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The Representation of Animals in Selected Plays by Edward Albee

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Abstract

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Starting from the 90s, critics began to highlight the importance not only of creating ecological based drama, but also of rereading and reinterpreting plays from an ecocritical standpoint. Applying ecocriticism to theatre studies involves showing the political significance of elements such as landscape and animal bodies on stage. The burgeoning field of animal studies has allowed critics to examine the significance of the representation of animals in literary works. Animal studies main aim is to bring "the question of the animal" to the forefront of the field of criticism. It also aims at examining and questioning the ideologies and the various discourses that created the gap between human and nonhuman animals. It is concerned with how animals are represented both literary and socially.

The Zoo Story (1958) and *Seascape* (1975) are two plays written by Edward Albee. Although animal ubiquity cannot be missed in both texts, yet the main focus of critics was usually on the human protagonists. Approaching the two plays from animal studies and posthumanist perspectives reveals the ideological connotations upon which the distinction between human and nonhuman animals is constructed.

The thesis consists of a preface, three chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 entitled "Theatre and Animal Studies" introduces the relation between ecocriticism and theatre as well as the emergence of the field of critical animal studies. Chapter 2 "The Animal Gaze in *The Zoo Story*" deals with the gaze of the animal and how it defines the relationship between human and nonhuman animals. Chapter 3 "Breaking Boundaries in *Seascape*" shows how that the corporeal experience can free both human and nonhuman animals from the ideological constructions that defined their relation for centuries reminding us that humans themselves are inherently animals.

This thesis is not seeking to prove that Edward Albee is writing for the sake of animals' welfare but, it presents a new reading of plays where animals are represented in order to demonstrate how they form part of the political, ethical and ontological argument of human beings. The animal's agency in Albee's plays generates uncertainty and disrupts the foundations whereby human beings define and distinguish themselves. It demonstrates that animals represented in Edward Albee's plays help in raising some ethical questions about human's co-existence with other species. It also shows that there are inseparable links between human identity and that of an animal.

Keywords:

Animal studies – ecocriticism – posthumanism – Edward Albee – The Zoo Story – Seascape -
Human/nonhuman relations – animal representation – material ecocriticism

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Preface

This thesis attempts to examine and analyze the role and representation of animals and human/non-human relationships in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1958) and *Seascape* (1975). The study will use critical animal theory, a burgeoning field of criticism. Whereas animals play a prominent role in several modern plays, these roles are often overlooked by critics who regard them only as metaphorical figures. This thesis aims at exploring the relationship between animals and the ideologies of certain dramatic texts. It also aims at showing how animals are sexualized, gendered and even raced. Exploring the ways animals are represented in modern drama will bring marginalized animals and animals rights to the forefront. One significant theme is the nature/culture dualism - and the paralleling animal/human dualism - that is taking control over Western thought. Culturally, animals occupy an intermediate position where they act as a link between nature and culture. Therefore, new readings of human/animal relationships in theatre should be advocated. These should involve exploring the ideologies that pervade human representations and the discourse of animals in modern drama and animality in human life.

Edward Albee who was born on March 12, 1928 in Washington D.C. is considered the greatest living American playwright. Albee is a three-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama (1967, 1975 and 1994); he also won the Tony Award in 1963 and 2003, the National Medal of Arts in 1996 and the Special Tony Award in 2005. Up till his seventies, Albee kept writing challenging, award-winning plays.

In 1958, Albee wrote *The Zoo Story* which marks the beginning of his career. It premiered in German in September, 1959, at Berlin's Schiller Theater Werkstatt, in double bill with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. The play was a huge success and consequently it received an American premiere at the off-Broadway Provincetown Playhouse in January 1960,

again paired with *Krapp's Last Tape*. Since his 1959 breakthrough with *The Zoo Story* to his most recent Broadway success, *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* (2002) Edward Albee's career went through many ups and downs. However, he managed to write many controversial plays such as *The Sandbox* (1959), *The American Dream* (1960), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1961–1962) *Tiny Alice* (1964), *A Delicate Balance* (1966), *Seascape* (1974), *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1981), *The Play About the Baby* (1996), *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* (2002) and many others. His works are usually considered experimental and regarded as unsympathetic examinations of the dilemma of the modern man. His early works belong to Theatre of the Absurd to which he was the first playwright to give it an American twist.

The research notes a relationship between both primary texts which inspired this thesis, in the sense that it attempts to investigate the ecological issues concerning the development of animal representation in the plays of Edward Albee. This presence has, up till recently, been often neglected by critics who rather focused on the human experience and minimized the significance of the animals' presence as independent entities in these plays.

Animal studies, as an emerging field, asserts the interdisciplinary connections between various fields including literary studies, theatre and performance studies, philosophy, sociology, biology, anthropology, geography, history and psychology. This thesis brings together these fields in order to present a critical re-reading of the mentioned texts from a new perspective. The aim of this thesis is to attempt to fill the gap concerning the relation between theatre, ecological theory and the burgeoning field of animal studies. It applies ecocriticism and critical animal studies, posthumanism to study the representation and role of animals in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and *Seascape*. It analyzes the discourses that govern the representation of animals in modern drama. This thesis aims at proving that the representation of animal characters, whether

their presence is just articulated within a narrative structure or physically staged, is a key to understanding how they are used to construct our cultural norms. Discourses on animals and on environment have been detached from each other. This thesis also aims at considering and reviewing where both discourses intersect.

Whereas animals play an important role in Edward Albee's plays, these roles have often been interpreted from an anthropocentric point of view. On one level, it is true that Albee's plays focus on the human experience and issues such as alienation and lack of communication among human beings. However, the representation of animals in Albee's plays is unconventional in many ways. In his plays, human characters seem to rely on the animal "Other" in order to define themselves.

The primary aim of this thesis is to propose a new reading strategy when analyzing *The Zoo Story* and *Seascape*. In order to examine the ecological geography and animal representation in the two plays, a posthumanist approach that makes use of Foucault's theories of space and power and knowledge, Bakhtin's Carnavalesque and the subversion and liberation of dominant assumptions and hierarchies, Derrida's deconstruction of the figure of human, Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of becoming animal will be used. Moreover, approaching language from both a philosophical as well as a scientific perspective should allow us to investigate the representation of animals in *The Zoo Story* and *Seascape*.

The thesis consists of a preface, three chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. Chapter 1 entitled "Theatre and Animal Studies", introduces the relation between ecocriticism and theatre as well as the emergence of the field of critical animal studies and how it developed from being a movement that advocated animal rights through philosophers like Peter Singer and Tom Regan to a more radical critical field through theorists like Jacques Derrida, Stacy Alaimo, Donna

Haraway, and Cary Wolfe who approach the issue from the standpoint of animal studies and a posthumanist perspective that assert the subjectivity of animals. Chapter 2, “The Animal Gaze in *The Zoo Story*”, deals with the gaze of the animal and how it defines the relationship between human and nonhuman animals. The nature of this gaze is influenced by the ecological forces of the spaces occupied by human and nonhuman animals. Finally, Chapter 3 “Breaking Boundaries in *Seascape*”, shows that many of the boundaries drawn between human and nonhuman animals can be broken by reviewing the old anthropocentric fundamentals upon which the concept of human is built. It also examines how the corporeal experience can free both human and nonhuman animals from the ideological constructions that defined their relation for centuries reminding us that humans themselves are inherently animals.

The contribution of this thesis is to demonstrate that animals represented in Edward Albee’s plays have an important role in raising some ethical questions about human's co-existence with other species. There are inseparable links between human identity and that of animals. Humans' perception of themselves should be in relation to the animal "Other". Albee is not just concerned with human relations but links human relations to their relation with other species. This can be explored by foregrounding nature and studying the non-human environment in *The Zoo Story* and *Seascape*.

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Chapter I

Animal Studies and Theater

Awareness of ecological crisis emerged long after the catastrophic disaster of the Dust Bowl¹ in the 30s through people like Aldo Leopold, Leo Marx and Rachel Carson. They started to realize that if people are still engaged in wrong practices towards the environment somewhere, the catastrophic results will not be confined to a certain place or species on the planet.

In the late forties, Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic," in his *A Sand County Almanac*, began to question the fixed notions of human beings who thought of the non-human world as a utility that serves their interests whether economically or psychologically. Richard Knight believes that Leopold drew attention to the fact that humans' relation to nature is governed by their economic interests without any moral or legal commitment that should regulate this relation. He criticized all the values that were laid upon nature in confining its value to either materialistic or visual consumption (3-5).

Since the sixties, the different social movements have affected the various discourses of the critical theory and equally affected ecocriticism though it was not as popular as studies like feminism and post-colonialism. Although ecocriticism is also concerned with an oppressed "Other," yet the fact that this other is a voiceless "non-human" being deprived it from being given much attention. The flame of the contemporary environmental movement was sparked by Rachel Carson in the early 1960s. In her *Silent Spring*, she highlighted the destructing effects of pesticide and herbicides as "nonselective chemicals that have the power to kill every insect" (8).

A growing awareness to the ecological problems demonstrated that they are not merely social problems, but also political and scientific problematic subjects that need to be investigated from several perspectives. Thus, like other political and social movements, environmental

concerns found their way to literary studies during the 70s although this was done through individual efforts under diverse headings like pastoralism, regionalism or American studies. During the 80s and the 90s, scholars' endeavors to make the field of environmental literary studies a powerful branch in the academic institution were successful. Ecocriticism aims at deconstructing the dualism between nature and culture. Unlike other political movements that limit the "world" to the social realm, ecocriticism aims at engaging human with the greater world that is "the entire ecosphere"(Glotfelty xv-xxi).

Critics differ in attributing the exploitation of nature to different eras or cultural practices. Nevertheless, none could argue about the interrelation between political and ecological issues. Our ill practices and habits towards the natural world are no doubt a collective result of political, religious, theological and economic grand narratives. Gabriel Egan refers to the radical exploitation of nature and earth resources that coincided with the Industrial Revolution and the role it played in transforming the ideology of people towards nature (22).

More radical ecocritics call for a change that aims at reforming the actions and processes of the political and economic institutions of the society. They believe that cultural notions and the discourse that reinforces the ideology of anthropocentrism should be deconstructed. Moreover, ecocritics aim at superseding such an anthropocentric attitude with biocentrism that would instead replace the human exploitation of nature with more appreciation of the fundamental importance and worth of nature and the other than *Homo sapiens* species. Thus, ecocriticism aims at examining the environment and the way it is represented in literature from an interdisciplinary perspective that engages literature with science, politics and morality (Clark 2-8).

Ecocriticism has often been trivialized by those who believe that issues that threaten the social and political welfare of human beings are more important. This, of course, is refuted as ecocriticism engages itself in social concerns by means of “developing insights of earlier critical movements, ecofeminists, social ecologists and environmental justice advocates seek a synthesis of environmental and social concerns” (Garrard 3). In fact, the field of humanities seems to have been alienated from science to a large extent for a long time. However, in engaging ecology and humanities, ecocriticism marks a change in this critical attitude (Egan 33).

This means that ecocriticism is studying literature from an ecopolitical stance. However, ecocriticism is not limited to reading works that are written about nature. Like other kinds of political criticism, ecocriticism is concerned with “all that happens in literary culture that tends to create or sustain the political, social, and cultural conditions that ecopolitics seeks to change” (Egan 34). Rereading literary works with the aim of uncovering ecological ideologies aims at proving that literary works, social practices and political inclinations are all integral.

Though the field of ecocriticism had been explored since the 70s, much of the attention had been given to the genres of novel and poetry while theater had been ignored to a large extent. Despite remarkable progress in the field of ecocriticism during the past three decades, applying the ecological discourse to theater studies has not been given the same attention. The reason behind this, Theresa May argues, is that the existing definition of ecocriticism as a theory is incomplete since it often disregards the political connotation implied in it. Ecocriticism, like feminism and postcolonialism, is filled with power relations that should be part of its definition. Ecocriticism, according to Theresa May, is “a critical (discursive) perspective” based on the scientific field of ecology and at the same time is connected to various cultural performances, not

only those of literary nature, but also ones that form parts of our daily lives (“Beyond Bambi” 97).

In the 1994 issue of *Theater*, Erika Munk stated that “our playwrights’ silence on the environment as a political issue and our critics’ neglect of the ecological implications of theatrical form are rather astonishing” (5). In the same issue, Una Chaudhuri drew attention to the relation between ecocriticism and theater. Speaking of the 19th century theater, she contends that theater has mainly supported the humanist discourse on the cost of the natural world. As part of the cultural activities of the society, theater tended to ignore nature and the non-human and to focus on the human conflicts within a complicated social and political web. Humanism is mainly founded on the superiority of man and his excellence in inventing complex machines that prove his intelligence and progress. This concept is based on the ability to conquer nature and all that is non-human. Chaudhuri posits that the nineteenth century theater mainly adopted the “anti-ecological” ideology of humanism in theater through naturalism, and later, through realism. The nonhuman world has been always part of drama and theater. Nevertheless, the images of nature existing in modern drama has been functioning as a rhetorical or a literary device. Nature has been concealed by being regarded as metaphor (“There Must Be a Lot of Fish” 24-5). Una Chaudhuri believes that “ecology as metaphor, is so integral a feature of the aesthetic of modern realist-humanist drama that, paradoxically, its implications for a possible ecological theater are easy to miss. Its very ubiquity renders it invisible” (24). In order to be able to involve theater studies in ecological issues, both playwrights and critics should take part in the process.

Theater is an effective cultural and communal institution that should be part of the ecological problem. Involving theater in ecological issues cannot just be achieved by focusing on environmental issues or establishing an “eco-canon” in contemporary plays, but also by the re-

estimation of the role of nature in modern plays in order to “recognize its presence, acknowledge its radical otherness” (24). Theresa May also calls on theater scholars to “flesh out the way in which the human imagination participates in, and is integral to, our ecological “situatedness”” (“Beyond Bambi” 95). May believes that stories can act as a powerful ideological force that has the ability to destruct, as much as the ability to protect, ecology in order to achieve its aims. Ecological or environmental disasters were not just the result of action, but the result of certain ideologies embedded in our culture through our stories. Thus, she calls for “a vigorous, unabashedly material-ecological discourse in theater studies, one that recognizes the ecological roots and implications of language, representation, systems of signification, and master narratives” (96). Similarly, Erika Munk has highlighted the importance not only of working on creating ecological based drama, but also of presenting an innovative ecocritical reading that offers a reinterpretation of plays that have been allegedly focused on only human issues (5-6).

Critics and historians have to raise the audience’s awareness towards the ecological discourse that is being concealed from them due to the deeply fixed humanist ideology that dominates their conscious (May “Earth Matters” 85). Likewise, Downing Cless accuses the American theater of being “stuck mainly in a humanistic antiecological mode” (79) and she refers to the consuming economic system that exploits the natural resources and causes the ecological system to deteriorate. For her, both ecology and economy should be brought to the theater where the relation between them is exposed and questioned (79-80).

The necessity of performing the two tasks, founding an eco-canon together with the rereading of the depiction of nature on stage, are fundamental to linking or applying ecocriticism to theater studies. Chaudhuri believes that “the ecological crisis is a crisis of values. Ecological

victory will require a transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present. And in this the arts and humanities-including the theater- must play a role” (“There Must Be a Lot of Fish” 25). Approaching theater studies from an ecological perspective not only contributes to raising awareness to ecological issues, but also highlights the intersection of different forms of discrimination like that of gender, race and even class. Any attempt to separate ecology from its political aspects means constraining it, May believes that:

All constructions of “nature” are ideological.... Ecocriticism should not be limited to literature, and indeed, the inclusion of theatre and performance within its discourse will bring new and important issues to light. Precisely because theatre is both a living art form and a site wherein bodies, communities, politics, commerce, and imaginative possibilities intersect in a material way, ecocriticism in theatre will engage the debates occurring around us. (“Beyond Bambi” 97)

Modern plays that usually focus on man and his problems and social life, enforce the gap between human and nature. Playwrights together with critics regard nature as merely tropes and natural landscapes as only settings that serve the human characters of the play. Theater is one of the forms of cultural representation in the community and therefore it should be subject to the critical review from an ecological perspective (95). If re-evaluated from an ecological point of view, this will contribute to raising the ecological consciousness. Drama is an exceptional genre; it joins text to performance, links words to action, and transforms the place and directions to a living place within a certain space. May notes that “Theatre studies is positioned opportunistically between the literary and the performative, and as such can function as a bridge between discourses” (96). As a cultural institution, theater has for a long time reinforced anthropocentrism, where every image or depiction of nature whether of a landscape or a