A World of One's Own: *The Issue of Belonging in Four Major North American Plays*

Um mundo todo seu: a questão do pertencimento em The Hairy Ape, The Zoo Story, The Glass Menagerie *e* Take Me Out

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Abstract

The present article analyzes the issue of belonging and its absence in four relevant North American plays, whose common focal points are their characters, who display peculiarities and difficulties in their interaction with the world. The corpus comprises plays written between 1922 and 2001, proving that it is a pertinent issue and that it has been calling the attention of several playwrights and from the most varied perspectives. Being the social and psychological points of view the most important ones in this analysis, this article also aims at understanding up to what extent and in what ways both aspects become involved and are consequence of one another.

Key words: belonging, drama, social relations, underdogs.

Resumo

Este trabalho pretende fazer uma análise da questão do pertencimento social e da falta dele em quatro relevantes peças de teatro estadunidenses, as quais possuem como pontos principais em comum personagens com peculiaridades e dificuldades em sua interação com o mundo. O corpus engloba peças escritas entre 1922 e 2001, provando que esta é uma questão pertinente e que há várias décadas desperta a atenção de diversos dramaturgos e sob os mais diferentes prismas. Sendo os pontos de vista social e psicológico os de maior importância na análise, o trabalho também se propõe a entender até que ponto e de que maneiras os dois se envolvem e são conseqüência um do outro.

Palavras-chave: pertencimento, teatro, relações sociais, excluídos.

INTRODUCTION

Finding a place in society, being recognized and feeling adequate among pairs are relevant issues for men, and literature, of course, is not blind to that. One of the most prolific branches to analyze the subject is North American drama that probably has in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* the major example of such discussion. However, other significant North American playwrights engaged in

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dealing with the issue through many different approaches and points of view. Four representative plays form the corpus on which the present analysis is based, namely: Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *The Zoo Story*, written by Edward Albee in 1959, and Richard Greenberg's *Take Me Out* (2001).

One of the most challenging aspects in the enterprise this article holds is the attempt of a proper definition of *belonging*. Obviously, such definition is not only complicated but also fundamental in order to develop a richer and more accurate analysis. Based on the concept of a given *social pattern*, the idea of belonging rises from the desire one has of being part of a social group and being recognized as such, both by the other members of the "target" group and by the outsiders as well. Naturally, deciding what is the best social group depends on background and upbringing, and it is a process that unfolds unconsciously most of the times. Hence emerges the temptation of judging the characters' – and consequently the playwrights' – decisions and ideologies according to our own choices and values. However, the focus of this article is merely to identify how each play deals with the issue and how they reflect the way readers/ audience react and feel about it.

EUGENE O'NEILL'S *THE HAIRY APE*

The Hairy Ape is, by far, the play within the selected corpus that deals more clearly with the topic, through Yank and all the games, metaphors and images related to him and the ape. To reinforce that, Eugene O'Neill gives to the characters and scene directions an Expressionist tone, which is a crucial feature to the development of the plot and the discussion of belonging. Yank and his fellow sailors are depicted, in the first stage directions, in an animalistic and crude way:

> (...)The room is crowded with men, shouting, cursing, laughing, singing – a confused, inchoate uproar swelling into a sort of unity, a meaning – the bewildered, furious, baffled defiance of a beast in the cage. (...)
> (…) The men themselves should resemble those pictures in which the appearance of Neanderthal Men is guessed at. All are hairy-chested, with long arms of tremendous power, and low, receding brows above their small, fierce, resentful eyes.

The Expressionist aspect that is so important in *The Hairy Ape* consists not only of the animalization of certain characters (mainly Yank) in certain situations but also of a clear distortion in Yank's perspective towards the rest of the world: he is sure that he belongs because he works in the ship, and also because he is young and strong. As he states that, he excludes his co-worker Paddy from all possibilities of belonging, once Paddy is older and cannot handle the heavy work as in past times. Yank's first lines are full of comments that define his idea of a person who belongs:

> Dis is home, see? [referring to the ship] Well den, we belong, don't we? We belong and dey don't, that's all [talking about first-class passengers, who are not be able to make the ship move]; You [Paddy] don't belong no more, see. (. . .) Yuh're too old. (. . .) He's dead but I'm livin'. Listen to me! Sure I'm part of the engines! Why de hell not! Dey move, don't dey? Dey're speed, ain't they? Dey smash trou, don't dey? Twenty-five knows an hour! Dat's goin' some! Dat's new stuff! Dat belongs!

It is interesting to point out that even though the title of the play is *The Hairy Ape*, and in spite of the innumerable references to monkeys and chimps, Mildred never calls Yank an ape or any other name of the sort. Her visit to the stokehole is the episode that triggers all of Yank's violent reactions, until his transformation into something similar to an ape – but she calls him a "filthy beast", and nothing else. He knows that Mildred is a first-class passenger, and that they come from completely different worlds; however, he seems not to understand why he does not belong with her, and he certainly does not understand why she should be considered "better" than him.

Yank wants revenge, or, according to his own words, he wants to "get square" with Mildred – however, his co-workers are not supportive of the idea, and that is when he reaches the conclusion that he does not belong in the ship anymore. He is sure that he is the right one, that the others are inadequate, so he leaves and decides to look for Mildred and her

rich father in the city, where, sadly, nobody seems to notice his presence. Once more, his not belonging and his lack of realization of such fact only serve to increase his anger. Eventually he is arrested, and after being released he looks for a trade union, thinking that through it he will be able to cause some damage to Mildred's father's business. In spite of his deep earnestness, people at the I. W. W. (Industrial Workers of the World) think he is a phoney because of his revolutionary speech and violent ideas, and once again, he becomes undesirable and cannot perceive that.

Throughout the play, Yank repeats that the others do not belong, but he does. This distorted vision of reality, that turns into his remarkable characteristic during most of the play, goes perfectly well with O'Neill's exaggerated Expressionism, and Yank's final scene in the cage with the gorilla is his last chance of finally being recognized as part of a social scheme. Nonetheless, the reader is left only with uncertainty as the play ends: Yank dies in the cage, but we do not know whether Yank could feel he belonged before he died. The pungent last sentence of the play (*And, perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last belongs*), only serves to show that, in spite of all his efforts, Yank would always be unfit, inappropriate, the underdog. Therefore, he dealt with that by considering all the others the underdogs, and treating himself as the pattern to be followed.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*

When not belonging becomes an issue to characters, delusional traces in their behavior are almost a certainty: that is what happens to Yank towards the end of *The Hairy Ape*, but, on the other hand, it is a recurrent feature in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. The Wingfields – Amanda and her kids Laura and Tom – all display some traces of inadequacy and delusion, mainly through (and because of) Amanda.

One of the most important visual devices in the setting is the presence of a huge portrait of the father in the family's living room. The father is not a living character, there is no action related to him or performed by him, but he is extremely important: the picture is the reminder of the only member of the family who managed to live the life he wanted to, but had to abandon his family to their own fate as a consequence. All in all, the portrait performs a fundamental role in the actions of the Wingfields.

Actually, each Wingfield represents a different perspective concerning belonging or not belonging within the play: Tom is sensible, down-to-earth, and presents more objectivity and lucidness. He is the masculine figure of this fatherless family, he has to earn not only his keep, but his mother's and sister's as well. At the same time, he wants to be a poet, and being forced to be a shoes salesman makes him part of a social scheme he did not choose. With the absence of a father, he is forced to take the responsibility for the family in all stances. His duties do not concern only work and money, once his mother assigns him a special mission: finding his sister a boyfriend, once she is shy and problematic and cannot do that by herself.

Laura seems to live in an oyster. Her handicap prevents her from being active in the real world, and concomitantly, she does not allow anyone to be part of her own world, which, in a way, is similar to Yank's behavior in *The Hairy Ape*: feeling that she is unfit to the world outside, Laura creates her own dimension, and unconsciously states that she is the only one who belongs in her world, because she does not allow anyone to join her. The only moment she tries to open up – when she finally receives the visit of a "gentleman caller", she is deeply hurt and feels even more rejected, which allows another parallel with the main character in O'Neill's play: both characters should not have engaged socially in such a sudden and desperate way, because that only made them feel more unfit and served to reinforce their anti-social behavior.

And finally Amanda, who is delusion in its essence: the action around her goes back and forth in terms of time, and her lines are full of references to her teen years, and to her previous popularity and beauty. When Tom's co-worker Jim shows up to have dinner, she rivals with Laura: she is colorful and bright, whereas Laura is a pale vision; while Laura cannot even sit at the table, afraid of facing Jim, who was her school passion, Amanda dominates the entire conversation, she is the feminine presence to be noticed. Time delusion, one of Amanda's strongest features, explains her behavior during the dinner-party: in scene I, she talks about her glorious past as a "heart-crusher":

> AMANDA: One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain – your mother received – seventeen! – gentlemen callers! Why, sometimes there weren't chairs enough to accommodate them all. We had to send the nigger over to bring in folding chairs from the parish house.

Even though *The Glass Menagerie* does not present a physical death, its finale is more cruel than *The Hairy Ape's*: when Yank died, he had nothing else to struggle for. On the other hand, the final scene of Williams' play shows us that the Wingfields still must deal with their dysfunctional relationship and hopelessness. Tom is fired for writing a poem on a shoe box (a clear evidence of the kind of belonging he seeks) and leaves home, and, with him, the Wingfields' pretence of stability is gone as well. In opposition to her behavior throughout the play, Amanda acts in a more orthodox, motherly way in the final scene:

> … Amanda appears to be making a comforting speech to Laura (. . .) Now that we cannot hear the mother's speech, her silliness is gone and she has dignity and tragic beauty. (. . .) Amanda's gestures are slow and graceful, almost dancelike, as she comforts her daughter. At the end of her speech she glances a moment at the father's picture – then withdraws through the portieres.

EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE ZOO STORY*

Amanda's struggle to make her kids belong is based on certain criteria that define the average citizen: she wants them to move from the chaotic life they have to one marked by stability, marriage and respectability. Conversely, Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* presents Peter, a man who goes in the exact opposite direction: in the beginning of the play, we see that he is a married man and has two daughters; a man who reads *Time* magazine and has two cats and parakeets as pets; he also has a position as an executive in a small publishing house, earning $18,000 a year, and lives in the fashionable side of New York City. Not coincidentally, he declares that his literary taste is influenced by his "catholicity". To sum it up: Peter is part of a social group which most underdogs want to be in, he has what most people tend to believe that is required to lead an accomplished life. Basically, Peter is a respectable middle-class family man.

However, the episode in the park with Jerry triggers in Peter all sorts of reactions and thoughts; they are the only characters in the play, and, in opposition to Peter, in whose life everything is figured out, Jerry is lonely, an outsider in all respects: he lives in a sort of boarding house in the least fashionable side of the city, among representatives of minorities: a black homosexual man, a Puerto Rican family, and a disgusting landlady who owns an even more disgusting dog. He lost his parents when he was a child, and recognizes he had a homosexual relationship in his adolescence, as well as the fact that he never loved anyone.

As he hears what Jerry had to say, Peter starts questioning his own values, all the beliefs that made him pursue certain goals and make certain choices. Peter realizes that, as he became part of a social scheme considered as ideal, he neglected himself as an individual: after all, he does not allow himself to appreciate Baudelaire or J. P. Marquand without feeling guilty; and what is more: he neglected himself as a man within his family: his daughters decide what pets the family has, his wife decides when and if they can or cannot have children. As a typical businessman, Peter has to compromise, or, according to Jerry's words, "make sense out of things" and "bring order".

Even though Jerry is obviously the one socially and psychologically neglected, and in spite of his defying and apparently contemptuous attitude, he wants a relationship: a situation in which he would be sure that someone cares about him, that he makes the difference to somebody. After being abandoned and becoming lonesome, he tries to sustain a relationship with another being, but his was an unorthodox choice: the landlady's dog. Here some aspects that define Jerry's personality are perceived: he was abandoned as a child, he must have some sort of disorder, he is frustrated in all ways, and even when he tries to build his story with the dog he displays a paradoxical attitude: he states that he loves the animal, but after feeling rejected he tries to kill it. His frustration becomes even more serious when he realizes that in both attempts – loving and killing – he is unsuccessful.

Jerry is the one in charge of the movements

and the sequence of events: he starts the conversation and, as the play follows, he elicits certain responses from Peter, indicating his obvious intention of teasing. And, without criticizing Peter's way of life clearly, Jerry makes the other realize the frivolous life he leads. But in spite of Jerry's delusion, there is method in his thinking: when he talks about Peter's pets, for example, he comes up with a creative idea to kill the cats and the parakeets at the same time: giving poison to the parakeets and let them out of their cages, so that the cats could eat them and die afterwards. And when they are having a fight because of the park bench he shows a surprisingly enormous objectivity in his speech:

> JERRY: (slaps Peter on each "fight"): You fight, you miserable bastard; fight for the bench; fight for your parakeets; fight for your cats; fight for your two daughters; fight for your wife; fight for your manhood, you pathetic little vegetable (spits in Peter's face). You couldn't even get your wife a male child.

However, the main evidence of Jerry's cleverness is found in the finale: he knows that he is hopeless, and that finding his place in society is a tough struggle. Therefore, death seems the best solution. But he does not have the courage to kill himself, in spite of his lack of strong religious values. He is afraid of death not only because of the obvious problems concerning it, but also because it symbolizes his failures and it is a reminder of all the significant negative features in his life: uncertainty, abandonment, sadness, loneliness. He manages to drive Peter insane, provides him with a weapon, and ends up being killed. The fact that Jerry's speech contains things that he would probably have liked to repeat to others in the course of his life is also representative, as well as being another evidence of his artfulness, as he makes Peter lose control with his sharp words, and at the same time he seemsto amuse himself very much with the situation.

RICHARD GREENBERG'S *TAKE ME OUT*

Among the four selected plays, Richard Greenberg's *Take Me Out* seems to be the odd one out for many reasons: it is the only play written in the 21st century, and its approach is different from the others: there are no characters with severe mental disorders or delusional traces. The idea of belonging and its discussion appear more objectively, without allegories or metaphors. The situations are real and more tangible than the ones presented in the other plays.

Darren is a successful baseball player. Therefore, he is professionally respected, consequently he belongs. He earns a lot of money, and that certainly helps one to belong; he is famous, good-looking, and, interestingly, he has a white father and a black mother, a fact which allows him to say "*I'm black* and white" when asked about his race: thus, he belongs to the two most significant North American racial groups at the same time – consequently, he is never an outsider. Throughout the play, Darren mentions his godlike attributes and has a pretentious attitude towards the others.

That leads to the principle of the world of one's own, recurrent in all plays analyzed in this essay. Laura, Yank and Jerry live in their oysters, capsule-like dimensions. No one is allowed in, the barriers are too difficult to be trespassed and their distrust is enormous because people can be mean and diminish them. The same happens with Darren in *Take Me Out*, but the main difference between him and the others is that he created his own capsule – actually, a temple of self-worship – because others are too insignificant to get in. In act I, one of his lines illustrates brilliantly such observation: *"God made me God, Toddy. Or at least invested me with godlike attributes. Whereas you?"*

Even though the play has as the main character one like Darren, it deals with many circumstances involving belonging – or rather, not belonging: race, with Darren, who is the only one who belongs in both groups, and also with the pertinent observation that baseball is "one of the few realms of American life in which people of color are routinely adulated by people of pallor" (act I); closely connected to the idea of race there is the concept of *nationality*, mainly through Kawabata, the Japanese player and two Hispanic characters, Martinez and Rodriguez. They are excluded from the very beginning, for they cannot speak English, therefore they are left out of dialogues with native speakers of English (Martinez and Rodriguez talk to one another, and Kawabata talks to himself); *sexuality*, which ends

up being the main focus of the play, once all the action is based on Darren's revealed homosexuality, and it also seems to be the only concrete chance society (his fellow players, the press, his friends) has to point their fingers at him.

A relevant proof of the fact that sexuality is the main factor to be taken into consideration in *Take Me Out* is that the most suggestive passage of the play is the dinner with Darren and his friend and fellow baseball player Davey Battle: the latter questions the former for drinking herbal tea, which implies that only belonging is not enough: one must also give proof of one's belonging. Merely being a successful baseball player is not enough to prove Darren a man, he must also drink beer, a manly drink. That is a serious reinforcement of the fact that appearance is a major feature when determining whether one belongs.

It is also suggestive that Darren and all the other players form a *team,* a group of people who is supposedly united and should focus their efforts towards the same objectives. After the revelation of Darren's homosexuality they all change their treatment with one another, and that apparent unity falls apart, the comradeship is gone and the bathroom jokes and games no longer exist. The only "world" where theoretically they all belonged despite their differences is destroyed. And that means that none of them, nor even Darren with his "godlike attributes", fully belongs.

CONCLUSION

In his *British Literature,* Anthony Burgess says in his chapter entitled *The Beginnings of Drama: "Drama is the most natural of the arts, being based on one of the most fundamental of the human and animal faculties – the faculty of imitation".* Bearing that in mind, it becomes easier to understand why drama is a genre that has always dealt in detail with our problems, and why it is so simple for us, readers/viewers to connect our own and backgrounds with the issues posed in the plays.

From its beginning in Ancient Greece, and through playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Aristophanes, drama has shown us not to try to escape from our destiny and to face our problems, otherwise we will be punished. Throughout the centuries and in various cultures and countries, dramatists such as Molière, William Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Henrik Ibsen, Bernard Shaw, Lillian Hellmann, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and, obviously, O'Neill, Williams, Albee and Greenberg have talked about their societies through various perspectives and approaches – but all of them understandable and coherent in one way or another despite their differences, because the audience/reader always has comparative parameters, facts and dilemmas to compare with their own lives.

The different approaches and questions posed in each play are a few amidst the innumerous possibilities. As it was mentioned before, feeling accepted as part of the world has been a crucial issue to us, maybe even more than actually being part of something. We all depend, in a moment or another, on approval from our superiors or our pairs. If pleasing everyone were possible, this discussion would be worthless and unnecessary, but there will always be someone to judge us for what we think, are or stand for. Reading these plays surely does not put and end to the discussion, but it makes us rethink our own patterns and values. By doing that, we can understand and respect other human beings more easily, and that, we all should know, is the first step for acceptance and, consequent real belonging.

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