

Theatre of the absurd
humour often relies
on a sense of
hopelessness and
violence...

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The theatre of the absurd encompasses a form of drama that emphasizes the absurdity of human existence by employing repetitious, meaningless dialogues and confusing situations, breaking the logical development, giving way to irrational and illogical speeches. A godless universe, human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down. The theatre of the absurd is sometimes defined it as a “ working hypothesis”, a device, instead of a real movement.

Martin Esslin in his book the “ Theatre of Absurd” quotes that absurdist theatre has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being- in terms of concrete stage images”. He indicated too, the influence of Camus’ Existentialism behind the absurd, with the idea that men are trapped in a hostile universe that was totally subjective, describing the nightmare that could follow when solitude and silence were taken to the ultimate degree.

Humour within absurdist plays is often found as black humour in which disturbing or sinister subjects like death, disease, or warfare, are treated with bitter amusement, usually in a manner calculated to offend and shock. In absurd theatre it is used to express the absurdity, insensitivity, paradox, and cruelty of the modern world. ‘ Waiting for Godot’ by Samuel Beckett and ‘ The Real Inspector Hound’ by Tom Stoppard. The plays are constructed into the form of meta-theatre, blurring the line between what is scripted and what goes on by accident, completely demolishing the “ fourth wall” and engaging the audience.

Both plays draw on Greek Theatre, with their small number of actors and absent divinity, including some ingredients from “ *commedia dell’arte*”, vaudeville, and circus. *Waiting for Godot*” is all about how the world is based on chance. A world based on chance can have no orderly time sequence, and thus time has no meaning. The extension, then, is that human life has no meaning. Realizing this, humans will create distractions and diversions, in the form of patterns and reliance on nebulous forces, to provide the purpose and meaning that is inherently lacking in their lives. *Waiting for Godot*” is the classical, archetypical presentation of this facet of human existence.

Although *Waiting for Godot*’ is seen to be very depressing and contains many elements which may mark it as a tragedy, the four characters create a great deal of humour in their mannerisms and their behaviour. *Waiting for Godot* is a play on human emotions and character which may give off feelings of despair, yet also of humour simultaneously. We know little concerning the protagonists, indeed from their comments they appear to know little about themselves and seem bewildered and confused as to the extent of their existence.

Their situation is obscure and Vladimir and Estragon spend the day (representative of their lives) waiting for the mysterious Godot, interacting with each other with quick and short speech. Although Beckett’s characters seem to expect so little from life, their minimal expectations are frustrated. We laugh at the characters because the scenes are humorous, yet it is human unhappiness that we are actually laughing at. Beckett creates this humour in such a way that there is no discernible purpose behind it.

Most of the time, the audience tends to laugh at the helplessness created by Vladimir and Estragon and the play can be seen as very humorous at times. Primarily, the tramps appear on stage, immediately Estragon is struggling to take off his boot, and this straight away is quite a comical issue, how he exhausts himself endlessly with little result, and then tries again and again. From this beginning, the audience would recognise Estragon in an amusing way, but would also see how pathetic he is in that he can't even take his boot off, an extremely simple task.

Beckett uses this entry to show how in many ways, Estragon has nothing better to do than try feebly to take off his boot, there is little meaning or purpose in his life. Also, when he states: 'Nothing to be done', a pessimistic tone is visible to the audience, how he seems to have almost given up on life, which will be further evident for the audience as the play goes on. The audience is inclined to laugh due to the state of Estragon, and his actions are designed to show his immense incompetence.

As Pozzo arrives, being dragged along by his human slave, Lucky, like a chariot, there is something distinctly humorous to the audience about a human riding another human like a chariot. Lucky's actions are also designed by Beckett to be amusing, almost trotting like a horse. The reference to the play as a tragicomedy comes into show here, as although it is very amusing to watch Pozzo's entry, one can also feel a great deal of sympathy for Lucky, being mistreated as if he weren't human. This contrast is used by Beckett to play on the emotions of the audience, leaving them in a dilemma as to how they should react to this entry.

Again, Becket relates to the theatre of the absurd, which is a crucial concept in the play, having a distinct effect on the audience. Finally Lucky's speech is mildly amusing due to the complete randomness and unpredictability of the words that spew from his mouth. Although the audience will feel bewildered at Lucky's words, his speech is a source of comedy due to its irregularity. Lastly, by omitting some of Lucky's words and separating them, an uncanny, partial quote remains, " Given the existence... of a personal God... outside time... ho... loves us dearly... and suffers... with those who... are plunged in torment... it is established... beyond all doubt... that man... " Either Beckett leaves off here to make the reader decide on his own, or he merely wants to annoy the reader with this long, rambling, nonsense. But more importantly, *Waiting for Godot* illustrates an attitude toward man's experience on earth: the poignancy, oppression, camaraderie, hope, corruption, scum, and bewilderment at the human antithesis that can only be reconciled in mind of the absurdist.

If Godot is God, then Didi and Gogo's (mankind's) faith in God has almost entirely disappeared. Yet the illusion of faith—that deeply embedded hope that Godot might come—still flickers in the minds of Vladimir and Estragon. It is almost as if these two men see no reason to have faith, but cannot renounce it completely. *The Real Inspector Hound* is a satirical, post-modern parody of crime conventions. However, the text has been greatly influenced by radical foreign dramatists and is also a part of the ' Theatre of the Absurd' genre of Post-WWII theatre.

The play has an attitude of questioning and challenging beliefs regarding religion, reality, theatre and the human condition which are traditional aspects of absurdist theatre. Attempts for realism are completely abandoned. The theatre world and the critical world are so intertwined that they cannot be separated. As an audience, we can't work out 'what's real and what's not'. The line between actors and real characters is frequently blurred. The relative nature of truth and the fluid nature of identity are resonate heavily in 'The Real Inspector Hound', especially that of questioning identity.

The structure of the play reflects these values. Meaningless and mistaken dialogue highlights the general chaos and 'meaninglessness' of the entire situation (a common central-concept of absurdist plays). It is also circuitous in structure. Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* is a very postmodernist play with no fixed time. *The Real Inspector Hound* consists of a mix of two situations that take place at the same time. First there is the actual play, a whodunnit, which has six main characters: Cynthia, Felicity, Simon, Mrs.

Drudge, Magnus and Inspector Hound. Next to this there is the play-within-a-play, in which Birdboot and Moon are the main characters. As audience you follow both of these situations and the play-within-a-play also follows the actual play. This situation is very confusing for the audience at first and they have to figure out that Birdboot and Moon are two critics who are also watching and analysing the same play as the audience is watching. *The Real Inspector Hound* refers to the meaninglessness of the human condition.

He combined the English tradition of the “ comedy of manners” (a play that attacks the customs of the upper classes) with contemporary social concerns by concentrating on the intricate and comical duplicities of everyday conversation within a wider, and often menacing, historical perspective. Stoppard focuses on having fun with different theatrical conventions such as the forth wall and seen on stage and what is not (the body). Terry Hodgson sums it up very nicely in his review of Tom Stoppard’s plays: “ Christie’s Mousetrap is formulaic.

Hound mocks the formula. The play starts with a stage empty of actors except for the corpse.... It is not a whodunit—it is about whodunits and also about the petty jealousies of the second strings, the understudies, the seconds in command and their desire to do away with those who block their way. They watch each other as we watch them.... The barriers between theatre and stage audience dissolve and the distinction between the real and the fictional disappears. (Terry Hodgson, The Plays of Tom Stoppard) Waiting for Godot and The Real Inspector Hound have key comical sections created to alter the mindset of the audience, or to change the mood and the atmosphere. The writers created this tragicomedy with elements that are distinctly funny, and each time an audience laughs, it seems to be the writers pure intention for them to do so. They have many different ways of creating humour in the plays, and overall both plays tilt more towards a comedy than a tragedy, as it does not seem like the writers wanted their audiences to feel a great deal of sympathy for the protagonists.