

The Caged Soul: A Study of Edward Albee's The Zoo Story

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ABSTRACT

Edward Albee is one of the world-wide known dramatists. His plays question broad issues that have to do with the dilemmas of the modern man in general. One of these issues is the caged existence of the modern man. He portrays characters who are victims to their gruesome liveness. They live on the margin of their society, and they are estranged almost from their fellow people.

Thus, this paper tries to examine Albee's treatment of the theme of the caged being of man in one of his outstanding plays, *The Zoo Story*, focusing on the alienated life of Jerry who lives and dies in his zoo, with no recognition or sympathy from the people of his society. It also examines how Jerry seeks redemption through media, which he hopes to give him a name for his nameless existence.

Edward Albee (1928-) is one of the prominent American playwrights. His plays received both national and international recognition due to the fact that they deal with the quandary of the human being and his inability to make plausible contacts with other people in his society. Albee's plays focus on how man's attempts to lay bridges of understanding with his fellow citizens stagger and reach a close end. Man is portrayed in Albee's plays as an alienated creature, who is cut loose from the people around him. He lives aloof with no real contacts. Moreover, he is totally neglected and ultimately dehumanized. Albee delineates modern man as a caged animal, who lost his freedom and his

identity. Thus, the present study deals with one of Albee's most famous plays, *The Zoo Story*, showing how man is treated as a caged soul, estranged from his society, and symbolically treated as an animal in a zoo.

The Zoo Story was written in 1958, and it took Albee only three weeks to finish it. It was first rejected by the New York Producers because of its absurd themes and its violent end; therefore, the play was first staged in Europe, premiering in Berlin at the Schiller Theater Werkstatt on September 28, 1959. Later on, people started to realize the real message the play conveyed and they started to identify themselves with the deep and miserable intent of its content. Thus, the play, afterwards, was performed successively in America, as well as in England. It is the same play that launched Albee into the national and international recognition. Not only this, it gave Albee a literary reputation, where a host of playwrights wrote plays using Albee's same techniques. *The Zoo Story* is the work that, in the words of playwright John Guare, "spawned a whole generation of park bench plays. . . . To show you were avant-garde, you needed no more than a dark room and a park bench."¹

The play consists of one act only, and it contains two characters, Jerry and Peter. The play begins with Peter who is sitting on the bench in the Central Park of New York, reading his morning newspaper. He is described in the stage directions as "a man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely. He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses. Although he is moving into middle age, his dress and his manner would suggest a man younger."² Jerry, on the other hand, appears to be a man who is disheveled and not well-looking. Albee describes him in the stage directions as a "man in his late thirties, not poorly dressed, but carelessly. What was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go to fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was. His fall from physical grace should not suggest debauchery; he has, to come closest to it, a great weariness" (ibid.). The differences between Peter and Jerry suggest their

discrepancy not only in shape and clothing but also the type of life they lead. Albee insinuates in the stage directions that Peter's and Jerry's different worlds can never be redeemed. Peter is an ordinary publishing executive, who is leading a very calm and settled life, while Jerry lives alone, no family and no friends.

The setting of the play is very important. Parallel to the caged animals in the zoo is the caged man who is no longer free. The restraints and complexities of the modern age incarcerate him and alienate him from his fellow people. He is striving alone to ascertain his own being but to no avail. He loses his contact even with animals. Jerry's visit to the zoo shows his desperate attempt to find contact with other human beings. That is why he comes to the zoo, in the hope that he might find intimacy with other creatures.

The action of the play starts with Jerry accentuating his presence in the zoo: "I've been to the zoo. [PETER *doesn't notice.*] I said, I've been to the zoo. MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO" (ibid.)! From the start of the play, Jerry behaves like a caged animal. He behaves like a desperate creature who knows that no one cares about him. Accordingly, he tries to draw the attention of others by repeating his statements over and over. Not only this, he keeps talking and asking questions, without waiting for Peter to finish his speech. This indicates his eagerness to talk and to be listened to rather than being talked too. Lisa M. Siefker suggests that Jerry "wants to give voice to the people of his stratum whose bypassed histories seem lost in the fast-paced tumult of society."³

Jerry feels that his life is useless, therefore, he decides to annihilate himself. He keeps telling Peter: "You'll read about it in the papers tomorrow, if you don't see it on your TV tonight. You have TV, haven't you" (656)? Peter seems to be totally ignorant of what Jerry means. What Jerry asks for is a little recognition from the oblivious people who do not have any concern for each other. He feels that the best way to achieve that is by putting an end for his life, in the hope that his death might grant him that wish.

Jerry in fact seems not to belong to the world he dwells in. He does not have any relation with any one. He really does not talk to people

because he feels that he does not concern anybody and that one ever cares to know about him:

JERRY: I'll tell you why I do it; I don't talk to many people, except to say like: give me a beer, or where's the john, or what time does the feature go on, or keep your hands to yourself, buddy. You know 'things like that.

PETER: I must say I don't ...

JERRY: But every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody, know all about him.

PETER: [*Lightly laughing, still a little uncomfortable*] And am I the guinea pig for today ?

JERRY: On a sun-drenched Sunday afternoon like this? Who better than a nice married man with two daughters and ... uh ... a dog? [PETER *shakes his head.*] No? Two dogs. [PETER *shakes his head again.*]Hm. No dogs? [PETER *shakes his head, sadly.*] Oh, that's a shame. But you look like an animal man. CATS? [PETER *nods his head, ruefully.*] Cats ! But, that can't be your idea. No, sir. Your wife and daughters? [PETER *nods his head.*] Is there anything else I should know? **(656-657)**

Jerry tries hard to create meaning in his life, but he does not succeed. This sense of meaninglessness and emptiness gives him the impression that he is like a caged animal in a zoo. So, the best way to get rid of this is to dispose of his life. He chooses to end it with Peter, the well-to-do husband with two daughters and a prosperous business. Jerry and Peter symbolize two different worlds, the world of success and prosperity, and the world of the caged and alienated souls whose lives are barely of any concern for anyone. Seifker notes that "Jerry's interruption of Peter's Sunday ritual of reading in Central Park escalates from a conversation with a stranger to a clash of two very different worlds."⁴

Albee chooses totally two different persons to heighten the sense of misery and deplorability that some people suffer from and whose suffering is unheeded by other people. As is mentioned above, Jerry, a

symbol of degradation and depravity, confronts the successful Peter in the zoo. This leaves the impression that as if Albee intended to say that those who came to enjoy watching the caged animals in the zoo are not aware of the animals' suffering. In the same vein, people, like Jerry, are like those caged animals which are watched but those who watch them are not conscious of the inferno those caged souls live in.

Jerry's world of the caged souls seems to incorporate people who live on the margin of the society. They live and die and no one knows about that. Jerry tells Peter:

I live on the top floor; rear; west. It's a laughably small room, and one of my walls is made of beaverboard; this beaverboard separates my room from another laughably small room, so I assume that the two rooms were once one room, a small room, but not necessarily laughable. The room beyond my beaver board wall is occupied by a coloured queen who always keeps his door open; well, not always but always when he's plucking his eyebrows, which he does with Buddhist concentration. This coloured queen has rotten teeth, which is rare, and he has a Japanese kimono, which is also pretty rare; and he wears this kimono to and from the john in the hall, which is pretty frequent. I mean, he goes to the john a lot. He never bothers me, and never brings anyone up to his room. All he does is pluck his eyebrows, wear his kimono and go to the john. Now, the two front rooms on my floor are a little larger, I guess; but they're pretty small, too. There's a Puerto Rican family in one of them, a husband, a wife, and some kids; I don't know how many. These people entertain a lot. And in the other front room, there's somebody living there, but I don't know who it is. I've never seen who it is. Never. Never ever. (658-659)

Jerry's "laughably small room" is bordered by other apartment living quarters dwelt by characters as single and pariah as Jerry: a coloured queen, a Puerto Rican family, and someone else who is alienated even a step further than the others in the building. Jerry's life

outside the mainstream “doesn’t sound like a very nice place,” (659) to Peter, who lives in an easily definable and average apartment. Jerry describes very accurately his cage in which he lives with no human relations and understanding for each other. This in fact justifies his eagerness to speak with Peter. Even when Jerry asks Peter a question, he does not wait for the answer. He just wants to speak no matter about what. In fact most of the speech in the play is said by him. Peter speaks very little. Jerry wants to establish communication with Peter, because, as is seen above, he does not talk to any one. Like the caged animals, he is just watched and his presence is felt, but no one talks to him or realizes what he wants and what he does not.

Jerry knows every single inch in his flat. Because he does not have anything to do, he keeps looking at his walls and his flat. Thus he memorizes everything in his flat perfectly, and he is ready to describe that to people. He tells Peter:

What I do have, I have toilet articles, a few clothes, a hot plate that I'm not supposed to have, a can opener, one that works with a key, you know: a Knife, two forks, and two spoons, one small, one large; three plates, a cup, a saucer, a drinking glass, two picture frames, both empty, eight or nine books. (**Ibid.**)

After hearing Jerry list his odd possessions, Peter asks, “About those empty picture frames...” (**ibid.**) ? To which Jerry answers: “I don’t see why they need any explanation at all. Isn’t it clear? I don’t have any pictures of anyone to put in them”(659-660). Jerry’s answer does not make sense to Peter, as he surely could have pictures of his parents or his aunt in those frames if he so desired. The emptiness of Jerry’s life is reflected by the empty frames he has. Had he succeeded in filling these frames, he could have filled the void of his life, and he could have made sense for his senseless life.

Jerry in fact was looking for audience to tell his stories. He feels the need to tell his stories in the hope that he can create some memorable incidents that will immortalize him. He realizes that he should find

escape from his grotesque alienation that overshadows his life through media. That is why he starts to tell Peter stories of his own life, starting with the story of the old Pop and old Mom. Then he tells the story of the notorious gatekeeper lady, who “leans around in the entrance hall, spying to see that I don't bring in things or people”(662). Jerry goes on narrating how that lady used to stop him when he comes to “press her disgusting body up against me to keep me in a corner so she can talk to me”(ibid.). She makes Jerry “the object of her sweaty lust”(ibid.). Even this lady treats Jerry as an animal whom she can use to gratify her sexual desires whenever she wants. She does not care about his existence and about his feelings. She can treat him the way she likes without any consideration to what he likes or he does not. It is interesting to notice that Jerry succeeds to control her with his stories:

But I have found a way to keep her off. When she talks to me, when she presses herself to my body and mumbles about her room and how I should come there, I merely say: but, Love; wasn't yesterday enough for you, and the day before? Then she puzzles, she makes slits of her eyes, she sways a little, and then, Peter... and it is at this moment that I think I might be doing some good in that tormented house...a simple-minded smile begins to form on her unthinkable face, and she giggles and groans as she thinks about yesterday and the day before; as she believes and relives what never happened. (**Ibid.**)

Jerry wards off the lady's sexual advances by embedding stories of their sexual memories in her mind. This allows the lady to conjecture memories of their imaginary love-making, which gratifies her sexual desires. In this way Jerry succeeds in deflecting her advances and he allows her to reproduce their imaginary love-making in her memory.⁵ This incident teaches Jerry to resort to stories to fill the void of his life. He learns to use the power of his stories to find some meaning to his hollow life. He makes his existence real for Peter through his stories.

Before that Jerry's world was not known for Peter. Thus, he feels that he must transfer his stories from his private realm to that shared by someone else. He feels the need to document his own history that must go beyond his enclosed and caged existence. Albee's message is that they must evolve beyond their incarcerated being. Matthew Roudané finds in *The Zoo Story* "the potential for regeneration, a source of optimism which underlies the overtly aggressive text and performance."⁶

Jerry then starts to narrate a series of shorter stories, before enacting the story of his life. The aim of these stories is to prepare Peter for the final story in which Peter is an audience as well as an actor. The most serious and moving story Jerry narrates is the story of the dog. This dog belongs to the gatekeeper lady. It is this same story that forces Jerry to come to the zoo to put an end for his caged existence: "But, it's why I went to the zoo today, and why I walked north ... northerly, rather ... until I came here"(663) . Jerry narrates his account of the dog story describing how the dog used to attack him whenever he came back home. Jerry thought of poisoning the dog to get rid of it. He put a poisonous piece of meat to the dog and it ate it, the second day the dog became sick, but it recovered. Jerry thought that he must establish a relationship with the dog because he is so hopeless to have any relation with the human beings. He tells Peter: "It's just that if you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS" (667)! Jerry hopes to find in his relation with the dog what he does not find in his relation with man:

Now, here is what I had wanted to happen: I loved the dog now, and I wanted him to love me. I had tried to love, and I had tried to kill, and both had been unsuccessful by themselves. I hoped ... and I don't really know why I expected the dog to understand anything, much less my motivations . . . I hoped that the dog would understand. (666)

But to Jerry's misfortune, the dog never loves Jerry. Jerry remains in his solitary life, like an animal in the zoo. He fails to make a

communication with neither a man nor an animal. Martin Esslin argues about Jerry's "inability to establish genuine contact with a dog, let alone a human being."⁷ Jerry wants desperately to communicate with someone, but he fails and he fails not only with people but with animals as well. This story of the dog is similar to the story of Jerry. Albee himself comments on the affinity between these two stories in an interview: "I suppose the dog story in *The Zoo Story*, to a certain extent, is a microcosm of the play by the fact that people are not communicating, ultimately failing and trying and failing."⁸

Thus, after Jerry fails to achieve his aim with the dog, he decides to come to the zoo to put an end to his life. He loses the chance to communicate with someone, so, nothing in his life is worth living for. He is not saved from his caged existence through finding his own real identity. He reaches the conclusion that "animals are indifferent to me...like people (*he smiles slightly*)...most of the time" (663). His caged soul remains unknown, unbefriended, and it lives in the middle of nowhere. No one seems really to care for him neither humans nor animals.

After the dog story Jerry narrates for Peter, he all of a sudden quarrels with him over the bench. This quarrel is just a pretext that Jerry feigns in order to find a way to kill himself. Jerry in fact preplans for his death. He wants someone to kill him so that his death will be reported in the media, and in this way he will be identified. In spite of this, he does not want to get Peter involved, but he must enact murder. To be murdered is more effective in media than to commit suicide. He can kill himself "but his suicide would not be remarkable enough to create much, if any, narrative in the media. Murder has a chance of making the news."⁹ He wants to put a meaningful end to his life. He spent his life unidentified and unknown; therefore, he wished that his end might have some meaning.

Ultimately, Jerry performs the rituals of his self-destruction when he impales on the knife, thus killing himself, but showing it was done by someone else. He finally feels that he achieves his aim for the first time in his life, thus he dies thanking Peter: "Thank you, Peter. I mean that, now;

thank you very much. [PETER's mouth drops open. He cannot move; he is transfixed.] Oh, Peter, I was so afraid I'd drive you away. [He laughs as best he can.] (673-673) You don't know how afraid I was you'd go away and leave me." Thereupon, Jerry alleviates his troubled conscience, when he finds a proper end for his suffering. He feels that his caged soul is now released. Only through death could Jerry establish communication with the careless people.

Jerry then asks Peter to leave quickly before the arrival of the police so that they will not notice him and blame him for killing Jerry. This proves that Jerry does not think of intriguing Peter in his death plan. He just wants an actor for his zoo story, and Peter unconsciously was an actor in this play which was metatheatrically performed in front of us. The zoo story thus is the story of the caged soul that lost its meaning in a meaningless world that cares for mundane and materialistic things than for human ones.

All in all, *The Zoo Story* enacts the story of the caged isolation of the modern man, whose real essence is lost in a world where people do not consider human values, but materialistic ones. Jerry is a caged man. His existence is similar to that of the caged animals in the zoo. He lives physically but he is dead spiritually. He is treated as an animal. His presence is felt, but no one cares for him. He is cut loose from the flux of the human civilization. He lives on the margins of his society. His apartment serves as his cage. He even does not know the names of his neighbours. He calls them by titles or descriptive words. His death is a protest against the deplorable and unjust circumstances that shade modern man's life and cage him. Thus he wishes that his death might add meaning to his meaningless life.

NOTES

¹John Guare, quoted in Mark Arnest, “Zoo Keeps Albee’s Brilliance on Exhibit” in http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4191/is_20010608/ai_n9988123?tag=content;col1. Page - 11 - of 12. Retrieved: January 20, 2009.

²Edward Albee, *The Zoo Story*, in *Twentieth Century Drama: England, Ireland, the United States*, eds. Ruby Cohn and Bernard Dukore, (New York: Random House, 1966), 654. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically in my text, showing page numbers.

³Lisa M. Siefker, “Absurdly American: Rediscovering the Representation of Violence in *The Zoo Story*,” in *Edward Albee: A Case Book*, ed., Bruce J. Mann (New York: Taylor and Francis Books, 2005), 34.

⁴Ibid., 40.

⁵Ibid. 39.

⁶Matthew Roudané, C. *Understanding Edward Albee*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 42-43.

⁷Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Anchor Publishing, 1969), 267.

⁸Edward Albee, quoted in Kathy Sullivan, “Albee at Notre Dame,” in *Conversations with Edward Albee*, ed. Phillip C. Kolin. Jackson , (University Press of Mississippi, 1988),184.

⁹Lisa M. Seiker, 42.

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