



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.2. 2020 (Apr-June)



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

ANALYZING 'GUEST' AS A SIGNIFICANT MOTIF IN ABSURD PLAYS

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Article information

Received:27/05/2020

Accepted:28/06/2020

Published online: 30/06/2020

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.2.269](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.2.269)

ABSTRACT

The theatre of the Absurd is one of the prominent genres of plays in literature that was successfully brought forth by the Hungarian born- British critic Martin Esslin in his essay "The Theatre of the Absurd". The genre gained wide popularity after the 1940s through the works of veteran writers like Samuel Beckett, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The plots of absurd plays usually include event(s) of abnormality and one can trace such events in his/her normal life too. A very common example is that of the arrival of a guest to one's space. The presence of a guest always causes a change in the host's normalcy. Once a guest reaches, a number of things change. Sometimes the presence of the guest could affect the host in apposite way and sometimes it could be the other way round. The absurd plays are usually characterized by the incomplete dialogues, repeated words or ideas, nonsensical language, switching of roles, etc. This paper tries to highlight the significance of the 'guest motif' in enhancing the absurdity of the absurd plays. A motif is a recurrent image, idea, or symbol that develops or explains a theme in literary works. The paper focuses on the usage of guest motif in absurd plays by analyzing two popular absurd plays: *Amédéor How to Get Rid of It* written by Eugene Ionesco and *The Arsonists* written by Max Frisch.

**Keywords:** The theatre of the Absurd, Martin Esslin, Guest, Motif, Eugene Ionesco, Max Frisch.

The life of a human is a wondrous phenomenon. Sometimes it goes smoothly; sometimes it gets cluttered with troubles and worries. Life involves happiness and fun; it involves misery and sorrows too. It is indeed an amalgamation of several emotions and events. The famous Hungarian born- British critic Martin Esslin coined the phrase 'The Theatre of the Absurd' in his popular essay of the same name. According to *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, "the function of such theatre, is to give dramatic expression to the philosophical notion of the 'absurd', a notion that had received widespread diffusion following the publication of Albert Camus' essay, *Le Myth de Sisyphe* in 1942" (Birch 35). The idea of existentialism is the major focus of the absurd plays. The authors of absurd plays attempt to present the raw reality of life in front of the audience through their plays.

Absurd literature has its roots also in the movements of expressionism and surrealism. The absurd theatre was actually begun in France following the devastating effects of World War II as a revolt against the fundamental beliefs and values in traditional culture and literature. Albert Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable

exile.... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity" (qtd. in Abrams and Harpham 1).

According to *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, "a motif is a conspicuous element, such as a type of event, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature" (Abrams and Harpham 229). It is usually a recurring idea in a work of art. This paper analyses how the motif of 'guest' plays a significant role in enhancing the absurdity of absurd plays, with reference to Eugene Ionesco's play *Amédée* or *How to Get Rid of It?* And Max Frisch's play *The Arsonists*. A guest can be considered as 'the other' or as 'an outsider'. There always happens a change in the host with the arrival of a guest. A visitor who comes to one's house, an external examiner, a new student in a class, all of them are guests because in the presence of these people, the host will never be the same as before, that is, a spark of abnormality instills in them with the arrival of the guest. Even the sperm is a guest that enters the female body and it leads to a magnanimous change in the host's body in the following nine months.

According to *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, "the Theatre of Absurd gives ample expressions, often leaving the observer baffled in the face of disjointed, meaningless or repetitious dialogues, incomprehensible behavior and plots which deny all notions of logical or 'realistic' development" (Birch 35). Redundant dialogues, lack of plot structure, indefinite characterization and incomprehensible situations being the key elements of absurd plays, the motif of 'guest' too is meant to be illumined while examining an absurd play, as it plays a major role in enhancing the absurdity as well as in portraying the reality of life.

The play, *Amédée*, or *How to Get Rid of It*, an absurd play in three acts, written by Eugene Ionesco, was published in the year 1954. The theme of the story is taken from Ionesco's own short story "Oriflamme". The play has Amédée Buccinioni, a writer and his wife Madeleine as the main characters. The third and the chief character in the play is a corpse, which is an uninvited guest that comes into the life of the couple. The corpse has been in one of the rooms in their flat for the past fifteen years and the couple has had a cloistered existence during this period. They have not left their apartment since the arrival of the corpse. The couple is not in good terms with each other. They quarrel constantly.

The subtitle of the play, "How to Get Rid of It?" clearly suggests the uneasiness caused by the 'guest' corpse in the life of the couple. They just want to get rid of it as it stands as an obstruction for the normalcy of their life. Amédée, a writer by profession, was not able to write anything properly since the arrival of this uninvited guest. "Fifteen years. You're right! I have not written more than two speeches since he..." [Ionesco] Even though the guest in their house is a corpse, its beard and nails grow. "I seem to remember fifteen years ago he was rather short. And so young. Now, he has got a great white beard" [Ionesco]. The corpse who is suffering from geometrical progression, that is, the incurable disease of the dead, begins to grow to gigantic proportion. As the corpse grows, mushrooms proliferate in the apartment.

Amédée gets annoyed whenever Madeleine gets inside the room where the corpse lies because she takes too long to come out. He thinks she spends time there gazing at his body. Madeleine too is annoyed with the presence of the corpse at their apartment. The identity of the corpse is not clearly revealed in the play. The characters themselves are not sure about it. He might be the lover of Madeleine, who would have come to fetch her hands and would have got killed by Amédée out of his fit of jealousy. Amédée also suggests that the corpse could be of a baby his neighbor, once left in their care and never called for again.

However, Amédée pushes the dead body out of their apartment and drags it towards a river. Soon the corpse becomes a kind of parachute and Amédée floats in the air. Madeleine wants him to come back, but Amédée floats away into the sky. "The body wound round Amédée's waist seems to have opened out like a sail or a huge parachute; the dead man's head has become a sort of glowing banner, and Amédée's head can be seen appearing above the rear wall, drawn up by the parachute; then his shoulders, his trunk and his legs follow" [Ionesco]

The corpse is symbolic of the dead love between Amédée and Madeleine and that is why it is presented as one that had come to their home years ago as an uninvited guest. In fact, Amédée escapes from

the intolerable situation simply by flying away with the guest, which could actually be his own burden of guilt. "The corpse represents the existential anguish in *Amédée*" (Rosemary 07:36- 07:40)

The playwright could have used any object inside the protagonists' household as the symbol of the dead love between them. But, Ionesco chose the corpse that is alien to the household. The havoc created by the 'guest' corpse in the house increases the intensity of the absurdness of the play. In this way, the usage of the motif of 'guest' as an absurd element in Eugene Ionesco's *Amédée* can be analyzed.

The play *The Arsonists*, also known as *The Fire Raisers* or *The Firebugs*, written by the German playwright Max Frisch, is a parody about the middle-class people who believe themselves to be extremely generous and open minded to the others. But the fact is that, these people who pride themselves are unaware about the dangers to which they may end up in due to their blind generosity. This play too can be placed in the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd. *The Arsonists* is a one act play, divided into eight scenes and all the scenes take place in the house of the protagonist, Gottlieb Biedermann.

The setting of this dark comedy is a town in Germany that is being regularly attacked by arsonists. The arsonists disguise themselves as hawkers and talk their way into people's homes and settle down in the attic, where they set about the destruction of the house. The central character, a businessman called Beidermann, is seen at the outset reading newspaper reports of arson, convinced that he could never be taken in for the attack of the arsonists.

"Fire bombers again. They should hang the lot of them. I've said it before and I'll say it again. Hang the lot of them. It's the same story every time: someone at the door trying to sell you something, ends up being invited in. Wangles his way into staying over night. Gets offered a corner of the attic to sleep in. Incredible...They should hang the lot of them!" [Frisch]

Within a few minutes, the first hawker, Schmitz appears and through a combination of intimidation and persuasion, he talks his way into spending the night in the attic. Later, a second arsonist, Eisenring arrives and joins Schmitz and Biedermann comes to know about his arrival only in the next morning. Before Biedermann can do anything to stop it, his attic is piled with huge oil drums full of petrol. Biedermann himself safeguards the hawkers from the police, saying that the barrels contain hair tonics.

He even helps them to measure the detonating fuse and gives them matches, refusing to believe the full horror of what is happening. He soon becomes an accomplice in his own downfall. He treats them with a grand dinner. Even when they say to him right on his face that they are arsonists, Biedermann does not believe them. He says, "No! You are my friends!" [Ionesco]. Poor Biedermann gives them the match box too and he consoles his wife saying, "Of course I gave them matches. If they would be real arsonists they would have them. Wouldn't hey?" [Ionesco]. At last, "the chorus closes the play saying 'what burns best is stupidity'" (The Fire Raisers to go 07:30-07:37)

The idea of 'Guest' possesses an invisible hallow. A guest in general, is mostly meant to be one's close ally who comes to inquire about our welfare. It can also be a stranger who comes to us for some particular purpose. Guests are supposed to be treated well and according to the Indian ideology, a guest is to be treated like God. *The Firebugs*, very humorously present to the readers the idea that a guest is not always a positive figure, which is a real fact. The guests in this play, Schmitz and Eisenring bring death to Biedermann's home.

In both the plays that have been analyzed above, the guests play crucial roles. The plots of these plays are incomplete without the presence of these guests. Even though the events that take place in both the plays are fictional, the readers will be able to relate with the plots very easily as the arrival of guests is an absolutely common event in their lives. Guests appear as bearers of absurdity to the plot not only in these two plays, but also in many other works. Harold Pinter's famous play *The Birthday Party* tells the story of a boarding house that is run by a couple with a single inmate Stanley. The arrival of two guests Goldberg and McCann brings the twist in the plot. Yet another famous play written by Pinter has been *The Caretaker*. In this play, the protagonist Aston invites Davies, an old tramp to his home. But soon Aston faces a situation similar to that of the Arab who offered space for the camel in his tent. Therefore, finally, Davies is sent away from the house.

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Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is one of the most celebrated absurd plays. In this play Vladimir and Estragon wait for an unidentified guest named Godot, who may or may not exist and with whom they sometimes think they have an appointment with. But, ultimately "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" [Beckett]. Therefore, it can be concluded that the guest motif carries immense importance in absurd plays.

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