The Zoo Story

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDWARD ALBEE

Edward Albee, the author of classic family dramas like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *A Delicate Balance*, was no stranger to domestic unhappiness. Adopted soon after his birth by a wealthy young couple, Albee's parents greeted his artistic aspirations with disinterest and disgust. After cycling through a series of upscale boarding schools, Albee, searching for a community that would welcome him as both an artist and an openly gay man, moved to New York City's Greenwich Village. It was in the Village that he penned *The Zoo Story*—the play that, after its 1960 premiere, put Albee on the map as a radically new theatrical voice. Albee followed *The Zoo Story* with a series of Tony- and Pulitzer-winning successes; though his career waxed and waned, due in part to his struggles with alcoholism, he continued to write critically acclaimed work (like *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*) well into the twenty-first century. Famous for his difficulty as a collaborator, his desire to challenge audiences, and his unusually expansive body of work, Albee was considered one of America's greatest playwrights by his death in 2016.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Albee's first major plays, *The Zoo Story* included, were all written in the tense early years of the Cold War, at the tail end of the Eisenhower era (named for then-president Dwight D. Eisenhower). The decade was a time of prosperity for most white Americans, but it also ushered in a new set of social and sexual standards to conform to. Albee is a critic of these standards—which emphasized monogamy, heterosexuality, the nuclear family and domestic displays of wealth—in much of his work. In *The Zoo Story*, affluent, married Peter represents these norms while poor, single Jerry defies them; in fact, Jerry often goes out of his way to defy the cookie-cutter expectations of the 1950s, asking blunt questions about money and prodding into Peter's domestic dissatisfaction.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In *The Zoo Story*, and in much of his work that would follow, Albee drew on two very different theatrical movements of the 1940s and 1950s. The first was American naturalism, a dialogue-based, true-to-life style made famous by playwrights like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. The second was European absurdism, known for its nihilism and repetition and best embodied by plays like *Waiting for Godot* (by Samuel Beckett) and *Rhinoceros* (by Eugene Ionesco). Albee's synthesis of these two movements is particularly impressive given that naturalists generally sought to make meaning out of post-war life while absurdist writers often depicted life as meaningless—a conflict that is perhaps borne out in the conversation between Peter and Jerry.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Zoo Story
- **When Written:** 1958
- **Where Written:** Greenwich Village, New York
- **When Published:** First performed in Berlin in 1959; U.S. premiere in 1960
- **Literary Period:** Theatrical absurdism; mid-century American naturalism
- **Genre:** Absurdist theater; tragicomedy
- **Setting:** The east side of New York City's Central Park, on a Sunday afternoon
- **Climax:** The fight between Jerry and Peter
- **Antagonist:** Jerry
- **Point of View:** Dramatic

EXTRA CREDIT

Mandatory prequel. In 2007, more than fifty years after the premiere of *The Zoo Story*, Albee wrote a prequel—*Homelife*, about Peter's marital troubles with his wife, Ann. The Albee estate now requires that the two short plays, which both are set on the same Sunday, must always be performed together.

Scary but compelling. The dark ending of *The Zoo Story* may scare off some audience members, but that was one of Albee's intentions. The playwright famously told the New York Times that "I want the audience to run out of the theater—but to come back and see the play again."

PLOT SUMMARY

The Zoo Story takes place on a Sunday afternoon in New York City's Central Park. Peter, a middle-class man of some means, is reading quietly on a park bench, as he does every Sunday. His reading is interrupted by Jerry, who is somewhat younger and looks a bit shabby, and who stands near the bench and announces (out of the blue) that he has "been to the zoo." Peter doesn't understand why this stranger has chosen to talk to him, but after trying unsuccessfully to return to his book, he begins to engage. Jerry again brings up the zoo, and mysteriously hints that something "happened" there.

Peter (still sitting) and Jerry (still standing) begin to discuss Peter's family: Peter is married and has two daughters, two cats and two parakeets. Jerry correctly assumes that Peter is not fully satisfied with his domestic life—Peter wanted sons and dogs. Peter is upset that Jerry has asked about such private information, and Jerry apologizes. He explains that he doesn't talk to a lot of people, but that when he does he likes to "get to know somebody, know all about him." Peter says these questions make him feel like a "guinea pig," but he continues to answer them, telling Jerry that he works in textbook publishing and lives in a nice apartment on the Upper East Side.

Jerry begins to pace as he explains to Peter that he traveled all over New York City in order to approach the zoo from the right direction—because "sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way in order to come back a short distance correctly." Peter guesses that Jerry lives in Greenwich Village, but Jerry accuses Peter of trying to "pigeonhole" him and reveals that he lives on the Upper West Side in a run-down boarding house. Jerry describes the other tenants in his boarding-house, his minimal list of possessions, and his sordid family backstory. He also tells Peter that he's never had sex with anybody more than once, except for a teenage fling with another boy.

After some more discussion of the zoo, Jerry, still pacing, launches into a long monologue about the boarding-house landlady and her dog. Jerry describes his disgust with the landlady, who drinks heavily and often comes on to Jerry. Peter is horrifiedand comments that it's "hard to believe that people such as that really *are*," because such characters should only be for "reading about." Jerry, though, focuses on the landlady's dog, who tries to attack Jerry every time he comes into the entry hall. Jerry tells Peter that he had tried to befriend the dog, feeding it hamburger meat every day for a week. But the landlady's dog would eat the meat and then still attack Jerry, so Jerry formulated a new plan—to murder the dog with poisoned meat. Peter is shocked by this confession, but Jerry explains that his attempt to kill the dog was also unsuccessful.

Jerry then explains that after failing at both befriending and murdering the dog, he was curious about what his "new relationship [with the dog] might come to." He says that he felt that if he couldn't "make a start" with a dog, he may not be able to find connection or understanding anywhere—maybe not even with god, who Jerry fears "turned his back on the whole thing some time ago."

Suddenly exhausted, Jerry describes his first post-poisoning encounter with the landlady's dog. After meeting the dog met in the entry hall, Jerry looked at him until they "made contact"—and then he and the dog wordlessly agreed to leave each other alone. This new indifference saddens Jerry, who tells Peter that he and the dog now "neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other." Jerry concludes his monologue and sits down, for the first time in the entire play.

Peter, upset, tells Jerry he doesn't "understand" the story. Jerry accuses Peter of lying, insisting that he must understand because Jerry explained everything as clearly as he could. Peter apologizes for upsetting Jerry, and begins to get up from the bench. Before Peter can leave, however, Jerry starts to tickle Peter, and Peter falls into hysterics, laughing that his "parakeets will be getting dinner ready… the cats are setting the table." Once Peter calms down, Jerry explains that he went to the zoo to learn about how people and animals "exist with each other," but "it probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else." Jerry pokes Peter on the arm, and tells him to "move over" on the bench.

Jerry keeps punching Peter and ordering him to "MOVE OVER!," even when Peter is crowded on one end of the bench. Peter gets angry and, as Jerry gets more violent, begins to yell for the police. Jerry mocks Peter, calling him a "vegetable." The argument escalates, and Jerry warns Peter that if he wants the bench back, he will have to "fight for it…like a man." As Peter gets ready to fight, Jerry pulls out a switchblade—but instead of using it himself, he tosses it at Peter's feet.

Peter is reluctant to pick up the switchblade, but as soon he picks up the knife, Jerry runs onto it and screams like a "fatally wounded animal." Peter panics, repeating "oh my god" over and over again. Jerry reveals "what happened at the zoo:" he decided he would find someone (like Peter) to talk to, suggesting that maybe he had somehow planned this whole interaction. Jerry then thanks Peter for "comforting" him, and tells Peter that he's not "really a vegetable…you're an animal too." Jerry wipes Peter's fingerprints off of the switchblade, and advises Peter to run. Peter lets out a "pitiful howl" and runs offstage. As Jerry dies, he whispers "oh my god"—and the play ends.

CHARACTERS

Peter – Peter is middle-aged, upper-middle class, and seemingly "normal" in every way: Albee writes in the stage directions that he is "neither fat nor gaunt, neither homely nor handsome." He lives in a nice apartment on the Upper East Side of New York with his wife and two daughters, and he works as a **textbook** publisher, a profession that fits with his seeming belief that things can generally be simply or easily explained. After being approached by Jerry, Peter initially keeps calm, in part because Peter seems to believe that frightening and confusing things happen only in books, and never in real life. But while Peter begins the play as a model of reasoned politeness, Jerry's provocations eventually push Peter to give in to his own "animal" instincts: he becomes passionate, irrational and even violent, eventually engaging in a physical fight over a park bench. Peter's trajectory therefore suggests, on the one hand, that humans are not so different from animals, and on the other that even the most apparently average people are full of

surprises—so no one can be put in a box, "pigeonholed," or be so easily or simply explained.

Jerry – Jerry is slightly younger than Peter and much less wealthy than him; he is also erratic, possessed of "a great weariness" but also of great strength. Jerry has no living family nor does he have a romantic partner, as he struggles to establish either sexual or interpersonal intimacy with other people. Jerry lives in a run-down boarding-house on the Upper West Side, and does not appear to be employed. He is a very physical person, not only behaving violently but also engineering his own suicide. In his brute physicality, he might initially seem to embody the very primal instincts that Peter tries to repress. However, Jerry is also very intelligent. He is able to infer a great deal about Peter's life after spending only a few moments with him, and he has a uniquely complex view of the world, stemming in part from his inability to "simplify" things. Jerry, therefore, can be seen as existing both *at* the zoo—an astute observer of others—and *in* the zoo, acting out the very contradictory behavior he is so fascinated by.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

ALIENATION AND UNDERSTANDING

The Zoo Story is one long conversation between Peter, a middle-class and mild-mannered publishing executive **reading** on a **park bench**, and Jerry, a poor and unconventional man who approaches him. As Peter and Jerry discuss family life, Jerry's troubled relationship with a dog, and a mysterious event at **the zoo**, they struggle to communicate. Even when they try to bridge the gaps between their different life experiences, they often misunderstand or offend each other. Towards the end of the play, Jerry antagonizes Peter to the point of violence, causing a fight in which the men reveal their true natures to each other—and thus begin to understand each other better. However, rather than bringing Peter and Jerry closer, their sense of mutual understanding makes their relationship even more fraught (and ultimately deadly). In demonstrating the ways that close contact further estranges the two protagonists, *The Zoo Story* suggests that mutual understanding, far from lessening a person's isolation, can often be the cause of it.

Initially, Jerry and Peter are able to carry on a friendly conversation, in spite (or perhaps because) of the fact that they often struggle to understand each other. Peter is "bewildered by the seeming lack of communication" he at first feels with Jerry, but he continues to engage as if "by reflex." In other words, the norms of polite society require Peter to continue speaking to Jerry despite the awkwardness between them, and, ironically, their friendship seems most natural during this phase of the play, when it is based on a code of manners rather than on any sort of emotional or intellectual bond. In fact, the more Jerry reveals about himself, the less comfortable with him Peter becomes. For example, Peter is cheerful to think that the unusual Jerry lives in the Village (a neighborhood Peter views as fittingly eccentric), and he "pouts" when he learns that Jerry actually lives on the Upper West Side. Peter seems to prefer to view Jerry according to his own assumptions about him, growing more distant the more he learns about his new acquaintance. The reverse is also true: every time Jerry arrives at an accurate insight about Peter's life, Peter becomes "irksome" and "annoyed." When Jerry guesses that Peter wanted sons but will never have any, Peter shuts down, asking "how would you know about that?" and telling Jerry, "that's none of your business!" Peter is thus suggesting that his personal histories and private feelings are not Jerry's to know—and that Jerry's attempts to understand Peter will put a stop to their mutual friendliness.

Jerry's relationship with the landlady's dog also demonstrates that mutual understanding can sometimes cause estrangement rather than intimacy. At the beginning of Jerry's story, he and the dog have a close—if tense—relationship: the dog continues to attack Jerry, and Jerry responds first by trying to feed the beast and then by trying to poison him. Yet even though they antagonize each other, Jerry comes to see the dog as his "friend," telling Peter that "I loved the dog now, and I wanted the dog to love me." To Jerry, fighting with the dog is a kind of connection, because they devote time and thought to each other. However, once Jerry and the dog "make contact," looking at each other closely and beginning to understand each other's motivations, they cease to share any sort of relationship. "We feign indifference," Jerry explains, "we walk past each other safely; we have an understanding. It's very sad, but you'll have to admit that it is an understanding." Here, connecting with and reaching an "understanding" with the dog immediately separates Jerry from his one-time animal "friend," demonstrating that understanding can directly cause alienation.

Ultimately, this same pattern—in which understanding divides people from each other instead of bringing them closer together—characterizes Peter and Jerry's relationship. As it was with the landlady's dog, Jerry's stated goal with Peter is "to get to know somebody, know all about him"; similarly, Jerry wants Peter to "understand" him, insisting that he has "tried to explain" himself "slowly" and in detail. Yet rather than growing closer over the course of the play, the two men become more afraid of and disgusted by each other. By the play's final scene, Peter and Jerry do (to some extent) "make contact" with each

other. They engage physically, fighting with each other over the park bench that Peter has been sitting on, and in the course of this they even start to speak many of the same phrases, telling the same jokes and making the same prayers. However, this newfound connection is the direct cause of the climactic violence, which leaves Peter traumatized and Jerry dead. Rather than connecting the men, this new understanding has destroyed both of them.

Tellingly, Jerry uses many of his final breaths to shoo Peter away: "you'd better go now," he says, "hurry away, Peter." At the beginning of the play, Jerry wanted Peter to stay and talk to him, but now he wants Peter to leave. Just like with the landlady's dog, Peter and Jerry's understanding of each other forces them to—quite literally—leave each other alone. This understanding also alienates them from the other people in their lives, as Peter presumably must live alone with the secret of what has happened to Jerry and Jerry, now dead, can no longer form any new relationships. In *The Zoo Story*, then, Albee reverses common tropes about understanding and human connection, suggesting that "contact" breeds not closeness but loneliness.

CIVILIZATION AND HUMANS VS. INSTINCT AND ANIMALS

In *The Zoo Story*, two humans—mild-mannered Peter and unconventional Jerry—have a conversation on **a park bench**. Peter (the one with a stable, middle-class life and an attachment to social norms) embodies the notion that humankind is civilized, and Jerry (with his odd social manner, unpredictable impulses, and his fixation on animals) represents the possibility that humankind might be more animalistic than we think. As the play progresses, it becomes something of a competition between these views of humanity: are people inherently civilized as Peter seems to believe, or is Peter's fixation on manners and norms merely an attempt to repress his animalistic nature? Ultimately, as Jerry's erratic behavior goads Peter into animalistic physical violence, the play suggests the impossibility of controlling animal instincts—and the harm that can come from those instincts.

From the beginning, the play blurs the distinction between human and animal. This is evident in the play's opening line: "I've been to **the zoo**," Jerry announces, "MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO." The zoo represents human mastery of nature and the notion that humans and animals can be neatly separated. But Jerry is shouting this line at a stranger in public, which undermines the notion than humans are more civilized than animals. Furthermore, as Peter explains his nuclear family, his high salary, and his established professional life, he also informs Jerry that he has pets: two cats, and two parakeets which his daughters keep in a "cage in their bedroom." The fact that his human family lives alongside animals (and that the animals might even be part of the family) undermines the neat distinction between humans and animals. In fact, later in the play, these animals become the subject of one of Peter's only jokes: "the parakeets will be getting dinner ready soon," he laughs to Jerry, "and the cats are setting the table." The joke posits that animals can behave like proper humans while Peter's behavior suggests the inverse: as he jokes, he has degenerated from a proper man reading on a park bench into someone laughing manically in public and telling nonsensical jokes, further demonstrating that he's not so different from an animal himself. Finally, the title of the play also makes this point. Albee has chosen to call this *The Zoo Story*, but not a single animal ever appears onstage. This title then positions the audience as the zoo-goers—and the human beings onstage as the creatures in the zoo.

Given this similarity between humans and animals, the play suggests that repression is central to maintaining the illusion that humans aren't animals. Jerry's early, offhand reference to Freud is telling. Sigmund Freud was a psychologist famous for his theory of the id, the ego, and the superego, in which the superego enforces socially acceptable behavior by suppressing the id (human instinct). By referencing Freud, Jerry is highlighting the contrast between Peter's civilized life and the internal, animalistic drives that Freud believed all humans share. And the play suggests that this kind of repression is associated with serious danger. When Peter tells Jerry about his pets, Jerry points out that the cats might eat the parakeets were it not for the cages. This emphasizes that animal instincts—in this case, the cats' desire to eat the parakeets—might destroy their home if Peter didn't literally lock the animals up. Of course, taken as a metaphor, this suggests that Peter's own animal instincts are locked up—and that they might be dangerous if they ever got free.

At the end of the play, Peter stops repressing his animal side, and it *does* get dangerous. It first becomes clear that Peter has changed when, due to Jerry tickling him, he loses total control over his body and his powers of speech; he can only say "hee hee hee," a striking loss of words for a man who works in publishing. And shortly afterwards, the two men fight physically over the park bench, just as dogs would fight over their territory. What began as a civilized day of **reading** in the park has devolved into a physical brawl—a brawl that ends with Jerry getting fatally stabbed. While he's dying, Jerry tells Peter that "you're not really a vegetable. It's all right, you're an animal. You're an animal, too." The crucial word "too" can be read in several different ways: Jerry might be implying that Jerry and Peter are both animals, or he might be implying that Peter, in addition to being a husband and father and publisher, is also a man of instinct. But either way, Jerry is implying that the horrifying violence that has just occurred is actually normal and Peter shouldn't feel bad; it's just his animal nature.

This ending reveals the true meaning of the play's title: even the most outwardly civilized people can and do fall prey to the

animal instincts they think they have left behind. The crucial question the play poses, then, is what to do with this knowledge—do we acknowledge these sometimes frightening impulses, or do we continue to try to master and suppress them?

SIMPLE CATEGORIZATION VS. MESSY REALITY

In *The Zoo Story*, Peter, a mild-mannered publishing executive reading on **a park bench**, tries to make sense of Jerry, the unconventional man who approaches him and strikes up a conversation. As they talk, Peter tries to understand and "pigeonhole" Jerry—but Jerry insists that he cannot be put in a box or easily categorized. Over the course of the play, Jerry proves that real life is more complicated than the **textbooks** Peter edits—in addition to revealing surprising information about his own life, Jerry ultimately pushes Peter to violence, demonstrating that even predictable Peter can behave unpredictably and his personality can be difficult to neatly classify. As Peter's mission to label and "pigeonhole" others is continually thwarted throughout the play, *The Zoo Story* illustrates that such categorization, while comforting, is never actually reflective of reality.

Peter feels safe when he believes that he understands how things work, so he loves to try to categorize the world. His job reflects this way of thinking; Peter works as an executive at a textbook publishing house. Textbooks exist to break down and simplify complicated concepts, usually diluting or distorting their nuance in the process. That Peter has an "executive position" suggests he is incredibly skilled at and committed to this kind of simplification. Throughout their conversation, Peter relentlessly tries to categorize Jerry in this same way. For instance, Peter initially assumes that Jerry lives in the Village because this helps him make sense of why Jerry is the way he is: eccentric people live in the Village, so this must explain Jerry's eccentricity. But Jerry actually lives in a neighborhood of much stuffier character, and he seems offended by Peter's assumption. "What were you trying to do?" he asks. "Make sense out of things? Bring order? The old pigeonhole bit?" Later, after Jerry has explained his complicated view of sex, Peter volunteers that "it all seems perfectly simple to me"—again demonstrating his desire to turn messy life into textbook "simplicity."

Yet even as Peter tries to do the "old pigeonhole bit," Jerry consistently reveals the ways in which real life defies such easy classification. When explaining his circuitous route through the city, for instance, Jerry informs Peter that "sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly." Metaphorically, this suggests that the obvious, "simple" explanation is often not the "correct" one—real understanding, according to Jerry, moves in zig-zag lines. Jerry also explicitly mocks the neat categories Peter bases his life on. For example, Jerry muses about the difference between "upper-middle-middle-class and lower-upper-middle-class," a joke that upsets Peter because it reveals the absurdity of such contrived, arbitrary divisions. Even Jerry's criticism of **the zoo**—"everyone separated by bars from everyone else"—suggests his frustration with categorization (a zoo is a very literal form of "pigeonholing," as it puts each species in its own box). The zoo can even be viewed as a real-life textbook, the very thing Peter works on and the thing Jerry seems to most rebel against.

The violence at the end of the play seems to validate Jerry's perspective, since both men begin to act uncharacteristically. Towards the end of their interaction, Peter—who is normally so settled and calm—begins to physically fight with Jerry about the park bench, prompting Jerry to declare that "you're not really a vegetable; you're an animal." In invoking these categories, Jerry makes clear that no person can ever be so easily labeled and understood. And, like Peter, Jerry also acts against type in the play's final scenes. As he dies, "his expression seems to change. His features relax," and "he smiles." Whereas for most of the show, Jerry has appeared to be unsettled and sometimes downright disturbed, in his dying moment, he reaches a state of inner peace. Moreover, while at the beginning of the play Peter was cordial while Jerry was loud and inappropriate, now Jerry is the one who acts in a socially acceptable way: he thanks Peter several times, and even reminds Peter to take his book as he flees. Just as Peter contains repressed violence, then, Jerry is capable of warmth and politeness.

The zoo exists to categorize and explain its animal inhabitants, but *The Zoo Story* makes clear that such categorization is not possible in the real world, where there are no bars to separate people. Instead, the play suggests that the complicated answer is always more revelatory than the simple one, and that a "textbook" approach to life deprives those who hold it of true understanding.

MASCULINITY, INSECURITY, AND VIOLENCE

Peter and Jerry live wildly different lives: Peter is married with daughters while Jerry is single and unsure of his own sexuality. Peter is a middle-class **textbook** publisher while Jerry is poor and his source of income is never revealed. But as they talk in the park, it becomes clear that they have something in common: insecurities around masculinity and sex. Whenever one of them alludes to the complexities of manhood and male sexuality, the other grows defensive—and rather than openly confronting their anxieties around gender and sexuality, Peter and Jerry begin to define masculinity in terms of violence, goading each other to "fight for your manhood." Finally, the tension between the two men does escalate into a physical fight, in which Jerry purposefully

impales himself on a knife that Peter is holding. In *The Zoo Story*, then, violence and even death are direct consequences of unhealthy masculinity and the pressure that men feel to perform a narrow idea of masculinity.

From the beginning, the play establishes that both characters have deep insecurities around masculinity and sex. For example, Peter seems profoundly uncomfortable when Jerry guesses (correctly) that Peter has not fathered any male children. Jerry then takes further aim at Peter's sense of manhood, saying that he guessed it from "the way you cross your legs…something in the voice." Here, Jerry is invoking the physical norms of masculinity (aggressive body language, a deep voice) to suggest that Peter is in some way failing to be masculine and therefore should be blamed for his lack of a male child. But Jerry seems to have similar insecurities. Set off by Peter's implication that Jerry should have a girlfriend, Jerry explains that he has never been able to have sex more than once with a woman. He identified as gay for a week when he was 15, but now he no longer seems comfortable with this label. Jerry's insistence that homosexuality is in his past, along with his distancing of himself from the gay "queen" who lives next door, perhaps implies his belief that masculinity is tied to heterosexual desire—and that he therefore should try to feel such desire, even if this goes against his natural impulses.

Both men's insecurities stand out most when Jerry discusses his deck of "pornographic playing cards." Jerry mocks Peter for throwing away his own pornography right before he got married, hinting that Peter's marriage has weakened or destroyed his sexual desire. Jerry, on the other hand, explains that when he was young, he would "use the cards as a substitute for real experience"—but now, he uses "real experience as a substitute for the fantasy." In other words, Jerry consistently finds the physical experience of sex with women disappointing, so he prefers fantasies of sex to the real thing—but this this cuts against the social pressure for men to enjoy sex. Both men therefore suspect that their desires for sex are somehow abnormal, insufficient, or un-manly.

Despite sharing insecurities about masculinity, neither man can openly discuss this topic, and instead they often over-compensate with anger, disgust, or hysteria. For instance, when Jerry tells Peter about his landlady's sexual advances, both men are revolted. "She presses her disgusting body up against me to keep me in a corner so she can talk to me," Jerry explains, and Peter replies, "that's disgusting. That's…horrible." Jerry feels literally "cornered" by female sexuality here, viewing it as a force that traps and "disgusts" him; this is a common theme for Jerry, who seems repulsed by even the women he does sleep with ("the pretty little ladies aren't pretty little ladies," he will later complain). But tellingly, Peter is also "horrified" by the landlady's behavior, even though he has never experienced it firsthand—in fact, this is one of the first times he has so wholeheartedly agreed with Jerry on anything. It can be argued, then, that Peter is also troubled by even just the *idea* of overt female sexuality, and therefore is not nearly as comfortable with heterosexual desire as he pretends to be. Furthermore, in the moment when Jerry tickles Peter—the first moment in which the two men make physical contact—Peter reacts almost "hysterically," his voice becoming "falsetto." Both of these words are traditionally used (usually with derogatory undertones) to describe women, so it seems that Peter—unable to make sense of physical male intimacy in any form—immediately resorts to a kind of feminized panic.

Ultimately, as each man's insecurity leads him to attack the other, the play suggests that rigid ideas of masculinity can cause dangerous violence. For instance, it's masculinity that initially leads the men to fight. Jerry has been trying to pick a fight for a while, but he fails to provoke Peter until he cries out, "fight for your manhood…you couldn't even get your wife with a male child." Peter then immediately picks up the knife, demonstrating that he is more insecure about his masculinity than anything else, including his family and his "self-respect," which Jerry has already insulted without inciting violence. Furthermore, the actual conflict between the two men is itself filled with phallic symbolism, which underscores that masculinity is at its heart. Mocking Peter's fixation on **the bench**, Jerry dismisses it as "this iron and this wood"—phallic language that suggests that Peter, by defending his place on the bench, is actually fighting to prove some kind of physical or sexual prowess. Moreover, the knife on which Jerry impales himself acts as a kind of phallus, entering him with deadly force. Jerry's death is thus a cautionary tale, exposing the harm of narrow gender norms and illuminating the need for a more expansive view of manhood and male sexuality.

LOGIC VS. FAITH

Peter is a rational **textbook** publisher who spends every Sunday not at church but reading on a **bench** in the park. He views the world as orderly and rational, and he seems to have no use for inexplicable things like spirituality. By contrast, Jerry behaves erratically, asks unanswerable questions that unnerve Peter, and brings up God and faith at several key moments in the play, gesturing to his belief that the world cannot be rationally understood. As the men's interaction progresses, Peter's rational and secular view of the world comes to seem more and more naïve, since he's unable to account for the emotional, irrational lives of human beings. But the play doesn't give a clear alternative to secular rationality: Jerry's faith is shown to be idiosyncratic and contradictory, and it may have nothing to do with a higher power at all. Nonetheless, as the play closes, both characters cry out "oh, my god" in the face of violence that they cannot understand. This suggests that faith—while inexplicable in itself—is sometimes necessary to make meaning from illogical life.

The play has a fairly clear attitude towards Peter's secular rationality: it's a shallow worldview that's incapable of explaining the mystery and complexity of life. In particular, Peter seems incapable of understanding the complexity within people, which he displays most clearly during Jerry's story about his landlady, a complicated and flawed person who drinks too much, makes sexual advances, and loves her mean dog. Peter's reaction is essentially denial; he says he "finds it hard to believe that people such as that" actually exist outside of fiction. In this way, Peter seems to be hiding from reality by embracing secular modernity; he publishes textbooks that impose false order on the world, reads fiction about flawed people instead of actually meeting them, and, when confronted with something he can't understand, he resorts to denial. Peter seems fragile and sheltered, his secular rationality a way of protecting him from his greatest fear: that the world is too complicated to understand.

Jerry, on the other hand, knows intuitively that life is complicated and illogical, which is reflected in his contradictory and idiosyncratic relationship to religion. For instance, when his landlady asked him to pray for her sick dog, he wanted to say that he didn't know how to pray, but also that he was too busy praying for all the people in his rooming house to pray for the dog. It seems that he can't decide whether he's not religious at all or whether he's zealously and obsessively religious. This is shown again in the final moments of the play, when the dying Jerry calls out to God with a "combination of scornful mockery and supplication." So it's clear that Jerry doesn't have a logical or straightforward relationship to religion, which is perhaps fitting, since his faith seems about as senseless and illogical as human life itself.

It's also not clear whether Jerry is actually referring to a higher power when he invokes God. During an emotional monologue, Jerry reveals his belief that God "turned his back on the [world] some time ago," yet he describes God as "A COLOURED QUEEN WHO WEARS A KIMONO AND PLUCKS HIS EYEBROWS" and "A WOMAN WHO CRIES WITH DETERMINATION BEHIND HER CLOSED DOOR." These descriptions specifically refer to fellow tenants of Jerry's rooming house, which perhaps subtly clarifies his faith: if God has abandoned the world, then perhaps he finds the divine in other people—particularly in flawed, suffering people like those in his rooming house. In this way, Jerry's obsession with connecting with another person (specifically, Peter) can be seen as a religious quest, albeit a doomed one, since Jerry is tormented by his belief that he can never truly connect with anyone at all.

Despite the play's confusing and contradictory depictions of Jerry's faith, Albee makes clear that faith is at the heart of a person's experience of the world. This is apparent in the way both characters invoke God at their most emotional and vulnerable moments. First, when Jerry is finishing the story about the dog, he becomes so emotional that he starts to blubber, explaining that if a person fails to connect with other people, they have to "make a start" somewhere else—with animals, he says, before listing various nonsensical items and then concluding, "with God." This suggests that God brings Jerry comfort and meaning amid his isolating and difficult life. And Peter, too, seems to turn to God for meaning in a moment of uncontrollable emotion. After Jerry impales himself with the knife, Peter begins to cry out "oh, my god." Faced with real crisis for perhaps the first time in his life, Peter loses the ability to make meaning except by calling out to God—a being in which, moments ago, he ostensibly did not believe. And while Peter is crying out to God, a dying Jerry does, too. Even if Jerry was never quite sure what he believed, God is still important enough to be the subject of his final words.

"God" is also the final word of the play, lingering in the air as the lights come up. In ending this way, Albee suggests that the answers of the secular, modern world—the science Peter reads about in *Time* Magazine and the history he publishes in his textbooks—are not enough to make sense of irrational, intense human relationships and feelings. Faith, then, remains a necessary source of meaning, not only for the erratic Jerrys of the world but for the seemingly logical Peters, too.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE ZOO

At the beginning of *The Zoo Story*, references to the zoo are very literal—Jerry has gone to watch the animals and wants to tell Peter about his experience. As the show goes on, however, the zoo becomes a shorthand for the way Jerry (and Peter) make sense of life: as Jerry puts it, the zoo helps him "find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too." But there is also an element of captivity to the idea of a zoo. Animals at the zoo can "exist" together, but only when they are separated and contained by bars; similarly, Peter's family home is (as Jerry says) a "little zoo," placing its members in relationship to each other but also trapping them in the norms of domesticity.

Finally, the symbol of the zoo serves to blur the line between humans and animals. For example, Peter and Jerry imagine that the "parakeets are making the dinner…the cats are setting the table," suggesting that it is difficult to distinguish between a human family making dinner in a house and an animal family eating dinner in a cage. It is even possible to argue that Peter and Jerry, "existing with" each other but confined (at least in Peter's case) by the conventions of 1950s urban life, are

themselves "at the zoo"—and in that case, the audience members act as the zoo-goers, watching Peter and Jerry onstage as they would a lion in a cage.

BOOKS AND READING

As the play begins, Peter is sitting on a bench and "reading a book." At first, Peter's interest in books seems to be mostly an indicator of his class and profession, and Jerry even mocks him for having unoriginal taste. However, as Jerry begins to describe some of the more unsavory characters he regularly encounters in his life, Peter's reading begins to symbolize his cluelessness about the real world. In one crucial line, Peter muses that it is hard to believe that "people like [Jerry's landlady] really *are*," because he believes they are "for reading about." Peter, it seems, is so sheltered from the messier aspects of life that he has convinced himself that such things exist only in fiction.

It is also particularly interesting that Peter works as a textbook publisher, because textbooks exist to turn complicated ideas into things that are simple and easy-to-learn (for example, a biology textbook might group animals by the region they come from, the food they eat, or their key behaviors). Several times throughout the play, Peter tries to simplify Jerry's life, making it more palatable. One instance of this is when Peter assumes that Jerry lives in New York City's Greenwich Village, because he views Jerry as odd and Peter believes the Village is where odd people live; another example comes after Jerry has explained his complicated sexual history, and Peter immediately responds, "well, it seems perfectly simple to me." Each time, Peter tries to view Jerry less as an individual, filled with quirks and contradictions, and more as a type or category.

THE BENCH

All of the action of the play takes place on and around a park bench in Central Park—in fact, the show's central conflict ultimately revolves around whether the erratic Jerry can forcibly take this bench from Peter, who sits on it every Sunday. The park bench, designed for leisurely park afternoons, is typically a symbol of civilized, evolved humanity: people, unlike animals, can build parks and benches and read books while sitting on them. It follows, then, that at the beginning of *The Zoo Story*, mild-mannered Peter sits on the bench while Jerry, lacking self-control, paces around it. Yet when Jerry tries to take over the bench, Peter sees it as an attack on his "manhood" and responds with instinctive aggression, becoming animalistic about an object that initially signaled human advancement. In depicting a fatal fight over a bench—"this iron and this wood," as Jerry calls it, highlighting the object's phallic undertones—the Zoo Story seems to imply that people's attempts to master their primal instincts are never fully successful.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Plume edition of *The American Dream and The Zoo Story* published in 1997.

The Zoo Story Quotes

JERRY: I've been to the zoo (*PETER doesn't* notice). I said I've been to the zoo. MISTER, I SAID I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!

Related Characters: Jerry, Peter (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

With this line—the very first thing spoken in the play—Jerry begins his conversation with Peter, who has been peacefully reading on a park bench. This quote is important because it introduces the zoo, the play's titular (and most important) motif. New York City's Central Park Zoo, where Jerry has just come from, would normally connote civilization and middle-class leisure: zoos are humans' ultimate triumph over animals, and attending the zoo requires money, free time, and aesthetic appreciation. Yet Jerry's talk of the zoo is distinctly uncivilized: he rudely interrupts Peter—a stranger in the park—and he begins to shout when Peter fails to acknowledge him. Already, this opening line shows how these hallmarks of evolved humanity (the quiet park, the zoo) are undermined by Jerry's odd, urgent need to connect.

This opening line also gives readers insight into the profound lack of understanding between the two men: Peter is not ignoring Jerry, he just simply cannot grasp why Jerry would be speaking to him. This miscommunication is a clue to Jerry's constant state of isolation—but it is also a sign of Albee's trademark absurdism, a theatrical style largely based on repetition and non-sequiturs.

JERRY: I don't talk to many people—except to say like: give me a beer, or where's the john, or what time does the feature go on, or keep your hands to yourself, buddy. You know—things like that.

PETER: I must say I don't…

JERRY: But every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really *talk*; like to get to know somebody, know all about him.

PETER (*lightly laughing, still a little uncomfortable*): And am I the guinea pig for today?

Related Characters: Jerry, Peter (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

After asking Peter a series of insultingly personal questions, mostly about his family life, Jerry tries to explain why he is so inquisitive. In the first section of this dialogue, Jerry seems to confess that he feels alienated by modern, urban life: his interactions at bars and movies are transactional and lack substance. Jerry's (apparently frequent) experience of being told to keep his "hands to himself" is especially salient, as it implies that he is often overly physical—or inappropriately sexual—with the other New Yorkers he encounters.

In the second section of this exchange, however, Jerry makes clear that his interaction with Peter will be different. Jerry plays with the word "know" in this passage: at first he uses it an idiom (he will "get to know" Peter), but then he repeats with a more scientific cast (he will "know all about" Peter, observing and decoding him). Peter's discomfort at being watched becomes clear in his "guinea pig" joke—a joke that also sets Peter up as an animal in a cage, studied in the same way that tourists study creatures they see at the zoo.

JERRY: Do you know what I did before I went to the zoo today? I walked all the way up Fifth Avenue from Washington Square; all the way.

PETER: Oh; you live in the Village! (*This seems to enlighten PETER*)

JERRY: No, I don't. I took the subway down to the Village so I could walk all the way up Fifth Avenue to the zoo. It's one of those things a person has to do; sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way in order to come back a short distance correctly.

PETER (*almost pouting*): Oh, I thought you lived in the Village.

JERRY: What were you trying to do? Make sense out of things? Bring order? The old pigeonhole bit?

Related Characters: Jerry, Peter (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

After a brief moment of tension between the two men, Jerry changes the subject by telling Peter about his journey to the zoo. Perhaps more than any other section of the play, this exchange highlights the difference between the two men's epistemologies (their ways of gaining knowledge). Peter, textbook publisher that he is, thinks categorically: he is excited to "pigeonhole" Jerry based on his first impressions, and he finds himself disappointed when Jerry defies his stereotypes. Peter "brings order" to the world by separating things—and people—into their appropriate box.

Jerry, on the other hand, adamantly refuses such neat thinking. Rather, his zig-zag journey through New York—from the Upper West Side southeast to Greenwich Village, and then northeast to Peter's bench—echoes the zig-zag way Jerry makes sense of the world. Jerry is fascinated by detail and contradiction; "correctness," to him, depends on a willingness to go "out of the way." In other words, if Peter likes to compartmentalize and juxtapose, Jerry is fascinated by the way people and events connect to each other—as he will later tell Peter, he believes that people always "have to know the effect of our actions."

In Jerry's mind, therefore, the superficial "order" that Peter creates is meaningless, because it disregards context and contradiction. At the same time, it could be argued that Peter's ability to create this mental "order"—to "pigeonhole" people and respond accordingly—is what allows him to succeed socially, where Jerry struggles.

JERRY: What I wanted to get at is the value difference between pornographic playing cards when you're a kid, and pornographic playing cards when you're older. It's that when you're a kid you use the cards as a substitute for a real experience, and when you're older you use real experience as a substitute for the fantasy.

Related Characters: Jerry, Peter (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

After Jerry reveals that he keeps a deck of pornographic cards in his apartment, Peter sees an opportunity to bond and recalls his own childhood experience with the nude pictures. But Jerry, despite being sexually active, now finds these cards (and the "fantasy" they enable) more desirable than the "real experience" of sex. Interestingly, Jerry uses the language of economics to compare Peter's childhood experience with the cards to his own adult one: Jerry believes the cards possess a higher "value" to an adult because he has experienced, and been disillusioned with, the physical act of sex.

This passage displays the extent of Jerry's sexual anxiety and helps explain why he struggles so much to find any kind of physical intimacy. But rather than understanding himself as in any way abnormal, Jerry's use of the second person ("*you* use the cards," "when *you're* older") suggests that this kind of sexual disappointment is universal, even if someone like Peter refuses to admit it.

Finally, it is important to remember that this play was written at the height of the "lavender scare," in which Senator Joseph McCarthy and his cronies would prosecute prominent gay men (and lesbians, to a lesser extent) merely because of their sexuality. With homosexuality literally criminalized, "fantasy" was often one of the view options available to people who did not fit within the restrictive box of heterosexual desire. Jerry's use of the second person, implying that every adult prefers sexual "fantasy" to the reality of intercourse, might also suggest Jerry's belief that *nobody's* desire is as narrow as mid-century laws dictated.

PETER: It's so…unthinkable. I find it hard to believe that people such as that really *are*.

JERRY (*Lightly mocking*): It's for reading about, isn't it?

PETER (*Seriously*): Yes.

JERRY: And fact is better left to fiction.

Related Characters: Jerry, Peter (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Having listened to Jerry describe the lustful landlady, Peter is horrified to contemplate that this woman really exists. In fact, this is one of the first moments in which Peter and Jerry share an emotional response: both of them are revolted by female lust, which further hints that both men are insecure—albeit in slightly different ways—about their own confused sexual desire.

Of more importance, though, is Jerry's joke—"it's for reading about, isn't it?"—which Peter takes seriously. Peter, who lives a sheltered life, is only willing to encounter troubled people in books, where they become (like animals in a zoo) packaged and contained as entertainment. Jerry's world, filled with others' suffering, is relegated to "fiction" in Peter's mind—and conversely Peter, who hides in his novels and who refuses to hear anecdotes that upset him, convinces himself that he is really a man of "fact." Peter's willful self-deception shows that even if Jerry's stories sound more far-fetched, he is perhaps the more honest narrator of the two.

JERRY: It's just that if you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere… with vomiting, with fury because the pretty little ladies aren't pretty little ladies, with making money with your body which is an act of love and I could prove it, with howling because you're alive; with God. How about that?

Related Characters: Jerry (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Drawing to the end of his long anecdote about the landlady's dog, Jerry begins to panic as he realizes he has failed to connect with the dog and might now be failing to connect with Peter. So each item on this list is, to Jerry, a possible point of contact with the world around him. "Vomiting" links Jerry to anyone who shares a human body,

with all of its frailties and discomforts. His "fury" with the little ladies opens the door to others—potentially like Peter—who feel sexually frustrated or are somehow insecure in their sexuality. In fact, Jerry is willing to bond with any creature who can so much as "howl," a sound that is at once an acknowledgement of being "alive" and an expression of great pain.

All of the items on Jerry's list reveal that he is deeply suffering, and he is desperate to connect with some other living creature to share this suffering. But discouraged by his encounter with the dog, Jerry turns away from human (or animal) answers and towards spiritual ones (namely, to "God"). Perhaps Jerry is beginning to believe that living things, despite suffering in many of the same ways, are unable or unwilling to communicate that suffering to each other—and so all must rely on an unseen, unliving force to hear their "howls."

JERRY: So: the dog and I looked at each other. I longer than the dog. And what I saw then has been the same ever since. Whenever the dog and I see each other we both stop where we are. We regard each other with a mixture of sadness and suspicion, and then we feign indifference. We walk past each other safely; we have an understanding. It's very sad, but you'll have to admit that it is an understanding.

Related Characters: Jerry (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

After previously confessing to Peter that he wanted to understand and be understood by the dog, Jerry has now gotten his wish. But rather than bringing Jerry and the dog closer, this new "understanding" has caused them to forever "walk past" each other. Whereas once Jerry and the dog devoted time and lots of emotional energy to each other, now they "feign indifference"—and in fact, their entry-hall interactions now begin to resemble the more transactional conversations of New York daily life ("give me a beer, or where's the john") that Jerry has earlier mentioned he hates.

This passage reveals *The Zoo Story* at its most nihilistic: Albee, famous for his often-bleak worldview, suggests that the more people are able to "understand" others, the more we will distance ourselves from them. Moreover, Jerry suggests that this alienation results from a desire for "safety," physical or emotional—if he and the dog do not try to "make contact," they cannot hurt each other either accidentally or on purpose. Here, again, Jerry is playing with words: in his initial desire to "understand" the dog, Jerry wanted to know the dog's motivations (and vice versa). But now, he and the dog have arrived at "*an* understanding"—a contract of sorts, impersonal and isolating.

JERRY: I have learned that neither kindness nor cruelty, independent of themselves, creates any effect beyond themselves; and I have learned that the two combined, together at the same time, are the teaching emotion. And what is gained is loss.

Related Characters: Jerry (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Concluding his story with the dog, Jerry sums up to Peter what he has "learned." This line is a prime example of what could be called Jerry's anti-categorical thinking: he believes that kindness and cruelty, seeming opposites, cannot be viewed "independently"—one does not exist without the other. His focus on "effects" is also important, as it again reveals how Jerry thinks in context (rather than removing things from context, as Peter prefers to do).

This line is also fascinating for what it reveals about Albee's unique stylistic—and ideological—mixture. Jerry's confessional, melancholy tone at the beginning of line is firmly rooted in naturalism, a realistic style of theater that nevertheless tends to showcase a hopeful, humanistic view of people. But Jerry's paradoxical realization ("what is gained is loss") is more absurdist—and theatrical absurdism, which delights in paradox and contradiction, tends to take a much less optimistic view of humanity than its naturalist counterpart. If Jerry has realized that understanding brings alienation, here he takes that sentiment farther, believing that knowledge inevitably leads to "loss." It is only fitting that, stylistically, this line moves from naturalism to absurdism as Jerry himself grows more convinced of the absurdity of life.

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 . . . (*PETER is beside himself now*) . . . and we're having . . . hee, hee . . . uh . . . ho, ho, ho.

Related Characters: Peter, Jerry (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Unsettled by Jerry's stories and looking for an excuse to leave the park, Peter is stopped in his tracks when Jerry begins to tickle him. In his laughter, Peter begins to imagine a role-reversal in his home, in which the animals engage in what would seem to be quintessentially human activities (cooking, "setting the table"). This absurd joke highlights that human behavior, when viewed in the same way we might view animal behavior, appears equally foreign and maybe even nonsensical.

It is especially interesting that it is Peter, and not Jerry, who makes this joke—all throughout the play, Peter has seemed to represent evolved humanity while Jerry has been the one to blur the boundaries between human and animal. Yet here, Peter, a textbook publisher, loses language completely; his "hee hees" are distinctly animalistic. So while Peter imagines his house-pets as human beings, the play's audience watches him become an animal, another way in which the play suggests that human and animal are not completely neat, separable categories.

The last thing to note about this scene is the sexual undercurrent. Tickling is an intimate, physical activity, and Peter appears to be having an almost orgasmic experience: he is "beside himself" with feeling, making sounds of pleasure and pain. Given that each man has a deep-rooted insecurity about his sexuality, especially as it relates to his sense of masculinity, the homoeroticism in this tickling moment is loaded—perhaps further pushing Peter and Jerry to prove their "manhood" to each other in the fight to come.

JERRY: I went to the zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too. It probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals. But, if it's a zoo, that's the way it is.

Related Characters: Jerry (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

In this crucial passage, occurring immediately after Peter recovers from being tickled, Jerry begins to explain what happened at the zoo. To Jerry, the zoo has an unusual meaning: rather than being a middle-class leisure activity, Jerry sees it as a place where he can observe relationships from a polite, acceptable distance ("the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other"). Jerry has been trying to obtain this kind of understanding the entire play, first with his interactions with the dog and now by getting to know Peter—and so if "the zoo" is a symbol for any kind of modern, civilized relational existence, readers can understand *The Zoo Story*'s title to refer not just to the physical zoo, but also to Peter and Jerry's strange friendship.

This line also shows that zoos, made of cages and "bars," by necessity involve captivity and alienation: "if it's a zoo," Jerry says, "that's the way it is." At a zoo, these bars are necessary for safety; without them, lions and tigers could eat the spectators. But if "the zoo" can be viewed as a symbol for human relationships, readers can infer that these "bars" exist metaphorically in these relationships, too. And in fact, the "zoo" of evolved humanity is filled with captivity and alienation: both men are trapped by norms surrounding maleness and male sexuality, and both men are alienated from the other New Yorkers around them by politeness and a desire to remain safe.

JERRY: You have everything in the world you want; you've told me about your home, and your family, and your *own little zoo*. You have everything, and now you want this bench. Are these the things men fight for? Tell me, Peter, is this bench, this iron and this wood, is this your honor? Is this the thing in the world you'd fight for? Can you think of anything more absurd?

Related Characters: Jerry, Peter (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Jerry, having almost pushed Peter off the bench, struggles to understand Peter's sudden, uncharacteristic rage. First, this line showcases the connection between the two men's violence and their insecurity around masculinity. Jerry specifies that this is the kind of thing "men fight for," highlighting how gender roles create largely pointless codes of "honor" that then lead to conflict. The phrase "iron and wood," with its phallic undertones, further shows that the bench has become a symbol of masculinity.

But if the bench poses a question about manhood, it also incites a fight over territory, bringing the men into completely animalistic conflict. Though Peter may have his "own little zoo"—his domestic life with his daughters and pets—here, he is the not the zoo-keeper but the animal himself, acting purely on instincts he cannot understand. Meanwhile, the more erratic Jerry now has words to articulate this reversal, suggesting that if it is possible to revert to animal behavior like Peter, it is also possible to return to language.

But perhaps most fascinatingly, Jerry here pointedly calls out the "absurdity" of modern life. Peter's family relationships are, in Peter's mind, less important—or at least less worth fighting for—than this bench. That's because the bench, a man-made object in a man-made park, where Peter goes to read (instead of going to church), seems to represent to Peter his entire urban, civilized, secular world. The great irony, and the thing that is so "absurd" to Jerry, is that Peter will revert to a primal state to define this symbolic proof of human superiority.

> JERRY: And Peter, I'll tell you something now; you're not really a vegetable; it's all right, you're an animal. You're an animal, too.

Related Characters: Jerry, Peter (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

As Jerry dies, he devotes his final breaths to thanking Peter for their strange interaction. Using categories like those in the game Twenty Questions (animal, mineral, vegetable), Jerry declares that Peter is an "animal" because he has been willing to fight for something. The word "too" here is important and ambiguous: Jerry might be implying that Jerry and Peter are both animals, or he might be implying that Peter, in addition to being a husband and father and publisher, is also a man of instinct. In other words, two major themes of the novel are joined by this word "too": either Jerry is trying to connect with and understand Peter, or he is demonstrating that even Peter cannot be simplified ("pigeonholed").

Also worth noting is the fact that Jerry tells Peter "it's all right." Moments before, Jerry has thanked Peter for "comforting" him, and he now appears to be doing the same thing (or at least trying to). Though Peter will soon flee, Jerry here seems to have found someone—other than god—to share in his pain, even momentarily. Though the play's ending is unquestionably tragic, Albee provides an unusual glimmer of hope in Jerry's tenderness here.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE ZOO STORY

Peter, a middle-aged man who is apparently average in every way—"neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely"—is spending his Sunday afternoon **reading** on a **bench** in Central Park. A disheveled stranger named Jerry, with an air of "great weariness" about him, approaches Peter.

Peter initially embodies modern, urban life: he's an average man sitting on a park bench reading a book, a perfectly normal pastime for a middle class, midcentury New Yorker. Right away, then, this opening establishes contrast: Peter is almost stereotypically civilized, whereas Jerry is chaotic and erratic. Peter lives a sheltered life, while Jerry is world-weary.

Jerry tells Peter that he has "been to **the zoo**." Not understanding that Jerry is speaking to him, Peter does not look up, causing Jerry to repeat himself and grow frustrated. When Peter does look up, Jerry asks Peter where they are in the park and tries to figure out what direction he has been walking in—while Peter, uncomfortable and confused, attempts to go back to **reading.** Jerry hopes he has been walking due north, and Peter confirms that he has been walking not due north but "northerly."

This opening line introduces the audience to Jerry's seemingly nonsensical way of acting; it's odd behavior to approach a complete stranger in the park and tell him, out of nowhere, that you've been to the zoo. The fact that he's been to the zoo is also telling; while the zoo is emblematic of the separation between humanity and nature (humans control nature in a zoo and go there to observe it, suggesting that animals are categorically different than people), Jerry is not exactly acting like a civilized person in this scene, so the difference between humanity and animals is a little blurred. Crucially, Jerry's focus on the exact direction he has been walking—"northerly" instead of north—also foreshadows his refusal to ever accept simplified, imprecise answers.

Peter prepares a pipe, prompting Jerry to mention all the different kinds of cancer that smoking can give you, and he mentions the medical device given to Freud after he had some of his jaw cut away because of cancer. Peter helps Jerry recall the word "prosthesis," prompting Jerry to remark that he thinks Peter is a very "educated man." Jerry tries to start up a conversation, but Peter still attempts to focus on his **book**.

Peter is a man of books and science, well-versed in all kinds of human knowledge. At the same time, the reference to Sigmund Freud recalls the psychoanalyst's most famous theory: that of the id, the ego, and the superego, in which human sexual instinct (id) was suppressed in favor of socially acceptable behavior (enforced by the superego). Already, Jerry is hinting at the contrast between Peter's bookish life and the internal drives that, Freud believed, all humans share.

Even though he's aware that Peter would rather read, Jerry presses Peter to have a conversation with him. Once again, Jerry announces that he has been to the **zoo** and mysteriously tells Peter that he will see it on TV or **read** about it in the newspaper tomorrow.

Not wanting to participate in the conversation, Peter is nevertheless driven to engage with Jerry out of his understanding of polite social norms. The zoo comes up for the second time—this time taking on a more ominous undertone.

Jerry now presses Peter for information about himself. Peter reveals that he is married and has two daughters. Jerry asks if Peter wanted sons, and Peter admits that he did, although Jerry assumes (correctly) that Peter will not have any more children. Peter snaps at Jerry for his invasive questions, but then apologizes for his outburst. Peter tries to understand what Jerry has been saying about **the zoo**, but Jerry brushes him off.

Jerry's assumptions make Peter uncomfortable for several reasons. First, Jerry knows things about Peter that Peter has not told him—Peter is uncomfortable with how quickly Jerry seems to have understood him. Second, Jerry is taking aim at Peter's sense of masculinity, implying that Peter is not manly enough to produce a male child. This implication causes Peter to instantly get angry, suggesting that Peter is not secure in his masculinity.

Jerry wants to continue asking Peter questions; while he doesn't talk to a lot of people, every so often he likes to "get to know somebody, know all about him." Peter laughs nervously and jokes about feeling like a "guinea pig," but he continues to answer Jerry's questions.

Again, Jerry's desire to understand Peter more deeply—to "know all about him"—makes Peter deeply uncomfortable. This is also the first time that a human is described in animal terms: Peter is made to feel like "a guinea pig," studied by Jerry just as animals at the zoo are watched by the zoo-goers. Quickly, this is blurring the line between human and animal, suggesting that Peter may not be as civilized as he believes.

When Jerry asks about Peter's pets, he learns that Peter—who loves dogs—has two cats because that is what his wife and daughters want. Peter also reveals that he has two parakeets in cages, and Jerry wonders if the parakeets are sick; if they were, he tells Peter, "you could set them loose in the house and the cats could eat them and die, maybe."

Peter and Jerry's opposing views of animal life are on full display here. Peter keeps his animals domesticated and in cages, seeing them as creatures to be tamed for human enjoyment. Jerry, on the other hand, sees the cats as predators, capable of killing the parakeets were they not separated from them by the cage. One implication here is that the animalistic natures of Peter's house pets are barely repressed, and chaos could break out if the cages failed. This can be seen as a subtle metaphor for Peter's own animal instincts, which the play will go on to show are barely repressed and ready to turn dangerous at any moment.

Jerry asks Peter what he does for a living, and Peter replies that he works as a **textbook** publisher. Jerry then asks how much money Peter makes and what his address is, causing Peter to worry that Jerry is going to rob him. Peter tells Jerry that he is normally "reticent" and all of these questions are unnerving to him, but he does reveal his salary and the general location of his home. Peter asks Jerry—who has been standing the entire time—to sit down, but Jerry refuses.

Peter's profession is important: as a textbook publisher, he works to provide the very sort of simple, categorical explanations that Jerry most despises. Peter's somewhat simplistic way of thinking is apparent in his incorrect assumption, when Jerry asks his income and address, that Jerry is going to rob him. Jerry is so unnerving to Peter because his questions and actions cannot be explained, so it actually comforts Peter to think that Jerry might be a robber, since that would at least make sense. While Peter explains his settled position in mid-century, civilized, New York, Jerry refuses to even sit on the bench, signaling his discomfort with the basic behaviors of urban life.

Peter again asks about **the zoo**, but Jerry seems confused by the reference. Out of nowhere, he asks Peter: "what's the dividing line between upper-middle-middle-class and lower-upper-middle-class?" When Peter is annoyed by the question, Jerry accuses him of being "patronizing." Peter apologizes for his inability to express himself, joking that "I'm in publishing, not writing." Jerry then responds that, in fact, it was he himself who was being patronizing.

Throughout the play, Jerry is fascinated by class and money—here, he's mocking class divisions ("upper-middle" and "lower-upper" have effectively the same meaning), which seems to be a jab at the absurdity of social norms and manners. Peter's critical response to this joke, and his claim to be in "publishing, not writing," both indicate his reluctance to think of familiar things in a new light.

Beginning to slowly pace the stage, Jerry tells Peter that, before going to **the zoo**, he walked all the way uptown from Washington Square. Peter assumes (with some excitement) that Jerry lives in the West Village, but Jerry retorts that he in fact lives on the Upper West Side and he "took the subway down to the Village so I could walk all the way up," because "sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out his way to come back a short way correctly." Peter is disappointed that Jerry, who seems like someone who would live in the Village, actually lives somewhere else.

Peter seems excited when he assumes that Jerry lives in the West Village because it helps him make sense of who Jerry is. Jerry's eccentric behavior has unsettled Peter so far, but being able to situate Jerry as living in the Village—a neighborhood known for its eccentric residents—helps Peter to categorize Jerry and therefore feel that he is safe, understandable, and predictable. But this feeling quickly shatters when Jerry informs him that in fact he lives on the Upper West Side, a neighborhood with a much stuffier character, which once again makes Jerry hard to classify. Furthermore, Jerry's behavior is completely inexplicable—instead of taking the most efficient route to the zoo, he zig-zagged around town to get there. Jerry crucially explains his circuitous route as the only way to arrive at his destination "correctly." Metaphorically, this gets at the heart of the personality difference between Peter and Jerry: Peter prefers straightforward, rational, simplistic thinking, whereas Jerry believes that to see the world as it is (or "correctly"), one must acknowledge its complexity and irrationality.


In a long monologue, Jerry accuses Peter of trying to "pigeonhole" him. He explains that he actually lives on the top floor of a boarding house in a "laughably" small room. On one side of him lives a Black, gay man who frequently uses the bathroom; on the other side of him lives a Puerto Rican family that throws a lot of parties. Peter comments that this boarding house seems like an unpleasant place to live.

Rather than allowing Peter to easily put him in a box, Jerry seems to delight in barraging Peter with tons of details that are difficult to categorize or integrate into a simplistic portrait of who Jerry is. Readers also start to get a sense now that Jerry lives in some degree of poverty, and that he is deeply isolated despite living close to so many people. Finally, this monologue reveals how observant Jerry is of his surroundings and the other people around him, even if he doesn't interact with them much. This adds to the sense that Jerry is a keen observer of the world and therefore implies that his perceptions should be taken seriously.


Jerry lists all of his possessions, from his hot plate to his "pornographic playing cards." He mentions that he keeps a variety of letters, many of which are asking him to reply or to come somewhere. He also informs Peter that he has two empty picture frames because he doesn't have "anyone to put in them."

Jerry's isolation from other people is confirmed here, as he seems to have lost touch with the writers of the letters he keeps—and as he has no one close enough to put in a picture frame. Jerry's list of his possessions (even the most everyday ones) also affirms that he believes that every detail of a person's life is important, even if they don't add up to a simple, coherent narrative of who that person is.


Peter suggests Jerry might put pictures of his parents or "a girlfriend" in the frames—but Jerry announces that both of his parents are dead, so he does not want to see them all "neat and framed." Jerry's mother left his father and engaged in a series of adulterous affairs when Jerry was only ten, and Jerry's father killed himself soon after. Jerry then moved in with his mother's sister, who was generally a dour person and died on the day of his high school graduation.

As Jerry recounts his family's tragic saga, he avoids sentimental cliches completely. Rather than using his family story to neatly "frame" his current state, Jerry takes pleasure in subverting expectations: he shows little emotion about his parents' deaths, and he spends as much time talking about his hot plate as he does on his mother's affair.

Jerry asks Peter his name, and the two men introduce themselves for the first time in the play. Jerry then circles back to the picture frame conversation, explaining that he does not have a girlfriend because he has never had sex with anybody more than once. The only exception was his eleven-day fling with a Greek boy at fifteen, at a time when Jerry understood himself to be "queer, queer, queer." Now he only sleeps with female prostitutes.

As a textbook publisher, Peter traffics in categories and labels, and as a person, Peter is obsessed with social norms and manners. So it's startling that they're this far into the conversation—having already learned intimate details about each other's families—before they learn each other's names. This suggests that Jerry's more complex view of the world—in which truth and nuance matter more than social norms—is taking precedence over Peter's simpler one. More importantly, this passage highlights Jerry's complex sexual identity. Adding to the difficulty in classifying him, he seems to identify neither as gay nor straight—in fact, he struggles to establish sexual intimacy with anyone.

After hearing Jerry's description of his life, Peter declares that it "it seems perfectly simple to me." Jerry then accuses Peter of wanting everyone to live his kind of domestic life, at which point Peter gets angry and tries to end the conversation. Jerry apologizes and Peter calms down.

Peter again tries to "pigeonhole" Jerry, declaring that his life and problems are "perfectly simple," when the whole point of Jerry's description of himself seems to have been to explain his own complexity. This dismissal of nuance would be offensive enough to Jerry on its own, but it seems that, on top of it, Peter is subtly implying that Jerry is really a closeted gay man, which would straightforwardly explain his sexual issues. Jerry lashes out at the simplification of his life and identity and, presumably, at Peter's suggestion that Jerry is gay. But it's worth noticing that Jerry doesn't push back by asserting his heterosexuality—instead, he pushes back by questioning the entire enterprise of middle-class heterosexual life.

Jerry again mentions his pornographic playing cards. Peter jokes that he himself is familiar with the cards from his youth, prompting Jerry to claim that there is a big difference between looking at such things as a child versus looking at them as an adult. "When you're a kid you use the cards as a substitute for a real experience," Jerry muses, "and when you're older you use real experience as a substitute for fantasy."

Peter now tries to bond with Jerry over their shared sexual desires. But, characteristically, Jerry thwarts this by complicating the situation. Here, he implies that real sexual experience is consistently disappointing to him—and that fantasy is always better. By implying that the same thing may be true of Peter, Jerry is suggesting that what is socially "normal" (preferring sex to sexual fantasy) is not necessarily natural or perhaps even desirable. In this way, Jerry is again showing how simplistic social expectations (like the expectation that men will enjoy heterosexual sex) fail to reflect complex reality.

Jerry brings the zoo up again, and Peter is enthusiastic to hear about what happened there (though he is embarrassed by his own excitement). But instead of talking about what happened at the zoo, Jerry tells Peter more about his boardinghouse. In particular, Jerry focuses on the landlady—who he describes as an "unwashed, misanthropic, cheap, drunken bag of garbage"—and her dog. Together, Jerry sees this pair as the "gatekeepers" to his home.

Though ostensibly "the zoo" and the landlady are two totally unrelated stories, Jerry's zig-zagging conversational style illustrates his own rule: that "sometimes a person has to go a long distance out of his way in order to come back a short distance correctly." In other words, Peter's understanding of what happened at the zoo may rely on his understanding of what happened with the landlady, even though this initially seems unrelated.

Jerry explains that the landlady is constantly "spying" on him from the hallway. When she is drunk she comes onto him, which is "disgusting" to Jerry. But he figures out that he can always get rid of her by claiming that they had sex the day before. This makes her "giggle and groan" with imagined pleasure.

Again, Jerry moves away from "real" sex in order to engage in "fantasy" sex. Moreover, his disgust with the landlady—and the emphasis he places on this disgust—likely suggests a deeper sexual anxiety on Jerry's part, although it's not totally clear what that is. It might be that he's generally repulsed by women, but that he feels he has to play up the landlady's specific repulsiveness in order to explain his own behavior without calling his masculinity into question.

Repulsed by Jerry's description of the landlady, Peter muses that it's "hard to believe" people like that really exist. Mockingly, Jerry suggests that, for Peter, people like the landlady are merely "for reading about." Jerry announces that he will tell Peter about the dog—and then he promises that if Peter stays on the bench, he will tell him about the zoo.

Three important threads come together in this section: Peter and Jerry's shared repulsion at the landlady hints at their larger (shared) fear of female sexuality. Peter's secular, rational "beliefs"—in which complicated, unfortunate people exist only within the safe confines of print—is challenged by the much more worldly Jerry. And finally, Jerry uses Peter's desire to learn what happened at the zoo to keep him listening and on the bench.

Jerry describes the dog as old and black, with bloodshot eyes, open wounds, and a permanent erection. Though normally animals are indifferent to Jerry, the dog has always snarled at him; sometimes, the dog even runs at him as if to bite him. Jerry speculates that the other roomers do not experience this because "it had to do only with me." Jerry tells Peter that he had formed a plan: he would try befriending the dog, and if that did not work, he would kill it instead.

Here, the focus returns to masculinity and male sexuality, this time in its most basic, (literally) animal form: the male dog is irrepressibly drawn to Jerry and he always has an erection when Jerry sees him. But a crucial aspect of this interaction is that, even as the relationship between Jerry and the dog seems antagonistic, it's also a somewhat intimate relationship in which both creatures devote a lot of attention to the other, so hate and love are inextricably mingled. Likewise, Jerry's plan to either befriend or kill the dog may seem to be pinballing between opposite extremes, but Jerry will later explain that a crucial thing he has learned in life is that kindness and cruelty are two sides of the same coin. The relationship between Jerry and the dog has obvious parallels to the relationship between Jerry and Peter, and the story of the dog will ultimately foreshadow the violence at the play's end.

Jerry bought a bunch of hamburger meat and offered it to the dog. The dog then tore into the meat with fervor, "making sounds in his throat like a woman," a memory Jerry reenacts for Peter. Jerry recalls that when the dog finished the meat, he smiled, which Jerry found "gratifying"—until the dog snarled and jumped at him again. Jerry tried to feed the dog in this way for five days, but it never made him friendlier; the dog always smiled and then jumped at him.

Jerry tries to establish intimacy with the dog by interacting on the dog's own terms: presenting him with meat. This is a little like the way that Jerry tries to get to know Peter on his own terms, by having a mostly polite conversation in the park. The intimacy between Jerry and the dog clearly has sexual undertones, as Jerry references the dog making "sounds in his throat like a woman" and uses the word "gratifying." This thematically intertwines sexuality and violence, as the dog's sexual desire and violent impulses seem to go hand-in-hand. The line between humans and animals is blurred here, as well, as Jerry begins to see a very human "smile" on the dog's face.

When Jerry announces that he attempted to murder the dog, Peter is horrified—but Jerry tells he can calm down, since the attempt failed. Jerry bought a single hamburger with the idea of covering it in rat poison. When he purchased this single hamburger without a roll, the man at the register asked if it was for his cat. To keep things simple, he said it was, but in a way that drew inadvertent attention to himself. He tells Peter that "it always happens when I try to simplify things: people look up."

It's telling that Jerry tries to murder the dog with meat meant for humans—he has consistently viewed this dog with the kind of nuance and attention that's typically reserved for humans, and this further blurs the distinction between human and animal. This part of the play also reveals something pivotal about Jerry, which is a key component of his aversion to simplicity: he believes that whenever he tries to skirt the truth in order to simplify a situation, it merely draws unwanted attention to himself, further alienating him from others. In this way, Jerry's relentless insistence on honesty and complexity seems like a plea to the rest of the world to understand him for who he is, thereby making him feel less weird and alone.

When Jerry brought home the poisoned meat, the dog—which he describes as "malevolence with an erection"—scarfed it down. He then approached Jerry with a smile (which made Jerry feel awful), and jumped at him. Jerry escaped as usual and knew soon after that the dog had then fallen deathly ill, because it no longer disrupted him as it entered the building and because the landlady sobered up with concern.

The dog, with its permanent erection and its threatening "smile," embodies Jerry's various insecurities about masculinity and human connection: it suggests that attraction and violence are intertwined, that Jerry is perhaps questionably masculine (as he is sexually desired by a male dog), and that he may never intimately connect with another being, as his efforts at bonding have ended in violence. This scene also perversely makes clear the depth of Jerry's concern for the dog, as he's just as attuned to the dog's absence as he was to its presence.

The landlady had asked Jerry to pray for the dog, and then had accused Jerry of wanting the dog to die. Jerry denied it, and he explains to Peter that his denial was true: he actually did not want the dog to die, because he wanted to see "what our new relationship might come to." Peter is repulsed by the entire story at this point, but Jerry insists that "we have to know the effects of our actions."

Despite trying to murder the dog, Jerry now reveals that he actually wanted the dog to live—it seems that he saw the poisoning not as an attempt to end their relationship, but rather an attempt to change and even deepen it. In the wake of the poisoning, he was excited to see if they might understand each other differently or better now that they'd been through something extreme. This explicitly reflects Jerry's desire for a thorough understanding of others, and it ominously foreshadows the lengths to which he might go to connect with Peter.

Jerry informs Peter that the dog eventually recovered and the landlady went back to drinking. To Peter's scoffing disgust, Jerry describes the dog as his "friend" and discusses his "heart-shattering" anxiety at seeing the dog again after the whole ordeal.

While Jerry previously showed a brief moment of compassion for the landlady when she was tending her sick dog (he stopped describing her as purely repulsive and remarked positively on her newfound sobriety and concern for the dog), he quickly returns to dismissing his landlady after the dog recovers. It's not like Jerry to view someone as simple and one-dimensional (as he mostly does with his landlady), which is a clue that she triggers something in him that makes him very uncomfortable. Perhaps she makes him insecure about his inability to connect sexually with women. Regardless, there's a striking contrast between Jerry's complicated and loving description of the dog and his reductive and mean description of the landlady—to him, the dog certainly seems more human.

When he did once again meet the dog in the hallway, Jerry and the dog stared into each other's faces and "made contact." Now, Jerry felt that he loved the dog and wanted the feeling to be reciprocated. After trying first to love and then to kill and finding that "both had been unsuccessful by themselves," Jerry wanted to be "understood" by the dog. Peter is "hypnotized" by this part of the story.

In one of the play's pivotal passages, Jerry explains to Peter his deepest wish—to understand and be understood by another creature. But it seems that—at least to Jerry—mutual understanding can only come through difficulty and even shared trauma, which is a somewhat eccentric and dark view of interpersonal relationships. (After all, few people's relationships would be considered close if it took an attempted murder to get there.) But it's significant that Peter is so mesmerized by this—it seems that he may relate to this idea in some way or have some inkling that it's true.

Jerry becomes agitated and tells Peter, "if you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere." Jerry wonders where he can "make a start," and he goes through a laundry list of possibilities ("a bed, a carpet, a cockroach…"). Jerry at one point thinks about whether it is possible to make a start with "a mirror," but he decides that would be too hard. He finally wonders if he can make a start with god—he speculates that god might exist in some of the other people in the boarding house, and then he comments that he's been told that in fact god has abandoned "the whole thing some time ago."

Having described his possessions and neighbors (both human and animal), Jerry now begins to wonder why he is unable to make meaning with any of them. Unsatisfied with the material world, Jerry begins to turn to a higher power, calling on god and then worrying that god has abandoned him. Interestingly, Jerry shouts his first reference to god, as if hoping to be heard from above.

Jerry tells Peter that he believes that the building's entrance hall, with the dog—"man's best friend"—was the best possible place to "make a beginning…to understand and just possibly be understood." Jerry is suddenly overcome with exhaustion, but he still finishes his story: he informs Peter that he and the dog now "feign indifference" whenever they encounter each other. "It's very sad," Jerry tells Peter, "but you'll have to admit that we have an understanding. We had made many attempts at connecting, and we had failed."

This passage illuminates the agony of Jerry's previous remarks about failing to find meaning in his belongings and wondering about the existence of god. As it turns out, the dog story has a tragic ending: while they did indeed arrive at an understanding of one another, just as Jerry hoped, it did not result in a stronger connection between them. Actually, now that they understand each other, they both "feign indifference" anytime they see each other, so it seems that mutual understanding has made them less *close than they once were. This leaves Jerry without a straightforward path to ending his isolation: all his attempts at building connection—even his most extreme one, poisoning the dog—have failed to improve his situation. What he hoped would be the "beginning" of contact was actually the end. Given the parallels between the dog story and Jerry's interaction with Peter, this hints that he and Peter will also fail to connect.*

Jerry tries to articulate his sense of sadness at having gained "free passage" into his apartment without being attacked by the dog (which is what he initially claimed to want). "We neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other," Jerry says of the dog, and laments how easy it is to "misunderstand each other." When he finishes his monologue, Jerry sits down—for the first time in the entire play—on the same **bench** as Peter.

Jerry believes that the intensity of feeling he first felt with the dog was born out of misunderstanding; as long as they didn't understand each other, they had a reason to try to interact. But once they gained a mutual understanding, there was nothing left to connect them or cause them to engage with one another—indifference became the natural response, because there was nothing left to learn. However, as Jerry finishes his story about the dog, he finally sits next to Peter, signaling to the audience that he will now try to "make contact" with someone else (even after the painful end of the saga with the dog).

A "suddenly cheerful" Jerry asks Peter if Peter thinks he could sell the story of the dog to Reader's Digest. Peter, deeply troubled and on the verge of tears, says he does not "understand" the story. Jerry accuses Peter of lying about not understanding, and he insists that he "slowly" explained everything Peter could possibly need to understand.

Jerry tries to put this story in terms Peter will understand: Reader's Digest is an easily digestible, commercial book that would be quite familiar to Peter in his publishing career. But Peter refuses to "understand," or at least to admit that he does—Jerry seems to believe that Peter does *understand, which is why he's so upset as to be nearly crying. Perhaps Jerry is right that Peter is merely refusing to understand because trying to take in something so complex and unresolvable frightens him.*

Peter says he does not want to hear any more about the landlady or her dog. This upsets Jerry, who has convinced himself that the dog belongs to him, although he quickly admits that that the dog in fact does belong to the landlady. After a moment of confusion, Jerry resigns himself to the idea that he and Peter are too different to understand each other: "I don't live on your block," he sighs, "I'm not married to two parakeets." Seeing Jerry's sadness, Peter apologizes.

Even now, after he and the dog have reached an indifferent "understanding," Jerry struggles to come to terms with their lack of a relationship. But just as Jerry admits that the dog is not his, he also seems to give up on reaching Peter. It's not clear whether this is genuine, though, as Jerry claims that they're too different to understand each other, a claim that runs contrary to the moral of the story that he just told. (The point of the dog story was that misunderstanding and difference are the only things that drive anyone towards each other.) In this light, it's possible that Jerry is manipulating Peter here by playing to Peter's investment in social norms; Jerry has made Peter feel rude for not engaging with his story, and, quite predictably, this causes Peter to re-engage with the conversation, giving Jerry another chance at what he really wants: to connect.

Jokingly, Jerry suggests that Peter does not know what to make of him; Peter jokes back that "we get all kinds in publishing." Jerry asks Peter, "do I annoy you or confuse you?" Peter explains that he was not at all expecting to have such an eventful afternoon, to which Jerry replies: "but I'm here, and I'm not leaving."

On the surface, this exchange seems reasonably polite—Jerry seems to make a self-deprecating joke about his own eccentricity, and Peter tries to put him at ease. But given the dog story, it's possible to read Jerry's insistence that Peter doesn't know what to make of him as a provocation—perhaps Jerry knows that, just like with the dog, he and Peter will be inevitably drawn together until they reach a better understanding. In this way, Peter's polite, dismissive responses seem impossibly naïve to the reality of the situation, especially considering the violence ahead. Jerry's insistence that he's not leaving seems threatening for the first time, particularly given what happened with the dog.

Peter checks his watch and moves to get up from the bench as he starts to say that he has to get going, but Jerry begins to tickle him. Peter is very ticklish, and he squirms, pleading with Jerry to stop in a "falsetto." Through his laughter, Peter jokes about the cats and the parakeets preparing dinner and setting the table. Jerry stops tickling Peter, but Peter is still laughing "hysterically." Jerry watches Peter laugh with a "curious fixed smile."

As Peter tries to leave, Jerry knows that he has to do something drastic to keep him there, so for the first time he resorts to physical touch (rather than mere conversational tactics). This is an escalation in both the intimacy of their relationship and in the implicit level of threat—Jerry is behaving more aggressively and erratically now. For his part, Peter cannot keep up his polite, civilized manner in the face of Jerry's animalistic tickling—and in fact, Peter too now blurs the line between human and animal, joking about the parakeets preparing dinner (thereby seeming human) while he himself laughs like a hyena. Peter's civilized veneer has suddenly disappeared, adding credibility to Jerry's view of human nature (that our animal instincts are always lurking, barely repressed). This moment is also curious from a gender perspective, as Peter, touched by another man (presumably an unusual occurrence for him), responds with "hysteria" (a word usually reserved derogatorily for women).

Now very calm, Jerry asks Peter if he wants to hear about what happened at **the zoo**. Peter, coming out of his laughing attack, tells Jerry he is very eager to hear. Jerry explains that he went to the zoo to learn about how people and animals "exist with each other," but "it probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else." Jerry pokes Peter and tells him to "move over" on the bench.

Jerry finally begins to explain what happened at the zoo. But first, he critiques the format of the zoo itself: creatures cannot truly connect with each other if they are placed into boxes and "separated by bars." Metaphorically, this critiques Peter's worldview, as Peter prefers to interact with others by categorizing them and thereby reducing their complexity. To Jerry, this is akin to barring people off from one another and preventing true interaction. As Jerry makes this critique of separating people or animals from one another, he moves directly next to Peter, closing the physical separation between them.

Peter moves over, and Jerry continues to describe **the zoo**. But every few sentences, Jerry pokes Peter increasingly hard—until he has almost the entire **bench** and Peter, annoyed, is crowded into a corner. Jerry begins to explain how the lion tamer at the zoo went into the cages to feed the lions. However, he interrupts himself, punching Peter on the arm and shouting "MOVE OVER!" Peter tells Jerry he cannot move over anymore, but Jerry continues to hit him.

When Jerry moves closer to Peter, Peter begins to lose his calm demeanor—and Jerry starts to become increasingly violent. In other words, the closer the men get to each other, the more instinctual and animalistic they become. It's easy to see the parallel between this passage and the dog story; Jerry and the dog used physical antagonism to get emotionally closer to each other, and Jerry seems to be employing the same tactic here with Peter. The detail about the lion tamer going into the cages to feed the lions also evokes the dog story; going into the cages at the zoo represents overcoming the artificial boundaries that people have erected between humans and animals, and feeding the lions (at risk of injury) runs parallel to the way that Jerry fed the dog to make them closer. All of the details in this passage point to one thing: Jerry and Peter getting closer via a dangerous and violent interaction.

Peter asks Jerry why he is behaving like this, and Jerry declares "I'm crazy, you bastard." Jerry explains that he wants this **bench** to himself, and if Peter wants to hear the rest of the story, he will have to sit on the other bench that's on stage. Peter does not see why he should have to leave his original bench, especially because he sits on the same bench every Sunday.

Peter becomes territorial about his bench, engaging in behavior that is reminiscent of a dog protecting its territory. Peter is also, for the first time in the play, abandoning his polite veneer and standing up for himself. For Jerry, this probably seems like progress—Peter is being more authentic to his emotions, rather than repressing them for the sake of being polite, which means that the two of them may finally have a chance to understand each other. Peter also reveals that he sits on this bench and reads a novel almost every Sunday. As Sunday is the day of worship in Christian faith, it is telling that Peter spends the day engaged in fully secular activities—unlike Jerry, who is curious about god because he finds little meaning in life elsewhere, Peter seems to have no use for spirituality.

Jerry insists that he wants the **bench**, and he scoffs when Peter tries to argue that people cannot get everything they want. Jerry calls Peter a "vegetable" and orders him to leave the bench and "lie down on the ground." Peter again refuses, and he tells Jerry that he only spoke to him because he could tell Jerry "wanted to talk to somebody." Jerry shouts that Peter's "economical" way of putting things makes Jerry sick.

While Peter and Jerry were polar opposites at the beginning of the play, they now begin to speak the same aggressive language and the bench has taken on outsized importance to both of them. Jerry seems to be deliberately provoking Peter—insulting his worldview, calling him a "vegetable," and ordering him to do dehumanizing things like lie on the ground—perhaps because he thinks that this is the way for them to get closer.

Jerry tells Peter to "give me **my bench**," but Peter yells back that it is "MY BENCH." When Jerry pushes Peter almost all of the way off the bench, Peter threatens to call the police, but Jerry says that all of the police officers are on the West side of the park, chasing and harassing gay men. Peter starts to scream for the police, but Jerry speculates that even if a policeman did come, he would think Peter is crazy and take *him* away.

Peter's useless attempt to call for the police further suggests that the men are no longer operating by the normal social rules of mid-century New York City; there's no external force that can impose order on this interaction, and they must instead resolve their tension by themselves. Civilization seems to have finally dissolved in favor of more animalistic norms. Jerry's reference to the criminalization of homosexuality emphasizes the pressure that both men feel to be traditionally masculine, and the mention of cops harassing gay men on the west side might be a nod to Jerry's own complicated sexuality, since he himself lives on the west side of the park.

Jerry threatens Peter, telling him that he will never again be able to sit on his "precious **bench**." Peter, now furious, insists that he wants the bench even if it does not make any sense. Peter begins to scream at Jerry to "GET OFF MY BENCH," but Jerry does not move; instead, he keeps repeating that Peter appears "ridiculous."

The two men have now completely moved away from any sort of civilized conversation—and, importantly, they've also flipped roles from the ones they initially occupied. While Peter was once the more polite and contained of the pair, he is now screaming illogically about a park bench while Jerry—the one who cared not at all for appearing polite or normal—is calmly telling Peter that his behavior makes him look ridiculous. This role reversal lends credibility to Jerry's view that people are complicated and unclassifiable. Finally, while the bench was initially a symbol of aesthetic pleasure and evolved design, now it becomes an object to own and kill over.

Jerry asks Peter why he cares about **the bench**, since he already has "everything in the world you want, your home, and your family, and *your own little zoo.*" Jerry asks if the bench, "this iron and this wood," is a question of honor for Peter—and Peter replies that Jerry "wouldn't understand" even if it were a question of honor.

Here, the boundary between human and animal is completely broken down: Peter's family, with its confining cages and restrictive domestic norms, is a "zoo" now, suggesting that his family is both unnaturally restrictive and animalistic. When Jerry remarks that defending the bench must be a question of honor for Peter, it seems perceptive; the bench seems to have taken on the weight of Peter's masculinity, which he wants to defend from Jerry's physical advances. The association between the bench and masculinity is strengthened in the phallic imagery of "iron and wood."

Jerry accuses Peter of not having any idea about "what other people *need*." Peter insists that Jerry does not need the bench; Peter feels that he needs **the bench** because he has been coming to it for years and it has given him great pleasure as he sits on it and **reads**. Jerry tells Peter that if he wants the bench, he will need to "fight for it…like a man."

When Jerry accuses Peter of not knowing what other people need, Peter assumes that Jerry is referring to the bench. But that's not likely true—what Jerry is probably implying is that Peter does not understand that Jerry feels the need to authentically connect with other people, which is why Jerry is instigating this interaction with Peter in the first place. To provoke a fight (and thereby bring them closer), Jerry ties violence to Peter's masculinity, implying that he is not a man unless he fights Jerry over the bench.

Still sitting on **the bench**, Jerry muses that Peter has a "certain dignity" about him. Jerry then rises, agreeing to fight for the bench but warning Peter that "we're not evenly matched." Jerry pulls out a switchblade, and Peter panics, believing that Jerry is going to kill him—but Jerry throws the switchblade at Peter's feet.

As Peter gives in to his more animalistic instincts, Jerry begins to approve of him for the first time, complimenting his "dignity" (which is not the usual sense of the word, as "dignity" normally refers to restrained human behavior rather than animalistic violence). Peter and Jerry's interaction becomes ever-more reminiscent of Jerry's story about the dog: Jerry tried to kill the dog but he did not actually want the dog to die, and here, he pulls out a knife but then lets Peter wield it.

Horrified, Peter does not want to pick up the knife. Jerry grabs Peter by the collar, standing so close to him that their "faces almost touch," and he orders Peter to take the switchblade and fight. Jerry questions Peter's "manhood" again, calling him a "pathetic little vegetable" and mocking Peter's inability to produce a male child. Peter picks up the knife, but he holds it in a defensive position and says he'll give Jerry one more chance to leave him alone.

In a moment filled with homoerotic undertones, Jerry gets close to Peter's face, grabs his clothing, and mocks his manhood. It is Jerry's comment about Peter's lack of a son—the comment that set Peter off at the very beginning of the play—that finally makes Peter pick up the knife, suggesting that Peter is most fragile on the question of his own masculinity.

Jerry says "So be it!" and then runs onto the knife that Peter is now holding, impaling himself. In great pain, Jerry screams with "the sound of an infuriated and fatally wounded animal." Peter begins to repeat the words "oh my god" over and over again.

Jerry's suicide-by-impaling relies on distinctly phallic, penetrative imagery, which further intertwines masculinity and violence and shows how self-destructive masculine insecurity can be. Furthermore, this moment is an extreme blurring of the line between human and animal, since Jerry entirely loses his instinct for language as he expresses his pain through an animalistic scream. Finally, Peter—usually so reliant on atheistic human knowledge—turns to faith in this moment of crisis, shouting "oh my god" over and over. In this most extreme moment of the play, both men lose their rationality and humanity, showing that, at heart, they were never entirely what they appeared.

As he dies, Jerry calmly thanks Peter and expresses his relief that he did not drive Peter away. Jerry finally tells Peter "what happened at **the zoo**"—at the zoo, Jerry decided he would walk "northerly" and find someone to talk to. Jerry wonders if he could have planned this whole thing, and he says both that he couldn't have and that he thinks he did. Then he predicts that Peter will see Jerry's face on TV that night. Jerry tells Peter that "I came unto you…and you have comforted me."

The whole play has been driven by the mystery of what happened at the zoo, which was implied to be so strange and momentous that it would be in the newspapers. But as it turns out, the "event" at the zoo was simply a decision; Jerry decided to find someone he could really get to know, which he did when he found Peter. On some level, though, Jerry knew that this would end in violence—and even in his own death—as this *is what makes the day newsworthy. It's hard to know how to interpret Jerry's quasi-planning of his own death. Perhaps he felt that life was not worth living after the dog taught him that he could not connect with others, or perhaps he felt that the extreme event of impaling himself was the only way that he and Peter could make a connection. As Jerry is comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction, perhaps he believed both things at once. When Jerry begins to describe his relationship with Peter, he uses Biblical language ("you have comforted me" is a paraphrase of the New Testament verse Isaiah 12:1), which emphasizes the play's sense that spirituality and irrationality might be the only way to grapple with the complexity of human life.*

Jerry warns Peter that he should leave before anyone comes and sees Peter with the knife. Peter, who is still only able to repeat "oh my god," begins to cry. Jerry tells Peter that he has been "dispossessed": he has lost his **bench**, but he has kept his honor. Jerry also murmurs that Peter is not "really a vegetable; it's all right, you're an animal. You're an animal too."

At the beginning of The Zoo Story, *Jerry was desperate to keep Peter around so he could listen to his story; now that Jerry and Peter have understood each other, Jerry begins to push Peter to run away. This echoes the dog story, in which once two beings understood each other, they no longer had reason to interact. Moreover, Jerry assures Peter that he has kept his honor (and his manhood) by releasing his "animal" instincts.*

With great effort, Jerry uses his handkerchief to wipe Peter's fingerprints off the switchblade. Jerry encourages Peter to run, and he reminds him to take his **book**. As Jerry loses breath, he whispers that the "parakeets are making the dinner…the cats are setting the table." Peter, who has run off stage, lets out a final "pitiful howl" of the words "OH MY GOD." As Jerry dies, he speaks in "a combination of scornful mimicry and supplication"—"Oh…My…God."

The final lines of the play are especially telling: the characters are far out of the realm of polite conversation about jobs, marriages, and family histories and into the animalistic and spiritual. Peter, letting out an animalistic "howl," moves between instinct and a cry to god, searching for some explanation of the meaning of what just happened that cannot be found in his textbooks. Jerry, meanwhile, gives a joking reminder that the play's title refers not just to the literal zoo, but also to the zoo in Peter's home, where the "cats are setting the table"—and perhaps even to the zoo that the audience has just witnessed onstage. Finally, Jerry's cry to god brings the lights down, leaving the show's audience with the suggestion that human relationships are so complex that we need a higher power to help us "understand."

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