The Zoo Story Study Guide

The Zoo Story by Edward Albee

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

When Edward Albee wrote *The Zoo Story* in 1958, it was the first play that he wrote as an adult and only the second play that he wrote in his lifetime. His only other play was a sex farce that he wrote at the age of twelve. After being passed from friend to friend, *The Zoo Story* traveled from New York to Florence, Italy, to Zurich, Switzerland, to Frankfurt, Germany and was finally produced for the first time in Berlin, Germany. It opened on September 28, 1959, at the Schiller Theatre Werkstatt. After much critical praise in Germany, it was less than three months before *The Zoo Story* finally opened in New York. It debuted off-Broadway at the Provmcetown Playhouse on January 14,1960, and instantly had a strong impact on critics and audiences alike. The vast majority of the reviews were positive and many hoped for a revitalized theatre because of it. A few critics, however, dismissed the play because of its absurd content and seemed confused as to what Albee was trying to say wilh it.

The story, in simplest terms, is about how a man who is consumed with loneliness starts up a conversation with another man on a bench in Central Park and eventually forces him to participate in an act of violence. According to Matthew Roudane, who quoted a 1974 interview with Albee his *Understanding Edward Albee,* the playwright maintained 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." Combining both realistic and absurd elements, Albee has constructed a short but multi-leveled play dealing with issues of human isolation, loneliness, class differences, and the dangers of inaction within American society. He focuses on the need for people to acknowledge and understand each other's differences. After garnering its initial critical praise, *The Zoo Story* went on to win the *Village Voice* Obie Award for best play and ran for a total of 582 performances. *The Zoo Story* continues to be a favorite with university and small theatre companies and persists in shocking and profoundly affecting its audiences.

Author Biography

Edward Albee was born on March 12, 1928, in Washington, DC, where he was given the name Edward Franklin Albee HI by Reed and Francis Albee, who adopted him from his natural birth parents. Reed and Francis Albee were the heirs to the multi-million dollar fortune of American theater manager Edward Franklin Albee I. Albee attended several private and military schools, and during this education he began writing poetry and attending the theatre. Albee was twelve when he attempted to write his first play, a three-act sex farce; he soon turned back to poetry and even attempted to write novels as a teen. He studied at Trinity College in Connecticut from 1946 until 1947 and then decided to take the trust fund his grandmother had left him and move to New York City's Greenwich Village. Albee was able to live off of this fund by supplementing it with small odd jobs, thus allowing him to focus on his writing career.

While in his twenties, Edward Albee had some limited success as an author of poetry and fiction, but he was still unable to make a living off of his writing and, therefore, continued to work small jobs to supplement his income, including working as a messenger for Western Union from 1955 until 1958. It was while working as a telegram messenger that Albee came up with the idea for *The Zoo Story*, when he encountered real life counterparts for Jerry and the other residents of the boarding house that he describes in the play.

At the age of thirty, Albee quit his job at Western Union and wrote *The Zoo Story* (1958), his first significant play. Inspired by the works of Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, Jean Genet, and Tennessee Williams, Albee wrote *The Zoo Story* in three short weeks. After being passed around from colleague to colleague, it was finally produced at the Schiller Theater Werstatt in Berlin, Germany, opening there on September 28, 1959. *The Zoo Story* won the Berlin Festival Award in 1959 and eventually found its way back to the U.S. where it opened off-Broadway at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York on January 14, 1960. While there, *The Zoo Story* shared the bill with *Krapp's Last Tape*, which was written by Samuel Beckett, one of Albee's greatest influences.

The Zoo Story went on to win the *Village Voice* Obie Award for best play in 1960, but it was not until after four more one-act plays that Albee wrote his most controversial and critically acclaimed play. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* opened on Broadway a the Billy Rose Theatre on October 13,1962, and went on to win the Tony Award for best play. Followed by controversy wherever it played, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? forced critics and audiences to react, both positively and negatively, and assured Albee's place in American theatre history. Admired and detested for its bleakness and negativity, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? was a critical and financial success and was eventually made into a film with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in 1966.

Edward Albee went on to win the Pulitzer Prize three times, for *A Delicate Balance* (1966), *for Seascape* (1975), and for *Three Tall Women* (1994). Albee continues to be one of the most acclaimed and controversial playwrights in the United States, and he has continued to use the commercial success of his more famous works in order to

pursue theatrical experimentation, despite sometimes scathing reviews and commercial failure. Mingling absurdity with acute realism in his early works off-Broadway during the 1960s, Albee has paved the way and inspired such contemporary playwrights as David Mamet and Sam Shepard, while continuing to experiment with and challenge theatrical form.

Plot Summary

Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* is a long one act play in which "nothing happens" except conversation until the violent ending. Shorn of much of the richness of Albee's utterly arresting language, and his astonishing nuances of psychological attack and retreat, the play can be described as follows:

A man named Peter, a complacent publishing executive of middle age and upper-middle income, is comfortably reading a book on his favorite bench in New York's Central Park on a sunny afternoon. Along comes Jerry, an aggressive, seedy, erratic loner. Jerry announces that he has been to the (Central Park) Zoo and eventually gets Peter, who clearly would rather be left alone, to put down his book and actually enter into a conversation. With pushy questions, Jerry learns that Peter lives on the fashionable East Side of the Park (they are near Fifth Avenue and 74th Street), that the firm for which he works publishes textbooks, and that his household is female-dominated: one wife, two daughters, two cats, and two parakeets. Jerry easily guesses that Peter would rather have a dog than cats and that he wishes he had a son. More perceptively, Jerry guesses that there will be no more children, and that that decision was made by Peter's wife. Ruefully, Peter admits the truth of these guesses.

The subjects of the Zoo and Jerry's visit to it come up several times, at one of which Jerry says mysteriously, "You'll read about it in the papers tomorrow, if you don't see it on your TV tonight." The play never completely clarifies this remark. Some critic think, because of statements Jerry makes about the animals, that he may have released some from their cages, while others think Jerry is talking about a death which has not yet happened, which might be headlined "Murder NearCentral Park Zoo."

The focus now turns to Jerry, who tells Peter that he walked all the way up Fifth Avenue from Washington Square to the Zoo, a trip of over fifty blocks. Adding Washington Square to Jerry's appearance and behavior, Peter assumes that Jerry lives in Greenwich Village, which in 1960, the year the play was first produced, was the principal "bo-hemian" section of Manhattan. Jerry says no, that he lives across the Park on the (then slum-ridden) West Side, and took the subway downtown for the express purpose of walking back up Fifth Avenue. No reason is given for this but Jerry "explains" it in one of the most quoted sentences of the play: "sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly." It is possible that Jerry saw his trip up Fifth Avenue, which gradually improves from the addicts and prostitutes of Washington Square to such bastions of prosperity as the famous Plaza Hotel, as a symbolic journey through the American class system to the source of his problem not millionaire's row but the affluent, indifferent upper middle class.

Without any prompting from Peter, Jerry describes his living arrangements: a tiny room in a rooming house, with a very short list of possessions; some clothes, a can-opener and hotplate, eating utensils, empty picture frames, a few books, a deck of pornographic playing cards, an old typewriter, and a box with many unanswered "Please!" letters and "When?" letters. Jerry's building is like something out of Dante's *Inferno*, with several

different kinds of suffering on each floor, including a woman Jerry has never seen who cries all the time, a black "queen" who plucks his eyebrows "with Buddhist concentration" and hogs the bathroom, and a disgusting landlady whom Jerry describes vividly. Jerry also reveals the loss of both parents -his mother to whoring and drinking and his father to drinking and an encounter with "a somewhat moving city omnibus" events that seem to have had little emotional effect on him. Jerry's love life is also discussed: an early and very intense homosexual infatuation and, at present, one-night stands with nameless women whom he never sees again.

It is clear in this section of the play that Jerry is trying to make Peter understand something about loneliness and suffering not so much Jerry's own pain, which he treats cynically, but the pain of the people in his building, the Zoo animals isolated in their cages, and more generally the societal dregs that Peter is more comfortable not having to think about. Peter is repelled by Jerry's information but not moved except to exasperation and discomfort. Desperate to communicate with Peter or at least to teach him something about the difficulties of communication, Jerry comes up with "The Story of Jerry and the Dog." It is a long, disgusting, and eventually pathetic tale of his attempt to find some kind of communication, or at least relationship, with the vile landlady's vile dog (the hound who guards the entrance to Jerry's particular hell). Jerry fails to reach the dog, though he goes from trying to kill it with kindness to just plain trying to kill it; the two finally achieve mutual indifference, and Jerry gains free entry to the building without being attacked, "if that much further loss can be said to be gain."

Jerry also fails to reach Peter, who is bewildered but not moved by this story and who prepares to leave his now-disturbed sanctuary for his comfortable home. Desperately grasping at one last chance, Jerry tickles Peter, then punches him on the arm and pushes him to the ground. He challenges Peter to fight for "his" bench, but Peter will not. Jerry produces a knife, which he throws on the ground between them. He grabs Peter, slapping and taunting him ("fight for your manhood, you pathetic little vegetable") until Peter, at last enraged, picks up the knife. Even then, as Albee points out, "Peter holds the knife with a firm arm, but far in front of him, not to attack, but to defend." Jerry says, "Sobeit," and "With a rush he charges Peter and impales himself on the knife."

Peter is paralyzed. Jerry *thanks* Peter and hurries him away for his own safety, reminding Peter to take his book from "your bench ... my bench, rather." Peter runs off, crying "Oh, my God!" Jerry echoes these words with "a combination of scornful mimicry and supplication," and dies.

Portions of Albee* s dialogue and stage directions have been included in this summary in an attempt to indicate the huge importance of Albee's incisive use of language and psychology in the play. The play resides, in fact, not in the physical actions of the plot (except the killing at the end) but in the acuteness (not to mention the shocking quality) of the language, in the range of kinds of aggression shown by Jerry from insult and assault to the subtlest of insinuations and even in the symbolism which becomes more apparent near the end of the action.

Pages 11-25

Pages 11-25 Summary

The play opens in the present day in Central Park in New York City, as two men begin to converse. Jerry, a man in his late thirties, walks into the park, finds Peter, a man in his early forties and begins to ask him questions about the zoo. The two men have never previously met, but obviously come from different worlds. Jerry, more unkempt, disheveled and rugged, seems out of place speaking with Peter, a reserved and classic-looking gentleman on a park bench. Jerry wonders if he has been walking north and continues to interrupt Peter from reading his paper.

Jerry informs Peter that he will learn all about what Jerry saw at the zoo in the papers. Then, Jerry proceeds to ask Peter if he has children. Peter concedes, saying he has two, but will have no more. Jerry informs his new friend that he does not like to speak to people much, but every once in a while, he likes to talk to people and make new friends. At this moment, Peter still seems uncomfortable, but obliges Jerry in his musings. Jerry wonders if this man with two daughters has pets. Peter's daughters each have a parakeet encaged in their room. Peter is becoming increasingly uncomfortable with this stranger asking him such personal questions, such as what he does for a living and how much money he makes.

Peter is an executive at a small textbook publishing house. He laughs nervously, informing Jerry that while he makes approximately $18,000 per year, he carries no more than forty dollars at a time. Jerry repeatedly ignores Peter's comments and continuously asks Peter random and somewhat personal questions, such as where he lives, where he was coming from, background about the zoo and finally what writers he likes. Peter returns to the question of the zoo, as Jerry seemed so emphatic about it when they first met a few moments earlier. On hearing this question, Jerry is bewildered, confused by Peter's questions. Peter assumes that Jerry lives in the Village, as he is walking north from the zoo. However, Jerry quickly corrects him: "No, I don't. I took the subway down to the Village so I could walk all the way up Fifth Avenue to the zoo. It's one of those things a person has to do; sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly" (Albee 25).

Pages 11-25 Analysis

The one-act play opens on a simple set, with minimal props and two characters. Because the setting of trees and a single park bench is so simple, the focus of the audience will invariably be on the dialogue and actors. They become not only the action, but also the setting, music, and space. The two actors fill more space than any set possibly could. As a result, the audience looks into this park with energy and excitement, knowing it can occur anywhere. Although set specifically in New York City's

Central Park, audience members can see that this play - the sudden relationship between the two men - could occur anywhere in the world.

It is interesting to note that the play begins with questions about the zoo. The theme of animals will recur sporadically throughout the play, leaving an underlying animalistic pull to the play. Both men ultimately become animals, after speaking of them so much. Furthermore, the zoo questions begin the conversation between the two men, and they will likewise end the conversation between the two men.

Jerry's line of questioning sets a mood for the audience. They can tell from his first awkward investigation of Peter's life that he is deeply disturbed. Because of this initial onslaught of insanity, they become more interested in the action of the play. Furthermore, his questions do allow the audience to understand what type of person he is, as well as Peter. Peter does have the American Dream lifestyle and consequently contradicts Jerry's life. When Jerry responds to Peter's question of where he resides, he responds with the comment that he must go out of his way to come back a short distance correctly. This is the first poignant line that comes after a series of banal small talk. It stops Peter, forces the audience to think, and provides a sense of anxiety and excitement for the future. Everyone wants to know what this man means with his odd statements.

Pages 26-35

Pages 26-35 Summary

Jerry quickly interrupts Peter, once again, to tell him about his background, as he presumes Peter is trying to make sense of his words and actions. An uncomfortable Peter wonders why Jerry lives in such a place. Jerry quickly responds with inquisitiveness. He is unsure and begins another long monologue about living in New York.

A dumbstruck Peter wonders about the empty picture frames. Jerry quickly responds by saying that it is obvious that he has nobody to put in the frames. He tells Peter blatantly about his worthless parents who are dead. His mother walked out on his father when he was ten and a half years old to sleep with many men in the southern United States. His father found her body and brought her back. Soon after, he was hit by a large moving omnibus and died. Jerry then moved in with his mother's sister, who simply dropped dead on the stairs to her apartment on the afternoon of his high school graduation. Jerry called that incident a middle-European joke. Peter is stunned, once again, by this man's misfortune.

After such an outpouring of background, Jerry realizes that he has yet to introduce himself to Peter, and they exchange greetings. Jerry further explains that there is no need to have a picture of a girl in two frames, especially since he has only been with a woman once. Peter claims that his life is simple, that it does not have to be complex. Jerry quickly becomes angry and wonders if Peter will tell him to get married and to have parakeets one day. Peter is equally angry, for he never started this conversation and wants to be rid of it. However, when Jerry becomes worried that Peter is angry with him, Peter quickly laughs and tells him he is not angry. Jerry wonders why he asked about the picture frames and not the pornographic cards. Peter claims that he has seen those cards and that he no longer needed them once he got older, but he still does not feel comfortable talking of such things. Jerry reminds him that he probably wants to know what happened at the zoo. Peter enthusiastically acquiesces.

Jerry begins by telling Peter why he went to the zoo in the first place. He returns to the talk of his rooming house. There is a woman on the third floor who cries all of the time. There is also the landlady with a dog, who Jerry absolutely abhors. He thinks she is lazy, ugly, cheap, and absolutely garbage. However, she waits in front of the building like a watchdog, emitting fumes and sexual lust towards Jerry, who still cannot stand to be near such a woman. Jerry continues with his story of how he somehow manages to escape this woman on a daily basis. He speaks of her dog and then claims to plan to speak of the zoo.

Peter is in shock that such disgusting people exist in the world. He also wonders nervously about the dog and the zoo. Still, he is uncomfortable and nervous, emitting laughter to fill the space. Jerry tells him, "You don't *have* to listen. Nobody is holding you

here; remember that. Keep that in your mind" (Albee 35). Peter understands this man's odd reprimand.

Pages 26-35 Analysis

In the first of several long monologues about his background, Jerry invites Peter (and the audience) into his world. By meticulously detailing every element of his rooming house, from the annoying to the grotesque, Jerry captures a strong picture of his life. Through these long, arduous descriptions, Peter has no choice but to listen. This is someone who he would never have met otherwise. His shock and surprise at hearing of Jerry's living conditions illustrate his distant lifestyle. By presenting these two men, Albee may be presenting the two societies in America: one (not necessarily of privilege) but of happiness, a lack of want, and another, where immigrants, diversity, and tragedy reign. While the play is called The Zoo Story, it can truly be called America's Story, for presenting both sides of life to the audience. Jerry's tragic family background is directly juxtaposed with Peter's happy family with a wife and two daughters. Jerry's empty picture frames confuse Peter, further establishing the contrast between these two men.

When Jerry realizes that he has yet to introduce himself to this man, he stops all conversation and greets Peter. The irony in this dialogue falls in the discussion. Jerry has just divulged intimate information about his life, events that most people would find trouble in telling a close friend. This man slits the veins in his emotions to a man he not only does not know, but to a man whose name he does even know. While the reader and audience intellectually realize that at this point the two men never had a proper introduction, the reminder of such a ridiculous notion would unconsciously escape them. This greeting simply reminds the audience of the absurdity of the situation between the two men.

It is interesting to note the repeated animal imagery. Jerry constantly returns to Peter's pets. He has parakeets and repeatedly teases him about them, even when he does not discuss the zoo. However, when Jerry reminds Peter that he began their conversation to tell him about the zoo, Peter quickly acquiesces. Peter's growing anxiety and discomfort during the entire play is realistic. While Jerry's actions and dialogue may fall into the absurd, Peter's remain quite human. Albeit friendly, Peter expresses fear, confusion and ultimately anger - emotions natural to a person in such a situation. Therefore, when Jerry begins his story about the landlady and her dog, he tries to listen. He realizes that he may be speaking with a crazy person and must listen accordingly. Jerry's caution and advice seem to come out of the blue. This man has been lecturing Peter for quite some time, and suddenly he tells Peter that he does not have to listen. Jerry might as well be speaking to the audience (and the rest of American society) with this statement. However, the increasing anxiety, energy and excitement he has brought to the park instinctually force Peter to *want* to continue listening. This caution is also quite blatant. Once he continues hearing Jerry's plight at the zoo, there is no turning back. It seems almost as if this is the point of no return.

Pages 36-44

Pages 36-44 Summary

Jerry breaks out into his excessively long monologue called "The Story of Jerry and the Dog." He is vivacious and animated as he tells this long story about the horrid dog that terrorized him upon his move into the rooming house. Jerry notes that this dog has red paws, a constant red erection, red bloodshot eyes and so forth. The dog consistently snarled and tried to hurt Jerry, until one day Jerry decided he would kill the dog nicely. If that did not work, then he would try to kill the dog no matter what.

At this point in the story, Peter winces, realizing that he might be speaking with a crazy man. Jerry tells him not to wince and that he should not react to the story. He should only listen, as he continues with his story.

Jerry claims that he proceeded to buy a bag of hamburgers and threw away everything but the meat. The dog was waiting for him in the entranceway of the rooming house when he returned. He gave him the bag of meat, which he quickly devoured. Quickly, Jerry ran upstairs to avoid the dog's wrath. Jerry did this for five days, hoping to allow the dog to like him, instead of hate him so desperately. Therefore, when the dog was still monstrous to him, he decided to kill him.

Again, Peter raises his hand in protest of the story, stopping Jerry at this point. Jerry calms Peter by telling him he was not successful in his quest. The day he planned to kill the dog, he had only bought one hamburger (without a bun) and wrapped it in rat poison. He walked home, gave the dog the poison, ran upstairs as usual and found himself safe. Soon after, the dog became deathly ill, the landlady sobered up, and she began questioning Jerry about her dog. She claims that he wanted the dog dead, but that he should nonetheless pray for it.

Peter is once again antagonistic and annoyed with Jerry longwinded story, wondering where his point lies. Jerry tells him that this part of the story is indeed rather important. He reveals that the dog survived. He came home one day after seeing a movie and genuinely was anxious to know if the dog would take to him, if the dog would be interested in him. Jerry speaks to Peter through the story, desperate to know if the dog would be kind to him. He explains further, as he explodes with sound, emotion, in fast, quick movements. It is essential to make contact with something, and if a person cannot make contact and deal with people, then at least that communication can begin with animals. It does not even matter what type of animal. Jerry lists items and animals that he needs to learn how to deal with, if he is ever to learn how to deal with a person: cockroaches, beds, mirrors, toilet paper and ultimately a dog. He thinks that an entrance hall is the perfect place to learn how to communicate. It is simply a start.

Pages 36-44 Analysis

The line between sanity and insanity is blurred in this speech/story; the line between animals and human, life and death. As Jerry tells his ludicrous and seemingly pointless story, Peter repeatedly interrupts, frustrated, wanting to know the point. However, by consistently speaking of such would-be nonsense, he falls into a perfect epiphany. By Jerry's desire to discover the dog's true persona, by him wanting to develop a relationship with the dog, Jerry may be trying to develop a relationship with other people. However, he realizes that he cannot start with honest citizens. He must begin with animals. The dog, describes in grotesque detail could be likened to society's image of Jerry. People may see him as diseased, disturbed, unwanted. However, in Jerry's attempt to both befriend and kill the dog simultaneously, he almost jumps into the role of both Jerry and Peter at this moment. He is unsure of what to think of the dog, just as Peter is unsure of what to think of Jerry.

It is important to look at Jerry's first mention of possibly killing the dog. When those words are first uttered, they come as a shock to Peter (and the audience). This man is actually discussing killing another living being. However, as his story progresses, we forget that he mentioned that desire, for he has grown as a person throughout his story. The tale, as lethargic, seemingly pointless and bizarre as it is, is one that (once complete) we all look at and can relate to on one level. Every person is simply trying to find another being with whom he or she can relate. Every person wants good relationships in life. Jerry knows who he is, he understand his social problems. As a result, he is starting out small, by trying to start a bizarre relationship with a dog.

The relationship between Jerry and the dog carries heavy weight. The reason Albee uses a dog and not the parakeets or any other animal is precisely as he has written. Dog is man's best friend. They live together, work together, play together and spend more time together than man and man often do. As a result, the line between friends can be blurred. As Jerry details his desire to love another being, the sick backdrop to his obsession with the dog slowly erases, and all that is left is the idea of love. Love, no matter the object, reason or place, is important. He simply needs to learn how to feel it. Additionally, without love, a man can go insane. Jerry has had little love in his life, to both give and receive. He may be a sad result of the product of such a life.

When Jerry completes his story, he quickly reverts into his uncomfortable dialogue with Peter. By bringing the conversation into a realistic setting, once again, the audience is reminded that we are in a play, the real world. The mention of *Reader's Digest* not only plants the possibility that this man suffers from delusions of grandeur, but it also gives him a bit of a humorous end to his story. Therefore, perhaps the tale of the dog is something fictional just to sell magazines. If so, then Jerry appears more awkward than before. If not, then this poor man is suffering from emotional pains so severe, not even Peter or the audience knows what to do.

Pages 45-62

Pages 45-62 Summary

Peter is dumbfounded, confused and furious for listening to such a crazy story for so long. He does not understand what Jerry is saying and wants to hear no more of it. Jerry quickly throws Peter's frustration back at him, claiming that he spoke slowly so that Peter would understand. However, then again, Peter would not understand Jerry because Peter is married and lives in another comfortable world, and could not possibly understand anything from a man who lives in a rooming house on the West Side.

Peter tells Jerry that he must be getting home, to his family and his parakeets. Jerry sits next to him on the bench, sitting down for the first time in the play. He begins to tickle Peter mercilessly, as he tries to leave. Peter bursts into hysterics, trying to get away from the tickling. As he subsides, Jerry dons a deadly serious face and asks Peter again if he really wants to hear why he went to the zoo. Jerry continuously pushes and punches Peter in the arm, asking him to move over on the bench, until Peter is scrunched on one side. Jerry admits he is crazy and is angrily trying to secure the entire bench. Peter claims that he does not care about hearing why Jerry went to the zoo to investigate behavior and relationships between animals and people. He simply wants his bench in the park, the same one he comes to every Sunday to read his paper.

Suddenly the two men break out into a loud verbal fight, screaming at one another that each man wants the bench. For the first time, Peter erupts. He screams at Jerry to leave his bench. He refuses to leave and claims to get a police officer to remove him from the premises, because he thinks he is a bum. He originally spoke to Jerry, he claims, because he thought Jerry needed someone to talk to. Now, he is simply angry and irate.

Jerry wonders why Peter wants the bench so desperately. Jerry urges Peter into a physical fight, calling him a vegetable that cannot fight for his bench, his family, his life. Jerry is enraged, frightening Peter, who simply wants to run away. Peter genuinely fears Jerry, thinking he might kill him over a bench. Jerry pulls out a knife, calling Peter names the entire time. He throws the knife at Peter's feet, claiming to even the duel. Peter quickly picks it up, holding it firmly in his hand for protection. Suddenly, Jerry runs into Peter, impaling himself on the knife. Both men scream, as Jerry stumbles back to the empty bench, crumbling into a ball.

Peter is in shock as he watches a content Jerry continue speaking to him. Jerry tells him about his plans and day at the zoo. He went to see the animals and walked north to find someone, Peter. He claims he did not plan any of this, but thinks he might have at the same time. Jerry smiles and thanks Peter numerous times. He tells him that he is not a vegetable; rather, he is an animal who must go home to his family and parakeets. Then, Jerry takes a handkerchief, wipes the knife clean of his fingerprints and tells him to run away. Peter is in shock, confused, unclear of what to do. However, as he listens to

Jerry's death cries, he eventually runs away, screaming, "Oh my God!" Jerry mimics these final three words, as he dies. The curtain falls.

Pages 45-62 Analysis

When Peter expresses his disgust and frustration with Jerry for wasting his time with a story he does not understand, Jerry lashes out. The discord between the two men that has been building throughout the play erupts in these final pages. The fact that Peter does not understand Jerry's story, overtly states that he cannot understand Jerry's plight in life. If Peter cannot understand Jerry, then the privileged America cannot understand the underprivileged America, and the nation falls into conflict. While this analysis may be slightly over the top, so is Jerry. The blatant lack of understanding between the two men is an underlying theme in the play, illustrating a severe lack of understanding between all human beings.

Jerry becomes violent when Peter wants to head home to his family. Jerry's shoves on the bench represent more than just the bench. Jerry wants the full bench, the full life, the full American Dream, just as he believes Peter has it. He pushes him until Peter can take no more and ultimately bursts into an emotional verbal blast for the first time. This explosion elicits all the energy and emotions inside Peter that have long been suppressed.

The bench argument spurs the two men into a physical brawl. At this point, Jerry and Peter are no different from animals in a zoo; animals in a story from a zoo that Peter has waited all afternoon to hear. When Jerry removes his knife, images of crime, of insanity, of degradation all float out of Peter's mind. In addition, when Jerry impales himself on his own knife, he feels at peace with himself and the world for the first time in the course of the play, and perhaps his entire life. This final image of animalistic behavior recalls the idea that people are no different from animals.

The fact that Jerry ends his life happy, thrilled and grateful to Peter for spending the afternoon with him, illustrates his extreme desperation in life. He has nothing to live for and simply wants to expel some of his beliefs onto another person. Because of his conversation, he will forever be remembered in Peter's life. Perhaps he will not be held in a picture frame on Peter's mantle; however, he will be inside an emotional frame in his heart. This man has affected Peter's life in a way that will change it forever.

In a last look at the final moments of the play, Jerry removes Peter's fingerprints from the knife. The removal of Peter's fingerprints from Jerry's knife signifies an erasure of life from Jerry's eyes. He no longer has to witness the grotesqueness in life; he no longer has to deal with the virulent claw of humanity. He has wiped his slate clean and can die happy. For Peter, however, the fingerprints represent another world. While Jerry literally wipes Peter's fingerprints clear from his death, Peter must live forever and deal with the blood and death of this man. The roles have suddenly switched in one quick moment. Jerry is now at peace, on his bench in the park, while Peter rushes away with a new, realistic and melancholic look on life.

Albee, Edward. *The Zoo Story and Other Plays*. Coward-McCann, Inc., New York: 1959.

Characters

Jerry

Jerry, the antagonist in *The Zoo Story*, confronts Peter while he is reading a book in Central Park and coerces him into partaking in an act of violence. Albee gives the following description of Jerry: "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." In contrast to Peter, Jerry lives in a four-story brownstone roommghouse on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, between Columbus Avenue and Central Park West. During the 1950s, this was a much poorer neighborhood than the East 70s, where Peter lives. Jerry is single and lives in one small room that is actually half a room separated from the other half by beaverboard.

Throughout the course of the play, Jerry tells Peter only what he wants Peter to know, and does not like to be asked questions or be judged. He makes a point of telling Peter very personal details of his life, like how his parents both died when he was a child and how he was a homosexual for a week and a half when he was fifteen and now only sees prostitutes. Peter finds Jerry's stories disturbing but fascinating and it is only when they get very strange that Peter begins to question Jerry's intentions. Jerry uses all of his resources including his storytelling ability, his humor, and finally his violent aggression to make-sure that Peter does not leave until he gets what he wants from him. In the end, Jerry resorts to physically attacking Peter so that Peter has to defend himself. Jerry sets it up so that ie is-able to impale himself on his own knife, while Peter holds it out in self-defense. In the end, Jerry uses Peter to get what he has planned to get from him all along.

Peter

Peter is the protagonist in *The Zoo Story* who after coming to Central Park to spend some time alone on his favorite bench to read a book on a Sunday afternoon, has his life forever changed by Jerry, who confronts him. Albee describes Peter as: "A man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely." Peter lives on Seventy-fourth Street between Lexington and Third Avenues, which was a rather wealthy neighborhood in Manhattan during the late 1950s. He is married, has two daughters, cats, and two parakeets. He holds an executive position at a small publishing house that publishes textbooks. These details about Peter's life all come out of the dialogue that he has with Jerry, and although at first they seem to be trivial facts, they serve an important function in establishing the two different worlds in which Peter and Jerry live.

When Jerry first confronts Peter at the beginning of the play, Peter is reluctant to have a conversation with Jerry and is obviously annoyed by him. However, Jerry's manner and

the way he talks intrigues Peter and it is this intrigue that allows Jerry to pull him into his world. The beginning of the conversation seems to be controlled more by Peter, because Jerry must use different tactics to keep Peter interested and to recover when he offends him. However, it is Jerry's vivid descriptions of his life that mesmerize Peter and allow Jerry to gain control over the situation. By the end of the play, Peter has unwillingly allowed Jerry to use him as a pawn in Jerry's plan to end his own life. In the end, Jerry leaves Peter with an experience that will haunt him for the rest of his life. Although he is more educated and has had more social and economic advantages lhan Jerry, Peter is the weaker and more naive of the two men.

Themes

Absurdity and Reality

The first Iheme of *The Zoo Story* has to do with absurdity and reality. During the beginning of the play, Jerry initiates the conversation with Peter and carefully chooses topics with which Peter will be familiar, such as family and career. However, Jerry soon begins to insert strange comments and questions into what is on the surface a conversation between two strangers trying to get to know each other. This is apparent during the moment when Jerry, assuming that Peter does not like his daughters' cats, asks if Peter's birds are diseased. Peter says that he does not believe so and Jerry replies:

"That's too bad. If they did you could set them loose in the house and the cats couid eat them and die, maybe." These unreasonable and ridiculous, or absurd, moments in the play begin to shake Peter's sense of reality and place. However, Jerry is quick to counter these moments with genuinely pleasant, benign comments and interesting stories to keep Peter engaged. Throughout the play, as Jerry's stories continue, he is careful lo control the conversation and manipulate Peter. By the end of the play, Jerry has managed to alter Peter's perception of reality lo such an extent that Peter becomes involved in a physical fight over what he believes to be "his" park bench and in an act of self-defense helps Jerry kill himself. The reality of what has transpired then strikes Peter full force, and he runs off howling "Oh my God!"

Alienation and Loneliness

The theme of alienation and loneliness, which in *The Zoo Story* is presented as being representative of the human condition as a whole, is largely what motivates Jerry to do the things that he does. From the beginning of the play, when Jerry enters Peter's world, it is obvious that Jerry lacks simple social skills. Jerry's first words are not, "Hello, may I sit down," but radier: "I've been to the zoo. I said, I've been to the zoo. MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!" Through Jerry's stories, Peter learns that Jerry lost his parents at the age of ten and then went to live with his aunt, who died on the afternoon of his high school graduation. Jerry also makes very explicit comments about the boarding house he lives in and the other inhabitants there who act as a sort of family to Jerry, even though he does not really even know them. He even includes them in his prayers at night. Albee establishes Jerry's alienation from the rest of the world rather quickly and then continues to fill in the whole picture of his life for the audience. It is the pain that comes with this loneliness that forces Jerry to kill himself with Peter's help at the end of the play. Jerry finally finds solace after he has been stabbed and he tells Peter: ' T came unto you and you have comforted me. Dear Peter."

Wealth and Poverty

The final major theme of *The Zoo Story* is wealth and poverty, and the illusions that are created between the social and economic classes. This theme is closely related to alienation and loneliness because Albee establishes the societal pressures of class as the cause of Jerry's suffering. The issue of class is brought up early in the play when Jerry is asking Peter about his family and his job, and then asks: "Say, what's the dividing line between upper-middle-middle class and lower-upper-middle class?" Obviously, Jerry belongs to neither of these classes, and by his own admission is simply being condescending. However, the illusions that Jerry has about Peter's life are very close to the truth, whereas to Peter Jerry's life is completely foreign. Critics have argued that Albee is condemning the wealthy classes for their false sense of security and their lack of knowledge or understanding of how the other half lives. This point of view seems to be very clear by the end of the play when Jerry has succeeded in bringing Peter down to a basic animal-like level of behavior. It is at this point that their classes become irrelevant and their similarities are seen as the truth. Whether wealthy or poor, the desire for contact and love from others is equally strong. *The Zoo Story* shows what can happen when this need is not fulfilled.

Style

Structure

The *Zoo Story* by Edward Albee is rather simple in structure. It is set in New York's Central Park on Sunday afternoon in the summer. The staging for the play, therefore, consists of two park benches with foliage, trees, and sky behind them. The place never changes and the action of the play unfolds in a linear manner, from beginning to end, in front of the audience. Everything happens in the present, which gives the play its immediacy and makes the events that unfold even more shocking. As an audience member, watching the play makes one feel as if one is witnessing a crime and is directly involved; this sense of involvement is achieved through the structure of the play.

Style

What makes *The Zoo Story* dense and difficult to define is the style in which it is written. It does not fit into die purely realistic nor the totally absurd genres that were both popular in 1958 when Albee wrote the play. The Theatre of the Absurd was a movement that dominated the French stage after World War U, and was characterized by radical theatrical innovations. Playwrights in this genre used practically incomprehensible plots and extremely long pauses in order to violate conservative audiences' expectations of what theatre should be. Albee took this absurd style and combined it with acute realism in order to comment on American society in the 1950s. With *The Zoo Story*, Albee points to French playwright Eugene lonesco's idea that human life is both fundamentally absurd and terrifying; therefore, communication through language is equally absurd. Albee is also drawing from existential philosophy in *The Zoo Story*, Existentialism is concerned with the nature and perception of human existence, and often deals 'with the idea that the basic human condition is one of suffering and loneliness. Jerry and his position in American society are clearly examples of this point of view. Another literary style which began emerging around the time that *The Zoo Story* was written is postmodernism. Postmodernists continued to apply the fundamentals of modernism, including alienation and existentialism, but went a step further by rejecting traditional forms. Therefore, they prefer the anti-novel over the novel and, as in *The Zoo Story*, the anti-hero over the hero. Although Albee does not belong solely in the realistic, absurdist, existential or postmodern literary genres, it is evident that all of these movements had an impact on *The Zoo Story* and Albee as a playwright.

Literary Devices

Albee used various literary devices in *The Zoo Story*. The first device is the anti-hero. An anti-hero, like a hero, is the central character of the play but lacks heroic qualities such as courage, physical prowess, and integrity. Anti-heroes usually distrust conventional values and, like Jerry, they often accept and celebrate their position as

social outcasts. Along with the anti-hero, Albee uses satire and black humor in *The Zoo Story*. Satire employs humor to comment negatively on human nature and social institutions, while black humor places grotesque elements along side of humorous elements in order to shock the reader and evoke laughter in the face of difficulty and disorder. Albee uses both of these devices in *The Zoo Story* to comment on the way different social classes choose to view and ignore each other in American society; specifically, he highlights the way that in which members of the upper classes deal with members of the lower ones. This is illustrated with the character of Peter, who Albee uses as an example by having Jerry methodically bring him down to an animalistic level in order to show that he is just like everyone else. Another device that Albee uses in *The Zoo Story* is allegory. Allegory involves the use of characters, representing things or abstract ideas, to convey a message. Jerry's story about his landlady's dog could be seen as an allegory for his own inability to relate to others. In the end, Jerry says that he and the dog harbor "sadness, suspicion and indifference" for each other, which is similar to the relationships that Jerry has with other people. Some critics have argued that *The Zoo Story* is an allegory for Christian redemption. Jerry, as the Christ-like figure, martyrs himself to demonstrate the need for and meaningfulness of communication. This Christian allegory viewpoint is also evident in some of the dialogue, such as when Jerry sighs and says "So be it!" just before impaling himself on the knife Peter is holding. This can be viewed as a reference to Jesus Christ's words as he dies on the cross: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Although the manner in which Albee employs literary devices in *The Zoo Story* is subject to critical interpretation, all of the devices are readily apparent and are used to create a compelling drama.

Historical Context

Social Climate in the 1950s

The 1950s in the U.S. are viewed by many people as a period of prosperity for American society as a whole. Socially, many catch phrases were being used at this time, like "standard of living" and "cost of living," which implied that life in America could be measured based on personal income and material goods. After experiencing the Great Depression in the 1930s and World War II a decade later, the U.S. was eager to embrace the notion that it had come into its own and, consequently, consumer confidence soared. Household appliances and automobiles became available to more people than ever before and the television became a prominent factor in the daily lives of Americans during the late 1950s. In 1947, a mere 14,000 families owned television sets; ten years later that figure grew to 35 million families. In theory, the television brought people closer together and allowed communication to reach new heights. However, many critics maintain that the way Albee mentions television in *The Zoo Story* and the fact that Peter has difficulty carrying on anything but empty conversation reflect on how disconnected society has become.

Political Climate in the 1950s

Politically, the U.S. was dominated by conservative values during the 1950s. One of the most extreme examples of this conservative tide was the effort led by Senator Joseph McCarthy to harass and prosecute individuals suspected to have ties with the Communist Party. This anti-Communist sentiment in America turned into a frenzy because of the ruthless and random nature of the McCarthy's witch hunts. Eventually, Americans began to react against the absurdity of these trials, although many were afraid that they themselves would be targeted. Three other factors also played a major role in worrying conservatives: the emergence of rock music, movies that were becoming more and more explicit, and especially, the publishing of Kinsey Reports in 1948 and 1953. Alfred Kinsey, a zoologist, traveled all over the U.S. to interview over 16,000 men and women about their sexual histories. The details that were revealed, especially those concerning premarital sex and homosexuality, shocked the nation. Critics objected to the fact that the researchers failed to pass moral judgment on the data that they collected. Jerry, in *The Zoo Story*, epitomizes the thrrty-seven percent of males in the Kinsey Report who reported that they had had a homosexual experience between adolescence and old age. He is also very eager to share the details of his homosexual experiences as a fifteen year old, which clearly makes Peter uncomfortable.

Cultural Climate in the 1950s

The cultural climate in the late 1950s included the beginnings of a backlash against conservative social and political views. Artists who lived outside the mainstream or who were dissatisfied within it began to comment boldly on this fact in their work. The Beat Generation were members of an artistic movement that centered in New York City and San Francisco during this time who protested against conservative values. Film audiences also began to idolize the tough guy at odds with "the establishment, " such as those played by Marlon Brando and, most famously, James Dean in *Rebel without A Cause* (1956). The Theatre of the Absurd was a radical movement making an impact on world drama, which dominated the French stage after 1950. Absurdist playwrights sought to violate conservative audiences' expectations of what theatre should be by using incomprehensible plots, stark settings, and unusually long pauses. Playwrights such as Eugene lonesco believed that life is terrifying because it is fundamentally absurd. Edward Albee used these absurd elements in a realistic mode with *The Zoo Story*, thus causing some confusion among critics and audiences in terms of how to label the play.

Critical Overview

The Zoo Story, Edward Albee's first play, premiered on September 28, 1959, at the Schiller Theatre Werkstatt in West Berlin, Germany. While there, it received much praise from critics including Friedrich Luft who, as quoted in *Critical Essays on Edward Albee*, called it a "shudder-causing drama of superintelligent style." Riding high on the praise it received in-Germany, *The Zoo Story* finally made its way back to New York where it debuted off-Broadway at the Provmcetown Theatre on January 14,1960, What made this debut even more exciting for Albee was the fact that he was sharing the bill with *Krapp's Last Tape*, a one-act play written by Samuel Beckett, one of Albee's idols.

Most New York critics declared *The Zoo Story* to be a very exciting play and viewed it as the beginning of a revitalized New York theatre scene. Henry Hewes in the *Saturday Review* claimed: "[Edward Albee] has written an extraordinary first play." However, a few critics expressed confusion over *The Zoo Story*, such as Tom Driver from *Christian Century* who wrote: "It is more than a little melodramatic, and the only sense I could draw from it is the conviction that one shouldn't talk to strangers in Central Park." Others simply dismissed the play, such as Robert Brustein, who in an article in the *New Republic* labeled the play beat generation "claptrap." The positive reviews outweighed the negative, however, and *The Zoo Story* ran for a total of 582 performances, which is remarkable for a first play. It also went on to win the *Village Voice* Obie Award for best play in 1960.

Whether or not people liked *The Zoo Story*, they felt compelled to discuss it, largely because of the sensational aspects of the play and the fact that people were confused about whether the play was absurd or realistic. Eventually, most people concluded that it was a mixture of the two styles, but critics remained divided over the play's message. Many critics have argued that *The Zoo Story* is a social commentary on the effects that loneliness can have on an individual in American society, George Wellwarth, in *The Theater of Protest and Paradox,* claimed that *The Zoo Story* "is about the maddening effect that the enforced loneliness of the human condition has on the person who is cursed (for in our society it undoubtedly is a curse) with the infinite capacity for love." Other critics viewed the play as a religious allegory, such as Rose A. Zimbardo who asserted in *Twentieth Century Literature* that the images that Albee uses are "traditional Christian symbols which ... retain their original significance " John Ditsky expressed a similar viewpoint in *The Onstage Christ: Studies in the Persistence of a Theme*, declaring that' "*The Zoo Story* rests upon a foundation of Christ-references, and indeed derives its peculiar structure from Jesus' favourite teaching device, the parable." Other critics have described *The Zoo Story* as a ritual confrontation with death, a morality play, a homosexual play, and an absurd play. However, in an essay in *Edward Albee: An Interview and Essays*, Mary C. Anderson maintained that *The Zoo Story* can be "explained as a sociopolitical tract, a pessimistic analysis of human alienation, a modern Christian allegory of salvation, and an example of absurdist and nihilist theater." She concluded that the play "has managed to absorb these perspectives without exhausting its many levels of meaning."

The overall opinion of *The Zoo Story* from most critics is that it is an exciting and risky first play from a playwright who has gone on to win numerous awards for his works. After much early success, Albee went on to garner both high praise and censure for his work that followed *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Wool*/?. He has continued to explore and experiment with both the form and content of theatre, which is a risky venture, especially in the commercial arena. What continues to make Albee so fascinating for many critics and theatergoers is the fact that, as C.W.E. Bigsby noted in *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays*, "Albee has remained at heart a product of Off-Broadway, claiming the same freedom to experiment and, indeed, fail, which is the special strength of that theatre." It is his penchant for experimentation that has caused Albee to be, as Bigsby contended, one of those "few playwrights" who continue to be "frequently and mischievously misunderstood, misrepresented, overpraised, denigrated and precipitately dismissed." Critical opinion has had little effect on albee as a playwright, for he has continued to write and have his plays produced on and off Broadway.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Coy is an esteemed authority on drama who has contributed to numerous publications. His essay praises the power of Albee's dialogue and the class dischord that it illustrates. Coy also addresses the religious imagery in Albee'splay.

There is very little action in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*: two men meet, they exchange information, and one dies at the hand of the other. But to a framework of action which any writer might have imagined, Albee brings a master's sense of the ways in which, psychologically, some people are able to dominate and manipulate others, and a frankness and grotesqueness of language which are startling even now, almost forty years after the play's premiere.

Albee opens with an impressive display. Peter, the quiet, insular, middle-class publisher, is reading abookon "his" bench in New York's Central Park. Along comes Jerry, who (as we will see) is not out for a stroll but urgently looking for someone with whom to talk. He spies Peter, approaches him, and begins the elaborate process of getting Peter (who wants only to be left alone) to put down his book and surrender to Jerry's desire to talk. This opening section of the play is too long to quote here, and in any case should be read through or better still seen onstage, but it is a marvel of resourcefulness.

Jerry announces that he has been to the Zoo, and when that produces no response he yells it. Peter barely responds even to this, so Jerry changes tactics and begins to ask Peter questions about where they are in the Park and in what direction he has (therefore) been walking. Peter fills his pipe as a way of trying to ignore Jerry, who, seeing this, uses it as a way of accusing Peter of a kind of cowardice: "Well, boy; you're not going to get lung cancer, are you?" Peter does not rise to the bait, so Jerry becomes more aggressive and more graphic: "No, sir. What you'll probably get is cancer of the mouth, and then you'll have to wear one of those things Freud wore after they took one whole side of his jaw away. What do they call those things?"

Poor dim Peter, college-educated but not street-smart, can't stop himself from showing that he knows the word: prosthesis Jerry seizes on this in a way that shows that he himself knows the word, and sarcastically asks Peter if he is a doctor. When Peter says no, he read about prosthetics in *Time* magazine, Jerry responds that "*Time* magazine is not for blockheads." This line is generally delivered sarcastically, so that it both patronizes Peter and shows the audience that Jerry thinks himself superior to most of middle-class America. Finally, Jerry bullies Peter into giving him his full attention by inflicting what is sometimes called "liberal guilt:"

JERRY- Do you mind if we talk?

PETER: (Obviously minding) Why... no, no.

JERRY: Yes you do; you do

PETER: (Puts his book down . smiling) No, really; I don't mind.

JERRY: Yes you do.

PETER. (Finally decided) No; I don't mind at all, really.

At this point the first section, or movement, of the play comes to an end. Many critics have pointed out that *The Zoo Story* is a play about the difficulty of communication. But that is a common problem offstage or on and only rises to dramatic urgency when there is something urgent to be communicated. Now that Jerry has finally succeeded in capturing Peter's full attention, the question is: what message has Jerry brought with him from the Zoo that he is so avid to communicate, even (or particularly) to a total stranger?

Avid or not, Jerry suddenly seems in no hurry. He returns to the subject of the Zoo, hinting that "it" (what "it" might be is not explained) will be on TV tonight or in the newspapers tomorrow. He begins to ask Peter about himself and his family, eliciting pieces of personal information. When Jerry guesses that Peter and his wife are not going to have any more children, Peter asks how he could possibly know that. Jerry responds: "The way you cross your legs, perhaps; something in the voice.... Is it your wife?" A subtle game is afoot here: Jerry earlier attacked Peter's manhood by implying it was somehow cowardly to smoke a pipe rather than cigarettes, and now, with his remarks about the legs and the voice, he seems to imply effeminacy or perhaps even suppressed homosexuality (a line of thought to which he will return later). In any case, he ends the line with a different kind of attack on Peter's manhood, implying that the dominant voice in the no-children decision, and the household, is that of Peter's wife, whose name is never given. When Peter tacitly admits this, Jerry actually shows a moment of compassion before briskly moving on: "Well, now; what else?"

During this second section of the play, in which the men exchange information about their lives, Albee avoids the dullness which often attends exposition by two means: frequent allusions to the Zoo and tantalizing hints about what may have happened there (we learn that Jerry was depressed by the way the bars separated the animals from each other and from the people but not if he actually did anything about it); and a combination of startling information and aggressive behavior that keeps Jerry firmly in our minds (and Peter's) as a figure of instability and menace.

Jerry tells Peter about his hellish rooming-house, the serio-comic loss of his parents, his first real sexual experience (while admitting it was homosexual, he gets in another dig at Peter's masculinity: "But that was the jazz of a very special hotel, wasn't it?"), and his landlady, "a fat, ugly, mean, stupid, unwashed, misanthropic, cheap, drunken bag of garbage." But the landlady, 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.

It is called "The Story of Jerry and the Dog," and it must be seen or read in its entirety, as no description could come within miles of doing it justice. It tells of Jerry's attempt to

"get through to" the disgusting landlady's even more disgusting dog, which attacked him whenever it caught him leaving or entering the building. Albee makes sure that we understand that Jerry's past attempt to reach the dog is parallel to his present attempt to reach Peter: he has Jerry try several ways to get through to the dog, from killing him with kindness to just plain killing him, just as he tried several different ways to get through to Peter.

The playwright has Jerry, who has so far disgusted Peter but not aroused his sympathy, say, "it's just that if you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS! Don't you see?" Of his final truce with the dog, a sad indifference, Jerry says, "I have learned that neither kindness nor cruelty, by themselves... create any effect beyond themselves; and I have learned that the two combined, together... are the teaching emotion." This lesson Jerry learned from his experience is of great thematic importance in the play, where every step forward in communication, large or small, is accomplished with a combination of kindness and cruelty.

Next comes the final section of the play. Of Jerry's story, Peter says, in fact he yells, "I DON'T UNDERSTAND'", but Jerry doesn't believe him and neither do most critics. They think he does indeed understand that Jerry is trying to tell him something about the pain, the loneliness, and the hideous suffering of those parts of society not normally encountered or even acknowledged by Peter's middle class; and they think that Peter's real feelings are more clearly seen in a subsequent line: "IDON'TWANTTOHEARANYMORE." Peter prepares to leave, they say, because "his " space has been invaded not only by an unwelcome person but by unwelcome information, both of which threaten the comfortable ignorance of his life.

Jerry is at first angered by Peter's refusal to comprehend, then apparently resigned to it. But he is not ready to quit. He taunts Peter, punches him and pushes him to the ground, challenging him to fight for his bench. Peter refuses, fearing he will be harmed. Jerry pulls out an ugly looking knife (a switchblade, wicked-looking and illegal in New York, is used as a prop by most productions) and throws it on the ground between them. Peter cowers back. Jerry tells Peter to pick up the knife but Peter won't. Jerry grabs Peter and says the following, slapping Peter each time he utters the word "fight": "You fight, you miserable bastard; fight for that bench; fight for your parakeets; fight for your cats, fight for your two daughters; fight for your life; fight for your manhood, you pathetic little vegetable You couldn't even get your wife with a male child."

Angered at last beyond caution, Peter snatches up the knife, even now holding it defensively. Jerry sighs heavily, says, "So be it," and rushes at Peter, impaling himself on the knife and giving himself, deliberately, a mortal wound. The words Jerry says as he is dying are most important: "Thank you, Peter.... Thank you very much. Oh, Peter, I was afraid I'd drive you away-----Peter... thank you. I came unto you and you have comforted me. Dear Peter." Jerry then sends Peter on his way, making sure he takes his book with him, but asserting that the bench (and, by implication, some part of Peter which will never be the same) belongs to him, to Jerry.

Many critics have pointed out that the Biblical language in this reference to Peter, together with other such language in the play (regarding the dog, Jerry says, "AND IT CAME TO PASS THAT THE BEAST WAS DEATHLY ILL."), and with the number of times God is called on from the stabbing to the end of the play, suggests Christian symbolism: Jesus (Jerry, a distantly similar name) dies for the suffering of mankind but not before he has passed on his gospel to his disciple Peter. This seems a reasonable inference, since playwrights choose their words, Albee more carefully than most. Whether the implication of Christianity expands or narrows the impact of the play is highly debatable, but the language is there not by accident and it should not be ignored.

The Zoo Story can best be understood (especially by actors, who are trained to play intentions but not mysteries or ambiguities) 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 spotted. 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, or, to make a cliche literal, die trying. 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. Peter may never wander preaching in the wilderness, but he will never again draw breath without the burden of the knowledge that Jerry has conveyed to him. That much of the torch, at least, has been passed.

Source: Stephen Coy, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In this essay, Johnson heartily endorses Albee's play, citing numerous elements that merit extensive study in the classroom.

Johnson is a critic and educational administrator.

Edward Albee emerges as one of the most controversial and, consequently, one of the most read contemporary playwrights. He does not write of human emotions and relationships in statements of fact that we like to hear. He uses abstract symbols and ideas to portray unidentifiable fears, subtle truths, intangible illusions, and the unattainable standards imposed upon society, Albee is difficult to understand because he does not discuss anything concrete. Facts are sensible. Abstracts are disturbing. To write about the mystical secrets of life without presenting any kind of solution exasperates the reader. But this may be Albee's intent. He once said that if after a play the audience is concerned only about finding their cars, the play failed. Therefore, Albee bares the souls of his characters his audience. He suggests the idiosyncrasies and failings of man and his sociality. And in doing so he often uses the outcast, the distorted man, the pervert.

This is what is shocking and terrifying. And this is one reason why many English teachers refuse to approach his plays in the classroom. Not only is he frustrating to interpret, but he also unveils some very eccentric exponents in society. They are not the type that provoke comfortable discussion. But in my opinion this is not reason enough to shelve Albee. He remains our most colorful coeval dramatist and as such belongs in a modern, progressive curriculum. He refuses to be ignored by the theater. Likewise, we cannot ignore him. Albee depicts some general human weaknesses that are argumentative and provide stimulating discussion for students....

The Zoo Story might be used for student study, because human contact and communication are lacking among young people It is about a wandering homosexual who, unable to adjust to his own world and hating the conventional world, latches onto a stranger sitting on a park bench and tricks this typical father of parakeets and cats into killing him. Here again Albee resorts to violence. A closer analysis of this play may bring out some ideas for classroom use.

Three human defects exemplified are lack of communication, alienation from society, and mediocrity. Jerry approaches Peter, sitting on a park bench where he has been coming the last four years, and says, "Do you mind if we talk?" And Peter, "obviously minding," replies that he does not mind. Immediately we see that people really do not, communicate. They do not say what they actually mean or are thinking. Peter becomes "bewildered by the seeming lack of communication." And Jerry, who feels the need to make contact with someone anyone says, "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...." How trite and nondescript we are! Very seldom does one human being fully and completely talk with someone, *talk* with him in such a way as

to know what really makes him tick. This is true also about young people. Their music is loud so they do not have to converse; they go to movies so they can look rather than talk; they watch TV rather than visit; even their cars make so much noise it is not necessary to think or talk.

Jerry felt the need. "But every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really *talk*; like to get to know somebody, know all about him.'1 And so Jerry begins asking questions but does not "really carry on a conversation." The experiences he relates about the dog only indicate the distance one will go to satisfy a need, to make contact. "A person has to have some way of dealing with SOMETHING." "People. With an idea; a concept. And where better, where ever better in this humiliating excuse for a jail, where better to communicate one single, simple-minded idea than in an entrance hall?" The unimportance of the place of communication becomes evident. But what is important is that one must communicate; and the entrance hall, even with a dog in an entrance hall, would be a start.

It is at this point in the play that Albee again makes us aware of his theory of the necessity of violence for contact. Jerry says in talking about his dog, "I have learned that neither kindness nor cruelty by themselves, independent of each other, creates any effect beyond themselves." The two of them together are the motivating device. And then the beautiful and desperate lines, "We neither love nor hurt because we not try to reach each other." We are so terribly misunderstood. We cannot understand love. How is love to be interpreted? By whom" This aspect of the play right here could trigger a very healthy discussion among students. And again at the end of the short play Jerry cries in desperation, "Don't you have any idea, not even the slightest, what other people *need*?." People need to be needed, and they need someone to need. They must have someone whom they make contact, with whom they can talk and be understood. If people do not make contact with someone, they resort to various perversions trying to find something with which to identify.

This point brings us to another human defect. The reader is made aware of Jerry's alienation and aloneness when he describes his apartment and points out the two picture frames that are empty. "I don't see why they need any explanation at all. Isn't it clear? I don't have pictures of anyone to put in them." And his more complete isolation from the square world is quite obvious when he says, "I was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l." Thus, when Jerry relates his experiences with the dog, we have a sense not only of his failure to communicate but also of his reaction to people. "... Animals are indifferent to me ... like people," People are trapped in their own little worlds like animals in a zoo, and everyone is "... separated by bars from everyone else." Some do not seem to mind their cage, because they accept this poor excuse for living and find a certain amount of satisfaction in things parakeets, cats, a park bench.

This, then, brings us to the third human failing, that of mediocrity. Peter is the "ordinary," life-size. He is married and has a family of girls, parakeets, and cats. He has an ordinary job and can talk about ordinary things. When Peter becomes perturbed at the thought of losing his bench, he says, "I've come here for years; I have hours of great pleasure, great satisfaction, right here. And that's important to a man. I'm a responsible person,

and I'm a GROWN-UP. This is my bench, and you have no right to take it away from me." He has found comfort and security in the everyday things that do not need explaining, so much so that he cannot bear the thought of losing one. Jerry sees him as he really is: "You are a vegetable-----" He further taunts him, bringing out more of his simpleness and sameness, "., .You've told me about your home, and your family, and *your own* little zoo. You have everything, and now you want this bench." Throughout the play there are indications and prevailing overtones of being trapped. At the very end of the play as Jerry dies, he says, "... Your parakeets are making the dinner ... the cats ... are setting the table ...." How very absurd! To be subjected and tied to these menial, dull, unstimulating tasks and responsibilities that we make for ourselves. The sad truth is that these things might be bearable if at the same time we could communicate.

This is the prevailing theme of *The Zoo Story* communication. It is obvious at once, and with a little guidance and prodding students can recognize quite readily the handicaps and limitation of man and his society as seen in this play. The results of a study of this play are encouraging, as is the idea that attacking a contemporary play on contemporary society is contemporary education.

Now, whether or not Albee deserves to enter the classroom depends upon whether or not the educators the English educators are willing to admit him. I firmly believe our students must be taught literature written during their time. And Edward Albee should be a part of every American literature course!

Source: Carolyn E Johnson, "In Defense of Albee" in *English Journal*, Vol. 57, no. 1, January, 1968, pp. 21-23,29.

Adaptations

Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? was adapted and filmed by Warner Bros., starring Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, George Segal, and Sandy Dennis. The film was released in 1966.

Topics for Further Study

Edward Albee was a child adopted by rich parents. Describe his attitude towards his upbringing from reading or seeing his one-act play *The American Dream*. In what ways does his upbringing evidence itself in *The Zoo Story*?

Research the concept of Theatre of the Absurd. Does *The Zoo Story* belong under that heading? Why or why not?

Compare *The American Dream* point-by-point with Eugene lonesco's absurdist play *The Bald Soprano*. How are the two plays alike? How are they different?

Why do you think it was important to Jerry to make Peter realize the misery that exists beneath everyday life? What was Jerry trying to achieve?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: The television set came into prominence in the American household. By 1957, a total of 35 million U.S. families had a television in their homes.

Today: Almost all American families, rich and poor, have at least one television set and with the emergence of cable television, the amount of channels available is well over 100. The television is now an integral part of American society.

1950s: Conservative family values dominated American society, with so-called "typical" nuclear families like Peter's in *The Zoo Story* viewed as ideal. Early television shows, such as *Father Knows Best*, that depicted such "ideal" families were extremely popular.

Today: Families are depicted in a much more realistic light on television today, on shows like *Rosecmne*. The nuclear family is no longer viewed as the "ideal" and most Americans consider themselves to have moderate values. Nevertheless, a very vocal conservative Christian movement is leading the fight to return to the idealized view of the family that was popular in the 1950s.

1950s: Consumer confidence and general prosperity within middle- and upper-class American society soared. However, this prosperity failed to carry over from white males to the Americans in lower classes, women, and ethnic minorities, who continued to earn less money and endure more job discrimination than white males.

Today: The U.S. economy is steady, but after some economic hard dines, consumer confidence is far lower than during the 1950s. White males still continue to make more money than women and minorities, but the gap is slowly closing. Many women and members of minority groups have been able to secure employment in powerful, high ranking professions.

What Do I Read Next?

It is essential that anyone wanting to understand Edward Albee read his 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?

Whether as relevant to Albee or not, everyone interested in modern drama should read Martin Esslin's 1961 text *The Theatre of the Absurd*.

Those interested in Albee as an adapter of other people's work (and what might draw him to that work) would enjoy *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, which he adapted from Carson McCullers's novel and *Malcolm*, adapted from the work by James Purdy.

After years of obscurity and what some took to be decline, Albee suddenly returned to prominence (and major awards) with the play *Three Tall Women*, produced on Broadway in 1994.

What was it about America in the 1960's that made Albee call it "this slipping land of ours" ? Two places to look for answers are in books and articles about President Dwight D Eisenhower's administration and in a book called *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac.

Further Study

Anderson, Mary C , editor. *Edward Albee: An Interview and Essays*, Syracuse University Press, 1983

A good resource for Albee's thoughts on the dramatic process. Also contains a number of essays that discuss the themes present m *The Zoo Story*

Bigsby, C. W. E., editor. *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, 1975.

A good critical overview of Albee's career up until 1974. Contains a number of perceptive essays on *The Zoo Story*,

Ditsky, John. "Albee's Parabolic Christ- *The Zoo Story*" in his *The Onstage Christ; Studies m the Persistence of a Theme*, [London], 1980.

Ditksy's book examines religious imagery in various dramas He details the parallels to the story of Christ that are evident in Albee's play.

Nilan, Mary M. "Albee's *TheZooStory*: Alienated Man and the Nature of Love" in *Modem Drama*, Vol 16,1973.

An essay that details Jerry's isolation from mainstream society and his failures at forming meaningful relationships.

Woods, Linda L "Isolation and the Barrier of Language m *The Zoo Story* m *Research Studies*, Vol. 36,1968.

A good examination of Jerry's alienation from middle class society and problems that he faces communicating with members of that group Peter in particular

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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