . I've so much to do. . .

is less severe for them than for Tobias because they have each other. Tobias is left with two resigned drinking companions and a house manager nattering away about millenniums.

Immunity to the plague is acquired through testing, which leaves one burned or isolated "unless we are saints" (Agnes' sarcastic alternative):

CLAIRE. So one night . . . I'd had one martini—as a Test to see if I could—which, given my . . . stunning self-discipline, had become three;

EDNA. We mustn't press our luck, must we: test.

The characters' immunity, Claire and Agnes excepted, exists in various stages: Tobias' is beginning; Harry and Edna's is advancing, though they resist it; Julia's is progressing nicely. Although she endured as a young girl a "two-year burn at suddenly having a brother" and subsequently has known four husbands (know in the biblical sense is sexual), Julia is still not sufficiently "wide awake" for the "great big world." She needs to return home to Tobias and Agnes.

Claire is the only character who believes her immunity to be complete: "I've had it. I'm still alive, I think." Without Claire who feels "a little bigger than life" and who is the real nexus of the household, we would have no way to identify the degree of Julia's immunity, or her ambivalence to it. Nor could we see by the end of the play that Agnes who is "neither less nor more than human" is also immune. For her inoculation is different from the others. They *resign* themselves to reality whereas Agnes *creates* her own—"I'm as young as the day I married you." They confront their demons in the daylight, but Agnes—"well, you know how little I vary"—quarantines hers in the unknown chambers of her heart. Thus the plague (and the play) becomes less mysterious when associations with the characters' names are permitted to illuminate it.

Critical Essay #5

One of the consummate strengths of *A Delicate Balance* is its universality. It speaks not only to its time, but out of it. Every year is a plague year somewhere, and no one is immune. As Hamm remarks in *Endgame* (a play with which *A Delicate Balance* has close affinities): ". . . you're on earth, there's no cure for that!" A major technique Albee employs to create this universality is characterization. This is partially achieved by the resonances, associations, and echoes the names of the characters have with life external to the play which fixes it in an historical—and literary—continuum. It is also partially achieved by the permutations of the characters themselves.

Just as Albee clues us in to the significance of names through Claire, so he clues us in to the significance of permutations by describing Harry and Edna as "very much like Agnes and Tobias." These internal resonances are as numerous and complex as the external ones. Furthermore, they determine the play's action and generate its vision, foci which are not coterminous.

When Claire declares to Tobias that "'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; yes we do," she acknowledges that the boundaries of love in their household are set though circuitous. Trouble arises when these boundaries are challenged, *e.g.*, by Harry and Edna:

TOBIAS. I almost went in my room . . . by habit . . . but then I realized that your room is my room because my room is Julia's because Julia's room is. . .

But while the boundaries are openly agreed upon by Agnes, Tobias, Claire, and Julia, they are constantly being unconsciously crossed: Claire, "like sister like sister"; Tobias, "My name is Claire"; Tobias calls Claire Agnes; Agnes becomes Julia's father, Tobias her mother; Claire calls Julia "daughter"; Harry becomes Tobias; Edna becomes Agnes. What this means is, as Claire points out, that like Tobias' friends they are all "indistinguishable if not necessarily similar . . ." They share a common environment. "When one does nothing, one is threatened by the question, is one nothing?" It is a question which threatens them all.

It is in fact the terror. Tobias' despairing "Doesn't friendship grow to [love]?" is rhetorical for everyone except himself. Claire had already answered it: "We're not a communal nation. . . ; giving, but not sharing, outgoing, but not friendly." An earlier assessment by Claire had driven Tobias to examine his boundaries:

TOBIAS. We'll do neither, I'd imagine. Take in; throw out.

CLAIRE. Oh?

TOBIAS. Well, yes, they're just . . . passing through.

CLAIRE. As they have been . . . all these years.

A later claim by Edna pushes his examination further: "We are not . . . transients . . . like some." But they are transients. All of them. They each try the other's roles in an effort to belong, and although they meld perfectly (Julia talks like Claire, Tobias repeats Agnes, Harry mixes drinks like Tobias) they find that the new skin is just like their old one: "dry . . . and not warm." As Tobias eventually, discovers, boundaries bind (blind?) more often than they enclose.

A Delicate Balance is neatly constructed. Agnes both opens and closes the play. Her opening speech is seemingly a descant on whether or not she will go mad, but upon closer examination we find that what really astonishes her most "is Claire." This of course italicizes Claire's enlightenment and establishes straight away the conflict between the two. It is the major conflict of the play with Tobias as the stake. Each wants to persuade him to embrace her vision of the world: Agnes, instinctively selfish, demands order; Claire, instinctively generous, accepts the absurd. Agnes wants "peace," Claire "merely relief." The appearance of Harry and Edna forces Tobias either to choose between these opposing visions or to adopt one of his own. He opts for the latter, and it becomes a last, desperate effort to inject meaning into his life ("God is good").

Harry and Edna are thus pivotal because they upset the delicate balance of this trio. (The play is full of delicate balances: one exists between each of the characters, between appearance and reality, between the play and its reader or spectator.) But Harry and Edna are like Tobias and Agnes, Tobias is like Claire and Julia is like Agnes. Thus all the characters are pivotal, although each is "moving through his own jungle." "All happy families are alike," Claire tells Tobias, Agnes and Julia, quoting the opening of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. And so are unhappy strangers.

Critical Essay #6

As with Jerry's parable of the dog in *Zoo Story*, Tobias' parable of the cat is an analogue of the whole play. The parable contains eleven salient points: (1) the cat existed before Tobias met Agnes; (2) the cat was feminine; (3) she didn't like people; (4) but she was contented with Tobias; (5) one day he noticed that she no longer liked him; (6) he shook her; (7) she bit him; (8) he slapped her; (9) she judged him, accused him of failing; (10) he felt *betrayed;* (11) he had her killed.

Agnes is the obvious analogue to the cat: she is feminine, she replaces the cat in Tobias' affection, she does not like people ("You would not have a woman left about you—only Claire and Julia . . . not even people"), and she is contented with Tobias (". . . I have reached an age, Tobias, when I wish we were always alone, you and I, without . . . hangers-on . . . or anyone"). Tobias noticed that Agnes no longer liked him after the death of Teddy, "god's gift," Tobias' "ward" and "guardian" (his archangel?), whose death that hot, wet summer permanently altered the balance of all their lives. (AGNES. "Ah, the things I doubted then: that I was loved—that *I* loved, for that matter!") Tobias then "shook" Agnes by being unfaithful; she "bit" him by "trying to hold [him] in." He "slapped" her by sleeping alone. She then judged him, accused him of failing ("Did my husband . . . cheat on me?" and "*You* could have pushed her back . . . if you'd wanted to"). Since married to Agnes, Tobias has felt betrayed by Teddy's death, Agnes' failure as a mother, Claire's infidelity with Harry, Julia's failure as an adult, and finally by Harry's refusal to "stay."

The analogue seemingly breaks down with point eleven: Tobias does not kill Agnes. Nor does Agnes kill Tobias. She does, however, see to it (Agnes is never blind to her own needs) that he is "put to sleep," her euphemism for killing, by injecting him with the plague, *e.g.*, by thwarting *his* vision which is to make Harry and Edna stay, by withholding her succor from him and them. And her injection, like the vet's, succeeds where his fails.

Albee carefully prepares us for this reversal in two ways. First he identifies Tobias with Claire (this identification began when Tobias switched to Claire's drink, brandy). Immediately before the parable, Agnes "decides Claire is not in the room," which is the reaction of the cat in the parable. During the parable Agnes again identifies herself with the cat when she wants to know if Tobias hurt her when he slapped her, while Claire identifies herself again with Tobias by asking what did he do, e.g., with the cat. Thus we intuitively feel that Tobias, like Claire, will succumb to Agnes' authoritarianism.

Second, Albee places the following exchange immediately after Tobias' "I had her *killed*!" which terminates the parable:

AGNES. Well, what else could you have done? There was nothing to be done; there was no . . . meeting between you.

TOBIAS. I might have tried longer . . . I might have worn a hair shirt, locked myself in the house with her, done penance.

CLAIRE. You probably did the right *thing*. Distasteful alternative; the less . . . ugly choice.

TOBIAS. Was it?

[*A silence from them all*]

AGNES. [Noticing the window] Was that a car in the drive?

TOBIAS. "If we do not love someone . . . never have loved someone. . ."

Each of these speeches foreshadows the end of Act III: Agnes' ". . . what else could you have done?" is precisely her response to the departure of Harry and Edna, as is Tobias' "I might have tried longer." Claire's "distasteful alternative" is comforting and pragmatic, while Agnes' nervous remark about the "car in the drive" parallels her breaking the silence with her—and the play's— concluding speech. But it is Tobias' quiet "Was it?" that is the most revealing, for he is suggesting that "the less ugly choice" might have been his own death. This is reinforced by his quoting Anges' "If we do not love someone . . . never have loved someone" which was originally her reply to Claire's "Or! Agnes; why don't you die?" The implication is that if one does not love someone, the generous "reflex" is to sacrifice oneself. This is what Tobias should have done with the cat; this is what he tried to do with Harry and Edna: "I DON'T WANT YOU HERE! I DON'T LOVE YOU! BUT BY GOD . . . YOU STAY! !" The reversal is complete: Tobias is ultimately the cat as he is the saint. But because God is dead—"The bastard! He doesn't exist!," to quote Hamm once again—sainthood is dead as well. As Julia explains, she first thought of her father as a saint, then as a cipher, and finally as a "Nasty, violent, absolutely human man."

This is what we are left with at the end of *A Delicate Balance*: three absolutely human beings— Tobias, Claire, Julia—seeking alcoholic "relief" from the disorder and "debris" of their stultifying existence, while the fourth member of their household, Agnes, speaking "To fill the silence," remarks upon "the wonder of daylight" before blithely welcoming the new day. The conflict is over. Agnes has won. The price? *Three* early morning drinkers and that "living room of a large and well-appointed suburban house" thoroughly infected with the plague.

Since 1966 when *A Delicate Balance* was first produced, the environment of America has become increasingly disordered and dirty. Mr. Nixon is a permutation of Mr. Johnson who was "very much like" Mr. Goldwater; Democrats become Republicans, Republicans Democrats: "everyone [is] moving through his own jungle." We are all "players," strangers in a room; our endings, like Agnes' (and like that unfinished sentence ending *Finnegans Wake* which continues on the first page of the book), are reminiscent of our beginnings, dependents seeking "relief." And this brings me back to W. H. Auden, whose sixth function of a critic is to "Throw light upon the relation of art to life. . ."

Source: E. G. Bierhaus, "Strangers in a Room: *A Delicate Balance* Revisited," in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 17, No. 2, June 1974, pp. 199-206.

Critical Essay #7

In the following essay excerpt, the author explores the themes of death, friendship, family, and their resistance to change in Albee's A Delicate Balance.

Notwithstanding the fact that Edward Albee received the Pulitzer Prize for *A Delicate Balance*, it still remains, aside from *Tiny Alice,* his most underrated play. Premiered on September 12, 1966, at the Martin Beck Theatre, its generally mild reception generated immediate controversy over Albee's continuing talent as a first-rate playwright. Martin Gottfried, reviewing for *Women's Wear Daily*, called the play "two hours of self-indulgence by a self-conscious and self-overrating writer." Robert Brustein, now Dean of the revitalized Yale School of Drama, said the writing was "as far from modern speech as the whistles of a dolphin." Conversely, John Chapman called it "a beautiful play—easily Albee's best and most mature." And Harold Clurman considered it "superior to the more sensational *Virginia Woolf.*"

While the critics could not agree on the play's merits, they seemed to be in general agreement on its theme, which they stated in various ways as man's responsibility to man. Albee had hinted at the theme before the play's opening (he wasn't going to be misunderstood again) when he revealed that the new work was about "the nature of responsibility, that of family and friends—about responsibility as against selfishness, self-protectiveness, as against Christian responsibility." In their reviews the critics simply paraphrased what Albee had said about the responsibilities of friendship since a major plot episode concerns the protagonists' best friends.

Norman Nadel claimed that the "delicate balance" was between "the right of privacy and the obligations of friendship." *Vogue's* reviewer echoed the other critics when he remarked that it is "when our friends make demands on us that we fail them." Leonard Probst, reviewing for NBC-TV, said in his one minute critique that "the delicate balance is the balance between responsibility to friends (when they're in trouble) . . . and the conflict with our own reasonable desires." John Gassner, in analyzing the play's structure, concluded that it was most concerned with saying "if we do not want to betray a friendship, we do not really want to carry it very far." With this general agreement on its theme, the critics turned out an onslaught of reasons why the new play was not well written.

Norman Nadel, referring to the neighboring couple who decide out of a private fear to stay on indefinitely, commented that their personal problem split the play into two parts which "do not relate as they should." John Gassner, writing for the *Educational Theatre Journal,* concluded that Albee had brought too many other elements into the play to simply resolve the friendship theme. Perhaps the most outspoken criticism of the play's structure came from the *Village Voice.* Michael Smith wrote that the play's crisis had "not been resolved but uncreated . . . [because] . . . Harry and Edna, quite on their own, simply go away. . . . Balance has been restored not by the called for heroic leap, but by removal . . . this play is a cop-out."

Each critic's evaluation was based on the premise that Albee had not carefully thought out the play's events as it related to the problem of friendship and its ensuing responsibilities. Professor Gassner, concentrating on what he considered Albee's intention, went so far as to say that certain major characters should not have been included in the play—specifically, that the alcoholic sister's appearance seemed somewhat arbitrary and the daughter's sudden homecoming uncalled for. Walter Kerr complained that "there are no events— nothing follows necessarily from what has gone before, no two things fit, no present posture has a tangible past." The critic for *Newsweek* summed up all the adverse criticism when he said there was a division between theme and procedure.

But the play examines more levels of our existence than the need for truer friendship among men. Once properly understood, the play's events are perfectly sequential (though I am not categorically against a plotless play as we shall see in the chapter on *Box-Mao-Box*), revealing an analysis of the modern scene that goes deeper than the reviews imply. One of the elements not discussed in any of the reviews is a continuation, and I believe culmination, of a major Albee theme.

From the very first Albee drama, through this play, two characters continually make their appearance: that domineering, man-eating, she-ogre of the American family—Mom—and her playmate, that weak-willed, spineless, castrated, avoider of argument—Dad. Together these two have woven their way through every single play of Albee's with the exception of *Tiny Alice*—although some critics have made an incorrect case for the existence of this sado-masochistic pair there also. Mom and Pop first showed up obliquely in *The Zoo Story* when Jerry began explaining his orphaned status to Peter. They next appeared as characters in both *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream,* its extention, playing out their roles of emasculator and emasculated, with Mom doing her part with such zest and relish that it made her male audience cringe with empathic pain. Even *Bessie Smith*, Albee's supposed civil rights play, got out of hand when his obsession with the battle of the sexes allowed the play's original theme to get away from him. It did, however, plant the seed of Daddy's fight for survival which came to fruition in the highly successful *Virginia Woolf.* The play's huge success is directly attributable to both the rich verbal texture and the fact that for the first time Albee gave Mom a formidable antagonist. This time Daddy would fight to the death before acquiescing to Mom's husband-destroying intentions.

Many critics have been quick to insist that Albee was really writing about his own foster parents and not about a typically American condition. A look into the many sociological texts on American life would negate that analysis. One such treatise, examining Dad's position in the American home, bluntly asserts that "in few societies is the role of the father more vestigial than in the United States." This same text vividly points out that the success of such comics as *Blondie* (now seen on television) or its home-screen predecessors, *The Honeymooners and The Flintstones,* is that the American public is convinced that the American father is a blunderer and has given up authority, because with him at the head "the family would constantly risk disintegration and disaster." One further example, this time analyzing Mom, should suffice as a preamble to the conflicts set forth in *A Delicate Balance*. The following condensed statement on Mom can be

found in a standard sociology textbook sold in most college bookstores across the country:

'Mom' is the unquestioned authority in matters of mores and morals in her home. . . . She stands for the superior values of tradition, yet she herself does not want to become 'old.' In fact, she is mortally afraid of that status which in the past was the fruit of a rich life, namely, the status of the grandmother . . . Mom—is not happy: she does not like herself; she is ridden by the anxiety that her life was a waste.

A Delicate Balance is a continuation of the Mom and Pop relationship as they enter the age of retirement. Through a rather bizarre event, Albee has forced the famous couple to re-examine the sum total of their lives with conclusions startlingly similar to the ones reached by the above sociological analysis. Albee wrote this play on boat trips to Europe. The relaxed slow pace of the ship's journey fit the needs of the playwright as he began to write his most introspective play. This particular style, not common to the American stage since it isn't filled with obvious physical action, was alien to many of the critics. Walter Kerr, in particular, reacted traditionally when he claimed that the play was "speculative rather than theatrical, an essay and an exercise when it might have been an experience." In spite of Kerr's criticism, Albee went on to develop the introspective technique further until he completely broke from theatrical narrative in *Box-Mao-Box.*

Mom and Pop begin *A Delicate Balance* in "the living room of a large and well-appointed suburban house." The couple, it will be remembered, started their careers as typically middleclass, later moved on to the university as intellectuals, and have now become well-to-do as they prepare for retirement. Placing Mom and Pop in the privileged class at the end of their lives is quite correct, because it is the symbolic end—the fitting reward for the dedicated American life. The American dream has come true; Mom and Pop have enough money now to isolate themselves from people and avoid any commitment to society. At one point in the play, Mom (Agnes) remarks, "I have reached an age, Tobias, when I wish we were always alone, you and I, without . . . hangers-on . . . or anyone." We find the two, self-isolated at the beginning of the play, as Agnes speaks to her husband, having quietly contemplated the possibility of going mad:

AGNES: . . . that it is not beyond . . . happening; some gentle loosening of the moorings sending the balloon adrift.

There is a death wish in her thought of insanity. Not verbalized yet, it's subliminally in her very description of madness. A recent movie, *Charlie Bubbles,* commenting on our society today, used the same imagery to suggest the death or suicide of its hero. At the end of the film, Charlie, totally alienated from his society and unable to live alone, performs the ultimate retreat from life as he steps into a balloon and sails out of this world.

Death is not a new concern in Albee's writing. The Zoo Story states that only at the supreme moment of death is there any human contract. *The Sandbox and The American Dream* are noticeably concerned with the death and removal of grandma from the American home. The title of *The Death of Bessie Smith speaks* for itself. *Virginia*

Woolf builds to the death of the imaginary child which symbolizes the demise of all illusions. Finally, *Tiny Alice* examines the death and subsequent martyrdom of a lay brother. This ever-present concern with death is continued in *A Delicate Balance* and is instrumental to the deepest meanings of the play.

Agnes is reassured by Tobias (Pop) that "there is no saner woman on earth," but unwilling to reciprocate her husband's support, she replies in her typically emasculating way that she "could never do it—go—adrift—for what would become of you?" Once again, as in all the past plays, Pop is reminded of his ineffectualness and total reliance on Mom. Presumably his life would disintegrate should Mom suddenly expire. Agnes continues her preoccupation with insanity, admitting now that thoughts of old age motivate her:

AGNES: Yes; 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, sell the house, move to Tucson, say, and pine in the good sun, and live to be a hundred and four.

Ironically, in an earlier version of Mom, notably *The Sandbox,* she put her mother in a bin to die—which grandma promptly did. Agnes now wonders when it will be her turn to inherit the fate of our senior citizens. Tobias, too, is aware of his coming old age for he says a moment later, "I'm not as young as either of us once was." Agnes, still unnerved over her future, asks Tobias to tell her what he'd do if she really did go insane:

TOBIAS: (*Shrugs*) Put you in a bin somewhere, sell the house and move to Tucson. Pine in the hot sun and live forever.

AGNES: (*Ponders it*) Hmmmm, I bet you would.

TOBIAS: (*Friendly*) Hurry, though.

Tobias is presumably joking, but under the friendly kidding is the same hatred that made George pull out a phony rifle in *Virginia Woolf* and shoot Martha. Agnes, somewhat taken aback by Tobias's admission that her senility and eventual death would not disturb him in the least, retaliates by assuring him that the perpetual blandness of her emotions would never lead to the psychological disintegration of insanity. She says, "I can't even raise my voice except in the most calamitous of events." Actually she makes the case for eventual psychosis even stronger by admitting that her personality doesn't allow her to respond normally to most events that circumscribe her life. She begins to consider various chemical ways to induce psychosis, and there is a hint that she would like to try LSD or its narcotic equivalent to induce the excitement needed to bring about a drastic change in her day-to-day boredom. She quickly gives up this idea of chemical madness when she realizes it isn't permanent:

AGNES: Ah, but those are temporary; even addiction is a repeated temporary . . . stilling. I am concerned with peace . . . not mere relief.

Here, Agnes unconsciously wishes for death, the permanent peace, because it has begun now "to mean freedom from the acquired load and burden of the irrational." Still

unable to rid her mind of its chronological inheritance, she resumes describing the dreary picture of their remaining years:

AGNES: You have hope, 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. Will it do?

TOBIAS: (*A little sad, too, but warmth*) It will do.

Ted Hoffman, reviewing for New York radio station WINS, was completely correct when he realized that so much of *A Delicate Balance* "deals with the loneliness and corrosion of growing old." This theme, introduced early in the play, propels the play's action and is directly related to its resolution.

This first section of the play ends as Claire, Agnes's alcoholic sister, enters and apologizes for her somewhat inebriated condition. She nevertheless accuses her sister of mistreating her because she is a drunk. Agnes defends herself in a way that Albee's heroine has never done, foreshadowing the change that will take place in her by the time the play ends:

AGNES: . . . If I scold, it is because I wish I needn't. If I am sharp, it is because I am neither less nor more than human . . .

Only in this play does Mom apologize for her unpleasantness. This gnawing self-awareness later becomes a factor in her surprising decision to step down, at the end of the play, and relinquish her longheld role as head of the family. She leaves Claire and Tobias together in order to call her daughter Julia who is far enough away from her mother to effect a time differential of three hours. No sooner has Agnes left the living room than Claire asks Tobias why he doesn't kill Agnes. Tobias replies "Oh, no, I couldn't do that," intimating that he doesn't have the guts for an act of bloody passion.

Albee uses Claire periodically as a quasi-narrator, sardonically commenting on the action. I find this practice unnecessary and her peripheral position alienating and at odds with the otherwise tight entanglement of his characters. One illustration of this annoying practice should be sufficient. When, in the midst of family crises, father, mother, daughter, and audience became deeply involved with the situation at hand, Albee breaks this involvement and, using Claire, gets cute:

CLAIRE: (To TOBIAS, *laughing*) Crisis sure brings out the best in us, don't it, Tobe? The family circle? 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 Tobe.

Ostensibly, Claire's monologue is supposed to alienate the audience, in the Brechtian sense, by describing the moment while it's happening. Claire, in giving us information that is not necessary to the plot, serves no purpose other than to hold up the action while the viewer is jolted out of his empathy. Albee has used the aside as far back as

The Sandbox, where Grandma talked to the audience and commented on the action. He used it again to less advantage in *Everything in the Garden,* but in these examples the aside was presentational in that the characters talked directly to the audience. It is clear now that Albee's periodic experiments with presentational speeches was a long-time predisposition, which eventually found its form in the later *Box-Mao-Box.* However, *A Delicate Balance* is structured representationally and periodic comments on the action from the sidelines does not work well in a post-Ibsen play.

Claire does serve another purpose, and it is here that her presence is effective. Claire tells the truth. She sees (clairvoyant) and tells it like it is. Perhaps this is why she drinks. She cannot cope with what she perceives and rather than kill herself or go insane, she drinks. When she isn't commenting sarcastically on the action, her propensity for the truth prods the characters on toward the play's resolution. The first truth emerges when Claire forces Tobias, now retired, to examine the genuineness and durability of his past business friendships.

CLAIRE: . . . With your business friends, your indistinguishable if not necessarily similar friends . . . what did you have in common with them?

TOBIAS: Well, uh . . . well, everything. (*Maybe slightly on the defensive, but more vague*) Our business; we all mixed well, were friends away from the office, too . . . clubs, our . . . an, an environment, I guess.

CLAIRE: Unh-huh. But what did you have in common with them?

Claire asks the question twice more, but all Tobias can answer is "please, Claire." Claire's insistence serves two purposes: first, it reveals the relative superficiality of most friendships because Tobias cannot think of one thing he has had in common with his friends except proximity. An eminent sociologist came to the same conclusion when he noted that "Americans change both residence and job with the greatest of ease; and with each change of either, friends are changed, too." Second, this brief revelation foreshadows and prepares the audience for the final tragic event concerning Tobias's closest friends.

Claire has made her point and is soon on to a new subject. She asks Tobias why he's switching from anisette to brandy. Tobias replies that the effects of anisette don't last as long. We realize that quiet, well-mannered Tobias looks to escape his surroundings by dulling his mind and memory for as long as possible. It is interesting to note that while Claire is said to be the alcoholic, Tobias drinks as often and as much as she does. Tobias is not off the hook though, because Claire will not let him forget. Reminding him of the time he was unfaithful to Agnes, she builds more evidence to dispel the image of tranquil, thoughtful Tobias, happily spending the final years of his life as the devoted, loving husband.

Claire then lies on the floor, arms outstretched in what Albee calls "a casual invitation." Tobias only moves away; he is not interested. Later we find out that he's not sexually

interested in his wife either. Years of constant emasculation have debilitated his sex drive until he is now like George in *Virginia Woolf:* impotent.

Impotency in Dad is a recurring theme in Albee's plays. We first hear of it in *The American Dream* (though Mommy and Daddy have no children in *The Sandbox*) when Mommy refers to Daddy's impotency as a result of a recent operation. The theme again appears in *Virginia Woolf* if we consider the inability of George and Martha to have a child. Impotency suggests loss of manliness as well as depletion of physical strength—both characteristic of the American daddy, according to Albee. It also implies sterility or the inability to produce a new generation. We do not create anything new; we only perpetuate, the old. At one point in the play Agnes corroborates this indictment. Talking about her only daughter she admits: "We see ourselves repeated by those we bring into it all. . . ." At another moment Claire makes the same observation when she says: "We can't have changes—throws the balance off."

Claire's remark also clarifies the title of the play, which is meant to mean the delicate balance of the *status quo*, whether it be in reference to an existing relationship within the family, a friendship outside, or the general state of affairs within the country or, for that matter, the world. Each and every relationship hangs in the balance of time, doggedly resistant to change. This difficulty of change within our lives is dramatically depicted as the play progresses, developing into the major theme of its denouement.

Unwilling to recognize Claire's open invitation to have sex with her, Tobias changes the subject, confessing that he can't remember the last time he saw his wife cry, "no matter what," indicating she is as dried up emotionally as he is sexually. Tobias asks Claire why Alcoholics Anonymous never helped her. She replies, in a rather descriptive monologue, that she could not accept a belief in God—the first tenet of the organization. Besides, she doesn't admit to being an alcoholic. Agnes re-enters and stuns Tobias with the news that their daughter, Julia, is coming home after the dissolution of her fourth marriage. Apparently everyone has been aware that the breakup was coming, except Tobias. He offers to talk to his son-in-law in an effort to save the marriage, which seems, from Agnes's reaction, to be a new role for her husband:

AGNES: (*As if the opposite were expected from her*) I wish you would! If you had talked to Tom, or Charlie, yes! even Charlie, or . . . uh. . . .

CLAIRE: Phil?

AGNES: (*No recognition of CLAIRE helping her*) . . . Phil, it might have done some good. If you've decided to assert yourself, finally, too late, I imagine. . . .

This sudden turnabout for Tobias is structurally important because it represents the first manifestation of an inner crisis that will grow during the course of the play, finally forcing Tobias to act contrary to his nature, in a last-ditch attempt to hold together his fast disintegrating ego. Agnes's remark, "too late, I imagine," foreshadows the tragic failure of his attempt.

Claire breaks in and alters the mood temporarily by singing a little ditty about Julia's ex-husbands, which is Albee's way of reintroducing the death theme. This time it is to inform us of the death of four marriages, the stigma of which, Julia carries with her:

CLAIRE: (*A mocking sing-song*) Philip loved to gamble. Charlie loved the boys. Tom went after women, Douglas. . . .

It seems that Julia has a knack for picking marriage partners who must fail her. Unconsciously she doesn't want these marriages to work because she needs a reason to return home to the protection of her parents and to resume the old parent-child relationship. Whatever happened over the years, we can only know that Julia feels deprived of something in that relationship and keeps coming back to get it. Agnes reinforces Julia's neurosis by taking her back into the house and allowing her to resume the mother-daughter premarital kinship because it gives her the illusion she is still young enough to have an unmarried daughter.

Cued by Julia's homecoming, Tobias obliquely gives us the needed information about Julia's years at home. He does this by confessing to a rather pathetic and apparently unrelated incident in his past. It seems that for many years before his marriage to Agnes, he and a pet cat enjoyed a mutual affection. One day Tobias realized that his pet cat no longer liked him; it would not come to him when called, and retreated whenever he approached. The cat's unexplainable rejection made Tobias all the more anxious to win back his pet's love. Finally, after many overtures, in desperation and utter frustration, he shook the cat violently yelling, "Damn you, you like me; God damn it, you stop this! I haven't *done* anything to you." Frightened at the outburst, the cat bit him, and Tobias, in retaliation, viciously smacked it. Tobias describes the outcome:

TOBIAS: . . . She and I had lived together and been, well, you know, friends, and . . . there was no *reason.* And I hated her, well, I suppose because I was being accused of something, of . . . failing. But I hadn't been cruel by design; if I'd been neglectful well, my life was . . . I resented it. I resented having a . . . being judged. Being betrayed.

CLAIRE: What did you do?

TOBIAS: I had lived with her; I had done . . . *everything.* And . . . and if there was a, any responsibility I'd failed in . . . well . . . there was nothing I could do. And, and I was being accused

CLAIRE: Yes; what did you do?

TOBIAS: (*Defiance and self-loathing*) I had her killed.

Almost every critic referred to the "cat story." It is obviously Albee at his best. The critics likened it to the dog monologue in *The Zoo Story,* maintaining that the telling of it meant more than the unfortunate experience of one man and an animal. Henry Hewes thought it meant that Albee was trying to puncture the myth that "people who are sufficiently happy together and are enough in love to get married will forever remain in love." Other reviewers thought the account was a lesson on friendship and tied the monologue to

what they thought was the major point of the play. This is not at all the case. What Albee wanted, in having Tobias relate the tale, was to have the audience realize Tobias's sense of failure as a father. The thought is so unbearable that he is unable to confess it directly. The narrative implies that like the cat, Julia once loved and related to her father and that despite his attempt to provide a home for his daughter, she inexplicably withdrew from him until they now no longer communicate. The last thing Tobias says before he begins the cat story concerns his failure to relate to her. Filled with anxiety, he reneges on his earlier offer to talk to his daughter about reconsidering the dissolution of her marriage:

TOBIAS: (*Not rising from his chair, talks more or less to himself*) If I saw some point to it, I might—if I saw some reason, chance. If I thought I might . . . break through to her, and say, "Julia . . . ," but then what would I say? "Julia . . . ," then nothing.

Tobias blames himself for his failing relationship with his daughter and her resulting inability to develop a satisfactory and durable relationship with a man. The results of his ineffectualness are all around him. Guilt ridden because of his failure as husband and father, he privately yearns for change.

In talking about *A Delicate Balance*, Albee has said that it "is about the fact that as time keeps happening options grow less. Freedom of choice vanishes. One is left with an illusion of choice." The experience has been as crushing for Tobias and Agnes. They too must live the remaining years without illusion. But their reality is somewhat different from learning that their closest friendship was at best superficial; what they learn is that there comes a time in every life when hope of change no longer exists. What they have made of their lives must now stand because it is too late for undoing. Tobias cannot change his skin. Even his impassioned plea to Harry is an indication not of strength but continued weakness because of its uncontrollable hysterics. Tobias a long time ago chose passivity; he must now accept its outcome.

It is interesting to read Harold Clurman's analysis of Tobias, based on his belief that the play had only to do with that "insuperable difficulty of loving one's neighbor." He feels that the character of Tobias should have been played not as a little man but rather as an "outwardly imposing figure, a very 'senator' of a man, a pillar of our business community in whom the springs of sensibility have begun to dry through disuse. The welling up of his being in the play's crisis would then become more stirring and, what is more important, exemplary." What Clurman has neglected to see, however, is that Tobias does not succeed in his attempt at rescuing his life from the quicksand of indifference. What is exemplary is not his sudden feelings of remorse for a life of aloofness, but his realization that despite his willingness to change, the patterns of his past are forever stamped in the anguished memories of a wasted life and in the knowledge that choice ceases to exist as we approach the termination of our lives. Tobias was, and must remain always, small. This theme is summed up rather movingly by Agnes at the end of the play:

AGNES: Time. (*Pause. The look at her*) Time happens, I suppose. (*Pause. They still look*) To people. 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 the steel . . . but you wait; and time happens. When you *do* go, sword, shield . . . finally . . . there's nothing there . . . save rust; bones; and the wind.

Despite the mixed reception *A Delicate Balance* received from the critics, on May 1, 1967, Albee was given the Pulitzer Prize. The next day he officially accepted the award, but remembering the controversy over the Pulitzer Advisory Board's decisions to overrule John Gassner and John Mason Brown when they proposed that Albee be given the prize for *Virginia Woolf,* he warned that it "is in danger of losing its position of honor and could foreseeably, cease to be an honor at all." The following day, speaking at a news conference, he reiterated his feelings, listing exactly why he accepted the award:

I have decided to accept the award for three reasons: First, because if I were to refuse it out of hand, I wouldn't feel as free to criticize it as I do accepting it. Second, because I don't wish to embarrass the other recipients this year by seeming to suggest that they follow my lead. And finally, because while the Pulitzer Prize is an honor in decline, it is still an honor, a considerable one.

Originally underrated by the majority of New York critics, yet heralded by the Pulitzer Committee as the best play of the year, *A Delicate Balance* has shown Edward Albee at his most sympathetic, his most gentle. There is more delicateness and maturity in this play than any of his other works, and it will prevail "not only [as] a brilliant and searching play but [as] a strangely beautiful one."

Source: Michael E. Rutenberg, "*A Delicate Balance*," in *Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest*, DBS Publications, Inc., 1969, pp. 137-51, 163-64.

Critical Essay #8

In the following essay, the author analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of Albee's A Delicate Balance.

In 1962 Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* narrowly avoided winning the Pulitzer Price. Although the previous award had gone to an insipid musical, no prize was offered in 1962-63. When another of Albee's plays is awarded the self-same prize some five years later, then, the critic is posed with an obvious problem. Have the Committee, one of whose members reportedly called *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* "a filthy play," become more catholic in their taste or has Albee compromised the values and the manner which had formerly made his work unacceptable? The answer, I believe, is that Albee has achieved what is clearly a rare distinction. He has played a part, small though it is, in the long process of educating the Pulitzer Prize Committee. For while *A Delicate Balance* is without doubt a lesser play than *Virginia Woolf* there seems little doubt that it does demonstrate Albee's continued determination to bring to the American theater both the lucidity and passion it has so often lacked and that desire to experiment without which any theater is in danger of vegetating.

Where *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* had examined the impotence of contemporary society, *A Delicate Balance* attempts to penetrate to the fear of which this impotence is merely one expression. Rather like T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion* it tries to delve below the surface of a precarious urbanity to the spiritual terror which exists just below the surface. In Eliot's words it is concerned with "The backward look behind the assurance . . . the backward half-look / Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror."

The play is set in the living room of a large and well-appointed suburban house and the action centers on six characters linked either by familial ties or by the familiarity of long association, falsely confused by them 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 spectres of their own fears.

Agnes and Tobias are approaching sixty and it is clear that they have evolved a workable relationship which, while protecting them from obvious loneliness, equally clearly has left them fundamentally estranged from one another. They live with Agnes's sister, an alcoholic who had once been Tobias's mistress. Into this tense but apparently reassuring atmosphere there intrude both their daughter, Julia, returned from the latest of her marital failures, and their "best friends," Harry and Edna. These three arrivals come in search of comfort, hoping to find some refuge from sudden crises in their own lives. In this atmosphere, however, the delicate balance of middle-class temporizing is disturbed, and for a moment they are forced into the sort of introspection which can lead either to a deeper perception or back into the anesthesia of contemporary life. Seeking comfort they find themselves face to face with their secret fears. As Eliot's Harry says in *The Family Reunion,* "the last apparent refuge, the safe shelter / That is where one meets them. That is the way of spectres."

When Harry and Edna arrive they are terrified, having just undergone a frightening experience which they are unable or unwilling to specify beyond the fact that "it was all very quiet, and we were all alone . . . and then . . . nothing happened, but . . . WE GOT . . . FRIGHTENED . . . We . . . were . . . terrified . . . It was like being lost: very young again, with the dark, and lost." Faced with what William James has called "an irremediable sense of precariousness" and Tolstoy an awareness of the "meaningless absurdity of life" they try to win their way back to "sanity" through contact with the "normal" world of suburban living. But as Camus has pointed out, this awareness of absurdity can itself emerge from the apparently reassuring repetitions of daily life. As he says, "It happens that the stagesets collapse. Rising, tram, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep . . . this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement." It is precisely with this moment of enlightenment, then, that Albee is concerned in *A Delicate Balance*. For he shares with Eliot something of the conviction voiced by Harry in *The Family Reunion*. His characters, like Eliot's, "are all people / To whom nothing has happened, at most a continual impact / Of external events"; they "have gone through life in sleep / Never woken to the nightmare." In this, his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, then, they are forced, for a while, to do precisely this: to wake to the nightmare.

The delicate balance which Agnes and Tobias have contrived in order to survive is not threatened by Claire, who, having been categorized as an alcoholic, can be safely ignored. The real threat is implicit in the very strategy by which they live. For accepting, as they do, that the ordered structure of daily routine in turn suggests a kind of "cosmic purpose," any disruption of that routine must imply a disruption of the very foundation of their existence. Thus it is that when Edna arrives and detects some change in the room Agnes is immediately apprehensive until she realizes with "relief" that the change is merely a rearrangement of the room, itself a part of an established routine. As Claire points out, "the drunks stay drunk; the Catholics go to Mass, the bounders bond. We can't have changes— throws the balance off . . . Just think, Tobias, what would happen if the patterns changed; you wouldn't know where you stood, and the world would be full of strangers." Perhaps it is no longer surprising to find that this is an insight shared by Eliot's characters, "We only ask to be reassured / About the noises in the cellar / And the window that should not have been open . . . Hold tight, hold tight, we must insist that the world is what we have always taken it to be."

When the precarious balance of this compromise is threatened, however, there remains only the retreat into illusion. In Claire's case this involves a simple resort to alcohol, but Albee is concerned here with a final and more dangerous subterfuge—complete alienation from a threatening reality. When the play opens Agnes is speculating on the possibility of going mad, becoming a schizophrenic, "since I speculate I might, some day, or early evening I think more likely—some autumn dusk—go quite mad, then I very well might." Since the action of the play takes place on just such an autumn evening there can be little doubt that the "insanity" does occur and that far from offering a protection it precipitates a sudden and frightening awareness of absurdity. Moreover it seems likely that Edna and Harry, who are described by Albee as being "very much like Agnes and Tobias," are to be taken as representing the other half of the schizophrenic

personality. Indeed there is a real sense in which Harry and Edna act as substitutes for those whose home they have effectively taken over, Edna herself taking on the role and function of the mother while Harry is actually referred to as "being Tobias." So that while the friends can be granted a separate identity they can also be seen as expressions of the suppressed fears of Agnes and Tobias.

R. D. Laing has pointed out that "the behaviour that gets labelled schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation." To Agnes it is indeed just such a strategy to be employed "if all else should fail; if sanity, such as it is, should become too much." But as Albee had insisted in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* those who retreat into insanity remain "undeveloped" and incapable of establishing genuine relationships, so that the illusion is ultimately worse than reality. The danger in fact in real terms is that the protective schizophrenia may become a total substitute for reality—a danger which Agnes recognizes when she accept the chance that "I could not . . . come back." At the very least, Albee insists, such a response must leave the individual totally alone, a fact which is emphasized by Agnes's description of this madness as a process of "becoming a stranger in . . . the world, quite . . . uninvolved." If this has overtones of Camus' *The Stranger,* however, Albee shows no tendency to exult in the sheer indifference of this stance. For clearly what he is calling for here, as in his earlier plays, is a courageous determination to face the world as it is, for to him, as to Nietzsche, "we no longer believe that truth remains truth if the evil is withdrawn from it." Or as Camus expresses it in *The Myth of Sisyphus,* "There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know that night." Significantly, indeed, of the play's three acts, two take place during the night, a time when, as Agnes admits, "we . . . let the demons out" and discover "the dark side of our reason."

To Albee the individual poised between the "leap of faith" which had tempted Julian in Tiny Alice and the bourgeois contentment seized upon by Agnes and Tobias should turn towards the one source of possible renewal—man. As Camus had said, "There are gods of light and idols of mud. But it is essential to find the middle path lending to the faces of man!" It is precisely the failure of the play's characters to do this, to establish the importance of human contact, of love, which is the essence of their predicament. It is this which endows them with a sense of guilt which has to be expiated. Claire, for example, identifies the consequences of her own retreat from reality as consisting in a destruction of that very love which alone could redeem her. The alcoholic whom she describes is, indeed, an obvious archetypal figure in a society which, as Albee has insisted in many of his plays, reverts to the bottle as part of its refusal to face the real, adult world: "your eyes hurt and you're half dead and your brain keeps turning off . . . and you hate . . . yourself, and everybody. Hate, and, oh God!! you want love, l-o-v-e, so badly . . ." But in this society, as Albee had stressed in *The American Dream,* even the word "love" has become corrupted. It becomes an expression of self-pity and greed or simply a means of describing social relatedness, so that there is clearly a savage irony in Claire's declaration that "You love Agnes and Agnes loves Julia and Julia loves me and I love you. We all love each other." In fact she feels constrained to add, "We love each other . . . to the depths of our self-pity and our greed. What else but love? . . . love and error."

Like Claire, Tobias too has withdrawn from what he sees as the harsher realities of life. He has become "too . . . settled," too "dried up." He has given up trying to make contact and is reduced in an ineffectual cipher primarily because he is afraid that to love is to become vulnerable. Unable to adjust to the loss of his son Teddy, who had died at the age of two, he refuses to accept the implications of love, choosing to substitute a kind of painless coexistence which inevitably leads to a breakdown of human values. When Julia and Claire appeal to him to rescue them from their desperate situation he can only mumble, "It's too late . . . or something." Such a reaction leads directly to what Agnes identifies as "the demise of intensity, the private preoccupations, the substitutions." Life becomes nothing more than the pointless tedium which Samuel Beckett had identified. As Claire says, "We're waiting, aren't we? . . . Waiting. The room; the doctor's office; beautiful unconcern: intensive study of the dreadful curtains."

If Tobias's distrust of the commitment involved in love is the cause of his isolation, however, it is also the cause both of his guilt and his fear. In order to clarify his feelings he tells a long parable of his relationship with a cat which in some ways parallels the story of Jerry and the dog in *The Zoo Story*. Tobias's cat, which had lived with him contentedly for fifteen years, had suddenly withdrawn its affection, refusing to stay in the same room, refusing even to purr. Tobias describes how he had become progressively determined to restore their relationship. His failure in this, however, had turned his affection to hatred, for he had come to feel that the cat's attitude implied an accusation; he felt that he had been betrayed. Finally, when his approaches are repelled, he has the cat killed so that it will no longer reproach him. It is precisely this failure to persevere in love merely because it is not returned which is the source of Tobias's sense of guilt. For Albee's point here is essentially that which Arthur Miller makes in *After the Fall,* namely that there is a need to renew love even in the face of inevitable failure. In place of Albee's cat Miller uses the image of an idiot child who is virtually incapable of responding to love but who for that very reason demands the renewal of that love even in the knowledge of its eventual failure. So here Tobias admits that "I might have tried longer. I might have gone on, as long as cats live, the same way. I might have worn a hair shirt. locked myself in the house with her, done penance." This sort of commitment clearly becomes especially vital in a society in which, as Tobias finally admits, our main dialogue is "with ourselves" Where Miller's hero discovers that the origin of all cruelty and treachery is the self, Edna similarly acknowledges that "the one body you've wrapped your arms around . . . the only skin you've ever known . . . is your own."

Erich Fromm has pointed out that for many, marriage itself is an attempt to counter just such a feeling of isolation; "the main emphasis" in such marriages, he points out, is "on finding a refuge from an otherwise unbearable sense of aloneness." When this fails, as it does time and again for Julia, "they continue to remain children, to hope for father or mother to come to their help when help is needed." So it is that Julia returns to her home and demands access to her own room—a room which clearly functions as a refuge, a womb, "Warmth. A special room with a night light, or the door ajar so that you can look down the hall from the bed and see Mommy's door is open . . . back from the world? To the sadness and reassurance of your parents? . . . You're laying claim to the cave." Julia's insanity— she becomes hysterical and eventually catatonic— is indeed an expression both of her failure to understand the real nature of love and of her inability to

face a world in which the connection between individuals is continually threatened. As Fromm has pointed out, "If the nature of sanity is to grow out of the womb into the world, the nature of severe mental disease is to be attracted by the womb, to be sucked back into it—and that is to be taken away from life."

Albee is not content, however, merely to state the dilemma of the alienated individual brought face to face with the corruption of human values. Neither is he content to slip into the determinism of Samuel Beckett. For in the coarse of the play Tobias gradually stumbles towards a realization both of the fact of his own isolation and of the real nature of the relationship which exists between himself and those he had taken to be his "best friends." He finally admits that he does not love them. He admits that they are a threat to his peace of mind. But by a supreme effort of will he tries to overcome the temptation of his own self-interest and in doing so goes some way towards expiating his sense of guilt. "I DON'T WANT YOU HERE! I DON'T LOVE YOU! BUT BY GOD . . . YOU STAY!!". In this moment he succeeds in transcending the egotism which has undermined the other relationships in the play, and he faces the brutal truth from which he had previously averted his eyes.

To Agnes, Edna and Harry represent only the fear which can upset her compromise with existence. She refers to them as a plague, a "mortal illness" which has descended on them and which must be rejected. The only response is to "isolate . . . quarantine . . . ostracize," unless we are saints. Tobias is potentially just such a saint. For to him Edna and Harry, and thus the terror, the sense of absurdity which they represent, must be embraced and not denied. Indeed it finally seems to him that if life is solely dedicated to preserving ourselves and the compromise which we have contrived, then love does not exist and there is no purpose. As he asks, "When we talk to each other . . . what have we meant? Anything? When we touch. when we promise, and say . . . yes, or please . . . with *ourselves*? . . . then it's all been empty." In response to Tobias's growing concern with his fellow man and with the need to face the darker side of the human condition, Agnes counterposes the family unit, "Blood holds us together when we've no more . . . deep affection for ourselves than others." By now, however, Tobias is on the verge of the realization which had been implicit in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, namely that genuine human contact becomes possible only when individuals are prepared to face the world as it really is without recourse to protective illusions, to the bottle or to the womb. As Erich Fromm has said, "The ability to love depends on one's ability to emerge from narcissism, and from the incestuous fixation to . . . clan." Perhaps this provides a clue, indeed, to Albee's dedication of the play to John Steinbeck whose Joad family had been brought to a similar understanding in *The Grapes of Wrath* that "Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody."

Edna and Harry, then, represent both those acquaintances who never really become anything more than strangers and those aspects of the human condition—the sense of absurdity, of precariousness —which we are afraid to acknowledge in our own lives. Insofar as Tobias succeeds in accepting them at the end of the play, therefore, he emerges as one of Albee's "reality-heroes"; a saint who accepts the Old Testament directive to "love the stranger" and who fulfills William James's primary Christian injunction, "a man must die to an unreal life before he can be born to a real life." Like

George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Julian in *Tiny Alice,* he has tentatively accepted an unpalatable truth and moved to establish genuine relationships. In essence he has followed the advice offered by Lafeu in *All's Well that Ends Well,* "we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear." Where Harry has to learn, in *The Family Reunion,* to face the Furies whom Aeschylus describes as "Armed with arrows of the dark, with madness, false night-terrors / To harass, plague, torment," Tobias has to learn a similar lesson in Albee's play. Indeed in a sense Harry and Edna fulfill the same functions as do the Furies in Eliot's play. For they too bring "death and terror, blight and poison" but can similarly be transformed if they are accepted instead of being banished.

A Delicate Balance is Albee's acknowledgment of the fact that "We're not a communal nation" and that there is a desperate need to reestablish human relationships on just such a firm foundation of truth. For to him if we continue to "submerge our truths" on "the grassy bottom" and prefer to "have our sunsets on untroubled waters," then the essential need for humanity is to "develop gills." The urgency of this transformation is underlined by the warning that "Everything becomes too late finally." Where the apocalyptic alternative to this necessary human response had been made abundantly clear in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* he now once again stresses that the alternative is "rust; bones, and wind."

If the world which he is describing is indeed a sterile one, this state of affairs, as we have seen, is a result of man's failure of nerve. Tobias, for example, unwilling to face the loss which is an endemic part of life, withdraws his affections from his wife—a sexual withdrawal which guarantees sterility. By the end of the play, however, he has regained something of his courage and achieved an insight into his private fears which, logically enough, comes to him as it does to Eliot's protagonist:

Not in the day time And in the hither world
Where we know what we are doing
There is not its operation . . .
But in the night time
In the nether world.

It follows from this that the apparently trite ending should not be taken at face value, for Agnes's expansive welcome of the returning day is clearly Albee's ironical comment on the ease with which the individual rejects new perception. Indeed when Robert Brustein accuses Albee of closing his play "with one of those vibrato rising sun lines familiar from at least a dozen such evenings," he is demonstrating little less than a failure to understand the whole point of the play. To a mind which grasps desperately at the apparent order of daily routine as a welcome escape from the more painful realities of life, the return of day provides a welcome excuse to escape the perceptions of the night. Tobias, however, had regretted that "when the daylight comes the pressures will be on, and all the insight won't be worth a damn." In this context the play's final lines have a searching irony as Agnes welcomes the return of day as the return of unconsciousness, for "when the daylight comes again . . . comes order with it." As Erich Fromm has emphasized, "the strict routine of bureaucratized, mechanical work" serves merely to

keep people "unaware of their most fundamental human desires, of the longing for transcendence and unity." So Agnes closes her eyes to the perceptions of the night and consoles herself with a return to her former coma: "Poor Edna and Harry. Well, they're safely gone . . . and we'll all forget . . . quite soon. Come, now; we can begin the day." To Albee, however, it is less Agnes's willing retreat from the brink than Tobias's stumbling perception which is significant. For, like Williams James, he believes that "Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun: but if a man live many years and rejoice in them all yet let him remember the days of darkness . . ." If Tobias's affirmation is only a tentative, even a slightly prevaricating one, perhaps it is an indication of the truth of his earlier perception—an understanding shared by George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* that "once you drop you can come back up part way . . . but never really back again."

The fact remains that man is free to act. If he chooses again and again to retreat into illusion and to elevate his own sense of guilt above the need for comparison, it remains clear that there is no inevitability in this choice. So it is that Claire insists that she is not an alcoholic, although it "would be simpler if I were." Indeed the distinction which she makes between herself and the alcoholics is at base the same distinction which Albee has always been at pains to make between Beckett's passive victims and his own protagonists: "they couldn't help it; I could, and wouldn't . . . they were sick, and I was merely wilful." Agnes, indeed, admits that man's absurdity is largely of his own making: "We manufacture such a proportion of our own despair." The door is thus clearly open for amelioration, and the suffering, which perhaps significantly takes place between Friday and Sunday, can result in redemption. The possibility always exists, as Claire says, that "a breeze might rise and stir the ashes." If Albee is getting more urgent, perhaps even more shrill, in his effort to force the need for love in a world seemingly intent on self-destruction, and content to find purpose in the sham order of bourgeois society, it is because he is strongly aware of the attractiveness of illusion. Albee is not a social reformer. He is concerned with moral and spiritual reform but he brings to this all the urgency of the committed. Indeed the very fact that he allows the last word to Agnes is a demonstration of his growing fear that his is a voice echoing in the wilderness. In fact it is possible to see *A Delicate Balance* as in part an expression of Albee's own sense of artistic frustration; the frustration of a dramatist able to command the attention of an audience in the theater but unable to wring from it an admission of the nexus which exists between the drama enacted on stage and their own lives. The audience, like Tobias, "can sit and watch . . . can have . . . so clear a picture, see everybody moving through his own jungle . . . an insight into all the reasons, all the needs . . . the dark sadness." But the return to routine, to daylight, as we have seen, means that "the insight won't be worth a damn." So too when Agnes speaks of being "burdened with the ability to view a situation objectively while I'm in it," when she apologizes for "being articulate" and adds "if I shout, it's merely to be heard . . . above the awful din of your privacies and sulks," this too can ultimately be seen as an expression of Albee's own sense of artistic martyrdom.

Critical response to *A Delicate Balance* was largely hostile. Robert Brustein, writing in *The New Republic,* found the play to be little more than "an old house which an interior decorator has tried to furnish with reproductions and pieces bought at auction"; while

Richard Gilman, in *Newsweek,* attacked what he saw as the "inflated dialogue," the "kind of cliché that is all too prominent in Albee's rhetoric." Certainly Albee's use of idiom lacks the control which it had evidenced in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* More important, however, is the fact that his preoccupation with the metaphysical roles which he ascribes to his characters is in danger of eliminating that very humanity which lies at the center of his dialectic. As James Baldwin has said of Camus, one cannot help feeling at times that ideas mean more to him than people.

Albee is always at his weakest with minor characters who seem to drift through the plays and who appear to be there truly to act as butts for humor or as conscious symbols. In this play Claire, whose name emphasizes the clarity of her insight, seems to be little more than the stereotype wise drunk. Rather like that inevitable figure in the early films who wanders in and out of the action and manages to survive reasonably intact while fist fights and custard pies proliferate, she moves uncertainly through the play making wise remarks which can have little validity so long as she lacks credibility as a character. The same is essentially true of Julia and of Harry and Edna. Their symbolic functions take complete control and they give the impression of being manipulated puppets. While Albee's characters have largely forfeited their humanity through their persistent resort to illusion and their acceptance of defined roles in the social charade, one is never convinced that their hollowness is merely an expression of this. Rather, as Brustein remarks, it is a direct result of Albee's failure "to give his characters life." This, then, is Albee's central dilemma. He needs to create characters who have made themselves social ciphers but whose fate must not be allowed to become a matter of indifference to the audience. It is his failure to resolve this dilemma which works to undermine the force of the play.

To an audience becoming increasingly alienated from Albee's experiments, *A Delicate Balance* appeared to be a move towards the naturalistic style familiar on Broadway. To several critics, however, the play's chief fault lay in its mixture of styles. For one, the play moved from "realism to fantasy," while to another, perhaps more surprisingly, from "symbolism" to "naturalism." In fact one of the most important lessons which Albee has to offer to the American theater is that distinctions such as these no longer make any sense. *A Delicate Balance* like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, defies such classification. Perhaps the most that can be said is that it represents an attempt to achieve in prose what Eliot had sought to achieve in verse in The Family Reunion. It is an attempt to invest a modern setting with metaphysical significance. These metaphysical overtones are present from the very beginning. The only variation is one of emphasis and intensity. The ordered nature of the dialogue at the beginning of the play reflects the balance which is still being stubbornly maintained; the stylized language towards the end is an expression of a growing loss of control. The balance has been finally upset. If Albee's constant aim is to penetrate beneath the exterior of modern society to the fears which exist below the surface, it is because he considers this to be both the chief function of the dramatist and the main responsibility of the thinking individual. With T. S. Eliot's Agatha, indeed, he would insist that

we cannot rest in being
The impatient spectators of malice or stupidity.

We must try to penetrate the other private worlds
Of make-believe and fear.

Source: C. W. E. Bigsby, "The Strategy of Madness: An Analysis of Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*," in *Contemporary Literature,* Vol. 9, No. 2, Spring 1968, pp. 223-35.

Adaptations

A movie adaptation of Albee's *A Delicate Balance* was produced in 1973 and directed by Tony Richardson. It stars such actors as Katharine Hepburn, Paul Scofield, Lee Remick, and Joseph Cotton.

Topics for Further Study

Although Albee's *A Delicate Balance* has often been described in realist terms, several critics point out absurdist elements in the play (such as the abstract fear that drives Edna and Harry out of their house). Do research on both the theories of realism and absurdism; then examine the play and write a report on examples of both of these theories and how Albee uses them.

One of the most disparaging societal elements for young people of the late 1950s was the concept of conformism. The 1950s gave birth to mass-produced, suburban housing in which one or two building designs were used to develop whole neighborhoods, eliminating a sense of uniqueness and individuality. Conformism has also been partially blamed for the spread of the anticommunist paranoia of McCarthyism. Write a research paper on the concept of conformism, providing current examples of it in the United States. Compare the 1950s with your generation. What elements of conformism exist today? How might conformism be used in a positive way? What are some of its negative aspects?

Albee has stated that Samuel Beckett more than any other playwright influenced Albee's writing. Read one of Beckett's plays (*Happy Days* or *Waiting for Godot* might be good choices), and then compare Beckett's style of writing, his choice of themes, and his characters to those found in Albee's *A Delicate Balance.*

Alcohol is used quite liberally throughout this play. Research alcoholism in the United States, and write a paper on the effects of alcohol both on the person who abuses it and on their families. Then conclude your paper with an analysis of how alcohol affects each of the play's characters.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) is founded in Cleveland, Ohio, and within four years its membership grows to 100.

1950s: The Twelve Step program of AA offers those who are suffering from alcoholism a way to grapple with their dependence. It is estimated that there are now over 100,000 members in AA.

Today: Membership in AA is now international and includes over 2 million members.

1930s: Dogs and cats roam freely without restrictions and without protection from cruelty caused by humans.

1950s: The American Humane Association is formed in an attempt to protect animals.

Today: It is estimated that over 40,000 dogs and cats are euthanized each day in various animal shelters and veterinarian offices throughout the United States.

1940s: During World War II, women take on a more independent role in American society, and birth rates drop as divorce rates rise.

1950s: It is calculated that there are over one million divorced people living in the United States.

Today: It is calculated that there are over 2.5 million new names added to the divorce list each year, with an estimated figure of over 20 million divorced people living in the United States.

What Do I Read Next?

Albee's writing is often compared to Eugene O'Neill's. In *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), O'Neill tells a story about an unhappy, dysfunctional family in which the youngest son is sent to a sanatorium to recover from tuberculosis, all the while despising his father for sending him there. The young man's mother is wrecked by narcotics, and his older brother is an alcoholic.

When Albee's writing leans more toward the absurd, it is often compared to Harold Pinter's. One of Pinter's more famous plays is *The Homecoming* (1976), which is set in an old house in North London, where an aging father lives with his two sons and his younger brother. The action begins when Teddy, another one of the father's sons, who has been away from the family for six years, brings his wife home to visit the family she has never met. As the play progresses, the younger brothers make passes at their sister-in-law until they all but make love to her in front of her stunned husband.

Albee has said that Eugene Ionesco is one of his role models. In *Rhinoceros* (1959), as in many of his early plays, Ionesco startles audiences with an absurd world that invariably erupts in both laughter and anxiety as the population of a town slowly transforms into a herd of rhinoceros with only one human, at the end, remaining. This is Ionesco's statement against conformity, especially in reference to the brutality of the Nazi movement of his time.

If Albee were to choose the playwright who most impressed him, it probably would be Samuel Beckett. In *Happy Days* (1961), Beckett explores relationships that bind one person to another by showing the mutual dependency of a woman, Winnie, who is buried in a mound of dirt (first up to her waist and later up to her neck) by her frustratingly silent mate, Willie.

Known as the Albee play that did not win the Pulitzer Prize, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) has often been described as a thematic precursor to *A Delicate Balance. Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a play in three acts with the action taking place in the living room of a house belonging to a middle-aged couple, George and Martha, who are drunk and quarrelsome. When another couple stops by for a nightcap, they are enlisted as fellow fighters, and the battle begins. A long night of malicious games, insults, humiliations, betrayals, painful confrontations, and savage witticisms ensues. The secrets of both couples are laid bare, and illusions are viciously exposed.

In order to better understand the disease of alcoholism, James Robert Milam and Katherine Ketcham have written *Under the Influence: A Guide to the Myths and Realities of Alcoholism* (reissue edition 1984). Based on scientific research, this book examines the physical factors of alcoholism and suggests a stigma-free way of understanding and treating alcoholics. Some of the topics in this book include ways of defining an alcoholic, stages of alcoholism, how to choose a treatment program, why prescribed drugs can be dangerous and even fatal for alcoholics, and how to ensure a lasting recovery.

Called one of the Angry Young Men (a group of writers in England who freely expressed their disdain for established British society), John Osborne is said to have changed the face of British theatre with his play *Look Back in Anger*. It was first performed in 1956, and although the form of the play was not new, its content was. The play centers on disenfranchised youth, an unusual topic at the time, with its hero, Jimmy Porter, frustrated with his position in society, which he can never overcome because the traditional possessors of wealth and privilege will forever hold him in his place.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Edward Albee,* Modern Critical Reviews, Chelsea House Publishers, 2000.

Edited by literary critic Harold Bloom, this book gives readers a well-collected and comprehensive history of the literary interpretations of Albee's work.

De La Fuente, Patricia, ed., *Edward Albee: Planned Wilderness—Interview, Essays and Bibliography,* Pan American University Press, 1980.

For a comprehensive background of Albee and his work, this book is a great resource.

Gussow, Mel, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography,* Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 2000.

This book has been heralded as a very clear and objective piece of writing in which Gussow observes much of Albee's personal and professional journey through the lens of a theater critic as well as a personal acquaintance. The biography is based on research and interviews with Albee and Albee's colleagues and friends, and it provides very good insights into the long career of this American author. Gussow has also written books on Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett, two playwrights who have influenced Albee's work.

McCarthy, Gerry, *Edward Albee,* St. Martin's Press, 1987. McCarthy provides an in-depth study of Albee's plays.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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