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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ABSURD ON DRAMATISTS AND THEATRE IN 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract:

Absurd means 'out of harmony' literally. It is talking about the dilemma of modern man, a stranger in an inhuman universe. Recognizing such strangers in stage characters in the 1950s, critic Martin Esslin's influential Theatre of the Absurd applied the term to contemporary playwrights who presented man's metaphysical absurdity in an aberrant dramatic style mirroring the situation. The absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious beliefs has deprived man of certainties, when it is no longer possible to accept complete closed systems of values and revelations of divine purpose, life must be faced in its ultimate, stark reality. Beckett's question, 'what has one thing to do with another?', is quite as much a formal matter as a philosophical one.

Keywords: Dilemma of modern man, theatre of absurd, uncertainty, out of harmony.

Immediately after the Second World War, Paris again became the capital of dramatic art in the west and French Theatre was soon associated with a short-lived eruption of surrealistic drama which came to be known as "*theatre of Absurd*". It is popularized by the works of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1952 and Ionesco's *Exit the King* in 1962. It was the decade of the 'cold war' and the extreme tension between the nations of the east and the west. Those playwrights working in Paris and thought of absurdist during that time were not a common philosophy. The theatre of the absurd was a writer's theatre not a director's like Irish Dramatic movement.

The sudden outburst of French absurdism explained as a nihilistic reaction to the atrocities, the gas chambers and the nuclear bombs of the war. Theatre of the absurd revealed the negative side of Sartre's *existentialism* and expressed the helplessness and futility of a world which seemed to have purpose. Beckett's bleak images of life in *Godot* and *Endgame* conjure up a human existence is like an 'Intolerable imprisonment spent' between the compulsion of birth and the worse compulsion of death.

Our life has its temporary freedom, but it is the freedom of the slave to crawl east along the deck of a boat travelling west. (p.58)

In *Exit the King*, Ionesco's characteristic subject is death, together with, in this play, the actual dissolution of the mind and the body. In such drama, every signal from the stage is a representation of irrationality designed to surprise and shock. Its grim vision of life reflects Kierkegaard's spiritless man, wholly negative and atheistic-unless one is willing to believe that what is negative may also embody some inducement to take positive action. As if to say, 'when things are as bad as this, why not do something about them? Camus's existentialist use of the term 'absurd' in *The Myth of Sisyphus* was ten years later vastly narrowed to connote man trapped in a hostile universe that was totally subjective, and made to describe the night mare that could follow when purposelessness, solitude and silence were taken to the ultimate degree.

Absurdist plays fall within the symbolist tradition, and they have no logical plot or characterization

in any conventional sense. Their characters lack the motivation found in realist drama, and so emphasize their purposelessness. The absence of plot serves to reinforce the monotony and repetitiveness of time in human affairs. The dialogue is commonly no more than a series of inconsequential clichés which reduce those who speak them to talking machines. As plays, they do not discuss the human condition, but simply portray it at its worst in outrageous image chosen to undeceive the innocent and shock the complacent.

As a result of this singular content, absurdism presented a special set of practical problems to the writer who wished to make his way in the theatre. Purposelessness is inconsistent with everything dramatic art has achieved in the past. The early plays of Samuel Beckett particularly drew upon the content and techniques of mime, the music hall, the circus and the *commedia de' ll arte* to represent the business of everyday living. All the characters of *Godot* and *Endgame*, Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, Hamm and Clov, Nag and Nell, are essentially pairs of comics or clowns who divert themselves, and so their auditors, with double-acts of cross-talk, tumbling and the *lazzii* of falling asleep, switching hats and so on. The tramps who wait for Godot quarrel, eat, try to sleep, even attempt suicide, all in the fashion of such performers, and the loss of dignity implicit in their antics itself becomes an absurd image of life. As in farce, cause and effect are discounted, time is speeded up or slowed down, fate is unpredictable and anything can happen. This must seem as it is in an irrational universe.

In Britain, the actor and director Harold Pinter started using Psychological realism in his plays. For Pinter, Beckett is 'the greatest writer of our time'. In his recent plays *Landscape and Silence* in 1968, he has inclined towards Beckattian monologue. But for the most part Pinter's extraordinary talent for suggestive obliquity in his dialogue is distinctively his own. It is called as English Drawing comedy. Speaking of his script for the film *Accident in Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1966, Pinter said,

Life is much more mysterious than plays make it out to be. And it is this mystery which fascinates me; what happens between words, what happens when no words are spoken.

Part of his achievement has been to find a dramatic way of revealing the threat behind the evasive exchanges of everyday life, and to convey the tension between people who think they know each other. In the one act play *The Room* in 1957, a woman learns with alarm that a stranger has been waiting outside the house for several days to see her. When this person is eventually seen, it comes as a completely unexplained surprise to find that he is black man, and when without motivation the woman's husband kills him, it comes as even greater surprise to learn that she goes blind. He is concerned to show people engulfed in trivia, whether of persons or things or talk. Pinter has added a powerful ingredients to his concoctions, that of sexuality. When relationships between the sexes are under his microscope, each little fear of rejection and loneliness, each hint of a threat to security and identity, is as amusing as before, but also much more painful. Pinter's perception of human behavior is acute, and his ability to convey objectively what he sees through character.

The major dramatists of the School of the Absurd, in Esslin's view are Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, and Genet. The senselessness of life and irrationality in terms of the old conventions are projected in majority of plays. Esslin makes certain important suggestions when discussing the significance of the Absurd. According to him, the number of people for whom god is dead has greatly increased in the present century. The theatre of the Absurd is one of the ways of facing up to universe that has lost its meaning and purpose. As such it fulfills a double role. Its first and more obvious role is satirical when it criticizes a society that is petty and dishonest. Its second and more positive aspect is shown when it faces up Absurdity in plays where man is "stripped of the accidental circumstances of social position or historical context, confronted with basic choices, the basic situations of the existence." The Theatre of the Absurd presents anxiety, despair, and a sense of loss at the disappearance of solutions, illusions, and purposefulness. Facing up to the loss means that we face up to reality itself. Absurd drama becomes a kind of modern mystical experience.

Man's identity, his limitations, and his place in the universe are at issue in the writings of Dramatists. Beckett's play, *In Happy Days* we find a woman, Winnie, buried waist-deep in sand against background that suggests the aftermath of an atomic holocaust. Her companion, Willie, is barely visible behind the mound. The conversation of the two is outrageously out of keeping with their situation. Our familiar postures and verbal habits, the standard poses of human wisdom and consolation, are subjected to a ruthless scrutiny in being adopted by half-buried woman. The counters of contemporary discourse-pretentious and unpretentious- are employed in a situation of impotence and near-total negation in which they bear the weight of sheer tragedy and comedy at the same time. *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Endgame* continue the same pre-occupations, the latter with Nagg and Nell in dustbins and their blind son chair-bound. Against paralysis and powerlessness of this kind, Beckett brilliantly employs a dialogue that is at once tragically and farcically at loggerheads with the immediate. It moves to tears and to laughter, yet compassion persists through nightmares of negation and absurdity.

By the time Beckett came to write *Krapp's Last Tape*, his only themes were memory and the contrast between a lost past and the sour present. The stage and the action in this play are, therefore corresponding bare. We find an old man, sitting alone, listening to a tape of himself talking thirty years before. It is a tape he had recorded when he was thirty-nine. The tape is a retrospect of a year just past and records the death of Krapp's mother, mixed with memories of a dutiful nursemaid, a dog and a rubber ball. There is also a moment of revelation at night by the seashore during a storm, the storm and darkness apparently reflecting some truth of *Krapp's* inner life. But what that "never to be forgotten" vision was we are not told. The old man keeps skipping the tape forward in an effort to find a scene which he has described in his ledger as "Farewell to Love." having found it, the old man then goes on to record his latest retrospect of the year that has just ended. His present style of recording lacks the fluency and precision of his youth, and befits a life failing to bits with old age and failure. In place of young man's vision, he reports a bleaker, deprived reality: "What's a year now? The sour cud and the iron stool." He now lives a life of total obscurity. Only seventeen copies of his book, his "opus magnum", have been sold and he scarcely leaves his darkened room. As for his love-life, an old sweet-heart did come in a couple of times but he could not do, much. His only comfort is to lie in bed and dream about his remote past.

Beckett makes use of the tape-recorder to show the elusiveness of the human personality. Krapp is a very old man who throughout his adult life has annually recorded an account of the past year's impressions and events on a tape. We see him old, decrepit, and a failure as a writer, listening to his own voice recorded thirty years earlier. But his voice has become the voice of a stranger to him. Through the brilliant device of the autobiographical library of annual recorded statements, Beckett has found a graphic expression for the problem of the ever-changing identity of the self, which he had already described in his essay on Proust. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, The self at one moment in time is confronted with its earlier incarnation only to find it utterly strange.

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