

***Gender and the Absurd:
Camus, Esslin, Playwrights, and the Consequences of Feminism***

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I. An Image

A man walks along a barren landscape, the desert of human existence. The man is naked with nothing to shield him from neither the hot sun nor the piercing winds with grains of sand that nip at his skin. He desires to move, but the world spins in the same direction at the same speed: he cannot move even though he desires it. There is nothing in this space that allows man to sustain a healthy existence, and yet, like the forever laboring Sisyphus, the man continues. He lives.

II. Introduction

Sisyphus does it with a smile (Camus 123), and Don Juan with his sexual exploits (72): the absurd man is conscious of his existence in which “the absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” that he then revolts against (28). Consciousness is the first step of the process toward absurdity. Once conscious, the man burns with a “passion, the most harrowing of all,” the need to know meaning, but the realization that behind everything is nothingness (22). Then comes revolt. The smile, the countless women Don Juan penetrates, the futile steps of the naked man are all a revolt against the absurd as each man creates his own conscious freedom, his own life full of the “freedom of action” (57).

As one reads these thoughts, it may resonate with the white male community, but it is important to point out the gendered, eurocentric nature of this work. The first part of this analysis will use gendered pronouns in correlation with the writings of Camus and Sartre. These two male writers have been classified together within Existentialist philosophy, and while they share some similar aspects in their writing, including male-centered language--they are not fraternal, but rather inherently opposed to each other. As I continue into a discussion about feminism, the gendered language will come into question in connection to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. I have a perspective of a white, upper-class male, and therefore any talk about experiences of women or people of color comes from that background. However, through consciousness, I believe I can lend a voice to the discussions on Feminism and the absurd.

Albert Camus' adventures through absurdity in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* reflects the struggle and futility of the characters presented by the Absurdist playwrights of the

post-WWII era. Martin Esslin, author of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, tries to make sense of the phenomenon he saw emerging in France by providing “a framework of reference that will show the works of the Theatre of the Absurd within their own convention,” working against the realistic theater of the time (Esslin 28). It is in the connections one finds between Camus’ absurdism and the Theatre of the Absurd that demarcates these plays from the traditional canon of western drama. Many critics have questioned the need to classify this group of writers as they were not “part of any self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement” (22), and this form of classification and canonization creates logical criteria in the face of senselessness. Esslin identifies Camus as the major philosophical contribution to the Theatre of the Absurd, although Camus denies logical reasoning to understand the world, making it ultimately contradictory that Esslin creates a classification for drama influenced by something opposed to classification. In an effort to promote the importance of these playwrights while deconstructing the classification Esslin has created, I will investigate Camus’ Absurdism, its differences from the seemingly fraternal philosophy of Existentialism, and the connective tissue between the authors of absurdist drama--mainly through Eugene Ionesco’s work. Finally, it is important to apply a feminist lens to these theories to both recognize the inadvertent misogyny latent in Camus’ writing and bring the consequences of Absurdism into the social realm, as well as recognizing the potential of absurdist drama returning to a world of semiotics as defined by Julia Kristeva.

III. Existentialism v. Absurdism

In order to begin the deconstruction of Esslin’s classification, one must understand the absurd as written by Camus, and its differentiation from Existentialism as examined by Jean-Paul Sartre. One of the main differences between Existentialism and Absurdism is the amount of control man has over his existence. On one hand there is free will, and on the other is fate; Camus investigates the man trapped by the world, but with the paradoxical choice of life in the face of death. Absurdism, instead of establishing a new philosophy, denies philosophy and expresses its ideas through the Absurd Man as exemplified by Sisyphus. Sisyphus, rolling a rock up a hill and watching it fall for the rest of eternity, represents the futile and monotonous existence that is man. Day after day a man goes through the same routines: “rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep” (Camus

12) until “at any streetcorner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face” (10-11). Sisyphus has been hit by absurdity in the moments he is conscious, as Camus sees him walking down the hill toward his continued fate (121). This consciousness is what begins the absurd reasoning. Once a man is conscious of his existence and place in the world, the world reveals itself as meaningless. Absurdity lies among the clash of these two opposing essences: the man looking for reason where none exists and Sisyphus faced with the meaningless torture of his actions. This is where the man is conscious: Sisyphus, walking down the hill recognizes that the rock is meaningless. Each step is a return to nothing and yet Sisyphus still walks.

There follow two options in Sisyphus’ journey: complacency and revolt. Camus envisions two returns to the rock, the first “when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man’s heart: this is the rock’s victory, this is the rock itself” (122). When faced with absurdity, man returns to the monotonous task, simply continuing, reverting to unconsciousness. He becomes one with the rock, and therefore one with his fate, denying any form of thought. The melancholy that counteracts the possible happiness causes this return to unconsciousness. When man is melancholy, the reversion to thoughtlessness takes over and leads to a refusal of action, and possibly death. This melancholy leads to an option that Sisyphus does not have, but mortal men do: suicide. As Camus states in ‘Absurd Reasoning’, “At that last crossroad where thought hesitates, many men have arrived and even some of the humblest. They then abdicated what was most precious to them, their life,” an action more meaningless than most since, without life, there is nothing (9-10). Without Sisyphus’ existence there would be nothing: no rock, no hill, no thought, nothingness. The second descent comes and “at that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory’s eye and soon sealed by his death” and Camus turns to the reader saying, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (123). This smile, this happiness in the face of endless turmoil is the moment of revolt that separates the second descent from the first. Through consciousness and defiance against death, Sisyphus lives, and this is all the Absurd man has in the world. Once taken away, there is nothing, but by living against death the opportunity for existence is limitless until death.

Peer to Camus and fellow survivor of the Nazi occupation in France, Sartre is one of the leading figures in both Existentialist and Phenomenological philosophy. The chief difference between Camus and Sartre stems from the idea of freedom. In Camus' thoughts, man is not initially free, but freedom comes from consciousness where "[one] can only experience [their] own freedom" (56). It is a fully internal experience that separates man from the social world. On the contrary Sartre writes, "I am condemned to be free...we are not free to cease being free" (Sartre *Being* 567) and as a free being "I carry the weight of the world by myself alone without anything or any person being able to lighten it" (710). Man enters this world with the ability to choose, a free will that forces man to become conscious of the consequences of his actions. For Sartre, meaning comes from within, a personal investigation into the perspectives of reality, but one must also take into consideration that one's views may clash with that of another. This is where consequence and the social world enter the philosophy and Sartre strives to represent "the moment of choice, of the free decision which commits [man] to a moral code and a whole way of life" (Sartre *On Theatre* 4). "Essence comes after existence" (*Being* 603) and the totality of man is defined purely by that man in society, whereas, with Camus the essence of man, when faced with the reality of the world, creates the opportunity for experience, in which "[Camus] must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living" (Camus 61).

At first glance, Camus and Sartre share many ideas--the lack of God or the focus on the individual--but at the personal level they are fundamentally different on the position of man in the world. Both authors were Paris-based during WWII, and were at one point associated with Marxism, while not committing to the Communist Party. Camus wrote that "Communism's appeal and its negative features sprang from the same irrepressible human impulse: faced with absurdity and injustice, humans refuse to accept their existence and instead seek to remake the world," (Aronson) whereas Sartre had a "long love-hate relationship with the French Communist Party, which he never joined but which for years he considered the legitimate voice of the working class in France" (Flynn). Their connection to Marxism stems from their mutual recognition of atheism, bringing both to similar conclusions. For Sartre, "Man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre *Existentialism* 23).

God plays no part in the fate of man, connecting Sartre's thoughts to those of Camus and his belief that "in the presence of God there is less a problem of freedom than a problem of evil. You know the alternative: either we are not free and God the all-powerful is responsible for evil. Or we are free and responsible but God is not all-powerful" (Camus 56). As both men focus on the responsibility of the individual, God cannot give meaning to man's actions if man is responsible for everything he does. Therefore, God does not exist, and man is given the responsibility of meaning for himself. The concept of meaning is where Sartre and Camus depart. Sartre sees that the world is full of meaning created by everyone alive, but it is the responsibility of the individual to make meaning of everything for himself. For Camus, the world is meaningless, and even in the face of his desire for meaning there is nothing man can do. Man will always search for meaning, trying to justify his existence, but this search is futile against the meaningless world the man inhabits. Sartre is free to make meaning and Camus is free from meaning. This differentiation in freedom is the paramount point of departure Camus takes from Existentialism, and this departure is the difference between the Theatre of the Absurd being influenced by Absurdism rather than Existentialism.

Separating Absurdism from Existentialism--not claiming that Absurdism is a philosophy of its own--is essential as one investigates the construction and importance of Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd. Esslin adheres to neither Existentialism nor Absurdism, but promotes the importance of Camus' influence on the writers he investigates. However, in his effort to portray the importance of Camus influence in creating this construction, Esslin creates a vocabulary for discussing these plays, but also creates philosophy where there is none.

IV. Theatre of the Absurd and Deconstruction

A decade after the alleged origin of absurdist drama, along with an expanded edition eight years after the first publication, Martin Esslin wrote the definitive criticism of what he coined as the Theatre of the Absurd. Before Esslin wrote his seminal text, the writers he grouped together were all loners, operating within a strange land: "An Irishman, Samuel Beckett; a Rumanian, Eugene Ionesco; a Russian of Armenian origin, Arthur Adamov not only found in Paris the atmosphere that allowed to experiment in freedom, they also found there the opportunities to get their work staged" (Esslin 27). Each one of them was a foreigner, flocking

to Paris, the historic sight of the Bohemians and the safe-haven of American ex-patriots, where they found refuge in a city of artistic wealth, paradoxically a time of complete oppression due to the Nazi occupation. It is no wonder that Esslin saw in these writers a common thread that could tie them together. It is in the preconceived gaps between these isolated men and their plays that Esslin begins to find similarities and qualify their work.

The main goal of Esslin's criticism was to classify a form of criteria for analysing these plays outside of realism, the most common form of drama at the time. Esslin points out the differences between realism--the seemingly *good* dramatic form--and Theatre of the Absurd:

“If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings”

(Esslin 21-22)

If these plays are not *good plays*, not the traditional well constructed work of realism that the audiences are used to, then why did they have such an effect on the minimal audiences that saw them at the beginning? This is the question that Esslin tries to answer. In response to seeing Ionesco's *The Chairs* in London, Kenneth Tynan wrote, “Ionesco's is a world of isolated robots, conversing in cartoon-strip balloons of dialogue that are sometimes hilarious, sometimes evocative, and quite often neither, on which occasions they become profoundly tiresome” (Tynan 209). Tynan exemplifies the common reaction against absurdist drama that Esslin found inappropriate and ill-informed. Tynan believed, like many, that “every play worth serious consideration is a statement,” giving Esslin the prerogative to make people see that Tynan's, and other critics', opinion may not apply to every play ‘worth serious consideration’ (214). Esslin saw worth in the work of Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, Genet, Pinter, and many others, reading these plays as an attempt to move beyond realistic conventions and portray “the human condition is presented to us as a concrete poetic image that has become flesh on the stage and that is at the same time broadly comic and deeply tragic” (Esslin 338). The battle then became about the didactic nature of theatre, and whether or not theatre as a whole art form should have a political

purpose, or should shun politics in the search for metaphysical reasoning. However, Esslin does not deny theatre's ability to do either of these things, but searches for a way to acknowledge that this new theatre form was worth investigating, and wasn't just a gimmick used for easy laughter.

In an effort to make sense of these isolated cohorts, Esslin created a structure of analysis, but what he really accomplished was the acknowledgement of a moment of crisis within the theatrical paradigm, highlighting the eventual shift in perspective necessary for a new paradigm to form; a paradigm of consciousness that allows everyone to start with meaninglessness and senselessness rather than logic. Esslin tracks the aesthetic influences on the Theatre of the Absurd from as far back as Greek drama, including "the work of jugglers, acrobats, bullfighters, or mimes [...] clowning, fooling, and mad-scenes [...] verbal nonsense [...] and] the literature of dream and fantasy" all the way through the Surrealists and other avant-garde art forms (328). Through this linear progression of ideas, not necessarily with causal relationships, Esslin creates a lineage of ancestors, in order to understand the mindset of these authors and investigate the deep-seated opposition to the logical mainstream that all of the previous movements opposed as well. The Theatre of the Absurd was not a planned movement, and Esslin only made them a group by including them in his book, focusing on the lack of plot, characterization, logical analysis, and sometimes language. Now, a group of loners, outsiders to the Paris community, have been identified--not as a community, but as individuals with invisible connections between their plays--and the greater theater community has been given the criteria to talk about their work. Esslin noticed a crisis--a moment of change that could become a catalyst--and showed critics that the work of these authors was worth consideration, and beyond that a serious investigation of their plays and their consequences. The crisis, a point where a paradigm is faced with a contradictory factor to the norm too prominent to ignore, created a space for Esslin to begin investigating alternate forms of expression. After publishing *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin solidified the possibility for a shift in paradigms, as he established a place in the academic world for the "Theatre of the Absurd's" consequences to grow.

As the "Theatre of the Absurd" has now become a vocabulary in theatrical academia and practice, the next evolutionary step in its work is the deconstruction of Esslin's criteria for the contemporary audience. As Esslin connects the Theatre of the Absurd with Camus' writings on

the Absurd, it is then necessary to allow the work of these authors to follow suit with Camus, and maintain their resistance against classification. Camus did not posit absurdism as a philosophy, and in fact scorned logic as the essential way of understanding the world. Therefore, if these authors were influenced by him, then they continue his process of presenting absurdity, rather than explaining it through logical means as Sartre did in his dramatic work. Esslin's classification of the Theatre of the Absurd provides outmoded terms, that must be cast aside as they limit the possibilities of what these plays can accomplish and what is defined as absurdist drama. As I continue, instead of using the term the Theatre of the Absurd I will use the term *conscious playwrights*. This does two things, the first being the individualization of each playwright. While Esslin examined the connective elements of these writers, their individuation is essential to this analysis, as the expression of absurdity is personal and distinct to each individual. The second aspect of this temporary classification is its focus on consciousness. The first step in absurdity is consciousness, and therefore, to express absurdity, as these playwrights have done, we must also acknowledge that first step of consciousness as what separates them from others. This is not an elitist separation, but rather an observation that, not only have these playwrights become conscious of absurdity, they have the need to express this consciousness. Each playwright in his own way is an Absurd Man, and the only way to deal with the absurdity is to raise consciousness.

In order to focus this argument, I will isolate Eugene Ionesco as an example of a conscious playwright. Ionesco's plays have many of the themes identified by Esslin: nonsense speak, lack of intention, circular or non-linear plots, influence of clowning and foolery, caricature, and many others. As a Rumanian author living in Paris and writing in French, Ionesco is *the* outsider interacting with a strange world in which, "The whole is not aware that it is the whole. There is no consciousness of the whole. There is only individual consciousness. So it is situations that change, but my essence is unchangeable. [...] But it is always I who become aware of the whole" (Ionesco *Present Past* 192). Ionesco is one of the conscious playwrights that writes on the metaphysical nature of his existence. Ionesco and the unconscious whole--the world or society that does not make sense, but tries to make sense of itself through constructions and false order--interact like the conscious man. Ionesco testifies in his notes on

theatre, “I try to say how the world appears to me, what it seems to me to be, as honestly as I can, without a thought for propaganda, with no intention of guiding the conscious of my contemporaries; within the limits of my own subjectivity I try to be an objective witness” (Ionesco *Notes* 153). As Esslin points out, Ionesco “[renounces] arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; [he] merely *presents* it in being” (Esslin 24). This presentation of Ionesco’s personal absurdity is where he shows the necessity of the deconstruction of the Theatre of the Absurd. Esslin noticed the crisis and created the vocabulary, but as the paradigm shifts, the construction he created must be deconstructed. Ionesco focuses on the individual nature of the absurdity he experiences. Without need to ‘guide the conscious’ of his contemporaries, he denies the need to group together and challenge the mainstream as a unit, but as an individual, the consciousness he raises in the audiences that see his work comes fully from his expression of his personal journey with absurdity. It is here in the individual nature of his work that Esslin’s classification of the Theatre of the Absurd becomes constricting. By placing Ionesco in a group of people, previously unconnected, Esslin creates a form of a whole--a construction that groups individuals together in a single cause or connection--losing the individual consciousness of each author. When that consciousness is lost, the power of their work is depleted, making it difficult to realize their individual visions.

Currently, sections III and IV have tried to answer four questions: What is Absurdism? How does it differ from Existentialism? What is the Theatre of the Absurd as defined by Martin Esslin? and Why is it necessary to deconstruct Esslin’s work? Now that the groundwork has been laid for further analysis, it is time to investigate questions that many readers may be asking: Why are all of the writers men? Is there an Absurd Woman? How well does this work hold up against the criticism of Feminism and Gender Theory? Is the gendered nature of Camus and Esslin’s writing a product of their times or can their thoughts be used now in order to promote gender equality? The following will be a critique of the work I have already done as well as an argument that the importance of conscious playwrights can be improved by the work of Feminist Theorists and Playwrights.

V. Feminism and its Consequences on the Absurd

In connection to Camus and Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir is one of the prominent

contributors to understanding Feminism's connection to absurdism. While de Beauvoir herself was a proclaimed Existentialist thinker, her work in *The Second Sex* links subjectivity and Feminism. In her connection to Marxism and materialist Feminism, she discusses man's ability to choose, but through man's objectification of women she seems closer to Camus' writing on the absurd and the human condition rather than Sartre and the man that makes his own meaning. At the beginning of her work, de Beauvoir examines the male-dominated society with three questions, "Is there a problem? And what is it? Are there even women?" (Beauvoir 3). The final question is the most interesting, and the beginning of the problem with absurdist thought. What is the role of women in a world created by men?

De Beauvoir recognizes that the idea of a woman has been formed by man and "the man who sets the woman up as an *Other* will thus find in her a deep complicity. Hence woman makes no claim for herself as subject because she lacks the concrete means, because she senses the necessary link connecting her to man without positing its reciprocity, and because she often derives satisfaction from her role as *Other*" (10). Men have continued to *other* women, objectifying them since the Greeks had women "confined to the house (explicitly, in the laws of Solon), they were removed from the public life of the intellect and the soul, lost their economic and legal powers, and were confined to the world of domestic labour, child-bearing and concomitant sexual duties" (Case 9). Woman has never been able to establish herself as a subject. In a male-dominated society, operating within a male-female, man-woman binary, the act of interaction has always been subject-object with the subjective man defining the objective female. The only way for a woman to have subjectivity is to then take on the persona of a man. In the process of acting like a man, the woman is then a double outsider: othered by men and scorned by other women. So, where or how does woman achieve subjectivity?

The initial step toward subjectivity for women is recognizing that, while Camus writes about the 'human condition' as pointed out by Esslin, he continually uses only male-gendered pronouns, and only talks about the Absurd Man, completely ostracizing women from the subjectivity he discusses. Furthermore, the only people--fictional characters--Camus uses to represent the Absurd Man are Don Juan and Sisyphus. Don Juan is a notorious womanizer and he is conscious of his desires and the futility of its completion: "If he leaves a woman it is not

absolutely because he has ceased to desire her. A beautiful woman is always desirable. But he desires another” (Camus 71). Through his absurdity he has filled his life with countless women, never looking for love, instead defining them as sexual objects placed on earth to please him. He has chosen to live life to the fullest by doing the one thing he has as a man; the ability to define women. Sisyphus and Don Juan share the same separation from society. Both men, used as exemplars, are completely isolated from society, and Camus never explores how their actions have consequences in the real world. Camus recognizes the process of the Absurd Man, but leaves no room for women to connect to these stories or see the ability to become an individual. So, how can women achieve this subjectivity, since this achievement is what will give the work of the conscious playwrights so revolutionary?

Changing perspective on the situation, woman is closer to experiencing absurdity on a daily basis than any man. Let one assume that women desire to gain subjectivity. This desire has been met with not only the silence of the meaningless world, but also the voice of the meaningless social constructions that have conditioned woman to become object. There exists a form of double absurdity for women. As an Absurd Person, women may become conscious of absurdity as Camus sees it in his writing with a focus on subjective experience, as well the absurdity of the social world. The constructions of men for women are as meaningless as the world. By gaining subjectivity, society would enter a subject-subject relationship in which “men and women must, among other things and beyond their natural differentiations, unequivocally affirm their brotherhood” (Beauvoir 766). The word ‘brotherhood’ is problematic, and may be due to translation issues, but the idea of communal living in equality is what comes from this new societal relationship--similar to what Marxism offers in its utopian ideal. In this case, with every moment the desire of subjectivity interacts with the senseless, absurdity arises, so every day is a touch with absurdity. With the concept of the Absurd Man, appropriating it to express the plight of woman, for the Absurd Person the revolt is life. Living in the face of absurdity, revolting against the male-dominated society, the woman is in a constant state of life, and it is only through consciousness of this situation that will bring out a form of subjectivity.

This consciousness may give woman subjectivity, but it will mean nothing within the society that continues to oppress her. De Beauvoir points out, “It is not a questioning of

abolishing the contingencies and miseries of the human condition in her but of giving her the means to go beyond them” (762). Consciousness on a personal level is not enough for the goals of Feminism, one of them being gender equality. In this possible subjectivity, consciousness brings out an individual journey with the absurd, but the journey for women may necessitate further work, for if other people are not only conscious of their own absurdity but also with the absurdity of women, there can be no development in the desired equality. While this sounds like a futile effort against the meaninglessness of the world, as Camus states, “The mind’s deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man’s unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, and appetite for clarity” (Camus 17). Even in the face of absurdity one of the desires of human beings is the desire for everything to make sense, and this is how the world continues to structure itself: the absurd is covered up by false meaning and senseless order so that it does not dissolve into chaos. Therefore, after consciousness, the personal relationship one develops with absurdity and the world must be recognized and dealt with in a way that both raises consciousness and promotes equality.

VI. Conscious Playwrights and Feminism

Consciousness is the beginning of absurdity. When faced with the absurd, people become lost in light of the meaningless. Camus discusses the invalid possibility of suicide, promoting the living of life to the fullest as that is the revolt necessary to remain somewhat lucid in this chaotic world. For men this has become apparent through Camus’ writing, but for women, until faced with the double absurdity of their social and personal lives, their consciousness becomes infinitely more apparent and difficult than the consciousness of men. Once conscious, the person achieves a personal subjectivity, one against the world, and through the meaninglessness the differences between men and women, the constructions of race, every identifying factor of humanity outside the self is taken away. All that is left in the world is the self, the individual, and that can be harrowing. What do human beings do when separated from society, from the communal bonds we usually share? They share their subjectivity in order to try and rebuild that *communitas*. In an effort to connect conscious playwrights with Feminism, I propose that the subjectivity gained through consciousness leads toward the need to express that process, establishing theatre as a prominent form of expression of not only consciousness, but the

need to raise the consciousness of the audience, promoting the absurd paradigm.

After consciousness and through the theatre as a medium, the conscious playwright not only allows for the audience to gain consciousness of absurdity, but expresses it in a world of *semiotics*, as defined by Julia Kristeva, outside of the *symbolic* order. Kristeva classifies two concepts of the world and language, “one, the ‘semiotic,’ the mobile patterning of instinctual drives within the infant prior to the acquisition of language proper; the other, the ‘symbolic,’ the domain of articulate language, discriminating between subjects and objects, signifiers and signifieds, and concerned with propositions and judgments” (Cook 437). The male-dominated society that objectifies women exists within the symbolic order. Within the logical framework of philosophy, and the high regard the western world places on intellect, man is stable in his ability to communicate through language and thought, following a Platonic ideal of the intellectual. “In Kristeva’s account, the ‘symbolic’ arises through the repression of the ‘semiotic.’ Poetic language marks the return of the repressed elements of the semiotic within the realm of the symbolic, notably by way of rhythm, mimesis, intertextuality, and linguistic play,” (437) and although Cook is writing about poetry, his thoughts can be transferred to the theatre, with some rewriting. The theatre of the conscious playwrights is a journey into the semiotic, outside of the symbolic, and has the potential to change the symbolic because their work has been established as academic work.

If the symbolic is the language of the male-dominated society, then the semiotic is a form of expression that allows for the subjectivity of women, even though society has never known what a semiotic world would look like. In a world full of meaning, the symbolic rules, so it is only in the meaningless world that no one understands that the semiotic can exist. Like the abyss of absurdity, the semiotic is not known. It is a world that expresses without language or classification, striving for connection through something one cannot ensure as meaningful. But, it is in this expression that the desire to communicate is met with the meaningless, just like the plight of the Absurd Person. The semiotic is the absurd, and yet the absurd is still a systematic classification. Camus’ writings on the absurd--a way of trying to make meaning out of the meaningless--and Esslin’s classifications of the Theatre of the Absurd have created a systematic understanding of the unintelligible. However, their writings do not spoil the potential for the

semiotic to take place. Esslin, especially, has created a criteria to judge the work of conscious playwrights, establishing the absurd within the academic world of the theatre, but it has also inadvertently planted the seeds of the semiotic within the systematic order.

The semiotic's connection to the absurd allows it to establish itself into the academic world, and with the deconstruction of Esslin's classifications the semiotic does not disappear, but rather has the ability to operate through work that has been deemed important by the symbolic but exists to break away the symbolic order of language and communication. Ionesco's work to disorient common language, the non-sequitur work of *The Bald Soprano* and his use of nonsense prose, works against the realistic dialogue that deals with logical, psychological explanation. He writes to raise consciousness of the idea that "to feel the everyday absurdity or improbability of everyday life and language is already to have transcended it; in order to transcend it, you must first saturate yourself in it" (Ionesco *Notes* 165). Ionesco is searching for a transcendent world where absurdity is recognized, and the language that we use is no longer needed, or at least no longer the defining factor of our existence. This is the semiotic, the pure expression of self that exists outside of the symbolic order. Now that Ionesco's personal expression of his own absurdity is reaching audiences in a way that has some serious potential to dismantle the symbolic order he has been associated into, the work of conscious playwrights no longer belongs to a subjectivity separated from society. As many feminist dramatists have worked toward, and promote, "the personal is political" (Case 65), and the work of conscious playwrights have serious social and political consequences.

Even as the possibility arises for the semiotic to grow within the symbolic, or even come from outside and deconstruct what is currently in control, the writers that I have investigated are still mostly men. If the world of men is the symbolic, then even if men like Ionesco or myself wish to escape that or change the world by raising consciousness, we are still permanently embedded in the symbolic until ousted from that reality. However, because the absurd is established in the symbolic while still containing the seeds of the semiotic, anyone can use the tools of conscious playwrights to continue this work.

Margaret Hollingsworth is one of the most prominent female playwrights that critics have connected to the work of absurdism. An English born, Canadian playwright, Hollingsworth does

not have the same disorientation and loneliness in Paris common with the other conscious playwrights, but she shares similar structural patterns associated with the Theatre of the Absurd.

In her introduction to her play anthology, *Endangered Species*, Hollingsworth writes:

“Many of the women in these plays may well be viewed as victims, and I am sure that this will not sit well with those who feel we should be presenting positive images of women on stage. I can only answer by saying, as many other writers have said, I call it as I see it, change cannot come without understanding and understanding can’t happen without elucidation.”

(Hollingsworth 8)

Hollingsworth parallels Ionesco’s writings as they both desire to express the world through their own subjective view of the world. However, as Ionesco claims no direct political intention through his work, Hollingsworth writes in order to point out the absurdity of the social and political constructions at work in the world. In an analysis of Hollingsworth’s play *The House That Jack Built*, Celeste Derksen argues, “Whereas both Western and Eastern European modes of absurdism seem to mourn the "universal" loss of agency and meaning, Hollingsworth's questions the power and presumptions that underlie different assumptions of agency. It indicates, for example, that both male and female characters are subjected by and subjected to gender (through the construction of themselves as subjects in linguistic, economic, social, and sexual relations)” (Derksen 223). Hollingsworth is not only addressing the absurdity of life, but the absurdity of the construction of gender. We may desire to classify and identify through gender, but the constructions we create are as meaningless as the world we live in. *The House That Jack Built* uses structures similar to those of the absurd, such as a bleak landscape, non-linear progression, images without singular meaning, and “the play's use of repetition needs to be read not only in traditional modernist fashion as an indication of the emptiness of words or lack of direction, but also as an indication of the power of words to shape the subject and also as an indication that this power is not total” (224). In this case, Hollingsworth is an excellent example of a female conscious playwright, working not only to present the audience with the absurdity she sees in the world, but also employs feminism to further politicize her personal vision. She is conscious of her socio-political and personal absurdity, allowing her to spread consciousness the more her plays are performed.

VII. Conclusion

The absurd haunts the desires of humanity as one recognizes that whatever they do, or desire to do, is futile in the face a meaningless world. This does not mean that nothing can be done. Theodor Adorno writes in his “Commitment” essay about the “shock of the unintelligible” (Adorno 180) and its ability to communicate what traditional thought cannot. The absurdity explored in the works of conscious playwrights is the gun to the head of the audience. The audience has two choices: they can either accept their fate, bring melancholy with them to the end, or they can smile in revolt, “for the dignity of [humanity] lies in [its] ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions -- and to laugh at it” (Esslin 429). Absurdism has its troubles with gender politics, and the conscious playwrights in the Theatre of the Absurd, sadly, are all men, but through the previously discussed steps of deconstruction, Feminism has great potential to improve the effectiveness of these works, as well as critique its merit in the search for something greater. The absurd and absurdity have previously been seen as very personal, subjective experiences, but a further look into consciousness and its effects on the systematic order shows that this extreme subjectivity and isolation is actually a revolutionary political action that connects the absurd to the socio-political world, allowing it to make a change in the current paradigms. Those who are conscious of absurdity, and wish to express their subjective experience, run the risk of isolating and outcasting themselves from society and the mainstream. They may not be financial or media successes, but their efforts to disrupt the systematic order is not in vain. In fact the world needs more of these writers, especially women and queer writers in order to continue this fight against the oppression of the subject-object, male-female, good-bad binaries, or any binary that may keep people from living life to the fullest.

VIII. A Non-Academic Post-script

As I conclude this analysis, I must reiterate a few points about my perspective. I am white male with the privilege to have a private college education. What I address in this analysis is not the answer to solving these problems, but rather it is a possible step. I have not addressed anything around queer theory, or the troubles that we face with the construction of race in this world. Those were not my focus in this essay. What I hope is that the reader will not critique this analysis based on what it lacks, but rather what it has the potential to do and what they can

do to improve it. The work of conscious playwrights is not the only theater that makes a difference, but in my connections to the work of these authors I wanted to investigate their potential to change the world the way I see it needs to be changed. This is all I ask of the reader: What do you love? What are its problems? Can you still love it and use it to change the world without discarding it completely?

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