

# JERRY'S SUICIDAL PLAN IN *THE ZOO STORY*: AN OPTION TO FACE THE HUMAN FEELING OF ABSURDITY\*

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**Abstract:** This article describes Jerry's suicidal mind in Edward Albee's most celebrated play *The Zoo Story*, a work having features of the theater of the absurd written in 1958. The article argues that Jerry's social alienation in a meaningless capitalistic society leads him to plan his own suicide cautiously. The interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior and Camus's philosophical notion of suicide were implemented to examine Jerry's gradual desire to die by suicide. It can be observed that Jerry creates three interdependent states of mind: a sense of thwarted belongingness, a sense of burdensomeness, and the acquired capacity to commit suicide. These states allowed Jerry to accomplish self-destruction successfully in response to his absurd existence.

**Key words:** Social alienation, the theater of the absurd, the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior, the sense of thwarted belongingness, the myth of Sisyphus.

## EL PLAN SUICIDA DE JERRY EN *LA HISTORIA DEL ZOOLOGICO*: UNA OPCIÓN PARA ENFRENTAR EL SENTIMIENTO HUMANO DEL ABSURDO

**Resumen:** Este artículo explora la mente suicida de Jerry en la obra teatral *La historia del zoológico* del célebre dramaturgo Edward Albee, una producción que contiene rasgos del teatro del absurdo escrita en 1958. Se argumenta que la alienación social de Jerry en una sociedad capitalista sin sentido lo conduce a un suicidio premeditado. Se examina el deseo progresivo que tiene Jerry de morir por medio del suicidio a la luz de la teoría psicológica interpersonal del comportamiento suicida, y de la noción filosófica que Camus hace sobre el suicidio. Desde estos enfoques se logra determinar que Jerry actúa bajo el control de tres estados mentales interdependientes: el sentido de pertenencia frustrada, la percepción de ser

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una molestia para los demás, y la capacidad adquirida para suicidarse. Estos estados llevan a Jerry, finalmente, a la auto-inmolación como respuesta a su existencia absurda.

**Palabras clave:** alienación social, el teatro del absurdo, la teoría psicológica interpersonal del comportamiento suicida, el sentido de pertenencia frustrada, la capacidad adquirida para suicidarse, el mito de Sísifo.

*A successful suicide demands good organization and a cool head, both of which are usually incompatible with the suicidal state of mind.*

Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*

*The Zoo Story* (1958), Edward Albee's most recognized play, primarily depicts the absurdity of the modern man living in a useless capitalistic society and in a purposeless world through the opposite lives of two characters, Peter and Jerry. This play contains elements of the theater of the absurd that not only show life as being totally worthless due to the ineffectiveness of men's efforts to face it, but confront the audience "with actions that lack apparent motivation" and "happenings that are clearly outside the realm of rational experience" (Esslin, 1980, p. 416). Such mysterious and puzzling happenings suggest that the world is a paradox with no conclusions, since "the playwright leaves open the paradox for the audience to make sense of it" (Bennett, 2011, p. 19). One of the paradoxes that deserves further understanding in *The Zoo Story* is that it portrays Jerry's rational and premeditated plan to commit suicide in response to face the human feeling of absurdity. Jerry disturbing Peter in Central Park, New York, has no other purpose than to orchestrate his own death successfully, a paradox that is only implied at the end because it is not an issue that Jerry clearly states from the beginning. Understanding the reasons why Jerry develops a suicidal behavior and why he finally succeeds requires a cautious examination because, as defined by Jimenez and Cardiel (2013), suicide involves complex and multifactorial manifestations related to personal, psychological, biological, and social concerns. To focus on this matter, Jerry's motives and process to commit suicide are here examined, considering Thomas Joiner's (2005, 2009) interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior and Albert Camus's (1942) philosophical notion of suicide and the value of human life.

There are important literary analyses that have contributed to the understanding of Jerry's character, namely as an alienated man (Nilan, 1973, Turki, 2009), as a tragic modern figure (Bennett, 1977), and in terms of his sexual identity as regarded by gender and queer criticism (Zaller, 2009). A new psychological approach, the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior, may serve as another

interpretative possibility to increase our critical knowledge of Jerry's inner conflicts and motivations to opt for self-immolation.

In fact, in his book *Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict*, Paris (1997) states that psychological theories can support literary criticism and characters analysis because it is possible to understand the behavior "of realistically drawn characters in the same way that we understand the behavior of real people. These characters are not flesh and blood creatures, of course, but are imagined human beings who have many parallels with people like ourselves" (p. ix). Thus, in literature, characters, like in the case of Jerry, are imagined human beings, *mimetic*<sup>1</sup> characters, that can be understood as psychologically affected by inner personal conflicts and by the interaction with other characters in the fictional world they appear. Paris (1997) states that characters are not simply functions and messages in a text from the author, but *imagined* human beings whose thoughts, feelings, and actions reflect our own real personal conflicts. Understanding these imagined beings with the support of psychological theories, according to Paris, is not only a fascinating quest, but leads readers to explore part of the *imagined* characters' human experience and the "inner logic of their own" (p. 7). Culler (2000) equally affirms that literary works usually represent human beings having identity crisis and struggling within their individual (the mind, the psyche, the conscious, the unconscious, and internal thoughts), and between the individual and the group (social norms and expectations).

Furthermore, this psychological analysis of Jerry's anguished mind is complemented with Camus's (1942) philosophical theory of suicide through the Greek myth of Sisyphus, which will lead to explore the mental, behavioral, and social factors that encourage Jerry to end with his own life.

The first implicit reference of Jerry's premeditation to die by suicide is mentioned at the beginning of the play when he arrives at Central Park, New York, and approaches Peter, a stranger he had never seen before. After requesting Peter to have a conversation with him, and while Peter is trying to avoid his company, Jerry unexpectedly claims, "You'll read about it in the papers tomorrow, if you don't see it on your TV tonight. You have TV, haven't you?" (Albee, 1961, p. 15). At the beginning, it is difficult for the audience/reader to understand that Jerry is referring to his suicide in this statement, yet it overshadows not only the reason why he has come to Central Park, but the news on TV announcing his death. Part of his plan

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1 Mimetic character: Paris calls a mimetic character those fictional characters that, although are not humans, represent, epitomize, and embody real human beings in body and mind, having unique behaviors and personal conflicts.

includes the media coverage of this incident; which Jerry mentions again at the end of the play when he is hurt with the knife that Peter holds in his hand.

According to the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior (Joiner, 2005), people are not born with the innate capacity to damage themselves. They rather build up a powerful force to avoid pain, injury, and death. However, due to negative experiences of life, some people develop “the ability to beat back this pressing urge toward self-preservation. Once they do . . . they are at high risk for suicide” (p. 22). Thus, for Joiner (2005) suicide is not just a sudden action, but a process through which an individual gradually overcomes the fear of death and the instinct for self-preservation to kill him/herself. In this sense, the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior claims that along this process an individual must develop three specific variables or states of mind to be fearless of committing suicide: a sense of thwarted belongingness, a perception of functioning as a burden to others, and the acquired capability for suicide. In *The Zoo Story*, Jerry’s suicidal action can be better understood from these interdependent psychological factors, even more when his suicide is seen as a paradox that has to be inferred by the audience due to the fact that the confusing events at the end of the play where Peter is holding a knife suggests, at first sight, that he apparently murders Jerry.

The first factor of a suicidal behavior, *sense of thwarted belongingness*, takes place when a person feels disengaged and alienated from others, causing unbearable circumstances of disillusion and loss. It deals with “the sense that one does not belong to or feel disconnected with a valued group or relationship” (Fitzpatrick and Joiner, 2006, p. 212). This factor relates to the need of social relations that may cause a lack of belonging to someone or to a group. In fact, Jerry, understood as a *mimetic* or imagined character (Paris, 1997), is socially alienated from the American capitalistic society in which he lives in terms of family, friends, and social relationships. The fact that Jerry goes to a park and attempts to establish a conversation with a stranger (Peter) on a Sunday afternoon, a day in which an average man would share time with his/her beloved, relatives, or friends, show that Jerry belongs to no one. In the conversation between Jerry and Peter we first discover that Jerry has always held a *sense of thwarted belongingness* because he comes from a dysfunctional family. Jerry reveals that his promiscuous mother abandoned him when he was ten years old so that she could get involved in “an adulterous turn [with] her most constant companion . . . among others, among many others,” while his father took a “moving city omnibus” without return (Albee, 1961, p. 23). Since Jerry suffered from parental detachment at an early age, having a promiscuous mother and a noncommittal father as models to follow, he confesses that he has no feelings for his parents, lacking a sense of family ties in the past and in the present.

Similarly, Jerry is an unmarried man in his late thirties who has been unable to establish friendly bonds with other people, including women. Paradoxically, he lives alone on the fourth floor in a "roominghouse" where he never sees the people next door and does not have any kind of friendly conversation with neighbors, "I don't know any of the people on the third and second floors" (Albee, 1961, p. 28). Moreover, he is harassed by the landlady of the building as he says, "she grabs a hold of my coat or my arm, and she presses her disgusting body up against me to keep me in a corner so that she can talk to me [because] she has a some foul parody of sexual desire" (Albee, 1961, p. 28). Jerry's sense of thwarted belongingness is determined by his incapacity of making friends in a cosmopolitan city like New York where, ironically, the only person he can talk to is a lady who sees him as a sexual object to satisfy her lust. Therefore, his disconnectedness from other human beings is characterized by intense feelings of unpleasant abandonment, extreme loneliness, and non-affective social encounters, and these isolated conditions are serious factors for his decision to commit suicide. As Joiner highlights, "this need to belong is so powerful that, when satisfied, it can prevent suicide" (2005, p. 18). If not, like in Jerry's case, it is a potential reason to die by suicide.

Jerry's tormenting social alienation framed within the mental state of thwarted belongingness, as proposed by Joiner, can equally be understood from Mann's (2001) definition of social alienation: "the state and experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved" (p. 7). In this regard, Jerry belongs to no one because he is a dysfunctional person, as his parents were in the past, being incompetent to develop social skills with others. His dysfunctional personality is possibly the result from the communication problems with his family when he was a child. The only occasions Jerry is lucky to speak with other people is when he meets strangers at public places such as at a bar, a park, a zoo, and at the movies just to ask for general information or buy items to please his human basic needs. He complains that the only times he interacts with other human beings is when he asks for "a beer, where is the john, or what time does the feature go on" (Albee, 1961, p. 17). Neal and Collas (2000) assert that this type of social alienation at public places and at work is the main problem of modern societies because the human being is compelled to exchange simple requests, sentences or phases with many strangers every single day, lacking the possibility of "any ongoing social relationship" or closer friendship (p. 114). Thus, the modern man is bound to produce and exchange superficial messages with people that he/she does not know well. We deduce, then, that Jerry, as a mimetic human being, only interchanges just a few sentences with other characters to satisfy immediate needs. However, he lives without having the opportunity to make long-lasting relationships based on trust, friendship, support, and close communication. In this sense, Jerry is a stranger

who lives among other isolated strangers that share the same place, New York City, and that hold empty and futile conversations, a pointless experience that gradually increases his understanding of the absurdity of life.

Moreover, Jerry's social alienation and sense of thwarted belongingness are emphasized by several bizarre and freakish strangers that live in the impoverished building where he has rented a room, including the lascivious landlady who only seeks sexual favors from him and a "colored queen" who lives in the other side of his room separated by a beaverboard, who apparently is a transvestite wearing a kimono, and who "never bothers" him (Albee, 1961, p. 22). Jerry could be exaggerating or even making it up the entire story about his disgraceful life in the rooming house where he lives, this being one of the ambiguities of the play and one of its absurd elements. However, his stay in that house indicates that he equally undergoes personal alienation because he cannot see himself belonging to any group or community. The problem is not only that the others reject him or are indifferent with him. The play suggests that he is socially dysfunctional, lacking communication skills to interact normally with close neighbors and, therefore, seeing them as strange and freakish human beings. Therefore, Jerry would never sympathize with them, as it happens with the landlady who apparently likes him and could release part of his pain if he were friendlier and more responsive to human company.

Jerry's profound condition of thwarted belongingness, as the first symptom of suicidal behavior, can equally be examined from Durkheim's (1952, 1982) theoretical approach of *egotistic* suicide which is founded on social factors. Durkheim explains that the egotistic suicide occurs in a society where individuals undergo an extended sense of not belonging and of not being part of a community on regular basis, because the social system is based on excessive individuation up to the point that the person is not socially integrated to a collectivity (social integration). Indeed, Jerry cannot fit the egotistical and individualistic American society in which he lives because he is a homosexual, a condition that worsens his painful sense of thwarted belongingness.

I've never been able to have sex, with or, how is it put? . . . make love to anybody more than once; that's it . . . Oh, wait; for a week and a half when I was fifteen . . . I was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l. I mean, I was queer (Albee, 1961, p. 25).

These words indicate that Jerry is not only socially, but also sexually alienated, two conditions that complicate Jerry's craving to belong to someone. It can be observed in the play that because of his sexual preference, it is complicated for him to find someone to belong to and love. When he hardly ever finds strangers, he can only have occasional and concealed sexual encounters to satisfy in any possible way his emotional, affective, and maybe instinctual basic needs. His sexual practices with male strangers no "more than once" stress his level of crude detachment from

others and show how other human beings, like him, equally undergo a desperate state of social alienation that can be somewhat lessened through occasional and stealthy sexual meetings. Additionally, Jerry is sexually annulled because ironically, the only person that offers him passion and sex, and that practically molests him, is the landlady, a woman that he describes as “fat, ugly, mean...cheap” (Albee, 1961, p. 27). Nonetheless, he would never sleep with a woman that does not produce any kind of feelings on him, since he proclaims he is totally gay. In fact, Jerry affirms that he is “queer, queer, queer . . . with bells ringing, banners snapping in the wind” (Albee, 1961, p. 25). The repetition of the word “queer,” the emphasis on the figurative sound of the bells, and the movement of the banners in the wind announcing his homosexuality seem to suggest that he has always been openly gay, and that his sexual identity is all he has left. Unfortunately, he has not found a stable partner to love, missing out the fundamental social needs of an ordinary person, naming love, sex, friendship, family, and human company. This lonely reality relates once more to the assertion provided by Neal and Collas (2000) that the modern man is forced to interact with strangers to share general information, lacking opportunities to create permanent and deep social relationships.

Since Jerry knows that he belongs to no one because he lives in an absurd world of strangers; he is forced to exceed the limits of reason by trying to find desperately an alternative type of friendship with animals and things:

It's just that if you can deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS...with SOMETHING if not with people... with a bed, with a cockroach... with a carpet, a roll of toilet paper, with pornographic playing cards...with vomiting... (Albee, 1961, p. 34).

These words suggest that Jerry has not only lost hope to find human company, but part of his human dignity by considering the possibility of making relationships with irrational beings and disgusting inanimate elements such as insects, toilet paper, printed pornography, and human fluids because being lonely without a sense of belonging is a desperate absurd situation. However, he is so immersed in the chaos of thwarted belongingness that he is not even able to establish good relationships with animals, namely a dog that counts as man's best friend. As can be seen, he is victimized by the landlady's ferocious dog: “the dog...is a black monster of a beast...he'd snarl and then go for me to get one of my legs...he got a piece of my trouser leg” (Albee, 1961, p. 30). Jerry recognizes that he does not even belong to the irrational levels of this absurd world despite his desperate attempt to empathize with a dog in replacement for human company.

The same situation happens with his disconnection from a powerful superior being. Jerry affirms that God has forgotten this world and its people for a long time

(Albee, 1961, p. 35). In this respect, Aouansou (2006) asserts that Jerry had decided to put an end to his senseless life because without God there is nothing to fear, but dying alone. From this attitude towards God's careless role in the destiny of man we can deduce that Jerry suffers from spiritual emptiness, forcing him to become a hopeless man. If such superior entity as God is not there to give support, there is no one Jerry can count on. Because of this meaningless life and because he has been dehumanized, he starts to develop egotistic suicidal thoughts, this being a reaction that could end his human feeling of absurdity.

In short, Jerry's example of social alienation can be understood by the conceptualization of thwarted belongingness proposed by Joiner (2005) and further treated by Van Orden et al. (2010, p. 581, and cited by Gunn and Lester, 2014, p. 26). This concept is captured by the phrase "I am alone," an idea that is subdivided into two main directions, *loneliness* and *reciprocal care*. By applying these two directions to Jerry's case, his loneliness is conceptualized by the phrase "I feel disconnected from others," while reciprocal care is conceptualized by the phrase, "I have no one to turn to and I don't support others" (Gunn and Lester, 2014, p. 26). In consequence, Jerry's meaningless existence bounded by solitude works as a predictor for his suicidal ideation.

In addition, as an *imagined* human being in this fictional world, Jerry suffers from *perceived burdensomeness*, the second mental state presented in the model of interpersonal theory of suicide as proposed by Joiner (2005). This factor occurs when a person feels useless in the world by seeing him/herself as a burden to others or to society. The individual observes that his/her death will be worth more than his/her life to family, friends, and society because he/she has become an undesired trouble to the others. Even though *The Zoo Story* does not show direct evidence of Jerry's burdensomeness to others, precisely because he belongs to no one, there are several traits that show him as a burden that could have driven him to develop suicidal ideas. Even though he is completely lonely without, at least, being able to establish any friendship with a dog—this being the most degrading level of social alienation—it is possible to see that he was a burden to people in the past as well as to the strangers he meets in the present in a lesser or greater degree.

In the past, Jerry's father deserted him because he did not want to complicate his life by raising a boy who had been abandoned by his mother. In a similar fashion, in the present Jerry is somewhat a burden to the landlady, a stranger who is always expectant to obtain sexual gratification from him, since his looks generate high levels of anxiety and jealousy on her as "she leans around in the entrance hall, spying to see that [he does not] bring in things or people" (Albee, 1961, p. 28). Also, he causes her distrust as when she calls him a liar because she suspects that Jerry wants to



poison her dog. At a certain extent, Jerry experiences one feature of burdensomeness named *liability* (Van Orden et al., 2010) which refers to a sense of guilt and bitter responsibility for causing trouble to other people. It is assumed that these inconveniences with the landlady at the place where he rents a room increases his already torturous social withdrawal. It is a risk that sooner or later he will be asked to move out if he rejects to please the landlady's insinuations. Similar situations of Jerry's perceived burdensomeness to society have to do with the acknowledgement of his own dysfunctional personality to establish normal communication with strangers, since he is aware of his difficulty to communicate and maintain long relationships.

Similarly, Jerry becomes an abhorrent burden to Peter, the stranger he meets in Central Park. We observe that Peter goes to Central Park to be alone for a while and enjoy the reading of a book. Unfortunately, he is disturbed by Jerry's obnoxious questions about his personal life so that Peter feels confused about being forced to answer. The play indicates that Peter becomes "puzzled," "bewildered," and "uncomfortable" because Jerry not only interrupts his reading, but invades his space. Distracted by Jerry's indiscreet behavior, Peter gets desperate until he says to Jerry, "it's that that you don't really carry a conversation; you just ask questions, and I'm ... I'm normally ... uh... reticent. Why do you just stand there?" (Albee, 1961, p. 19). Jerry's intrusion and inability to communicate appropriately as normal people would do unavoidably shows him as a heavy burden and a despicable individual to this stranger in the park. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that Jerry's rude behavior with Peter in this occasion is part of the plan he has prepared to commit suicide, an aspect that will be later addressed. So far, Jerry seems to be a burden to those he tries to interact with; he is a nuisance and unwanted creature to deal with and he knows it. Because of his perception of being a burden, he represents an absurd man "devoid of purpose" and "cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots" (Esslin, 1980, p. 23), prompting him to create suicidal ideations as one solution to end his absurd reality.

At this point of the discussion, the idea of Jerry's mental states of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness, which lead him to see that his life is essentially meaningless and absurd, can be put in dialog with Camus's (1942) analysis of suicide in his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus discusses the outrageous human condition of Sisyphus, a Greek mythological figure, punished by Zeus to eternally and repeatedly roll a heavy rock up the top of a hill only to have it roll down again to start anew. Camus (1942) asserts that Sisyphus holds a meaningless life because he must do the same pointless task of rolling a rock every day without possible change. At a certain point, Jerry embodies a contemporary Sisyphus who equally must roll up his own rock for a lifetime. Sisyphus' heavy rock symbolically

correlates Jerry's burden of suffering, social alienation, and psychological pain, a purposeless experience not worth living every day.

However, through Sisyphus' myth, Camus (1942) wonders whether the idea that life is absurd inevitably suggests that life is not worth living and, in consequence, whether suicide should be the only solution to the absurd:

I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions. How to answer it? On all essential problems (I mean thereby those that run the risk of leading to death or those that intensify the passion of living). (p. 2)

Camus suggests two possible answers to face the human feeling of absurdity: whether hope or suicide, and he points out that suicide should not be the absolute solution to an absurd world. He explains that the first option, hope, embraces the idea that the human being may continue living as much as possible in a meaningless world while he becomes conscious of trying to reach a definitive answer to why he is attached to a worthless life. In other words, the capacity to endure a meaningless existence, instead of committing suicide, is not only determined by the instinct for life, but by man's strong sense of hope as he holds blind faith for a better life and hopes to eventually find any type of meaning in life. Such is the case with Sisyphus; despite he is forced to roll a heavy rock up the top of a hill, Camus sees this tragic hero as a hopeful man doing his hard task every day because he has become aware of this tragic and hopeless reality:

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn (p. 9).

Man is able to struggle and cope with the conditions of the meaninglessness of the world through a hopeful and faithful quest for a better life, taking the risk that his attempt for better conditions may fail. The human being, as Sisyphus, can also endure an absurd world when he is conscious of such reality despite his tired, monotonous, and ineffective life. Camus states: "Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes ... [a] definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery" (p. 3). Even though Sisyphus's life is meaningless, Camus imagines Sisyphus as a recovered and

happy man because “his rock is his thing and he is still on to go,” since “the rock is still rolling” (p. 10), and that rolling is, at least, a sense in his life. Camus indicates that Sisyphus, an absurd man, is conscious of his absurd fate and so keeps fighting by doing his useless task happily. “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (p. 10) for having awoken, understood, and accepted the implications of his senseless life.

Although it has been stated that in *The Zoo Story* Jerry possesses to a certain extent some characteristics of a contemporary Sisyphus, carrying his own “rock,” mainly his tortuous mental states of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness, Jerry, in contrast to Sisyphus, chooses the second option, suicide, to face the human feeling of absurdity as conceived by Camus. Jerry is so destroyed that he is not determined to continue holding a wretched lifetime. In his awakening, Jerry observes that life is meaningless and his option is to commit suicide. Jerry suits Camus's assertion that:

killing yourself amounts to confessing ... that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it ... that ‘is not worth the trouble.’ Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, ... the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering. (Camus, 1942, p. 3).

Jerry, as a mimetic tragic hero is not, in words of Camus, “superior to his fate” and “stronger than his rock” (1942, p. 9) to undertake the pains of life and defeat them. Although Jerry understand the absence of purpose for living, he is incapable of revolting the absurd because he lacks Sisyphus's insurrection and victory.

However, from another perspective, Jerry becomes fearless for self-injury. His decision to commit suicide does not only rely on his incapacity to fight consciously against adversity and the absurd, but on his increasing courage to trigger his self-destruction, as for dying by suicide the individual needs bravery and sturdy self-determination. This fatal courage opens the discussion of the third and last mental psychological state that a suicide attempter can reach: *the acquired capability for suicide* as proposed by Joiner's theory of suicide.

As has been said and according to Joiner's (2005) interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior, the desire of dying is constituted by two initial psychological states, a sense of thwarted belongingness and a perception of functioning as a burden to others. Yet, these two states are not enough to instill the interest in ending one's life. However, the combination of both states can produce on some people the fearless capacity for self-injury, and this is the third factor in Joiner's theory which he calls *the acquired capability for suicide*. This capability entails the idea

that repeated exposure to painful, frustrating, and negative experiences in life will confer a person to develop extraordinary capacities to overcome self-preservation and, therefore, come to be fearless of committing suicide. In Joiner's words, "it is difficult to overcome the most basic instinct of all; that is to say, self-preservation." (2005, p. 46). That is why "suicide isn't about cowardice. It's not painless or easy, like pulling the fire alarm to get out of math class. It takes 'a kind of courage,' ... 'fearless endurance' that's not laudable, but certainly not weak or impulsive" (Dokoupil, 2013, Newsweek, in an interview with Joiner).

The acquired capability for suicide can be associated with Freud's theory of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, addressed in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principles* (1922). Freud believes that the *Eros drive*, or the life instinct, involves those instinctual feelings and behavior that are essential for preserving life and avoiding pain and suffering, including love, acceptance, and basic needs as eating, drinking, and having shelter. Also, he affirms that the death drive, *Thanatos* or the death instinct can be activated when a person suffers from difficult traumas so that he/she feels a strong impulse to die instead of keeping the life drive. Jerry, for instance, holds a traumatic life that finally forces him to develop the death drive simply because he lost the pleasure to live. Because of that, he generates self-destructive behaviors through suicide ideation.

Therefore, Jerry reaches a level of consciousness that could tell him that absurdity is part of life and that living is not that easy. Thus, he chooses suicide instead of hope (recalling Camus' words about his view of suicide). In consequence, he emerges as a courageous man to face death because he has acquired the capability to commit suicide before he arrives in Central Park. By then, he has been accustomed to so much pain, frustrations, and others' violence and indifference, destroying all the dimensions of his human experience, that he is not afraid of being injured any more. Hence, it is assumed that he has been able to overcome the sense of self-preservation. Jerry acts according to Joiner's (2005) view that people habituate so much to physical pain and the fear of death that "such difficulties become demoralized and hopeless, and because of this, more prone to suicidality" (p. 74). In this respect, Durkheim (1982) explains that the mind of the person who commits egoistic suicide does deep reflection and self-analysis of how to kill himself, being this, as Joiner also says, a process that requires "a resolved plan and preparations" (2005, p. 78).

One of Jerry's preparations to die is to count on any stranger that could assist him with his suicide so that, at most, that stranger could notice that Jerry was someone who existed and, in some measure, secure social recognition at the last moments of his life. Also, as he later clarifies, he wants his death to be reported on the media because part of his suicidal plan is to be recognized publicly, at least, through his death. Committing suicide in his room and in secret would have been as meaningless

as the desolated life that he has already undergone so far. Consequently, when coming to the park, he calls the attention of the first stranger he sees there who happens to be Peter. Considering Joiner's (2005) theory of the acquired capacity to suicide, the first preparation of the resolved plan to commit suicide requires *a sense of courage* to make the attempt, which is the first symptom reflected in Jerry's determination to come to the park. Once being there, Jerry incites Peter to violence by asking many questions, invading his space, tickling his ribs, insulting him, and taking his bench to get Peter enraged to harm him:

Peter: MY BENCH!

Jerry: (*pushes Peter almost, but not quite, off the bench*). Get out of my sight.

Peter: (*regaining his position*) God da ... mn you. That's enough. I've had enough of you. I will not give up this bench; you can have it, and that's that. You can go away. (*Jerry snores, but does not move*). Go away, I said ... if you don't move on, I'll get a policeman here and make you go... (*His fury and self-consciousness have possessed him*). . . GET AWAY FROM MY BENCH. (Albee, 1961, p. 43)

Jerry is fully aware that if he gets Peter infuriated for taking his bench, Peter will end up attacking him both verbally and physically. At this point, Jerry is not afraid of any possible aggression because, since he has been so habituated to pain and violence, he has already lost his intuitive sense of self-protection. If he is beaten, it will be a normal hurting experience of his hard life as he has been excluded and injured hundreds of times in the past. As explained by Joiner (2005) "abuse habituates people to pain and provocation and thus lowers their resistance to self-injury" (p. 65). Jerry's interest in having the bench is no other than an excuse to get hurt and die. Even though in the previous fragment we can see that Jerry has accomplished part of his plan to be hurt, he still needs to find a stronger cause to enflame Peter's anger so that this stranger takes physical actions against him. Possessed by courage and deliberation, Jerry defies Peter to engage in a fight when he says, "Fight for it, then. Defend yourself. Defend your bench . . . We'll battle for the bench" (Albee, 1961, pp. 45-46). On the contrary, Peter holds his own instinct for self-survival or self-preservation and gets on guard to defend his life. This defensive position implies that Peter will do whatever it takes to protect his bench, his honor, and his own life if necessary, while Jerry is practically asking for lethal harm. That is why Peter also demands physical combat: "You've pushed me to it. Get up and fight . . . like a man, if you insist on mocking me even further" (Albee, 1961, p. 45). Jerry prompting Peter to quarrel constitutes *a sense of competence*, which is the second preparation of "the resolved plan," as conceived by Joiner (2005), once Jerry has acquired the capacity to commit suicide. Jerry needs to develop certain abilities such as manipulating the misunderstanding about the bench and offending the stranger, as

well as pretending that he wants to fight in order to make his own suicide possible. This *sense of competence* needs to be convincing for Peter.

Jerry's premeditated suicidal plan is more evident when he takes out an ugly-looking knife. Instead of using it to defend his life, he strangely "tosses the knife at Peter's feet" (Albee, 1961, p. 46), practically telling Peter to take it and hurt him with it. It is implied that before coming to Central Park, Jerry had already thought about the weapon with which he could be injured. The knife represents the third preparation of the resolved plan which is called the *sense of availability of means* to complete the suicidal act, according to Joiner's (2005) explanation. In addition, Jerry rushes over Peter, grabs him by the collar, and offends his manhood as a strategy (*sense of competence*) to force the stranger to pick up the knife from the floor and kill him. Jerry even asks him without hesitation to use the knife:

Now pick up the knife and you fight with me. You fight for your self-respect . . . You fight, miserable bastard; fight for your bench; . . . fight for your wife; fight for your manhood, you pathetic little vegetable (*spits in Peter's face*). You couldn't even get your wife with a male child (Albee, 1961, p. 47).

This part of *The Zoo Story* vividly indicates that Jerry has made the plan to commit suicide because he has acquired the capacity of being fearless in the face of death and has developed a deep understanding of an absurd world. On the contrary, Peter realizes that he is in danger, presumably somewhat suffocated because Jerry has grabbed his neck and, therefore, is forced to take hold of the weapon he has been told to use to save his life. Thus, Peter's sense of self-preservation leads him to pick up the knife, stands in front of Jerry, and asserts, "Not to attack, but to defend" (Albee, 1961, p. 47). Surprisingly, Peter does not have to make too much physical effort to defend his life because Jerry sighs heavily, getting ready to what is coming, and "impales himself in the knife" (Albee, 1961, p. 47). Here Jerry has taken advantage of the situation. Since these events happen as he had planned, he intentionally hurtles himself toward the knife to die by suicide, and Peter holding the knife is just an instrument to do it. It could have been any other person in the park to help him commit it. While Peter is in shock, Jerry, who is agonizing, thanks Peter for assisting his suicide:

Jerry: Thank you, Peter. I mean that, now; thank you very much . . . Oh Peter, I was so afraid I'd drive you away (*he laughs as best he cans*). You don't know how afraid I was you'd drive away and leave me . . . Here we are. But . . . I don't know . . . Could I have planned all this? No . . . no, I couldn't have. But I think I did . . . and now you know what you'll see in your TV, and the face I told you about . . . you remember . . . my face . . . and you have comforted me. Dear Peter. (Albee, 1961, p. 48).

The implications of Jerry's agonizing words are important in regards to his acquired capability to suicide. Jerry has not been angry or belligerent with Peter from the moment he meets him, it is an acting performance to achieve his suicidal goals. Once he is stabbed, he thanks Peter. The words "Thank you, Peter. I mean that, now" indicate that he is truly honest when thanking Peter for having hurt him deadly. Moreover, the words "you have comforted me," entail the idea that Peter does not only stop his painful existence, but works as a tool that Jerry uses to make his plan succeed. So, Jerry plans his death to look like a murder instead of a suicide to draw the attention of the people who overlooked and ignored him.

Peter is not a murderer, he suddenly emerges as a modern savior who has liberated Jerry from the menacing, devouring, and meaningless world in which he has undergone and absurd existence. In this respect, Zimbardo (2000) considers that *The Zoo Story* is a morality play because it shows salvation through sacrifice. We might deduce then that death is comfortable and pleasing, since Jerry has nothing to lose on earth. He needs self-immolation to release from suffering. His confession also reveals how afraid he was that his premeditated plan to commit suicide had not worked. Jerry is not afraid of death or pain, he was rather afraid of not being killed. Despite the tension and the complications Jerry had to go through by involving Peter in the suicide, Jerry was able to coordinate his death successfully. Although Jerry is agonizing and his mind seems to be raving and delirious because of the fatal wound, he admits Peter that it was a plan. These words also reveal that part of his plan to die by suicide included the media to announce his death, a comment he said from the beginning when he just arrived in the park. He wants his face to be seen on TV or the newspapers to gain a bit of social recognition after his death. According to Turki (2009), Jerry wants his suicide to look like a murder so that it can be reported in the media as a striking piece of news. Also, Siefker (2003) asserts that Jerry's death resembling a murder would provide more narrative to the media than just reporting a suicide. In this sense, since Jerry was nobody all his life, the media reporting his supposed murder would at least give meaning to his death. We may deduce, then, that Jerry's suicide was meant to bring recognition of the world to him. He lived with no human love, care, and recognition, so he hoped that his suicide would call the attention of the world that he, as a human being, did exist.

It is also relevant to consider that part of Jerry's plan to die by suicide is to avoid Peter having a legal sentence in prison for his death, since part of his gratitude is to advise him to go away before the police arrive. Although Jerry is in great pain and is losing consciousness, he warns Peter to take his book so that there is no evidence in the crime scene that may incriminate him. Jerry, who is shown at first sight as a weird man, almost as a dangerous psychopath because of his seemingly antisocial

personality, turns out to be a noble and considerate man at the end who is tired of the violence and alienation of the world. Moreover, he is a smart man who finds the way to die, at least, by Peter's recognition, and maybe by the media announcing his death for one or a couple of days, without getting Peter affected by legal proceedings in court because of his determination to die by suicide. Joiner emphasizes that "People will die by suicide when they have both the desire to die and the ability to die" (Joiner, cited by Dokoupil, 2013 p. 1), an idea that evidences Jerry's careful and rational plan to commit suicide because he does not want to live in an absurd and paradoxical reality any more.

Based on the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior, it has been examined how Edward Albee has created a suicidal attempter who achieves his objective. This theory claims that three states of mind are necessary for a person to commit suicide. In the case of Jerry's suicide, he is tormented by a sense of thwarted belongingness as he is alone and socially alienated, a sense of burdensomeness as he thinks that he is a problem for others because he cannot communicate normally, and the acquired capability for suicide as he finally develops the fearless capacity of dying. Jerry is a lost human being consumed by unbearable loneliness that gradually trains him to become a suicide attempter because he discovers that he is a victim of an absurd reality. He lacks the basic needs and goals of life in terms of family, social acceptance, friends, marriage, sex, religion, and even the ability to communicate. Once he experiences this "awakening" and understand the absurdity of life, he rejects "recovery" through hope and faith, as Camus (1942) would say, and rather choses suicide. Thus, since he develops the mental capacity to enact self-injury, he makes a well-prepared and ingenious plan to successfully end his painful human feeling of absurdity.

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