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TRACING THE URBAN EXISTENTIAL DIMENSION AND SENSIBILITY IN
EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE ZOO STORY*

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Abstract

Edward Albee's play *The Zoo Story* mainly focuses on various issues like urban existentialism and ethos, alienation, deprivation and depression. This play portrays a two dimensioned urban alienation that the two differentiated American classes underwent, the bourgeois (the privileged) class and the middle class (the unprivileged). Jerry enacts as a very elite Bourgeois man and on the other hand, Peter enacts as a common man from the American middle-class. The Great Depression period that the Americans suffered, highly affected the young generation. Men became jobless and alienated from their loved ones and the worst thing that the Great Depression did was making the American population undergo an existential crisis. In the play, we notice that Peter is a rich man and his life consists of every pleasure and comfort. However, Jerry has a life just the opposite of Peter. Jerry lived alone in a small apartment and had lost his parents at a very young age and does not have friends. We notice that all his attempts of making friendship fail, which is clearly revealed after the dog scene and also, at the end of the play. The similarity between Jerry and

Peter is that they are both alienated in their own world. Jerry tries to make Peter realize that he should accept the fact that he is unhappy and alone as worldly pleasures do not pose a valuable stage when it comes to companionship. It seems that both of them don't want the lives they own. They are enforced to lead these kinds of lives by the society. Due to the capitalist and industrialist nature of society in the urban city, the humans have lost their track of desires. The American society have just became a puppet to commercialization leading to their consciousness of the question 'Who am I?' Therefore, this paper is an attempt to trace the urban existential dimension and sensibility in Albee's play *The Zoo Story*.

Keywords: Alienation, Communication, Existentialism, Industrialization, Sensibility, Society.

Introduction

The rapidly developing urban cities in the first decade of 1920s in America served as an inspiring backdrop to Edward Albee's play, *The Zoo Story*. Albee in this play showed the way in which urban city

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life provoked ambivalent feelings for an individual's self-realization and existential dimension. Through the character of Jerry, he brings out the condition of modern urban life where the very concept of love is disfigured and falsified, incapable of forging a normal relationship between individuals in the society. Ironically, larger cities offered a weaker sense of community than small towns did and this causes the solitary existence of the modern man as they are estranged from their fellow people.

Jerry's incapability to establish a communication with the society is an example of the tragic alienated man driven to overcome separateness. The urban city around Jerry and Peter is reflective of the decay of human existence caused by industrialization. However, on the other hand, Peter wishes to retain his social status quo by remaining detached and separated from Jerry and all animals in the zoo. Jerry is actually the symbol of the modern man in the urban society as he continuously tries to create a new bond with Peter throughout the novel by narrating facts about his past life and the story of the dog. Through this communication, they exchange a subtle conversation but this relationship hardly fulfils the ideal selfless bond of genuine love and compassion between them.

As a critique of the ambiguous and double-faced construction of American cultural code in his society, Albee's works

were remarked by Bell as the "Modern capacity for ugliness, hate and evil, Albee's plays seem to say, lurks beneath the well-brushed veneer of post-war American society" (*A Concise Companion to Postwar American Literature and Culture* 124). The play dramatizes the states of illusion and reality, by stressing on the fact about what is destructive to human life. Jerry sacrifices himself to change Peter into a more knowledgeable person who is able to understand the alienation covered inside the masks of a wife, two daughters, two parakeets, and an elegant job.

Peter has come out and developed through the various phases of existentialism to the point that he has taken responsibility for his own existence and lives his life responsibly and morally. He works at a job that was not supposed to be his 'dream job', but he has already given up dreams. He knows he can never have a son and he isolates himself from his family. Every Sunday afternoon he goes to a partly deserted part of the park to sit on his particular bench and read his book in solitude. He considers that his isolation and escape through reading is his reward after a week of work and performing his moral responsibilities. The action of the entire drama takes place in the Central Park in New York City on a summer Sunday afternoon. There are two park benches and Peter is seated on one of them reading a book which is his preferable activity for

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such afternoons. Matthew C. Roudane says that,

In the absurd play, a pseudo-crisis occurs when a similar complex situation and tension is brought to a head without resolving anything, without contributing to any development or progression, serving in fact to demonstrate that nothing as meaningful as progression or development can occur, emphasizing that complexity and tension are permanent and unresolvable elements of a world of confusion” (*Understanding Edward Albee* 52).

The American Dream, Capitalism and the Industrialization Boom in Albee’s The Zoo Story

During the 1950s, after World War II, the US economy boomed, and a middle-class lifestyle was more obtainable than ever before. But, the effects of this capitalist ethic on American culture were quite huge that influenced many writers to write scathing satires of American materialism. Karl proclaims about this period by saying, “There is a sense of counterfeit, the deceptive, the fraudulent, the artificial and the imitation” (*A Concise Companion to Postwar American Literature and Culture* 21). Albee shares this scepticism of the culture and society in

‘*The American Dream*’. In the 1950s, new technologies and products in America contributed to the prosperity of the society.

The Americans were optimistic and everybody believed in a bright future. The American Dream was still alive for a vast majority of the population. In this play Peter is a representative of this boom. He is a well-established average American who has made his private little dreams come true and Jerry represents the minority of those who have been excluded from that boom.

Jerry thinks that family life has captivated Peter, and that the bourgeoisie are so hooked up in material success that they do not pay any heed to the world around them. But, it can be noticed that Jerry desperately seems to want to be involved in this world anyway. One of his many contradictions is his craving to be embraced by a world he detests. Vyacheslav P. Shestakov states, “*The American Dream is a representation of the national democratic development that includes individual hopes for everybody in achieving success, equal opportunities, and the pursuit of happiness*” (*American Dream and American Culture* 586). Hence, in a way Albee tries to portray a realistic picture of the contemporary American society in his play.

The Urban Existential Sensibility of Jerry and Peter in Albee’s the Zoo Story

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Peter and Jerry are unable to traverse their differences to attain any real communication and this communication failure occurs on both linguistic and philosophical levels. Jerry asks a simple question to Peter regarding the distinction line between upper-middle class and the lower class. However, Peter fails to give a suitable answer to this as he cannot analyze the context of the question. As Jerry describes about his rooming house and the people who live, it can be understood that he is poor. He tells Peter about the place where he and the other tenants live. Indeed, Jerry cannot relate himself to the egotistical and individualistic American society. Peter is unable to comprehend Jerry's condition as he has never experienced any situation like that and everything in his life are safe and secured.

The two empty picture frames in Jerry's place represents the emptiness and loneliness in Jerry's life. His parents are dead and there is no photo which he could put into frames as he had no such relationship with anyone. The dog attack also shows that Jerry's home was not secure and even at home he had to undergo cold aggressions.

Later in the play, Jerry tries to kill the Dog by mixing poison in the Hamburger. After the dog survives, there is some sort of contact between them and they are able to stare into each other's eyes without being attacked. Albee himself

comments on the story of the dog in an interview saying that: "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" (*Conversations with Edward Albee* 184). Jerry knows that he is associated to no one because he lives in an absurd world of strangers. He is compelled to break the limits of reason by trying to find desperately and different types of friendship with animals and things by saying:

It's just that if you can deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS ... with SOMETHING if not with people ... with a bed, with a cockroach ... with a carpet, a roll of toilet paper, with pornographic playing cards ... with vomiting. (*The American Dream and The Zoo Story* 34).

Peter lives isolated in his social class and have made a second cage around him on the bench. Peter represents those people who would rather sleep. Jerry releases Peter from his own zoo by making him get out of his own conformity and complacency. Peter's representative family is even more threatening than individual alienation because it serves to cover alienation without resolving it. Peter also

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needs a means of avoiding truth, a deviation and an escape from the stark reality of his life and from his personal insufficiencies. Albee has posed Peter as a member of the 'elite society' in an opposite contrast to Jerry who belongs to the 'middle class society'. Both of them undergo 'reversal alienation'.

Jerry dreams of having a life like Peter. Peter had a satisfactory life as the owner of a Publication house with a big house and his family and workers but in contrast to this, Jerry had nothing. However, Peter also desires to have a life like Jerry so that he can just move freely without any personal bindings or societal oppressions. As Peter belongs to the elite group, he even comes to the park on Sundays wearing a suit and a tie. Peter seems to admire Jerry's independent and bond-free life when he enquires Jerry about the empty photo frames and about his girlfriend. Jerry and Peter both lead a life of alienation. It is very obvious that Peter does not like his family life because instead of a male kid, he has two girl kids and this fact makes him quite unhappy. A happy man would spend his Sundays with his family but Peter sits alone in the park and prefers reading a book. He even finds himself bounded in a regular job work not only in his publication house but also at home. Peter wants to have a life like Jerry but he is unable to say it as he does not want to expose his cravings like a middle class man

since, it would lower down his status in front of Jerry. But Jerry understands him and aims at taking out the 'animal' from inside him. He sculpts his last communication with him before dying by teaching him to come out from his cage and be free. Jerry exclaims before dying:

Thank you, Peter. I mean that, now; thank you very much ... Oh Peter, I was so afraid I'd drive you away (he laughs as best he cans). You don't know how afraid I was you'd drive away and leave me ... Here we are. But ... I don't know ... Could I have planned all this? No ... no, I couldn't have. But I think I did ... and now you know what you'll see in your TV, and the face I told you about ... you remember ... my face ... and you have comforted me. Dear Peter. (*The American Dream and The Zoo Story* 48).

Jerry was not only socially but also sexually alienated because of two conditions that complicate Jerry's craving to belong to someone. It is because of his sexual preference and also he could only have occasional and concealed sexual encounters to satisfy in any possible way his emotional, affective, and instinctual

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basic needs. Indeed, Jerry does not fit the egotistical and individualistic American society as he is a homosexual. He exclaims to Peter saying, "I've never been able to have sex, with or, how is it put? ... make love to anybody more than once; that's it ... Oh, wait; for a week and a half when I was fifteen ... I was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l. I mean, I was queer" (*The American Dream and The Zoo Story* 25).

Jerry knows every single inch in his flat as because he does not have anything else to do. He just spends his time looking at his walls in his flat. He remembers everything in his flat perfectly and therefore he was searching for an audience to describe his place. He feels the urge to tell his stories to someone as by doing this, he thinks that he can create some memorable incidents that will immortalize him. Therefore, he starts to narrate stories about his life to Peter by starting with the story of his father and mother. Jerry lives physically but he is dead spiritually. Jerry's universal predicament can be best understood by Eric Fromm's statement, "Man - of all ages and cultures - is confronted with the solution of one and the same question: the question of how to overcome the separateness, how to achieve union, how to transcend one's own individual life and find at-onement" (*The Art of Loving* 9).

Cages and their effects in the Urban Society in Albee's *The Zoo Story*

Albee portrays the human misunderstandings and the failure of communication between Peter and Jerry who represents the various social classes in America. Jerry's cage was the rooming house in which he lived. Jerry created a plan of a fatal scene at the Central Park to scare the self-cantered elite people with a teaching emotion as it was quite difficult to get the attention of the higher class people living in the American society that time. Jerry initiates Peter for resorting to violence by asking too many questions, invading his space, tickling his ribs, insulting him, and ultimately taking his bench. Jerry's sense of alienation forces him to be engaged in a deep and fierce conflict with Peter. Lisa M. Siefker Bailey emphasizes the importance of Jerry's attempts at storytelling by stating, "If Jerry's story can somehow become real in another's mind, Jerry can help end the alienation" (*Edward Albee: A Casebook* 34). Jerry explains to Peter about the way animals live at the zoo and he visualizes New York as a zoo in which people live like animals, in their cages and isolated from each other. They are aware about each other's existence but are unable to get in touch because they are sealed up in their own isolated existence. To get out of this, a key is required which is the key of social contact. Peter gets enraged to harm Jerry and exclaims:

God damn you. That's enough. I've had enough of

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you. I will not give up this bench; you can have it, and that's that. You can go away. Go away, I said ... if you don't move on, I'll get a policeman here and make you go ... GET AWAY FROM MY BENCH! (*The American Dream and The Zoo Story* 43).

Jerry's death is a perverse act of love but it is also this fact that love is not possible in a world in which people live like zoo animals in their separate cages. It can be understood in the play that Jerry's engineered suicide is a way to go through some kind of human affection, however inverted or gruesome, before taking leave of a world which he no longer wants.

Conclusion

Albee centres two points in his play, the polarization of modern society and the difficulty of human communication. For Jerry suicide is the only means to get away from this isolation because his wishes for communication and having a relationship with someone have never been fulfilled. Jerry thinks animals as a solution to his social isolation due to his problem of getting along with other people, and assumes that he can settle this by forming companionship with animals. Under the absurd, grim, pessimistic and violent cover, this play sparks illumination of hope and positivism. As Jerry's own existence is

threatened, he lives and dies in his zoo with no recognition and sympathy from the people around him. He seeks redemption through the medium of establishing a connection with someone, which he hopes will give him a name for his nameless existence.

By focusing on the limitations of animals, Jerry also suggests that humans have these limitations within us. Rutenberg asserts, "Edward Albee writes reformist plays of social protest which unflinchingly reveal the pustulous sores of a society plagued with social ills" (*Playwright in Protest* 108). Albee shows how a man's soul is estranged and caged in the society and is parallel to the life of the caged animals in the zoo. Thus, Jerry's death is an opposition against the deplorable and unjust circumstances that shape the modern man's urban life and bind him to his very own existential dimension. Hence, in this way, this paper traces the patterns of the urban existential dimension and sensibility in Albee's *The Zoo Story*.

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