



RESEARCH PAPER

Logic within the Absurdity: A Deconstructive Analysis of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1959)

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ABSTRACT

The major objective of this Research is to focus on the multiplicity of the interpretations in language, context, and themes of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1958) while applying Jacques Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction. The reason to apply Deconstruction to this play is to expose the American society in general and the characters in the play in particular. Characters of Jerry and Peter are the representatives of two different worlds and demonstrates opposing values to each other. This background will help the reader to understand the significance of language and diction used by these characters. This is a qualitative research as this involves different literary articles and books to expose the social chaos and psychological displacement of American society. The conclusion of this research would help the reader to explore and examine the multilayered interpretations of language used by Albee in *The Zoo Story* while applying the theory of Deconstruction.

KEYWORDS Context, theme, Deconstruction, Interpretations, Displacement, Interpretation and Language

Introduction

The Dream of achieving greatness and power has been a common theme in literary works all over the world. In American Literature, however, dreams hold a unique significance due to the chameleonic nature of 'American Dream' that both helped sustain and complicate the American society. The objective of this study is to look into those aspects that deconstructed the American Dream, particularly in the context of Edward Albee's play *The Zoo Story* (1958). This paper is an investigation into the chaos, vacuum and disintegration reflected in Edward Albee's play *The Zoo Story* and it aims to expose and challenge the myth of order, hope and coherence played out within the American Dream. Albee's *The Zoo Story* has been used as a case study to explore and expose the reality and essence of the American Dream in Postmodern America along with its importance and rejection by its own citizens. The major objective of this paper is to analyze and evaluate Albee's perception of America and the American Dream while applying the theory of Deconstruction by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). The major reason to choose this theory is to expose the internal and external discourses and the intricate linguistic expressions that reveal the diversity of perceptions in the selected play. Deceptively simple language, ambiguous discourses, multiplicity of interpretations, absence of absolute meaning and the presence of complex and self-conflicting circumstances are the important features of Albee's dramaturgy. The philosophy of the American Dream which emerged from the American Declaration of Independence (1776), captured, and stimulated the American mind with expressions like equality and contentment. In this paper, American dream and Albee's play *The Zoo Story* will be discussed while applying Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) Theory of Deconstruction. The aim of this paper is to explore and expound the ambiguous yet multi layered expressions used by Edward Albee in his play. This paper

also focuses on the concept of American Dream to make the reader understand the present significance of American Dream in Postmodern American society.

Literature Review

Harold Bloom's *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979) emphasizes the importance of language and the deconstructive analysis of different texts. Bloom defines the theory of Deconstruction and its application to analyze the linguistic expression in the text and this source has been helpful to examine and explore the language in Albee's *The Zoo Story*. Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Différance* (1977) defines the theory of Deconstruction in detail and the relationship between the text and the language used in the text. Derrida also defines the different aspects of various texts and their deconstructive analyses. Micheal Bennett's *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of Absurd* (2015) explores the modern and postmodern American theatre and the themes related to Absurdity, social chaos, alienation, and malaise. This source helps the reader to understand the psychological issues and the chameleonic status of twentieth century American Drama.

Materials and Methods.

This research is based on qualitative research methods as various articles and books have been consulted to establish an intense connection between the Derridean theory of Deconstruction and the primary text *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee. Multiple secondary texts have been incorporated to develop an authentic point of view.

Results and Discussion

Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* was written in 1958 and staged in 1959. This is a one act play that focuses on the two characters, Peter, and Jerry. Major emphasis of Albee in this play is to demonstrate the exposition of an individual in the Postmodern American society. *The Zoo Story* revolves around a forlorn and miserable individual who fails to communicate with people and is unable to determine a space for himself. He is confused and in search of his real self. Jerry meets Peter in Central Park where Peter is found reading his book while sitting on a bench. Peter belongs to middle class family, owns a comfortable house, and has a wife and two daughters. Peter is satisfied with his life, job (he works as a publishing executive), and family and he usually visits the park to read his favorite books. On the other hand, Jerry is presented as a vagabond, a rootless individual, who wants to get acknowledged but is tired of his very existence. In this play, Albee presents two characters who belong to two different parts of Postmodern American Society which are quite alienated from each other. When Peter and Jerry meet in the beginning, Peter seems quite reserved in the beginning, but Jerry keeps pestering him with his questions; questions about his wife, daughters, pets (two cats and Parakeets). Peter is described as:

A man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses. Although he is moving into middle age, his dress and his manner would suggest a man younger. (1958, p.1)

Peter is presented as an individual who is quite successful and does not seem to have any regret in his life. When the play opens, he is found sitting on a bench and enjoying solitary moments while reading his book. Jerry, on the other hand, is introduced as, "A man in his late thirties, not poorly dressed, but carelessly. What was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was" (p.1). Jerry's appearance demonstrates his deplorable condition, isolation, and dejection. It seems that the story of *The Zoo Story* is not told but felt by its readers. The

title of the play seems dramatic, yet the content focuses on two different worlds which are unable to understand each other. Mathew Roudane quotes one of Albee's interviews that was taken in 1974, "he got the idea for *The Zoo Story* while working for the Western Union: I was always delivering telegrams to people in rooming houses. The models for all those people in the play in rooming houses. Jerry, the hero, is still around" (Roudané, 1987, p.196). Albee believes that Jerry is not the character, it's a type and he represents that marginalized class of society which is not heard and understood by the others. So, Jerry's utterances and his fractured and repetitive conversations with Peter expose the fluidity of language used by this specific class. The reason for using the word, 'marginalized' is significant because Jerry has a strong urge to communicate with people, yet he is in distress because there is nobody around him who can talk to him or even realize his existence.

In this paper, *The Zoo Story* will be analyzed to explore and expound the fluidity and undecidability within the context, language and characters while applying Jacques Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction. The utterances, expressions and the contexts in which Jerry shares the bits and pieces of his shattered life, have a strong sense of fluidity and undecidability. The theory of Deconstruction would help the reader to understand the linguistic, contextual, and thematic aspects of the utterances spoken by Peter and Jerry. Kristi Seigal defines that Deconstruction:

... is a reaction to structuralism, and it works against seeing language as a stable, closed system. It is a shift from seeing the poem or novel as a closed entity, equipped with definite meanings which it is the critic's task to decipher, to seeing literature as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single center, essence, or meaning. (2009, para12)

Deconstruction is to understand a text against its stable, persistent, and unwavering meaning. This is to destabilize and dismantle the meaning to make it different as well as creative. According to Derrida (1977/1979), Deconstruction is, "[the] destabilization on the move.... Destabilization is required for 'progress'....And the 'de-'of deconstruction signifies not the demolition of what is construction itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructivist or destructionist scheme" (1977, p.77). Derrida believes that the destabilization of language in fact makes language constructive and multifaceted. Language does not have only one meaning nor does this follow any kind of binary opposition rather it goes far beyond these restrictions to progress towards manifold meanings. It seems that language denotes the possibility of decentrality of meaning which makes language more challenging and significant. Lois Tyson asserts this point that post structuralism is a "reaction against structuralism's orderly vision of language and human experience" (1990, p.250). Derrida comments on Deconstruction, "It is just visiting" (1977, p.68). Visiting here means to understand and analyze the text without having any presupposed meanings and interpretations. Derrida asserts that Deconstruction is something unpredictable and irregular. He declares that "Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one" (1977, p.169). According to him, Deconstruction can be applied to any text, even to a dictionary and encyclopedia. While using the word, 'method' Derrida shows his reluctance to the finality of expression. According to Derrida, "method" obstructs thought process and prepares the individual to draw some conclusion and this procedure makes the deconstruction impractical. Deconstruction, according to Harold Bloom:

[is] post structuralist theory which was initiated by Jacques Derrida. It is a combination of the words "construction" and "destruction". Deconstruction does not know however, seek to destroy, rather it points out the limitless instability of language.

Deconstruction is a complex process because meaning is contextually determined and since contexts are always changing meaning becomes indeterminate. (1979, p.34)

What Bloom asserts is that Deconstruction is not about destruction, rather it focuses on the instability of language and indeterminate contexts. It is surprising that Derrida himself did not like the word, 'Deconstruction'. He argued, "Deconstruction' is a word I never liked and one whose fortune has disagreeably surprised me" (1980, p.22). Derrida did not like the word, 'Deconstruction' because he believes in the fluidity of expression and even this expression does not fulfill this purpose. Derrida took this word from Heidegger's 'Destruktion' but for him it meant to construct, destruct, reconstruct and deconstruct. For Heidegger, *Destruktion* is a positive process and it involves human passion, skepticism, knowledge and understanding as in *Being & Time* (1926) he illustrates that term *Destruktion* (my italics) has nothing to do with something negative, disturbing or deriving individual's rationality away from the nature of being, rather its main focus is the process of 'positive possibilities' to understand and comprehend the dichotomy between nature and being (1926, p.44). For Heidegger, *Destruktion* (my italics) focuses on something positive and rational while Derridean Deconstruction asserts the mutability of language and the chameleonic expressions of the contexts. The most important thing for Derrida is to be persistent in finding out the new interpretations of the text. He concludes that "there is nothing outside the text" (1979, p.178). Derrida believes that reading is beyond all the shackles and constraints of theories and methods as it relies on the perception of the reader and his/her understanding of the text. The major point of deconstruction is that it does not provide any conclusion. Rather it emphasizes the understanding of the text, its different strains and diversity within it. That is why Deconstruction is an ongoing process and there is nothing outside the text as it provides the readers enough space to recognize the text according to their imagination, not what writer wants to believe.

Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* brings forward two characters, Peter, and Jerry, who belong to two opposite worlds meet each other in Central Park and find themselves in an incongruous situation. Jerry wants to communicate while Peter tends to avoid him but fails to resist to Jerry's persistent and repetitious utterances:

JERRY: 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!

PETER: Hm? . . . What? . . . I'm sorry, were you talking to me?

JERRY: I went to the zoo, and then I walked until I came here. Have I been walking north? (1958,p.6)

Jerry urges Peter to communicate with him, to respond to his queries and to be attentive towards him. The language used by Jerry is repetitive, dull yet unpleasant. Albee has made his expressions both absurd and meaningful. In Albee's plays, the precision, incomplete utterances, unnecessary emphasis, offensive expression, and unpleasant gestures represent multiplicity of interpretations within the language, behaviors, and expressions. As Michael Bennett points out:

Part of the journey for Albee and his characters is the exploration of language and how the precision of language is vital for understanding our reality... Albee places extreme importance and value on language and the necessity for clarity and precision in order to communicate effectively and deeply with other humans. (2015, p.67)

Albee's language is deceptively simple, the complexity of his language is demonstrated through the disoriented utterances of his characters. Jerry's detailed but nauseatic descriptions of his landlady and his hideous looking dog reveal his repulsion towards his current circumstances.

JERRY: Let me tell you about why I went ... well, let me tell you some things. I've told you about the fourth floor of the rooming house where I live. I think the rooms are better as you go down, floor by floor. I guess they are; I don't know. I don't know any of the people on the third and second floors. Oh, wait! I do know that there's a lady living on the third floor, in the front. I know because she cries all the time. Whenever I go out or come back in, whenever I pass her door, I always hear her crying, muffled, but ... very determined. Very determined indeed. But the one I'm getting to, and all about the dog, is the landlady. I don't like to use words that are too harsh in describing people. I don't like to. But the landlady is a fat, ugly, mean, stupid, unwashed, misanthropic, cheap, drunken bag of garbage. And you may have noticed that I very seldom use profanity, so I can't describe her as well as I might. (1958, p.10)

The choice of words Jerry has for his landlady is quite repulsive. His expressions towards her demonstrate not only his hatred but ironically his obsession with her physical appearance. The words used by Jerry are deceptively simple as he hates and likes the landlady. He wants to kill her dog but at the same time he has started liking it. Jerry's choice of diction is of great significance as his intention is to expose the complex relationship between him and his landlady. Words uttered by Jerry are simple but demonstrate his failure to communicate with others. According to Albee, Jerry is not a special character, rather he is a common figure roaming around in the streets and in dire need of human communication. He is confused about everything. He loves the Landlady's dog but at the same time he hates him, "I loved the dog, and I wanted him to love me. I had tried to love, and I had tried to kill, and both had been unsuccessful by themselves" (1958, p.7). This confusion and undecidability in his expression expose the fluidity of language. Derrida asserts that language has unreliability and flexibility and Bertens puts forward this idea:

Derrida tells us that language is inherently unreliable. This means, language operates on the basis of differentiation. What enables words to refer to whatever they refer to is their difference from other words, not a direct link to their so-called referents? However, those words function within a linguistic system (a language) that never touches the real world. (2001, p.124)

According to Bertens, Derrida focuses on the unreliability of language, and it exposes the differentiation within the thematic and contextual structures of the text. Jerry's attitude towards the landlady, her dog, and his own circumstances. Jerry has long speeches while Peter utters very few lines. To Jerry, Peter is a consumer, and he is unable to understand the miseries of Jerry's life. As with the help of Jerry's voice, "Albee intentionally questions not only Peter's value but those of the capitalistic patriarchy into which American men are socialized" (Vorlicky, 1995, p.127). Peter has no idea of personal value and expression, and he is not interested in other people's issues and problems, "Peter tries to avoid talking about any subject that has real relevance, anything that has roots penetrating the carefully prepared mask which he presents to the world, and even to himself" (Zimmerdo, 1962, p.11). Jerry reveals his character while narrating the character of Landlady and her dog, his own family and while doing this, he unconsciously admits his failure of communication. As Marcia points out, "Albee's characters are fascinating but rarely likeable or even sympathetic in any consistent way; while unfailingly intelligent and articulate, they tend to lack any real ethical or moral compass" (2019, 129). Peter wants to

escape from the situation, but Jerry drags him to the extent that Peter murders him for the sake of his place. Jerry is the *Other* (my italics) in *The Zoo Story* who wants to be understood by Peter because Peter is the only character who listens to him. The language uttered by Jerry demonstrates his other *self* (my italics). Jerry blames Peter for having every luxury of life while he (Jerry) is deprived of everything and even has no one around him to communicate with:

JERRY: Why? You have everything in the world you want; you've told me about your home, and your family, and your own little zoo. You have everything, and now you want this bench. Are these the things men fight for? Tell me, Peter, is this bench, this iron, and this wood, is this your honor? Is this the thing in the world you'd fight for? Can you think of anything more absurd?

PETER: Absurd? Look, I'm not going to talk to you about honor, or even try to explain it to you. Besides, it isn't a question of honor; but even if it were, you wouldn't understand. (1958, P.12)

Jerry wants Peter to leave the bench for him, but Peter is determined not to leave that place as he urges that bench belongs to him. Albee represents two different American representations in this play. Jerry represents the deplorable condition of society while Peter is the representative of that class which is quite indifferent to social issues.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research has made some efforts to establish connections between Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction to understand the fraudulently simple language in which both characters Jerry and Peter reveal their original selves. Derridean Deconstruction would help the reader to explore and expose the expression and diction used by Albee while keeping in view the Postmodern and Postwar American Society.

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