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## Revisiting Menace in Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance* in the Covid-19 Era

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### Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 in the recent years raised concerns over the welfare and health conditions of the human being, and urged people to reconsider their existence amid this unexpected pandemic. Following the confinement that health authorities all over the world have imposed on citizens to limit the spread of the disease and curb the incredibly increasing number of deaths, some people resorted to the realm of literature seeking relief and consolation, and discovered that threats have always shaped the life of humans throughout history. In reality, various authors addressed the concept of menace and presented life-threatening situations in their works. Edward Albee, for instance, tackles the idea of menace in *A Delicate Balance* through the introduction of a mysterious plague that destabilized the existence of all the characters. Like the COVID-19 threat, the unknown terror in the play put the lives of the family members at risk and pushed them to question their very existence. The present article, then, seeks to explore Albee's conceptualization of menace in his work and investigate the overlapping commonalities between the Coronavirus and the plague that has greatly affected the perception and subsistence of the characters and mankind.

**Keywords:** Menace, Plague, COVID-19, the Artistic, the Real.

### Introduction:

Edward F. Albee (1928 – 2016) is an American dramatist famous for writing existentialist and Absurdist plays during the Post WWII period. This prominent playwright received many acclaimed prizes, such as The Pulitzer Prize for Drama (thrice) and The Tony Award for Best Play (twice), and some of his works were translated into several languages. The first play to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama was *A Delicate Balance* (1966) and it was premiered in 1967. It opens with Agnes and Tobias discussing Agnes's thoughts of madness and the behavior of her drunken sister, Claire. Agnes announces that their daughter Julia is coming back home. Agnes and Tobias are later joined by Harry and Edna, their best friends, who reveal that they have been frightened by a nameless terror. Act II begins the following evening with Julia complaining about the fact that Harry and Edna are occupying her old bedroom. Julia and Edna start a quarrel over which one of them has the right to stay in Tobias's and Agnes's home. Act III begins with Tobias and Agnes discussing their guests' presence and Tobias divulges that he will reluctantly let Harry and Edna live in his home. In his turn, Harry confesses to Tobias that he would not let him and his wife stay in their house if the situation was reversed. The play ends with Harry and Edna departing from the house, leaving their old friends interacting with Claire and Julia.

*A Delicate Balance* centers on the mysterious plague that subverted the life of the guests Harry and Edna, and of Agnes's and Tobias's family members. Indeed, the coming of the two guests destabilized the already delicate balance of the family and led to a further escalation of tension between the six characters. The atmosphere of menace and fear that dominates the play due to the presence of an unnamed plague resembles the collective feelings of panic and anxiety that the whole world witnessed following the outbreak of the COVID-19. Indeed, with the heavy death toll and the human lives losses inflicted upon the international community, humans started worrying about this wide-scale menace and thinking of the ways to preserve the integrity and safety of the human race. It is undeniable that the threat this disease has posed to the world of humans is not restricted to the physical and physiological health damage it can cause, since it has greatly affected people's psychological, intellectual, emotional and even social wellbeing.

Albee stages the mysterious threat that swept through Agnes's and Tobias's house and contaminated the lives of all its inhabitants to emphasize his perception of humans' unsteady existence and draw attention to the various menaces that the human being is susceptible to, while linking the artistic to the real. Accordingly, this paper aims to study Albee's multilayered dramatization of menace in his work and explore the ways the terrifying plague inflicted upon the family could parallel the damage that humanity suffered due to the Coronavirus.

### **I. Staging Menace and the Echoes of COVID-19:**

*A Delicate Balance* examines the unstable life of the members of an American family who are on the verge of collapse due to a mysterious disease brought by their guests Harry and Edna. The play is set in Agnes's and Tobias's house, precisely in their living room, and involves their daughter, Julia, and Agnes' sister, Claire (9). Tobias and Agnes are depicted as a middle-aged couple who are visibly "materially comfortable people" (Wilmeth and Miller, 1996).

The play begins with a dialogue between Tobias and Agnes about her fear of madness. Agnes tells her husband: "I might very easily – as they say – lose my mind one day," and adds, "I might, some day, or early evening I think more likely – some autumn dusk – go quite mad" (Albee, 1967). Apparently, Agnes is haunted by the idea of insanity as she thinks she will be mad one day for sure. The sense of security that this well-to-do family seems to have is put into question, and the apparent comfort they are living in is disrupted by Agnes's disturbed peace of mind. Agnes's thoughts about madness represent a potential menace to the unity of her family. In this context, the concept of menace has been defined as "a declaration or indication of hostile intention, or of a probable evil or catastrophe; a threat" (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989). In generalized use, the term menace means the intention and action of threatening or intimidating. The atmosphere created in the opening scene of the play is dominated by obscurity and menace due to Agnes' inexplicable fear. Indeed, *A Delicate Balance* is "deeply redolent of mystery and nameless fears" (Esslin, 1972). On the surface everything seems to be fine, but in reality the characters, particularly Agnes, are facing many troubles and uncertainties. Her fear of this psychological disease and its potential damage is reminiscent of the menace of COVID-19 and its disastrous effects on people's psyche and the human race as a whole.

Each character, in this play, is going through a crisis that would be aggravated with the coming of Harry and Edna. Actually, their arrival is introduced by a stage direction that describes their anxiety: "they seem somewhat ill at ease, strained for such close friends" (Albee, 1967). The first reference to the guests in the play indicates that they are afraid and they are seeking refuge in their friends' house. Their terror is further revealed when they were asked about the reason behind their unexpected visit to Tobias's and Agnes's house:

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

(*Edna begins to weep, quietly*)  
... and then ... nothing happened, but ...  
(*Edna is crying more openly now*)  
... nothing at all happened, but ...  
EDNA. (*Open weeping; loud*).  
WE GOT ... FRIGHTENED ... (Albee, 1967)

Harry and Edna's feelings, behavior, and words clearly indicate their fear, and the repetition of expressions like "frightened" and "scared" throughout the conversation highlights the seriousness of their situation. Although their fear is evident, they do not reveal anything about the cause of this terror. It is noticeable that even Harry and Edna themselves are not pretty sure of the cause of their fear. Edna claims: "WE WERE FRIGHTENED ... AND THERE WAS NOTHING" (Albee, 1967). She admits that they are scared, but they ignore the nature of the menace they are facing. Apparently, Harry and Edna live by themselves and they have nobody to reassure them and their recourse to Tobias's and Agnes's house could mean that they are the only ones they can resort to.

Harry and Edna are escaping from a mysterious terror, but they carry it with them into Agnes's and Tobias's house. Katherine Worth (1981) comments on this idea claiming that Harry and Edna "have brought into the house a disturbing sense of generalized anxiety relating to fears of darkness, nothingness and death." The mysterious plague, which resembles the Coronavirus in its severity, destabilizes the already "delicate balance" of Agnes's and Tobias's household. Upon their arrival, the guests contaminate their friends' frail family relationships and threaten the fragile situation in their home. In this context, Shabir Ahmad Lone and Aijaz Ahmad (2020) argue that "as of now, COVID-19 continues to spread globally, with increasing morbidity and mortality." In the play, the coming of the guests, who are infected with a deadly disease, means that the plague will be spread to other places, particularly Agnes's and Tobias's house. Like the COVID-19, this unknown plague has ruined the lives of the visitors and will be transmitted to other characters once they contact the infected people.

The whole awkward situation of the family is aggravated by the presence of Harry and Edna who brought with them the menacing disease that threatens the balance of the family. Harry's and Edna's "uninvited anxiety disturbs the characters' sense of well-being, forcing them to sense the precariousness of their being in the world" (Roudané, 1987). This menace becomes very disturbing to the family members as the following conversation shows:

AGNES. And I've been thinking about Harry and Edna; about disease.  
TOBIAS. (*After a pause*). About what?  
CLAIRE. (*After a swig*). About disease.  
JULIA. Oh, for God's sake ...  
AGNES. About disease – or, if you like, the terror.  
CLAIRE. (*Chuckles softly*). Unh, hunh.  
JULIA. (*Furious*). TERROR!?  
AGNES. (*Unperturbed*). Yes: the terror. Or the plague – they're both the same. Edna and Harry have come to us [...] and brought the plague. (Albee, 1967)

Agnes announces that the house is contaminated with the plague that Harry and Edna have carried with them and all the family members are at risk of infection. This disease bears a resemblance to the Coronavirus, especially in its ways of spread (talk, physical contact, breath, etc.) and its frightening consequences. In this respect, Adekunle Sanyaolu et al. (2021) clarify that "the rate of spread of COVID-19 is affected through respiratory droplets, most commonly when infected individuals cough or talk. The virus is released through respiratory secretions that infect individuals once contact with mucous membranes is made directly or indirectly." Akin to the COVID-19, the unknown disease in the play seems to be highly infectious and

poses a real threat to the existence of mankind. At a certain point in their lives, Harry and Edna realize that their life is seriously threatened and this may be the real reason that pushed them to seek refuge in their friends' house. Apparently, the major objective behind this visit is to escape the plague that invaded their life and re-assert their existence.

Following the outbreak of the corona crisis, health authorities all over the world have imposed the COVID-19 Protocol that compels corona patients to stay home and self-isolate so as not to infect other people. In this context, Nisreen A. Alwan et al. (2020) explain that "the transmission of the virus can be mitigated through physical distancing [...] and by avoiding crowds and poorly ventilated spaces. Contact tracing and isolation are also critical to controlling transmission." Similarly, in the play, Agnes insists that urgent measures should be taken to dispose of this plague and preserve the safety of her family. She reminds Tobias that protecting the family from this lurking menace is his role. "It is the task of the quiet but downtrodden head of the family, Tobias, to maintain a 'balance' between family and friends" (Styan, 2003). But, Tobias appears indecisive as he oscillates between taking the risk of accepting them in his house and refusing their stay. He claims: "I WANT YOU HERE! I HAVE BUILT THIS HOUSE! I WANT YOU IN IT! I WANT YOUR PLAGUE!" (Albee, 1967). However, after realizing the gravity of the plague, he recedes and insists: "I DON'T WANT YOU HERE! YOU ASKED?! NO! I DON'T" (Albee, 1967). Tobias finally decides to expel his sick friends from his house to keep his family safe. He actually prefers to preserve the integrity and wellbeing of his family members and dispose of the threatening plague that, if left inside the house, would cause the deadly contamination of his family.

The values of friendship, love, and strong social ties are at stake in this situation. Eventually, Tobias's words propel Harry and Edna to leave the house and after forty years of friendship, the guests are left alone facing the plague and the uncertainties of the future. In this play, Albee seems to question the human's devotion to moral principles and ethics, and accentuate the idea of personal salvation following moments of crisis. The play is, according to M. Gilbert Porter (1979), an "exploration of the quest for love and the various forms of insularity available to disguise the absence of love in contemporary society [...] shallow friendships, closed families." By emphasizing the prevalence of selfishness over friendship and love, Albee suggests that, when facing a serious menace, individual priorities gain the upper hand over humanitarian morals.

This family's reaction to the threatening plague could run parallel to the safety measures taken by the health authorities worldwide, particularly self-isolation and confinement, in order to prevent the transmission or acquisition of the infectious Coronavirus. Albee's staging of a threatening situation, the menacing plague, and the reaction of the family members half a century ago (55 years since the production of the play) foreshadows in a way humankind's response to the threat of the COVID-19, as it has been faced with suspicions, fear and seclusion. It also highlights his perception of life as a continuous struggle to preserve the human race amid the diverse crises that humans are encountering. Albee seems to suggest that menace has always been part and parcel of Man's existence and that the major objective of the human being is to survive despite all the diseases and threats that humanity may confront.

## II. The Poetics of Menace:

Albee's complex yet refined dealing with the threatening plague in *A Delicate Balance* is coupled with a crafty staging of the concept of menace based on the power of language. Actually, he employs a distinctive style and an unconventional language to address the notion of menace and to draw readers' and audiences' attention to the universality of the characters' suffering. In many instances of the play, the dramatist makes use of a fragmented language that is indicative of the characters' unsteady psyche due to the threat of the plague and its potential effects on their existence. In most of their interactions, Harry and Edna converse using incoherent utterances that accentuate their fear of the disease inflicted upon them. Their

awkward speeches and confused state is noticeable mainly when talking to Tobias and Agnes about the cause of their visit:

EDNA. (*Open weeping; loud*). WE GOT ... FRIGHTENED ...

HARRY. (*Quiet wonder, confusion*). We got scared.

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

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

EDNA. We ... were ... terrified.

HARRY. We were scared. (Albee, 1967)

Harry and Edna are neither able to understand their fear nor capable of fully explaining the reason behind their mysterious terror to their friends. The repetitive structures, pauses and fragmentation in this exchange make it difficult for them to express themselves and for Tobias and Agnes to understand their confusion. The discontinuity at the level of their speech hints to their psychological instability, and the disorganized utterances become their only tool to articulate their predicament. Albee's use of incoherent and ungrammatical structures is meant to accentuate the horror the characters are feeling. The excessive use of the diction of fright, such as "weeping," "frightened," "confusion," "scared," "sobbing" and "terrified," betrays their deep fear of the menacing plague and its deadly consequences. These very feelings of insecurity and fear that had pushed Harry and Edna to leave their home had overwhelmed entire populations following the outbreak of the Corona in late 2019. In reality, people all over the globe felt scared and confused after witnessing the damage that the virus caused, especially the terrible deaths of some of their relatives and family members. Like the severe aftermaths of the plague in the play, the impact of the COVID-19 was disastrous and led to the separation of people from one another and the ultimate breakdown of communication between them; even the members of the same family preferred to isolate themselves and limit their contacts for fear of contamination.

In addition to revealing the perturbed inner state of the characters, the unconventional language in the play is also meant to indicate the actual breakdown of communication between the dramatis personae and to accentuate their ultimate alienation as a result of their infection with the mysterious disease. The characters' illogical speech and ungrammatical statements reflects the deficiency of language, humans' major means of interaction, and designates the absence of affection and understanding between them. Even Harry and Edna themselves emphasize their inability to express themselves properly and reflect on the lack of authentic communication between them as husband and wife, affirming:

HARRY. Edna and I ... there's ... so much ... over the dam, so many ... disappointments, evasions, I guess, lies maybe ... so much we remember we wanted, once ... so little that we've ... settled for ... we talk, sometimes, but mostly ... no. we don't ... "like." Oh, sure, we like ... but I've always been a little shy – gruff, you know, and ... shy. And Edna isn't ... happy – I suppose that's it. (Albee, 1967)

Harry admits that there is no real contact within his house and he seems to face communication problems with his wife Edna. The excessive recurrence of silence, in the form of three dots, betrays his inner sense of bewilderment and his inability to articulate his thoughts properly. His utterances, and consequently the play in general, provide "an image of man's loneliness and isolation, and his inability to make contact with other people in the contemporary world" (Laskar and Das, 2014). Harry and Edna are isolated from each other and are unwilling to communicate because of their fear of the menacing plague that ruined their relationship. The couple's reference to loneliness and absence of contact is reminiscent of the isolation of people and avoidance of communication with others for fear of being infected with or transmitting the COVID-19. Like Harry and Edna, people around the globe confined themselves in their private rooms and avoided making verbal or physical contacts with others so as to protect themselves

and their beloved ones from the pandemic. Harry's and Edna's reaction to the plague, then, reflects the universality of the human experience as their preference of self-isolation and limiting contact resembles the human's self-confinement and social distancing to restrain the spread of the Coronavirus.

The characters' fear of the disease and its fatal repercussions is further made clear through their use of minimalist dialogue that mirrors their unstable state of mind and reluctance to interact. In fact, the dramatis personae are seen communicating most of the time using very short statements that allude to the superficiality of their speech and evasion of the other. Most of Harry's and Tobias's conversations, for example, are characterized by incomplete and diminutive exchanges:

HARRY. (*Seemingly casual*)  
 Oh, you were ... awake, hunh?  
 TOBIAS. Yes.  
 HARRY. I slept a little.  
 (*Glum laugh*)  
 God.  
 TOBIAS. What?  
 HARRY. You know what I did last night?  
 TOBIAS. NO? (Albee, 1967)

Although they are close friends, the characters, particularly Tobias, interact in single monosyllabic words and fragmented sentences, and this minimalistic speech reinforces the assumption that they are unwilling to converse. The use of such uncommunicative utterances and minimalist dialogue recurs throughout the play, making the whole conversation monotonous and creating a form of stagnation at the level of language and plot. The short statements and shallow interaction are indicative of the absence of genuine comprehension and the disregard for the values of friendship and understanding due to their panic about the menacing plague. The characters' refusal to face each other and engage in meaningful conversations, plus the dominance of fragmentation in their interactions, reveal that their life is menaced and they are trying to limit the disastrous effects of the plague. Their cautious behavior finds its echo in the preventive measures that health authorities imposed to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus. Within this frame of reference, Adekunle Sanyaolu et al. (2021) assert that the concerned health agencies around the world made "efforts to bring awareness to the general public by ending public gatherings, tracking and managing close contacts, and self-isolation to curb the transmission" of COVID-19. The characters' behavior and actions in the play, particularly their reluctance to communicate and make contact with each other's, when facing the lethal disease could in a way foreshadow humans' conduct, especially self-isolation, following the outbreak of the Coronavirus.

The last conversation in the play, which represents the resolution, could also be related to the concept of menace within the context of COVID-19 and reflect the effectiveness of the preventive measures to limit its spread:

AGNES. They say we sleep to let the demons out – to let the mind go raving mad, our dreams and nightmares all our logic gone awry, the dark side of our reason. And when the daylight comes again ... comes order with it.  
 (*Sad Chuckle*)  
 Poor Edna and Harry.  
 (*Sigh*)  
 Well, they're gone ... and we'll all forget ... quite soon.  
 (*Pause*)  
 Come now; we can begin the day. (Albee, 1967)

Agnes closes the play announcing its relatively happy ending, the departure of their guests and the preservation of the delicate balance of the family. Her words sound more like a maxim reflecting her large experience in life, as her speech touches upon the nightmarish existence of humans and indicates the possibility of hope after difficult life times. Agnes's thoughts and wise dialogue are meant to bring to light the universality of the human experience and draw attention to the importance of hope that humans cling to even in the most obscure and melancholic moments. Further, Agnes wraps-up the play with a life-call, which mirrors the open-endedness of this work, to embrace another day after the gloomy mood the menacing plague has inflicted upon the family. This technical resistance to closure serves as a bridge that relates the dramatic situation, i.e. the artistic, to the actual world of the reader / spectator, i.e. the real, and that stresses the continuity between what is presented in the text / onstage and their existent realities. Albee seems to suggest that there is always hope whatever problem / crisis the human being is encountering. Just like humanity faced the deadly Coronavirus, the family in this play confronted a serious menace that destabilized the delicate balance of the house, but when they took the right decisions, everything has been restored to order and the family regained their balanced life.

### **Conclusion:**

Albee grounds the play in unstable human relationships as each one of the characters is going through a crisis. The coming of the guests, Harry and Edna, deteriorates the situation of the family as they carry with them a mysterious plague that disrupts the fragile stability of the house. Like the COVID-19, the terrible disease damaged the characters' life and forced them to seek personal salvation through confinement, limiting contact, self-isolation as well as physical and verbal distancing. Upon sensing the potential danger of the plague, Tobias and Agnes ultimately decided to expel their friends and the threatening terror with them in order to save their family. The play could, thus, reflect the universality of the human experience as the suffering of the characters because of the plague echoes the real torment and fear the humankind went through due to the COVID-19. But, the glimpse of hope that humans cling to is always present as there is inevitably calm after the menace of the storm.

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