

Breaking Through the Bars of Edward Albee's

The Zoo Story

Stephen TOSKAR

When studying the plays of Edward Albee one cannot help but feel a certain ironic amusement and sadness at the mass of contradictory opinions and backbiting among critics, as well as at the irrelevant charges made against Albee's plays because certain critics don't like his homosexual orientation or see it and the vulgarity in some of his plays as a threat to the very foundations of western civilization, dismissing his work with a blind righteous indignation that would be shocking if heard even from a pulpit, let alone a literary critic's soapbox. It appears that for some, drama criticism has developed to the point where plays are judged not for their artistic merits, but against some preconceived moral standard of what they should be. Perhaps in an increasingly secular society which at one time had a very strong religious foundation, this trend cannot be helped, for as the basis of most great art is the search for value and meaning, for the truths of human existence, the arts more and more have come to take the place of religious ritual. It is only a shame that some critics in their ministerial zeal cannot get past the words, so to speak, to the plays themselves. Thus, Albee's nomination for the Pulitzer Prize for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* was turned down, according to Bigsby, in a very thorough and evenhanded treatment of the controversy behind Albee and his plays, because one member of the committee thought "it was a filthy play" (Bigsby, 1975, p.3).

In the same essay Bigsby clarifies the issues behind the Albee controversy even further by highlighting the peculiar state of tran-

sition that existed in the American theater at the time *The Zoo Story* received its first American production in 1960. At that time a vacuum was created by Eugene O'Neill's death, Arthur Miller's seeming lack of interest in the theater and Tennessee Williams' repetitiveness. With those three out of contention, the emergence of Albee was hailed almost as if a savior had appeared on the scene. Thus the burden of expectation weighed more heavily than it should have on Albee's subsequent plays, leading to a false sense of betrayal on the part of some critics because the playwright didn't deliver what they had hoped for.

But perhaps the greatest misunderstanding of all was the inclusion of *The Zoo Story* in Martin Esslin's anthology *Absurd Drama*, a categorization the play doesn't deserve at all, but one which Esslin thinks fits because "his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism" (Esslin, p. 23). Unfortunately, that sweeping generalization could cover much of contemporary literature, and only blurs rather than clarifies the real differences that exist between Albee and writers such as Beckett and Pinter, for example.

It is unfair, however, to be too critical of the range of critical interpretations that have arisen around *The Zoo Story*. It was Albee's first play, and Albee's was a talent the critical world did not yet have adequate terms for. His command of language was especially unique and disturbing. He combined "vividly colloquial diction with a seemingly leisurely indirection. . . .," making *The Zoo Story* sound "absurdly disjunctive" (Cohn, 1971, p. 131). It is more than likely this seeming absurdity which has led Esslin and others on a blind chase. It is also likely that the seeming absurdity of life is one of the undercurrent themes in Albee that he uses to expose unnecessary man-made barriers, the bars that separate us from each other. His purpose is not to proselytize in the no-cause of absurdity, but to confront contemporary men with their abdication from existential responsibility.

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Also, in their search for a critical approach to *The Zoo Story* too many critics have been looking for the one interpretation that will supersede all others, and therefore fail to comprehend the highly complex nature of the play and its symbolism. And most importantly, too many critics have failed to see Jerry as an essentially ironic character, focusing their interpretations more on what they see as social criticisms of those middle-class values embodied in Peter.

The major critical approaches to *The Zoo Story*, then, focus on it as: 1) an absurd drama, 2) a play about homosexuality, 3) a profane reenactment of Christ's sacrifice, or 4) a play about communication. The trouble with any of these approaches is that they are all somehow operating in the play and each fails to explain the play fully by itself, at least as presented by their adherents. What I would like to do is present each of these views of the play and then show how, through an understanding of Jerry as an ironic character, they can be synthesized, yielding a richly complex artistic structure.

The Absurd Approach

Brian Way (1967) presents a most enlightening discussion of the theater of the absurd and argues that Albee has borrowed the techniques of that school without embracing "the metaphysic which makes the techniques completely meaningful" (Way, p. 31), for "Albee still believes in the validity of reason—that things can be proved, or that events can be shown to have definite meanings—and, unlike Beckett and the others, is scarcely touched by the sense of living in an absurd universe" (Way, p. 26). Way goes to great lengths in this essay to define what the theater of the absurd is and how one must write if one belongs to that school: denying meaning, the possibility of knowledge and reason. The most constructive possibility of the essay is that it should put to rest rather than fan the illusion that *The Zoo Story* is an absurd drama. However, Way does just the opposite

and proceeds with his criticism of the play as if it were a failed absurd drama. He argues that since the play reverts from the techniques of the theater of the absurd to those of realism at the end when Jerry “explains” things to Peter while he is dying, “previous events in the play seem arbitrary in a wholly unjustifiable way: they can no longer be seen as appropriate symbols of life in an absurd universe” (Way, p. 41). He continues by saying:

The slightest hint that events in an absurd play are amenable to everyday explanation is completely destructive of their dramatic effectiveness. If it were possible to say of Vladimir and Estragon, or of Davies, that they are crazy bums who should be locked up, *Waiting for Godot* and *The Caretaker* would be ruined. In spite of some striking effects, it is possible to entertain this suspicion about Jerry, and it is largely because of this misguided attempt to exploit the advantages of the theater of the absurd and of realism, that *The Zoo Story* misses the greatness which at times seems so nearly within its grasp (Way, p. 41).

Not only does Way fail to see any inconsistencies in his argument, but he also fails to respect or make an attempt to understand the eclecticism of Albee's method. It is that very suspicion about Jerry's character that Way says makes the play miss its greatness which I would like to take up later as one of the keys that opens up a way to unify the various approaches. It seems that Way is arguing that the play would have been better if only Albee had seen the world as devoid of reason and held no hope for the future. It is for this reason that I would like to label Brian Way's analysis absurd.

It is interesting that Esslin (1961) similarly attacks the end of the play as being marred by its sentimentality, “especially as the victim expires in touching solicitude and fellow-feeling for his involuntary murderer” (Esslin, p. 23). Not only is Esslin the originator of the

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expression "Theater of the Absurd," but he is also the first to have placed Albee and his plays in that school ("The old pigeonhole bit," as Jerry so sarcastically says). It is therefore quite easy to understand why he might wish to protect his classification at the expense of a more open-minded approach that would see the ending not as sentimental but as ironic; and not as absurd but as an existential challenge to contemporary man.

The Homosexual Approach

For anyone to deny the homosexual overtones of *The Zoo Story* would be very difficult indeed, though Hayman (1971) weakly attempts to do so. In numerous places in the play there are innuendos and references to Jerry's homosexuality, the most significant of which is one in which Jerry is revealed to have tried to repress or deny the fact that his adolescent experience means anything in his present life. It is a very telling piece of dramatic irony that I will explore in much greater detail later. Jerry confesses to Peter :

No. I wonder if it's sad that I never see the little ladies more than once. I've never been able to have sex with, or, how is it put?...make love to anybody more than once. Once; that's it...Oh, wait; for a week and a half, when I was fifteen...and I hang my head in shame that puberty was late...I was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l. I mean, I was queer... (Very fast)...queer, queer, queer... with bells ringing, banners snapping in the wind. And for those eleven days, I met at least twice a day with the park superintendent's son...a Greek boy, whose birthday was the same as mine, except he was a year older. I think I was very much in love...maybe just with sex. But that was the jazz of a very special hotel, wasn't it? And now; oh, do I love the little ladies; really, I love them. For about an hour (Albee, p. 25.

From now on all quotations from *The Zoo Story* will be indicated by ZS and page number.).

It seems fairly obvious that Jerry is trying to conceal his current homosexual orientation, but from whom? Well, in 1958 it was very difficult for a homosexual to openly admit his inclinations to another person, especially if he were unsure of that person's orientation. Perhaps following that line of reasoning, Richard Kostelanetz sees the encounter as "a failed homosexual pass," the dogs and the cats in the play symbolic of males and females respectively, "The stiff arm holding the knife on which Jerry impales himself . . . a symbol of the erect phallus" (Hayman, p. 9). I am forced to agree that the symbolism that Kostelanetz sees does operate in the play, and that it is in some respects a failed homosexual pass, but one with very different implications, for I would like to argue that Jerry is not fully aware of his homosexual tendencies; in fact, that the repression of his homosexuality gives rise to his confusing and somewhat psychotic behavior. To see Jerry's suicide simply as the result of frustration over a failed homosexual pass would reduce the play to melodrama of unbearable proportions, while at the same time demeaning the very positive themes that are developed. How easy it would have been for Jerry to go to the Y. M. C. A. if he only wished to satisfy his homosexual desires.

Jerry As Jesus

Rose Zimbardo (1962) sees *The Zoo Story* as a modern reenactment of Christ's sacrifice for man. In her interpretation, Peter, like St. Peter, is an average man who is led to his salvation by the modern Jerry-Jesus, and the dog story takes on the deeper symbolic meaning of Christ's descent into and conquest over the forces of evil in hell. In fact, there are so many other symbolic correlations she

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finds between the play and the Biblical story, she says, "it skirts being allegory" (Zimbardo, p. 50). I have no doubt that these correlations exist on the one hand, while on the other I feel that their ultimate structural significance is something quite different, for Zimbardo's reading of the character of Jerry renders him a beneficent do-gooder, an interpretation that simply jars with too much that we come to know of him from the rest of the play.

Bigsby (1969), in one of his earlier monographs on Albee, took up Zimbardo's interpretation and tried to make sense of the homosexual theme by weaving them together. Bigsby says that Jerry's homosexuality is a warped final attempt on his part to communicate his gospel of love, his understanding for the need for love and communication that he learned in his encounter with the dog. The problem with this also is that it casts Jerry in an altruistic light, when he is selfish, and it makes his homosexuality the result of relatively recent alienation and desperation, which it isn't. And though Peter's failure (or refusal) to understand the dog story is the final trigger that releases Jerry to his preconceived suicide, that recourse is still not taken for Peter's sake.

The most plausible explanation is that Jerry has cast himself in the role of savior in an attempt to sublimate and camouflage his true desires, not that Albee has simply tried to write a modern allegory of redemption and sacrifice.

Communication

I think Ronald Hayman (1971) comes close to capturing the essence of the play, seeing it basically as an attempt at contact between two very differently flawed characters, Jerry representing "the questing, idealistic side of the personality, the element that used to be called the spirit, while Peter represents the side that wants to settle complacently for the middle-class comforts" (Hayman, p. 11).

He also sees a tragic rather than absurd element in Jerry's death because it is "an illustration of the impossibility of living in accordance with the values he represents" (Hayman, p. 11). But I think he misses the mark in interpreting what those values are and in stating that Jerry's death is necessary because otherwise "Albee would not have been able to make the point that Jerry could not have got through to Peter in any other way" (Hayman, p. 11).

Hayman interprets the play too much in dramatic terms, reducing actions and events to dramatic necessity. There is an unfortunate lack of focus in his analysis on what is really happening to Jerry, why he fails, what his tragic flaws are. He recognizes the sense of danger that ensues from Jerry's aggressive and ironic attempts to communicate, but writes it off as well crafted dramatic tension or an attempt to shake the audience out of their own complacency.

What we have here is a failure to bring a certain degree of common sense to the analysis of literature. If it is an attempt to communicate that fails, I think we have to first look in more realistic terms to try to understand why. Therefore, instead of attacking Peter for his middle-class complacency, we should first ask ourselves why he should communicate with Jerry, this stranger who talks in riddles while standing before him, prying into his private life and ridiculing him whenever he can. We might equally say that Jerry could have got through to Peter had he tried to communicate reciprocally rather than inflict himself so aggressively on him. No, Jerry is not trying to communicate with Peter; he is trying to force Peter to understand and love him, just as he tried and failed with the dog. It is the one-sided communication of a self-alienated man doomed to failure from the outset. The *communication problem* that so many see as interpersonal really boils down to a failure in self-communication.

Pulling It Together

Bigsby says some very insightful things about Albee's heroes in general which he might well have applied to Jerry himself. He states :

His heroes have all failed in some fundamental way. They have betrayed the values to which, even now, they are capable of pledging a belated allegiance. They are liberal humanists who have allowed themselves to become detached from a reality which disturbs them and hence from those individuals who are the expression of their commitment to a vision of private and public responsibility. They have sold out ; not for wealth or success, but for an untroubled existence--to preserve their own innocence (Bigsby, 1975, p. 7).

On first glance this characterization might seem to apply only to Peter, not Jerry, because the stereotype of Peter's character stands out so boldly when compared to that of the idiosyncratic Jerry. And Jerry, being the stronger and most definitely the more aggressive of the two, seems to be in control of the action and the situation. But just as with Christ, the fact and manner of his death makes us reexamine what came before.

As he is dying, Jerry explains, confesses to Peter :

You see? Here we *are*. But.....I don't know....could I have planned all this? No....no, I couldn't have. But I think I did. And now I've told you what you wanted to know, haven't I? And now you know all about what happened at the zoo. And now you know what you'll see in your TV, and the face I told you about....my face, the face you see right now. Peter....Peter?...Peter....thank you. I came unto

you (He laughs, so faintly) and you have comforted me. Dear Peter (ZS, p. 48).

Shortly before this Jerry tells Peter he was afraid he would have driven him away and expresses his gratitude for Peter's having stayed. Close to the beginning of the play Jerry says to Peter, "Wait until you see the expression on his face" (ZS, p. 19). If we tie these elements together it becomes fairly obvious that this suicide was in Jerry's mind, at least half-imagined, from the beginning of the encounter, and again we have to ask ourselves why he goes through such pains to have another man kill him. Why not walk into a bus as his father did?

It is on this point that I think the question of Jerry's homosexuality becomes crucial. In the passage quoted earlier about Jerry's adolescent homosexual experiences with the park superintendent's son, it becomes clear that Jerry's unsatisfactory and brief sexual encounters with women, which go no further than sex, are the result of his repressed homosexual tendencies. As I stated before, to live openly as a homosexual at that time was very difficult and demanded much courage, much more than it seems Jerry was able to muster. So he "sold out" and tried to live as a heterosexual, a denial of his own reality that warped his relationships with everything and everyone around him. During his long monologue in the dog story, when he talks about his painful attempts to establish relationships with things, animals and people, we can understand the root cause of his failure to be that he has broken his relationship with himself. The cause of his alienation is not external, not because he lives in an absurd world where there is no meaning, but because he has been living a lie. Gerald Weales (1969) comes close to this aspect of Jerry's personality when he notes, "Jerry is too well drawn a character—self-pitying and aggressive, self-deluding and forlorn—to become the conventionnal hero"(Weales, p. 20). This, then, is a tragedy of self-

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deception, not comedy in the manner of *The Divine Comedy*, not in the manner of the triumph of Christ. So how can we resolve the allegorically religious imagery?

It would seem that Jerry is trying to mythologize his life in an attempt to compensate for his alienation and give meaning to his suicide, and therefore to his life. He is a study in how a self-alienated being can find no other way of dealing with his plight than by turning himself into a sacrifice. One reason some critics see the end of the play in a positive light is that they feel that somehow Jerry has passed on his life to Peter, has selflessly sacrificed himself so that Peter might be redeemed. But to me there is something doubly ironic about the ending in that Peter is shaken, shocked, out of his old definition of himself. However, we have no clear idea as to what will become of him, whether or not he will be able to carry on in some truly positive way. I think a more accurate way to read Jerry's sacrifice, for whatever effect it may have on Peter, is to look upon it as Jerry's way of saying: "Here, you live your life true to yourself instead of my having to do so."

To understand further what is happening at the end it might be useful to look at the theme of fantasy passing for reality, which comes up explicitly at least twice in the play. First there is Jerry's discussion of the value of pornographic playing cards in childhood and in adulthood. He tells Peter that in childhood the fantasy substitutes for the real experience, and in adulthood the real experience substitutes for the fantasy. Later Jerry tells Peter how he appeases his landlady's lust by suggesting to her that they have already had sexual relations and that she should be satisfied. Then "a simple-minded smile begins to form on her unthinkable face, and she giggles and groans as she thinks about yesterday and the day before; as she believes and relives what never happened" (ZS, p. 28). It is interesting that both of these examples of the fantasy/reality substitution are sexual in nature because when we look at the ending

of the play where Jerry impales himself on Peter's outstretched knife (his name itself a common slang expression for penis), the homosexual overtones take on added significance. When Jerry tells Peter he has comforted him, we see the scene not as Jerry's sacrifice for Peter, but as Peter's having been forced to aid Jerry to enact his (perhaps unconscious) homosexual fantasies in the guise of religious sacrifice. In this way Jerry never has to admit to himself or to Peter what he is really doing.

Allen Lewis (1970) also suggests that "the knife may represent a macabre love affair of latent homosexual relations" (Lewis, p. 83). The important word here is "latent," that which lies hidden beneath the surface, but which still influences thought and action. It is the destructiveness to the self and relationships with others resulting from such self-deceit that is the main theme of the play. Homosexuality itself is not important, and this should not be viewed as a first in gay liberation literature. The subordinate theme of Peter's emascualtion through his excessive compromises with society yields a similar warning. Yet it is mainly through the meaninglessness of Jerry's suicide—meaningless because Jerry could not fully comprehend why he was compelled toward it—that the destructiveness of such deceit is driven home.

The question of Jerry's motivations is the most controversial in the play. When Ruby Cohn, echoing many others, says, "The main theme of *The Zoo Story* is communication" (Cohn, p. 3), she is both correct and wrong because she looks only at the confrontation between Peter and Jerry, while that confrontation is really an outward manifestation of Jerry's inner fall from grace. By erecting a religious framework through which to enact his "communication" with Peter, Jerry becomes more caught up with fantasy, more deluded. He is killed by lies.

Those who attack the ending of the play as being sentimental and melodramatic, or as a failure in its abrupt return to the con-

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ventions of the naturalistic theater from those of the theater of the absurd, fail to see it as ironic and fail to see that the weight of guilt remains with Jerry. When Jerry wipes Peter's fingerprints off the knife, he is not so much exonerating Peter's guilt as he is admitting his own culpability. Thus, when Jerry says, "Oh...my...God!" at the very end of the play, "a combination of scornful mimicry and supplication" (ZS, p. 49), his words mean more than anything else: What have I done? The bitter irony of the religious masquerade of the master/disciple relationship almost breaks its way into Jerry's consciousness upon his death.

Finally, we can look at the whole play as something that was staged by Jerry, not just his staging of the dog story—"ALL RIGHT. (As if reading from a huge billboard) THE STORY OF JERRY AND THE DOG!" (ZS, p. 30)—, and his use of suspense and theatricality that of an actor trying to control and move his audience. Unfortunately, he gets so caught up in his role-playing, goes such a long distance out of his way, that he is unable to come back the short distance correctly. By employing absurd techniques, Albee is really trying to show that absurdity is something man-made, that meaninglessness is something we impose on ourselves by distorting the truth. Time and again he comes back to this theme in other plays, most impressively in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, in which George and Martha inflict almost unbearable verbal violence upon each other because they have not been able to distinguish adequately between fantasy and reality. They live by filling the emptiness of their lives with the fantasy of an imaginary son, a fantasy they continually reinvent to inflict further violence on each other. It is not until the exorcism of that fantasy at the end of the play that we feel the possibility of hope exists for them to face their failures honestly.

With Jerry that possibility doesn't exist. Even his moment of illumination at the zoo is a hoax: his discovery of "the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and

with people too”(ZS, p. 39-40). This discovery that led him to seek out Peter and break through the bars that separate them is an outward-directed self-deception that keeps him from exorcizing his own demons. No, the true emotional impact of the play lies in the recognition by the audience of the waste of Jerry's life, a waste that can only be redeemed in their own lives by living with a courage strong enough to face the truth.

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Since its first performance in Berlin in 1959, Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* has been both widely acclaimed and damned. It has also been interpreted in various ways by critics looking for the one approach that will supersede all others. The problem that arises is that all of the approaches have some validity, while yet at the same time not adequately explaining the whole play. The trouble, in my view, is that not enough attention has been given to viewing Jerry as an ironic character and his death as an object lesson in the need for existential responsibility.

In this paper I propose to critique the four main critical approaches to *The Zoo Story* and to show how they can be synthesized by an understanding of Jerry as an ironic character and his death as a waste. By so doing I wish to show that Albee has not written this play in the manner of the theater of the absurd, but more as a challenge to it and to those who view man's condition as externally controlled.

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109	(本文16行目) so <u>caugh</u> up	so <u>caught</u> up
111	(本文 3行目) much <u>involed</u> ,	much <u>involved</u> ,
226	([リ]の部 2行目) : An <u>Error</u>	: An <u>Error</u>