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A Cross cultural study of sexual harassment in college students

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Towards an Impressionistic Allegory of Alienated Protagonist in Edward Albee's *The Zoo story*

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Abstract

Many studies have examined Albee's *The Zoo Story* from different perspectives. This paper is planned to be an addition by reconsidering this play as an impressionistic allegory. Through the concept of allegory which simply means turning characters into conceptual entities, the study revisits the tragic figure of Albee's *The Zoo Story*, Jerry, who is predominated with unattainable desires of communication and socially alienated. Via the vehicle of reader response theory, the focus may highlight new interpretation of Albee's work. Moreover, alienation comes in discussion as Jerry's sexual reference drives him to his destitution and it is to certain extent the cause of his detachment from the society and ultimately leads him to a tragic end.

The study aims to provide the reader with an impressionistic overview of what alienation is in this specific context of the play and what is the lesson behind such type of allegory.

Key words: Albee, impressionism, reader response theory, allegory.

Towards an Impressionistic Allegory of Alienated Protagonist in Edward Albee's *The Zoo story*

"Every honest work is a personal or private yowl, a statement of one's individual pleasure or pain." Edward Albee

The Rationale of the study

Edward Albee (1928--) is one of the milestones of modern American drama. His tragic works gain many rewards in the field of American literature. The choice of Albee in this study comes as he represents such daring playwrights who come so close to the essence of man by many personas on the absurd stage. He presents what is beyond materialism of the modern age. In 1956 Albee wrote *The Zoo Story*, which emphasized his genius in the field of drama.¹ This type of drama is characterized by Martin Esslin as "a clinically accurate study of schizophrenia, in images of man's loneliness and inability to make contact, and also on the ritual self-immolation that has curious parallels with Christ's atonement."²

No doubt that Albee's era (after the World War II) witnesses the most controversial and rapid change of thoughts in history and social disturbance without parallel. Not only Albee but also other people are intensely disappointed by the effects of wars and new technology. Thus, they need a literature that would explain what was happening to their societies. As a result, many literary movements battle to determine the ultimate goals and the meaning of life of the average person. Albee, as many critics believe, appears with an instinctive perception of what modern tragedy is. He presents protagonists who are alienated from their milieu and ultimately they get nothing but death.³ It is necessary to recall that many psychoanalytic themes appeared in twentieth-century literature.

David Krasner, ed. *Twentieth Century American Drama*, (New York: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), p.7.

Martin Esslin, *Absurd Drama*, (Ringwood: Penguin Books Ltd., 1967), p.22.

Rebecca Bushnell, *Tragedy: A Short Introduction*, (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2008), P. 33.

century American drama like Oedipus complex, loss of identity, sexual suppression, frustration, etc. Accordingly, psychoanalysis provides the American tragedians with suggestion and direction. However, as Sievers adds that "the flesh and blood of their characters and their emotional agonies are the dramatists' own."⁴

In general, the American tragedians, specifically O'Neill, as a forerunner, and Albee as a representative, show a seeming lack of regard to the Aristotelian imperatives that are concerned with the unity of plot, nobility of character, refinement of language, and control of violence. Their indifference to the Aristotelian principles of writing tragedy reflects their attempt to create a form which is true to the realities of modern American life. Commenting on the content of the modern American tragic plays, Iyer points out that this genre will attempt to transfer to dramatic art the illumination of those deep and vigorous and eternal processes of the human soul which the psychology of Freud and Jung have given us through the study of the unconscious, striking the heart of emotion and linking our life today with the emanations of the primitive racial mind. He adds "when man's conscious, beginning to lose its authority over the external world, was likewise beginning to turn inward, to become repressed, sinister, poisoned by doubt and suspicion and morally sick."⁵

Alienated hero is not a new subject in literature. So as people evolved most likely they are alienated from certain tradition, culture or even from their being. This has a deep and evident concern especially with the consequence of certain trends such as Impressionism that try to interpret life on stage.

⁴ W. David Sievers, *Freud on Broadway: A History of Psychoanalysis and The American Drama*, (New York: Hermitage House, 1995), p.113

⁵ Iyer K.S., et al. *New Direction in American Literature*, (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2003), P.17.

Nevertheless, Albee is well known as an absurd dramatist and this study tries to add that he is so close to be impressionist fulfill his desire presenting the allegory of Jerry. The following brief note about impressionism may justify our proposal of Albee's attitude.

Expressionism

Expressionism is an artistic literary movement which began in Germany at the first decades of the twentieth century is often considered a revolt against realism and naturalism seeking to achieve a psychological or spiritual reality rather than merely recording external events in logical sequence. It expresses subjective feelings and emotions rather than reality or nature with objectivity. It portrays man in a state out of normalcy, confronted with feverish dream states in nightmare. Its manners are marked by what critics call a wild, anarchic yearning for irresponsible life and pure sensation. It is interpreted as the vain and futile expressionist desire for life as a sign of the artist's sense of permanent exclusion from the vital center of existence.

In drama, though the term is specifically applied to a group of early twentieth German dramatists, including Gerhart Hauptmann, Kaiser, Karl Copek and Ernst Toller, the Swedish dramatist August Strindberg (1849-1912) is considered the forefather of expressionism. Strindberg has laid down the main features of the chief principles of expressionism in his trilogy *The Road to Damascus* (1898-1901).⁷ These principles have undoubtedly widened the possibilities of drama and to a large extent it succeeded in making the twentieth century audience aware of inner drama that is more interesting than the drama that external life is. The interest is no longer in the development

⁶ M.H. Abrams & Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, (Cengage Learning, USA 2015), p. 226.

⁷ David Mikics, *A new handbook of literary terms*, (Yale University Press, New York & London. 2007), P.114.

the plot or character but in the expression of a soul swollen with tragedy.⁸ Often there is a rejection of the strong individualistic character in favour of the more abstract symbol. There is seldom an interest in cause and effect because the dramatist wants to convey his ideas through abstractions to portray crude violence and emotional intensity.

It should not be presumed that expressionism in itself is always a better technique than realism or other modes of expression. What ultimately matters is the vision of the playwright and his capability of creating a suitable medium for its communication rather than his interest with various techniques without anything to communicate. As such, Albee's interest was not the external vivid reality or the universality of romantic attachment to illusions; it was his desire to explore the various unconscious motivations of man and to explain some of the psychological mysteries. Nevertheless, under the influence of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Carl Jung (1875-1961) and his own literary responses, Albee deals with interests clashing and shaping the behavior and language of man to present such a suggestive play.⁹

The Impressionistic Allegory in *The Zoo Story*

It is a fact confirmed by many critics and scholars that the play shocked the audience when it was first performed due to the homosexual minor reference that was offensive and extremely unusual for its time. Later on, people started to realize the allegory behind the play and they started to appreciate the profound gist of its plot that is far from being only homosexual.

8 Annett J. Saddik, *Contemporary American Drama*, (London: Edinburgh UP Ltd), 2007. P.13.

9 David Krasner, ed. *Twentieth Century American Drama*, (New York: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), P. 18.

It highlights the actions of its alienated protagonist Jerry, who was seeking identity and recognition as a man.¹⁰

Historically, In the 1950s, American society was socially conservative and not as liberal as it appears to be today. Homosexuality was illegal and considered a mental disturbance. If an individual was revealed as gay, he was at risk to be socially not fit and totally condemned. On his side, John M. Clum states that *The Zoo Story* is "a homosexual love story set deep in the closet of a repressive society".¹¹ He adds that the play depicts "homosexual love as an innocent pleasure of adolescence, free from the tensions and misogyny of heterosexual relationships."¹² The significance of this reference comes as it reflects the play's homosexual theme as a part of general urban alienation. At several points in the play Jerry and Peter's conversation turns briefly to the pornographic playing cards. Like the other possessions of Jerry, this highlights a spot of strangeness. Moreover, playing "pornographic" cards instead of anything else may reflect a nostalgia for childhood; it at least indicates a lack of seriousness to do something worth mentioning. Jerry himself acknowledges that the cards are childish, and points out that, for many men, sexual fantasy is more gratifying than actual sex. Again, this is consistent with the interpretation of *The Zoo Story* as a homosexual allegory. Fantasy would have been a much more attainable gratification than real sex. But even if one downplays the sexual interpretation, Jerry's attitudes about the cards suggest that he is more comfortable with an imitation of life than with actual life. After all, the latter makes him feel like a failure, while suggesting that the cards allow him to fabricate his own fantasy:

¹⁰ Harith Ismaiel Turki, *The Caged Soul: A Study of Edward Albee's The Zoo Story*, *Harith Journal*, No. 40, June 2009, P.2.

¹¹ John M. Clum in <http://www.gradesaver.com/the-zoo-story/study-guide/summary-12>.

¹² *Ibid.* 9-12.

PETER: [*embarrassed*] I'd rather not talk about these things.

JERRY: So? Don't. Besides, I wasn't trying to pull your post-adolescent sexual life and hard times; what I wanted to get at is the value difference between pornographic playing cards when you're a kid, and pornographic playing cards when you're older. It's that when you're a kid you use the cards as a substitute for a real experience, and when you're older you use real experience as a substitute for the fantasy. (p. 10)¹³

As a protagonist, Jerry, is portrayed as an alienated creature who is dehumanized by others. The inhibitions and aloofness could have been caused by various factors of social detachment. In fact, a major subject in this allegorical drama is the lonely outcast who tries to make contact with another human being and who finally binds himself to the other in death. The term impression would be perceived as an idea, a feeling, or an opinion that one gets about something or somebody. This process occurs when a person has been motivated by definite incidents or situations.

The differences between Peter and Jerry suggest their discrepancy not only in stature and attire but also the type of life they lead. Albee states in the stage directions that Peter and Jerry's different worlds can never be redeemed. Peter is living a very calm and settled life, while Jerry lives alone, without a family nor friends:

JERRY: you'll read about it in the papers tomorrow, if you don't see it on your TV tonight. You have TV, haven't you?

¹³ Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*. E book retrieved from the internet.

<https://www.amazon.com/Collected-Plays-Edward-Albee>. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition, page number will appear after each quotation.

PETER: yes, we have two; one for the children.

JERRY: You're married!

PETER: [*with pleased emphasis*] Why, certainly!

JERRY: It isn't a law, for God's sake.

PETER: No ... no, of course not.

JERRY: And you have a wife.

PETER: [*bewildered by the seeming lack of communication*] Yes!

JERRY: And you have children.

PETER: Yes; two.

JERRY: Boys?

PETER: No, girls ... both girls. (3)

Albee makes it obvious that Jerry's sense of alienation springs from multiple reasons. Looking deeply into the nature of this character, one can perceive that these causes may be psychological or personal conditions, i.e. they are related to Jerry himself. They may also be social conditions related to the society in which the character lives. Directly or indirectly, societies may impose a sense of alienation upon its members.

Going to certain details of the plot we may confirm the impact of family and society on Jerry as a character who was an unhappy child in a broken family. This may reflect Albee's own uneasy childhood and his estranged relationship with his mother who remained unconsolidated till her death, "I was a very dutiful and a good son. But she never quite approved of me or forgave me for walking out. When she died she almost completely cut me off from her will."¹⁴ Jerry's mother was alcoholic who left his father when Jerry was ten years old. His father then died of an accident a year later. Jerry was brought up by his aunt who died on the day of his high school graduation. As a result, he feels lonely and lacks company. The two empty picture frames that he keeps

¹⁴ Bruce J. Mann, *Edward Albee: A casebook* (Routledge New York & London, 2004), 110.

room and his relationship with women which are restricted to prostitutes only build an image of an outsider who is utterly depressed:

PETER: [*stares glumly at his shoes, then*] About those two empty picture frames ...?

JERRY: I don't see why they need any explanation at all. Isn't it clear? I don't have pictures of anyone to put in them.

PETER: Your parents ... perhaps ... a girlfriend ...

JERRY: You're a very sweet man, and you're possessed of a truly enviable innocence. But good old Mom and good old Pop are dead ... you know? ... I'm broken up about it, too ... I mean really. (8)

Reconsidering Jerry's personal conditions, it can be noticed that Jerry's early childhood quirk comes as a result of his parents' disintegration. Jerry told Peter that his mother had forsaken them and had taken the road of vice: "good old Mom walked out on good old Pop when I was ten and a half years old; she embarked on an adulterous." (8) This means that his mother's separation from his father and her later death leaves Jerry with injury in his early life. Moreover, his father's death later on deepened his sense of being alone.

Back to homosexuality which is discussed once in the text; Jerry mentions his childhood relationship with another boy at the midpoint of the play is an axial point because he swiftly adds that he has since that time only had sex with women. Moreover, it confirms that it is an important component of the play's exploration of homosexuality. As a result, Jerry lacks a stable home and that leads him to lack the social integration from his community. He was afraid of the society when he was a teenager. He explains how he felt at that time:

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
 queer ... [Very fast] ... queer, queer, queer ...
 bells ringing, banners snapping in the wind. And
 those eleven days, I met at least twice a day with
 park superintendent's son ... a Greek boy, whose
 birthday was the same as mine, except he was a
 older. (9)

He was aware that he may be excluded from the society if he
 knew about his homosexuality. Moreover, he doesn't mention
 anything about having any feeling for a woman. The reason
 could lie behind his hatred for his mother and her promiscuity.
 At the end of the play Jerry is stabbed with a knife as he fights
 Peter to defend himself to get the bench:

JERRY: *[rises lazily]*: Very well, Peter, we'll battle
 the bench, but we're not evenly matched.

[He takes out and clicks open an ugly-looking knife.]

PETER: *[suddenly awakening to the reality of
 situation]* You are mad! You're stark raving
 YOU'RE GOING TO KILL ME!

JERRY: Now you pick up that knife and you fight
 me. You fight for your self-respect; you fight for
 goddamned bench.(16)

The scene is full of significance as it suggests that Jerry's
 purpose has been a reflection of repressed desires. As suggested
 by Millon that physical attacks are often the product of a very
 uneducated individual who is unable to express a reaction
 feels helpless to respond in any other way.¹⁵ Jerry's death is
 seen as a lesson to Peter and the society behind him about the
 danger of being alienated and not recognized by others. His

¹⁵ Theodore Millon, et al. *Personality Disorders in Modern Life*. 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004), p.533.

as he mentions may lead others to see on TV or read about him and know something about this accident of a man planned to be killed in the zoo:

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 ... you remember ... the face I told you about ... my face, the face you see right now. Peter ... Peter? ... Peter ... thank you.(18)

Hence, the inadequate relationship between individuals who are supposed to be friends is implicitly recurrent in Albee's plays. However, even in the essence of the absurdist movement, Albee wants to divulge the true insufficiencies, fears, and desires within these individuals' relationships, hitherto he does it in a virtually realistic style.¹⁶ From an impressionistic perspective, Jerry has committed suicide by throwing his body against his own knife in Peter's hand. In doing so, Jerry has left an impression that the unanticipated quarrel is the reason behind his death.

The most striking impressionistic fact about Jerry is that he is a victim of what is known as a distressed psyche. He pursues an outlet even in his relation with animals though the readers are not told about the actual cause of his existence in the zoo. Because of life complexities and people's rivalry to live, many external motives play a significant role in perplexing the individuals' thinking and behaviour. Robert Cavalier asserts that relationships are built when selves are disclosed to each other;

¹⁶ S. C. W. Abbotson, *Thematic Guide to Modern Drama*, (London: Greenwood Press, 2003), p.192.

when "we share with one another our needs, interests, and values in short what motivates us."¹⁷

Morally and psychologically speaking, modern men and women see themselves primarily as centers of needs and rights and only secondarily as centers of obligations and duties. The basis of morality is a belief that good and harm to particular people is good or bad not just from their point of view, but from a more general point of view, which every thinking person can understand. More importantly, each person has a reason to consider not only his own interests but the interests of others when deciding what to do. Consequently, one would be lost without friends since his triumph seems hollow unless he has friends to share them with, and "our failures are made bearable by the understanding of others. Even our self-esteem depends in large measure on the assurances of friends; by returning our affection, they confirm our worthiness as human beings."¹⁸

Modern American drama has been studied from different vantage points, usually concerned either with the theme or subject of plays or with the approach that the plays take to their subject matter. Additionally, the literary work has two poles, which might be called the artistic and the esthetic. Accordingly, the artistic refers to the text created by the dramatist, and the esthetic refers to the realization accomplished by the reader.¹⁹ As such, any drama cannot achieve successful literary work unless it stimulates the reader's realization.

The motives in relationships are many, including affection, laughter, intimacy, love, and companionships. Simultaneously, the threats in relationships, however, are almost equal in number.

¹⁷ Robert P. Cavalier, *Personal Motivation: A Model for Decision Making*, (Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), P.39.

¹⁸ Sommers, Christina and Fred Sommers, *Vice & Virtue in Everyday Life*, (New York: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, Inc., 2001), P. 344.

¹⁹ Philip Rice & Patricia Waugh, *Modern Literary Theory, A Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1989). P. 97.

uch as conflict, rejection, competition, jealousy and grief.²⁰ Indeed, the short time that brings Peter and Jerry together is not enough for the readers or viewer to recognize the actual motivations of each. In doing so, it seems from the impressionistic view that the playwright cannot forsake his absurdist technique.

Conclusion

According to the theatre of the absurd, Albee's *The Zoo Story* lacks plot and character development but it ends with death which has meaning by itself. This end deviates the play from being a pure absurdity as it concentrates on an axial point of action: if things happen, they happen for no reason and life has no purpose or meaning. Man lives for a while, tries to communicate and then ends with nothing. The sexual hints of the play offer a wide variety of interpretations. It depicts the chaos and moral perplexity in which man exists and highlights his alienation as a cause of external as well as internal reasons. From an impressionistic perspective, Albee adds new step of knowledge to understand what modern theatre is after.

Albee's play is not about an event but rather about an impression behind the tragedy of this strange relationship among people. This tragic allegory confirms once more man's awareness of his own troubles and his futile struggle against his own nature and circumstances that cripple his ambitions and lead him to nothing but death. The tools of death (poison, knife) are already prepared in this play to confirm that Jerry is psychologically ill. Part of the reader's impression has been framed towards Jerry's emotional crisis. Instead of poisoning himself, Jerry has poisoned his girlfriend's dog and instead of killing himself by a knife he proves that he needs someone else to end his suffering. Thus, he

²⁰ Joseph Forgas & Julie Fitness eds. *Social Relationships: Cognitive, Affective, and Motivational Processes*, (New York: Psychology Press, 1984), P. 220.

deliberately gives a knife to Peter and then he throws himself against it.

With the elements of expressionism that are concerned with what is spiritual and abstract, one can appreciate some significant tragic scenes happened with people. This type of existence is a result of the dangerous sense of deterioration of morals under the impact of the pressure of life and the change of one's beliefs and philosophies. The lesson behind the allegorical persona of Jerry is transmitted as an impression towards the audiences and readers as well. People should communicate responsibly and comprehend that they complete each other. Socially alienated people are part of their societies; therefore, the remedy comes from other parts of these societies not from Marxism.

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نحو رمزية انطباعية لبطل مغرب في مسرحية "قصة حديقة الحيوان"

بحث مقدم من

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تخصص آداب في اللغة الانجليزية

جامعة الانبار - العراق

المستخلص

تناولت دراسات عديدة مسرحية "قصة حديقة الحيوان" للكاتب الاميركي إدوارد ألبى لأهميتها في عصرها ولغزارة ما تمتلكه من مواضيع تستحق الوقوف عندها شكلا ومضمونا كنتاج مسرحي. تأتي هذه الدراسة كمحاولة لإضافة بعد تحليلي للمسرحية كحكاية رمزية تصل للقارئ من خلال الانطباع الذي سيتكون عند متابعة شخصية بطايا الذي يعيش حالة تغريب بين الناس. فالمدرسة الانطباعية التي تطرقنا لذكرها باختصار في هذه الدراسة توفر مساحة نقدية تفسر ما حصل في مضمون المسرحية احساسا وشعورا لا يتلمسه الا من لديه خلفيه ومدى معرفي أدبي كما تتطلبه نظرية التحليل التي اعتمدت الدراسة عليها وهي "نظرية رد فعل القارئ". تهدف الدراسة الى توفير فسحة للقارئ ووجهة نظر انطباعية عن ماهية شعور التغريب الذي سيطر على بطل المسرحية وما هي الدروس والعبر لهكذا حكاية تحمل رمزية عالية تجذب نظر القارئ او المشاهد لها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إدوارد ألبى - الانطباعية - نظرية رد فعل القارئ - الحكاية الرمزية