

Breaking Off the Fetters of Ideology: Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* as a Critique of the American Dream

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Abstract

*This paper argues that Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* presents a powerful critique of the American Dream ideology via dramatizing how it falsifies Americans' consciousness of their reality. Like all repressive ideologies, it ties individuals to their conditions of living through an imaginary relationship, not a true one. People, under the hypnotism of the American Dream, falsely believe they are happy in their lives, free in their decisions, and autonomous from their socioeconomic milieu. They are blind to the fact that they are subjective to numerous economic, social, and political forces that ideology strives deliberately to conceal. Albee's critique of the American Dream ideology is centred on how this ideology leads to death both in its physical and spiritual senses. In *The Zoo Story*, people are left with only two choices, both of them are bitter. They have either to conform to the American Dream ideology and, hence, feel false happiness based on the illusionary belief that they are what they choose to be, or they can refuse to assimilate and, hence, suffer from spiritual vacuum that may lead to physical death as a result. In other words, they have to choose between illusion and death.*

Key Words: Edward Albee, *The Zoo Story*, American Dream, Capitalism, Ideology, False Consciousness, Marxist Criticism, Louis Althusser

This study hypothesizes that Edward Albee's earliest drama, *The Zoo Story* (1959), presents a radical critique of the American Dream ideology that has accompanied the economic capital system in America since its emergence via uncovering the role it plays in falsifying people's consciousness of their reality. The researcher argues that *The Zoo Story* portrays a typical image of capitalist America in the 1950s and dramatizes how the American Dream ideology functions to disguise the bleak truth of reality in such a period, reality that suppresses man's humanity and turns him into an automaton, a cog in a huge machine that functions mechanically without much need of him as a subject. However, it does such disguising through "hail[ing] or interpellat[ing] individuals as subjects" (Althusser, *Ideology* 700); in other words, it creates a state of false consciousness among individuals in which they are deluded into believing that they are human subjects responsible for their own actions according to their own free will. Such false consciousness stabilizes the economic, political and social status quo through aborting any serious attempt, based on true understanding and insightful awareness of it, to change it. Ideology, thus, serves the interests of those in power, be it political, economic, social, or all of them.

Albee's critique of the American Dream ideology in his drama is centred on how this ideology leads to death both in its physical and spiritual senses. Spiritually, a state of death in life has taken place all over the American society where communication fails, mutual love disappears, and materialism prevails. People are imprisoned in their own selves with each competing to get his share of the promised dream. Those who succeed in meeting the demands of the dream live in a big illusion that they are happy, fulfilled, and satisfied, whereas those who are dislocated by the same dream are suffering from loneliness, unhappiness, and alienation. This state of spiritual death is

accompanied by a state of physical death, suicide, when the futility of life is realized and living in illusion becomes the escape; here death triumphs over life. Physical death is represented in the drama by the death, rather suicide, of the protagonist towards the end of the play after he grasps the futility of making contact with others and the impossibility of opening their eyes to the truth of their reality. These two cases of deaths that the play traces epitomize the core of *The Zoo Story*'s criticism of the American Dream ideology.

To investigate how *The Zoo Story* transcends the ideology in which it was produced to radically criticize it, the researcher traces the concept of ideology and its relationship to literature in the writings of the canons of Marxist literary theory in the twentieth century such as Louis Althusser, Terry Eagleton, and Raymond Williams. Light is shed on the definition and nature of ideology, its relation to the capitalist system, and its function within a class society. Moreover, the relationship between ideology and literature is investigated. And finally these theories about the nature and function of ideology are employed to arrive at a better understanding of Albee's drama and how it manages to provide a powerful critique of the American Dream ideology.

Traditionally, ideology is defined as "a system of belief characteristic of a particular class or group" (Williams 55). However, by the passage of time the concept has acquired additional, yet related, shades of meanings. For example, this system of belief has come to be described as "false", "illusory," or "imaginary". In his remarkable book, *Marxism and Literature*, the Marxist philosopher Raymond Williams highlights this new dimension of ideology within the Marxist theory: "a system of illusory beliefs – false ideas or false consciousness – which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge" (55). The idea of false consciousness has gained profound stress in the writings of one of the most influential Marxist critics in the 20th century, Louis Althusser. In his influential article, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," he defines ideology as "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (693). According to Althusser, then, individuals relate to their reality through an imaginary relationship rather than a real one. In other words, their relationship with their conditions of living is not based on true awareness of that reality and their position and function within it; rather, it is founded on faked consciousness of their actual status in it. For example, instead of viewing themselves as mere automatons performing mechanical functions in society, they conceive themselves as autonomous, free-willed human beings who are capable of directing society the way they like. The question that arises now is: Why do individuals relate to the world they live in in that particular way?

To answer this question, one needs to go back to the nature and function of ideology as found in the classical literature of the Marxist theory. Traditionally, ideology as used by Marx and Engels is part and parcel of any capitalist society. The dominant class, the one that owns the means of production and, thus, directs the economy of the whole society, propagates its own values, traditions, ethics, and principles among the other classes, in most cases the working ones, as universal values. In other words, the governing group seeks to make its own values and traditions the standard ones for the whole society; what is right for it is as such for the whole society and vice versa. The rationale beyond this is that by circulating and making standard its values among the other classes and groups, it guarantees its command not only of the economic system, but of the minds of people as well. People in classes, other than the capitalist one, come to believe that they cannot live without

these values and, thus, without the group that holds and propagates them. Hence, both economic command and political hegemony are achieved.

The function of ideology, therefore, is to blind people to their true socio-economic reality via creating a state of utter alienation from such reality. Ideology, thus, is not a mere set of doctrines that are imposed upon people by force; rather, it, as Terry Eagleton notes, “signifies the way men live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas, and images which tie them by their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole” (qtd. in Bennett and Royle 172). For Eagleton, thus, ideology works to alienate people from their real experience of the world in which they function as mere cogs in the gigantic machine of the modern capital society. However they are blind to such an obvious fact and, instead, experience themselves as the centre of the world and conceive their social roles to which they are tied as crucial to their humanity due to the effect of ideology. “For Marxism,” Hans Bertens argues, “we are blind to our own condition because of the effects of what it calls ideology” (84). He further explains the nature and function of ideology in capitalist societies:

For Marxists, ideology is not so much a set of beliefs or assumptions that we are aware of, but it is that which makes us experience our lives in a certain way and makes us believe that the way of seeing ourselves and the world is natural. In so doing, ideology distorts reality in one way or another and falsely presents as natural and harmonious what is artificial and contradictory. (84-85)

Bertens’ words shed light on two important dimensions of ideology: its distortion of reality and its ostensible naturalness. The first of which has to do with the function of ideology whereas the second concerns the way it presents itself, or rather is presented, to people. The former elaborates Althusser’s widely-used definition of ideology as “an imaginary relationship” that relates both the individual and the reality in which he lives. Ideology falsifies the individual’s consciousness of reality and the way people relate to it. Instead of seeing themselves as the products of many social determinants, fulfilling mechanical functions in a society that can easily dispense with them or transfer their functions to other “automatons”, they experience themselves, in Eagleton’s words, as “free, unified, autonomous, self-generating individuals” (149), hence their ability to do their social roles willingly. In his comment on Althusser’s definition of ideology and the reason that makes people spontaneously subscribe to it, Eagleton gives us further insight into the way ideology functions in modern capitalist societies:

How is it ... that human subjects very often come to submit themselves to the dominant ideologies of their societies – ideologies which Althusser sees as vital to maintaining the power of a ruling class? ... For him [Althusser] human individuals are the products of many social determinants, and thus have no essential unity ... such individuals can be studied simply as the functions, or effects, of this or that social structure – as occupying a place in a mode of production, as a member of a specific social class, and so on. But this of course is not at all the way we actually experience ourselves. We tend to see ourselves rather as free, unified, autonomous, self-generating individuals; and unless we did so we would be incapable of playing our parts in social life. For Althusser, what allows us to experience ourselves in this way is ideology. (149)

The main function of ideology is, thus, to make people live in a state of false consciousness that makes them unable to realize the true reality of their existence in this world and, therefore, be able to fulfil their social, economic and political functions smoothly in a way that serves the interests of the hegemonic class. "While we believe that we are acting out of free will," Bertens strongly argues, "we are in reality acted by the ... system" (86). For ideology to do so, it needs to present itself in a natural and logical way that people are unaware of, rather than as a set of doctrines that people are attentive to. "Ideology never says I am ideological," asserts Althusser (*Ideological State Apparatuses* 700). Rather, it slides secretly to the deepest recesses of our psyches to the extent that we cannot live without it. "Man is an ideological animal by nature," (*Ideological State Apparatuses* 700) argues Althusser, meaning that the individual cannot live but within an ideology that gives him an untrue relieving sense of integration, unity, and humanity. To this spontaneous, natural, and unnoticed way in which ideology creeps into the fabric of people's lives Raman Selden refers: "Ideology is normally lived as if its imaginary and fluid discourse gives a perfect and unified explanation of reality" (98). Similarly, Lois Tyson argues that "Undesirable ideologies promote repressive political agendas, and in order to ensure their acceptance among the citizenry, pass themselves as natural ways of seeing the world instead of acknowledging themselves as ideologies" (56). Then, he pinpoints the rationale latent beyond the seeming naturalness of repressive ideologies:

By posing as natural ways of seeing the world, repressive ideologies prevent us from understanding the material/historical conditions in which we live because they refuse to acknowledge that those conditions have any bearing on the way we see the world. ... The most successful ideologies are not recognized as ideologies but are thought to be natural ways of seeing the world by the people who subscribe to them. (57)

An important question is posed now: Which medium does ideology exploit to slide into peoples' lives in this natural way? Althusser gives special emphasis to such a medium to the degree that he allocates a special article, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," to expose this means. According to him, ideology finds its way to the individual's psyche through what he names "ideological state apparatuses", that is, "organized religion, the law, the political system, the educational system – in short, all the institutions through which we are socialized" (Bertens 85). In other words, the person is ideologised and subjected unconsciously to the prevailing ideology during the span of his lifetime through the social apparatuses which are responsible for the process of upbringing and socialization.

What is the role of literature, then, in exposing and criticizing the dominant repressive ideologies of its time? According to Althusser in his "A Letter on Art in Reply to Andre Daspre," "the peculiarity of art is 'to make us see' ... 'make us perceive,' 'make us feel' something which alludes to reality" (222). He, then, pinpoints what it is that art makes us see and perceive: "What art makes us see ... is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself, and to which it alludes" (222-223). The function of art in general and literature in particular is, therefore, to allude to the dominant ideology at the time in which it is written so as to help people examine it critically and, hence, achieve a step forward towards restoring their true consciousness of the reality they live in, consciousness that has been falsified by ideology. "Once it [ideology] is worked into a text," Selden argues, "all its contradictions and gaps are exposed" (98); in other words, it becomes

open for criticism. The important question now is: How can literature provide a critique of ideology in spite of the fact that it is “born” in it, to quote Althusser’s term? The answer lies in Althusser’s concept of detachment of art.

To critique the repressive ideology of its time, literature needs to detach itself from it, that is, to alienate itself, in the Brechtian sense, from the ideology it is born in. “Art ... achieves a ‘retreat’ (a fictional distance deriving from its formal composition) from the very ideology which feeds it. In this way a major literary work can transcend and critique the ideology in which it is nevertheless ‘bathed,’” Selden argues in this regard (98). It is, thus, an intrinsic feature of literature to distance itself from ideology due to its formal elements and technical devices and, therefore, has the ability to criticize the dominant ideology of its time. The inherent distancing feature of literature enables the readers/spectators to get fully aware of the ideology that entraps their minds and controls their lives instead of identifying passively with it. As a result, they can criticize it and get rid of its traps and, therefore, be able to change their status quo.

In the light of the above survey of the definition, nature, and function of ideology within the Marxist theory, Albee’s *The Zoo Story* can be examined. As the thesis statement of this study hypothesizes, Albee’s drama presents a powerful critique of the American Dream ideology that correlated with the capitalist system in America. Yet, before embarking on analyzing the play to see how it criticizes this ideology, we need to trace the history, significance, and later developments of the concept of the American Dream itself and how it has become one of the greatest formative influences in the American mind during the twentieth century, with special reference to the 1950s in which the drama was written.

It is commonly accepted that the first one to coin and use this concept, or at least to fly it among Americans, was the American historian James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*. Adams attempted in his book to base America’s history on an ideal that has been aspired to throughout the recorded history of the American nation. He, thus, formulated the concept of the American Dream about which he writes:

The American Dream, that dream of a land in which life should be *better* and *richer* and *fuller* for every man [Emphasis is the researcher’s], with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. ... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (qtd in Bulkeley 13)

The concept was repeated for nearly thirty times in his *Epic* and since then it has come to be, as Jim Cullen notices, the icon of success for every one dreaming to be successful and the nourishing national motto for the American nation as a whole. “Jubilant athletes declaim it following championship games,” Cullen writes, “Aspiring politicians invoke it as the basis of their candidacies. Otherwise sober businessmen cite achieving it as the ultimate goal of their enterprises” (5). In a word, the American Dream has become “the most potent ideology in American life” (DeVitis 4).

The American Dream ideology has been, like all ideologies, presented to people as a natural way of seeing things rather than an ideology. It introduces itself in simple logic: as long as you work hard and have the necessary ambitiousness, you will

achieve success in a society that guarantees equal opportunities for every one living in it whatever their circumstances of birth are. Accordingly, "if some people are poor, it is because they are shiftless and lazy" (Tyson 57). DeVitis supports the same point when he asserts that poverty "springs, according to this ideology, from laziness, vice, lack of thrift, and sometimes misfortune" (4). The significance is that "an individual has the power over his own material destiny in spite of prior social position or the workings of the economic and cultural structures" (Dermo 1).

The above ostensibly natural and logical way in which the American Dream ideology is presented to people makes it typically function as an oppressive ideology that creates a general atmosphere of false consciousness in which individuals are blind to their reality. This blindness meets the aims of American capitalism. People who vehemently espouse the ideal of "*work hard and you will succeed*" are ignorant of the suffering of other people since they are totally preoccupied with themselves at the expense of others; they even regard the unprivileged as "lazy and shiftless." They are blind to see the huge social and economic factors that lie in their way of achieving success. Furthermore, they falsely imagine they are free in their choices and decisions, yet they are actually subject to many determinants outside themselves. The idea of equal opportunity that the Dream circulates is in DeVitis's words "equivocal, serving the interests of the powerful while placating the powerless" (5). The homeless, to give an example of people who cannot get their share in the American Dream, are looked upon as "lazy," overlooking the fact that for them to get their share in the American Dream requires many facilities, at least a place to live in, which are not available for them.

The state of false consciousness in which most Americans live in under the hypnosis of the American Dream serves the interests of the capitalist class. Imagining that they are responsible for their success or failure, the public are indulged in a rat race after success, embodied mainly in financial achievement and social prestige: house, job, car, a small enterprise, beautiful wife and the like. The competitive atmosphere in which they find themselves in requires from them to do their best: working hard and exerting every possible effort to get their share in the American Dream. Hence, production doubles and fortune accumulates from which the dominant ruling group benefits the most, while leftovers are the public's share. As a result, the status quo is stabilized, rather circulated, in a vicious circle with no end, negating any possibility for a different pro quo.

Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* takes place in the 1950s, at the end of a decade in which the American Dream ideal was in its prime both individually and nationally. Historically, this period followed the Great Depression of the thirties and the Second World War in the forties and witnessed the acceleration of the tempo of the Cold War. Economically, production increased and national income amplified. Concurrently, large steps were actually taken towards achieving military supremacy. DeVitis describes the decade as the period of "America's pre-eminence as a military and economic power" (5), and for him this was a major cause of the revival of the American Dream after its short-term eclipse in the two preceding decades. In a word, the 1950s witnessed an unprecedented prosperity, but, as usual in America, it was confined to specific sections of the society whereas the other sects are excluded. In his *Rethinking the New Left: An interpretative History*, Van Gosse highlights such prosperity of life:

The white majority reached comfort and disposable income never seen before in any country. From 1946 to 1964, the United States underwent

the most sustained period of economic growth in world history, effectively tripling the average income of Americans. Any white-male high school graduate could reasonably expect to support a family with his paycheck, to own a home, a car, and plenty of other goods, and to send his children to college. (10)

However, this witnessed breakthrough in people's lives was accompanied by the aggravation of the class system in America. Since the economic growth went to particular groups, namely the whites and businessmen to name but a few, to the exclusion of other sections of society like blacks, women, and immigrants, the class system worsened and the poor were crushed. Though complicated in its structure, five main classes within the fabric of the American society can be identified: the homeless, the poor, the financially-established, the well-to-do, and the extremely wealthy. Those groups can be referred to respectively as underclass, lower class, middle class, upper class, and aristocracy (Tyson 55).

In *The Zoo Story*, Edward Albee attempts to mirror this period and uncover the reality of the 1950s capitalist America that the American Dream ideology disguises. The true reality that Albee attempts to reveal is the stereotypical capitalist reality in which all the negative phenomena of capitalism appear. Rugged individualism, absolute privacy, lack of communication, and alienation are but just few examples of these phenomena. By doing so, he attempts to eliminate the state of false consciousness people live in and restore a state of true awareness of the current capitalist status quo. In other words, *The Zoo Story* breaks off the "imaginary relationship" between the American individual and the capitalist reality s/he lives in. Albee fulfils this task by making us, in Althusser's words, "see" or "perceive" or "feel" the truth of the ugly reality to which he alludes in his drama.

The Zoo Story is about a random meeting, rather a confrontation, between two utterly different characters, Jerry and Peter, who belong to two radically different sections of the American society: the lower class and the middle class respectively or, in other words, the poor and the well-established. Jerry represents the social outcast, the one excluded from the American Dream, while Peter stands for Mr. Everyman, the stereotypical American citizen; he typically reflects the American conformist who adopts the ideals propagated by the dominant ideology to the utmost. Albee stresses the stock character of Peter from the very beginning by giving him negative, rather than positive, characterization: "A man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely" (33). He intends him to be the representative of the mainstream American citizen believing heartily in the American Dream myth. To emphasize this dimension of Peter's character, Albee further sketches him with features that were characteristic of the typical successful American in the fifties of the twentieth century: "He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses" (33). Jerry, on the other hand, is portrayed to represent every social outcast in America, those who are victimized by the American Dream ideology, or "*the permanent transient[s]*" in his own words. He is described by Albee as "A man in his late thirties, not poorly dressed, but carelessly. What was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was. His fall from physical grace should not suggest debauchery; he has ... a great weariness" (33). This state of physical deterioration mirrors a parallel condition of spiritual decline.

The contrast between Jerry and Peter is meant to reflect the contrast between two large sections in the American society: those who assimilate to the American Dream

ideology and those who live outside its borders. Liza Bailey highlights this dramatic contrast and its realistic reflections:

Peter functions as a cog in the system of consumerism, a man who contributes to the standard of society. Jerry, on the other hand, exists on the margin of society. His “laughably small room” exists surrounded by other tenement living quarters inhabited by characters as unique and outcast as Jerry. ... Jerry’s life outside the mainstream “doesn’t sound like a very nice place” to Peter, who lives in an easily definable and average apartment in the East 70s. (37)

Seeking a kind of “real talk” that satisfies his essential human craving for communication, Jerry attempts to indulge in an intimate conversation with Peter whom he sees for the first time in the Central Park. Annoyed by Peter’s reluctance to talk and his insistence on going home later and leaving him alone, Jerry raises the tempo of the situation and finally ends it with his suicide at the hands of Peter. Through this short encounter between the only two characters in the drama, Albee manages to uncover many of the shortcomings of capitalism in America which the American Dream ideology attempts to disguise. Accordingly, he succeeds in making people see the prejudices of the ideology to which it alludes and, thus, contributes to restoring people’s critical consciousness that has been falsified by the American Dream.

The most remarkable feature of the capitalist reality in America that *The Zoo Story* attempts to attract people’s attention to is the class structure of the American society, an inevitable outcome of capitalism. As mentioned above both Jerry and Peter belong to two utterly different classes; this appears in where and how each lives. While Jerry lives in “a four-story brownstone roominghouse on the upper West Side between Columbus Avenue and Central Park West” with other social outcasts like him (Albee 45), Peter lives in an apartment in the East Seventies with a wife, two daughters, two parakeets, and a cat. When Jerry tells Peter about the people who inhabit the other rooms in the roominghouse – a coloured queen, a Puerto Rican family, an unknown figure – Peter shows an utter state of ignorance of Jerry’s world through the questions he asks and the comments he makes. He asks, “Why ... why do you live there?” and comments, “It doesn’t sound like a very nice place ... where you live” (Albee 48). The same reaction pops out on the occasion Jerry tells him about his landlady and her sexual fantasies: “It’s so ... unthinkable. I find it hard to believe that people such as that really *are*” (Albee 54). The astonishment that obsesses Peter on hearing stories about Jerry’s neighbours transcends its personal significance to its social implication; it reflects the dichotomy between two social classes, rather worlds, in which each person is ignorant of the people living on the other border. He can just hear about them, but to really know them as real human beings who are the very same as him is far beyond his grasp. “It’s for reading about, isn’t it?” Jerry sarcastically asks Peter, and Peter spontaneously answers, “Yes” (Albee 54).

Among the tenets of capitalism that ideology works hard to disguise and circulate as natural and fair is rugged individualism, the utmost belief in the individual. In capitalism, the individual is seen of primary importance and the traits of self-reliance and personal independence are highly celebrated. Every individual is given full chance to develop himself/herself and carry out his/her economic and social goals to the utmost that his/her talents and skills allow. Though fair and natural it may seem, rugged individualism is criticized on the ground that, “it puts self-interest above the needs – and even above the survival – of other people. By keeping the focus on ‘me’

instead of ‘us’, rugged individualism works against the well-being of society as a whole and of unprivileged people in particular” (Tyson 60). In other words rugged individualism has created a society in which no body stops for a while to think about the suffering and misery of others, for he is all the time preoccupied with his own advantage.

Rugged individualism has, in its turn, generated secondary phenomena that have aggravated man’s sense of loss under the capitalist system. Isolation, killing privacy, lack of communication, alienation, materialism, and reification of human relations are some of these phenomena that the American Dream myth endeavours to hide beyond the illusionary belief in material success and social promotion. In *The Zoo Story*, this bleak inhuman reality is alluded to with the aim to restore people’s consciousness of it and, therefore, offer them the opportunity to change it and break off the chains of the repressive American Dream ideology.

The very title of the play itself encapsulates the miserable status of man under capitalism. The human community has been reduced to a big zoo in which each individual is separated from others by the bars of his private life. Nobody allows the other to approach his cage lest his privacy would be invaded and his self defences, therefore, exposed. Lucina P. Gabbard comments in this regard:

Locked out of their compatibility with nature and community, men become imprisoned within hostile selves. They feel isolated, alienated, and alone. Their despair centers on anger, and they must separate themselves from one another to prevent their mutual destruction by hate and violence. Therefore, their sense of abandonment deepens until the only answer to the call for help seems to lie in self-destruction. (20-21)

The cage one imprisons himself within may vary from one to the other: one’s family, job, social prestige, etc. Peter, for example, imprisons himself beyond the bars of his bench seat and book. On feeling his privacy being endangered by the meddling Jerry, he does his best to protect it through bars of ignorance and reluctance. Attempting to distance Jerry from his “cage”, Peter reacts to the former’s relentless attempts to invade his privacy with expressions like, “Hm? ... What? ... I’m sorry, were you talking to me? ... I think so” (Albee 34), whereas the stage directions exposes his physical reactions as “puzzled”, “anxious to get back to his reading”, “anxious to dismiss him, prepares his pipe” (Albee 34-35). In this way, Peter reacts similarly to the dog in the dog parable Jerry is going to relate later in the play; the dog attacks Jerry, he relates, “whenever I came in; but never when I went out ... I could pack up and live in the street for all the dog cared” (Albee 57). Both Peter and the dog are worried about those who try to approach nearer not about those who remain at distance. “Both Peter and the dog are willing to fight to the death any invader of their territories” (Zimbardo 12). According to Mohamed Elsaid Alcon, “They [people] equate human communication with intrusion which they feel will open them up and expose their absurd lives” (9).

This fervent desire to live in one’s own cage has led to a miserable state of absence of communication. Everybody is reluctant to get into real contact with others for fear that their privacy is endangered and their empty lives exposed. “Being cut off from one another,” Rose Zimbardo argues, “we fear, and fearing, we hate with an unreasoning hatred any creature who threatens to invade that little area of the world that provides us with security” (12). Yet, security here is not genuine security, but an illusionary one. It is security based on one’s fear of “the reality which might be

exposed by true lucidity” (qtd in Wakid 19), reality that the American Dream ideology tries to conceal.

From the start, the marginalized Jerry uses small talk as an attempt to penetrate the private world of Peter with the aim to foster a sort of warm communication that satisfies his deep human need for it. He begins with indirect statements like, “I’ve been to the zoo” (Albee 34) and ends by explicitly stating his need, “Do you mind if we talk” (Albee 36)? However, the tactics that Jerry exploits for initiating and sustaining communication with Peter throughout the play contribute to the failure of this promised contact and indicate, on the other hand, how Jerry has lost by the passage of time his sensitivity to talk with others due to the chronic absence of communication in capitalist America. Bombarding Peter with a series of questions about his life, family, job, and the like and making remarks like “Well, boy; you’re not going to get lung cancer, are you?” (35) reflect how lack of genuine contact among people can negatively affect their human potential.

The need to communicate with one’s fellow men is a basic human craving. Without it, one’s life becomes barren and meaningless. For this reason, Jerry is doing his best to start and maintain a channel of communication with Peter though he cannot get it right as he wishes, partly because of his intrusive questions and partly because of Peter’s defences. From the very beginning we feel Jerry’s worry to lose Peter: “I’m sorry. All right? You’re not angry?” (Albee 51), “Don’t go. You’re not thinking of going, are you?” (Albee 55). Towards the end of the play, he divulges this anxiety frankly to Peter: “Oh, Peter, I was so afraid I’d drive you away. ... You don’t know how afraid I was you’d go away and leave me” (Albee 80). The anxiety Jerry expresses is attributed to the importance communication represents for people. The mechanisms Peter uses to keep him at distance motivates Jerry to divulge his urgent need for communication to him: “I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody, know all about him” (Albee 40). Yet, this pressing want is met with indifferent mockery on part of Peter: “[Lightly laughing] And I am the guinea pig for today?” (Albee 40) In face of this neglect, Jerry states that man has to make “a start somewhere. ... A person has to have some way of dealing with SOMETHING” (63). Here comes the significance of the story of the dog that Jerry pays special attention to and relates in detail to Peter.

When Jerry fails through mere words to penetrate Peter’s defences against communication, he attempts another mechanism; he tells him his story with the dog and “the teaching emotion” he has learned from this experience. “Realizing that Peter cannot be drawn out of his tough shell with talk,” Zimbardo argues, “Jerry tries to touch Peter beneath this consciously preserved surface” (13). He wants to persuade Peter of the necessity of communication and how its absence can lead to violence to achieve it. “He wants ... to impress upon him [Peter] the extremity of violence that his environment forced him to use to make such contact” (Bailey 41). Here lies the importance of the story itself as Albee himself remarks: “I suppose the dog story in *The Zoo Story* ... is a microcosm of the play by the fact that people are not communicating, ultimately failing and trying and failing” (qtd in Bailey 34).

On telling the story, Jerry is keen on attracting Peter’s attention to the underlying similarity between the Jerry-dog story and the current situation they are in. He remarks while narrating, “Animals are indifferent to me ... like people (He smiles slightly)” (Albee 56) as if saying, “You understand me ... I know”. Then he tells him that it was necessary to start to make contact even with a dog in case human contact malfunctions; he has to find a start somehow and somewhere: “It would be A START!

... to understand and just possibly be understood ... a beginning of an understanding” (Albee 64). Touched by the intensity and humanistic dimension of the story and recognizing that he is the one meant by the parable and that he is the human equivalent of the dog, Peter cannot help but feigning inability to understand the implications of the parable as if to resist its therapeutic effect. The stage directions describe Peter’s reactions throughout listening to the different stages of the narrative: “Peter indicates his increasing displeasure and slowly growing antagonism.”, “Peter sets to thinking, but Jerry goes on.”, “Peter reacts scoffingly.”, “Peter seems to be hypnotized.”, “Peter is silent.”, “numb”. The stage directions indicate that Jerry has managed for the first time to penetrate the barriers Peter surrounds himself with against any human contact. The collapse of Peter’s defences culminates in his crying at Jerry towards the end of the story: “I ... I don’t understand what ... I don’t think I ... (Now almost tearfully) Why did you tell me all of this?” (Albee 65) as if to blame Jerry for opening his eyes to the bleak reality he is living in. Then, he endeavours to withdraw once more into his illusionary world of happiness and self-complacency; he insists that he is unable to understand and, further, announces his desire not to listen further: “I DON’T WANT TO HEAR ANYMORE. I don’t understand you, or your landlady, or her dog ...” (Albee 66). It is a true moment of self-confrontation that Peter faces, maybe for the first time in his life, where he comes to know about the suffering and misery of other people.

As for Jerry, he has learnt much about human nature through his encounter with the dog. He has discovered that friendliness alone leads to temporary moments of amiable relationships, whereas violence leads to a compromise: a negative feeling towards each other, yet a state of isolation and estrangement: “And what is gained is loss. And what has been the result: the dog and I have attained a compromise: more of a bargain, really. We neither love nor hurt because we don’t try to reach each other” (Zimbardo 12-13). In other words, “The dog has returned to garbage and I to solitary free passage” (Albee 64). The experience with the dog has taught Jerry then that “Men are islands irrevocably cut off from one another. Contact is from time to time made, but always with great pain and difficulty and never with any assurance that it can be sustained” (Zimbardo 12).

Rugged individualism and the utter absence of communication in the 1950s capitalist America that the world of *The Zoo Story* dramatizes lead to endemic materialism that features people’s lives. In reality, people are lusting after luxury and material comfort. Individuals are preoccupied with meeting the needs of the body with utter neglect of the demands of the soul. Spiritual, intellectual, and cultural interests are considered of secondary importance compared to material considerations. Everything has come to be evaluated according to its monetary value, even if it were a non-material object such as a classical painting, an antique carpet, or an old edition of a book. Related to this materialistic view is the phenomenon of commodification that is, “relating to objects or persons in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value” (Tyson 62). For example, the value of a book is sometimes considered according to the sum of money I have bought it with or the social prestige it will bestow on me when found in my bookcase, not according to the knowledge it contains. Human relationships themselves could be commodified when they are not meant for themselves, but for the material benefit or social promotion that one may harvest from them. ‘I commodify human beings,’ Tyson argues, “when I structure my relations with them to promote my own advancement financially or socially” (62). Marriage becomes a commodity when I get married just to ascend the social ladder or

to impress others with the beauty or riches of my wife. In his *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm observes that human relations in modern capitalist societies have been commodified in their greatest part:

What is modern man's relationship to his fellow man? It is one between two abstractions, two living machines, who use each other. ... Everybody is to everybody else a commodity, always to be treated with certain friendliness, because even if he is not of use now, he may be later. There is no much love or hate to be found in human relations of our day. There is, rather, a superficial friendliness and a more than superficial fairness, but behind that surface is distance and indifference. There is also a good deal of subtle distrust. (139)

In *The Zoo Story*, Peter is obsessed with the material view of things and the commodification attitude. Jerry succeeds in exposing the materialistic attitudes of Peter in the battle-for-the-bench scene. On asking Peter to get off the bench, Jerry manages to show the animal of materialism within Peter. The latter refuses firmly to give up the bench and shows relentless readiness to fight for it. Arguing for his right to the bench, Peter states that he sits on the bench for almost every Sunday so "I have it all for myself" (Albee 72). Then, he screams, "MY BENCH" (Albee 73). Peter's phrase, "have it all for myself," encapsulates the capitalist philosophy of rugged individualism and its concomitant materialism. If I get my hand on something first, it means it is mine, no matter other people may want to use it one day. Peter so believes in his possession of the bench that he shows for the first time his readiness to fight: "You have pushed me to it. Get up and fight" (Albee 77). Tyson observes the dilemma of modern man under capitalism. For him millions were killed and injured "in wars that man got involved in fakely imagining 'he was fighting in his self-defence, for his honour, or that he was backed up by God'" (4). Jerry takes the opportunity of Peter's defence for his right to the bench to direct a severe attack on the ideology of capitalism and its cherished ideals that man is after. "Are these the things men fight for?" Jerry exclaims, "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?" (Albee 75-76). Jerry's purpose from the very beginning was to expose Peter's empty material life in front of his two eyes, at least to oblige him to reconsider it. "In Forcing Peter to fight for the park bench," Zimbardo argues, "Jerry is once again challenging Peter's attachment to material things that are in themselves without value to him" (13). Albee's own message transcends Peter to the audience themselves who are meant to re-examine their void lives: "Jerry's insistence on possessing Peter's bench is surely a cruel satire on American society's insistence on compartmentalization. The subtext of the action says: This is your patch; this is mine; we cannot share; we must have our own isolated territories" (Kolin 24).

All the previous social maladies – class society, rugged individualism, killing privacy, lack of communication, materialism, and commodification of human relationships – are but results of capitalism in the American reality that the American Dream ideology, in its turn, attempts to disguise. Ideology tries to pass these phenomena as natural by-products of the modern way of life; if there are poor people, they are so because they do not have the initiative; if there is lack of communication, it is the result of people's preoccupation with their necessary advancement in life. By endeavouring to hide the previous reality, the American Dream ideology falsifies people's awareness of it and, therefore, stabilizes the social, economic, and political status quo. Yet, individuals' responses to ideology differ; some may absolutely

subscribe to it and, therefore, base their relationship to their conditions of existence on an imaginary foundation, while others might choose to break off the fetters that tie them to this ideology. Peter belongs to the first group whereas Jerry falls within the second.

Peter and Jerry are two different characters in their reaction to the same ideology they live within its boundaries. Peter succumbs totally to it allowing it to guide him through life, while Jerry chooses rather to rebel against its claims. To understand how Peter assimilates willingly to the dominant American Dream ideology one needs to go back to the working definition of ideology that the present study adopts, namely Althusser's definition of it as "the representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." In Althusser's theory, the individual subscribes willingly to the dominant ideology because it gives him an 'imaginary' sense of self-integration. Instead of realizing himself truly as a mere cog in a huge economic, social, and political machine, man is lulled by the false ideological belief that he is the centre of the socio-political, economic operations in his society and that he is a subject rather than a mere object. In other words, people choose to withdraw into a comforting illusion rather than living the bitter facts of everyday life.

Peter is a typical example of such an assimilationist subject and is dramatically used by Albee to critique the American Dream ideology. Both Jerry and he are two faces of the same coin. "They are opposites, yet they reflect one another," and "... the meaning of their positions become clear through their oppositions" (Bailey 41). Both are victims of the capitalist society in the typical sense. They suffer from alienation, lack of communication, monotony of life, etc in spite of their different circumstances. Moreover, they are both unsatisfied with the mechanical way of life they are leading; however, their only difference is that Jerry endeavours to change it while Peter does not (Malik 141).

Peter is presented in the drama as the typical embodiment of the American Dream. He has a wife, two daughters, and some pets, owns his own home, and has a stable job that guarantee him a stable yearly income. "He reads the 'right' books, lives on the 'right' side of the park, has the average number of children, and the 'right' Madison Avenue job. His is the New Yorker ad life to which most middle class citizens, consciously or unconsciously, aspire" (Zimbardo 11). Jerry ridicules his hearty adoption of the American Dream ideals sarcastically when he knows that he does not have dogs at home like many Middle Class Americans: "Oh, that's a shame" (Albee 40). Feeling the emptiness of life and the absurdity of the human situation, Peter, unlike Jerry, attempts to rationalize reality, yet through irrational ways. Instead of revolting against the prejudices and injustices of the socio-political context he lives within, he voluntarily succumbs to it in a futile attempt to find meaning in his life. In Althusser's words, he turns from an individual living outside the realm of ideology to a subject that submits willingly to the dominant ideological myths that govern his relationship with his conditions of living. Simply, Peter chooses to withdraw from the world of reality to that of illusion in search of lost happiness, absent communication, and aspired-to freedom. Peter's family, pets, job, glasses, and bench are but props that disguise his empty life. At the same time, they function as tools that deepen his belongingness to the world of illusion.

Peter is keen to assume the appearance of the average man in *The Zoo Story*. His marriage and his children are but means that bestow certain social appearance on him. His wife and daughters are interchangeable with the cat and parakeets in the famous tickling scene at the end of the play. The latent meaning is that all are but props for

social prestige. For the same reason, he gets furious when Jerry asks him about not having a boy, maybe because Jerry has deliberately reminded him of his falling behind the average American model with a wife and two children: a boy and a girl, not two girls. Insisting on being the Everyman of America is part of the herd instinct and the imaginary tie that ideology relates its subjects to their reality. Outside this herd, Peter will feel insecure and will suffer from anguishing pointlessness of his life.

Living in illusion, however, aggravates Peter's sensation of his dilemma and worsens the dichotomy within his character instead of relieving him of his feelings of nothingness and loneliness. Robert M. Post highlights the dissonance that characters like Peter suffer from:

Albee's characters often retreat into a world of illusion in an effort to bridge the gap between what they believe they should be and what they really are, or, in other words, to reduce dissonance and gain consonance. Instead of resolving the discrepancy, the illusionary world intensifies existing conflict and, more often than not, creates further cognitive dissonance. (60)

Jerry, on the other hand, is fully aware of the malignant context in which he lives and, therefore, strives to change it for the better, instead of assimilating to it. He refuses to accept the role of the subject that ideology offers him in case he subscribes to it. In other words, he refuses to live the illusion of being a full human subject that Peter imprisons himself in. Rather, he assumes the resistant role though he knows he is to pay for it. Deciding not to lull himself to the alleviating effects of the American Dream ideology, Jerry suffers to the end of his life. Central to the suffering of him is his alienation from everything and everyone around him. His alienation is essentially the result of his decision not to subject himself to the dominant ideology, he, therefore, finds himself on the margin rather than in the centre of society. His barren room in the rooming house reflects the bareness at the centre of his life. The two empty photo frames epitomize the emptiness of his emotional and social life. This barren emotional landscape is reflected in the random sexual relationships he gets involved in. He never sees "the pretty ladies more than once" (Albee 49). Sex, for him, is an end in itself rather than a means for sentimental and spiritual intimacy. "His encounters with 'the little ladies' are about only the physical sex act," Bailey argues, "not about remembering or connecting to the women in emotional, spiritual, intellectual ways, so Jerry does not put their pictures in the frames. When his physical connection with one of them ends, the relationship is over and has served its purpose" (38). What Jerry seeks beyond his temporary sexual relationships is, in fact, neither physical satisfaction nor spiritual closeness; Peter is alienated, and "the alienated person finds it almost impossible to remain by himself because he is seized by the panic of experiencing nothingness" (Fromm 155). Physical relationships are, hence, an alleviating pill for Jerry.

Although both Jerry and Peter, the study claims, are alienated, the major difference between them is that the former is aware of it whereas the latter is not. Jerry is fully cognizant of the role of the American Dream ideology in alienating him from his reality. Therefore, he strives throughout the drama to break off the fetters that it puts on his consciousness and that of others, Peter as an example. He carries upon himself the responsibility of restoring others' true consciousness of their reality that ideology in its turn attempts to disguise. By doing so, he can help change their status quo for the better by basing their relationship to reality on true consciousness of it rather than false consciousness. For doing so, he exploits more than one mechanism

in his encounter with Peter: attempting to establish contact with him, telling him stories, tickling him, provoking him into fight, and finally committing suicide at his hands.

The first tactic that Jerry uses for compelling Peter to come out of his shell is to have a humane contact with him whose main aim is to open Peter's eyes to the suffering of other people whom he is utterly ignorant of, victims of the American Dream ideology. However, all attempts to communicate with Peter fail because of the latter's reservedness and the former's intrusiveness. Much of Jerry's tough, rather hostile, attitude is attributed to his marginalization. "Catalyst to Jerry's anguish is hostility, his defence against loss of love," Gabbard maintains adding that, "He insults and offends those whose love and attention he seeks" (16).

Shocked by the reluctant nature of Peter, Jerry experiments with another mechanism that is telling stories. Throughout the drama, Jerry moves on skilfully from one narrative to the other. He tells Peter stories about the roominghouse in which he lives, the landlady, the dog, the zoo, and other related ones. Narrating stories fulfils more than one function in the play. On the superficial level, they are meant to get Peter out of his nutshell and compel him into communicating. On a much deeper level, they contribute to alleviating Jerry's deep sense of alienation. To have a listening ear to one's stories would help one to surpass the tormenting feelings of isolation and loneliness even for a while, something which is important for keeping psychologically sane. Fromm stresses this point:

He [man] is aware of his aloneness and separateness; of his powerlessness and ignorance; of his accidentalness of his birth and of his death. He could not face this state of being for a second if he could not find new ties with his fellow man. ... Even if all his psychological needs were satisfied, he would experience his state of aloneness and individuation as a prison from which he had to break out in order to retain his sanity. (30)

A third function of storytelling in *The Zoo Story* is to open Peter's eyes to the suffering and misery of other people who live on the margin of the American society, rather than at the centre of it, people like Jerry himself. By telling Peter stories about himself, the landlady, and the other marginalized residents of the roominghouse, Jerry seeks to restore's Peter's true consciousness of an ugly reality that the American Dream ideology strives to conceal. Jerry's intended message for Peter is that there are people like you who suffer, and with your help their suffering may come to an end. A final task of telling stories in the play is to give voice to all the victims of the American Dream in America. "He [Jerry] wants to give voice to the people of his stratum whose bypassed histories seem lost in the fast-paced tumult of society," Bailey maintains in this regard adding that, "he wants to earn his marginalized story a memorable place in the larger narrative of society (34).

When small talk and telling stories fail to get a true communicative response from Peter, Jerry thinks of a different effective way that may flash truth before Peter's eyes. He seeks a way that puts him beside himself and, therefore, can see the truth of the life he is leading. He tickles him. Peter actually gets beside himself and the emptiness of his life is exposed in front of his two eyes. Amidst his loss of control over himself, he unconsciously substitutes his wife and daughters with the pets as if both were the same for him: "the parakeets will be getting dinner ready soon. ... And the cats are setting the table" (Albee 68). And when asked by Jerry whether he wants to hear the zoo story, he openly expresses his true feeling: "Well, I had my own zoo

there” (Albee 69). Through tickling, Peter has realized, even for a short moment, the truth of his monotonous life and that he is not really happy; he merely pretends it. “Once Peter, has, even whimsically, questioned the happiness of having the right life, the right family, the right pets,” Zimbardo comments, “he has taken the first steps towards his salvation. He has taken the first step in a journey that will lead him to the realization of what it is like to be essentially human and to be an outcast” (15).

Realizing that the truth Peter glimpses for a short while in the Jerry-dog story and the tickling scene is so fragile to make him get out of his nutshell and that the introvert nature of Peter needs something drastic to penetrate it, Jerry decides to ‘tell a story dramatic enough to become newsworthy’ (Bailey 36). He makes up his mind to sacrifice his life for the sake of his fellow men, for the outcast all over America that need somebody to give memorable voice to their suffering, and for the ideology assimilationists whom Peter typically represents to shock them back to the bleak reality they live in. He reaches this decision after several attempts to engage Peter in a real contact that saves both of them. Jerry’s suicide comes as a logical result of the abortion of his dream of having warm contact with his fellow men and enabling others to live outside the constraining, imaginary realm of the American Dream ideology. What happens to Jerry is what the American poet Langston Hughes warned of in his memorable “Harlem”:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? (n.p)

Realistically, Jerry’s dream explodes in the face of society at large leaving deep scars on the makeup of the American society in which man’s dreams end in death. However, the death of Jerry does not go in vain. It conveys an unforgettable message to all the Peters in America: “We should try to face the reality without shutting the doors on it” (Malik 143). “Jerry’s death is intended as a catharsis for the complacent, a wake-up message to get involved in life – ours and others” (Kolin 24). In a word, Jerry dies for Peter and everyone like him; he dies to break off the fetters ideology puts on their humanity and to help them restore their true consciousness of reality in capitalist America which is fully crammed with outcasts like Jerry himself and, therefore, a hoped-for humane pro quo can replace the American inhumane status quo.

Albee’s *The Zoo Story*, thus, presents a powerful critique of the American Dream ideology via dramatizing how it falsifies Americans’ consciousness of their reality. Like all repressive ideologies, it ties individuals to their conditions of living through an imaginary relationship, not a true one. Under the hypnotism of the American Dream, people like Peter falsely imagine that they are happy, free, and autonomous. They imagine that their decisions come out of their free will as fully integrated human subjects that can choose for themselves, instead of seeing themselves as outcomes of various economic, social, and political determinants.

People like Jerry, on the other hand, are looked upon as deserving the present degraded kind of life they are leading because they have chosen not to get involved in the American Dream, rather than because of the surrounding circumstances. Individuals like Peter, hence, choose to subscribe to the dominant ideology to experience themselves falsely as subjects, instead of truly experiencing themselves as mere automatons. On the other hand, many socially outcasts like Jerry choose to rebel against the American Dream ideology that suppresses their humanity and deprives them of a true opportunity to develop their human potential.

The Zoo Story, thus, portrays only two available ways in front of Americans, both of them are bitter. They have either to conform to the American Dream ideology and, hence, feel false happiness based on the illusionary belief that they are what they choose to be or to refuse to assimilate and, hence, suffer from spiritual dryness and physical death as a result. In other words, they have to choose between illusion and death. Life under the American Dream ideology has, thus, become without meaning, “there is no joy, no faith, no reality. Everybody is ‘happy’ – except that he does not feel, does not reason, does not love” (Fromm 360). Here lies the main message of Edward Albee: “to create cognitive dissonance between the illusion they believe and the reality in which they function because ... existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance” (Post 58). In other words, Albee has succeeded through *The Zoo Story* in inviting his readers to question ‘the traps that we set for ourselves, the roles we box ourselves into. And ... we may sometimes need to take a risk, a blind leap of faith, to free ourselves, however dangerous or frightening that may seem’ (Bottoms 14).

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