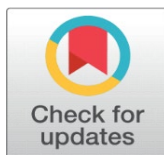
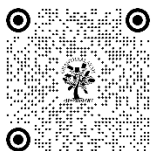


CONFRONTING THE ABSURD: FROM CAMUS TO BECKETT: EXPLORING THE STRUGGLE FOR MEANING IN EXISTENTIAL WORKS

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i3.2024.3790](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i3.2024.3790)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“I have come to believe that the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth” (Eco. n.pag).

Umberto Eco in the above quote in *Foucault’s Pendulum*, enunciates the essential proclivity of human life upon thrusting meaning into our existence, into places where none exist.

Absurdism is a philosophical school of thought which states that the efforts of humanity in finding a meaning will eventually fail and life does and always will embody uncertainty and scepticism, a belief that the universe is chaotic, disorganised, essentially a muddle, absolutely devoid of any purpose and meaning. Any attempt in finding a true meaning would be proved ineffectual.

The similar contention has been effectively put by Martin Esslin in his celebrated essay ‘Theatre of the Absurd’-The meaning of the term absurd is ‘out of harmony with reason or propriety; illogical’ (Esslin 23).

Of all the existential writers, Albert Camus occupies a significant place, whereby his essay ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ substantiates his claims a great deal. Sisyphus is given a herculean task of pushing the boulder up a mountain, only to see it coming down. He is the archetypal absurdist hero who has to live a life of unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. Camus in the above-mentioned essay elucidates that, “The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must be clung to because

ABSTRACT

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the whole consequence of life can depend on it, the irrational, the human nostalgia and the absurd that is born of their encounter" (Camus 10). According to Camus, in this world man is confronting his obscurity, since he cannot change it, he rebels against it. Thus, absurdity is confrontation between man and the irrational world.

An American Journalist and Radio Broadcaster Dorothy Thompson has once quoted: 'Disillusion comes only to be illusioned. One cannot be disillusioned of what one never put faith in. There is nothing more demoralizing than sudden overwhelming disillusionment'. (Thompson n.pag)

Man initially has in his mind an established frame or a pattern of thought which is governed by his past experiences and the milieu that he has bred in. As a result of which, he perceives the world along those lines. But to his utter disappointment, when the world does not turn out to be how he has expected, all the presumptions are frustrated. He fails to come to terms with the punctured, the fissured and the dismantled structure whereby he begins to distance himself from the society, feeling as if he is no longer part of that macrocosmic entity as he was once incorporated into. Often when a man is ripped of his illusions and pre-conceived notions, does he find himself at the mercy of either the sleeping pills or by having a nerve to jump in front of a moving train. Suicide in that sense can categorically be regarded as one of the dimensions to the condition of the absurd, as maintained by Camus in "The Myth of Sisyphus": "I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusion that give them a reason for living" (Camus 2)

Contrary to this, there is another lot -an individual who after having had his vision lands onto a monothematic belief built around nihilism. Even though he gets baffled at every juncture, yet he takes life to pieces in an attempt to get a deeper understanding. In the process of doing the same, this individual becomes a rebel much like Kierkegaard, who was a pioneer to the existential thought. Existential philosophers strictly condemned the 'essences' relying on the notion that existence precedes essence and not the other way. They were driven by the idea of living life onto their own terms by questioning the established norms as enunciated by Kierkegaard: 'the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live or die.' (Kierkegaard n.pag)

The Stranger is another ground-breaking work by Camus under the ambit of Absurdist literature which delineates the similar doctrine, be it Meursalt's apathetic response to his mother's death, his characteristic impotency to mourn by her coffin and the indifference with which he deals his own death sentence. In 1955, Camus commented on *The Stranger*, '... a long time ago I summed up *The Stranger* in a sentence which I realize is extremely paradoxical: "...in our society any man who does not cry at his mother's funeral is liable to be condemned to death". I simply meant that the hero of the book is condemned because he does not play the game' (Berlins n.pag). The reason Meursalt, the solipsist, does not play the game, according to the author is that he refuses to lie. It may occur to us that Meursalt has had his own vision of life. He has been enlivened, enlightened and consequently disillusioned to a point where he embraces happiness and gloom alike.

Camus gives no reason for Meursalt's crime; he commits a senseless murder. Meursalt states-'I'd provoked a brawl with Raymond's enemies, in the course of which Raymond was wounded. I'd asked him for his revolver and gone back by myself with the intention of using it. Then I'd shot the Arab. After the first shot I waited. Then, "to be certain of making a good job of it," I fired four more shots deliberately, point-blank, and in cold blood, at my victim.' (Camus 62-63).

Ironically, Meursalt had taken the revolver from Raymond in order to prevent Raymond from acting rashly on his part but his clean intention takes a ghastly form, with Meursalt shooting the Arab four more times. Camus wants his hero to commit a crime he is otherwise innocent of, only to be condemned to death for not crying at his mother's funeral rather than for killing a man. That probably would have been the only way the novelist would have let the real solipsist hero to come to the surface. Camus presumably never wanted his readers to have pity on his hero, rather the suffering of Meursalt should be more relative to the suffering of the common man.

Franz Kafka is another existential writer who is presumably regarded as a precursor to such philosophy. His work *The Metamorphosis* stands testimony to his worldview of alienation and absurdity as portrayed in the character of Gregor Samsa. Samsa, a travelling salesman, the sole breadwinner of the family strives for a stable existence but is unable to find one. Even though he does not quite enjoy his work, yet he takes pride in his ability to support the family. However, all the hopes turn to dust when one day he wakes up from anxious dreams, only to discover that he has been transformed into a 'verminous bug' (Kafka 3). The first thing that occurs to him is that how will he explain this to his boss and who 'would take over the family arrangements just as he had earlier' (Kafka 57). These questions ostensibly become the exposition to his absurd condition which heighten alienation. A great degree of psychological distance is created twist Gregor and those around him. Even though his body has been transformed, his interior self is still engrossed into familial cares, worries of financial constraints and his ensuing inability to provide for the family in the times to come. That is the

moment of existential dilemma where his anatomical self puts limitations onto his inner compulsions. But Gregor would not give up, for even in his miniature form, he tends with utmost care to the comfort of the family. Gregor is himself puzzled by his vacillating inclinations, one lies in his urgency to not be a source of embarrassment for his family, the other being, which exhibits bug-like characteristics like abhorring his usual human breakfast. He is neither able to keep nor forsake one being for the other, subsequent to which he indeed becomes a misfit. Death would have been the only befitting solution to the problem not only for Gregor but for the family as well, who fails to succumb to the presence of the changed Gregor, finding it hard to assimilate him into their everyday existence, ironically, their solitary care remains to get rid of him, as is expressed by his sister, Grete: "It must be gotten rid of, that is the only way, father" (Kafka 69). It is necessarily the sacrifice of Gregor that lifts the pall of gloom which had previously been cast upon the family and makes the rising sun shine brighter upon them now.

The crux of the above work insinuates that meanings usually crumble since there is no absolute meaning in the Kafka universe to hold on to. Nevertheless, Absurdist literature still has a mission: to affirm that literature, like everything else is pointless. Kafka's disciple, the playwright Samuel Beckett puts it well in 'Three Dialogues' when he says that the writer "has nothing with which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (Shiojiri 83).

Traces of Kafkaesque influence on Beckett are justifiably evident in his works, among which *Waiting for Godot* holds primary position. Beckett's prowess comes to the surface in his ability to combat the traditional aspects of time. The two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, marooned on a barren land are given to nothing but waiting for hours and days for someone named Godot, who never turns up. This waiting is suspended for the time being by the arrival of master and slave duet, Pozzo and Lucky and by the messenger which informs them that Godot will not come today but surely tomorrow. The enigmatic identity of Godot only adds to the obscurity in the mood of the play and the audience alike. When Beckett was asked as to who Godot is, he only made an appropriate retort that if he knew, he would have said so in the play. Beckett's claim led to manifold interpretations by the critics about the identity of Godot. The most plausible explanation suggests Godot as god, just as in the name, Godot is an elongated version of god. Probably, Godot must have promised to rescue the duo from some imminent disaster as is resonated in the following excerpt from the text:

"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." (Act 1. n.pag)

The above discussion reflects the Biblical angle been employed by the dramatist. What one gathers from the above quote is that Godot might provide for their saviour and at the same time echoes St. Augustine's assertion- 'Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved ...do not presume, one of the thieves was damned'. (qtd. in Cunningham)

The tramps remain on tenterhooks from ceaseless waiting. The characters engage in trivial actions like switching hats just to combat the emptiness which envelops them. In a situation as theirs, the idea of a suicide does not come as a surprise with Estragon saying, 'let's hang ourselves immediately!' (Act 1. n. pag.). However, the idea of hanging does not materialize since the cord of Estragon's trousers, with which they try to hang themselves, breaks, much like the idea of leaving where none moves. This is suggestive to the stasis that has clutched their mundane existence.

The circular plot, the act of endless waiting and the monotony which surrounds them reverberates the absurdist condition in which they are placed where 'nobody comes, nobody goes. It's awful.' (Act 1. n. pag.). The state where one human is alienated from the other, the destitution peppered up with the oblivion of the characters, all accentuate the nonsensical ambience. A man struggles to live in an uncaring world where a sense of stagnation captivates him and the universe fails to resolve the dilemmas confronted by him. The landscape is a symbol of barren and fruitless civilization. The setting is reminiscent to the post war condition of the world laden with uncertainties and despair. Even the dialogue is nothing but a meaningless banter. The plot does not adhere to the Aristotelian unities but remains fragmented.

Martin Esslin in his 'Theatre of the Absurd' observes : "These [absurdist] plays flout all the standards by which drama has been judged for many centuries; they must therefore appear as a provocation to people who have come into the theatre expecting to find what they would recognize as a well-made play... a well-made play is expected to entertain by the ding-dong of witty and logically built up dialogue; these plays often start at an arbitrary point and seems to end just as

arbitrarily... and yet strangely enough, these plays have worked, they have had an effect, they have exercised a fascination of their own in the theatre. In writing *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett did not intend to tell a story, he did not want the audience to go home satisfied that they knew the solution to the problem posed in the play. Hence there is no point in reproaching him with no doing what he never sought to do; the only reasonable course is to try and find out what it was that he did intend.' (Esslin n. pag.) It only implies that the audience must not indulge themselves into finding moral implications nor look for a plot, seeking sense out of the nonsense, rather let the nonsense be the end in itself. It is only when the spectators give up on their desperate urgency in finding a structure save visualizing a literary work with its freckled and blotched texture as a finished piece of parchment, that the true Beckettian purpose be achieved

Across the chasm Vladimir and Estragon look upon Godot either for survival, a ray of hope or an agent of rescue, we do not know what. Godot, who procrastinates, occupies a pivotal place in the play, despite making no appearances. In the last scene of the play, the defeat of the meaningful is symbolized by the dejection of Godot's not coming. *Waiting for Godot: A Marxist Study* by Akhter mentions- 'It is the most striking example that reflects obliteration in total despair and angst of the characters Estragon and Vladimir, which most fully embody the normal human aspirations towards significance' (Akhter 45). This significance is never realized in a world where a sense of purposelessness abounds and transient blissfulness offers no consolation. Even religion is defeated in the purpose to pilot the oppressed and the downtrodden as much as Godot is defeated in his incapacity to come and break the humdrum state of the tramps. The moment a little left faith gets wiped from his life does the catastrophic man begin to unhinge, rather question his own existence, only to find himself landed onto the island of absurdity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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