

Death Drive: A Psychological Study of Thanatos In Albee's The Zoo Story

SHANG JAMAL MUHAMMAD¹, DR. KAWAN OTHMAN ARIF¹

1 College of languages – University of Sulaimani

رێکەوتی وه رگرتن: 8 ئاب ٢٠١٩، په سه ندردن: 28 ئاب ٢٠١٩، بلاوکردنه وه: ٢٥ کانونی یه کهم ٢٠١٩

SHANG JAMAL MUHAMMAD, DR. KAWAN OTHMAN ARIF © ٢٠١٩ مافی چاپ و بلاوکردنه وه

پوختە

ئەم توێژینە وەهیه بە ناوینیشانی " پالنه‌ری مردن: لیکۆلینە وەهیه‌کی دەروونی بۆ مەرگ دۆستی له چیرۆکی باخچه‌ی ئازهلان‌ی ئەلبی " لیکۆلینە وەهیه‌که‌که‌ ده‌ر باره‌ی رهن‌گدانە وەه‌ی ئەو بیهیواییه‌ی که نووسه‌رانی شانۆگه‌ری بیهووده‌یی به‌ تابه‌ت ئیدوار ئەلبی دوو چاره‌هاتوون له‌ ژیان و ره‌فتاری خه‌ لک پاش جه‌نگه‌ جیهانی‌یکان. وه‌ک ده‌رئه‌نجامی شاهیدحالی بوونی ئەو هه‌موو ویرانیه‌ به‌ هۆی جه‌نگ و نه‌مانی متمانه‌ له‌ ژیان‌ی مۆدیرندا، مرۆڤی دوا‌ی جه‌نگ ژیان‌ی به‌ بێ ئامانج و بێ مه‌به‌ست به‌ سه‌رئه‌برد. هه‌روه‌ها ده‌سیان کرد به‌ جه‌خت کردن سه‌ر مادییه‌ت و بێ سوزی و ئەنجامدانی کاری نامرۆڤیانه‌ که‌ سیمایی مەرگ دۆستی پێ دیاره‌له‌ رێی ره‌فتاری خود روخینه‌ر وه‌ک خود کوشتن و کوشتن .

مه‌به‌ستی ئەم توێژینە وەهیه‌ بریتیه‌ له‌ خستنه‌ رووی چۆنیتی کارکردنی مەرگ دۆستی له‌ که‌سایه‌تیکانی چیرۆکی باخچه‌ی ئازهلان. ئەم کاره‌ ئەنجامدراوه‌ له‌ رێی شیکردنه‌ وەهیه‌کی دەروونی بۆ ئەو شانۆیه‌ له‌ دوو به‌شدا. یه‌که‌م پێشه‌کیه‌ک بۆ شانۆی ئەلبی له‌ تیروانینی هه‌نێ ره‌خنه‌گر، هه‌روه‌ها پێشکه‌ شکردنی پوخته‌یه‌ک بۆ مەرگ دۆستی له‌ تیروانینیکی دەروونی. دووهم به‌ش توێژینە وەهیه‌کی دەروونی بۆ ساناتۆس له‌ چیرۆکی باخچه‌ی ئازهلان.

ووشه‌ سه‌ره‌کیکان: ساناتۆس، ئیدوار ئەلبی، چیرۆکی باخچه‌ی ئازهلان، خود کوشتن، کوشتن، جیاکرنه‌وه‌، نامۆیی.

Abstract

This paper entitled “Death Drive: A Psychological Study of Thanatos in Albee’s *The Zoo Story*”, studies the reflections of the despair that the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, particularly Edward Albee, saw in people’s life and behavior after the world wars. As a result of witnessing all the destruction that resulted from the war and the inauthentic nature of modern life, some people lived their life with no aim and no purpose. They started to turn into materialistic objects with no emotions, and do inhuman actions dominated by Thanatos, expressed through self-destructive acts such as suicide and murder.

This study claims that Thanatos dominates the life of the characters in *The Zoo Story*. This is done through a psychological analysis of the play, conducted in two sections. First, there is an introduction which presents Albee’s play through a number of critics’ viewpoints as well as a brief presentation of Thanatos from the psychological perspective. Then, in the second section, there is a psychological study of Thanatos in *The Zoo Story*.

Keywords: Thanatos, Edward Albee, *The Zoo Story*, Suicide, Kill, Isolation, Alienation.

Introduction

jzsb.univsul.edu.iq

Edward Albee wrote *The Zoo Story* in 1958, he found his own voice in what is one of the finest one-act plays ever written by an American (Bercovitch 45). It was not instantly received by the community. Albee talks about how his play passed from a friend to another, a country to another, from manuscript to tape to production then it returned to America. This indicates that it was rejected by the American society due to its subject matter and language (Bloom 21). This play covers a number of issues in the society including homosexual tendency, alienation, and broken communication among people around him. Apparently, Albee's highlighting of these issues and criticizing the lack of contact or malcontent was more welcome in Europe than America. Actually, there are striking connections between *The Zoo Story's* world and events in Albee's personal life (MacCaethy 4).

Sally Harvey considers *The Zoo Story* a celebrating storytelling as a means for human communication, in a way that these stories first create an opportunity for people to start a conversation and second to empower them to kill. Therefore, this two-character play discovers the connections between life, death and storytelling. Sacvan Bercovitch suggests that Jerry is depicted as the storyteller and the playwright, while Peter represents the inactive audience that need to be activated, fascinated and transformed. Jerry uses a variety of narrative and dramatic skills, from simple storytelling to metaphorical parable to physical action. Through these techniques he forces Peter to stay and listen to him. The language he uses in "the play is oblique, the words are aggressive, also there is grammar to the relationship that goes beyond the exchange of lexical meaning" (qtd. in Bercovitch 46).

The play starts at a point and accelerates till it reaches the climax when Jerry inflames Peter into drawing a knife and then impales himself on it. The dilemma of Jerry, the schizophrenic outsider, is converted into an act of sentimentality, particularly as the victim perishes in touching attentiveness and fellow-feeling for his involuntary murderer (Mann 33).

At the end, Jerry takes Peter's bench, then throws a knife at his feet and demands him to fight for his 'god damned' bench, through insulting and spitting on his face to unleash the animal inside him. After he picks up the knife, Jerry impales himself on the knife in a suicidal act. Mathew Charles suggests that "Jerry's death gives a way in brief, to nothing less than Peter's rebirth, a recharging of the spirit" (Roudane 30). Accordingly, Jerry's suicide is considered a heroic act, suggesting that he scarified himself for Peter to allow him to rejuvenate and recharge his spirit. In other words, Albee claims that "Peter has become Jerry to a certain context", which means they merged into one character (30).

Jerry decides to carry out his suicidal act with someone's aid to make it look more like a murder. According to the stories that he told about his early and current life, he lived somehow unseen or unnoticed, so he wanted his death to matter and make a difference, at least to be noticed. In other words, Jerry wants his story to make an alteration; he wants to earn his marginalized story an unforgettable place in the larger narrative of society. Albee entitles *The Zoo Story* as such to emphasize Jerry's attempts at storytelling, so if Jerry's story can somehow become real in another's mind, he can help end the alienation (Mann 34).

The Zoo Story's title functions as a clue to the double lesson that Jerry learned and wishes to convey to Peter. He has been to the zoo, to explore the human's expression of isolation in the caged

jzsb.univsul.edu.iq

animals, as a reflection for what he had experienced. He claims isolation as a means of obtaining immunity from complexities of relationships, but he realizes that the caged animal's vitality is a quality that is absorbed by society, and is sufficiently presented by Peter (Bercovitch 46). The play suggests that the world people live in is a zoo, and all the inhabitants are animals, which are separated by bars, some are preys like Peter, and others are predators like Jerry (Singh 21). However, each person has a civilized side through which one acts as a normal individual in the society, and a wild side that can be active at any time when one is insulted, under threat or in danger. Each inhabitant like the animals is separated from another by invisible bars or limits that these individuals set for themselves according to their social class, education level and their own beliefs and principles. Sometimes, these limitations are also imposed by the society on some individuals who act, behave or think differently, which may seem as a threat on the society's unity and normality.

The Zoo Story is an open-ended experience into which audiences (as well as critics and scholars) are gently poked (Mann 24). Tom Praideaux indicates that the play never loses its universal meaning of being a complete embodiment study of real people (110).

One of the repetitive themes in the Theatre of the Absurd is death. The set of correlated imagery to this concept is mostly reflected in the characters' unconscious behaviors and motives. Freud (1915) noticed that some events and desires were too frightening or painful for his patients to acknowledge. Thus, these events and desires were imprisoned in the unconscious mind, through a process called repression. The unconscious mind also includes human's biologically based instincts (Eros and Thanatos) which address human's primitive urges for sex and aggression. He argues that these primitive desires are not expressed openly, because they are rationally, socially, morally and religiously unacceptable. Therefore, people have developed some coping skills which include a range of defense mechanisms (such as repression, denial, regression, etc.) in an attempt to ignore unconscious motives and feelings. However, the impact of the unconscious is so strong that despite all resistance and repression, it is still revealed through dreams and slips of tongue (which is now known as 'Freudian slips') (Freud 117).

The primitive needs such, as life, food, and safety, are called Eros (Greek for "Love") by Freud. The opposite set of such instincts, namely, destruction, aggression and death, is called Thanatos (Greek for "death") or death instinct. Both appear in the childhood state and do not change through time or experience. Both are in constant conflict which can be a context of the individual's mental experiences (Habib 577).

Every living being, according to Laplanche, has an internal tendency to explore death, and the diversity of life, in all its forms. An individual transforms and evolves through undergoing a number of traumas or obstacles that make them reject to die, but simply, "to die in its own way" (107). However, there is an opposing force that may restrict this 'universal' death, which is the life drive or Eros. It contains a degree of optimism obtained through the progression of ideology's evolution. Eros tends to continually create richer and more complex unities, first on the biological level, second on the psychological, and third on the social ones. It also inclines to preserve and raise the energy level of these unities. Both Thanatos and Eros are internal forces, inherent within the individual. Since the ancient

jzsb.univsul.edu.iq

times, these two forces have been in a fierce struggle, a part of the original destructiveness is repelled towards the external world, which escalates to create phenomena such as aggressiveness, (Laplanche 108). This struggle causes one to kill another individual as a means of self-preservation. Nevertheless, if the death drive is directed inwards, it results in self-destruction or self-murder (Carel 22).

Another Australian psychologist, Otto Rank (1884-1939), who was one Freud's closest assistants, introduced the term 'pre-oedipal' stage in 1925. Rank is famous for the trauma-of-birth theory and the will theory. Through the birth trauma theory, he elaborates the notions of life and death instinct. He believes that life is just an experiment for discovering the secret of death. Therefore, the ultimate goal of life is to die, which proves the inevitability of death. His conception of death is bravery, kindness, and openness rather than gloom and fear (Lieberman 27).

Rank suggests that the process of 'ageing' has an unconscious aim that applies itself in systematic destruction of the body. The deconstruction occurs through all kinds of disabilities and diseases that eventually lead to death. This is projected as the natural Thanatos (Rank 197). Freud describes Thanatos as a static and morbid state that happens in the mind of a morbid soul which was brutalized and hurt. While Rank describes the morbid energy in terms of the man who is living his life, but who is self-murdered, self-killed.

Pentti Ikonen and Eero Rechartd claim that Thanatos is a determined active instinctual struggling to approach an experienced state of peace. It is an attempt to leave behind any disturbing or unpleasant experience. Death is the only form and means of potential state of peace and destruction. Thanatos's main intention, "aim and purpose is precisely peace in one form or another, attained in some way or another." (28). Psychoanalysis is not concerned with the biological demonstration of Thanatos, but rather with the psychic striving. Therefore, the Thanatos theory illustrates the variety of psychic events, in a way that some of them are destructive while others are not. It also substitutes of the experimental striving form by a state of peace (28).

Thanatos in *The Zoo Story*

Thanatos as previously mentioned is the self-destruction thought or behavior in one's unconscious mind. It is passively innate in each individual, and it is activated through life's difficulties and struggle (Freud 117). It is most obvious when one's life reaches a gloomy and hopeless point, in a way that one's vision is darkened. This section investigates *The Zoo Story*, for the spectacles, gestures, words and behaviors that indicate the presence or domination of Thanatos over the characters in the play.

The play starts with a physical description of Peter, the reader is informed that he 'smokes a pipe', which is an act of self-harm and considered as a slow suicide. This notion is suggested by Jerry when he sees Peter preparing his pipe, he says: "you're not going to get lung cancer, are you?" (Albee 7) The word cancer is mostly associated with death, or at least the process of dying.

jzsb.univsul.edu.iq

However, Peter denies and answers “No, sir. Not from this.” (Albee 7-8) Jerry mentions another type of cancer with a more terrible end, “What you'll probably get is cancer of the mouth, and then you'll have to wear one of those things Freud wore after they took one whole side of his jaw away. What do they call those things?” (Albee 8) Then Peter affirms through wondering “A prosthesis?” (Albee 8).

The physical description of Jerry makes the reader picture a fading man who “fall[s] from physical grace” (Albee 5) due to an exhaustion from life’s troubles. Jerry does not believe in marriage, which is a depiction of Eros, renewal and reproduction of life. This is clarified when he surprisingly states to Peter: “You’re married!” Peter confirms “Why, certainly.” (Albee 8).

This annoys Jerry and he expresses his disbelief through telling Peter “It isn’t a law, for God’s sake” (Albee 8). Through the course of the play, Jerry is depicted as an isolated character that lacks social and psychological support. Jerry himself confirms that in his speech “I don’t talk to many people ... But every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody, know all about him” (Albee 9). This makes Peter realize that he is the ‘guinea pig’ or the one that Jerry wants to know all about.

Singh claims that Jerry’s acknowledgment of truth is that men are islands irreversibly separated from one another. Sometimes interaction is made, but always with great pain and difficulty and never with any guarantee that it can be constant (23). After asking many questions and concluding many things, Jerry knows about Peter’s little zoo at home, the cats and the parakeets. He asks whether the birds carry any diseases, and Peter responds that he does not think so; Jerry is disappointed “That’s too bad. If they did you could set them loose in the house and the cats could eat them and die, maybe” (Albee 10). This suggestion is a depiction of his dark and evil thoughts which all arouse around destroying, damaging and killing.

Peter is reluctant to tell Jerry about where he lives, and Jerry strangely comforts him by saying that he is not going to rob him, kidnap his parakeets, his cats or his daughters. This style of provoking someone to reveal more about him is an awkward one; it is somehow predicting what the other may think would happen and confirming that it would not happen (Kane 171).

Jerry told Peter where he lives and his neighbors whom he recognizes. One of these neighbors is the colored queen who keeps his door open when he plucks his eyebrows and he has rotten teeth. This description of the colored queen appearance and behavior indicates his vulgar atmosphere and miserable living condition that makes one be depressed and lose hope in anything that can be better. The rotten teeth of the colored queen resemble the decay of the inhabitants of Jerry’s neighborhood. The other neighbor that draws Jerry’s attention is a lady that lives in the third floor; he knows that because she cries all the time he hears her crying every time he goes out or comes back. The crying lady represents another aspect of Jerry’s life that enhances the gloominess and the despair in his mind. Therefore, this resident/inmate is socially marginalized twice because of race and gender (Bottoms 21).

Jerry’s family died, and left him with some properties among them two empty picture frames. Peter was surprised that the picture frames were empty. This made Jerry tell him about his parents’ death; how his mother was adulterous and left his father and how he brought her ‘dead’ body back north between the Christmas and the new year. After only two weeks, his father ‘slapped into’ the front of a moving omnibus, and then his mother’s sister took care of him until she dropped dead on her apartment’s stair in his high school graduation’s afternoon. All these events shaped Jerry’s life

as an orphan boy with no mentor or supervisor that may show him a better rout to live his life and direct his tendencies in a more healthy way. Death shapes Jerry's life. He feels abandoned on all fronts. His questions, the rapidity style of his speaking, the grasps, reveal a man in the middle of emotional collapse during the last phase of his life (Balachandran 262).

Jerry also comments on the reason he has no girlfriend due to his short interactions with the 'pretty little ladies', as he cannot stand to be with any of them more than once and only for one hour. The only relationship that lasted for a week and a half was the one he was ashamed of with a Greek boy who had the same birthday but one year older. His different sexual tendency may have generated a feeling of estrangement in his soul, that the only happy or positive experience in his life is somehow odd and disapproved by the society (Albee 13-14).

Moreover, Jerry describes his ugly, fat, lusty landlady and her black dog; both are the 'gatekeepers' of his rooming house. The dog and the landlady remind the reader of Hades, the underworld, its entrance is guarded by Cerberus, the three headed dog which resembles the description of the landlady's dog whom he describes as "black monster of a beast: an oversized head, tiny, tiny ears, and eyes ... bloodshot, infected, maybe; and a body you can see the ribs through the skin. The dog is black, all black; all black except for the bloodshot eyes" (Albee 16). It is probably hard for Jerry to feel safe, if this is the way he thinks of the dog guarding his residence (Singh 23). Consequently, thinking of his room as a room in the underworld and himself a dead living being, Jerry starts narrating 'THE STORY OF JERRY AND THE DOG' to Peter, in a lengthy monologue, where he talks about his unsuccessful attempt to kill an aggressive dog through poisoning. Hereby, Jerry is exemplifying his self-torture nature which prepares him for his climatic suicide/murder (Balachandran 262).

He starts with a claim that usually animals like humans are indifferent to him, but this dog is not. From the first day he moves in, he is worried about this animal that snarls and then goes for him to get one of his legs. The dog repeats this aggressive behavior every time it sees Jerry going up to his room, but never when he leaves, which makes him think to do something about it. Jerry decides to kill the dog with kindness, and if that does not work, he will just kill it.

Actually, Jerry does not want the dog to die, since he is interested to find out how the murder attempt would change their relationship and the way they interact with one another. He loves the dog and wants the dog to love him, in the same sense the dog wants to interact with Jerry and reach him through violence, but none of it succeeds. However, after the poisoning, both become indifferent or stop trying to reach one another.

In other words, the death experience taught him that gentleness and violence have no result beyond them, however both of them together teach sentiments; and one loses whatever one has gained. For this precious lesson that Jerry learned he called the dog 'The Most Unforgettable Character' in his life. Thus, to start connection, one must dig under the surface to the level of pain and pleasure, to the animal principle. One must reach into the realm where emotions themselves are not sharply distinguished (Singh 24). Albee and many critics have declared that the story of Jerry and the dog is "a microcosm of the play," at the same time it contains the essence of his zoo experience and fuels the tension that Jerry hypnotically communicates to Peter (Bottoms 22).

“A permanent transient” (Albee 22) is the expression that Jerry uses to describe himself to Peter when the latter does not understand him. This is one of the most provocative paradoxes in the play, which suggests that Jerry is both a trapped prisoner and traveling parolee. Highlighting Jerry’s role as temporary and cultural criminal is because of his rooming-house, a penitentiary of the psyche, which he considers as a “tormented house” (Albee 15). Jerry designates the building and his possessions in terms of restraining attachments (Bottoms 20-21). Thus, his feeling of alienation has put him in a permanent transient state; in other words, he is neither living life fully, nor dying and moving to the other world. He is stuck in a waiting condition between the two worlds. As Jerry sits on the bench next to Peter, he starts telling him what happened in the zoo, and gradually asking peter to move over until he is about to fall off the bench. Jerry’s main purpose behind visiting the zoo is to explore the animal world, how they exist with each other and with the humans; that is to say, how they communicate beyond the bars. Jerry emphasizes on animals because they represent the basic instincts, and express them truthfully as they are. Thanatos tends to be shown clearly in them; when animals attack, destroy or hurt something/someone, most of the times they do it viciously and fully with no pre-thinking or any calculations.

Jerry’s operation of occupying Peter’s bench starts from the statement that suggests “It’s feeding time at the lion’s house” (Albee 24). When Peter refuses to evacuate his bench, Jerry insults him in every way, calling him a ‘vegetable’, slaps him and spits on his face demanding him to hold the knife and fight. Peter is asked to fight for his bench, for his parakeets, for his cats, for his two daughters, for his wife, for his manhood, and finally is disgraced for not being able to get his wife pregnant with a male child. That was the breaking point for Peter; he calls Jerry a monster and holds the knife to defend himself not to fight and gives Jerry a last chance to leave him alone. But, suddenly, Jerry impales himself on the knife in a suicidal act which astonishes him. Afterwards, Peter is forced to know himself and feel the kinship with the outcasts. Therefore, Jerry’s death is based on the principle that the paradox of human communication has been resolved through a complete commitment stimulated by fear, but dignified through death (Singh 24). Jerry thanks Peter for not leaving and for comforting him, and tells him what happened at the zoo, as he walked north to the zoo and found him or somebody and talked then this murder happened.

Peter’s ignorance is transformed to knowledge as a result of Jerry’s self-sacrifice. The teaching emotion is fulfilled through Jerry’s death. Peter’s sorrowful, “Oh My God”, pronounced seven times at the end, redeems his earlier thoughtless replies. Somehow, Albee suggests that only through death Jerry can break through Peter’s perfect world in order to educate him. While, Peter’s humanity fails due to a withdrawal into a comfortable, bourgeois life which denies the tragic; Jerry’s failure is due to his inability to preserve permanent relationships in his world which courts the tragic. Still, Jerry’s failure lies in his success; his death covers an affirmative existentialism (Balachandran 265).

Thereby, Thanatos derives Jerry into that monster who destroys himself and at the same time destroys Peter’s innocence and indifference toward the other people. His death turns him into a kind of a tragic hero, and the audiences involve in the catharsis of pity and fear (Singh 25).

Conclusion

Reading Albee's *The Zoo Story*, one can notice that from the beginning to the end the play moves towards one direction which emphasizes on the concept of death or the process of dying. Thus neither life nor the relationships would be the same before and after that phenomenon. This is proved through Jerry's stories about his parents' death, his aunt's death, his attempt to poison the land lady's dog and finally his own suicide.

The story of what happens at the zoo acts as wake-up call for Peter and may be the reader and the audience as well. It shakes them from their comfortable ignorant lives and obliges them to wide-open their eyes and see the lower class, the invisible people whose lives are full of agony, suffering and pain. All these activate their innate death drive and urge them to act in an aggressive, offensive or violent manner either towards themselves, others or both.

Jerry goes through a number of experiences that contribute to the rise of his instinctive death drive. This is basically seen through Jerry attempt to murder the landlady's dog as a result of his failure to establish communication and his provocation of Peter to the start a fight with the intention of being murdered.

Works Cited

- Albee, Edward. *The Zoo Story and The Sandbox*. New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1988.
- Balachandran, K. *Critical Essays on American Literature*. India: Sarup and Sons, 2005.
- Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Volume 7, Prose Writing, 1940-1990*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Bloom., Harold. *Modern American drama*. United States of America: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005.
- Bottoms, Stephen. *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Carel, Havi. *Life and Death in Freud and Heidegger*. New York: Rodopi B.V., 2006.
- Freud, Sigmund. *General Psychological Theories, Papers on Metapsychology*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963.
- Habib, M. A. R. *A History of Literary Criticism*. USA: Blackwell, 2005.
- Kane, Leslie. *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama*. London: Associated University Presses, 1984.
- Ikonen, Pentti and Eero Rechartt. *Thanatos, Shame and Other Essays on the Psychology of Destructiveness*. London: Karnac, 2010.
- Laplanche, Jean. *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Jeffrey Mehlman. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967.
- Lieberman, E. James. *Acts of Will: The Life and Work of Otto Rank*. New York: The Free Press, 1985.
- MacCaethy, Gerry. *Macmillan Modern Dramatists Edward Albee*. London: Macmillan Publishers LTD, 1987.
- Mann, Bruce J.. *Edward Albee: A Casebook*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Praideaux, Tom. "The Albee Attitude, both seet and sorrow." *LIFE* (1962): 110.
- Rank, Otto. *The Trauma of Birth*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Roudane, Mathew Charles. *American Drama Since 1960: A Critical History*. Twayne Publishers, 1996.
- Singh, Chakradhar Prasad. *Edward Albee The Playwright of Quest*. Delhi (India): Mittal Publications, 1987.