



Research Paper

The Art of Paradox and the Voice of Anguish: Absurdism in Albee's *The Zoo Story*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the theme of absurdism in Edward Albee's play *The Zoo Story*. Absurdism is a literary and philosophical movement that presents the human condition as illogical, meaningless, and chaotic. The paper uses the analytical-critical method in the analysis of the texts. Sartre's existential concepts of "anguish" and "choice" serve as the critical framework of the discussion. The study reveals that the play showcases the absurdity of human existence through the portrayal of characters trapped in mundane and absurd situations. The play employs paradoxical elements of protest to convey the themes of absurdism. Albee uses the paradox of intimacy and isolation to explore the complexities of human relationships. The voice of anguish in the play further emphasizes the absurdity of the characters' existence, as they struggle to find meaning in a chaotic and irrational world.

KEYWORDS: *absurdism, existentialism, Camus, Sartre, Poulet's theory*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The use of the absurd in literature serves as a powerful tool to convey the existential struggles and uncertainties of human existence. Absurdism as a literary and philosophical movement presents the human condition as illogical, meaningless, and chaotic. Post-war theatre, as George Wellwarth argued, "consist of a common theme (protest) and a common technique (paradox)" [1].

Albee's *The Zoo Story* is a prime example of this theatre and technique that is used to reflect on the anxieties and isolation that can come with a lack of direction in life. The play utilizes paradoxical elements that protests the voice of anguish through the sense of absurdity inherent in human existence. By confronting these themes head-on, readers and audiences are forced to confront their own beliefs and values, leading to a deeper understanding of the human condition. This paper examines the ways in which Albee employs paradox of absurdity to voice anguish, and how successfully he displays a world that challenges the traditional notions of reality and meaning. By delving into the depths of absurdity, the audience is compelled to question the essence of human existence and the futility of their pursuits.

Absurdism suggests that the universe is inherently senseless and irrational, making it futile to search for meaning. This leads to the question of why we should continue living if life itself is absurd. Albert Camus asserts that contemplating suicide is a natural response to the lack of inherent meaning in life: "Earthly hope must be killed; only then can one be saved by true hope" [2]. He maintains "those who commit suicide were assured of the meaning of life" [2]. Accordingly, constantly seeking meaning in life is absurd because it does not actually exist. The human being "is what it is not" [3].

Ultimately, we are left with a bewildering conundrum: why do we keep looking for experiences that make us feel alive, even when in the end these experiences might not have any real bearing on the size of the universe? At the heart of human existence is this contradiction, which is strongly related to Camus's absurdist philosophy. He considers that "by asserting that all is true we assert the truth of the contrary assertion and consequently the falsity of our own thesis" [2].

Jerry's persistent pursuit of a relationship with Peter reflects his quest to resolve Camus's paradox of human absurdity: "A man is always a prey to his truths . . . A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it . . . he should strive to escape the universe of which he is the creator. All the foregoing has significance only on account of this paradox"[2].

The source of this dilemma is found in our humanity. We have the capacity to consider and provide meaning to our existence as conscious beings. Despite the absurdity and indifference of the universe, we attach great importance to our subjective experiences. In moments of intensity, when we feel most alive, we temporarily soar above the existential weight of absurdity and find purpose in the immediate, personal, and visceral components of existence.

Therefore, Jerry's quest to feel alive thus turns into a protest against the ridiculousness of life. It is by saying that he finds it difficult to give the world meaning of his own by looking for connections, despite the fact that he believes the world is meaningless inherently. Jerry's deed demonstrates that what validates and justifies our search for meaning in the ludicrous, uncaring, and irrational environment is our acceptance of this paradoxical desire of feeling alive, our assertion of our life in spite of it. Therefore, "the very thing that led to despair of the meaning and depth of this life now gives it its truth and its clarity"[2].

II. THE ART OF PARADOX AND ALBEE'S ABSURDIST THEORY IN THE ZOO STORY

While absurdism as a literary movement has been explored by various writers, the works of Edward Albee have been particularly influential in highlighting the themes of paradox and anguish in the absurd. In *The Zoo Story*, paradox serves as a vehicle for social critique. Numerous commentators contend that *The Zoo Story* is a social reflection on the impact of loneliness on an individual in the context of American society. In *The Theater of Protest and Paradox*, George Wellwarth asserted that *The Zoo Story* "is about the maddening effect that the enforced loneliness of the human condition has on the person who is cursed . . . with the infinite capacity for love" [1].

Bigsby C.W. E. argued that Albee's tendency for experimenting has made him one of the "few playwrights" who are still "frequently and mischievously misunderstood, misrepresented, overpraised, denigrated, and precipitately dismissed"[4]. The paradox in Albee's writing is brought to light by this fundamental modernist fact. His life and plays are replete with references to his constant obsession with loss. "In an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief," Wallace Stevens remarked, "indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost." In his words, man's interest "in the imagination and its work is to be regarded not as a phase of humanism but as a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains" [5].

In addition to being a work of theatre, *The Zoo Story* is also a potent critique of our lack of empathy for one another. In the play, paradox is a technique for exploring existential themes. The protagonists of the play are characterized by a state of alienation and isolation that fosters the "incommunicability of existence," as the drama takes place in a paradoxical environment. By drawing a contrast between the pleasant routine and the violence hidden underneath it, the play's paradox tackles the difficulties of 'civilized' living while also criticizing society conventions. As a method of protest, to decry "the strictures imposed on the individual" and to denounce "the hopelessness of the human condition," the truth is paradoxically "presented by an exaggerated emphasis on its opposite"[1].

The Zoo Story minimalistically critiques human grand world, connecting the illusory society with its true reality through absurdist style and technique. As Camus puts it, "The most paradoxical and most significant is certainly the one that attributes rational reasons to a world it originally imagined as devoid of any guiding principle" [2].

Jerry-Peter relationship embodies this paradoxical nature, which is also present throughout the story. Albee's skill lies in his ability to portray man's anguish through a paradoxically absurdist manner. This echoes Camus's idea that "For an absurd work of art to be possible, thought in its most lucid form must be involved in it" [2]. The title of the play itself establishes the presence of human suffering, and surprisingly, the seemingly fictionalized story reflects the harsh realities of modern capitalism and materialism. The play is structured on a paradoxical tenet of thought. Interestingly, it is not a story of an animal in the zoo, but about a zoo in the human.

Epiphanized and dramatized as such, the contrast between Jerry's desire for connection and his inability to effectively communicate with others serves a prototypical example of this paradox. Throughout the

play, Jerry repeatedly expresses his longing for companionship and his need to connect with another human being. However, this paradox is complicated by the fact that Jerry himself is not entirely free from the constraints of society. Although he rebels against conventional norms and challenges social conventions, he is ultimately unable to escape the influence of societal expectations.

Located within a Sartrean perspective, *The Zoo Story* explores the paradoxical nature of individual desires and their connection to one's fundamental relation to Being. Jerry's desire to engage in a conversation with Peter, a stranger he encounters in Central Park, appears trivial at first. His desire for conversation is thus elevated beyond the superficial, gaining significance in relation to his fundamental relation to Being. Sartre argues that individuals hold the responsibility to create meaning in their lives through their actions and choices: "each individual desire, however trivial, has meaning only in connection with one's fundamental relation to Being"[3].

Jerry's desire for connection with his fellow human beings leads him to seek out Peter, a representation of the very society he despises. Whereas Jerry is searching for meaning of life through communication, Peter finds meaning in silence and beinglessness. Whenever Jerry approaches Peter to initiate a conversation with him, Peter remains relatively unresponsive:

JERRY

I've been to the zoo.

(PETER doesn't notice.)

I said, I've been to the zoo. MISTER! I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!

PETER

Hm? ... What? ... I'm sorry, were you talking to me?[6]

Jerry's efforts to establish a connection are hindered by Peter's apathy, or rather, go unnoticed due to Peter's preoccupation with his own troubles. Both individuals experience the anguish of trying to ignore their losses, yet neither is willing to accept their current state. This paradox underscores the challenge of true communication and the deep sense of isolation that Jerry and countless others endure in today's society.

Also, Sartre's assertion that "the ultimate source of true wisdom is nonrational aligns with Jerry's unconventional perspectives and actions, emphasizing the potential for profound insight when one transcends rationality[3].

Furthermore, Jerry's action reverberates the Camunian tenet of existential choice. Existential angst is predicated on the individual's lack of exercise of judgment and choice to create meaning in their lives. This paradoxically entails that eliminating conscious revolt is equivalent to avoiding the problem. Camus maintains, "Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it" [2]. Hence, when Jerry decides to walk a longer route from Fifth Avenue to the zoo rather than the more popular shorter route, he takes an existential choice; the first move Jerry takes to lower the walls separating him from the outside world is his decision. His search for love and attractiveness in a dog is also another example of the existential option that paradoxically reveals his anguish in action. He yells: "Animals are indifferent to me . . . like people [he smiles slightly] . . . most of the time," indicating that he is aware of how alone humans are.[6]

Another paradox that pervades *The Zoo Story* is the juxtaposition of the natural world with the artificial construct of human society. Jerry frequently references animals and nature as symbols of freedom and authenticity, contrasting them with the conformity and rigidity of human relationships. He sees himself as a "zoo animal" trapped within the confines of civilized society, longing to break free from societal expectations and constraints. Many a time he refers animals such as the "dog", "cats", "birds" and "parakeets".

Jerry: [As if reading from a huge billboard] THE STORY OF JERRY AND THE DOG! [6]

Jerry often uses animal metaphors to convey his feelings of being trapped and isolated within societal confines.

JERRY: The dog is black, all black; all black except for the bloodshot eyes, and . . . yes . . . and an open sore on its ... right forepaw; that is red, too. And, oh yes; the poor monster, and I do believe it's an old dog . . . it's certainly a misused one . . . almost always has an erection . . . of sorts."[6]

This quote demonstrates Jerry's desire to break free from societal expectations and reveals how he sees himself as a trapped "zoo animal" trying to find authenticity and freedom amidst the conformity of human relationships.

JERRY: And fact is better left to fiction. You're right, Peter. Well, what I have been meaning to tell you about is the dog; I shall, now.[6]

Furthermore, Jerry's ultimate act of violence towards Peter can be seen as a paradoxical attempt to assert his individuality and break free from societal constraints. In killing Peter, Jerry seeks to shock and awaken him to the harsh realities of life. However, this act ultimately reinforces the sense of alienation and isolation that Jerry feels, exemplifying the paradoxical nature of seeking liberation through violent means.

Towards the end of the play, Jerry implores Peter to go all the way with him, suggesting that he needs someone to acknowledge and act on his desire for a genuine connection and an escape from societal

conventions. Jerry eventually gets relieved from his agony in life, and laughingly states: "You don't know how afraid I was you'd go away and leave me. And now I'll tell you what happened at the zoo..."[6]

Perspectively, the play challenges traditional notions of identity and meaning through the paradoxical relationship between the characters. The encounter between Peter and Jerry presents a juxtaposition of intimacy and isolation, highlighting the complexities of human relationships and the inherent absurdity in trying to establish meaningful connections.

Thus, the absurdist representation of the man's anguish and condition reveal a paradoxical twist. Wherein the very fact of absurdity and meaningless becomes itself the only redeemable meaning. Sartre asserted that "consciousness is a Nothingness." However, it is also a revelation of Being in its Nothingness [3]. Camus once said, "You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of." This renowned phrase is worth quoting. If you are searching for the purpose of life, you will never have it. [7]

From a Camusian perspective, Albee's play *The Zoo Story* reflects the futile nature of mankind's search for meaning, as life itself is inherently absurd. Consequently, the conversation between Peter and Jerry is destined to descend into desperation and confrontation. Albee's absurdist technique, exemplified by the nonsensical discussion about a dog named Queenie, serves to amplify the lack of logic and rationality in the characters' lives and in the human condition as a whole. This aligns with Poulet's theory of passive consciousness, which permeates Albee's absurdism by emphasizing the importance of confronting the absurdity of our existence. Interestingly, by acknowledging the meaninglessness of life, we can paradoxically begin to create our own meaning and discover purpose in our existence. The character Jerry is portrayed as a lonely and alienated individual who yearns to understand the world around him and find meaning in his life. However, he is unable to form meaningful connections with others and feels isolated from society. His encounter with Peter vividly underscores the absurdity of his existence and his inner anguish.

Jerry's state of anguish can be examined in relation to Sartre's concept of "choice" and Poulet's theory of "absence." Jerry's lack of meaningful connections in his life is evident in his interactions with Peter, who represents the superficiality and emptiness of modern society. Through their conversation, Jerry confronts the absence of purpose in his existence and ultimately embraces his own mortality. He strives to break free from the senseless cycle of life that traps him and torments his mind. Jerry yearns for something more than the mundane routine he leads, and his encounter with Peter gives him a glimmer of hope. However, as the play progresses, it becomes apparent that Jerry's efforts to escape his isolation and find meaning in his life are destined to fail. The absurdity lies in his pursuit of significance in a world that lacks meaning. Again, this is a poignant reflection on the human condition and the struggle to find purpose in an often-purposeless world. Despite his endeavors, Jerry ultimately cannot escape the cycle of absurdity surrounding him, highlighting the futility of human existence.

Through the reckless attempts of Jerry, Albee reminds us that while we may search for meaning and purpose in our lives, we may never truly find it, and that the struggle itself is what gives our lives meaning. This echoes Sartre's words, "This contradiction motivates on my part a free choice of the true objectivity. The objectivity that I have not chosen is what I will call 'subjectivity'", wherein the search for meaning in a world that often seems hopeless and chaotic, is eventually meaningless [3]. Ultimately, Jerry's tragic death is the optimal meaning that he gets in his search for meaning and purpose in a world that can be harsh and unforgiving.

III. CONTEMPORARY MAN'S ANGUISH IN THE ZOO STORY

The Zoo Story is a postmodern account of the paradoxically humanoid contemporary life. The play addresses the larger theme of human suffering in the modern world characterized by human progress and human failure. Although human luxury has been progressively remarked, humane ramifications are regressively recorded. The unmatched telecommunication advancements witnessed the worst alienated histories in human life. Man's anguish increases as global materialistic life sophisticates.

Through the character of Jerry, Albee captures the profound solitude and hopelessness that can result from living in a society that prioritizes conformity and material success above all else. Jerry's discontent with his own life and the world at large is evident, and his interactions with Peter underscore the profound detachment that many individuals experience in today's society. When Jerry recounts his visit to the zoo, he articulates a profound affinity with the animals and a longing to break free from societal restrictions, much like they do. However, societal pressures and norms prevent him from doing so, leading to overwhelming anguish and despair.

Throughout the course of the play, Jerry's distress grows stronger, leading up to his explosive outburst and heartbreaking demise. Albee skillfully portrays Jerry's inner turmoil, shedding light on the innate longing for connection and significance that all humans share, and demonstrating the devastating consequences that can ensue when these yearnings remain unmet. With *The Zoo Story*, Albee prompts us to ponder our own

encounters with isolation and hopelessness, urging us to explore methods by which we can liberate ourselves from societal confines and discover true meaning and fulfillment in our existence.

An investigation of the characters' existential crisis reveals the deeper societal issues that contribute to his struggle. The characters' traumatic exigences result from the dichotomy between the individual aspirations and social appropriations. Hence, Jerry's sense of isolation and despair is not unique to him alone, but rather a symptom of a society that values conformity and material success over individuality and human connection. Consequently, these characteristic aberrations are paradoxical manifestations of the characters' failure to respond to the imposed values.

Albee's portrayal of Jerry's struggle brings attention to the universal human desire for meaning and purpose, and the devastating consequences that can arise when those desires are unfulfilled. For example, in modern society, many individuals may feel the pressure to conform to certain social norms and expectations, such as pursuing a traditional career path or getting married. Those who do not fit into these molds may feel isolated and disconnected, leading to feelings of despair and hopelessness.

The protagonist's struggle for identity and meaning can also shed light on larger societal issues. In Albee's play, Jerry's struggle is not just a personal one, but also a reflection of the isolation and disconnection that many people feel in modern society. The pressure to conform to societal norms and expectations can leave individuals feeling lost and unfulfilled, leading to a sense of despair and disconnection. The examination of Jerry's struggle can also lead to a deeper understanding of the human condition as a whole. We all face moments of doubt, fear, and uncertainty, and it is through these struggles that we grow and learn. By confronting these challenges head-on, we can develop a greater sense of self-awareness and empathy for others. Through our own struggles and experiences, we can work towards creating a more fulfilling and meaningful existence for ourselves and those around us.

IV. CONCLUSION

Albee's *The Zoo Story* is a minimalistic absurdist masterpiece of the poetics of paradox. The play showcases a mastery of paradox, utilizing it as a tool to explore the complexities of human existence. The minimalistic setting and absurd situations may seem disjointed or nonsensical, but upon deeper analysis, the play reveals profound insights about the nature of reality and the human condition.

A key paradox in the play lies in the juxtaposition of the natural and artificial worlds. The play takes place in a park, a setting that usually symbolizes harmony with nature. However, the presence of a zoo nearby emphasizes the artificiality and confinement of modern society. This paradox highlights the alienation and disconnection that often plague individuals in urban environments, despite their proximity to nature.

The character of Jerry embodies this paradox beautifully. On one hand, he yearns for authentic human connections and despises the superficiality of modern life. On the other hand, his actions and words often contradict his desire, leading to a sense of isolation and despair. This paradoxical nature of Jerry's character further reinforces the central theme of alienation in the play.

Moreover, the play employs the poetics of paradox to challenge societal norms and question the complacency of individuals. Through the character of Jerry, Albee confronts the audience with uncomfortable truths about the façade of civilization. By presenting Jerry as an outsider, Albee forces the audience to critically examine their own lives and question whether they too have become complacent in their own limited perspectives.

Furthermore, the minimalistic style of the play, devoid of unnecessary props or scenery, enhances the impact of the paradoxical elements. With minimal distractions, the audience is more attuned to the dialogue and the underlying layers of meaning present in the characters' interactions.

Throughout these paradoxical poetics, Albee underscores the themes of isolation, communication, and the struggle for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. Desperate to communicate, Jerry pushes Peter into a fight in an attempt to create a hostile environment. In the end, he selflessly impales himself on Peter's dagger, which Peter had been using to ward off his advances. Ironically, this deed forces a strange kind of human connection through the development of a perverse blood brotherhood, which culminates in the building of a twisted tie between them. Through these paradoxes, Albee invites the audience to reflect on the inherent struggles and contradictions that define our existence.

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