

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In the 20th century during the post-World War II, there was a period when some people became confused with the world in which they lived. The destruction effect of World War II had caused depression in many devastated countries and made people at that time think whether their lives were actually meaningful. They began to question themselves about the purpose of their lives and the way to fulfil their own pleasures. However, there were some people who hold the thought that no matter how successful one is in finding “meaning” in life, it is essentially a pointless and irrational process. This thought is known as Absurdism, which proposes that any attempt to find meaning is futile, and one must accept the irrationality of the world. (Hightower).

Not only is it as a philosophy, but there are also so many playwrights use absurdism as their ideology in their works. One of the most famous absurdist writers is Samuel Beckett. An absurdist, Martin Esslin considered Beckett’s works as one of the Theatre of the Absurd, whose plays focus on human despair and the will to survive in a hopeless world that offers no help in understanding the meaning of life. The term

“Theatre of the Absurd” is briefly defined as dramatic works of certain European and American dramatists of the 1950s and early 60s who agreed with the Existentialist philosopher Albert Camus’s assessment, in his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” (1942), of which the human situation is essentially absurd, devoid of purpose (“Theatre of the Absurd”). Beckett’s “contribution to this particular genre allows us to refer to him as the grand master, or father, of the genre. While other dramatists have also contributed significantly to this genre, Beckett remains its single, most towering figure.” (“Critical Essays Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd”).

Similar to Beckett, another European writer, Eugene Ionesco, was also an important figure in contemporary literature, whose writings also reflected the idea of absurdism. Through his absurd stories, he can deliver meaningful messages. Ionesco was an international theatrical superstar, who also continued to grow in popularity and influence in the 1950s (“The Chairs Introduction”). Ionesco’s works also considered in Theatre of the Absurd and “had an important role that he helped inaugurate the Theatre of the Absurd ... Ionesco remains among the most important dramatists of the 20th century.” (“Eugene Ionesco”)

The concept of absurdism is reflected in Beckett’s *Happy Days* (1961), which tells a story of a girl named Winnie, who is stuck in a rounding life but nonetheless lives her life with optimism. Compared with Beckett’s other works, *Happy Days* is one of Beckett’s plays which is regarded as his bleakest and his most humanistic play (Bowden). *Happy Days* also received a positive impression from the audience due to its new convention with “A marvellously constructed tragicomedy” (“Happy Days A Play in Two Acts By Samuel Beckett”). Absurdism is also reflected in Ionesco’s *The*

Chairs (1952), which tells a story of an old pessimistic man who finds his life uninteresting, so he hopes to get back to his youth. *The Chairs* is different from other Ionesco's plays as the use of invisible things become highly important in this story. *The Chairs* is also appreciated very well in theatre history. (Alberg)

Both Beckett and Ionesco present a strong portrayal of the protagonists who are stuck in boredom. However, their protagonists manage to escape from their boredom by creating a diversion in their lives. I see this as a reflection of Blaise Pascal concept of diversion in his book *Pensees*. Pascal states, "The only thing which consoles us for our miseries is diversion ... without this we should be in state of weariness, and this weariness would spur us to seek a more solid means of escaping from it" ("Blaise Pascal: On Diversions"). The theory means that the search for diversion is an attempt to escape from miseries. However, the diversion that both protagonists choose are different. I see this as a reflection of Kierkegaard's concept of individual freedom. Kierkegaard states that, "Each individual not society or religion is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living passionately and sincerely" ("A Primer on Kierkegaardian Motifs"). This means that there is no right or wrong in choosing actions because individuals are responsible for their own actions. Thus, this thesis will analyze the portrayal of the protagonists in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* and Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs*, and see how the protagonists manage to get away from their miseries, particularly boredom.

In the 1920s, there was a theory known as formalism, which refers to a style of inquiry that focuses on features of the literary text itself. Formalists at that time believed that by reading and focusing on the literary works it is possible to trace the

context of the works itself. (“Formalism (Literary Theory)”). I choose formalism for my thesis because I can figure out the characteristics of the protagonists directly from the works themselves. Nonetheless, I still use Blaise Pascal’s and Kierkegaard’s concept of diversion and individual choices only as the background to help me find further meaning of diversion concept which is applied in the plays.

Statement of the Problem

1. How is the protagonist portrayed in the plays?
2. What is the purpose of the author in portraying such a protagonist?

Purpose of the Study

1. To reveal the portrayal of the protagonists of the plays
2. To analyze the purpose of the authors in portraying the protagonists

Method of Research

I use library research that includes reading and understanding the primary texts, which are the plays, and other references, in order to make an objective and nonsuperficial analysis in the process of writing the thesis. Next, I analyze the portrayal of the protagonist in each of the plays. Lastly, I draw some conclusions from my analysis.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One is Introduction, which consists of Background of the Study, Statement of the Problem, Purpose of the Study, Method of Research, and Organization of Thesis. Chapter Two contains the analysis of the portrayal of the protagonist in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*. Chapter Three contains the analysis of the portrayal of the protagonist in Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs*. Chapter Four is the conclusion of the analysis. The thesis ends with the Bibliography and Appendix, which consists of the summary of the two plays and the biography of the two authors.

