



Received: 23-10-2022

Accepted: 03-12-2022

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

Specific Features of the Theatre of Absurd and its Exposition in Sam Shepard's Plays

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Abstract

The Theatre of the Absurd began as a protest against man's existence and developed into a significant style and form of theatre. As a new form of drama, the Theater of the Absurd originated from France after The Second World War. Its name was coined by Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre*

of the Absurd, which was published in 1961. Several of the founding works of the movement include Jean Genet's *The Maids*, Eugene Ionesco's "The Bald Soprano", Arthur Adamov's "PingPong", and Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot".

Keywords: Theatre of Absurd, Anti-language, Absurd movement, Anti-character, Anti-drama, Anti-plot, Absurdism, Devaluation of language

1. Introduction

Theatre of the Absurd is an expression, which lends itself to interpretation. Although commonly used to mean ridiculous, the word absurd is not used in this connotation when referring to it as a style of theatre. According to Oxford Dictionary the word absurd means originally in Latin "out of harmony", more correctly identifies "inappropriate, unreasonable, illogical." Absurd refers to humans struggle to find the reason in his life and his inability to find it due to humanly limited constraints. Thus, absurd refers to something which is humanly impossible rather than logically impossible. The playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd engaged in creating extremely grotesque plays both in form and contents, which revealed the conditions of human beings' existence in modern society. In the Theater of the Absurd, multiple features are used to express tragic theme with a comic form. The features include anti-character, anti-language, anti-drama and anti-plot.

The absurdist plays categorized in this movement typically represent human existence as nonsensical and often chaotic. They rarely follow a clear plot, and what action occurs serves only to heighten the sense that characters (and human beings in general) are mere victims of unknown, arbitrary forces beyond their control. The Dialogue is often redundant, setting and passage of time within the play are unclear, and the characters express frustration with deep, philosophical questions, such as the meaning of life and death and the existence of God.

2. Methodology

Language is an important constituent of literary work. The use of language is regarded as criterion to evaluate a writer's style and ability. Different writers form their own writing styles in their literary career. In traditional dramas, language is usually used in a logical order. When someone asks some questions, other people will give their answers. No matter whether the answers are true or false, they must obey certain logical order. But in the Theater of the Absurd, language has no fixed or settled form and regularities. The protagonists usually speak or talk in disorder. What the character has said sometimes is not the words that his partner has asked or wanted to get. Sometimes a character asks his partner something, but the partner says another thing that is irrelevant to what they are talking about. That is to say, language has no regularity to infer or obey. What they have said cannot be understood by the audience. Just several minutes ago, the characters argue on the question of who will come. A moment later, they change to another irrelative subject, and finally you cannot follow their thoughts, which will lead you misunderstand their mind. In the "literary" theater, language remains the predominant component. But in the anti-literary theater, language is reduced to a very subordinate role. The Theater of the Absurd has gained the freedom of using language as merely one component of its multidimensional poetic imagery. By putting a scene in contrast to the action, by reducing it to meaningless patter, or by abandoning discursive logic for the poetic logic of association or assonance, the Theater of the Absurd has opened up a new dimension of the stage. In its devaluation of language, the Theatre of the Absurd is in harmony with the trend of our time. Apart from the general devaluation of language in the flood of mass communications, the growing specialization of life has made the exchange of ideas on an increasing number of subjects impossible among

members of difficult spheres of life who have each developed their own specialized jargons. Language is an extensive category in literary field which extends from words or sentences to paragraph. In different type of literary forms, multiple languages are used. Moreover, different writers have their own style to apply languages. In the Theater of the Absurd, playwrights usually apply language skillfully and adequately. In order to achieve the sense of absurdity, they often use multiple artistic techniques to describe characters, including their behavior, language and the plot of the theater.

Language in these plays is mainly used to play games and to pass the time. Therefore, language loses its meaning when these characters use it as an evasion from the harsh reality underlying it. Beckett develops a language which is used as an inconvenient medium for communication. Language is a habit and nothing more. Beckett shows the devaluation of language through characters who generally talk in monologues even if they appear to talk to another character. Albee's characters follow Beckett's strategies to dramatize the lack of communication in the society which he portrays. His characters are unwilling to converse with another character, and their speeches tend to be in the form of monologue. Unfinished and fragmented sentences, unanswered questions, and interruptions—all serve to reveal the insufficiency of language. To present the devaluation of language, on the one hand, Beckett's characters generally talk in monologues even if they appear to talk to another character. While many authors spend their lives creating their own prosaic style, others focus on drama. Samuel Beckett, through the creation of his plays *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, was able to spend time adapting his style in these two different types of literature. In developing his own personal style, Beckett seems to have thrown out most of the rules in conventional writing. His plays definitely have a simple style that makes them his own, and his plays are written with such an unconventional style that almost separates them from the rest of literature all together; however, Beckett's style also has some overarching traits found in both his drama and his prose. It is almost entirely due to his style that Beckett's works are easily set apart from those of other authors.

3. Literature review

Sam Shepard, as the author of 44 plays and several books of short stories and essays, gained a reputation as one of America's foremost playwrights since he received ten Albee Awards, a Pulitzer Prize for Drama and critical praise. Shepard's plays are not easy to categorize. Some of his early plays belong to the Theatre of Absurd while the rest Shepard's plays do not have the characteristics of the Theatre of Absurd. As a new form of a drama, the Theatre of Absurd was originated in France after the Second World War. The term was firstly introduced in "The Theatre of the Absurd" in 1961 by Martin Esslin. Absurd plays questioned the nature of human existence by presenting a world without logic or morals, and without using of conventional dramatic language, plot and narration.

Shepard's earlier plays were heavily influenced by the Theatre of Absurd. Later on, his plays took on a more serious feel but were still influenced by absurdism. Shepard said: "The stuff that had biggest influence-on me was European drama in the sixties. That period brought theatre into completely new territory, Beckett especially who made

American Theatre look like it was on crutches. I don't think Beckett gets enough credit for revolutionizing theatre, for turning it". (Hassan, I. 1987) ^[2]. These words suggest Shepard's relation to Samuel Beckett who exposed Shepard to the Theatre of Absurd.

The plays that fall under the caption Theatre of Absurd have no story or plot. The plays have neither a beginning nor an end. Absurd plays lack a final clarity. The plot is essentially repetitive and cyclical. There are isolated characters who are mostly common people. These features are highly noticed in the play "La Turista". The play borders on the Theatre of Absurd with its illogical circumstances and bizarre plot. Several incidents in the play are left unexplained. Throughout the play, portraying Salem and Kent, as the characters who lack meaning and purpose in life, is considered the main aspect of the Theatre of Absurd (Hassan, I. 1987) ^[2].

The plays of Sam Shepard have always been concerned with the problem of identity crisis of modern people. The two brothers in Shepard's "True West" provide the best examples of the problematic dual identity of the Theatre of Absurd (Williams, M. 1997) ^[3]. Lee and Austin represent two kinds of ways that a modern man behaves; Austin tries to cling to the past by having the eagerness of going to the desert with his brother and he shows his nostalgia and eagerness to get back to the family roots, but he fails. Lee is another type who is ready to encounter the free land. It is evident, thus, that the dramatic characters in Sam Shepard's plays demonstrate a strong sense of being isolated. The search for identity, has long been of primary importance to Shepard, and is evident in the way the two brothers, Austin and Lee in his "True West", the two rock stars in the "Tooth of the Crime" and Eddie and May in "Fool For Love" are lost in their sense for history.

4. Discussion

One characteristic of the Theatre of Absurd in general, is a focus on the inability of the language to accurately represent the truth. In other words, language cannot reach the actual individual feeling and it is an insufficient means for transforming the ideas that exist in one's mind. The dialogues, in the author's two plays "Tooth of the Crime" and "True West", fail to transfer the meaning. In Act I, scene I, when Austin is offering Lee to choose another neighborhood because he is afraid that Lee might "get picked up," Lee's response suggests two opposite things. He tries to convey that Austin is also like not a "regular looking" trying to suggest that Austin resembles Lee. However, a few lines later, he apparently rejects any close affinity with his brother, saying "Yer not gonna' have to worry about me! I've been doin' alright without you. I haven't been anywhere near you for five years! Now isn't that true?" (Williams, M. 1997) ^[3]. The spoken words demonstrates the inadequacy of language as a means of communication. Another of Shepard's early plays "Chicago" is also in tune with the Drama of the Absurd. Throughout this play, Shepard deals with the decay of the American society and its dysfunctional families. The characters Stu and Joe in the play are alienated from each other. There is a lack of communication between the characters. The dialogue is devoid of sense and meaning. The conversation is an exchange of meaningless banalities used to fill the emptiness between people or within them as is suggested by the dialogue between Stu and Joy:

STU: Biscuits. Who need biscuits at this hour? Whoever needs biscuits? Joy?

JOY: (off right): What?

STU: Who needs biscuits?

JOY: Peasants in Mexico (Schmidt, K. 2005)^[4]

The conversation is reminiscent of the purposeless word-play between Didi and Gogo in Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot".

5. Conclusion

Above-mentioned special features have caused people to understand the Theater of the Absurd with many difficulties. But the Theater of The Absurd is still popular among people because it reflects the darkness of reality in modern society. If you ever read a drama that belongs to the Theater of the Absurd, you must realize that the language in this kind of drama is obscure and disorderly. Meanwhile, it has no regular rules to follow. One cannot guess what the character will speak in his next statement because their language is irregular and unpredictable. The most important thing is that it never obeys ordinary sense and thoughts. It seems that sometimes people who are speaking in their own points are difficult to understand by others with common sense. So, when you read one of the Theaters of the Absurd, you must prepare enough energy and wisdom to understand the obscure language. In this sense, Shepard could be categorized as an absurdist playwright whose early plays: "La Turista", "True West", "Chicago" and "Tooth of Crime" contain above mentioned specific features of the Theatre of Absurd as the plot is repetitive and cyclical, the characters are usually isolated men who suffer from lack of communication. This is due to the devaluation of language as a mean of communication, which is the main feature of the absurd drama.

6. References

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