

## *The Zoo Story : Character Alienation*

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This paper is designed to focus on one of the major themes presented in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, the theme of character alienation. "Isolation, loneliness and frustration are, in fact, major subjects in this realistic and symbolic drama of a lonely outcast who tries to make contact with another human being and who finally binds himself to that other in death"<sup>1</sup>. The play presents characters who suffer from 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 leads majorly to agonizing life experiences and finally to the death of the main character. This paper tries to reveal the reasons out of which the characters' alienation springs and at the same time the consequences to which these reasons lead.

Albee is one of the great American playwrights who follow Ionesco in writing Absurd plays<sup>2</sup>. In other words, both of them write plays about man's isolation and aloneness<sup>3</sup>. Edward Albee emerges as one of the most controversial and, consequently one of the most read contemporary playwrights<sup>4</sup>. His works are considered well-crafted and often unsympathetic examinations of the modern condition.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Alienation is one of the main thematic strands presented in the *The Zoo Story*. That is why the play is considered as the first successful play written by Albee. Michael Stapleton states that "Albee achieved his first success as a dramatist with the one-act *The Zoo Story*"<sup>7</sup>. Thus one may assert that isolation, loneliness, and frustration are, in fact, major subjects in this realistic and symbolic drama<sup>8</sup>. It is a play about contact.<sup>9</sup> The play contains two main characters: Jerry and Peter. Jerry is one of the only two

characters in the play who greatly suffers from alienation. Albee makes it obvious that Jerry's sense of alienation springs from multiple reasons. Digging deeply into the nature of this character ,, one can perceive that these causes may be private or personal conditions,i.e. they are related to Jerry himself, and may be social conditions related to the social atmosphere in which this character lives. In other words, society as a whole imposes a sense of alienation upon its members.

To start with Jerry's personal conditions, one may perceive that Jerry's juvenile oddity ,i.e. his practicing of homosexuality with an older boy at the age of fifteen, comes as a result of his family disintegration. In telling his family history to Peter, Jerry says that his mother forsakes them and leads the path of vice : “ Besides , or , rather ,to be pointed about it , good old Mom walked out on good old Pop when I was ten and a half years old ;she embarked on an adulterous turn of our southern states...(The Zoo Story ,p.28 ). This indicates that his mother's separation from his father and her later death leaves great gap in Jerry's early life. Not only that, but his father's death by a bus accident aggravates his sense of alienation .He is , as a result ,taking in by his aunt who dies on his high school graduation day .He feels alienated and lonely in the absence of maternal and fatherly guidance .when he enumerates his personal belongings ,he tells Peter that he has two empty picture frames ,but he does not have pictures of anyone to put in them. Even his parents don't leave behind them any sort of tangible memory .The emptiness of the frames reflects that his parents are nothing now but shadowy and superficial memories hardly flashing in his own mind .The absence of their pictures represents the shallowness of their present memory in his life. Moreover, family disintegration leads to Jerry's resorting to physical contacts with an older boy. This homosexual relationship foreshadows his perverted sexual contacts with different prostitutes in future.

The social side in Jerry's life is of prime significance in shedding light on his state of alienation . From the outset of the play, Jerry intrudes upon Peter's quiet sitting and isolation . It should be stated that Albee makes use of conversation and dialogue more than action to shed light on the two different characters in the play. Jerry , for example , repeats the word , “ the zoo “ more than seventeen times

throughout the play mainly to provoke Peter and make him respond. In addition, this word “ **zoo** “ is of high importance in the sense that Albee uses it as a title in his play in order to show that people in America live just like animals in the sense that they are barred by complacency, self-interest, and indifference to one another. Animals in the **zoo** are barred by bars, but Americans are separated from one another by the absence of real human relationships. From such a horrible milieu emerges the notion of alienation that Jerry as an American suffers from. 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 : “ 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 ?”(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 himself. 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 rooming 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. 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,Iguess;but they ‘re pretty small ,too. There’s a Puerto Rican family in one of them , a husband , a wife ,and

kids; I don't know how many .These people entertain a lot and in the other front room ,there is somebody living there ,but I don't know who it is .I've never seen who it is .Never. Never ever. (p.27)

This quotation summarizes the zoo milieu in which poor Jerry lives. Like the animals in the zoo, Jerry and the other tenants are separated from one another by the wall of indifference , self-interest , and complacency. In other words , Jerry lives in total isolation and alienation in spite of knowing some meager particulars about the lives of the other tenants. Everyone of the tenants is living in his own small zoo.The coloured queen, for instance , is preoccupied with plucking his eyebrows,wearing his kimono ,and going to the john .The Rican family ,on the other hand ,seems to be self-sufficient and independent, whereas the front room is occupied by totally unknown person to Jerry and the last line of the quotation emphasizes the grave state of alienation and isolation in which Jerry lives. This gives the impression that Jerry's relations to other tenants seem superficial and very weak in the sense that there is no real or tangible human interaction between them. One of the people in the rooming house is the landlady. Jerry tells Peter about this woman and her dog.She is ugly, almost similar to 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 nature ,he keeps her imagining that they 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 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...as she believes what never happened. (p.32 )

Jerry deceives her through 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 that

Jerry suffers from . At the beginning , the relationship between Jerry and the dog is based on hostility . Whenever he tries to enter the house , the dog begins attacking him savagely. Jerry describes the horrible situation :

From the very beginning he'd snarl and then go for me, to get one of my legs ..It was a good , stumbly run ; but I always got away. He got a piece of my trouser leg...So .Anyway, this went on for over a week whenever I came in; but never when I went out .(p.33)

As an act of preventing these attacks , Jerry makes up his mind to kill the dog. For six days, he brings hamburger for the dog, but after eating the meat ,the dog goes on attacking him. On the seventh day , he poisons the meat , .When the dog eats the poisonous meat , it becomes extremely ill. It is at that moment that Jerry feels so sorry for the dog, that he no longer wants it to die. Before becoming ill, the dog can attack Jerry,i.e. there exists some sort of a relationship between the two. Such a relationship is created by an act of hostility .After becoming ill, the dog cannot bark or run after Jerry. That is why Jerry feels remorseful for poisoning the dog. He perceives that some intimate relationship will come to an end He doesn't want such a thing to happen because if the dog dies ,their contact will be broken . He tells Peter :

I was so hoping for the dog to be waiting for me . I was ... well, how would you put it...enticed? ...fascinated?...no I don't think so. ...heart – shattering anxious ,that's it : I was heart-shattering anxious to confront my friend again. Yes , Peter; friend. That's the only word for it.( p.37)

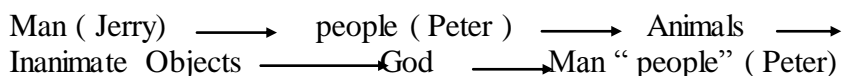
Jerry considered the dog as a friend because he lives in a world which is indifferent to him as a human being . The human world in which he lives is an alienated world that is why he wants to compensate ,in such an intimate relationship with the dog ,for the state of alienation that society imposes on him .Ronald Hayman says that “ dogs are surrogate males and cats become females.”<sup>9</sup> So if there is an absence of real communication with humans ,there will emerge a need to have a substitute to take man's role .Thus Jerry senses that the human world in which he lives neglects his own existence .To affirm

his existence ,Jerry finds an outlet in having new relationships with animals .He needs pure relations void of any sense of impurity or vice .This is why he does not have any tangible relation with the landlady.His instinctive nature pushes him in the direction of building intimate relationships based on humanity.In other words , he feels more akin to the animal world of cats and dogs.Yet there is no better passage that illuminates the state of alienation and aloneness as the following one :

It is just ...it is just that ...(Jerry is abnormally tense ,now)  
it's just that if you can't deal with people ,you have to make  
a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS(Much faster now ,and like  
a conspirator)Don't you see? A person has to have some way dealing  
with SOMETHING. If not with people...SOMETHING. With a bed,  
with a cockroach, with a mirror...no, that's too hard, that's one of the  
last steps. With a cockroach, with a ...with a ...with a carpet, a roll of  
toilet paper...no, not that, either ...that's a mirror ,too ;always check  
bleeding...Withaa street corner, and too many lights...with a wisp of  
smoke, a wisp ...of smoke...with...with pornographic playing -cards,  
with a strong-box...WITHOUT A LOCK...with love ...with  
vomiting, with crying...with God. HOW about that ?WITH GOD  
WHO IS A COLOURED QUEEN WHO WARES A KIMONO AND  
PLUCKS HIS EYEBROWS IS A WOMAN WHO CRIES WITH  
DETERMINATION BEHIND HER CLOSED DOOR...with God  
who, I'm told, turned his back on the whole thing some time ago  
with.some day,with people(p.38).

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. Albee 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 exclusively suffers from . He seems to reach the state 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. The following diagram shows the different kinds of relations Jerry wishes to have :



Jerry seeks contact with different types of things , yet he can not 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."( p.40 )The quotation certifies the statement of J.L Styan that "they are unable to understand each other; they fail to communicate"<sup>10</sup>. Although Jerry knows very well that Peter ,who represents 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. ( p.42)

One may find out that Jerry's is a problem of an alienated existence .He goes to the zoo and finds the bars separate animals and at the same time these very bars 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 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,

telling him to move over. Peter responds at the beginning , but when he behaves crazily when Jerry orders him off the bench :

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 .(p.45)

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. He tells Peter that at the zoo he decides to walk north until he finds someone to talk to, to give his message to , to make contact with .<sup>12</sup>When he finds Peter, he decides to make contact and relationship with him. But the attempt at achieving such a task is difficult to the extent that he gives his own soul for its own sake. His sense of alienation compels him to be engaged in a deep and fierce conflict with Peter which results, in turn, in feeling comfortable :

Oh , Peter, I was so afraid I'd drive you away.(He laughs  
As best he can )You don't know how afraid I was you'd go  
Away and leave me...Peter...Thank you. I came unto you  
(He laughs so faintly.) and you have comforted .Dear Peter. (p.47)

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 .Jerry , in fulfilling his goal, namely breaking out of his own zoo , viz alienation. And as one of the critics states “ Albee creates a protagonist who is a martyr to brotherly love...In arousing smug Peter to enact a zoo story Jerry strikes hard at complacent conformity.”<sup>13</sup> In this sense Jerry triumphs over all the barriers of alienation that prevent contact. 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 aloneness out of which there is no outlet except in the existence of real and forceful human needs to interaction , communication and contact.Moreover ,



Jerry tries strongly to build firm relationships with humans when sacrificing himself not for his sake , rather it is an example 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 estranged by the bars of alienation .To sum up , Albee's Jerry is the typical representative of the sense of man' unity with man , man's unity with nature represented by the nature of animals and objects , and man's affection for contact ability .

### Notes

- 1 – X.J.Kennedy, *Literature: An Introduction to fiction* „poetry , and drama .Longman : New York ,1999. p. 1480
- 1- Ruby Cohn, *Twentieth Century Drama : England, Ireland , the United States*.(Random House :New York , 1966 ).p.650
- 2- John Orr ,*Tragic Realism and Modern Society* ( London :The Macmillan Press LTD,1977) P.188
- 4- Harry Shaw, *Dictionary of Literary Terms*(New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company , 1972 ) p.377
- 5- *Edward Albee : A casebook* ,ed.Bruce J. Mann .2003, p.176
- 6-*Edward Albee*,from the free encyclopedia (<http://en.Wikipedia.org>.
- 7-Gayla Nelson, *Alienation in Twentieth Century American Drama*. (<http://www.gaylasgarden.com/alienation.htm>.)
- 9- Michael Stapleton , *The Cambridge Guide to English Literature*( New York : Cambridge U.P. ,1983 )P.9
- 10 – Ronald Hayman , *Contemporary Playwrights : Edward Albee*.p.9
- 11 – J.L. Styan , *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, (London : Cambridge U. P. , 1981),p.142
- 12 – *The Plays of Edward Albee : Notes* ,(Canada :Coles Publishing Company Limited , 1981),p.5
- 13 – Rwarren French , *Twentieth Century American Literature* .(London : The Macmillan Press Limited, 1980), p.30

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