

# “The Zoo Story”: Alienated Men in the Shrinking Urban Space

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“The Zoo Story”, as a representative work of the theater of the absurd, is filled with grotesque scenes and languages, in which city images are an essential component. What lies behind the apparent absurdity is the morbid life and psyche of the people in modern city. In fact, man and city consists an important theme of the play. In “The Zoo Story”, the houses, parks, and streets are three main city images that cause oppression and alienation to people. Therefore, the analysis of the dominant urban space and alienated modern citizens in the play from the perspective of city writing enhances the thematic implication of the play.

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The towering building of cold steel and concrete, the irresistible torrent of flowing lights, cars, and throngs constitute the “phantasmagoria” of a city, perplexing and dwarfing individuals. In modern city, private spaces are being walled up. Public spaces are being commercialized, lacking the leisure aura of salon or café in 18th and 19th century Paris. Both spaces are being transformed to be confined places, and the ironical and lamentable result of it is that human beings lose sense of belonging in both spaces altered by themselves. In “The Zoo Story”, alienation is generated when men are confined to the cubical houses which make up the yoked city under the seemingly democratic and liberal systems while in actuality men are bewildered and manipulated by it and reduced to the tool of it, feeling hardly possible to exert human creativity as an advanced species. What Albee concerns most is “the collapse of community, the Other as threat. His subject is loss, desolation, spiritual depletion” (Bigsby, 2000, p. 125), and “The Zoo Story” is “a potent fable of social anomie” (Bigsby, 2000, p. 129).

## The Shrinking Urban Space

### The Oppressive Private Space: Home

As one of the most private spaces, one’s home is supposed to serve as one’s spiritual shelter. But in “The Zoo Story”, neither of the two protagonists derives solace from their home. Gaston Bachelard (1994) believed that beyond the positive values of protection, the house is also imbued with dream value, “A house constitutes a body of image that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability” (p. 17). And a house is imagined as a “vertical” as well as a “concentrated being”, of which “verticality is ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 17). Verticality has been an intimate value to human beings for it represents the ability to transcend. But in modern city, people are stuffed in the little superimposed boxes with neither a cellar nor attic; hence, home has lost its inner verticality. Besides, houses in big city are built in lumped complexes with fewer natural surroundings thus fail to accommodate human intimacy. The houses Peter and Jerry dwell in are just two small

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units of the countless urban buildings, a place that brings men sense of oppression.

It can be seen that Peter is of upper-middle class from the tweeds he wears and the pipe he smokes. He mentions his downtown house to Jerry in a smug tone, but he does not cling to it. The house to him is a signal to show his wealth in the consumer society where everything is signified by its financial value. As a married man, Peter has been castrated at home. His wish of giving birth to a son is stoutly refused by his wife. Despite that he does not like animals, his wife and two daughters keep two cats and parakeets and he has to change the toilet box for the cats. Alienation exists even at one's home, and as a result of it,

men no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreation, or at most in his dwelling and dressing-up, ect.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. (Marx, 1988, p. 74)

For Peter, his house is like a small zoo where the animals play the function of mankind while human beings are like animals: “the parakeets will be getting dinner soon, and the cats are setting the table” (Albee, 1959, p. 19). Peter's masculinity is oppressed by his wife and daughters at home, so the house to him is no longer a place of love and attachment, but becomes a place that he wants to escape. Therefore, he turns to the open and quite park, where he can seclude himself from his families and others.

For Jerry, home is no better than a jail. Since spaciousness is closely related to the sense of being free, the enclosed space more or less fetters people. In his “laughably small” apartment with rooms separated by beaverboard, all Jerry has are some utensils and other minor articles, like playing cards, letters, rocks, and two empty photograph frames. The neighbors are strange “coloured queen, the Puerto Rican family, the person in the room” who he has never seen and “the woman who cries deliberately behind her closed door” (Albee, 1959, p. 15) and the disgusting landlady who “has some foul parody of sexual desire” and Jerry is “the object of her sweaty lust” (Albee, 1959, p. 9). In such a queer community, everyone is the small plankton in the vast ocean, connecting with each other inorganically. Jerry is also one of them. He is devastated by the violent death of the only few people who are keen to him: Mother died in a southern state; father hit by the city omnibus (probably suicide); and aunt drops dead in the apartment in which he now lives. Jerry has been living all alone in the empty apartment throughout the years since his aunt's death. The unbearably loneliness stimulates his heart-shattering eagerness of getting touch with someone, so he chooses to get out of the confined apartment to the streets.

### **The Narrow Public Spaces**

**Central park.** Parks, with the natural plants and penetrable soil, is supposed to be a symbol of nature and provide itself as a place where people can take a breath. For years, Peter would come to the park to enjoy his Sunday afternoon. However, Peter does not intend to acquire contemplation or epiphany of his life from the park. The garden in the past is a place in which seeing is not just an aesthetic activity but has intellectual values for the garden is “designed to involve, to encompass the visitor who, as he walks along a winding trail, is exposed to constantly shifting scenes” (Tuan, 1974, p. 137). Parks in modern city are enclosed boisterous spaces mainly designed for recreation, which can hardly provide people a patch to meditate. Central Park is located in the most hilarious area in New York, which is surrounded by the Rockefeller Financial Group, a center of the commercial community of America; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, an epitome of American, even the whole mankind's culture; and the Empire State Building, a landmark of America as the world empire. Besieged by the sky-scrappers, the park is inundated with post-industrialized artificiality, from which visitors

can hardly obtain an authentic bond with nature or immerse themselves in reverie.

More importantly, in nature, Peter is a numb and fatigued person who is stuck in the tedious life yet without realizing the problem of it or thinking of changing it. Even when resting at the park, he takes no action to appreciate the natural sceneries or engage in the crowd. Rather, all the hours he just sits on the bench reading. Intentionally, he sets up a transparent wall around himself, keeping a courteous but aloof distance from other people. When Jerry is eager to talk to him, he gives friendly but absent-minded responses while complaining inwardly for Jerry's spoiling the only few moments when he can stay away from his home. All Peter cares to resort to is the small corner of the park, where he can regularly get "recharged" so as to be ready to get involved in the new round family and life torment. So, the park to Peter is merely an escapement to temporarily relieve himself, a place paid no due attention for its own aesthetic and intellectual value.

**Streets.** Unlike Peter, Jerry tries to blend in the crowds all his life. So, he turns to the streets for streets with bars and theaters and throngs of moving passersby can very often mirror the panorama of a city. For Walter Benjamin, street is the place where the flaneur is at home. "The street becomes a dwelling place for the flaneur; he is as much at home among house facades as a citizen is within his four walls" (Eiland & Jennings, 2003, p. 19). However, street scenes are also changing as a modern urban component, "The automobile transformed the character of the city and man's relationship to his urban environment" (Tuan, 1974, p. 189). With the introduction of wheeled traffic, class division is expanded. The rich intend to tour in the city by private riding tools while their poorer counterparts have to walk on foot. Sitting high up in the carriage or cosily in cars, the rich become the gazer of the city while the poor are reduced to the gazed. Besides the inner division of mankind to polar groups, in urban planning, mankind as a whole are deprived of the ownership for public spaces. Modern urban streets have become a world for vehicles rather than that for human beings. Cities are designed for vehicles: The parking quantity directly affects the scale of a plaza; the width of streets is measured by the driveway; the color of streets is mainly the color of traffic light, which favors cars while men have to stare carefully to avoid missing a single second to hurry forward like a tale-fired rabbit. Little of the noise is of human and few humans are to be seen. The losing ownership of men for public spaces signifies men's loss of initiative spirit in city's growing.

Since streets become a confined space, it is hard for city rovers to find consolation, so even in the streets full of crowds Jerry cannot unshackle his inner loneliness. Spiritual isolation and apathy of people has undermined mutual understanding. Conversation is made difficult between people. Jerry talks to the crowd without the due substantial content of a conversation: "give me a beer, or where is the john, or what time dose the feature go on, or keep your hands to yourself" (Albee, 1959, p. 5)—again, everything about human vitality has degraded to animal functions. Worse still, people grow intolerant and acrimonious to each other. Humanistic care is missing in the alienated secular culture, which makes Jerry feel himself a misfit in society. The main-stream culture embarrasses him to admit that he is homosexual and he only takes his liberty to tell this by spelling the word "homosexual" letter by letter and cannot help repeating very fast that he is a queer after confiding it to Peter. When buying the hamburger at the shop, he replies to the assistant a little "too loud and too formally" that it is a bite for his cat, he again feels the bystanders' judging eyesight: "people look up. It always happens when I try to simplify things, people look up" (Albee, 1959, p. 14). Being shackled at home, Jerry flees to the outside world, but what he can find in this modern city is the pervasive estrangement and marginalization.

## **The Alienated Modern Men**

### **Paralyzed Fugitive**

In the rising period of capitalism after first industrial revolution, Karl Marx (1988) observed that the relationship between the workers and the products are alienated. The right to possess their own products is deprived and labor is made external of the workers, therefore the workers are unable to fulfill their personal value as a human being. In modern city, alienation does not only exist between workers and products but is sprawling across every façade of human life. Modern writings have been focusing on the relationship between men and city. Lehan (1988) stated that the two major themes of modernism are “the artist and the city. Perhaps the major modernist theme is that of the artist or the equivalent of the artist, in the city” (p. 77). In “The Zoo Story”, Peter and Jerry specifically represent two kinds of men when responding to the alienated environment.

Peter is a representative of the dull modern man from top to toe, displaying no interest in the things and people around him. He does not understand Jerry and views him as a strange lunatic. When Jerry tries to stimulate him by tickling him, the combined and contradictory inner furiousness and facial hysterical laughing turns him into a freak, which hints the split of spirit and flesh of modern men; when Jerry tries to awake him by punching him and challenges him to fight for the bench, he is unable to take any actions but orally asking Jerry to stop, a sigh of modern men’s lacking power for action; even at the end when Jerry impales himself on the knife, Peter is struck dumb and is only able to give a “sound of an infuriated and fatally wounded animal” (Albee, 1959, p. 26). Like what Jerry calls, Peter is a subhuman “vegetable” who finds no dignity or anything belongs to himself in the house. Therefore, when he claims so firmly and threatens Jerry in the park that the bench is his, he is begging for his long-lost honor, and the bench to him is the only thing that he sees as a property of his own. Facing the punches of life, Peter is like a hammered bull with no attempt to make things better but to be a fugitive.

### **City Flaneur**

Unlike Peter, Jerry is the few people in whom there still remain senses and emotions of a normal human being. Jerry is the city “flaneur” in Walter Benjamin’s word. Baudelaire (2010) defined modernity as the present experience of evanescence, which cannot be understood by learning or imitating from old masters, but can only be felt by childlike perception and one’s acuminous imagination while roaming on the crowd” (pp. 22-40). Benjamin has noted that city flaneurs are those who possess such perception for they immerse as a part in the crowd when cruising on the streets as well as being a solitary outsider of the crowd so as to observe and sense the ephemeral presence in their current time. Thus, a flaneur is like a detective who “sees rather wide areas opening-up to his self-esteem. He develops reactions that are in keeping with the tempo of a big city. He catches things in flight; this enables him to dream that he is an artist” (Eiland & Jennings, 2003, p. 22). Flaneurs may also be interpreted to Lehan’s “equivalent artist” mentioned above. “By *equivalent* I am suggesting an observer who brings a distinct consciousness to the city or the consciousness in pursuit of the effect of urban activity on another location or place” (Lehan, 1998, p. 77). Jerry is just the flaneur in New York City. Strolling among the crowd, Jerry acquires a keen insight towards this city and life.

Jerry has sharpened his eyes when in the crowd. He senses the corrupted morality and collapsed faith in the city. “...all colours reflecting the oily-wet street...with a wisp of smoke, a wisp...of smoke...with...with pornographic playing cards, with a strong-box...WITHOUT LOCK...” (Albee, 1959, p. 16). The seemingly disordered monologue of Jerry implicates the equally chaotic and materialized city scene in which imbued with

Jerry's despair and despondency. Moreover, Peter is sensitive about life, which can be glimpsed from many of his witty comments: "Sometimes a person has to go away a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly" (Albee, 1959, p. 8). It can be said that Jerry serves as Albee's mouthpiece, from whose monologue the bitterness of modern life and Albee's concern for and critic to modern urban development can be well inferred.

The most impressive and striking part of Jerry is the tragic spirit displayed on him. Although fully aware of the deep-rooted malady of modern city, he still fights an unwinnable war. Though reality fails him, Jerry never gives up in awakening stiff modern men. Even towards the end of his life, he tries to stimulate Peter from the spiritual narcosis by tickling and yielding at him and even creating such a violent yet courageous death scene at the cost of his own life right in front of Peter. Being repelled by the human world, Jerry even turns to animals. He attempts to improve "the relationship" between him and the landlady's dog, which is used to chasing and attacking him fiercely. To his disappointment, the burger feast does not change the dog's wickedness to him. And the poison only turns the dog aphonic to him, which is even more unbearable than the formal hatred. The dog's response to him is just like that of human beings, and Jerry's paradoxical sick and pity attitude to the dog is also how he feels for those mechanic men.

Being unable to reverse the paralyzed life, Jerry chooses to go back to the origin of his life. In his inner heart, there is nostalgia for his childhood when he is with "good old Mom and good old Pop" in the "good old north". From the beginning to the end of the play, he has been constantly searching for the north, which is not only his homeland, but also a place where he hopes to get to after he dies because there is pure childhood happiness in north. Jerry is determined to die at the beginning of the play, he tells Peter that he will see the zoo story on tonight's TV or tomorrow's newspaper, which indicates that the news of his death will be reported soon, so he tells Peter "while I was at the zoo I decided that I would go north...northerly, rather...until...I found you...or somebody...and I decided that I would talk to you..." (Albee, 1959, p. 26). Jerry's death is both a helpless and brave resistance against being drugged like most modern men, which is attached with a solemn and stirring tragic heroism. But also it is from the failure of Jerry's persistent attempts of getting touch with someone that the alienation between modern men and the ruthlessness of modern urban environment are unveiled.

### **Conclusion**

The rapidly-multiplying city and fast-paced urban life squeeze mankind's vitality and creativity, leaving them only with engulfing numbness and ennui. In "The Zoo Story", from the vague description of the two characters in the beginning, it can be seen that Albee aims to weaken their specific individual characteristics, but to shape them into common human being so that their experiences are the common experience of modern men in general who are robbed of happiness in the shrinking urban space, becoming alienated with each other. Peter and Jerry respectively represent two kinds of men when responding to the alienated environment. Peter is the common public, while Jerry is the few awakened but marginalized "Other". The intermittence and compactness of Jerry's words implicate the powerlessness of modern men under the irreversible progress in urban development as well as the tense and alienated relation between modern men.

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