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Matrix of Gender Intelligibility and Heteronormativity in Edward Albee's the Zoo Story

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Abstract

Edward Albee's first play, *The Zoo Story* (1959) is one of those literary assets which dedicatedly cut through the illusions of contemporary American politics and cultural ethos, to confront the long-held social values. With the publication of the absurdist fictional 1-Act play, Albee came to be perceived as the leader of a new theatrical movement in America, 'The Theatre of the Absurd'. The work explored themes of isolation, loneliness, gender, sexuality, identity, miscommunication as anathematization, social disparity and dehumanization in a contemporary commercial world. Albee's success was in part predicated on his ability to straddle the traditional with the avant-garde. He combined the realistic with the surreal, voicing a critique of the society by calling into question the values and norms that underpin it. To Albee, alienation is a product of decisions taken, action deferred, myths endorsed and freedom denied, rather than a simple consequence of capitalism. He was a liberal voice recalling the individual to his moral and spiritual responsibility. His most celebrated play 'The Zoo Story' is a cautionary tale, exposing the harm of narrow gender norms and illuminating the need for a more expansive view of sexuality. This paper aims to explore the role of gender and sexuality in *The Zoo Story*. It also aims to examine the relationship between gender performance and social exclusion within the context of the play and how the characters (Peter and Jerry) are caught up in a matrix of gender intelligibility and heteronormativity in contemporary society.

Keywords: Edward Albee, the zoo story, gender performance, sexuality, heteronormative, social exclusion

Introduction

As a playwright who came of age during the post-World War II era of American global hegemony, Edward Albee was witness to a time of middle-class affluence and media saturation in America. From 1945 to 1960, America was a prosperous society that encouraged its citizens to compete for luxury items, homes, cars, and televisions through consumer culture. Popular television programs of the time depicted idyllic suburban prosperity with white middle-class nuclear families, where traditional gender roles were maintained and the father was the organization man while the wife took care of the family and home.

It was during this time that Albee debuted his first play, *The Zoo Story*, in 1959. The play harshly criticized the dominant culture of the era, which is represented by Peter, an upper-middle-class publishing executive. The play opens with Peter reading *Time* magazine on his favorite bench at the park where he spends his Sunday afternoons. He has a wife, children, a home, and two televisions. Suddenly, Jerry, a carelessly dressed stranger, enters the scene and initiates a conversation with Peter, beginning with "I have been to the zoo."

Jerry talks about his life in a poor rooming house owned by a cruel woman and her frightening dog who tries to bite him. He also tells Peter a story about his unsuccessful attempt to

communicate with the dog and how he tried to kill the animal. As Jerry reveals his life story to Peter, it becomes clear that he has suffered at the hands of societal norms and expectations. His childhood was marked by a dysfunctional family, with a mother who left with her lover and an alcoholic father. He has come to the park with the intention of making himself heard and understood through his self-destructive actions, targeting a seemingly perfect middle-class man. Later on, Jerry and Peter fight over the possession of the bench, which leads to an unusual encounter ending in Jerry impaling himself upon Peter's knife, committing suicide/murder in front of those who have been hypnotized into a state of 'vegetable'.

The Zoo Story is a confrontation between two individuals, one who has assimilated into the dominant culture and power structure of society, while remaining oblivious to the vanity of the life he leads, and the other, Jerry, being a socially and economically unprivileged outcast who denies the definitive norms of his society.

The Matrix of Gender Intelligibility

The matrix in Edward Albee's play "The Zoo Story" refers to the set of social norms and expectations that dictate how gender is understood and expressed within society. In the play, the two main characters, Jerry and Peter, are presented as embodying different aspects of this matrix.

Peter represents the more traditional, normative aspect of the matrix. He is a middle-class man who is married with children and lives in a comfortable home. He presents himself in a way that is recognizable to others as masculine, adhering to traditional gender norms such as dressing in a suit and tie and displaying confidence and authority. His behavior and presentation align with societal expectations for middle-class men.

Jerry, on the other hand, represents a more non-conforming aspect of the matrix. He is an outsider who does not fit neatly into traditional gender norms. He is described as having a "queerly pretty" face and dresses in a way that challenges traditional gender roles. He also exhibits behavior that is unconventional, such as his desire for a pet dog, which he fears would be seen as feminine. Jerry's presentation challenges the norms and expectations of the matrix, making him an outsider in society.

Throughout the play, Jerry's struggle to be understood and accepted by Peter reflects the difficulties that arise when someone's gender expression or identity does not conform to the matrix of gender intelligibility. Jerry's inability to express himself in a way that is recognizable to Peter and society at large results in his marginalization and isolation.

Overall, "The Zoo Story" depicts a matrix of gender intelligibility that is limited and restrictive, making it difficult for individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms to be understood and accepted by society.

Resisting Heteronormative Constraints

Heteronormativity refers to the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm and that it is the only acceptable sexual orientation. In "The Zoo Story," there are several instances where heteronormativity is reinforced.

One example is the way in which Peter's family is presented as the epitome of the traditional nuclear family. Peter has a wife and two children, and he is portrayed as being content with his domestic life. There is no mention of any non-heterosexual relationships or identities, and the assumption is that Peter's family is the ideal.

Another example is the way in which Jerry's desire for companionship is framed as being unfulfilled because he does not have a romantic or sexual partner. Throughout the play, Jerry talks about his loneliness and his need for human connection, but he never mentions any non-heterosexual desires or relationships. The assumption is that the only way to achieve fulfillment is through a romantic or sexual partnership with someone of the opposite sex.

Furthermore, in "The Zoo Story" Jerry's sexuality is rejected or invalidated in a number of ways. The portrayal of Jerry's queer presentation is at times used to marginalize him and present him as an outsider. "Jerry: No. I wonder if it's sad that I never see the little ladies more than once. I've never been able to have sex with, or, how is it put?... make love to anybody more than once. Once; that's it... Oh, wait; for a week and a half, when I was fifteen... and I hang my head in shame that puberty was late... I was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l. I mean, I was queer... [Very fast]...queer, queer, queer... with bells ringing, banners snapping in the wind. And for those eleven days, I met at least twice a day with the park superintendent's son... a Greek boy, whose birthday was the same as mine, except he was a year older. I think I was very much in love... maybe just with sex. But that was the jazz of a very special hotel, wasn't it? And now; oh, do I love the little ladies; really, I love them. For about an hour." (Albee in *The Zoo Story*, 1959:606) He cannot live a normal life as a

homosexual either. Here are some instances where this occurs:

When Jerry reveals his desire for a pet dog, Peter questions why he would want one, saying "You're not one of those queer dog-lovers, are you?" This comment implies that there is something abnormal or deviant about having a strong affection for animals, and links it to non-heterosexual desires or behaviors. Pet ownership is relegated as a traditionally feminine activity which is met with surprise and skepticism when Jerry reveals his desire for it.

Later in the play, when Jerry is trying to connect with Peter by telling him a story about a homosexual encounter he had in the park, Peter dismisses the story as "silly." Peter's refusal to engage with Jerry's story showcases a rejection of non-heterosexual experiences and desires.

When Jerry tells Peter that he loves him, Peter responds with fear and disgust, saying "What do you want? What are you going to do?" Peter's response suggests that he is interpreting Jerry's expression of love as a sexual advance, and that he is uncomfortable with the idea of same-sex attraction.

In another conversation between Jerry and Peter, Jerry asks Peter if he has ever thought about killing his wife. When Peter responds with shock and anger, Jerry suggests that Peter's rejection of his question is a way of repressing his own violent and aggressive impulses. Jerry's comment may be read as an attempt to challenge traditional gender roles and expectations, but it is also a suggestion that Peter may have desires or tendencies that he is unwilling to acknowledge or confront.

Overall, these moments in the play suggest that non-heterosexual desires and experiences are not accepted or validated by the characters. Jerry's attempts to express his feelings or desires are met with rejection, fear, and marginalization. This reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is the norm, and that any deviation from it is seen as abnormal or deviant.

Jerry is marginalized not only by his socio-economic status, but also by his non-conformity to traditional gender norms. However, Jerry's sexuality in the story suggests that he challenges the power structures that reinforce gender norms. He is a recluse who is unable to communicate with society and cannot form lasting relationships or even interact with women, making it impossible for him to have a family like Peter.

He decides to take the bench of a middle-class man and fight for possession to challenge the power structure that has excluded him from social life. He attempts to commit suicide in Peter's presence, a symbol of power as a gendered citizen of society, to challenge the matrix that has doomed him to misery and isolation. He hopes that he will be seen and heard in the news after his death. This is a society where minorities are not allowed to have a voice, and if they want to be seen and heard, they must fight for it. He hopes that Peter will understand that everyone has the right to need something and that Jerry's gender identity has caused him to be an outcast in a society where traditional gender roles and family values are emphasized. Jerry tries to shake Peter out of his role and resist the unjust system that victimizes both him and Peter.

Conclusion

In "The Zoo Story," Edward Albee challenges the audience's expectations of male relationships by exploring a sphere of male interactions that is rarely examined. The play dramatizes the ways in which men engage in power struggles to forge their identities and connect with other men. These struggles

are characterized by both the desire to assert one's masculinity and the fear of emasculation.

Through the power struggle between Jerry and Peter, Albee critiques patriarchal norms and heterosexual values, and exposes the ideological cages that separate individuals in society. One powerful symbol in the play is Jerry's story about the dog, which represents the patriarchal, heterosexual masculine values that preserve power and domination.

Ultimately, Jerry and Peter are victims of the heteronormative, patriarchal capitalist discourses that shape society. Albee's play invites the audience to re-examine these norms and values, and to question the ways in which they impact human relationships and interactions

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