

# American Society: A Brief Study of the Plays of Edward Albee

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## Abstract

Albee is concerned about the American democracy which under the garb of democracy is actually a dictatorship of two parties – Republican and Democrats – and of a few people. These are the matters of concern for Albee in relation to society and civilization. Thus, Albee unlike the ‘art for art’s sake’ school fits in the group of those writers who believe in the idea of ‘art for the sake of society.’ Albee’s art has a specific purpose i.e., to amend the society. He wants to make his civilization realize that disorder is spreading its wings in personal, professional and social wards of life, and in order to expose the weaknesses of American society literature should be used as an instrument.

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## Introduction

Due to this very reason of attacking American optimism, Albee’s work falls into the category of the Theater of Absurd. Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* considers Albee one of a few absurd writers of the United States.

Albee’s absurdism has the touch of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. Beckett’s preoccupation with the problem of being and the identity of self can be seen in Albee’s plays. The perplexity of ‘who I am?’ consists the grain of truth in it. It is a very helpful pondering for providing a complete explanation for the deep existential anguish that is the keynote of Beckett’s work. The feeling of uncertainty is the very ebb and flow of Beckett’s plays, in the same way uncertainty and instability are important characteristics of Albee’s plays. For Beckett, as for Sartre, man has the responsibility and duty of facing the human condition as a recognition that at the root of our being there is nothingness; so the idea of nothingness and the concept of ‘nada’ or ‘nihilism’ is the very base of Beckett’s writings. As Beckett lacks both characters and plot in the conventional sense in his play *Waiting for Godot* because for him subject matter is more important factor where neither characters nor plot exist; in the same way Albee’s various plays, e.g., *Box-Mao-Box* and *Knock! Knock! Who’s There!?* lack any plot and important characters because of the same purpose. On the other hand Albee is equally influenced by Eugene Ionesco who, in Tynan’s words, declares that “words were meaningless and that all communication between human beings was impossible” (qtd. in Esslin, *Theater of Absurd* 128). Ionesco accepts that his images of world are nothing except those of evanescence and brutality, vanity and rage, nothingness and hideous, useless hatred; and a similar idea of this brutal and selfish world and society is given by Albee. The ideas of isolation and lack of communication in Albee’s absurd society have been derived from Ionesco’s world in which people can no longer talk because they can no longer think. Difficulty to communicate is the root cause of the loneliness of man in a community or society. Ionesco in *The Lesson* and Albee in *The Zoo Story* present this idea. Thus, Albee has exposed the absurdity of his society by using absurdism as an instrument.

American society has been awakening from this long sleep through the medium of realistic literature, and absurdism and existentialism are the branches of this tree named realism.

The society in the United States is divided in two categories – the legendary and the real i.e., one who lives in dream world and the other who has experienced the real world. *The Zoo Story* (1959), *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1961) *Box-Mao-Box* (1968), *The Man who had Three Arms* (1983), *Occupant* (2002) and *Knock! Knock! Who's There !?* (2003) focus on these two sections of society. The aim is to peep into that side of American society where many complex questions have still to be answered. This is a civilization where everything is smooth at the upper level which is just a mirage. The civilization believes in 'congenital optimism', it believes that 'difficult we do at once, the impossible takes a little longer'. Even immigrants claim to be 'a one hundred percent American, born and raised in America.' Thus, the idealism is the very root or spirit of this nation. But the very foundation of idealism starts shaking when it confronts realism. This is what the above mentioned plays expose in order to amend the society.

Theater happens to be the greatest weapon to unearth the human absurdities which are presented on the stage by dramatist. Thus Albee, too, uses theater as a tool to unite different classes which have been divided by the growth of the cities. Like Charles Dickens' London, Albee presents New York in *The Zoo Story* where people do not have contact with each other. Therefore, like London, in this play New York becomes the place where people have lost humane touch with each other. Albee, thus, in this play satirizes the cold behaviour of one man to the other. He advocates that instead of coldness there should be warmth in the human relations which American society certainly lacks. He believes that the rat-race for material success is a great hindrance to express the passion between the two fellows. In this play his main objective is to create the fellowship between Jerry and Peter who represent two different sections of society. He further portrays that this fellowship should be real not notional.

*The Zoo Story* brings together the legendry and the real, the "upper-middle-middle-class and lower-upper-middle-class" (ZS 163), success and failure, the 'vegetable' people and the 'animal' people, reticence and the real talk, open movement and the zoo by bringing together the polar opposites of American society in the guise of Peter and Jerry. *The Zoo Story*, Albee's first produced play, is an attack on fragmentation, isolation, lack of communication and social disharmony. Albee describes the situation of New York in 1950s when people after the World War Second moved to different places in order to search for their livelihood. The people from all over the world found America, particularly metropolitan cities like New York more lucrative. As physically the war did not make any impact here in comparison to Asia and Europe which were totally ruined by war. In this play, Albee portrays a struggle between the people who were there and who came from outside.

From Albee's point-of-view, both wards which are presented through the Peter and Jerry are based on himself. He himself says that the two characters are "the two Edwards, the one who lived back in Larchmont, and the one who lives in New York City" (qtd. in Gussow 93). Thus, the play is an attack on the upper class life he lived in Larchmont as the adopted son of millionaire Reed and Frances Albee, and also exposes the life of a poor common man in New York which he experienced when he left his parents' home in 1958. Albee, like the protagonist of the play, Jerry, travelled all over New York encountering strangers and experiencing the loop holes of this city when he worked as a delivery boy for Western Union, a job he did for almost two years before writing *The Zoo Story*. Thus, the play gives a realistic presentation of both the legendry and realistic sides of American society for the writer had experienced both.

In this play Edward Albee depicts the problems faced by human beings in metropolitan cities. Major characters – Peter and Jerry – the representatives of two different social classes, meet on "a Sunday

afternoon” in “Central Park”, New York (ZS 159). Jerry is “A man in his late thirties . . . His fall from physical grace should not suggest debauchery; he has, to come closest to it, a great weariness” (ZS 158). This introduction of Jerry gives a clear idea of the outcasts in American society, who live in the “west side of the park” which “doesn’t sound a very nice place” to live (ZS 165). Jerry is an outsider, “He is not a native New Yorker” (Rutenberg 18), and his utter poverty forces him to remain alone in the largest city in this world. The second character named Peter is “A man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely” (ZS 158) who makes around “eighteen thousand (\$) a year” (ZS 162). He has a wife, two daughters, two parakeets, two cats, a secure job and a good apartment. He represents upper middle class American society. Philip C. Kolin remarks, “Peter is the opposite. He is passive, inhibited, unwilling to give up his solitude for confrontation. A conformist and isolationist, he is both Jerry’s nemesis and his hope, enemy and heir” (*Early one act Plays* 20).

Through this microcosmic presentation of two different worlds of New York – one of the most developed cities of the United States – Albee has given the macrocosmic presentation of the United States. The problems of alienation, lack of communication, social disparity, class discrimination and indifference are not only prevalent in New York but throughout the country. In this “greatest city of the world” (ZS 177) people do not care for personal contact or relationships, but only crave for a successful and materialistic life. For Albee, living in a big city is just like living in a world full of strangers where no one is able to make contact with other, understand other’s situation and to empathize with other person, class or category. The reason is materialism. This blind race for monetary security leads human beings to alienation which results in separation, discontentment, loneliness and meaninglessness.

The two opposites are brought together by the author as an attempt to break ‘that long silence’ of this society or to dissolve the distance between the rich and the poor. Jerry, the lower class man, has a desire to narrate his own stories, he wants to talk because he wants to give voice to the people of his stratum whose bypassed histories seem lost in the fact-paced tumult of the society. He is voicing the isolation and the alienation of the suppressed and the ignored people in order to make a difference in the prevalent situation. He wants to earn his marginalized story a memorable place in the larger narratives of society. If Jerry’s attempt of storytelling somehow becomes real in another’s mind, he can help in ending the alienation. So he is looking for a real talk and says, “every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody, know all about him” (ZS 161). This is why, as soon as Jerry finds Peter in the park he starts talking to him. After Jerry has received the basic information about Peter – his family, his wife, his daughters, his work, his salary, his hobbies etc. – the talk turns into a narration and Jerry starts narrating his own stories – story about his dwelling place and “STORY OF JERRY AND THE DOG” (ZS 170). Matthew C. Roudane asserts, “Moreover the socio-political dimension of the play seemed to cast Albee as a consummate civic protester, a playfully demonic social jester, the new angry young playwright blasting social schisms which separates the haves from the have-nots” (29). The worlds of both the characters are completely different. Peter’s world is comfortable. He has a good job, a so called happy family. He is a modern man who is passive, inhibited and unwilling to give up his solitude for confrontation. On the other hand Jerry’s world is troubled. This is an environment filled with suffering humanity. Peter is made aware of the other side of society by the narratives of Jerry.

Jerry first narrates the story of his dwelling place and his relationship with his co-residents. He is living in a jail-like apartment which he is sharing with “a coloured queen”, “a Japanese Kimono”, “a Puerto Rican family,” “somebody” (ZS 165) in the front, room an anonymous crying woman, a landlady and her dog; but he has no contact with these people except the landlady who tries to seduce him, and the dog who attacks him. This place, just like any other densely populated area, is full of people but no contact. This is a

satire of the alienated life in a big city where people are physically connected because they live under the same roof but do not have any emotional connection. This jail-like house is a zoo for Jerry. Zoo is highly symbolic, as it is a place where animals are confined, and cages as well as bars separate the animals from one another and from the people who are watching them. The same compartmentalization can be seen in O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, where O'Neill has used cage as a symbol which represents the separation of our society on the basis of class and category. There are invisible bars around us which are separating man from the fellow man and are turning this world into a zoo in which every man inhabits a cage. The bars of the cages in this zoo (world) are socio-economic, racial, cultural, political and psychological. Jerry's first story shocks Peter because he has never imagined this kind of home. Philip C Kolin remarks, "In Jerry's stories lives are connected and separated by symbolic geography. Space and environment play a major part in America's dichotomous cultural landscape that Albee seeks to invade and invoke in *The Zoo Story*" (Kolin 21).

Jerry's zoo hints towards man's self-created zoo. Metropolitan cities can be compared to a zoo in which people occupy cages. Either it is Mumbai or Delhi in India, Shanghai in China, London in England or New York in America it will be witnessed that the residents in these cities do not have any social relationship and live in their self-created cages. This is why Jerry went to zoo before his final attempt to communicate with someone i.e., before coming to the park:

I went to the zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too. It probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals. But if it's a zoo, that's the way it is. (ZS 179)

Jerry's blatant confession portrays the grotesquely pathetic picture of a very real life in New York City and American society. New York gives a true picture of American society: "It is a city of indifference, apathy, and isolation" (Rutenberg 25) where man is completely disengaged with his fellow man. Philip C. Kolin says, "Deconstructing the national ecology of America's pen spaces – the land of the free and the home of the brave – Albee pursues the prison motif of Jerry's narratives into central park . . ." (*Early one act Plays* 23). Cages and confinements are not only shown at Jerry's side but are also part of Peter's conventional family life. His daughters keep parakeets in cages and Peter himself – unwilling to talk to anyone and unable to live life at fullest – is in a cage.

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