

THE “CARNIVAL” IN EDWARD ALBEE’S *THE ZOO STORY*

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Abstract: *The Zoo Story* (1959) by Edward Albee depicts the grotesqueness of mankind and humans’ struggle for communication to survive. The play portrays the conflicting lives of the protagonists, Peter and Jerry, and how they (re)shape each other’s lives with a bizarre but effective means of (lack of) communication, creating a dialogic relationship in a carnival-like setting. Thus, the Central Park becomes more significant in terms of spatiality as it welcomes both Peter representing the official culture and Jerry the un-official. Their dialogic relationship starts when Jerry consciously disturbs Peter trying to find his own existence and meaning(lessness) of life, which is also the way for Peter to show an awareness of his own life. Moreover, their meeting and (lack of) communication in the Central Park, spatially constructs the carnivalesque atmosphere in which Jerry enthusiastically celebrates the collapse of social boundaries via Peter, who shockingly witnesses this process. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to study Edward Albee’s play *The Zoo Story* from the Bakhtinian perspective, focusing on the concepts of chronotope, carnival and dialogism to have a better understanding of disconnected yet interdependent characters struggling to survive by trying to find the meaning(lessness) of their lives.

Keywords: *The Zoo Story*; *Absurd theatre*; *Bakhtin*; *chronotope*; *carnival*.

“I’ve been to the zoo. I said, I’ve been to the zoo.
MISTER, I’VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!”
(Jerry, *The Zoo Story*)

In the Central Park, a man (Jerry) goes to a bench on which another man (Peter) is sitting and all of a sudden, he says “I’ve been to the zoo. I said, I’ve been to the zoo. MISTER, I’VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!” (Albee 12). Peter becomes annoyed and he does not understand what is happening and looks at the man with shocking eyes. He does not know at that time the fact that this man who suddenly appears will interrupt not only his reading the book, but also his life by turning the truths about him upside down, which he has disregarded for many years. Jerry becomes Peter’s death and rebirth at the same time while Peter becomes a tool helping Jerry to end his disappointment, frustration as well as his life. The story of *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee begins with this meeting of Jerry and Peter in the Central Park and the play goes on in a different way, contrary to the expectations of the readers/audience.

The play is a pivotal work within the canon of Absurdist Drama, together with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Albee, very similar to Beckett, depicts the existential condition of mankind, defying the in-built absurdity and alleged meaninglessness of the world and human existence. In that sense, the zoo stands as the symbol for the world in which people are estranged from each other. In addition to human isolation, another central theme in the play is (lack of) communication since language is no longer a means for communication as well as social intercourse. Thus, the man becomes a grotesque body, an alienated one, an important characteristic of the Theatre of Absurd, and the flesh, i.e., the body is described in terms of decomposition, decay, mud and muck. Moreover, the Central Park, as the symbolic zoo, becomes more significant in terms of spatiality since it welcomes both Peter, representing the official culture and Jerry, the unofficial, and their dialogic relationship starts when Jerry consciously disturbs Peter and his routine, trying to find his own existence and the meaning(lessness) of life, triggering Peter to gain awareness about the (un)realities as well as (un)certainities of his own life. Besides, their meeting and (lack of) communication in the Central Park spatially constructs the carnivalesque atmosphere in which Jerry enthusiastically celebrates the collapse of social boundaries via Peter who appallingly witnesses. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to study Edward Albee's play *The Zoo Story* from the Bakhtinian perspective, focusing on the concepts of chronotope, carnival and dialogism to have a better understanding of detached yet interdependent characters struggling to survive by trying to find the meaning(lessness) of their lives.

In his essay entitled "Rabelais and His World," Bakhtin talks about the distinction between the official and the folk culture in terms of the body and the bodily life as well as between the Renaissance body and the body in the classical canon (Bakhtin 1994: 195). In the classical canon, the body is conceived as "a totally completed, finished product" which is "separate from the other bodies" (Bakhtin 1994: 195). On the other hand, the grotesque canon characterizes the body as "unfinished, open and proliferating" (Bakhtin 1994: 195), which is closer to the body represented in the Theatre of Absurd. In addition to its being individualized and subjective, it reflects, as Bakhtin explicates, "a phenomenon in transformation, and yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming" (Bakhtin 1984: 24). Bakhtin also emphasizes the contrast between the official/the ruling culture, in the play, denoted by Peter, and the non-official/folk culture, represented by Jerry (Bakhtin 1994: 197). As there is the separation between two cultures, Bakhtin's concept, the carnival, "a time of festive and exuberant celebration" becomes a good ground where "groups from different social classes and backgrounds meet and mingle freely" as "the normal social boundaries

collapse,” and also it is “in a mood of reverse that runs directly counter to the cold, sterile and humorless world” (Booker 106). That is why, Bakhtin describes the carnival as “the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal” because it celebrates “temporal liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions (Bakhtin 1994: 199).

Accordingly, Bakhtin’s carnival is the essence of Albee’s play, *The Zoo Story*, due to the meeting of two cultures represented by two opposing characters, Peter and Jerry, both of whom are unfinished, open and proliferating. In this clash of the official culture and the folk culture, thus Peter and Jerry, Jerry becomes the clown, the fool of the carnival who talks about the realities and truths of the official culture, thus Peter’s. When the depiction of the characters in the play is considered, it can be easily seen that both characters have the typical characteristics of the cultures they belong to. Peter is pictured as a man in his “early forties” and despite his age, “his dress and manner would suggest a man younger,” while Jerry is a man in his “late thirties” with “great weariness” (Albee 11). Peter is always described with “neither...nor” indicating that he is an average person, in Zimbardo’s words “the modern version, in middle class stereotype of Everyman” (10), while Jerry is described with the past tense, implying that he used to be a man of the official culture, yet, transformed, changed, and has become a man of the folk culture who has a great critical eye on the official. Moreover, Peter is dressed in a conformist way, viz., he wears tweeds, smokes a pipe and carries horn-rimmed glasses and thus, he seems to be an intellectual who comes to the Central Park every Sunday to read books instead of spending time with his family.

As the play progresses and Jerry talks to Peter, it is revealed that Peter is a man who seems to have realized the American dream. He has a good job as a publisher, earning much money, which is also the criticism of the official, and the capitalist system and consumerism as well, since Peter is not creating but, selling what is created, so, he is the dominant and he is the one who is “patronizing” (Albee 20). He is married, living in one of the luxurious and elite places with her two daughters (it also disturbs the picture of the ideal American family as there should be one son and one daughter), cats (which should be dogs in the ideal picture) and parakeets (Albee 16-18). Unlike him, Peter, living in a bad-conditioned and cheap apartment, has two empty frames symbolizing his family that he lost long ago, thus his loneliness that he does not care any longer (Albee 23). When the two characters are compared in terms of human isolation, it is seen that Peter is “self-isolated”, meaning he builds such a life “to protect him from himself and the world” (Zimbardo 10). However, for Jerry “his isolation is forced upon him [and so] he is determined

to discover the essential nature of the human condition” by creating a kind of communication with Peter (Zimbardo 12).

The distinction between the two cultures is clear even in the very beginning of the play as these two men are talking about totally different things. Jerry repeatedly says that he has been to the zoo, however, Peter’s answer is, “Hm?...What?...I’m sorry, were you talking to me?” (Albee 12) Whilst Jerry goes on talking, Peter insistently says that he does not understand what Jerry is talking about, but Jerry never gives up. Bakhtin elucidates that a single consciousness cannot create awareness, but it requires another consciousness, to put it in another way, Bakhtin emphasizes the significance of the physical and spatial existence of the body (Bakhtin 1994: 98). Here the “dialogic,” another Bakhtinian concept gains importance. As stated by Bakhtin, meaning or existence evolves when there is dialogue or the dialogic interaction between the self and the other, as exemplified in the play through Peter and Jerry despite the meaninglessness of their communication (Bakhtin 1994: 98).

In addition to the dialogic relationship, Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia is equally significant since it means the coexistence of various speeches, that is, it is another’s speech in another’s language, functioning to convey the authorial meanings but in an indirect way (Bakhtin 1994: 116). Heteroglossia, as Bakhtin clarifies “constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*” with “two voices, two meanings and two expressions” which are “dialogically interrelated”, and they seem “as if they actually hold a conversation with each other. Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized” (Holquist 324) (*my emphasis*). So, different languages or speeches of social heteroglossia are dialogically oriented, and during this process, each language conveys its own ideological and cultural meaning as well as reality about the world. Each language of heteroglossia meets its own socio-ideological and cultural requirements such as class, profession, and gender, but at the same time, it also actively participates in multiple speeches around it. In that manner, each word/utterance is populated with multiple accents and purposes that create numerous layers internally (Holquist 272). Therefore, Bakhtin considers the dialogic process of language as an ongoing and simultaneous play between centralizing and decentralizing forces of language, that is to say, between centripetal and centrifugal forces (Bakhtin 1994:75). So, it is not wrong to say that heteroglossia indicates the tension between official and the non-official discourses within the same language. In the play, Jerry’s voice is accompanied by the authorial voice and when Jerry criticizes and questions Peter’s and his own life, the authorial voice also resonates to critique the modern world and the meaninglessness as well as absurdity of life. Moreover, Jerry’s so-called monologues change into dialogues with Peter’s responses. Although sometimes he is silent, other times he responds with

physical unrest and he clearly states that he does not want to listen, all his responses giving emphasis to the heteroglotic nature of the play.

Hence, in relation to what Bakhtin asserts, in the play, the response of Peter's consciousness is active. As the representative of the ruling class, Peter narrows the meaning of words and makes social signs uni-accentual; on the other hand, as the representative of the folk culture, Jerry makes all the signs vital and multi-accentual, highlighting the conflict between the official and non-official. Therefore, from then on, the Central Park becomes Jerry's marketplace, which is described by Bakhtin as "the center of [...] unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remain[s] with the people" (Bakhtin 1984: 153-154). Afterwards, Jerry starts the carnival, which would bring birth and death for these characters.

The carnival is depicted as a temporal and spatial moment when boundaries dissolve and when the energies of life explode beyond the limits of the conventional decorum (Booker 106). As Bakhtin clearly states, "carnival is not a spectacle seen by people" but

they live in, and everyone participates because its very ideas embrace all people [...] It is a universal spirit; it is a special condition [...] of the world's revival and renewal in which all take part. (Bakhtin 1994: 198)

Taking the context of the play into consideration, Peter, symbolizing the official culture stands at the heart of the carnival Jerry starts in the Central Park, the carnivalesque setting, situated in the middle of the city, which connects everything and everyone, thus, the low and high cultures. It is the marketplace where everyone can express themselves free from the restrictions and the conventions of the ruling class and culture, very similar to Peter and Jerry who live all the energies of life there. Moreover, the bench, the only prop in the play, is very symbolic since it is neither the commodity of the high culture nor the low one, i.e., it belongs to everyone. However, it becomes a very valuable possession with what it represents for Peter, that is, his honour and manhood that he tries to protect for the first time in his life. For Jerry, the bench denotes the meaning(less)ness of his life and his death.

By these means, the carnival begins for these two men when Jerry talks about Peter's life and telling him the covered lies/truths that he does not want to dislocate his conventional and high cultural life. Jerry attacks Peter's personal life, which annoys the latter, and Peter does not want to talk to this weird man who knows about his life much more than himself. Jerry is like a prophet or a fortune teller who makes comments about Peter's life effortlessly and confidently. In this carnival, Jerry gives Peter a second chance/life to be aware of the facts and to turn into "an animal (becoming)" from "a vegetable

(being)” (Albee 49). Likewise, Jerry also gives himself a second chance/life through Peter since he can express himself freely, allowing him to break free from all the suppressive restrictions.

For this reason, Bakhtin’s concept of carnival symbolized with the Central Park emphasizing subversion, social relationships and ambivalence, is closely linked to the condition of the modern man and the modern world. The play depicts the existential crisis of modern men and the search for meaning in this carnivalesque world. This is also closely linked to Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope which means “intrinsic connectedness of spatial (a specific point of historical time) and temporal (that is the physical-geographical space) relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. It expresses the inseparability of time and space” (Bakhtin 1994:184). With this definition, the place, the Central Park, and time –Sunday in the modern time period– reshape the existential images of these two men, Jerry and Peter, as well as their interaction and its outcomes in the play. Furthermore, as aforementioned, the symbol of the zoo in the play becomes more significant in terms of chronotope because it represents not only the Central Park but also the modern world and it also extends to Jerry’s house. He draws the picture of a micro-zoo while talking about his apartment as a “four-storey brownstone rooming house on the upper West Side between Columbus Avenue and Central Park west” with its grotesque and marginalized residents (Albee 22). With his emphasis on the people living there, Jerry accentuates non-communication and un-social intercourse, creating another carnivalesque setting when he describes a coloured queen with his “rotten teeth” and “a Japanese kimono” who “always keeps his door open” and “is plucking his eyebrows, which he does with Buddhist concentration” (Albee 22). Additionally, he talks about a “Puerto Rican family [...] a husband, a wife, and some kids” who “entertain a lot” (Albee 22). Jerry’s illustration of all these people living in his apartment with bodily excessiveness underlines the fact that the apartment is another marketplace and carnival which is full of socially peripheral people, belonging to the low culture, folk culture or the non-official, like Jerry, himself. Among these people, the most outstanding and grotesque one for Jerry is the landlady who is pictured with excessiveness, which aligns with Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque body. Jerry describes her as a “fat, ugly, mean, stupid, unwashed, misanthropic, cheap, drunken bag of garbage” underscoring the bodily excessiveness and degradation, with her dog, with which Jerry has a different kind of interaction (Albee 27). While the landlady always welcomes Jerry when he goes to the apartment and tries to seduce him, her dog, the “gatekeeper of [Jerry’s] dwelling” does not allow him to enter the apartment (Albee 27). Jerry’s (lack of) communication with the dog calls attention to the Bakhtinian concept of the “dialogic” even between human and non-human

figures since the dialogue or “dialogic” relations with the other, creates the meaning or the reality. That is,

Any utterance [...] makes response to something and is calculated to be responded in return. [...] To understand another person’s utterance means to orient himself with respect to it, find the proper place for it in the corresponding context. (Voloshinov 35)

Accordingly, every utterance creates a response in the recipient even if that response is not outspoken, but still, it creates a reaction within the recipient’s discourse. In his expose of the dog, Jerry creates a grotesque image with excessiveness like its owner, the landlady since he pictures the dog as “a black monster of a beast: an oversized head, tiny, tiny ears, and eyes...bloodshot, infected, [...] the ribs through the skin” (Albee 30). He further highlights its blackness and the colour red he associates with the dog as

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 [...] it’s certainly a misused one...almost always has an erection...of sorts. That’s red, too. (Albee 30)

By drawing an incongruous picture of the dog, Jerry correlates the dog with the marginalized people, like himself. The first meeting of Jerry and the dog is noteworthy because although Jerry points out the indifference of animals to people and to him, this dog “[g]rrrrr[s]” when it sees Jerry (Albee 30). The dog’s utterance and Jerry’s silent yet active response can be taken into consideration as a dialogic relationship, showing the communicative way of the modern world. By stating people’s indifference to him, he implies the indifference of the modern world, suggesting a heteroglossic environment full of diverse interactions. Albee here criticizes the modern world with its indifferent people who lack communication and any social intercourse. The dog represents the modern man with its human-like features. However, a new means of communication emerges between Jerry and the dog after he gives it hamburgers. The dog’s response, which is the reversal of the roles, starts a new interaction between them positioning Jerry as the marginal at the end while in the beginning the dog is the other, underlining the fluidity of identity and power dynamics within marginal spaces.

Likewise, the spatial and temporal condition of the characters reflect the existential condition and social interconnectedness of the modern man. Thereupon, with this chronotopic encounter, Peter’s life is altered by Jerry who is also seeking a meaning in his life. So, Jerry’s forced dialogic relationship/communication with Peter in the Central Park creates a carnivalesque setting for both men to uncover their inner worlds, feelings and thoughts, which becomes a revelation or self-confession. Although Peter does

not want to get involved in this communication, he cannot resist, by sometimes becoming angry, shocked or entertained, he, reflexively, with his reactions and answers, depicts his unconscious. In that sense, this mis/ (lack of) communication turns into a functional dialogic one with language used to reveal what is hidden in the unconscious. According to Voloshinov, the unconscious of people is an extension of the class –the official or the non-official– they belong to. He claims that every utterance is an outcome of the interplay between speakers, giving emphasis to inner speech which “assumes a listener and is oriented in its construction toward that listener. Inner speech is the same kind of product and expression of social intercourse as is outward speech” (Voloshinov 42). In relation to this, the inner speech though unuttered is shared and understood by the characters Jerry and Peter, in the play. To illustrate, when Jerry talks about the pornographic pictures and asks if Peter still has these cards or not, Peter gets angry, an implication of his having these cards, creating a contrast with his happy and ideal family (Albee 34). Upon discovering Peter’s habitual visits to the park every Sunday, Jerry tries to find reasons for these regular visits, which makes Peter reevaluate his life and confront his repressed thoughts and desires, transferring him from “being” into “becoming”. As a man who represents high culture with his so-called ideal family, it is unexpected for Peter to come to the park every Sunday instead of spending time with his family. As Jerry’s unconscious is a continuum of the official, he conceals his real reasons and tendencies as his picture is almost perfect as the representative of the official, however, he prefers to come to the park alone (without his happy family) ironically just to read books.

Similarly, through the end of the play, Jerry tickles Peter and Peter irritatingly and unintentionally laughs with absurd and bodily expressions, another way of response to Jerry, which can be seen as the subversion of the authority by the carnival laughter, a central element of Bakhtin’s carnival that erases all the boundaries and hierarchies of the power dynamics and as Bakhtin defines it is “the language of the marketplace” (Bakhtin 1994: 206). Although Jerry’s tickling is an attempt to provoke Peter to evoke awareness and realization, he keeps on laughing,

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....OHHHHH! Don’t do that. Stop, stop. Ohhh, no, no.

JERRY: Oh, come on.

PETER: [as Jerry tickles] oh, hee, hee, hee. I must go. I...hee, hee, hee. After all, stop, stop, hee, hee, hee, after all, the parakeets will be getting dinner ready soon. Hee, hee. And the cats are setting the table. Stop, stop, and, and... (Albee 38)

Peter’s laughter depicts a moment of his relief, realization or self-awareness, which explains him having difficulty in controlling himself. According to

Bakhtin, carnival laughter, “is first of all a festive laughter” which is more than an individual response to a comic event but as he explains,

Carnival laughter is the laughter of all people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. (Bakhtin 1994: 200)

Laughter, as articulated by Bakhtin, calls attention to the dynamics and changeability of the relationship, rather than fixed, one-sided and hierarchical roles within a relationship, meaning, as he explains thoroughly,

The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation. [...] Laughter, on the contrary, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority. (Bakhtin 1984: 90)

Therefore, laughter has the role of a subversive force, disrupting power structures and creating a good ground for alternate ways of interaction founded in ambivalence and renewal. Peter’s laughter, in this fashion, is the overcoming of his fear of this stranger, Jerry, and more importantly, what Jerry tells him under the name of the zoo story since Jerry constantly says that he is going to tell him what happened in the zoo, but, whenever he says so, he starts to tell something else. Bakhtin explains that “[t]he truth of laughter embraced and carried away everyone; nobody could resist it” since it “overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations (Bakhtin 1994: 209). Peter’s laughter, for this reason, becomes liberating as it frees him from all the restrictions of the official culture, and it is the same laughter that makes him overcome fear, a central element in Bakhtinian carnival, in which laughter becomes a means of reactionary defence in response to fear. As Zimbardo states, Peter has the realization of seeing “the emptiness of his life in which cats, children, wife and parakeets are interchangeable because they are all merely props whose function it is to disguise nothingness and isolation” (13). More specifically, Peter de-centres himself and his life by revealing his doubts and thus, breaking the external shell of his life.

To insinuate the generative energy of the carnival imagery, Bakhtin encompasses ambivalence with physical force as the carnival is “humiliating and mortifying”, while simultaneously being “revived and renewed” (Bakhtin 1984:203). This dialectic and dialogic connection can be seen in Jerry’s having the knife, which has the sexual connotation symbolizing the sexual unity of Peter and Jerry at the end of the play and him giving the knife to Peter in order to protect his honour and manhood is the punch line of the play and Jerry’s

carnival. Prior to a detailed commentary, it is important to remember the cultural clash in the play. In the very beginning of the play, Peter represents the official and Jerry, the non-official, nevertheless, as the play proceeds, there is the reversal in the power structure and Jerry has the power as the marginal, and Peter weakens in this temporal and spatial carnivalesque place where Jerry becomes the dominant whereas Peter, the marginal. At the end of the play, conversely, Jerry, by empowering Peter with the knife, pretends to be the weaker, reinforces Peter to protect his manhood and honour for the first time in his life (Albee 46-47). Thus, this carnivalesque abuse is humiliating and degrading for Jerry, but at the same time it is vitalizing and renovating, which liberates him and makes him “an animal” and committed. The values are inverted and thereby relativized. Jerry celebrates his grotesque body not in terms of the bodily excessiveness but in terms of spiritual and mental excessiveness in the play and opposes to the uncontrollable importance of spirit and the harsh repression of bodily instincts and desires. Therefore, the dialogic intercourse between them helps Peter have a realization, resulting in his transformation into an active marginal and thus, the play ends with Jerry’s death, liberating not only Peter but also Jerry. At the end of Jerry’s carnival, Jerry achieves peace and self-redemption, and Peter becomes a member of the marginalized group, breaking all the lines with the high class. He becomes a grotesque figure owing to his change; as explained in Jerry’s words, Peter turns into an animal from a vegetable, so, he is taken apart and reproduced. The end of the play also accords with the Bakhtinian concept of finalization as there is no absolute meaning for Bakhtin, so, there are no finalizations. Bakhtin rejects finalizations due to the constant change in the self as well as the inversion of the official and the non-official, therefore, people have multiple meanings and “becoming(s)” in temporal and spatial contexts, which is also chronotopic. The play ends with an open ending and the readers/audience witness the re-generation and transformation in Peter, which signals possible future carnivals in his life as he becomes the marginal and the grotesque figure like Jerry.

In conclusion, Edward Albee, in his play *The Zoo Story*, through the dialogic relationship of his grotesque characters Jerry and Peter in the carnivalesque setting, the Central Park, critiques the meaninglessness of the modern world and modern man with his existential turmoil. The play also underscores the fragmentation in the lives of people as well as fragmentation and absurdity of the language as a means of communication leading to miscommunication and thus alienation and disconnection. Although Albee does not offer a resolution or closure at the end, the play can be considered to have a hopeful end since Jerry says to Peter “you’re not really a vegetable; it’s all right, you’re an animal. You’re an animal, too” (Albee 49). In that sense, the collapse of the hierarchal power structures, subversion of identities and

voices as well as disruption of the boundaries between high and low cultures in this carnival, the spatial and temporal shifts become more significant not only to criticize the alienation of the modern man, but also to celebrate the subversion.

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