

Theatre of Absurd and Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' as an Absurd Drama

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Abstract: *The term 'Theatre of Absurd' was coined by Martin Esslin in his essay 'The Theatre of the Absurd' (1961). The dramas belonging to the genre of Theatre of Absurd project a state which is described as 'metaphysical anguish'. The plays of Theatre of Absurd lack a logical and conventional structure which is the representation of the absurd predicament. Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' bears the presence of elements of Theatre of Absurd. This paper is an endeavor to shed light on 'Waiting for Godot' as an Absurd Drama.*

Keywords: Absurd; God; Meaningless; Men; Universe

1. Introduction

The phrase 'Absurd Drama' or 'The Theatre of Absurd' gained currency after Martin Esslin's book 'The Theatre of Absurd' was published in 1961. Esslin points out that there is no such thing as a regular movement of Absurd dramatists. The term is useful as "A device to make certain fundamental traits which seem to be present in the works of a number of dramatists accessible to discussion by tracing the features they have in common." By 'Absurd', Camus meant a life lived solely for its sake in a universe which no longer made sense because there was no God to resolve the contradictions. In other words, what Camus called 'absurd', Kierkegaard called 'Despair'. And it is on this philosophy that Beckett created his famous play 'Waiting for Godot'. Before the genre of Absurd Drama gained popularity in the hands of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco and Gennet, plays were characterized by clearly constructed story and subtlety of characterization and motivation. However, the absurd plays were characterized by non specific unrecognizable characters who are presented almost like mechanical puppets. These dramas speak to a deeper level of the audience's mind. It challenges the audience to make sense of non-sense, to face the situation consciously and perceive with laughter the fundamental absurdity.

Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' belongs to the tradition of the Theatre of Absurd. It is unconventional in not depicting any dramatic conflicts. In the play, practically nothing happens, no development is to be found, there is no beginning and no end. The entire action boils down in an absurd setting of a country side road with two tramps Vladimir and Estragon who simply idle away their time waiting for Godot, about whom they have only vague ideas. They have nothing substantial to tell each other and yet they must spend the time, for they cannot stop waiting. Two other characters, a cruel master called Pozzo and his half-crazy slave called Lucky appear. Eventually a boy arrives with a message that Godot will arrive the next day. The two tramps decide to go away, but they do not move and the curtain falls, eventually nothing happens. The second act is the replica of the first act, but Pozzo is now blind and Lucky is dumb. The wait of Vladimir and Estragon continues but in despair. This monotony characterized the world after the

wars and this condition was captured and depicted in the Theatre of Absurd.

The Absurd theatre dealt with a deeper layer of absurdity---the absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certainties. Like the waiting between birth and death in Gelber's plays, Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot', is also about an absurd wait. According to Martin Esslin, the Theatre of Absurd projected a situation where it was "no longer possible to accept simple and complete systems of values and revelations of divine purpose." Life was projected to face its "ultimate stark reality." What the existential philosopher Kierkegaard believed that "we are thrown into existence here and there", is reflected in the theatre of absurd. And Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' reveals this stark reality of human existence through the characters of the two tramps.

Beckett's deliberate efforts result in displaying the presence of Vladimir and Estragon on the bare stage stripped of any social position or historical context. The barren stage stands symbolic to the universe where the two tramps are thrown to confront with the basic situations of their existence and undergo through the dilemma of choices and expectations. And this situation ultimately makes Vladimir and Estragon passive and impotent before time. Thus they surrender themselves to the 'absurd waiting' for Godot. Often they grow tedious of the wait and decide to go but they fail as they say :

Estragon:- I'm tired! Let's go.

Vladimir:- We can't

Estragon:- why not

Vladimir:- We are waiting for Godot.

(Act 1)

The theatre of Absurd is a post world war creation. It is a creation and a search for a way of relief after the two terrible wars. This provided a dignified way for the people to confront the universe deprived of what was once its centre and its living purpose---the God and faith. Beckett also unfolded "Waiting for Godot" with similar view. The title itself is suggestive that the play deals with a prolong wait and the waiting of the two tramps is for Godot. When Beckett was asked who Godot was, he replied, "If I knew, I

would have said so in the play.” Such a reply forced the critics to offer varied interpretations of the identity of Godot. The very word ‘Godot’ is suggestive of a weakened or diminutive form of the word ‘God’. In fact, the French version of the play “En Attendant Godot”, seems to contain an allusion to a book “Attente de Dieu”, which further supplies evidence that ‘Godot’ stands for God.

Beckett very tactfully highlighted some religious references to figure out God as whimsical, partial and capricious. The Biblical story of salvation of one thief and damnation of the other is although narrated as babblings by Vladimir to while away the time, actually raises question on God’s partial nature. The messenger who works for Godot, lets Vladimir know that Godot executes physical tortures to his brother, a shepherd, for no reasons. This episode of the play instantaneously draws the readers’ attention to the Biblical story of Cane and Able. And pathetic enough one of the brothers receives the Lord’s grace without any rational explanation. However, at the same time, Beckett in his play projected the supremacy of Godot and the futile dependence of man on a supreme power. Vladimir and Estragon tell about Godot to Pozzo, whom they took to be Godot :-

Estragon:- . . . we hardly know him

Vladimir:- True . . . we don’t know him very well . . . (Act I)

Godot’s identity is in veil to Vladimir and Estragon , and yet they expect their future to be molded on Godot’s arrival. Pozzo’s utterance gives us an insight to the minds of the two tramps about Godot.

Pozzo:- . . . Godot . . . Godot . . . Godin . . .

Any how you see who I mean,

who has your future in his hand . . . at least your immediate future. (Act I).

Beckett proves to completely abide by the views of the theatre of Absurd while Constructing his monumental play ‘Waiting for Godot’. The dramatists of Absurd theatre were influenced by what Nietzsche said in “Zarathustra” that “God is dead.” And at the end, Beckett left a remarkable question mark on the existence of God. However till the end of the play, Godot never turns up, but keeps on procrastinating his visit to which the two tramps eagerly look forward.

The theatre of Absurd is concerned with projecting the author’s personal world and so the plays lack objectivity and valid characters. Unlike the communicable social and moral lessons Brecht’s narrative epic theatre, Beckett’s ‘Waiting for Godot’ being an Absurd play, does not intend to narrate a story. Rather, ‘Waiting for Godot’ communicates in a pattern of poetic images. Beckett unfolds the play with a nihilistic approach. Right with the opening dialogue,

Estragon:- Nothing to be done. (Act I).

The hovering of pessimism in the play comes to the very fore. The tramps suffer a state of vagueness and uncertainty. Although they wait for Godot, they are uncertain of his identity, they are neither sure whether they are waiting in the right place and on the right day, nor do they know what would happen if Godot came. Their ignorance reaches the highest peak as they have no watches , no time-tables and to add to the worse, there is none to fetch them information. There expectation from

Godot is neither definite:-

Vladimir:- Oh . . . nothing very definite.

Estragon:- A kind of prayer

Vladimir:- Precisely

Estragon:- A vague supplication. (Act I).

Theatre of Absurd captures the stasis in which the world had fallen after the wars. ‘Waiting for Godot’ reflects this stasis through the act of endless waiting of the two tramps. The ignorance leads the tramps in a state of impotence. A sense of baffled helplessness is produced as the tramps are forced to remain in a situation which is beyond their control. They indulge in trifles merely as stop-gaps to help pass the time. The waiting is the outcome of ignorance and impotence. And the trifles are the only source to realize and prove their existence as Estragon said, “. . . We always find something , eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist.”

The title of the play is of immense significance in reflecting the genre of Absurd theatre.

The play is a superb construction of the dominant action of time and its experience by man. Throughout the play, nothing really happens, and the change is in itself an illusion. Structurally the play is of two acts and the second act is the replica of the first. The play is the dramatization of the themes of habit, boredom and monotony. Out of boredom and monotony Of waiting in Act 1, Estragon says :-

“Nothing happens ,nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful.”

2. Conclusion

Habit, boredom, monotony, ignorance and impotence which enveloped the world after the wars and created an absurd existence, is recreated by Beckett in “Waiting for Godot.” Beckett captured this situation and depicted it through the deadening condition of the two tramps in a null and void state without any real action. The play has often been interpreted as a parable where Godot stands as God, or for a mythical human being or for the meaning of life, death or something eventful.

Reference

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