

Theatre of the absurd an overview english literature essay

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'The Theatre of the Absurd' is a term coined by the critic Martin Esslin in the early 1960's, to highlight reoccurring themes that occurred within the work of certain playwrights, mostly written in the 1950s and 1960s. The term is derived from an essay by the French philosopher Albert Camus. In his 'Myth of Sisyphus', written in 1942, he first defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. Whereas traditional theatre attempts to create a photographic representation of life as we see it, the Theatre of the Absurd aims to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams. The focal point of these dreams is often man's fundamental bewilderment and confusion, stemming from the fact that he has no answers to the basic existential questions: why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice and suffering. Absurdist playwrights, led by Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet, embraced this vision and sought to portray the grim ridiculousness of human life using a dramatic style that subverted theatrical convention. Characterized by fantasy sequences, disjointed dialogue, and illogical or nearly nonexistent plots, their plays are concerned primarily with presenting a situation that illustrates the fundamental helplessness of humanity. Absurdist drama is sometimes comic on the surface, but the humour is infused with an underlying pessimism about the human condition. In his book "The Theatre of the Absurd" Martin Esslin uses a quote from Eugène Ionesco to illustrate his use of the term:

" Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless".

Ionesco here expresses the thoughts that were being voiced by many philosophers and writers. People were becoming disillusioned and were losing faith in the beliefs that had once sustained them. Friedrich Nietzsche had declared that ' God is dead' and the World Wars had shaken the fundamental laws of life, which showed the total impermanence of any values, shook the validity of any conventions and highlighted the precariousness of human life and its fundamental meaninglessness and arbitrariness. The trauma of living from 1945 under threat of nuclear annihilation also seems to have been an important factor in the rise of the new theatre. People no longer had a strong sense of purpose or identity; they were lost without direction or guidance. At the same time, the Theatre of the Absurd also seems to have been a reaction to the disappearance of the religious dimension from contemporary life. The 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 and primeval anguish. The Absurd Theatre hopes to achieve this by shocking man out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical and complacent. It is felt that there is mystical experience in confronting the limits of human condition. As a result, absurd plays assumed a highly unusual, innovative form, directly aiming to startle the viewer, shaking him out of this comfortable, conventional life of everyday concerns. In the meaningless and Godless post-Second-World-War world, it

was no longer possible to keep using such traditional art forms and standards that had ceased being convincing and lost their validity. The Theatre of the Absurd openly rebelled against conventional theatre. Indeed, it was anti-theatre. It was surreal, illogical, conflictless and plotless. The dialogue seemed total gobbledygook. Not unexpectedly, the Theatre of the Absurd first met with incomprehension and rejection.

Language in ‘ The Theatre of the Absurd’:

One of the most important aspects of absurd drama was its distrust of language as a means of communication. Language had become a vehicle of conventionalised, stereotyped, meaningless exchanges. Words failed to express the essence of human experience, not being able to penetrate beyond its surface. The Theatre of the Absurd constituted first and foremost an onslaught on language, showing it as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. Absurd drama uses conventionalised speech, clichés, slogans and technical jargon, which is distorts, parodies and breaks down. By ridiculing conventionalised and stereotyped speech patterns, the Theatre of the Absurd tries to make people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically.

Conventionalised speech acts as a barrier between ourselves and what the world is really about: in order to come into direct contact with natural reality, it is necessary to discredit and discard the false crutches of conventionalised language. Objects are much more important than language in absurd theatre: what happens transcends what is being said about it. It is the hidden, implied meaning of words that assume primary importance in absurd

theatre, over and above what is being actually said. The Theatre of the Absurd strove to communicate an undisclosed totality of perception - hence it had to go beyond language. Absurd drama subverts logic. It relishes the unexpected and the logically impossible. According to Sigmund Freud, there is a feeling of freedom we can enjoy when we are able to abandon the straitjacket of logic. In trying to burst the bounds of logic and language the absurd theatre is trying to shatter the enclosing walls of the human condition itself. Our individual identity is defined by language, having a name is the source of our separateness - the loss of logical language brings us towards a unity with living things. In being illogical, the absurd theatre is anti-rationalist: it negates rationalism because it feels that rationalist thought, like language, only deals with the superficial aspects of things. Nonsense, on the other hand, opens up a glimpse of the infinite. It offers intoxicating freedom brings one into contact with the essence of life and is a source of marvellous comedy.

Theatre of the Absurd; Devoid of dramatic conflict:

There is no dramatic conflict in the absurd plays. Dramatic conflicts, clashes of personalities and powers belong to a world where a rigid, accepted hierarchy of values forms a permanent establishment. Such conflicts, however, lose their meaning in a situation where the establishment and outward reality have become meaningless. However frantically characters perform, this only underlines the fact that nothing happens to change their existence. Absurd dramas are lyrical statements, very much like music: they communicate an atmosphere, an experience of archetypal human situations.

The Absurd Theatre is a theatre of situation, as against the more conventional theatre of sequential events. It presents a pattern of poetic images. In doing this, it uses visual elements, movement, light. Unlike conventional theatre, where language rules supreme, in the Absurd Theatre language is only one of many components of its multidimensional poetic imagery.

Theatre of the Absurd-totally Lyrical Theatre:

The Theatre of the Absurd is totally lyrical theatre which uses abstract scenic effects, many of which have been taken over and modified from the popular theatre arts: mime, ballet, acrobatics, conjuring, music-hall clowning. Much of its inspiration comes from silent film and comedy, as well as the tradition of verbal nonsense in early sound film (Laurel and Hardy, W C Fields, the Marx Brothers). It emphasises the importance of objects and visual experience: the role of language is relatively secondary. It owes a debt to European pre-war surrealism: its literary influences include the work of Franz Kafka. The Theatre of the Absurd is aiming to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams.

The Myth of Sisyphus:

Albert Camus wrote a book *The Myth of Sisyphus* and within it he sets Sisyphus up as being an absurd hero. This is because in the Greek myth Sisyphus scorns the gods, attempts to evade death and as punishment is trapped for eternity pushing a boulder that will never remain at the peak of the hill he is aiming for. His situation echoes the plight of the modern man

who, in his daily drudgery, toils endlessly with no sense of significance or hope of reward. Camus also states that the absurd comes about in man's constant state of contradiction. He seeks meaning in a world that offers none and desires immortality where death is inevitable. It is this struggle that inspires the playwrights who Esslin places under the umbrella of the absurd.

Playwrights of the Absurd:

There are many playwrights whose works could be described as absurd; they include such writers as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter. Within their plays they explore such ideas as the state of existence, the questionable presence of God, the unreliability of language, and the concept of time. Nearly all these concepts are present in the plays of Samuel Beckett. In his play *Waiting for Godot* Beckett's characters, like Sisyphus, are engaged in a fruitless task; they are to wait for an indeterminable amount of time for the mysterious Godot. They fear silence and void and so fill it with seemingly meaningless chat. Beckett uses repetition to highlight the ceaseless circularity of life and his characters throw doubt on the reliability of memory, language and of existence itself: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist? *Waiting for Godot* P69 Stasis is also frequently seen in Beckett's plays. In both *Endgame*, *Happy Days* and *Krapp's Last Tape* he has characters that are longing to progress but who are trapped into immobility either by nostalgia or fear: Yes, let's go / They do not move. *Waiting for Godot* p54

Absurdism in Literature:

The absurd is not confined to theatre and can be seen in literature as well, notably in the novels of Albert Camus and Franz Kafka. In Camus' novel *The Outsider* the absurd hero Meursault commits a murder and is sentenced to death and it is here he fulfils the criteria of the absurd man; trapped in a cell waiting for inevitable death while filled with the contradictory hope of freedom and life. Kafka employs the use of extreme images and scenarios to highlight the conflicts within life. In *The Metamorphosis* his character Gregor Samsa waking up to find himself transformed into a giant insect illustrates the parasitic nature of man and the fact that Samsa's only worry is about how he is to get to work shows how the mundane in life envelops everything else. In *The Trial* Josef K is arrested but he does not know what for and is never told. His struggle to prove his innocence against unknown crimes is an echo of the habitual struggle of man against the unknown forces of the world.

Laughing in the Face of Adversity:

While the concept and ideas of the absurd can be seen to be very bleak one thing that many of these writers have in common is their use of humour.

Within the plays especially there is a great deal of dark comedy, as, when all we are faced with is endless toil and then death what else is there to do but laugh?

Some of the predecessors of absurd drama:

In the realm of verbal nonsense: François Rabelais, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. Many serious poets occasionally wrote nonsense poetry (Johnson,

Charles Lamb, Keats, Hugo, Byron, Thomas Hood). One of the greatest masters of nonsense poetry was the German poet Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914). Ionesco found the work of S J Perelman (i. e. the dialogues of the Marx Brothers' films) a great inspiration for his work. The world of allegory, myth and dream: The tradition of the world as a stage and life as a dream goes back to Elizabethan times. Baroque allegorical drama shows the world in terms of mythological archetypes: John Webster, Cyril Tourneur, Calderon, Jakob Biederman. With the decline of allegory, the element of fantasy prevails (Swift, Hugh Walpole). In some 18th and 19th Century works of literature we find sudden transformation of characters and nightmarish shifts of time and place (E T A Hoffman, Nerval, Aurevilly). Dreams are featured in many theatrical pieces, but it had to wait for Strindberg to produce the masterly transcriptions of dreams and obsessions that have become a direct source of the Absurd Theatre. Strindberg, Dostoyevsky, Joyce and Kafka created archetypes: by delving into their own subconscious, they discovered the universal, collective significance of their own private obsessions. In the view of Mircea Eliade, myth has never completely disappeared on the level of individual experience. The Absurd Theatre sought to express the individual's longing for a single myth of general validity. The above-mentioned authors anticipated this. Alfred Jarry is an important predecessor of the Absurd Theatre. His UBU ROI (1896) is a mythical figure, set amidst a world of grotesque archetypal images. Ubu Roi is a caricature, a terrifying image of the animal nature of man and his cruelty. (Ubu Roi makes himself King of Poland and kills and tortures all and sundry. The work is a puppet play and its décor of childish naivety underlines

the horror.) Jarry expressed man's psychological states by objectifying them on the stage. Similarly, Franz Kafka's short stories and novels are meticulously exact descriptions of archetypal nightmares and obsessions in a world of convention and routine. 20th Century European avant-garde: For the French avant-garde, myth and dream was of utmost importance: the surrealists based much of their artistic theory on the teachings of Freud and his emphasis on the role of the subconscious. The aim of the avant-garde was to do away with art as a mere imitation of appearances. Apollinaire demanded that art should be more real than reality and deal with essences rather than appearances. One of the more extreme manifestations of the avant-garde was the Dadaist movement, which took the desire to do away with obsolete artistic conventions to the extreme. Some Dadaist plays were written, but these were mostly nonsense poems in dialogue form, the aim of which was primarily to 'shock the bourgeois audience'. After the First World War, German Expressionism attempted to project inner realities and to objectify thought and feeling. Some of Brecht's plays are close to Absurd Drama, both in their clowning and their music-hall humour and the preoccupation with the problem of identity of the self and its fluidity. French surrealism acknowledged the subconscious mind as a great, positive healing force. However, its contribution to the sphere of drama was meagre: indeed it can be said that the Absurd Theatre of the 1950s and 1960s was a belated practical realisation of the principles formulated by the Surrealists as early as the 1930s. In this connection, of particular importance were the theoretical writings of Antonin Artaud. Artaud fully rejected realism in the theatre, cherishing a vision of a stage of magical beauty and mythical power. He

called for a return to myth and magic and to the exposure of the deepest conflicts within the human mind. He demanded a theatre that would produce collective archetypes, thus creating a new mythology. In his view, theatre should pursue the aspects of the internal world. Man should be considered metaphorically in a wordless language of shapes, light, movement and gesture. Theatre should aim at expressing what language is incapable of putting into words. Artaud forms a bridge between the inter-war avant-garde and the post-Second-World-War Theatre of the Absurd.