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## The Philosophical basis of the Absurd Theatre

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### Abstract

Disappointed and disillusioned by the mayhem and destructions caused by the two world wars, certain playwrights of the 1950s, mainly in France, broke with the traditional concepts of Western theatre. According to these playwrights it is not the world that is absurd but the confrontation of its irrational character and this desperate desire for clarity in human minds. Thus the absurd is neither in man nor in the world, but in their common presence. This type of theatre shows an existence devoid of meaning, and depicts the unreason of the world in which humanity is lost. The apparent absurdity of life is an existentialist theme found in the works of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. This article attempts to explain the philosophical and logical basis of the Absurd Theatre.

**Keywords:** Absurd theatre, Theater of the absurd, Waiting For Godot, Samuel Beckett, The Empty Chairs, The Stranger, Le Mythe de Sisyphe, Albert Camus, Ionesco, Arrabal, Adamov, Genet. Jean Paul Sartre, Martin Esslin, Existentialism

### Introduction

“It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.”

Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus

The theatre of the absurd is a term first formulated by the writer and critic Martin Esslin to designate an important theatrical direction of the 20th century, to classify the works of certain playwrights of the 1950s, mainly in France, who broke with the traditional concepts of Western theatre. It essentially designates the theatre of Beckett, Ionesco, Arrabal, the first plays of Adamov and Genet.

In fact, it is not the world that is absurd but the confrontation of its irrational character and this desperate desire for clarity whose appeal resounds in the depths of man. Thus the absurd is neither in man nor in the world, but in their common presence. It arises from their antinomy. “It is currently their only link. It seals them together as only hatred can rivet beings. The irrational, human nostalgia and the absurd that arises from their tete-a-tete, these are the three characters of the drama which must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable”.

In the absurd theatre the absurdity of the situations but also the de-structuring of the language itself have made this theatrical style a dramatic movement in its own right. This type of theatre shows an existence devoid of meaning, and depicts the unreason of the world in which humanity is lost. The apparent absurdity of life is an existentialist theme found in the works of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The theatre of the absurd is neither a movement nor a school. The absurd theatre playwrights were a few extremely individualistic authors who did not belong to the bourgeoisie. What they had in common is a desire to reject the rules of the theatre, namely unity of time, unity of place and unity of action. These writers were dealing with the absurdity of human existence, through their productions. They tried to comment on the condition of man abandoned in a world that could neither answer his questions nor satisfy his desires.

The theatre of the absurd is neither a movement nor a school. It shows an existence devoid of meaning and depicts the unreason of the world in which humanity is lost (the difficulty of man to communicate). It is a more psychological approach to society and man, which the authors try to share with an intrigue, communication through often difficult dialogue and characters who often wander in this world without the slightest landmark, prisoners of themselves and sometimes their ignorance.

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This theatrical style is a dramatic movement in its own right. The absurd is not demonstrated, but simply staged; it is up to the spectator to understand, thanks to the gestures.

The term absurd is used in a philosophical sense to designate certain literary creations. Literature of the absurd reached its peak after the two world wars. The tragic political context indeed led to a deep existential disillusion. After the wars, writers perceived an absence of a God and a lack of communication between men. The wars, therefore, had a great impact on the perception of the world by writers and their creations. They tried to reproduce this absence of God and this lack of communication in their works. In the play *La Cantatrice Chauve*, for example, Eugene Ionesco introduces the reader to characters who speak incoherently and make communication difficult, if not impossible. Samuel Beckett, in his plays and novels, shows a meaningless existence. The two wanderers, Vladimir and Estragon, in his famous play, *Waiting for Godot*, are plagued by boredom as they wait for someone named 2 Godot. Their life has no meaning and it is a life characterized by the repetition of daily gestures.

In his essay on the absurd, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Albert Camus draws inspiration from Greek mythology to demonstrate the absurdity of all human existence. According to Albert Camus the absurd is an experience that man can feel. But how can one feel the absurd? Camus makes the link between the world and the way of perceiving it. The absurd is therefore a feeling, but it is not essentially irrational. Absurdity is not the absence of meaning, but this meaning is contradictory: two incompatible ideas like "noisy silence". Camus talks about the divorce between man and his life. Neither man nor the world is absurd, but man's point of view on the world gives a confrontation. Nothing is absurd in itself or by itself. Man wants everything to be logical, but the world is strange and irrational. "The absurd always arises from a comparison between two or more contradictory terms. Sartre observes that *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* aims to give the reader the "notion of the absurd" and *The Stranger* gives him the "feeling of the absurd". For Ionesco: the theatre of the absurd is the theatre which poses the problem of the human condition.

#### **James Feibleman writes of Camus that**

"He was neither a great novelist nor a great dramatist; his work is too non-specific and undramatic. For the most part, he was rational but at the same time superficial, often reasoning closely about what hardly matters, pages which sometimes give off the appearance of philosophy but deal with trivial generalities, the finished work amounting only to weak philosophical essays and glimpses of plans for fiction. It is difficult to see anything of permanent worth in all of this if we confine our judgment strictly to his writings in their proper categories. Camus did not advance the cause of either the novel or philosophy, and these are the two fields to which he devoted most of his attention. And yet there is a tremendous value in Camus which is worth recognizing and saving <sup>[1]</sup>". (Feibleman, 281-2).

#### **Albert Camus and the absurd**

Albert Camus separated himself from it clearly enough to

attach his name to a personal doctrine, the philosophy of the absurd. Defined in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, an essay on the absurd (1942), taken up in *L'Étranger* (1942), then in the theatre in *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding* (1944), this doctrine finds itself through a significant evolution of his thought, until in *The Plague* (1947). It is important, to remove all ambiguity, in order to study this philosophy in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and to specify the meaning of terms such as the absurd, the absurd man, revolt, freedom, the passion which, under the pen of Camus, have a particular resonance.

#### **The nonsense of life**

Is life worth living? For most men, living comes down to "doing the gestures that habitual behaviour commands." But suicide raises the fundamental question of the meaning of life: "To die voluntarily supposes that one has recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous nature of this habitual behaviour, the absence of any deep reason for living, the senseless character of this daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering".

#### **The feeling of the absurd**

Such awareness is rare, personal and incommunicable. It can arise from the "nausea" inspired by the mechanical character of existence without a goal: "Sometimes the sets crumble.

generally people follow an easy route of live to get in the morning go to office or factory, take meal and sleep the whole week they follow this route is easy to follow most of the time. One day only, the "why" rises and everything begins in this weariness tinged with disgust". This discovery can be born from the feeling of the strangeness of nature, from the primitive hostility of the world to which one suddenly feels foreign. Or the ideas that all the days of a dull life are stupidly subordinated to the next day, while the weather which leads to the annihilation of our efforts is our worst enemy. Finally, it is above all the certainty of death, this "elementary and definitive side of the adventure" which reveals its absurdity to us: "Under the mortal light of this destiny, uselessness appears. No morality, no effort is a priori justifiable before the bloody mathematics of our condition. Besides, intelligence, recognizing its inability to understand the world, also tells us in its own way that this world is absurd, or rather "populated by irrational people."

#### **The absurd man**

If this notion of the absurd is essential, if it is the first of our truths, any solution to the drama must preserve it. Camus therefore rejects the attitudes of escape which would consist in skipping one or the other term: on the one hand suicide, which is the suppression of consciousness; on the other hand, the doctrines situating outside this world the reasons and the hopes which would give a meaning to life, that is to say either religious belief or what he calls the "philosophical suicide of the existentialists" (Jaspers, Chestov, Kierkegaard) who, in various ways, deify the irrational or, making the absurd the criterion of the other world, transform it into a "springboard of eternity". On the contrary, only he gives the drama its logical solution who decides to live only with what he knows, that is to say with the awareness of the hopeless confrontation between the spirit and the world.

#### **The Challenge**

"To live an experience, a destiny, is to accept it fully. It is a perpetual confrontation between man and his own darkness.

<sup>1</sup> Feibleman, James K. "Camus and the Passion of Humanism." *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1963, p. 281-292. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4334322](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4334322).

She calls the world into question every second she has... She is not an aspiration, she is hopeless. This revolt is only the assurance of a crushing fate, minus the resignation that should accompany it". This is how Camus contrasts the spirit of the suicide (who, in a certain way, consents to the absurd) with that of the condemned man who is at the same time aware of and refuses death (see epilogue of *L'Étranger*). According to him, it is this revolt that gives life its value and its grandeur, exalts the intelligence and pride of man struggling with a reality that surpasses him, and invites him to exhaust everything and to exhaust, because he knows that "in this conscience and in this day-to-day revolt, he testifies to his only truth which is the challenge".

### **Freedom**

The absurd man leaves aside the problem of "freedom in itself" which would have meaning only in relation to belief in God; he can only experience his own freedom of mind or action. Until he encountered the absurd, he had the illusion of being free but was a slave to habit or prejudice that gave his life only a semblance of purpose and value. The discovery of the absurd allows him to see everything with new eyes: he is profoundly free from the moment he knows lucidly his condition without hope and without tomorrow. He then feels untied from the common rules and learns to live "without appeal".

### **Passion**

Living in an absurd universe will consist of multiplying lucid experiences with passion, to "be in front of the world as often as possible". Montaigne insisted on the quality of the experiences that one increases by associating one's soul with them; Camus insists on their quantity, because their quality stems from our presence in the world in full consciousness:

"To feel one's life, one's revolt, one's freedom, and as much as possible, is to live and as much as possible. Where lucidity reigns, the scale of values becomes useless. The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man".

"Everything is permitted" exclaimed Ivan Karamazov. However, Camus notes that this cry contains more bitterness than joy, because there are no longer consecrated values to guide our choice; "The absurd, he says, does not deliver, it binds. He does not authorize all acts. Everything is allowed does not mean that nothing is forbidden. The absurd only renders their equivalence to the consequences of these acts. He does not recommend crime, that would be childish, but he restores to remorse its uselessness. It is precisely in the field of possibilities and with these limits that the freedom of the absurd man is exercised: the consequences of his acts are simply what must be paid for and he is ready for it. Man is his own end and he is his only end, but among his acts there are some which serve humanity, and it is in the direction of this humanism that Camus' thought will evolve.

### **The theatre of the absurd according to Martin Esslin**

Esslin explains that "the Theatre of the Absurd merely communicates one poet's most intimate and personal intuition of the human situation, his own sense of being, his individual vision of the world<sup>2</sup>" Esslin (402-403).

For Esslin, this theatre of the absurd aims at a radical depreciation of language in favour of a poetry that emerges from concrete scenic images. Martin Esslin's essay published in 1962, where the expression theater of the absurd becomes famous, defines this type of dramaturgy by analyzing it in the light of the writings of Albert Camus. Faced with the absurdity of the world, the authors of what Esslin called the "theatre of the absurd" develop immobility, a desperate expectation. Unable to be satisfied with the dramatic form as it existed at the time, and which often rested on realistic bases, they continued the work begun by the surrealists on a poeticization of the language, and put the dramatic form service of this finding of absurdity.

Martin Esslin notes common points between these authors, in the forefront of which Ionesco, Adamov and Beckett. First, no one trusts language as a tool of communication anymore. Language is the tool of power; it is oppressive and absurd, most often frozen in ossified forms. It is these forms that Ionesco places at the base of his work as a playwright, using them by pushing their meaninglessness to the extreme in order to better destroy them. With Beckett, it is communication that no longer works: the characters no longer manage to dialogue. Finally, with Adamov, language is synonymous with manipulation and deception. Their pieces are also found in their ability to show, through poetic and subjective images, the absurdity of life, both in their themes and in their construction.

The authors of the absurd refuse the realism of the characters and the plot. Their plays do not feature strong personalities, nor intrigue in the "narrative" sense of the term. The place where the action takes place is often not mentioned with precision. Time is not linear: either it does not advance, or it repeats itself. Finally, the theatre of the absurd works on both the comic and the tragic: if the absurd makes you laugh at first sight, after reflection, you can detect much darker messages in it. On derision, on a form of comedy that would make fun of the absurdity of the world to better thwart its tragedy.

### **The process of the theatre of the absurd**

The important notion to understand with regard to the theatre of the absurd is that it opposes realism in the theatre and we try to find a new way of doing theatre. We find here a refusal to realism, characters and plot. Often, there are no marked personalities or intrigue in the "narrative" sense of the term. Most of the time, the characters of the theatre of the absurd are interchangeable, that is to say that each of them has no significant influence on the course of the story. Several linguistic processes can be used in the absurd: repetitions, pleonasm, syntactic problems, certain rhymes, several proverbs and bad translations are numerous. 5

### **A deconstruction of language**

The language used on the stage is no longer a means of communication but it expresses emptiness, incoherence and represents life, which is itself ridiculous. There are a lot of silences that generate discomfort between the characters. It is therefore a form of theatre where you can dare everything, use your imagination without limiting yourself and above all, not worry if what you are saying is faithful to reality. This implies, for example, a deconstruction of language and a staging that is different from what we were used to do and see. The playwrights try to demonstrate the absurdity and insecurity of the human condition and its existence, inspired

<sup>2</sup> Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. New York: Vintage, 2004. Print.

by war, they portray human behaviour in times of crisis and the misunderstanding of the times. Basically, they try to criticize their time, and the way they live it.

It should be noted that the essence of modern literature is to revolt against the traditional conventions of literature. Writers no longer saw the importance of emphasizing form. They were trying to show the mess of the world in their style of writing. The Theatre of the Absurd does not emphasize character development and there is no defined plot. Moreover, the theatre of the absurd is characterized by the crisis of conscience which stages the loneliness, the suffering and the absurdity of the human condition.

By a refusal: refusal of traditional characters and history. The mode of narration changes, it becomes mostly external, even internal in rare cases. So the traditional technique is abandoned and new techniques and ideas are introduced. There is experimentation with the style among several writers. In this, the writers show the meaninglessness of human existence through their works.

### **The characters of the theatre of the absurd**

The theatre of the absurd stages characters bogged down in waiting or the monotony of existence, it favours anti-heroes, without depth or well-defined character. Their psychological underdevelopment manifests itself in their behaviour, that is, in their gestures, in their way of speaking, and through their interdependence. The contrast between the excessive animation of the characters and their weakness accentuates the tension inherent in these pieces. This exaggerated opposition serves both to underline their puppet qualities and reveals the personality of superficial, weak, vulnerable and easily manipulated by everyone. But at the same time, their capacity to suffer reveals a dimension that contradicts their superficiality.

### **Link between war and literature**

The two world wars had a lot of influence in France and also on literature, the art world, such as surrealism and absurdism of that time. The impact of wars is much more visible in the arts and in literature. Most often, the stories of writers who participated in wars are not reality, but fiction. It is a subjective impression of the war. Nevertheless readers seek to penetrate the reality of wars by reading these stories. Writers of the absurd do not try to tell the reality of wars, but they try to transpose the feeling of wars. For writers, a war gives a lot of inspiration to write books, poems or even plays. Literature represents the history of wars; it is a way of "remembering". Literature partially constructs the collective memory of a culture.

Literary stories are a medium of collective memory. Places of memory are material and concrete things (possibly geographically located) but they are also abstract and intellectually constructed things. The memory of war cannot be concrete, because they are individual and subjective memories and commemorative ceremonies. Nevertheless the war has become part of the collective memory. The literature of the absurd reached its peak after the two world wars. The tragic political context indeed led to a deep existential disillusion. After the wars, writers perceived an absence of a God and a lack of communication between men. The wars, therefore, had a great impact on the perception of the world by writers and their creations. They tried to reproduce this absence of God and this lack of communication in their works.

### **The human condition after the World Wars**

In the aftermath of the Great War, the economic and political situation was difficult, but from a social point of view it got even worse: the population was totally struck by the events of the war which shook the whole world. A general sense of loss and confusion characterized 20th century Europe. Man experiences a sense of failure, expressed by the thought of existentialism. At the end of World War society is shocked by the horrors of war; in addition, the new nascent totalitarian regimes strike the population, which finds itself in a state of confusion and perdition. Human life loses its value. Man lives in a disenchanted way. The pessimistic vision characterizes the work *La Peste* de Camus: it is a testimony, of the painful reality of the world. Camus denounces human fragility in the face of Nazism: the condition of man is his same prison; man is incapable of reacting in the dark, of moving in the face of the unknown. The only way man has to survive is to accept the absurdity of his situation.

### **Conclusion**

I would like to say in the conclusion that when we speak of absurdity we bring up the idea of the human condition, because the absurd is born in man in relation to life. The man expresses absurdity in literature. In this essay, plays were the focal point in literature. Plays are more than literature, because of course there is the aspect of the event. The experience of war is perceptible in the performativity in a theatre, but we can well find the feeling of the absurd and the connection with war in the texts of plays. The theatre of the absurd is not a literary current or a school, but rather an aggregate of very different approaches to theatrical art. Nevertheless, these avant-gardes of the fifties have opened the way to a new way of writing plays. Freeing the dialogue and the stage from traditional shackles, they leave a legacy to playwrights who follow the intuition that the theatrical form must be questioned, and that a different work on language is possible. Strengthened by its surrealist heritage and existentialist thought, the dramaturgies of Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, Arrabal and Pinter open the way to contemporary dramaturgies by also showing the essential contribution of the other arts, in the first among which the music hall and the cinema.

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