
A Probe into Absurdism in Edward Albee's Play *The Zoo Story*

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Abstract: As an American playwright who established his fame in 1960s, Albee finds his name and plays widely listed among critics' hails and attacks. Liked or disliked, praised or condemned, original or posturing, he has played an undoubtedly essential role in the development of American play. This paper attempts to study Edward Albee's style of Theatre of the Absurd with special focus on his play *The Zoo Story* (1959). It first explores the distinguishing characteristics that mark the playwright Edward Albee out from other writers, that is, the description of violence in his plays, his standing on the borderline between absurdism and realism, and the attack upon the optimism of the American Dream. Then by seeking recourse to literary theories like the Theatre of the Absurd, and the Theatre of Cruelty, and philosophical terms such as Existentialism, the latter part of the paper deals with the specific discussion of Albee's play *The Zoo Story*, commenting on its devaluation of language, the existential choice and violence in action, and simulation in characterization. The paper intends to draw the conclusion that absurdism is permeated in the play, which indicates that Albee enriches the philosophy and practice of the Absurd theatre and continues its tradition through transplanting it in the soil of American theatre.

Keywords: Edward Albee, Theatre of the Absurd, *The Zoo Story*, Absurdism

1. Introduction

As the Theatre of the Absurd has always been regarded as the style and hallmark of the European writers like Kafka, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter, Edward Albee (1928—2016) becomes one of the few playwrights who hold the limelight when it comes to the impact of the absurd theatre upon the American stage. In Robert Cohen's account, the American theatre lacks "ancient theatre buildings", "royally established acting companies" and "traditional dramatic repertoires" to call upon [1]. As a result of that the mainstream style of American drama, from the beginning of its birth to the modern time has been realistic. If people want to understand the historical contexts of absurd literature in the United States of America, it is crucial, in Bennett's words, to notice "that (arguably) the first American absurd play (Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* in 1958) came out ten years after the first wave

of French absurd plays (1948)" [2]. Hence to probe the development and continuation of the Absurd theatre in American theatre, it is worthwhile to have a thorough study on the features of Absurd theatre in Albee's plays.

The Zoo Story, Albee's one-act play released in 1959, was an immediate hit, whose success delivered Albee reputation and affirms his place in Broadway theatre. As MacNicholas comments, among the young playwrights who were customarily criticized in the early 1960s, Albee was the most "successful", "prolific" and "controversial" [3]. *The Zoo Story* is deemed as Albee's first play bearing strong features of the Absurd theatre. The consciousness of absurdity in Albee's plays reflects that the advancement of material has not brought forward better communication between people but instead become barriers between them. Under the alienating modern technology, people have become aloof and detached. As Bottoms has mentioned, the play "[attacks] the cherished myths of his own country and theatre" [4]. This paper

endeavors to analyze Edward Albee's style of the Theatre of the Absurd, which distinguishes him from other absurd writers/playwrights, and his one-act play *The Zoo Story* will be employed as the base to discuss how absurdism is reflected in his plays.

2. Features Distinguishing Albee from Other Absurd Writers

Albee fits into the category of "the Theatre of the Absurd" for the compelling features in his plays which are aligned with those of the Absurd theatre—the failure of communication in modern society, the thinking of existentialism, and the disillusionment of the American Dream. In Albee's biography, Mel Gussow defines him as an "innovator", "the American agent of the absurd" and "our hometown equivalent of Beckett" [5]. Similarly, Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* places Albee under the category of the Theatre of the Absurd for "his works attacks the very foundations of American optimism" [6]. Some critics, like McCarthy, prefer to define Albee as much an 'angry young man' of the American theatre as an absurdist [7]. Compared with other absurd writers, Albee possesses distinguishing features that mark him off from them.

Firstly, violence in Albee's plays demonstrates Antonio Artaud's idea of "the Theatre of Cruelty", which advocates restoration to the modern theatre the metaphysical power and force in ancient dramas. The practice of it depends on the energy carried in gestures, sounds, lights and other nonverbal elements to hypnotize the audience and subvert their comfortable and safe world. In *The Zoo Story*, the progression and menace in the action of Jerry, the protagonist, and his suicide disrupts the audience's sense of comfort. The sudden barrel-gun shooting in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* frightens the audience when they're unprepared. The brutal and bloody dismembering of children in *American Dream* shocks the audience and draws them from the feeling of complacency. The violence proves Albee's alignment with Artaud in believing that violence is indispensable for an effective outlet of his characters' problems.

Secondly, Albee stands on the borderline between absurdism and realism. His exposure to the American realism is just as important as that to the absurdism. As he himself admitted, "[m]y exposure to Beckett and to late O'Neill was probably important right at the time I gave up poetry and novel" [8]. The trace of realism is prevalent in the setting, plot and structure of Albee's plays. Albee sets his lays against the background of the American families. Besides that, the plot and storylines are discernable and integrated. The cause-and-effect, which is usually missing in traditional absurd plays, is retained in Albee's plays. As Way compares Albee with other absurd writers, he argues that Albee's plays lack the pursuit of the irrelevant which is indispensable to the Absurd theatre [9]. In addition, the structure in Albee's plays is progressive, for the endings bring the stories to new phases of development and solution.

Thirdly, Albee's attack upon the optimism of the American Dream is what makes his plays Americanized. Reverberating with the postmodern thinker Jean Baudrillard's theory on simulation, Albee's plays attack the false value of the family life and the substitution of the signs for real things. The phenomenon of simulation is illustrated in the characterization. The young man called "American Dream" is exactly the product of simulation, for he is perfect externally but empty and numb internally. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* the character Nick represents the imperialist western science which kills the difference and individuality of other culture and history, taming it within scientific terms, for he's experimenting on altering the chromosome of human race, which will ultimately lead to the dying out of the marginal groups and individuality. The character Peter in *The Zoo Story* embodies Albee's attack at the seemingly admirable bourgeois family life that actually renders people numb and incapable of passionate emotions and sympathy towards others.

In the following parts, the play *The Zoo Story* will be employed to demonstrate the above-mentioned characteristics that have made Edward Albee who he is.

3. The Devaluation of Language in *The Zoo Story*

Language in Albee's plays is marked by the characteristics of repetition and ridded clichés. Furthermore, the reality that the dramatic language constructs is illusive and ambiguous, for in language reality is often blended with delusion. Devaluation of language amounts to the phenomenon of noncommunication. Inconsistent with Beckett and other absurd writers, Albee views the motive behind the phenomenon of noncommunication in another way.

The play *The Zoo Story* unfolds to us the torturous process of building up genuine communication and the deadly price of it. Jerry, starts by telling his story to Peter, a stranger he meets in the park and ends in losing his life. The story takes place in Central Park of New York City. Jerry starts his contact with Peter by shouting to him that he has been to the zoo, following with sequence of embarrassing questions about Peter's private life. Out of politeness, the reluctant Peter is obliged to carry on the conversation with Jerry, who delivers a long speech of the story between him and a dog and finally the story of the zoo. After that Jerry purposely irritates Peter by driving him off the bench and goading him to a fight. Infuriated, Peter defends himself with the knife Jerry tosses to him. In the end Jerry impales himself upon the knife and dies in gratefulness to Peter.

The theme of absurdity is usually consistent with the artistic form to display it in absurd works. In absurd plays the characters' talks are characterized as being illogical and non-sequitur (a Latin term which means "it does not follow"). Words are used and placed together in an inappropriate way and sentences do not follow in sequence. Dialogues that are supposed to be interaction between characters function rather like irrelevant and spontaneous overflow of the individual's

inner activity.

The mal-function of language illustrates the theme of inability of communication, the main theme of the absurd works. The attempt to establish a genuine communication in life and the failure of it has been an issue that the absurdists are always exploring in their works. A congruous theme in Samuel Beckett's plays is the futility of achieving genuine communication. The failure of communication, for Beckett, is mainly due to the malfunction of language, for language can no longer articulate the loneliness and anxiety of the characters. Beckett's characters are situated in a world uncertain and strange to themselves. They are unable to make their inner feelings articulated with the help of language. Therefore, they are isolated and locked in their own world. Any emotion and feeling towards each other proves to be barren. In *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo treats Lucky like an animal and he even sells him in the fair. In *Endgame* there is not any trace of human contact and emotion between Hamm and his parents, Nagg and Nell, the two old legless people who are dumped into two dustbins and treated like trash. The same concern over noncommunication also obsesses Ionesco. Slightly different from Beckett, Ionesco believes that the failure of communication is not caused by the detention of language, but is due to the fact that people ultimately say nothing in their talk. In Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*, the opening dialogue between Mr. Smith and Mrs. Smith vividly demonstrates the emptiness and meaninglessness in the talk between the couple.

Albee does not go so far as his European predecessors to discard the logic and interaction function of language. It is conspicuous that dialogues in *The Zoo Story* still stick to the roles of making initiative and delivering response, though the content of the characters' talks is very often down to the superficial and hypocritical level. Logic is still preserved in dialogues, and sentences still follow each other in sequence. This is particularly prominent in *The Zoo Story*. Furthermore, the climax and tense of the plays is realized by the interaction of dramatic lines. For instance, in *The Zoo Story* the accumulation of tension in the dialogue between Jerry and Peter can be noted from an ordinary greeting between two strangers to a committed violence. Unlike the language of Beckett and Ionesco, from which we can only catch irrelevant and fragmented ideas, logic in Albee's language gives us a grip on the plot and meaning of the play.

For Albee, it's not language itself that should be blamed for the collapse of communication, but the clichés people fill in their talks that renders everyday talk senseless and void. Albee's mock at the emptiness in people's talk echoes Ionesco's viewpoint that it's the clichés loaded in people's talk that serves as a barrier of true communication. Considering this reason Ionesco advocates the breakdown of such language that is "nothing but clichés, empty formulas and slogans" [6]. In *The Zoo Story* Albee throws his attack upon the triviality and clichés in everyday talk. His viewpoint is articulated through the character Jerry's confession of his resentment of people's talk which is charged with clichés and nothing else, like "give me a beer", "where's the john" and "what time does the feature go on"

[9]. It's apparent that human intercourse is down to a superficial level. The fundamental reason of it, according to Albee, is due to the conformist attitude hold by the bourgeoisie, who is scared to open themselves up in profound and serious talks. Below is a dialogue between Jerry and Peter from *The Zoo Story*, which shows Peter's safe playing way in daily interaction with others,

- 1) Jerry. You're married!
- 2) Peter. [with pleased emphasis]. Why, certainly.
- 3) Jerry. It isn't a law, for God's sake.
- 4) Peter. No...no, of course not.
- 5) Jerry. And you have a wife.
- 6) Peter. [bewildered by the seeming lack of communication]. Yes!
- 7) Jerry. And you have children.
- 8) Peter. Yes; two.
- 9) Jerry. Boy?
- 10) Peter. No, girls...both girls.
- 11) Jerry. But you wanted boys.
- 12) Peter. Well...naturally, every man wants a son, but... [10].

The dialogue consists of questions raised by Jerry and response of Peter. It can be detected that almost every time when it is Jerry's turn to talk, he does not use a question but a statement, which subjects Peter to a submissive position. To avoid conflict with Jerry and remains polite, Peter thinks more than twice before he answers Jerry's questions, and he tries to place his answer along with the majority people. From this interaction, it's not difficult to detect Peter's conformist philosophy that he would rather play safe, fearing the loss of it through the revealing of his mind and honest confession to others.

In an interview with Roudane, Albee confesses his critique upon the conformist way of life of the bourgeoisie and even the majority of people: "Some people are capable of a great deal more communication than they engage in. There's a problem in all this because communication is dangerous. It may open people up, which is terrifying to many" [11]. What Albee calls for in his plays is a full and genuine participation in human contact as a necessity to live authentically, "I am concerned with being as self-aware, and open to all kinds of experience on its own terms—I think those conditions, given half a chance, will produce better self-government, a better society, a better everything else" [11]. Albee's idea is bespoken by Jerry that, "sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly" [10]. To breakdown the isolating human condition which resembles the animals separated by the bars in the zoo, Jerry strives to achieve communication with even a dog and Peter even at the cost of his life.

4. The Existential Choice and Violence in Action

The philosophy of Existentialism has been a profound influence on the Theatre of the Absurd. Existentialist literature, in Crowell's words, provides "an important means of access to

existentialist thinking” [12]. Likewise, the action in Albee’s plays embodies the essence of Existential thinking that meaning and value is realized in individual’s commitment and choice, which is basically carried out through action. In addition to the teaching of Existentialism, the violence in action reveals the ideas of the Theatre of Cruelty, which advocates the use of action to involve the audience and induce trances from them.

4.1. Existential Choice in Action

The action in *The Zoo Story* vividly displays the essence of existential thinking, which believes that meaning and significance is fulfilled in individual’s commitment and choice. Refusing to surrender to the absurdity, Camus insists that we first fully recognize it and contempt it. As he puts it, “Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem” [13]. The effort Jerry makes in choosing a long way to walk from the Fifth Avenue to the zoo instead of taking a short cut favored by the majority of people is an existentialist choice. I see the distance from Jerry’s starting place to his destination, the zoo, as a symbol of the span of our life. What Jerry gains from going a long distance out of his own way is enriching his life with various experiences gained by meeting people and paying attention to them, and Jerry’s choice is the first step he makes to break down the isolating walls between him and the outer world.

Jerry’s attempt to seek love and appeal from a dog also embodies the existential choice. He is aware of the separating condition of human life, as he tells Peter that, “animals are indifferent to me...like people [he smiles slightly] ... most of the time” [10]. Therefore, he makes up his mind to redeem his miserable situation by trying to love the dog of his landlady and make it be friendly to him. Nevertheless, the dog does not stop biting Jerry in spite of the hamburgers Jerry buys for it. Out of disappointment and fury Jerry poisons the dog. Though the killing fails and the dog is indifferent to him from then on, Jerry has engaged himself in the endeavor to love and hate the dog, which I think achieves a kind of sentimentality greater than indifference. We have to make our being impressed or marked upon something, that’s what Albee implies in the story of Jerry and the dog. It’s like Jerry’s words go, “it’s just that if you can’t deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS!” [10], for nothing comes from nothingness. Jerry’s words echo the existential philosophy that only action can endow meaning and significance.

The fight for the bench again powerfully exemplifies the existential philosophy. Peter remains detached and indifferent till the moment when Jerry forces him off the bench he is sitting. Irritated by Jerry’s words, Peter picks up the knife which Jerry tosses to him and defends himself. Jerry’s impaling himself on the knife creates meanings in two aspects. On the one hand Jerry succeeds in making a genuine contact with Peter, his death will definitely arouse Peter’s emotion no matter what it is towards him; on the other hand, Peter is shocked out of his ignorance of his being and he defends his

dignity with his own hands. His peaceful world, as Roudané compares it to that of Tolstoy’s Ivah Ilych, “most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible” [11], is shattered together with the abrupt death of Jerry.

The existential choice in the action in Albee’s plays marks him off from other absurd playwrights in the sense that he retains the validity of reason in his plays. There is usually a loss of faith in reason and hope in the absurd works, for the absurdists believe that rational exploration of experience only proves to be self-deceptive. Therefore, in their works the ending doesn’t deliver any solution or hope to the questions raised to the audience. Thus reason and significance of the characters’ behavior is missing in the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter and so on. As in Ionesco’s *Bald Soprano*, the fireman’s visit is cut off from its motive, for nobody not even the fireman himself knows the reason why he knocks at the door of the Smiths. Similarly, in *Waiting for Godot*, the ending merely presents the state of waiting as it is from the beginning of the play. Here no promise or hope is hinted by Beckett.

Yet Albee retreats from the full acceptance of the vision that metaphysical meaning has vanished. The action and choice of Albee’s characters is connected with motive and significance. In a sense the metaphysical meaning has taken the place of God as the ultimate value standard in Albee’s plays. Albee still believes in rational solutions of his characters’ problems, which is powerfully proven in the end of *The Zoo Story*. We have a glimpse of it from the speech uttered by Jerry for the purpose of irritating Peter to a fight for the bench they’re sitting,

Jerry [contemptuously]. You don’t even know what you’re saying, do you? This is probably the first time in your life you’ve had anything more trying to face than changing your cat’s toilet box... [10].

Although Peter’s self-defense is an outcome of Jerry’s humiliation, his reaction realizes the significance of Jerry’s unswerving effort to drag Peter out from the sense of complacency and indifference. Jerry’s death as the ending of the play also functions as a solution and a turning point, albeit it is not a pleasant one. In Roudané’s opinion, death is the only way to disrupt the well-ordered world of Peter and to educate him [11]. Peter’s four exclamations of “Oh my God” at Jerry’s death shows the great shock he’s experienced, and he will certainly not be what he used to be after the contact with Jerry. Jerry’s death gives way to something more than Peter’s rebirth, “a recharging of the spirit” [11]. The ending of *The Zoo Story* affirms a value which echoes with W. H. Auden’s idea that, “[w]e must love one another or die” [3].

4.2. Violence in Action

Like the action in typical absurd works, the action in *The Zoo Story* is economic but obvious enough to illustrate the idea of the Theatre of Cruelty. Its influence can be traced through the examination of Jerry’s action. As Peter stands for the attitude of elusion and conformity, Jerry embodies the opposite one of progression and subversion.

The escalation of tension is carried out by the enhancing of

progressiveness in Jerry's action. The first suggestion of Jerry's action appears while Jerry's narrating the story of him and the dog. In Albee's description, "The following long speech, it seems to me, should be done with a great deal of action, to achieve a hypnotic effect on Peter, and on the audience, too..." [10]. Albee's particular concern of Jerry's action here aims to enhance the degree of tension, to involve and entrance the audience. Jerry's action suggests that gesture and movement here exerts the effect not less important than words in involving the audience's. We can discern the increase of tension when Jerry moves to the bench where Peter is sitting and sits down beside him after he's finished telling Peter the story. It is also the first time when Jerry sits down. The shortening of the distance between Jerry and Peter not only implies a closer contact between the two protagonists, but also creates a feeling of uneasy and slight threat to Peter and the audience, as the majority of people behave almost in the same way as Peter and the audience in such situation. The level of tension rises to a considerably high degree when Jerry tickles Peter's ribs with his fingers in order to force him to stay a while longer. The meaning realized in Jerry's outrageous behavior is profound. On the one hand, the reaction Jerry induces from Peter is direct and instinct, for we will all laugh when being tickled; on the other hand, Jerry's behavior is a violation against the social convention of always appearing polite, which is mostly maintained in the hypocrite human relationship. In that way the audience's sense of complacency is broken and the habitually accepted moral standard is subverted.

The climax of the play arrives when Jerry forces Peter off the bench he's sitting and tosses him a knife for a fight. What's more, Jerry spits on Peter's face. The humiliation and indignation in Jerry's behavior brings tension to the point of eruption. The play ends in Jerry's killing himself with the knife he tosses to Peter. The effect is like what Artaud has envisaged that the audience's fear and shock is aroused by the compelling force in action. McCarthy regards the ending as Albee's technique to reveal to his audience the absurdity that real contact can be established only through the most animal expression: violence [7]. For Albee violence and death is also life-giving, if the audience is willing to have the status quo assaulted, to have their consciousness raised and values questioned or reaffirmed [11].

5. Simulation in Characterization in *The Zoo Story*

The characters in absurd plays usually belong to the type of existential characters, while those in Albee's plays don't fit into this category. Albee's characters are not meant to be identified with or sympathized with because their actions and choices lack moral concerns. As Marcia comments, "Albee's characters are fascinating but rarely likeable or even sympathetic in any consistent way; while unfailingly intelligent and articulate, they tend to lack any real ethical or moral compass" [14]. Moreover, the characterization exemplifies the phenomenon of simulation on them.

The characters in absurd plays exemplify the idea of existentialism, which holds that a person creates his own existence in the process of action and commitment. A person develops a self only in taking action and making choices. Consequently, characterization in absurd plays downplays the background information of characters, hence, the lack of exposition. For instance, the two protagonists in *Waiting for Godot* are devoid of biographical information. There is little concern for the characters' past in the play. The characters exist only in the moment when they appear on stage and engage themselves in action. In this sense, they belong to the existential type of characters.

On the contrary, the biographical information of characters plays an indispensable role both in the portrayal of characters and the presenting of themes in Albee's plays. For the characters of *The Zoo Story*, *American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* particularly, the past more often than not lays the foundation of what becomes of the present. Hence the background information of characters helps to construct a part of their present life. In analyzing Albee's intention, Bigsby points out that "far from facilitating human contact, illusions rather alienate individuals from one another and serve to emphasize their separation" [15]. Albee once admits that the representation of Jerry finds its counterpart in life everywhere in the society: "when I wrote the play...I was making a living delivering telegram...I met all those people in the play in rooming houses. Jerry, the hero, is still around. He changes his shape from year to year" [11]. What's more, the recognizable characters highlight the effect of simulation on them.

What is more, the representation of Peter reflects the hypocrisy of bourgeois family life. As a married man with two daughters, two parakeets and an executive position in a publishing house, Peter has a family that seems to be admirable and satisfactory. However, as Jerry sees it clearly that the seemingly admirable life of Peter actually fails to nurture genuine love and spiritual contact. The inability to get a masculine child in Albee's opinion is the implication of the barren of the bourgeois family life. In addition, Peter's emotional detention and his fear to attempt real contact with strangers suggests the futility of family life to give birth to real emotions and sympathy. Therefore, from the characterization of Peter it can be seen that Albee's attack upon the simulation of bourgeois family life, indicated by people's substitution of material comfort for real love and communication.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the unique observation of noncommunication in language, the thinking of Existentialism and Theatre of Cruelty in action, the trace of realism in setting and structure and the notion of simulation in characterization all together demonstrate Albee's distinctive manipulation of the Theatre of Absurd. Meanwhile his style of the Theatre of Absurd enriches the philosophy and practice of the Absurd theatre and continues its tradition through transplanting it in the soil of American theatre.

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