



Demystifying the Absurd in Samuel Beckett's Fiction and Drama

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Abstract

Understanding the philosophy of the absurd has always solicited the attention of modern and postmodern critics, scholars, and researchers. The absurd remains one of the most inscrutable concepts that both philosophy and literature have ever produced. The absurd as a vision of life came at a time when Western societies were experiencing a transitional juncture in terms of social, cultural, philosophical, political, and technological changes. These societies were progressively shifting from the traditional values of conservatism and uniformism that were essential characteristics of the first half of the 20th century to a more experimental and avant-gardist culture that defines most modernist and post-modernist contexts. Writers of the period reflected the mood of the age, which hinged on an outspoken need for change that would meet the aspirations of younger generations. However, the change writers were seeking was thwarted by the looming shadow of the philosophy of the absurd, which incarnated a deep feeling of loss of faith, pessimism, and belief in the futility of human existence that finds its sustainability in the meaninglessness of man's endeavor to impart meaning to life. Absurdist's problematized human actions and convictions, believing that they would lead to no avail as they were mere abstract notions devoid of any substantial significance or viability. I have always been struck by the similarity between the absurd and cyberspace, which is a defining marker of 21st-century digital technology. Both breed virtual and abstract spaces: one on the stage and the other on digital tools' screens. I even argue that William Gibson's seminal definition of cyberspace could be applicable to the absurd as both a concept and a literary genre. Gibson defines cyberspace as "a consensual hallucination experienced by billions of legitimate operators..." (Gibson, 1984). Indeed, the phrase "consensual hallucination" finds relevance in the literary works of the absurd, especially Samuel Beckett's novels and plays, which squarely dramatize the nothingness of human beliefs, values, and convictions, which are represented as sheer hallucinations and abstractions that human's consent to take for granted. Beckett's philosophy of the absurd will be examined through his "denormalization" of literary genre, deconstruction of language, and disembodiment of the individual self.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt at studying the philosophy of the absurd through the novels and plays of its leading figure, Samuel Beckett. By implementing the content analysis approach, two major issues are addressed in this work. First, Beckett's experiment with the concept of genre in the sense that he attempted to blur the binary line between fiction and drama, seeking to "deformalize" his works and trespass on the defining characteristics of genre. Second, Beckett's vision of the absurd is largely highlighted by focusing on his treatment of the individual self, time, space, language, and, above all, the concept of "nothingness" that is part and parcel of the philosophy of the absurd (McDonald, 2006).

Beckett's novels and plays clearly dramatize the way he views the modern world as a barren, empty, and hollow space, a "waste land", stripped of religious, moral, and humanistic values. An irrevocable void where language ceases to make sense, where human actions become meaningless, where man loses faith in life, and where human existence turns into a lost game! Throughout his works, Beckett epitomizes the main tenets of the theater of the absurd represented by the School of Paris, founded by, besides Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, and Albert Camus. The common denominator of the school revolves around the notion of the absurd, which is also akin to the philosophy of existentialism. In fact, the first half of the twentieth century was mostly characterized by a mood of pessimism, cynicism, skepticism, and loss of faith as a consequence of the two world wars. The war was not only ravaging in terms of human loss and massive destruction; it was also deeply felt as a loss of human values, convictions, and certainties that made the so-called modern world seem appallingly meaningless and, worse, hostile to human existence.

This is the scope within which we can evidently contextualize the theater of the absurd in general and Beckett's fictional and dramatic works in particular. Commenting on the general mood of the period, Charles Glicksberg pointed out that "the hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions" (Glicksberg, 1970, p. 23). All that was cherished as meaningful and unshakable became untenable and devoid of significance for the absurdists, who saw man "cut off from his religious, metaphysical roots... lost; all his actions became senseless, absurd, useless" (Esslin, 1980, p. 23).

2. Reflections on the Theatre of the Absurd

Beckett is presumably one of the most notorious representatives of the theater of the absurd. He did, to a large extent, contribute to the rise of this literary doctrine, which took on a colossal dimension in the age of modernism, the age of social, cultural, literary, and philosophical transformations. There was a clear-cut paradigm shift in most Western societies, which were experiencing a transitional process or mobility by seeking to move away from traditional or conservative norms that absurdist considered stale and incongruous with their new visions of the world, the individual self, art, and society. Writers, absurdist in particular, were intensively concerned with existential and ontological questions that were radically

eclipsed in traditional writings. Being inspired by the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simon de Beauvoir, James Joyce, and others, writers of the absurd took it upon themselves to "raise such questions as: what is a world? What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation or when boundaries between worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is a projected world structured? (McHale, 1986, p. 60). This is the ontologically overwhelming mood that prevails in the writings of the absurd. All traditional values and concepts were rejected and stripped of their core meanings; they were too hollow and superficial to respond to the existential preoccupations of experimental, avant-garde writers such as Samuel Beckett. The supposedly meaningless of existence is best epitomized in the concept of "nothingness," which is paradoxically the most reverberating 'doctrine' or 'certitude' of the absurdists. Indeed, nothingness can be regarded as the literal incarnation of the absurdists' belief in the emptiness of the world and the purposelessness of human actions (Weighell, 2010).

Literally speaking, the term "absurd" means out of harmony or ridiculous (Esslin, 1980, p. 23). This definition, however, remains to some extent cryptic, as it does not completely unfold the philosophical and ontological ramifications of the term. "Absurd" as a literary concept refers to the loss of faith in the power of reason, the validity of religion, the purpose of human existence, and the certitudes of previous ages and generations. For the absurdists, "all comforting familiarities are gone. All traces of human landscapes and human situations vanish, and we find ourselves in a hellish void... (Binns, 1980, p. 98). Such a nihilistic vision thoroughly defines the way absurdists conceive the world around them—a world where every single flicker of hope or faith drastically crumbles to give way to a relentless void, or more precisely, nothingness. More recently, Terry Eagleton has come to realize that Beckett's story is still going on as "the human subject is diffuse, decentred... The all-powerful autonomous subject has been humbled and chastened in our time, dislodged from its imperial sovereignty, and unmasked as no more than the ephemeral product of language, culture, history, the unconscious, and so on (Eagleton, 2010, p. iv). Beckett's individual subject is fragmented, dispossessed of its existential certitudes, and nullified by its own conditions.

Absurd writing is, then, reflexive of that sweeping aura of nihilism, especially in terms of stage performance (Pratt, 2005). The stage upon which actors perform roles is a literal reification of the emptiness of the world, as in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, where characters are ironically performing 'nothingness' in its true sense; the stage, in this context, could be seen as an extension of the outside world, a world of despair, void, pessimism, helplessness, and nihilism, a world of inaction and inertia, a world where « nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes... In an instant, all will vanish, and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness, as stated by Beckett's main characters in *Waiting for Godot*.

The absurdists' nihilistic thinking is a hallmark of their philosophy, hence their writings. For them, life is a mere illusion or farce in its core meaning. Ontologically, humans are completely duping themselves by their 'senseless' endeavor to seek meaning in a meaningless, or more precisely, a treacherous, world devoid of any tenable expression or viable communication. All that persists for the absurdists is the "expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (Kennedy, 1976, p. 134). The word 'nothing' is actually a leitmotif of the absurdists' world; for example, everything in

Demystifying the Absurd in Samuel Beckett's Fiction and Drama

Beckett's plays and novels is conscientiously crafted to fully allow readers and audiences to not only see or read but experience the notion of nothingness at its core. They become themselves entangled, wrapped up, or shrouded in nothingness. Besides stage, language, accessories, and characters are designed to personify nothingness. They do not simply act or perform roles in the conventional sense; they rather play a game, a lost game in Beckett's vision, creating, therefore, an intersection between playing the game of the stage and the game of life; both serve to render how profound the absurdists' belief in the illusion of reality or life is. They write "to bring out the pathos and the absurdity of the modern man" (Fletcher, 1972); most of them were striving to define "nothing" and reach the verge of "annihilation" (Hoffman, 1962, p. 38).

It is, thus, not surprising that death is somehow celebrated as a triumph by the absurdists, not to say a salvation from life. The word 'salvation' denotes a religious signification, and writers of the absurd, as mentioned earlier, lost faith in religion. Death is seen as relief from the trauma of life rather than a tragedy, as in Beckett's novel *Murphy*. The protagonist experiences the "quietude" and "peace" of death, which release him from the turmoil of nothingness. It is also predictable that Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* keep craving suicide, and Hamm in *Endgame* longs for death. In fact, Beckett was born with the taste of death in his mouth (Alvarez, 1973, p. 48). The world of the absurdists is an extremely grotesque, ghastly, and unwelcoming environment that is precariously hostile to human existence.

3. Beckett and the « Deformalization » of Genre

Beckett did not only write plays, for which he is best known; he also wrote novels, namely *Murphy and The Unnamable*, in which he attempted to experiment with the concept of genre by narrowing down the generic differences between fiction and drama. It was a tradition for Beckett to keep switching between the two genres; for example, the novel *The Unnamable* and the play *Waiting for Godot* were written almost simultaneously, sharing, thus, the same development and vision. Rubin Cohn, the most eminent critic of Beckett's works, commented on the overlapping relationship between his novels and plays:

It is a critical convenience to discuss Beckett's fiction and drama as though each had an independent development, but this is inaccurate. Not only did Beckett zigzag from drama to fiction and back...but he frequently translated in the one genre while producing original work in the other. (Cohn, 1983, p. 55)

In this sense, there is a stark resemblance between *The Unnamable* as a work of fiction and *Waiting for Godot* as a work of drama. Following his experimental propensity, Beckett wrote *The Unnamable* from a dramatic perspective, which is clearly manifested in the dramatic monologue that pervades the whole novel. The unnamed 'protagonist' keeps addressing readers or the audience directly, in a stage-like manner reminiscent of the world of drama. The protagonist's consciousness is entirely projected through a dramatic monologue that echoes Hamlet's powerful soliloquies in Shakespeare's play. "So tenuous" is, therefore, "the dividing line between Beckett's dramatic works and his later novels, which are all cast in the form of dramatic monologue, that extracts from these have been performed on the BBC's" (Esslin, 1980, p. 41). We can unambiguously notice that Beckett's modernist and experimental

tendencies arose from his literary endeavor to transcend the limits of genre through his attempt to approximate fiction to drama and to write outside of generic constraints.

Beckett's represents, indeed, the mindset of modernism, which reflects a general proclivity towards projecting into the human psyche and its multilayered consciousness. Most writers of the period internalized human action through the processes of introspection and stream of consciousness. The focus was centered on the human mind for the sake of dramatizing the repercussions of the outside world on the modern man's molested and unstable psychology, subsequent to both the loss of faith and the pervasive dominance of nothingness that constitutes the gist of the absurd. By dismantling the generic conventions of drama and fiction, Beckett positioned himself within the circle of experimental avant-garde artists who sought to shake off the status quo and make literary genres concomitant with the spirit of the age. By "deformalizing" drama and fiction, Beckett succeeded in making the two literary genres take an innovative turn that allows modernist writers to gain momentum. The absurdists' attitudes towards the world, individual actions, and human values are not only a matter of content but of form as well. They did radically reject the literary conventions that pertained to traditional writing. The assumed meaninglessness of existence is also substantiated through their "deformalization" of characters, plot, structure, and language. In this context, Martin Esslin confirms that such works have no "cleverly constructed story" or plot to speak of. They have no "recognizable characters"; they are almost "mechanical puppets. Besides, absurdists' writings are mere reflections of dreams and nightmares rather than "finely observed sketches. In terms of language, it often consists of incoherent, meaningless, and fragmented "babblings" (Esslin, 1980, pp. 21–22), as will be highlighted later.

4. Beckett's conception of individual self/identity

In his two novels, *Murphy* and *The Unnamable*, Beckett explores the duality between the personal/inward self and the social self. The personal self is "the uniqueness that differentiates one individual from the next... it is that part of the self-concept that is free of role or relationship determinants" (Breakwell, 1983, p. 4). Whereas the social self is "that part of the self-concept derived from individual group membership, interpersonal relationships, and social position and status" (Breakwell, 1983, p. 9). In *Murphy*, the protagonist keeps oscillating between the two dimensions of the self, with a certain insistence on making the inward personal self triumph over the social. *Murphy* expresses a strong aversion to the outside world by seeking to liberate himself from the part that links him to society or the material world. He shuns social roles and activities by secluding himself in his own dark room and plunging into a kind of spiritual trance that takes him far away from external reality and social personae. By definition, a 'trance' is a "sleep-like condition; it is a "dreamy" or "hypnotic" state (*Oxford Dictionary*) through which the central character loses contact with reality and recedes into his own mental state or inward self.

Murphy's mental withdrawal is a willed act to resist the impending forces of society that molest his inward propensity towards isolation. By practicing trance, he surrenders to the control of the mind and cherishes a hypnotic or transcendental state. In the whole novel, Beckett depicts society as an inaccessible labyrinth, stripped of compassion and understanding between individuals who are mostly driven by greed, exploitation, and egocentrism. Modern society, for Beckett, is filled with scorn and neglect, especially towards those who fail to adapt to its

rules. In the outside world, Murphy often finds himself an object of derision and contempt, which intensifies his certainty that he does not belong to the big world; he rather belongs to the little world of his own. However, Beckett's nihilistic vision condemns Murphy to annihilation; neither the outside world of society nor his inward mental isolation can help him achieve self-fulfillment. By experiencing a series of disillusionments, he comes to the realization of the futility of human existence and the predominance of nothingness, which best describes Beckett's nihilism. As in most of Beckett's works, Murphy plunges into a condition of psychological disorder and selfhood disruption "that leads to a loss of 'grip' on concepts and precepts (Barry, 2016, p. 183).

In his experimental novel, *The Unnamable*, the concept of nothingness takes on a more discernible nihilistic dimension. The main character, or more accurately, 'no character', is completely disembodied, literally stripped of any identifying signifiers: no name, no body, and no individual self. The physical body is the medium through which individuals create the very notion of the 'self'; it is the "locus of selfhood" (Docherty, 1987, p. 237). Absence of the physical body naturally entails absence of both the social self and the inward self, which are evidently one's identity markers. On the one hand, the world of the novel is entirely unorthodox or unconventional in relation to the real world that lies outside the novel. On the other hand, it is to a large extent typical of Beckett's nihilism: all modes of human existence are literally annihilated; void and nothingness supersede.

The unnamed character engages in a hopeless endeavor or quest for the self in an attempt to reach a conceivable or identifiable glimpse of identity. Beckett has, indeed, succeeded in constructing an impersonated, disembodied, and decharacterized entity that is reminiscent of the postmodern tradition of the anti-novel, which was initiated in France through the concept of "le Nouveau Roman." This movement signaled the "end of the novel" in its traditional definition, in the sense that readers are made fully conscious of the fictitious dimension of the literary text, seeking, therefore, to destroy the illusion of reality that readers might assume. By "decharacterizing" the *Unnamable*, reducing him to mere voice, and depriving him of bodily existence, Beckett is dismantling the very components of the liturgical text at its core. Nothingness is not only a matter of ontological scope; it is also reified through Beckett's annihilation of the mainstream defining components of the literary text. He has deflated the world of the novel to the point of literal nothingness by evoking in the readers' or audience's mind the same "black void" experienced by the character himself. As Martin Esslin rightly observes, he attempts to explore nothingness in its being (Esslin, 1980, p. 59).

Beckett's experimental mindset in regards to the "anti-novel" or "nouveau roman" is also substantiated by his unconventional or revolutionary attitude towards language. The world Beckett constructs in his works exists only at the level of language; he is as if inviting people to revel in what could be described as 'linguistic reality', a reality that has been forged by words and only words, as clearly articulated in *The Unnamable*: "The words are everywhere, inside me, outside me... I hear them; there's no need to hear them; there's no need for a head; and it's impossible to stop them... I'm in words, made of words, others' words, what others say, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling—all words (*The Unnamable*, p. 340). The character's dramatized self-consciousness is intended to interrogate the very nature of the novel as a work of fiction, especially in the post-modern age where there is a concern with the fictitious aspect of the novel. Beckett spent much of his artistic career in France, and obviously he was influenced by the French school of the absurd and the experimental trend of "le Nouveau

Roman." *The Unnamable* was written within this innovative framework, which sought to lead the novel to annihilation, to its self-destruction, or, in other words, "deformalization."

In this context, the French postmodern critic Nathalie Sarraute argued that the novel in the post-modern age has lost its defining and visible characteristics in terms of plot, action, language, and characters who have no discernible contours that could make them identifiable (Sarraute, 1956, p. 72). The illusion of reality is, indeed, what the postmodern writer sought to represent, not only through the ontological concept of nothingness but more profoundly through rethinking the novel as genre, a work of fiction that exists at the level of language, the only recognizable reality. For Beckett, the verisimilitude of reality is altogether dashed down; what persists are words that constitute the very act of writing, as Jean Alter confirmed in his comment on the realm of the « anti-novel » or « nouveau roman » when he said that everything in the novel recedes to oblivion except language, which is the only tangible reality of the post-modern novel (Alter, 1972, p. 71). Nothing is conceivable in Beckett's nihilistic world; both the unnamed character's search for selfhood and the novel as a literary genre dwindle to a mere jumble of words. What is more obfuscating in Beckett's use of language is that he sought to go beyond what is known, or what lies "beyond representation" (Colerick, 2019, p. 256).

The concepts of nothingness, nihilism, self-consciousness, and selflessness are further dramatized in Beckett's groundbreaking plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. The two plays, namely *Waiting for Godot*, were conscientiously crafted to dramatize nothingness at its utmost core. The stage is literally empty, desolate, barren, and dismal to prevent the audience or readers from coming up with the slightest viable meaning or interpretation. Beckett did, in fact, completely barricade the stage against the external world by sweeping out mainstream and traditional notions of time, space, society, and communication. He stripped his characters of any discernible or recognizable features we normally associate with traditional literary works. The characters are carefully constructed to clearly incarnate the void churned out by nothingness, and it is no coincidence that the first word spoken in *Waiting for Godot* is "nothing" when Estragon says, "Nothing to be done," which becomes the most imposing leitmotif of the play. Vladimir and Estragon do not fit into the conventional and defining components of characters in the sense that their presence or absence on stage does not evoke any social, cultural, or realistic parameters that would make them identifiable by the audience. They are "abstractions... in the most cruel literal sense of the word: they are abstracti, which means: pulled away, set apart" (Anders, 1956, p. 140). Despite their bodily existence on stage, Beckett insists on dissolving their physical presence in the audience's mind. Their pseudo-existence is entirely bound to their speech, to the words and babblings they utter to fill their monotonous, tedious, and purposeless dialogue (Hamilton, 2010).

For all this, *Waiting for Godot* has often been celebrated as the most iconic or quintessential of the theater of the absurd. It has, indeed, pulled the absurdists' assumption of the futility of human life to its utmost crucible. Nothing makes sense in the macabre and grotesque space of Beckett's play; the act of waiting for Godot becomes an act of waiting for an illusion, a fantasy, a nightmare. The longer the process of waiting lingers, the more Beckett incites us to deeply reflect on the worthlessness of human existence. The author has deliberately, but pertinently, shifted the focus from the identity of Godot to the act of waiting per se as "an essential and a characteristic aspect of the human condition" (Esslin, 1980, p. 50). The senselessness of the human condition is, to a large extent, seriously dramatized through the playful and trivial, not to say childish, actions of the characters, who are actually intended

Demystifying the Absurd in Samuel Beckett's Fiction and Drama

to deflate the human instinctual grip on life. For example, the two main characters speak about the act of taking off boots, which is, on the one hand, symbolic of the triviality of human action; on the other hand, it is symptomatic of the monotony and dullness of human life, as compellingly asserted by Vladimir while addressing Estragon: "Boots must be taken every day; I am tired of telling you that..." (1956, p. 10).

In this absurd quagmire, the quest for selfhood becomes an illusory venture on the part of the characters. "Nothing to be done, except for the useless and unavailing act of waiting for Godot, who never shows up, leaving the characters hooked up in a state of void, where words, although devoid of meaning, are the only tangible reality. In fact, Beckett is trying to make us reflect on the assumption that nothing is so "insufferable to man as to be completely at rest, without passions, without business... He then feels his nothingness, his insufficiency, his dependence, his weakness, and his emptiness—gloom, sadness, fretfulness, vexation, and despair (Hesla, 1987, 117). In *Waiting for Godot*, man is constantly brought up to Beckett's irrevocably cynical and misanthropic vision of human existence, a vision that can be considered an epistemological onslaught on Western societies, which started to foster a rapacity for materialism, pragmatism, and egocentrism at the expense of moral and humanistic values.

I believe *Waiting for Godot* performs nihilism at its peak, contrary to Gunter Anders' assumption that « Vladimir and Estragon conclude from the fact of their existence that there must be something for which they are waiting; they are champions of the doctrine that life must have meaning even in a manifestly meaningless situation... What Beckett presents is not nihilism but the inability of man to be a nihilist even in a situation of utter hopelessness (Qtd. in Valentine, 2009). The fact of being engaged in a hopeless quest for the inscrutable Godot is in itself a nihilistic action. Godot is no more than a word, an abstraction, an illusion, or a figment of the characters' imagination; nothing moves or makes sense in the play; even language loses its core function, which is communication. The characters speak to elongate the act of waiting, not to communicate a sensible meaning or message we are often expected to glean from their dialogue. In my view, Beckett has deftly succeeded in crafting the doctrine of nihilism at its utmost best.

This nihilistic vision reaches its utmost intensity in Beckett's later work, *Endgame*. The play is horrendously apocalyptic in the sense that the author depicts an entirely perishable or morbid world, except for a tiny and barren spot or stage where the action or inaction of the play takes place (McDaniel, 2003). From the outset, we are made to dramatically witness a dying world, especially when Clov says: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished..." (1986, p. 93). To foreground his apocalyptic vision, Beckett remains faithful to his tradition of "decharacterization, dramatized in *Endgame* through Hamm, who is blind and handicapped, embodying, therefore, a dismembered and selfless image of the human body, which is in itself an extension of the decaying world of the play. Hamm, in a sense, is a kind of "objective correlative" that physically incarnates the extent to which humans are impetuously depraved, repulsive, and loathesome. He unequivocally alludes to the loss of human soul, teeth, hair, bloom, and, above all, ideals (1986, p. 97), to end up in the same lingering condition: void and nothingness; all existential beliefs are radically nullified, that is, to the point of Zero, as emphatically stated in the play (1986, p. 94).

To further deepen the absurdity of existence, Beckett employs the metaphor of the game in the play by drawing an analogy between human existence and the world of the play. For this purpose, we are continuously reminded that the characters are playing a game, the game of life

on stage; they find themselves entrenched in a kind of simulacrum or hallucination that makes life seem like a game, or even worse, a lost game. The dialogue the characters share in the play is the only action that allows them to stay on stage and play the game of life. When, for example, Clov thinks of leaving Hamm, this latter reminds him that he cannot because of the "dialogue" (1986, pp. 120–121). Through the words they exchange, they manage to both make the audience fully conscious that the play does not go beyond the scope of language and to ensure Beckett's conception of the game-like aspect of their (the audience's) lives. *Endgame* does incarnate nihilism in its multiple layers: stage, characters, action, and language (Herren, 2007).

I believe Beckett's nihilism is typically representative of his own vision, which prevails throughout his works. The fact that Beckett continues to gain academic interest among scholars and critics is evidence that his works still have an impact on literary criticism. However, most of Beckett's critics veer toward identifying him with either Western metaphysics writers or philosophers, which is, in my view, an "epistemic violence" (Spivak, 1988) that depletes Beckett's works from their core "Beckettian" tradition. To illustrate, Beckett is often, sometimes systematically, identified with Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy, Schopenhauer's pessimism, and above all, Nietzsche's existentialism. For example, Beckett is referred to as the "Nietzschean hedonist," who has long been discussed, performed, and read in terms of nihilism, existentialism, and postmodernism. Beckett, the mimetic nihilist, the existentialist humanist, "has been self-consciously indebted to what has been supposed to be Nietzsche's influence" (Marshal, 2013). All modernist and postmodernist labels have been, ironically, pinned on Beckett, and I really doubt whether Beckett himself had any self-consciousness about them. I argue that Beckett might have been influenced by Western philosophy, but he ingeniously succeeded in crafting his own vision that axiomatically pertains to Beckett's tradition.

5. Beckett's experiment with language

In Beckett's experimental/avant-gardist attitude to language, we can clearly discern an unconventional reaction to the 'linguistic' dimension of literary texts. Contrary to the semiotic/structuralist approach to language, which draws on the twofold concept of signifier and signified, Beckett has drastically blurred the nuance between the graphic sign or word and its semantic load. Both are constructed to literally dramatize the ontological nihilism and nullification Beckett insisted on instilling in the audience's mind and psyche. Words have been systematically depleted of their core meaning; if they are supposed to convey any message, it is that of nothingness, the literal void. It would be sheer fantasy to search for meaning in Beckett's world; we are rather compelled to search for the meaninglessness that characterizes the drama of the absurd. Apart from the words that characters utter, nothing in Beckett's drama is amenable to serious and coherent reflections, as in traditional or mainstream drama. Nothing in Beckett's dramatic text can yield itself to the formal, aesthetic, and hermeneutic notions we conventionally attribute to the literary work. We cannot formulate a lucid conception of either the characters on stage or the abstract world of Beckett's fiction. All is encapsulated within the scope of language, and the characters exist only through the words they speak; they cannot be

imagined outside words; they are no more than "verbal constructions" (Glücksberg, 1970, p. 162).

In this regard, we can consider Beckett's experimental and innovative approach to language his most everlasting contribution to the "deformalization" of the traditional literary text. He made language assume an independent existence, not bound to external reality. Beckett was profoundly inspired by James Joyce, who sought to "desophisticate" language and clean it up from the 'affectation' and 'superficiality' of traditional writings. To express his fascination with Joyce's experiment with language, Beckett wrote that Joyce's "writing is not about something; it is that something itself... When the sense is asleep, the words go to sleep; when the sense is dancing, the words dance. The language is drunk. The very words are tilted and effervescent. The sense is forever rising to the surface of the form and becoming the form itself" (Beckett, 1984, p. 27). Words are, indeed, infused with a life of their own; in the postmodern tradition, words do not only represent something else; they are this something *per se*.

Beckett was also engaged with "language games" or play in most of his dramatic works. The concept of "language game" was postulated by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who defined the term as the act of bringing "into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity, a form of life... a word is analogous to a chess piece, and utterances can be thought of as moves within the language games that make up the human social bonds" (Nealon, 1988, p. 520). In *Waiting for Godot*, for example, the two tramps play with language. Their only activity in the whole play is to speak—to make utterances that are most of the time repetitive and devoid of meaning. In this sense, speaking becomes a senseless and monotonous activity. To fill the ontological abyss, Beckett's characters are often compelled to entangle in language games to pass time and to elongate the illusion of life. I conceive of language in Beckett's works as the sole bulwark that barricades characters against total annihilation. Speaking is their *raison d'être*, without which they would both cease to exist and become elusive to the audience's or readers' imagination. It is extremely toilsome to try to vest Beckett's characters with lifelike attributes, as we normally do with traditional literary works. The characters Beckett has constructed are mere linguistic utterances; they play the language game or language simulacrum, in the sense that the only meaning Beckett seeks to convey to us is that there is no meaning beyond the chess-like aspect of language. In Beckett's world, it does not matter who is speaking (Tubridy, 2018, p. 2); what matters is the incapacity of language to transmit the discomforts and anxieties that lay behind Beckett's philosophy of the absurd.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have come to the realization that the absurd is by far an inaccessible, inscrutable, and indescribable world that deliberately challenges not only the status quo but also the worldly and literary assumptions that were thought to be unshakable. Absurdist's were completely disillusioned by the major political, religious, and moral tenets of their modern societies, which were supposedly believed to promote human rights and individual welfare. In his works, Beckett epitomizes that aura of disappointment and despair that looms over most modern texts, leaving no room for optimism, solid convictions, or faith. The world of the absurd is a kind of abysmal and grotesque quagmire where the most cherished human values are literally tested and, therefore, proven vacuous, pointless, and hollow to the marrow. The tragic repercussions of the two world wars and the increasing rise of the culture of materialism and

individualism seriously impelled absurdist to make their writings reflexive of the mood of the age, which was also exacerbated by the sweeping dominance of the doctrine of existentialism. The world was not only conceived in terms of nothingness and a horrific void; it was more appallingly viewed as hostile, inhospitable, and inimical to human existence, which clearly betrays a relentlessly misanthropic attitude toward humanity. This is, as a whole, where we have to position the literary movement of the absurd by seriously reflecting on its social, cultural, psychological, philosophical, and historical junctures that contributed to the shaping of the movement. We have evidently seen how Beckett was engaged in not only annihilating human beliefs and certitudes but also pulling apart the mainstream formalistic components of the literary texts that would make them legible to audiences and readers. The novel as a literary genre was driven to self-implosion or destruction. The so-called characters were brought down to a process of "decharacterization" and "disembodiment," which makes them recede to mere linguistic/verbal and elusive abstractions. Beckett's setting or stage is a forlorn and literally deserted space that dramatizes the futility of human life. In terms of language, Beckett did open a breach in the way we read and receive literary texts. Words are neither symbols, signs, nor carriers of meaning; they are rather literally graphic signifiers of the meaninglessness of human existence that constitutes the gist of the absurd.

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Demystifying the Absurd in Samuel Beckett's Fiction and Drama

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