

## John and His Loneliness in David Mamet's *The Cryptogram*

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**Abstract:** *This study encompasses the theme of loneliness as one of the commonest features of human beings in David Mamet's masterpiece play, The Cryptogram, leading to one's alienation and death. Mamet depicts an American family of three bothering from devaluation of ethical issues which cause an ultimate separation of John's mother and father. In this essay John's loneliness as a societal and psychological phenomenon is analyzed based Robert S. Weiss' interactive view of loneliness typology. Weiss conceptualizes loneliness as two different types: social and emotional. John as the only child of the family suffers from being neglected and his speech is full of secretive codes illustrating his loneliness. This paper studies the symptoms indicating John's loneliness and Mamet's skills in depicting this loneliness by using Weiss's viewpoints regarding loneliness. John can be considered as the central character of the play, someone whose loneliness is originated from the outsiders and it influences him in such a way that death is something favorable in his eyes than living under such a heavy unbearable conditions.*

**Key Words:** *Loneliness, Typology, Emotional Loneliness, Social Loneliness, Interactive View, Alienation*

### Introduction

Loneliness is a common problem having a long history in man's life leading to other serious problems like man's alienation from himself and from the others. Loneliness has been studied from different dimensions although it is just in its infancy. Many psychologists and sociologists have tried to theorized loneliness under various labels of which Weiss' *Interaction View* is of special weight since his explanations suggest a kind of loneliness typology. He believes that loneliness is neither a function of personality factors, nor of situational factors, but a product of both of them, i.e. loneliness is the combined effect of both personality and situational factors while in interaction. He differentiates two kinds of emotional and social loneliness. By emotional loneliness, he means the loneliness results from the absence of a close friend, a family member, or someone who you care about. The product of such a loneliness is anxiety, restlessness, and emptiness. Social loneliness, on the other hand, is the reaction of one who has been considered socially marginal and meaningless. Both of these two kinds of loneliness seem to have the capacity to initiate alienation as a both psychological and sociological in the man.

David Mamet, the contemporary American playwright who won a Pulitzer Prize for in 1982, was born in 1947 in Chicago. He depicts the problems of the American society with a psychological, sociological, and pathological viewpoint in his works. He makes the reader find out the causes and the roots of those problems by his style in writing that consists of incomplete utterances in chaos produced by the characters while leading to a meaningful message. It can be easily understood that people in today's society bother feelings of irresponsibility, loneliness, confusion, and illusions. During his artistic life, Mamet has tried show these feelings in his works since they have the strength to ruin our lives.

In *The Cryptogram*, Mamet shows an American family immersed in immorality and because of that it is going to experience a separation. John, the only child of the family, suffers from loneliness and its consequent anxiety, restlessness, insecurity, self-alienation, and fear. No one can help him to overcome the situation and his eventual fate is terrible. He is a boy of ten, but his behavior and words do not correspond to his age. He has no classmate, friend, brother or sister to share his thoughts with. He speaks like an adult and analyzes the situation of his family better than his mother and their family friend, Del. John's loneliness is not felt by the others. He is treated just like a child, although he resists and tries to show that he has grown up enough to analyze the family's problems. He has found out that he values nothing in the family and he is a big bother. At the end he puts an end to his loneliness and bewilderment by committing suicide.

### Review of Literature

Lousie C. Hawkey in his book *Loneliness* says that, "The most broadly accepted definition of loneliness is the distress that results from discrepancies between ideal and perceived social relationship." (24) In the other words, the needed social contact and the perceived one follows a continuum from low to high. When the perceived social contact is lower than the needed or desired one, it leads to loneliness. On the whole, loneliness is not a new issue although its scientific analysis is new and it must be differentiated from isolation, solitude, aloneness, or lonesome. Loneliness is a severe, continuous, and everlasting experience while the others are a normal transient state of mind may happen to anyone because of missing someone. Loneliness is state that may happen to someone while he or she is living with the others. It is an under skin state that can't be seen easily. Because of this essence, eight approaches are utilized by psychologists or sociologists to observe and analyze loneliness. The first psychoanalytic approach to loneliness was introduced by Zilboorg as Psychodynamic Models. In this approach, the roots of adult loneliness as an unpleasant experience are in his or her childhood. Roger's Phenomenological Perspective is the other approach to loneliness. Carl Rogers believes that the society impel the individuals to act in a limited but socially accepted way. When someone is going to pay attention to his or her inner self regardless of what the society desires, loneliness is born.

The third approach is the existential one in which it is believed that human beings are ultimately alone and one should try to come up with loneliness and enjoy it. Peplau, L.A (1982) asserts the existentialism approach to loneliness as “Existentialists encourage people to overcome their fear of loneliness and learn to use it positively.” (126) The other approach to loneliness comes under the title of Sociological Explanations which deals with loneliness as a sociological experience caused by a decline in group relationship, an increase of family mobility, or social mobility. They all creates a new environment for the subject who has other-directed personality. The one who puts his own desires aside to fulfill the others’. However Slater believes that the Americans’ problem is not having other-direction character but individualism. He believes that as human being we are sociable creatures interested in being with community and depending to others while the need of being with others is disappearing in American society and that’s because of new technology since it destroys the interdependence among the individuals. The fifth approach is Weiss’ interaction view which is the cornerstone of this paper and it will be discussed more precisely later. The cognitive approach to loneliness introduced by Peplau and her fellows in 1981. She distinguishes two levels of achieved and desired social contacts and believes that when the achieved social contact is less than the desired one, more loneliness will be the result. Derlega and Margulis introduce the other approach to loneliness under the title of a privacy approach by which, as Hawkley quotes in his book, they believe that “social relationships help the individuals to achieve various goals. Loneliness is caused by the absence of an appropriate partner who could assist in achieving these goals.”(129) The last and eighth approach is labeled as General System Theory proposed by Flander. In this approach, loneliness is seen as a behavior produced by several factors working with each other as a system simultaneously. (i.e. loneliness is the product of both individual and situational causes.)

The leading figure of the Interaction approach to loneliness is Weiss. His view of loneliness is interactionist since he believes loneliness in not solely the fruit of personality factors or the situational ones, but it is their combined effect. He also believes that social relationships like attachment, guidance, and a sense of worth are of importance while analyzing loneliness. He classifies loneliness into two kinds: Emotional and Social loneliness. Because of his classification, his view of loneliness is labeled as Weiss’s Typology. Emotional loneliness refers to lack of a close, intimate attachment like a lover. The result of such a loneliness is anxiety, restlessness, and fear. While social loneliness is a reaction to the lack of meaningful friendships or a sense of community. When the society doesn’t care about someone and his or her needs, he or she will feel being marginal, worthless, and to put it in Shakespeare’s words ‘to be or not to be, the problem is this.’ Weiss thinks that loneliness is a normal reaction produced by both internal and external causes although the external causes are more effective.

Mamet’s *The Cryptogram* is a gripping short play combining intelligence with terror and bewilderment. *The Cryptogram* is seemingly depicting a journey to nowhere. On a night in 1959 a boy is waiting to go on a camping trip with his father. His mother wants him to go to sleep. The

mother of the family, Donny, and her son, John and their family friend, Del, all are waiting for the father of the family, Robert, to join them. As the story flows, the reader finds out that the boy travels to nowhere since Robert has abandoned the family. It is the moment when the sheltering world is suddenly revealed as a place full of dangers for the boy. John has a central role in the play. He is a boy of ten but his words do not show his age. His speech is full of meaningful codes leading to a terrifying decision. John is the principal victim when Robert walks out on Donny and leaves the family. While his mother is not a wicked woman, she's so destroyed by her husband's abandonment that she hasn't the patience or the interest to deal with a little child of ten. "I love you", she tells the boy at one point, "but I can't like you." She comes to see Del as a reaction to her husband adultery.

### Methodology

Surely the method being utilized in this research is a qualitative one being established on an inductive approach base. First the play is analyzed to find out if the notion of loneliness based of the Weiss's typology can be extracted or not. After a careful analysis, the symptoms of loneliness are gathered and classified in Weiss's framework. At the end the conclusions are made to clarify if John bothers from loneliness, if so what kind.

### Findings

The play is of three acts each of which has its own characteristics. The first act is full of seemingly unrelated utterances produced by John and his mother and Del. In a conversation analysis one can easily find out that the turn-taking rule of conversation is not obeyed. They all are speaking most of the time unrelated up to the point of complete confusion. Nevertheless at the end of act one the reader is aware of everything. Such a style of writing proves that sometime irregularity is the best regularity. If someone wants to understand what's happening, he or she must always bear in mind all the words he or she has read up to that time. At the end of first act, it is obvious that the family is going to be smashed, a love is ended, a ten-year-old boy is severely anxious. The boy is alone and he cannot sleep anymore. A trip is planned but the destination is not clear. The presence of the boy's father is felt but he is absent. It is also comprehended that the boy is not just a boy. His words belongs to a grown-up guy. At the beginning of the second act, his philosophical viewpoint about the epistemology and the ontology of all he sees around himself gets clear when he says:

*"Maybe there's nothing on the thing that it is of. We don't know what's there. We don't know that those things are there."*

*Then he continues: "Or in the buildings we have not been in. Or in history. In the history of things. Or thoughts. I was lying there, and maybe there is no such thing as thought. Who says there is? Or human beings. And we are a dream. Who knows we are here? No one knows we are. We are a dream. We are just dreaming. I know we are. Or else ... or else... and how do*

*we know the things we know? We don't know what's real. All we do is say things. Where do we get them from? And, or that things, go on forever. Or that we're born. Or that dead people moan. Or that, or that there's hell. And maybe we are there. Maybe there are people who've been there. Or, or else why should we think it? That's what I don't know. And maybe everything is true. Maybe it's true that I'm sitting here...." (54)*

A boy of ten can never speak about the ontology and epistemology of creation. Here it is understood that he thinks more than his calendar age. In what follows in the play, gradually John is introduced as the protagonist of the play.

From the very beginning of the play, the audience are looking for cods, meaningful ones. When some objects are introduced in the play like: the rope, the knife, the broken teapot, and the blanket, the audience are trying to find out a meaningful connection among them. When John is expecting the third misfortune to happen, since he has read in a book that the misfortunes happens in three, the fragrance of a terrible incident is smelt. When John delivers his father's letter to his mother, some parts of the codes are revealed. The people living with each other do not love each other anymore therefore, Donny wants to put an end to their relations. She has some affairs with their family friend, Del. Her husband is also with other women. Neither of them care about their son. John isn't also eager anymore to continue this situation and that's when he speaks about death fearlessly. Throughout the play Del and Donny show their tendency to get rid of John and Del gives John a knife several times. At the end of the play John fulfills their desire.

Based on Weiss's typology of loneliness, John suffers from emotional loneliness. There is no one in his life who cares about him. His mother and father do not want him since his father has abandoned the family and his mother hates being with him. There is no other guy to listen to him and fulfill his demands. The blanket which is the symbol of love and being with family is torn and John is very anxious about his situation in the family and his future. When his mother complains: "why aren't you sleep?" or "What are you doing down here?" and when she force him to go to sleep in many places in the play, she rudely expresses her dissatisfaction of being with him.

When Del wants to give John the knife, he knows it is dangerous for a boy of ten to handle a knife, but his mother implicitly agrees to give him the knife and John reemphasizes that his father agrees, too. Mamet tries to say that John is alone and his parents cannot help him with his loneliness. He is living in loneliness so fearful and hatred that his belief in death is not bad, when he talks about death, he says: "It's not such a bad feeling, is it?" (78) John complains that her mother assumes him an object without feeling when he says: "No one understands. You think that I'm in something.... You don't know what I'm feeling." (57) This is a clue to his emotional loneliness. At the end of act two John in hallucination, speaks about death and loneliness: "In my

room. It was burning there. I said, "I'm perfectly alone." This is what I was saying a lone time. Cause I didn't have a pen. Did that ever happen to you?"(76) The jigsaw puzzle is being completed. He convinces himself to perform the third misfortune, his death, since he is alone and loneliness is fatal disease for everyone, especially a boy of ten who seems older than his age. John is anxious, and his anxiety has been depicted via irrelevant utterances scattered throughout the play. The other sign of John's emotional loneliness is his restlessness. He is tired and sleepy but he cannot sleep. Del says: "He has trouble sleeping." Then he continues: "That's his nature." This utterances rise this question, if restlessness is part of John's nature or not. His mother answers the question that all what happen to him every night have made him restless. Waiting for a long time to see his father coming back home has made him impatient. Therefore what has made John's loneliness is rooted from his environment.

Peplau (1982) quotes Weiss's social loneliness as "the absence of meaning friendship or a sense of community."(128) If the play is surveyed wholly, it is clear that John is an alone boy without any friends, classmates, or someone who cares about. The only people in his life are his continuous absent father, his selfish mother, and his family friend who has some affairs with his mother and somehow wants to get rid of him. He is a human being living in a society and family, but he is alone. No one can help to overcome his problems. In his loneliness, he speaks of others talking with him. He hears them and follows their conversation, especially at the end of the play he say: "I hear voices. They're calling me." Or "they are calling my name. Mother. They are calling my name." He is full of illusions and delusions, then.

There is no love in the family anymore and the blanket that is the symbol of love is torn. In so many places in the play, the boy is calling for the blanket. To remind his mother that there was love in the family once. He is afraid of loneliness and he has found love as an important factor to bring the family members to gather under a roof. Without love, the separation of the family members is certainly near to happen.

John also has found himself worthless and nothing. At the start of the second act, says:

"I thought that maybe there was nothing there. (Pause) I thought that nothing was there. Then I was looking at my book. It talked about the buildings. Maybe there's nothing in the buildings. And .... Or on my globe. You know my globe? You know my globe."(53)

In this short section of the play, he speaks of nothingness and the absurdity of the world and he himself as a small portion of the world. He can find nothing valuable in his world, his childish world full of problems caused by the adults around him.

Young John as focal point of the play has an astonishing character. He's a particular child whose loneliness and give his mind a special awareness. He is fascinated by the notion of thought. He

cannot sleep because of the thoughts. What kinds of thoughts are they? Are the thoughts harmful or useful? It is only understood that one of the factors that cause his loneliness are the thoughts, a factor to his illusion, too.

### Conclusion

David Mamet tries to depict the problems of modern American society and family in his play, *The Cryptogram*. In this play, a family is going to experience a separation. None of the parents wants to keep their son, John. Because of this, John feels severe loneliness, both emotionally and socially to put it in Weiss's Typology of Loneliness. His emotional loneliness has made him anxious, restless and alienated from himself and from the others. He cannot sleep well and he fears to sleep, too. His social loneliness also puts him in a situation with no friend, classmate, and partner of his age. His father and mother think about their own life and has forgotten John and his ruined world. At the end of the play, his loneliness and alienation force him to commit suicide, an incident seems not to be so bad for his so-called people in his life: his father, his mother, and their family friend.

### Suggestions and Recommendations

Loneliness as a psychological and societal phenomenon can't be studied without its causes and effects. If you shake a ring in a piece of chain, the rings before and after of that one, will surely be shaken. Because of this, for those who want to do a similar research on a given work of a given playwright or writer, I suggest to bear in mind to analyze the causes of loneliness, in addition to its effects so as to have a comprehensive research or maybe to find a cure for one's loneliness in real life by avoiding the causes creating loneliness. At the end there is popular saying in Persian regarding loneliness: Loneliness teaches us so many thing, but don't leave me, I want to be ignorant.

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