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The Theatre of the Absurd

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Abstract

The Theatre of Absurd started in the early 20th Century by a group of dramatists who considered themselves intellectuals and wanted to show their reaction to the realistic dramatists of the 19th Century who were very popular in their time. The Theatre of Absurd was a reaction against the realistic drama of the 19th Century. Gradually this movement became very popular among the audience of the time. Martin Esslin made the form popular. He wrote a book entitled Absurd Drama which propagates the theory and principles of Absurd Drama. Many dramatists like Samuel Beckett, Eugene O' Neil, Arthur Adamov, and Edward Albee etc. Wrote many absurd plays which became very popular among the audience. Although it declined in beginning of the 21st century but still even in our age there are some dramatists like Harold Pinter, who wrote Absurd plays. In this paper we will discuss the definition of Absurd plays, a brief history of Absurd Movement and chief characteristics of the absurd Drama.

Keywords: Absurd Drama, Absurd Movement, Characteristic of Absurd Drama, History of Absurd Drama, Realistic Plays.

Introduction:

The Theatre of the Absurd is a movement made up of many diverse plays, most of which were written between 1940 and 1960. When first performed, these plays shocked their audiences as they were startlingly different than anything that had been previously staged. In fact, many of them were labelled as "anti-plays." In an attempt to clarify and define this radical movement, Martin Esslin coined the term "The Theatre of the Absurd" in his 1960 book of the same name. He defined it as such, because all of the plays emphasized the absurdity of the human condition. Whereas we tend to use the word "absurd" synonymously with "ridiculous," Esslin was referring to the original meaning of the word-- 'out of harmony with reason or propriety; illogical' (Esslin 23). Essentially, each play renders man's existence as illogical, and moreover, meaningless. This idea was a reaction to the "collapse of moral, religious, political, and social structures" following the two World Wars of the Twentieth Century (Abbotson1). This movement known as the Theater of the Absurd was not a consciously conceived movement, and it has never had any clear-cut philosophical doctrines, no organized attempt to win converts, and no meetings. Each of the main playwrights of the movement seems to have developed independently of each other. The playwrights most often associated with the movement are Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov. The early plays of Edward Albee and Harold Pinter fit into this classification, but these dramatists have also written plays that move far away from the Theater of the Absurd's basic elements.

The most important dramatists of the Absurd movements were:

- Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)
- Arthur Adamov (1908-1970)
- Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994)
- Jean Genet (1910-1986)
- Edward Albee (1928)
- Harold Pinter (1930-2008)
- Tom Stoppard (1937)

Influences:

Absurdist Theatre was heavily influenced by Existential philosophy. It aligned best with the philosophy in Albert Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). In this essay, Camus attempts to present a reasonable answer as to why man should not commit suicide in face of a meaningless, absurd existence. To do so, he uses the Greek mythological figure, Sisyphus, who was condemned to push a boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll back down. He repeats this futile cycle for all of eternity. At the end of the essay, Camus concludes that, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 123). He means that the struggle of life alone should bring one's happiness. Essentially, we can find meaning in living even without knowing why we exist.

The absurd dramatists, however, did not resolve the problem of man's meaningless existence quite as positively as Camus. In fact, they typically offered no solution to the problem whatsoever, thus suggesting that the question is ultimately unanswerable.

Themes:

While absurdist plays feature a wide variety of subject matter, there are certain themes, or ideas, which reoccur frequently within the movement. These themes are the product of a new attitude that swept post-World War II Europe. It consisted primarily of the acknowledgement that the "certitudes" and "assumptions" of prior generations had "been tested and found wanting, that they [were] discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions" (Esslin 23). Two themes that reoccur frequently throughout absurdist dramas are a meaningless world and the isolation of the individual.

A World without Meaning:

The decline of religious faith in the Twentieth Century is partly responsible for the growing notion that life had no identifiable purpose. Whereas one who believes in the

afterlife sees life as a means of getting there, one who does not believe is left to either conclude that there is no purpose or to find an alternative justification for his/her life. Esslin notes that this decline was "masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies" (23). Yet these approaches also appeared flawed, leaving the other option--the assertion that there is no meaning behind human life. In his play, *The Chairs*, Ionesco capitalizes on this meaninglessness. Throughout the play, the two main characters prepare chairs for invisible guests who are all coming to hear the meaning of life as declared by an orator. The main characters kill themselves just before he speaks and then the audience discovers that the orator is a deaf-mute. Ionesco himself described the subject of the play as, "not the message, nor the failures of life, nor the moral disaster of the two old people, but the chairs themselves; that is to say, the absence of people, the absence of the emperor, the absence of God, the absence of matter, the unreality of the world, metaphysical emptiness" (qtd. in Esslin 152). This kind of world view is characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd.

The Isolation of the Individual:

The playwrights involved with the Theatre of the Absurd were not conscious of belonging to a movement while writing their plays. Ironically, they each thought of himself as "a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in [his own] private world" (Esslin 22). This perspective clearly penetrates their work, as most of the plays emphasize the isolation of the individual, or man's inability to connect with others. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), the most well-known play from the absurdist movement, features this idea. The two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are both tramps who spend the entirety of the play on the outskirts of society. Though they have each other, they are at the same time isolated from one another. One indication of this is that they are never able to adequately communicate; their conversation goes in circles.

Form:

The form of a piece of art is often neglected in favor of its subject matter. More specifically, drama is often studied in terms of what it is saying rather than in how it is saying it. (At least this is so in most academic settings because students typically read a play rather than see it performed.) Form, however, is arguably the most important aspect of absurdist plays. It is what separates them from other similarly themed movements, mainly existential drama. Esslin claims that "the Theatre of the Absurd goes one step further [than existential drama] in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed" (24). Essentially, these playwrights were reacting against realism because it did not align with their objectives. They did not want to show life as it really was, but rather, the inner-life of man--what was going on inside his head. Esslin explains that "the Theatre of the Absurd merely communicates one poet's most intimate and personal intuition of the human situation, his own sense of being, his individual vision of the world" (402-403). In order to portray this "personal intuition" the playwrights had to abandon conventional methods and adopt a more poetic, or lyrical, form.

Devaluation of Language:

One characteristic of this poetic form was the devaluation of language. The absurd dramatists felt that conventional language had failed man--it was an inadequate means of communication. As a result, the movement of the characters on stage often contradicts their words or dialogue. For example, both acts of **Waiting for Godot** conclude with the line "Yes, let's go," only to be followed by the stage direction, "They do not move" (Beckett 6). Essentially, the dramatists are trying to emphasize a disconnect between "word and object, meaning and reality, consciousness and the world" (Blocker 1). Moreover, in doing so they expose how unreliable language is; one

can easily say one thing and do the opposite.

Another common way in which they presented the uselessness of language was by having their characters constantly speak in clichés, or overused, tired expressions. One prime example of this is from Ionesco's **The Bald Soprano**:

Mrs. Martin: How curious it is, good Lord, how bizarre!...

Mr. Martin [*musings*]: How curious it is, how curious it is, how curious it is, and what a coincidence! (Ionesco 14).

The phrase "how curious it is" has been said so many times, even outside of this play, that it has lost its meaning. Therefore, their repetition of it is empty—they are speaking without actually communicating. Essentially, the dramatists are claiming that language has become a means of occupying time and space rather than a way to effectively communicate with one another.

In contrast to Beckett, Arthur Adamov, in his themes, is more closely aligned to the Kafkaesque, existentialistic school, but his technique is that of the Theater of the Absurd. His interest is in establishing some proof that the individual does exist, and he shows how man becomes more alienated from his fellow man as he attempts to establish his own personal identity. For example, in *Professor Taranne*, the central character, hoping to prove his innocence of a certain accusation, actually convicts himself through his own defense. For Adamov, man attempting to prove his own existence actually proves, ironically, that he does not exist. Therefore language, for Adamov, serves as an inadequate system of communication and, actually, in some cases serves to the detriment of man, since by language and man's use of language, man often finds himself trapped in the very circumstances he previously hoped to avoid. Ultimately, Adamov's characters fail to communicate because each is interested only in his own egocentric self. Each character propounds his own troubles and his own achievements, but the words reverberate, as against a stone wall. They are heard only by the audience. Adamov's plays are often grounded in a dream-world atmosphere, and while they are presenting a series

of outwardly confusing scenes of almost hallucinative quality, they, at the same time, attack or denounce the confusion present in modern man.

Lack of Plot:

Another poetic aspect of absurdist plays is that they lack a plot or a clear beginning and end with a purposeful development in between. There is usually a great deal of repetition in both language and action, which suggests that the play isn't actually "going anywhere." In **Waiting for Godot**, the stage directions indicate that Vladimir and Estragon are constantly moving. For example, they repeatedly "rummage" through their pockets and "peer" into their hats (Beckett 4-9). These actions are so frequent, however, that the audience begins to feel as if they are watching the same thing over and over again. They could even be called static actions as they contribute nothing to the flow of the play. Yet this lack of purposeful movement in **Waiting for Godot** and most other absurdist dramas is intentional. As discussed above, the plays are attempting to portray an intuition which by definition should be an instantaneous or immediate insight. It is "only because it is physically impossible to present so complex an image in an instant [that] it has to be spread over a period of time" (Esslin 404). Therefore, if one does not view the play as a story, but rather as a single idea being acted out, this supposed lack of plot becomes irrelevant.

Early critics referred to the Theater of the Absurd as a theater in transition, meaning that it was to lead to something different. So far this has not happened, but the Theater of the Absurd is rapidly becoming accepted as a distinct genre in its own right. The themes utilized by the dramatists of this movement are not new; thus, the success of the plays must often depend upon the effectiveness of the techniques and the new ways by which the dramatists illustrate their themes. The techniques are still so new, however, that many people are confused by a production of one of these plays. Yet if the technique serves to emphasize the absurdity of man's position in the universe, then to present this concept by a series of ridiculous situations is only to render man's position even more

absurd; and in actuality, the techniques then reinforce that very condition which the dramatists bewail.

In other words, to present the failure of communication by a series of disjointed and seemingly incoherent utterances lends itself to the accusation that functionalism is carried to a ridiculous extreme. But this is exactly what the absurdist wants to do. He is tired of logical discourses pointing out step-by-step the absurdity of the universe: he begins with the philosophical premise that the universe is absurd, and then creates plays which illustrate conclusively that the universe is indeed absurd and that perhaps this play is another additional absurdity.

Conclusion:

Above all, the absurd dramatists sought to reconcile man with the modern world. Esslin eloquently states that "the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions--and to laugh at it" (Esslin 429). The absurd dramatists were the first to propagate this idea of acceptance in the face of absurdity. In doing so, they challenged the preconceptions of what does and does not constitute theatre. Essentially, the absurd dramatists redefined the art form and created a space in which succeeding movements could flourish.

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