

IS LIFE WITHOUT SELF-DECEPTION POSSIBLE?
A Comparative Analysis of Tadeusz Różewicz's *The Witnesses*
and Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*

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I

Although my engagement with the idea of dramatic deceit precedes it, I am indebted to the study published in 1994 on the role of deception in natural history and human affairs written by Loyal Rue and entitled *By the Grace of Guile*. Rue, however, does not deal with dramatic or theatrical works. He claims that dislike of deception is a prejudice of Western thinking and an inclination toward deception is a universal weakness of the human condition. Analysing the biblical myth of the Fall in Genesis, Rue explains the origin of human vulnerability to deceit as follows:

The decisive act of disobedience in the Garden of Eden is plausible to the reader because it results from a universal human experience, the experience of being deceived: Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate"... There is nothing to suggest that the woman is attempting to display responsibility (as Adam has done); she is giving an honest account of her behaviour: She was genuinely taken in by the serpent. The reading to be favoured here is that sin is a possibility precisely because human beings are vulnerable to deception. Unlike God, human beings can be deceived, and herein lies an explanation for the universal weakness of the human condition.¹

It is important to clarify here that Rue's study does not explore deception's negative connotations but rather elucidates less commonly acknowledged positive aspects. Rue provides numerous examples from natural history and argues that natural selection has developed human beings with brains that succumb to trickery. The consequences of such a notion might be truly dangerous; Rue, however, does not seek excuses to justify all manner of deceitful

characters' lives are governed by different political and economic principles and their expectations of life and its standards differ significantly. However, their inner worlds manifest astonishing similarities.

Agnes and Tobias, a married couple in their late fifties, spend most of their lives in a large, well-appointed suburban house with Agnes' younger sister Claire. Claire has lived with Agnes and Tobias since her descent into alcoholism. Julia, the couple's 36-year-old daughter, is about to visit her parents' house, seeking shelter after the failure of her fourth marriage. *A Delicate Balance* becomes a psychological study of a middle-class American family whose uneventful life can be described using the famous Chekhovian quote: 'Most of the time they eat, drink, flirt, talk foolishly ... People eat dinner, they simply eat dinner, and at that very moment...'

Like Różewicz, Albee is concerned with 'the duration of a certain situation'.⁸ His play appears quite realistic on the surface, but in fact concentrates on penetrating what is hidden behind the masks of the characters' artificial smiles and routine politeness. Różewicz seems to be occupied with exactly the same idea.

Unlike the characters in *A Delicate Balance*, the wife and the husband in *The Witnesses* have only generic names and represent what is average and typical. They are more the embodiments of certain concepts, ideas, and notions than Ibsen-like psychological case studies. However, Różewicz manages to capture many quintessential elements of the human personality in the characters he constructs. For example, in his first full-length play *The Personal File* [Kartoteka], Różewicz creates a character called 'hero' who impersonates the entire World War II generation of Poles born in the nineteen-twenties. While this hero is called by various names, is of varying ages and has a rather unspecified occupation, he also manifests individual character traits. This unique ability to merge archetypal, stereotypical, and highly individualistic features into one dramatic character is one of the most distinctive elements of Różewicz's dramatic style.⁹ What is significant about the generic names in *The Witnesses* is that although the characters are practically reduced to the function of being husband and wife, their names are Man and Woman. This alone calls into question the very idea of the happy family, suggesting desire instead

announce with a 'suddenly serious and harsh' voice: *I can't live like this, I can't live like this any longer** (26). She then withdraws into her 'normal condition' indicating a full acceptance of the current situation. By denying her real feelings, the Woman induces the spurious belief that things are 'all right and further suppresses her growing tension. Consequently, both spouses become self-deceivers and deceivers of each other at the same time.

Another mechanism of deceit can be observed in the monotonous pattern of the characters' behaviour, the repetitive actions (getting ready to leave for work, drinking coffee, preparing breakfast), and the trivial topics of their conversations. The dialogue between the Man and the Woman is full of clichés ('milk is definitely very good for you'), repeated phrases ('we've put something by, we've saved a little', and pseudo-meaningful expressions ('I'm glad everything's turned out all right'- Because of the unpleasantness of their real situation, the couple shifts their attention to less painful thoughts that keep their illusion alive. However, their ostensible happiness is frequently disrupted. In her unexpected monologue, the Woman clearly exposes that their life together is more stressful than satisfactory :

WOMAN: (*with mounting irritation*) You don't want anything.
 How can you speak to me like that
 Don't you see I am suffering
 I know you don't see it
 why have you suddenly gone blind
 you don't see me
 but I see you
 (*The woman's voice becomes a scream*)
 Oh how well I see
 if you knew
 how clearly I see
 how remote you are
 (*The voice is now a whisper*)
 how remote
 how terribly remote you are. (27)

This sudden outburst of hidden emotions stands in drastic opposition to the remainder of the couple's dialogue and further unmasks such emotions as anger, mutual disappointment and even resentment.

and animalistic levels of the human psyche and stands in contrast to the tamed, socialised behaviour exposed also by Agnes and Tobias.

Although the American couple never reaches the point of such frustration, they justify their emotional indifference, exercising another strategy of self-deception known as 'positive misinterpretation':¹¹

AGNES: ... well, you know how little I vary; goodness, I can't even raise my voice except in the most calamitous of events, and I find that both joy and sorrow work there... wonders on me more... evenly, slowly, within, than most: a suntan rather than a scalding. There are no mountains in my life ... nor chasms. It is a rolling, pleasant land... verdant, my darling, thank you. (9)

Agnes really describes her inability to be moved, to be deeply touched, as well as her lack of spontaneous reactions to the drastically disparate events in life. It is significant that Agnes selects words with a mild emotional tone: joy, not happiness; sorrow, not despair. And these are consequently followed by antonyms with no emotional connotation at all: 'suntan' versus 'scalding' and words like 'mountains, chasms, rolling pleasant land' which all very well describe Agnes' well-balanced emotionless landscape.

When Tobias sees Agnes' frigidity and lack of emotions, he convinces himself that these are signs of strength. He admits to Claire: Do you know that Agnes has... such wonderful control I haven't seen her cry in... for the longest time... no matter what? (23)'. Likewise, Agnes justifies Tobias' cruelty in having had his cat killed because it no longer showed him love and obedience. Agnes interprets her husband's deed as 'the right thing', 'the less ugly choice' of 'distasteful alternatives', which everyone must face at some point. Even the most obvious signs of the couple's emotional indifference can be disregarded and read as indications of strength and wisdom.

While the family's existence is disrupted by a single event in Albee's play, the superficial stabilisation of the characters' lives in *The Witnesses* is undermined constantly. The Woman and Man quite often say things that do not fit into the everyday pattern of conversation:

WOMAN: Are you asleep, my pussy cat?

asks her husband:

Do you love me?

(Man is silent)

Say if you love me.

MAN: Listen, my dear . . .

WOMAN: Do you love me?

MAN: You can't ask me just like that.

WOMAN: Tell me.

MAN: Of course.

WOMAN: Say 'I love you', not 'of course'.

MAN: I love you.

WOMAN: Have something to eat before you go. (29)

Thus, whenever their deadly routine is unexpectedly interrupted and the signs of mutual disappointment begin to appear, these symptoms must be ignored immediately so that things can 'go back to normal' and can reach a state of 'balance' again.

In both dramatic worlds, deceit and comforting lies are used to suppress true emotions. In Albee's play it is emotional indifference which comes first. Then comes fear (Harry and Edna), which Agnes identifies with a plague and a disease. Surprisingly enough, in both plays, the women are the ones who most consistently bring up images which are clear symptoms of masked emotional uneasiness. In *The Witnesses*, the Woman talks about death and finally admits: 'I'd like to die'(26). In *A Delicate Balance*, Agnes talks about Harry's and Edna's visit in terms of 'the terror', 'the plague', 'disease', and 'mortal illness'(151). Agnes is convinced that 'the plague' (indicative of death as well as something contagious and rampant) has invaded their lives. These phrases, used by both women, allude perhaps to the couples' emotional death.

The characters in Rózewicz's play suppress far more than just boredom, indifference, or fear. A full disclosure of their emotions comes with the man's final monologue. "Now pay attention: - the Man says - I will be brief (32). The briefness applies to the condensed imagery which illustrates the invisible, deeper layer of their 'return to normal':

MAN: . . . A sky speckled with clouds reflected in the water.
The clouds float along. A little girl running across the meadow.

like... to be a wife; a mother; a lover, a homemaker; a nurse; a hostess; an agitator; a pacifier; a truth-teller; a deceiver
(57)

The endless repetition of role playing results in numbness, indifference, and consequently in emptiness which become the dominant elements in the American couple's marital life.

Both plays end in a similar fashion. In *The Witnesses*, the Man kisses the Woman and leaves. The Woman's voice calls out "Bye, bye, darling' and is followed by silence. In *A Delicate Balance*, Agnes ironically concludes her monologue:

... And when the daylight comes again... comes order with it.
(*Sad chuckle*)

Poor Edna and Harry. (Sigh) Well, they're safely gone... and we'll all forget... quite soon. (*Pause*) Come now, we can begin the day. (170)

Thus, both couples return to their lives of pretence playing their own games for the sake of others and themselves. As Claire concisely defines: *We submerge our truths and have our sunsets on untroubled waters'(93).

In both families the spouses deceive each other without creating any patently false fantasy. They also do not lie in the strict sense of the word: basically they reassure themselves that there is nothing to worry about. Agnes and Tobias do not know that their reading of the situation is not true, so their self-deceit is rather irrational. The situation of the Man and the Woman is not as clear. Their subconscious imagery reveals that they both know the opposite is true, yet in order to be able to cope with their terrifying reality, they hide what they know and feel, and continue their game of deception more intentionally than Agnes and Tobias.

The Polish family enters into self-deception as a partial result of acquiring the belief that things are 'back to normal' politically and socially speaking, and that peaceful life is possible in a country destroyed by World War II and Stalinism. Agnes and Tobias enter into their self-deception not so much as a result of acquiring a belief but in retaining one. After living together for almost thirty years, they convince themselves that they have created a loving and peaceful family, which they can protect only by maintaining their status quo.

when admitted, would inflict pain and suffering. She does not want to acknowledge her real emotions, which would enable her to understand her real self, and would restore life into her cold, cerebral universe.

In presenting Agnes' and Tobias' life, Albee is far from being judgmental; he merely depicts a certain kind of lifestyle which can either be accepted or rejected. Albee makes the reader aware that there is a price that comes with each choice - and even when the choice is not made consciously - its consequences should be made known. Albee does not impart any arguments for or against self-deception, but focuses on the results of irrational and unintentional misrepresentation. He skilfully reveals the mechanism which is built into each individual and which is not always possible to control, or even to recognise.

Rozewicz's view of self-deception is more drastic and moralising than Albee's, but this occurs mostly in the final third part.¹² Part II demonstrates that self-deception, being an indispensable part of the 'back to normal', does result in frustration and aggression, but there seems to be no alternative.

Regardless of conventional, cultural and contextual differences, both plays illustrate that deception is absolutely crucial in the lives of characters, whether they realize it or not. The recognition of this fact creates a frisson in the spectators and, as Shaw put it, we become 'guilty creatures sitting at a play'.¹³

NOTES

1. Loyal Rue, *By the Grace of Guile* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 8. Subsequent page references will appear in the text.
2. Quoted after Anthony S. Abbott, *The Vital lie* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1989) 214.
3. Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*, trans. Dounia B. Christiani (New York: Norton, 1968) 64.

9. Martin Esslin praises Pinter for the same ability which he achieves by different means. *The Peopled Wound* (London: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970) 156.
10. Edward Albee, *A Delicate Balance* (New York: Atheneum, 1966) 9. Subsequent page references will appear in the text. The bold part of the text in quotations, wherever it appears, is marked by me.
11. Mele, p. 139.
12. Considering the moralising aspect of the play, Filipowicz states: It would be disingenuous to deny that *The Witnesses* is a *pièce à thèse*, a message play attacking post-war complacency head on'. Filipowicz, 94.
13. J. L. Wisenthal, ed. *Shaw and Ibsen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979) 219.