

**Twentieth Century American Drama**  
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**Lecture - 37**  
**Albee's the Zoo Story Part 3**

We continue reading the iconic American play by Edward Albee title *The Zoo Story*.

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### Historical Context



- 1950s US.
- Politically and socially **conservative community**.
- Idea of '**American Dream**' was very popular among the masses. People assessed good life based on financial security and material possessions. The Play criticizes American Dream.
- In the play the character Peter represents American Dream. He has a well paying job and a typical nuclear family with a wife, two daughters, and pets.
- Homosexuality and queer were treated with contempt in 1950s US.  
E.g.- In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association listed homosexuality as a form of mental disorder.



We are halfway through reading the play and it is important to take a look at the historical context. It is to know what has been happening in 1950s in the 1950s in America. So, politically and socially we can also see this in the play very evident in the play it was a very conservative community in terms of its preferences, in terms of his its taste its expectations from the society from others .

He also finds that in the persona of Peter we find a character who is easily shocked . There are certain neat expectations, naive expectations that he has from the world outside. So, the ideal of the 'American Dream' was very popular across all classes and this is also something that we have seen in the place the other place that we have discussed; how the American dream, gave an opportunity for all individuals to aim for success aim for material success despite their backgrounds.

But we do find that it does not always work that way because the divide in very visible ways continue to be there and the this possibility that anyone can achieve anything, makes it more tragic and that also makes people feel like personal failures because there are certain divides, there are certain privileges which are always already there it's an uneven, unequal race to begin with and this promise of egalitarianism, this promise of which is held out to everyone presumably in an equal way.

It also makes them feel as if they are incompetent that they do not fit in which is something we saw spectacularly in Arthur Miller's plays, where individual characters are made to feel like failures to they are made to feel very inefficient that helps them in their functioning not in the professional sense, but also in the way within their families they feel less they feel like lesser men, they feel like less of a father, less of a family person and that affects them to the point of leading them to take their own lives.

We here find a similar kind of thing happening though in a slightly different way, here also the person is driven to a point where he decides to bring an end to everything including his own life. There is a way in which in the 1950s in this very conservative community which is also a facilitating the financial thriving of certain sections, there is also this divide where people look down upon the ones who do not have the kind of financial security and the material possessions which defined the American Dream.

This play critiques that notion those expectations and those expectations which dehumanizes certain sections of the society. The character played by Peter he represents the American Dream. Along with the material success that he reaps which includes an apartment in a very posh side of the city in New York City, he is complete, this perfect family his wife two daughters and two parakeets two pets and there is a typical nuclear family over here.

He does not have to deal with intrusive neighbors, there is nothing that he need to worry about the world outside because it is also an American Dream in some sense it is also about keeping ones family secure enjoying the security of the individual and the family and by extension the in a larger sense the systemic belief was perhaps that each individual takes care of himself or herself and each family enjoys its security and by extension.

It would promote the nation's security and the nation's financial and contribute towards the nation's financial and material wealth as well, but we are one certainly knows that it does not happen that way, it does not operate that way in a practical sense. This is why. We find that even in Adam Millers plays there are these characters who are really trying very hard to make their families secure.

But once they are derailed in some form in an ideological sense in the psychological sense in an emotional sense, this also becomes a race to which they cannot get back to. So, here the play complicates this question or this quest to the American Dream by bringing in an alternate sexuality, an alternate preference, an alternate mode of living which clearly does not fit in.

So, what about a person like Jerry whose sexual preferences are different, whose parents were adulterous in nature, who got orphaned at a very young age, who was raised within very irresponsible circumstances within which a child should never be kept .

It is know how does one account for his race towards this American Dream, how would he person like Jerry reach his destination of the American Dream given that he is competing with the likes of Peter whose life lives could be drawn out in this very neat linear trajectory.

It fits within the heteronormative system, it also does not challenge the world views, it does not challenge the belief systems, it is perfectly drawn out equation and so, it also needs to be remembered that even in 1952, the American psychiatric association had listed homosexuality as a form of mental disorder.

Here is an additional question of the skewed way in which body has been treated the preferences of the body were treat an as disorders, it is not just about the economic divide, just not about the class divide its further deep down about the kind of preferences personal preferences which also are mapped on to the larger equations of the society.

Jerry is also made to feel lot of shame, lot of humiliation for being the way that he is.

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## Anti-establishment phenomena in 1950s US



- Interestingly 1950s also marks the beginning of counteractions against the conservative socio-political climate in US.
- **Beat generation** – A group of young writers who protested against conservative ideals.
- Films began idolizing protagonists who went against establishments. E.g. - James Dean's *Rebel Without A Cause* (1956)
- **Absurdist plays** that went against dramatic conventions were gaining popularity. French playwrights were using this genre for social critique.



This anti-establishment phenomena began to gain a lot of momentum socially, politically and culturally in the 1950s, it began to reflect in a massive way in the popular culture. So, which is why if we read through the history of America the political and socio cultural history, the 1950s mark the beginning of a lot of counteractive exercises , lot of counteractive movements against the conservative political climate in US, the conservative socio climate in US, the socio cultural climate in US.

Because this was also feeding indirectly into the economic system that was getting promoted and they were all like constantly feeding into each other and the system in that sense was getting very suffocating for all those who wanted to do something slightly different, who are alternate preferences, alternate lifestyles.

The beat generation for instance what a generate what was a group of writers a very young set of writers who protested against these conservative ideals and maybe in one of the maybe we can try and read up a bit more about the beat generation which had produced poetry which is very radical in nature . They were trying to find a medium through which the counteractions could be exercised in a very non violent way this was more like a cultural revolution.

The films also began to be produced which idolize these entire hero figures like James Dean's *Rebel Without A Cause* in 1956 production, it was about a protagonist who challenge this conservative climate . So, we find that when Edward Albee is writing and

performing and staging this zoo story, it is also a favorable political climate, it is a favorable political favorable lesson there are a lot of these movements and American drama is also trying to plug into these movements in some sense.

This is also a time when we find is mentioned in one of the earlier sessions there is a there is much that the American drama seems to have been drawing from the European conventions, from the European traditions the Absurdism being one of them. So, we find that the dramatic conventions are also being challenged Absurdism and this entire play this one act play where something very random happens in a park bench its very survivalist in some sense, it is a very absurdist in some sense.

So, we find that this is being mimicked this is being replicated in very useful ways within American theatre as well because this was a convention, this was a kind of genre which was gaining a lot of popularity in different parts of Europe.

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- **Kinsey Reports** (1948 and 1953)- A zoologist named Alfred Kinsey travelled across US to interview about 16000 men and women about their sexual histories. The results shocked the nation as many US citizen admitted about their history of pre-marital sex and homosexuality.
- Jerry, in *The Zoo Story*, was eager to share his homosexual experience, which makes Peter uncomfortable.



So, just to give a background to this, in between 1948 and 1953, these Kinsey reports also came out where the results of which shocked the nation because a lot of American citizens contrary to popular belief admitted to their history of pre marital sex and homosexuality which majorly challenged the notions the value systems that the nation thought was inherent in it.

This decay of the 1950s also mark a movement from this denial towards it not this acknowledgement that, it is it need not be neat it need not be linear and need not be perfect in the way the American Dream or the American society had thought about things to be. So, in the play also we find that Jerry he is eager to share his homosexual experience, but that makes Peter extremely uncomfortable.

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## Major Themes

- Loneliness
- Absurdity
- Existentialism
- Miscommunication
- Criticism of American Dream



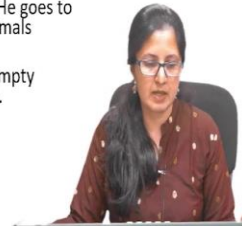
So, as we move forward with this play we will find that there are these major themes there are these different themes which are being explored such as loneliness, absurdity, existentialism, miscommunication and majorly the criticism of the American Dream which is an overlapping feature across these different themes.

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## 1. Loneliness

- Loneliness is one of the main themes of the play.
- Jerry is presented as the representative of loneliness in the play. His parents died when he was a child, he lives alone in an apartment where the landlady constantly fights with him, he tries desperately to connect with the landlady's dog as he could not form connections with human beings, and finally he opens up his life stories to Peter, a total stranger whom he meets at the park bench.
- Jerry's conversations reveal that he deeply contemplates about human bonds in order to learn to make meaningful connections. E.g.- He goes to zoo to observe how humans interact with animals and how animals interact with each other.
- Jerry's loneliness is starkly revealed when he says he has two empty photo frames but don't have pictures of anyone to put in them.



So, we will just try and address some of these and see various instances fitting in perfectly with these themes. So, in this play Jerry is presented as a representative feature from a certain class who also embodies loneliness and this loneliness is not something which caught up to him during a certain phase in adulthood.

It is not the result of any momentous event this was something that he was growing up with his parents his mother was also adulterous in nature his father led a very irresponsible life, we let get to know and he was orphaned at a very young age. He lives alone in an apartment and the landlady is constantly fighting with him and he is also trying to further into the play we will find that he is also trying desperately to connect with the dog the non-human being.

Because he has never been successful in forming a real connection with any real human being starting from his parents. Even in an intimate space we find that he has as a person as a human being he has been failed. So, there is nothing that he can relate to, there is nothing in Peter's world that he can relate to. The discomfort that Peter faces now it is that is also could be entirely lost on a person like Jerry.

Because he grew up with the within a setting where even the notion of family was completely absent. The perfection the world of perfection that Peter inhabits also expects certain codes of behavior from people like Jerry, which unfortunately they cannot deliver due to the circumstances within which they are placed. This loneliness is this loneliness

takes a very tragic form too when he talks about those two empty photo frames and there are two empty photo frames but there are no pictures of anyone to put in them.

These are certain objects certain images which are entirely taken for granted in the world that Peter inhabits. So, from the very beginning from the very outset we find that many of the things which are part and parcel of the ordinariness that Peter inhabits our luxuries, our privileges when we look at it from the point of view of Jerry. And what makes this play more enduring in a senses.

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- Peter too is lonely. He has a wife, children and pets in his house and yet he sits alone in the park. It helps him escape his dissatisfied life.
- Peter says about the bench in the park – “I’ve come here for years; I have hours of great pleasure, great satisfaction, right here. And that’s important to a man”.
- Peter has two daughters yet he wishes for a son.
- Although he signals his discomfort in conversing with a total stranger, he doesn’t leave the conversation because he is fascinated with the way Jerry could be vocal about his loneliness and general dissatisfaction with life while Peter is unable to admit the same.
- In the prequel titled *Homelife*, Albee has portrayed the loneliness of Peter in detail.



We find that even Peter is a lonely being, despite the world that he inhabits, despite the rich and diverse world that he inhabits which has all material comforts too, he too is lonely in some form or the other and right at the outset even Jerry begins to have this Jerry begins to cull out this information from him that he has two daughters, but he always wished for a son and that perhaps is not going to happen at all.

While Jerry can be vocal Jerry can afford to be vocal about his loneliness about the tragedy in his life, the irony is that Peter who supposedly inhabits a more privileged situation, he cannot afford to be vocal about his loneliness. It would be seen as an aberration, if he admits that he is lonely because that is not what is expected out of his stage out of his character, out of the setting where he is placed.



This play in that sense explodes many complex questions about identity, about the expectations and limitations of different identities and different social situations whether which these identities are located.

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## 2. Absurdity

- Martin Esslin, in his seminal book titled *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1962), includes Edward Albee in his list of writers who fit into the Theatre of Absurd. Edward Albee is the only American writer included in the list. Esslin says that:  
“Edward Albee comes into the category of the Theatre of the Absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism”
- *The Zoo Story* can also be considered as an Absurd play in that sense as it attacks the American Dream and rigid morality that forms the foundations of 1950s America.



Through this notion of absurdity, through the tool of absurdity, this play manages to strike at attacks the American Dream and the rigid morality that also had laid the foundations of American society particularly in the 1950s. Martin Esslin who is the author of the theatre of the absurd very celebrated work in terms of the theoretical frameworks that one could use to read absurd drama, he includes Edward Albee among the list of writers who can fit into the theatre of the absurd.

This is what he comments about Edward Albee, who is also incidentally the only American writer who finds himself in that list. Edward Albee comes into the category of the theatre of the absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism and this is a very keen observation, this perhaps sums up what this play is entirely all about it also perhaps this is an observation which could be extended to talk about the other place that we have discussed as well.

It is know how it attacks the very foundations of American optimism. We find that the American Dream is largely about this utopian optimism where everything seems fine not just the moment one decides to believe in oneself and the individual capacities are put to its fullest use, one is almost guaranteed as per this utopian dream, one is guaranteed

material and the financial success and reputation and good wealth and in almost permanent ways.

But at the same time one is also guarantee satisfaction in the family front. These two seem to be complementing each other it is almost like we go for the American Dream with believing in our capacity as an individual and both the sides the social financial security and the family security everything will be taken care of and this is the foundations on which perhaps the nation's dreams were built.

One critique also comes from the fact that a lot of outliers many who lost their lives, many who could not fit themselves into this framework which was not ideologically compatible to the world views of perhaps of the non-capitalist attitudes .

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- The Absurdism of the play stems from Jerry's dialogues.
- He defies social conventions. He abruptly starts telling long complicated stories that include his attempted murder of a dog and his homosexual experience. He shares these deeply private stories with a total stranger with seemingly no apparent reason.
- This act seems absurd because Jerry speaks the truth in a society which is afraid of the truth.
- Jerry's personality and dialogues seems more absurd when placed next to the conventional nature of Peter.



We will notice that the absurdism is largely located in the way Jerry speaks. Jerry is the embodiment of this dissatisfaction and this absurdism. He is the character who can afford to sound absurdist over here because a character like Peter he is very sorted, he is placed in such ways that there are lot of limitations in his speech as well he cannot sound as free as Jerry sounds. Jerry is a character who defines social defies social conventions, he does not there is something very outlierish about him in terms of the quality of a social life.

There are very few expectations from him and that also makes him freer he is not even Peter does not expect him to stick to the conventions that he is used to otherwise socially,

which is why he starts telling a lot of long and long and complicated stories which are of little relevance in a social setting but it brings out the tragedy which foregrounds the tragedy given that he is sharing.

These very deeply private stories with a total stranger and for no reason there is no trigger to this conversation, it is all very random it is a randomness which accentuates the tragedy of this as well and this absurdism that the tragedy in fact, gets in some form it becomes very matter of fact within this absurdist framework because he is in this act play what Jerry is being enabled to do by the author by this absurdist setting.

He is been unable to speak the truth and this is a society which is afraid of the truth. Despite the way in which Peter is placed as a man, as a family person as a career oriented successful New York based American.

We find that he is the discomfort also comes from some fear, he is scared of not just speaking the truth, he is also scared of encountering truth from others because this utopian pessimism sorry this utopian optimism on which the foundations of American society are laid particularly during that period in society that also does not enable them to address certain kinds of fears it does not enable them to acknowledge certain kinds of truths certain kinds of realities.

Jerry's personality if these two characters they are like chalk and cheese over here and the absurdity the level of absurdity also gets heightened because of the nature of this contrast which Jerry keeps doing this at the beginning of every story the every little detail he will graphically give details of how absurdly located his own apartment is. In contrast to the neat tidy organized way in which Peter's life could be described his wife two kids and two pets.