Chapter VI

Albee’s *The Zoo Story*: The Interdependence of Form and Content

The Theatre of the Absurd projected a reality beyond the limits of logic and literal vigilance. Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Edward Albee, and Harold Pinter playwrights of Absurd drama experienced a deep sense of loss, despair and hopelessness due to the destruction caused by the two world wars and responded to the anguish in a similar manner. Theatre of the Absurd was not a movement because it neither had a slogan, flag nor a manifesto. Instead it was a state of mind and an attitude to life that became a common perception. The Absurd theatre is analogous to the wild fancy and dark humour of Surrealism and Expressionism and reminiscent of the many of the stylistic tricks and moves of the surrealist practitioners on the stage during the two world wars. It has deep affinities with Existentialism also as both reject the concept of man as a purely rational being. Absurd drama is a drama of being which deals with the elusive experiences of the inner world. And these experiences are revealed through the language which is a discourse of living experience not of conceptual thought and reason. It thus shunned the realistic techniques of presentation. The struggle for integration between the subject matter and the form in which Absurd drama is expressed separates the theatre of the Absurd from existential theatre. The absurdists ignore the rationally measureable ingredients of the theatre, the highly polished carpentry of plot in
a well-made play, the imitation of reality and the sharp motivation of
characters. The theatrical effect may be achieved through the use of comic
gestures, exaggeration, repetitive action and dialogues, and the use of
incongruous or bizarre props. Instead of being provided readymade solutions
the audience is exhorted to formulate queries that are related to the meaning of
the play. Esslin in his path breaking book ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’
explicates:

It is a theatre of situation as against a theatre of events in
sequence, and therefore it uses a language based on patterns of
concrete images rather than arguments and discursive speech.
The Theatre of the Absurd projects its author’s personal world, it
lacks objectively valid characters. It cannot show the clash of
opposing temperaments or study human passions locked in
conflict, and is therefore not dramatic in the accepted sense of the
term. Nor is it concerned with telling a story in order to
communicate some moral or social lesson, as is the aim of
Brecht’s narrative ‘epic theatre’ (Esslin 293).

Further he calls it a literature of “verbal nonsense”. The plays have no story or
plot and are often without recognized characters and present the audience with
almost mechanical puppets. They have neither a beginning nor an end but often
seem to be reflections of dreams and nightmares consisting of incoherent
babblings, or witty repartees and pointed dialogues (Esslin 293). The plays
reflect the preoccupations and apprehensions, the sentiments and thoughts
processes of the modern man of our times. The hallmark of this attitude is that
the unwavering basic concepts and traditional axioms of the former ages have
been discredited and debunked as cheap and childish illusions. The theatre of
the Absurd is a return to an old even obsolete tradition. Its newness lies in its
somewhat unusual coalescence of archaisms. A scrutiny reveals that what
rattles the unprepared spectator as iconoclastic and unintelligible innovation is
in fact a mere expansion and development of procedures that are familiar in
just slightly different context.

The unprecedented and startling treatment of language is another striking
characteristic of Absurd drama. This distrust and devaluation of language is in
tune with the mood and temper of our times. Language has been so completely
pulverized by clichés, banalities, mechanical thoughts and the conventional
attitudes that it fails to convey meaning explicitly. The drama rises above the
categories of comedy and tragedy and combines laughter with dark humour.
Nicolle sums up the essence of Absurd drama:

Here is the dramatic mirror which shows us the basic Absurdities
of present day men, able to achieve undreamt of wonders by the
application of their scientific imagination and yet the constant
prey of devouring thoughts and passions: here are the human
beings so proud of their ability to communicate with each other,
delineated in such a manner as to demonstrate the
meaninglessness of their common talk; here are men and women
outwardly logical and ‘sensible’, who are victims of
psychological and social irrationalities; here, in fact, is a vision of man and his universe which may seem entirely new and fresh (Nicolle 5).

American realistic drama which began at the turn of the century was goal-oriented depicting the socio-ideological concerns of its major practitioners. The objective was to be explicit and precise. The dramatic components of the realistic drama are thus structured to reveal the mystery in the drama and provide a solution to the problem raised in it. Characteristically the action progresses towards a single climax, meanings are accentuated, characters reveal their motives, the plots move linearly, and language communicates the confusion and mystery within the logical structure. By the 1920s the realistic conventions of drama began to show signs of changes giving way to the ‘theatre of the Absurd’. John Mason Brown explicates the advent of the Theatre of the Absurd in the following words:

To speak for a world that seemed well-made, there was once the “well-made” play. That was before the threats and confusions of the present. To reflect a world that to more and more people has seemed ill-made, the “unmade” play came into being… It was, in the jargon of the avant-garde, “anti-play” and “anti-theatre” and as different from a conventional play as in painting the work of today’s abstract expressionist is from yesterday’s realist. Its lack of logic was its sole claim to logic, because authors employing its
form did not believe logic could be superimposed on an illogical world (537).

The impelling cause behind the disturbances in the twentieth century was the decline in moral and religious faith. Nietzsche’s philosophy of ‘God is Dead’ led to the promotion of science, human progress and political ideologies. After the two devastating world wars humanity struggled for faith, companionship and compassion. The new philosophy of Existentialism led to an awareness of the true human condition and a search to regain humanity’s lost sense of religious belief. The late 1920s witnessed that this philosophical development started to influence art and literature thematically as well as technically, and by the end of World War II the playwrights began to incorporate this content into their works. Consequently the existentialist ideas were transformed into an entirely novel theatrical idiom which later came to be referred as the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’.

The theatre had become “middle-aged”, says Brown, and “lacked daring” (535). For the major part it was a reiteration of the content without innovations. Apparently it does not synchronize with the contemporary times and unwilling to entangle with the problems of the times. Writers from different countries such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, and others revolutionized the theatre in their own nations, seemingly heading in the same direction. A Hungarian born author and a critic, Martin Esslin grouped them together under the title of the Theatre of the Absurd. His path breaking work and a comprehensive
document of the same name became a guideline for the study of contemporary stage. He indicates that originally “Absurd” was a musical term meaning “out of harmony”, hence its extension to “out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical”. It was on similar plane, Esslin points out, that Camus used the term “Absurdity” to “diagnose the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs”, and Ionesco defined the term Absurd as “that which is devoid of purpose” and adds, “cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless”. Hence the theatre is an expression of modern man’s endeavors to come to terms with the world in which he lives and to liberate him from the delusion that causes disappointments. Further, Gassner observes:

It (Theatre of the Absurd) uses antibourgeois shock tactics including, a deliberate resort to coarse even scatological speech, childish or freakish simplifications and exaggerations, clowning and acrobatic circus feats, mock-heroic passages, brusque transitions from apparent Realism to the wildest kind of farce, cultivated naïveté, and calculated incredibility (326).

The plays of the Absurd tradition are preoccupied with life’s intricate mysteries. The recurrent themes have been failure to communicate with people, the falseness of most human values, man’s isolation from his fellow human beings, the living who are unknowingly dead and the resemblance between animals and humans who live in a zoo of their own. In an essay, ‘Which theatre is the Absurd one?’ Albee calls the Theatre of the Absurd as the Realistic
theatre of our time because it mirrors man’s condition as it really is. Also in the similar essay he describes the Absurd theatre as:

Man’s attempt to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in the world which makes no sense – because the moral, religious, political, and social structure man has erected to illusion himself have collapsed (Gassner 332).

Whereas Albert Camus explicates the situation in the following words:

In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights. Man feels an alien, stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of the 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 (Camus xii).

To incorporate this content Absurd drama disrupts the logic and breaks the language into units. Esslin defines the plays written in this tradition as moving:

“toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself” (Esslin 26).

He further explains:

The element of language still plays an important part in this conception, but what happens on stage transcends, and often contradicts, the word spoken by the character (26).
The aim of the Absurd dramatist is to present the mysteries and paradoxes in human existence within the dramatic structure. Logical communication is reduced to meaningless cries and screams. They use clichés, silences and ambiguities as effective techniques to represent life as they perceive it. The unsaid meaning is conveyed through gaps, fragmented speeches, incomplete stories that leave the hidden motives, facts concealed or cryptically revealed. These silences, incomplete sentences with pauses and ellipses used in the text open the drama to myriad interpretations. Actors engage in verbal and non-verbal dialogues and make silences speak through vocal intonations and gestures.

Thus Absurd drama is not a drama of ideas but drama of the spirit of existence. It abandons discursive thoughts and rational devices and uses the language of living experience. It overlooks the realistic mode of presentation since the absurdists find Realism inadequate to accommodate existing state of affairs, that is, “man’s loneliness anxiety vulnerability and the vision of his entrapment in a complicated, painful and incomprehensible situation”. (Zaidi 160). Absurd drama shares affinities with Existentialism but in its struggle to integrate content and form it distinguishes itself from the existential theatre. Zahida Zaidi condensed the philosophy into a few words.

It (Absurd Drama) does not seem to be motivated by a clearly defined philosophic system. Its insights are arrived at independently and intuitively and its artistic approach more experimental and imaginative (183).
The Zoo Story, The Death of Bessie Smith, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf, and The Sandbox established Edward Albee as a playwright of repute. With The Zoo Story which has Absurdist overtones Albee came to be regarded as the enfant terrible of American theatre, challenging and debunking the myth his country represented. As an avant-garde artist and an iconoclast, he attacked American materialism, breakdown of communication, and superficial values. One of the important preoccupations of Albee is to highlight the adverse effects of living in illusion and upholding myths as false forms of consolation in an otherwise inane existence.

His writing career is typified by experimentation and a long training of trial and error which eventually resulted in success and fame. At the age of twenty he walked out on his affluent adoptive parents and lived inconspicuously among artists and bohemians of New York’s Greenwich Village. Albee attempted several genres of writing and received recognition for plays that depicted the quintessential contemporary American society. An accidental meeting of two strangers in a park (The Zoo Story), a satiric treatment of a marriage revealing the emptiness of the relationship between a couple (The American Dream), the life of an elderly couple revolving around a son who never existed (Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf) are easily recognizable familiar situations.

As a critic of American consumerist society living under the impact of marketing and advertisement, Albee attempts to debunk the fanciful American Dream. The illusion of a perfect and comfortable living with financial stability
and material prosperity is mocked at from the Absurdist point of view in his plays.

An exploration of the gallery of Absurd drama conjures a series of lively images on the screen of imagination: an old man sitting by his tape recorder, running a tape of his past life, (Krapp’s Last Tape), two vagabonds waiting unendingly under a tree (Waiting for Godot), a middle-aged man in the park and his desperate attempts to make contact with a complacent companion. These images are the projection of human predicament made tangible through dramatization on stage. The study of this avant-garde movement as literature, as innovative stage technique, as an expression of modern sensibility and contemporary sufferings can be contained from the assessment of the works themselves. From the above cited instances, this chapter intends to examine ‘The Zoo Story’ by Edward Albee more closely for its characteristic Absurd dramatic mode.

The movement appeared late in America because there has been no relative loss of faith and purpose. However Edward Albee attacked the foundation of ‘American Dream’, that is, American optimism of being superpower. By doing so he came to be known as the playwright of the Absurd stream. His debut play ‘the Zoo Story’ (1959) brought him world-wide recognition as a proponent of the Theatre of the Absurd’. Jean Gould comments:
He had spoken out at last, telling the truth in sweeping indictment of the world as he had found it—a world that made conformity a virtue and nonconformity a vice, a disease (277).

A brilliantly drawn discourse between Jerry, the outcast and Peter, the conformist, is interrupted by its sensational ending.

… the plight of the Schizophrenic outcast is turned into an act of sentimentality, especially as the victim expires in touching solitude and fellow feeling for his involuntary murderer (Esslin 311).

The play opens on a bare stage with a park bench. The place is the public park yet more secluded and lonely than a dark alley. The theme of Absurdity is apparent from the beginning, characterized by an empty stage without stage settings and props and just two characters to enact the entire drama. Comparable to Beckett’s “Waiting For Godot,” the play neither witnesses any significant development in plot or action nor change in settings. Jerry impaling himself on the knife is the sole important action which forms the climax of the play.

The secluded park creates a vivid and realistic image of isolation combined with the quietness of mood, conveyed by Peter, a middle-aged respectable man sitting by himself on an idyllic Sunday afternoon reading in the park. However, the play’s apparent serenity does not last long. The bench is an entity to take over, an arena for assertion. The brawl over the bench turns
out to be lethal. It ends with Jerry impaling himself on a knife held by Peter, shattering the self-reflecting world of this man. Peter does not get involved in the suicide/murder out of impetuosity. In fact he does not even know Jerry’s secret intention. By the play’s end, Peter has taken a man’s life and had his own relentlessly transformed.

Edward Albee’s ‘The Zoo Story’ is a long one-act play in which “nothing happens” except the exchange of dialogues until the violent ending. It is a drama of language. Depicted in the play also, Absurd drama strives to integrate content and form. Language carries the subject matter thereby content converts into form and form is content. Language creates situations and gives momentum to the play. Through verbal communication only Jerry Albee’s anti-hero depicts the haunting loneliness, and the human despair to establish a ‘connect’ with others. With the character of Jerry, Albee gave a new voice to American drama.

Albee empowered the disempowered. Living on the margins of the society, Jerry is the anti-establishment, counterculture hero. He is the dark stranger, the social outcast, the orphan, the Other (Stephen Bottoms 19).

The play with minimum number of characters, almost no props and stage settings, no action, no drama, in its accepted sense of the term, effectively portrays the predicament of contemporary modern man. The disillusionment, loss of religious faith, alienation, isolation and separation from fellow beings, breakdown of communication consequent to the second world war left man a
stranger in his own world. Absurd dramatists endeavored to display this human adversity on stage. Content and form are so completely merged with each other that seemingly content becomes form and form content. This is the Absurdity of Absurd technique of which *The Zoo Story* is an apparent manifestation. Therefore language has a very significant role to play in Absurd drama. On one hand human yearning to communicate, to establish some sort of contact is presented on stage through language. On the other hand, a breakdown in communication and failure of language to bridge this gap is also staged in the theatre. Language is used to highlight the failure of language to facilitate communication. It is only through words that the play is set in dramaturgic mode since action is conspicuously absent.

The narrative, in the simplest terms, recounts the events in the life of Jerry, who, bogged down with loneliness, starts up a conversation with a stranger in a park and eventually compels him to commit a brutal act. In the play’s stage directions *Peter* is described as:

a man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely. He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses. Although he is moving middle age, his dress and his manner would suggest a man younger (14).

The picture is suggestive of Peter’s perfect life which he seems to be living on his own terms. He is a representative of the bourgeoisie, which Albee criticized throughout his writing career. For Albee, Peter’s life is an epitome of American middle-class complacent existence. In contrast to the protagonist *Peter*, Jerry is
created as an antagonist, diametrically opposite to Peter. His portrayal is indicative of his deterioration:

What was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go to fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he was once (14).

His “fall from physical grace” suggests “a great weariness” (14). On the stage, Peter’s book stands for an intellectual escape which shields him from Jerry’s intrusion. He constantly turns away from Jerry and looks into his book to communicate his cautiousness and indifference to a stranger. Instead of addressing a person with formal greetings, Jerry abruptly tries to start a conversation, immediately upon entering the stage, “I’ve been to the zoo”. This weird manner of starting a conversation goes unnoticed. Albee devises Peter’s silence in parenthesis – “Peter doesn’t notice”. The Zoo Story serves as an introduction to the understanding of Albee’s characteristic use of “silence and pauses”. The author articulates collapse in communication, festering sense of alienation, camouflage the past, and the unclear and doubtful motives of characters during their interaction with each other through narrational silence. Peter uses silence to communicate his unwillingness to listen while Jerry who initiates the conversation evades his own emotions with his eloquent long speeches. To Jerry’s questions Peter’s responses are brief and cryptic. Jerry perceives a sense of inadequacy in his reactions. Peter’s faltering replies becomes clear when the conversation moved to the subject of family. For
instance, to Jerry’s enquiry that whether his children are boys, his answer: “No, girls…both girls” (18) is an unscripted note of regret denoted by ellipses.

In order to attract Peter’s attention, Jerry raises the pitch of his voice that Albee scripts in bold letters – Mister, I’ve been to the zoo! Which Peter is unable to ignore; he “puts his book down, his pipe out and away, smiling” (17). Albee does not use stage directions but a few to convey the change in emotions. Apparently, Jerry is successful in involving Peter to converse, and establish some contact with him. Thus, from the commencement of the play, the two characters, from two distinct classes are prepared to collide. Their meeting place, the central park, lies in between Peter’s east-side ‘paradise’ and Jerry’s west-side ‘prison’. Albee’s objective is, instead of focusing on their disparities, to present a sense of isolation and emptiness which is common to both the characters. The basic difference is that Jerry is aware of his loneliness while Peter’s still lies buried below the superficial middle-class bliss.

Further, the frequent use of the phrase “I’ve been to the zoo/ “What happened at the zoo” is technically significant. Albee uses repetition as an important tool to escalate action or movements. The first and the major movement of the play is employment of ‘repetition’ for intensification. The dramatist uses the catchphrase to draw the audience’s attention to human predicament in his Absurdist style. During the course of the play, Jerry tells some substantial stories from his personal life as an introduction to the awaited zoo story:
Jerry… after I tell you about the dog, do you know what then?

Then...Then I’ll tell you about what happened at the zoo (26).

The untold story in the play is that the life in a zoo is analogous to the life of people in America. The Americans compartmentalized living wherein communication is not possible, mutual empathy does not exist and people are unable to come to terms with their true condition.

With the refrain “I have been to the zoo” which is repeated three times in the beginning of the play, Jerry is trying to communicate to Peter and to the audience as well, that he has experienced this world, contemporary America - the New York City. The dramatist assigns several digressions to the speeches of Jerry. The recurrence of the expression allows the readers/audience to retrieve the original idea. Also when the readers get carried away with Jerry’s extensive tales about his past life, an abrupt and sudden use of the refrain, ‘what happened at the zoo’ breaches the concentration of the audience giving the feel of ‘estrangement effect’. William I. Oliver in his essay ‘Between Absurdity and the Playwright observes:

One of the advantages of the expressionistic control in Absurdist drama is its power to alienate the audience, keeping it alive to the ideological by-play of the symbols (Bogard and Oliver 9).

He further adds that Esslin is of the opinion that the Absurdist have succeeded in attaining this alienation effect more effectively than its inventor Bertolt Brecht.
Albee describes Jerry’s dwelling place as a “laughably small room” conjoint with several other similar rooms (21). It connotes the weirdness of his living conditions. He knows a little about his neighbors - “the colored queen”, “the Puerto Rican family”, and “the lady who cries all the time” (20) - because, he has no genuine communication with them. This is a solitary existence characterized by his list of minimal belongings including empty picture frames and a pack of pornographic playing cards among other things. The Absurdity of his existence gets more obvious in the account of his carnal relationships. He remarks:

I wonder if it’s sad that I never see the little ladies more than once. I’ve never been able to have sex with, or, how is it put?... make love to anybody more than once. And now; oh, do I love the little ladies; really, I love them. For about an hour (24).

He does not form meaningful relationship with them – nothing worth remembering to put in one of the empty photo frames.

This picture of Jerry’s confinement is a manifestation of his attitude towards American life. From the description of his hive-like rooming house to his story about the titular Zoo, Jerry draws a picture of a society in which people are ensnared and separated from each other due to sociopolitical and interpersonal barriers. The zoo provides the accurate analogy for such human isolation Jerry says:

I went to the zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animal 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 (34).

For Jerry, zoo is a metaphor for American life. Realizing this, Jerry seeks an escape in the form of having some contact with Peter who is a complete stranger to him.

The next noteworthy situation is generated when Jerry is asked about putting his parents’ pictures in empty photo frames. Jerry tells Peter that his parents died when he was very young. From this single incident stem many situations and thus drama is created. His mother deserted his father for adulterous relationship which lasted for a period of a year only. Her alcoholism led to her death at Christmas and then his father’s accidental demise left him alone. The seriocomic loss of his parents can be assessed in the light of Esslin’s statement: “Theater of the Absurd transcends the categories of comedy and tragedy and combines laughter with horror”. (Esslin 300). After his parent’s death his mother’s sister looked after Jerry till she dies after which Jerry finds himself alone in the woeful world. Nevertheless, in a strange insensitive way, he admits:

that was a long time ago, and I have no feeling about any of it that I care to admit to myself (23).
From these entanglements emerge emotional decline of his relationship that never took shape. This is conveyed through his restless movements on stage, abrupt and unrelated questions, repressed anxiety and mood swings directed at Peter who does not understand his emotions. Peter, for whom life is confined to peaceful family life and economic stability, is unable to look beyond and finds Jerry’s horrors of life incomprehensible. On one hand Jerry is desperate to have some contact with Peter to overcome his isolation. On the other, he wants to take Peter out of his complacent existence and make him confront the stark realities of life.

In increasingly frantic attempts, to establish a connection with Peter and make him responsive of the sterility of his existence, Jerry narrates the allegorical ‘story of Jerry and the Dog’. Before that Jerry describes his landlady which serves as an introduction to one more drama in the play. He says, she is “fat, ugly, mean, stupid, unwashed, misanthropic, cheap, drunken bag of garbage” (25). The scatological language used at this point and throughout the play is peculiar to the Absurd playwrights. On introducing the engaging character of landlady, Stephen Coy, a well-known drama critic, comments on the introduction of this particular character to the play:

The land lady despite being one of the most arresting offstage presences in American drama is only the prelude to what might be called the third movement of the play.
The vivid and powerful portrayal of the landlady and her voluptuous advances towards Jerry makes her come alive on the screen of the viewers’ imagination. Such is the sovereignty of language in Albee’s plays.

The mention of the character of landlady causes consternation to Peter because this young publishing executive is a representative of a culture that negates the existence of such individuals like Jerry and the Landlady. Reality is defined by images presented on television and ‘‘Time’ magazine for Peter.

PETER. It’s so... unthinkable. I find it hard to believe that people such as that really are.

JERRY. (Lightly mocking) It’s for reading about, isn’t it?

PETER. (Seriously) Yes

JERRY. And fact is better left to fiction (26).

But by the end of the play, Jerry has managed to change Peter’s perception of reality to such an extent that Peter gets into physical fight over what he believes to be “his” bench and in self-defense helps Jerry kill himself. The reality which initially appears more real than fiction to Peter now fills him with starkness and force and he runs off screaming “oh my god!”

As Jerry narrates the story of the ‘Jerry and the Dog’, his continual back and forth movements on stage convey his deep anxiety. During the course of this encounter he narrates that he tries to pacify the dog, which growls at him whenever he comes into his apartment, using alternate gestures of love and
violence. In this long monologue by Jerry, the dramatist barely provides stage direction but for Peter’s gestures and change in emotions. For example:

- *PETER* raises a hand in protest
- *PETER* indicates his increasing displeasure and slowly growing antagonism
- *PETER* sets to thinking…
- *PETER* reacts scoffingly
- *PETER* seems to be hypnotized

As for Jerry’s movements, Albee recedes into background by staying reticent and leaves most of the interpretation of the drama to the discretion of the actor and director. Critics have carefully examined the story for its incoherent narration. The improper fluctuations in Jerry’s tone of correlation of the unrelated objects into peculiar analogies lead to oddity of language:

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It’s just… It’s just that… *(Jerry is abnormally tense, now)*…
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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 of dealing with SOMETHING. If not with people…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… *(30).*
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The mounting menace and the growing angst are distinctly evident in Jerry’s quick pacing on the stage and recurring shrieks amid the monologue. Critics observe linguistic uniqueness in the story in Jerry’s frequent obstructions in his thoughts with the words “and” and “oh, yes”, use of linking word “so” to connect his fragmented tale, and his repetition of the phrase, “it’s just that…” as he struggles to find words for indefinable emotions.

By the end of the story, Jerry’s broken speech, his tone and physical movements convey his hankering to form a connection, to communicate with some living breathing object. Jerry is thus an absolute personification of Absurd predicament very artfully projected on stage. The love hate theme is carefully developed in the story.

But during that twenty seconds or two hours that we looked into each other’s face, we made contact. Now, here is what I had wanted to happen: I loved the dog now, and 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… and I don’t really know why I expected the dog to understand anything, much less my motivations... I hoped the dog would understand (30).

Before concluding the story Jerry is silent and the silence is prolonged. The silence is perhaps indicative of Jerry’s hope for being successful in making contact with Peter. The reaction is contrary to what he probably anticipated as Peter is “silent” “disturbed” and “numb” at the end of the story. He spontaneously rejected Jerry’s emotional encounters. Besides, Peter’s silence
conveys to Jerry his realization of the unsaid content of the story that he instantly refuses to accept. The hesitant and disjointed utterances make this apparent:

PETER. I… I don’t understand what … I don’t think I … (now almost tearfully) why did you tell me all of this?

… I DON’T UNDERSTAND!

JERRY. That’s a lie

PETER. No, No, it’s not.

JERRY (quietly): I tried to explain it to you as I went along. I went slowly; it all has to do with….

PETER. I DON’T WANT TO HEAR ANYMORE. I don’t understand you, or your land lady, or her dog… (31).

An understanding of the underlying meaning baffles the audience. The dramatist reverses the purpose of dramatic irony, for generally a play creates irony where audience perceives the meaning and characters are ignorant of it. Jerry and Peter share the understanding implied by the unspoken words which enhances the dramatic tension. The incoherent statement by Peter with ‘pauses’ inserted in between suggests the disturbance in Peters mind as he encounters the situation he always detached himself from and avoided.

The monologue is incredibly dramatic: Albee magnificently creates drama through linguistic coherence with rise and fall in the tone in accordance with the mood and temper of the story. Effectively enough, Jerry articulates the
entire speech acting out each situation and every character he mentions. Jerry provides momentum to the play. The representation of his life story, the story of Jerry and the dog, the description of the landlady, tenants of rooming houses remind readers of an ancient Roman theatrical performance of ‘pantomime’. His effortless staging of different roles gives an impression of improvised stage show. Silences speak of the persistent loneliness in Jerry, his pain of alienation, his desperation to establish contact with anyone, his failure to achieve what he desires and the violent feelings of a disoriented character who desperately needs emotional fulfillment and can die for it. The expressions, gesticulations and movements highlight Jerry’s desperation and Peter’s horror to come to terms with stark realities of life. This drama without significant action appears instinctive and appealing. It seems to be unscripted and created impromptu on stage.

Owing to the frustration of failure to gain Peter’s understanding and attention Jerry resorts to violent means to suppress his pain and anger. The park bench which is an object to seize, to gain or take control of becomes unusually important. ‘Grotesquely fatigued’ at the end of the story, Jerry sits down on the bench besides Peter. This is the first time in the play Jerry sits. He observes that instead of making a breakthrough in communication he has annoyed Peter. Suddenly acting impishly, he “tickles”, “pokes”, “punches” and “pushes” Peter off the bench. Moreover an insult to his manhood aggravates Peter’s anger and he decides to fight for the possession of bench. But when Jerry opens a knife and tosses before Peter, he refuses to take it. Then he rushes over, grabs Peter
by collar, slaps him and spits on his face and drives Peter to rush over to pick the knife. Then with a heavy sigh Jerry runs into the knife and kills himself. Mita Mitra in her essay ‘The Role of Silence in Edward Albee’s plays’ analyses the scene thus:

Taunted by Jerry, Peter denies in his response that the possession of the bench in indeed a “question of honor”. But his anger at Jerry’s encroachment contradicts his statement, and his effort to protect the bench implies that it has assumed an abstract meaning for him. In his turn, Jerry manipulates this “Absurd” confrontation over a bench to deflect attention from the despair he feels before he forces Peter to pick up a knife and then runs into it (31).

Albee depicts the quintessence of the scene in the subtext:

For just a moment, complete silence, JERRY impaled on the knife at the end of PETER’s still firm arm… with the knife in him, he stumbles back to the bench that PETER had vacated. He crumbles there, sitting, facing PETER, his eyes wide in agony, his mouth open… JERRY is dying, but now his expression seems to change for the most part he seems removed from his dying. He smiles … PETER’s mouth drops open. He cannot move, he is transfixed (39).

Jerry concludes the play with a blend of mockery, contempt and a desperate supplication to god who fails to relieve of his sense of hopeless alienation:
Oh….. my… God (He is dead)

Anthony Hopkins, in an article, “conventional Albee: Box and Chairman Mao”, comments on Albee’s art of writing:

There is perhaps a formal departure from some conventions of the dramatic presentation, contain within their boundaries what is essentially an extension of Albee’s continuing examination of American moral collapse and ethical decay (147).

While Esslin remarks:

In the Realism of its dialogue and its subject matter - an outsider’s inability to establish genuine contact with a dog, let alone any human being- The Zoo Story is closely akin to the world of Harold Pinter (Esslin311).

The play takes shape with the combination of language and silences. The Zoo Story’ acts like a musical score which is repeated at every turn of the play. Jerry frequently alludes to the zoo assuring Peter to describe what happened at the zoo but always postpones the telling, thereby holding the interest of Peter and the audience. Mita Mitra quotes Oscar Lee Brownstein’s analysis.

He distinguishes Albee’s narrative technique as an example of “prospective” strategy that engages our interest in the future, but unlike the dramatic strategy of “foreshadowing”, it does not allow the audience to anticipate the outcome (Mitra 31).
The persistent allusion to the zoo without providing any details sustains the audience’s interest and arouses curiosity. The unpredictable climax of the play leaves the audience astounded. Albee’s technique of incomplete or limited revelation and withholding is parallel to the refrain in “Waiting for Godot” where the characters through bizarre activities and ‘Absurd’ discourse struggle for recognition and expression.

The play creates a tension through seemingly conflicting characters, their different geographical backgrounds, fictionalities, even props—Jerry versus Peter, rooming house against central park, animals contrasted with men, freedom as opposed to imprisonment, and conformity against confrontation. Through these opposing ideologies The Zoo Story unravels a parable about the existing human condition.

The Zoo Story is essentially the drama of language where words control the action. The opening is monosyllabic mounting to energetic flow of dialogues. Jerry with his long engrossing and stirring discourse has successfully shaken Peter out of his complacent existence that he refuses to acknowledge till Jerry loses his life through a knife held by Peter. The incident stimulates Peter and the death, perhaps passes on to Peter an understanding of the despair, the underlying pathos and alienation, crumbling faith, collapse of communication the sterility of human existence and other existential problems and dilemmas which threaten the comfortable existence of his life. As an embodiment of instability and menace, Jerry remains alive in the readers mind.
Works Cited


