

***The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee: Introduction, Critical Analysis, Themes and Character Analysis**

The Zoo Story (1958) is a one-act absurdist play by Edward Albee depicting a tense, fatal encounter in Central Park between Jerry, a lonely, socially isolated transient, and Peter, a conventional, middle-class publisher. Jerry forces conversation, stories, and eventually a physical fight over a park bench upon Peter.

Key Details:

- **Plot:** Jerry relentlessly interrogates Peter about his comfortable life. After sharing disturbing stories, Jerry provokes Peter into a fight, ultimately impaling himself on a knife he forced Peter to hold.
- **Themes:** The play explores extreme loneliness, the inability to communicate, social class disparity, and the intrusion of chaos into orderly, suburban life.
- **Characters:** Jerry is a desperate, chaotic force, while Peter represents safe, passive conformity. Jerry dies on the bench, having finally achieved a raw human connection, leaving Peter horrified and forever changed.

Key Interactions and Themes:

- **The Bench Conflict:** Symbolizes a fight for territory, power, and existential space, with Jerry trying to take Peter's "spot".
- **Communication Failure:** The play highlights the inability of the two men to connect, emphasizing the isolation of modern life.
- **The Zoo Analogy:** Jerry posits that the world is a zoo, where people are either in cages, watching, or interacting violently, drawing parallels to his own life and his need for a "real" encounter.

***The Zoo Story*: Character Analysis**

➤ Jerry

Jerry is the primary source of energy in *The Zoo Story*. He bounds into the serene Central Park setting and infuses Peter's life with an unwanted excitement that Peter will never forget. Jerry is desperate to make any kind of connection with any other human being, so he latches on to Peter as a suitable source. Jerry's loneliness has made him desperate. He wants to forge

a meaningful connection with another human being, and the interaction with Peter is his last attempt to do so. Jerry enters Peter's life and alters the course of both of their existences. His energy, strangeness, and pathetic existence are enough to rock the foundations of Peter's boring, successful life. Jerry is a storyteller. He recounts numerous anecdotes which include the titular zoo story. At first Jerry appears to enjoy the act of storytelling, but he is actually inserting himself into a new, more tragic story. The zoo story is not an anecdote. The zoo story culminates in the meeting between Jerry and Peter. Jerry's death is the real ending of the anecdote, and Jerry has written himself into the story. The act of storytelling does not dwell on fiction or memories. Jerry's form of storytelling is real, energetic, and violent. He does not tell Peter a story. He imposes a story on Peter. Peter will read the newspaper accounts and see the television news reports about Jerry's death, and Jerry will finally become the central figure of the story.

➤ **Peter**

Peter is bored. He has everything society tells him to want such as a large salary, a big house, a wife and two daughters, two cats, two parakeets, and two televisions. Peter does not just have one of everything. He has two. His life is so much more successful than Jerry's life that Peter has double the accoutrements that Jerry could only ever hope to attain. However, Peter does not have everything. He refuses to speak his dissatisfaction aloud, but Jerry almost elicits a confession from Peter that he might have preferred a male child. Peter recognizes that he has erred and immediately walks back his statement. He represses his true desires and refuses to speak them aloud. These desires fester in his subconscious and make him unhappy. He is fascinated by Jerry because Jerry explicitly states all of the desires that Peter refuses to acknowledge. Neither man is happy with life, but at least Jerry can acknowledge his dissatisfaction. Jerry changes Peter's life forever. Peter cannot return to the simple, dull existence he once knew and loathed. He is now a murderer and will live in constant fear of being caught. The park bench was once a sanctuary of calm and the one place he could escape to when he tired of family life. Now the park bench reminds him of brutal, unexpected violence. Peter longed for excitement, and Jerry provided it to him. The play ends with Peter discovering that excitement comes at a cost.

Themes

1. Intimacy

In *The Zoo Story*, Albee introduces the audience to Jerry's unconventional ideas about what it means to be intimate with another person. For Jerry, intimacy is not just about friendship – it requires a fundamental sense of understanding and compassion between two people. This kind of intimacy does not necessarily need to be accumulated over time. He believes that it can be achieved simply by approaching a stranger like Peter and "get[ting] to know somebody, know all about him" (4). Jerry's ideas about intimacy fly in the face of established social norms, which do not often encourage this kind of mingling between strangers. His defiance of received ideas about personal space can be interpreted as a critique of the alienation imposed by modern, urban society. Especially considering that Peter represents this modern, polite society, intimacy also provides a way to understand the play's primary conflict.

2. Animals

Jerry frequently refers to animals in his conversation with Peter – indeed, he claims to be on his way home from the Central Park Zoo when they first meet. His focus on animals has two implications.

Firstly, Jerry sees animals as a solution to his social isolation. He understands that he has a problem 'getting along' with other people, and believes that he can resolve this by practicing interaction with animals. Ironically, the kind of companionship Jerry seeks is not the sort that animals can provide or even prepare him for. Jerry is looking for someone who can understand his iconoclastic opinions on modern society and empathize with his difficult past. These kinds of sophisticated interactions are only possible with people – but when Jerry attempts them with Peter, the men are unable to truly connect because of failures in communication.

Secondly, the frequent mention of animals also underlines a greater idea that humans have a capacity to be animalistic. Peter begins the play as a self-defined, civilized, polite, urban fellow. But through his responses to Jerry's provocations, he taps into his more aggressive tendencies and ultimately participates (however unwittingly) in a murder. By focusing on the limitations of animals, Jerry also suggests that humans have these limitations within ourselves.

3. Urban alienation

When *The Zoo Story* was written in 1958, the urban lifestyle that is familiar to modern audiences would have been a relatively new concept. The 1920s were the first decade in which more Americans lived in cities than in rural areas. As American cities continued to grow, people began to find that large cities ironically offered a weaker sense of community than small towns did. This social context helps explain Jerry's deep sense of loneliness (although it can also be attributed to his eccentric personality). This kind of individual alienation in an urban context was a popular topic for many modernist writers, including T.S. Eliot and John Dos Passos. By the 1950s, these themes had diffused into popular literature and would have been familiar to Albee's audience. Jerry's attempts to find intimacy are counteracted by the depersonalization of the urban landscape, which ties this theme directly to the play's central conflict.

4. Social class

One source of the awkwardness between Peter and Jerry is the vast difference in their life stories and their social class. While Peter enjoys a high salary and a stable family life, Jerry has no job and characterizes himself as a "permanent transient." This difference is not just a matter of how much money the men have; it affects everything from their philosophical viewpoints to the way they perceive the world. Because the men's lives up to this point have been so radically different, they do not share common experiences and thus have trouble understanding each other. That social class distinctions could facilitate the tragedy of this play is a tragedy unto itself.

5. Failures in communication

In so many ways, Peter and Jerry are unable to bridge their differences to achieve any real communication. This communication failure occurs on both linguistic and philosophical levels.

On the linguistic level, the men have trouble conversing because they have different understandings of words and concepts. An example of this comes early in the play, when Jerry asks Peter about his family. When Peter tells Jerry that he has two daughters, Peter assumes this communicates that he is married. However, Jerry does not make this assumption, and Peter is confused when Jerry continues to ask him about his family. Because the men come from such different socioeconomic backgrounds, they do not approach issues with the same definitions, and hence is their ability to achieve any real intimacy hampered.

There is also a deeper failure to communicate on a philosophical level; their opinions on life and its meaning are so different that the difference impedes their ability to connect with each other. For example, Peter states on p. 22 that people should not get everything they want; he believes that a certain amount of deprivation is essential to the human experience. Jerry, on the other hand, has experienced real suffering and misfortune, and therefore has a different viewpoint on the topic. The insensitivity of Peter's remark diminishes the tentative connection that the men have made. Ultimately, the play's tragedy results from the inevitable fact that Jerry will never find a way to communicate with a world that considers him an outsider, and refuses to try and see the world the way he does.

6. Capitalism and the American Dream

The 1950s is often considered the heyday of the American Dream. After World War II, the US economy boomed, and a middle-class lifestyle was more attainable than ever before. However, many of the period's greatest authors were critical of the effect this capitalist ethic had on American culture. Many of Albee's contemporaries – such as Arthur Miller and Richard Yates – wrote scathing satires of American materialism. Albee shares their

skepticism about the 'American Dream'. Through Jerry, an impoverished social outcast, Albee suggests that a middle-class existence is not as attainable as it seems - and that it may not even be desirable. Jerry is harshly critical of Peter's conventional lifestyle; he argues that family life has emasculated Peter, and that the bourgeoisie are so caught up in material success that they do not pay attention to the world around them. And yet perhaps the most scathing attack of all is how desperately Jerry seems to want to be included in this world anyway. One of his many contradictions is wanting to be embraced by a world he despises, and this is one of the many forces that lead him to such drastic action at the end of the play.

7. Alternative sexualities

The Zoo Story's frank discussion of homosexuality was extremely unusual for its time, and for this reason, many critics interpret the play as an allegory about the repression of taboo sexual desires. Albee himself is gay, and critics including Robert Zaller consider Jerry's loneliness – and desperate fumbling for intimacy with a male stranger – to be representative of the gay male experience in 1958. There are also erotic undertones to Peter and Jerry's interaction, even when sex is not being discussed explicitly. For example, many critics have pointed out the phallic resonance of Jerry's death, which occurs through a knife-wound in the abdomen.

Albee's portrayal of alternative sexuality is closely tied to his exploration of alienation. Because America had an extremely conservative culture where sexuality was concerned, people whose desires fell outside the mainstream were often marginalized. Although Jerry's loneliness is not entirely a product of his sexuality, it can be seen as illustrative of the challenges that people with alternative sexualities had to face at the time.