

The Zoo Story: Regeneration Through Communication

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Abstract

A critical analysis of *The Zoo Story* reveals that under the absurd, grim, pessimistic and violent cover, the play sparks illumination of hope and positivism. This article endeavours to establish that the play carries a strong message for reconciliation of the compartmentalized modern society. It also examines how the playwright delivers the message through experimentation on communication and violence in order to create a 'teaching emotion' to push the higher class to endorse existence and needs of the vulnerable lower class.

Keywords

Absurd, Regeneration, Communication, Violence, Isolation, Optimism, Nihilism, Kindness, Cruelty

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1. Introduction

Grim atmosphere, isolation, negative words, scary scenes and broken communication label Edward Albee's one-act play *The Zoo Story* as an absurd drama, but a closer look into the work reveals positive efforts of Jerry, a New York vagabond, to send a message to the higher class of the society by sacrificing his own life. Jerry passed through relentless agony for the lack of true, lively and fruitful communication. He realized that only effective communication could break the social barriers and make the higher class recognize existence, honour and needs of the lower class. When Jerry narrated some of his life-experiences to Peter, Peter shouted, "I DON'T UNDERSTAND!" And Jerry [*furiously, but whispering*] replied to that, "That's a lie." Higher class has no interest in lower class because they know showing interest comes with taking responsibility. They erect strong walls around them and live in that confinement so the lower class can't penetrate into their luxurious life. Even when they come to park on a holiday, they sit on their favourite place, get engaged in their favourite task and ignore the real world

around them. Wolfe (1965) believes that the class barrier prevents Peter and Jerry from the "development of a true personal relationship marked by mutual respect and dignity" (250). It was not easy to get attention of the self-cantered higher class; so Jerry designed a plan of creating a fatal scene at the Central Park to scare the self-cantered elite people with a 'teaching emotion' made of 'cruelty and kindness' which would force the higher class endorse existence, honour and needs of the lower class.

2. Body

2.1. Optimism Versus Pessimism

The Zoo Story calls for effective communication to reinforce human as well as social values. Jerry, a New York tramp, ends his life after being edged out; but before death, he enlightens the humanity by passing his life-earned knowledge to Peter, a well-paid publishing executive, who lacks adequate real-life experience and represents the modern as well as indifferent capitalist society. Thus, the drama upholds a strong optimistic tone and hints at passing message

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to the society in the milieu of sadness and agony of humanity. Albee dispels the accusation that *The Zoo Story* is 'nihilistic and pessimistic,' by defending that "on the contrary, by dying Jerry passes on an awareness of life to Peter" (Stenz 11). Albee substantiates this concept in an interview:

...I am concerned with being as self-aware and open to all kinds of experience on its own terms—I think those conditions, given half a chance, will produce better self-government, a better society, a better everything else. (Roudane 8)

Phillips marked Albee's two completely opposite characters that live in the same society:

Peter is enjoying his ritualistic Central Park bench visitation, away from his stifling marriage and daughters and parakeets and cats. Along comes Destiny in the form of a rooming-house punk, Jerry. Jerry has stories to tell, one about a trip to the zoo, another about his efforts to murder his landlady's dog.

2.2. Potential Regeneration

Matthew Roudane sees in *The Zoo Story*, "the potential for regeneration, a source of optimism which underlies the overtly aggressive text and performance" (42-3). Jerry's death does much more than martyr him as a Christ figure. Albee uses the savage final tableau to force a kind of rethinking of American optimism on the drama's characters and its audience. The communication accomplished through Jerry's violent death follows an American tradition identified by Richard Slotkin in his exploration of American myth, *Regeneration through Violence*. Slotkin identifies a 'frontier psychology' running through American literature:

The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience. (33)

Jerry's frontier is Central Park where he opposes the establishment. His vigilante experiment upon Peter breaks through the boundaries of civilized communication and proves that people, when confronted with an outrage, can alter their compartmentalized, zoo-like condition. With his experiments in communication, Jerry discovers that society's structure acts as 'humiliating excuse for a minimalistic capacity to respond to vicious acts'. Roudane indicates that the "regenerative spirit of *The Zoo Story* is not limited to actors; Albee also directs the benevolent hostility of the play toward the audience" (43). Just as in Slotkin's reading of regeneration through violence, Albee allows Jerry to commit

an unthinkable act in his desperate effort to communicate with someone else using "the shock of this unacceptable violence to instil in his audience the idealistically American call to action to change the world for the better" (Mann 33).

2.3. Lack of Effective Communication

Lack of proper and timely communication with other people marred Jerry's childhood with bitter experiences which engendered his frustration and alienation. His mother left the family 'on an adulterous turn' when Jerry was ten and a half years old. After a few weeks, his father was killed by a city omnibus. Jerry, being an orphan, moved in with his mother's sister. This lady died on the stairs of their apartment on the afternoon of his high school graduation. Jerry's own tragic life-story seemed to himself, 'a terribly middle-European joke', but this was his reality, or in his words it is the way 'cookie crumbles.' All these facts created a New York vagabond named Jerry who at a certain age discovered himself all alone, confined in his own 'cage' like room isolated from other people of the civilized world. Jerry's childhood matches Albee's own childhood to some degree. His experiences with his adoptive parents were never good. Rutenberg gives an account of the playwright's birth and childhood:

Of Edward Albee's birth, it is only known that he was born on March 12, 1928 somewhere in Virginia. His biological parents gave him up for adoption two weeks later to Reed and Frances Albee, and this transaction took place in the District of Columbia. Albee's relationship with his adoptive parents was fraught with discord and he freely admits that he was 'a problem child' (3).

Jerry was totally isolated from his neighbours and he didn't have any sort of social relationship with them. He lived in a brownstone rooming house on the upper West side of New York City, between Columbus Avenue and Central Park, in a poor neighbourhood. He didn't know much about them, and he didn't know all of them. Thus, he couldn't enjoy a healthy social relationship with his neighbours in the rooming house. This also had severe negative impacts on his mind. Albee's focus on the people of the rooming house brings some link with his personal experience. According to Matthew Roudane, who quoted a 1974 interview with Albee in his *Understanding Edward Albee*, the playwright mentioned that he got the idea for *The Zoo Story* while working for Western Union: "I was always delivering telegrams to people in rooming houses. I met [the models for] all those people in the play in rooming houses. Jerry, the hero, is still around."

The Zoo Story is complete failure of communication where what the characters say don't go anywhere, that is, they don't reach the listener; even if they reach the listener, the listener

makes a different meaning out of it. Here goes a brief analysis of a few quotes from the play. Line number has been given within parentheses next to the quotes.

Quote 1: 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! (1)

This is the first line of the play. Jerry shouts here. Peter doesn't care and as a result miscommunication, unhappiness, absurdity and capital letters are happening. This isn't going anywhere good.

Quote 2: Peter: "I...well, no, not due north, but we...call it north. It's northerly." (14)

Peter hesitates, stutters and tries to figure out which direction is which and where language is supposed to take him. He is puzzled by Jerry's word-trap.

Quote 3: Jerry: JERRY: Do you mind if we talk? PETER: (Obviously minding) Why...no, no (30-31)

Peter isn't saying what he means, nor does meaning what he says (Shmoop). Social convention gets the better of him. That's a sign of Peter's character, but it's also a sign of how language works in the play: as a barrier to honesty and communication rather than as an aid to them. Johnson (1968) argues, "[Peter and Jerry] do not say what they actually mean or are thinking".

Quote 4: Jerry: I'll tell you why I do it; I don't talk to many people—except to say like: give me a beer, or where's the john, or what time does the feature go on, or keep your hands to yourself, buddy. You know—things like that. (65)

Lack of effective communication creates in Jerry a strong desire for talking to people. So he grabs a stranger and talks to them for a long time. He admits his loneliness.

Quote 5: Peter: I didn't mean to seem...ah...it's that you don't really carry on a conversation; you just ask questions and I'm...I'm normally...uh...reticent. Why do you just stand there? (84)

Peter blames Jerry for not communicating properly. Then he admits that he himself is not good at communication either. Neither of them communicates well. No wonder this play is so confusing.

Quote 6: JERRY: ...What's your name? Your first name? PETER: I'm Peter. JERRY: I'd forgotten to ask you. I'm Jerry. PETER: (With a slight nervous laugh) Hello, Jerry. (118-121)

Peter and Jerry finally introduce themselves a good long way into the play. They've gone from strangers to acquaintances, just because they have given each other a name. That's how language works. But of course they still don't really know each other that well yet, but that sort of thing takes time.

Quote 6: Jerry: It's just...it's just that...it's just that if you can't deal with people you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS! (163)

Jerry's confusion and stammering mar the logic here. One big difference between humans and animals is that humans talk. For a human it's very important to communicate and share their happiness, grief and ideas, but as he didn't get sufficient opportunity to communicate with fellow humans; he tried the same with the dog. Though it was a one-way communication as the dog could not reply verbally, Jerry was happy to see a vent for his suppressed desire for communication.

After considerable effort, Jerry got Peter's courtesy-attention and developed some communication but that was not effective as Rénaux described the nature of their conversation in the following manner:

The whole duologue between Peter and Jerry is on a basis of inquisitive-on-answer type (Jerry-Peter), or of confession (Jerry). The moment his confession is completed, Jerry is ready to die. The play does indeed go "from realism to a semi-abstract metaphorical quality".

2.4. Desire for Communication

By producing a clash between Peter and Jerry, Albee's personal vision of the world in *The Zoo Story* becomes "an image of the difficulty of communication between human beings in our world" (Esslin). The absence of proper communication created a strong desire in Jerry to communicate to the world and this urge ultimately found its outlet through violence—committing suicide in Central Park. Throughout his life, Jerry was friendless as well as unwelcome and ignored by everybody. Nobody communicated with him and shared his ideas, sorrows and joys with him. He communicated to people only on needs and the style of that communication was also 'fragmented'—he uttered only some words and phrases to have the communication or that particular purpose done. Jerry described nature of his communication in the following manner: "... I don't talk to many people—except to say like: give me a beer, or where the john is, or what time does the feature go on, keep your hands to yourself, buddy. You know—things like that. (Albee 23) Others also responded to him in the same way. This fragmented communication developed a strong longing in him to express suppressed feelings, emotions and untold tragic stories. He admitted: "But every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really *talk*; like to get to know somebody, know all about him." (Albee 24) Such an urge to really 'talk' to somebody, to know him and to share ideas, happiness and sorrows with him; also, to teach him some necessary lessons of life brought Jerry to Central Park, a meeting place of people of

different classes. "The entire play involves Jerry's attempts at story telling; Albee entitles the play *The Zoo Story* for this reason. If Jerry's story can somehow become real in another's mind, Jerry can help end the alienation" (Mann 32). Jerry took Peter as a medium or in Peter's words, 'guinea pig' to communicate with fast, industrialized and capitalist world. Stephen Coy commented:

The Zoo Story can best be understood by starting off with a single, basic assumption. Jerry lonely, unstable, and desperate, made a life decision at the zoo —or perhaps even at home before he went to the zoo 'correctly'. He would leave the zoo and walk 'northerly' in the Park until the first human being he spots. He would strike up a conversation with that person, by whatever means it took, and then make the best effort of his life to teach that person what Jerry already knew about the sufferings of mankind, especially the sufferings others prefer not to notice. He would force that person to understand his feelings and conditions. Jerry's suicide is thus the last logical item on the list of 'whatever it takes' to take from Peter his ignorance, his indifference, and his complacency. (45)

A continuing indifference from people fostered in Jerry a desperate desire to communicate to and be communicated with, to understand and be understood. He knew there was a section of economically prosperous people in New York City totally unconcerned and unaffected by the adversities of a section of poor people like him who live in the same city. Jerry's description of his nasty, crowded and unhygienic rooming house; its mysterious residents and its 'dirty' landlady seems 'hard to believe' to Peter, a well-off, self-content, publishing executive who spends his Sunday afternoons reading books and sitting comfortably on a clean bench in Central Park. The West corner of the city where usually poor people like Jerry live is not far from this park, but Peter appears to be totally unaware of the miserable living condition of those people. For this reason, Jerry mocks him saying: "fact is better left to fiction" (Albee 36). A desperate desire to communicate with someone effectively brought Jerry to Central Park and perhaps he hoped that he would be put on the lead news on the TV that night or on the newspaper the following morning. Any suicide or murder in Central Park would seize the attention of the busy and so-called civilized people for their own interest as the park is one of the places of entertainment for them. At such news, the rich would be concerned about their own security in the park. Jerry knows that these so-called civilized and modern people are interested only in their own issues. After entering the park, he declares: "You will read about it in the papers tomorrow, if you don't see it on your TV tonight" (Albee 28). At the end of the play, Jerry thanks Peter because he has paid

Jerry some attention; also, because Peter has helped Jerry to fulfill his plan. At the moment of dying, Jerry openly expresses his gratitude to Peter:

Thank you, Peter. I mean that, now; thank you very much. ... Oh, Peter, I was so afraid, I'd drive you away. You don't know how afraid I was you'd go away and leave me. ... I came unto you and you have comforted me. Dear Peter (Albee 58).

Although Jerry is as alienated as Peter, he tries to become more communicative. As he has realized that true communication is of vital importance to the survival of love and humanity, he tries to find some ways of making contact with people like Peter who escape from the realization of this need. Johnson (1968) argues, "[people] must have someone with whom they make contact, with whom they can talk and be understood" (23). She affirms, "If people do not make contact with someone, they resort to various per-versions trying to find something with which to identify" (p.23). Jerry expresses the grief he feels over his need— communication: "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 ... SOMETHING..." (Albee 13); he also says hopelessly, "We neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other" (Albee 14). Thus, Jerry initiates the conversation by repeating "I've been to the zoo" several times (Albee 1). He shows an overwhelming desire to communicate: "Every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk..." (Albee 3). He constantly asks questions about the right direction although Peter wants to get back to his reading all the time. Jerry heads in the direction of the zoo purposefully since he appreciates the significance of confronting the reality of his life. He says, "Do you know what I did before I went to the zoo today? I walked all the way up Fifth Avenue from Washington Square; all the way" (Albee 5). His departure from the zoo and his arrival in the park show his willingness to find a person with whom he can truly share his feelings. As Sykes (1973) affirms, Jerry persists in "knowing the truth" and "facing it squarely" (455).

2.5. Attempts for Communication

As an attempt to inform others about the existing and apparently invisible bars among individuals and social classes, Jerry rushes to Central Park, selects Peter and shares some of his bitter experiences as well as his ideas with him. Thomiszer (1982) explains that Jerry asks many questions in order to 'arrive at a truth' about Peter's life (56); whereas, Meyer (1968) believes that "what is truth for one may seem illusion to the other" (p.69), hence the impossibility of true

connection and/ or understanding. When Jerry is almost done, Peter shouts: "I... I don't understand what ... I don't think I... [*Now almost tearfully*] Why did you tell me all of this?" (Albee 44) To such a reaction, Jerry's reply is satiric:

"... of course you don't understand. [*in a monotone, wearily*] I don't live in your block; I'm not married to two parakeets or whatever your set-up is. I am a permanent *transient*, and my home is the sickening rooming houses on the West Side of the New York City, which is the greatest city in the world. Amen" (Albee 45).

The 'Jerry—the dog' parable presents a crude reality that every human being aspires for sharing and exchanging thoughts and ideas with others. A total indifference from people became intolerable to Jerry. He expected response and recognition as a human being. Jerry wanted to initiate communication with someone. His failure to communicate with any human being started his attempts with the dog. As he explains, "if you can't deal with human beings, you have to make a start somewhere" (Albee 38). When the landlady's dog rushed to attack him, Jerry, at first, liked the dog because the animal paid him some attention. Jerry decided to establish a friendly relationship with the dog, so he offered him six 'perfectly good' hamburgers. The dog devoured all of them. Jerry continued offering such food to the dog for five days more but there was no change in the dog's attitude. He was as usual—"snarl, sniff, move, faster, stare, gobble, R A A G G G G H H H, smile, snarl, BAM, etc." So, finally he decided to kill the dog. One day he offered the dog one hamburger with 'a murderous portion of rat poison'. The dog fell ill and the landlady, being scared, 'sniveled and implored' him to pray for the animal. Jerry did not actually intend to 'kill' the dog. He exposed his real intention to Peter: "... I didn't want the dog to die. I didn't, and not just because I'd poisoned him. I'm afraid that I must tell you I wanted the dog to live so that I could see what our new relationship might come to" (Albee 41). The dog survived and as Jerry expected, a new relationship between him and the dog emerged. At their first meeting after the attempted murder, they stared at each other with a combined feeling of wonder, shame, fear and respect. Again, an effective 'eye contact' was set up between them. His plan was successful as he did not completely lose the dog—the only animal that was 'not indifferent' to him; moreover, a new type of relationship based on 'mutual understanding' took its way. He explained to Peter:

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 that the dog would understand. (Albee 42)

Jerry was happy in his new relationship with the dog as he discovered that it was an understanding, a compromise that all his life he sought with humans. Jerry explains his 'new relationship' with the dog in the following manner:

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 will have to admit that it is an understanding. (Albee 43)

From this incident, Jerry learned that neither 'kindness' nor 'cruelty' can independently create any effective connection, but when they are combined, they could work as a 'teaching emotion'. This lesson has a great thematic importance in the play where every step forward in communication, large or small, is accomplished with a combination of kindness and cruelty. In an interview, Albee admits, "I suppose the dog story in *The Zoo Story*, to a certain extent, is a microcosm of the play by the fact that people are not communicating, ultimately failing and trying and failing" (Mann 32). Jerry's behaviour with Peter parallels his experiment with the dog. "At the conclusion of the play, if Jerry could miraculously live as the dog lived, Peter and Jerry could be friends..." (Mann 32). He then draws on what he has learned from the dog to attempt communicating with a human being. But it is Jerry's numbed response that forces him to select a violent act, like the extreme action he took with the dog, to provoke a reaction.

Jerry's stories attract Peter into the hypnotic realm of fiction which in itself is a means of deviation and illusion. However, Jerry uses it in order to match its content with the content of Peter's life and eventually awakens him to the fictional (illusive) nature of it. Bailey (2005) emphasizes the importance of Jerry's attempts at storytelling: "If Jerry's story can somehow become real in another's mind, Jerry can help end the alienation" (p. 34). In order to change Peter, Jerry uses fiction as a cure as if he were an audience sitting in the theatre.

2.6. Obstacles for Communication

Jerry faces obstacles to communicate as Peter doesn't cooperate with him at first. Debusscher observes: "The impossibility of communicating with 'the other' is remarkably expressed by the slowness, awkwardness and difficulty of the dialogue which often tends towards monologue with Peter, a reluctant and monosyllabic partner....." (14). And for this reason, Jerry has to undertake different strategies to hook Peter to his stories. Jerry knows that people in the civilized world live like animals, in their respective cages, isolated from each other. They know about

each other's existence, but they are not able to get in contact with each other. 'Social contact' is almost absent among the residents of the city. Peter lives in his social class and makes for himself a second cage on the bench in the park; whereas, Jerry's cage is the rooming-house he lives in.

The world seems to be 'a zoo' to Jerry where he finds people living in their respective cages just like animals. These people don't like to communicate or share anything with others and even if they want, they can't make it because they are locked in their respective places. Roudane comments: "...the shaping metaphor 'the zoo', with its bars and cages, symbolizes the disconnectedness of one human being from another which fuels Jerry's 'angst'" (39). Jerry takes the responsibility to pass the lessons and experiences that he has learned to somebody whom he thinks lacks such practical knowledge. He explicitly reveals his plan to Peter: "... I should tell you why I went to the zoo. 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" (Albee 42). Jerry metaphorically declares that the world is like a 'zoo' which is evident in what he says to Peter: ".....the lion keeper comes into the lion cage, one of the lion cages, to feed one of the lions" (Albee 49). Jerry thought that Peter could be that person he would tell his lessons because Peter represents middle class society with his structured and balanced life; he also lacks sufficient knowledge of the real world. Jerry sums up Peter's character in one line: "You're a very sweet man and you're possessed of a truly enviable innocence" (Albee 31).

3. Conclusion

The final image of Jerry's brutal death does communicate with Peter and the audience, and this intense desire on Jerry's part to accomplish the connection with the indifferent, affluent, higher class society keeps this play out of the realm of the 'Theater of the Absurd'. Jerry's plan to get somebody to pass his lessons is clearly shown in his own speech: "I'll start walking around in a little while, and eventually I'll sit down. (*Recalling*) Wait until you see the expression on his face" (Albee 26). In the second sentence of the quotation above, the word 'you' obviously means the audience and 'his' is Peter's. Thus, the play creates a grim atmosphere with so many negative elements like alienation, isolation, poverty, insecurity, homelessness, suppressed sexual desire, inability of communication, violence, murder, etc., but under all these negative phenomena lies the fact that the protagonist dreams for a better society by sacrificing his life to create a news item that would hook the controlling higher class society and make them aware of the presence of the poor, homeless as well as vulnerable people who live in the same city.

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