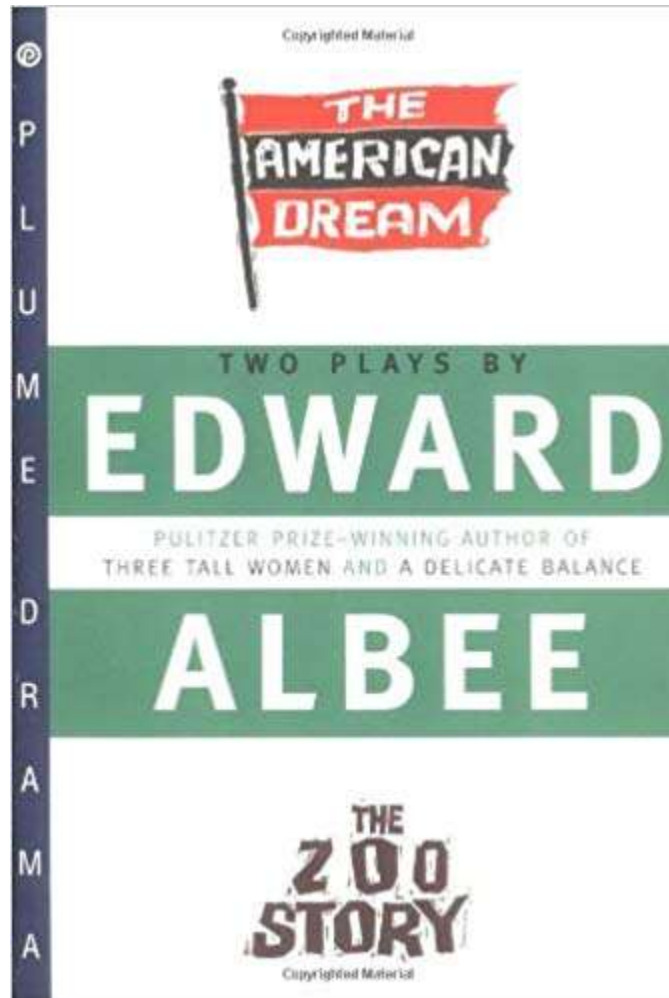


The Malady Called Indifference in *The Zoo Story*

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The Zoo Story

Indifference is one of the many maladies normally inflicted on the drifters of any society. Many unfortunate individuals are forced to feel so alienated even from their own people. Edward Albee, one of the towering personalities of the 20th Century American Theater, had effectively captured the badly nurtured lives of such estranged multitudes of his society in his many trend-setting and controversially stirring presentations on the stage. Gabbard in his work *Edward Albee's Triptych on Abandonment* asserts that Edward Albee's plays "ring with rage at

society's disregard for its outcasts". Albee used his plays to delineate the painful life of such disturbed persons. *The Zoo Story* is one such play wherein Albee brought to light the plight of Jerry, a victim of the indifferent attitude of a decomposing society. Driven to madness, and thereby driven to a Zoo to learn how the caged animals co-exist, Jerry walked northerly to reach a Central Park only to miserably fail in his yet another attempt to clinch a conversation with a fellow human being, leading to his own suicide-murder. Though what happened at the Central Park, or the plot of this one-act play, seems unrealistic, Jerry's appalling death shocks not only Peter, whose indifference finally forced Jerry to commit the heinous crime of suicide, but also the complacent theater-goers of an ailing society. This paper attempts to stress on the importance on the need of a remedy for the ego-centric malady called indifference.

Many Turn Neurotic - Deterioration

In the past, individuals turn romantic to wander lonely as clouds to converse with the captivating codes of Nature. In the modern world, many troubled individuals turn neurotic unable to cope up with the excruciating modes of torture. Deprived of all basic needs, these poor creatures creep deep into the caves of solitude only to erupt emotional, and, at times, violent. In many such cases, the individuals are not to blame. Many factors contribute to the distasteful deterioration. Playwrights of the twentieth century endeavor to lay bare the deterioration and its causes. The plays of Edward Albee too "portray alienated individuals who suffer as a result of unjust social, moral, and religious strictures..." (CLC 113)

Jerry in *The Zoo Story* – The Permanent Transient

Jerry in *The Zoo Story*, Grandma in *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*, Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Bessie Smith in *The Death of Bessie Smith* are some of the individuals who suffered as a result of unjust social, moral, and religious strictures. The individual whose life is taken up for analysis in this paper is Jerry, the troubled individual in *The Zoo Story*. The play which launched Albee's meteoric rise to fame is about the inability of Jerry, "the permanent transient," (ZS 1) in making a meaningful contact with a fellow human being. It presents a confrontation between the middle-class America and its outcasts. Set in the Central Park, an average American is confronted by a drifter from the other side of the park. The duologue (between Peter, the conformist bourgeois and Jerry, the outcast) ends when Jerry provokes Peter into drawing a knife and then impales himself on it. Through a sequence of failed conversations and many misinterpretations of the act of love, Jerry tries to teach Peter the nature of human existence and relations.

Example of Alienated Youth

The character of Jerry is a classic example of the alienated youths who are the victims of the maladies of modern society. The play offers no detailed direct account of how the world is actually responsible for Jerry's precarious life. But, his rootless, aimless and frenzied life is certainly the result of his broken home and also of the casual, complacent and indifferent society. The play throws enough light on what made Jerry's life so shaky and in shambles. A peep into the life of Jerry will clearly explicate an intensely harrowing expression of estrangement in American society. Jerry is consumed

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with loneliness. Living in a rooming house, he is alone and longing, rather desperately, for some meaningful communication with fellow human beings. Unable to achieve that, he sacrifices his life to accomplish a permanent contact with a stranger called Peter. Albee introduces Jerry as "a man in his late thirties, not poorly dressed, but carelessly. 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 once was" (ZS 3). Though only in his late thirties, Jerry is in physical decline. His weariness is evidently a result of his sordid personal history. He is a product of a broken home, the orphaned son of a promiscuous, alcoholic mother and a weak father. His adoptive puritanical aunt dies prematurely. Deprived of a normal family environment, Jerry is apparently unable to find solid, loving relationships. His homosexuality separates him from others, and his seedy rooming house reeks of alienation. The most vivid tenants of the rooming house are symptomatic of a pathological contaminant of contemporary life.

Pathological Contaminant of Contemporary Life

The tenants are people caged in their respective cells of solitude, cut off from one another in a hellish world, throwing Jerry to shore all alone on the top floor where he lives in a laughably small room. Further signs of desolation and desperation lie first in the figure of the fat, ugly, misanthropic, drunken landlady, who makes repulsive sexual advances to Jerry, and next in the figure of her monstrous dog. Jerry and the dog are as alienated from each other as the animals in the zoo are from one another and from human beings. Jerry's inability to communicate with the dog has rendered him desperate for one last chance at contact with a living being. He tries it with Peter at the Central Park. What happens at the park forms the plot of the play.

Peter's Failure to See the Moral

Peter, the other character in the play, however, with his tweeds, pipe, horn-rimmed glasses, and afternoon book, is unable to offer the vital breakthrough that Jerry has been desperately looking for. Peter, hails from a highly organized and conventional middle-class world, repeatedly fails to apprehend the moral in any of Jerry's stories. More importantly, he fails to see the desperation and vulnerability of Jerry. Also, he fails to recognize his own human deficiencies. He remains a representative of the successful American businessman. He is so securely locked into the bourgeois values and comfortable way of life that he cannot see or respond to the desolation around him. He is a sophisticated version of the impersonality and also atypical of the indifferent attitude of the society that refuses to pay any attention to the pains and needs of its outcasts.

Poles Apart

Both are almost of the same age – Jerry is in his late thirties and Peter is in his early forties – they are poles apart. The polarity is so telling. Peter, well settled in life, married, blessed with two daughters, two parakeets, and two television sets, lives in a nice neighborhood enjoying an executive position in a textbook publishing firm. But, Jerry remains a drifter, drifts along the chaotic current of a disorganized world, and lives in no better place than a dungeon. Jerry may have longings to live together but lives alone and remains a drifter. There is no one to talk to him, to share his joys, if any, or

sorrows. Nothing in his life is meaningful and lasting; everything is miserable and painfully passing. There is absolutely no one whom he can look up to for any needs. His long lingering thirst for some true communication is shamelessly thwarted by people who live in some shells of their own. Jerry remains a tramp, being trampled by the tribulations caused by a decomposing society.

All About Absurd Situation – Breakdown in Communication

The basic situation that Albee provides for his *The Zoo Story* is absurd. A stranger meets another stranger in a Central Park, attempts a conversation and, after having failed in his attempt, orchestrates his own (suicide) murder. Whether absurd or illogical, the happenings in the central park on that fateful Sunday evening has clearly brought to light how indifference drives human beings to desperation and eventually to death. Behind this absurd situation, there is a strong message. Breakdown in communication caused by indifference and complacency can never make but only break the lives of poor individuals. A society where such poor individuals turn schizophrenic, learn lessons from dogs, burn his passions with strangers for some conversations, and finally turn violent, can never be a healthy society. Albee just attempts a fine tuning with the shocking episode at the Central Park in *The Zoo Story*.

Pinch of Loneliness

Albee's Jerry has been a troubled individual throughout his life. This hero is not merely a figment of Albee's imagination. In an interview, Albee has reportedly said that all those people shown to be living in the rooming houses are real. The miserable life of those people has had a strong impact on the young playwright and the play is the result of that impact. They are so isolated from the rest of the world that they find human contacts a far cry. All those troubled people, especially Jerry, feel the pinch of loneliness. The play is an expression of a loquacious desperation. Jerry has been longing for someone whom he can talk to. "But once in a while", he tells Peter, "I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody, know all about him" (ZS 6). Man is a social animal. He is not a machine and cannot lead a lonely life in the midst of a madding crowd. One of the basic needs of man is the urge to communicate. Not in man alone, almost in every creature, this urge is so innate. This need to communicate is the very foundation for a healthy bond and thereby a healthier life. Jerry is badly deprived of all.

Any barrier to healthy communication will naturally result in a sort of disorder in the persona of any individual. The world provides only barriers to Jerry in all his life. Man cannot live alone and live without sufficing the urge to communicate. Jerry has been living alone and without any soul, excepting the landlady and the dog, to make contact with. This breakdown in communication is one of the serious ills affecting the modern society. Albee is painfully aware of this grave concern. Through the portrayal of what happened at the central park, Albee has tried to send a strong message to the audience, to the readers. This malady has to be cured. It cannot be cured as long as the society turns a blind eye to the precarious lives of individuals like Jerry. Mankind needs to be

sympathetic and caring to the needs of such people. Some consideration will surely make the world a better place for the bitterly suffering lives.

Peter as Modern Man

Peter stands for the complacent modern man. He is well settled in life, has a regular income, and has been living happily with his family. He has no major issues to settle with in his smooth world. He comes to the park to read. He prefers reading a book to having any conversation with a fellow human being. He does not like to be disturbed by anyone. Had he been a little more receptive to the intruder's many prattles, one precious life could have been saved. The unexpected suicide murder could have been averted. The modern society is full of persons like Peter. Albee wants Peters of this world to learn a lesson from his play. He wants them to be more compassionate, more sympathetic, and more social with fellow human beings. It may be easier to remain passive without participating in the affairs of others. But, Albee wants modern man to be active, active even with the activities of others. Albee's message from this play is the utter necessity of healthier human bond. Albee makes this message through the story of Jerry. The world is like a zoo and the people living therein are separated by self-inflicted bars. There "we neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other" (ZS 22). Albee's consideration for the well-being of the individuals is very effectively delineated with the help of the two characters Jerry and Peter. One is so loquacious and the other one so reticent. They are oxymoronic in many ways. The playwright has purposefully created these two characters to be opposites. Albee generates much of the play's tragic tension by yoking opposites together. As it has been already stated, they are poles apart in many ways. The contradiction is so telling that it effectively brings to light the core of grief of modern man. The deep-rooted desperation with which Jerry suddenly barges into the secluded part of the park to announce to Peter and also to the audience that he has been to the zoo has obviously disturbed the complacent attributes of every one. Peter's preoccupation with the book receives a jolt with the restless Jerry's relentless attempts at conversation with him. With the death of Jerry, Peter, the other character, might have been dispossessed not only of his bench but also of his indifference and complacency. He can never be the same person again.

Core of Grief of Modern Life

Though variedly seen, one aspect of the play is generally accepted that the play lays bare the core of grief of modern life. Roudane has rightly termed this play as "nothing less than the general tragedy of modern existence itself" (28). Indeed, modern life proves to be a tough nut for many poor individuals. Especially when people pay more attention to material success, they fail to see the world around them, resulting in societal schisms which separate the haves from the have-nots. The 1950s is often considered the heyday of The American dream. After the World War II, the US economy boomed, and a middle-class lifestyle was more attainable than ever before. However, many of the period's greatest authors were critical of the effect this capitalist ethic had on American culture. Many of Albee's contemporaries – such as Arthur Miller and Richard Yates – wrote scathing satires of American materialism. Albee shares their scepticism about the

American dream. Albee suggests that middle class existence is not as attainable as it seems- and that it may not even be desirable.

Middle-Class Life

The middle-class life is not attainable for Jerry whose world is troubled, an environment filled with suffering humanity and with a disarming mixture of love, hate, and squalor. His neighbors – a “colored queen” (ZS 23) who plucks his eye-brows, the Puerto Rican family, the invisible crying woman, the landlady – function as constant reminders of those whose lives are ontologically different from Peter’s. In many respects Jerry’s present environment is merely a terrible extension of his past world: his mother ran away, had numerous affairs, and wound up dead; soon after, a city bus crushed his drunken father; Jerry then moved in with his aunt, only to witness her death on his high school graduation day. Emotionally buffeted in his youth, Jerry feels abandoned on all fronts. His present condition offers little sense of resolution, boundaries, and solace. Jerry is helplessly on the brink of madness. Not only middle – class life, even a human contact remains a far cry for him. Jerry’s life offers a harrowing portrait of a young man alienated from the human race.

On the contrary, the middle-class life is very much within the reach of Peter. But in his case the life proves to be undesirable. He lacks individuality, and in the words of Zimbardo, he “blends perfectly into the brightly-packaged emptiness of the modern landscape” (46). Peter’s comfortable but banal inactive life and his non-participatory stance towards any meaningful human encounter prove that his middle-class life is utterly meaningless and undesirable. He learns to deflect social engagement, turns away all opportunities for such engagements. He fails in human intercourse because of a withdrawal into a comfortable bourgeois life.

Death Experience

Edward Albee seems all at pains to bring to light this undesirable attitude of modern man. Peter alone is not responsible for the death of Jerry. Many factors might have contributed to the death experience at the end of the play. The most important factor that actually drives him to desperation and to death is the acute sense of loneliness. This loneliness, in the case of Jerry, is not self-inflicted but inflicted upon him by the indifferent attitude of the society which, according to the playwright, refuses to participate in the affairs of others. Albee believes that the Peters of the modern world may not remain the same after the suicide-murder in the central park. Legally Peter will not be accountable for Jerry’s death, but, Albee implies, after this Sunday afternoon’s events he will feel accountable in a spiritual sense. Peter will not be able to remain isolated; also, he may not remain the same person again.

Albee’s concerns are not restricted to the pitiable existence of individuals like Jerry alone. The playwright is also equally worried about the banal lifeless existence of Peters. He too is a victim of isolation with a difference. In his case, it is mostly self-imposed. Conditioned by the culture, he becomes excessively insensitive to his surroundings. Benumbed by the false comforts of material advantages of the modern

world, he leads a life of predictable patterns. Albee provides the Peters of the modern world a teaching emotion through the death of Jerry. While discussing the necessity of stabbing, Albee, in an interview with Philip C. Kolin, suggests that death is the only way Jerry can break through the well-ordered world of Peter to educate him (36). Indeed, *The Zoo Story* is a life-affirming play. The play certainly subordinates pessimism to the possibility that the individual can communicate honestly with the self and the other during the precious time of our lives. What Albee ultimately presents in the play is a potential for regeneration and a great unquestionable source of optimism which underlies the overtly aggressive text and performance.

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