

Theatre of the absurd assignment

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THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD The dictionary meaning of the word ‘ Absurd’ is unreasonable, ridiculous or funny. But it is used in a somewhat different sense when we speak of the ‘ Theatre of the Absurd’, or more commonly known now-a-days as ‘ Absurd Drama’. The phrase ‘ The Theatre of the Absurd’ was coined by the critic Martin Esslin, who made it the title of his book on the same subject, published in 1961. Esslin points out in this book that there is no such thing as a regular “ movement” of Absurd Dramatists. The term was useful as ‘ a device to make certain common fundamental traits that were present in the works of a number of dramatists’.

Esslin saw in the works of these playwrights as artistic co-relation to Albert Camus’ philosophy that life is inherently without meaning as is described in his work ‘ The Myth of Sisyphus’. In this essay Camus has described the situation of the human beings as one out of harmony with its surroundings. The Theatre of the Absurd, today, can be considered as a designation for particular plays written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, and also, along with that, to the style and form of theatre which has evolved from their work.

A short but true story narrated in the beginning of Martin Esslin’s book The Theatre of the Absurd provides the best commentary on the significance of the Absurd, and also helps in understanding the human values of Samuel Beckett’s play Waiting for Godot, which is famous as an Absurd Drama par excellence. This is the story as told by Mr. Esslin ??? “ On 19th November 1957, a group of worried actors were preparing to face their audience. The actors were members of the company of the San Francisco Actor’s workshop.

The audience consisted of fourteen hundred convicts at the San Quentin penitentiary.....
..... The curtain parted. The play began. And what had bewildered the sophisticated audiences of Paris, London, and New York, was immediately grasped by an audience of convicts..... The trio of muscle men, biceps overflowing..... parked all 642 lbs on the aisle and waited for the girls and funny stuff. When this didn't appear they audibly fumed and audibly decided to wait until the house lights dimmed before escaping. They made one error. They listened and looked two minutes too-long-and stayed. Left at the end.

All shook. A reporter from the San Francisco Chronicle who was present noted that the convicts did not find it difficult to understand the play. One prisoner told him ' Godot is Society'. Said another ' He's the outside'. A teacher at the prison was quoted as saying: They know what is meant by waiting..... and they know if Godot finally came he would only be a disappointment. " This story is helpful in understanding the genre of the Absurd. Playwrights commonly associated with the Theatre of the Absurd include Samuel Beckett from Ireland, Eugene Ionesco from Rumania, Jean Genet from France and Harold Pinter of Great Britain.

The Absurd in their plays takes the form of man's reaction to a world apparently without meaning, or man as a puppet that is controlled or threatened by an invisible outside force. Though the term is applied to a wide range of plays, some characteristics coincide in many of the plays. For instance broad comedy is mixed with tragic images where the characters are caught in hopeless situations and are forced to do repetitive or meaningless action. Even the dialogues are full of specialized jargons, and wordplays and <https://assignbuster.com/theatre-of-the-absurd-assignment/>

cliches and even nonsense. Even the plots are mostly cyclical or absurdly expansive.

Regarding the story, it is either a parody or a dismissal of realism. The Theatre of the Absurd is commonly associated with Existentialism, and Existentialism was an influential philosophy in Paris during the rise of the Absurd Theatre. However, it is not exactly correct. Historically Existentialism grew with the nineteenth century writings of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. On reading Nietzsche's Zarathustra published in 1883, the readers come across a startling phrase that God is dead! According to Esslin, since then for many more people, God has died.

He says; " And so after two terrible wars, there are still many who are trying to come to terms with the implication of Zarathustra's message searching for a way in which they can with dignity, confront a universe, deprived of what was once its centre and its living purpose, a world deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle, which has become disappointed and purposeless. The Theatre of the Absurd is one of the expressions of this search; it seeks to re-establish an awareness of man's situation when confronted with the ultimate reality of his condition. For the people, in between the two World Wars, the world seemed to be falling apart. Disintegration of the society, the menace of the unknown and utter loneliness of man, all this and many more made human beings look upon life as useless and futile. The world had become a place where man continues to waste, and pine and, and degenerate. In Samuel Beckett's play, Waiting for Godot, the situation of man in this universe is summarized by Pozzo's

outburst in the second act of the play: “ One day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough.

They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. ” A most poignant image of death comes out in these lines.

Esslin feels that in Beckett's plays physical nature follows its own cycle, birth ??? growth ??? degeneration – decay and death. Seasons follow each other but there is hardly any escape The origin of the Theatre of the Absurd is rooted in the new pioneering experiments in the art of the 1920s and 1930s. The aim of these experiments was to do away with art as a mere imitation of appearances.

It was after the First World War that German Expressionism attempted to project the inner realities and also tried to objectify thoughts and feelings. At the same time, the Theatre of the Absurd was also strongly influenced by the traumatic experience of the horrors of the Second World War, which showed the total impermanence of any values and shook the validity of long time held conventions. It also highlighted the precariousness of human life and also its fundamental meaninglessness and unpredictability.

The trauma of living from 1945, under the threat of nuclear annihilation also seems to have been an important factor in the rise of this new theatre. At the same time, the Theatre of the Absurd also seems to have been the reaction to the disappearance of the religious dimensions from contemporary life. Absurd Theatre hopes to achieve this by shocking man out of an existence that has become overused, mechanical and self satisfying. It aims

to startle the viewer, shake him out of this comfortable conventional life of everyday concerns.

The Theatre of the Absurd highlights man's fundamental bewilderment and confusion originating from the fact that man has no answers to the basic existential questions like why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice and suffering. Playwrights share the view that man is inhabiting a universe with which he is out of key. Its meaning is indecipherable and his place within it is without purpose. He is bewildered, troubled and maybe even obscurely threatened. Man's tragedy is that he is not aware of his problem. Man is always trying to seek some purpose in life by getting involved in trivialities and superficial pursuits.

This is one reason why tragedy and farce are closely interlinked in the Theatre of the Absurd. Even at the moment of the tragic climax in *Waiting for Godot*, farce enters the moment. Estragon's trousers fall in attempting suicide and the chord breaks, when they try its strength, making Estragon and Vladimir almost fall. The comedy here illustrates their life's hopelessness and the futility of all their efforts to end them. The perfect statement of the philosophy of the Theatre of the Absurd as defined by Martin Esslin, is in which the world is seen as a hall of reflecting mirrors, and Reality merges gradually into fantasy.

If God is dead, then surely the Theatre of the Absurd is looking for an alternative spiritual goal, i. e. making man aware of his lost moorings and trying to make him feel what he has to regain. Plays within this group are absurd in that they focus not on logical acts or realistic occurrences or even

traditional character development. They instead focus on human beings trapped in an incomprehensible world facing incidents which are illogical. Mainly the theme of incomprehensibility is coupled with the inadequacy of language. Basically there is no story, no dramatic conflict and nothing really ever happens.

Mostly there is repetitive action and circular arrangement of events.

Devaluation of language is also an important trait of the Absurd Drama.

Esslin says that Absurdism is the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity and purpose. Absurdist drama asks its viewers to draw his own conclusions and make his own errors. Though Theatre of the Absurd may be seen as nonsense, they have something to say and can be understood. Even regarding plots, traditional plot structures are rarely considered as good plots in the Theatre of the Absurd. Plots usually consist of Absurd repetition of action as in *Waiting for Godot* or *The Bald Soprano*.

Often there is an outside force that remains a mystery like in *The Birthday Party* or *A Delicate Balance*. Absence, emptiness, nothingness and unresolved mysteries are central features in many Absurdist plots, for example, in *The Chairs* an old couple welcomes a large number of guests to their home, but these guests are invisible so all we see is empty chairs, representing their absence. Another example is where the action of *Waiting for Godot* is centered on the absence of a man named Godot, for whom the two characters keep waiting till the end of the play. Plots are also cyclical like in *Endgame*, it begins where the play ended in the beginning.

One of the important aspects of Absurd Drama was its distrust of language as a means of communication. During those times language had become ‘ a vehicle for conventionalized, stereotyped meaningless exchanges’. Words usually failed to express the fundamental nature of human experience because it was not able to penetrate beyond its surface. So the playwrights of the Absurd Theatre constituted first and foremost an onslaught on language, showing it as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. During those times language had become ‘ a vehicle for conventionalized, stereotyped meaningless exchanges’.

Words usually failed to express the fundamental nature of human experience because it was not able to penetrate beyond its surface. So the playwrights of the Absurd Theatre constituted first and foremost an onslaught on language, showing it as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. Absurd Drama uses conventionalized speeches, cliches, slogans and technical jargons, which it distorts and breaks down. It is by ridiculing the ‘ conventionalized and stereotyped’ speech, that Absurd Theatre tries to make people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speeches and communicating more authentically.

The theme of the Absurd play is the purposelessness of human life. Albert Camus in his essay ‘ The Myth of Sisyphus’ has described the situation of human beings as one out of harmony with its surroundings. The Theatre of the Absurd is one of the ways of facing the life that has lost its meaning and purpose. As such, it fulfils a double role. Its first and more obvious role is satirical where it criticizes a society that is petty, superficial and dishonest.

Its second and more positive aspect is that it highlights the basic absurdity of the human situation.

It showcases the condition of human beings in a world in which man has lost all his faith. Here he is presented in his basic situation where he is left with no choice and desperately searches some refuge or heaven. Such a play produces the effects of alienation. We find it very difficult to identify ourselves with the characters in the Absurd Drama. Even though their situation is very painful and violent, they are presented to us in such a way that we tend to laugh at them and their condition and behavior. Esslin feels that this kind of drama speaks mostly to the deeper level of the audience's mind.

In a way it challenges the audience to make sense of the nonsense. It urges them to face the situation consciously and along with that, to laugh at this fundamental absurdity of such situations. So, the dominating theme of the absurd playwrights is man's loneliness, despair, and desperation when he finds that his faith in God is declining. In all the writers of the Absurd Drama, the common traits are usually the devaluation of language, absence of characterization and motivation and search for meaning in a basically absurd situation.

But each of them has his own style of presenting these traits. For example Ionesco presents absurdism through hilarious and outrageous farce. In Beckett's works, absurdism is presented by depicting a world which is devoid of God, where life is full of anguish and despair. In the plays of Harold Pinter menace and terror surrounds people. His plays, famous as comedy of

menace, are basically funny up to a point. The most surprising thing about plays of this group is that in spite of their breaking of the rules, they are very successful.

In his book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin says, “ If a good play must have a clearly constructed story, these have no story to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerism of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings. ” To conclude, the Theatre of the Absurd presents anxiety, despair and a sense of loss at the disappearance of solutions and the illusions of life. Now facing all this means that we are facing reality itself. Thus, it can be said that Absurd Drama becomes a kind of a modern mystical experience. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situations as the writers see it.

It becomes a kind of a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, with all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, because there are no solutions to the mysteries of existence. That is because ultimately man is alone in this meaningless world. To accept all this freely and without fear may be painful, but doing so brings a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why we say that the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair

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but the 'laughter of liberation'. Bibliography PRIMARY SOURCES 1. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* SECONDARY SOURCES 1. Martin Esslin, *Introduction to The Theatre of the Absurd* 2. Arnold P. Hinchliffe, *The Absurd* 3. Ronald Gaskell, *Drama and Reality* 4. Eva Metman, *Reflections on Beckett's Plays*