

# ***The Goat or, Who is Sylvia? (Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy): Bestiality in Psychoanalysis Perspective***

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses bestiality in the script play entitled *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia (Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy)* by Edward Albee (2005). The script play presents the main character, Martin, who has a sexual impulse toward a goat, named Sylvia. Since most societies consider heterosexual as the normal sexual preference and any other preferences are regarded as a perversion, Martin's desire cannot be accepted by other characters around him which leads to Sylvia's death. This study aims at revealing bestiality factors of the main character. The method used in the discussion was a qualitative method; the main character's dialogues were analyzed using Freud's psychoanalysis theory.

**Keywords:** *bestiality, perversion, psychoanalysis, repression*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Edward Albee is an author of absurd dramas. Some of his famous works are *The Zoo Story* - 1959; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* - 1962 (Tony Award); *A Delicate Balance* - 1966 (Pulitzer Prize), *Seascape* - 1975 (Pulitzer Prize); and *Three Tall Women* - 1991 (Pulitzer Prize). *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia? (Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy)* discussed in this paper was awarded the Tony Award, New York Critics Circle Award (2002). The drama was first staged at the *John Golden Theatre*, New York on March 10, 2002. This paper tries to discover the male character's bestiality tendency by using Freud's psychoanalysis theory.

*The Goat or, Who is Sylvia? (Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy)* is a three-scene play by Edward Albee (2005). The story is about Martin, the main character, who experiences bestiality or has sexual activity with an

animal. In the first scene, Stevie, Martin's wife, was busy preparing the room for an interview recording session between Martin and Ross. The interview was held because Martin has just received an award in architecture, *Pritzker Prize*, and he was also appointed to design the construction of *The World City* in Kansas. Right before the interview session, Martin felt disoriented and complained to his wife that he suffered from Alzheimer. Moreover, Martin was unable to comprehend the questions asked by Ross in his interview. In the next scene, Stevie asked for an explanation from Martin about Ross' letter exposing his secret affair with Sylvia, a goat. While listening to Martin's explanation, Stevie destroyed the furniture around her. In the last scene, Stevie entered the wreck room, dragging a dead goat.

## Literature Review

Psychoanalysis, a term for examining the relationship between *the unconsciousness* or the human mind and *the consciousness* or the behavior, can be used to interpret a literary work (Gillespie, 2010). As literature uses narrative to present a complicated human relation, knowing the hidden motive of why a character acts a certain way will help us, readers, to respect others as human beings.

*The id* is the desire for pleasure or happiness. This desire lays in the unconscious mind. On the other hand, *the ego* lays in the conscious mind, reflected in selected actions of the id adjustment to the superego. *The superego* is the values that represent the moral principles of community in general, the conscience. In order to survive, one must fulfill his/ her desire. However, at some point, this desire may be considered immoral by the society. Thus, the desire has to be forgotten or *repressed* which then leads to certain kind of neurosis, one of them is forgetting of proper names (Freud, 1914). This “temporary forgetfulness of proper names” is the result of trying to forget the forbidden desire; someone “forgot the one against [his / her] will, while he/ she intentionally wished to forget the other” (Freud, 1914: p. 3 & 8).

The childhood memory of the traumatic experience, namely the separation from the mother as the source of life plays a significant role in a boy’s sexual impulse. The desire to be with his mother, called *Oedipus Complex*, lays in the unconscious mind, which is repressed by desiring something else that may appear different yet somehow still relates to his traumatic experience. Thus, Freud concluded that every individual may have the sexual desire that is unrelated to the sexual object desired (Milner, 1992). Since most

societies consider heterosexual as the normal sexual preference while any other preferences are regarded as a perversion, people who are experiencing non-heterosexual desire are judged immoral and therefore they have to forget their instinct, repress their desire. In an attempt to get rid of this so-called immoral desire, someone may choose an animal as their sexual partner. This act is called *zoophilia* or *bestiality*, Freud argued that “animals replace the proper object of one’s sexual desire that one is unable to secure[;] the animal represents a close person that one is unable to express one’s love sexually” (Chia, 2015, para. 6).

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Martin’s longing for Sylvia, “*It was at that moment that I realized ... that she and I were ... going to go to bed together,*” is the id (Albee, 2005, p. 601). This desire, on the one hand, must be fulfilled in order to achieve pleasure (Milner, 1992), but on the other hand, it is opposed by his superego “*Well, ... I realized something was wrong. I mean, ... I realized people would think something was wrong, that what I was doing wasn’t ...*” (Albee, 2005, p. 585). The conflict between the id and the superego has brought Martin to a therapy session for those who prefer animals as their sex partners. When Martin learned that he was not the only one experiencing bestiality, he no longer felt guilty, “*Oh, we fall in love with many other creatures ... dogs and cats, and ...*” (Albee, 2005, p. 603). His sentence represents his ego that he decided to channel his sexual desire to Sylvia, a goat; he no longer hesitated as he did in the beginning. Martin then felt astonished that people experiencing bestiality in the therapy session he attended were trying to get rid of their sexual desire toward animals.

Martin, at some point, realized that he had to hide his desire for Sylvia because it was against the public morals. He repressed his sexual desire toward Sylvia, especially when he was with his wife, Stevie, which then made him so disoriented in the first scene.

Martin: *“Why can’t I remember anything?”*

Stevie: *“What can’t you remember?”*

Martin: *“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”* (Albee, 2005, p. 539).

When Martin was with Stevie, his memory of Sylvia was being repressed which made him forgetful and he thought that his forgetfulness was part of Alzheimer. Martin and Ross have been friends since college; his forgetfulness of Ross’s son’s proper name was the result of his trying to forget Sylvia, the one he loved but he knew he must not. Therefore, while intending to forget his desire toward Sylvia, he forgot the name of his best friend’s son instead. This temporary forgetfulness happened because at that time Martin was going to be interviewed by Ross, about his next project to build *The World City* on wheat fields in Kansas, a place where he met Sylvia. Since the topic he was going to discuss with Ross was related to Sylvia’s whereabouts, forgetting Sylvia as his attempt to repress his sexual desire became forgetting Ross’s son’s name, the one he knew for sure.

The struggle between Martin’s id and superego can be seen also at the beginning of the first scene.

Stevie: *“Something’s going on, isn’t it!?”*

Martin: *“Yes! I’ve fallen in love!”*

Stevie: *“I knew it!”*

...

Martin: *“I fought against it!”*

...

*“Fought hard!”*

Stevie: *“I suppose you’d better tell me!”*

Martin: *“I can’t! I can’t!”*  
(Albee, 2005, p. 546-547).

Martin actually felt guilty to Stevie, for cheating. Moreover, he knew that he was not supposed to choose an animal as his sex partner. When Martin finally admitted that he fell in love with Sylvia, which was a goat, Stevie laughed at him; she thought that Martin was cracking a strange joke.

Ross came and Martin was able to converse without being as disoriented as he was with Stevie. However, while being interviewed, Martin was uncooperative in answering questions from Ross related to his achievements as an architect; as if he was thinking about something else.

Ross: *“Weren’t you ... thunderstruck!?”*

Martin: *“Well, no; they’d hinted at it—the Prize, I mean, and ...”*

Ross: *“But it was pretty wonderful, wasn’t it?”*

Martin: *“Yes; yes it was pretty wonderful—is pretty wonderful.”*

Ross: *Tell us about The World City.*

Martin: *Well, you just did: two hundred billion dollars, and all, the wheatfields of Kansas, or whatever ...*" (Albee, 2005, p. 554).

Ross had to speak in exaggerated enthusiasm to give Martin a clue that he was supposed to show excitement for the recording sake. However, Martin did not feel that good about his achievements. The phrase *whatever* indicates that he was indifferent to the World City construction-related topics. This happens because he felt guilty for destroying nature as part of his profession as an architect. His guilt can be seen in this scene:

Ross: *"I hear a kind of ... rushing sound, like a ... whoooooosh!, or ... wings, or something.*

Martin: *It's probably the Eumenides.*

Ross: *More like the dishwasher. There; it stopped"* (Albee, 2005, p. 551).

The phrase *the Eumenides* in Greek mythology refers to the goddess who punishes human misconduct (Marino, 2011). Martin said the phrase unconsciously because he felt guilty getting rid of the Kansas wheat fields in order to build a city.

This guilt was triggered by his background; Martin grew up in a country and had wanted to go back living in a farmhouse. His love for

nature can be seen when Martin described the place where he met Sylvia.

Martin: *"I found a wonderful place, a wonderful old farmhouse, and a lot of land.*

*... And I stopped, and the view was ... well, not spectacular, but ... wonderful. Fall, you know?, with leaves turning and the town below me and great scudding clouds and those country smells.*

Ross: *Cow shit, and all that.*

Martin: *... 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...*

Ross: *The whole thing; right.*

Martin: *Oh you city boys! And from up there I could trace the roads out toward the farm, and it gave me a kind of shiver"* (Albee, 2005, p. 566).

Martin's description of the crops (corn, beans, tomatoes, peaches) suggests that he appreciated nature as the source of life. The ambiance of the country brings back his childhood memory. From this journey he found Sylvia. Martin was especially interested

in Sylvia's eyes "*And there she was, looking at me with those eyes*" (Albee, 2005, p. 567); "*I'd never seen such an expression. It was pure .. and trusting and ... and innocent; so ... so guileless*" (Albee, 2005, p. 597). For Martin, Sylvia's expression represents the purity of nature that he loved.

Knowing Martin's act of bestiality, Ross tried to stop it, "*Do you know there are prison terms for this? Some states they kill you for it? Do you know what they'd do to you? The press? Everybody? Down it all comes—your career; your life ... everything*" (Albee, 2005, p. 620). In this scene, Ross is the superego; he represents the moral principles of a society that is against bestiality. For Ross, Martin's act is a perversion and he should be punished.

Martin's longing for Sylvia indicates a state of Oedipus complex, boy's desire of his mother (Freud in Barry, 2009, p. 93). Martin lost his mother when he was a child. It can be inferred from his denying when Ross said that he knew him the longest. Martin answered that his aunt knew him the longest. Losing her mother frustrated the young Martin who failed to achieve sexual satisfaction in the oral stage, namely the enjoyment while sucking the breast in order to eat (Milner, 1992). The bitter memories of losing his mother make Martin felt guilty for destroying the nature; which means killing the mother earth, the source of life, the producer of crops that humans need. The elimination of wheat fields also means separation from the mother earth. This signifies he would be separated from his mother for the second time, which was not expected. Martin saw Sylvia at the "*top of a hill,*" in this case Sylvia is the mother earth (Albee, 2005, p. 566). The phrase *top of a hill* is a symbol of the mother earth's breast, which also represents the source of life, milk for babies. Thus, Sylvia is the mother earth

that Martin wanted to have and his sexual desire for Sylvia is triggered by repression, bitter memories when he lost his mother as a baby.

Sylvia as a mother (the mother earth) is described by Martin unconsciously as he explained to Stevie about Sylvia as his mistress, "*... someone just like you[,] [a]s bright; as resourceful; ...*" (Albee, 2005, p. 546). In his confession about his affair, Martin compared Sylvia with Stevie. The word *resourceful* that he referred to Sylvia and Stevie represents what a mother supposed to be for her baby; she provides anything to her helpless baby. Moreover, he said to Stevie, "*You're ... my playmate, my cook, my bottlewasher*" (Albee, 2005, p. 542). The phrase *bottlewasher* has an implied meaning as *milk* which is also implied in the word *resourceful* that Martin used to describe Sylvia. The goat, Sylvia, as the mother earth, is a symbol for a mother who provides milk as her baby's food. In this case, Martin was experiencing "oral-passive" personality, expecting those around him to act as his mother, which is caused by frustration at losing the pleasure of sucking his mother's breast when he was a baby (Hartono, 2003, p. 8). Thus, for Martin, Stevie and Sylvia represented the presence of a mother who gave milk (and everything a baby needs) to Martin.

According to Freud's theory, every individual may have the sexual desire that is unrelated to the sexual object desired (Milner, 1992, p. 105). Martin, "*I didn't know what it was—what I was feeling. It was ... it wasn't like anything I felt before; it was ...*" (Albee, 2005, p. 567), could not explain how he felt that way toward Sylvia. Martin's desire toward Sylvia has nothing to do with her being a goat since she was technically just a substitute to which he directed the sexual desire influenced by the Oedipus complex that

he suffered. However, heterosexual is considered the normal sexual preference while any other preference is regarded as perversion (Freud in Milner, 1992). Thus, Martin's opposed desire affects the other characters' psychology as bestiality is against the morals. Martin's act could not be accepted by Ross, "*Wrong! Deeply, destructively wrong!*" (Albee, 2005, p. 619), so he tried to stop Martin by sending mail to Stevie. Meanwhile, Stevie, who was from the beginning has suspected the possibility that Martin was having an affair, could not accept that she was being compared to a goat as Martin's sex partner. Her act of breaking things means she was experiencing hysteria.

Stevie: "*How it cannot be dealt with—how stop and forgiveness have nothing to do with it? and I am destroyed? How you are? How I cannot admit it though I know it!? How I cannot deny it because I cannot admit it!? Cannot admit it, because it is outside of denying!?*" (Albee, 2005, p. 604).

The word *it* from Stevie's sentence above refers to the bestiality, Martin's choosing a goat as his other sexual partner. Just like Ross, Stevie considered Martin's sexual impulse as perversion; his act was beyond understanding. It was not the affair that bothered her but it was the bestiality that she found so hard to comprehend. The uncomfortable feeling of accepting something which is opposed by her conscience results in hysteria, "excessive anxiety" which is showed in her destroying things (Freud in Gray, n.d., chap. 1).

## CONCLUSION

Desiring Sylvia, the goat, is Martin's "life instinct" that is driven by libido or desire to fulfill the sexual pleasure (Hartono, 2003, p. 5). At the end of the scene, Stevie's slaying of Sylvia means Martin was actually the one getting killed, as his life instinct was executed. This explained the title of the drama, *Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy*. According to Aristotle, tragedy is a drama that ends with a tragic event, namely the fall of the hero from reputable position to a meaningless condition (Boal, 1985). At the beginning of the story, Martin was a successful architect who had a harmonious married life. When his secret was revealed, Martin lost his relationship with his wife and his best friend, and his career was in danger. Sylvia, thus, is "the tragic flaw;" Martin's happiness who actually takes him to misery (Boal, 1985, p. 34). Sylvia's death represents the use of goats as sacrificial animals in Greek mythology (Zeffry, 1998). As a sacrifice, a goat does not do anything but to die. This is illustrated by Martin's weeping, "*What did she do!? What did she ever do!?*", when he saw Stevie dragging Sylvia with an incision in its neck (Albee, 2005, p. 622). Sylvia's death serves as a "catharsis" for the audience (or in this case, readers), namely the purification on a husband's act of having an affair (Aristotle in Boal, 1985, p. 37).

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