CHAPTER II
It is paradoxical that Albee's first play was a great success although it was rejected by the producers initially. It was not only a great success but was a curtain raiser for Albee's career as a playwright. It canonized him as America's most promising playwright. It is much more paradoxical that this play returned to America through Europe. The playwright himself describes the voyage of his work, the voyage to American continent. In the 'preface' to the printed play Albee wrote:

... a young composer friend of mine, William Flanagan by name, looked at the play, liked it, and sent it to several friends of his, among them David Diamond, another American composer, resident in Italy; Diamond liked the play and sent it on to a friend of his, a Swiss actor, Pinkas Braun; Braun liked the play, made a tape recording of it, playing both its roles, which he sent on to Mrs. Stefani Hunzinger, who heads the drama department of the S. Fischer Verlag, a large publishing house in
Frankfurt; She, in turn... Well, through her it got to Berlin, and to production. From New York to Florence to Zurich to Frankfurt to Berlin.¹

From the above it may be gathered that the strength of the play was discovered not in Albee's own country but elsewhere. It appears the author himself was amazed at the success of his play. Albee wrote about the grand reception to his play in the following words:

... One concentrates, but one cannot see the stage action clearly; one can hear but barely; one tries to follow the play, but one can make no sense of it. And, if one is called to the Stage afterwards to take a bow, one wonders why, for one can make no connection between the work just presented and one's self. Naturally, this feeling was complicated in the case of The Zoo Story, as the play was being presented in German, a language of which I knew not a word, and in Berlin, too, an awesome city. But it has held true since. The high points of a person's life can be appreciated so often only in retrospect.²

It is interesting to note that the playwright saw his play first in the German language, not in English. He did not
understand a word of the play but he could see for himself the appreciative response from the audience. It was a good beginning for a playwright a start his playwriting career and a good introduction to the American audiences. Richard E. Amacher comments may be useful to under the structure of the play:

The Zoo Story has a rather simple and easily comprehensible structure of three main parts that are climactically ordered. In the first part we are introduced to Jerry and Peter and to their differences with respect to person, background, economic status, marital status, literary taste, philosophy, desire for communication, the way they talk and so on. The second part deals with the story of Jerry and the dog, and the third is the Zoo Story -- What happened at the Zoo.  

Although the above summary of the play, The Zoo Story, suggests a simple story it proves to be very unconventional. Unlike the traditional play which begins with a bang presenting a complex situation involving a host of characters, this play opens in an undistinguished location, a public park. There are a couple of park benches on the stage with trees for the background. Two men Peter and Jerry, again very
undistinguished, a kind of stereotype representing two different classes of American society constitute the characters in the play:

.... Peter, in his early forties, is obviously an Average Middle-Class Father. He wears a tweed jacket, smokes a pipe, reads a book through horn-rimmed glasses, and does not like conversations with strangers. He is careful, conservative, conventional, where Jerry, slightly younger and carelessly dressed, soon gives the impression of not wanting to hold on to things, of not having much that is worth holding on to.  

Peter and Jerry have not known each other before. When Jerry enters the park on a Sunday afternoon in summer, he finds Peter already seated in one of the benches. Without caring to know who the other person is, Jerry begins telling that he has just returned from the Zoo.

Jerry: 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!

Peter: Hm? ... What? ... I'm sorry, Were you talking to me? (p. 12)
Having been designated as "the least likely murderer," Peter makes the acquaintance of "the Victim of a Perfect Crime."

Peter does not know why he is being addressed by the stranger. Jerry enquires Peter whether Peter is an educated man. Peter replies that he reads *Time* Magazine suggesting to him that he owes the knowledge of medicine to the *Time* Magazine. In the course of the conversation Peter admits to being a married man with two girl children. He is an executive in a publishing house. He earns enough to spend on his wife and children.

The conversation between Peter and Jerry is filled with a number of irrelevances with Jerry shifting from one subject to another giving the impression that he is not a normal person. Peter's references to Baudelaire and Marquend suggest that he is middle class. At this stage in the play we have the first long speech of Jerry in which he tells Peter about himself. He lives in a small room in a rooming house. Peter also talks about other roomers with whom he has very little contact:

.... I live in a four-story brownstone rooming-house on the upper West Side between Columbus Avenue and Central
Park West. 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 beaverboard wall is occupied by a colored 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 colored 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 he 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. (pp. 25-26).
There is a black-homesexual with the rotten teeth who plucks his eyebrow with Buddhist concentration. There is a Puerto Rican family living in another room and there is someone else in one of the rooms whom Jerry has ever seen. There is a woman in the front room on the third floor, who cries whenever Jerry passes her door. "At first, when Jerry describes his rooming house as a "humiliating excuse for a jail", Peter cannot help being sorry for him." To Peter's question why he lives in such a place, he replies:

Well, no; it isn't an apartment in the East Seventies. But, then again, I don't have one wife, two daughters, two cats and two parakeets. 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 small strong box 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 ... please
why don't you do this, and please
when will you do that letters. And
when letters, too. When will you write?
When will you come? When? These letters
are from more recent years. (p. 27).

He also tells Peter about the broken marriage of his parents
and their deaths. His family was disrupted when he was
at a particularly delicate stage of development; the departure
and death of his mother retarded his physical growth and
his puberty:

... But good old Mom and good old
Pop are dead ... you know? ... I'm
broken up about it, too ... I mean
really. BUT. That particular
vaudeville act is playing the could
circuit now, so I don't see how I can
look at them, all neat and framed.
Besides, or, rather, to be pointed about
it, good old Mom walked out on good
old Pop when I was ten and half years
old; she embarked on an adulterous turn
of our Southern States ... a journey
of a year's duration ... and her most
constant companion ... among others,
among many others ... was a Mr.
Barleycorn. At least, that's what good
old Pop told me after he went down
... came back ... brought her body
north. We'd received the news between
Christmas and New Year's, you see, that good old Mom had parted with the ghost in some dump in Alabama. And, without the ghost ... she was less welcome. I mean, what was she? A stiff ... a northern stiff. At any rate, good old Pop celebrated the New Year for an even two weeks and then slapped into the front of somewhat moving city omnibus, which sort of cleaned things out family-wise. Well no; then there was Mom's sister, who was given neither to sin nor the consolations of the bottle. I moved in on her, and my memory of her is slight excepting I remember still that she did all things dourly: sleeping, eating, working, praying. She dropped dead on the stairs to her apartment, my apartment then, too, on the afternoon of my high school graduation. A terribly middle European joke, if you ask me. (pp. 28-29).

Jerry's account of his parents, who never got on well was a pathetic one. It is against this background of ruined family and a disharmonious relationship that Jerry grew up. Hence the thwarted and twisted personality he has developed. In fact he admits that he had homosexual tendencies:

.... Once; that's it ... Oh, wait; for a week and a half, when I was fifteen
... and I hang my head in shame that puberty was late ... I was a h-O-m-O-S-e-x-U-a-l. I mean, I was queer ... (very fast) ... queer, queer, queer ... with bells, ringing, banners snapping in the wind. And for those eleven days, I met at least twice a day with the park superintendent's son ... a Greek boy, whose birthday was the same as mine, except he was a year older. I think I was very much in love ... may be just with sex. But that was the jazz of a very special hotel, wasn't it? And now; oh, do I love the little ladies; really, I love them. For about an hour (p. 30).

From an account of his possessions, Jerry moves on to narrate his experiences with other tenants. There is to begin with the landlady with her dog, "the gate-keepers of my dwelling. The land-lady is as a fat, ugly, mean, stupid, unwashed, misanthropic, cheap, drunken bag of garbage.

... The woman is bad enough; she leans around in the entrance ball, spying to see that I don't bring in things or people, and when she's had her midafternoon pint of lemon-flavoured gin she always stops me in the hall, and grabs a hold of my coat or my arm, and she
presses her disgusting body up against me to keep me in a corner so she can talk to me. The smell of her body and her breath ... you can't imagine it... 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. 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 tiny eyes, she sways a little, and then, Petor ... 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. Then, She motions to that black monster of a dog she has, and she goes back to her room. And I am safe until our next meeting. (pp. 33,34).

The dog is black with an oversized head, tiny ears, blood-shot eyes, a red open sore on one of its fore-paws. Both
the landlady and her dog assault Jerry, the woman by pressing her body against him and the dog by biting his ankles. Jerry gives Peter a long account of his troubles with the dog.

Everytime he tries to enter the rooming house the unfaithful dog attacks him but not when he is leaving. "Cozy, So, Anyway, this went on for over a week, Whenever I came in; but never when I went out." (p. 37). While talking about dog's behaviour, the moment when it finds him at the entrance Jerry says that it treats unfaithfully and cruelly. The dog begins like this:

... Grrrrrrr! Which is what he did when he saw me for the first time... the day I moved in. I worried about that animal the very first minute I met him .... From the very beginning he'd snarl and then go for me, to get one of legs. Not like he was rabid, you know; he was sort of a stumbly dog, but he wasn't half-assed, either. It was good, stumbly run, but I always got away. He got a piece of my trouser leg, look, you can see right here, where it's mended; he got that the second day I lived there; but, I kicked free and got upstairs fast, so that was that (Puzzles) I still don't know to this
day how the other roomers manage it, but you know what I think: I think it had to do only with me .... That's funny, Or, it was funny. I could pack up and live in the street for all the dog cared. (36,37).

The demeanour of the dog is wonderful. He is fascinated by the dog's hatred in the same way the unseen old woman who cries whenever he passes her door. He has not seen her. He does not know the real cause of her pain. Both the dog and crying woman are doubtful and unconventional. Jerry could not find the solution of salvation for their mysterious troubles, trials and tribulations. But finally he comes to a decision. He plans to kill the dog with an act of kindness, and if he fails he will kill it. At first he wants to love the dog and to be loved. So he feeds the dog with dried and fried mutton pieces. Jerry account runs thus:

.... So, the next day I went out and bought, a bag of hamburgers, medium rare, no catsup, no onion; ... when I got back to the roominghouse the dog was waiting for me ... I opened the bag; and I set the meat down about twelve feet from where the dog was snarling at me. Like so! He snarled;
stopped snarling; sniffed; moved slowly; then faster; then faster toward the meet. Well, when he got to it he stopped, and he looked at me. I smiled; but tentatively, ... He turned his face back to the hamburgers, smelled, sniffed some more, and then ... RRRAAAAAGGGGGHHHHH, like that ... he tore into them. It was if he had never eaten anything in his life before, except like garbage... I don't think the landlady ever eats anything but garbage. But, He ate all the hamburgers, almost all at once, making sounds in his throat like a woman. Then, when he'd finished the meet, the hamburger, and tried to eat the paper, too, he sat down and smiled ... So, I got upstairs, and I lay down on my bed and started to think about the dog again ... So, I tried it for five more days, but it was always the same: snarl, sniff; move; faster; stare; RAAGGGHHHH; smile; snarl; BAM. Well, now; by this time Columbus Avenue was strewn with hamburger rolls and I was less offended than disgusted. (ppp.37,38,39).

But the dog seems to be not loving. Instead of loving it hates Jerry. So we can understand that the love-hate situation is launched between the dog and Jerry. Finally he gives poisoned meat. Nothing troubles, nothing happens, nothing realizes. The dog neither dies nor comes to love
Jerry. Jerry and the dog look at each other for a moment instantaneously and the dog withdraws from contact with him. "We neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other." (p. 44) Jerry says, trying to express his agony of his need:

... I loved the dog now, 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 that the dog would understand. (p. 42).

While Jerry narrates his travails with his landlady and her dog Peter remains uninterested. So, Jerry tries to tickle Peter's ribs to make him share his experiences. Now Peter demands to know about Jerry's experiences in the Zoo which the latter promised in the beginning. Anne Paolucci summarizes in this manner:

Peter's reaction is frustrated, almost tearful confession of his inability to get the point. Jerry is furious at first, but he soon recovers as though divining what must be done. He changes tactics abruptly, joking and tickling Peter and suddenly reminding him of the earlier promise to tell him what happened at the Zoo that day. The Biblical
overtones of these passages prepare us for the symbolism which now emerges of the zoo as a man made hell, where people are separated by bars and communication impossible. The Zoo is the condition of human existence; Jerry has put this revelation to a preliminary test in the experiment with the dog; he now proceeds to put it to the definitive test in an experiment involving another human being. The Zoo is the perfect setting for the brutal confrontation with Peter. Its violence must be unleashed if complacency and selfish withdrawal are to disappear. Salvation if needed possible - must be preceded by a destructive crisis, like the death on the Cross. In this crisis, the subconscious and the instinctive must be brought to light and acknowledged, Oedipus - fashion.

Jerry now begins to tell:

.... I went to the zoo to find out more about the 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 everyone 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. (p. 49).
From now on Jerry's action begins to annoy Peter who is poked on the arm repeatedly by the former.

After he tells Peter "THE STORY OF JERRY AND THE DOG," Jerry speaks sadly:

.... Man is a dog's best friend, remember. So: the dog and I looked at each other .... Whenever the dog and I see each other we both stop where we are. We regard each other with a mixture of sadness and suspicion, and then we feign indifference. We walk past each other safely; we have an understanding. It's very sad, but you'll have to admit that it is an understanding. We had made many attempts at contact, and we had failed. The dog has returned to garbage, and I too solitary but free passage. I have not returned. I mean to say, 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 .... 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 in the first place? (pp. 43-44).

Both are silent for sometime and then Jerry goes to Peter's bench and occupies it directly. Until then he has been standing on the dias. As an unknown citizen and an unwanted friend he comes to Peter and disturbs him. By giving number of irrelevancies one by one Jerry succeeds in convincing Peter by force. He takes Peter's goodness or calmness as lenience and he shares his series of bitter experiences with a landlady, a dog, a garden superintendent's son and some others in the absurd society as an orphan, permanent transient and outcast. Latter he attacks Peter verbally and argues logically for the bench. Peter never abandons his bench and even he gets ready to battle for "goodammed bench." (p. 58). He blames God, slightly. "Great God, I just came here to read, and now you want me to give up the bench. You're mad." (p. 54) Jerry consoles Peter reasonably:

Jerry: ... you have everything in the
Scene from *The Zoo Story*, with Scott Hylands (left) and Robert Goldby, at the Marines' Memorial Theatre, San Francisco. (Courtesy American Conservatory Theatre, San Francisco, Calif. Photograph by Hank Kranzler)
world you want; you've told me about your home, and your family, and your own little zoo. You have everything, and now you want this bench. Are these the things men fight for? Tell me, Peter, is this bench, this iron and this wood, is this your honour? Is this the thing in the world you'd fight for? can you think of anything more absurd?

Peter: Absurd? Look, I'm not going to talk to you about honour, or even try to explain it to you. Besides, it isn't question of honour; but even if it were, you wouldn't understand. (pp. 55,56).

Jerry asks Peter to move over from the bench by and by until the latter is left with no room for himself. When finally Peter refuses to vacate the bench, Jerry curses him saying that Peter has everything and now wants to take away even the bench. Peter's reasoning that he has always used the park bench for years and that he has a right over it only makes Jerry more irrational. Jerry becomes belligerent, throws a knife at Peter and asks him to defend himself. Peter holds the knife with a firm arm to defend himself, and backs away, saying he will give Jerry one last chance to go away and leave him alone. But Jerry intentionally rushes in to impale himself on it. Dying, he thanks Peter for giving an opportunity to commit suicide.
After the suicide-murder, Peter rushes howling from the scene. Jerry dies knowing that the real victim will never return to that bench again, to the safety, escape and innocence it represents. Without warning, on a pleasant Summer's day the comfortable, self-reflecting world of a man shatters all around him.

According to Gilbert Debusscher:

(Jerry's) death (is) an escape from an unbearable world and a hellish life, a capitulation to the interior contradictions which tear him apart. His last words do not express the jubilation of a victor but the humble thanks of a wounded animal put out of his misery at last.

Trivial and childish though it seems the quarrel between Jerry and Peter over the park bench is suggestive of petty possessive character of mean and low, reminiscent of beasts which fight for crumbs. Peter deems the park bench his own property just as the dog considers the rooming house its own lands or property. But the dog and Peter in the play get ready to fight to the death for their material things. The dog mirrors with deadly accuracy all the qualities even in his parents, landlady like hatredness, lust, smiling exploitation and treachery which Jerry has found
in the animals already. Thus Jerry and dog could stand in antithetical relation to one another in the play. Jerry and the dog both neither love nor hurt because they haven't tried to reach each other. From what appears to be casual comparison of men and beasts in their greediness, the comparison gains intensity and depth when Jerry alludes to the mythical Cerberus and the Sin and Death. Jerry's account is as follows: The gate-keepers of rooming house in West side are a foul woman and a dog, "a black monster of a beast; an oversized head, tiny tiny ears and eyes. The dog is black, all black; all black except for the bloodshot eyes" (p. 36). This description immediately identifies the dog as Cerberus, the monster, all black with flaming eyes, who guards Hell day in and day out carefully. The drunkard, foul woman whose affection for the dog is almost material adds further dimension to the allusion for we recognize the pain as Milton's Sin and Death. Jerry bribes and feeds the dog dried, poisoned meat pieces for getting way into the rooming house just as Theseus bribes drugged honey-cakes to cerberus to get entrance to the underland. The West side of the rooming house, then, is Hell and Jerry's adventures with the dog symbolize the mythical hero's or God's descent into Hell. He can see here Albee's method of symbolism. "...Sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out
of his way to come back a short distance correctly" (p. 25)

Realizing the potential of a mythical hero in Jerry the landlady requests him to pray to Jesus Christ for the animal. "I wanted to say to her: Madam, I have myself to pray for, the colored queen, the Puerto Rican family, the person in the front room whom I've never seen, the woman who cries deliberately behind her closed door, and the rest of the people in all rooming houses, everywhere." (p.40). In fact he cannot pray to God. But to simplify the conversation with landlady he says "...I told her I would pray." (p. 40).

In the last scene of the play Jerry dies to save Peter's soul from death by spiritual starvation. Through Jerry's death or suicidal act Peter has been forced to realize himself and to feel kinship with the homeless people, who are driven out from the society, for whom Jerry has prayed Jesus Christ before committing suicide or self-murder. The words of Peter 'Oh my God,' 'Oh my God' suggest his identifying that Jerry is Jesus Christ. In this modern morality play man is alone, and a prisoner of self in his natural state, has to understand the human condition and values, and should be realized from his animal nature. In providing this kinship, he is extending his boundaries, defying self, proving his humanity and maintaining realism;
love and affection with other creatures. Here Jerry has dropped his blood and sacrificed his life to save the fellow human souls from the inevitable death of spiritual salvation just as Jesus sacrificed his life. The stream of blood from the body of Jesus Christ has washed out the sin completely from this Cosmos. The sacrificed blood of Jesus Christ purified the human souls or sinners on the earth.

Commenting on the kind of play that The Zoo Story is, a critic remarks: "The American way of life is a structure of images, and the images, through commercial and political exploitation, have lost much of their meaning." Basically it has become a political slogan and a commercial vested interest since War, and is maintained and manipulated through a conscious process of image-building carried out mainly by the mass-media of communication. Albee has used the images of non-reason in his attack on the American way of life. The play Zoo Story belongs to the second level of the theatre of the absurd. It is the most exciting production of the American theatre in the last thirty years but it lacks the metaphysic which denies in the finest level.

The play Zoo Story is a fine dramatic writing and an exploration of the extreme pains, unbearable loneliness, depression and humiliation of human isolation. The two characters Peter and Jerry are totally different from each
other. Peter is a successful young man in publishing business and Jerry is a depressed and disappointed man who breaks the four walls of Peter's isolation. Peter is dispossessed and Jerry is permanent transient. Peter is surrounded by the material good and the prefabricated ideas. He has constructed the isolation himself carefully. In the words of Amacher:

... isolation, a common element of life in large cities, Jerry feels challenged to combat vigorously, aggressively, and, as it happens, to the death. Thus the theme of the play bears directly on a current social problem and at the same time on the deeply philosophical subjects handled by Ionesco, Beckett, and Genet -- the breakdown of language, the attempt to live by illusion, the alienation of the individual from his fellow men, the terrible loneliness of every living human being.12

In the play Zoo Story what we come to know is the world is Zoo with men separated from one another, human beings from others, animals from the people and the men from their animal nature by the bars of isolation, loneliness, humiliation, dissatisfaction, depression and lovelessness. The entire human condition is twisted, disordered and meaningless. Thus the play belongs to the tradition of absurd drama in theme and technique.
NOTES


2. Ibid.


5. All textual quotations are from The Zoo Story, The Death of Bessie Smith and The Sandbox: Three Plays, Introduced by the author Edward Albee, (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc. 1960).


7. Ibid., p. 9.


