

Introduction: Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd

Samuel Beckett (1906 – 89) is probably the best known of the Absurd dramatists but like all other creative artists, he has his individuality and even idiosyncrasies. His ambivalent presentation of ‘Godot’, who has variously been identified as the Christian God, the son of God, a chaplinesque God and one Monsieur Godean from Balzac’s Le Fasseur, has indeed provoked criticism in spite of the somewhat disingenuous disclaimers from the author himself. It is an inadequate appreciation of the complexity that has led some critics to include him among a group of writers who simply do not subscribe to Christian values. Hugh Kenner holds the view that Cartesian ideas are current in Beckett’s oeuvre (80). Martin Esslin considers Beckett’s writing a literary exposition of Satre’s existentialism (60). According to Ruby Cohn, “Beckett mocks the whole classico – Christian tradition in Godot” (222). A.J Leventhal states: “Beckett has no strong views

on the existence of God” (qtd. in Calder 8). An investigation into Beckett’s plays reveals considerable echoes of Christian images, ideology and idiom in the author’s works. Accordingly, it is intended here to suggest an approach giving due consideration to the theological elements of the Christian culture in which Beckett grew up. The highly original sense in which this dramatist appeals to our modern feelings about the ‘absurdity’ of contemporary life will be analysed from the perspective of cross-currents generated by the ongoing transition away from dogmatic theology. Critics like Ronald Gray, Fred E. Luchs, Charles McCoy have dealt with Christian problems in Waiting for Godot (1955) but other major plays like Endgame (1958), Krapp’s Tape (1959), All That Fall (1967), Eh Joe (1967), Not I (1973) and Catastrophe (1984) have not been brought under the ambit of Christian interpretation. Moreover, no extensive study has been made to relate the study of Beckett’s plays to the Bible and to substantiate that there is a Biblical dimension to the dramatist’s view of the Absurd.

Absurdity has a long history. It can be traced as far back as the Ecclesiastes, the mime plays of antiquity and the commedia dell’arte.

Even Shakespeare, Goethe and Ibsen are regarded as harbingers of the Absurd. So the whole work of dramatic literature has been a prelude to the glorious emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd. But any discussion of Absurdity involves the collection of essays called The Myth of Sisyphus (1942) by Albert Camus who is still most widely known as the philosopher of the Absurd. A number foreign playwrights of the 1950's and early 60's living in France and agreeing to the view of Albert Camus that the human situation is essentially absurd, gave expression to the post war mood of the disillusionment and scepticism in their writings. These writers did not belong to any formal movement but it came to be called "the Theatre of the Absurd". The spirit of Absurdism is seen in Alfred Jarry's anarchic Ubu Roi produced in 1896. It is in the book The Theatre of the Absurd (1961) by Martin Esslin that the term and the philosophy of Absurdism were made familiar to the reading public. Some of the first plays of the Theatre of the Absurd are Eugene Ionesco's The Bald Prima Donna (1950), Arthur Adamov's The Invasion (1950) and Beckett's Waiting for Godot (1955). Later Absurd writers included Harold Pinter of Britain and Edward Albee of the United States. Their writings reflect

the influence of comic traditions drawn from such sources as commedia dell'arte, vaudeville and music hall combined with such theatre arts as mime and acrobatics. At the same time, the impact of ideas as expressed by the Surrealist, Existentialist and Expressionist Schools and the writings of Franz Kafka are evident in the movement. The Theatre of the Absurd declined by the 1960s. Still some of its innovations have been absorbed into the main stream of theatre while serving to inspire further experiments.

It is one of the general experiences of human beings to confront a world deprived of a comfortable and generally accepted vision of life. It turns out to be a disjointed, purposeless and absurd world. When we are cut off from religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, a sense of loss is inevitable. This metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of human condition is understood to be the theme of the plays of the Absurd movement. Consequently the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' is applied to a group of the dramatists of the 1950's who, nevertheless did not regard themselves as a school. They merely share certain attitudes towards human predicament in the universe. "They have, moreover, two further distinguishing features: their tremendous

variety and patent unwillingness to fall neatly behind any one standard or one leader; and the fact that the great majority of them have working-class origins” (Taylor 11). The Theatre of the Absurd is not doctrinaire; it only strives to express diverse nuances of a common sense of the senselessness about the human condition. It also seeks to expose the inadequacy of the rational approach. By the abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought, Absurdism challenges conventional ways of looking at complex reality. It does not, however, argue about the absurdity of the human condition. It merely presents it in terms of concrete images. As a result, most of the Absurdist plays are incomprehensible to the uninitiated and they are part of a new and still developing stage-convention that has not been generally understood and defined properly. Yet, some defining characteristics can be identified and it is worth considering them.

When we think of a good play, we have in our mind a clearly constructed story, subtle characterisation, a fully explained theme, a spirit of the age, witty repartee and pointed dialogue but Absurd plays have no story or plot to speak of, no recognisable characters and no beginning or an end. On the contrary, the Absurd playwright tends to

paint an inner landscape instead of the outer world. No clear dichotomy between fantasy and fact is seen. The playwright develops a free attitude towards time and it is used according to his subjective requirements. The environment of the Absurd plays in which a series of images are presented to project mental conditions, very often remains fluid. We find the language very unnerving as it seems to get nowhere. Despite its patterns and cliches with its uncanny resemblance to 'real' speech and disorganised and pointless qualities, we may be able to find a greater reality. Moreover, they have a predilection for an iron precision of language and construction as it is considered a defense against the chaos of living experience.

The Absurd plays are conceived as something which the audience must experience even though they may not be able to offer a logical explanation of the details of that experience. We will be nearer to appreciating them than thinking. It is because such reactions are probably what the playwright intends. We are not expected to have explanations. There won't be any. We will get only the feeling of what the play is about in a broader sense. The Absurd plays very often frustrate our expectations. There will be elements of realism. The

settings may be detailed and domestic. The talk may be like ordinary conversation. So we tend to expect that the play will pose a problem that will eventually be resolved but only to be frustrated. There will be bizarre elements that prevent us from making sense of what we see.

Each of the Absurd dramatists is an individual who regards himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private life. Each has his own personal approach to both subject matter and form, his own roots, sources and background. But they have a good deal in common. Their work most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the Western world. Writers like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Robert Pinget, N.F Simpson, Edward Albee, Fernando Arrabal and Gunter Grass exemplify in their works one form or another of the tradition of the Absurd. By incorporating devices from circus, mimes, clowning, verbal nonsense and the literature of dream and fantasy which often have a strong allegorical component, Absurdists have blazed new trails.

The hallmark of their attitude is that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have to be swept away. These were tested, found wanting, discredited as cheap and childish illusions. The decline of religious faith was latent until the end of the Second World War; as a form of substitute religious faith in progress, nationalism and various totalitarian fallacies masked the subliminal agitation. All this was shattered by the war. By 1942, Albert Camus was putting the question why man should not seek escape in suicide since life had lost all meaning. "The Absurd, for Camus, is an absence of correspondence between the mind's need for unity and the chaos of the world the mind experiences, and the obvious response is either suicide or, in the opposite direction, a leap of faith" (Hinchliffe 36).

The Theatre of the Absurd is noted for its 'devaluation' of language though language is an important point in its conception. The concrete and objectified images of the stage tend towards a poetry couched in the transcendence and contradictions of the words spoken by the characters on the stage. "The theatre of Absurd is thus part of the anti-literary movement of our time which has found its expression in abstract painting with its rejection of literary elements in pictures"

(Esslin, Absurd 26). The success of the Theatre of the Absurd within a short span of time was phenomenal and it stimulated a large body of work in its convention.

The attitude of this kind of literature is a judgment on ourselves in a time of outrage and apocalypse. Moreover, it has adopted a new attitude towards itself accepting silence as its metaphor. Silence is the state towards which the entropy of language tends. The result is anti-literature. Therefore, anti-literature, the term used for the literature of Beckett, symbolises intimations of violence and revelations which lead to inversions of forms and content. But this silence in literature does not result in the drying up of spirit. Instead, it proclaims a new form of transcendental experience. The new literature very often evades the social, historical and aesthetic standards that used to render identity to literature in previous periods. Writers belonging to this genre of literature touch on the experiences that awe them. The outrage that one finds in their writings is the result of this metaphysical revolt. When human beings find their existence on the earth painful, their ire is turned against God and it amounts to metaphysical revolt. In certain situations, humans show their desire for

nothingness consequent in the exhaustion of the mind by its own rebellion. This is tantamount to metaphysical surrender.

In the outrage, the very being of man is put on trial. What follows is a language of violence, demonic action and reaction compressed into a terrible unity that ultimately becomes a nothingness as no meaning or value can be assigned to it. Its function is to turn human beings into things. Under its pressure the change of the human form is downward, towards the worms of Beckett, the insect people and sentient ooze of Burroughs. It is not temporal but spatial, not historical but ontological. In the landscape of violence, an inescapable part of this literature, both the attacker and the victim constitute an integral part. Even the motive is reversed in this type of literature. Old fashioned protests yield to modern outrage. Outrage is a response to the vacuum and it requires apocalyptic change. Apocalyptic violence can be conceived by the oppressed as retribution against their enemies and even the millennium can be understood by them as an idea of power rather than of love. Moreover, we come across the rejection of the self or human identity revealed through apocalyptic metaphors. The image of the man as the measure of all things is shattered when

the writers speak of the cripples, the satyrs and the junkies and sometimes such loathing of human identity reaches its consummation in orgiastic destruction.

Outrage and apocalypse are not the only main responses that find expression in the new literature. Other ideas also are central to the character of the literature of the Absurd. When the writer begins to write, he conceives anti-literature either as pure creation or futile play. The Absurd creator does not value his work highly. He spurns his activity. Thus the imagination gives up its ancient authority and it finds its glorified ideal in the ironic attitude of the wordless author. Literary obscenity also finds its place in the works of the Absurd authors. In a culture where there is sexual repression, protest may take the form of obscenity and the literature that exposes this motive becomes a literature of revolt. In their works we notice that the excremental obsessions parody themselves and deny all love. In the game of parody as in the act of obscenity, antilanguage rules.

The literature of the Absurd denies the old principles of causality, psychological analysis and symbolic relations. It presents characters convinced of universal irrelevance and things breaking

loose of words and of connection between subjects and objects. It refutes all ideas of pre-established order. If man wants to be alone and refuses communion with the universe, the fate is neither tragic nor comic, but absurd. This type of literature develops a new attitude challenging the assumptions of our civilisation and also the ancient excellence of literary discourse.

Samuel Beckett is a master of the avant-garde. He lives in “a universe where love has been frozen, then, an insidiously plausible universe, a universe that bubbles up into invisible grotesques and a universe that its creator did not happen upon until relatively later in life, after he was forty” (Kenner 16). For him, art is not art if it is not taken away from impossibility. Words can only demonstrate their emptiness. Certainty in knowledge is no longer possible. Religion and metaphysics have lost their traditional authority. Human relations are at bottom cruel. Therefore, love is a disguise of power and power is a disguise of solitude. Matter that undergoes decay remains alien to mind giving no chance for union between the two. But human consciousness is capable of reflecting upon itself and entertaining its own end. Thus literature becomes the inaudible game of a solipsist and

it tends to contract into silence or towards an entropic state. Yet his silence, despite its grim satiric note, has something in common with the silence of holy men who after knowing pain and suffering, reach for a peace beyond human understanding. “Beckett’s view of life is basically a religious one: it is the view of a man who seeks some meaning beyond the trivial happenings of everyday life, a purpose beyond the physical needs of a specific time and place” (Pronko 54). Indeed, the emphasis in this thesis is on the religious echoes from the Christian Scripture in the plays of Beckett, as will be demonstrated particularly in chapter five.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Through these chapters, an attempt will be made to introduce the main themes and motifs recurring in Beckett’s plays. At the same time it is intended to highlight the ways in which Beckett’s dramatic expression of some of the basic human philosophical problems are viewed against the background of the Biblical tenets and dogmas.

After a short introductory chapter highlighting the chief characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd and Beckett’s premier position among the Absurdist, attention focuses in the second

chapter, “Beckett’s Vision of Life and Art”, on his vision of life and art, the shaping of which has been the result of various influences. His early upbringing, education, influence of philosophers and writers like Descartes, Camus, Sartre, Proust, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, various literary moments, religion, society and art have contributed to his Absurdist view which is the hallmark of his vision. His pessimism, cynicism and his morbid despair are discussed in depth.

The third chapter, “Beckett as an Avant-garde: His Plots and Characters in Absurdity” concentrates on the salient features of Beckett as an Avant-garde playwright. His plots and characters demonstrate how they differ from those of the conventional plays and appeal to a particular section of people that embrace the tramp, the homeless outcast, the crippled and the deranged. The rejection of the sequential plot, disability, pathos and transitoriness of human life are analysed. The absurd elements in the plays are studied against the background of the Bible to substantiate that there is a religious aspect to Beckett’s Absurdism.

The fourth chapter, “The Motif of Time in the Plays of Beckett”, aims at the discussion of the idea of Time developed in the

plays. The linear and the static qualities of Time are analysed with their impact on human beings. Beckett's thesis that Time and space are voids, also is discussed. Moreover, his views on Time are examined in the Biblical context too.

The fifth chapter, "Biblical Imagery and Echoes in the Plays of Beckett", proposes to give a detailed picture of religious imagery and litotes in the plays. Beckett's intent to lean onto Biblical characters, stories and situations for cross-references is examined and how he has succeeded in creating a situation of humorous irreverence by irony, satire, paradox and sarcasm, also will be subjected to detailed study.

The sixth chapter, Conclusion, will have a recap of the conclusions of all the preceding chapters with an emphasis on the many-splendoured genius of Beckett. Over and above, efforts will be made to prove the thesis that Beckett by his attack and assault on God and religion has succeeded in formulating his philosophy of Absurdity, still with a religious dimension.