

A Comparative Study of Selected Plays by Edward Albee and Eugene Ionesco

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Abstract

The thesis is a comparative study of the Theatre of the Absurd and the influence of existentialism in Albee's three plays *The Zoo Story*, *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Ionesco's two plays *The Chairs* and *Rhinoceros*.

This thesis deals with themes of alienation, illusion and reality as well as the disrupted family relations. It also points out parallels between the various plays in relation to the dilemma of modern man and the playwrights' philosophy behind it.

The study includes an introductory chapter, four chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter I is entitled "Theatre of the Absurd", where the term 'absurd' is defined and the main characteristics of absurdist drama are tackled. The history of the Theatre of the Absurd is displayed and how the social background helped in its emergence. It reflects how the internal conflicts of man in the plays are associated with absurdist effects. The study answers questions on the success and failure of the ability to transcend the meaningless world and the escape from the limitations of reality to an imaginative power which forces viable solutions. This chapter shows that although there are distinctions between avant-garde theatre in France and America arising from difference in purpose, yet both writers employ similar methods and present similar views on the dilemma of the modern human condition. They both express in their plays the sense of loss, the futility of existence and how modern man faces the absurdity of his or her essence.

Chapter II entitled "Alienating Factors of Character Portrayal" deals with the major reasons and philosophical ideas which led to human isolation. It explores the psycho-social milieu that led to such a state. The alienation of both Albee and Ionesco's characters is inner and outer. Their

conformism alienates them from themselves, their prejudices and indifference towards each other alienate them from society. Although the alienation of Ionesco's characters is perceived immediately, in Albee's plays, the domestic and the superficial relationships disguise it for a while during the play.

Chapter III entitled “Illusion and Reality” attempts close analysis of this theme in the selected plays of Albee and Ionesco respectively. It deals with the American Dream in Albee's plays and the absurdity of life in Ionesco's plays. For Albee, it was a product of the falsity of the American Dream, while for Ionesco it was the protest against the deadliness of present-day mechanical bourgeois civilization. They both expressed the loss of real values and the degradation of human life. They reflected characters which belonged to a frightened populace which creates illusory values and dreams. Albee and Ionesco express an illuminating reflection of reality through the absurd lens. The playwrights were able to transcend the meaningless world they convey and escape from the limitations of reality by forcing an admission of awareness and rejection of the status quo.

Chapter IV entitled “Disrupted Family Relationships” tackles family relations in the light of the social milieu that leads to distorted relationships. In Albee's plays, although they have a family, they live in separate shells, while in Ionesco's plays the family tries to pass the time with absurd games and alcohol. Thus, the psychological reasons that lead to disrupted moral and family values are exposed, yet provide the impetus for a more honest and courageous encounter with the conditions of existence.

The conclusion includes all the findings and comparisons between the two playwrights.

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Introduction

‘ There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something, even more bizarre and inexplicable’ (Adams 153).

This theory reflects closely the primary concern which this thesis centers on. That is the human desire to impose meaning on an invariably meaningless universe. This desire is disappointed and nullified in the light of what existentialists call the human condition, a condition of being flung into an arbitrary and superfluous universe without having had any choice in this regard. As the theatre is regarded as one of the few outlets for the expression of public concerns and doubts, the Theatre of the Absurd was a prominent medium for this.

Read at face value the theory is humorous, however, through further consideration, it expresses one of the most prominent philosophical pursuits of the Theatre of the Absurd. It reflects how for many, the lack of meaning in the universe means that our futile attempts to give meaning and value to our lives deserves ridicule. Thus, absurd drama has contributed to an enlargement of human perception and opened new areas of experience that will be portrayed.

This thesis is a comparative study which will draw a comparison between the absurdity of human conditions in two different countries, America and France, yet reflect the same concerns, fears and pre-occupations. The study will explore the world view of the Absurd experience as depicted in three plays by Edward Albee *The Zoo Story* (1958), *The American Dream* (1950) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia*

Wolf? (1961-62) and two plays by Eugene Ionesco *The Chairs*(1952) and *Rhinoceros*(1961) respectively.

Methodology and Theatrical Framework:

The thesis attempts to examine the Existential theory as the pivotal philosophical background of The Absurd. It will also present the philosophical questions concerning the meaning of man's existence, the feelings of the absurdity of man in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of his certainties. It also poses the argument of what makes up the essence of being, a human being.

This thesis attempts the analysis of the selected plays using a comparative approach between both playwrights concerning their background and history which reflects the social relations between people and their values. Culture, therefore, governs a material, emotional and moral behaviour of the individual in relation to other people. The interaction between the characters is revealed and reflects their culture and society in the plays. The plays are thus translated and interpreted through reality and how they make people aware of various kinds of reality. Absence of awareness of a certain phenomenon is no proof that the phenomenon does not exist.

The Theatre of the Absurd was heavily influenced by Existentialism and its theories are the backbone of the movement, so this analysis cannot be achieved without taking these theories into consideration. In addition, the actions in the selected plays are primarily concerned with responses to the existential situation through the Absurdist themes that communicate an immediate reality, such as themes of marriage without love, families without understanding or contact without communion? As

Martin Esslin says:

Ultimately, a phenomenon like The Theater of the Absurd does not reflect despair or a return to dark irrational forces but expresses modern man's endeavor to come to terms with the world in which he lives. It attempts to make him face up to the human condition as it really is, to free him from illusions that are bound to cause constant maladjustment and disappointment. For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions and to laugh at it (567).

This literary movement has enabled Albee, Ionesco, Beckett, Genet, Adamov and Pinter as well as other dramatists to speak their thoughts through their work, in an understandable, commonplace and tragicomic style. This style ignores theatrical conventions and thwarts audience expectations, and most certainly conveys the meaninglessness of modern human existence. As Paolucci notes that:

Albee transforms social diatribe into an existential question, like Pirandello, he is not satisfied with exposing the public image, but works his way into the private conscience stripping it bare... He is not a critic with an ideal set of values, but the promethean destroyer of modern myths (25).

The theatre of the Absurd and Existentialism share the concern of the philosophical understanding of the purpose of life and what meaning life may have. Existentialism is concerned with the nature and perception of human existence and deals with the idea that the basic human condition is one of suffering and loneliness. The influence of Existentialism on The Theatre of the Absurd could be traced in the selected plays. For example, Albee is drawing from existential

philosophy in *The Zoo Story*. Jerry and his position in the American society are such examples. Each character exists within the bounds of his own private ego, while making futile attempts to get another character to understand him which usually results in more alienation.

These ideas are also presented in *The American Dream*, the inability of Daddy and Mommy understanding Grandma who they believe speaks a lot, but says nothing significant, portrays that the philosophical thinking begins with the human subject not merely the thinking subject but the ("being is" doing) acting, living, feeling human individual. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* there is also a clear influence of existentialism as George and Martha exist in a state of existential anxiety, each taking the blame for each other's failures, each trying to give reason to each other's fears. They are isolated in their deluded worlds. Ionesco's plays also reflect the existential philosophy, for they emphasize human freedom and responsibility. In *Rhinoceros* and *The Chairs*, everyday realities seem absurd, the individual has little power and is forced to conform and human communication is impossible. This inability to communicate shows the humorous phenomenon of men turning into rhinoceros, as every human being except one turns into a vicious animal, thereby abandoning all hopes of language as a means of communication. In *The Chairs*, this portrays old people who need to express their thoughts, but end up addressing themselves to a mass of empty chairs.

The thesis also attempts to analyze the different views on absurdism concerning the selected plays. As drama must have a plot then what could Absurd plays add if nothing happens in them? What new observations or insights could be available in such productions? The thesis will attempt to answer these questions. The plays selected are

directly associated to the Theatre of the Absurd as they share several characteristics, including nonsense dialogue, repetitive or meaningless action and non realistic plots. They are a reaction to realism. They do not try to conform to a concept of real life but provide an unreal experience. Characters are not meant to mimic real people, but instead are often metaphorical. These selected plays also illuminate how they were a reaction to the collapse of moral, religious, political and social structures following the two World Wars. The plays also convey the dehumanizing effects of modern civilization and depict the despair of the individual.

The thesis thus, is a pursuit of major themes in the Theatre of the Absurd. It is also a review of how absurdity is steeped in humankind's reasonable relation to the world, in a world that man did not choose to exist in, a world without any inherent significance. The realization of the insignificance of life as well as the perpetual need to reinvent this world in order to survive will also be displayed. Alienation, illusion and reality and the disrupted family relationships are the themes to be discussed in light of the Theatre of the Absurd.

The goal of this thesis is to inspect these themes and show how they are related to the dilemma of modern man. By pointing out parallels between the various plays, the present writer will attempt to create a full-scale picture of the two playwrights' philosophy and to discover the existential dimension behind the texts.

Through comparison, the thesis encapsulates the problems that face this generation and the social conditions affecting contemporary Western society. It will examine the role of inner and outer conflicts in the development of the plot of these plays. It is a search for a healthy and optimal way of living in such a society.

The study reflects how these absurdist playwrights aimed at conveying feelings of bewilderment, alienation and despair dominant at the time, and the sense that reality is itself unreal. They created not only plays that depicted the struggles on stage, but also the conflict in the lives of those portrayed.

The identifying traits of some writers in the theatre placed them in the philosophical thought of absurdism. It relied on a complete critique to the standards, rules and forms of existing drama. At the heart of the movement is the notion that human beings live an 'absurd' existence, with limited abilities to communicate to each other, while struggling in an unpredictable universe.

The study investigates the reasons why man in, a strong and rich society has gradually become inhuman and violent, how he has sacrificed human happiness to ensure materialistic success, why has man lost contact and communication with other fellow men? Why emotional emptiness and meaninglessness has shaped man's life?

The essence of Albee and Ionesco's plays revolves around a world in which reality proves to be an illusion where the characters find themselves deceived by the American dream they believed for so long in Albee's plays, and the bourgeois world in Ionesco's plays. Consequently, they feel estranged in their culture and their beliefs. The study will also examine how the playwrights were influenced by "The Theatre of the Absurd".

The dramatists of the theatre of the absurd sought each in his own way, to convey their sense of disillusionment and loss of faith. This attitude, a natural product of the Second World War, was also an echo of

the ideas highlighted, by existential philosophers, whose writings, as well as the social conditions resulting from the war, formed the cultural background of the theatre of the absurd. The Absurd dramatists, who viewed the world as irrational and man's behaviour as unmotivated and pointless, believed that any attempt to revolt against man's position in the world would be futile and impotent. Although Beckett and Ionesco insisted on man's confrontation with his environment and the dilemma of his existence, however this confrontation was in vain. According to them, man should bear the tragedy of existence because he is a helpless creature caught in the grip of a cruel fate with no faith to sustain him. For them, all the values and beliefs man has created to delude himself have failed to provide him with the sought-for salvation and have, therefore, collapsed. So, the dramatists of the Absurd believed that instead of building and maintaining new myths, man should face the ugliness and harshness of life and accept it as it is without any hope of changing.

Although America has emerged from the Second World War with a more prosperous and flourishing economy, and although American society has not directly experienced the horrors of war, it has suffered from other problems. It has experienced the feeling that a strong and rich society is gradually becoming inhuman and violent, sacrificing human happiness to ensure its materialistic success. This society now, feels it is heading towards its own destruction because it has departed from the values and morals that constitute the principles of civilization. It is a society which has not lived up to the ideals of freedom, individualism and prosperity which the pioneers tried to establish and which were meant to be the foundation of the 'Free World'.

The post-war generation in America has been strongly disillusioned by a society that has failed to maintain the simplest rules of the code of civil rights. It is horrified by the wars waged against peaceful countries on the assumption that this will maintain world peace; it is a generation

That has suddenly discovered that there are two levels of justice enforced by its own bigoted society whereby, in theory, it proclaims equal rights for all its citizens yet, in practice, racial discrimination is strongly maintained. In short, in such a society, only the strong has a chance to enjoy, freedom, individualism and democracy (Richard 370).

Thus, the younger generation which witnessed the growing injustice of American society, felt a strong urge to liberate itself from all kinds of social and political oppression. A new trend of social and political dissent started which aimed at changing the prevalent conditions in American society and its way of life. Demonstrations and civil disobedience were the expression of this trend of dissent. In the theatre, groups of experimental artists manifested this trend of protest in plays which they presented in non commercial off-Broadway theatres. Ionesco and Albee are eminent representatives of the new experimental theatre. Through the exploration of these two playwrights, this thesis will show man's weaknesses and his endeavour for change.

Chapter One

The Theatre of the Absurd

Since I find the world incomprehensible, I am waiting for someone to explain it to me
(Ionesco, interview, 1949).

To explain Ionesco's words according to Camus, man is put in an “absurd” situation as a result of the conflict between the human desire to understand the world and the inability to understand it (Cohn1).

Existentialism said: absurdity of human existence is the necessary result of man's attempts to live a life of meaning and purpose in an indifferent and uncaring universe. Absurdism replies: absurdity characterizes a world that no longer makes sense to its inhabitants, in which rational decisions are impossible and all action is meaningless and futile.

Both existentialists and Absurdists are concerned with the senselessness of the human condition, yet the way this concern is expressed differs. The Existentialists explored the irrational nature of human existence within the rational and logical framework of conventional and philosophical thought. The absurdists, however, abandoned the traditional elements of literature in general and theatre in particular. The setting, plot, and character development conveys a sense of absurdity in both form and content.

In general, the two movements differ in the conclusions yet each seems to draw from the realization that life is meaningless. Many absurdist productions appear to be making a case for the idea that all human efforts are futile and action is pointless; others seem to suggest