

N. F. SIMPSON AS AN ABSURD PLAYWRIGHT

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Abstract

The use of Absurdity in literature is a medium for writers to explore those fundamentals in the world that do not make sense. It examines questions of meaning and life and writers often use absurd themes, characters, or situations to question whether meaning or structure exists at all. Existentialism spaces a human being at the starting point of thought and emphasizes the confusion such an individual feels in the face of a meaningless and alone world. Separate from other individuals and alienated from the world itself a human being is left to wander alone and is much more susceptible to mass manipulation and government control. Existentialism places a human being at the starting point of thought and emphasizes the bewilderment such an individual feels in the face of a meaningless and lonely world. Separate from other individuals and alienated from the world itself, a human being is left to wander alone and is much more susceptible to mass manipulation and government control.

*Martin Esslin coined the term "The Theatre of the Absurd" in 1960. Esslin grouped these plays around the broad theme of the Absurd related to the way Albert Camus uses the term in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). The human beings are responsible for their own actions despite the prevailing uncertainty about right or wrong. Many have examined the plays such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* through an existential lens. Main quality of an existential work includes the existence of anti-heroes, unstable understanding of the past and unstable identities.*

Key words: *Absurd play, existentialism, Meaningless, N.F.Simpson & Nothingness.*

If Pinter's plays transmute realism into poetic fantasy, N. F. Simpson's works are philosophical fantasies based on reality. N. F. Simpson was born in 1919. N. F. Simpson, an adult education lecturer who lives in London, first came into prominence by winning one of the prizes in the *Observer's* 1957 play-writing competition with *A Resounding Tinkle*. Although Simpson's work is fantasy as that of Lewis Carroll's, and called by the author himself as 'Jabberworky,' it is based on the educated class system. If Beckett and Pinter's worlds are full of tramps, Simpson's world is a suburban.

ARESOUNDING TINKLE:

Simpson's *A Resounding Tinkle* is a comedy. Simpson wrote the play in 1957. The play was performed in a much-shortened version at the Royal Court Theatre, London in the same year. The play is in two acts and the characters are First Comedian, Second Comedian, A Technician, an American Tourist, the Producer, First Cleaner, Second Cleaner, Bro Paradock, Middie Paradock, Uncle Tod and the Author. Interestingly the play has some critic-characters like Mustard Short, Denzil Pepper, Miss Salt, Mrs Vinegar, Chairman, Man in Bowler Hat and Producer. The play is set in a suburban living room. The time is evenings spread over two days.

When the play opens we find the Paradocks chatting about everyday affairs. Middie Paradock announces that a man has come there wishing Bro Paradock to form a government. What kind of government and where is not made clear. Yet Mrs Paradock refers to Ireland. Later two comedians arrive

there as if commissioned. Mr. Paradock mistakes the First Comedian for his Uncle Tod. The Second Comedian arrives shortly. They chat about horse and dog breeding. Mrs Paradock brings the guests some drinks and her husband brings them some eatables. They ask them to enjoy, "Let us laugh with those we tickle...Let us weep with those we expose to tear gas. Let us throw back our heads and laugh at reality, which is an illusion caused by mescaline deficiency; at sanity, which is an illusion caused by alcohol deficiency; at knowledge, which is an illusion caused by certain biochemical changes in the human brain structure during the course of human evolution...Let us laugh at thought, which is a phenomenon like any other. At illusion, which is an illusion, which is a phenomenon like any other..."¹

The First Comedian thinks of the earth as flat and the discussion about it prolongs.

Act Two opens with new characters. Author comes. He speaks of Portugal, tragic relief, while Bro Paradock speaks of the absence of repetition as the fundamental law of life; Bro Paradock. Oh! The fundamental law of life...is a complete negation of repetition! But I find that a certain movement of head or arm, a movement always the same seems to return at regular intervals. If I notice it and it succeeds in diverting my attention, if I wait for it to occur and it occurs when I expect it, then involuntarily I laugh. Why? Because I now have before me a machine that works automatically. This is no longer life, it is automatism established in life and imitating it. It belongs to the comic.

MRS PARADOCK. Good. And what does he say on page fifty-eight?

MR PARADOCK. He says, We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing. You've marked it. But where does all this get us?

MRS PARADOCK. You'll see. These two are Bergson trained.

MR PARADOCK. They'll be like that for hours yet.

The two comedians begin to stir.

MRS PARADOCK. Will they?

The two comedians look around them as though coming out of a trance. Second Comedian leaves around his chair and advances to the front of the stage. First Comedian follows:

SECONDCOMEDIAN. You could call this intellectual slapstick.

FIRST COMEDIAN. We are, metaphysically, the Marx Brothers.

SECONDCOMEDIAN. Presenting the custard pie comedy of the abstract.

FIRST COMEDIAN. Quintessentially.

SECONDCOMEDIAN. And working to a blueprint.

FIRST COMEDIAN. The fundamental law of life is a complete negation of repetition! But I find that a certain movement of head or arm, a movement always the same, seems to return at regular intervals...If I notice it and it succeeds in diverting my attention, if I wait for it to occur and it occurs when I expect it, then involuntarily I laugh. Why? Because I now have before me a machine that works automatically. This is no longer life, it is automatism established in life and imitating it. It belongs to the comic."²

The above passage evinces the presence of humour in Simpson's comedy. Simpson introduces the dialogue of music hall comedy. Mr Paradock mimes something illogical, "Two in the circle two in the circle two in the circle two in the circle at seven and six, and six and five, and five and four, and four and three and three and two in the circle at six and five, and five and four, and four and three, and three and two in the circle at four and three, and three and two in the circle at three and two, and one, and naught."³

There is a Technician speaking about the conduction of the play. Some typical characters like Prayer and Response speak of merry-making. The Paradocks' reason for inviting the comedians is stated thus when Mrs Paradock asserts: "...Bro and I need some good comedians in the house to prevent us quarrelling all the time."⁴

The Paradocks buy the toys of some animals like serpents. They buy the toy of an elephant. They like to call it with different names like Trench and Oedipus Rex. The comedians chat and amuse the old couple. The Author refers to his failures in the play. Critics come there finally. The Critic has many followers like Pepper, Salt, Mustard, Mrs Vinegar and others. The Critic asks others as to the quality of the comedy. Pepper says it is a hotchpotch; and Mustard says it is a producer's play. The Chairman of the team says, "We seem to be getting away from the play itself. Can we try to reach agreement on what kind of production this is? Is it a comedy. Denzil Pepper what do you think about this play as a comedy?" to which Pepper replies: "What do I think about it as a comedy? I believe I laughed once. So, technically I suppose the play could be a comedy."⁵ So he seems to think *A Resounding Tinkle* must be a comedy of errors. Likewise the Author appears at the end of the play and says, "What a waste of talent it's all been. What a waste!"⁶

Nonsense and satire are mingled with parody here. Martin Esslin observes, "N. F. Simpson's plays are highly intellectual entertainments. They lack the dark obsessiveness of Adamov, the manic proliferation of things in Ionesco, or the anxiety and menace of Pinter. They are spontaneous creations that often rely on free association and a purely verbal logic and lack the formal discipline of Beckett. As Simpson himself put it in one programme about to become detached from the main body, "No attempt, well intentioned or not, should be made from the audience to nudge these back into position while the play is in motion. They will eventually drop off and are quite spontaneity."⁷

THE HOLE:

N. F. Simpson's second play *The Hole* is equally interesting. The theme of the play is the exploration of the relativity of our vision of the world. The play was first performed at the Royal Court in December 1957. Here a group of characters congregate around a hole in the street, discussing what it might be, each of them in turn seeing different things happening in its dark opening. There is a visionary thinking that the hole stretches away from him in every direction known to the compass. The more commonplace characters arrive there and watch the hole projecting their own preoccupations about it. The discussions around the hole become a survey of the fantasy-life of an English suburb. The discussion, in Martin Esslin's words, "...starts with sports, ranging from dominoes to cricket, boxing, and golf; proceeds to nature, turning the hole into an aquarium housing a variety of species of fish that can be discussed with expertise; then turns to crime and punishment and violent demands for torture, execution, and revenge; and, having aroused the emotions of all concerned, culminates in fantasies of a political nature the violence of both chauvinism and revolutionary action. After all this, a workman emerges from the hole and informs the bystanders that it contains a junction box of the electricity supply."⁸ The intellectual of the group Cerebro accepts the statement. But his opponent Soma accuses him of the deprivation of mystery surrounded around it. Gradually some sort of metaphysical significance is attached to the event. The technological facts have been turned back into vague emotional mumbo-jumbo. Critics think the play is a moral story. It is observed, "*The Hole* is a philosophical fable."⁹

ONE WAY PENDULUM:

Simpson wrote the play *One Way Pendulum* in 1960. The play has two acts. It was first performed at the Theatre Royal, Brighton in 1959. *One Way Pendulum* has many characters like Kirby Groomkirby, Robert Barnes, Mabel Groomkirby, Sylvia Groomkirby, Aunt Mildred, Myra Gantry, Arthur Groomkirby, Stan Honeyblock, Judge, Policeman, Usher, Clerk of the Court, Prosecuting Counsel and Defending Counsel. Simpson combines the theme of philosophical nonsense with suburban nonsense in this play *One Way Pendulum*. When a critic asked Simpson about the meaning of the title, the author is reported to have replied that the name is just a name as London or Simpson. It is a kind of signpost indicating that the contents of the play are paradoxical. The first sub-title of the play when it was staged at the Royal Theatre, London, in 1959, was 'An Evening of high drung and slarrit.' Later the subtitle was changed to 'A farce in a

new dimension.'

As in *The Hole*, a group of characters is presented and each of whom is preoccupied with a private world of fantasy. As Simpson says, "In these plays each man is an island. The whole point about the relationship in the family is that everyone is in fact preoccupied with his own interests and makes very little contact, except superficially, with the other characters in the play."¹⁰ The family in question is the Groomkirbys. Arthur Groomkirby, the father of the family works in a private enterprise as a keeper of metre. Like everyone he has a hobby. He constructs model structures. He builds up a model of the court in his living room. Arthur's son Kirby Groomkirby who has trained himself by the Pavlov method is engaged on a gigantic educational enterprise. He wants to teach five hundred 'speak-your-weight' weighing machines to sing the 'hallelujah' chorus from the Messiah. He thinks if they can speak they can sing as well. He makes some progress. He thinks once they sing they can be transported to the North Pole and attract tourists. He even wants some holocausts to take place on the earth. The teenage daughter of the family Sylvia is also preoccupied with the theme of death. She is unhappy with human conditions. There is an old aunt in wheel chairs and she is treated as a thing. The mother of the family Mabel is highly eccentric. She exploits the maidservant at home.

In Act Two the home-made Old Bailey (a model of law court) is suddenly filled with judges and lawyers. Arthur Groomkirby is summoned for cross-examination. Later it is announced that the accused is his son. The play ends with a note of despair. Martin Esslin observes, "*One Way Pendulum* owed its considerable success with the public to the sustained inventiveness of its nonsense and, in particular, to the brilliant parody of British legal procedure and language in the court scene, which occupies almost the whole of the second act. In fact, however, the play is far less amiable than it appears at first sight. What seems little more than a harmless essay in upsidetown logic is essentially a ferocious comment on contemporary British life."¹¹ The play depicts the fact that suburban people are preoccupied with their private thoughts. Automatism is a key image here. To lead an emotional life, Kirby has to stun himself into unconsciousness; only then can he indulge in sex. When awakened from one of these stupors by his Pavlovian cash-registrar bell, he angrily exclaims, "I might have been dreaming... Might have stopped me stone dead in the middle of an orgasm."¹² It is said habit and social conventions are the deadeners of a society that has lost its authenticity. *One Way Pendulum* portrays a society that has become absurd because routine and tradition have turned human beings into Pavlovian automata. In that sense, Simpson is a more powerful social critic than any of the social realists. Martin Esslin thinks his work is proof that the theatre of the absurd is by no means unable to provide highly effective social comment.

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