

## Enlightenment and Modernity in the Absurd Plays of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee

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### Abstract

The absurd plays of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee, bewildered the audience who were accustomed to a well-made play as defined by Aristotle. This paper will argue that an important reason for the bewilderment of the audience is the absence of the sense of inclusivity that is required to be able to combat, to quote Esslin, the “divorce between man and his life,” which arises due to the absence of reconciliation of the scientific worldview and enhanced Americanization with the centrality of the free individual subject. This paper while analysing select plays of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee will argue that these plays depict a heightened awareness of the post-war European/ American society and are based more on the Nietzschean concept of *Amor fati* and the championing of the Dionysian impulse, which forms an indispensable part of the human nature. In its search for a voice that echoes the anti-establishment tone of the traditional social norms, this paper will argue that the plays of Absurd Theatre, in its depiction of an unfamiliar world, promotes the cause of inclusivity and highlights the need for an enlightened modernity.

**Keywords:** Theatre of the Absurd, Existentialism, *Amor fati*, Dionysian, Modernity.

The plays that Martin Esslin so famously classified under the umbrella term of “Theatre of the Absurd” were able to generate the sense of absurdity by staging a moment of crisis, by presenting characters at a critical juncture of their live. The plays also critique the Aristotelian concept of a well-made play by refusing access to any introduction to the characters or a beginning and an end to the action of the plays. Along with an apparent devaluation of language as a means of communication, these plays baffled the theatre-goers of Europe and America, who were not accustomed to such theatrical techniques. According to Esslin, these techniques were used by the playwrights to “... achieve a unity between

its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed” (24).

The philosophy of existentialism has been a major influence on the plays by these playwrights. The existential philosophy became especially significant as a result of the destruction caused by the two world wars that led to a turn to individual responses to moments of crisis rather than abstract philosophical subjects. Thus, the existential philosophy tends to analyse the individual responses through personal perspectives rather than the universal ones in its attempts to analyse the meaning of life. This analysis of lived experience of the individual human being to a crisis, caused by the changed socio-cultural circumstances, has taken two opposing directions: the pessimistic in the existential philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer and Soren Kierkegaard and the optimistic in the philosophy of Friedrich W. Nietzsche. What united these philosophers was their critique of the rationalism of modernity.

Arthur Schopenhauer stressed the importance of the unconscious rather than conscious mental processes and took the will to be the central concept of his philosophy. Creative will is the blind and non-rational force in both the world and the human nature. Drawing from the philosophy of Plato of the world as mimesis, Schopenhauer claimed that the world exists only in our thoughts. He contended that representational knowledge of thing-in-itself cannot be acquired. He held that the task of art was to communicate the aesthetic intuition, which, according to him, was the task of the philosopher. His legacy of “dark and slanted image of the totality of life” (Wellbery 327) is most visible in the tradition of literary writings that contain revered artists such as Kafka, Melville, Tolstoy, Hardy, Proust, Borges, Beckett and Cioran. Schopenhauer claimed that the essence or basis of all beings is “need, lack, and thus pain” (WWRI 368), which comes to the very fore in such plays as Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* and Albee’s *The Zoo Story* and can even be seen as an essential topic. What this means is that a person is born near death, happiness may occur occasionally, but suffering is everywhere and lingering all the time.

Søren Kierkegaard, the first thinker in modern times to insist on making the process of philosophizing a relevant and formative force, argued for recognition of the vital significance of authentic identity and strove to make it

an operative value. The term “authenticity” has been at the centre of existential philosophy, for the term implies a kind of essentialism, an objectivity that is foreign to authenticity. Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy is heavily reliant on Christianity, whose important motif is “resignation to fate.” However, the Kierkegaardian strategy of “infinite resignation” proposed in *Fear and Trembling* differs from many other strategies of detachment (for instance Buddhist strategies) in that it is not meant to involve extinction of desire. According to Kierkegaard, resignation is not indifference:

God is the one who demands absolute love. Anyone who in demanding a person’s love believes that this love is demonstrated by his becoming indifferent to what he otherwise cherished is not merely an egotist but is also stupid.... For example, a man requires his wife to leave her father and mother, but if he considers it a demonstration of her extraordinary love to him that she for his sake became an indifferent and lax daughter etc., then he is far more stupid than the stupid. (73)

For Kierkegaard, “The absurd is a category, the negative criterion, of the divine or the relationship to the divine. When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd-faith transforms it, but in every weak moment it is again more or less absurd to him” (7). The Kierkegaardian notion of existentialism manifests itself in the plays of Theatre of the Absurd, which present the failure of modernity as scientific modernization caused by rationality. Just as Kierkegaard represents the absurdity in the leap of faith in positing Christianity in relation to modernity, the plays of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee depict the lack of faith in God and the dehumanization of mankind. The plays by these playwrights have been read primarily as depicting the meaninglessness of existence in a world that fails to provide any meaning. This failure to find meaning can be attributed to the loss of faith that characterized post Second World-War.

Samuel Beckett’s revolutionary play *Waiting for Godot* dramatizes a scene of “uncertainty and the inability in the modern age to find a coherent system of meaning, order, or purpose by which to understand our existence and by which to live” (Chatterjee 189). Beckett’s portrayal of an

incomprehensible world in the play—starting right from an incomprehensible location and time—“*A country road. A tree. Evening*” (Act 1) to a complete absence of information about the central character – Godot, who never appeared in the play, to a sort of identity crisis of the two characters on stage, Vladimir and Estragon, who simultaneously call themselves Didi and Gogo, presented an absurd world, that had, to quote Esslin, “bewildered the *sophisticated* audiences of Paris, London and New York...” (Esslin 1). The play that has been considered the hallmark of the Theatre of the Absurd has a typical plot that does not move forward. The language of the play is often without meaning and does not correlate with the action on stage. Despite the obvious incoherence, Esslin remarks that the play was immediately grasped by an audience of convicts. Uncertainty is pervasive throughout the play—the uncertainty of purpose, of time, place, emotion, relationships, truth and hope. In other words, nothing is certain except the existence of the two tramps on stage. Descartes’ distinction of the body and the mind as represented by Estragon and Vladimir respectively brings forth their inevitable co-existence as well as their separate existence. The two characters cannot stay without the other and it is only in their togetherness that the action of the play takes place. The audience is led to doubt the certainty of their existence in isolation. Even the most fundamental things are not certain:

ESTRAGON: Wait! (*He moves away from Vladimir.*) I sometimes wonder if we wouldn’t have been better off alone, each one for himself. (*He crosses the stage and sits down on the mound.*) We weren’t made for the same road. VLADIMIR: (*without anger*). It’s not certain.

ESTRAGON: No, nothing is certain.

*Vladimir slowly crosses the stage and sits down beside Estragon. (Act I, 52)*

A similar sense of uncertainty prevails in the plays of Harold Pinter. His play, *The Birthday Party*, depicts the disruption of the life of Stanley Webber, intruded by two mysterious characters Goldberg and McCann. The reasons for the intrusion remain uncertain. The initial recognisability of the stage setting

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to the audience turns into a resistance to rationalisation. As Rabey points out, “... verbal gestures of ostensible accessibility become, in dramatic usage, ironic indications and reiterations of the persistent separateness of individual perspective and interests” (52). The play distorts the conventional sense of speech in theatre to illustrate how bids for linguistic communication seek not dialogue but confirmation. This becomes evident from the early scenes:

Meg: Is that you, Petey?

Pause.

Petey, is that you?

Pause.

Petey?

Petey: Yes, it's me.

Petey: What?

Meg: Is that you?

Petey: Yes, it's me.

Meg: What? (Her face appears at the hatch.) Are you back?

Petey: Yes.

Meg: I've got your cornflakes ready. (She disappears and reappears.) Here's your cornflakes. (He rises and takes the plate from her, sits at the table, props up the paper and begins to eat. Meg enters by the kitchen door.)

Are they nice?

Petey: Very nice.

Meg: I thought they'd be nice. (She sits at the table.) You got your paper?

Petey: Yes. (Act I, 19)

As with *Godot*, Pinter refuses to disclose the identities of his characters. We are just told about the probable ages of the characters and nothing more. The

mutual relationship between Petey and Meg, for instance, is never revealed. We are just led to imagine that they are a couple. Similarly, the antecedents of Stanley are not revealed, due to which the suspense grows when Goldberg and McCann intrudes and in a series of random interrogation, breaks him down psychologically and eventually, take him away to “make a man of you” (Pinter, *Plays: I* 80). This information is required by the audience to make sense of the play.

Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story* (1959) presents the exposition and violent denouement of two strangers’ conversation in New York’s Central Park. Each turn of the dialogue brings the two men closer to each other and to an understanding of human relationships. Some elements in the play, however, such as the men’s chance meeting and their conversation, which touches on themes of fragmentation, alienation, and isolation, have prompted reviewers and critics to read it as an absurdist drama. Thus, Mary Castiglie Anderson calls *The Zoo Story* “an example of absurdist and nihilist theater” (93) and Charles Lyons places the play “within the genre classification of the absurd... because it assumes the absurdity, the chaos, of the human condition and its essential loneliness” (qtd. in Bigsby 15). Anne Paolucci compares *The Zoo Story* to Sartre’s *No Exit* (43). The play dramatizes the frustration of the protagonist, Jerry at being deprived of the basic amenities in a capitalist society:

Jerry: What were you trying to do? Make sense out of things? Bring order? The old pigeonhole bit? Well, that’s easy; I’ll tell you. I live in a four-storey brownstone rooming-house on the upper West Side between Columbus Avenue and Central Park West. I live on the top floor; rear; west. It’s a laughably small room, and one of my walls is made of beaverboard; this beaverboard separates my room from another laughably small room, so I assume that the two rooms were once one room, a small room, but not necessarily laughable. The room beyond my beaver board wall is occupied by a coloured queen who always keeps his door open; well, not always but always when he’s plucking his eyebrows, which he does with Buddhist concentration. This coloured queen has rotten teeth, which is rare, and he has a Japanese kimono, which is also pretty rare;

and he wears this kimono to and from the john in the hall, which is pretty frequent. I mean, he goes to the john a lot. He never bothers me, and never brings anyone up to his room. All he does is pluck his eyebrows, wear his kimono and go to the john. Now, the two front rooms on my floor are a little larger, I guess; but they're pretty small, too. There's a Puerto Rican family in one of them, a husband, a wife, and some kids; I don't know how many. These people entertain a lot. And in the other front room, there's somebody living there, but I don't know who it is. I've never seen who it is. Never. Never ever. PETER: [embarrassed] Why ... why do you live there?

JERRY: [From a distance again] I don't know.

PETER: It doesn't sound a very nice place ... where you live.

JERRY: Well, no; it isn't an apartment in the East Seventies. But, then again, I don't have one wife, two daughters, two cats and two parakeets. What I do have, I have toilet articles, a few clothes, a hot plate that I'm not supposed to have, a can opener, one that works with a key, you know: a Knife, two forks, and two spoons, one small, one large; three plates, a cup, a saucer, a drinking glass, two picture frames, both empty, eight or nine books, a pack of pornographic playing cards, regular deck, an old Western Union typewriter that prints nothing but capital letters, and a small strong-box without a lock which has in it ... what? Rocks! Some rocks ... sea rounded rocks I picked up on the beach when I was a kid. Under which ... weighed down ... are some letters ... please letters ... please why don't you do this, and please when will you do that letters. And when letters, too. When will you write? When will you come? When? These letters are from more recent years. (4)

The play presents Jerry's attempts at establishing meaningful communication with other human beings. His behaviour with Peter parallels his experiment with the dog. The final image of Jerry's brutal death does communicate with Peter and the audience, and this intense desire on Jerry's part to accomplish connection, according to Lisa M. Siefker Bailey, keeps this play out of the realm of the Theatre of the Absurd. With its hope for change, *The Zoo Story* presents itself as an American play in its depiction of individualism.

The underlying tone of pessimism in such studies is very much apparent. While such pessimism has been associated by Esslin as being associated with Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it is significant to note that Camus' apparently pessimistic tone is contained only in the opening sentence:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. (1)

The rest of the piece specifically goes on to argue why suicide is not justified. While the plays of the Absurd theatre can definitely be read in terms of the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, Camus' refutation of succumbing to suicide as the only option of life, leads us to study and analyse the plays in terms of the positive perspective of the existential philosophy. This perspective finds its most powerful advocate in the philosophy of the German philosopher Nietzsche, who introduced the concepts of the "Apollonian" and the "Dionysian" in his *The Birth of Tragedy* as constituting the true nature of the human being. The "Apollonian" aspect, according to Nietzsche, comprises the rational self of man while the "Dionysian" aspect constitutes the irrational and wild self of man. According to Nietzsche, the "Apollonian" aspect of man has been upheld ever since the advent of the Greeks, more precisely Socrates, while the "Dionysian" aspect has been suppressed, thus causing an imbalance in the human nature. The recognition of this irrational self is a step towards recognition and appreciation of the unknown. Together with his theory of *Amor fati* (love of fate), Nietzsche's notion of existence provides with a means to combat the absurdity of the world by giving us a sense of it. The major concerns of philosophy, revealing universal phenomenon, were the least of his concerns. Nietzsche was, as Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes argued, a local philosopher than a global one. His major concerns were not the search for universal phenomenon but were like "How does a particular phenomenon affect an individual in a given context?" (Gemes and Sykes 377). It is against this background that the contradictions in his writings is explained. The playwrights of the Absurd theatre do not provide an

adequate background that the audience was so familiar with, thereby provoking/forcing them to create their own interpretations of the possible backgrounds to the action of the plays that, just like Nietzsche's treatises, are more local than global.

It is interesting to note the contrast and its relation to Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian drives. The sophisticated audience, who represented the Apollonian rationality, consider the play as absurd as it fails to conform to the established theatrical practices. In being affected by the absurdity of the play, the Apollonian audience of Beckett's play also displays its failure to accommodate the new, thereby negating the enlightenment modernity that strives to be inclusive of diversity.

In so far as the plays of Theatre of the Absurd dramatise the personal confrontation of its characters with the uncomfortable Dionysian subjects that have been suppressed by the Apollonian selves, the protagonists of the plays want to give voice to the people of their stratum whose bypassed histories seem lost in the fast-paced tumult of society. However, in so far as involving the audience in the play's action is concerned, all the Theatre of the Absurd plays do so. The conventional notion of Aristotelian catharsis to which the Apollonian audience was accustomed, is challenged when the catharsis does not prove to be universal, but local. As Demastes points out in his *The Theatre of Chaos: Beyond Absurdism, Into Orderly Disorder*, "the nature and degree of correspondence between the mimetic object and what we may in general refer to as its inspiration sets up a persistent and profound dialectic between non-spectacular/linear action and spectacular/non-linear action" (68-69).

Just as Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati* and Dionysus prepare his readers to re-evaluate the conventional Apollonian value, the plays of the absurd theatre in their depiction of a world where absurd but real things happen, prepare its audience to confront the irrational component of existence. These plays problematize the space of the theatre as a place where true things and events occur that aren't necessarily real and where the true and the real can readily and unpredictably trade places. Writing about Artaud, Ionesco, and the virtues of the French Avant Garde theatre in 1962, Leonard Pronko, in his *Avant-Garde: The Experimental Theater in France*, stated, "The reality of

life...cannot be expressed in so many words, for life goes far beyond the logic of language.... Facts may be known, but Truth can only be experienced” (118). In claiming that the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd attempts to “integrat[e] ... the subject-matter and the form in which it is expressed,’ (6) Esslin confirms Pronko’s statement. This unity is achieved through the use of unconventional devices of minimization which tends to make the plays more Dionysian in opening the vistas for the suppressed selves. The plays of the Theatre of the Absurd expose its audience to the fact that the Apollonian selves have made us, in Nietzsche’s memorable expression “strangers to ourselves” and hence, lack a sense of inclusivity. Following Zarathustra’s claims that the construction of a genuine, that is, unified, self is something yet to be achieved, the plays of the Absurd Theatre, in revealing the Dionysian selves, present the modern man as a mere jumble, as echoed in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where we are told:

In the present age human beings have in their bodies the heritage of multiple origins, that is opposite and not merely opposite drives and value standards that fight each other and rarely permit each other any rest. Such human beings of late cultures and refracted lights will on the average be weaker human beings. (BGE 200)

In so doing, the absurdity of the plays of Beckett, Pinter and Albee, can be looked upon as inspiring the mankind to be an Overman who is a labyrinth with centre everywhere and circumference nowhere, thus being a truly modern and enlightened being. It strives to infuse a sense of inclusivity in man that will enable him to confront the absurd.

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