

AN EXISTENTIAL INQUIRY IN “THE ZOO STORY” BY EDWARD ALBEE

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*This research article aims to explore the theme of “Existentialism” in “The Zoo Story” by “Albee”. The story explores the emotional death of an individual who faces emotional struggle in the society. Research also highlights how the social challenges can lead a person to commit suicide. The textual analysis of this story shows how the major character Jerry struggles to find meaning in his life. It also highlights the role of society in shaping individuals' choices. The story is about an individual's quest for a meaningful life, happiness, and satisfaction. Emotional death is more painful than physical death. People only realize physical death or when a person dies physically. The researcher used qualitative research and textual analysis of the story is followed by Sartre's framework of existentialism discussed in his major work *Being and Nothingness* (1943). The research is significant because it highlights the significance of a meaningful and purposeful life because people are social animals.*

Keywords

Edward Albee, Emotional death, social animal, Emotional struggle, suicide.

Introduction

Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1958) is a one-act play about two characters, Jerry and Peter. Jerry is deeply lonely and feels ignored by society, which leads him to commit suicide. Peter is also sad but not as much as Jerry. Jerry desperately wants to connect with people and even animals, but both reject him and treat him with contempt. His loneliness and feeling like an outsider show the play's themes of emotional pain and the need for human connection. Jerry suffers because no one cares about his feelings, showing how isolated someone can feel even in a crowded world. Existentialism is a philosophy about personal freedom and choices (Fadell, 2015).

It says that we create who we are through our actions. Unlike objects like a chair, which have a fixed purpose, humans are born without a set meaning and must find their own. Søren Kierkegaard, known as the father of existentialism, said people have the freedom to shape their lives through their choices. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his book *Being and Nothingness* (1943), wrote, “Man is condemned to be free,” meaning we are responsible for giving our lives meaning. Friedrich Nietzsche believed that believing in God limits human freedom. He once told his students that without God, people could be truly free to take responsibility for their lives. Writers like Sartre and Albert Camus believed life has no fixed meaning, and each person must create their own purpose. People crave attention but are treated as transient “passengers,” deepening their sense of isolation (Turki, 2009).

In *The Zoo Story*, Jerry's struggle to connect with others shows this search for meaning. His loneliness is like that of a quiet student who feels alone at school, hiding pain behind a smile. Jerry feels unimportant and unheard, with no choices left. The play shows how losing hope and struggling to find meaning can lead to deep emotional pain and even death. Al-Subari (2017) argues that the play reflects a society where individuals are physically surrounded but emotionally disconnected, failing to establish meaningful interactions.

Research Question

- How are emotional death and other existential themes presented in the



play Zoo?

- How do societal factors force Jerry to commit suicide?

Objective of the Study

Exploration and deep study of the story “The Zoo Story”. It involved systematically questioning about existential inquiry.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research of The Zoo by Edward Albee published in 1958. The researcher used theory of Existentialism and used Sartre’s framework to explore different existential themes. Sartre’s major work Being and Nothing is the primary source for analysis. The text is also a primary source for research. Secondary sources include research articles or journals. The data of the zoo play is collected by reading the text that focuses on the emotional death and man quest for a meaningful life through the lens of existentialism.

Significance of the study

This research focuses on emotional death, a common but ignored issue that causes deep pain in our society. It affects teenagers, young adults, and older people, as society often forces them to follow its rules instead of living life their own way. Through the character of Jerry, the study shows how modern life’s pressures can harm personal freedom and happiness. This study is important because it brings attention to how society fails to support people’s emotional needs. It aims to spark conversations about this hidden problem and help find ways to support emotional well-being, encouraging people to live authentically and freely.

Analysis

The Zoo Story by Edward Albee is a modernist play. The play tells of the complexity of our modern day in which we are slaves of modernism. We lose interest in people due to a lack of communication. Due to this modernist age, we stay away from each other even when we are physically close. Because of this modernism, nowadays we face many harmful diseases because we think if we have a lot of money, we will be happy, but we don’t know it’s just fake happiness; real happiness is real communication. In this modern age, we are unable to talk to ourselves and we are careless about original traditions. We are unable to experience any person’s situation. We think we live in a modern era, we will progress, but in the end, we are emotionally struggling. The modernist play highlights the complexity of loneliness and fake happiness. We are emotionally detached from each other, and in the end, we lose ourselves; we have no sense of living in this modernist play. Jaf and Raheem (2014) further highlight the tragedy of detachment, emphasizing social disconnection as a primary cause of loneliness in the play. They argue that this isolation leads to severe mental health issues, driving individuals to view life as unbearable and death as peace.

Edward Albee was an American playwright known for his good work. He belonged to a rich family. He was born on March 12, 1928, in Washington, D.C. Albee was an adopted child; his parents were wealthy, but his childhood was not good. He felt detachment from his parents; his father was not a good person, he was involved in illegal work, and his mother preferred wine and dance. He got admission to Lawrenceville School, but due to bunking classes, his name was removed from the school, and then he joined a military academy. Albee started to trust in writing; then he wrote a poem (Eighteen) published in the literary magazine Kaleidoscope when he was 17 years old. Albee got success and came with his existentialist one-act play The Zoo Story by Edward Albee in 1958. He wrote many works: Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf



(1962), in which he explored the complexity of immoral relationships between middle-aged and younger generations, and he won a Tony Award for the best work in 1963. *Three Tall Women* in 1994 explored the lives of women and their complexity and won the Pulitzer Prize. *A Delicate Balance*, a drama, explored the theme of a wealthy family and its identity. He won many prizes. Sasan (2023) discusses existentialism as a philosophy that prioritizes the uniqueness of each individual, drawing on Nietzsche's rejection of traditional values like religion and morality.

The Zoo Story explores the theme of loneliness and emotional struggle. There are two characters, Jerry and Peter. Jerry wants attention and identity. Peter is sitting in the park; Jerry comes and starts talking with Peter, but Peter ignores him. He again tells, "Hello friend, I went to the zoo." Peter's feeling is bad because he is reading a magazine, and Jerry interrupted him; he doesn't like to talk to Jerry, but after some time, Jerry gets angry with Peter and starts talking. Jerry again tells, "I went to the zoo." Peter says, "Why are you telling me?" Jerry wants to share something with him. Peter says, "You look sad, are you married?" Peter does not feel good because Jerry is asking about his personal life. Jerry tells, "I live in a rented house in which a woman owns the house, but she is not good; she always tries to use me sexually, she thinks I am an object for her, but I always run from her. She has a dog. The dog also hates me; I try to make friendship with the dog, but he hates me like the landlady." Aberšek (2014) connects Sartre's existential philosophy to contemporary issues, such as modern conflicts and mental health crises. Sartre's ideas, rooted in post-World War II contexts, address physical and mental wars, including depression. Aberšek draws parallels with Socratic and Buddhist philosophies, which question individual freedom in the 21st century, aligning with the play's themes of autonomy and isolation.

Peter thinks he is a mad person who wants friendship with animals. Peter gets up with manners and says goodbye, but Jerry opens a knife and says, "I will kill you. If you want this bench in this park, you should fight with me." Peter is very surprised. Jerry gives the knife to Peter, and Peter also holds the knife for self-defense, and then Jerry hits himself on Peter and is severely injured, near death. He tells, "You don't know me, no one knows me, nobody likes to talk to me, tomorrow everyone will know me." Peter says, "Run away, otherwise the police will arrest you, and thank you so much." He cleans Peter's fingerprints and soon dies. The researchers underscore how loneliness fosters existential despair, sometimes culminating in thoughts of suicide (Jaf and Raheem, 2014).

This play shows in what way people are in depression due to a lack of communication; nobody likes to talk to everyone; it's the complexity of our modernist era "I have been to the zoo" (p. 1). Jerry wants to tell of it to Peter, but Peter does not notice. He is sitting alone; Jerry tries communication, but Peter doesn't focus. He is also confused and sad. Peter was listening but didn't focus on any talk of Jerry "Existence precedes essence" (p. 19-20). In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre tells that our actions show we are sad or happy, good or bad; in this way, Jerry feels himself sad, not because of Peter. Sartre says happiness is in your inner self; recognize it and enjoy. Kierkegaard (1843), and Warburton (2011), frame the play's exploration of individual freedom, faith, and the search for meaning. Together, these perspectives position "The Zoo Story" as a powerful commentary on human isolation and existential struggles in modern society.

Peter: "I am sorry, were you talking to me?" Peter shows he is a stranger; that's why Peter doesn't focus on his talk. People don't care about any person; they think they are like strangers. "Life is a useless passion". Sartre tells life is a useless passion; people think others are useless, they don't try to focus on others and don't try to listen to them. Every person and everything



has a positive and negative role; if you feel you are nothing, it means your values in your eyes are not what you want; you want the attention of others. Sartre wants every person to feel happy individually; if he feels happiness, he is burning himself. Every person has inner and outer happiness; if he feels the essence of happiness, if he depends on others, it's his weakness; nobody cares about you, you have individual freedom. Everything deserves its own identity; it's up to you what meaning you give to yourself. If he feels happy at the expense of others, it's just an illusion of being eternal. Peter: "I don't like the west side of the park" (L. 23). Jerry supposes he is not on the good side of the park; that's why he feels the west side of the park is not good.

Like and dislike are just passions. He focuses on just dislike. Whenever all the places are just ways of going and coming, Peter: "Why do you live there?" Jerry: "I don't know." When Peter asked Jerry why he lives there, he didn't know why he is living because he thinks he is nothing. Sartre tells we are our choices. If we are careless about ourselves, how is it possible others will care and try to know you? If you are living in this world, you must have essence; search for the meaning of your life. You should make a bridge for success in your life for individual freedom and know the meaning of your life (L. 37-38). (L. 79) Jerry: "You don't have to listen. Nobody is holding you here; remember that, keep that in your mind."

Sartre explores the theme of identity; respect yourself, then anybody will respect you. You should use your common sense. Jerry: "My BENCH!" Jerry: "Get out of my sight." Peter: "God damn, that's enough. I have had enough of you. I will not give up this bench... go away, I said." Sartre highlights the value of yourself; you all have complete control over your emotions. You should try this kind of activity. If you will be responsible, you will grow in a good way (L. 215- 217).

Conclusions

This research paper highlights the theme of emotional death and uses the theory of Existentialism to reveal the complexity of human essence. The protagonist of the play, Jerry, faces emotional detachment in this modernist world, but people do not realize this situation. Through the text, I have seen how much Jerry struggles with the loss of emotion and disconnection from society. Jean Paul Sartre states that human beings are "condemned to be free," and every person has the right to choose meaning in their life with individual freedom. As individuals feel disconnection from self, they lose desire and life. The findings of this research focus on emotional death in "The Zoo Story" by Edward Albee. Every person should take responsibility for their emotional lives. We need to be emotionally strong as individuals, build strong connections, and try to find meaning in our own lives. Emotional death is a critical statement of the human condition in the modern world, embracing freedom. Every person must find the true meaning of life. Nowadays, many people are facing these issues. Freedom can change your life if you make decisions with responsibility. "No one can be a greater thinker who does not recognize that as a thinker, it is his first responsibility to think" (Being and Nothingness).

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