

B.A. Third Year The Zoo Story Questions

1

The characters in The Zoo Story frequently refer to the play's New York setting. What does Albee accomplish by so heavily emphasizing the setting?

Albee built his reputation on combining American-style realist drama with the European Theatre of the Absurd. The Zoo Story's strong sense of setting enhances the play's realism and grounds it even as it explores universal ideas about disconnection, alienation, and misunderstanding. The play is both realistic and stylized, and needs this specificity to achieve that balance. The play's New York setting is also important because the city was (and is) America's largest and most impersonal metropolis, and thus a perfect setting through which to explore the themes of loneliness and urban alienation.

2

What is the symbolic significance of Jerry's death?

Jerry's death is a shockingly violent twist in a play that is, up until that point, a drama of manners revolving around conversation rather than action. However, the event has multiple layers of significance. First and foremost, it is the culmination of Jerry's characterization as a lonely outcast, and it drives home Albee's point that urban alienation can have profoundly serious consequences, both for individuals and for society. The way that Jerry dies also has phallic resonances – he is stabbed by Peter in the abdomen. The critic Robert Zaller argues that the moment is an important component of the play's exploration of homosexuality; according to his interpretation, Jerry enlists Peter in his suicide as an act of intimacy. Finally, one can see Jerry's death as a martyrdom of sorts; he dies to teach Peter about the dangers of alienation and judgment, in hopes that his act might resonate by making Peter change his life and perspective.

3

What does The Zoo Story say about capitalism?

When Albee wrote The Zoo Story, many Americans were enamored with capitalism's potential to make a middle-class lifestyle accessible to anyone. However, Albee is sharply critical of the capitalist mentality; Jerry is living proof that economic stability has escaped the poorest Americans. What is worse is that they are now taunted with an impossible promise. Jerry also criticizes Peter's materialism by linking it to naïveté about the world outside his middle-class milieu. Through Jerry and Peter's numerous miscommunications, Albee suggests that privileged Americans are sometimes blind to the struggles of others, and hence are blind to the truth about themselves.

4

Analyze how Peter's attitude about the bench changes over the course of the play.

For most of *The Zoo Story*, Peter sits alone on the bench while Jerry moves around him with great animation. Peter's physical positioning reinforces the fact that he is a mostly passive player in the narrative; he sits and watches while Jerry unravels before his eyes. This fact supports the interpretation of the play as a lesson Jerry is trying to teach. However, when Jerry tries to join Peter on the bench, Peter becomes possessive of his own space – even though he knows that this attitude is absurd. When Jerry forces him off the bench and claims it for himself, Peter becomes furious. Peter's possessive attitude toward the bench could be taken as a critique of middle-class consumerism, where material objects are considered a status symbol. It could also be a reinforcement of the idea that people see the world in terms of separation; Peter needs to be different than Jerry, to have something different. The idea that they might share the bench flies in the face of his pre-conditioned worldview.

5

Discuss Albee's depiction of homosexuality in *The Zoo Story*.

Albee himself is gay, and many critics have argued that *The Zoo Story* is an allegory about the experience of being homosexual in the conservative culture of 1950s America. Jerry's experimentation with homosexuality as a young boy is only discussed briefly, but it is nevertheless portrayed as one of the most fulfilling relationships in the story (Jerry's flings with women were brief and insubstantial, and Albee strongly implies that Peter's marriage is also unsatisfying). Jerry's alternative sexuality could also explain his loneliness. American culture was so hostile to homosexuality at this time that barely-erotic moments like Jerry's tickling of Peter were often the most intimacy a gay man could hope for. The only other alternative was to seek anonymous intimacy with men in the park, a fact that Jerry alludes to. Finally, one could see the sudden violence as a comment on the Freudian link between repression and violence. When sexual urges cannot be honestly expressed, they have a tendency to explode in uncontrollable ways.

6

What role do animals play in *The Zoo Story*?

Jerry and Peter frequently refer to animals in *The Zoo Story*. Peter's views toward animals are relatively conventional – he does not devote much serious thought to them, but he is also compassionate toward them, as we see when he gets upset about Jerry's dog story. Jerry, on the other hand, sees animals as a potential solution to his feelings of loneliness and alienation. Although he has trouble forging fulfilling relationships with other humans, he believes that he can solve this problem by interacting with animals. For Jerry, they are a stepping stone to learning how to 'get along in the world.' What helps to elucidate their different attitudes towards women is the suggestion that we are all of us animalistic beneath our 'civilized' facades. Peter wants animals, which are driven by instinct, to be separate from himself. Jerry believes they are expressions of ourselves.

From this vantage, Jerry's ultimate lesson, in which he forces Peter to engage in violence, is about exhibiting the human potential for impulsive animal behavior.

7

Compare and contrast Peter and Jerry's personalities.

Peter and Jerry have complex, fully-realized personalities – one of the most important characteristics of realist drama. Peter is level-headed, polite, and compassionate, but he is also a somewhat shallow thinker. He does not seem to analyze much of what goes on around him, and his comments about his favorite books show that he values being diplomatic more than having strong opinions. Jerry, in contrast, spends a great deal of energy analyzing the world around him, and has a variety of unconventional opinions, all of which he is eager to share with Peter. Although the two men do not seem to share many personality traits, they do have certain qualities in common. Both seem to be unsatisfied with their home lives (although Peter halfheartedly argues to the contrary), and both seem to feel alienated and misunderstood by society. That they ultimately define themselves by their differences rather than by these profound similarities offers a comment on the human potential for miscommunication.

8

Do Peter and Jerry represent certain values or ways of thinking?

Although Peter and Jerry are complex, unique characters, they are also emblematic of certain values in American culture. Peter's financial success and his conventional family life make him a living example of the American Dream. At least on the surface, he appears to have found personal fulfillment and financial stability. When he does espouse strong opinions - about bohemianism or about not expecting too much from life, he reflects a capitalist mentality. Jerry, on the other hand, represents iconoclasm. He rejects many of society's expectations of American men: he has no wife or children, he does not hold a job, and he has even experimented with homosexuality. He is highly critical of certain parts of American life – for example, he does not see how having a family like Peter's could be fulfilling. Therefore, the characters work both as individuals and as symbols of two sides of a culture clash.

9

How is one to understand Jerry's strange behavior? Why does he act the way he does?

There are several potential explanations for Jerry's behavior. He freely admits to being socially isolated, and many of his actions seem to be driven by loneliness and a desperate need for human connection. In other words, he might be crazy. However, the cause of Jerry's loneliness is up for debate. Some scholars have argued that he is alienated because he is a repressed homosexual, others that his isolation is a product of urban culture, which makes it difficult for individuals to connect with those around them. Finally, one can argue that Jerry's behavior is less unhinged than it seems, and in fact is deliberately designed to counter what he perceives as Peter's conventional values. In other words, Jerry acts as he does

to teach a lesson, to try and find intimacy by forcing a new awareness on Peter, rather than relying on the subtler methods that have clearly not worked for him elsewhere in life.

10

Jerry never gets around to telling Peter the titular zoo story. Why is that?

Jerry's story about the zoo is an example of a MacGuffin. A MacGuffin is a plot device where characters seek to complete a goal or find an object, but never achieve it – instead, the story focuses on their journey to achieve the goal. Jerry makes several attempts to tell Peter what happened at the zoo, but he each time becomes distracted and instead launches into a different story.

Albee's failure to tell us the zoo story has several important consequences. Firstly, it drives home the tragedy of Jerry's death. Although he died by suicide, his life was still incomplete; he never achieved his long-term goal of feeling human intimacy, nor his short-term goal of telling Peter what happened at the zoo. From a more mechanical standpoint, the zoo story gives the plot a sense of forward momentum that it would not otherwise have – if Jerry and Peter's conversation had no explicit purpose or direction, then the play would lose its tight structure. Finally, the fact that their conversation never goes where they expects reinforces the central theme of miscommunication.

Dr Rajdhan
Assistant Professor-English