

A Study of Absurdity in Samuel Beckett's Play *Waiting for Godot* and Albert Camus Novel *The Outsider*

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Abstract *While keeping in view the elements of absurdity, the study focuses the analysis of Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot" and Camus' novel "The Outsider". The artistic features of these works such as title, setting, structure, theme, characters and actions/dialogues are overviewed through the lens of absurdity. Both of the texts have these issues in some proportion with different contexts but many similarities. The absurdity appeared was in the form of meaninglessness of life without any goal and purpose, chaos in life, love for death and emotional and spiritual barren characters.*

Key Words:

Samuel Beckett, Camus, Chaos, Existentialism, Absurdity, Novel and Play

Introduction

There are different methods and approaches to texts analysis which are carried out at different levels and at different stages. If some focus on linguistic analysis of text then other are interested in literary analysis. If some prefer post colonial analysis of text then other are motivated by discourse analysis and so this process continues. As far as the present study is concerned, it is also a point of the same circle. Here, in this study we decided to work on the absurdity in two texts in order to bring some sort of comparison that how these two texts represent key issues of absurdity. The texts selected are Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot" and Camus' novel "The Outsider". Though much have been written on these two literary texts from existentialist point of view but still we believe that the present

study has uncovered many dilemmas of absurdity in the texts and in this way the analysis will further our understanding of absurdity. Although efforts have been made to make the analysis more comprehensive, but still because of the length of the texts only limited examples are selected and thus worked on.

Existentialism

Existentialism which carries different themes and meanings is a twentieth century philosophical movement that began and flourished after World War II in France. The first existentialists with whom this philosophical movement can be related are Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. They were not existing when the actual existentialism started in the twentieth century. Though existentialism got different connotations but basically its focus was on individual and his relation to God that why people exist and what role this existence has got. It says that man's life is full of unease, restlessness, awkwardness, apprehensions, worries, angst, and fear and with no meaning in life. In this regard Marshall (2006) while presenting all the negative aspects of life states that it is concerned with homelessness, facelessness, meaninglessness and solitariness. There are two views about existentialism i.e., atheist and theist existentialism. Atheist existentialism is the belief that life is meaningless with no purpose. It is just existence with no ultimate truth. This view is shared by Camus and Samuel Beckett etc. Camus even goes to the extent that even philosophy begins with reflection on suicide. On the other hand, theist existentialism believes that it is not the fact that life is without any purpose and meaningless but it is we people that cannot understand this phenomenon. This includes Kierkegaard's philosophy about existence who turns to Christ for salvation (Blackman, 1952). To make this meaningless life more dignified and decorous, choices are to be made. This does not mean that these choices too are meaningless. These choices are supposed to be rational and not irrational like the world, man lives in with no purpose. In this regard Nietzsche (quoted in Maurice Natanson, 1973, p. 2)) says "God is dead and men are faced with the profound responsibility of deciding for themselves, choosing for themselves, acting for themselves, and being themselves; i.e., choosing authentic existences rather than "losing" themselves in the crowd, being coming a "non-entity," escaping reality". It means that they are of the view that do, what you want to because after death only your existence will come to an end and there will be no future about which you are to be worried.

There is another name Jean-Paul Sartre whose famous maxim is "existence precedes essence". William Barrent (1964, p. 67) says that "essence is what the thing is; existence refers rather to the sheer fact that the thing is". He further clarifies it and says that if somebody says that I am a man then it means that "I am" represents existence and "man" is the essence that the presence creates. It means that we exist with no essence and thus no reason or purpose. Man does not exist

for the fulfillment of some predefined goals but rather it is man himself who will define his goal and essence. In this way individual is free to live and act. In this sense these views reject any agreed upon or determining code. But it should be kept in mind that this freedom does not avoid man's responsibility. This is this freedom which leads towards responsibility. The individual is responsible for what he is doing, he is and what he thinks. As there is no limit to man's freedom, in the same way there is no rational bound to what he is responsible for (Tulloch, 1952). It is man who can choose his own course of action but this freedom is also a problem (Warnock, 1970). Now what happens is that if individuals are free and they are completely responsible for their actions, beliefs and other things then this struggle between freedom and responsibility creates a situation of anxiety which leads to escapism and at last to self deception.

To conclude we can say that existentialism is a movement whose basic themes include individual freedom, responsibility, irrationality of life, subjectivity, selection of choices, anxiety and absurdity. As we have tried to analyze both the texts while keeping in view the major themes of absurdity, so here I will just throw some light on absurdity.

Absurdity

Absurdity is the view of existentialist philosopher that human existence in this universe is ambiguous and chaotic. In literal sense absurdity is meaninglessness, bizarre, incongruence, silly, ridiculous and strange. Though it was Beckett who is well known for the theater of the absurd but basically the word absurd was coined by "Martin Esslin to describe the anti-realistic post-war drama of playwrights as Beckett, Arthur Adamov and Jean Genet" (Nelson, 1993, p. 67). In absurdity, no meaning exists in this universe for man, but it is man himself who has to search for the meaning. Absurdity is in fact a condition where man is compelled to exist without his individualism in society and hence does not possess any degree of effective communication (Robert, 1995). In the real sense, man's existence cannot escape from being absurd. One cannot claim that he has some solutions for attaining the life which is without being absurd. Martin Esslin quoted in Nelson (1993, p. 68) says that absurd is a:

kind of drama that presents a view of the absurdity of the human condition by the abandoning of usual or rational devices and by the use of nonrealistic form....Conceived in perplexity and spiritual anguish, the theater of the absurd portrays not a series of connected incidents telling a story but a pattern of images presenting people as bewildered beings in an incomprehensible universe.

So while keeping in view the above definitions of absurdity we can say that in absurd conditions man becomes senseless, lost and detached. It is this senselessness where one gets "conscious realization that there is no final resolution---no final synthesis---but only a kind of social game whose purpose it is

to create theses that will eventually destroy themselves” (Goodwin, 1971, p. 45). In absurdity death is considered the most awaited thing and in fact the most important moment of one's life and hence celebrated. Now, the question arises that why death is so welcomed besides the fact that it is the harshest aspect of one's life. The answer to this question is escapism i.e., to escape from the very source of absurdity, which is life.

So all this means that absurdity is despair i.e. disparity of life and actions where man is compelled to go for some remedies and in this way death is considered as opium which can help in escapism from this absurdity.

Samuel Becket and Absurdity

Samuel Becket was born in Dublin in 1906. It is said about his father that he was a contractor. His mother was a nurse. Beckett got his early education from a boarding high school and it was 1923 that he took admission at Trinity College, Dublin from where he got his bachelor degree. There he read modern languages and that is why joined as an English teacher. Then he served as a lecturer and taught French at Campbell College, Belfast. In Paris he met James Joyce and started writing in criticism and poetry. After traveling many countries, at last he settled in Paris and joined writing as his profession. In his writing, Beckett covered almost every genre of literature, which ranged from novels to essays, short stories, poetry and criticism. Beckett major work includes three best plays which are Endgame, Happy days and Waiting for Godot.

If Beckett is studied, then most of his work deals in some manner with some of existentialists' ideas and absurdity. In fact, Beckett considers human existence as the continual force of despair and disappointment. In fact it was his play “Waiting for Godot” wherefrom the idea of the theatre of absurd came. His contribution to the theatre of absurd is so great that he is considered as the father of theatre of absurd. In “Waiting for Godot” there is absurdity in the sense that both the two characters are waiting for some body known Godot, who seems to solve their problem. But what happens is that after having waited for days, he does not come and thus they are left in despair without Godot's help and comments. So this means that Beckett was an existentialist who does not believe in God as “Waiting for Godot” suggests and comes in the category of atheist existentialists.

Camus and Absurdity

Albert Camus was born in 1913 Mondovi, Algeria. His father name was Lucien Auguste Camus and mother name was Catherine Helene Sintes. His father was an agricultural laborer. He died in 1914 in the Battle of the Marne. After his father death he was moved to Algiers. He too, like Beckett worked in different places at different levels. First he worked as a police clerk and then as a salesman. Like

Beckett he too was an athlete but like him, due to tuberculosis he does not become a teacher which he wanted. In 1940 he left Algiers and had to return because of the German army attack on France. World War II brought Sartre and Camus together. After writing the novel "The Fall" he was awarded with Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957. His literary career came to an end when he was died in 1960.

Like Beckett, he too wrote in different genres of literature like essays, plays and novels. His major work includes The Fall, The Myth of Sisyphus and The Outsider also known as The Stranger. Like Beckett, if we study most of Camus work, it reveals its existentialist spirit and absurdity. Quite interestingly Camus too is absurd in his writing. Absurdity is obvious from his novel "The Outsider". Meursault the protagonist of the novel got no interest in the world but rather see it quite hostile towards him and thus being tired of its cruelty, represents the absurd world. He becomes aware of the insane nature of life and considers himself as an alien to this world. Like Beckett, Camus too comes in the category of atheist existentialists who does not believe in God as his man character Meursault does.

Absurdity: Waiting for Godot and The Outsider

Before starting the analysis, we would like to say something about the plan which we have followed while doing this analysis. First, while dealing with general topics like title, characters and setting etc., general analysis of both the texts is presented and then actual text based analysis (analysis of actions) is given.

Absurdity in Title

If we take the very titles of both the texts and compare it with reference to absurdity, then we are made aware that both the titles show the absurd nature of the texts. For example the title "Waiting for Godot" reflects absurdity in the sense that it too is full of problems and dilemmas as human existence is. As the title is "Waiting for Got", but still nobody knows that who Godot is. Usually waiting is done for those who we associate some meaning and purpose but here in this play neither purpose nor meaning is associated and hence create the effect of meaninglessness in the title. It is this meaningless which not only makes things ambiguous but also absurd.

Likewise, the title of the Camus' novel "The Outsider" or "The Stranger" also reflects absurdity but from different angles. Here the stranger or outsider is used for a person who is rejected by the community and particular society. This fact is obvious from the text where Meursault, the protagonist is thrown away by the community not only to jail but also tries him to be executed. Meursault has become a stranger to all i.e., who so ever know him or not. Another proof of his strangeness is his weak belief on God and in this way he is estranged to God as well. Hence, the title shows the absurd nature of the novel.

Absurdity in Setting

The setting of the play “Waiting for Godot” is an odd and alien one. It is a roadside where two men are standing under a barren tree and waiting for someone named Godot. This is this strangeness, barrenness and loneliness, which set the environment of despair where one’s hopes could not fulfill. Here too, the two persons who seem deserted and isolated from the community, with rags and tattered clothes got no destiny except waiting. The strangeness and despair nature of the setting produces sense of anarchy and thus adds to the absurd nature of the drama.

In the same way, if we look at the novel “The Outsider” then we are convinced to some extent that here too the setting is not free from absurdity. Here we observe no single setting where the whole events are taking place rather two three places where the actions are taking place e.g. hometown of Meursault, the beach and lastly the court and jail. Thus, if the happening in each of these settings are observed (almost deaths) then the absurd nature of the novel will come to the surface.

Absurdity in Structure

The play “Waiting for Godot” is structured in a way, which presents the idea not only about the uselessness and meaninglessness of time but also of life. The basic structure of the drama where being tired of their lives and waiting but without any help from Godot, the two main characters with non-sensical existence, two times both in Act one and Act two, try to commit suicides. The continuous waiting increases their despair and their lives are disgusted in this way and thus absurd. This is this structure, which shows the absurd nature of the drama.

Similarly, the novel “The Outsider” also got a complicated structure which is completely absurd. What happens in the very beginning is that Meursault’s mother dies and starts giving hints of the absurdity in the novel. In the second part of the novel, Meursault kills an Arab which leads to Meursault’s trial and finally execution and death in the last part.

So we can say that death, which is fear, and the end of life, time and hope is the overwhelming theme in both of these texts. We know that death is the worst happening and no body will want it to have but still if we look to the protagonists of the concerned texts that are Meursault in “The Outsider” and Estragon and Vladimir in “Waiting for Godot”, they not only want death but also welcome it. They want death to escape the harsh realities of life and to achieve their goals and this is the sign of absurdity.

Absurdity in Theme

As we have been through the structures, titles and settings of both the texts and

found elements of absurdity in them. So the same can be the case with the themes of the texts. The major theme in both the texts seems to be that of isolation; physical, spiritual and mental isolation. If “Waiting for Godot” is taken, it is obvious from the setting i.e., country roadside, a barren tree and evening time and two absurd characters Estragon and Vladimir, the isolation and detachment in this case is more physical than spiritual one. They are waiting for Godot quite away from their community in a detached and absurd manner.

In the other play Meursault is living alone in an isolated apartment, quite away from his home town and from his parents without any family, represent his physical isolation. In the same way, he is emotionally and spiritually isolated without any love for his girl friend Marie and no respect to the existence of God, which is spiritual isolation. This theme of isolation is absurdity. Because if we consider again Camus definition of absurdity as already mentioned, then the strangeness, exile and detachment and isolation in themes of the texts is an evidence of its absurd nature.

Absurdity in Characters

The characters of the texts also got elements of absurdity. In order to prove it, if we consider the main characters of “Waiting for Godot” i.e., Estragon and Vladimir, we can see that they are waiting without knowing the purpose they are waiting for. Furthermore, they are not making sense of the lives and existence and that is why they think about suicide. In the same way, they also indicate the carelessness of Godot towards them. This relationship is represented in the shape of master slave dichotomy named Pozzo, the master and Lucky, the slave, where no importance is given to the slave and is overburdened without any care. This is to make Estragon and Vladimir realize that though you are waiting for Godot but this could be your situation in the end. Another thing which is also associated with the absurdity in the characters of “Waiting for Godot” is their trust on each other for holding up and support. Each of them believes to get some sort of help from the other one and thus tries to put a seal to his chaotic life.

Same is the case with “The Outsider’s” main character Meursault. As we have already discussed about his detached nature whether from social or religious point of view, proves absurdity in his character, we know that in the novel many events occurred but without slight attention and care from Meursault, which shows his indifference and meaningless of life. During the trial he is asked many times about the five shootings for influencing him but he remained untouched and unmoved. Similarly, he is questioned about the death of his mother but still he was unmoved because he was sure about the chaotic world where he lives and so got no means of defending oneself. Furthermore, he appears more absurd when he is asked about God but he did not appear to believe in any such existence.

Therefore, we can say that it is this meaninglessness, this detachment, this strangeness and finally, this spiritual and physical isolation in the characters of both the texts that make them absurd characters.

Absurdity in Actions/Dialogues

There are many examples in both the texts, which highlight the absurdity of the texts. In the “The Outsider” when Mersault’s mother dies and he receives a telegram, quite carelessly he explains: “Mother died today. Or, may be, yesterday; I can’t be sure. The telegram from home says: Your mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Deep sympathy” (p. 14). It seems that Meursault is quite indifferent to his mother’s death. He shows no sentiments of sorrow. Why this happens? It is because that from the very beginning he is not taking thing seriously. He recounts his mother’s death as nothing has happened. Furthermore, when he goes for the funeral, the caretaker asks him that whether he will see his mother, he replies with simple no. Meursault has come to believe that human life is meaningless and it makes no difference whether one exists or not. Rather he considers death as a solver of all problems. Similarly, Marie loves him and most of the time she remains with him, whether in cinema or at home. He has been to the extreme of having sex with her. He recounts: “A moment later she asked me if I love her. I said that sort of question has no meaning, really; but I suppose I didn’t” (p. 42). This shows that he is quite detached from the society and social norms. Though he goes with the girl but without any love. He considers these things as quite meaningless as the human existence is. It is this estrangement from society where absurdity comes. If we consider the trial and execution scene, there too he shows his indifference. This time his indifference is not only to society but also to God. When he is asked in the last chapter, do you believe in God? He responded:

“I explained that I didn’t believe in God.

Are you really sure about that?

I said I saw no point in troubling my head about the matter; whether I believed or didn’t was, to my mind, a question of so little importance. (p. 114)

All this shows that he is so estranged even from the existence of God that he came to the state that he clearly announce that he does not believe in God. Meursault has even lost all his hopes and become pessimistic consciously. In this regard he was asked by Chaplin “have you no hope at all? Do you really think that when you die you die outright, and nothing remains?” (P.115). To this Meursault answers “Yes”. This means that being fed up by the useless and meaningless life, Meursault welcomes death for freeing himself from the disordered and disorganized situation of life.

In “Waiting for Godot”, the very first page and in fact the very first dialogue between Estragon and Vladimir has absurdity and purposelessness of life. Estragon while pulling off his shoes, panting and quite exhausted rests for sometime when Vladimir enters. Estragon says:

ESTRAGON: (*giving up again*). Nothing to be done.

VLADIMIR: (*advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart*). I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (*He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon.*) So there you are again. (p-1)

This dialogue bring into surface the absurd nature of the play where though Estragon is discussing his problem of taking off of his shoes but it represents the entire human existence where man is disappointed and disillusioned by the very fact of existence which bring despair and hence, absurdity. It means that man cannot change his situation. What simply he can do is to exist and suffer. This “nothing to be done” is repeated four times in this play (pp. 1, 3, 4& 15). It stresses the helpless nature of man. The word “again” in the above extract refers to repetition which makes the life monotonous and boring. Similarly, Vladimir's state of action is also symbolic in nature as he gets inflicted with prostrate disease due to which he is moving with legs wide apart and with stiff strides. It represents man's suffering in this universe where life is nothing but absurd. In another place, the despair in life is discussed as:”

VLADIMIR: (*gloomily*). It's too much for one man. (*Pause. Cheerfully.*) On the other hand what's the good of losing heart now, that's what I say. We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties. (p-2)

Vladimir is fed up of the routine miseries of life and that is why he says “it is too much for one man”. He means to say that life is a sort of burden where living has got no incentives and no purpose and hence, quite absurd. Vladimir's actions too are absurd. He starts gloomily and after a pause becomes cheerful when he says that it is no use of crying over spilt milk. It means that the time has gone when he should have thought about these troubles. Now, he has lost all that he had. His life is completely absurd.

The two character of the play “Waiting for Godot” are in fact inviting death. They cannot bear this absurd life anymore where there is no clarity of purpose and goal. They invite each other to kill each other so that they can escape this absurdity of life. This fact is clear from the following dialogue.

VLADIMIR: You always say that, and you always come crawling back.

ESTRAGON: The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.

VLADIMIR: What other? (*Pause.*) What other?

ESTRAGON: Like billions of others.

VLADIMIR: (*Sententious.*) To every man his little cross. (*He sighs.*) Till he dies. (*Afterthought.*) And is forgotten. (57)

They even want recognition but are not welcomed. Absurdity cannot exceed further than the fact that your very name becomes senseless as what happened with Pozzo.

POZZO: (*Terrifying voice.*) I am Pozzo! (*Silence.*) Pozzo! (*Silence.*) Does that name mean nothing to you? (*Silence*) say does that name mean nothing to you? (*Vladimir and Estragon look at each other questioningly.*) (p. 23)

Here Pozzo asks time and again that his name is Pozzo but then too Estragon and Vladimir are indifferent and call him with wrong name. If somebody loses his identity and name, the situation becomes unbearable and absurd. This gives the sense that like Pozzo, everybody will lose his or her identity in this chaotic world where people become so indifferent that they cannot even recognize you by your name. Absurdity is not only in the meaninglessness of the world we live in but also in the time when we become blind to it and cannot realize its effects or functions. Vladimir when ask Pozzo about his blindness he told:

POZZO: I woke up one fine day as blind as Fortune. [*Pause.*] Sometimes I wonder if I'm not still asleep.

VLADIMIR: And when was that?

POZZO: I don't know.

VLADIMIR: But no later than yesterday-

POZZO: (*violently*). Don't question me! The blind have no notion of time. The things of time are hidden from them too. (p. 85)

Here the important point is that of meaning. Symbolically, this means that we all are blind without the notion of time. In fact, this is the situation of all human beings. The meaninglessness of time is in fact the meaninglessness of life and this meaninglessness cannot be changed if one makes efforts as Vladimir says that "one is what one is...the essentials doesn't change (p.15). It means that the absurdity of the world is not to be changed but it is you who is supposed to undergo change and that is death.

Conclusion

To conclude, we would say that as both the writers are famous for their absurdity, so their present works, also shows absurdity because of the meaninglessness of actions, sterility of the characters and strangeness of setting etc. Furthermore, we can say that both the works show some sort of absurdity but still got many differences. The very basic difference is that of their beliefs in God. On the one hand, Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for days for the arrival of Godot but on the other hand Meursault does not believe in God. Though Estragon and Vladimir

believed in God and waited for His coming but like Meursault who did not believe in God, have not the blessing of meeting Him and thus the play ends with nothing but with meaninglessness and absurdity.

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