EDWARD ALBEE’S THE ZOO STORY OR THE MISERY OF MODERN MAN

ABSTRACT

Written and first performed in 1959 in the wake of On the Road (1957) that created the Beat Generation overnight, it was reasonable to expect that Edward Albee’s The Zoo Story would echo the malaise of post-WWII America with its spiritual vacuum and stultifying materialism. The two Eisenhower Administrations brought to America unprecedented prosperity along with deep moral impasse. Everything was sacrificed to Money: spiritual values lost their ground to materialistic considerations that deadened man’s heart and soul, spiritual decay set in with loneliness and misery for those who were hungry for human relationships, human contact and companionship, the Beat Quest “par excellence”.

The concept of “incommunicability” (l’incommunicabilité des consciences) was resurrected to express that loneliness. The Existentialist philosophers and writers popularised the concept and the theatre of the absurd made it its major theme as for instance. The Zoo Story is a powerful expression of that loneliness, that “sickness unto death”.
composer, resident in Italy. Diamond liked the play and sent it on to a friend of his, a Swiss actor, Pinkas Braun. Braun liked the play, made a tape recording of it, playing both its roles, which he sent on to Mrs Stephanie Hunzinger, who heads the drama department of the S. Fischer Verlag, a large publishing house in Frankfurt; she, in turn...well, through her it got to Berlin, and finally back to New York where, on January 14, 1960, it received American production, off Broadway, at the Provincetown Playhouse on a double bill with Samuel Beckett's Krapp’s Last Tape.

I read this last mentioned play and found that on two points, both plays are dealing with the same topics and belong together in the same Absurdist universe: the two topics being Man’s loneliness, and Sexuality. But they differ on the final outcome: if Peter kills himself, though KRAPP has thought of committing suicide too, he finally decided to live in the memory of past possibilities of happiness.

A few lines from the end of Krapp’s Last Tape in the French version will show the similarities of both plays, but also the difference.

"Je me suis trainé dehors une fois ou deux avant que l’été se glace. Resté assis à grelotter dans le parc, noyé dans les rêves et branlant d’en finir. Personne... Dernières chimères... Me suis endormi et suis tombé du banc...

Me suis demandé quelquefois dans la nuit si un dernier effort ne serait peut-être ... Assez! Vide ta bouteille et fous-toi au pieu. Reprends ces conneries demain ou restes-en-là. Installe-toi là dans le noir. adossé aux oreillers - et vagabonde...

... Ici. je termine cette bande... Peut-être que mes meilleures années sont passées. Quand il y avait encore une certaine chance de bonheur. Mais encore une chance de bonheur. Mais, je n’en voudrais plus. Plus maintenant que j’ai ce feu en moi. Non. Non, je n’en voudrais plus”.

Krapp accepts his misery, his loneliness; acknowledges even the fact that man is ontologically lonely, which the word feud, i.e. the excruciating need and impossibility of communication metaphorically expresses.

The setting of The Zoo Story is a public park (Central Park, New York) on a Sunday afternoon. There are 2 park benches and we have only two characters for the coming tragedy. With the story, apparently taking place in a public park, the title therefore becomes enigmatic and will remain so until the end: unless the author has at the back of his mind, the notion of society as a human zoo, which the body of the play does not bear out, or unless, as a critic puts it, “everyone entrenches himself behind iron bars making communication impossible”. Which reminds one of O’Neill’s uncomprehending Yank in The Hairy Ape.

The two characters are as dissimilar as possible; of course, if they were to resemble each other, that resemblance would have robbed the play of its essential dramatic tension. The elements of tragedy are present in the enormous physical and moral differences between both characters.

Peter (meaning rock, may convey a Christian symbol) is apparently a solid representative of bourgeois society with its values and institutions. He is a respectable citizen, a quiet family man with a wife, two (2) daughters, cats and two (2) parakeets as pets, as you would find in self respecting bourgeois households. Physically, he is a solid successful man: a young executive. He is in his early forties - not fat, nor gaunt, nor handsome, nor homely. He wears horn-rimmed glasses which are a sign of intellectuality: he smokes a pipe, not cigarettes, which are vulgar. He may be a member of either the lower or upper middle class. he belongs in the Establishment. In other words, and in Beat terminology, he is a Square, a regular guy, meaning someone who conforms to social norms.

Jerry: on the other hand is apparently a less successful and even a less reliable member of society; he strikes me much like Bereager in Ionesco’s Rhinoceros. He is in his late thirties but he seems already beaten up by life. He is not poorly dressed but carelessly, all the same. But what matters most in his depiction is his weariness. He is said to have once had a muscled trim and lightly body which is now becoming fat, and he is no longer handsome; he has paid a heavy toll to life and fallen from physical grace: he is a fallen angel, so to speak. And even his name and his sacrifice at the end of the play may evoke in the religiously-minded, the name of Jesus. I would say that as opposed to Peter, Jerry is a Beat.
He has been buffeted and beaten up by life.

But on the whole, *The Zoo Story* both in its atmosphere and treatment of language has all the characteristics of the Drama of the Absurd.

Professor James F. Miller, Jr defines the words surd and absurd as follows:

“Surd in its root meaning is irrational without reason .......In the Quest surd the irrationality lies predominantly in the Seeker, in the Quest Absurd, the irrationality lies predominantly in the world where he wanders” pviii (Quest Surd and Absurd Essays in American Literature, University of Chicago 1965). Given the nature of *The Zoo Story*, it is obvious that it belongs in the Drama of the Absurd. The Weltanschauung of the play is a very lonely one indeed with the two characters wrapped up in their solitude that the strange kind of conversation they try to keep going fails to break.

Edward Albee has succeeded in achieving the same goal as Ionesco and Beckett i.e. revealing the absurdity of life through language or the breakdown of communication.

That strong sense of the absurd starts with the very first words spoken by Jerry to Peter whom he does not know, has never met before, informing him that he has been to the zoo, repeating that information three times, each time with mounting emphasis. All along, Jerry refers to the zoo without ever telling his interlocutor or the audience what happened there. Albee keeps us expectant. The Bald Prima Donna or The Lesson and other plays of the genre are dislocations of reality that in a poetic image show us the futility and the irrationality of our existence and our metaphysical loneliness and estrangement as a consequence. The best description of our plight is given by Jean Paul Sartre in his *Nausea*:

Nous étions un tas d’existants gênés, embarrassés de nous-mêmes, nous n’avons pas la moindre raison d’être là ni les uns ni les autres, chaque existant, confus, vaguement inquiet, se sentant de trop par rapport aux autres. De trop...moi aussi j’étais de trop .......Je rêvais vaguement de me supprimer .... Mais ma mort même eût été de trop. De trop mon cadavre, mon sang sur ces cailloux j’... Je rêvais vaguement de me supprimer .... Mais ma mort même eût été de trop. De trop mon cadavre, mon sang sur ces cailloux .......j’étais de trop pour l’éternité.

This is a very articulate way of putting what Jerry is going to confusedly act out in *The Zoo Story**. He immediately makes us aware of this modern phenomenon of the isolation of man. In an effort to break the shell that imprisons him and to get free by connecting with other people (Peter here), he asks this perfect stranger if they can talk, if he can ask him questions. This is an awkward way of relating with people; he explains the drama of modern man in our modern age when we are afraid of intruding on others, breaking into their silence: he doesn’t talk to people as a rule, he tells us. We gather that his “conversation” is only utilitarian, stripped to the bare minimum designed to elicit the information he needs “I don’t talk to many people—except to say like: give me a beer, or where’s the john, or what time does the feature go on, or keep your hands to yourself, buddy you know things like that” (page 161). “Keep your hands to yourself, buddy” is a precious indication of his sexual life or more explicitly his homosexuality. It’s not that he doesn’t feel the need to talk—that would be unfair to him, we would say that he hungers for human contact but in a way, has to repress his desire to bridge the gap. However, that hunger sometimes gets the better of him and then he does depart from his self-imposed restriction for “in every once in a while I like talk to somebody, really talk, like to get to know somebody know all about him”(page 161). It’s this hunger for human contact that has led him to the park, to Peter with this abrupt opening about his visit to the zoo: there is aggressiveness, even a sort of provocation in his opening by asking Peter—whether he minds having a chat with him.

Jerry: “Yes you do; you do.
Peter: “No, really, I don’t mind”.  
Jerry: “Yes you do” (page160)

It is a matter of psychological interest to know how many times Jerry has referred to his visit to the zoo as if it were an “idée fixe” an obsession. In a 6 entry dialogue, he mentions the word zoo five times and then seems to have completely forgotten it:

Jerry: Wait until you see the expression on his face
Peter: What? Whose face? Look here; is this something about the zoo?
Jerry: The zoo?
Peter: You mentioned it several times

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** The Zoo Story in Absurd Drama (Penguin Plays, 1982)
Jerry: (still distant but returning abruptly) the zoo? Oh yes; the zoo. I was there before I came here. I told you that (page 163)

In the meantime, Jerry has been carrying on a senseless kind of dialogue, jumping from one thing to an unrelated one, breaking up what little communication he had been able to establish with Peter; so much so that the latter bewildered, disconcerted by this seeming lack of communication (page 161) remarks “It’s that you don’t really carry on a conversation; you just ask question” (page 163). Jerry’s loneliness is the kind that leads to neurosis and ultimately to suicide and the fatal end of their mock fight was of his own doing. His last words are tragically replete with loneliness and betray his decision to get rid of his life.

Oh, Peter, I was so afraid I’d drive you away { ... } 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 ... I think that while I was at the zoo I decided that I would walk north ... northerly, rather ... until I found you ... or somebody ... and I decided that I would talk to you ... I would tell you things ... and things that I would tell you. Well here we are ... you see. Here we are.(Page 184)

And here he is indeed dying at the point of his own switch blade and the things he has told Peter are about man’s pathetic and tragic loneliness. It is all to the credit of Edward Albee to have depicted for his audience in very few words what philosophers from Kierkegaard, Jaspers to Camus and Sartre have tried through their writings volumes to bring to our awareness. The roominghouse where Jerry has been living until his death hour is a microcosm of our modern world, the dominant note of the description he has given us is the utter loneliness of its inmates. The sadness of their twisted lives is what Jerry imparts to us. As he said, on the other side of his beaverwood partition wall, there lived a coloured queen who always keeps his door open, plucks his eyebrows with buddhist concentration, goes to the toilets with his Japanese kimono open; he never has any visitor. He lives all by himself. That is on the fourth floor. back. In the front room, there live the Puerto Rican family who entertain a lot but in the other front room, next to the Puerto Rican family, lives somebody he doesn’t know, he has never seen. He then tells us about the lady who lives on the third floor and who cries all the time:

I know because she cries all the time wherever I go out or come back in. whenever I pass her door. I always hear crying, muffled, but ... very determined. Very determined indeed (page 168).

Another prisoner of life is the drink-sodden landlady who would corner him with her sweaty lust. She too is lonely with her “ill-used” dog always in erection. Only Albee knows what he means by “ill-used dog” but this human misery that comes from too much loneliness is the landlady’s everyday experience that she dulls and deadens by drinking.

The woman is bad enough; she leans around in the entrance hall { ... } and when she’s had her mid afternoon pint of lemon-flavoured gin she always stops me in the hall, and grabs a hold of my coat or my arm, and she presses her disgusting body up against me to keep me in a corner so she can talk to me [ ... ] when she presses herself to my body and mumbles about her room and how I would come there (page 169).

So much loneliness distracts the mind and as a consequence, the landlady can’t keep track of her doings and is easily persuaded as Jerry tells the audience, she deludes herself for he has found a way to get rid of her by making her believe that they had had sex the previous days:

Love, wasn’t yesterday enough for you, and the day before? Then she puzzles, she makes slits of her tiny eye, she sways a little, and then, Peter ... it is at this moment that I think I might be doing some good in that tormented house ... a simple-minded smile begins to form on her unthinkable face, and she giggles and groans as she thinks about yesterday and the day before as she believes and relives what never happened [ ... ]. And I am safe until our next meeting (page 169).

Jerry confesses that his lying to the landlady is some kind of good he does in what he calls that tormented house because the love-starved landlady, would begin to smile with happiness for what had never been. She needs that illusion to go through, the drudgery of her every day life but her dog is as eager for Jerry’s company, however strange his manner of
company could be: first he is always in erection and will attack him (Jerry) whenever he comes home never when he goes out. Theirs is a complex love and hate relationship. First Jerry has decided to befriend the dog by offering him hamburgers; that failed; then he made up his mind to kill him, feeding him hamburger with rat-poison. That too failed but the dog has been critically ill for a few days. When he recovered, there has been a change in their relationship: the trauma of the poisoning has brought about a modus vivendi: the dog no longer attacks Jerry but just stands looking at him, long... with sadness and suspicion. We may wonder why that monster of dog would single out Jerry for his erection and his attacks. Is all this a way to connect with him and break his own loneliness? The modus vivendi they have come to is a sad one because made up of loneliness. But the incidents have created a sort between Jerry and the dog and now Jerry cares for, even loves the dog, as he confesses:

Then Jerry sums up, in a very dramatic way, the existential problem of man:

I had tried to love, and I had tried to kill and both had been unsuccessful by themselves. I hoped ... and I don't really know why I expected the dog to understand anything, much less my motivations ... I hoped that the dog would understand. (page 175)

Jerry doesn't know anything about the dog's relationship to the other tenants but that doesn't matter. His experience is illuminating for us; it shows us the lonely world of both man and dog*. Albee takes us a little further into his metaphysical considerations: we have to relate, if we can't relate to people, then we should relate to something, whatever it may be, a bed, a cockroach, a carpet, a street corner, a wisp of smoke, even to pornographic playing cards (page 175) but he has excluded the mirror that gives you back a reflection of yourself, he dismisses the roll of toilet paper too. The problem is having something to attach oneself too, something to care for, love, something that could give meaning to one's existence. We have to learn to care for things in order to learn to care for people:

Metaphysical anguish if, as Jerry recalls Nietzsche's dictum that God is dead which makes all of us orphans in a lonely world and life a kind of prison from which escape is impossible unless we opt out, as Jerry does here in the play, by impaling himself on his knife held out defensively by Peter. In this Godless world, we need to support each other and even absurd as it may sound - pray for one another. In answer to the landlady's invitation to pray for her dog, Jerry declares:

Madam I have myself to pray for, the coloured queen, the Puerto Rican family, the person in the front room who I've never seen, the woman who cries deliberately behind her closed door, and the rest of the people in all rooming houses everywhere (page 173).

As humans, we need each other, we need each other's sympathy -why not empathy - we need to

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* Dog is just God read backward and Jerry would be talking about God later on. This is an oblique way to introduce metaphysics into The Zoo Story.
establish this chain of solidarity and concern. Peter—though we must have associated his name with the mineral kingdom, not vegetable—is aware of that need for love alone has the power to link us together into a human family; love and concern we need to care for one another but in a world gone dead on us when does love come in? What are the chances of it being understood without what Jerry has called “teaching emotion”. As it is, in our daily life of indifference to each other:

We neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other. And was trying to feed the dog an act of love? And, perhaps was the dog’s attempt to bite me not an act of love? If we can misunderstand, well then, why have we invented the world love in the first place? (Page 176)

The pessimist calls Death the cure-all. In a positive attitude to life, love should be the cure-all. However, we are not sure we know how best to express our love with the certainly of being understood. In this world gone dead where we are all like zombies, what matters is that personal revelation as if by intuition, of the need for real incommunicable contact. Peter has understood Jerry’s need to communicate with somebody even if the latter is misusing that good will and generosity:

I’ve put up with you long enough. I’ve listened to you because you seemed ... well because I thought you wanted to talk to somebody. (Page 180)

Talking, that is talking sense but apparently there has been little or no real communication – formal communication we mean and in the breakdown of communication, this chaos, this lack of order, we have the formal expression of the theatre drama of the absurd. Martin Esslin puts it this way in the Introduction to Absurd Drama.

For many intelligent and sensitive human beings the world of the mid twentieth century has lost meaning and has simply ceased to make sense. ... Suddenly man sees himself faced with a universe that is both frightening and illogical—in a word absurd (page 13).

In such an absurd world where there is more suffering, both physical and spiritual, where man senses he is deserted by God, how does man handle his destiny? The alternatives are not easy, dying on dragging oneself along?

Jerry has been going through the gruelling experience of the absurdity of life and feels the need to come to its conclusion even if it’s not the right conclusion, it is his:

It’s one of those things a person has to do; sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly. (page 164)

He has repeated this sentence twice (page 170) this time in connection with the dig and it functions, as a preamble to his story: “The story of Jerry and the Dog” If Jerry has repeated that same sentence word for word in such a short time, it only means that he has been reflecting on it and has made it the conclusion of his life experience, an obsession almost. He has been to the zoo; he has seen the animals behind the bars, and people looking at them, behind the bars too: we are all behind bars. The zoo image is a striking poetic image of man’s plight; imprisoned in our daily cares, sharing nothing with our fellow men except on the surface, we are just like these animals in their cage, which image Jerry has called “this humiliating excuse for a jail” (page 175). Taking one’s own life instead of plodding forlornly in a lonely world is the solution to our misery, according to Jerry-Albee. Writing about The American Dream in the Preface to the play (May 24, 1961) Albee had this to say:

Every honest work is a personal, private Yowl, a statement of one individual’s pleasure or pain; but I hope that The American Dream is something more than that. I hope that it transcends the personal and the private and has something to do with the anguish of us all (page 54).

In Listening one of his characters said:

We don’t have to live, you know, unless we wish to; the greatest sin, no matter what they tell you, the greatest sin in living is doing it badly—stupidly, or as if you weren’t really alive, or wickedly; taking it in your own hands, taking your life in your own two hands may be the one the one thing you’ll ever do in the whole stretch that matters.

1 *“L’absurde”, according to Albert Camus, “ne délivre pas, il lie”
2 *In Modern America Drama: Essays in Criticism. Edited BY William Taylor. 1968
Jerry then had decided to put an end to his senseless life. In a world without God, what do we have to fear? Nothing. But dying alone, committing suicide in a roominghouse behind a closed door or crying softly in one’s room is no statement of the agony of living. But doing it the way Jerry did it at the hand of Peter, with Peter as a witness, is an act of creation, the “teaching emotion” that would create a new Peter suddenly shocked out of his mineral/vegetable life and powerfully projected into the full awareness of spiritual anguish. The ticking episode has served to bring out Peter’s latent homosexuality but the fight for the bench has brought out the animal in him Max Halperon writes about Peter and Jerry in “What Happens in Who’s Afraid ....?*” But in his sojourn among society’s outcasts in society’s underworld, Jerry has learned something Perry does not know, or has forgotten. For “sometimes”, according to Jerry, “a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly.

Jerry has come back to an understanding of man’s feral nature, his baser instincts, as we have been taught to call them. And Jerry knows that any genuine communication any real contact requires an appeal do the lower as well as the upper being ....So Jerry can make contact only by deliberately awakening the slumbering animal in Peter pushing him, insulting him, forcing him to pick up a knife in self defence ....Between the two animals contact has been established unforgettably. The beast in Peter, and by implication, the carefully “penned” “animals” in society at large, can no longer be disowned.(pages 130-131)

We strongly disagree with this interpretation of Peter’s awakening: it’s not the baser nature in Peter that has been awakened but the higher part, the feeling and thinking part. The vegetable-mineral part, in Peter should give way to the thinking-feeling:

Jerry: 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. Stupid! Don’t you have any idea; not even the slightest, what other people need? (Page 182)

And then he sets about telling Peter his move from the zoo. In fact, it’s not a zoo story but a pilgrim’s deliberate progress to death:

Jerry: I think this is what happened at the zoo. I think....I think that while I was at the zoo I decided that I would walk north ....northerly, rather .... Until I found you .... Or somebody ...... and I decided that I would talk to you .... I would tell you things .....And that I would talk to you would....Page 184)

Which words echo Jeremiah’s?

Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not”(Jer 33:3) Jerry has come and talked to Peter, has reached out to him and taught him . Now nevermore will Peter be the same man or fall back into his vegetable-mineral life, he has attained to “animal” life, a life of spiritual unrest and anguish

Jerry: And Peter, I’ll tell you something now. You’re not really a vegetable; it’s all right. You’re an animal. You’re an animal too (page 184).

Jerry had evidently planned his death but he didn’t want it to go unnoticed. He wanted it to be a STATEMENT, his yowl. He had told Peter that he would see “his” face in the papers or on TV. Whose face if not his own but better than that, his story is one of the staples of The Reader’s Digest “The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve ever met (page176). That amazing story of the dog applies metaphysically to himself for never will Peter forget that afternoon, the fight for the bench nor will he ever forget Jerry. But Albee’s solution is too pessimistic. It’s not because life is absurd that we should opt out in a cowardly way. Beckett’s two characters have all the reasons in the world to give up; yet, they do not, however strong the temptation

Estragon: Why don’t we hang ourselves? (Page 93) Vladimir: We’ll hang ourselves tomorrow. (Pause) Unless Godot comes.

Estragon: And if he comes?
Vladimir: We’ll be saved.
Vladimir: Well shall we go?

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1 Hermann HESSE. Steppenwolf, Penguin Modern Classics, 1972.

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Estragon: Yes, let’s go. (They do not move) (Page 94)
Yes indeed, why move when there’s nowhere to go? The ending though symbolically pregnant since it is to be construed as the awakening of Peter to spiritual anguish sounds too pessimistic nonetheless if we compare it to Krapp’s decision to go on living whatever the suffering and the loneliness.

Hermann Hesse, writing about his character Steppenwolf in the novel of that title declared:

But I would be happy if many of them (his readers) were to realize that the story of Steppenwolf pictures a disease and crisis but not one leading to death and destruction, on the contrary: to healing. (Page 6)

Steppenwolf, contrary to Jerry, would go on living his spiritual misery. As he tells us himself:

I knew that all the hundred thousand pieces of life’s game were in my pocket. A glimpse of its meaning had stirred my reason and I was determined to begin the game afresh. I would sample its tortures once more and shudder again at its senselessness. I would traverse not once more, but often, the hell of my inner being. (Pages 252-253)

As a matter of fact Jerry was another Steppenwolf to some extent. Here is what the narrator says about the latter in the Preface to the book: so, many are the affinities between the two men:

Some years ago the Steppenwolf, who was then approaching fifty called on my aunt to inquire for a furnished room. He lived by himself very quietly and a good many chance encounters on the stairs and in the passage—we should have remained practically unacquainted. For he was not a sociable man as a matter of fact he was unsociable to a degree I have never before experienced in anybody....I certainly did not know how deep the loneliness was into which his life drifted ... and how consciously he accepted this loneliness as his destiny. (Preface pages 7-8)

And about his records. Hermann Hesse had this to say:

I see them as a document of the times. for Haller’s sickness of the soul, as I now know is not the eccentricity of a single individual but the sickness of the times themselves. the neurosis of that generation to which Haller (Steppenwolf) belongs, a sickness it seems that by no means attacks the weak and worthless only but rather those who are strongest in spirit and richest in gifts.....They are an attempt to present the sickness itself in actual manifestation. They mean, literally a journey through hell, sometimes fearful, sometimes courageous journey through chaos of a world whose souls dwell in darkness, a journey undertaken with determination to go through hell from one end to the other, to give battle to chaos and to bear the evil to the full. (Preface 27-28)

Suck is the plight of modern man in an absurd world and such is the plight of Jerry who committed suicide in protest, again, contrary to Steppenwolf as contrary to Estragon and Vladimir and more importantly to Sisyphus. and Everyman who do not.

Apart from the metaphysical considerations. Albee has lightly touched on the homosexual strains in his characters, both Jerry who avowed his past homosexual relations and Peter who suddenly discovered his through the tickling episode with his hysterical laughter, false to voice and particularly these outbursts:

Peter: Stop, stop. Ohhhh no, no, oh, ha, ha, ha, what? What? Oh my
.......................Ah. ha, ha. The ....... Oh, ha, ha well ....I had my won zoo their for a moment with ... hee, hee, the parakeets getting dinner ready , and the , ha .ha ....
......................Yes, yes, by all means; tell me what happened at the zoo. Oh my, I don’t know what happened to me.(page178)

Alvin B. Kernam commenting on the homosexuality of the characters wrote this:
From another perspective, Jerry’s death is
erotic, Jerry withdrew from “normal” sex when he rejected conformist social goals and it seems mixed up in his mind with the other “normal” activities he despises. Occasional sordid contacts with women and daily encounters with his obscure landlady (another mammy) reinforce his queasiness. Peter’s domesticated heterosexuality is part of what affronts Jerry, and as he throws himself onto the blade in Peter’s hands, he spear’s himself on erect sex terrifying and fascinating because institutional. The irony is that Peter’s way of life has scarcely prepared him to perform this duty, and he would not have held the blade out if Jerry had not assaulted the root of his honour: property rights. Jerry is the more capable male in the real encounter, he plays the active partner.

This may account for the fact that Peter held this phallic symbol defensively:

(Stage direction page 47: “He holds the knife with a firm arm, but far in front of him, not to attack but to defend”)

Allan Lewis, on his part, declared this:

With Albee, the knife may represent a macabre love affair of latent homosexual relations, but it is also the meeting of two separate worlds in a modern society, held together at the point of a switchblade.

_The Zoo Story_ has been interpreted by some as a Christian play with Jerry in the role of Jesus Christ. His suicide has been viewed as Christ’s sacrifice, in order to redeem the damned. Allan Lewis remarks: “Jerry comes close to religious peace” and he quotes this passage to back up his claim: “I came unto you and you have comforted me dear Peter”. Is this a reminiscence of Apocalypse (Revelation) 3:20 “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock, if any man hear my voice and open the door I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with him and he with me”.

Some may reject this Christian construction of the play and consider it in terms of psychology, as a study in schizophrenia. That is the point of view put forward by Lilian Kerjan:

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_Le Zoo Story_ a pu être jugé comme une étude de schizophrénie et Jerry est sans doute un schizophrène.

**CONCLUSION**

Whichever way we consider _The Zoo Story_, it remains a challenging play, a representation of our human condition. “To be or not to be” or in Sartrean terms “L’Etre et le Néant”. We have to stand up and take up the challenge of our daily misery. As a final note, let’s listen to Camus in _Caligula*_:

“Les hommes meurent et ils ne son pas heureux”.

And in _L’Aveu*:

“Je dis que l’homme est un écartelé. Et pas seulement un écartelé, un crucifié. Je dis que les membres sont étiérés vers les quatre horizons, centre déchiré est le cœur même de la création”.

If God is dead as Zarathustra claims, then man inherits the awesome responsibility of the Universe with its existential and Pascalian anguish.

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1 *Quoted by Emmanuel Jacquart in *Le Théâtre de dérision*. Paris Idées/Gallimard, 1974, page 93
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