



The Zoo Story: Demise of communication

Dr. Ali Hasan

Lecturer of English

Government College, Malpura(Tonk)

The Zoo Story seems to be a complex play. Critics have given diverse interpretations of it. Richard Kostelanetz considers it as the play about the failed homosexuality. According to him, "Dogs are surrogate males, and cats become females. Thus, when Jerry says he wants companionship with a dog, he symbolically announces his homosexual designs" (qtd. in Hayman 14). Ruth Zimbardo in an article 'Symbolism and Naturalism in Edward Albee's The Zoo story and Henry Heves in a review of the play found biblical expressions in the play and said, "Jerry like christ - succeeds at the cost of his life in arousing the human soul out of its deep lethargy to an awareness of its animal self" (Benchmanship, 32). In an interesting article "The Albatross in Albee's Zoo" Peter Spielberg refers to the parrallel story of coleridge's The Ancient Mariner in The Zoo Story:

I, therefore suggest that we would be coming much closer to the true analogical vehicle and consequently to a clearer understanding of Jerry's character and problem, if we were to label Jerry "The Ancient Mariner" Peter "The Wedding Guest", and the dog in Jerry parable "The Albatross" (563).

Brushing aside all the above interpretations of the play, it one reads it with an open mind and without any preconceptions as Albee expects from his audience The Zoostory is a fairly simple play, written in a quite simple language and form. It deals with the problems of dislocation of values which has alienated people from one another. The Zoo Story describes the maddening gulf between the affluent and the deprived. When one probes deeper, one finds that The Zoo Story discusses the dislocation of values at another level also. It is evident from the beginning of the play that Peter is a well off executive in a publishing firm. Why does Jerry want to communicate only with Peter and not with the coloured queen or Puerto Rican family who are the inhabitants of the front room. About them he expresses an extreme sense of indifference when he says, "I've never seen who it is. Never. Never ever" (26). Besides all this why does he rebuff the love and the amorous discourse of the landlady? The answer to these questions lies in the fact that there is a lack of communication among the affluent as well as among the deprived. In other words people of neither class are happy. The frustration and dislocation of values is found in both the classes. As Lucina P. Gabbard remarks, "In The Zoo Story Albee's focal concern was the demise of communication within and between classes - a kind of psycho-social withdrawal of men from one another" (367-368). Peter has got everything in his life. But there is no meaningful communication between him and his wife. Therefore he spends each Sunday in the park and

occupies the same bench there. This excursion has become a routine with him to avoid contact. When Jerry prolongs his stay in the park by narrating "the story of Jerry and the dog" and about his relationship with the landlady, Peter is annoyed. The reason he gives for his annoyances makes the situation funny and sarcastic. He says "the parakeets will be getting dinner ready soon. And the cats are setting the table" (48). Peter is conscious and careful about cats and parakeets' dinner rather than about his wife and children.

The substitution of false experience for real experience is the main cause of loss of communication in the present society. Peter shows maximum love and care for animals, but he is totally indifferent to the human beings close to him. He is completely disinterested in his relationship with wife and children. Jerry has no family, and described as a "permanent transient" (45). He is not in communion with the people of his class and seems to hate them. Neither he has a glorifying past to fall upon nor a promising future to dream about. The few things which he possesses, torment him. With anguish, he describes his possessions:

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, a pack of pornographic playing cards, regular deck an old Western Union typewriter that prints nothing but capital letters, and a small strongbox without a lock which has in it... what? Rocks! Some rocks... sea rounded rocks I picked up on the beach when I was a kid. Under which... weighed down.... are some letters. Please letters.... (27).

Being unable to communicate with people of his own class, Jerry tries to make contact with the people of upper class. He says in conversation with Peter that, "sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly" (25). When Jerry approaches Peter, he finds it highly difficult and improbable to make contact with Peter's class because they are more alienated and uprooted than his class. Jerry is disillusioned and takes the final decision of putting himself on the erect knife in Peter's hand. Before his self-sacrifice, Jerry resolves the enigmatic question which has been repeated a number of times in the play, why did he go to the zoo?

I went to the zoo to find out more about way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too. It probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from every one 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 (49).

The opening remarks of the protagonist Jerry in The Zoo Story "I have been to the zoo" uttered thrice in the play each time more emphatically than the previous one is a powerful image. It reveals the characteristic traits

of modern man. Jerry's room in a four-story brownstone rooming house on the upper west side between Columbus Avenue and central park west is one cage in the gigantic human zoo. The other occupants are busy in their own affairs. The room adjacent to Jerry is occupied by a coloured queen of whom Jerry says, "he never bothers me, and he never brings anyone up to his room. All he does is pluck his eyebrows, wear his kimono and go to the John" (26). The two front rooms are occupied by a Puerto Rican family. They also have kids but Jerry does not know how many kids they have? In another front room there is one more occupant but Jerry has never seen him. In the whole house only the landlady seems to be willing to make contact and communicate with Jerry. Her wish is not meaningless. According to Jerry, "and somewhere, somewhere in the back of that pea-sized brain of hers, an organ developed just enough to let her eat, drink and emit. She has some foul parody of sexual desire. And I, Peter, I am the object of her sweaty lust" (33).

As animals in the zoo are separated from each other by bars, modern man is also separated from others by his self-imposed isolation. The concept of love has been reduced to the satisfaction of lust. There is no communication amongst human beings unless they have self-interest. C.W.E. Bigsby writes about modern man's desire to communicate and says "it is simply avoided as being a threat to complacency and comfortable isolation" (Albee, 19).

Peter is an executive in a publishing house. It is most probable that except Sunday, he should have a busy schedule of work. Why does Peter go to the park every Sunday? He has got only one day of the week to stay with his wife and children. In this context the predicament of modern man according to existentialist writers is due to his individualism being merged into collectivism. This fully illustrates Peter's behavior. His visit to the park and the reading of the book is a form of retreat from his own self. But escapism and self-delusion are not substitutes for reality. Jerry questions Peter, when the latter is adamant about the defence of the bench "Stupid! Don't you have any idea, not even the slightest, what other people need"? (56). Peter is not disturbed at all, rather he establishes that this bench belongs to him because he was coming there for years. Next time Jerry again hurts his ego by calling him "you pathetic little vegetable. (Spits in Peter's face) You couldn't even get your wife with a male child" (59). This time Peter becomes enraged and picks up the knife to defend himself. Desmond Morris in his book The Human Zoo refers to prevailing isolation and rigidity in human relationship with "the modern human animal" (8) He describes the condition of man in our times in these words, "trapped, not by a zoo collector, but by his own brainy brilliance, he has set himself up in a huge, restless menagerie where he is in constant danger of cracking under the strain" (8-9).

The Story of Jerry and the dog' covers a considerable part of the play. Albee has suggested some specific directions for acting this part of the play. According to him, "the following long speech should be done with a great deal of action, to achieve a hypnotic effect on Peter, and on the audience too" (36.) The story symbolically

presents the life of Jerry and Peter. The difference is, that the roles have been changed, Jerry becomes the dog and Peter becomes Jerry. There is one more significant change. As in the dog's case, Jerry tried to kill him by giving poison between the meat, because the dog's behaviour had remained fixed even after eating the hamburger for five days continuously. Jerry's intention was not really to kill the dog. He wanted to see him alive in order to observe the changed relationship. The new behavior of the dog frustrated Jerry. After the poison the dog does not run after Jerry any more. Thus being given a free passage by the dog, Jerry feels more lonely than ever.

I have gained solitary free passage, if that much further loss can be said to be gain. I have learned that neither kindness nor cruelty by themselves, independent of each other, creates any effect beyond themselves; and I have learned that the two combined, together, at the same time, are the teaching emotion. And what is gained is loss. And what has been the result: the dog and I have attained a compromise; more of a bargain really. We neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other. And was trying to feed the dog an act of love? And, perhaps, was the dog's attempt to bite me not an act of love? If we can so misunderstand well then, why have we invented the word love first place? (43-44).

Hence, in Peter's case, Jerry does not want to take any risk. He finds, his death is necessary, to give Peter the full impact of the situation. Otherwise, the effect created will be melodramatic. If Jerry remains alive, the situation would have become more serious. Peter, a reticent by nature would have become more suspicious and alert in his life. Perhaps, in future, he would not be ready to listen any person particularly the strangers. Commenting on Jerry's death at the end of the play and the effect created by it Ronald Hayman Writes:

His death, like the death of many tragic heroes in earlier plays, is an illustration of the impossibility of living in accordance with the values that he represents. To make real contact with a fellow human being, he has to take his life in his hands just as Columbus did when he set out on a voyage from which there would have no return if he had not found what he was looking for. Without killing his hero, Albee would not have been able to make the point that Jerry could not have got through to Peter in any other way (16).

Jerry's death at Peter's hand gave him a tremendous shock. From now onwards, Peter will be an entirely different person, more alienated and conscious of his loneliness. In the very first play, Albee emphatically pronounces his social concern. He is agonised to see how the modern man is trapped in his own self-created web. Perhaps the adversities of the frontier were a far better experience than the prosperity of present times which has distanced one man from another.

References:

1. Albee, Edward. The Zoo Story. The Death of Bessie Smith. The Sandbox. Three Plays, Introduced by the Author. New York: Coward MacCann&Geoghegan, Inc., 1960. All the subsequent quotations are cited from this edition.
2. Bigsby, C.W.E. Albee. New York: Chip's Bookshop, Inc., 1978.
3. Bigsby, C.W.E. A critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama. Vol.2. Cambridge: Cambridge. University Press, 1984.
4. Hayman, Ronald. Edward Albee. New York: Ungar, 1971.
5. Hewes, Henry. "Benchmarkship". Saturday Review (6 February 1960): 32.
6. Gabbard, Lucina P. "At the Zoo: From O'Neill to Albee". Modern Drama 19 (1976): 367-68.
7. Morris, Desmond. The Human Zoo. London: Jonathan Cape Limited, 1969.
8. Spielberg, Peter. "The Albatross in Albee's zoo". College English. 27 (April 1966): 562-65.