

## INTERPRETING THE ABSURD THEATRE THROUGH EXISTENTIALISM APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

*Absurdity which is a form of human existence is the dominant theme to express human view of life. Albert Camus, a French writer, was well known for his philosophically called absurdism which has some similarities with existentialism. Introducing the concept of absurd theater in a foreign language to a group of literature students is not an easy task. Therefore, it is necessary to find an ideal approach to enhance students in this theater course and facilitate them for literature understanding through several literature theories. This study proposed sociological literature approach with two elements involved, the sociology of the author and the sociology of literature, in order to help students understand the absurdity of literary works. Existentialism approach was also used to solve the complexity of concepts in each drama scripts. Through the two elements of the sociology of literature, we acquired that the essence of existentialism is the term 'exist', as Camus's work on rebellion theme, 'I rebel; therefore I exist'. The root of absurdity is absurdity itself. Therefore, talking about the absurdity of literary works is talking about the notion of absurdity itself and the notion of its feeling, and then about attitudes determine our actions. Absurdity also need to be explored through emotions and intertextuality.*

**Keywords:** *absurd, existentialism, Camus, intertextuality*

### INTRODUCTION

Proposing drama as a teaching model requires a thorough consideration and elaboration. As we all know, there are various kinds of drama, starting from classical drama to the modern one. Teaching drama may be seen similar to teaching other subjects. However, in this case, drama can be positioned as either teaching materials or as a teaching model at the faculty of letters. This study aimed to understand the basic concepts of the absurd theater and then how to convey these concepts to the students of English Department.

This study was conducted based on a problem rose in the field: students' difficulties in understanding the absurd concept of the absurd theater performances. Perrine (1987) said that

drama of the absurd is a type of drama allied to comedy, radically nonrealistic in both content and presentation that emphasizes the absurdity, emptiness, or meaninglessness of life. According to Jakob Sumardjo (1986), absurd means irrational, absurd, deviate from general logic. Rationale absurd is the notion that the world is entirely neutral. Mohammad (2010) argued that the sensation of the absurd is a sense or feeling that comes from mind and deed. All are metaphysics or mental attitude that seems vague but clearly, far but near. The onset of this sensation is not visible. A person can be invaded by a feeling of absurdity in the corner of the street, and so on. The absurdity may invade if someone personally see and feel life as a routine and mechanical, boredom, and finally felt

exhaustion. There are aspects of unhuman in man, as the absurdity appeared with anxiety. Absurdity is also interpreted and connected with nature. Human-nature relationship shows that nature is strange and that oddity is absurd. Based on historical studies conducted by Esslin, it is known that the absurd theater, in fact returns to the traditions of the past. Novelty lies in a new combination of the tradition that preceded it. There are positive and negative reactions to the absurdity. A positive reaction is to maintain awareness, retaining the world on consciousness, and the product of the overlapping between consciousness and the world is absurdity. While the negative reaction is unawareness of the surrounding world.

In the process of teaching drama, Duffy (1988) stated that imagination and creativity are firmly rooted in play (Moyles, 1989) and playfulness remains part of the creativity process throughout life. Play promotes the flexibility and problem-solving skills that are needed to be creativity. Further Duffy (1985) said that teaching requires imagination and creativity. Duffy's concept (1985) was developed by Sherratt and Peter (2002) and illustrated in Figure 1. Figure 1 describes three important aspects of a meaningful teaching. Those three aspects are (1) *interest developmentally*, consisting of components as appropriate content, ideas, concepts, themes, values, and challenge. At this stage, the main aim of the course is to create interesting

concepts in teaching, (2) *affect* (affective meaning) is a dimension related to the reactions or feelings of listeners or readers on a literary work or drama, (3) *the structure*, which is associated with the choices and decisions, how to make a meaningful form of teaching in the field of drama or literary work.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative method with sociology of literature approach. Sociology as an approach to literature considers literature and social terms (Wellek and Warren, 1990). Wellek and Warren divided the sociology of literature as follows:

1. Sociology authors, including professional writers and literary institutions, namely the information about the family background of the author that have a role in the disclosure issue of sociology author (Wellek and Warren, 1990).
2. Sociology of literary work which deals with the literary work in order to explore what is implied and what its purpose is.
3. The social context of the author which deals with the author positions in society and in literature community, it also concerns with social factors that can affect the literary works; author professionalism and the target readers intended by the author.

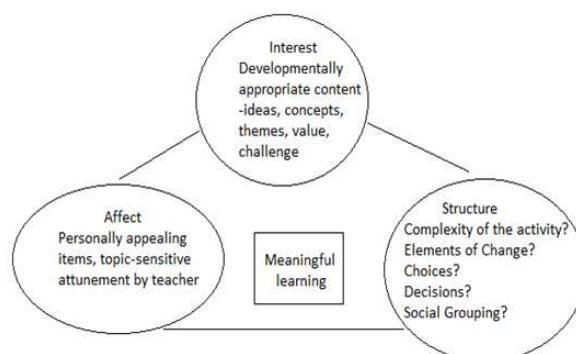


Figure 1. Model of Meaningful Teaching Context (Sherratt and Peter, 2002).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Absurd theater was created by Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett et.al; they presented a script with foreign concept to their students. Foreign concept emerged in researcher's mind because of the complexity of language use in the absurd script. Good English proficiency is required to comprehend the text. A holistic understanding is also required to understand the sequence of events in the story and the relationships that build the story elements. Therefore, it is quite interesting to assign literature students to discuss a problem depicted in a literary work, in this case reviewing the absurd literature as teaching materials as well as teaching media to understand the foreign language and culture.

As language learning media, students need to be encouraged to comprehend quotations from foreign language texts that support the argument of the story. The citation presented were the original version and sometimes the students were given its translation when necessary. The script was translated literary in order to capture the soul of the story. Of course there are ways that much better than literal translation. This technique was considered as an appropriate option by the researcher. The 'soul' of stories have three basic possibilities: (1) foreign language skills and Indonesian language skills, (2) understanding of the context, and (3) knowledge of the story setting. Therefore, through this study, the sociology of literature approach and the theory of existentialism were used in learning the absurd theater both as teaching materials and teaching models.

### Existentialism

One concept of existentialism stated that the universe has no purpose and is absurd. According to the philosophy of existentialism, absurd refers to the lack of meaning in life, the lack of structure and

there is no consistency. Existentialism does not only influential in the Western world, but throughout the world, including Indonesia. Several of Indonesian ways of thinking are affected by existentialism. They consider themselves as subjects or objects of the world (James, 2012).

Existentialism is derived from the word 'existence' with the root word 'exist'. The word 'exist' is Latin means 'ex' out and 'sistere' means stand. So existence is to stand out of yourself. There are various arguments on how to define existentialism. However, there are some that can be agreed upon: human beings as the central theme.

At the beginning of the 9th century, *Kierkegaard* who was known as the father of existentialism have witnessed the tendency of rationalism puts human intelligence as the sole measure of the reality of anything in this world. Intelligence is considered as the only valid source of all human knowledge and beyond that there is no valid source of knowledge. For example, in a daily reality of urban communities as a representation of modern humans occurs spiritual wave phenomenon. The characteristic of modern human is the rational and empirical thinking or in other words the paradigm of modern human is existentialistic.

We present two absurd texts, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Albert Camus) and *Waiting for Godot* (Samuel Beckett), as well as existential review on one of texts. Students can review the literary work (drama scripts, theater scripts) using the approach of sociology of literature, such as the following analysis:

### Sociology of Literature

#### 1. *Sociology of Author*

Albert Camus (1913-1960) is a figure that connects the chain of absurdism and existentialism. Camus wrote an absurd literary works, for

example, the novel entitled *The Pestilence and the Foreigner*. the concept of absurdity itself was discussed in his essay entitled *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1913-1960), first published in 1942. In that essay, Camus (1955) depicts a figure of Sisyphus who perform odd activity. He pushed a boulder to the top of the hill that he never reached. Every time the peak was almost reached, the stone rolled down, and he had to push it all over again. Thus he continue to do so. The strange act of Sisyphus in Western world is a portrait of a human who lost his life purposes. But what is the essence of Camus' essay (1955)? Bakdi (2001) on his criticism said that based on intertextual approach, people can connect it with Camus's other works, *Le malentendu* (misunderstanding), a drama script and also his novel (1954) entitled *L'etranger* (Line Outsiders). Camus (1955) discussed the basic questions of human existence; how life can be meaningful. However, this does not imply suicide? As the following text excerpts:

... *O My soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible.*

-Pindar, Phytian (iii)

... *O my soul, do not aspire to eternal life, but finish after possible boundaries.*

-Pindar, Phytian (iii)

Paradoxically, Camus saw that a reason to live is also the reason to die. For Camus such person is a sinner. Suicide in Camus's view is a meaningful suicide (Bakdi, 2001), which described by Justin O'Brien as 'suicide is solving the absurd situation' (Camus, 1955: 5). In this context, it seems absurd is a serious problem. *En attendant Godot* (1952) or *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett is a story about two traveler who spends their days in waiting but without certainty who or what they are waiting for, because no one ever came. Below are some

quotations from the story *Waiting for Godot* in Quenell and Zetterholm (1986):

*Estragon: Why don't we hang ourselves?*

*Vladimir: With what?*

*Estragon: You haven't a bit of rope?*

*Vladimir: No.*

*Estragon: Then we can't.*

*Silence*

*Vladimir: Let's go*

*Estragon: Wait, There's my belt.*

*Vladimir: It's too short*

*Estragon: You could hang to my legs.*

*Vladimir: And who'd hang on to mine?*

*Estragon: True.*

*Vladimir: Show all the same. (Estragon loosens the cord that holds up his trousers which, much too big for him, fall about his ankles. They look at the cord). It might do at a pinch.*

*But is it strong enough?*

*Estragon: We'll soon see. Here*

*They each take an end of the cord and pull. It breaks.*

*They almost fall.*

*Vladimir: Not worth a curse.*

*Silence*

*Estragon: You say we have to come tomorrow?*

*Vladimir: Yes*

*Silence*

*Estragon: Didi.*

*Vladimir: Yes.*

*Estragon: I can't go on like this.*

*Vladimir: That's what you thing.*

*Estragon: If we parted? That might be better for us.*

*Vladimir: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. (pause). Unless Godot comes.*

*Estragon: And it he comes?*

*Vladimir: We'll be saved.*

According to Bouty (1988), the drama has a cutting-edge themes of human absurdity associated with the art of making avant grade who had left the classical forms as drama. Beckett broke the traditional concept of humanism which also want to leave its rhetoric.

Harsono (1997) stated that the Beckett's view contributed significantly to the existential philosophy related to human experience of the most concrete and specific as the basis of all common concepts and values.

Some other famous people who worship the absurdity concept are Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Fernando Arrabal, Václav Havel, and Edward Albee. Most of them lived in France, Harold Pinter in England, and Edward Albee in America. Novelist Nathalie Sarraute emphasized language absurdity and showed that there is lack of communication between the events in human life. The authors tend to reject absurd ideology, they only favor their own messages, the messages which are not messages at all.

Absurd theater in Europe and America is not growing alone and isolated from the West literary, but along with the development of absurd theater, emerged traditional naturalistic dramas with plots carefully arranged and seemed to be a revolution of play writings. All of this was at first influenced by the great novelist of the 20th century such as Michael Prost, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, and Thomas Mann. They are writers in the same era and experiment with new forms and less dependent on the logic of artistic and individual imagination. The most influential person at that time was Sartre.

## 2. *Sociology of literature*

According to Ousby (1988), the absurd theater means 'out of harmony', absurd is what Albert Camus referred to the situation of modern human, a stranger in a world without humanism. Dick Hartoko and B Rahmanto (1986) stated that: "..... *Movement in the world of art performance in 50s did not only grow in Western world.*" Influenced by French existentialism, especially regarding the

spiritual climate and themes which are discussed, say for example, the absurd position of human: man's search for order, logic, coherence, while the world does not have that category. Impossibility to communicate with fellow human beings, loneliness, fear, desire to escape into a fantasy world. The message conveyed by this absurd theater is about human's pointless search for meaning and significance.

Another absurd works is the Beckett's works 'Waiting for Godot' (Waiting for Godot)' at the beginning of 1970. In Indonesia, the work has been performed by Renda et al. Les Chaises (Chair) has also been translated by Toto Sudarto Bachtiar in the early 1960s. The study of absurd theater use sociology of literature approach and existentialism, those studies suggests that absurd theater presents a fundamental turmoil of human experience. Turmoil originated from multiple causes, such as the impossibility of communication, the disappearance of harmony, the loss of a link of cause and effect, no clear sequence of events, resulting in incapacitation human just like figures painted on the absurd theater.

In understanding the absurd theater, students need to consider several things below:

1. absurd theater is a theater that emphasizes atmosphere and movement, the student must aware that to understand the absurd theater, they do not only need to understand word for word.
2. Students should understand the strength of each character deeply.
3. If students have to perform as players in the absurd theater, student needs thorough preparations in order to perform well on stage. The players should be students who are mature, intelligent, and skillful but capable of thinking realist.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on this descriptive qualitative study, the conclusions are summarized as follows:

1. Sociology of literature as adrama learning model is a study that views literature in social term. The aim of assessment of literary work is to facilitate students for better understandings of the literature elements and to receive a series of messages from a literary work. Students can also find out more closely the various theories of literary studies in order to broaden their literature knowledge.
2. Absurd theater is a theater that has irregular structure, such as plot, character, setting, and so on. To bring out the atmosphere of the absurd theater, students are required to study the original texts or watch the performances directly. Through direct introduction to the text, the absurd theater can be called a pure theater. A pure theater is dominated by a variety of pantomime motion requiring interpretation and gives the impression as pure theater. However, when viewed from consciousness angle, it seems that absurd theater is not completely pure.

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