

MEANING IN A MEANINGLESS WORLD: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF HAROLD PINTER'S *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY* AND SAMUEL BECKETT'S *WAITING FOR GODOT*

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ABSTRACT

*The Theater of the Absurd came to prominence in the wake of the World Wars, showcasing the existential upheaval of modern society. This research article explicates Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* as core works of theater of the absurd. These plays challenge conventional dramatic structures, discarding commonsense plot and means of communication with dialogue that is circular, ambiguous, and replete with silence. Beckett highlights the fundamentally futile aspect human existence through ceaseless waiting, while Pinter displays menace and unstructured identity within the everyday scenarios that characters are placed into. Extrapolating from Martin Esslin's theory of absurdism and its close affinity with Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*, the paper showcases how these works exhibit the disorientation of meaning in a disordered world. Thus, absurdist drama emerges as both a philosophical reflection and a cultural critique of human condition that emerged after the world wars.*

Keywords: *Theater of the Absurd, Beckett, Pinter, existentialism, futility*

Introduction

The world wars left deep ingrained scars on modern civilization. The advance in science and technology opened new vistas for development and destruction in equal measure. It witnessed an age with unbridled technological advancement and potential for massive growth. The atrocities of war and the pace of human growth propelled it in uncharted territories and it slowly and gradually gave way for confusion and mass hopelessness. Therefore, the literature of 20th century battled issues of unprecedented headway in technology and the grave, dark future of mankind in the face of war. Literatures opened up for new genres like futurism, Dadaism, surrealism and theater of the absurd as myriad means of human expression of its morbid state. Theater of the Absurd and its canons were championed by James Joyce, Harold Pinter, Jean Janet, Samuel Becket along with the rest.

This new permutation in the genre of drama filled audiences around the world both with wonder and excitement. Its non-conformist nature to the established rules and principles of the art drama of the time distinguished it from the rest and earned it the title of 'the theater of the Absurd'. French Dramatist Samuel Beckett heralded Absurd theater with his dramas and it would not be amiss to call him the father of this genre. Although Beckett was not the only figure in the Absurd theater, his contribution surpasses the rest very easily with their intellectual depth and potential for philosophical inquiry.

Besides, Samuel Beckett, other major playwrights that are associated with the Theater of the Absurd are as alluded to above are Jean Genet, , Edward Albee, Arthur Adamov and Eugene Ionesco. British Author Harold Pinter plays are also Absurdist in nature. Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* are often regarded as archetypical absurdist plays conforming to the broad principles of the theater of the absurd. This paper will analyze their ability at encapsulating the essence of absurdism and forcing mankind to make sense of a world that is otherwise meaningless and defies logical assessment.

The plays that fit the description of absurdist writing have overtime earned the title of Theatre of the Absurd as a contribution of the writing of European authors in 1950s. The style of the new art form in due course attracted much attention and earned the epithet of Absurdist Theater. Besides its other allied themes, the idea of a meaningless human existence takes the center stage. It is a world where communication cannot be sustained and fails eventually. Where all debate yields no conclusion except for mere silence, nothingness. Search of meaning in a meaningless world brings Theater of the Absurd ideologically closer with existentialism of world where human will fails to hold sway and gives way eventually where choices determine the courses of action for humankind.

The term 'Theater of the Absurd' was coined by the Critic Martin Esslin in his essay of the same name penned in 1960. Esslin argued the absurdist plays had much in common with the existentialist angst portrayed in Albert Camus's essay called 'The Myth of Sisyphus' that allegorically depicts human existence as struggle in the face of antagonist forces and those forces are out of his control (Buchanan, 2010). Seeking meaning in absurdist plays is a futile endeavor in so much as it means that there is no meaning. Mankind is caught in a vicious cycle of futile existence where all effort and endeavor deliver nothing and the series of out of control circumstances. It has the broad characteristics of broad comedy, the helpless lot of characters caught in hopeless situations, where all dialogues and action are meaningless. Buchanan maintain that they bear clichés, wordplay and at times sheer nonsense, realism has no stay in absurdist settings (2010).

Theoretical Framework

Theater of the absurd portrays human existence bereft of power and control, sways in irrationality and disputes the very notion of rationality. However, despite its aversion to order and control, it, nonetheless, sustains certain characteristics. It is often laced with a kind of broad comedy that stems from incongruity in the portraits of human condition depicted in the backdrop of the faulty means of communication used to engage in day-to-day conversation (Brater & Cohn, 1990). Secondly a persistent and reigning sense of menace permeates absurdist works along with the alienation effect. The alienation effect in absurd theater serves to continually shake audiences off narratives and force them to think on their wider significance. It is meant to 'make the familiar strange' for the purpose of a critical evaluation and social response from the audiences. Bradley argues that German playwright Bertolt Brecht loathed conventionality in the theater of the time and coined this term to signify the break with the conventional traits of theater (2006).

It predominantly paints an overly pessimistic worldview with reigning sense of despair in the characters. It is, in effect, parodies the conventional well-made play by flouting principles of conventional characterization and plot construction in plays. Brater and Cohn ascribe a kind of prevalent irrationality and logical and rational expectations are routinely dashed with surprising and uncommon plot turns and twists quite akin to postmodernist works (1990).

Playwright Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot" is one of his most well-known works and in a way representative of the Theater of the Absurd. The play depicts futility of human existence devoid of logical sense and order. Efforts and struggle bring forth nothing. It stands for absence of meaning in uncaring, indifferent world oblivious to the throes of human lot caught in the web of day to day existence from his very birth and end of life. The play adheres to unconventionality through its lack of portrayal of dramatic effects. It is play where absolutely nothing happens. It is bereft of a proper of a beginning or well-designed end. The action of *Waiting for Godot*, if any, revolves around two characters Vladimir and Estragon who beguile their time beside a country road wait for *Godot* who does not show up. They have strange ideas about *this Godot*. It would not be amiss to call it a tragic comedy given to the depiction of harsh truths of human existence which mankind has lost sight given the hustle of life. It has five characters i.e. Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo, Lucky and a boy. The language of play is devoid of complexity and is very simple.

DISCUSSION

The plays show a world without meaning and that stems from mechanical nature of modern human life. It brims of words that are alien to them and isolation prevails devolving space and time. The language in *Waiting for Godot* is almost gibberish and does not make sense at all. It is not a kind of dialogue that entertain audiences and is totally absurd keeping with the spirit of the Theater of the Absurd. The theme of nothing is repeated with the words 'Nothing to be done' oft reiterated reinforcing their value as banal and without meaning (Lawrence, 21) as Plays from the Theater of the Absurd a coherent plot and there is not real communication of language. The language eludes meaning and is hard to decipher. Responses in dialogues are often non sequiturs and do not logically follow from the general report of dialogue. There is much repetition and circularity which is best captured in the 'dog song' at the beginning of Act 2.

*A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread.
Then cook up with a ladle
And beat him till he was dead.
Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb—
He stops, broods, resumes:
Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb
And wrote upon the tombstone
For the eyes of dogs to come:
A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread.
Then cook up with a ladle
And beat him till he was dead.
Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb—
He stops, broods, resumes:
Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb—
He stops, broods. Softly.
And dug the dog a tomb . (2.1)*

Another feature of Absurdist drama as employed in Beckett's play is on the inadequacy of day to day human language. Absurdist's felt that it had failed to deliver as a potent vehicle of communication. This quality or feature of language forces the characters to resort to cliché's laced with platitudes. The language only serves to heighten the sense of emptiness that is dominant.

Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* is reminiscent of existentialist angst. A search for meaning and order and vociferous resentment over its absence. Vladimir may be classified as someone still holding on to the cherished ideals of mankind and seeking salvation through religious doctrines and comfort through spiritual harmony while on the other hand Estragon seeks to construct order in this apparently meaningless chaos of disorder and confusion and is more geared towards practical side of life as illustrated in the following dialogue between them.

VLADIMIR

Well? What do we do?

ESTRAGON

Don't let's do anything. It's safer.

Vladimir: Let's wait and see what he says.

Estragon: Who?

Vladimir: Godot.

Estragon: Good idea.

Vladimir: Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.

Estragon: On the other hand, it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes. (1.194-9)

The modern advances in science and technology and successive progress in human thought with the publication of books i.e. Darwin's *The Origin of Species* shattered comfortable beliefs. Religion was losing its relevance. People wanted more, and the absence of meaning gave way to a mindset receptive to notions of a Godless and meaningless world and all meaning had been induced and injected into it by meaning as the prospect of truth was too frightening. Vladimir and Estragon typify this lot of people.

The tree by the road side in *Waiting for Godot* could be symbolic of Christianity in its promise for a resurgence of value. Absurd plays tend to have an ending that defies clear explanation. Myriad themes of hope, redemption is alluded to. Things and dialogues fail to make sense. Lack of purpose plays a part. In short, it sums up the dominant theme of meaninglessness of human life. The following dialogue illustrates that

"ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go.

(They do not move)."

(End of second act)

"VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

(They do not move)."

The five characters in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* are archetypal of a modern society without meaning and purpose. There are the ones like Vladimir who may hold on to the very last iota of hope and emotion for a purpose and design and search for value and meaning and, on the other hand, Estragon represents a sheer hopelessness and does not see an end in sight that may prove answers to the key issues that have beset human kind.

Harold Pinter's first play *The Birthday Party* was written in 1957 and did not gain immediate recognition. Audiences were bewildered as to its true meaning. Nevertheless, Raby

maintains that it is Harold Pinter's one of the most popular plays and has gained the status of classic and often performed in theater despite its lukewarm response in the beginning (2009).

Stanley Webber as the play's protagonist plays central character and has been a piano player. Now, in his thirties, he has taken up lodgings with the Boles family in their boarding house. The couple, Meg and Petey live a monotonous routine life bereft of any change or Excitement. Peter's wife Meg patronizes Stanley with her maternal care and insists that it is Stanley's Birthday. Goldberg and McCann turn up this seaside house and say they have looking for Stanley. They join in the supposed party and which turns into a riotous party that goes wrong. Lights go off.

Critic Martin Esslin regards Harold Pinter as one of the towering figures of theater of the Absurd along with Samuel Beckett. Pinter tallies with the same themes of enigma and vacuum in the human existence and portrays this state of minds with his plays (1965). The effects of Theater of the Absurd on *The Birthday Party* are captured through its broad characteristics i.e. a lingering sense of doom and gloom, shift in identities, characters show a lack of purpose and the whole atmosphere is capped in mystery with ambiguous and meaningless communication that does not have any direct bearing on the situation in hand.

Absurdist theater employs different techniques to obtain the characteristics associated with it. Therefore, communication fails to convey meaning and sense. The setting and other effects serve to shock audiences into thinking. The effective use of silence and character traits are out of keeping with the pace of the play. Pinter encapsulated the gist of The Absurdist Theater in his speech called, 'Writing for the Theater' which he penned delivered in 1962. Pinter stated that it is extremely difficult endeavor to separate the real from the unreal or to be absolutely certain as to the nature of truth. Theater of the Absurd, to him, lay somewhere in the middle of this very thin line of real and unreal (Raby, 2009).

A sense of imminent menace prevails in the scene where they play the Blindman's Buff, The scene where McCann and Goldberg interrogate Stanley is replete with emotional tension as well as brims with tragedy. Stanley is gripped by bouts of panics and screams unable to cope the storm brewing inside him. All the characters exhibit a sense of hopelessness and purpose. Stanley is a mystery and his all existence is shrouded in mystery. Meg and her husband Petey Boles lead meaningless monotonous lives and all passion for life is absent in them.

The Birthday Party has in its heart a raging sense of paranoia, exploring the quest for identity and a constant struggle at communication. This is reflected in the character of Stanley who harbors a persistent fear of doom and believes that someone is trying to punish him. He is so resigned to his circumstances and fate that he does not flee when Goldberg and McCann come looking for him. Stanley is a portrait of a guilt-ridden conscience always in conflict with himself. His unstable state of mind forces him to project his deep-seated fears on visitors. Events come to head to strip of his identify and sanity. The characters of Goldberg and McCann stand as figurative equivalents of dangers in an unknown world that can wreak havoc on one's complacent conformity. Petey's character has the air of complete resignation and indifference in common with Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. Lulu's exchange with Goldberg reveals her hopeless frustration in life.

Marin Esslin is of the view that Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1958) may also be interpreted as an allegory surrounding the nature of conformity. By using language as a weapon, Stanley, the pianist, the solitary and individual artist, is forced to confine to the ways of Goldberg and McCann (1965).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, meaning in both the plays is like the proverbial holy grail, impossible to find. As archetypical absurdist plays *The Birthday Party* & *Waiting for Godot* portray a world bereft of order and structure. The tools for everyday communication prove futile and fail to serve their purpose. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* underscores most the existentialist sentiments. All the characters and the dialogues reinforce the futility and purposeless of human existence, depicting it as struggling for a lost cause. Similarly, Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Pater* echoes a similar philosophical bent. It brings into light the mundane human existence trapped in constant paranoia without any escape in sight.

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