

# Anthropocentric Disturbance and Devastation in Edward Albee's *The Goat*

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## Abstract

Edward Albee is one of the most prestigious contemporary American playwrights whose works tend to be engrossing for their avant garde expressions of the postmodern plight. Compared with his other works, *The Goat or Who is Sylvia* (2002), premiering at the turn of the millennium, pays relatively more attention to human-non-human relationship instead of interactions within the human community. Given the inadequacy of interdisciplinary studies on the play, this paper takes the philosophy of ecological ethics as the theoretical framework and juxtaposes Martin's disturbance and Stevie's devastation to nature, especially to the innocent goat, which share the same essence of anthropocentric exploitation, and which can lead to tragic consequences both for nature and for human-beings. Hopefully, this study can not only shed some light on the contemporary crisis of the coexistence between nature and humanity, but provide some reference for subsequent scholars to conduct more diversified cross-field studies of Albee.

**Keywords:** *The Goat or Who is Sylvia*, Edward Albee, anthropocentrism, ecological ethics

## 1. Introduction

Awarded the Pulitzer Prize three times, Edward Albee is one of the "Big Four" classic American playwrights, including Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller. In 2002, a new avant garde play by Edward Albee has appeared on Broadway for the first time since his last play in 1986, which features zoophilia and even bestiality, and which he warns is bound to be the most controversial premiere of the season. Yet it turns out that *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* (*The Goat* for short) nearly pulls off the triple crown of American literary honors for drama. It receives the Tony Award for Best Drama of the 2002–2003 season and the 2002 Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, and manages to become one of three finalists for the Pulitzer Prize.

*The Goat* is a three-act play, portraying two days in the lives of the Gray family. Martin Gray, the father and a renowned architect, appears to have a wonderful relationship with his long-married wife Stevie who originally perceives merely a joke Martin's confession of falling in love with a goat. Nevertheless, Ross Tuttle, Martin's best friend and a noted television journalist who arrives to interview him on his latest achievements, finds out the truth that Martin has actually established a romantic relationship and had coitus with a goat whom he calls "Sylvia". Stevie then receives Ross's letter detailing the specifics of Martin's affair with Sylvia and ultimately storms out. She leaves the house threatening, "You have brought me down, and, Christ!, I'll bring you down with me!" Finally, the play ends as Stevie reenters, dragging the carcass of the innocent Sylvia whom she has cruelly slain (Albee, 2003, p. 137).

## 2. Literature Review

Previous studies of *The Goat* have shown a relatively preliminary yet rapidly flourishing trend, concentrating mainly on the theme, genre, and narrative strategy of the play. In terms of cultural motifs, Medoff (2003) illustrates that Sylvia can be the symbol of sexual appetite which is a prominent theme of existential theatre; Weitz (2009) explores the play as a tool to represent the outer boundaries of the concepts of sex and love, civilization and barbarism; Narnhofer (2012) notes that the play explores the themes of broken identities, and the danger of routines and conventions; Ishida (2013) regards that *The Goat* makes self-pronounced "open-minded" people stop and think by providing ultimate foreignness—interspecific sex; Fatimah (2014) analyzes the political thoughts behind the queerness of Martin as a bestialist to normalize the political notions of alleviating

discrimination and intolerance in the society; Lei Yu (2022) claims that the play reflects a post-humanist idea that modern humanity is doomed to an isolated and distorted state if they draw a strict line between themselves and the animals; while Naseef (2023) argues that in *The Goat* Albee critiqued the new material condition and the deviation behaviors that reigned in American society during his time, and appealed for devotion to human interactions (especially within the family).

When it comes to the genre of the play, both Medoff (2003) and Weitz (2009) mention that it is the textual representation of the intersection of two distinct forms of comedy and tragedy; Rád (2009) utilizes Victor Turner's and René Girard's anthropological theories of ritual and drama, merging them with terms, concepts, and assertions of subject theories to show how the protagonists experience liminality as a loss of their positions within the discursive practices of the familial, social, and linguistic structures they belong to, and thus directs readers' attention towards the elements and conventions of the tragedy that *The Goat* not only displays but also scrutinizes, analyzes, and subverts; Robinson (2011) claims that this play plunges headlong into revolutionary tragedy out of a desperate need to break the deadlock of liberal tragedy, and it does not disguise the costs to domestic life and political self-knowledge of this upheaval; Lucas (2016) argues that this play marks a shift in tragedy's purview, from relations between men to those between humankind and nature; Wagoner (2017) investigates how Albee uses the idea of definition as an asymptotic limit to explore the concept of tragedy as a genre; Sofer (2017) maintains that *The Goat* characterizes tragedy as the unmaking of a world through utterance, irrespective of the (supposed) acts that precede it; Zhang Lianqiao (2018) believes that this play reflects other paradoxes besides the paradox of identity, such as the paradox of emotion, the paradox of action, the paradox of time and space, and the paradox of language, which broaden the scope of the study of paradox in Western tragedy.

As for narrative approaches, Wan Jin (2019) suggests that through unnatural narrative, the author takes the hero's unspeakable secret as an event, thereby examining the essential motives of tragedy as well as presenting a new conflict of modern drama. Last but not least, it is equally worth noting that the only comparative study is conducted by Zhang Lin and Guo Jide (2009) on Albee's ideas of Ecological Ethics in *Seascape* and *The Goat*, which illuminates that both plays advocates that man's inner nature should return to the nature, that man should respect the animals, and that a man's natural and social attributes should be united in harmony.

Granted, all these studies have excavated the opulent undercurrents of *The Goat*, laying solid foundation for subsequent interpretations, but overall there is deficiency in interdisciplinary research with quite patently a limited number of papers on *The Goat* compared with Albee's other plays such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Also, the perspectives of thematic research sometimes overlap and are largely anthropocentric. Standing at arm's length from bestiality, what Albee himself has called "one of the few remaining taboos" in our culture, the abnormality of which tends to cause discomfort and even disgust, researchers mostly fail to thoroughly reveal the anthropocentric attribute of Martin (Gainor, 2005, p. 204). Furthermore, although some scholars have looked into the pathological relationship between humanity and nature in the play, they have not juxtaposed Martin's and Stevie's conducts which share the same essence of human exceptionalism.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Under these circumstances, this study attempts to employ the philosophy of ecological ethics as the theoretical framework for discussion and argue that Martin's disturbance and Stevie's devastation to nature, especially to the innocent goat, are two vivid manifestations of anthropocentric exploitation in the capitalist society which are destined to cause tragic results not only for nature, in particular for the non-human animal, but for human-beings, especially for the family, as a whole. Hopefully, this study could dig deeper into the eco-humanistic value of the play and shed some light on the contemporary crisis of the coexistence between nature and humanity.

### 4. Discussion

#### 4.1 Martin's Anthropocentric Disturbance

Martin turns to nature for a reason. It can be seen in the opening act that Martin has been deeply traumatized by the depressing and tedious city life. His memory is degraded and his senses are numbed by the complex and hypocritical human interaction in which he is constantly entangled. "Anything; nothing; can't remember a thing. This morning—so far!—I couldn't remember where I'd put the new head for the razor; I couldn't recall Ross's son's name—still can't; two cards in my jacket make no sense to me whatever, and I'm not sure I know why I came in here... (Shakes his head, mock concern) Every sense going! Taste next! Touch; hearing. Hah! Hearing!" Between the lines, Martin reveals a strong sense of revulsion and panic at the frequent and meaningless social interactions of modern society (Albee, 2003, pp. 2–3). What is more, shackled by his social status as a celebrated architect, Martin is embarrassed and unhappy to be required to put on his "public face" (Albee, 2003, p. 28)

when taking the interview which overly praises the pinnacle of his success, while his wife Stevie has never been sensitive enough to comprehend the suffering of shooting for her poor husband and simply busy brightening up the corner with flowers to “make the cameras happy” (Albee, 2003, p. 3). These details suggest that Martin is bound by the rigid rules of the “information society” and meanwhile does not receive enough understanding in his marital life (Webster, 2003, p. 1).

All these oppression and isolation Martin suffers in the city leads him to develop a fondness for nature where he could find spiritual solace in its purity and simplicity. However, Martin’s affection for nature is not in line with what Kant calls a “non-utilitarian aesthetic judgement” (2012, p. 28), as he has perceived that he can definitely benefit from living in a relatively natural environment and decided to “have a real country place—a farm beyond the suburbs” which he “deserves”. And he has already “found a wonderful place ... and a lot of land.” Here it is implied that Martin is apt to treat nature as a resource to be appropriated to serve his needs (Albee, 2003, pp. 56–57). Such anthropocentric notion leads to an interesting phenomenon in the play that every time Martin portrays the natural scenario he adores from his own perspective, it seems that the nature has been occupied, managed and even harvested by man—“New-mown hay, fella! The smell a country; the smell a apples! (Normal tone again) The roadside stands, with corn and other stuff piled high, and baskets full of other things—beans and tomatoes and those great white peaches you only get late summer ...” (Albee, 2003, p. 58)

Paradoxically and ironically, while Martin is determined to escape from the more corrosive city to the less corrosive countryside, he is chosen to design the “World City”, the two-hundred-billion-dollar dream city of the future with a pertinent name indicating humanity’s will to be sovereign of the whole world, financed by U.S. electronics technology, and set to rise in the wheatfields of the Middle West; and he indifferently agrees with Ross’s statement during their interview that it is amazing and thrilling to be chosen (Albee, 2003, pp. 29–30). It is conceivable that the construction of the Midwest would result in a holocaust of the natural species that inhabit the region, with large areas of farms poured into concrete amidst the dust and smoke from the heavy machinery. Under the inertia of industrial civilization and the power of capital, this relatively tranquil natural territory becomes the prey of humankind who is obsessed with excessive expansion, and Martin becomes the hunter who plans how the prey will be dismembered. At this point, he has transformed from a victim of the hermetically sealed urban life into a potential facilitator to a new wave of urban construction at the expense of nature.

Although it is not written in the play that Martin actually sets out to design the World City, in conjunction with his vision of possessing a country farm above, Martin’s role of the future architect of the World City can be interpreted as the hint deliberately dropped by Albee, from which readers can extrapolate that Martin is extremely familiar with and accustomed to the barbaric logic of human-beings imposing their will on nature and forcibly transforming it to suit their own interests.

Later in the play, Martin’s anthropocentric disturbance of nature is most vividly and thoroughly illustrated in his act of bestiality. Although Martin passionately recalls that he and Sylvia, the goat, instantaneously “love and want each other very much” so that he “has to have her” (Albee, 2003, p. 128), it is crystal clear that Martin’s self-assumed “Sylvia’s wanting” and “loving” merely comes from his own “empathy”, a term coined by Lipps which refers to the process of fusing natural perceptual representation and subjective sentiments by injecting the subject’s own feelings and thoughts into the object and dyeing it with subjective hues (Coplan, 2014, p. 36). Such empathic assumption makes Martin interpret expansively the expression of the goat that for him seems “so pure, so trusting so innocent and so guileless”, and feels as if there is “a connection, a communication, an epiphany”, and a mutual understanding “so intense, so natural” between Sylvia and him (Albee, 2003, pp. 121–123). Yet as a matter of fact, all of these are nothing more than Martin’s fantasy, as he projects some of his most desired qualities onto the goat, fulfills his deepest longings by taking it, and then rationalizes this one-sided possession into an “unimaginable love” between the two parties (Albee, 2003, p. 107).

The underlying essence of Martin’s empathy is his merciless intrusion of the human “language system” and behind it a flood of human implicative notions into the animal’s “species-specific frame of behavioral meaning”, which is fundamentally based on human subjective idealism (Bourke, 2020, p. 124). Non-human animals are unlikely to possess the cognitive understanding of certain acts for humans. What human participants think is sexually suggestive might not be so for the animals involved. In ordinary parlance, what Martin regards as robust evidence of the approval of the goat actually cannot prove anything—such as its “coming toward” him, “slipping its face between his hands”, “bringing nose to his” and “nuzzling” with “sweet, warm breath” (Albee, 2003, p. 124). It is so easy to “mistake” consent when power intrudes, but sexual consent should never be assumed, and as is stated by the well-known eco-ethicist Singer in his *Animal Liberation*, if certain actions are immoral for women, they are equally immoral for animals (2004, p. 7). Therefore, what Martin has done to the goat is a particularly harrowing form of violence: rape.

Now it is obvious that the greatest flaw of Martin lies in his denial of the objectivity of the empathized object's own system of behavioral meaning, which embodies his anthropocentric ideology of placing other living beings in an unequal position below humanity. While in a sense releasing the accumulated stresses of urban life and easing the trauma he suffers from human relationships via his intercourse with the goat, Martin transfers and imposes what he wants to vent onto the goat, turns the goat into a passive recipient of pressure just like himself in the social environment of the city, factually causing anthropocentric disturbance and damage to the objective existence of nature. In Stevie's words, Martin "takes advantage of this creature"; he "rapes this animal and convinces himself that it has to do with love" (Albee, 2003, p. 132).

Naturally, the goat, as the weaker party, is tragically left to passively receive Martin's aesthetic, emotional and even desirous instillations and is subjected to harm disguised as love. Such is the startlingly appalling consequence of Martin's anthropocentric conduct that the non-human animal as the natural object has been controlled, manipulated, and exploited by man. As one of the most prominent sociologists working on human-non-human relationships, Piers Beirne further emphasizes in a series of his highly influential essays published in the 1990s and early 2000s that bestiality, which almost always involves coercion, is a destruction of the animal's nature as well as a desecration of the animal's free will. Like Ishida says, *The Goat* challenges our tolerance and open-mindedness, but never promotes bestiality, and "some sort of defense mechanism must be working here to create the line between 'acceptable queer' and 'unacceptable queer'" (2013, p. 62).

From Martin's interspecies sexual assault on the goat under the name of love, Albee seems to charge humanity of its poor track record in expressing love for other creatures and nature. We admire exotic wildlife while destroying its habitats. We are distressed by the unkind treatment of animals but regulate their slaughter within abattoirs. We can always be entertained by the idyllic pastures while our lifestyles are "wholly dependent upon farming animals", which involves practices of extraordinary cruelty (Bourke, 2020, p. 9). No wonder the philosopher Jacques Derrida invents a term to describe human-animal relationships: "carno-phallogocentrism". In other words, our treatment of animals is based on privileging traits of man ("phallo") and the possession of language ('logos'); it involves a willingness to relentlessly take other sentient beings ("carno") (1990, p. 920).

Yet the goat is not the only innocent one who has to face the tragic outcomes of Martin's anthropocentric disturbance. Martin's family also suffered a huge adverse effect. For the wife Stevie, to whom Martin breaks his vows, her carefully managed matrimony has been turned into complete chaos.

STEVIE

My mother told me—"Your father and I have the best marriage anyone could possibly have," she said to me, over and over. "Be sure you do, too."

MARTIN

Stevie, I ...

STEVIE

"Be careful who you marry," she said to me. And I was. I fell in love with you? No ... I rose into love with you and have—what—cherished? you, all these years, been proud of all you've done, been happy with our ... funny son, been ... well, happy. I guess that's the word. No, I don't guess; I know. (Begins to cry) I've been happy. (More) Look at me, Mother; I've married the man I loved (more) and I've been ... so ... happy.

(Albee, 2003, p. 115)

Stevie has heard Martin tell her how much he loves her, how he has never even wanted another woman, how they have been a more perfect marriage than chance would even allow. They have "a straight line through life, right all the way to dying, but that's OK because it's a good line ..." so long as they "don't screw up" (Albee, 2003, p. 133). But lamentably, Martin has screwed it up.

And when it comes to their son, Billy, who originally has a homosexual inclination, Martin's "fence jumping"—admitting his affair with the goat makes him feel more vague and uncertain about the ethical and moral norms of human emotion than ever (Bourke, 2020, p. 93). As Billy explains ruefully to Ross, "I get confused ... sex and love; loving and ... I probably do want to sleep with him. I want to sleep with everyone" (Albee, 2003, p. 158). Such blurring of ethical rules of the human society finally leads to the transformation of the meaning of "love" in Billy's mind "from a filial affection to an erotic connection" (Wagoner, 2017, p. 311), which is fundamentally catastrophic.

I love the man ... when he's not giving it to a goat! I love this man! I love him! (Drops whatever he's

holding, moves to MARTIN, arms out) I love him! (Wraps his arms around MARTIN, who doesn't know what to do. Starts kissing MARTIN on the hands, then on the neck, crying the while. Then it turns—or does it?—and he kisses MARTIN full on the mouth—a deep, sobbing, sexual kiss. ROSS has entered, stands watching. MARTIN tries to disengage from BILLY, but BILLY moans, holds on. Finally MARTIN shoves him away. BILLY stands there, still sobbing, arms around nothing.) (Albee, 2003, p. 155)

Billy's frantic words and movement, culminating in the "deep, sobbing, sexual kiss" with his father, signals together with Martin, his cross over into the world of sexual abandon. At this point, we see as if there is a real pit "so deep!, so wide!, so ... HUGE! ... underneath the house, down in the cellar" as is imagined by Billy with grief, and three members of the shattered family all fall in and "never ... be ... able ... to ... climb ... out ... again"—no matter how much they want to, how hard they try (Albee, 2003, pp. 154–155). And at the bottom of this tragic pit lies still the essential issue that has wrecked the family, the father's affair with a goat.

#### 4.2 Stevie's Anthropocentric Devastation

From the above analysis, it is evident that the so-called Sylvia that Martin loves is in reality his conceived, pure and understanding mistress, while the goat is merely the animal carrier of his ideal lover, a forced object of empathy and a victim of sexual abuse. Nevertheless, as the enraged wife, Stevie does not care a bit about the essence of Martin's bestiality or whether the goat is innocent or not. The only thing she is overwhelmed with is the fact that her husband has went to bed together with a goat, a completely inferior animal for her that should by no means be involved in any sort of romantic or erotic interaction with human, pushing her to an embarrassingly equal position with a non-human animal. Such equation is "horrible" for Stevie that so radically upsets the "traditional cosmic order" or what E. M. W. Tillyard has called "the Great Chain of Being" (1959, p. 76). Sharing her husband's ideology of human exceptionalism, Stevie thereby is infuriated by Martin's claim:

MARTIN

(Hopeless) I love you. (Pause) And I love her. (Pause) And there it is.

(STEVIE howls three times, slowly, deliberately; a combination of rage and hurt)

(Albee, 2003, p. 123)

It is worth noting that Stevie's complete inadmissibility of bestiality is not out of her concern for the dignity of the animal, but rather out of her conviction that bestiality implies animals' equal status with humanity, which is totally unacceptable to her, as is manifested in her later furiously stopping Martin from calling the goat "her". As Peter Morriss argues, bestiality is regarded by many people as distasteful "not because it degrades animals, but because it upgrades them—it treats them as something better than they are" (1997, p. 260). He observes that these people, like Stevie, overlook the imbalanced power relationship between the vulnerable non-human animal and the arbitrary man, and suppose that interspecies sexual intercourse is carried out between two creatures of approximately equal standing. Thus, for a human to have sexual intercourse with an animal implies that it is of equal standing to not only the human but his or her spouse. It denies a hierarchy in which animals are always lower than humans. So "it blurs, or denies, boundaries, particularly the boundary between the human and the animal" (266). Feeling extremely humiliated and polluted, Stevie then brings Martin to trial in a hard and slow tone:

You've screwed up everything because you've broken something and it can't be fixed! Fall out of love with me? Fine! No, not fine, but that can be fixed ... time ... whatever! But tell me you love me and an animal—both of us!—equally? The same way? That you go from my bed—our bed ... (aside-ish) it's amazing, you know, how good we are, still, how we please each other and ourselves so ... fully, so ... fresh each time ... (aside over) ... you go from our bed, wash your dick, get in your car and go to her, and do with her what I cannot imagine myself imagining? Or—worse! ... that you've come from her, to my bed!? To our bed!? ... and you do with me what I can imagine ... love ... want you for!?

(Albee, 2003, p. 134)

Sick of her husband putting herself and the goat on an equal footing, Stevie decides to exercise her human initiative and privilege to slay the animal whose very existence has threatened her, and simultaneously exploit the dead goat to take revenge on her husband who has juxtaposed her with an animal. Most intriguingly, in the play Stevie once warns Martin dispassionately that she is going to kill him but ultimately the innocent goat has become the scape-goat and died for Martin. This is conceivably because the cost of killing an animal in an anthropocentric society is much lower than that of killing a human being, and this leads to a situation where a human being can basically harm or even slaughter an animal without hesitation, especially if that animal is a defenseless goat that is often served on the dinner table.

With Stevie dragging the goat's corpse onto the stage like a "brute beast" in the final scene (Naseef, 2023, p. 36), the heartbroken Martin in a sense acknowledges the goat's innocence, and his own empathy and over-interpretation of the goat—the goat does not actually love him. For John Kuhn, it is Sylvia's corpse that "forces Martin to face the full consequences of his act" (2004, p. 23). However, Stevie at this point seizes on Martin's earlier statement that the goat loves Martin back as a pretext for her own ruthless slaughter of innocent animal, shifting her guilt onto the dead goat:

MARTIN

(Crying) What did she do!? What did she ever do!? (To STEVIE) I ask you: what did she ever do!?

STEVIE

(Pause; quietly) She loved you ... you say. As much as I do.

(Albee, 2003, p. 169)

Throughout the play the goat is deprived of a voice as it is in real life; Albee does not mention the harm it has suffered, only that it is killed by Stevie at the end, and everything else about the goat is portrayed from a human perspective. Compared with Martin's bestiality, Stevie's eventual sadistic slaying of the non-human animal for her own sake is a more ubiquitous symptom of anthropocentrism that has characterized the history of capitalist society, which deserves our attention. In contemporary Western culture, however, the act of butchering an animal holds much less "shock value" than bestiality (Gainor, 2005, p. 214), as a highly developed consumerist society has led us to normally see animals as commodity subordinate to people to be used, traded and even killed at will.

Given humans' long record of exploiting animals, it can be found that sexual assault is only one of many ways we harm animals. Those who are neither vegetarian nor vegan may want to think about why discussing the sexual abuse of animals is so upsetting, especially when we consider all the other terrible things many people do to them. Animals are slaughtered; their skin is fashioned into handbags; their flesh is cooked and eaten. Violence is intrinsic to human-animal interactions. Yet the sexual part of violence is nevertheless particularly revolting to people, even to carnivorous leather fetishists.

What I would like to argue is that despite the often contentious debate between the zoophilic and non-zoophilic communities over the legitimacy of bestiality, they both inherently tend to treat animals in a callously anthropocentric manner based on an unequal power relationship, as is demonstrated in Martin's disturbance and Stevie's devastation to the goat. Actually, it "annoys the zoos" that non-zoos routinely exploit animals and are unconcerned by the fact that animals are unable to verbalize their protest, yet at the same time obsessively demand that zoos obtain spoken consent when talking about sexual relations (Bourke, 2020, p. 97).

Kant believes that humans possess an inherent dignity. I suggest that non-human animals do as well. Indeed, non-human animals possess inviolable rights to have their interests and preferences respected. They do not exist to serve human ends. Their lives matter to them, as ours do to us. If the seemingly righteous anthropocentric mutilation and murder of animals performed not only in the play but in our very real world are neglected and unbridled, they will lead to serious ecological consequences that will eventually devour humanity itself.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, in *The Goat*, Martin's disturbance and Stevie's devastation to nature, especially to the vulnerable goat, are two archetypal manifestations of contemporary anthropocentric exploitation inflicted by humans on non-human animals, which will take a heavy toll not only on nature but on the living of humans.

With the play's parenthetical comment "Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy", Albee seems to intentionally pivot the "theoretical horizon" of tragedy away from "relationships between men" toward a relationship between humankind and the other-than-human (Gainor, 2005, p. 214). The tragic experience of the innocent goat—being raped by Martin in the name of love and then killed by Stevie in the name of vengeance, makes the play undoubtedly a goat song of the modern era, advocating that people should honor the dignity of other species, protect them from humiliation, excessive exploitation, and interference, and thereby coexist with them harmoniously. In Albee's own words, this play can hopefully make people "think afresh about the rational direction of the relationship between man and nature" (Albee, 2009, p. 56).

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