

The Theatre of the Absurd

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Page _____

The theatre of the absurd constitutes a triumvirate of modern drama. The other two triumvirs being, the Revival of poetic drama in Ireland pioneered by W.B. Yeats and the Revival of verse drama inaugurated by T.S. Eliot in England. We agree with Martin Esslin that the theatre of the Absurd is nothing but an intellectual shorthand for a complex pattern of similarities in approach, in mode, of group of plays that have common set of philosophical premises.

Salient Features of the Absurd Drama

According to Irving Warkle, the salient features of an Absurd Drama are as follows:

(1) Static rather than Dynamic - An Absurd drama presents a static situation that has no dynamism in it. It does not progress at all, but ends where it started - It only expands and swells but hardly moves an inch ahead of its starting point. Like a caged beast it whirs, yells or even roars but only in vain.

(2) Substitution of an Inner Landscape or the Outer World :-

Another important feature of the absurd drama is the substitution of an inner landscape for the outer world. An absurd drama endeavours to carry the onlookers in to the psychological realism of the characters rather than to present the outer spectacle of the world. Before the audience or onlookers, the mental recesses of the protagonists are unfolded, parading the fear and menace.

(3) Want of Boundary Line Between Fantasy and Fact -

In an absurd play, there is no border line between fantasy and fact. Both of these elements intermingle and merge together. The want of a clear-cut line of demarcation helps create perplexity; confusion, absurdity.

(4) **Plasticity of Time** - Again, the plasticity of time limit makes an absurd play either contractible or retractable as the need might be there, offering the playwright an option to prolong it either, or to shorten it, as the case might require.

(5) **A Fluid Environment** - Another important characteristic feature of an absurd play lies in its fluid and amoeboid environment that admits of transformation of one mental condition into another form through visual metaphors. The suggestive and generally monosyllabic or even tacit dialogues help a lot to create this amoeboid milieu in an absurd play.

(6) **Obsession of the Protagonist** - In an absurd play, the protagonists are obsessed with defeat, despair, fear and death, which render the atmosphere of the play gruesome and menacing, the presumption of some inimical and hostile intruder haunts the minds of the protagonists recurringly till it becomes an obsession for them, pricking their minds and souls always and anon.

(7) **An Iron Precision of Language and Construction** - An iron precision of language and construction is a must and a characteristic feature of an absurd play as it is the writer's only defence against the chaos of living experience.

(8) **The Absurd Drama versus Conventional Drama** - The Absurd drama can, perhaps, be best understood when compared with the conventional well-made drama. A well made drama, has a clearly defined plot, with a beginning, a middle and an end. It is tightly structured. Such a play presents

sharply drawn characters who are convincingly motivated. The dialogue is not only witty but also dialectical. The play presents a problem or a theme that is unmistakably understood by the audience. And plays by Shaw or Ibsen have all these characteristics. But the absurd play, on the other hand, flouts all these age honoured conventions. It has absolutely no story; it starts at an arbitrary point, and ends as arbitrarily as it begins. It has no linear progression. Its movement is rather circular that it ends where it started. Its characters are hardly recognisable and they are not, in the least motivated. Any part of the dialogue can be assigned to any character we like. The dialogue, far from being brilliant is pointless, discursive, banal, degenerating into meaningless absurdity. It does not hold up a mirror to nature; rather, it represents a dream or a nightmare.

Again, a well-made play is based on three common assumptions - that in human life there is a relationship of cause and effect, that the character exists and the language communicates, but an absurd drama rejects all these assumptions, its basic assumption being that human life is irrational and that man is hurled in to the world purposelessly. Life itself is a contingency. Death defies all logic and it is the greatest reality of life. The Absurd dramatist opines that character or personality is a myth and that man is a ridiculous creature in meaningless universe. He can not act but rather he is always acted on. Lastly, that language is no more an intelligent tool for communication. They believe that human experiences in their extreme states are not communicable.

The absurd drama deals with situations that are painful and violent and we can not identify ourselves with its characters. The absurd drama appeals to a deeper level of the mind of the audience. It challenges the audience to make sense of nonsense, to face the situation consciously rather than feel it vaguely and perceive with laughter and pathos ~~are~~ the fundamental absurdity of our lives.