





# The Theatre of the Absurd and Psychoanalysis: E. Albee's *The Zoo Story* as a Study Case.

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## Abstract

This article aims at showing the link between Psychology/Psychoanalysis and The Theatre of the Absurd. An attempt is made to study the postmodern anti-hero in Edward Albee's absurd tragedy in order to show the way new thoughts, beliefs, and morals are oppressed by the old certainties of the mainstream cultural discourse. The study puts emphasis on one major psychological aspect-for instance **the transference process**- coined by Julia Kristeva to demonstrate the psychological obstacles, traumas, fears, and desires of the self in his never completed identity stability. This transference process should move through a three-dimensional temporality to ensure a well-balanced identity of the self. The first time is called **the linear time**; the second is **the zero time**, and the third is **the resurrection time**. In order to conduct this issue, I have proposed to analyze Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* as a sample of the postmodern struggle for achieving identity stability. As a conclusion, I have reiterated that unlike any other theatre of any other previous age, The Theatre of the Absurd-with its complex language and its literary devices- is much closer to Psychoanalysis and much concerned with an individual's inner struggle that seeks to secure a position of respect and dignity within the symbolic order of the world.

## Introduction:

This paper is an attempt to show the extent to which the **Theatre of the Absurd**, more than the Greek, the Elizabethan, and the modern theatres, coincides with some psychoanalysis concepts. It will comment and discuss Julia Kristeva's concept of **Transference**. The Theatre of the Absurd can be seen as the theatre that freed itself from the artistic conventions the Greek tragedians had implemented to this art. The Greek theatre or their way of writing made a deep impress on all western literature. They shaped and moulded the minds and spirits of the humanity as a whole. Being brief, straightforward and precise observers, they produced a penetrating drama which gave a real account of their life. Pericles once declared, "*We are lovers of beauty with economy.*" (Hamilton, 1948: 18) Everything for the Greeks had its roots not in mysterious and metaphysical world but in reality itself. Then, the Christian and Elizabethan tragedies as those by W. Shakespeare came to put emphasis on the human flaw and impose the removal of the tragic hero before any order is restored. Such destruction is often considered to be a divine one. During the modern era, the reassurance that religion provided in the face of the disturbing and unexplained questions of life and death did not exist. Modern playwrights documented man's universal frustration, defeat, despair, and sought to find its significance in the subjective experience. Chekhov, Strindberg, Ibsen, O'Neill and Miller depicted man struggling against his immediate environment, not against any strange and superhuman forces of fate. Arthur Miller for example says that "*the commonest of men may take on [tragic] stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest*" (Bloom, 1987: 79). There were already a kind of shaking off of the past usual adherence to false myths and a re-centring of interest toward characters with whom an audience can identify- a sense of realism directly drawn from Ibsen. However the difficulty of finding true happiness which characterizes all kinds of tragedy

has always been underlined. So the causation sought in man's real life, in God's wrath, or in the environmental forces (social, political, economic, cultural or moral) is abandoned later by the playwrights of the Absurd who acknowledged the importance of psychology.

The Theatre of the Absurd, which is associated to playwrights like S.Becket, H.Pinter or E. Albee, allows free experimentation. Ionesco defined the word **Absurd** as follows: "*Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose...cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.*" (Esslin, 1961: 23) The characters are incapable of exposing logical ideas for they are incongruous, unreasonable and illogical; they mirror the dreams and nightmares of their age. Actually, we can hypothesize that they suffer from a psychological incoherence as we will demonstrate here below.

The Theatre of the Absurd goes also back to antiquity from which it re-appropriates the **pure theatre** and **verbal nonsense** techniques. First, it does not rely on language alone as a means to express the profound levels of meaning. Thus, an attempt is made to perform theatre from movement and sound in the same way fools, jugglers, acrobats, dancers, singers and mimes used to do in archaic times (Ibid: 319). As for the second technique of verbal nonsense, it permits the tragedians of the Absurd to achieve a "*liberating effect by expanding the limits of sense and opening up vistas of freedom from logic and cramping convention*" (Ibid: 338). In fact, the Theatre of the Absurd, according to the cited definition, is a projection of psychological troubles into concrete reality.

Subsequent to what is said above, the Theatre of the Absurd interprets the absurdity of man's life. Man is faced with basic choices impossible to make because he is deprived of certainties. It is concerned by presenting the personal intuition of reality as man experiences them-the individual vision of the world.

## Review of Literature:

Anne Paolucci, in *Edward Albee: A Casebook*, underlined **the obscure contradictions of the characters' speeches**, and the fact that they seemed “*voices rather than personalities.*” She has also signalled the usual fashion of E. Albee who “*has mapped a journey into the interior through what appears to be a fixed point*” (Paolucci, 2003:21). For her part, Lisa M. Siefker Bailey in a chapter entitled *Absurdly American: Rediscovering the Representation of Violences in The Zoo Story*, has pointed to Jerry's desire to “*earn his marginalised story a memorable place in the larger narrative society.*”(Ibid: 32) And she added that, “*in order to bring a sense to his story, Jerry must find an audience for his tale. Jerry wants to be noticed...; and ultimately he wants to exert his control over those events.*”(Ibid: 37) Terry Otten has stressed on the “*inevitable cycle of construction and destruction, illusory peace and unending restlessness*” that “*has formed the pattern of human history.*” (Otten, 1982:174) To end, others like Zoltan Szilassy has suggested that “*Many view The Zoo Story as representative of all the problems that Albee would deal with later: the hopelessness of the American Dream, non-communication, cliché-talking, illusion versus reality, sexual misery, psychopathological of non-conformism, the near musical arrangement, and so forth.*”(Szilassy, 1986: 25)

Considering these cited critics' views that embody all the material psychoanalysts rely on for the conduction of their therapies, we can without doubt justify Julia Kristeva's theoretical element- the transference process- which is suggested for the discussion of Edward Albee's tragedy.

## Method and Material

For Julia Kristeva, the **transference process** occurs whenever two individuals are in relation with each other. There is *a to and fro of energy, desire, memory* exchanged between them; this can offset one from the other by engendering sickly behaviours like abjection or make them respond to one another in some way. In an article titled *Psychoanalysis and the Imaginary*, (Silverman, 1998: pp 181-195) Julia Kristeva has explained the transference process by concentrating on the three dimensional transference time. Thus, ***transference occurs along a varied temporality: the linear time, the suspended or zero time, and the interpretation or resurrection time of the imaginary.*** Such temporal process is experienced by the potential melancholy Western being- for instance, Jerry and Peter in *The Zoo Story*- before s/he is secured to the dominant cultural world.

**Linear time** is assured by *speech* which allows an individual to adhere to large narrative discourse. ***Modulation or vocal intensity, phonatory gestures, facial expressions, images, photos, and paintings*** mark the **zero time**, a time which shows the inner unconscious turmoil. While the meaning generated by the imaginary points to the **interpretation or resurrection time**, which represents the way out to the safe symbolic. ***“The imaginary”*** Kristeva says ***“will be able to help us clear the logical impasse where (the child) has been blocked.”*** (Ibid: 192) Kristeva also states that **the time of the imaginary** ***“is tortuous time which encompasses the non-time of unconscious, the tiresome repetition of eternal recurrence, the sudden irruption of suffering, which can assume the face of anger, and lastly, the bright spell of comprehension.”***(Ibid: 192)

## Discussion

*The Zoo Story*, set in New York central park, is a human encounter of two persons, **Jerry** the outcast and **Peter** the conformist bourgeois who suffer from a **communication problem**. **The opening descriptions of Jerry and Peter suggest that they are two melancholic or depressed Western subjects, for the first is *carelessly dressed* and that his physical appearance might suggest that *he has come closest to debauchery (immoral behaviour)*; the second is dressed in woolly cloths and withdraws solely to a park bench to read.** It is for Kristeva undoubtedly “*a depression*” which “*is characterised by the denial of the symbolic. Language does not count, your signification does not matter to me, I am not one of you, I am withdrawing, I am not fighting you like a child suffering from a character neurosis would; no, imprisoning you in my unutterable meaning is killing me.*” (Ibid: 187) But my comment will concern mainly Jerry, the post-modern anti-hero, who distrusts the conventional values and institutions; who is lost; who attempts to triumph over sadness, loneliness and alienation, and who makes efforts to have his inner traumatic experiences correspond to outer significant world. Throughout the course of the play, Jerry appears to seek territoriality, space and dominance. This means that he is retreated in his unutterable semiotic world; as a result of being at **the zero time**, he should travel the path of temporal categories so as to reach **the linear symbolic time** and be integrated and recognized in society. To succeed in this harsh psychological enterprise, Jerry should seek through **the resurrection time** of his imaginary to transfer his inhibition to the symbolic mainstream world by identifying himself to Peter, the representative of the history world which would permit *a bright spell of self comprehension* and self assertion in the mainstream cultural world.



## **1-The linear time:**

The play starts by Jerry's saying, "*I've been to the zoo (Peter doesn't notice) I said, I've been to the zoo. MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!*" which is the fixed point or situation E. Albee uses in order to travel to the interior semiotic world of this character. Along the play, Jerry does not say what happens in the zoo though Peter has incessantly wanted him to do. In fact, Jerry wants to narrate *a story* that would allow him to reconcile with the cultural world, Peter's story. Peter is educated, has a wife, two children, a T.V, cats, two birds, and lives by the richest side of the town. Peter's story belongs to **the linear time** Jerry wants to reach; and Peter as a subject personifies the other missing side of Jerry's personality/identity. Without such story, Jerry would never secure a position of respect and dignity in life.

Very early Jerry expresses this desire to adhere to the world Peter symbolizes. He insists on having *a talk* with Peter. He says "*Do you mind if we talk?*" he hopes that the talk would end his alienation. He never ceases to make use of intrigues, tactics, and vivid descriptions about his life in order to drive Peter's focus and interest. Therefore, he continues to tell other stories like that of the lady living on the third floor and her dog. As any reader of this tragedy, Peter makes this remark to Jerry: "*You're...you're full of stories, aren't you?*" (Albee, p.1991) Albee suggests that to perform this long speech on stage, the actor must use a great deal of action in order to achieve a hypnotic effect on Peter. In relation to this story, Jerry admits that "*now animals don't take me like Saint Francis had birds hanging off him all the time. What I mean is: animals are indifferent to me... like people (he smiles slightly) ...most of the time.*" (Ibid: 1991) He also describes the dog as a monster and plans to kill it. He poisoned it but it recovered. During their confrontation Jerry notices, "*...doggy friend. I came back in the door and advanced...I stopped; I looked at him; he looked at me...But during that twenty seconds or two hours (the zero time) that we looked into each other's face, we made contact. Now, here is what I wanted*

*to happen: I loved the dog now, and I wanted him to love me ...I hoped that the dog would understand....we had made many attempts at contact, and we had failed”* (Ibid: 1993-4). A love story. Julia Kristeva has said that **“these stories which structure the subject and thus create the conditions for linguistic categories are love stories”** (Silverman, 1998: 193)

Later on Jerry evokes **the reason of his visit to the zoo**, which is *“to find more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too...”* (Albee, p.1996) – a proof that he does not understand how things function in outward cultural world. By the end of the play, Jerry reaches to another level of identity construction, for he claims territoriality or space. He urges Peter to *“Move over”* the bench. And the play from then on evolves around this dispute. Jerry seeks even a higher position-one of dominance-than that of Peter because he wants him to go to another bench.

## **2- The zero time:**

This time is the one that would show off the person’s inner troubles, desires, and drives. Images, paintings, photos, or any special and personal effects would reflect the unutterable meaning of the person. Jerry’s **unconscious world** is reflected by his alienated neighbours, by his poor home props, by his old typewriting machine, and above all **by his small strongbox** of which he says that: *“has in it ...what? Rocks! Some rocks...sea-rounded rocks I picked on the beach when I was a kid. Under which ...weighed down...are some letters...please letters... please why don’t you do this, and please when will you do that letters. And when letters, too. When will you write? When? These letters are from more recent years.*

Peter. *About those two empty pictures frames ....?*

Jerry. *I don’t see why they need any explanation at all. Isn’t it clear? I don’t have pictures of any one to put in them.*

**These sea rounded rocks, the empty picture frames and the letters** carry a meaning / signification that is deciphered only by Jerry-no other person can measure their importance, for they

are not expressed in plain language. This is what Kristeva calls a marker of *the zero time*. Like the improvised operas of Kristeva to cure Paul's inability to utter a single word, these contents of Jerry's **small strongbox** "*carried also the meaning of the representatives of affects and instincts coded in (the objects)... which were more accessible to (Jerry), which were his element, more than the linguistic charm itself*" (Silverman, 1998: 188-9).

Another instance of the zero time is **the moment he dies**. *Laughing as best he can*, Jerry makes a very penetrating declaration when he says: "*You don't know how afraid I was you'd go away and leave me. And now I'll tell you what happened at the zoo. I think...I think this is what happened at the zoo...*" (Albee, p. 1999)

Jerry has orchestrated his death but only after failing to reconcile or reintegrate the dominant symbolic world Peter represented. Julia Kristeva writes that in such situation the transference process may lead to sickly behaviours- Jerry's death for instance.

### **3-The resurrection or interpretation time:**

This time is marked by the eternal recurrence or repetition and the sudden irruption of suffering in form of anger. Many times throughout the play, Jerry's **anger** suddenly comes out of him as a reaction toward all what Peter incarnates, whether values, morals, ways of life and social status. When Peter inquires about the place Jerry lives in, this latter has a vehement warn up. He says "*what were you trying to do? Make sense out of things? Bring order? The old pigeon hole bit?*" (Ibid, p. 1988) And again he **angrily** adds a bit further in the text, "*Look! Are you going to tell me to get married and have parakeets?*" (Ibid, p. 1990) In fact, Jerry longs to reconcile with the symbolic world of culture but his inner fears and apprehensions do hold him back. He must overcome this last obstacle, which is to accept the way life is socially organized. By the means of his imaginary, he must transfer Peter's values, morals, beliefs into his own self so as to found and occupy a territory in the outer cultural world. This

would serve to ensure his identity equilibrium. The third instance of the **resurrection time** is the already mentioned **bench dispute**. Like the never-told story of *being to the zoo*, the bench dispute symbolizes the eternal recurrence and repetition. This time Jerry sincerely pretends to have become another person (like Peter), for he declares “*Hey, I got news for you, as they say. I’m on your precious bench, and you’re never going to have it for yourself again.*” (Ibid, p. 1997) In his imaginary, the bench would refer to the unshakable cultural background which has engendered Peter’s personality, and actually Jerry believes to be able to shatter these old symbolic certainties. He is even ready for the use of violence to secure once for all a new cultural position.

At the end, the **transference process** engaged by Jerry in order to achieve an identity reestablishment has failed because he has used violence and also because Peter has shown a kind of resistance against the new thoughts Jerry attempts to impose. The dog also refuses to love Jerry. In reality all the friendly or love relations Jerry wanted to establish in the play have not been conducted to term. That is why Jerry kills himself by rushing into the knife. Jerry has never succeeded to endorse the role of the hero (Peter’s) while Paul, Kristeva’s patient, has identified himself “*with Pinocchio...particularly in the episode where the little boy saves his father from the jaws of the whale Mostro. This story allowed the child not only to dominate the voracious whale, but to cease to be the victim. Paul took revenge on the father Gepetto.*” (Silverman, 1998: 189) As a result, Paul the singer has become a speaker but Jerry the outcast has driven himself to death.

## **Conclusion**

It follows that discourse/language is a complex psychological phenomenon “*which cannot be reduced to the dimension of grammatical categories*” of **the linear time** of the symbolic. It comprises also “*the semiotic modality*” of **the zero time** which encloses all the desires, fears, inhibition, traumas, and the

psychical representatives of the subject's affects. (Ibid: 190) In addition to these two language aspects, **the resurrection time** "where a conflict arises and is resolved into an outcome" through the imaginary is also essential in generating and revalorizing a subject's identity establishment. A person must go through these three temporal stages in order to complete a transference process basically undertaken in order to found identity stability.

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