Setting as Character: The Poetics of Space and Human Anxiety in Stephen Karam's *The Humans*

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Abstract

This research paper argues that Stephen Karam elevates the setting in his family drama, *The Humans*, from a mere physical backdrop for the narrative to an active participant in the play, mirroring the Blake family members' fears, anxieties, and insecurities. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, which explores the intimate relationship between physical space and one's psychological state, this paper attempts to analyze the dynamic relationship between the setting of *The Humans* and the psychological landscape of its characters. The New York ground-floor duplex in which the family gathers for celebrating Thanksgiving turns to be an extended metaphor for the Blakes' precariousness and vulnerability under the pressures of their external and internal worlds alike. With its creaking floors, eerie noises, flickering lights, and suffocating atmosphere, the apartment externalizes the characters' deepest psychological tensions and unresolved conflicts about aging, mortality, lack of recognition, and financial insecurity, while its basement level structure mirrors their own entrapment within their repressed fears and secrets. In this sense, boundaries between psychological and physical space are blurred and the setting becomes a living being that both aggravates and reflects the family's vulnerability, fragility, and anxiety.

Keywords: Stephen Karam; *The Humans*; Gaston Bachelard; *The Poetics of Space*; anxiety; setting

البيئة كشخصية: جماليات المكان والقلق الإنساني في مسرحية "البشر" لستيفن كرم

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الملخص

تدور فكرة هذا البحث حول نجاح الكاتب المسرحي البريطاني ستيفن كرم في الإعلاء من مكانة البيئة المكانية في مسرحيته "البشر" لتصبح شخصية محورية فاعلة في الأحداث الدرامية تتفاعل مع مخاوف شخصيات المسرحية وهواجسهم واحساسهم الدفين بانعدام الأمان بدلا من أن تكون مجرد خلفية مكانية للأحداث ذاتها، ويستخدم الباحث في سبيل ذلك كتاب "جماليات المكان" للفيلسوف الفرنسي جاستون باشلار الذي يستكشف العلاقة الوثيقة بين البيئة المكانية والحالة النفسية للفرد كإطار نظري لهذه الدراسة، حيث يرى باشلار أن الأماكن القريبة الصلة بالإنسان مثل البيت ذات علاقة حميمة بحالته النفسية حيث تعد مستودعاً لأسراره وموطناً لذكرياته كما تذكره بالماضي بكل ما يحمله من أسرار ومخاوف ومشاعر مكبوتة، واستناداً الى ذلك الإطار النظري يسعى الباحث الى دراسة العلاقة الحميمة بين البيئة المكانية لمسرحية "البشر" والحالة النفسية لشخوص المسرحية، حيث تصبح شقة مانهاتن التي تجتمع فيها اسرة بليك للاحتفال بعيد الشكر بحالتها المتردية وألوانها الباهتة وأرضيتها المتهالكة وخلوها شبه التام من الأثاث صورة مجازية معبرة عن حالة الخواء النفسي والصراع الداخلي والقلق الوجودي والمخاوف الإنسانية التي تعتمل في اعماقهم وتنعكس في حواراتهم المتبادلة طيلة تواجدهم معاً، وما هذا القلق والضعف النفسي إلا انعكاساً مباشراً لضغوطات الحياة المختلفة عليهم، حيث تتنوع مخاوفهم ما بين الخوف من التقدم في العمر والمرض والموت وعدم الأمان المالي والخوف من الوحدة والفقد وانعدام التقدير، وتأتي الشقة بكل ما تتسم به من عشوائية في البنية ورثاثة في الهيئة لتعبر عن هذا كله صعوداً وهبوطاً، حيث يرمز الطابق السفلي من الشقة الذي تدور فيه جُل الأحداث لمخاوف عائلة بليك المكبوتة وصراعاتهم النفسي التي تأبى الحل، ومن ثم تتلاشى الحدود بين ما هو مكاني وما هو نفسي وتصبح البيئة المكانية كائنًا حيًا يزيد من وطأة صراعاتهم النفسية ويجسدها في الوقت ذاته.

Setting as Character: The Poetics of Space and Human Anxiety in Stephen Karam's *The Humans*

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Since its Off-Broadway debut in 2015 and subsequent Broadway production in 2016, Stephen Karam's *The Humans* has been publicly celebrated as one of the most captivating theatrical pieces about the modern American family. The play is widely praised for its exceptional blending of realism, the uncanny, and existential themes. Throughout its short, yet remarkable, history, the play has succeeded in attracting the attention of both audience and drama critics worldwide for its insightful examination of contemporary family dynamics and modern anxieties. The rapturous reception of the play has been translated into a number of distinctive prizes and nominations; it won the 2016 Tony Award for Best Play and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in the same year, something which highlights the merit of the play as a landmark in American theatre. In other words, *The Humans* has consolidated its unique importance as a compelling contemporary dramatic commentary on the fears and anxieties of the modern American family amidst the surrounding societal, economic, and psychological pressures.

The story begins with three generations of the Blake family gathering for a Thanksgiving dinner in a rundown, ground floor apartment in New York. By the passage of time and progress of small talk, a great deal of the family members' fears, anxieties, sufferings, and vulnerabilities that lie deep behind their mutual interaction and fervent conversations are revealed, and the effect is a "comprehensively haunting picture of the uncontrollable forces we fear to face every day" (Williams). The play, therefore, concentrates on the themes of existential anxiety, human fragility, and economic instability of modern families within the American context. "Mr. Karam underscores his themes, of life's fragility, and our vulnerability to forces beyond our control, with inspired symbolism that nevertheless doesn't break with the play's keenly observed realism," Charles Isherwood maintains. Through the course of the play, we discover a good deal about the Blakes' secrets, regrets, and insecurities that are intricately interwoven with the hot issues of identity, aging, and financial stability. The apartment in which the familial gathering takes place has a vital role to play in such a tense atmosphere; with its uncanny structure, dim light, creaking floors, and strange sounds, the flat becomes a character in the drama, besides the Blakes, reflecting their inner fears, anxieties, and mutual tensions. Through the realistic

form of the play along with its uncanny elements, Karam succeeds in crafting a rich, yet unsettling, family drama in which members of the Blake family struggle all throughout to keep warm communication and human connection despite their harsh lives and the internal and external pressures that pervade their lives.

For a better understanding of *The Humans* as a whole and the instrumental role setting plays within the overall structure of the drama, this research paper employs Gaston Bachelard's theory about space and its affinity with the human experience as a framework for the reading and analysis of the play, in general, and its setting, in particular. Bachelard's philosophy was fully developed in his 1954 seminal book, *The Poetics of Space*, which explores how physical spaces, with specific reference to intimate places like one's home, are intertwined with one's own experience, memory, emotion, love, fear, and anxiety. Spaces, according to Bachelard, are not merely physical structures inhabited by people, but storehouses of memories and imagination and, therefore, are closely connected with one's identity and psychological state. One's house, "shelters daydreaming … protects the dreamer … allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard 6); phrased differently, home is the site of comfort, peace, nostalgia, and intimacy for its dwellers. Specific spaces within the house itself get special meanings in Bachelard philosophy; for example, basements, attics, and corners may evoke feelings of happiness or sadness, security or insecurity, anxiety or inner peace, based on the personal associations with such places. In this way, space in drama has a double function: it is associated with the characters' stored dreams and hopes and, at the same time, it mirrors their phycological anxieties and insecurities. In his forward to Bachelard's book, John R. Stilgoe argues that Bachelard "probes the impact of human habitation on geometrical form, and the impact of the form upon human inhabitants" and, therefore, the house becomes "a metaphor for humanness" (vii). Through focusing on the special role spaces, especially intimate ones, play in our emotional life, Bachelard's philosophy can be used as a solid framework for understanding the psychological landscape of literary characters and how setting itself may function as a dynamic character in literary works.

In *The Humans*, the setting takes a more vital role than in traditional drama. The apartment is no longer that passive location of the family's gathering but, rather, an active character that interacts with the characters' fears, anxieties, hopes, and wishes. With its rundown state, the basement level flat becomes the physical representation of the characters' unspoken worries and insecurities. The eerie structure of the apartment, its frequent

noises, creaking floors, and dim lights reflect the tension and instability of the Blakes due to internal and external pressures. The family members' struggle with financial stress, physical ailments, and senses of guilt come in utter harmony with the deteriorating state of the flat. This research paper, thus, argues that *The Humans* employs the apartment as a central dynamic character within the structure of the play that interacts actively with the other characters' psychological and emotional states, embodying their fears, anxieties, and insecurities.

The basic concept in Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* is that the house is the space of memory for people living in it and, therefore it has a key role in shaping their identity and psychological experience. Every corner elicits memories of the lives of its residents. Bachelard describes the house as the "topography of our intimate being," suggesting that homes are not just material constructions in which we live, but psychological arenas that are pregnant with different emotions, hopes, and dreams (xxxvi). Each part of the house, be it an unseen corner, a dim-lighted corridor, or a hidden attic, relates to our personal life in a way or another and, therefore, is a reminder of the past and a witness to the present. Those spaces function as a warm shelter for their dwellers from the stresses of life. "Without it [home]," Bachelard argues, "man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world" (6-7). Bachelard's theory of space can, thus, be used as a lens through which setting in drama is analyzed for a much deeper understanding of the reciprocal, dynamic relationship between space and one's psychology. Carl Jung makes a stunning comparison between the architecture of the house and the structure of the human psyche as follows:

> We have to describe and to explain a building the upper story of which was erected in the nineteenth century; the ground-floor dates from the sixteenth century, and a careful examination of the masonry discloses the fact that it was reconstructed from a dwelling-tower of the eleventh century. In the cellar we discover Roman foundation walls, and under the cellar a filled-in cave, in the floor of which stone tools are found and remnants of glacial fauna in the layer below. That would be a sort of picture of our mental structure. (qtd in Bachelard xxxvii)

In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard gives exceptional importance to specific parts of the house – corners, attics, and basements – that have special meaning to people. These spaces can sometimes have dual implications as they may evoke feelings of safety or fear, depending on

the memories associated with them. In a hidden corner, for example, one can find the peace of solitude as they feel enclosed and protected. However, the same place can evoke the opposite feelings of fear and insecurity, especially when accompanied by darkness, strangeness, and eerie noises. Basements, for example, are usually connected with man's subconscious and repressed feelings and, thus, summon primal fear within people. These insights into the relevance of physical spaces to the human psychological landscape can function as a solid basis for understanding how the physicality of space shapes the experiences of the literary characters and reflects their inner vulnerability. "House images … are in us as much as we are in them," as such Bachelard argues (xxxvii). Accordingly, the setting of a literary work is exceptionally important for the communication of meaning in literature. Stilgoe argues in this regard:

> This book [Bachelard's] opens its readers to the titanic importance of setting in so much art from painting to poetry to fiction to autobiography. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard reveals time after time that setting is more than scene in works of art, that it is often the armature around which the work revolves. He elevates setting to its rightful place alongside character and plot, and offers readers a new angle of vision that reshapes any understanding of great paintings and novels, and folktales too. (x)

Among the key concepts that Bachelard sheds light on in his philosophy about space is that of "verticality". He distinguishes between high places such as attics and low ones such as basements in their relationship to human psychology; while the attic, high and well-lighted, is usually connected with the ideas of solitude, shelter, and tranquility of mind, the basement – underground and dimly-lighted – usually refers to the world of the subconscious. Above-ground floors, in general, are associated with rosy dreams and romantic escapism from the pressures of life. "We always go up the attic stairs, which are steeper and more primitive," Bachelard argues, "For they bear the mark of ascension to a more tranquil solitude" (26). On the other hand, basements and ground floors symbolize the dark world of the subconscious and the descent to the bottom of repressed fears and anxieties; basements are, therefore, the spaces where man's primal fears and insecurities find room for surfacing and dominating. "Instead of facing the cellar (the unconscious), Jung's "prudent man" seeks alibis for his courage in the attic" (18). The contrast between high places and lower places, therefore, reflects a deep dichotomy within the human psyche between his aspiration for living a calm peaceful life free from tensions and fears and his inevitable

submission to both external pressures and internal anxieties. Bachelard's concept of verticality represents an effective tool that can be used in the analysis of setting in literature as these spaces often mirror the psychological and emotional states of the literary figures. By analyzing the places in which the characters keep going to and coming from, we can better understand their states of mind and have a full grasp of their hidden fears and nagging anxieties. This is exactly the case with Stephen Karam's *The Humans*.

In *The Humans*, the apartment in which the family gathers for Thanksgiving is not merely a physical setting that functions as a stereotypical backdrop for the family gathering; rather, it is a dynamic participant throughout the play, interacting with the different characters' states of mind and symbolically contributing to the development of narrative and characters. Karam employs the apartment as a symbol of the family's gathering and dispersal at the same time, suggesting that the family is dispersed between moments of familial warmth and individual anxieties. David Rooney argues in this regard that although Karam exploits the duplex as a dramatic setup for the family's gathering, he "removes the reassuring factor of home from the equation by putting the characters in the newly occupied Manhattan apartment," and, therefore, uses it as embodiment of the characters' insecurities. In the opening scene of the play, Karam describes the flat as follows:

A turn-of-the-century ground-floor/basement duplex tenement apartment in

New York City's Chinatown. It's just big enough to not feel small. It's just

small enough to not feel big.

The two floors are connected via a spiral staircase. Each floor has its own

entrance.

The apartment's pre-war features have been coated in layers of faded off-white paint, rendering the space curiously monotone. The rooms are worn,

the floors are warped, but clean and well kept.

The layout doesn't adhere to any sensible scheme; the result of a mid -century renovation in which two autonomous apartments were combined.

Generally speaking, the declining state of the flat with its eerie noises, dim lights, and creaking floors reflects the psychological landscape of the Blakes where insecurity, anxiety, and hidden fear pervade. The apartment dramatically functions as an extended poetic image of the deteriorating

mental and psychological state of the family members and the overall themes of instability and insecurity. "Just like the apartment, the family has its own cracks and each character struggles with their flaws and problems" (Duygu Beste 32). The choice of New York, specifically Manhattan, to be the general setting of the play reminds of the deep traumatic experience of the 11/9 events and their concomitant feelings of fear and anxiety all the time. Described as a "ground-floor/basement duplex" in New York City's Chinatown, the apartment represents the duality in the Blake family from the start; being neither an above-ground flat nor an entirely underground one mirrors the unstable psychic condition of the family members, wavering between moments of shared love and happiness and others of fear and precariousness. The paradox latent in the playwright's description of the apartment as "just big enough to not feel small" and "just small enough to not feel big" embodies a state of conflict within the dwellers' psyches between their intimacy to one another and their struggling with their individual hidden tensions, which indicates how space itself expands and narrows according to the emotional state of its occupants. Describing the walls of the duplex as "coated in layers of faded off-white paint, rendering the space curiously monotone" symbolizes the passage of time and fadedness of physical colourfulness, which in itself is an indication of the fading of the characters' identities under the pressures of the external and internal tensions. Wrapped floors, on the other hand, signify the cracked family life due to each member's own secrets and repressed desires. As for the "spiral staircase" that connects the two levels of the duplex, it represents Bachelard's notion of "verticality" in which the basement stands for the immersion of characters in their own subconscious with its fears and unresolved conflicts, while the ascent to the upper floor suggests moments of tranquility and rest from the stresses of life.

Karam continues his detailed description of the constituent sections of the apartment in a way that attracts attention to its relevance to the interior of the Blake family members. The upper floor is described as a "two rooms divided by an open entryway … large deep-set window with bars. The window gets no direct sunlight. urban recliner is the only piece of furniture upstairs." The barred window and the absence of sunlight bring to mind the idea of prison, symbolizing the psychological confinement and isolation of the Blakes from one another despite their physical presence in a single place. The emptiness of the whole floor from furniture, except for the recliner, stands for the emptiness of the Blake family's life from senses of security and stability. The downstair

floor, on the other hand, is described as "two windowless rooms divided by an even larger open entryway … A small kitchen alley is wedged awkwardly behind the spiral staircase. The other room is dominated by a modest folding table. … Scattered moving boxes. Not much else." The "awkward" placement of the kitchen suggests a sense of disharmony among the group with a wide generation gap separating three generations of the Blake family, while the windowless rooms stand for their imprisonment within their fears. Generally speaking, the bare furniture across the duplex – an urban recliner, a modest folding table, and scattered moving boxes – suggests the void within the lives of the characters, which makes their lives vulnerable and fragile. The table itself, described as modest, symbolizes both their fragility and constant attempts to be together despite their fears and worries. Phrased differently, both the upper and lower floors of the duplex stand for the senses of fragmentation and dispersal that dominate the Blake family members' psyches. Elaine M. Smith argues:

> The dramaturgical function of the apartment resides in its seeming reactions to surges in anxiety throughout the play. The apartment darkens as light bulbs burn out throughout the evening. Each time a bulb burns out, the playable space for the characters gets smaller and dimmer, forcing the Blakes to celebrate Thanksgiving with an ever-shrinking safe space. (21)

The apartment is, furthermore, described as having an uncanny element about it: "The apartment is a touch ghostly, but not in a forced manner; empty pre-war basement apartments are effortlessly uncanny." The "ghostly" nature of the apartment along with the "sickening, thud sound from above the ceiling" align with Freud's famous concept about the uncanny, "das Unheimliche". According to Freud, the uncanny is "related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror" (219). The uncanny results from the unsettling experience of encountering something that is both familiar and unfamiliar simultaneously; it arises when our sense of reality is disrupted when familiar things acquire weird qualities that make them strange and eerie. In this way, repressed fears and desires are considered an essential element of the uncanny when they surface unexpectedly as they usually cause irritation and anxiety, "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220). In literature, the uncanny elements are used both to mirror and evoke deep senses of psychological unease. Through juxtaposing what is familiar and what is strange in a literary work, the characters are forced to confront their inner fears and anxieties face to face. In *The Humans*, the familiar – the apartment where the

family's gathering takes place – becomes unfamiliar through its strange structure, sparce furnishing, eerie sounds, and creaking floors. The phrase "effortlessly uncanny" by which Karam describes the flat underlines how the duplex naturally reveals feelings of dread and unease. The natural uncanny appearance of the apartment mirrors the family's different worries about aging, illness, death, lack of intimacy, and financial instability. The apartment, therefore, functions as a physical reflection of the distorted subconscious of the characters and the blurring of the boundaries between the physical world and the internal landscape.

Another element of the uncanny in the play is the choice of the basement floor to be the main location of the familial gathering as the table is set there. As discussed earlier, the basement in Bachelard's philosophy stands for the subconscious with all its repressed elements. Freud argues that the uncanny is closely connected with the idea of repression: "for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (241). Gathering mainly in the basement to celebrate Thanksgiving turns the basement into an open area for the surfacing of repressed wishes, anxieties, and insecurities. The frequent, eerie sounds and the flickering lights intensify the atmosphere of dread that usually results from one's confrontation with their repressed secrets and guilt and, thus, creates a pervading sense of unease throughout the play. This resulting unease hinders the family members' fervent tries to come together and face their insecurities. By incorporating the uncanny elements within the structure of play, Karam engages both the characters and the audience alike in the unsettling senses of tension and instability all throughout the drama.

As the family gathers and small talk progresses, mutual differences and emotional tensions float to the surface. What begins as a traditional Thanksgiving celebration ends into individual confessions of each one's fears and repressed anxieties: Erik's affair and financial problems, Deirdre's aging and unappreciated efforts, Aimee's deteriorating health and job loss, Brigid's aspirations for a better future, and Momo's dementia. "As darkness falls outside the ramshackle pre-war duplex and eerie things start to go bump in the night, the Blake clan's deepest fears and greatest follies are laid bare" (Center Theatre Group). The choice of New York city to be the locale of the apartment, just a very small distance from the former two World Trade Centers site, immediately brings to memory the events of the eleventh of September and the traumatic experience related to them, especially when we know that Erik Blake and

his daughter, Aimee, were among the survivors of the horrific incidents. Elaine smith highlights Karam's deliberate choice of New York as follows:

> Karam adds layers of anxiety to these ordinary stresses by transplanting Thanksgiving from Scranton to New York City, only two miles away from Ground Zero. This is important to the play because Erik and his daughter Aimee are survivors of the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. Both characters experience physical manifestations of PTSD, including lack of sleep and physical illness. They cannot ignore their ailments as they attempt a return to a pre-9/11 state of normal in a post-9/11 reality. (19)

The events of that day have left Erik with deep repressed psychological scars that find outlet every now and then in recurring nightmares, functioning as a permanent source of fear and trauma for him. He once narrates a terrible memory of that day to Aimee when he saw a fireman carrying a body "with your same suit on… but with a coat of ash melted onto her… like she got turned into a statue;" the memory is dug deep into his psyche, causing him continuous PTSD. For example, when he sees falling ashes from the upper floors of the building looking like flight flurries, he immediately "feels unsettled" and "steps away from the window, takes a few calming deep breaths" (Duygy Beste 42). He keeps blaming his daughter, Brigid, for choosing to live near the site of the former Twin Towers: "I *hate* that you're moving a few blocks from where two towers got blown up and in a major flood zone." Throughout the play, Erik is, thus, obsessed with safety preparations such as insisting to have the LED lantern wherever he goes as if preparing himself for any emergency; he is always under the stress of living in an unpredictable world in which catastrophes may happen in a blink of an eye. The generation gap between Erik and his daughter Aimee is crystal clear in their different responses to the trauma; while Erik is trying to get meaning out of his traumatic experience, Aimee unconsciously denies the trauma, hoping that this denial would relieve her of her psychological agony; he asks his daughter, "Don't you think surviving that day means something?" but she answers, "It means the two of us were in New York on a terrible morning. That's all." The tragedy of the 2001 events, thus, functions as an embodiment of how public tragedies can affect one's image, behaviour, and relationships to the utmost degree possible.

Besides the events of the eleventh of September as a source of Erik's fears, there are other no less important sources: his financial instability, his affair with one of his colleagues at school, and his loss of control over his family. Erik's "mental absence, as he stares out the window at the

brick alley or simply pauses and lets his thoughts wander far, far away, are a sure giveaway that something is seriously troubling him," Stasio rightly analyzes Erik's nonverbal behaviour. He has been fired from school, left struggling with a threatening financial situation that is worsening every day. He advises Richard to keep saving money to secure his future, reflecting an insecure present situation of himself: "I thought I'd be settled by my age, you know, but man, it never ends . . . mortgage, car payments, internet, our dishwasher just gave out . . . I even started cutting my own hair to try and save a few bucks." The costs of taking care of Momo have also contributed to the deteriorating monetary state of Erik: "you wouldn't even believe how much the [medical stuff costs]." The Manhattan apartment with its deteriorating state and wrapped floors mirrors Erik's failing financial position and his entrapment withing the vicious circle of his own insecurities. The flickering lights and the squeezing floors of the duplex symbolizes a haunting fear of further future collapse. The financial worry of the protagonist is accompanied by another moral one, i.e., his affair, which has shaken his moral identity and his relationship with his wife and daughters. He confesses to his daughters that he is the one to blame: "Hey easy, cut it out. Stop it, both of you, stop, this is on me and —hey, I'm working it out." Beyond this courage to carry full responsibility for his infidelity is a shattered self-image as an irresponsible husband and a bad father. The confession takes place in the basement that Bachelard, as discussed earlier, associates with the return of the repressed; Erik's secret is, thus, divulged in it and his anxiety finds an outlet there. The confined structure of the basement and its lack of sunlight serves as a metaphor for the father's entrapment in his own misdeed and his descent into guilt and vulnerability, unable to escape.

On the level of his role as a father, Erik has also deep insecurities regarding his inability to provide a secure shelter for his family from the hardships they are facing in life. His doubts concerning his role as a family man are aggravated by his loss of his permanent job and his secret affair which undermine his sense of dignity and control. The spiral staircase that connects the two floors of the apartment, with its asymmetrical design, stands for the father's inability to reconcile his responsibility as a father and his defects as a human. The turbulent psychological state of Erik is articulated in his recurrent nightmares that leave him covered in sweat as his wife describes, "The sheets were covered in sweat last night . . . I dunno if he's having nightmares or what." These nightmares reflect an internal conflict between the father's

deep desire to reclaim his role as one responsible for his family and his deep sense that he is fallible and unqualified for such a role. Jenny Lee maintains that Erik's dreams are "linked to past trauma surrounding the 9/11 attacks, as well as his guilt over not properly being able to provide for his family." The site of the apartment and its internal uncanny structure amplify his insecurities and deepen his psychological suffering, which reflects how the playwright has successfully managed to use the setting of the play to externalize the psychological fragility of Erik.

Erik's wife, Deirdre, is no exception in the anxiety cycle that overwhelms the Blakes in *The Humans*. Her insecurities lie mainly in her fear of aging, lack of recognition, and financial burdens, which all find echo with the deteriorating state of the apartment. Approaching her retirement, the mother is deeply concerned about her low position at work and her collapsing role in her own family. Her utter disappointment of her status at her workplace is manifested when her husband mentions that the "Whole place would fall apart without her;" at this point, she breaks down and reveals her deep agony towards her diminishing position at work despite the fact that she has spent almost forty years working for the same company, "yeah, well my *salary* doesn't reflect that, and these new kids they hired, I'm working for two more guys in their twenties, and just 'cause they have a special degree they're making five times what I make, over forty years / I've been there." The lack of recognition that Deirdre complains of is not merely restricted to work but extends to her familial role as a wife and a mother; after a long-lasting marriage, her husband has cheated on her and her children indifferently dismiss her conservative opinions or take her sacrifices for granted. She is also struggling within her family to keep her role as the family's moral compass and emotional anchor despite the wide gap that stands between her moral code and her daughters' ethical one. For example, she is such a religious character that believes firmly in God and says her prayers regularly, while her daughters are such liberal ones who do not pay attention to such matters. The multilayered faint paint on the walls of the rundown apartment typically mirrors the role of Deirdre in the drama – worn down but surviving, overlooked yet essential.

Deirdre's financial burdens further amplify her insecurities. Both she and her husband are grappling with their debts while continuing to support their daughters financially and covering the high expenses of Momo's treatment. In this sense, both wife and husband are "emblematic of the embattled middle classes, who have seen the bright expectations of the American dream fraying in the harsh headwinds of economic stagnation" (Isherwood). Once she remarks smartly about her daughters'

financial reliance on their parents as she never had a parent to depend on for her monetary needs; the remark reflects the mother's inner conflict between her desire to help her daughters and her resentment of the financial pressures placed on her. In more than an occasion in the play, Deirdre stresses her financial problems as, for example, when she mentions that, "I bought blueberries last week . . . they're not cheap;" the mere mentioning of small purchases like blueberries embodies how financial concerns pervade her thoughts and frustrate her. In other situations, she turns her frustrations into a dark joke that bears much agony within it as when she makes irony of her dreams, "Well I'd rather be ruined in a Four Seasons somewhere, on a beach, you know?... I'll take wealth for four hundred, Alex." Anxiety about aging and losing health is also a concern for Deirdre, aggravated by her being a witness to the deteriorating state of Momo. She is so much immersed into thinking about physical vulnerability and mental weakness in the future. Reflecting on Momo's physical and mental state, she comments on the long journey man undertakes in life and what may be there at the end of it, "It's hard to predict now how she's gonna be... this is definitely her last big trip." The uncertainty about Momo's state worsens Deirdre's worries about the future and what may be lying ahead. The apartment with its decaying state and creaky infrastructure functions as an objective correlative of the mother's entrapment within her own insecurities. Lee comments in this regard that, "her relationship with both her husband and daughters is a perfect example of how it feels to be trapped, and her subsequent emotional breakdown is one of the most poignant scenes." The worn out structure of the duplex despite its importance for the family's gathering symbolizes Deirdre herself; she is a key figure for the whole family with her limitless sacrifices and unconditional love, yet her role is taken for granted from all around her as if she is bound to give without receiving all the time.

Not only do the parents have their own anxieties and insecurities in Karam's play, but the adult children do have their own as well. Aimee, for example, struggles with her chronic physical illness and internal depression and loneliness after breaking up with her girlfriend; both physical and psychological sufferings aggravate her deep senses of vulnerability, which the apartment intensifies with its gloomy, almost empty space, reflecting the emptiness within her. Diagnosed with ulcerative colitis and facing the possibility of having an imminent surgery, Aimee fears losing control over her body and, in turn, her life path as a whole. She expresses the trouble her illness has caused her

regarding her career, "I missed a lot of time last year when I was sick... and then I had another flare-up this month." On the personal level, she has lost ambition and fallen prey to negative thoughts about her case, whereas on the professional level, she has lost her job, "I was informed last month I'm no longer on the partner track," justifying this decision disappointedly that, "You get the sense they support your chronic illness as long as it doesn't affect your billable hours." Her physical and professional decline is accompanied by her fear of relying on her parents for financial support in the future, something that would diminish her independence and make her more vulnerable.

Besides her physical illness and financial insecurity, Aimee experiences a state of emotional void due to her recent breakup with her girlfriend, Carol. The separation leaves her psychologically destroyed, suffering utter loneliness and unbearable emotional pain that sometimes find an outlet in tears and other times in a bitter joke. In one of the scenes of the play, for example, she seizes the opportunity of being alone upstairs and makes a call with Carol in an attempt to transcend her devouring senses of loneliness. When the reply comes disappointing, she "cries, unable to hold it in. Erik holds her." Crying bitterly, she confesses to her father that "I miss her." In other situations, she turns her painful experience into bitter humor, telling Brigid sarcastically that nobody is going to date her after the surgery, "I wait for the *third* date to be like: 'Just FYI, I shit out of a hole in my belly'." Joking in such a painful situation becomes a defense mechanism against the harsh painful reality Aimee is facing.

The Manhattan apartment functions in this context as an objective correlative of Aimee's internal struggles with her physical and emotional pains. The apartment with its windowless basement is a poignant symbol of Aimee's entrapment within her own fears and anxieties. The out-of-place kitchen wedged behind the staircase symbolizes Aimee's psychological dislocation due to her illness and breakup. Her deep senses of loneliness and psychological agony is reflected in her reluctance to share much with her family as they gather and talk about their daily concerns or in her defensive remarks. Mitchell R. Miller argues in this regard that *The Humans* is mainly about "loneliness and isolation within your own family. Even while participating in an annual tradition, each person is isolated from the rest of the group in at least one meaningful way;" Aimee is no exception. The disposable table items like the paper plates and plastic utensils stand for Aimee's current state of temporariness and instability in everything related to her, be it health, career, or relationships. The absence of sunlight in the basement and the

flickering, dim lights upstairs mirror Aimee's lack of hope for a bright future and the absence of any possibility for a better state of affairs, which represents how her anxieties and insecurities are beyond healing. In *The Humans*, therefore, Karam juxtaposes Aimee's insecurities with the eroding state of the apartment, making the setting an active witness to and constant reminder of her struggles on both physical and spiritual levels.

Brigid Blake, the youngest daughter and the owner of the apartment along with her boyfriend, has her own worries and fears, too. She is struggling with her unrealized potential as a musician and her partial dependence on her parents for financial support, the same way her older sister does. The lack of recognition and dependency augment her deep insecurity and vulnerability. Though she works hard day and night to fulfil her aspirations, she is weighed down by her student debts and the high cost of living in an extraordinarily expensive city like Manhattan: "I'm spending most of my nights bartending—you guys don't even know how much student debt I'm stuck with." Her inability to actualize herself in the field she likes makes her always defensive when her parents criticize her choices in life; for example, when Erik talks to her about the unsafety of the area she has chosen to live in, she aggressively responds, "This area is safe … Yeah, that's why I can afford to live here—it's not like you gave me any money to help me out." The less polite reply reveals a fragile self beyond which hates its utter dependence on parents' support while an adult. Here comes the apartment with its emptiness and disorder to reflect Brigid's chaotic and conflicted self as she is torn between her desire to fulfil herself and accomplish her aspirations, on the one hand, and her lack of appreciation and dependency on her parents, on the other hand. The flickering lights and the strange noises heard now and then and towards which she lacks control further emphasize her helplessness with her life as a whole as she cannot reconcile her harsh reality with her rosy dreams.

More than any other character, Momo stands as symbol of all existential anxieties and fears in the play; she is a poignant example of the problems of aging, dependency, and loss of identity. Surrendering to dementia, she loses contact with her family and the world at large. Her only connectivity with the world is through her incomprehensible muttering and incoherent outbursts every now and then. Only two of her utterances that she keeps repeating have meaning; the first of which is "You can never come back... you can never come back," which is an embodiment of the idea that the beautiful past, if any, can never be

relived and, therefore, we are doomed to live the present with all its gloominess and anxiety. The other utterance is "Where do we go? Where do we go?" which symbolizes man's constant existential questioning of the purpose and rationale beyond human existence and life journey. The repetition of the question resonates with the Blakes' collective uncertainties about mortality, aging, and death and how her physical and mental deterioration is an embodiment of the shared anxieties of the family as a whole. The existence of Momo among the Blakes represents a burden and a source of happiness at the same time; while she is deeply cherished and lovingly cared for by every member of the family, she still represents a burden because of the high cost of her treatment and the psychologically demanding nature of the caregiving process. The apartment with all its disorder and lack of consistency mirrors the state of Momo, at odds with everything and everyone around her. The strange, unjustified noises in the flat reflects her internal confusion. Therefore, Karam succeeds through the character of Momo in intertwining the Blake family's love, caregiving, fear, and anxiety in one fabric, using the flat as an embodiment of all that is working inside their own psyches.

Despite their mutual differences and shared anxieties, however, the Blakes show a strong possibility of transcending all that annoys them and shatters their psychological stability through shared love, responsibility, and tolerance. Brock Swinson argues in this regard that, "*The Humans* is a meticulous character study of the love that binds families and how it overcomes economic fears and anxieties." In the same vein, Marilyn Stasio maintains that, "Instead of erupting in bitter hatred, Karam's characters respond to these revelations with deep love." As such, the characters, despite their personal insecurities and tensions, demonstrate unconditional love towards one another, which suggests the possibility of healing and continuity. A striking example of how tolerance dominates even at times of mounting tensions is when Erik confesses his financial crisis and sexual affair. Opposite to expectations of erupting anger, nervousness, and rejection, the family members, even Deirdre herself, show understanding and empathy. Likewise, the daughters sympathize with their parents despite their mistakes and show full understanding of the financial and psychological burdens laid on them, communicating a subtle message that love can heal everything. The playwright, therefore, shows that the "Blakes cope with adversity, deal with mistakes, face the stinging possibility failure and yet, hopefully endure" (Rooney). In the same vein, Peter Debruge argues about mutual understanding in *The Humans* as follows:

> It's about how different generations interact with each other. It's about tolerance, which flows both ways: parents who love their kids unconditionally, even when they show up with same-sex or nonwhite partners, and kids who find it in themselves to respect their folks' old-fashioned Christian values. Above all, it's about acceptance and reconciliation, whether that comes from a religious place or not.

The apartment is not separate from such an idea, for it stands as a space for both mutual differences and familial bonds. Its lack of furniture obliges the Blake family to gather around a small table, which suggests their emotional closeness despite their insecurities as if they find healing and redemption possible in such closeness. The worn, shabby duplex mirrors the failures in their lives, yet it remains a place where they gather, talk, laugh, share their secrets, and recite their prayers; therefore, it stands as a symbol of family bonds and the ability to achieve unity and connection amidst worries and fears. Erik's worry for his daughters and their future, Deirdre's keenness on taking care of Momo and maintaining tradition and religion within the family, the two sisters' care for their grandmother and their deep desire for comforting their parents, and the whole family's insistence on reading Momo's last letter before falling into dementia – all are clear indications of their understanding that love and intimacy are the only escape from their insecurities. While the disposable kitchen utensils on the table signify the instability of their lives, they also symbolize their inherent ability, through familial love, to renew their lives and get rid of their worries. Karam's final message, thus, is that the Blakes can transcend their worries and fears, finding emotional healing and resilience through mutual love and family unity.

In conclusion, Stephen Karam elevates the Manhattan duplex in *The Humans* beyond a mere physical setting of the play; rather, he transforms it into an active participant in the drama, mirroring through its rundown state the precariousness of the family under the pressures of the external and internal worlds alike. Throughout the drama, the setting is employed dynamically as an extended metaphor for the Blakes' worries and insecurities. The decaying state of the apartment mirrors the disintegrating lives of the family members, while its creaking floors and lack of sunlight externalize their deepest psychological anxieties and tensions. However, the dining table around which the family gathers to celebrate and recite their prayers suggests a possibility for unity and coherence that can transcend generation differences and personal insecurities through mutual love, tolerance, and acceptance. Through using the apartment as a living entity that interacts with the other

characters in the play, reflecting their fears and anxieties and representing their potential for unity and closeness, the writer has succeeded in writing a family drama where setting is a character rather than a mere physical space.

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