

Inspector hound
doesn't exist:
recognising empty
social institutions in
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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus explores the absurdity of the human condition, and attempts to find a way for man to reconcile himself with such an inherently meaningless existence. It is not something that is particularly hard, as Camus puts it: " We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking" (Camus 15). Camus suggests that the human instinct for survival is so strong that man often adapts to existing societal roles and functions in order to live, while not necessarily thinking about the significance and purpose of his actions. This theme is explored in Václav Havel's *The Garden Party*, as well as Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*, as both plays feature their protagonists navigating seemingly interchangeable roles in society. In the former, young Hugo Pludek rises up the ranks at the Liquidation Office simply by adopting the dominant mannerisms and rhetoric within the institution (Havel), and in *The Real Inspector Hound*, critics Birdboot and Moon find themselves literally transformed into the characters in a play that they are watching (Stoppard). By showing how the characters easily get used to and insert themselves into completely new roles, the plays imply that while social roles are ultimately arbitrary and meaningless constructs, one instinctively adapts to the society's rules and ideologies in order to survive. However, both Havel and Stoppard also suggest that mindless adherence to social institutions is not a good thing - rather, it is only when one recognises their inherent lack of meaning that they can achieve success and happiness in life.

Through the character of Birdboot, Stoppard highlights how one can easily adapt to societal rules in order to fit into the system. When Birdboot goes on stage to pick up a ringing phone, he ends up caught in the play when it

begins again (Stoppard 59-60). Felicity, a character within the play, returns to the stage and exclaims, "Honestly, darling, you really are extraordinary" (60). These are the exact same lines that she spoke earlier to the character of Simon (32), and Birdboot replies, "Yes, well, here I am" (60), which is also an exact repetition of Simon's lines. Birdboot is quickly taken for Simon simply because he happens to act the same way Simon is supposed to (61). However, he does not reject this identity - when Cynthia tells him to "just hold [her]", he readily accepts (62). From the way Birdboot still responds to Moon when the latter calls him "Birdboot" (62), it is evident that he has not really stepped into the role of Simon. Furthermore, considering how Birdboot is wowed when Cynthia first appears on stage, lauding her as "a vision of eternal grace" (35), it is implied that he is just adhering to the directions of the play so that he can be with Cynthia, whom he so admires. Birdboot does not question why things are so - he simply adapts to the nature of the play's internal system in order to survive in it and get what he wants. However, the play goes on to point out the danger behind such blind acceptance of social institutions and their constructs, by suggesting how meaningless these rules actually are.

Later on, Moon is also taken for the character of Inspector Hound in the play (Stoppard 72). Although he "makes swiftly for his seat", he finds that the actors who play "Simon and Hound are occupying the critics' seats", and speaking in the exact same manner that Birdboot and Moon were speaking before (73). Just as Birdboot can easily take Simon's identity as long as he displays the same mannerisms, Moon and Birdboot's roles can also be usurped by Simon and Hound, or anyone else who is able to act the way they

do. By having these characters from a play take over Moon and Birdboot's real-life personas, Stoppard conflates theatrical roles with societal roles, thereby exposing the inherent emptiness of social institutions. Birdboot and Moon's societal roles as theatre critics are no less a performance than Simon and Hound's roles on the stage - the identities that are given to them by society are ultimately meaningless labels that can easily be achieved through a fixed set of behaviour. Stoppard highlights the danger of blindly adhering to such meaningless constructs, as mindless acceptance simply results in people who can be unknowingly replaced by one another, such as Birdboot and Moon are replaced by Simon and Hound.

The Garden Party emphasises further on the dangers of mindlessly accepting institutional structures through the breaking down of language and implicating the audience. Through the play, the audience is constantly exposed to nonsensical ramblings by the characters. For instance, Albert Pludek often says weird phrases such as " I've been feeding a chipmunk so long that my pipe fell into the rushes" (Havel 9-10), and " lentils are lentils and oats are oats" (11). While these phrases seem to sound like wise proverbs, they actually mean nothing at all. Similarly, the employees at the Liquidation Office suggest nonsensical ideas such as asking for technology to make use of " the periodic table of the elements" (22), which is a concept in chemistry. Hugo himself displaces Falk and the Director from their positions by adopting the same meaningless way of speaking, launching into a tirade about how the Clerk and Secretary " both were wrong and both were right" (23). These monologues expose the inherent lack of meaning in language and the emptiness of institutions that depend on language to function.

However, despite the content of the play carrying no significant meaning, David Danaher has it that when “ the actor playing Hugo manages to get through this and other similar monologues flawlessly, the audience often erupts in spontaneous applause at the brilliance of the actor’s performance” (78). Here, the audience is implicated in the play’s critique of the characters’ blind adherence to a meaningless language and institution. They clap likely because they are impressed by the actor’s performance and the traditional importance of monologues within plays, but just like most of the characters within the play, they do all these without registering the real meaning – or non-meaning – that is present within the monologues.

In contrast, Hugo’s rapid rise up the ranks in the Liquidation and Inauguration offices posits that when one recognises the meaningless nature of social institutions, one will be able to achieve success and happiness. Right at the start of the play, Hugo is seen “ playing a solitary game of chess” (Havel 3). By taking up dual roles as both the player and the opponent, he already displays knowledge that the rules that are enforced upon a game of chess – that there must be a player and an opponent – are completely arbitrary. As long as he makes the moves as a player and opponent are supposed to, then there is no reason why he cannot be both at the same time. At the garden party, Hugo ends off his argument with the Secretary and Clerk with the word “ Check” (19), suggesting that he applies the same chess playing logic onto the way he interacts with the members of the Liquidation Office. Indeed, when he finds that the employees disagree with his ideas “ most emphatically” (19), he starts to silently listen to them and repeat their ideas “ to himself” (20). After learning the word “ lyrico-

epical verses" from the Secretary's speech (20), he goes on to use it in his verbal battle with Falk, stating that " the lyrico-epical verses will help in the chemification of the liquidation practice" (23). Here, just as he does when he is playing chess by himself, Hugo steps into the shoes of his opponent and eventually takes up their role himself. Through the way he is shown to be actively learning and shaping himself to become just like the employees of the Liquidation Office, it is implied that Hugo is very much aware of how easily they can be replaced, and how meaningless the entire institution is. With this knowledge, he manages to become " the master of the situation" (38), taking over Falk's position by " put[ting] on Falk's gay nose" (24), and eventually being " assigned the extremely honourable task of constructing [...] a central commission for inauguration and liquidation" (48-9). He is able to craft himself into someone of power within the institution because he understands that the institution and positions that Falk and the Director hold are meaningless, as they are informed by empty speech patterns and mannerisms that can be easily emulated.

The importance of recognising the inherent meaningless nature of social institutions is further emphasised on in *The Real Inspector Hound*, as Stoppard contrasts Moon's over-reliance on his social identity with third-string critic Puckeridge's knowledge that these titles are empty and easily replaceable. Moon's firm belief in the rules of the social institution is brought out early on in the play, when he speaks about the first-string critic, Higgs, whom he is secondary to: " My presence defines his absence, his absence confirms my presence, his presence precludes mine." (Stoppard 16). To Moon, it is necessary for there to be a first-string theatre critic in order for a

second-string critic like him to exist – there is no second without a first, and vice versa. This logic suggests Moon's belief in the fixed and absolute nature of structures within social institutions; he believes that there is a meaning and purpose for each person to be in their positions. This belief directly leads to Moon's demise in the end – when he is suspected to be the killer in the play, Magnus asks him if he is “ the real Inspector Hound” (77). Still clinging on to his empty identity as Moon the second-string critic, Moon refuses to step into the role of Inspector Hound, retorting, “ You know damn well I'm not!” (77). It is this outburst that convinces the other characters of the play that “ it was [him]! [...] The madman! [...] The killer!” (77), and allows Magnus – who is actually Puckeridge – to reveal himself as “ the real Inspector Hound” and kill Moon (78). Puckeridge, on the other hand, is able to first take on the role of Magnus, before claiming that he is “ the real Inspector Hound”, and eventually even transforms himself into the lost Albert Muldoon (79). In the end, he wins Cynthia's heart in the play (79), ends up the hero, and even gets rid of the first and second-string critics in real life, rising up to the rank of first-string himself. While Moon clings onto his social role as something that is meaningful and irreplaceable, Puckeridge is able to switch between identities freely, simply by manipulating the system's rules and conventions. Therefore, Puckeridge's success highlights the importance for one to recognise how social institutions are inherently meaningless.

Both *The Garden Party* and *The Real Inspector Hound* play with the idea of interchangeable social roles, suggesting the ultimate emptiness of such titles, as well as the rules that social institutions place upon people. While

characters like Birdboot, Moon, Puckeridge and Hugo are all depicted as people who are able to readily adapt to the rules of social institutions, their lack of or possession of the ability to acknowledge the emptiness of these arbitrary rules and conventions determine their fates. As Camus writes in his essay, the “existential attitude”, which is only concerned with survival instead of enlightenment, is little more than “philosophical suicide” (26), and it is telling that Birdboot and Moon both meet their deaths by the end of Stoppard's play. In the end, the titular “Real Inspector Hound” is still yet to be found, and the play suggests that perhaps it does not matter – for anyone can be Inspector Hound, if they so wish.

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