

The Theatre of Absurd: Blending the Existential and Nihilistic Concerns

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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to analyze the conceptual aspects of Existentialism and Nihilism, as also to figure out the unconscious aspects in the contemporary era carried out from Samuel Beckett to Franz Kafka. An attempt has been made to focus on the uncanny aspects in seminal texts like A Passage to India, Crime & Punishment, The Stranger, The Trial, Waiting for Godot and also to compare and contrast their specific preferences. The paper, thus, presents an overview of Absurdism whose hallmark is total rejection of all rationality in plot, character, dialogue & projection the vision of a world in which common man is out of harmony with the universe.

Keywords: Existentialist ; lost ; nihilism ; theatre of absurd ; irrational ; aimless ; albert camus; Eugene Ionesco

INTRODUCTION

“ Absurd” is a term coined by the Hungarian born critic **Martin Esslin** who exploited the phrase “ **Theatre of Absurd**” in 1961. Theatre of Absurd is etymologically derived from the existentialist philosopher Albert Camus assessment in his essay “ The Myth of Sisyphus” in 1942^[1]. It laid emphasis on the modern sense of purposelessness in which a man finds himself in a situation of “ No Exit”.

The **Theatre of the Absurd** a designation for particular plays of absurdist fiction written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1950s, as well as one for the style of theatre

which has evolved from their work. Their work expressed the belief that human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down. Logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and to its ultimate conclusion, silence.^[2]

In the first (1961) edition, Esslin presented the four defining playwrights of the movement as Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco, and Jean Genet, and in subsequent editions he added a fifth playwright, Harold Pinter—although each of these writers has unique preoccupations and characteristics that go beyond the term “absurd.”^{[3][4]} The practitioners convey their sense of bewilderment, anxiety, wonder in the face of inexplicable universe. Theatre of Absurd relishes the unexpected and the logically impossible.

The classic work of absurdist theatre is Samuel Beckett’s “ Waiting for Godot” (1952), which receives some of the conventions of clowning and farce to represent the impossibility of purposeful actions and paralysis of human aspiration. “ Nothing happens, Nobody comes, Nobody goes, its awful !” “ Krapp’s Last Tape” also belongs to the same genre. Harold Pinter’s “ The Care-Taker” and “The Birthday Party” are much celebrated examples of this genre. Albert Camus in “ The Outsider” unmasks the myth of nothingness: “ Man is not a rational creature living in an intelligible world, but an isolated being moving from nothingness to nothingness, and anguished and absurd existence.”

Eugene Ionesco unleashed the trait of transitoriness in his "The Bald Soprano", "The Chairs", "Amedee". These are the most towering plays which fall under the category of "Theatre of Absurd". Some revolutionary instances are notices from the novels and stories of **Franz Kafka**, in which the characters face alarmingly incomprehensible predicament "Fate". It is in relation to the concept of the devastating awareness of meaninglessness that Albert Camus claimed that **"there is only one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide"** in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Esslin cites William Shakespeare as an influence on this aspect of the "Absurd drama."^[5] Shakespeare's influence is acknowledged directly in the titles of Ionesco's *Macbett* and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Theatre of Absurd is closely clubbed with **Albert Camus** Psychological Movements **"Existentialism"** which is derived from the Latin word **"Existere"** which connotes **"Human Existence"**. Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. Existentialism embraces diverse doctrines but centers on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad. **Existentialism** is a term applied to the work of certain late 19th- and 20th-century philosophers who, despite profound doctrinal differences,^[6] shared the belief that philosophical thinking begins with the human subject—not merely the thinking subject, but the acting, feeling, living human individual.^[7] In existentialism, the individual's starting point is characterized by what has been called

"the existential attitude", or a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world.^[8] Many existentialists have also regarded traditional systematic or academic philosophies, in both style and content, as too abstract and remote from concrete human experience.^[9] Existentialism was the outcome of the world wars and the mass destruction which led to nostalgia & nihilism. **Nietzsche**, **Sartre**, **Heidegger**, **Albert Camus** can be clubbed as rigid nihilists. They postulated the fact that truth is erroneous, thus there is no truth. God is belittled and is reduced to a mere creation of the human mind. **Nietzsche** ushered: **"God is dead, Man is alone in a godless universe"**. **Later Sartre corroborated to the nihilistic approach: "God, when he does not know what to do with us, kills us"**.

Facticity is a concept defined by Sartre in **Being and Nothingness** as that "in-itself" of which humans are in the mode of not being. According to various Existentialists, man is portrayed as he is thrown into this world as a diseased animal. Man exists among and against other men into a brutal adventure without any purposeness. Existentialism and the theatre of absurd portrays the bleak side of humanity and also lays stress on human finitude, misery and despair of the human life from cradle to grave. Christian existentialists like Kierkegaard, Unamuno, Dostovsky believed that **"in God, Man may find freedom from tension"**.

The Hallmark of Theatre of Absurd is its total rejection of all rationality in plot, character, dialogue & projection the vision of a world in which common man is out of harmony with the universe. The absurd drama begins and ends arbitrarily. Its movement is rather circular as it ends where it starts. The

dialogues are pointless , discursive , banal, often degenerating into a meaningless babble. The language in absurd; play is often dislocated , full of clichés ,puns , repetitions and non – sequences. For example, in **Ionesco’s “The Bald Soprano”(1950)**, the protagonist sits and walks repeating the obvious until it sounds like non – sense. But there is an underlying message of metaphysical distress.

The most eminent exponent of this literary genre “ **Eugene Ionesco**” has unveiled the absurdist everyman as :“ **Cut off from his religious , metaphysical and transcendental roots which are lost , all his actions become senseless ,absurd,useless**”. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is an absurdisttragicomedy first staged at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1966.^[10] The play expands upon the exploits of two minor characters from Shakespeare's ‘Hamlet’. Comparisons have also been drawn to Samuel Beckett's ‘Waiting For Godot’, for the presence of two central characters who appear almost as two halves of a single character. The Absurdist playwrights believe that our existence is absurd because we are born without asking to be born , we die without seeking death , we live between birth and death trapped within our body and reason , unable to conceive of a time which we were not or a time in which we will not be ,for nothingness is very much like the concept of infinity. The more we strive of perfection, definition & permanent distinctions , the more absurd we are . Man is at the mercy of oppressive and arbitrary forces and institutions . His Life is stupid , his efforts are aimless and rootless .Man is stranded and blind , a bare item of existence . He is not a man of action who conquers his environments , but he is a patient of an inscrutable agent . Laws written and unwritten have made him an outlaw. Life is an unwanted gift forced upon man for no reason that he can understand which will one

day be terminated by an equally meaningless death.

According to **Irving Wardle** , The features of the Absurd Play are :

1. A static situation does not progress but only expands.
2. Lack of any clear division of fantasy or fact.
3. A fluid environment which projects mental conditions in the form of visual metaphors .
- 4.An obsession with defeat , despair , fear and death.

The World War Second was the catalyst that finally brought the Theatre of Absurd to life . During this period the prophet of the absurd **Antonin Artaud** rejected realism in the theatre ,calling for a return to myth and magic and to the exposure of the deepest conflicts within the human mind.

CONCLUSION

Thus, to sum up, **The Theatre Of Absurd** can be dubbed as a man’s reaction to a world apparently without meaning or man as a puppet controlled or menaced by invisible outside forces. Metaphorically speaking , this contrasts with “**karmic**” ways of thinking in which one wonders that “**bad things don't happen to good people**”. **Dr.Jan Culik** reiterates :“ Absurd theatre can be seen as an attempt to restore the importance of myth and ritual to our age , by making man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition,by instilling in him again the lost sense of cosmic wonder & pre – medieval anguish . The Absurd Theatre hopes to achieve this by shocking man out of an existence that has become brutal , mechanical and complacent. It is felt that there is a mystical experience in confronting the limits of human condition.”

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