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**“TIME MAGAZINE IS NOT FOR BLOCKHEADS:” THE AMERICAN ADAM’S  
VACILLATION BETWEEN CULTURAL HOMOGENEITY AND HETEROGENEITY IN  
EDWARD ALBEE’S *THE ZOO STORY***

## **Abstract**

The present paper studies the way media shapes public opinion and aims at creating certain cultural homogeneity in Edward Albee’s *Zoo Story* (1958). The play is based on a dialogue between two ideologically different characters who do not display the same attitude concerning contemporary culture. Unlike Peter who adheres to cultural conformity, Jerry has a non-conformist attitude as he seeks for subverting contemporary cultural norms. Media is one of the important means that contribute to shape the behavior of Peter and his family. In this context, he reveals that his family has two televisions in the same house and Jerry is implicitly and ironically considering the family as a victim of consumerism. In fact, Jerry’s family is a fine example of the moral and spiritual loss of some American citizens who are easily manipulated and who blindly obey contemporary culture without displaying any critical attitude. In this way, Albee stresses the role of media in serving the capitalist system and in turning the human being into a caged animal. While Albee represents a pessimistic view about the role of cultural conformity in entombing the American Adam and in affecting his faculty of thinking, he offers a glimpse of hope at the final scene. Through the characterization of Jerry, the modern playwright calls for rethinking the role of media and for giving larger space to cultural diversity instead of having a structured way of thinking.

**Keywords:** Church; Contemporay Culture; Heterogeneity; Homogeneity; Interior Monologues; Media.

## **1. Introduction**

Before starting with the role of media in establishing cultural homogeneity in Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story*, it is pertinent to deal with the historical context of the play and to study the role of media in shaping public opinion during the nineteen fifties. This period witnessed the dominance of audio-visual media because of the development of color television. The sharp increase shows that television is starting to capture the attention of a massive number of American citizens and it is becoming influential as it contributes to impose certain sameness at the level of some American families’ ways of life. TV shows used to celebrate the image of the ideal and traditional family which is composed of a couple that respects the traditional roles assigned to men and women. The stereotype of the nuclear and perfect family was further sustained by “various comedy TV serials [which] fostered the idea that the American life style made people happy, [but] the real world did not reflect these idealistic family portraits” (Bailey, 1981, P 34). The gap between the myth of the ideal family and the reality of family disharmony proves the role of TV programs in shaping public opinion and giving an illusory and bright image about the American family. This idea will be developed in the analytical part by examining the solitude of Jerry and the role of media in reconstructing Jerry’s passive family whose members live apart. Stylistic, dramatic and thematic elements will be deployed to decipher the role of media in shaping public opinion.

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## 2. American Media and the Ideology of McCarthyism

The role of media in shaping public opinion can be exemplified through the personality of Senator Joseph McCarthy who “directed his attack against the press itself, calling it a major instrument of the communist conspiracy” (Bayley, 2008, p 8). Television is another effective means of manipulation as it targets a larger portion of citizens belonging to different social classes and to different generations. The relationship between television and manipulation is further examined by Foucault who insists that “ the arrangement of power is accomplished and facilitated through surveillance, panoptic technologies, government surveillance, closed circuit television and so on” (Murdocca 2014, 20). Television is a means of surveillance as it exercises certain power over the way of thinking and it affects the behavioral aspect of the Y generation. Foucault hints at the way media affects the behavior of the individual when he insists on the role of discipline at domesticating the behavior. Indeed, “discipline is a mechanism of power which regulates the behavior of individuals in the social body. This is done by regulating the organization of space, of time and people’s activity and behavior” (Mudocca 2014, 21). In this respect, McCarthy resorted to media as a powerful means of taming the behavior of the audience and at stimulating a red scare hysteria. He used the press as a channel of directing public opinion against the ideology of communism and he worked on creating a capitalist alliance and on establishing a sense of cultural conformity. In fact, “though nationally televised congressional hearings and press conferences, Senator Joseph McCarthy used the media’s soapbox to peddle his extreme and often unsubstantiated brand of anti-communism” (Hoynes, 2013, p 231). The soapbox succeeded at increasing the red scare hysteria and at tarnishing the reputation of communists. The McCarthy hearings were also reported in some famous newspapers like the *New York Times* which “carried the running transcript of the hearings-7, 424 pages- throughout the hearings” (Bayley, 2008, p 210). The huge page number shows the role of print media in shaping public opinion and in contributing to political propagandas.

McCarthy was criticized by some journalists who aimed at reorienting public opinion and at accentuating the ambivalent stance of McCarthyism. In this respect, in his program *See It Not Broadcasts* in 1954, the famous journalist Edward Murrow exposed some of McCarthy’s contradictory public statements. “In the first minutes of the program, Murrow quoted McCarthy as saying: ‘The American people realize this cannot be made a fight between America’s two great political parties,’ then quoted the Republican senator later calling the Democrats Treasonous: ‘The hard fact is that those who wear the label democrat wear it with the stain of historical betrayal’” (Streissguth, 2006, p. 44). Murrow is clearly criticizing McCarthy’s hypocritical behavior and his use of special words to manipulate public opinion and to spread certain phobia against communists. The contradictory behavior is revealed when McCarthy declares his neutral position, his call for a peaceful relationship between the two political parties and his description of the Democrats as disloyal because of their communist orientation. McCarthy used media as a tool to shape public opinion against communism, but media was also used as a means against McCarthy in the sense that some journalists used TV platforms to raise doubt against the spirit of McCarthyism and to invite some citizens to change their opinions regarding the red scare hysteria. In the same way, Jerry will reject cultural conformity and will criticize Peter’s adherence to cultural heterogeneity.

## 3. Americanization in *the Zoo Story*

Peter’s passive acceptance of the American values and culture of the nineteen fifties and Jerry’s attack on contemporary culture and on the role of media in heightening the importance of Americanization are made conspicuous from the very beginning of the play. The relationship between media and culture is studied by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard who argues that “ culture is one which tries to let everything be produced, be read, become real, visible and marked with the sign of effectiveness, let everything be said, gathered,

indexed and registered” (1977, p. 21). In other words, TV generates the culture of mass consumption by producing programs which are meant to redirect the attention of the audience into silly issues. In this context, Peter is victimized by the culture of Americanization which is formed by media; Peter is introduced as a prestigious man who “wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses. Although he is moving into middle age, his dress and his manner would suggest a man younger” (Albee, 1958, p. 11). The lack of verbs of actions shows that Peter is not a productive man, but he is rather a member of the consumer society. On the other hand, his remarkable younger age indicates that he is not life-weary and that he accepts things as they are without thinking twice. We notice through the first encounter with Peter that he can be considered as a victim of “the post-war American culture [ which] was infused with Americanization involving compartmentalization of soul, conformity to capitalism, patriarchy and dehumanization of American society, and heteronormativity under the command of an anti-communist media” (Firoz & Nabi, 2016, p. 240). Peter seems to be influenced by this anti-communist media which aims at the “compartmentalization of soul” by aborting creativity. Peter gives the impression of being educated, but his knowledge is ironically reduced to what he reads in magazines and passively receives through visual and written media. When Jerry warns him of heavy smoking: “You’ll probably get cancer of the mouth, and then you’ll have to wear one of those things Freud wore after they took one side of his jaw away. What do they call those things?” (Albee, 1958, p. 13), he answers: “Prosthesis.... I read about it somewhere; *Time magazine*, I think” (Albee, 1958, p. 13). His answer suggests his limited knowledge and his heavy reliance on media as a tool of scientific education. The scientific term “Prosthesis” which stands for an artificial component of the body may connote the superficial knowledge of Peter. This superficial media education is created on purpose and it is meant to divert the public attention away from serious issues and to restrict the freedom of thought.

#### **4. *New York Times* and Public Opinion**

Jerry pokes fun at Peter when he implicitly asks him: “*Time Magazine* isn’t for blockheads” (Albee, 1958, p. 13). Jerry is indirectly criticizing the *Time Magazine* for capturing the attention of readers by inventing attractive blockheads which have political ends. In this respect, McCarthy’s temporary success at heightening the hysteria against communism is manifested when “media featured stream of alarming reports on Red influence.... There were endless headlines in *the New York Times* like, Soviet Agents Plotting to Ruin Unity, Defenses of America (1952)” (Thomas, 2003, p. 246). The common point between the two *New York* headlines resides in containing a biased attitude and in encompassing some pejorative words against communism. The use of a lexical register related to war (“plotting,” “ruin,” and “defenses”) shows the role of media in making the audience aware of the existence of an enemy and of urging them to react by using force. It is clear that Jerry is conscious of the political agenda which relies on media as an efficient tool of reshaping the minds of some citizens. Peter provides an example for the naïve acceptance of what he receives through the different means of media. Unlike Jerry who has a critical stance regarding the blockheads of the *Time Magazine*, Peter affirms: “*Time Magazine* isn’t for blockheads.... No, I suppose not” (Albee, 1958, p. 13). This presupposition suggests his lack of doubt about the trustfulness of the magazine and his belief in the objectivity of media. He seems to believe in the role of media in establishing a democratic society by diffusing objective news, exposing different opinions and representing the voice of the different other. This view is not shared by Jerry who sheds light on the way media is manipulated by the elite to reach personal ends.

## 5. TV Programmes and Peter's Dysfunctional Family

Not only is Jerry referring to the subjective blockheads of the *Time Magazine*, but he is also attacking the role of TV in instilling in children the principle of passivity and in structuring the human mind from the phase of childhood. Television used to be influential during the second half of the twentieth century when “only 9 percent of all households had a television set, within five years, almost two thirds of all American households owned a television set” (Berry & Goldman, 2008, p. 163). It used to be a new invention that captured the attention of the audience and restructured the image of the traditional family tree. In fact, “the TV shows of the time depicted white middle class nuclear families in which the father was an organization man, the wife looked after the family and home, and the traditional roles were maintained” (Shams and Pourgiv, 2013, p. 2). In his insistence about the role of TV in determining social relations and in diffusing information in a smooth way, Jerry addresses Peter: “You’ll read about it in the papers tomorrow, if you don’t see it on your TV tonight. You have TV, haven’t you? ... [You] have two, one for the children” (Albee, 1958, p. 15). The presence of two TVs indicates that the older and the younger generation are victimized by the biased media; the common point between the two generations is their dehumanization and their misuse of the faculty of thinking. In fact, TV addiction has led to the antisocial behavior of Peter and his family. His daughters are isolated from the outside world and they enjoy taking care of domestic animals: “[Birds] my daughters keep them in a cage in their bedroom” (Albee, 1958, p. 18). Animal imagery is significant as caged birds can be interpreted as Peter’s imprisoned daughters whose behavior is domesticated and whose knowledge is limited to what they receive via TV channels. The lack of family communication and seclusion are incurred by the addiction on technological gadgets. Howdy Doody show is an example of the programmes dedicated to children and which “reflected Americans’ fascination with technology. Part of the fantasy of Doodyville were crazy machines such as electromindomizer, which read minds, and one Honkadoodle which translated Nother goose’s hanks into English” (“Howdy Doody Show,” 2014). The machine which is specialized at reading minds is a fine example of controlling the human being and of limiting free thinking. On the other hand, the machine of translating foreign words into English shows the universality of the English language and alludes to the role of globalization in creating a homogeneous culture. This homogeneity is facilitated by the presence of technological machines which contribute to shape the minds of children by creating passive future adults. It is the case of Peter’s daughters who are prevented from being socially involved, from being independent or from sharing personal opinions.

Jerry responds sarcastically to the way silly TV programmes shape the mind of the daughters: “you could set them loose in the house and the cats could eat them and die” (Albee, 1958, p18). The cats can be considered as the external power and in this way Jerry is implicitly saying that Peter’s daughters suffer from social disintegration as they are not endowed with the means of debate, criticism, communication and social activism. TV addiction has made them out of touch with reality and with social life. This passivity is part of the political agenda which aims at creating easily manipulated citizens who receive without reacting and who have a world of their own. In this respect, media instilled in Peter’s daughters the principle of female submission and TV shows have taught them that “an ideal” woman is a woman who is preoccupied with domestic activities. For example, “in 1954, artist Saul Steinberg did a series of cartoons promoting Jell O. In his distinctive style, Steinberg drew a cutaway of a woman’s brain, illustrating household tasks and unending work” (Young, 2004, p. 48). We notice that this cartoon is dedicated to young girls to remind them of the social roles they are supposed to perform. Like Jell. O whose mental roadmap is characterized by the presence of household activities, Peter’s daughters accept to be caged as TV shows have shaped their minds and convinced them that female creatures have to accept their destiny

of being confined in the house. It is clear that media is gendered in the sense that it contributes to shape the opinion of young girls and to persuade them about their secondary position.

## **6. Media and Ethnic Groups in *the Zoo Story***

Not only is the role of media in shaping public opinion manifested through the manipulation of the daughters' minds, but it can also be studied through the treatment of members of ethnic minorities in the play. Albee believes that media is biased against ethnic groups as it aims at creating one way of thinking and at rejecting difference which can ignite criticism. The exclusion of the other is projected through Jerry's consideration of his Puerto Rican neighbors as alien creatures. He confesses: "there's a Puerto Rican family.... I don't know how many [members]. These people entertain a lot. And in the other from room, there's somebody living there, but I don't know who it is. I've never seen who it's. Never. Never ever" (Albee, 1958, p. 22). The use of visual imagery "I've never seen" reveals the invisibility of the Puerto Rican family because of their cultural difference. Jerry's language "I don't know" or "there's somebody" shows the walls of disintegration and the treatment of the ethnic other as a strange creature. The estrangement of members of ethnic minorities is reinforced by the biased use of media. In fact, "hundreds and thousands of Puerto Rican laborers who came to the United States under the Bracero program (1948-68) and operation boost strop (1950 s), respectively faced political, economic, racial and linguistic discrimination as well as negative media representations" (Guryman, 2018, p 91). These negative connotations contribute to give a negative impression about the Puerto Rican group. It is clear that media plays an important role in diffusing ethnic stereotypes, in rejecting cultural differences and in imposing the American style of life.

Not only is the Puerto Rican group minimized, but Jerry also mentions the Japanese characters who are merely presented through their sartorial appearance. He describes them using the following terms: "he has a Japanese Kimono, which is also pretty rare.... All he does is pluck his eyebrows, wear his kimino and go to the John" (Albee 1958,p 22). It is noticeable that Jerry describes his Japanese neighbor in a superficial way without getting deep into cultural richness. This superficiality is the outcome of the American political agenda which seeks for consolidating the dominance of the mainstream culture and of excluding local cultures. In this context, what is specific about the 1950's is that Japanese American media used to give high attention to the values of mainstream culture at the expense of the national Japanese identity. For example, "Japanese American magazines from the 1950's like *Scene*, *Nisei Veue* and *East Wind* implored their readers to Americanize themselves by performing cultural citizenship and engaging in consumer culture to dress and fix their hair in contemporary styles, participate in traditional sororities and women's clubs, and throw parties with American food products" (Lopez, 2016, p119). The common thread between the magazines mentioned above is their insistence on strengthening cultural homogeneity and on imposing the American cultural style. The relationship between media and cultural homogeneity can be further exemplified through the creation of some magazines which aim at creating diplomatic relations with the Russian communist counterpart and at giving an alluring image about the American culture. Accordingly, some magazines like *America* "[were] designed to win the hearts and minds of Soviets with vivid pictures of American life and culture, [*America*] was first published in 1945, as an outgrowth of USA. After Stalin died in 1953, President Eisenhower decided to try again to 'lower the barriers which now impede the interchange of information and ideas between peoples'" ("Amerika," 2004). Eisenhower's view about opening the barriers can be discussed because lowering the boundaries is meant to serve the American mainstream culture and to reject any type of cultural exchange. This rejection of the culturally different other is made manifest through the reaction of Peter regarding Jerry's neighborhood: "It doesn't sound like a very nice place where you live" (Albee, 1958, p 24). Peter describes the neighborhood using dark terms because it is crowned

with the existence of citizens having different roots. This reaction proves the role of media in shaping Peter's mind and in making him exclude any culture which is not American.

## **7. The Effects of the Consumerist Culture**

Unlike Peter, Jerry has a critical stance as he does not accept things as they are and he is opposed to manipulation. In this respect, Peter is irritated because of Jerry's questions: "You don't really carry a conversation; you just ask questions. And I'm normally reticent" (Albee, 1958, 19). The absence of conversation shows the social gap between Peter who belongs to the upper middle class and Jerry who is the spokesman of the working class. Peter seems to be indifferent about the suffering of the lower classes as he is influenced by the consumerist culture which is based on the remarkable lack of human bonds. Accordingly, Peter feels puzzled when Jerry asks him about the effects of social stratification: "Your question about the classes bewildered me.... I don't express myself too well.... I am in publishing not writing.... We get all kinds in publishing" (Albee, 1958, p 37). This answer is not convincing and it betokens Peter's naïve response and the lack of reflection. His argument that he is in charge of publication instead of writing shows his lack of creativity and that he works in a mechanical way. Unlike Peter who is influenced by the communist culture, Jerry is detached as he has a sarcastic view about the deplorable conditions in modern America. Accordingly, there is a lack of communication between the two ideologically different characters and Jerry admits that he decides to visit the zoo to find a companion and to observe the relationship between animals and people: "I went to the zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too. It wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals. But, if it's a zoo, that's the way it is" (Albee, 1958, p 40). The presence of the bars suggests the distance between human beings and shows Jerry's lamenting voice over the absence of any energetic dialogue. Besides, the remarkable repetition and interplay of nouns like "animals" and "people" evokes the absence of rationality and the transformation of modern man into a passive object of systematic media control. It is the case of fake intellectuals (like Peter) who are ensnared in the machine of media industry.

## **8. The Cultural Clash between Peter and Jerry**

Peter threatens to call the police if Jerry does not quit the bench "You won't find a policeman around here; they're all over on the west side of the park chasing fairies down from trees or out of the bushes. That's all they do. That's their function. So scream your head off; it won't do you any good" (Albee, 1958, p 43). The fact of chasing fairies suggests the existence of imaginary enemies and the limited power of the police which is supposed to be the symbol of authority and protection. Jerry is explicitly attacking the government for creating imaginary enemies to further manipulate public opinion, to make citizens engrossed in trivial issues and to control them. In this context, Jerry depicts Peter as an animal because he functions as a puppet to the capitalist system and he is easily manipulated by media (especially magazines). He addresses him: "You've lost your bench, but you've defended your honor. And Peter, I'll tell you something now; you're not really a vegetable; it's all right, you're an animal" (Albee, 1958, 49). The common point between Peter and animals lies in the absence of thinking, the passive reception of information, consuming without producing and running in a rat race without reaching a happy ending. When Peter responds violently and threatens to call the police, Jerry pokes fun at him: "You look ridiculous: a grown man screaming for the police on a bright Sunday afternoon in the park without nobody harming you. If a policeman did fill his quota and come sledging over this way he'd probably take you in as a nut" (Albee, 1958, p 43). Jerry's sarcastic tone shows his attack on the government's inability to protect its citizens as it is embarked on serving the elite. Accordingly, Jerry opts for death as an escape from the meaningless life he is leading and he provokes Peter to kill him.

## 9. Evaluation of Jerry's Tragic End

The last scene incorporates instants of violence, especially when Jerry “screams and it must be the sound of an infuriated and fatally wounded animal. With the knife in him, he stumbles back to the bench that Peter has vacated” (Albee, 1958, p 47). The brutal way of killing Jerry can reflect the impact of TV violence on Peter who is supposed to be an intellectual. The representative of intellectuals is reduced into a passive spectator who swallows the values seen on screen without having any critical eye. In fact, “the small screen, allowed a degree of criminality to come forward as a norm in place of compromise”(Rickels, 2016, p 25). Put differently, Peter seems to be influenced by some TV programmes that contribute to legitimize violence which becomes the norm in a corrupt society whose members do not develop any sense of consciousness. On the other hand, Jerry is deeply conscious of the evil practices incited by media, the unscrupulous aspect of the modern American Adam and his entrapment by the tentacles of corruption. His quest for cultural homogeneity is handicapped by the gigantic propaganda machine which drives him to have a special death wish. What is tragicomic about Jerry is that he wants to be covered in media after being killed and to be considered as the epitome of cultural heterogeneity. He wants his end to be a moment of awakening and a new beginning for his peers who blindly subdue to the system which succeeds at manipulating public opinion.

In his last moment of confession, he addresses Peter: “now you know what you'll see in your TV, and the face I told you about... You remember the face I told you about ... My face, the face you see right now” (Albee, 1958, p 48). The desire to be covered in Tv reflects the wish to capture the attention of a larger portion of spectators and to deliver his message about the necessity of respecting the downtrodden voices and of achieving cultural diversity. Jerry is clearly trying to use TV in a constructive way and to reshape public opinion in a positive way by making the audience sympathize with his tragic end. The dialogue between Jerry and the audience occurs only at his farewell moment when Albee concludes that “people can have some of the things they want, but they can't have everything” (Albee, 1958,p 42). Peter has succeeded at accumulating wealth, but he is still passive as he has not reached intellectual maturity; Jerry has not succeeded at collecting lucre, but develops certain maturity as he is aware that media contributes to make humanities in peril and he insists on the recreation of a meaningful life based on the adamant belief in personal values. The audience sympathize with his victimization by a ferocious murder, but they appreciate his challenge of public opinion, his call for being active, for being skeptical, for reviving the roots of democracy and for respecting minority groups. His death is significant as it marks his strident voice; despite the fact that Jerry can be criticized for having a theoretical project and for calling for an ideal transformation, but his merit lies in envisaging a glaring future and in affecting the young generation. His heroic death is meant to be a lesson for the future generation who are supposed to add meaning to their life by refusing to be passive receivers of the (mis)information displayed in the audible, visual and written means of media. Albee succeeds at showing that “in the USA, at least, television viewing integrated viewers into capitalistic society, by reinforcing its norms and marginalizing deliberative analysis” (During, 2006). In this way, Albee is seeking for relocating a democratic society where media functions as a watchdog and not as a subjective tool of manipulation.

## 10. Conclusion: The Implementation of Cultural Diversity

The play functions as a critical piece against the intellectual oppression reinforced by media. It has turned citizens into machines, prevented them from having a personal opinion and from having access to cultural richness. The paper has studied the way media serves dictators, nurtures the voracity of the elite and makes common people and some intellectuals (like Peter) mere caged animals in a modern American zoo. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that the events of the play have taken place in a zoo. The goal lies in highlighting the bestial side of

the alienated American Adam in a barren land which witnessed a regressive change. Accordingly, Jerry has dramatically insisted on displaying his tragic end on TV in order to raise his exceptional voice of subversion. Through the voice of Jerry, the modern playwright debunks the myth of the objectivity of media when he implicitly asks for not treating the human being as an animal and for respecting individuality. Hence, Jerry uses TV differently and tries to remind the audience about the necessity of resisting the crippling propaganda machine and its legacy.

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