

TREATMENT OF EXISTENTIALISM IN ELEUTHERIA

Dr. Barun Kumar Jha

Associate Professor

Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak, India

Abstract

Existentialism is one of the glaring themes of the Beckettian plays. The play, Eleutheria is no exception to it. It revolves round the theme of freedom, suicide, frustration, choice, etc. The play challenges the unities and norms of the classics to represent human life on the stage. It depicts the theme of existentialism by advocating freedom in the life of its protagonist. It has been executed with the machination of time, character, plot, stage setting and language in the play.

Keywords: Existentialism, Choice, Frustration, Freedom, Suicide, etc.

Introduction

Eleutheria is an important play of Samuel Beckett propounding the philosophy of existentialism. It was written in 1932 and finally accepted for publication by Lindon in 1951. Eleutheria is a complete full length play challenging the ability of existing drama to represent humanity. Eleutheria contains the serious theoretical underpinnings of the new kind of drama which Beckett was to initiate in *Waiting for Godot*.

At the time of its composition Beckett states that Eleutheria is a serious work to be considered along with *Waiting for Godot*. Throughout the play, the audience witnesses the search for a play which provides a more suitable dramatic vehicle for the humanity represented by its protagonist, Victor Krap. The purpose of the play is described three times by its characters in the same phrase - 'amuse the gawkers.' (Eleutheria Revisited: 74)

Discussion

Eleutheria is the first play in which Beckett puts forth his views on drama and dramatic structure. He evidently wishes to free himself from the Aristotelian concept of drama as having a proper beginning middle and end offering a final apotheosis accompanied by the classic catharsis or purgation of the audience's emotions. Beckett hates the snowball effect of the well-made play which he finds

untrue to the facts of life, the deplorable human condition as he sees it. (Eleutheria Revisited: 75)

Beckett also seems to free himself from the dramatic convention of characterization. His characters are not intended to be full-fledged representation of reality, but are to be seen as staged embodiments of his personal views on life and the theatre, presented through irony and caricature.

The play emphasizes 'Freedom' again and again. It is one of the glaring themes of existentialism. Eleutheria is a Greek title asserting 'freedom' from the constraints of dramatic precedents going back into classical antiquity, 'freedom' for the protagonist'. Victor Krap tries to set himself free from the family of Kraps and Piouks. This includes first the freedom of the play from the necessity of trying to provide an artificial catharsis in drama which is not available in life, as Samuel Beckett has written in his essay on *Proust*.

Tragedy is not concerned with human justice. Tragedy is the statement of expiation, but not the miserable expiation of a codified breach of a local arrangement, organized by the knaves for the fools. The tragic figure represents the expiration of original sin. For such guilt there is no cathartic. The purgation is endless. The title also includes the freedom of Victor Krap not to assume a pre-existing social or theatrical role.

Much of the freedom demanded in Eleutheria is achieved through destructive humor. The play is among other things, a very sophisticated and funny. By placing Victor Krap in scenes, Beckett shows the comic absurdity of previous attempts to record the human condition dramatically. Gross parallels link Victor with Hamlet, Oedipus and Oswald Alving. Like Alfred Jerry, Victor's father writes in the genre 'merdre'. In the true fashion of Atrand's Theatre of Cruelty, the script is tossed aside before a Chinese torturer is brought into interrogate Victor. (Beckett in Theatre: 30)

There is no time indication other than three successive winter afternoons. However, the play breathes slightly pre-World War II atmosphere. After all, the concept of time in Eleutheria is absurd supporting the existentialist philosophy.

Moreover, the characterization in Eleutheria reveals that all the characters are flat and possessing allegorical names. All of them are in search of their existence in the absurd world.

M. Henry Krap is a cynical, sharp-witted, lecherous, aged writer. He is tired of marriage and indeed of life itself. He compares himself to:

The cow who arrives at the gate of the slaughterhouse and only understands all the absurdity of the pastures I am in a circle [of Hell.] The ninth. (Eleutheria: 20) In the same vein, Mme Henry Krap is equally fed up with her partner. Her major concern is her body in particular her 'bas Venture' or 'prolapsing Womb.' The fallen uterus is symbolic of her sexual frustration embodying the existential philosophy.

Next to her Dr. Piouk is Victor's uncle newly married in the family, who arrives from abroad at the beginning of the play. He functions like one of Ibsen's catalytic agents who define alternatives and present choices which will establish the attitude and destiny of the protagonist. He is a specialist of venereal disease. Dr. Piouk initiates the action of the snowball act. He offers Victor the opportunity to commit suicide by taking a tablet of morphine. This will force him to choose either grand refusal or re-entry into life. The outcome of Dr. Piouk's plan may be either a recognizable tragedy or comedy. The play will end in the tragic death or comic restitution with Victor reunited with his finance, and restored to the family and society he has abandoned. In the end the resolution of the play into a familiar generic formula is not successful. Thus, the play delineates existentialist themes of choice and suicide through the characters of Dr. Piouk and Victor.

Victor as an Aristotelian tragic hero modeled upon Oedipus. Victor is a complete failure. He does not achieve tragic grandeur by committing suicide. As he points out, he is not one of those who have paid the price so that accountability is maintained. He is called upon repeatedly to give an accounting which he fails to make and the play ends with him still owing the landlady for the right to inhabit his room. He fails to disclose his unique error. He fails to arouse pity and terror in his fellow men as other social misfits do. The 'broche' which is to serve as a catheter for his catharsis is never employed. Victor turns out to be no better a representation of a traditional comic protagonist than a tragic one. He does not swallow morphine but he refuses to be reunited with his finance and family. (A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett: 29)

Victor is a young writer who has lost his taste for life and abandoned his family and fiancée for a minimal existence in a boarding house room with only a bed. The members of the Krap household find it intolerable that nothing is done and refused to allow Victor to exist in a state of sordid inertia. Madame Meck is the next important character in the play. She is the most flagrant threat to Victor's freedom. She is the first in the series of characters to be dispatched by Victor from his room into the corridor.

Spectator is another character who is bored and unsatisfied. He has watched the play in a state of fascinated frustration. He condemns both- the play and its author. He calls the play 'rubbish' and its author 'Beke, Samuel'. Spectator embodies the Pirandella in manifestation of the audience on the stage. (Beckett in Context: 13)

Jacques the servant is more deferential in his intrusion onto the set of Victor's room not to receive victor's self explanation. That has already taken place in Krap's household in the previous evening. In his function as a receiver of confidence he is notably inept. He is unable to repeat what Victor has told him. He can express only a fawning gratitude for Victor, telling him about the life he leads and explaining his motives. His purpose in coming to Victor's room is to offer him information. The drama rids itself of the contrived characters who actively manipulate the protagonist. The presence of some characters other than the protagonist to provide and receive information and to react would seem indispensable. Jacques embodies that presence. The demands of the audience for other characters to interact with the protagonist are illustrated when Jacques says, 'I must go' and the Spectator tells him vehemently, 'sit down'. He then sits down with Glazier on the bed with Victor.

Jacques is dismissed by Glazier. He turns sadly to Victor, repeats the gesture of raising his arms and letting them fall, and depart. Glazierre presents an authorial presence, there to mediate between audience and the representation on the stage.

Mrs. Karl is the keeper of the door. She wants to know whether Victor is staying or going. If he is staying, she wants her bill paid. First, two, then three others are waiting to replace him if he cannot meet expense or find the room suitable. Beckett seems doubtful about the present and future material condition from dramatizing humanity. It is Madame Karl who is left ultimately with Glazier's old tools and his card.

Conclusion

The play ends with a short mine and Victor is free from the intruders. The conventional devices have been systemically excluded from the stage with great difficulty. Victor moves his bed as far as possible from the broken window. The direction of that movement is away from the audience but to the very front of the stage. He sits on the bed and looks intently at the public, the orchestra, the balcony-to the right, to the left, and then he lies down, his thin back turned towards humanity. This final gesture is ambiguous. If his posture implies rejection of the audience, he has previously acknowledged them. His posture does not preclude his being seen and understood for what he is:

“Even in that thin back huddled in its bed in recoil from a life offering no acceptable solace, the audience may perceive a stage image of humanity. (Eleutheria: 46)”

In this vein, the play depicts the themes of freedom, alienation, choice, bad faith, etc. closely associated with the philosophy of existentialism.

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