



MATERIALISM AND TRAGEDY: EDWARD'S IDEA IN *THE ZOO STORY*

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ABSTRACT

The tragic vision of Edward Albee is very different from the masters of classical tragedies. In the classical drama, tragedy was related to the persons of higher class like kings, queens, generals and courtiers or some other members of the upper class. The reasons of meeting the tragic fate in the classical heroes and heroines were also the serious issues of life. The tragedy occurred either because of hamartia or caused by divine interventions. In the twentieth century the human life is also faced with the serious issues that bring a crisis of different nature, and this crisis in human life is related to the consumerist, materialistic and individualistic social system.

INTRODUCTION

Edward Albee brings out this kind of crisis of modern human life in almost all of his plays. The crisis of modern human life is due to the lack of communication, individualism, materialism, alienation and lack of motivation for living life. Edward Albee in his plays explores the tragedy of the modern man in a very sensitive and comprehensive way. From the beginning of his career his ears were sensitive to the voices of anguish of human life. In this chapter I have analyzed four very important plays of the playwright to make the sense of the tragedy that has engulfed the human life. These plays are significant because the theme together with the technique powerfully convey the existentialist crisis of modern man. In analyzing Edward Albee's plays, it is necessary that only the themes do not become the focus of the analysis, the technique is analyzed for making a complete sense of Albee's idea of the tragedy. Albee himself writes in the introduction of his first collection of his plays:

"I never talk or write about what my plays are "about", their meanings." I find them all quite clear (as I do Becket, for example, one of the most naturalistic playwrights) to anyone who approaches them as unique experiences and participates in them



unfettered by notions of what a play should “be”, what it should “say”, or how it should go about its business.” (The Collected Plays of Edward Albee 1958-1965 P.9)

Albee is one of those great American playwrights who have presented human being's isolation and loneliness in very acute and sensitive manner. It can be said that Edward Albee is slightly controversial playwright and his works are considered well-crafted and often unsympathetic examinations of the modern condition. Alienation is not a new theme presented in American drama, nor is it a twentieth century phenomenon, it is found in literature from Beowulf to the modern fiction. However 20th century alienation is different from earlier sense of alienation. Alienation is the focusing point in the play *The Zoo Story*.

The first important play by Edward Albee is *The Zoo Story* that was first produced in Berlin, Germany on Sep 28, 1959 at the Schiller Theatre Werkstatt. In three months time, it came to America. It was staged at Broadway on January 14, 1960. It made a strong impact on the critics and the audience. It revitalized the theatre because it depicted the deep rooted crisis in human life. Albee combined the realistic and absurd elements to deal with the issues of human isolation, loneliness, class differences and the dangers of in action. He emphasized the role of community life and social interaction.

The Zoo Story, points out the theme of alienation, isolation, loneliness and frustration. The major themes in this realistic and symbolic drama are the loneliness and lack of communication of a frustrated man who tries to make contact with another human being and who finally binds himself to death. The play presents characters who suffer from the lack of tangible human relationships, the sense of loneliness and from being alienated and isolated from the other members of their own society. This suffering compels him to commit suicide. The play focuses on the reasons out of which the characters alienation springs and presents the consequences that finally result is death.

When the play opens, Peter is seen to be seated on the bench in the central park. He is reading a book, he stops reading, cleans his glasses, goes back to reading, when Jerry enters the scene, he repeats the line three times-“I have been to the zoo” (*The Zoo Story P.15*), and after this we find that there is a series of conversation between the two characters but every time there is an attempt to make meaning, but the attempts fail. Jerry wants to communicate but his life is such that he almost realizes that communication is a question that has not been answered. He says, "But every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk, like to get to know somebody, know all about him" (*The Zoo Story P 8*). On the other hand Peter simply does not seem capable of communicating, for he has surrendered his openness and perceptiveness to his traditional lifestyle and philosophy of life. The question that arises is – are they truly trying to communicate? Except for his communication with the dog, which, in recounting, he is honest and sincere for perhaps the only time in the play, he shows only anger and bitterness.



In a crowded city such as Manhattan, it is no wonder that a man like Jerry feels loneliness. He is without a friend, a mother and father, and wife, children, and a dog, that many others have. He is thrown in a world that he feels does not want him, and his human flaw of wanting to escape loneliness led to his tragic death. All Jerry wants is to be heard and understood, and in the end, after sharing his life story with a complete stranger, he gets his final wish – death. *The Zoo Story* not only tells about the alienation of man in modern society, but also reflects the philosophy of twentieth century existentialism.

The Zoo Story is symbolic as Edward Albee considers the whole city of New York as a zoo in which the people live in their respective cages, isolated from others. The people know that there are others also who live in their confinements in their neighborhood but they can't communicate with each other. This leads to ultimate tragedy of human life – the tragedy of human isolation, loneliness and lack of communication. Jerry makes a conscious choice of wanting to end his life, while Peter, a man who chooses to act as the "guinea pig" and stays and listens to Jerry's story, made a conscious choice of picking up the same knife that killed Jerry. Although it was Peter who held the knife that killed Jerry, it is Jerry who takes the responsibility to, despite great effort and pain, wipe the knife handle clean of fingerprints, to allow no trace of the murderer. However, although Peter escapes without responsibility, he has to deal with the guilt that it was he who held the weapon that ended the life of Jerry.

The Zoo Story can be analysed from the point of view of the characters and their actions. This play portrays a situation in which Jerry is in a state of loneliness and alienation, but desperately tries to come into contact with other people. He lives in the age of affluence. Yet, he cannot enjoy the prosperity that the country provided at that time. Jerry's sufferings arising from his sense of alienation and social disparity have actually become the hidden motivation to commit suicide. However, on the superficial level there are no apparent reasons that lead him to commit suicide. Peter and also the spectators never expect that Jerry would take such step. If his fatal action is caused by the quarrel about the bench, then, it is totally unmotivated.

Albert Camus mentions that people commit suicide because they judge that "life is not worth living". According to Camus, a reason for living is the same as a reason for dying. People may kill themselves for the ideas and illusions that give them the reason for living (Camus, 1991:4). Camus provides further explanation of the uselessness of suffering and the loss of the will to live. A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. All healthy men having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and

longing for death (Camus, 1991:6). Under the above circumstances, it can be said that it is the reason for Jerry to commit suicide. Jerry has reasons to end his life as he thinks that his suffering is useless. He has tried very hard to realize his ideas and dreams in making Peter understand the importance of contact with others. However, he fails in doing so. Then he thinks that by committing suicide he will be able to dislodge Peter from his alienation and his apathy toward the reality of life in his surroundings. Jerry does not think about the necessity to defend his life as he thinks that his life is not worth living. On the other side, Jerry has the illusion that after he commits suicide then he will be able to give a new perspective to Peter's life. Newspapers often mention that personal problems such as deep sorrows and miserable and acute illness may comprise the primary reasons for committing suicide.

Modern societies tend to have high rates of suicide because they lack kinds of secure and interpersonal relationships. According to Durkheim, the act of committing suicide is caused by a social condition rather than by the personal temperament of the doer. A high rate of suicide shown by a certain society indicates weaknesses in the web of relationships among the members of the society and not weaknesses of the personality of the people (qtd. In Stark, 1998: 7). Based on these notions, it can be said that Jerry's suicide is caused by the impact of modernization in American society. As has been mentioned previously, Jerry lives in New York City, which he calls the greatest city in the world (Albee, 1960:37)" Yet, he does not have interpersonal relationships. He is alienated from other people. The problem of alienation that he suffers, coupled with the dimming optimism of living in a modern society have led him to commit such a fatal deed.

The Zoo Story portrays the problem of alienation in big American cities especially in the mid-twentieth century. Jerry is a low class proletariat who suffers from the absence of personal contact; feelings of loneliness, meaninglessness, isolation, separation and discontent. In *The Zoo Story* Albee stresses the need for man to break his self-alienation and complacency and to make contact with his fellow men. For Albee, true human relationships are very essential. Therefore, he tries to attack the indifference and sterility of contemporary American society. The play carries a message for people living in modern life who are confined within individual walls. All in all, this play challenges not only American life in the mid-twentieth century, but also the void of life in modern times. The absurdity of life, as depicted in the play, can be overcome by building the awareness that humans are social beings, therefore they need to build positive and meaningful relationship with others. In order to live in harmony, people need the nerve to break the bars and walls limiting their lives.

Throughout the play Jerry tries mainly to provoke Peter and make him respond. He repeats this sentence "I have been to the zoo" to make Peter respond to him, but the latter is so preoccupied with the mental realm of his book pays little attention: "Jerry: I've been to the zoo.(Peter does not notice) I said, I've been to the zoo. MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO! Peter: Hm?...What?...I'm sorry, were you talking to me ?"(The Zoo Story P.21) Peter

hardly pays any attention to Jerry. He, as a result, is obliged to be in midway between reading his book and hearing Jerry's provocations. Thus the provocative intrusion and questions of Jerry impel Peter to talk to Jerry and to reveal a number of facts about him. He tells Jerry that his possessions are one wife, two daughters, two parakeets, two television sets, an apartment, an executive position with a small publishing house, an annual \$ 18,000 income. Jerry, in return, tells him that he lives in a small room in a house in a poor section of the city. He knows who the other tenants are, but he does not know them as people. In other words, he does not have real communications and contacts with his neighboring tenants. He tells Peter about the place where he and the other tenants live:

I live on the top floor; rear; west. It's a laughable small room, and one of my walls is made of beaverboard separates my room from another laughable small room. So I assume that the two room were once one room, a small room. But not necessarily laughable. The room beyond my beaverboard wall is occupied by a colored queen who always keeps his door pen; well, not always but always when he is plucking his brows which he does with Buddhist concentration...He never bothers me and never brings anyone up to his room.(The Zoo Story P.21)

Jerry tells Peter about the woman and her dog. She is ugly, almost like an animal in seeking to satiate her lust. She wants to use Jerry as the tool to satisfy all her sexual desires. To avoid her animalistic desire, he keeps her imagining that they have had previous sexual sessions:

I merely say: but, love; wasn't yesterday enough for you and the day before? Then she puzzles, she makes slits of her tiny eyes, she says a little, and then, Peter...and it is at this moment that I think I might be doing some good in that tormented house...as she believes what never happened. (The Zoo Story P.32)

making a previous, though nonexistent, illusion that may give her some sort of pleasure. Thus the relationship between them cannot be considered as a real human contact because it is built on sexual perversion which does not last except for transitory moments. So evasion on the part of Jerry and naive imaginings of nonexistent sexual interactions cannot be deemed as human relationships. Moreover, the story of Jerry and the landlady is an introduction to the second story of Jerry and the landlady's dog which is indispensable to understanding the state of alienation.

Albee here, in the voice of his alienated character Jerry, expresses his indictment and accusation of the whole world including God. All things in the world seem unwilling to be in harmony or even slight contact with one another. The playwright indicates the dilemma of modern man who seems to live in a chaotic world where there is nothing except indifference, disintegration, and alienation. The quotation above mentioned shows the extreme state of alienation that Jerry suffers from. He seems to be on the verge of despair, but there is some

sort of hope that turns his attention from man, people in general and Peter in particular, to animals, represented by the zoo in general and the dog in particular, and from animals to things, represented by his own belongings, then from things to God, and finally from God to people, represented by Peter.

Jerry seeks contact with different types of things, yet he cannot have a suitable and influential contact and relationship except with man represented by Peter. This means that Peter is Jerry's final resort and hope. But in spite of telling all these facts about himself to Peter, yet the latter pretends not to understand:

"Peter (numb): I...I don't understand what ...I don't think I... (Now, almost tearfully) why do you tell me all of this? Jerry: Why not? Peter: I don't understand." (The Zoo Story P.31).

Thus it is clear that Peter doesn't want to understand Jerry and fails to communicate.

Although Jerry knows very well that Peter, who represents middle class society, is unable to construct any contact with him, yet he doesn't give up the attempt at telling Peter what happens at the zoo:

"I went to the zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals and with people too. It probably wasn't a fair test, what everyone separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals. But if it is a zoo that is the way it is" (The Zoo Story P.34).

One may find out that Jerry has a problem of an alienated existence. He goes to the zoo and finds the bars that separate animals and at the same time separate animals from people. This zoo is a symbolic representation of the human zoo in which Jerry lives. People live in complete detachment and indifference to each other. In other words, Peter is indifferent to all of Jerry's incessant details. This is why Jerry tries from now on to follow the same strategy that he applies to the dog, i.e. to be hostile to Peter. As with the dog previously, hostility may lead to communication, contact, and then to a relationship with Peter. As a result, it may compensate for Jerry's big problem in life, namely the problem of alienation. Moreover, Jerry's acts of hostility begin when he tries to dispossess Peter of the bench that he is sitting on. Jerry pokes him on the arm.

Peter responds in the beginning, but when Jerry orders him off the bench he behaves angrily:

"I've come here for years; I have hours of great pleasure Great satisfaction, right here .And that's important for a Man. I'm a responsible person, and I'm a GROWN-

UP this is my bench, and you have no right to take it away from me” (The Zoo Story P.37).

At this point Jerry tells Peter to fight for the bench. He throws a knife down at Peter’s feet, but even at this point Peter seems unwilling to fight. He evades involvement. Jerry goes on insulting and assaulting him and Peter becomes aroused to pick up the knife. Finally Jerry rushes at Peter, deliberately forcing Peter to kill him.

In killing himself, Jerry creates a bond between Peter and himself. He releases Peter from his own zoo, i.e. he makes him get out of his own conformity and complacency and share and reaches his destination. In this sense Jerry triumphs over all the barriers of alienation. He breaks the bars of his own zoo and those of Peter. One may conclude that Albee does not preach pessimism or failure, rather he stresses the idea that modern man is caged in some sort of alienation and loneliness, for out of which there is no outlet except in human interaction, communication and contact.

Jerry tries strongly to build firm relationships with humans and in this desperate attempt, he loses his life. His suicide may be taken as the sacrifice for all humans in all ages. It is Albee’s indictment of the silence of all humans on the issue of alienation in the world. The gap is getting wider and wider with passage of years and man is further enmeshed in the web of alienation.

To sum up, Albee’s Jerry is the typical representative of the loss of man’s unity with man, his unity with nature represented by the nature of animals and objects, and his desire for communication and contact with fellow human beings. Jerry decided to put an end to his senseless life. Jerry’s decision to put an end his senseless life it indicates that in a world without God there is nothing to fear. But dying alone, committing suicide in a closed door house or crying softly in one's room can’t express the agony of living. However doing it the way Jerry did it at the hands of Peter, with Peter as a witness, may be taken as an act of creation, the "teaching emotion" that would create a new Peter suddenly shocked out of his vegetable life and powerfully projected into the full awareness of spiritual regeneration.

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