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Absurdism in the Select Soliloquies of William Shakespeare

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Abstract

This paper investigates the concept of absurdism in the select soliloquies of William Shakespeare. William Shakespeare is the most read playwright, as his works are widely recognized with life, human psyche and death. Soliloquies make the task easier when it comes to dealing with human mind. The hidden desires and thoughts of humans can be traced through soliloquies and therefore Shakespeare used them in abundance. The soliloquies selected here are from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *As You Like It*.

Key words: Absurdism, Soliloquies, Shakespeare.

Absurdism

Absurdism is one of the greatest philosophies that the humanity has witnessed and experienced. The theory of absurdism was established in the world of academics by Albert Camus. Absurdism fundamentally deals with life, humans' reaction to and relationship with life, with a supposition that life is meaningless. Therefore, the theory of absurdism will always be relevant in the life of universe and humans. The whole of the humanity struggles to find meaning and certainty, which unfortunately leads us to meaninglessness, as there is no assured guarantee about anything in life, except the death. Absurdism is a theory which resurfaces itself when the humans try to search for an order and certainty in life, which eventually culminates into disorder and uncertainty. Hopelessly, the humans, therefore chase religion, God and suicides. Once the lesson of absurdity is experienced and learnt, humans tackle with it through false hope, live life in the name of God, commit suicide and continue to live on accepting the absurdity. Absurdism is a realization in human life which is acclaimed after suffering. In order to experience absurdism, one has to suffer through the pains of life. Absurdism also comes to fore when the society involves in war, hopelessness, alienation, isolation and helplessness.

The word absurdism fundamentally means something difficult to fathom and unusual. To quote,

As we can very clearly observe, "Absurdism" comes from the word 'absurd' and its literal meaning is 'something unusual or strange and different from traditional/normal things'. Absurd - an avant-garde style in which structure, plot, and characterization are disregarded or

garbled in order to stress the lack of logic in nature and man's isolation in a universe which has no meaning or value. The term is derived from the Latin 'absurdus', formed from ab and surdus, meaning "deaf" and "stupid". So, we can understand 'absurdism' in easy terms as a genre of literature which does not employ the traditional plot structure. (Absurdism Concept)

Absurdism was the invention of Albert Camus. He was brought up in a society which was struggling to survive the aftermath effects of war and that is how his absurd philosophy got sculpted. He did live a life of hopelessness and transformed himself into an absurdist. His works represent his persona and ideology of absurdism. His novel *The Stranger* explicates the strange life of a man who deals with his death sentence. Meursault, the protagonist in *The Stranger* reflects on absurdism through his behavior and personality. Absurdism is the ultimate philosophy to be experienced by the humans. Once it is tasted, there is no returning to the other philosophies. To substantiate,

The philosophical idea that existence in general is nonsensical is known as absurdism. This means that the world is not entirely comprehensible by reason and is devoid of significance or a greater purpose. In the context of absurdism, the word "absurd" also has a more particular meaning that describes a conflict or disparity between two things but leaves room for debate as to what exactly those things are. These debates have a variety of repercussions for both the validity of absurdism and the justifications offered for and against it. The conflict is typically described as a collision between a logical man and an irrational world, between intention and result, or between subjective evaluation and objective merit. The assertion that the entire world is ludicrous is a key component of absurdism. (Sinha 258)

Soliloquy

The soliloquies have been a prominent narrative technique in literature. They help us to read the minds of characters and their dilemmas. A soliloquy exposes the inner intentions, desires and thoughts of the character which are unheard and unknown to the other characters. Only the audience are those who will know what is pursued by the character in soliloquy. Therefore, it is considered as a brilliant style of narrating the inner expressions of a character to audience. To quote,

According to J.A Cudon "soliloquy" as a "speech, often of some length, in which a character, alone on the stage, expresses his thoughts and feelings". However, this definition falls short and is inadequate. Shakespeare's soliloquies frequently play with the concepts of what "seems" and what "know[s] not seems," frequently shattering the fourth wall between actor and audience, and are intentionally theatrical and cognizant of their dramatic setting. According to Morner & Rausch, "Soliloquy is a dramatic convention in which a character in a play, alone on stage, speaks his or her thought aloud." The definitions of soliloquy are essentially identical. Therefore, a soliloquy can be defined as a theatrical monologue delivered by a character who is alone on stage or who believes they are alone. It assists in bringing out a character's innermost feelings. (Agarwal 102-103)

Soliloquies are extensively used in dramas and plays of English literature. They are used to represent the thoughts of the character in solitude. The character talks to oneself or to his mind while being all alone and conscious. To explore,

St. Augustine coined the word in Latin, *Soliloquium* evidently from *solus* and *loqui*; hence used by Augustine as a talking to oneself. The English version preserves the root idea; the soliloquy is a speaking alone. When a character, during the course of a drama, is actually alone upon the stage and his speech implies that he believes himself alone, then he is soliloquizing. Even though other characters are present, the speech may be soliloquy if it shows complete isolation and oblivion to surroundings. (Arnold 2)

It is Christopher Marlowe and Shakespeare who are noted for the use of soliloquy and convey the internal struggles, trauma, intense torment, guilt of the protagonist to the audience. Shakespeare was, for sure influenced by Christopher Marlowe in his use of soliloquies. Marlowe and Shakespeare popularized the technique of soliloquy through their plays. To verify,

It was Christopher Marlowe who consecrated the soliloquy as a revelation of thought and feeling. Others of Shakespeare's predecessors – Lyly, Peele, Kyd – attained this conception, but they did not so consistently and successfully maintain it. Lyly gave a note of fancy, Peele of lyric rapture and lament, Kyd of suffering and passion: Marlowe crystallized them all, making the soliloquy an artistic unit. The revenge tragedies and the domestic dramas of the day found channels for the philosophizing soliloquy; and even the late moralities, popular entertainments and chronicle histories, often uncouth and florid, added impetus to the soliloquy's popularity. (Arnold 13-14)

Absurdism in the Soliloquies of Shakespeare

The soliloquies of Shakespeare are the most widely known and celebrated till date, for their significance. They contain the greatest philosophies that every human should embrace in their lives. His plays are considered as the best and are appealing as they include the extra weight of soliloquies. Some of the important soliloquies of Shakespeare are from *Hamlet*, *Cymbeline*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, etc. Almost all the plays of Shakespeare include soliloquies. The play *Cymbeline* has the highest lines of soliloquy, which represents length and profusion, whereas *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice* have lesser number of lines of soliloquy. The soliloquies selected here are from *Hamlet*, *As You Like It* and *Macbeth*. "To be or Not to be" from *Hamlet*, "Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow" from *Macbeth* and "All the World's a Stage" from *As You Like It* are chosen for the study.

Hamlet is a play of vengeance and guilt. Claudius murders the father of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark and marries his mother Gertrude within a month. When the ghost of Hamlet's father reveals the name of the murderer, Hamlet is deeply hurt. He arranges a play which mimics the murder and witnesses the guilt of Claudius. Claudius orders for the death of Hamlet and at the climax is killed by Hamlet by the poisoned rapier. Hamlet and Gertrude too die at the end of the play, representing the tragedy. The dilemma 'to be or not to be' is present in Act III and scene I, denoting the trauma that Hamlet is suffering from. The first sentence in the soliloquy is 'to be or not to be'. To quote, "To be or not to be—that is the question: /Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer /The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, /Or to take arms against a sea of troubles /And, by opposing, end them". (Shakespeare, Act III, Scene I)

Often the notion of dilemma and uncertainty induce absurdity in life. When nothing seems to be certain, the mind hovers like a pendulum and fails to fix itself. The thoughts of Hamlet also continue to question whether one should suffer in mind by the outrageous fortune or go on a war against the sea of troubles. The words like suffer, outrageous fortune and sea of troubles represent the meaning of life he was going through. Absurdity prompts up from the consistent sufferings and when one sees no hope in life and action. Hamlet here continues to ponder upon death which ends his heartaches and natural shocks that the life has given him. Absurdity involves three escapes: suicide, God and acceptance. Hamlet's thought about death showcases his suicidal thoughts. He seeks a pause, to pause the mortal coil, life. Hamlet mentions the endless reasons for which he seeks death including love, law, power and how he has grieved the whips of time. He is clear in his expression that he no more wants to bear the burdens of life and seeks death, the undiscovered country. These lines explicate the absurd thoughts of Hamlet representing the meaninglessness of his life. The lines, "Thus conscience does make cowards (of us all,)/And thus the native hue of resolution/Is (sicklied) o'er with the pale cast of

thought, / And enterprises of great pitch and moment / With this regard their currents turn awry / And lose the name of action. (Shakespeare, Act III, Scene I)

The last lines of this soliloquy endorse absurdity through the thoughts of Hamlet, when he confesses that he is a coward who has failed to face life which is always uncertain and so he lost. It is true that our conscience leads us to the absurdity of life. Hamlet is no different and all that he dreamt of life couldn't be true and loses action. These lines depict uncertainty of life and persuade us to accept the absurdity of life.

The next soliloquy from *Macbeth* 'Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow' is another epitome of absurdity, by Shakespeare. This soliloquy is present in Act V, Scene V. These lines are uttered by Macbeth when he learns that his wife Lady Macbeth is dead. To note,

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time; / And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to
dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! / Lives but a walking shadow, a poor player, / That struts
and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot,
full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing. (Shakespeare, Act V, Scene V)

This soliloquy by Macbeth denotes the absurdity in life when his wife Lady Macbeth dies. Macbeth is influenced by power and rule, who recklessly murders the king and all those who falter his way to throne. But he loses his wife as well, on this journey to throne. The play ends, as a tragedy of Macbeth, as he dies. He stresses the word tomorrow thrice signifying the length and pace of life, meaning that one lives day after another, until it's over on the last day. Yet in the next line he ponders upon death, nostalgic about how everyone and everything leads to death, one fine day. One can witness absurdism that Macbeth is experiencing here. The enlightenment about life that we can't escape from death represents absurdity. Analyzing the life as a brief candle endorses the notion of how futile and uncertain the life is. The next lines deal with the absurdity and meaninglessness of life when he says life is like a walking shadow. The word shadow symbolizes that it is an illusion, which is yet another expression of life under absurdism. The next line depicting life, like a poor player, who boasts about one's achievement just for an hour on the stage of life and then heard no more, showcases the short span of life and makes even the greatest achievements null and void. The last lines in this soliloquy are the best lines as they signify the reality, that life is narrated by a fool which includes nothing but noise and chaos, signifying absolutely nothing. The word nothing is an important term in absurdism. Shakespeare hints that if we don't understand that life is meaningless then we all are fools. The meaning of life leads to nothingness from sound and fury. Macbeth's realization about life is denoted here as he is near to his own death, which signifies absurdity.

The last soliloquy is from *As You Like It*, from Act II, Scene VII, delivered by Jacques, a character. This play is all about love and power. Jacques talks about life and the journey of humans in this soliloquy. To quote, "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women are merely players; / They have their exits and their entrances, / And one man in his time plays many parts, / His acts being seven ages." (Shakespeare, Act II, Scene VII)

This soliloquy begins with the line explicating that this world is a stage and we all are just paying our roles for a while. The very first line exhibits the sense of absurdity as there is an expression of life as a performance on the stage for a short period and how we play our roles that are destined. Everyone having their own entry and exit, denotes the birth and death that we experience. One man plays seven roles in his life like the infant, the whining schoolboy, the lover, the soldier, the Justice, the old man and lastly the second time child sans everything. To describe, "Last scene of all, / That ends this strange eventful history, / Is second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." (Shakespeare, Act II, Scene VII)

The last lines of the soliloquy are weighing with absurdity through the words like second childishness and oblivion which is sans everything. These lines establish the absurdity by depicting the meaning of life as a strange history and sans everything. The journey of life and the seven roles end up meaninglessly as the last role portrays that in the last stage, everything is lost and man is where he was at his birth. Hence, similar to the myth of Sisyphus, the journey of life is also like the boulder carried by Sisyphus, which represents a cycle of insignificance.

Thus, the three soliloquies of Shakespeare express absurdism in a deep sense and exhibit the principles of absurdity. All the three soliloquies analyze life, journey of life, death and the meaninglessness, futility and uncertainty in between, which makes humans ultimately absurd.

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