

Dialectical Discourse on Absurdism and Existentialism in Harold Pinter's The Birthday Party

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Abstract

Absurdism, one of the most exciting and creative movements in modern drama, is a name applied to a particular type of realistic drama that has absorbed theatre audience and critics for the past decades. One specific area, appropriately labeled 'Theatre of the Absurd' by the American Critic, Martin Esslin in the 1960s, offers its audience an existentialist point of view of the universe and forces them to consider the meaning of their existence in a world where there appears to be no true order or meaning. Including ever closer to a realistic representation of life, the evolution of absurd drama from Beckett to Stoppard brings a new focus to absurdism and expands the role of philosophy and metaphor in theatrical drama. Until the rise of this theatre of the absurd, drama had certain definite standards by which it was judged. The standards include characterization, engaging dialogue, clearly defined beginnings, middles and endings and definite setting. However, the drama of the absurd breaks all these conventions. Thus, this work focuses on the characteristics of absurdism and existentialism in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. The method employed is that of textual analysis through a philosophical concept called existentialism which serves as a guiding principle to the absurdist playwright and the

instrument used is drawn from the play of Harold Pinter; *The Birthday Party* (1958). A critical analysis of the text reveals the absurdist messages that reflect the condition of all existential beings as they confront life's crisis and meaninglessness of life at one time or the other.

Key words: Absurdism, Existentialism, Nothingness, Meaninglessness, Disillusionment.

Introduction

The Theatre of the absurd is a movement made up of many diverse plays, most of which were written between 1950s and 1960s. When first performed, these plays, such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) and Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1958), shocked their audiences as they were different from anything that had been previously staged. Martin Esslin coined the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' in his 1961 book of the same title. He defined it as such, because all the plays emphasized the absurdity of the human condition. He says in the book (1961, p. 5), Absurdism is that which is devoid of purpose, cut off from religious, metaphysical and transcended roots. Man is lost, all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.

Each play of the absurdist mode renders man's existence as illogical and meaningless. The idea of absurdism was a reaction of the collapse of moral, religious, political and social structures, following the two world wars which took place in 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 respectively. These wars made man to overlook God as the ultimate solution to human problems. Also democracy gave the spirit of man a new lease, so the

divine right of kings and monarchs were seen as illusion of reality. There was a radical move towards liberty of the conscience and action, that justice be brought to light. During these wars, some promises were made by the government, which were never fulfilled. People were left with disappointment and disillusionment. The existing religious faith in the spirit of nationalism, various totalitarian fallacies and commitment in ensuring implicit order in the universe, were all dead. The most obvious message of the absurd writers is that they reveal through a careful use of satire the absurdity of life lived without an awareness of the basic existential reality of life.

The view that man is lost in the universe where he lives and all his actions have become senseless and useless had earlier been dramatized in Albert Camus' book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Although, the notion of the absurd is pervasive in all the literature of Albert Camus, *The Myth of the Sisyphus*, is his chief work on the subject. In it, Camus considers absurdity as a confrontation, an opposition, a conflict or a divorce between two ideals. Specifically, he defines the human condition as absurd, as the confrontation between man's desire for significance/meaning/clarity and the silent, cold universe. The character Sisyphus is the prototype of an absurd hero condemned by the gods forever to roll a rock to the top of a mountain, only to have it rolled back down again by its own weight. This character represents the epitome of futile labour and pointless existence. Camus therefore argued that humanity had to resign itself to recognizing that a fully satisfying rational explanation of the universe was beyond its reach; in that sense, the world must ultimately be seen as absurd. Such realization or encounter with the absurd leaves the

individual with a choice; suicide. For Camus, suicide is a confession that life is simply not worth living. "It is a choice that implicitly declares that life is too much. Suicide offers the most basic way out of absurdity; the immediate termination of the self and self's place in the universe" (Camus, 1942, p. 120).

Many theatre historians and critics have labeled Alfred Jarry's French play *Ubu Roi* as the earliest example of theatre of the absurd. Absurdism also has its origin in Shakespearean drama, particularly through the influence of Commedia dell Arte. The current movement of Absurdism however, emerged in France after World War II, as a rebellion against traditional values and beliefs in western culture and literature. The playwrights loosely grouped under the label of the absurd attempt to convey their sense of bewilderment, anxiety and wonder, in the face of an inexplicable universe. They include Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov and Harold Pinter.

In absurdist drama, there is often no real story line, instead, there is a series of free-floating images which influence the way in which an audience interprets a play. There is a focus on the incomprehensibility of the world, or an attempt to rationalize the irrational, disorderly world. Language acts as a barrier to communication, which isolates the individual, thus making speech almost futile. In other words, absurdist drama creates an environment where people are isolated. Clown-like characters stay together simply because they are afraid to be alone in such an incomprehensible world.

Despite this negativity however, absurdism is not completely nihilistic. Martin Esslin explains in his book, *The Man and His Work* (1959, p. 384):

The recognition that there is no simple explanation for all mysteries of the world; that all previous systems have been oversimplified and therefore bound to fail, will appear to be a source of despair only to those who still feel that such a simplified system can provide an answer. The moment we realize that we may have to readjust ourselves to living with less exalted aims and by doing so, become more humble, more receptive, less exposed to violence, disappointments and crisis of consciousness and therefore in the last resort, happier and better adjusted people, simply because we then live in closer record with reality.

Therefore, the goal of the absurdist playwright is not to depress audiences with negativity but rather, it is an attempt to bring them closer to reality and help them understand the meaning of their own life. This is why Esslin says further in the book:

The human condition, being what it is, with man, small, helpless, insecure and unable to fathom the world in its hopelessness, death and absurdity, the theatre has to confront him with the bitter truth that human endeavour is irrational and senseless, that communication between

human beings is well-nigh impossible and that the world will remain an impenetrable mystery... if we realize the basic absurdity of most of our objectives, we are free from being obsessed with them and thus relieve ourselves with laughter (p. 86).

Theatre of the absurd was heavily influenced by existential philosophy. Existentialism can be thought of as the 20th century analogue of the 19th century Romanticism. It is typically focused on human lives and the inevitability of suffering and choice for each individual human life.

Existentialism is all about freedom and personal choice. It is a philosophy of the here and now concrete human existence. It is anti-idealistic, non-transcendental and anti-metaphysical. As a praxis, it is about facing up to the reality of human condition as it really is with courage, naked honesty and the willing preparedness of following things through to the end. Existentialism puts the individual back at the centre, allowing him to engage his own project while providing him with the possibility to make something of himself and to flourish without suffering alienation by recourse to external transcendent world of values and entities (Olajide, 2017).

Deeply rooted in authentic humanism, which is the goal of the philosophy, existentialism asks that we accept essentially as given an indifferent universe that is at its root meaningless to the point of absurdity. What is then left is a world of human subjectivity, that devoid of any externally given readymade values. Each individual must therefore invent and choose his/her own values

against the crushing discomfort of the realization of aloneness in a deaf and dumb world and the arbitrary contingent nature of all our values (Garry Cok, cited in Olajide, 2017). The theoretical framework of Edmund Husserl for existentialism rests on the nature of will and the true essence of reality. The existential philosophers want their readers to personally accept the fact of freedom, be absorbed by it and eventually be transformed by it.

With regards to concrete existence, John MacMurray's *The Self as Agent* (1957) provides the central themes for existentialism. Such themes as freedom, decision and responsibility are prominent in all the existentialist philosophers. These matters constitute the core of personal being. It is the exercise of freedom and the ability to shape the future that distinguishes man from all other beings. It is through free and other responsible decisions that man becomes authentic himself. The golden thread that cuts across existentialist themes includes such topics as Alienation, Despair and Death. Man's freedom and his quest for authentic personal being meet with resistance and sometimes with frustration. As far as the individual is concerned, existence ends in death. Perhaps the tragic side of existentialism is already simplified in its starting point where human existence is set over against the beginning of the inanimate world. For the existentialists, man is never just part of the cosmos but always stand to it in a relationship of tension with possibilities for tragic conflict (Mac Murray, 1957, p. 48).

Existentialism mocks the notion of a complete and fully satisfying life. The life of every man, whether he

explicitly recognizes it or not, is marked by irreparable losses. Man cannot help aspiring towards the good of this world, nor can he help aspiring towards the serene detachment from the things of this world. According to Robert Elson's *An Introduction to Existentialism* (1992):

We spend our lives wanting more and more. Once we realize the futility of worldly desires, we try to accept what we have, we turn to philosophy or religion. To accept less, we want to detach from our worldly needs but we cannot do so. It is the human condition to desire.

The message of existentialism according to Robert Solomon (2006, p. 43) is that:

Every one of us as an individual, is responsible for what we do, responsible for who we are, responsible for the way we face and deal with the world, responsible ultimately for the way the world is. Existentialism in a very short way, is a philosophy of no excuse.

Invariably, this means that if nature made us in one way, it is up to us to decide what we are to do with what nature gives us, whether to go along or fight back to modify or transcend nature.

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1958)

The play opens with breakfast in the living-room of a house in a seaside town. Petey Bole, the central character in the play, is apparently a deck-chair attendant in his

sixties. He lives with his wife, Meg, an elderly woman also in her sixties. Stanley, a man in his late thirties has been taking refuge in the boarding house, obviously for some time. Petey announces the possible arrival of two new guests, after which Meg goes to wake Stanley. Stanley is disturbed and alarmed when he heard about the coming of the guests but pretends that they are coming to cart Meg away in a wheel barrow. Lulu, a young girl comes in with a mysterious parcel and tries through her words to get life back into Stanley. She invites him to go out with her, but he refuses. As Lulu leaves, Stanley goes into the kitchen door and comes out of the back door. Goldberg and McCann are obviously looking for a particular place for a specific assignment. Meg later informs the house of Stanley's birthday. Goldberg insists that it is not really his birthday. Meg gives Stanley the parcel that contains a toy drum to replace the piano. Stanley marches round the room beating the drum.

McCann is alone tearing a newspaper into five strips. Stanley comes in and tries to find out what the two guests have in common. He recapitulates on what association McCann and Goldberg have with his previous life in either Basing Stoke or Ireland. He continues in his effort to get rid of them by saying that there is no room, but submerged by some questions from the new lodgers.

Meg's entrance stops further provocation. A party scene follows. The central event of the party is Goldberg's speech. Initially, Stanley does not participate in his birthday party, but later joins as Lulu introduces a game of blind man's buff. As he is blindfolded, Stanley picks his way across the room. McCann removes his glasses

and breaks it quietly and pushes the drum away. Stanley crushes his foot.

In Stanley's dismay, he attempts to strangle Meg when all the light goes out. As this goes on, McCann drops the flashlight and when it was later found, Lulu is lying spread on the table. Stanley bends over her, retreats, giggling to the way when Goldberg and McCann bear down upon him with the light.

There is another breakfast. A large car that belongs to Goldberg waits outside to take him away. Stanley has had some sort of nervous breakdown. Petey offers to get a Doctor or find a tape to repair the broken glasses but Goldberg brushes aside his offers. McCann comes down from Stanley's room. He seems upset and starts to tear the newspaper rapidly into strips. There is a quarrel between McCann and Goldberg. Goldberg later terminates the fight.

McCann's entrance turns the game between Goldberg and Lulu into another interrogation. When Lulu is asked to confess, she leaves. Stanley is brought, ni a new man in striped trousers, black Jacket, white collar, carrying a bowler hat and his broken glasses. He is clean, neat and shaven. Goldberg and McCann woo him with relish. Stanley seems dumb. Petey attempts to intervene. She invites him to go with them but he retreats. Stanley is taken away to a 'monty' by the two men. The play ends leaving Meg unaware of Stanley's whereabouts.

Existentialist and Absurdity Characteristics in *The Birthday Party*

A critical study of *The Birthday Party* reveals that the text is a dramatic presentation of the nature of man's

existence in the world. Pinter's message in the play is the main focus of the existentialist philosophers and the absurdist writers in dramatic literature. Existentialism, as earlier discussed is a philosophical doctrine that presents man as a unique and isolated being in a hostile universe. The existentialists are basically concerned with man's nature. They are convinced that thought and reason are insufficient to comprehend the mysteries of living.

Harold Pinter, throws Stanley the central character in the play into a symbolic conflict. He presents him as being lonely in his self-made world in a room in the boarding house at a seaside where he has been taking refuge. Having an insightful knowledge of existential philosophy, one may claim that the dramatic interest is not in the choice which he makes and why he makes it. The existentialists emphasize in their writings that man is responsible for his own actions and that he is free to choose either good or bad which in turn will be his destiny. So also, Stanley's choice to confine himself within the wall of the room, is a dramatic presentation of a universal man that anxiously longs for security, where in most cases, it cannot be found by man in the universe which he calls his environment. The room, to Stanley is the only place of love and security which he likes most. Other world outside this room, to him is unsafe.

Stanley in this case, is a typical existential man in his unique and isolated environment which is hostile to his existence, Hence, the sense of alienation which dominates the works of both the absurdist and the existentialists is portrayed by Harold Pinter. It could be noticed that Stanley suspects threat which brings fear

and feelings of insecurity. This suspicion is a pointer to the metaphysical anguish that often plagues existential man in the world. Also, the room is the major image in the play. All the actions centre around the room which further express the static nature of man's existence. Man is born into the world that is devoid of human understanding and reasoning for his nature of existence. Pinter dramatizes the outside world of the room as that which threatens the existence of man. Meg inquires from Petey, her husband how the outside world is, as she asks; "is it nice out?" (Pg.2)

She asks of the weather, which can also be interpreted as the threatening world. The symbolic usage of the 'room' is meant to show the failure of man to reconcile with the absurd world.

The nature of man's existence is reflected here as Stanley can be seen as a man who has withdrawn to protect his illusion and continues to deceive himself in his self-made world where the peace is temporary. As McCann and Goldberg appear, they remove him from this state. He is taken into the outside world where he is made to face the realities of the illogical world.

As a result of feeling insecure, man secretly nurses fear and anxiety thoughts which is basic to an existential man. This is noticed in Stanley and Meg's speech before the arrival of the visitors.

STANLEY: I don't believe it.
MEG: It is true.
STANLEY: (Morning to her) you are saying it on purpose?
MEG: Petey told me this morning.

STANLEY: Who are they?
MEG: I don't know.
STANLEY: Did not he tell you their names?
MEG: No.
STANLEY: (Pacing the room) Here? They wanted to come here?
MEG: Yes, they did. (She takes the Cutters out of her hair).
STANLEY: Why?
MEG: This house is on the list.
STANLEY: But who are they?
MEG: You will see them when they come.
(pp. 12-13)

Through the conversation above, one would notice that Stanley repeatedly seeks the identity and the intention of the new lodgers. Stanley thus remains within the walls of the room till the very end of the play.

Also, Pinter tends to show that communication through the use of language should not be seen as the basic means of expression of human thoughts and feelings. He presents characters that engage in continual cross-talk about other things rather than revealing through a logical language, the root of their relationship. Although Pinter uses simple language but deliberately omit explanation for certain actions in the play. For instance, Meg deliberately avoids direct reply to Stanley's questions as he dramatizes it in the dialogue that follows:

STANLEY: Who is it?
MEG: The two gentlemen.
STANLEY: What two gentlemen?

MEG: The ones that were coming. I just
 took them to their room. They were
 thrilled with their room.
STANLEY: They have come?
MEG: They are very nice, Stanley.
STANLEY: Why did not they come last night?
MEG: They said the beds were wonderful.
STANLEY; Who are they?
MEG; They are very nice, Stanley.
 (pp. 27-28)

This seems to be an action that is done intentionally to avoid giving details about the root of their relationship.

Attempt to ask questions is a common task when it comes to man's existence, which takes place through communication. Conversation between some characters could be seen as that of siblings, but there is element of doubt and confusion over identity. This makes it crystal clear to man that it is difficult for him to understand what is going on in the minds of individuals as effort to seek the truth through language by an existential man fails.

The problem in exposing man's real self is one of the central focus of the absurdist writers in their plays. One may question the relationship between Goldberg, McCann and Stanley. There is a hint that Stanley recognizes Goldberg when Meg asks:

MEG: Why Stan? Do you know them?
STANLEY: How do I know if I know them until I
 know their names? (p. 28)
He systematically avoids the questions.

Further still, horror and uncertainty constitute what form the metaphysical anguish that existential man experiences in all sphere of life. There are so many things that befall man which demand explanation and meaning. If no reasonable explanation is given, such a state of existence can result to a situation where man seems to see no reason why he should continue to exist. The tone of uncertainty fills the play and no explanation is given for some actions that are absurd in nature. For instance, such a situation surrounds Stanley. He narrates the story of how he succeeded as a pianist. Meg begins to believe his story without any attempt to verify its genuineness. One may ask if the truth itself can found in a meaningless world, full of all forms of absurdities. Stanley claims that his first concert at Lower Edmonton was a great success and that he was kidnapped, as he narrates:

STANLEY: (Pause) yes? Lower Edmonton.
Then after that you know what they did?
They carved me up. It was all worked out.
My next concert... (pp. 12-13)

One would notice that Stanley's life is characterized by inactivity under the pretence of uncertainty of his fate in the world. For this obvious reason, his claim to be a successful pianist is somewhat doubtful. How would a self-acclaimed world pianist be taking refuge in a dingy boarding house and subject himself to humiliation? Also the truth about the birthday is unknown to Stanley whose birthday they claim to be celebrating. He insists that it is not his birthday but Meg and the visitors insisted on organizing a birthday party for him. All that takes place at the birthday party is

ridiculous which further expresses the precarious nature of man's existence.

The dialogue before the party, between McCann and Goldberg turns to a horror. McCann takes a chair to cover his head.

GOLDBERG:	Steady, McCann
STANLEY:	(Circling) uuuuuhhhhh!
McCANN;	Right, Judas!
GOLDBERG;	(Rising) Steady, McCann.
McCann:	Come on
STANLEY;	uuuuuhhhhh!
McCANN:	He is sweating.
STANLEY;	uuuuuhhhhh!
GOLDBERG:	Easy, McCann.
McCANN:	The bastard sweat- pig is sweating. (pp. 44-45).

One would wonder that those who relate as siblings not quite long, engage in a situation where trouble and uncertainty can be noticed. Pinter uses some expressions in the play that are philosophical in nature which expose readers to unquestionable truths about the position of man in the universe.

PETEY:	But what brought it on so suddenly?
Goldberg:	(rising and moving upstage). Well, boles it can happen in all sort of ways... sometimes, it happens gradual. Day by day it grows and grows... proof! (p. 61).

This conversation expresses Stanley's condition of health after the birthday party. The two visitors now arrive to

take him out of the state of inactivity to active participation in life. Even human being ought to inculcate that which is ideal to him and be able to accept his position of being absurd. Stanley is a good example of an existential man in an absurd world where he fails to reconcile with the nature of his existence. The image of paper tearing by McCann reflects the existential and absurdist portrait of the world's voidness.

From the instances mentioned above, one would agree that Harold Pinter has successfully written a play that has shed light on the absurd nature of man's existence in an illogical world.

Conclusion

In this work, one has carefully examined the concepts of 'Absurdism' and 'Existentialism' in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. One has also set the study against the socio-historical background of 1914-1945 and 1939-1945, that covered the two world-wars. These wars made man to overlook God as the ultimate solution to human problems while the divine rights of kings and monarchs were seen as illusion of reality.

In the universe where man lives, he finds it difficult to explain by his reasoning a lot of things. It is a universe where the unfortunate and the under-privileged are sentenced to misery, deprivation and loneliness. In Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, he looks at the plight of his hero, Stanley from the perspective of someone who feels threatened and afraid of his environment, as he looks for refuge in a sea-side hostel. The insecurity that surrounds the environment is very much like the uncertainty that is reigning in our contemporary world today. The fear that makes Stanley shut himself up in his

seaside hostel is very much the same kind of fear that obsessed the underprivileged in the society.

Harold Pinter witnessed the Second World War (1939-1945) in England. He experienced the fear and deprivation that people in the western world lived by; such as the failure of the then conservative government under Churchill to live up to his promise to make life better for the British citizenry. This failure caused the average people of the society to become disillusioned and frustrated.

But more than this Pinter has drawn the readers' attention to a strange attribute of the modern man, as he hardly understands what goes on in the mind of his fellow man, just as nobody understands what goes on in the minds of Stanley, Goldberg and McCann. Yet, it is necessary for man to be logical enough to know that it is pointless to accept the irrationality of the outside world. There is need for man to know that the universe he inhabits is so constructed that it can never satisfy his desire or reward his efforts.

The pressure of the society is always with us because each individual is from the beginning integrated and oriented towards society. The existentialists therefore try to make one view existence in the world from the point of view of the individual subject who, finds himself as a pilgrim in the world and strives after the realization of the idea, engage himself within the limitation of time in expectation of fate having its way and the common destiny of every existential man which is death, to fulfill his desire. So far, no matter how much one tries, one can never be satisfied. The reason is because the universe

which man inhabits can never satisfy one's desire nor reward his effort and the reality of life is that man will never stop to confront the existential crisis as far as one is in the universe. Therefore, if man must live and not just exist in the universe, he must savour the riches, agony and the variety of happenings in the universe.

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