

THE OPPOSITIONS IN EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE ZOO STORY*

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ABSTRACT

*An abundance of contradictions characterizes most of Edward Albee's plays. The playwright emphasizes the crucial function of contrasts in everyday life going beyond just expressing them. The playwright reveals that one has to live with such opposites as black and white, good and bad closely since it is not possible to avoid them. Moreover, one should go one step further and accept this unavoidable situation even embracing this contradictory situation. As an example, that we are spiritually dead, while living, is one of his most important themes. Life and death, in fact, are realities of humanity, close to each other, going hand in hand any moment in life. But this is persistently ignored by his characters as well as by mankind in general. The playwright tries hard to make the reader be aware and acknowledge that this is the case. Therefore, we will try to examine the contradictions in *The Zoo Story*, give examples, and reveal how influential they are in the play as well as in real life.*

Key Words: Edward Albee, Paradoxes, *The Zoo Story*.

ÖZET

Çok sayıda ikilemlerin varlığı Edward Albee'nin birçok oyununu karakterize eder. Yazar, bu ikilemlerin varlığını sadece ifade etmenin de ötesine giderek, bunların günlük yaşamda sahip oldukları fonksiyonları vurgular. Bu gerçekten kaçınmanın hiçbir sorunu çözmediği, yapıtlarının ana temalarından birisidir. Dahası, birey bir adım öteye gitmeli, bu kaçınılmaz durumu kabullenmeli ve hatta kucaklamalıdır. Yazarın en önemli temalarından birisi de, yaşarken aslında manen ölü olduğumuzdur. Yaşam ve gerçek insanlığın bir gerçeği ve yaşamın her anında birlikte yürüyen iki olgudur. Ancak bu durum genel olarak insanlık tarafından olduğu gibi onun karakterlerince de görmezlikten gelinmektedir. Yazar, okuyucunun bu durumun farkına varması ve bunu kabullenmesi için çaba gösterir. Bu yazıda, Hayvanat Bahçesi Masalı oyunundaki ikilemleri örnekler vererek incelemeye ve bunların hem oyunda hem de günlük yaşamda ne denli etkili olduğunu ortaya koymaya çalışacağız.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Edward Albee, Çelişki, Hayvanat Bahçesi Masalı.

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Introduction

In most of Albee's plays there is an attraction as well as a clash between the oppositions, notably the reality and illusion. Apart from the paradoxes he handles in *The Zoo Story* (1958), the playwright deals with an interesting relationship between reality and illusion in *Tiny Alice* (1964); there is a continuous clash between artificiality and reality in *American Dream* (1960), and *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1961) is about the impossibility of living a life without illusions. In these plays the characters are trapped between the undesirable lives they lead and those they wish to live.

Almost all his characters are trapped in unhappy marriages, alienated with other people, and grasped in a bitter loneliness and suffering. As an important sign of contradiction, the individuals feel isolated in the mid of the crowds.

The playwright has many misfortunes in his life beginning even his childhood. Albee is an orphan; he is dismissed from schools, and is employed in different trivial jobs. His characters do not lead a life much different from that of his own. They are squeezed in their narrow world from where they dream to escape. However, their efforts are insufficient for such a challenging task. Illusion works only for a short time and this temporary relief soon brings about even worse conflicts (Kingsley, 1973: 72).

The decade of the 1950s, in which *The Zoo Story* is written, is a period for Americans to generate a new milieu due to a new culture and new values much different from the old norms. It is quite a revolutionary period either in terms of industrial, social or moral affairs, and a period of change and development. The new generation is in a search, ignoring the existing order and values. Extraordinary technologic improvements and mechanization mark the age, which gradually leads to the devaluation, alienation and metamorphosis of humanity.

Contradictions in *The Zoo Story*

The Zoo Story is a one-act play about a psychopath, Jerry and a conventional man, Peter, and it is based on the conversation between them in Central Park. Peter is seated on a bench reading a book in a Summer Sunday. Then Jerry comes and disturbs him. Jerry tries to have a real conversation, which, seemingly, he had never before (Amacher, 1982: 41). So he says: "...every once

in a while I like to talk to somebody, really *talk*,” (741) and tells Peter about the rooming house he lives in, his neighbours, his landlady, his belongings, his trouble with the landlady’s dog, and even the most private issues about himself. But, in spite of all his effort, he fails to communicate with Peter, and quarrels with him over the bench. In the end, he infuriates Peter and makes him take the knife Jerry has hurled towards him. Then Jerry fatally impales himself on the knife which Peter holds tightly. Thanking Peter, Jerry dies right there.

A close look into the play would put forth “strong sense of duality” (qtd. in Robb, 2002: 1). One of these dualities is always privileged over the other. And we also get the impression that one of the opposites may include its counterpart as well. As the play progresses, the generalisations are replaced with the individual experiences. Rough classifications of gender and class divisions, the conventional boundaries, and the old way of representations are fragmented.

The playwright generates much of the play’s tragic tension by mixing opposites together. Jerry and Peter are two opposite characters; they almost have nothing in common. And the environments they live in are in stark contrast to one another. Peter, the passive listener, lives on the East Side of New York City, and his world seems quite well ordered. He represents the successful businessman and the content, comfortable, upper-middle class family man. Peter, the “Grant Noble” is the “isolated everyman, oblivious and innocent” (Rob, 2002: 1). On the other hand, Jerry is the active speaker, that is active audience, lives on the West Side; he is from lower-middle class and his world is unquestionably fragmented (Amacher, 1982: 40). He is an active audience in that he defies most of the society’s obligations. He appears as the alienated loner who searches for meaning in society. But in Albee’s depiction and in Jerry’s assumptions, Peter is a docile and obedient one: he takes up any role society imposes on him. In contrast, Jerry questions the injustices, challenges the cruelties and shows no sign of consent.

Edward Albee’s own personality and life blend completely with his work. He does not remain outside the play and pose an objective attitude, but instead, treats his characters subjectively. Throughout the play we feel the author’s sympathy with Jerry. The man of disorder humiliated by the dominant community is valued over the accepted, well-ordered Peter. As Albee introduces Peter to us, he is “neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely” (739). That is, he is an ordinary man who is “in no way distinctive” (Zimbardo, 1975: 46). The statement, “Peter is seated on the bench stage-right” (739), is the opening stage direction. With the term “right,” the playwright possibly points to some referential

meanings. Peter is meant to stand on the correct side the dominant hegemony obliges, and perhaps by implication “does all the right things” (Stenz, 1978: 8). “He reads the ‘right’ books, lives on the ‘right’ side of the park,” sits on the ‘right’ bench, and has the ‘right’ job (Zimbardo, 1975: 46).

Similarly, various dualities and conflicts are at work. Reality-illusion and reason-madness are the main opposites forming the play. Jerry’s frankness, courage, bachelorhood, homosexuality and awareness are opposed to Peter’s pretensions, cowardice, marriage, heterosexuality and ignorance, respectively. Peter is seated but Jerry is standing. Throughout the play, mostly Jerry is asking while Peter is answering. The close interaction between the opposites creates an unstable atmosphere. The remarkable number of such oppositions can be taken as the evidence of anxiety and insecurity over existing values, particularly over the stability and the validity of a paradoxical life on which those values are based.

Peter has many contradictions in his life. As an example, he is married, lives among crowds, and has children and animals, but in fact he is alone. In a nice sunny Sunday afternoon, he is not where he should be, but alone in a park (Stenz, 1978: 9). He is in crowds, but not aware of them, just as he is ignored by the same society. Moreover, he seems to have no human feelings, such as love or sympathy with others. In contrast with him, Jerry is single and unemployed, so his loneliness does not seem unnatural, and what is more, such a situation complies with his mood.

The play begins like a comedy, but ends in an unexpected tragic death. We get the impression that, though both represent opposite poles, in a way, comedy contains tragedy or vice versa. Likewise, the language of the play is an ironic one, but soon this irony turns into a frank and direct speech. Sexual innuendo that infects so much of the language of the play indicates that the ultimate interpretation of language can always escape the intentions of the original speaker as the natural result of an insecure and unreliable language. Wordplays are contrasted with serious statements. Puns are by nature multiple in meaning. Throughout the play tension increases at times, but soon it is replaced with a tranquil one.

There are overt transgressions of boundaries in the play. The oppositions that form the play are highly unstable. A close analysis of the play reveals that the structure and the language of the play often undermine such oppositions. For example, the relationship between Peter and Jerry seems to be strictly defined by

opposite characteristics: educated versus uneducated; upper-middle class versus lower-middle class; order versus disorder; rich versus poor; and culture versus nature. But the relationship between these two characters might not be quite as clear as it seems. Jerry, for example, seems to be uneducated, ignorant, but in fact, he knows more, and is more conscious about the people compared to Peter whose attitudes towards life are rather pretentious and misleading. Peter stands for upper-middle class, Jerry for lower-middle class; therefore, this may be regarded as the contradictions between the classes of the 1950s in America. Jerry is clearly against such class divisions and dominance of one class over the other:

Jerry. Say, what's the dividing line between upper-middle-middle-class and lower-upper-middle class?

Peter. My dear fellow, I...

Jerry. Don't my dear fellow me.

Peter. (unhappily) Was I patronizing? I believe I was; I'm sorry. But, you see, your question about the classes bewildered me.

Jerry. And when you are bewildered you become patronizing?

Peter. Oh, I thought you lived in the Village.

Jerry. What were you trying to do? Make sense out of things? Bring order? The old pigeonhole bit? (741-42).

The oppositions of both characters, Jerry and Peter, are further undermined by the fact that they actually have a great deal in common. For example, they are of the same age, have grown up in the same city, both are loners and are victims of the dominant hegemony. It is not the story of Peter, but of Jerry who is from a subordinated class. Though they are at the same age, almost forty years old, the playwright is determined to stick to the differences, so he introduces Peter as "in his early forties," and Jerry "in his late thirties" (739). We have another contradiction here because Peter's dress and manner suggest a younger man, while Jerry gives the impression of older age although Jerry is a little bit younger. And although both are in solitude, Jerry is aware of it, while Peter is not. They seem to represent two main different groups of the society, which gives the impression that, on one hand they are opposite poles, on the other hand they balance each other, that is, the differences of each character complete the blanks of each, since they both together form the whole society.

Jerry has complete control over Peter; he directs and Peter is directed. Jerry sometimes speaks calmly, sometimes increases the tension, and Peter is provoked. Jerry talks in an ironic way but Peter in a serious way. And each time Peter is trapped in what Jerry sets for him. For example, Jerry pretends to be ignorant, recalling dramatic irony:

- Jerry. You are an educated man, aren't you? Are you a doctor?
Peter. Oh, no; no. I read about it somewhere; *Time* magazine, I think.
Jerry. Well, *Time* magazine isn't for blockheads.
Peter. No, I suppose not (740).

Asking Peter many detailed questions, even the most private ones, Jerry is applying a sort of a psychiatric therapy. And he makes Peter answer all questions despite his initial resistance. Jerry, in fact, is not a talkative man, and he usually does not speak so much, but that day he assumes a different role; likewise, Peter is taciturn in general, but that day he answers any questions of Jerry, though he has never met him before. Furthermore, although they have a conversation for less than one hour, Peter will never forget Jerry, and he will know him better than anyone in his life (Hayman, 1971: 1).

It is possible to see that the opposite traits contain their oppositions considering peculiarities of the characters. For example, the allegedly educated Peter, in fact, lives far from the realities around him, cannot control his anger, and so gives the impression of a man of ignorance. On the contrary, Jerry, seemingly an uneducated man is a good observer, calm, sensitive, sees the world from a multi-dimensional perspective, and a good reader of literature and philosophy. For example, some famous figures of the time, such as Sigmund Freud, Charles Baudelaire and John Philips Marquand are mentioned by name in the play. When Peter preparing his pipe, the playwright makes a reference to Freud, the father of psychoanalysis: "...What you'll probably get is cancer of the mouth, and then you'll have to wear one of those things Freud wore after they took one whole side of his jaw away..." (740). In 1923 when Freud was stricken with jaw cancer, he had surgical operations, and his jaw was removed, displaced with a prosthesis. Jerry asks Peter about his favourite writers mentioning Baudelaire and Marquand. But, Peter knows nothing about them: "Well, I like great many writers. Those two men are fine, each in his way. (*Warming up*) Baudelaire, of course...uh...is by far the finer of the two, but Marquand has a place...in our...uh...national ..." (741-2).

Having a close look into the lives of both Baudelaire and J. P. Marquand together with Edward Albee and his character Jerry, we get many similar characteristics of each. Their childhood, lives, views, sexual preferences, thoughts, and life styles show many similarities. Edward Albee is abandoned by his natural parents in his infancy, adopted by millionaire Reed and Frances Albee. A rebellious youth, Albee is not a successful student and never has a good relationship with his adoptive father, but had a love for his mother. Trying his hand at writing poem, novel and short story, the playwright has not been

successful at all. At the age of 30, he begins playwriting. He tries to explore the darker side of human soul, the paradoxical mixture of love and death. His grimly humorous plays, usually categorized in absurd theatre, focus on man's tendency to torment others and destroy himself.

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) is a bohemian French poet and a precursor of the symbolist movement. During his life time, he is condemned as the morbid and decadent author of immoral verse. Also the poet of strangeness, ugliness, fear and systematic self-destruction, the poet never forgives his young mother for remarrying the year after his father's death when he is 6, though he hardly remembers his father. However, he loves her tenderly. The similarity between Jerry's attitude towards his mother and that of Baudelaire is clear as Jerry says "...good old Mom walked out on good old Pop when I was ten and a half years old; she embarked on an adulterous turn of our southern states..."(743). Baudelaire, considering himself another Hamlet (Poggenburg, 1989: 4), never develops much admiration for his stepfather Major Aupick, a highly esteemed officer in the French army. Later in his life, he runs heavily into debts that afflict him until the end of his life. He indulges in homosexuality and debauchery. He also tries his hand at the short story and novel, which results in failure. These turn out to be highly erotic, satanic and irrational works. He dies in misery in Paris in 1867. Baudelaire, Albee and his character Jerry have the same homosexual tendency, which is the most important characteristic they have in common. Jerry clearly puts it: "...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..." (743).

John Philips Marquand (1893-1960) is an American novelist and short story writer. He satirizes upper-class New England social structure, depicting characters from this environment as unhappy individuals restricted by family tradition. The households in his works are torn between their own desires and the traditions their families expose on them. Unhappiness, pressured by the society, and the grey world, the characters are subjected to, are what approach Albee to Marquand. Albee does not deny the influence of various writers, and so it is likely that Baudelaire and Marquand are two of them.

Jerry lives in a rooming house, which he defines as "a laughably small room" separated from other rooms with a beaverboard (742). With the rooming house there seems to be a reference to the title of the play 'The Zoo,' and thus, to the world. People are separated from each other by the cage bars in the world (Stenz, 1978: 132), which is very similar to a gigantic zoo, as Jerry says: "...I

went to the zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too. It probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else..." (749).

The relationship between abandonment and alienation of Jerry and the real life of Albee is clear. Being an adopted child has a deep psychological effect and experience on Albee. Jerry's answer to Peter's question concerning why Jerry has two empty picture frames, in fact, seems to be a summary of the playwright's life: "...Isn't it clear? I don't have any pictures of anyone to put in them" (742). As the play progresses, Jerry assumes a crazy role. And here again we have oppositions penetrating to one another: reason turns into madness. As such, at the beginning of the play, while Peter is in an unconscious manner, towards the end of the play he develops a conscious attitude with the death of Jerry. So, consciousness is changed into, as well as privileged over, unconsciousness.

Though the play is an attack on the bourgeoisie, Albee has some similar characteristics with Peter, too. Albee, in real life, is a fan of animals, polite, well-ordered and looks younger like Peter who has a stable life, while nothing has been permanent in Jerry's life. For example Jerry says: "...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..." (743).

Jerry's neighbours are as queer as Jerry himself. One of Jerry's neighbours is, in his words, "a coloured queen who always keeps his door open; well, not always, but *always* when he's plucking his eyebrows, which he does it with Buddhist concentration. This coloured queen has rotten teeth, which is rare, and he has a Japanese kimono" (742). The other one is a Puerto Rican Family, made up of "a husband, a wife and some kids" who "entertain a lot" (742). He has another neighbour whom he does not know at all. And his last neighbour is a woman who always cries. His landlady is, as Jerry introduces: "fat, ugly, mean, stupid, unwashed, misanthropic, cheap, drunken bag of garbage" (744). She is a lusty woman and usually harasses him sexually. Jerry says: "...she has some foul parody of sexual desire. And I am the object of her sweaty lust" (744). And she has a dog which usually disturbs not anyone, but particularly Jerry, and not any time but particularly when he comes home. Jerry refers to the dog as "a black monster of a beast: an oversized head, tiny ears, and eyes...bloodshot, infected...the dog is black all black; all black except for the bloodshot eyes...and an open sore on its...right forepaw...an old dog...almost always has an

erection”(745). The similarity between the landlady and her dog is emphasized: both are old, disgusting and full of lust, and each disturbs Jerry.

For Jerry, there is a close resemblance between animal and man: “...animals are indifferent to me...like people” (745), which gives the impression that Jerry seems to believe that both man and animal are interchangeable and either shares essential aspects of each other. He makes a connection between these two seemingly different oppositions. He tries to get on well with the dog, but he does not succeed. Then, he thinks of killing it. He poisons it, but it proves futile and the dog does not die. Jerry tries a similar attempt with a human being, Peter, and he fails again, but with a slight difference. He does not try to kill Peter, but himself, and eventually succeeds in that. The dog takes the rooming house his own home, so whenever Jerry comes, it attacks him, as such, at the end of the play Peter sees the bench as one of his belongings, and he fights and kills for the sake of it (Zimbardo, 1975: 48). The similarity between these two different attempts and illusions is clear enough. The problematic and aggressive relationship between Jerry and the dog is almost the same as that between human beings.

We get another contradiction when Jerry uses the term “friend” for the dog, while the dog was nothing, but an enemy to him: “...I was heart-shatteringly anxious to confront my doggy friend again” (747). Another paradoxical situation exists with the terms ‘love’ and ‘kill,’ since there is a strange mixture of love and death in the play. For example Jerry says: “I had tried to love, and I had tried to kill” (747). Interweaving the opposite feelings and situations, the playwright makes up a strange environment in which the term ‘enemy’ begins to connote the term ‘friend,’ and likewise, ‘love’ connotes ‘killing.’

Jerry makes a strange parallelism between two seemingly different and opposite beings: his coloured gay neighbour, the created, and God, the creator, or between crying woman and God, exchanging the roles of each:

A person has to have some way of dealing with something. If not with people...SOMETHING..._with God. How about that? WITH GOD WHO IS A COLOURED QUEEN WHO WEARS A KIMONO AND PLUCKS HIS EYEBROWS, WHO IS A WOMAN WHO CRIES WITH DETERMINATION BEHIND HER CLOSED DOOR...with God who, I am told, turned his back on the whole thing some time ago... (747).

Here we have a direct reference to a belief system, that is, Deism. This faith is different from theism and pantheism, and it is, in fact, somewhere in

between. It conceives the idea of God totally away from the universe: God created a well-ordered universe granted it with immutable laws, which, later, began to operate without any further divine intervention. This tenet of the impossibility of divine intervention conflicts with traditional Christian belief in divine providence and revelation. It is clear that Jerry, who might be regarded as the reflected image of Albee, seems to believe in that. And this is very much in harmony with his absurdist approach.

Humour and distress are the other elements interrelated in the play. Albee sees laughter and pain close to one another. We get an impression that there is a sort of interaction, and even collaboration, of contradictory features of kindness and cruelty to create education, as Jerry puts it: "I have learned that neither kindness nor cruelty by themselves, independent of each other, creates any effect beyond themselves, and I have learned that the two combined, together, at same time, are the teaching emotion. And what is gained is loss" (748).

Toward the end, Peter holds the knife, which Jerry tosses at his feet, with a firm arm, not to attack, but to defend himself. The image of 'knife' is also interesting since it is a gender coded object and connotes the "erect phallus" (Hayman, 1971: 9). And we also know Jerry's sexual preference. Jerry's impaling himself on the knife may symbolize sexual intercourse. After Stabbed to death, Jerry says: "...Peter...thank you. I came unto you (*he laughs, so faintly*) and you have comforted me. Dear Peter" (752). When Jerry was about to die he thanks Peter. At first, thanking a man who tries to kill may seem quite a contradiction. But later Jerry makes it clear that he planned it deliberately: "...could I have planned all this? No...no, I couldn't have. But I think I did" (752).

Jerry makes a general classification of all living things. For him there are two kinds of exact oppositions: animal and vegetable (Amacher, 1982: 51). And the first one is superior to the second. Animal symbolizes the active and the conscious, but vegetable is passive. As J. Cooper Robb puts it, "with the bars erected by our socially and economically stratified society now removed, the 'animal' Jerry attempts to communicate with the 'vegetable' Peter" (1). First he classifies Peter into vegetables, but then he upgrades him placing into the animal class: "...you're not really a vegetable; it is all right, you're an animal, too..." (752).

Conclusion

The more technology pervades the society, the more humanity suffers because of the paradoxical nature of life, which Jerry sees equal to suffering and pain. Albee's characters are generally isolated from their environment, family and even from themselves. They seem to be living in an untouched vacuum where intervention does not seem possible. However, what is worse, they are the victim of the very society they live in. The playwright tries to underline the existence of the contradictions in everyday life. Denying the existence of these opposites does not bring a solution; on the contrary, it deepens and worsens the already gangrenous predicament. Therefore what the playwright suggests is to confront such a denial and even "understanding the paradoxes of living and embracing them all" (Miller, 1986: 149).

Avoiding the reality of death is another disease of the humanity. And Albee urges the reader to contemplate over his or her own death. This is what Jerry tries to teach Peter. Life and death are so close that one can not separate them since many live a semi-dead life, though unconsciously.

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