

Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* as the Play of Absurd and the Themes of Existentialism

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the themes of existentialism and absurdity in *The Zoo Story*, is a master piece play of the absurdity in the mood, where the playwright explores the different themes of existentialism, isolation, loneliness, paradox in communication as anathematization, social disparity and dehumanization in an artificial, produced and materialistic American society. These are some of the features of absurd play that reveal all the elements of absurd and social criticism in the sense of behavior, habits, and customs in the play. Edward Albee applies the absurd techniques to show a real like image of the south-east American multicultural society in the frame of present unreasonable, mental apathetic states, and self-destructive devalues of the generations throughout the play. The point is brought home by a meeting between two characters, Jerry and Peter. The whole action is in the form of a conversation between them until it culminates in the death of Jerry.

1- INTRODUCTION

Albee's "early works reflect his mastery and Americanization of the Theatre of the Absurd that found its peak in works by European playwrights such as Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett, and Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter etc." 1 The play examines the themes of alienation, loneliness and "dehumanization in a commercial world."2 At first, it was titled *Peter and Jerry* and the play was not approved by the New York producers. Later on, it was titled, *The Zoo Story* was published in 1958, that was emerged as Albee's first excellent absurdist play, showed the representation of the social disparity and dehumanization in the commercial world of today. Less than a month before his thirtieth birthday, he wrote *The Zoo Story*. For Albee, the process of writing the play was a transformative one as he says: "Something very, very interesting happened with the writing of that play. I didn't discover suddenly that I was a playwright; I discovered that I had been a playwright all my life, but I didn't know it because I hadn't written plays..... And so when I wrote *The Zoo Story*, I was able to start practicing my 'nature' fully."3

"I finished the play ' *The Zoo Story*' in three weeks Everything in my life had led to this moment; the writing seemed to flow some inner need and conviction."4 This marked the beginning of Albee's prolific and outstanding career as a playwright.

Recently (in 2004), Albee expanded *The Zoo Story* into a two-act play.

2- LITERATURE REVIEW

When *The Zoo Story* was written in 1958, Americans were racing to obtain what was called the American Dream. The background of the dream was the result of World War Second. World War Second left America and its allies in a horror condition. A great number of dead people, ruined buildings, diseases, collapsed economic broken social structure, broken hearted people, and poverty were the most common scenes at that time. It was difficult to get proper food and shelters. They saw that there were no ways out to overcome this situation but they were really aware that they had continued their lives. So Albee could create an atmosphere through these emerging burning social sources into his blooming writings to be able for using the various absurdist techniques in his *The Zoo Story* to employ the themes of existentialism for emphasizing on the absurdity of the situation, time, and place where with the generations are facing and suffering in the contemporary American artificial society.

3- METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses on the present status of society and the responses or conducts of people toward society. This paper highlights the social conditions at that time. So, sociological approach is used in order

to find out the social conditions at that time. This is used as there is a relationship between society and literary works. Even society produces its own literary works and by learning them we may know what kind of society it is behind the work.

4- OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper has many objectives to reveal the real images of the produced and materialistic society. It finds out the social background at the time that influences characters' behaviors either in their paradox dialogues and hidden attitude. Society holds a central point in forming human beings' attitude. The other objective of this study is to find out the response of the characters in facing that kind of social sufferings and conditions. In facing the society, a human being can do two things first he can accept the society where he lives in or he chooses to reject it. The Zoo Story, in this sense, is a social document which reflects the society and social condition when a literary work is written.

5- RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

The term, Theater of the absurd, was coined by the critic Martin Esslin, who in his book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, asserts that these dramatists write from a "sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of human condition".⁵ The Theatre of the Absurd is a Post-World War II designation for particular plays of absurdist fiction written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1950s, as well as one for the style of theatre which has evolved from their work. Their work focused largely on the idea of existentialism and expressed what happens when human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down. Logical construction and argument give way to irrational and illogical speech and to its ultimate conclusion, and silence.

The Absurd in the plays takes the form of man's reaction to a world apparently without meaning, and/or man as a puppet controlled or menaced by invisible outside forces. This style of writing was first popularized by the 1953 Samuel Becket's play *Waiting for Godot*. Though the term is applied to a wide range of plays, some characteristics coincide in many of the plays: broad comedy, often similar to

vaudeville, mixed with horrific or tragic images; characters caught in hopeless situations forced to do repetitive or meaningless actions; dialogue full of clichés, wordplay, and nonsense; plots that are cyclical or absurdly expansive; either a parody or dismissal of realism and the concept of the "well-made play". These plays were shaped by the political turmoil, scientific breakthrough, and social upheaval going on in the world around the playwrights during these times.

While absurdist believed that life is absurd, they also believed that death and the "after life" were equally absurd if not more and that whether people live or not all of their actions are pointless and everything will lead to the same end hence the repetitiveness in many of the absurdist plays.

5.2. THE ZOO STORY AS AN ABSURD PLAY

The Zoo Story written by Edward Albee is an absurd play and hence deviates from the conventional drama. The absurd play is a form of drama that emphasizes the existentialist philosophy of the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence.

The main characteristic of absurd plays is to show that life is essentially meaningless, hence miserable. There is no hope, because of the inevitable futility of men's efforts. Man is fascinated by death, which permanently replaces dreams and illusions. There is no action or plot. Very little happens, because nothing meaningful can happen. The final situation is absurd or comic.

The Zoo Story is a seminal work in that it introduces themes which recur in almost all of Albee's plays. The principal fact is the lack of contact between human beings and the reluctant apathy, indifference, self-destructiveness, and cruelty. The point is brought home by a meeting between two characters, Jerry and Peter. The whole action is in the form of a paradox conversation between them until it culminates in the death of Jerry. While, traditionally audiences expect the "well-made" play-life-like, psychologically realistic characters, witty dialogue, and well-crafted, causal plots with neatly tied up beginnings, middles, and ends. But the theater of the absurd subverts these expectations at every turn.

5.3. ABSURDIST QUALITIES IN THE ZOO STORY

Following are some of the features that are common in an Absurd play that can be seen in this play.

5.3.1. ESSENTIAL TRAITS

(a) Actually the Absurd play departs from realistic characters, situations and all of the associated theatrical conventions.

(b) Time, place and identity are ambiguous and fluid, and even basic causality frequently breaks down.

(c) Meaningless plots, repetitive or nonsensical dialogue and dramatic non-sequiturs are often used to create dream-like or even nightmare-like moods.

The setting, in other words, is meant to be all nice and quiet and comfortable to contrast with the dirty, messy unpleasantness and absurdity of existence. Everything looks neat and ordered, “with each animal in its cage, but it isn't. Be careful of the park—it's out to get you”.⁶ Though all these happen in an Absurd Play, there is a fine line between the careful and artful use of chaos and non-realistic elements and true, meaningless chaos. While the title seems to be quite random and meaningless on the surface, an underlying structure and meaning are usually found in the midst of the chaos.

5.3.2. CHARACTERS

In this play, the value is on a fictive location and the characters do not have any personality and often nameless, feel imprisoned, ignored, and not accepted by own society. The characters in the Absurdist drama are lost and floating in an incomprehensible universe and they have abandoned rational devices and discursive thought because these approaches are inadequate. Many characters appear as automatons stuck in routines speaking only in cliché. Characters are frequently stereotypical, archetypal, or flat character types as in *Commedia dell'arte*.

Here are two main characters Peter and Jerry. Both of these characters are almost the same from the beginning to the end. There is no character development in the play. The dramatist gave hardly any effort to portray their psychological development; and Albee applied only the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior and knowledge to Jerry's inner conflicts and

motivations to opt for self-immolation which leads to explore the mental, behavioral, and social factors that encourage Jerry to end with his own life that shows absurdity only in this play.

5.3.3. LANGUAGE

Despite its apparent nonsense language, a great number of the dialogues in Absurdist plays can be regarded naturalistic. The moments when characters resort to nonsense language or clichés— to Esslin when words appear to have lost their denotative function, thus creating misunderstanding among the characters—make Theatre of the Absurd distinctive. Language frequently gains a certain phonetic, rhythmical, almost musical quality, opening up a wide range of often comedic playfulness. It consists of absurd and naturalistic elements contradictory because of the inability of verbal communication and end of talks in the senseless dialogues where absurdism lies in the dialogue because it is more or less. Jerry's monologue is free from the time and conditions. Even though the absurdity lies in the title, *The Zoo Story*, where, a story is not told. The title refers only to its theme.

It can be said more about the play called *The Zoo Story*, but Jerry never actually tells us what happens at the zoo. That's how communication works in this play—poorly and strangely. Jerry babbles on and Peter doesn't understand him, and then there's more babbling and less understanding, and then there's sadness and screaming, all culminating with blood on the bench. Part of what's absurd about the Theater of the Absurd is that language doesn't work right; instead of giving us insight and knowledge, it just gives us confusion and discomfort. Language in the play seems designed to isolate us—which is maybe why Jerry feels the best form of connection he can hope for is to have somebody stab him, ‘Uh... yeah, that makes total sense’.⁷

5.3.4. PLOT

Traditional plot structures are rarely a consideration in Absurdist plays. Plots can consist of the absurd repetition of cliché and routine. Often there is a menacing outside force that never reveals why. Absence, emptiness, nothingness, and unresolved mysteries are central features in Absurdist plots.

In *The Zoo Story*, there are two characters, namely Peter and Jerry where Jerry is messed-up. He keeps two empty picture frames in his room because "I

don't have pictures of anyone to put in them," which is pretty much the most emoting we've heard since Simple Plan was sorry they couldn't be perfect" (113-115)⁸.

Jerry is unpredictable and dangerous, but that's why he holds our attention. "I find it hard to believe that people such as that really are" (145)⁹, Peter says, and though he's referring to Jerry's landlady, he could just as easily mean Jerry himself. Jerry doesn't fit; he doesn't work— "and that's annoying but delightful, too, like being tickled until you almost pee your pants"¹⁰. Peter's a boring guy. He's got a wife, two daughters, and a few parakeets and cats. He comes out to the park on Sunday and sits on the bench and reads Time magazine.¹¹

In part, Albee wrote the play because, he, too, thought Peter was a bit of a blank. "Jerry is a fully developed, three-dimensional character. But Peter is a backboard. He's not fully developed. Peter had to be more fleshed out,"¹² Albee told to an interviewer.

The story of the zoo is never told that keeps to absurd notion because it reflects how sometimes the world just doesn't make sense. According to the philosophy of absurdity, humans want to find value and meaning; they want to know what happened at the zoo. But the world frustrates them; it won't tell them about the zoo. This is why people, in general, are cranky and filled with despair. Or at least Jerry and Peter are. Yep, it's that kind of play. Therefore, the plot explores the life situation of the modern man, the pointless and absurdity of the human situation. The overall breakdown of values, the other incapacity for creative action and the ennui of routine life are seen as the manifestations of the malaise of the modern man. The absurdist viewpoint and generalized questions relating to existence self have been at the very heart of the play's inspiration. It is also possible to read the play as a picture of the problems and conflicts of an existential character.

Therefore, *The Zoo Story* contains almost all the elements of an absurd play. The play depicts the irrationalism of life in a grotesquely comic and non-consequential fashion with the element of metaphysical alienation and tragic anguish. At the time of production, there were two distinct opinions about the play; some called it a hoax and others called it a masterpiece. Nevertheless, *The Zoo Story* has claimed its place in literary history as a

masterpiece that changed the face of twentieth century American drama.

5.4. THEMES OF EXISTENTIALISM

The Zoo Story is not an old-fashioned play; but it shows the present burning issues of the two different social psychological standard problems as lower class and upper class. In the play, Albee chose affective location named Central Park that exhibits different community living conditioned people who gather on the open public reception, "there are no official opening events. There are no invitations. There are no tickets. Central park is public space open and free to all people"¹³. The playwright shows his worries socially to the public parks where people are alleged to live an animal cage life because present generations do not have social contacts consequently they are isolated, bias, and frustrated into their own existence. Therefore, American multicultural citizens are stayed beyond the civilized cultures and religions. Now, they are surviving under the shadow of the cold- morals and animal culture for using violence; while enlightened hearts have desires to their friendly communication and building up a relationship for someone has never been satisfied. Thus, it shows the conversational discrepancy between lower class and upper class in the American pathetic society; as well as Indian cultural cage of caste and creed system is facing from the centuries.

The lack of communication between Jerry and his landlady's vicious dog is merely an analogy for the hostility among living beings in a world in which alienation and lack of sympathy are deep-seated psychological conditions. The story of the dog leads to Jerry's zoo story, but the roundabout, digressionary mode of relation is emblematic of Edward Albee's style. This drama is one in which a lonely man on the verge of nervous breakdown desperately attempts to find at least one individual who will hear him out and come to an understanding of the existential plight that Jerry sees as a malaise in the world.

Although only in his late thirties, Jerry is in physical decline. His weariness is evidently a result of his sordid personal history: He is a product of a broken home and sacraments, the orphaned son of a promiscuous, alcoholic mother and a weak father. Deprived of a normal family environment—his

adoptive puritanical aunt dies prematurely— Jerry is apparently unable to find solid, loving relationships. His homosexuality separates him from others, and his seedy rooming house reeks of alienation. Its most vivid tenants are symptomatic of the problem that Jerry sees as a pathological contaminant of the contemporary life.

This one-act play tells the story of two New York citizens named Peter and Jerry who meet each other in the Central Park for the first time. Albee opens with an impressive display. Peter, the quiet, insular, middle-class publisher, is reading a book on "his" bench in the New York's Central Park. Along comes Jerry, who (as we will see) is not out for a stroll but urgently looking for someone with whom to talk. He spies Peter, approaches him, and begins the elaborate process of getting Peter (who wants only to be left alone) to put down his book and surrender to Jerry's desire to talk. This opening section of the play is too long to quote here, and in any case, should be read through or better still seen onstage, but it is a marvel of resourcefulness.

Jerry announces that he has been to the Zoo, and when that produces no response he yells it. Peter barely responds even to this, so Jerry changes tactics and begins to ask Peter questions about where they are in the Park and in what direction he has (therefore) been walking. Peter fills his pipe as a way of trying to ignore Jerry, who, seeing this, uses it as a way of accusing Peter of a kind of cowardice: "Well, boy; you're not going to get lung cancer, are you?"¹⁴ Peter does not rise to the bait, so Jerry becomes more aggressive and more graphic: "No, sir. What you'll probably get is cancer of the mouth, and then you'll have to wear one of those things Freud wore after they took one whole side of his jaw away. What do they call those things?"¹⁵

Suddenly Jerry starts asking Peter questions and although he is obvious that Peter is not interested in communicating with a man like Jerry, Peter answers because of his politeness.

Every time Peter wants to block the dialogue, Jerry turns to a new subject and gives him the feeling of being intolerant or arrogant if he does not answer, while they are talking, Jerry is the active one because he asks questions all the time. Peter is the passive one. It becomes clear very soon that Jerry has a

strong desire for communication. This becomes clear when he says:

"But every once a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody. Know all about him."¹⁶

The action is linear, unfolding in front of the audience in "real time". The elements of ironic humor and unrelenting dramatic suspense are brought to a climax when Jerry brings his victim down to his own savage level.

Eventually, Peter has had enough of his strange companion and tries to leave. Jerry begins pushing Peter off the bench and challenges him to fight for his territory. Unexpectedly, Jerry pulls a knife on Peter and then drops it as an initiative for Peter to grab. When Peter holds the knife defensively, Jerry charges him and impales himself on the knife. Bleeding on the park bench, Jerry finishes his zoo story by bringing it into the immediate present: "Could I have planned all this. No... no, I couldn't have. But I think I did." Horrified, Peter runs away from Jerry, whose dying words, "Oh...my...God", is a combination of scornful mimicry and supplication.

Through his conversation, Jerry tries to teach Peter the realities of life that Peter has tried to ignore. He also tries to teach Peter the nature of human existence and relationship but he fails and realizes his own absurdity.

The set-up of the play is idyllic. Peter, "a thoroughly respectable young executive, sits by himself, enjoying a Sunday afternoon reading in the park".¹⁷ The play's seeming serenity does not last long, however, as Anita Stenz remarks, "without warning, on a pleasant summer's day, the comfortable, self-reflecting work of (this) man shelters all around him."¹⁸ Indeed, by the play's end; Peter will have taken a man's life and had on his own inexorably altered. Peter has the appearance of the perfect life. He has an apartment in Manhattan's east 70s, a homemaker wife, two daughters, two parakeets, and an executive position on Madison Ave. For Albee, Peter is the symbol of the American bourgeoisie: a man, average in every way, whose life could have been ripped from the pages of a magazine.

The play's protagonist, Jerry, is created in diametric opposition to Peter, whereas Peter possesses an average, yet fit physique, Jerry's show signs of determination. His "once trim and the lightly muscled

body has begun to go to fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was.”¹⁹

From the play's inception, these two seemingly desperate lives of Peter and Jerry are primed for a collision. They meet in Central Park, a cultural no-man's land between Peter's east side paradise and Jerry's west side prison. The play's crowning achievement, however, is that, rather than focusing exclusively on their differences, Albee "presents them as sharing a profound sense of isolation.”²⁰

Jerry's existence is a solitary one typified by his short catalog of worldly possessions, which includes, among other things, several empty picture frames and a pack of pornographic playing cards. He has no friendship to speak of and a complete inability to achieve intimacy with another person. When discussing his past sexual exploits, he remarks,

“I wonder if it's said I never see, the little ladies more than once. I've never been able to have sex with, or, how is it put? make love to anybody more than once And now; oh, I do love the little ladies; really, I love them. For about an hour.”²¹

His relationships with these women are purely sexual. He makes no meaningful emotional connection with them – certainly nothing worth memorializing in one of his empty picture frames. Jerry's attitude about American life is characterized by the imagery of confinement. From the discussion of his hive-like rooming house to his story about the play's titular zoo, Jerry paints a picture of a society in which people are trapped and separated from one another by socio-economic and interpersonal barriers. The Zoo, in fact, provides the ultimate symbolic model for human (non) interaction:

Jerry –

“I went to the Zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals and the way the animals exist with each other, and with people too. It probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated 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.”²²

For Jerry, American life is a zoo, and he is animal trapped in it. So desperate is his need to escape his isolation that he sets upon Peter, a complete stranger, and begins to talk to him.

The young publishing executive is a representative of a culture that, in effect, denies Jerry's existence. For Peter, the reality is defined by images presented on television and in the Time advertisements. Jerry's description of his ghastly landlady astounds him:

Peter – It's so ...unthinkable. I find it hard to believe that people such as that really are.

Jerry- (lightly mocking) It's for reading about, isn't?

Peter- Yes.

Jerry- And fact is better left to fiction. You're right, Peter.

Jerry launches into the allegorical “Story of Jerry and the Dog”. (The Zoo Story, P.30). Over the course of the story, in which Jerry tries to assuage the anger of his landlady's dog, he first attempts to befriend the dog (unsuccessfully) and then resorts to poisoning it. When the dog becomes seriously ill, however, Jerry realizes that he has true affection for it. Jerry says:

Jerry – I loved the dog now, and I wanted him to try to kill, and both had been unsuccessfully by themselves ... It's just that It's just that if you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS!.....And where better, where ever better to communicate one single, simple-minded idea than in an entrance hell? ...than with A Dog. Just that; a dog.”²³

As Rose Zimbardo suggests that Jerry and the Dog present “a perfect model of most human relationships.”

After all, if he did acknowledge the truth of Jerry's story, he would also have to accept his own isolation and alienation, his own sterile distance from his wife and children, his own inability to feel. Jerry realizes, as he did with the dog, that kindness is not enough to make a connection with Peter. In order to force Peter to face his illusions, a violent act is necessary. He begins shoving Peter, talking more of the bench space for himself. He goads Peter, ridiculing his middle-class vacuity and hollowness. He says, “you fight, you miserable bastard; fight for that bench; fight for your packets; fight for your cats, fight for your two daughters; fight for your wife; fight for your manhood, you pathetic vegetable.”²⁴

Finally, a true connection between the two men has been made as Zimbardo rightly remarks, “Jerry dies for Peter. He dies to save Peter's soul from death by spiritual starvation.”²⁵ Bailey has labeled Jerry's murder / suicide a “meta-theatrical shock effect.”²⁶

By forcing Peter to kill Jerry, Albee creates a vivid moment of stage violence that will be imprinted indelibly on sun audience.

Some early critics and reviewers criticized *The Zoo Story* as being overtly and overly pessimistic or nihilistic. In a review of the original production (which was doubly billed with Samuel Beckett's play, *Krapp's Last Tape*) a critic wrote, "Nothing in during value is said in either play. Each of them captures the dismal mood that infects many writers today." - (Atkinson: 2006:37). Such a reading of *The Zoo Story* suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of the play: The playwright himself once commented that "The Zoo Story is neither nihilistic nor pessimistic. My hero is not a beatnik and he is not insane. He is over-sane. Though he dies, he passes on an awareness of life to the other character in the play; the play, therefore is obviously not a denial of life."²⁷ Indeed, Jerry's death, though tragic, suggests significantly that communication is possible if only we choose to stand up and fight for our 'bench'.

Albee's created this masterpiece is both subtle and complex, and it reflects the tension between realism and the Theater of the Absurd. Thus, the action and dialogue of *The Zoo Story* are dislocated, arbitrary, and absurd up to the moment of Jerry's death. Jerry spends his dying breath telling the audience what the play means. Jerry explains to Peter the farce and the agony of human isolation. It is because human isolation is so great, and because the "contact" that would end it is so painful and difficult to obtain, that Jerry went to the zoo. What he discovered that the entire human condition is a zoo story of people (and animals) forever separated by bars. From his experience with the dog, which symbolizes the vicious aspects of society, Jerry learned "the teaching emotion," that combination of kindness and cruelty that forms, for him at least, life itself.

At the same time, Albee engages his audience in harsh social criticism as he attacks the American way of life, the way in which Americans are assumed and expected to live. In the play, Albee explores the relationship between the observed world and its inner reality. He uses the images of non-reason in his attack on the American way of life without accepting the absurdist vision that generated them.

6- CONCLUSION

The Zoo story, thus, has always and everywhere been considered as being a representative play of the Theatre of the Absurd. In *The Zoo Story*, Edward Albee explores the themes of existentialism and absurdism. Here the playwright points out the idea that human life is both fundamentally absurd and terrifying, therefore, communication through language is equally absurd. It is mainly through the protagonist Jerry; a "permanent transient" the dramatist expounds the central themes of existentialism, dadaism, surrealism, and absurdism. Existentialism treats an individual as a conscious being who leads a life of anguish, resistance, revolt, absurdity, and alienation amidst the encircling nothingness or zeroness and to whom death is as unimportant and meaningless as birth. In this case, it can be safely said that Jerry comes out as a perfect symbol of the absurdist individuals who are conscious and whose consciousness makes them suffer miserably.

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