



Camus' Absurdity in Beckett's Plays: Waiting for Godot and Krapp's Last Tape

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Abstract

*Although T. S. Eliot and Edward Albee are from different generations, use different formal approaches (loosely characterized as verse drama and absurdist theatre), and have differing worldviews (the Orthodox and the agnostic), their plays resolve at a similar space, which, following Eliot, is the place one might call "the Shadow." In this paper, I would like to propose that this notion of the Shadow-space provided Eliot and Albee resources for dealing with contingencies following World War II. My reading of Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* and Albee's *Tiny Alice* emphasizes not a distinction between Christian orthodoxy and agnosticism, but rather Eliot's modernist exploration of a realm between the empirical and non-empirical. With this emphasis, we might see Eliot's verse drama as more explorative than has typically been seen, more willing to interrogate Christian mythology, and we might also see Albee offering meaning that is more than abyssal. Thus in the shift from late to post modernism, as I intend to conclude, Eliot and Albee meet somewhere between recourse to abstraction, absurdism and materialism as exclusive sources of meaning, somewhere between the idea and the reality, in the Shadow.*

The Theatre of the Absurd is a designation for plays written by a number of playwrights in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, as well as to the style of theatre which has evolved from their work. Their work expressed the belief that, in a godless universe, human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down. Logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and to its ultimate conclusion, silence. Critic Martin Esslin coined the term "Theatre of the Absurd", relating these plays based on a broad theme of absurdity, roughly similar to the way Albert Camus uses the term. The Absurd in these plays takes the form of man's reaction to a world apparently without meaning or man as a puppet controlled or menaced by an invisible outside force.

Esslin regarded the term "Theatre of the Absurd" merely as a "device" by which he meant to bring attention to certain fundamental traits discernible in the works of a range of playwrights. The playwrights loosely grouped under the label of the absurd attempt to convey their sense of bewilderment, anxiety, and wonder in the face of an inexplicable universe.

The fundamental concept of absurdity which Esslin points out as the common denominator in the plays of the playwrights of "Theatre of the Absurd" is derived from Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* wherein Camus analyses the reaction of man faced with the inexplicable. Camus opines that it is the basic human nature to reduce everything around him/her to a logical conclusion. The failure to do so creates the absurd. In Camus' view, neither human existence nor the world is themselves absurd. Instead, the absurd arises because the world is resistant to its reduction to human intelligibility: "we want the world to make sense, but it does not make sense. To see this conflict is to see the absurd." However, this is not to say that the absurd is born of an irrational response to the limitedness of human intellect. Camus insists that the awareness of the absurd is specifically a rational, intellectual discovery, deduced from the recognition of the division between our expectations of the world and the world itself, unresponsive to those expectations.

The Myth of Sisyphus is primarily concerned with an examination of responses to the absurd, and in the essay Camus argues that philosophers concerned with absurd have sought to overcome or transcend it. For example, he accuses Kierkegaard of reducing the problem of the absurd to the hubris of human desire to reduce the world to clarity and coherence. The absurd, the "very thing that led to despair of the meaning and depth of this life", becomes for Kierkegaard "its truth and its clarity". Kierkegaard, put simply, advocates "leap" of faith which

Camus' Absurdity in Beckett's Plays: *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape*

expressed the individual's nothingness without God, but for Camus this leap constitutes a suppression of the very tension of the abrupt and unexpected loss of faith in habits, routines and fundamental assumptions and beliefs, that is at the heart of the human condition. It is in this context of estrangement that the question of suicide is raised: "Does the Absurd dictate death?" Camus responds that it does not, since suicide represents a flight from the Absurd condition it only appears to acknowledge and the destruction of the very tensions and contradictions at the heart of the Absurd it pretends to affirm. Absurd reasoning, as a thinking of difference, separation and divorce, strives to maintain these tensions and make them the reasons to live.

What could be worse than Sisyphus's fate, one might still be inclined to ask? Camus encourages us to ask at the same time what fate would in fact be better? As the precondition for other, more active forms of resistance and as an expression of scorn for the gods who control Sisyphus's fate, but who have not succeeded in destroying his consciousness, his will or his attachment to life, that is, his freedom, it is perhaps not that difficult to imagine Sisyphus happy after all.

Similar concerns have already been expressed by Freiderich Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals* wherein he portrays how society changed over decades of time from being content with joy to utter discontent with feelings of revenge. Moral judgements changed enormously and Nietzsche is ought to examine the origin of morals questions by going back to the basic idea of good and evil. What is good, and if it is, why is that so? When he pronounced "God is Dead", he meant that the idea of God is no longer capable of acting as a source of any moral code. Nietzsche criticized how the modern world, and modern man, no longer held the need for a God. Together, the ideas of Camus and Nietzsche suggest that the concept of "God" cannot be significant in a world in which the absurd is embraced; a belief in a God requires submission to the idea that there is a way of rationalizing existence. Absurdism rejects this idea and because the concept of "God" cannot be negotiated with Absurdism, religion can no longer have a place in society. This newly godless society defined by absurd qualities was popularized by the works of Samuel Beckett.

Although audiences had already been introduced to modernist, experimental modes of theatre before Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* appeared in 1953, this is the play that had the most profound and wide-ranging impact. Before this play, the audiences could expect the 'well-made'

play – life-like, psychologically realistic characters, witty dialogue and well-crafted, causal plots with neatly tied up beginnings, middles and ends similar to the plays of GB Shaw and Ibsen. But *Waiting for Godot* subverts these expectations at every turn. The circularity of the play is highly unconventional. Traditional cause/effect plot development is abandoned in the play. The movement of the play is circular and symmetrical. The second act parallels the first. Nothing new happens except the tree grows leaves indicating a surrealistic passage of time. The characters engage in ways that closely parallel the first act; the key difference seems to be an increased struggle in the second act to “pass the time”, which passes quickly in the first act because of Pozzo and Lucky, who appear in the second act only for a short duration. The dilemma intensifies in the second act because Estragon is more and more desperate to leave and Vladimir has to continually remind him why they mustn’t leave because they are waiting for Godot. One can see how this play presents us with a non-traditional plot although there is a dilemma; the characters want to go but ‘feel stuck’ waiting for Godot. They want to commit suicide, but have grown too apathetic or too helpless to act on their own desires. Even today, it is not what we expect at all. But it is very common in the tradition of the theatre of the absurd.

We can’t fail to miss the theme of uncertainty and the inability in the modern age to find a coherent system of meaning, order, or purpose by which to understand our existence and by which to live in *Waiting for Godot*. Uncertainty is pervasive throughout the play: the uncertainty of purpose, of time, place, emotion, relationships, truth and hope. Existence is the only certainty the play allows. The Cartesian dictum that declares with such certainty “I think, therefore I am” is challenged, but essentially holds true. Didi and Gogo are themselves vivid dramatic representations of Descartes’ body/mind split. Even the most fundamental things are not certain:

ESTRAGON:

Wait! (*He moves away from Vladimir.*) I sometimes wonder if we wouldn't have been better off alone, each one for himself. (*He crosses the stage and sits down on the mound.*) We weren't made for the same road.

VLADIMIR:

(*without anger*). It's not certain.

ESTRAGON:

No, nothing is certain.

Vladimir slowly crosses the stage and sits down beside Estragon. #

Camus' Absurdity in Beckett's Plays: Waiting for Godot and Krapp's Last Tape

Beckett concerns himself with the system of language and the faultiness of the proposition that the complex system of signs can actually communicate meaning. In *Waiting for Godot* (1954) and *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), for instance, Beckett starkly paints the nature of reality as he sees it -- as an endless stream of signifiers, signifying nothing much at all. The irony in Beckett's works is that to speak is to exist, but in order to speak; one must adopt the system of language, words, which have no inherent meaning. Beckett's technique, to demonstrate the lack of referent (or signified) in language, illustrates the lack of meaning not only in language but also in life. These plays are stripped to their bare essentials; there are few characters and even fewer props so that the meaninglessness of postmodern life is starkly highlighted. Moreover, the dialogue, the language, is made more prominent by virtue of Beckett's sparse use of props. What few props exist are used symbolically to illustrate the gaps and holes in language and the lack of shared meaning (or the inability of language to communicate meaning) that is caused from these "gaps." Only rarely does it serve us well, leading us to truth or beauty, but we can't sustain those functions very well. Pozzo's poetic description of the twilight may be true and even beautiful, but it cries out, "That's how it is on this bitch of an earth." Language fails us just when we need it the most. Even when the language conveys the sense, we tend to run away from the truth, as Didi does near the end of the play when he empathizes with Pozzo's despair. "What have I said?" he pulls back. However true, we don't want to know.

VLADIMIR:

I don't know what to think any more.

ESTRAGON:

My feet! (*He sits down again and tries to take off his boots.*) Help me!

VLADIMIR:

Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be?

(*Estragon, having struggled with his boots in vain, is dozing off again. Vladimir looks at him.*) He'll know nothing. He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot. (*Pause.*) Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the

grave digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (*He listens.*) But habit is a great deadener. (*He looks again at Estragon.*) At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (*Pause.*) I can't go on! (*Pause.*) What have I said?

However, Beckett does not provide the reader/viewer with a definitive, logo centric text with decidable meaning -- nor is this his purpose. In this sense, Beckettian drama anticipates many Foucauldian and Derridean philosophical ideas.

In Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, much effort is made in *performance*: looking, touching, doing the mechanical, robotic almost: "*Krapp remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh, looks at his watch, fumbles in his pockets, takes out an envelope, puts it back, fumbles, takes out a small bunch of keys, raises it to his eyes, chooses a key, gets up and moves to front of table*" etc. . In the play, Krapp, a "wearish old man," listens to his memories on a series of reel-to-reel tapes as he proceeds to presumably get drunk offstage. *Krapp's Last Tape* exists as a dialogue between Krapp and his former selves encapsulated on tape. But these dialogues are almost void of emotion. Krapp does not come to any conclusion about his life except that his former selves are silly and presumptuous. We, as readers or viewers, are spared the emotional component of Krapp; he stops the tape whenever it seems he ponders the truth of his life or attempts to answer any existential question: "What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely -- (*Krapp switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again*). . . unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire -- (*Krapp curses louder, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*)".

However, it is exactly what is left unsaid that is unsettling to us. We do not hear any proposed answers on the meaning of Krapp's life as he reflects. We are left, as is Krapp, in the bleak void of ennui. We are left to face Krapp's pessimism and the fact that there are no answers, that there can be no justification for one's existence. Krapp does not want to hear about his old conclusions about his beliefs or the eventual questioning of formerly relied upon beliefs. He considers his former selves to be foolish for presuming that he once claimed to have any answers: "Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that's all done with anyway. . . . Nothing to say, not a squeak. What's a year now? The sour cud and the iron stool. (*Pause.*) Revelled in the word spool" (24-5). The

Camus' Absurdity in Beckett's Plays: Waiting for Godot and Krapp's Last Tape

finale of the play involves Krapp listening to the portion of the tape that describes a final sexual encounter with a woman; perhaps this illustrates Krapp's last chance for happiness but he does not want those years back:

I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side. . . . Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back.

Thus Beckett creates the effect that Krapp's focus is always on the sensory aspect of each of his life experiences and not on personal meaning or significance. Krapp's excessive physical detail is a coping mechanism that allows him to avoid facing his own emotions and regrets, but his avoidance of emotion makes it difficult for him to establish sense of continuity over the years. His objective and straightforward tone produces the sense that he is superficially but not emotionally attached to his memories. Krapp's inability to connect with his recorded past suggests that, "As a character he has no depth, since the memory is not inside him" (Langbaum 85). Such treatment of his past prevents him from the self-actualization necessary to construct a consistent identity for himself.

Krapp's fragmentation into a progression of past selves also occurs because of his constant interruptions and editing, which disengage his memories. Krapp constantly stops the tapes he is playing in order to "brood," laugh, drink, or sing, and the play is characterized by its sheer amount of asides, commentaries, and curses (13). For example, while he is replaying the tape of his "Memorable equinox" – his spiritual realization – he becomes impatient and winds the tape forward three separate times. Krapp's idiosyncratic tendency to interrupt himself, as well as his tendency to fast-forward and rewind his recorded memories, both reveal his attempt to essentially edit his past – to mechanically dwell on the memories he relishes and to forget the memories he has come to hate. Thus, "the tape recorder is a necessity for him, but it serves ultimately to confirm precisely the split in identity which it was meant to close" (Lawley 94). Krapp's editing by means of his machine creates a halting, punctuated, and interrupted rhythm that magnifies his fragmented self (Lawley 90). By editing his past, Krapp divides himself into a succession of individuals (Levy 186). The reduction of Krapp's life into a succession of

individual selves parallels the breakdown of his past into a succession of moments. By listening to old tapes, Krapp has become accustomed to “separating the grain from the husks...[separating] those things worth having when all the dust has – when all *my* dust has settled”. By sorting through his memory, Krapp compartmentalizes the events, salvaging the ones that seem valuable and discarding what now seems foolish to him. The memories that Krapp has salvaged are a series of personal losses – most notably the death of his mother and the loss of his lover. When the window blind goes down to signify that his mother has died, Krapp is in the act of throwing a ball to a little white dog. Younger Krapp fragments this memory when he says, “Moments. Her moments, my moments. (*Pause.*) The dog’s moments”.

Beckett again demonstrates this fragmented perception of time with Krapp’s description of a moment of enjoyment as the “happiest moment of the last half million”. His fragmented perception of time, memory, and his own existence correspond to his fragmented perception of his own identity. Although Krapp strives towards continuity as he attempts to construct a single identity for himself, this fragmented mindset constructs “conflicting formations of the self”. Beckett himself acknowledges this concept of a fragmented self when he writes in an essay, “At the best, all that is realized in Time...can only be possessed successively, by a series of partial annexations – and never integrally and at once”. The disparity between the Older Krapp and the Younger Krapp also decreases the possibility for continuity in Krapp’s self-identity. The audience listens as Younger Krapp describes the spiritual revelation that he experienced during a fierce storm on a beach. Older Krapp later comments, “Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that ”. Krapp now scoffs at the mental clarity and realization of his past, and his harsh use of the word “bastard” to describe himself connotes a sense of regret and contempt. Furthermore, Krapp’s next line, “Thank God that’s all done with anyway,” reveals his detached and cynical tone. “Ironically,” writes literary critic Paul Lawley, “this narrative of reconciliation reveals the split between Krapp and his younger self at its widest. The exultant rhythms of the vision are now absurd to him” (92). This conflict between the two contrasting attitudes of Krapp’s younger and older selves towards his past realization creates “confusion between actuality (the present) and pseudo-reality (the past created by the conscious writer)”. The Younger Krapp says, “Perhaps my best years are gone....But I wouldn’t want them back. Not with the fire in me now”. These last lines of the play significantly contrast with Older Krapp’s comment, “Drowned in dreams and burning to be

Camus' Absurdity in Beckett's Plays: Waiting for Godot and Krapp's Last Tape

gone". This conflict between Krapp's selves evokes the concept in the play that "there is no recovery of selfhood by means of retrospection". Such confusion augments the split between Krapp's selves, further fragmenting his identity.

The disparity between the individual selves is also evident in Krapp's frequent episodes of laughing at his former goals. Beckett writes, "And the aspirations! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*) And the resolutions! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*) To drink less, in particular. (*Brief laugh of Krapp alone*)" (Beckett 16). By mocking his former aspirations, Krapp rejects his former identity and places the blame for his present state onto his former selves. Therefore, his present suffering is never his fault, and he can rationalize to himself to "go on with this drivel in the morning. Or leave it at that". By mocking his past actions and rejecting the responsibility for his present state, Krapp further separates his selves, even to the point that he is unable to recognize his former self: "Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp". Krapp further fragments his identity by not only mocking his memories, but also by discarding many of them. Krapp discards the envelope that he writes on and throws away the tape he is recording. Furthermore, his editing of his tapes, especially his fast-forwarding through parts he dislikes, also exhibits his habit of discarding those memories. It is interesting that Krapp's attitude towards his memories parallels his attitude towards the banana skins left over from his apparent obsession with bananas. Literary critic Eric P. Levy notes that Krapp's "much-emphasized discarding of banana peels is obviously analogous to his tendency to reject or forget memories". Krapp's vaudeville behavior at the onset of the play includes peeling a banana, dropping the skin, peering at the skin, and finally pushing it "with his foot over the edge of the stage into pit". Similarly, Younger Krapp says on tape at the conclusion of the play, "Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back". It seems that like bananas, memories are also "fatal things for a man with [Krapp's] condition". Like bananas, Krapp's memories both sustain and plague him. By discarding his memories, mocking his younger selves, and rejecting his present state, Krapp makes an utter refusal of continuity in his identity.

The tension between life and story, self and story, fills Beckett's works and has frequently been discussed as a key issue in his novels and shorter fictions. It is even more

important in his drama because there not only does this tension provide a major thematic concern but the narrative form itself has been employed as a significant new dramatic technique.

Beckett can be situated as belonging to an aesthetic which is both anterior to contemporary performance and yet, in some ways, opens up areas which contemporary theatrical practitioners have begun to explore. While Beckett remains largely within a Modernist context, he is also attacking some of its central tenets. Indeed, I believe that Beckett's continuing significance lies in the weight of literary and philosophical heritage which even his most minimal plays evoke. Beckett's work presents a sustained critique of this heritage and the extent to which it infiltrates the most intimate areas of our experience, revealing the construction of our identity to be linked to dominant forms of representation and knowledge.

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Camus' Absurdity in Beckett's Plays: Waiting for Godot and Krapp's Last Tape

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