

**The ‘Absurd’ as a Way Ahead:
A study of select plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter**

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Abstract

The plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter were labelled as belonging to the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ by Martin Esslin. However, he confessed that it was neither a conscious ‘movement’, nor has the term been accepted by the playwrights themselves. Notwithstanding, as Michael Bennett says, the term has stuck and has been the basis of criticism of the plays by these playwrights. What was it that bound these playwrights under the common label of the ‘Absurd’? This paper would argue that the label ‘Absurd’ has been the common denominator that the playwrights used to produce a community of audience that questioned the value systems associated with modernism and was led to the possible co-existence with the realisation of ‘multiple modernities’.

Keywords: Theatre of the Absurd, Modern, Multiple Modernities, Nietzsche, Apollonian & the Dionysian.

The plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter were labelled as belonging to the 'Theatre of the Absurd' by Martin Esslin. However, he confessed that it was neither a conscious 'movement', nor has the term been accepted by the playwrights themselves. Notwithstanding, as Michael Bennett says, the term has stuck and has been the basis of criticism of the plays by these playwrights. What was it that bound these playwrights under the common label of the 'Absurd'? This paper would argue that the label 'Absurd' has been the common denominator that the playwrights used to produce a community of audience that questioned the value systems associated with modernism and was led to the possible co-existence with the realisation of 'multiple modernities'.

In his paper *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin referred to the success of the plays of the playwrights whom he had categorised as belonging to the 'Theatre of the Absurd' and observed that "*This reception is all the more puzzling when one considers that the audiences concerned were amused by and applauded these plays fully aware that they could not understand what they meant or what their authors were driving at.*" (3) The absurdity of these plays can be deciphered in their open abandonment of rationality, to quote Esslin, these are the plays where '*The laws of probability as well as those of physics are suspended*' (3). Thus, while Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* presents Lucky and Pozzo as slave and master in the first Act only to return with their roles swapped in the second act. Similarly, at the very beginning of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, the clock strikes seventeen and in *Jack the Submission*, the ladies have two or three noses and are referred to as beautiful. The conclusion of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* seems to imply the adoption of the profession of prostitution by Ruth, who is the daughter-in-law of the family. This open abandonment of the values of modernism, that Nietzsche had referred to as the 'Apollonian' drive in human being, had shocked the audience as, this paper would argue, to bring forth the oppressed 'Dionysian' drive in the human being. The purpose was not to subdue the Apollonian rational but to uphold the values and illustrate their true potential when compared in relation to the 'wild' and 'irrational' Dionysian self to reconsider and reconfigure their values. Thus, the term 'absurd' can be said to refer to the situatedness of the narrative of these plays, which, according to David Herman, is a mode

"... to use textual cues to reconstruct a storyworld [that] must also draw inferences about the communicative goals that have structured the specific occasion of the telling, motivating the use of certain cues in favour of others and shaping the arrangement of the cues selected." (17)

The 'Theatre of the Absurd' went into oblivion almost as rapidly as it gained popularity. Historically, this period ranging from the early 1950s to late 1960s, coincide with the transition from the modernism to postmodernism. Often read against the backdrop of the two world wars, the plays act as a critique of the modernism as well as the traditional theories of scientific modernization. According to Lyotard, "[Postmodernism] designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts." (xxiii) However, while the term implies a total rejection of the enlightenment project and the associated modernity, this paper argues that the plays of the 'Theatre of the Absurd', while conforming to the notions of postmodernism, leads its audience to a notion of 'multiple modernities' which, according to S. N. Eisenstadt, 'denotes a certain view of the contemporary world-indeed of the history and characteristics of the modern era-that goes against the views long prevalent in scholarly and general discourse.' (1) In doing so, it envisages that the project of enlightenment has been

refashioned. While some of its values are still considered significant, the project has been reshaped – it is no longer *the Enlightenment*, but enlightenment, and following it, there is not a single modernity but multiple modernities. The plays of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ enhance the scope of ‘multiple modernities’ and its relations to the project of enlightenment, to be inclusive and accommodative of individualities.

Read primarily against Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the plays of ‘absurd’ theatre tend to be more ‘local’ than ‘global’. Camus has stated it explicitly in his analysis of suicide: -

There are many causes for a suicide, and generally the most obvious ones were not the most powerful... But one would have to know whether a friend of the desperate man had not that very day addressed him indifferently. He is the guilty one... (5)

While the immediate backdrop of the mass destruction caused by the Second World War formed the background for the pessimistic tone of the philosophy of Existentialism that governed the reading of the plays of the ‘Absurd Theatre’, the element of the avant-garde can be deciphered in these plays’ attempt of ‘pushing the boundaries’ of art (Lara Cox). The commonly referred theatrical technique of minimalism, when applied to these plays, acts as instigators for the audience as they are provoked to participate in the process of meaning formation.

Martin Esslin’s famous book ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ begins with a reference to Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*, which, according to him, ‘bewildered the sophisticated audience of Paris, London and New York’. (1) The play comprised of almost two similar acts, with the two characters, Vladimir and Estragon (or Didi and Gogo?) waiting for Godot, who, according to them, can influence their future. A boy appears in each of the two acts to announce that Mr Godot will not come this evening but ‘surely tomorrow’; and when night falls, Vladimir and Estragon contemplate suicide, decide to leave, but do not move. As Lawrence Graver points it out, “*Stripped to its crude outline, Beckett’s play certainly does sound like an allegory: a dramatic action in which events, characters, and settings represent abstract or spiritual meanings.*” (19) The play has evoked multiple responses, both by those who admired it as well as those who had objections against it. It is due to these multiple responses that these plays were considered to be depicting an ‘absurd’ world. The play could be read against several backgrounds, especially against the universal setting of time and place with the very title of the play referring to the God. The religious background to the play is further confirmed by the many allusions to events in the life of Christ as recounted in the New Testament.

VLADIMIR: Did you ever read the Bible?

ESTRAGON: The Bible... [*He reflects.*] I must have taken a look at it.

VLADIMIR: Do you remember the Gospels?

ESTRAGON: I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That’s where we’ll go, I used to say, that’s where we’ll go for our honeymoon. We’ll swim. We’ll be happy. [Act One, 13]

Again, there is a conversation between the two about the two thieves as described in the New Testament:

VLADIMIR: Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story?

ESTRAGON: No.

VLADIMIR: Shall I tell it to you?

ESTRAGON: No.

VLADIMIR: It'll pass the time. [*Pause.*] Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour. One –

ESTRAGON: Our what?

VLADIMIR: Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other... [*He searches for the contrary of saved*]... damned.

ESTRAGON: Saved from what?

VLADIMIR: Hell.

ESTRAGON: I'm going.
[*He does not move.*] [Act One, 14]

This conversation is directed to a community of audience that has lost its faith on God. Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God was never more relevant in the history of Europe before it witnessed the destruction caused by the two world wars. As he said in *The Gay Science*:

"Where has God gone?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. We are his murderers. (181)

The proclamation of the death of God had shattered the religious faith of man that had been instrumental to the development of Western civilization. Read against Nietzsche's theory of the 'Apollonian and the Dionysian' propounded in *The Birth of Tragedy*, it becomes obvious that he was referring only to a symbolic death of God and thereby the values associated with Him that were the founding stones of the Western civilization. For Nietzsche, the true combination of the Apollonian and the Dionysian drives resulted in the great Attic Greek tragedy. However, the Dionysian drive was suppressed ever since Socrates and subsequently, has lead to the decline of the western civilization and thereby to nihilism. As Walter Kaufmann points it out:

Nietzsche prophetically envisages himself as a madman: to have lost God means madness; and when mankind will discover that it has lost God, universal madness will break out. This apocalyptic sense of dreadful things to come hangs over Nietzsche's thinking like a thundercloud. (97)

The bleak picture of the timeless world of Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' is a manifestation of the Nietzschean nihilism as well as a critique of the imbalance caused by the total absence of the Dionysian drive resulting in excessive Apollonian or the rationalist drive in human being and the society. However, the conventional theatre-goers were not able to link the play to any, as Graver points it out, "specific system or structure of thought existing outside the work itself, as if such systems or structures would explain what this strange work was fundamentally 'about'." (21), despite being set in a very worldly setting.

While most of criticism has based itself on the identity of Godot (sometimes related to God, in terms of the prevalent existential reading of the play), Beckett himself was of the opinion that the play was not about Godot but about waiting. Both the acts of the play end similarly:

ESTRAGON: [...] [*He turns to VLADIMIR.*] Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON: [*Despairingly.*] Ah! [*Pause.*]

The play presents the conflict wherein the two characters face the conflict between their realistic desire to leave and their obligation to stay. As Vassilopoulou opines, "this shared private world (between the two characters) does not accord with the actual world of the play, in which Godot never arrives, nor is he likely to do so at some point after the end of the play" (133). This conflict results in the characters' failure to undertake any action that may accelerate the plot, resulting in the absurd affect on the audience. What Camus referred to as "*that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that denies*" (37), is manifested in the play as an affect of the absurd that leads the audience beyond a mechanically formal posture to long for creating a meaning deeply rooted in humanity.

A more avert critic of the degraded state of humanity in the post Second World War, Eugene Ionesco utilises the affect of the 'absurd' to attack what Esslin referred to as '*the deadliness of present-day mechanical, bourgeois civilization, the loss of real, felt values, and the resulting degradation of life*' (157). The mechanical civilization manifests itself as the Professor in *The Lesson* (1950), the Orator in *The Chairs* (1951), Mother Peep in *The Killer* (1957) and the Logician in *The Rhinoceros* (1959). Looked upon from the Nietzsche's philosophical perspectives of the 'Death of God' and the Apollonian/Dionysian drives, the plays can be read as a critique of the western modernity that had led it to place the 'white European man' at the centre of the universe and had a two-fold affect on the audience. Firstly, it created an affect of absurdity to the audience who were yet to come out of the watertight compartments of the conventional Aristotelian drama. Secondly, it provoked its audience to question the value-systems of the Enlightenment, thus creating a discourse of multiple modernities.

Ionesco's play *The Lesson* manifests the mechanical nature of education that fails to justify itself and has ceased to be in sync with the rationality of the enlightenment project. The play depicts the hollowness of the claim to rationality as the professor fails to teach the

student, and, in frustration, murders her. The play starts critiquing the knowledge system from the very outset, as we are shown a pupil who ‘have [her] science diploma and ... arts diploma, too’ (49), not sure about such elementary stuff as the name of the seasons. As the play progresses, we find that the pupil is not even sure about the elementary arithmetic. The affect of the absurd is created when the audience is informed that such a pupil is desirous of pursuing a career in medicine. Notwithstanding the above, the process of imparting education to the pupil commences and with the passage of time, the pupil begins to show signs of physical ailment, beginning with toothache to earache as she finally succumbs to the mental stress arising out of the education:

PROFESSOR [*makes a gesture as though to protest, then refrains, a little helpless. Suddenly, he remembers*]: Ah! [*He goes quickly to the drawer where he finds a big knife, invisible or real according to the preference of the director. He seizes it and brandishes it happily.*] Here is one, young lady, here is a knife. It’s too bad that we only have this one, but we’re going to try to make it serve for all the languages, anyway! It will be enough if you will pronounce the word “knife” in all the languages, while looking at the object, very closely, fixedly, and imagining that it is in the language that you are speaking.

PUPIL: I’ve got a toothache.

PROFESSOR: [*almost singing, chanting*]: Now, say “kni,” like “kni,” “fe,” ... and look, look, look at it, watch it...

PUPIL: What is this one in? French, Italian or Spanish? PROFESSOR:

That doesn’t matter now... That’s not your concern. Say: “kni.” PUPIL:

“Kni.”

Professor:... “fe”... Look.
[*He brandishes the knife under the Pupil’s eyes.*]

PUPIL: “fe”,,,

PROFESSOR: Again... Look at it.

PUPIL: Oh, no! My God! I’ve had enough. And besides, I’ve got a toothache, my feet hurt me. I’ve got a headache.

PROFESSOR [*abruptly*]: Knife ... look... knife ... look ... knife ... look...

PUPIL: You’re giving me an earache, too. Oh, your voice! It’s so piercing!

PROFESSOR: Say: knife ... kni ... fe...

PUPIL: No! My ears hurt, I hurt all over...

PROFESSOR: I’m going to tear them off, your ears, that’s what I’m going to do to you, and then they won’t hurt you anymore, my pet.

PUPIL: Oh ... you're hurting me, oh, you're hurting me ... (73)

Two conclusions about the education system become obvious. Firstly, that the core of education is missing; it is imparted without any justification. Secondly, in pursuit of education, man seems to be losing the element of human compassion. While Ionesco has studied as a critique of the fascist temperaments, it is important to note that this temperament arises out of an incomplete assessment of the Apollonian drive of Nietzsche and subsequently the enlightenment project. The rationale of imparting knowledge has been lost. The pupil is being forced to 'memorise' the knowledge rather than making her understand the essence of the knowledge. According to Nietzsche, the fall of western civilization has been due to an imbalance between the Apollonian and the Dionysian selves. The deformed Apollonian rationale of the Professor fails to impart knowledge to his pupil and consequently Dionysian wilderness ensues as the pupils are 'murdered' with the 'knowledge' devoid of the enlightened Apollonian rationale. As the play ends, we are made aware that the Professor had killed many pupils before and that the action that had unfolded on stage, was only one of the many that had taken place before and will continue to take place. That the process of the lesson will continue, as a new pupil enters the stage only to be killed, creates an affect of absurdity in the audience and leads to a loss of faith on prevailing system of education and to subsequent nihilism. The audience is provoked to search for an 'alternative world', although a changed world that will conform to the values associated with enlightenment.

This quest for an 'alternative world' by means of a struggle for power manifests itself in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1964). Pinter reveals the element of the absurd at multiple levels. From the very beginning, the audience confronts a father, Max, struggling hard to retain his dignity and assert his authority over his sons.

MAX. What have you done with the scissors?

Pause.

I said I'm looking for the scissors. What have you done with them?

Pause.

Did you hear me? I want to cut something out of the paper.

LENNY. I'm reading the paper.

MAX. Not that paper. I haven't even read that paper. I'm talking about last Sunday's paper. I was just having a look at it in the kitchen.

Pause.

Do you hear what I'm saying? I'm talking to you! Where's the scissors?

LENNY (*looking up, quietly*). Why don't you shut up, you daft prat? (Act One, 12)

While this conflict between the father and the son in the play is evident from the outset, it is also significant that the father figure, Max, is performing the role of the mother, as he cooks

and performs the household activities that has traditionally been associated with women. The other well-known element of conflict is that of usurpation. While Teddy returns to his father's house, numerous critics have asserted that it was Ruth's homecoming, as she exercises her sexuality to gain supremacy in the family of males. The conflict ensues between characters due to their use of language. While the hostile language is very much evident between Lenny and Max, it is open to debate whether Lenny considers Max as his father or the oppressed mother figure. The conflict begins to assert itself with the conflict shifting to Ruth, who begins to assert her authority:

LENNY..... Excuse me, shall I take this ashtray out of your way?

RUTH. It's not in my way.

LENNY. It seems to be in the way of your glass. The glass was about to fall. Or the ashtray. I'm rather worried about the carpet. It's not me, it's my father. He's obsessed with order and clarity. He doesn't like mess. So, as I don't believe you're smoking at the moment, I'm sure you won't object if I move the ashtray.

He does so.

And now perhaps I'll relieve you of your glass.

RUTH. I haven't quite finished.

LENNY. You've consumed quite enough, in my opinion.

RUTH. No, I haven't.

LENNY. Quite sufficient, in my own opinion.

RUTH. Not in mine, Leonard.

Pause.

LENNY. Don't call me that, please.

RUTH. Why not?

LENNY. That's the name my mother gave me.

Pause.

Just give me the glass.

RUTH. No.

Pause.

LENNY. I'll take it, then.

RUTH. If you take the glass ... I'll take you.

Pause.

LENNY. How about me taking the glass without you taking me?

RUTH. Why don't I just take you? (Act One, 29)

It is this seeming indecent 'proposal' by Ruth that shocked the audience leading to the affect of absurd. However, apart from the presumed role of prostitute, the meek acceptance of the role by Ruth's husband, Teddy, is another element that has shocked the audience. This had lead the audience to question the values of family ties that has been associated with the enlightenment and by extension to the Apollonian rationality.

Pinter's play disrupts the enlightenment values as with the progress of the play, Ruth asserts herself as the new matriarch of the family, so much so that at the end of the play, all the other male members, except Lenny, succumb to her. The last scene of the play shows Ruth sitting "*relaxed on her chair*" as the other male members strives to get her affection. However, the fact that Teddy is absent in the last scene as also the fact that Lenny keeps on standing, implying that he has not succumbed to the matriarch Ruth, manifest itself as the eternal conflict between the Nietzschean Apollonian and the Dionysian drives. While the male members of the family cling to their individual interpretations of words, Ruth remains playful with the use of language, not identifying with the labels imposed on her by men, which enables her to overcome the traditional watertight compartments of feminine as subservient to the male. As William S. Haney II points it out, "*While being human or a Mensch, as Nietzsche says, will make us think, being an Ubermensch allows you to transcend the influence of language by witnessing thoughts flowing through the mind without being subjugated by them.*" (109) Ruth's rise to power is due to her open mindedness, as she is able to adjust to the circumstances as well as dominate it, as per the qualities of the Nietzschean Ubermensch.

This notion of fluidity is associated with that of multiple modernities. Jasbir Jain distinguishes between the terms modern, modernity and modernism:

The *modern* is always with us, modernity is an attitude, performing an adjectival role and modernism is a concept which is bound together by the medium of thought which it expresses itself. (2-3)

The term 'multiple modernities', albeit used frequently to refer to the uniqueness of the colonial cultures, may also be extended to the uniqueness of individuals, especially in moments of crisis that are portrayed in the 'absurd' plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter. That modernism and, by extension, modernity, is not one but many, aptly manifests itself during moments such as those referred to in the 'absurd' plays that the crisis comes forth due to the confrontation between the collective social values and the individual priorities. As the analysis of the plays in terms of the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses reveal, these plays provide an umbrella term to define the behaviour of the individuals in moments of crisis. Moreover, the conventional notion of the modernity as being synonymous with progress has already been nullified by the large scale destruction caused by the two world wars. Subsequently, the concept of 'multiple modernities' has come into vogue since the 1950s and 1960s, which the plays of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'

promote. In doing so, these plays create a bond between the playwrights; the actors on stage and the audience, creating a community that will be appreciative of the uniqueness of each condition and will be more inclusive, thereby evolving as the Nietzschean *Übermensch*.

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