

Twentieth Century American Drama
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Lecture - 39
Albee's the Zoo Story Part 5

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The Zoo Story

Edward Albee



This is on Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*. As mentioned in one of the earlier sessions, this play has a universal appeal. There is a way in which it would begin the largest setting would fit in very well within the non-American situation as well. So, this play incidentally was premiered in Berlin at the Werkstatt Theatre.

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The contrasts

- Peter's 'normal' family vs. Jerry's dysfunctional family
- Peter's swanky upper-middleclassness vs. Jerry's poverty
- Peter's order and routine vs. Jerry's messy eccentricity
- Peter's propriety vs. Jerry's uncomfortable truths
- Peter's life vs. Jerry's death



We continue to look at some of the major themes, some of the major frameworks through which we can analyze this the difference between Peter's and Jerry's systems as individual as people who are embedded within socio-cultural frameworks.

We find these peculiar contrasts at work. We can find that this is quite relatable not just within this setting of this play, there is a larger way in which we can connect this to different other contexts as well. Peter's normal family; normal in the sense of there is a wife, two kids, two pets. He works in the publishing sector, he we find that his normalcy the seeming normalcy of his family may be contrasted with Jerry's dysfunctional family.

We did take a detailed look at how Jerry presents his own family. And it is entirely dysfunctional. There is almost everything which is part and parcel of his life, and it has growing up, has never been a smooth affair, there is adultery, there is a suicide, and there is a family who cannot take care of even children. There is poverty as well. So, in that context, we also see another major difference.

We find that the way Peter and Jerry they project themselves, they talk about their situations, they introduce themselves. Even their body language, it reflects the swanky upper middleclassness in Peter's self-versus Jerry's poverty. It reflects in his look in the way his he presents his appearance, his speech. It is very deeply seated in this economic divide.

The order that Peter's life is used to, the way he occupies a certain position in the bench and he also talks about how this has been a routine for him. The way he holds the book, and the way he is going about his measured words, there is a plan and a routine and a system within which everything could be located.

This may be compared with Jessy's, this may be compared with her Jerry's messy eccentricity. There is an eccentric quality about his language about the way he presents himself about the randomness with which he approaches Peter. There are also their social behavior, the social codes that they apply in language in their body language, and the way they engage with strangers everything is very different.

Peter comes across as an individual who is deeply whose sense of propriety is exactly in place. Jerry when he begins to talk about his own life that comes across his very impropriety, very inappropriate because his life is also about uncomfortable truths; it is also about things which are not accepted not acceptable within the normal American system.

In the end, there is this larger contrast as well. Jerry's, Peter's life is preserved intact vis-a-vis Jerry's death. In fact, Peter's life also assumes a kind of validity that it never had before, a certain kind of an adventure that it never had before. He also becomes more like a living being than a vegetable as Jerry also puts it towards the end through Jerry's death. So, it is in these contrasts that we have also been trying to read this play.

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Language

- Absurd
- We never get to know what actually happens at the zoo!
- Poor communication – very deliberate
- Language = confusion and discomfort NOT communication
- Connection established at death



If we take a closer look the kind of language used over here, it is very absurd, and we never really get to know the title of the play is *The Zoo Story*. But as we never really get to know what actually happens at the zoo. It is more like a conversation starter for Jerry. He keeps telling about “I have to tell you about what happened at the zoo”. Every story seems to be in an interlude towards a prelude towards what happened at the zoo.

There is very poor communication, this entire system which is very absurd language is the source of confusion and discomfort here, it does not connect, it does not operate as a bridge, it does not communicate. The only connection that both of them have are the connections in terms of the bodily connections so to speak, Peter begins to feel liberated a bit when Jerry’s tickling him. So, only in these in the context of such very inappropriate gestures we find that they are able to connect with each other.

There is an absence of communication and absurdity which emerges from that the entire play needs to be read within that as well. The only connection that they eventually managed to establish happens only at the time of their death. There is no conversation at that point, just random exchanges, and there is some a frenzy at that time. There is shock in the bubble dormant.

It sums up what the play is entirely or entirely about if we go through if we read through the play closely again, we find that it is impossible to find one strand of conversation over there. Sometimes there is even a lack of conversations just an exchange of words which causes lot of confusion and a lot of discomfort and the connection becomes possible as mentioned only at the end.

And it almost as if it is almost as if Jerry is driven to that point to that point of connecting through death because there is absolutely no way in which he connect they could connect through the other means.

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The absurdity



- Sudden and arbitrary conversation(?)
- Sudden and arbitrary death
- Jerry dies for no reason, Peter left shocked and baffled



This absurdity can be seen as this sudden and arbitrary conversation, conversation or the lack of it. The same way at the ending is almost like a parody, there is a sudden and arbitrary death just like Jerry started this conversation in a very arbitrary way in a without any context. We find that the death also happens without much of a context. It is very sudden, it is very arbitrary.

It is entirely a futile to look for a reason, to look for a context, to try and understand why this happened. The play in that sense is also teasing the reader because our tendency as a reader is also to look for a reason to find the rationale behind the various actions. This beats rationality in every way, this challenges the frontiers of what we consider as rational or irrational. Jerry dies for no reason. This death here does not arrive because of something, death here does not happen because something else happened before.

So, the before and after that we are normally used to in conventional storytelling is entirely absent over here. Peter just like the reader is left shocked and baffled at the end of it, trying to make sense of it.

In fact, Jerry even articulates this at some point in the play asking the reader as well as Peter. “Are you trying to make sense of this? Is your mission this innate tendency in Peter’s classroom society?” We try to read the plays or you trying to make sense of these random things because there is no sense at all.

We find that the absurdity is there ok getting performed to the core. This is another say waiting for go the moment where whatever happens there is nothing which is happening, and there is a notion of something about to happen. There is a forced kind of action, a forced kind of murder which happens over there. The death here almost becomes like a, the death here almost becomes like a sacrifice as mentioned in the earlier session.

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Sigmund Freud

- Undertones of sexuality



There are lot of undertones of sexuality. The fact that Jerry is Jerry cannot disclose his sexuality. He does not even utter the word homosexual. He spells it out. There is a lot of trauma, there is a lot of shame behind that identity. He is hiding behind many things we find that there is perhaps an inhibition from Peter side to engage with.

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PETER: [lightly, by reflex] Ha, ha.
JERRY: [after a slight pause] But not due north.
PETER: I ... well, no, not due north; but, we ... call it north. It's northerly.
JERRY: [watches as PETER, anxious to dismiss him, prepares his pipe] Well, boy, you're not going to get lung cancer, are you?
PETER: [looks up, a little annoyed, then smiles] No, sir. Not from this.
JERRY: No, sir. 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 ?
PETER: [uncomfortable] A prosthesis?
JERRY: The very thing! A prosthesis. You're an educated man, aren't you ? Are you a doctor ?
PETER: Oh, no; no. I read about it somewhere: Time magazine, I think. [He turns to his book.]
JERRY: Well, Time magazine isn't for blockheads.
PETER: No, I suppose not.
JERRY: [after a pause] Boy, I'm glad that's Fifth Avenue there.
PETER: [vaguely] Yes .
JERRY: I don't like the west side of the park much.
PETER: Oh? [Then, slightly wary, but interested] Why?
JERRY: [offhand] I don't know.



In the play, we can find right at the outset, there is a mention of Freud where they are talking about when Jerry is seeing Peter smoking preparing his pipe to smoke. And he mentions lung cancer, and then ask then you will have to wear one of those things Freud wore after they took one whole side of his jaw away. This reference is not entirely out of context.

So, despite this absurdity, the theme of absurdity that display foregrounds, we find that it is very carefully crafted. There is nothing over here which is included by a way of an accident. There is nothing which is not really fitting in to the theme or the larger context. Freud finds a mention over here which also corroborates very well with the undertones of sexuality this that the play also foregrounds into various points.

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The bench

- The tussle for power
- Belongs to the rich?



So, the bench over here becomes a marker, becomes this symbol of power, there is a tussle for power. The bench though, it is a common public property, it is out there for anyone to access it, but still we find that it is part of the privilege which belongs to the rich the leisure the space where some kind of socializing happens that is all part of the privileges which are accorded to the rich. This is also something that this play is challenging through the figure of Jerry.

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Oh my god



This expression “My God” which gets repeated towards the end of the play multiple times without really a context, sometimes we even feel that Jerry is trying to parody the anxiety and the stress out of which Peter keeps uttering “Oh My God”.

Here, it could also connect with some divine plan in a very abstract sense because Jerry also says whether he also half admits perhaps he plant this in such a way, and he is also becoming his own god in that sense trying to orchestrate these series of events.

In such ways that it almost falls befalls Peter like a divine plan out of which he has no respite, out of which he cannot escape. His role is also pre-determined over here because Jerry uses him as a pawn.

Peter’s role in this is predetermined, there is no free will that he can exercise in this whole exercise. We find that this expression the repetition of this expression becomes meaningless as well as very abstractly profound simultaneously.

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at the zoo.

PETER: [enthusiastic:] Oh, yes; the zoo. [Then, awkward:] That is ... if you ...

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.

PETER: You describe her ... vividly.

JERRY: Well, thanks. Anyway, she has a dog, and I will tell you about the dog, and she and her dog are the gatekeepers of my dwelling. The woman is bad enough; she leans around in the entrance hall, spying to see that I don't bring in things or

people, and when she's had her midafternoon pint of lemon-flavoured gin she always stops me in the hall, and grabs a hold of my coat or my arm, and she press a her disgusting body up against me to keep me in a corner so she can talk to me. The smell of her body and her breath ... you can't imagine it ... and somewhere, somewhere in the back of that pea-sized brain of hers, an organ developed just enough to let her eat, drink and enjoi, she has some foul parody of sexual desire. A

I Dator I am the object of her sexual lust



If we may quickly go through the play and take a take look at some of the segments which are also interesting, particularly the instance where particularly the instance where he begins to talk about the situation with the dog which is also at the center of this play.

So, people know now quickly take a look at that instance and wrap up this session as well. He first introduces a landlady in such an in very mean ways a fat, ugly, mean,

stupid, unwashed, a misanthropic, cheap, drunken, bag of garbage. We find that here language becomes a tool a medium through which he is venting out his anger too.

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PETER: [irritably] I know that.
JERRY: You do? Good.



[The following long speech, it seems to me, should be done with a great deal of action, to achieve a hypnotic effect on Peter, and on the audience too. Some specific actions have been suggested, but

the director and the actor playing JERRY might best work it out for themselves.]

ALL RIGHT. [As if reading from a huge billboard] **THE STORY OF JERRY AND THE DOG!**
[Natural again] What I am going to tell you has something to do with how sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly; or, maybe I only think that it has something to do with that. But, it's why I went to the zoo



The story that he now begins to narrate about the dog. It is also in some way replicating what he is facing, he is going through in his mind. He gives a title to the story. He reads it out as it is visible out there on a huge billboard the story of Jerry and the dog.

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short distance correctly; or, maybe I only think that it has something to do with that. But, it's why I went to the zoo today, and why I walked north ... northerly, rather ... until I came here. All right. The dog, I think I told you, is a 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, and ... yes ... and an open sore on its ... right forepaw; that is red, too. And, oh yes; the poor monster, and I do believe it's an old dog ... it's certainly a misused one ... almost always has an erection ... of sorts. That's red, too. And ... what else? ... oh, yes; there's a grey-yellow-white colour, too, when he bares his fangs. Like this: Grrrrrr! Which is what he did when he saw me for the first time ... the day I moved in. I worried about that animal the very first minute I met him. Now, animals don't take to me like Saint Francis had birds hanging off him all the time. What I mean is: animals are indifferent to me ... like people [He smiles slightly] ... most of the time. But this dog wasn't indifferent. From the very beginning he'd snarl and then go for me, to get one of my legs. Not like he was rabid, you know; he was sort of a stumbly dog, but he wasn't half-assed, either. It was a good, stumbly run, but I always got away. He got a piece of my trouser leg, look, you can see right here, where it's mended; he got that the second day I lived there; but, I kicked free and got upstairs fast, so that was that. [Puzzles] I still don't know to this day how the other roomers manage it, but you know what I think: I think it had to do only with me. Cosy. So. Anyway, this went on for over a week, whenever I came in; but never when I went out. That's funny. Or, it was funny. I could pack up and live in the street for all the dog cared. Well, I thought about it up in my room one day, one of the times after I'd bolted upstairs, and I made up my mind. I decided: First, I'll kill the dog with kindness, and if that doesn't work ... I'll just kill him. [PETER



The dog is being described as “a black monster of a beast with oversized head, tiny, tiny ears, and eyes bloodshot infected maybe, and a body you can see the ribs through the

skin”. Here the dog becomes a symbol, a manifestation, an embodiment of all the horrors that Jerry has faced in his life.

If we go through these descriptions, we will find that it is very graphic in nature in terms of the details which we are consuming from here. It says this dog was not indifferent from the beginning. He had snarl, and then go for me to get one of my legs, not like he was rabbit, he was sort of a stumbly dog, but he was not half ass half-arsed either it was a good stumbly run, but always got away.

It is a very intimate story that he is narrating over here where it is possible for us to interpret that maybe the dog becomes everything in his life which is trying to chase him, and everything in his life that he is going to fight and somehow struggle and survive. So, he keeps saying that he keeps evaluating the choices that he had, and he is also sharing those with Peter much to his horror.

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one of my legs. You know, you know, he was sort of a stumbly dog but he wasn't half-arsed, either. It was a good, stumbly run, but I always got away. He got a piece of my trouser leg, look, you can see right here, where it's mended; he got that the second day I lived there; but, I kicked free and got upstairs fast, so that was that. [Puzzles] I still don't know to this day how the other roomers manage it, but you know what I think: I think it had to do only with me. Cosy. So. Anyway, this went on for over a week, whenever I came in; but never when I went out. That's funny. Or, it was funny. I could pack up and live in the street for all the dog cared. Well, I thought about it up in my room one day, one of the times after I'd bolted upstairs, and I made up my mind. I decided: First, I'll kill the dog with kindness, and if that doesn't work ... I'll just kill him. [PETER winces.] Don't react, Peter; just listen. So, the next day I went out and bought a bag of hamburgers, medium rare, no catsup, no onion; and on the way home I threw away all the rolls and kept just the meat. [Action for the following, perhaps.]

When I got back to the rooming-house the dog was waiting for me. I half opened the door that led into the entrance hall, and there he was; waiting for me. It figures. I went in, very cautiously, and I had the hamburgers, you remember; I opened the bag, and I set the meat down about twelve feet from where the dog was snarling at me. Like so! He snarled; stopped snarling; sniffed; moved slowly; then faster; then faster towards the meat. Well, when he got to it he stopped, and he looked at me. I smiled; but tentatively, you understand. He turned his face back to the hamburgers, smelled, sniffed some more, and then ... RRRAAAAGGGGGHHHH, like that ... he tore into them. It was as if he had never eaten anything in his life before, except like garbage. Which might very well have been the truth. I don't think the landlady ever eats anything but garbage. But. He ate all the hamburgers, almost all at once, making sounds in his throat like a woman. Then, when he'd finished the meat the hamburger and tried to eat the paper too, he sat down and smiled. I think he smiled



“First, I will kill the dog with kindness. And if that does not work I will just kill him and of course, Peter’s with the winds is at the very thought of it.”

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into the entrance hall, and there he was; waiting for me. It figures. I went in, very cautiously, and I had the hamburgers, you remember; I opened the bag, and I set the meat down about twelve feet from where the dog was snarling at me. Like so! He snarled; stopped snarling; sniffed; moved slowly; then faster; then faster towards the meat. Well, when he got to it he stopped, and he looked at me. I smiled; but tentatively, you understand. He turned his face back to the hamburgers, smelled, sniffed some more, and then ... RRRAAAAGGGGGHHHH, like that ... he tore into them. It was as if he had never eaten anything in his life before, except like garbage. Which might very well have been the truth. I don't think the landlady ever eats anything but garbage. But. He ate all the hamburgers, almost all at once, making sounds in his throat like a woman. Then, when he'd finished the meat, the hamburger, and tried to eat the paper, too, he sat down and smiled. I think he smiled; I know cats do. It was a very gratifying few moments. Then, BAM, he snarled and made for me again. He didn't get me this time, either. So, I got upstairs, and I lay down on my bed and started to think about the dog again. To be truthful, I was offended, and I was damn mad, too. It was six perfectly good hamburgers with not enough pork in them to make it disgusting. I was offended. But, after a while, I decided to try it for a few more days. If you think about it, this dog had what amounted to an antipathy towards me; really. And, I wondered if I mightn't overcome this antipathy. So, I tried it for five more days, but it was always the same: snarl, sniff; move; faster; stare; gobble; RAAGGGHHH; smile; snarl; BAM. Well, now; by this time Columbus Avenue was strewn with hamburger rolls and I was less offended than disgusted. So, I decided to kill the dog.
[PETER raises a hand in protest.]



And then in between he gives another detailed encounter, very graphically detailed account of this encounter with the dog and says he actually decided to kill the dog.

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Oh, don't be so alarmed, Peter; I didn't succeed. The day I tried to kill the dog I bought only one hamburger and what I thought was a murderous portion of rat poison. When I bought the hamburger I asked the man not to bother with the roll, all I wanted was the meat. I expected some reaction from him, like: we don't sell no hamburgers without rolls; or, wha' d'ya wanna do, eat it out'a ya han's? But no; he smiled benignly, wrapped up the hamburger in waxed paper, and said: A bite for ya pussy-cat? I wanted to say: No, not really; it's part of a plan to poison a dog I know. But, you can't say 'a dog I know' without sounding funny; so I said, a little too loud, I'm afraid, and too formally: YES, A BITE FOR MY PUSSYCAT. People looked up. It always happens when I try to simplify things; people look up. But that's neither hither nor thither. So. On my way back to the rooming-house, I kneaded the hamburger and the rat poison together between my hands, at that point feeling as much sadness as disgust. I opened the door to the entrance hall, and there the monster was, waiting to take the offering and then jump me. Poor bastard; he never learned that the moment he took to smile before



Peter raised his hand in protest because this is completely against his social conditioning, completely against the moral fabric within which he leads his life completely against a value system which dominates him. "He says he decides to kill, but do not be so alarmed, I did not succeed. The day I tried to kill the dog, I bought only one hamburger. And then

he talks about I thought was a murderous portion of a rat poison, and then the dog falls sick.”

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erection, waiting. I put the poison patty down, moved towards the stairs and watched. The poor animal gobbled the food down as usual, smiled, which made me almost sick, and then, BAM. But, I sprinted up the stairs, as usual, and the dog didn't get me, as usual. AND IT CAME TO PASS THAT THE BEAST WAS DEATHILY ILL. I knew this because he no longer attended me, and because the landlady sobered up. She stopped me in the hall the same evening of the attempted murder and confided the information that God had struck her puppy dog a surely fatal blow. She had forgotten her bewildered lust, and her eyes were wide open for the first time. They looked like the dog's eyes. She sniveled and implored me to pray for the animal. I wanted to say to her: Madam, I have myself to pray for, the coloured queen, the Puerto Rican family, the person in the front room whom I've never seen, the woman who cries deliberately behind her closed door, and the rest of the people in all rooming-houses, everywhere; besides, Madam, I don't understand how to pray. But ... to simplify things ... I told her I would pray. She looked up. She said that I was a liar, and that I probably wanted the dog to die. I told her, and there was so much truth here, that I didn't want the dog to die. I didn't, and not just because I'd poisoned him. I'm afraid that I must tell you I wanted the dog to live so that I could see what our new relationship might come to.

[PETER indicates his increasing displeasure and slowly growing antagonism.]

Please understand, Peter; that sort of thing is important. You must believe me; it is important. We have to know the effect of our actions. [Another deep sigh.] Well, anyway; the dog recovered. I have no idea why, unless he was a descendant of the puppy that guarded the gates of hell or some such resort. I'm not up on my mythology. [He pronounces the word myth-o-logy.] Are you?

[PETER sets to thinking, but JERRY goes on.]

At any rate, and you've missed the eight-thousand-dollar; question, Peter; at any rate, the dog



We also took a look at that session where he is also being asked by the landlady to pray for the dog. We did see in the last session what his response was.

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happen: I loved the dog now, 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. 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.

[PETER seems to be hypnotized]

It's just ... it's just that ... [JERRY is abnormally tense, now.] ... it's just that if you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS ! [Much faster now, and like a conspirator] Don't you see.? A person has to have some way of dealing with SOMETHING. If not with people ... SOMETHING. With a bed, with a cockroach, with a mirror ... no, that's too hard, that's one of the last steps. With a cockroach, with a ... with a ... with a carpet, a roll of toilet paper ... no, not that, either ... that's a mirror, too; always check bleeding. You see how hard it is to find things ? With a street corner, and too many lights, all colours reflecting on the oily-wet streets ... with a wisp of smoke, a wisp ... of smoke ... with ... with porno. graphic playing cards, with a strong-box ... WITHOUT A LOCK ... with love, with vomiting, with crying, with fury because the pretty little ladies aren't pretty little ladies, with making money with your body which is an act of love and I could prove it, with howling because you're alive; with God. How about that? WITH GOD WHO IS A COLOURED QUEEN WHO WEARS A KIMONO AND PLUCKS HIS EYEBROWS ! WHO IS A WOMAN WHO CRIES WITH DETERMINATION BEHIND HER CLOSED DOOR ... with God who, I'm told, turned his back on the whole thing some time ago ...



The point is here the dog story becomes very central. We are also coming to the crux of this play as we are wrapping up this session too. The dog story becomes very central to this play because this is also about the ways in which Jerry as well as Peter by extension

are trying to connect with each other, and fails miserably in two different ways altogether.

“Jerry says it is just that if you cannot deal with people you have to make a start somewhere with animals. A person has to have some way of dealing with something.” So, ultimately this is just a symbol, the dog becomes just a symbol, the bench becomes the park bench becomes just a symbol, these conversations become just random kind of tools that they use to connect with each other, ultimately there is this need to connect.

If we cannot start with people, you start with something with an animal or with a bed, with a cockroach, a mirror. “He also says that is too hard the mirror that is one of the last steps because mirror is in fact its replicating one’s own persona, even a cockroach is better than just having no one other than oneself .

We find the intense pathos within which this is located as well. The world of both these men look very similar in uncanny ways both of them on a Sunday afternoon they have nowhere to go nowhere else to go, no other person to connect with. He is sitting there with a book, and Jerry is Peter sitting there with a book, and Jerry is just walking around with a story or what he thinks is a story waiting for another person to share it with.

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JERRY: Her dog! I thought it was my ... No. No, you're right. It is her dog. [Looks at PETER in intently, shaking his head.] I don't know what I was thinking about; of course you don't understand. [In a monotone, wearily] I don't live in your block; I'm not married to two parakeets, or whatever your set-up is. I am a permanent transient, and my home is the sickening rooming-houses on the West Side of New York City, which is the greatest city In the world. Amen.

PETER: I'm ... I'm sorry; I didn't mean to ...

JERRY: Forget it. I suppose you don't quite know what to make of me, eh ?

PETER: [a joke] We get all kinds in publishing. [Chuckles.]

JERRY: You're a funny man. [He forces a laugh.] You know that ? You're a very ... a richly comic person.

PETER: [modestly, but amused] Oh, now, not really. [Still chuckling.]

JERRY: Peter, do I annoy you, or confuse you ?

PETER: [lightly] Well, I must confess that this wasn't the kind of afternoon I'd anticipated.

JERRY: YOU mean, I'm not the gentleman you were expecting.

PETER: I wasn't expecting anybody.

JERRY: No, I don't imagine you were. But I'm here, and I'm not leaving.

PETER: [consulting his watch] Well, you may not be, but I must be getting home soon.

JERRY: Oh, come on; stay a while longer.

PETER: I really should get home; you see . . .

JERRY: [tickles Peter's ribs with his fingers] Oh, come on.

PETER: [he is very ticklish; as JERRY continues to tickle him his voice becomes falsetto.] No, I OHHHH! Don't do that. Stop, Stop. Ohhh, no, no.



There is this sense of shock, and sense of surprise in Peter which we also share, this was not the kind of art afternoon we would anticipated. There is something very predictable, very routine like about Peter's life which is being completely thwarted.

We find the violence. It is difficult not to see the violence inherent in this, but we also find that sad in a certain way, this predictability within which he has stuck from where he has nowhere to go either. They are both quite pathetic in similar ways.

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JERRY: And I am there, and it's feeding time at the lion's house, and the lion keeper comes into the lion cage, one of the lion cages, to feed one of the lions. [Punches Peter on the arm, hard.] MOVE OVER!
PETER: [very annoyed] I can't move over any more, and stop hitting me. What's the matter with you?
JERRY: Do you want to hear the story?
[Punches Peter's arm again.]
PETER: [flabbergasted] I'm not so sure! I certainly don't want to be punched in the arm.
JERRY: [punches Peter's arm again] Like that?
PETER: Stop it. What's the matter with you?
JERRY: I'm crazy, you bastard.
PETER: That isn't funny.
JERRY: Listen to me, Peter. I want this bench. You go sit on the bench over there, and if you're good I'll tell you the rest of the story.
PETER: [flustered] But ... what ever for? What is the matter with you? Besides, I see no reason why I should give up this bench. I sit on this bench almost every Sunday afternoon, in good weather. It's secluded here; there's never anyone sitting here, so I have it all to myself.
JERRY: [softly] Get off this bench, Peter; I want it.
PETER: [almost whining]: No.
JERRY: I said I want this bench, and I'm going to have it. Now get over there.



We find that as we discussed before Jerry in fact is liberating him through this final encounter of violence, he is the one who starts who starts of this quarrel begin to fight the fight that starts about the bench. "I want this bench." And then Peter is also equally adamant, "I sit on this bench almost every Sunday afternoon and good weather. It is secluded here; there is never anyone sitting here, so I have it all to myself." So, we do not know whether it is his privilege or his isolation which is at work over here.

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JERRY: [softly] You won't find a policeman around here; they're all over on the west side of the park chasing fairies down from trees or out of the bushes. That's all they do. That's their function. So scream your head off; it won't do you any good.
PETER: POLICE! I warn you, I'll have you arrested. POLICE! [Pause.] I said POLICE! [Pause.] I feel ridiculous.
JERRY: You look ridiculous: a grown man screaming for the police on a bright Sunday afternoon in the park with nobody harming you. If a policeman did fill his quota and come sludging over this way he'd probably take you in as a nut.
PETER: [with disgust and impotence]: Great God, I just came here to read, and now you want me to give up the bench. You're mad.
JERRY: Hey, I got news for you, as they say. I'm on your precious bench, and you're never going to have it for yourself again.
PETER: [furious] Look, you; get off my bench. I don't care if it makes any sense or not. I want this bench to myself; I want you OFF IT!
JERRY [mocking]: Aw ... look who's mad.
PETER: GET OUT!
JERRY: No.
PETER: I WARN YOU!
JERRY: Do you know how ridiculous you look now?



It is very open ended in that sense it does not give us a sense of closure except by way of death and Peter in fact is driven to a certain irrational mode of acting over here by Jerry. And this is also to show that there is very little difference between these two men. And when driven to a point when encountered with such unnatural circumstances, even Peter is capable of this insanity, this kind of violence, this kind of irrational behavior.

Ultimately, the play is also showing that both of them though they inhabit very different contrasting worlds as we saw at the beginning that is a superficial layer. Beneath that they are just two human beings, two men with a lot of eyes related feelings, and they are all trying to connect in some form or the other.

And for them to do anything that bothers on a kind of a connection, there is also a tendency for it to become violent, because intimacy also becomes something very violent over here as we would see. And towards the end it is entirely irrational.

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bench to myself;
I want you OFF IT !
JERRY [mocking]: Aw ... look who's mad.
PETER: GET OUT !
JERRY: No.
PETER: I WARN YOU !
JERRY: Do you know how ridiculous you look now ?
PETER: [his fury and self-consciousness have possessed him] It doesn't matter. [He is almost crying.] GET AWAY FROM MY BENCH!
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 honour? 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 honour, or even try to explain it to you. Besides, it isn't a question of honour; but even if it were, you wouldn't understand.
JERRY: [contemptuously] 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 cats' toilet box. Stupid ! Don't you have any idea, no even the slightest, what other people need ?
PETER: Oh, boy, listen to you; well, you don't need this bench. That's for sure.
JERRY: Yes, yes, I do.
PETER: [quivering] I've come here for years; I have hours of great pleasure, great satisfaction, right here. And that's important to a man. I'm a responsible person, and I'm a GROWN-UP. This is my



Jerry is trying to foreground that your irrationality when he says “you have everything in the world you want; you have told me about your home, your family, your own little zoo. It is also as a zoo, where everything is organized, everything is compartmentalized. There is no way in which you can expect any natural order there. It is very carefully manicured and crafted. 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 honour? Is this the thing in the world you would fight for? Can you think of anything more absurd?” We clearly see that Peter is not the kind of person who can fight for anything. He is not the kind of person who can say do anything which is out of the way which is out of his ordinary routine.

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Besides, it isn't a question of honour; but even if it were, you wouldn't understand.
JERRY: [contemptuously] 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 cats' toilet box. Stupid! Don't you have any idea, no even the slightest, what other people need?
PETER: Oh, boy, listen to you; well, you don't need this bench. That's for sure.
JERRY: Yes; yes, I do.
PETER: [quivering] I've come here for years; I have hours of great pleasure, great satisfaction, right here. And that's important to a man. I'm a responsible person, and I'm a GROWN-UP. This is my bench, and you have no right to take it away from me.
JERRY: Fight for it, then. Defend yourself; defend your bench.
PETER: You've pushed me to it. Get up and fight.
JERRY: Like a man?
PETER: [still angry] Yes, like a man, if you insist on mocking me even further.
JERRY: I'll have to give you credit for one thing; you are a vegetable, and a slightly near-sighted one, I think ...
PETER: THAT'S ENOUGH....
JERRY: ... but, you know, as they say on TV all the time - you know - and I mean this, Peter, you



Jerry is also challenging and provoking him further very deliberately we would know towards the end. "I will have to give you cred for one thing; you are a vegetable, and a slightly near-sighted one, I think."

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JERRY: [rises lazily] Very well, Peter, we'll battle for the bench, but we're not evenly matched. [He takes out and clicks open an ugly-looking knife.]
PETER: [suddenly awakening to the reality of the situation] You are mad! You're stark raving mad! YOU'RE GOING TO KILL ME!
[But before Peter has time to think what to do, JERRY tosses the knife at Peter's feet.]
JERRY: There you go. Pick it up. You have the knife and we'll be more evenly matched.
PETER: [horrified] No!
[JERRY rushes over to Peter, grabs him by the collar; PETER rises; their faces almost touch.]
JERRY: Now you pick up that knife and you fight with me. You fight for your self-respect; you fight for that goddamned bench.
PETER: [struggling] No! Let ... let go of me! He... Help!
JERRY: [slaps Peter on each "fight"] You fight, you miserable bastard; fight for that bench; fight for your parakeets; fight for your cats; fight for your two daughters; fight for your wife; fight for your manhood, you pathetic little vegetable. [Spits in Peter's face] You couldn't even get your wife with a male child.
PETER: [breaks away, enraged] It's a matter of genetics, not manhood, you ... you monster. [He darts down, picks up the knife and backs of a little; breathing heavily.] I'll give you one last chance; get out of here and leave me alone! [He holds the knife with a firm arm, but far in front of him, not to attack, but to defend]
JERRY: [sighs heavily] So be it!
[With a rush he charges Peter and impales himself on the knife.]



And he is provoking him to fight.

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me alone! [He holds the knife with a firm arm, but far in front of him, not to attack, but to defend]
JERRY: [sighs heavily] So be it!
[With a rush he charges Peter and impales himself on the knife.



Tableau: For just a moment, complete silence, JERRY impaled on the knife at the end of Peter's still firm arm. Then PETER screams, pulls away, leaving the knife in JERRY. JERRY is motionless, on point. Then he, too, screams, and it must be the sound of an infuriated and fatally wounded animal. With the knife in him, he stumbles back to the bench that Peter had vacated. He crumbles there, sitting, facing Peter, his eyes wide in agony, his mouth open.]

PETER: [whispering] Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God ...
[PETER repeats these words many times, very rapidly. JERRY is dying; but now his expression seems to change. His features relax, and while his voice varies, sometimes wrenched with pain, for the most part he seems removed from his dying. He smiles.]
JERRY: Thank you, Peter. I mean that, now; thank you very much. [PETER'S mouth drops open. He cannot move; he is transfixed.] Oh, Peter, I was so afraid I'd drive you away. [He laughs as best he can.] 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. I think that while was at the zoo I decided that I would walk north ... northerly, rather ... until I found you ... or



And he does do that. And eventually we find that Jerry impales on the knife at the end of Peter's firm arm, the knife is literally thrust on him. And he impales on the wire and the knife and then, he meets with his end.

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JERRY: You'd better go now. Somebody might come by, and you don't want to be here when anyone comes.
PETER: [does not move, but begins to weep] Oh my God, oh my God.
JERRY: [most faintly, now; he is very near death:] You won't be coming back here any more, Peter, you've been dispossessed.
You've lost your bench, but you've defended your honour. 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. But you'd better hurry now, Peter. Hurry, you'd better go ... see? [JERRY takes a handkerchief and with great effort and pain wipes the knife handle clean of fingerprints.] Hurry away, Peter. [PETER begins to stagger away.] Wait ... wait, Peter. Take your book ... book. Right here ... beside me ... on your bench ... my bench, rather. Come ... take your book. [PETER starts for the book, but retreats.] Hurry ... Peter. [PETER rushes to the bench, grabs the book, retreats.] Very good, Peter ... very good. Now ... hurry away. [PETER hesitates for a moment, then flees, stage-left.] Hurry away ... [His eyes are closed now.] Hurry away, your parakeets are making the dinner ... the cats ... are setting the table ...
PETER: [off stage, a pitiful howl] OH MY GOD!
JERRY: [his eyes still closed, he shakes his head and speak; a combination of scornful mimicry and supplication] Oh ... my ... God. [He is dead.]



CURTAIN



So, towards the end, there is also certain validity that Jerry gives to Peter, he allows Peter to run away to save his life and his reputation. "You have lost your bench, but you have defended your honour. And Peter, I will tell you something now you are not really a vegetable; it is alright, you are an animal."

It was quite certain that till the end of Peter's life this would be perhaps the most intimate connection that he made with another human being. And towards the end he is also mimicking Peter, "hurry away, hurry away, your parakeets are making the dinner, the cats are setting the table, and Jerry continues, oh my God".

We do not know whether it is sarcastic, we do not know whether it is a parody, we do not know whether he is calling out to God, but he is dead. So, he calls out to God and then he is also dead.

This is also a very interesting way in which the absurdity over here works. So, we find that this is also generally seen as one of those very few works from within the American theatre from within the productions of the American theatre who are which is seen as intricately, intensely, absurdist in nature.