

Melih Cevdet Anday’s “Dead Want to Talk” in Terms of the Playwriting Tendencies of “The Theater of the Absurd”

Melih Cevdet Anday’ın “Ölüler Konuşmak İsterler” İsimli Oyununun Absürt Tiyatronun Oyun Yazımı Eğilimleri Bağlamında İncelenmesi

Simay YILMAZ¹ 

¹Istanbul University State Conservatory, Department of Theater, İstanbul, Türkiye

Corresponding author /

Sorumlu yazar : Simay YILMAZ

E-mail / E-posta : syilmaz1@istanbul.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

Melih Cevdet Anday, one of the foremost playwrights in modern Turkish theater, has authored plays that exemplify the influence of “The Theater of the Absurd”. This article aims to explore the presence of absurdist tendencies within one of his works, “Dead Want to Talk”. With this objective, the article has assessed the playwriting tendencies of “The Theater of the Absurd” and evaluated Anday’s play within this framework.

It has been observed that the plot centers on the theme -the absurdity of human-portraying passengers on a ferry who talk without taking action. Modern individualism and lack of communication are layers of thought, conveyed effectively through the use of self-centered monologues instead of meaningful dialogues. Symbolism plays a crucial role, with characters as anonymous figures lacking depth or development, representing various human portraits or traits. The vagueness in time and setting allows the plot to embrace ‘anytime’ / ‘anyplace’ where the modern individual exists. Additionally, the use of humor enables readers to engage with the critical perspective. In conclusion, Anday’s play exemplifies the influence of the playwriting tendencies of “The Theater of the Absurd” to a significant extent, thus serves as a notable example of the absurdist influence in modern Turkish Theater.

Keywords: The Theater of the Absurd, Melih Cevdet Anday, Dead Want to Talk

ÖZ

Modern Türk Tiyatrosu’nun önemli oyun yazarlarından Melih Cevdet Anday’ın, Absürt Tiyatronun etkisini taşıyan oyunları bulunmaktadır. Bu makalede, bu eserlerden biri olan “Ölüler Konuşmak İsterler”deki absürdist eğilimlerin araştırılması amaçlanmıştır. Bu amaçla, Absürt Tiyatronun oyun yazımı eğilimlerini değerlendirilmiş ve Anday’ın oyunu bu çerçevede incelenmiştir.

İncelemeye göre, olay örgüsü, oyunun teması -insanın absürtlüğü- etrafında şekillenmiştir; okuyucuya, yalnızca konuşan fakat eyleme geçmeyen bir grup feribot yolcusu sunulmuştur. Modern bireysellik ve iletişimsizlik, anlamlı diyaloglardan ziyade ben merkezci monologların kullanımı yoluyla okuyucuya iletilen diğer düşünce katmanlarıdır. Sembolizm, oyunda önemli bir rol oynamaktadır; karakter derinliği veya gelişimi taşımayan anonim figürler olan oyun kişileri, çeşitli insan portrelerini veya özelliklerini temsil etmektedir. Zaman ve mekândaki detaysızlık, hikâyenin modern bireyin var olduğu “her zaman”ı / “her yer”i kucaklamasına olanak tanımıştır. Ayrıca, mizah öğesinin kullanımı okuyucunun eleştirel bakış açısıyla etkileşimde bulunmasını sağlamaktadır.

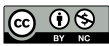
Sonuç olarak, Anday’ın oyunu, absürdist oyun yazımı eğilimlerinin etkisini önemli ölçüde yansıtmakta ve bu bağlamda, Absürt Tiyatronun modern Türk Tiyatrosu üzerindeki etkisine önemli bir örnek teşkil etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Absürt Tiyatro, Melih Cevdet Anday, Ölüler Konuşmak İsterler

Submitted/Başvuru : 12.05.2024

Accepted/Kabul : 03.06.2024

Published Online/
Online Yayın : 07.06.2024



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)

INTRODUCTION

Melih Cevdet Anday stands as one of the influential playwrights in modern Turkish theater, and "Dead Want to Talk" serves as a prime example of the influence of "The Theater of the Absurd" within his works. This article aims to explore the impact of the 'absurdist' playwriting tendencies on "Dead Want to Talk". Beginning with a concise overview of "The Theater of the Absurd" and the concept of the "absurd", the article will proceed to assess the 'absurdist' tendencies in playwriting, and subsequently evaluate Anday's play within this framework.

"The Theater of the Absurd"

"The Theater of the Absurd" is known as "a theatrical genre of the 1950s and 1960s, in which accepted stage conventions were largely abandoned in order to present a view of the world as meaningless and incomprehensible" (Law, 2011, p. 2). Unlike movements in the history of theater with clearly defined boundaries and rules, which have created a unity of style; it is hard to define conclusive rules about "The theater of the Absurd". Because, what caused these playwrights to be mentioned together under the umbrella of 'absurd' were not the common and immutable rules they adopted in form and style, but the fact that they expanded the conventional theatrical understanding of their time, bringing the 'absurdity' of the life and the human to text and the stage.

The term "The theater of the Absurd" was introduced by Martin Esslin in 1961, in his essay of the same name, wherein Esslin recognized the philosophical concept of existentialist 'absurd' to resonate in the plays of certain playwrights of the era; notably Beckett, Ionesco, and others (Law, 2011, p. 2). Zarilli and others explain "The Theater of the Absurd" as follows:

An expression coined by the critic Martin Esslin in 1961 to categorize plays by Arthur Adamov, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet. Relating them all to the existentialist philosophy of Albert Camus (1913–1960), Esslin presented these playwrights as unified in their portrayal of the human condition as meaningless (2010, p. 589).

According to Stylianou, this was a brief period in 1950s and 1960s, the decade of the Cold War:

It ["The Theater of the Absurd"] belonged to the feverish decade spanned by Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (Waiting for Godot, 1952) and Ionesco's *Le Roi se meurt* (Exit the King, 1962). It was the decade of the 'cold war' and the extreme tensions of the east and the west (1981, p. 125).

As previously noted, the playwrights associated with "The Theater of the Absurd" were loosely connected, lacking a set of formal or stylistic rules that could be applied to all of them or their works. According to The Methuen Drama Dictionary of the Theater, the grouping of these playwrights together was primarily attributed to a "similarity of theme and treatment" during that brief period: "The impression of a coherent movement was largely the result of an accidental similarity of theme and treatment, and by the 1960s the leading writers had already begun to take different paths" (Law, 2011, p. 2.). It's reasonable to assert that, whether accidental or not, the resemblance of these 'absurdist' playwrights have stemmed from the historical and philosophical *Zeitgeist* of the post-World War II era, and their dramatic inclinations were primarily shaped by their artistic departure from prevailing artistic norms and their thematic interest in the 'absurdity' of the world and human existence.

The "Absurd"

The philosophy of the post-World War II era, and consequently "The Theater of the Absurd," is primarily associated with existentialist philosophy, notably Albert Camus' "Myth of Sisyphus," which introduced the concept of the endless 'meaninglessness' of existence. Pavis attributed the philosophical origins of the movement as follows:

The origins of this movement date back to Camus (*The Outsider*, *The Myth of Sisyphus* 1942) and Sartre (*Being and Nothingness* 1943). In the context of the war and the post-war period, these philosophers painted a disillusioned picture of a world devastated by conflict and ideology (1998, p. 2).

Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus" delves into the existential dilemma of human existence through the mythological character of Sisyphus, condemned to endlessly roll a boulder up a mountain. Despite recognizing the futility of his task, Sisyphus persists, embodying the absurdity of the human condition. Camus employs Sisyphus as a metaphor for the 'absurd struggle' of individuals to find meaning in a seemingly meaningless world (1942). According to Esslin, citing Camus, 'the absurd' refers to "that which is devoid of purpose. . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (1961, p. xix). Building upon this background and philosophy, dramatists under the umbrella of "The Theater of the Absurd" tended to depict the absurdity of human life:

The sudden outburst of French absurdism may in part be explained as a nihilistic reaction to the recent atrocities, the gas-chambers and the nuclear bombs of the war. [...] expressed the helplessness and futility of a world which seemed to have no purpose (Stylan, 1981, p. 125).

Skinner Dace have listed common themes in portraying 'the absurdity of the human condition' as follows: "the inability to act and the futility of action", "the absurd in the guise of death", "the absurd as uncertainty", "vitiating values", "conformity and identity", "non-communication and isolation", "emotional atrophy" (1967). According to Esslin, 'absurdist' drama 'strived' to "express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (1961, p. xix-xx).

So, it can be concluded that the playwriting tendencies characterized by the abandonment of conventional theatrical devices and a thematic focus on 'absurdity' have unified "The Theater of the Absurd" as a cohesive group. In the following section, we will explore these tendencies in greater detail.

Playwriting Tendencies

As previously mentioned, establishing definitive rules about "The Theater of the Absurd" proves challenging, as the plays under this umbrella do not portray a unity of form or style. However, while not applicable to all, common tendencies in playwriting conceptualized by researchers may serve as a framework for examining plays influenced by "The Theater of the Absurd." To start with, in his evaluation of absurdist plays, Esslin noted:

These [plays] have no story or plot to speak of; [...] are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; [...] often have neither a beginning nor end; [...] seem to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; [...] often consist of incoherent babblings [instead of dialogue] (1961, p. xvii-xviii).

Esslin also suggested that the 'absurdist' plays tend toward "a radical devaluation of language": "The element of language still plays an important, yet subordinate, part in this conception, but what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters" (1961, p. xxi). Similarly, Stylan outlined the playwriting tendencies of absurdist plays as follows:

Absurdist plays fall within the symbolist tradition, and they have no logical plot or characterization in any conventional sense. Their characters lack the motivation found in realistic drama, and so emphasize their purposelessness. The absence of plot serves to reinforce the monotony and repetitiveness of time in human affairs. The dialogue is commonly no more than a series of inconsequential clichés which reduce those who speak to them to talking machines. As plays, they do not discuss the human condition, but simply portray it as its worst in outrageous images chosen to undeceive the innocent and shock the complacent (1981, p. 126).

Pavis stated that "the absurd play" was first seen as an "anti-play" or "anti-theater" in relation to classical dramaturgy and she evaluated the dramaturgical characteristics of the 'absurd' as follows:

[...] the absurd often implies an ahistorical, non-dialectical dramaturgical structure. Man is a timeless abstraction incapable of finding a foothold in his frantic search for a meaning that constantly eludes him. His actions have neither meaning nor direction; the fabula of absurd plays is often circular, guided not by dramatic action but by wordplay and a search for words. [...] The preferred form of absurd dramaturgy is that of a play without a plot or clearly defined characters in which chance and invention reign supreme. [...] (1998, p. 1-2).

Additionally, the use of 'comic' is recognized as another prominent aspect of absurdist plays. Skinner Dace regards "comic technique" as a notable feature of 'absurd' drama, describing it as a form that mirrors its content (1967, p. v). Stylan also emphasizes the significance of humor in 'absurdist' works:

The early plays of Samuel Beckett particularly drew upon the content and techniques of mime, the music hall, the circus and the commedia dell'arte to represent the business of everyday living. [...] As in farce, cause and effect are discounted, time is speeded up or slowed down, fate is unpredictable and anything can happen. [...] such drama achieves a kind of poetry and rhythm in comic form and farcical style peculiar to itself, and it is this comic method which has made theater of the absurd more widely acceptable (1981, p. 126-7)

Moreover, according to Stylan, the incorporation of comedy in absurdist plays serves to make the absurd more palatable to audiences. This distancing effect allows viewers to engage with the thought-provoking themes of the plays while maintaining a critical distance from the characters on stage:

[T]he best comedy teases and troubles an audience; it can be painful. Comic method can serve to create an imaginative but dispassionate attitude; to create conditions for thinking; to free dramatist in his attempt to tap certain rational resources of mind in his audience. [...] we are encouraged for the most part to keep our critical distance from the central characters [...] It may do so in surrealist comedy like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where the slapstick convention of the play deceives us most of the time into thinking that we are not looking at ourselves [...] (Stylan, 1962, p. 51).

Based on the information provided, the main tendencies of absurdist playwriting can be summarized as follows:

- Abandonment of conventional plot construction: Absurdist plays tend to abandon the conventional plot structure. The plays reinforce not the plot but the thought of the play.

- Abandonment of the conventional concept of character: Characters in absurdist works tend to be symbolic and lack traditional depth or development, serving more as representations of abstract ideas or human traits rather than fully fleshed-out individuals.
- Abandonment of the conventional concept of language and dialogue: The dialogue is frequently nonsensical. The lack of communication conveys meaning itself.
- Tendency to portray the absurdity of the human condition through symbolic means: Absurdist playwrights utilize symbolism and allegory to highlight the inherent absurdity of human existence and the struggles of modern life.
- Use of comedy and humorous criticism: Comedy is often employed as a tool for critiquing societal norms and challenging audience expectations, providing a means of engaging with difficult subject matter in a more accessible manner.
- Focus on themes that depict the absurd state of modern humanity: Absurdist plays often explore themes such as individualism, isolation, lack of communication, the inability to act, social corruption, and the inherent meaninglessness of existence, reflecting the existential anxieties of the post-World War II era.

PLAY ANALYSIS: "THE DEAD WANT TO TALK"

One of the works that portray the influence of "The theater of the Absurd" in modern Turkish theater is Melih Cevdet Anday's play "Dead Want to Talk" (original name: "Ölüler Konuşmak İsterler"). Originally published by "Yankı Yayınları" in 1972, the play was republished in 2014 by "Everest Yayınları" as part of "Toplu Oyunlar I" (Complete Plays I), which is the version used as the source of this study.¹

In the following sections, the play will be examined in terms of the key tendencies of absurdist playwriting identified earlier.

The thought and the plot: The 'absurdity' of 'too much talk, no communication; much opinion, no action'

As mentioned before, absurdist plays tend to be structured around the thought of the play, rather than adhering to a classical understanding of linear plot construction, which typically involves acts and dramatic elements such as a climax.

The analyzed play demonstrates a similar tendency in terms of plot structure. It is a one-act play comprising a single scene, set entirely on a single location, namely a ferry deck, and it depicts a continuous exchange of 'monologues' (which will be assessed later in the article) among passengers from some point after departure until the sinking at the end.

The characters are symbolic figures, lacking any character depth or development. These are named as: "Girl", "Non-Meat-Eater", "Funerals Officer", "Fat Woman", "Her Husband", "Bushy Moustache", "Old Man" and "Young Man with a Badge".

The play begins with the character "Girl" appealing to her fellow passengers on the ferry, seeking their attention for a moment. She reveals that the man seated beside her, referred to as "Bushy Moustache," has deceived her with false promises of marriage and therefore she needs money to sue him. Following this opening, an intersecting and unrelated pattern of talk begins among passengers, with each individual voicing own thoughts and concerns, predominantly focusing on themselves, and this pattern continues throughout -and creates- the entire plot. Each passenger gives a speech about whatever is on their mind, without listening to or understanding each other. Most of the time, they are not even aware of the topic. In this way, the play addresses the issues plaguing modern society and the human condition, including individualism, selfishness, social corruption, lack of empathy and respect for others, and the prevalence of idle talk devoid of meaningful action. Thus, the play highlights the 'absurdity' of modern human.

Next, "Girl" walks around the passengers with a bag to collect money. Some passengers disregard her plea entirely, while others mechanically put money into the bag without even acknowledging her presence, underscoring how meaningless and automatic even a positive behavior as donating has become in modern world. People act without thinking, this behavior reflects the pervasive sense of automatism and detachment from genuine human connection prevalent in the modern world. Several dialogues within the play illustrate this point further. For instance, when "Young Man with a Badge" responds to "Girl" by automatically stating, "I already got one, thank you," he mistakenly assumes she is selling something, indicating a lack of attentiveness and empathy (p. 121). Further, the conversation between the

¹ Since the play is written in Turkish and there aren't any published translations to English; the passages quoted from this copy of the play was translated to English by the author of the article.

“Fat Woman” and “Her Husband” reveals that the passengers are completely oblivious to the content of “Girl’s” plea, as they remain preoccupied with their own personal concerns:

FAT WOMAN: (To “Girl” in front of her): What is this money for?

GIRL: Court costs.

FAT WOMAN (To “Her Husband”): Did you hear? She wants court costs.

HER HUSBAND: Yes.

FAT WOMAN: Why does she want it from us? She should take it from our tenants, I am the landlord (p. 123).

Individuals of the modern world are so focused on their own lives and issues and so disconnected from the social sphere that, as seen in this example, they perceive even an issue that has nothing to do with them in the context of their own issues.

Following “Girl’s” plea, the second passenger to address the group is “Non-Meat-Eater,” who supports vegetarianism. During this speech, modern people’s failure to listen to others and their disrespect is dramatized further: While “Non-Meat-Eater” speaks, a woman pulls him aside and passes in front of him. Later, a character named “Funerals Officer” interrupts “Non-Meat-Eater” and starts speaking. “Funerals Officer’s” concern -which has nothing to do with the subject- is the weight of the corpses. He advises passengers to lose weight before they die to avoid problems with cemeteries and to cut off their moustaches, as they continue to grow in the grave. This interruption not only underscores the theme of individuals’ self-absorption; also the finale of the play is foreshadowed from the very beginning.

It is important to address a crucial point here: As mentioned earlier in the article, in modern theater, the importance shifts from the plot to the thought and this reaches one of its peak points in “The theater of the Absurd”. The thought of the play rises to the first place in importance; therefore, the aim is not to build a play on the action and the curiosity it arouses in the audience, but to structure the play in a way that brings thought to the fore. Therefore, foreshadowing can be considered one of the modern elements that help shift the audience’s attention from the plot to the thought by revealing the end of the play from the very beginning.

Meanwhile, “Girl,” having collected some money from the passengers, proceeds to deliver it to the man she had accused of deceiving her. The man casually pockets the money without any objection from the others, illustrating the deceitfulness inherent in modern society. Undeterred, “Girl” takes a further step by complaining that the man took her money:

(The girl brings the money she collected and gives it to “Bushy Moustache”, man she claims who have raped her. He counts and puts the money in his pocket.)

GIRL (To the passengers): Dear passengers! This man took the money I collected from you (points to the man next to him). He says, “I swear, I won’t do it again.” You are all my witnesses, aren’t you? This is over. Let the court decide (p. 124).

Meanwhile, the passengers remain oblivious to the fact that “Girl” has committed fraud, as their sole preoccupation revolves around discussing their own personal issues. The utterances of these individuals reflect the self-centered nature of modern society, where people are indifferent to anyone else’s affairs but their own and are willing to resort to any means to advance their own interests. This portrayal highlights the pervasive selfishness and moral detachment prevalent in contemporary culture:

FUNERALS OFFICER: Please do not interrupt me.

NON-MEAT-EATER (jumps up): You also interrupted me just now.

FUNERALS OFFICER: My case is urgent (p. 124).

Indeed, delivering a speech during this journey is neither necessary nor obligatory, yet the phrase “my case is urgent” slips from the mouth of the “Funerals Officer,” even in a context unrelated to urgency. This utterance serves as a poignant portrayal of the pervasive clichés and corrupt, self-centered mentality prevalent in modern society.

The next speaker is the “Fat Woman”. Having absorbed everything said so far entirely by placing herself at the center, she shouts it all out in a nonsensical manner, blending all the topics without even making clear what she’s objecting to. With the passage of the woman rebelling as if there were an accusation or threat directed at her, the play exemplifies a human behavior of rebellion solely for the sake of opposition and seeing oneself at the center of everything:

FAT WOMAN (jumps up): Why shouldn’t I eat meat? Look at this madness! Why shouldn’t I be buried in the grave I want? Look at this madness! I’ll eat meat, I’ll get fat, and I’ll be buried in a big grave. I may kick my tenants out of my house if I want to. [...] (P. 125)

As the passengers persist in speaking from their own perspectives without listening to each other, the hint that the ferry will sink is reiterated to the reader when the “Funerals Officer” mentions that his task for the day is to bury the passengers on the ferry. (The sinking of the ferry was already symbolized in the beginning by the presence of a black flag in the author’s description of the setting):

OLD MAN: What's your task for today?

FUNERALS OFFICER: Burying the passengers on this ferry (p. 130).

However, the passengers are so self-absorbed that they merely hear the words spoken but fail to truly listen. Thus, when the "Funerals Officer" implies that all will die, he fails to incite panic or even draw attention. Conversation among the passengers persists, oblivious to the impending danger, while in the background, the ferry gradually begins to take on water:

(The ferry starts to sink slowly. Initially, the sea level rises to the deck, followed by a gradual ingress of water.) (p. 133)

Even in this situation, the passengers fail to grasp the seriousness of the situation and continue their chatter. For example, the "Fat Woman" casually mentions her plans to cut off her neighbor's flowers upon returning home, seemingly unaffected by the impending disaster. Eventually, two passengers do notice that the deck is taking on water, but their response is passive observation rather than active intervention. This behavior exemplifies the modern phenomenon of "intellectuals" who offer commentary on events from their own perspective but seldom take tangible action, akin to armchair critics.

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE (Calmly): The deck is filling with water. (To NON-MEAT-EATER) Do you see?

NON-MEAT-EATER: Yes, I see. We'll pay for our sins.

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE: Believe me, you won't find a ferry filling with water this slowly anywhere else in the world.

I've been to Lapland. Eskimos call their boats *kayaks*. NON-MEAT-EATER: We're paying for our sins.

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE: Yes, because we're not opening up to the world. Yet today, it's completely understood that the world is round. We have the photos taken by astronauts in our hands. [. . .] (p. 134)

As the play nears its end, "Non-Meat-Eater" repeatedly informs other passengers that the ferry is sinking. However, everyone remains preoccupied with their own affairs. Rather than assessing the situation herself, the "Fat Woman" nudges her husband to inquire about the risk. In keeping with his behavior throughout the journey, "Her Husband" dutifully echoes his wife's statements, affirming them and providing the expected responses to her questions:

NON-MEAT-EATER: The deck is flooding, passengers, we're sinking.

FAT WOMAN (Nudging her husband): The deck is flooding.

HER HUSBAND (Looking at his feet): Yes.

FAT WOMAN: What should we do?

HER HUSBAND (Calmly): I don't know.

FAT WOMAN: Surely the ferry won't sink? It won't, right?

HER HUSBAND: It won't. (p. 135)

The ferry continues to rapidly take on water, yet everyone remains preoccupied with their own concerns. Eventually, the "Funerals Officer", citing his work (he will handle the funeral arrangements for the passengers when they drown with the ferry) exits the deck. The passengers bid him farewell, and he bids them farewell in return. All the remaining characters in the play, without altering their attitudes they have adopted from the beginning, slowly sink with the ferry.

This ending symbolizes the sinking of a society where everyone speaks out, but nobody truly listens, thinks, or takes action, carrying its inhabitants along with.

(The water rises further. Passengers calmly look at each other's faces. They ponder. "Youngster Wearing a Badge" smiles and nods to "The Girl", shaking his head. "Fat Woman" stares with a grim expression. "Her Husband" shows the audience the fingers of his two hands. "The Moustache" combs his mustache, and "The Girl" smiles at everyone. The curtain falls slowly.) (p. 138)

Dialogue: Or simultaneous monologues?

The play effectively portrays one of its central themes - the lack of communication - through the exchange of self-centered monologues rather than genuine dialogues. Despite the appearance of interaction, there is a distinct absence of true communication. The conversations among characters seem like dialogues, but they are merely exchanges of monologues. No one on the ferry listens or understands each other; all are solely focused on expressing their own thoughts and addressing their own concerns. This pervasive self-absorption prevents them from comprehending the gravity of the situation, such as the sinking of the ferry, and taking necessary action.

Throughout the play, this breakdown in communication is a recurring narrative. Here is an example that encapsulates this theme:

GIRL (Opens her bag and starts walking among passengers)

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE (Points to the badge on his collar): You had just given this to me, thank you.

GIRL: This isn't a badge..

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE: Oh, I see, you're selling combs then, I guess.

GIRL: No, you still don't get it.

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE: Honeysuckle?

GIRL: No, I'm selling mustaches. To protect young girls' honor. Come on, there are mustaches, mustaches.

OLD MAN (to "HUSBAND" who's sitting next to him): Did you do your military service?

HUSBAND: I bought four, and three summer houses, that makes seven, I also have two plots of land, which makes nine, and a shop, which makes ten. (Grins) (p. 131)

Vagueness in time and setting: Embracing 'anytime', 'anyplace' modern individual exists

The time and setting of the play are mutable and vaguely defined. There is no clear information about the exact date the play takes place. Based on the date of writing, it can be estimated that it may be set in the 1970s. The only directive provided at the beginning of the play is "around noon, the weather is sunny" (p. 121), which suggests an ordinary day. In this context, since the play does not specifically refer to a time, it retains the characteristic of being applicable to anytime, which is a common tendency of absurdist plays.

Similarly, the setting of the play is minimally detailed, with only one location utilized throughout: "the stern deck of a ferry" (p.121). This ferry could be situated within the territorial waters of any country. While it may be assumed to be a City Lines ship in a Turkish city based on the author's background, the setting could also represent a ferry from anywhere in the world. Additionally, instead of a ferry, any location that brings a group of strangers together could serve as the setting.

In essence, the time and setting do not play a primary role or are not indispensable to the narrative. However, the constant factor is the presence of individuals from the 'modern world', highlighting the universality of the themes explored in the play.

Symbolism in setting: We're all on the same 'ferry'

Although not primary or indispensable, the choice of a ferry as the setting carries effective symbolism. The group of individuals are on the same ferry, so the sinking may affect all of them. It is quite reasonable to relate this choice of setting to the idiomatic expression "we're all on the same boat," which means that everyone is in a similar situation or facing the same circumstances. Therefore, it can be inferred that the individualism and self-concern of the people on the ferry cause them to overlook the fact that they're actually 'all on the same boat' and sink with the ferry while speaking their own minds.

The second layer of meaning could be associated with society. The "boat" in the phrase often refers to the society people live in, conveying the meaning that individuals actually depend on each other in terms of society. The characters of the play represent different types of people in society; this small group of individuals is almost like a sample of individuals in modern society (this will be further assessed in the next section). But in terms of society, these very different individuals depend on each other. So, the sinking of the ship in the end while everyone is still preoccupied with their own matters and taking no action symbolizes a society that deteriorates in the same way.

Symbolic figures rather than characters: A ferry-deck-sized sample of self-centered individuals

As previously mentioned, the characters in the play are symbolic figures, devoid of any substantial character depth or development. They are simply identified as "Girl", "Non-Meat-Eater", "Funerals Officer", "Fat Woman", "Husband", "Bushy Moustache", "Old Man", and "Young Man with a Badge". These characters lack personal names, resembling stock figures that represent various archetypes within society.

Each figure in the play highlights a caricatured trait, skillfully presenting some human portraits in modern society. These characters do not carry specific character traits; what makes them significant in the play is not their psychological dimensions or depths of character, but rather, their representation of certain human prototypes in society. In this regard, the characters conform to the absurdist tendency of representing universal behavioral patterns transcending time and place.

For instance, the figure "Girl", alongside "Bushy Moustache", embodies individuals prone to deception, manipulating others with fabricated stories. "Girl" collects money from passengers by portraying herself as a victim through a series of narratives. While it is evident to the reader that "Girl" and "Bushy Moustache" collaborate in their deceitful scheme, the passengers, behaving like automatons who speak without critical thought, are highly susceptible to manipulation, facilitating the execution of the plan devised by "Girl" and "Bushy Moustache".

"Young Man with a Badge" exemplifies the so-called intellectuals disconnected from the society they live in. He uses phrases like "nowhere in the world" or "I've seen it there too" in almost every conversation, implying that he has travelled and seen the world. Thus, he positions himself as superior to others. In the play, this character exemplifies

modern individuals who are disconnected from the society they live in, consider themselves superior to the rest of society, and perceive themselves as "European", claiming to have seen the West. There is a hypocrisy in his so-called 'Westernization'; he boasts about the situations in his country by giving references from the West but does not find a solution. The 'I know everything' and 'I've seen everything' attitudes are satirically portrayed in the following dialogue between "Young Man with a Badge" and "Non-Meat-Eater":

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE: What are you going to do now?

NON-MEAT-EATER: I don't know.

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE: Have you applied to UNESCO?

NON-MEAT-EATER: Are you working there?

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE: Yes.

NON-MEAT-EATER: Then could I ask you?

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE: But I'm on vacation now. I'm resting. We have one month of leave per year. I'm not busy with any work. But I keep my mind open to all impressions. I don't know what accumulations there will be tomorrow. Believe me, every country has its own uniqueness. As these come together and merge, a brand-new world will emerge. For instance, Indian music and French music are completely different.

NON-MEAT-EATER: I also wrote to the United Nations.

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE: That's not bad either. I worked there too.

NON-MEAT-EATER: I wrote to NATO too.

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE: That's not bad either. I worked there too.

NON-MEAT-EATER: I wrote to SEATO too.

YOUNG MAN WITH A BADGE: That's not bad either. I worked there too. (p. 133).

"Young Man with a Badge" consistently refrains from offering positive endorsements of any of these organizations; instead, he employs the phrase "that's not bad either" to underscore the perceived superiority of his own standards. Thus, he embodies the archetype of an individual who is incapable of appreciating anything or anyone beyond themselves.

On the other hand, the "Fat Woman" epitomizes the self-centered individual who perceives the world solely through her own lens of understanding. Her affluence is apparent, and she evaluates every situation exclusively from her own vantage point. When the sinking of the ship is brought to her attention, her immediate concern is how such an inconvenience could occur when she has a scheduled event the following day. In her view, the ship should postpone its sinking until she is no longer aboard:

FAT WOMAN: The water is rising, isn't it?

HER HUSBAND: Yes.

FAT WOMAN: Don't we have an engagement tomorrow?

HER HUSBAND: We do. One two three four. . .

FAT WOMAN: We have an engagement, so why is the water rising (p. 136).

The figure "Her Husband" lacks autonomy, as his sole defining characteristic in play is his relationship to the "Fat Woman" as her husband. He exists primarily to affirm and support his wife, seldom expressing independent thoughts or making decisions of his own. Throughout the journey, he predominantly responds to her inquiries or occupies himself with counting his possessions, which seem to serve as the focal point of his existence. His use of his fingers as a symbolic gesture to count highlights the mundane nature of his preoccupations.

It can be inferred that he has grown accustomed to subjugation under his wife's dominance over the years, resigning himself to a passive role in their relationship:

FAT WOMAN: [...] And then, sir, I have four apartment buildings, three summer houses, two plots of land, and a shop. The neighbor's wisterias are hanging over the garden of my summer house. Why should they hang? Tell me, why should they hang? The branches, the scents, are just two or three meters above my land. They deliberately planted the wisterias near the wall so that the branches and scents would come towards our side. Just like my land, the air of my land is also mine, isn't it? Look at the fool! I don't want it. I don't want the tenants either. Let them leave now. (She taps her foot on the ground as if stamping, then sits down.)

OLD MAN (to the HER HUSBAND): A woman like a soldier, I like it. What does she say, son?

HER HUSBAND: She's my wife, she's good, she's fine. She's my wife, she's good, she's fine (p. 125).

The "Old Man" illustrates the archetype of elderly in society who are deeply rooted in conventions and traditions of society. These individuals define themselves and others solely within the parameters of societal norms and their own memories. They perceive the world through the lens of established conventions and often view others through the same framework. For instance, the "Old Man" interprets people within the context of a specific societal conventions, such as military service:

BUSHY MOUSTACHE: I am auctioning off this comb. We will give the proceeds to the girl.

OLD MAN: Have you done your military service? (p. 127).

The figure “Non-Meat-Eater” represents a caricatured individual who focuses on relatively luxurious concerns amidst all the problems and corruption in society. While the issues he advocates for hold value, his propensity for opposition, protest, or dissent becomes a defining trait in the play. For instance, his inclination toward opposition is so ingrained that he perceives a warning about mustaches as an act of discrimination against women. However, it is inherently logical to direct warnings about mustaches toward men, and it does not entail discrimination against women:

FUNERAL OFFICER: As a funeral officer, I advise you, dear passengers, to trim your mustaches before your demise. While human flesh decays, mustaches do not.

NON-MEAT-EATER: I object. Although our friend claimed to speak for all passengers, he is only addressing men. (He sits down triumphantly, smiling at those around him.) What should women do before they die? I’ve seen many like you (p. 126-127).

Finally, the figure “Funerals Officer”, represents working people that seek to fulfill their duties in the most convenient and least troublesome manner possible. Throughout the play, his discourse revolves around streamlining the burial process by addressing factors such as weight and mustaches, which could potentially complicate funeral arrangements.

The use of ‘comic’: Humorous criticism

In the play, the use of ‘comic’ plays a significant role too. Each character embodies human traits that are both open to criticism and humorous. For example, the following passage is a pitiful satire of individuals who prioritize material possessions and consider themselves superior to others, even in terms of death. While reading this passage, we both smile and sense a critical attitude:

FAT WOMAN: They say you’ll die soon.

HER HUSBAND: I heard.

FAT WOMAN: We have an appointment tomorrow, darn it.

HER HUSBAND: Yeah. Can’t we postpone it?

FAT WOMAN: Yeah, but why are you making this guy say it? Why would I die? I have so much property. (p. 132).

The coexistence of humor and criticism in this passage is a good example of the aesthetic of contrasts in absurdist plays. The use of the comic, cause reader to have a distance to the characters, where criticism starts. Within the context of this aesthetic in absurdist plays, presenting the tragic and the comic together leads the reader to realize the absurdity of life. In this play as well, the absurdity of the characters’ attitudes, and therefore the corruption of society, is subtly conveyed to the reader through the coexistence of humor and criticism.

CONCLUSION

In this article, Melih Cevdet Anday’s play "Dead Want to Talk" has been evaluated concerning the influence of playwriting tendencies of “The Theater of the Absurd”. To assess the text, a concise introduction to “The Theater of the Absurd” was provided, and the most common playwriting tendencies were examined. Subsequently, the play was evaluated concerning the following aspects: The thought and the plot, the time and setting, the dialogue, symbolism, the characters, and the use of comedy.

Starting with the thought and the plot of the play; it has been suggested that, rather than adhering to classical plot construction, Anday’s play was constructed around the element of thought; which portrays the ‘absurdity’ of the human using themes such as ‘much talk no action’, ‘individualism’, and ‘lack of communication’. There is a group of individuals - passengers on a ferry deck - each symbolizing various types and traits of people. The single act is set entirely on a single location, a ferry deck, and consists of the continuous exchange of ‘monologue’ among passengers from some point after departure until the sinking at the end. This ‘plot’ construction lacks any action and solely portrays a daily scene of people randomly put together. The reader observes these people; the way they talk, react, or better to say, the ‘absurdity’ in their state; the way they just talk and do not act.

Another layer of thought, serving the main thought of the play - the absurdity of much talk no action - includes ‘individualism’ and ‘lack of communication’. The play emphasizes the individuality of the people of ‘modern society’. The passengers are all concentrated on themselves and speak their own issues or try to emphasize their viewpoints. As mentioned before, there is an exchange of self-centered monologues rather than dialogues. There is too much talk but not real communication. There is a narrative of communication breakdown. A group of people who do not listen to each other, and often not even aware of what the other is saying, all speaking at the same time. Each is in an effort to express themselves, not listening to what the speaker is saying. The individuality of passengers becomes obvious in passages where they understand everything from their point of view and relate to themselves, building sentences starting with “my” or “I”, such as: “I’ve been there too”, “My house”, “my tenants”, “I have one of those” . . . etc. Due to their individuality, they hardly communicate. These two themes (‘individualism’ and ‘lack of communication’) are

foundational to the main theme (the absurdity of much talk no action). Individualism and lack of communication cause these people to talk without really communicating and without taking action, eventually leading to their sinking with the ferry.

The use of time and setting in the play also embraces the absurdist tendency, allowing the theme of the play to resonate universally on a broad scale, relevant for any time and place. There isn't much detail provided on time or setting; it is simply known that the action takes place on a ferry deck around noon. However, the play could have been set in a train station as well. The selection of time and setting is neither of primary importance for the progression of the story nor determinant of the characters' behaviors. The focus of the play is on portraying the absurdity of human through a group of random individuals who happen to be in the same place, and it does not specify particular circumstances for this portrayal. As a result, the portrait we observe serves as a depiction of individuals anytime, anywhere.

The use of anonymous characters without specific names also reinforces the absurdist inclination of depicting "the human" as a universal entity rather than a particular individual in specific circumstances. In other words, the use of symbolic figures each representing a type of human or a trait, instead of detailed and developed characters, enables the play to resonate with everyone; to speak for the concept of 'human'. Each of these figures symbolizes aspects of human: The girl and the mustache symbolize deceit and duplicity; the woman and her husband represent dependency on economic capital and a self-centered understanding of life; non-meat eater embodies resistance and protest; young man with a badge signifies reliance on cultural capital and the desire for superiority, while the old man epitomizes adherence to conventional norms in understanding life. Each figure symbolizes traits or tendencies of 'the human'. Therefore, the reader observes 'the human' with some of its most common traits in the modern times, picked up by the playwright.

The symbolism in setting is just as pivotal as that conveyed through characters. As mentioned in the play analysis, 'The ferry' can reasonably be interpreted as a symbol, drawing from the idiomatic phrase "we are all on the same boat," which implies that individuals, in fact, depend on each other. In Anday's play, the choice of a ferry as the setting, and its subsequent sinking at the end after the reader has witnessed a group of individuals solely concentrated on themselves, delivers a highly symbolic meaning when considered together.

The use of comedy is another characteristic of "The Theater of the Absurd", which is also evident in Anday's play. The incorporation of humor in the play makes its criticism more digestible for readers. Through humor, readers not only become critical but also sympathetic towards the figures and the way they act, enabling them to contemplate the absurdities of modern human and society. This offers readers an opportunity to recognize the absurd inherent in the human condition.

In terms of the primary focus on the theme, namely 'the absurdity of human', the plot constructed around this theme, the reduction of the significance of time and setting, the use of symbolic figures representing human traits instead of conventional characters, the exploration of themes such as miscommunication and individualism, as well as the incorporation of humor, it is reasonable to conclude that the play demonstrates absurdist tendencies in playwriting and to consider Anday's play as one of the works that reflect absurdist influence in modern Turkish theater.

Peer Review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Grant Support: The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Çıkar Çatışması: Yazar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

Finansal Destek: Yazar bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

ORCID ID of the author / Yazarın ORCID ID'si

Simay YILMAZ 0000-0002-3794-4967

REFERENCES / KAYNAKLAR

- Anday, M. C. (1972). *Dört Oyun: Yarın Başka Koruda, Dikkat Köpek Var, Ölüler Konuşmak İsterler, Müfettişler* (Four Plays: Tomorrow in a Different Grove, Beware of the Dog, The Dead Want to Speak, and Inspectors). Istanbul: Yankı Yayınları.
- Anday, M. C. (2014). *Ölümler Konuşmak İsterler* (Dead Want to Talk). In *Toplu Oyunlar I (Complete plays I)* (pp. 117-138). Istanbul: Everest Yayınları.

- Camus, P. A. (1942). *Le Mythe De Sisyphe*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- Esslin, M. (1961). *The Theatre of the Absurd*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Law, J. (Ed.). (2011). *The Methuen Drama Dictionary of Theatre*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Pavis, P. (1998). *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Skinner Dace, L. (1967). *The Theatre of the Absurd: Its Theme and Form* (Master's Thesis, Kansas State University, Kansas). Retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/33369251.pdf>
- Stylan, J. L. (1981). *Modern drama in theory and practice: Symbolism, surrealism and the absurd*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stylan, J. L. (1962). *The Dark Comedy: The Development of modern comic tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zarilli, P. B., McConachie, B., Williams, G. J., & Sorgenfrei, C. F. (2010). *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*. New York and London: Routledge.

How cite this article / Atıf Biçimi

Yılmaz, S. (2024). Melih Cevdet Anday's "Dead Want to Talk" in Terms of the Playwriting Tendencies of "The Theater of the Absurd". *Konservatoryum – Conservatorium*, 11(1), 240–250. <https://doi.org/10.26650/CONS2024-1482628>