Section A

Literature, Discourse and Cultural Studies

Edward Albee and Arthur Kopit: Look Who's Wearing the Pants!

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Abstract
The aim of this paper is, on the one hand, to make the readers acquainted with the realities of the twentieth century American family, as perceived by the two American playwrights, and, on the other hand, to underline the unusual phenomena that have been brought by the changing dynamics of the family relationships. All the five plays under discussion – All Over, A Delicate Balance, The American Dream, The Sandbox *by Edward Albee, and* Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad *by Arthur Kopit – present situations in which the female characters seem to have become the leader, taking the place of the head of the family, of the pater familias. They stop acting like loving mothers and wives, they forget to take care of their families; instead, they lock away their hearts and assume the part of some sort of tyrant: they control everyone and everything in the house, their word being the equivalent of a rule. The female characters are endowed with masculine traits, whereas the male characters are emasculated, effeminate, deprived of any kind of power. The purpose of the paper is to demystify the myth of the ideal, perfect American family, to make the readers realize that the image that has been presented to the non-American public is, in the twentieth century, nothing but a disguise. Our goal is to display the image of the new American family hoping that, in doing so, we will succeed in making the readers realize the fact that human relationships, especially the ones within the family, need to be re-established on a deeper and more meaningful level.*

Key words: American cultural studies; Modern American drama; demystification

No one can deny the major part that mass media play in our lives. Mass media, including radio, newspapers and television, have great influence in shaping people's ideas. The news that we hear or read, the images that we repeatedly see manage to enter our subconscious and influence the way we think, the manner in which we act or perceive certain realities.

One such example is the image of the perfect American family that mass media have inoculated in our minds, especially in the minds of the non-Americans. According to the beautiful images presented in the American movies and commercials, the ideal – and may we say

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stereotypical – American family of the 1960s "is white, middle class, homogenous, and patriarchal" (Oswald 2003: 310). The mother, usually unemployed, is the equivalent of the Victorian "angel in the house": she is the one taking care of the husband and the children, the one cleaning the house, running the errands and waiting for the spouse to come home from work, meeting him with a nice warm meal for dinner, wearing an apron and smiling. Her perfect bun and posture make us believe that she does not have to face any difficulties, that the life she is living is perfect. This portrait corresponds to the traditional perspective that "placed women in the private sphere of life, centred on running a home and raising a family, while men engaged in the public sphere of earning a living and participating in civic and political events" (Smith 2001: 36). Taking into consideration that the man was the bread-winner, in most of the cases, "the traditional family circa 1960 had a pyramidal power structure where decision-making tended to flow from Dad on down to the Kids, although feedback from the bottom up may be considered in the decision" (Oswald 2003: 311).

Nonetheless, "the image of a golden age in the past when granny stay beside the fire knitting, while helping to look after the children" (Ruggles 1994: 103), the idyllic atmosphere of the family has suffered transformations that have come along with the development of technology, with the changing mentalities and the reversal of moral values and principles.

In order to illustrate those changes, in the following lines, we will briefly analyse five plays (four by Edward Albee and one by Arthur Kopit), written in the second half of the twentieth century.

Edward Albee was the playwright of his times and, through his plays, written in an absurdist manner, he succeeded, using satire and a moralizing tone, to sketch the portrait of the new American family.

The Sandbox, a play written in the memory of his grandmother, introduces the readers to the world of Edward Albee's characters. In this one-act play, the readers make acquaintance with the Mommy – Daddy – Grandma trio, a trio that we are to meet again in *The American Dream.*

The play opens with the two characters, Mommy and Daddy, who arrive at the beach. From the very beginning, Edward Albee points out to the new role that Mommy has assumed in the family, that of the leader: "Mommy and Daddy enter from stage-left, Mommy first" (Albee 2004: 87). As the leader, she is the one that coordinates all the actions: "Let's go get Grandma" (Ibidem). The father, once the head of the

family, now acts like an obedient child, agreeing to everything the woman says: "Whatever you say, Mommy" (Ibidem). Even simple things, like talking, require the woman's permission: "Shall we talk?" (Albee 2004: 89), who answers laughing: "Well, you can talk, if you want to… if you can think of anything to say… if you can think of anything new" (Ibidem). Her line does nothing else than to underline the fact that the two spouses have run out of subjects to talk about. We can only suppose that they have been married for so long that they have nothing else to discuss. On the other hand, her words, which sound more like a challenge, discourage the man to even try to think of a new conversation topic.

We encounter the same imposing wife and spineless husband in "the absurd world of The American Dream" (Canaday Jr. 1966: 28). The action of this play centres on the futile American life, "deprived both of meaning and purpose" (Koreneva 1981: 48). This time, the "dull, dumbwitted Mommy and Daddy" (Albee 2004: 49), unlike the couple from *The Sandbox,* engage in conversation, while waiting for someone to arrive. However, their conversation lacks meaning and purpose. All the talking about rent, buying the hat or fixing the toilet is just a means of waiting for the time to pass.

Here too, Mommy wants to control everything, including her husband. She cannot tell what has happened to her without constantly making sure that he is listening to her: "you just keep paying attention" (Albee 2004: 100), always asking him "what did I say?" (Ibidem, 101).

The fact that she is treating her husband as if he is not present in the room is not enough for her; she wants him to acknowledge how fortunate he is of having her as a wife:

> Well, she is right. You can't live off people. I can live off you, because I married you. And aren't you lucky all I brought with me was Grandma. A lot of women I know would have brought their whole family to live off you. All I brought is Grandma. Grandma is all the family I have (Ibidem, 106).

It seems that she has done him a favour by not bringing all her kin to live off him.

By marrying a rich man, Mommy has climbed up the social ladder; now, thanks to her husband, she belongs to another social class. Having been raised only by her mother, at a farm, the marriage with a rich man was the only solution to get rid of all the problems she had to

face because of the lack of money. However, her situation is rather common; many women marry out of interest, but the manner in which she treats her husband is despicable.

The woman's domination of the situation and, in fact, of the whole family life is clear. "For Mommy admits to having married her husband simply for wealth and security and, having acquired both, wants no further contact with him" (Bigsby 1969: 32):

> I have a right to live off you because I married you, and because I used to let you get on top of me and bump your uglies; and I have a right to all your money when you die. And when you do, Grandma and I can live by ourselves… if she's still here. Unless you have her put away in a nursing home (Albee, 2004: 106).

The woman thinks she is entitled to live off her husband for the simple fact of having married him. Even more, she seems to consider her rights granted because of the intimate relations they used to have. What used to be natural and normal between a husband and his wife is now only a duty that is no longer accomplished. We notice here the use of the "used to", which implies the fact they have stopped from having intercourse a long time ago. In this family, the woman controls her husband, his money, and the way in which they interact as man and woman. In fact, it seems that money is the single reason she has married Daddy; she does not love him.

By letting Mommy having her way, Daddy acknowledges her power and superiority, thus losing his status as *pater familias.* Nicolas Canaday correctly observes that "his only defence against Mommy is to withdraw into his empty world, pretending to listen to her and responding just enough to keep her satisfied, which of course is all that she requires" (1966: 29).

The same distant relationship between husband and wife is also present in *A Delicate Balance,* where Agnes and Tobias also seem to have given up sexual encounters. However, they realize this only when Edna and Harry invade their home, driven by an unjustified fright, ruining, thus, the "balanced" environment in which they live their comfortable lives. Given the fact that they have been friends for a long, long time, they cannot ask the two guests to leave and offer them their daughter's room to spend the night. Not being used to having other people in the house, Agnes and Tobias feel uncomfortable and confused, even if they try to be calm.

Laughing, Tobias confesses to Agnes that "I almost went into my room… by habit… by mistake, rather, but then I realized that your room is my room because my room is Julia's because Julia's room is…" (Albee 2008: 93). We can only see here how confused Tobias is because of all the sudden changes.

Living separate lives, each of them having a room of one's own, Agnes considers her husband a stranger in her bedroom:

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

The recollection of their past, the inability to fall asleep next to the man she has chosen as husband prove that their spiritual connection does not exist anymore. The blessing of the intimate companionship longer characterizes this couple. The idea of growing old together fades away for Agnes and Tobias. Failing to give and receive love, they remain bitter and choose to lie to themselves, believing their life is perfect as it is.

In *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream,* the presence of the father is almost useless within the family, the life of the spouses being conducted by the demanding mother, who always knows what to do, when to do and what to ask from the other members of the family. Consequently, we are not surprised when in Albee's play *All Over* or Kopit's play *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad,* the male character does not take part in the action, being on the deathbed or already dead.

All Over focuses "on the dying of a central character, who we never see – surrounded in his final hours by his family, his mistress, best friend and medical assistance" (Bigsby 2004: 140). Like in *The Sandbox* or *The American Dream,* the characters do not have a name, all being named "for their relationship to him: wife, daughter, mistress, best friend, son, doctor, nurse" (Ibidem, 142). All these people literally wait for the man's end. Like the characters in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot,* they pass the time talking about the one lying in bed. However, unlike Vladimir and Estragon or Lucky and Pozzo, they do know what they are waiting for. As they wait for death, "they verbally explore their pasts, their

relationships with the dying man, and their relationships with each other" (Marley 1971: 341), chatting as if nothing unpleasant is about to happen. From time to time, the verbal flow is interrupted by short lines, uttered by the wife, who constantly asks "*Is he dead?*" (Albee, 2008: 305). Normally, we would have expected his wife – at least her, his lifetime companion – to show more concern for the dying husband; instead, her only worry seems to be whether her husband is dead or not, so she can have her way with the funerals. Once again, we are shown how the female character is "*struggling for control*" (Rosenbaum 2005: 94), even in such a delicate situation.

If in Edward Albee's plays the male character is still present – even though emasculated – in Arthur Kopit's play he is literally dead. Madame Rosepettle has managed what the other female characters have not: to completely control her husband by killing him and having him stuffed, as if he were an animal. To her, the dead husband is nothing more but a trophy she carries with her all the time, wherever she goes; "He's my very favorite trophy. I take him with me wherever I go" (Kopit 1997: 52). As the play unfolds, we learn about Madame Rosepettle's history with men and about her "love story" with Albert Edward Robinson Rosepettle III, story that somehow, in a very absurd way, justifies her murder.

A twenty-eight year old virgin, Arthur Kopit's female character has perceived men as a threat and has studied them, as a hunter studies his prey:

> Oh, I had spoken to men. (Their voices are gruff.) And in crowded streets I had often brushed against them. (Their bodies, I found, are tough and bony.) I had observed their ways and habits, Mr. Roseabove. Even at that tender age I had the foresight to realize I must know what I was up against. So I watched them huddled in hallways, talking in nervous whispers and laughing when little girls passed by. I watched their hands in crowded buses and even felt their feeling elbows on crowded streets (Kopit, 1997: 55).

Madame Rosepettle ventures in marrying the first one who proposes to her. From her dialogue with the Commodore, we learn that she has married Albert just because he seemed to be the kind of man she could easily dominate:

> I don't really know why. I guess it just seemed like the right thing to do. Maybe it's because the first one who ever asked me. No, that's not

> right… Perhaps it's because he was so ugly and fat; so unlike everything I'd ever heard a husband should be. No, that doesn't make much sense either… Perhaps it's… yes, perhaps it's because one looks at Albert's round, sad face and I knew he could be mine… that no matter where he went, or whom he saw, or what he did, Albert would be mine, all mine – mine to love, mine to live with, mine to kill; my husband, my lover, my own… *my very own* (Kopit 1997: 57).

The family life of the couples in the plays of Edward Albee and Arthur Kopit do not resemble, not even by far, with the beautiful images presented by the mass media. The mother gives up her apron and forgets about her duties as a wife; she becomes a tyrant whose only desire is to detain absolute power; the home is no longer a shelter, filled with love and concern for the beloved ones, but a place in which strict rules must be respected. In his turn, the father, who, in most of the cases is just a shadow, fails to maintain his position as *pater familias*, living the frustrated life of a pet, that is noticed only when needed – and, even so, just to reinforce Mommy's ideas or opinions.

This is the family that the two playwrights portray, the new family of the twentieth century, the century of changes. The American families presented in these plays are not governed by love and care for their members, but by fear and denial of reality. The spouses no longer love each other; in fact, they are just strangers who happen to live in the same house. They have become estranged, the flames of passion are long gone, and they have nothing important to talk about. They are so absorbed by the dullness of their own lives that the slightest change, like a visit received from friends, disturbs them.

In conclusion, we can state that in the new American family, the relationships' dynamics have suffered enormous changes, changes that, in the end, have ruined the myth of the typical, ideal family.

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