

EXPLORING EXISTENTIALISM ON STAGE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TWO CLASSICS

¹Eva Müller and ²Alejandro González

¹Department of Linguistics, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

²College of Humanities, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

Abstract: In the aftermath of World War II and amidst the escalating global tensions, existentialism, pessimism, and nihilism pervaded the intellectual landscape, significantly influencing the trajectory of modern drama. As social contradictions deepened between Britain and America, a fresh and illuminating dramatic style known as "The Theatre of the Absurd" emerged. Coined by critic Martin Esslin in his influential 1960 essay, this movement introduced a profound shift in theatrical expression. The Theatre of the Absurd encompasses a genre of plays rooted in absurdist fiction, predominantly crafted by European playwrights during the late 1950s. It also characterizes the evolving theatrical style that emerged from their collective efforts. These works delved into the repercussions of human existence devoid of meaning or purpose, leading to the breakdown of all communication. Paradoxically, this artistic movement sought to awaken audiences to the pursuit of the opposite. In this context, rational discourse and structured argumentation gave way to irrational, illogical speech, ultimately culminating in silence. Renowned playwrights hailed as masters of The Theatre of the Absurd include Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Luigi Pirandello, Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Miguel Mihura, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Fernando Arrabal, Václav Havel, Edward Albee, and Badal Sarkar. Among these luminaries, American playwright Samuel Beckett and British-born Irish playwright Edward Albee made an indelible mark on the theatrical world when they simultaneously unveiled their groundbreaking dramas, "Krapp's Last Tape" and "The Zoo Story," at Berlin's Schiller Theater in 1959.

Keywords: Theatre of the Absurd, absurdist fiction, existentialism, Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee

Introduction

After World War II, with the continuous acceleration of the tense situation of the world and the increasingly acute social contradictions between Britain and America, existentialism, pessimism and nihilism thoughts swamped and thus greatly influenced the development of modern drama. Under this situation, a bright new style of drama "The Theatre of the Absurd" emerged, which was coined by Critic Martin Esslin in his 1960 essay[1].

The Theatre of the Absurd is a designation for particular plays of absurdist fiction written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1950s, as well as one for the style of theatre which has evolved from their work.

Their work expressed what happens when human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down, in fact alerting their audiences to pursue the opposite. Logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and to its ultimate conclusion, silence.[2].

Playwrights widely acknowledged as masters of the Theatre of the Absurd include Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Luigi Pirandello, Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Miguel Mihura, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Fernando Arrabal, Václav Havel, Edward Albee and Badal Sarkar. Among these playwrights, American playwright Samuel Beckett and Irish born British playwright Edward Albee made a sensation in the world of theater because they simultaneously presented their new dramas *Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Zoo Story* in Schiller Theater in Berlin in 1959.[3].

Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* is a one act one character play in English with only one character, Krapp, a 69 year old man who repeatedly plays a tape recorded on his 39th birthday, the year in which he discarded love and happiness and took up his "magnum opus", which proved unfaithful eventually. It was written for Northern Irish actor Patrick Magee and first titled "Magee monologue". In this play, Beckett shows his modern techniques in presenting the absurd and futile nature of human life. Because of its avant-garde postmodern characteristics and absurdity, this play received overwhelming negative comments from critics and audiences initially, but finally acknowledged as an outstanding representative work of the Theater of the Absurd.

Albee's first play *The Zoo Story*, written in 1958, originally titled Peter and Jerry, is a one-act play written in 1958 and completed in just three weeks. It depicts the story between Peter and Jerry. The play explores themes of isolation, loneliness, miscommunication as anathematization, social disparity and dehumanization in a commercial world. Rejected by New York producers, the play premiered in West Berlin at the Schiller Theater Werkstatt on 28 September 1959 in a double bill with the German premiere of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. [4]

Though these two plays have been widely studied respectively, they are seldom compared within one article. This paper attempts to look into the deeper connection between these two classical works of the Theater of the Absurd, and thus to find the similarities and differences of them.

2. Similarities

Plays within this group are absurd in that they focus not on logical acts, realistic occurrences, or traditional character development; they, instead, focus on human beings trapped in an incomprehensible world subject to any occurrence, no matter how illogical it is. The theme of incomprehensibility is coupled with the inadequacy of language to form meaningful human connections. According to Martin Esslin, Absurdism is "the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose." [5] As representative works of the Theater of the Absurd, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Zoo Story* have something in common, showing the distinctive characteristics of plays belonging to this school.

2.1. Theme

Though the themes of *Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Zoo Story* are not exactly the same, they both reflect the inner world of the lonely people and further illustrate the spiritual crisis of the common people.

In *Krapp's Last Tape*, Krapp is an elderly man living alone, who, through playing the tape recorded in the past, laments on his past and struggles between the lost past and the gloomy present. Except his own voice from the tape recorder, Krapp has no connection with any human being. By listening to the tape, he recalls the memories of the past, especially his several connections with women, which shows his eagerness for communication and

love. In the end of the play, realizing another reel of tape is finished and his meaningless life has to be continued, he laments, “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.”[6] Life takes away his confidence, dream, and his pursuit of happiness, only leaving him the tapes recording his old memories, which, with the passage of time, have become empty shells. At last, with the tape running on endlessly, he is caught in a hopeless situation and faced with the tragic beginning of a new reality.

In *The Zoo Story*, Albee mainly shows the story between Peter, a middle-class publishing executive with a wife, two daughters, two cats and two parakeets and Jerry, an isolated and disheartened man, who desperately wants to have a meaningful conversation with another human being. Though, on the surface, Peter lives better than Jerry, they both feel lonely in their deep hearts. Every Sunday, Peter comes to the park and reads books on a bench. Obviously, he doesn’t like bustle and noise or making friends. He cautiously keeps self-isolated and seems not to be interested in communication with others. For Jerry, he is tortured by loneliness for a long time. He has two empty photo frames, showing that he has no family members or he has nobody worthy to be missed. Jerry even says to Peter, “But every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody, know all about him.”[7] Through these words, Jerry’s eagerness to have a real communication with others is completely unmasked. But, unfortunately, Jerry even fails to make friends with a dog. In order to achieve a real communication with Peter, he even purposefully irritates Peter and forces Peter to stab him, and finally pays the cost of his own life.

Therefore, these two plays both show the themes of human loneliness, spiritual crisis and social indifference. Through the tragic endings, audiences or readers can perceive the themes preferred by the playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd.

2.2. The Design of Characters, Plot, Setting and Stage Property

Simple design is another similarity of *Krapp’s Last Tape* and *The Zoo Story*. In the arrangement of characters, plot, setting and stage property, both Beckett and Albee show the characteristic of concision.

For the design of characters, *Krapp’s Last Tape* merely has one character while *The Zoo Story* has only two characters, which is rarely presented in traditional plays. In the former play, Krapp has a communication with his past self by listening to the tapes recorded in the past to ensure the continuity of the story and to present the theme of the play. Similarly, in the latter one, Peter and Jerry’s conversation and the later physical altercations compose the zoo story. Both Beckett and Albee use the least characters in their plays.

The plots of these two plays are simple and clear. In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, Krapp plays his tape to recall his old times and show his loneliness and lamentation for his lost past. During the process of playing tapes, he continues his bad habits, i.e. overeating bananas. At last the tape runs endlessly and thus forces him to enter a new tragic reality of repetition. In *The Zoo Story*, Jerry induces Peter to talk with him by repeatedly mentioning his going to the zoo, forces Peter to share his private life, and finally irritates Peter to stab him to death to get a real relief from his meaningless life. Finally, Peter, as well as the readers or audiences, knows that the real zoo story actually happens in the process of Jerry’s attempt to get a real communication with another human being, Peter.

The settings and stage properties of the two plays are few and simple, but really impressive. There is no concrete and real setting on the stage, instead of which, there is a metaphorical setting paralleled with reality. This symbolic stage extends the language of drama, enhances the dramatic effect, and leaves a great impression and profound reflection on the audiences.[8] There is only one table, one chair, and one man on the stage of *Krapp’s Last Tape*.

A beam of light shines on the stage, and Krapp appears and disappears in the light, showing his present darkness and past happiness and indicating the tragic reality that there is no light in his life except the only light of his memory. What's more, the tape exerts the biggest effect with the simplest form. It not only contains Krapp's past, but also reflects his present. With the help of this simple stage property, the possibility of conversation between the only character in this play and his past self is achieved. On the stage of *The Zoo Story*, the setting is one corner of the Central Park, with two benches, the trees behind it, and the sky. Absurdly, Peter and Jerry fight for one of the benches, which finally becomes the immediate flashpoint for Jerry's death. The simple stage property of the bench may represent for more meanings than itself including the status, property, fame or other important things that people in the world fight against each other for. Therefore, a simple stage property extends the drama language. Beckett and Albee exaggerate the effects of stage property to visualize the absurdity of life.

These techniques in writing drama are commonly applied by Beckett and Albee, which distinct the two plays in works of the Theater of the Absurd.

2.3. The Depreciation of Language and Dialogue

Plays of the Theater of the Absurd have a distinctive characteristic of depreciating language and dialogue, which is also represented in *Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Zoo Story*.

In *Krapp's Last Tape*, there is no dialogue because it has only one character, Krapp, who has some monologues of the past in the tape and those of the present. In the drama, Krapp sits in a shabby room listening to the tape recorded when he was 39. He pauses to mutter something to himself or to hum a love song. In *The Zoo Story*, though dialogue is evident, it is mainly Jerry's own wishful thinking with Peter's unwillingness to have a conversation with him. Peter responds indifferently and only reluctantly answers Jerry's questions to show his politeness. In this play, Jerry makes a lengthy monologue, which nearly hypnotizes Peter. In these two plays, language and dialogue are applied not to facilitate communication but to manifest people's loneliness. The language of the characters is incoherent, illogical, fragmental and even baffling.

By changing language or dialogue into meaningless and ceaseless chattering, the Theater of the Absurd opens a new dimension in drama.

3. Differences

As two masterpieces of the Theater of the Absurd, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Zoo Story* have many similarities, but they also have their respective unique features, for Beckett and Albee are two great playwrights exploring their unlimited imagination and experiment to construct a new formula for the development of drama in their own way. Naturally, there are also many differences between these two great plays.

3.1. The Way of Presenting Drama Conflicts

Drama conflicts are presented in different ways in *Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Zoo Story*, with the former presenting an invisible conflict while the latter a visible one.

Without any evident plot in *Krapp's Last Tape*, it seems that the drama conflict disappears, but actually the invisible conflict exists throughout the whole play. With the help of the tape, Beckett makes the past of Krapp appears in the form of memory. The invisible time takes away Krapp's youth, happiness, dream and love, which makes him suffered a lot. Thus, an invisible drama conflict comes into being in Krapp's confrontation with his past. The tape records the passage of time, indicates Krapp that the past is past, which makes him disappointed, frustrated and hopeless. Repeatedly compared with the hopeful young Krapp, the disillusioned old Krapp becomes more disappointed and thus the conflict is further intensified. Pursuing his writing cause, young Krapp sacrifices

his love, but proves to be fruitless at last. In the end, he laments that his best years have gone, which leaves him limitless loneliness and disappointment.

However, the conflict in *The Zoo Story* is presented in a totally visible way. Jerry is desperate to have a real communication with others. He says to Peter, “But every once in a while, I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody, know all about him.” However, in reality, his wish is repeatedly frustrated. Therefore, when he meets Peter in the park, he decides to fulfill his dream by chatting and telling stories. But, unfortunately, Peter is reluctant to talk with him and sometimes even shows his indifference and scorn. After hearing Jerry’s long story about the landlady and the dog, Peter even tells Jerry directly and furiously, “I DON’T WANT TO HERE ANY MORE. I don’t understand you, or your landlady, or her dog...”[7] Confronting with Peter’s disdain and strong opposition, Jerry doesn’t give up and tries his best to have a real talk with Peter. Thus Jerry’s insistence and eagerness of communication contrast sharply with the indifference of Peter, and the conflict reveals itself naturally and obviously. Without realizing his purpose, Jerry begins to intentionally irritate Peter by speaking sarcastically or ironically. He even tries to drive Peter away from his bench and to seize the seat. Finally, Peter can’t stand it any more and has to hold a knife given by Jerry to defend himself. To Peter’s surprise, Jerry charges Peter and impales himself on the knife with a rush. Until this point, the conflict escalates to a bloody event, which exerts a great impact on the audience.

Whether the conflict is presented in a visible or an invisible way, the two great playwrights achieve their purposes through the ingeniously conceived plays.

3.2. The Arrangement of Language and Action

While the traditional dramatic language and action are usually employed with referential meanings, this function of language and action in *Krapp’s Last Tape* is dissolved. On the contrary, in *The Zoo Story*, language and action are presented with a trend of construction.

In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, Krapp’s words are messy, trivial, intermittent, and hesitant. On the one hand, the fragmentary words and incomplete sentences seem to be an expression of his past history, or his automatic speaking in a hypnotized state, or his delirious talking. Without any indication, the audiences have no way to get the real meaning and intention of them. On the other hand, there are numerous presentations of zero language in the tape, which hinders the readers’ attempt to grasp the real meaning. In the tape, there are more than 70 pauses, lots of silence, and meditation, which are also evidences of zero language. Due to the lack of explanation and clues, the drama language is divided into fragments scattering throughout the whole drama and therefore is dissolved. With the presence of the signifier and the absence of the signified, the language in *Krapp’s Last Tape* presents the content or plot with great ambiguity, hollowness and redundancy. For example, in the drama, Krapp frequently changes his topics without any transition. He talks about the light in the former part, followed by the pause, after which he changes the topic from the light to the grain: “The grain, now what I wonder do I mean by that, I mean...”[6] It bewilders the audience, for there is no transition or hint between these two different topics. The dissolved dramatic language highlights Krapp’s extremely confusing, alienated and exhausted thoughts.

In this drama, like the dissolution of language, the action is also dissolved. In traditional drama, action and plot are the key elements to proceed the development of the story, but in this drama, there are few actions. The only character, Krapp, usually contemplates, or gives an absent stare at the front, or stays motionless. The whole action of him is characterized with the features of being casual, mechanical, repetitive, spontaneous, and numb, etc. Krapp has to contemplate for 10 and 15 seconds before and after unclenching the bottle cap, which shows the

static and passive action of a dispirited old man in his closing years under a state of physical decline and spiritual confusion. It can boil down to this: the actions are merely the intuitive and dissolved actions of the old man, for the meaning of them is totally lost.

There is no plot, no clock time, and no sequential progression of action *Krapp's Last Tape*. The disorder and confusion of time in the play powerfully question the meaning of existence, the purpose of life and the fate of man's future.

In contrast, the dramatic language and action in *The Zoo Story* show an obvious constructive feature. Through the application of language, Jerry intrudes on Peter's peaceful state by interrogating him and forcing him to listen to stories about his life, and the reason behind his visit to the zoo. He mentions the zoo six times to arouse Peter's interest in communicating with him. Unexpectedly, the playwright uses a lengthy monologue or indirect language to present Jerry's eagerness to make Peter realize the importance of communication, which only leads to Peter's impatience. With the failure of indirect language, Jerry has to apply a more direct way by provoking and even cursing Peter, and finally ends his life in an extreme way. Accompanying with the application of language, the action is linear, unfolding in front of the audience in "real time". Jerry tickles, pokes, and even thumps Peter to offend Peter's body, trying to torture and irritate him. After that he even tries to push Peter away from the bench, and challenges him, with aggressive language, to fight for his territory. Unexpectedly, Jerry pulls a knife on Peter, and then drops it as initiative for Peter to grab. When Peter holds the knife defensively, Jerry charges him and impales himself on the knife. Bleeding on the park bench, Jerry finishes his zoo story by bringing it into the immediate present: "Could I have planned all this. No... no, I couldn't have. But I think I did." Horrified, Peter runs away from Jerry, whose dying words, "Oh...my...God"[7], are a combination of scornful mimicry and supplication. All of the series of language and actions are directly pointed to the theme of the drama, construct a distinctive dramatic effect, shocking the audience in a distinguished way. **3.3. The Design of Structure**

Compared with the static and circular structure of *Krapp's Last Tape*, *The Zoo Story* has a dynamic and linear structure.

In *Krapp's Last Tape*, there is no cause and effect relationship, and the structure is designed around the tape, which is played repeatedly and sometimes backward, so the structure is circulated with the tape, time being on and on, without a start or an end. Meanwhile, the only character in this drama determines the static feature of the structure. Without a partner, all the actions and words are progressed by Krapp, which can't be responded. Therefore, the whole drama creates an atmosphere of loneliness, darkness and death.

However, the structure *The Zoo Story* is closer to reality. The two characters in it are of flesh and bones with their respective background, identity, and personality, etc. The structure is complete with a starting point, a climax and an ending. In total, three parts constitutes the structure: the dialogue between Jerry and Peter, Jerry's monologue and the fighting between them. The development of the plot is more and ore dynamic with the conversion from conversation to fierce quarrel and to Jerry's death. Peripeteia is also applied in this drama and is evidenced by the death of Jerry, a former challenger and offender, which enhances the dynamic feature of the structure.

3.4. Literary Implication & Rhetorical Skills

In *Krapp's Last Tape*, Beckett shows the absurdity of human existence and his assertion of inactivity through the description of Krapp's absurd and awful life. He realizes that the absurdity of human life is beyond remedy, inactivity being the only way to cope with it. For rhetorical skills, Beckett applies binary opposition in this play to make a sharp contrast or paradox. For example, pairs of words such as "dirty" and "white", "white" and "black",

and “light” and “darkness” show the absurdity of Krapp’s life and his situation of approaching death or being a living dead. Irony is also applied such as being a writer, he doesn’t know what to say when making a new tape. An excessive description of abnormal physical appearance is used to show the absurdity of human condition. In *The Zoo Story*, Albee presents a parody of human society by examining the absurdity of human condition, disclosing the experience of alienation caused by the collapse of communication, spiritual desolation, and despair in modernity. A variety of symbols are applied in this play. The title is named *The Zoo Story*, but the author doesn’t mention anything concerning the zoo. “The zoo” is actually a symbol of the isolated human society, with all the people in it, or in their respective cages. What Jerry tries to do is to break the cage of Peter and to have a real communication or contact with another human being. “The zoo” is repeated again and again, which also indicates the connection between the zoo and the real society. After breaking the cage preventing his communication with Peter, Jerry killed himself. The isolation, indifference and violence of human society are exposed in the sun. When introducing himself to Peter, Jerry mentions the two empty photo frames in his room, which are also a symbol indicating that there is nobody worthy of his admire or that he has nothing to cherish. These empty photo frames also symbolize his empty emotional world, isolation from others, and inner loneliness. Jerry’s story with the dog is another successful symbol, which indicates the absurdity of his experiment to communicate with an animal. After the fierce fight with the dog, Jerry builds a new relationship with it: “the dog and I have attained a compromise; more of a bargain, really. We neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other.”[7] Jerry’s conversation with Peter further indicates Jerry’s despair. In the process of communication with Peter, Jerry analogize his relationship with Peter to that with the dog, but this time Jerry is like the dog, and Peter Jerry. Though Jerry pushes himself to the knife, it is Peter who holds the knife tightly and causes Jerry’s death, which becomes a substitute of Jerry’s previous thought of killing the dog. The great significance of Jerry’s death is thus conceived: Only through violence can Jerry leave an impression on other people. Tragically, Jerry’s death is not a real communication with others, but an incidence making him to be the picture in the photo frame, which makes people stop their numbness and remember him. There’s also a connection between *The Zoo Story* and the Bible, both of which are showing the model of crime, punishment, confess and salvation.

4. Conclusions

As masterpieces of the Theater of the Absurd, *Krapp’s Last Tape* and *The Zoo Story* both possess the main characteristics of this special school of drama such as the minimum number of character, the scarcity of setting, lack of cause-effect relationship and excessive description of abnormal physical appearance, etc. However, the two masters Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee show their different talents and writing skills in the creation of their respective works.

References

Esslin, M. (1960) *The Theatre of the Absurd*. *Tulane Drama Review*, 4(4), 3-15.

Hutchinson (1999) *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia*. London: Hutchinson.

Zhang, J. (2011) *Meditation on Two Absurd Picture Scrolls: A Comparative Study of The Zoo Story and Krapp’s Last Tape*. *Foreign Literatures*, 1, 144-151.

*Wikipedia (2023) Krapp's Last Tape. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krapp%27s_Last_Tape [5] Wikipedia (2003) Theatre of the Absurd. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_the_Absurd [6] Beckett, S. (1959) *Krapp's Last Tape*. London: Faber and Faber.*

*Albee, E. (1992) *The Zoo Story: And, the American Dream*. Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop. [8] Zeng, Y. (2006) *Research on Western Postmodernism Literature*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.*