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ENTROPY AND ECSTASY: THE DYNAMICS OF HUMAN  
RELATIONSHIPS IN BERNARD SLADE'S *SAME TIME*  
*NEXT YEAR*

I.

The research objective outlined in the title will be realized through a three-pronged approach. Bernard Slade's 1975 drama, *Same Time Next Year* will be examined from three vantage points, the applicability of the entropy theory, the analysis of the shared mental images held by the participants in the adulterous affair described in the drama, and the investigation of the role of confession in the play. In connection with the first research component it has to be declared that a forceful application of a law of physics to society or human interaction is by no means a purpose of the present effort. The entropy concept serves as a possible explanation, or a research tool to explain the dynamics of George and Doris' marriage and adulterous affair.

The second law of thermodynamics asserts that in a closed system, due to a lack of external stimulation, the previously varied energy levels will equalize, the system slows down and eventually stops and reaches the state of thermal or heat death. This also implies that any physical system left to itself tends to move spontaneously toward disintegration or entropy. Treating George and Doris' marriages and affair as separate physical systems, the present essay is based on the core assumption that human relationships yield to the laws of physics and consequently just as in any physical system, George and Doris are considered to be molecules operating at differing energy levels. As the entropy theory can only be applied in a closed system, the characters'

marital and extramarital relationships have to be examined in order to establish whether the above metaphor is relevant. Furthermore, the deployment of the entropy metaphor is based on Abádi-Nagy's observations assigning the former a principal function of conveying a sense of crisis, a mental or emotional breakdown characterized by such concepts as depression, isolation, disintegration, solitude, or guilt (41-42).

## II.

In my view George and Helen, and Doris and Harry's marriages can be regarded as closed systems. According to Ludwig von Bertalanffy open systems communicate, experience a metabolism and exchange their components (Cramer). Consequently a closed system is characterized by a lack of or insufficient communication, a decreased metabolism and the inability to exchange the system's components. George's marriage meets the requirements of the closed system. Despite the exchange of words and ideas between George and Helen, the recognition of the other's personality is not present. George's emotional side remains hidden from his spouse. For Helen George appears as a somewhat insecure, yet well-meaning person. He is yearning for romance and Helen's "socially responsible" attitude about sex and intimacy stifles his passionate side. The lack of effective and sincere communication also plagues Doris and Harry's relationship as Doris' eavesdropping on Harry's conversation with his friends during a wedding anniversary celebration reveals that the best time of her husband's life was not experienced while living with her, but it occurred in the army, a period which included a brief stay in a Japanese prisoner of war camp.

Consequently, certain aspects of George and Doris' character remain hidden from their spouses, moreover, the latter are surprised when the emotional or romantic side of their partner comes to light. In addition to a lack of effective communication, the marital relationships suffer from a decreased metabolism as both George and Doris' marriage reached a "comfortable" phase during which they appear to be stranded in a "personality rut." George consistently emanates the father and husband image, while Doris principally appears to Harry as

a mother and homemaker. Whereas the extramarital affair is clearly motivated by an escape from the onset of entropy, the liaison's time frame and spatial arrangement suggest a closed system as well. George and Doris meet every year at the same time and at the same place. The predictable schedule of the encounters indicates temporal closure and the enclosed meeting space suggests spatial limitation.

While George and Doris function in a closed system, their marital relationships also display signs of entropy. The entropic nature of the marriage is suggested by the exchange of stories between George and Doris concerning their spouses' best and worst deeds framing the personalities of Helen and Harry into a bipolar system respectively. Helen's almost supernatural ability to sense George's potential disloyalty keeps George in a closed system, figuratively limiting his movement. Doris' story concerning Harry's best feature also suggests entropy. Harry, intending to spend some quality time with his son Tony by flying a kite, took him along to a public park. As there was not enough wind to fly a kite, Tony's initial excitement subsided and Harry alone spent all his energies trying to make the kite fly. It can be argued that Harry and Tony formed a closed system, and as a result of limited stimulation due to the low wind, the original fervor decreased and Tony with his energy level dropping to zero fell asleep.

The upheavals of George's conscience over his absence during his daughter's loss of a baby tooth create a personal crisis. When in order to ease his troubled mind, George wants to leave earlier, Doris insists on him staying. Thus foils his breakout attempt from this closed system. This is the first indication that the relationship between George and Doris tends to develop into a restrictive framework. Also Doris's reminder of George's commitment within their relationship functions as another reference to figurative enclosure. Scene 3 of Act One offers further indications of the enclosed nature of both characters' marriage. George suffering from temporary impotence blames his wife for his sexual misfortunes. George's association of sexuality with guilt suggests entropy. The description of George and Helen's sexual desire level also reveals entropy as the former's increased, the latter's decreased, bringing Maxwell's demon and its ability of classifying or separating molecules commensurate to their heat emission capability to mind. Another reference to closed systems

can be found in Doris' dreams of making love with George under water "in caves, grottos, swimming pools," (271) that is always in closed spaces. Doris's view of her pregnant self: "catatonic, incredulous, angry, pragmatic, and finally maternal" (275) displays an increasing energy level during the first three terms, and declining intensity in the second half of the continuum. The amount of energy emitted in a "catatonic" state is zero, one can experience a slight increase in energy output in the "incredulous" state reaching the highest intensity level in the "angry" stage. The term "pragmatic" means reluctant acceptance and "maternal" connotes concession to and acceptance of the pregnancy. George's sexual arousal over the pregnant Doris coincides with the beginning of her labor pains and the birth process and once again this results in a guilt attack

The next scene contains a reference to personal or psychological entropy as George mentions the walls he built up to hide his true personality (296). This time it is Doris who complains of the declining intensity of the relationship, which can be considered another symptom of entropy: "George, you ever get the feeling we're drifting apart?"(298). The feeling of guilt awakened in Doris (300) also reinforces the applicability of this concept and George's reference to the "emotional straitjacket" (303) connotes entrapment, or functioning in a closed system as well. The final scene also offers entropic elements. First of all the closed system of Harry and Helen is literally eliminated by Helen's death, but it is continued figuratively. George's life is in disorder, and is unable to function in this semi-closed system, thus he invents the story of Connie and his desire to marry her in order to force Doris to leave Harry and marry him. The energy level and intensity of George come full circle when he emotionally admits that the previous scheme was just a ploy and he is ready to continue the relationship to the end

As the law of entropy focuses on the energy level of the components of a closed system, the energy emitted by the drama's characters should be examined. The vigor or power radiated by the given scene can be gauged by the author's description of the activity and mental state of the characters. At the beginning of the play George noticeably operates at a higher energy level. His actions displaying "intense nervous energy, sitting bolt upright in the bed" are frantic.

Slade uses the following terms to describe George: "agitated, he moves quickly, he grabs a bottle"(240) or "anguished"(242). Doris's energy output at this point is lower, she acts as a spectator to George's anxiety driven performance. George displays high velocity action and Doris shows the opposite. The adjectives and the expressions connected with George connote heat and by extension high energy output. George's thoughts and actions move frantically without any order or consistency and Doris emanates steadiness and tranquility. George's suggestion of leaving the children behind and running away with each other leaves her astonished. The description of George at the beginning of Scene 2, "wearing a charcoal suit, his insecurities flashing through, " along with references to "mercurial moods" (257), connotes thermal output, in a broader sense, energy. However, his previously frantic energy level is decreased as he is more subdued and controlled. Doris also functions at a similar energy level. The energy equilibrium, however, is upset by a phone call from George's daughter Debbie. George's expression drastically changes, he assumes a tense position, and becomes overwhelmed with guilt. Doris responds with equanimity and continues her business as usual attitude toward her lover's personal crisis. Furthermore, as a result of his guilty pangs and as another reference to heat, George suffers indigestion, or heartburn. Doris' energy level also changes as she throws a hairbrush at George and explodes at him as the scene concludes with a passionate embrace.

At the beginning of Scene 3, once again it is George described by such terms as "angry, exasperated, incredulous, frustrated." who radiates more energy. His energy level, however, masks deep frustration over his impotence and indicates his disappointment concerning Doris' pregnancy. The scenario or the set up is familiar, George radiates more energy, Doris is more subdued and this does not change even at the conclusion, when George helps Doris to deliver her baby. However, at the end of the scene George becomes more controlled and his frantic action gives way to steadiness partly inspired by Doris' tranquility.

Summing up the energy map of Act One it can be concluded that while energy dissipation can be discerned, the state of inertia cannot be detected. As in any closed system external information can have a negentropic effect, and the former plays a significant role in all three

scenes. In the above scenes when the energy level of the characters appears to even out, a phone call or some other new information disrupts the development of equilibrium. The ensuing intensity of energy dissipation between the characters or the mutually high energy output prevents the formation of the entropic condition. In Scene 1 a knock on the door sends the characters into frantic action, in Scene 2 Debbie's phone call stirs George up both emotionally and physically, and in Scene 3 Doris' pregnancy exerts a negentropic effect.

Act Two starts with reversed energy output levels as it is George who responds in an astonished manner to the changes of Doris. She bursts on to the scene and George appears more reserved. George forced to react to Doris' personal metamorphosis becomes more agitated as his tirade also includes his views on the society of the 60's. Eventually his revelation of his son's death prevents the setting in of entropy between the two lovers. In Scene 2 George by assuming the very values of society he previously rejected appears to have achieved an inner serenity. The change of apparel from suits to jeans indicates that an insecure accountant gave way to an artist at peace with himself. Just as when the internal calm and stability of the characters virtually results in a mutual decline of energy levels Harry's phone call jolts George out of his tranquility and forces an indirect confession in the name of Doris, eventually repairing the relationship between her and Harry. The last scene of the drama shows a definite decrease of energy, the passionate embraces are replaced by affectionate hugs and the upcoming state of inertia is avoided only by George's announcement of Helen's death and his subsequent marriage proposal to Doris. Having been rejected by Doris, George leaves the stage only to burst in again moments later. Upon George's exit Doris exhibits a trance like behavior and intends to leave the hotel room suggesting that the closed system would experience a heat death. But once again, George reverts to his old self and his passionate declaration of commitment to Doris exerts a negentropic effect. In conclusion, in Act Two a reversal of the intensity of the characters' energy output notwithstanding, outside information provides additional impetus as Michael's death, Harry's phone call and George's proposal all prevent the onset of entropy. The energy map of the play in fact comes full circle, as by the end of the play George

becomes the same agitated, frustrated person and Doris the identically astonished yet reserved individual as she had been at the beginning of the drama.

Thus while George and Doris function in a closed system, they experience a continuous renewal as new information or facts are injected into the story providing additional momentum to the play and to the characters' energy level. The extramarital affair contains entropic elements, including George's guilt, or Doris' rejection of his marriage proposal, but it never reaches the entropy or disintegration stage. In fact it operates as an open system, because communication, metabolism and the exchange of components can be discerned. Contrary to the character's marriage, George and Doris' true identities and hidden personalities are mutually revealed. The characters' personal crises, George's guilt attacks, his impotence, the death of his eldest son, Doris's pregnancy, her personal and psychological awakening provide an endless flow of external stimuli. Furthermore, while George and Doris appear to be the same in their marriages, they are presented as different people in each scene of the affair. Whereas to Helen George comes into view as an insecure, frustrated businessman in search of his true identity, he assumes several selves in the adulterous relationship. He is the guilt-ridden parent, the sexually frustrated individual yearning for romance, the confused father mourning his son, the rebellious artist and the conformist professor. Doris also undergoes personal development from a frustrated housewife to an educated and successful businesswoman.

The entropy metaphor's principal function is the expression of a personal crisis. The drama in fact presents two people experiencing personal calamities ranging from sexual, and psychological crises to economic instability. The signs of the crisis include the feeling of entrapment, and the drama indeed offers an escape, but only at the fantasy level. In fact these two people themselves represent closed systems functioning in several closed frameworks.

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Another issue we have to examine is the reason for the continuation of the affair. While at first one would draw the conclusion, that

George and Doris' ongoing relationship is an escape from the humdrum state of their comfortable marriage, it can also be argued that in a broader sense the respective spouses are substituted by their equivalents in the affair. That is the very reason George continues meeting Doris is that her internal characteristics remind him of Helen, and it is George and Harry's similarity that acts as the primary attracting force for Doris.

This can be proven by a closer examination of the stories related by George and Doris concerning their spouses and the respective subsequent reaction. In fact the drama reports the story of ongoing personal crises on both sides and the reaction of the cheating spouses is definitive in this regard. When George confesses to Doris that their previous night's encounter was the first instance of adultery in his life, she reacts bathetically by inquiring whether she could eat his breakfast (248). At this point George realizes subconsciously that Doris has the same basic features, including a dry acerbic wit and a peculiar sense of humor, as Helen does. Furthermore, George's confession of a mishap during his first sexual encounter elicits an anticlimactic reply from Doris as she only expresses her concern whether George had any insurance after the accident accompanying the tryst. Doris also likes the way Helen reacts to George's impotence and upon hearing Helen's reaction to George's most embarrassing experience of walking into a closet during a visit, she expresses an open identification with Helen: "I've been meaning to tell you this for years, but I think I'd like Helen"(289). George's personal voyage into himself elicits the same reaction both from Helen and Doris, as the former throws a grapefruit at him, the latter expresses her great dissatisfaction in a verbal form. Furthermore, Doris upon learning Helen's death states that she feels as she lost her best friend.

Doris appreciates the same features of George that are present in Harry as well. The stories about Harry's foiled attempt to take his son kite flying or acting as a den mother to local girls in her absence reveals him as a caring, awkward and sincere person. Harry also has trouble with adapting to Doris's awakening self-assertion and economic success. He tries many jobs, but "lacking the killer instinct"(263) he becomes a failure as a provider. His features are summed up in Doris' evaluation of George's character as she points



out that the latter “used to be crazy—and insecure and dumb and a terrible liar and—*human*” (290). It can be argued that this is the subconscious personality pattern or model she seeks in George, whose physical awkwardness, constant self-doubt and soul-searching form a parallel with Harry.

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The third issue to be explored is the role of confession in the drama. The relationship between George and Doris is based on or motivated by several confessions and it is also noteworthy, that George does most of the confessing and Doris reacts. The reader witnesses numerous personal crises alleviated by confessions. The latter can be seen as a reaction to a crisis and by involving another person in one’s drama the closed system is forced open and at the same time a moral obligation is foisted upon the listener or receiver. The roles of the confessor and “minister” shift throughout the play. It is remarkable, that while Doris is a Catholic and emphasizes the need for confession, it is George, a Protestant, who confesses the most.

George’s first confession concerns his views on sexuality and marriage. His admission of his desire to enliven his marriage, or the “old book” by another relationship is motivated by guilt. On the one hand George wants to relieve his conscience, but also, one could apply Foucault’s assertion that sexuality does not exist, only when it is confessed (<http://cgi.student.nada.kth.se/cgi.-bin/d95-aeH/get/foucaulteng.>). Thus it can be argued that by confessing his view on sexuality and marriage his identity is established as well and consequently, he asserts himself as a man:

“When it comes to life I have a brown thumb. I mean nothing goes right. Ever” (243). This quote reveals George’s deep internal insecurities, and establishes a frame of mind, or an intention to make sure that everything in the future will indeed go right and thus the relationship with Doris appears to be his greatest success. George’s confessions can be grouped into three categories reflecting the roles society expects from a male: man, husband, and father-provider. Three of George’s confessions are related to the fatherhood role. The first one concerns the admission of having three children instead of two,

the second is the guilt attack brought on by his absence during his daughter Debbie's loss of her baby tooth, and the third one is his announcement of Michael's death. George's declaration of his eternal love for Doris reaffirms his identity as a lover. This is in straight contrast with the admission of his temporary impotence in Scene 3 of Act One. The anxiety over his inability to perform sexually is countered by the reaffirmation of his male or lover's identity. Consequently, since most of George's confessions are relevant to fatherhood, it can be concluded that his greatest worry concerning the affair is the potential undermining of his ability and status as a father.

The confession at the end of Scene 2 Act Two is a unique one. The confession technically could be regarded as Doris', but it is delivered by George for Harry, Doris' husband. In fact this indirect confession is the climax of the play. By this time George's guilt level reached its zenith, the relationship lasting over 20 years achieved maturity, and his need to succumb to long-stifled impulses of honesty is overwhelming. Whereas the confession starts ambiguously implying a routine admission of adultery and cheating, the real confessor is not George, but Doris. George confesses Doris's love for Harry and realizes the lack of communication between the two, and attempts to break up the entropy by revealing Doris's true feelings for Harry. Furthermore, during the confession George assumes the identity of a priest, in itself a bizarre turn of events, reversing the order of confessing between priest and parishioner.

The relatively lower frequency of Doris' confessions is partially explained by the fact that she is not tortured by guilt to the same extent as George is. Her confessions also revolve around the roles society assigns to women: mother, wife, homemaker, and career woman. In Scene 1 of Act One she asserts emphatically:

Well, look at my life. I got three little kids underfoot all the time, so I'm never alone. I live in a two-bedroom duplex in downtown Oakland, we got a 1948 Kaiser that's almost paid for, a blond, three-piece dinette set, a Motorola TV, and we go bowling at least once a week...I mean, what else could anyone ask for? (251)

The first part of her confession asserts her role as a mother, the description of her home, the equipment, and the appliances are

connected with her homemaking function, and the rhetorical question reveals stifled desires for romance. At the beginning of the play Doris also admits that she never finished high school, a situation clearly in contrast with her later development as a successful businesswoman.

Doris also confesses her desire to contact George during the year in between their clandestine meetings, thus in fact she would break the rules of the game:

George, during the past year I picked up the phone and started to call you five times. I couldn't seem to stop thinking about you. You kept slopping over into my real life and it scared the hell out of me. More to the point I felt guilty. So I decided to stop seeing you. (266)

In addition to an admission of feeling guilty Doris informs on the crisis the relationship exerted on her marriage. This confession is motivated by a desire to force an obligation onto George. Doris makes a similar confession at the end of the play when she reveals her secret wish of being proposed by George. This is her final confession and by thanking George for the duration of the affair and its ability to help her cope with various crises she reasserts a retrospective commitment between the two lovers. Also, her view of marriage: "We share the same memories. It's—comfortable. Maybe, that's what marriage is all about in the end—. I don't know" (310) makes the play come full circle. While at the outset of the romance George emphasized sexuality and compared marriage to a book, here she highlights the mutual experiences, viewing marriage as a community of memories, a virtual space. Doris' greatest concern is to obtain proof about being truly loved, either by George or Harry.

One can, however, never overlook another question, namely how can the duration of the illicit affair be justified? One could eagerly conclude that something is lacking from the characters' marriage. While George's manhood is affirmed by Helen, he needs further reinforcement by Doris, and in return Doris seeks self-fulfillment. Thus, two people suffering a series of personal crises search for certain types of positive reinforcements. The uniqueness of the situation is that they seek the equivalent of their spouses in the other person, and to a certain extent find it.

### III.

The analysis of this drama rested on three pillars. The application of the second law of thermodynamics, or the concept of entropy to the relationship, the examination of the mental image concerning the other partner held by George and Doris, and the investigation of the role of confession in the play. The application of the entropy formula offers a partial explanation. Whereas George and Doris' marriage and adulterous relationship take place is a temporally and spatially closed system, entropy only affects their respective marriages. The shared relationship functions as a virtual continuation of the marriage and the separately experienced crises provide the necessary negentropic effect. As it has been shown the primary reason for the duration and success of the affair is that both participants seek the equivalent of their spouses in the other. George and Doris undergo personal crises and the spouses' reaction is unsatisfactory for them, but they realize that they cannot escape the boundaries of the marriage. In fact their relationship is the projection or extension of the respective marriages.

Throughout the drama the concept of confession is not used in a religious sense. Despite several religious references the drama does not examine that issue from a religious point of view. The confessions offered in the play include a realization of one's secret side, a communication of hidden desires, an indirect or direct assertion of one's identity, and an establishment of personal obligation.

Finally, one more issue has to be discussed. Do George and Doris really commit adultery? In a literal sense they both engage in a sexual and emotional relationship outside the boundaries of the marriage. However, they are driven by a desire to find the equivalent of their spouses in the other and consequently, a subconscious desire at improving their marriage can be discerned. The relationship between George and Doris expands the narrow boundaries of the marriage, but does not destroy it and the emotional climax of the play, George's indirect confession, helps Doris' marriage. Bertalanffy's definition of an open system, described as one digesting influences from without while experiencing interaction among its various levels can be helpful in this case. The digestions of influences from without indeed prevent George and Doris' relationship from slowing down or reaching the

state of entropy, and the resulting interaction among the components in fact functions as an extended marital therapy session.

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