The Audience's Tragicomic Response to Absurdist Plays

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1. The Purpose of the Study

Tragicomic, combining qualities of tragedy and comedy, has received relatively little critical attention, compared to tragedy or comedy. As David L. Hirst explains in *Tragicomic* (1984), the Renaissance critics and dramatists were the first to define the mixed genre. The views of Giovanni B. Guarini, the leading theorist of the genre in that period, had a strong effect on the mixed genre from 16th and 17th century pastoral romances to 18th century sentimental comedies and 19th century melodramas. According to Guarini, tragicomic relies for its generic effect on the plot movement from extreme danger to a happy ending for the main characters, and the audience laughs and weeps together with the characters as the plot develops. However, Guarini’s theory is no longer effective when applied to most modern tragicomedies. In *Modern Tragicomic* (1966), Karl S. Guthke distinguishes modern tragicomedies from the earlier ones whose emphasis is upon the plot movement from tragedy to a comic denouement, and explains that modern tragicomedies depend on “the reciprocity of the tragic and the comic” for their tragicomic effect in which the audience, through laughter, experiences “tragic awareness” of the characters’ painful situation (58). Most definitions of modern tragicomic are closely related to Guthke’s emphasis on the interaction of tragic and comic elements and on the importance of the audience’s role in the play’s generic effect. For example, Friedrich Durrenmatt argues that the playwright “can achieve the tragic out of comedy” and invite the audience to perceive “comedy [as] the expression of despair” (857). J. L. Styan also explains that modern tragicomic compels the audience to be “aware of the blood relationship of the tragic
and comic senses, of interbreeding of tears and laughter" (37).

However, these definitions do not take into account the tragicomically significant interaction of the audience and a distinctive plot pattern in such modern tragi-comedies as Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* (1950), Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957), and Edward Albee's *The American Dream* (1961). These playwrights incorporate disjointed dramatic devices and outside characters into the plot pattern to heighten the tragicomic effect in the four absurdist plays. This paper argues that the plot pattern of the four plays produces and intensifies the plays' generic effect by provoking the audience's creative participation in giving tragicomic significance to the plays. The aim here is to explore how the tragicomic effect is created and intensified and thus to illuminate the tragicomic nature of the four absurdist plays.

The plot pattern of absurdist plays is said to be characterized by contradictory and disjointed elements in the characters' verbal or nonverbal actions. These disjointed dramatic devices, which are distinctive to absurdist plays, bewilder the audience and discourage its emotional identification with the characters. Through this alienating impact, absurdist plays provoke the audience's critical response to the disjointed stage situation and stimulate the audience's intellectual participation in giving to the situation a tragicomic meaning, a mixture of a tragic sense of disjointedness from meaningful human life with a comic sense of deviation from normal human behavior. When the plot pattern of the four absurdist plays presents characters who are outsiders, guests or visitors whom the audience expects to play important roles in the characters' situation, the outsiders negate this expectation to activate the audience's critical response to the disjointed stage situation, to deepen its tragicomic perception of the situation, and thus to intensify the tragicomic effect which is produced by the audience's response to the disjointed situation.

Before exploring the nature of absurdist tragi-comedy in further detail, this paper will explain essential elements of tragedy and comedy and show how earlier tragi-comedies combine the elements of the opposite dramatic genres. This exposition will help to clarify how the absurdist plot pattern distinctively combines the tragic and the comic through