

Possible worlds in the theatre of the absurd

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Abstract

The present paper applies possible-worlds theory – as developed by literary theorists – to the analysis of absurdist drama, a genre that has to date been unexplored in these terms. I argue that this framework can prove very useful in the approach to absurdity. I discuss some selected extracts from Pinter's *Old Times*, Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna*, *Jacques or Obedience* and *Rhinoceros*, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The analysis is based on Ryan's (1991) typology of accessibility relations as well as on her catalogue of types of alternative possible worlds that can be included within a fictional universe (Ryan, 1985). A discussion of the plays in terms of the first typology shows that some partial impossibilities can often be captured by accessibility relations other than logical compatibility, which is typically associated with absurdist drama. It is further examined whether it is the relaxation of these relations alone that is responsible for the created oddity. Additionally, in discussing the conflicts within the fictional universe it is argued that a further factor for the creation of absurdity lies in the fact that the mismatches fail to move the plot forward, contrary to what happens in other genres.

1. Introduction

The aim of the present paper is to examine whether possible-worlds theory can be relevant to the study of absurdist drama. In other words, I seek to extend the applicability of possible-worlds models to this genre by discussing selected extracts from Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna*, *Jacques or Obedience* and *Rhinoceros*, Pinter's *Old Times* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in order to examine whether these models can contribute to a thorough interpretation of absurdity. Having Ryan's (1991: 32) claim that absurdist plays "may liberate their universe from the principle of noncontradiction" as a starting-point, I check whether there are any other accessibility relations, apart from that of logical compatibility, that are relaxed in these plays as well as the reasons for the creation of the subsequent oddity. Moreover, I examine the role that the inter-world clashes play in the development of the plot of these plays. The study is a comparative one and seeks to show whether there are any similarities and differences in the three playwrights' preferences for the ways of building up absurdity, as far as the projection of possible worlds is concerned. The corpus on which the analysis is based consists of twenty plays, nine from Ionesco, nine from Pinter and two from Beckett, all belonging to the playwrights' early periods.¹ Since my discussion is based on the written text of the plays, from this point onwards I will be referring to readers of the plays rather than theatre audiences. First, I will discuss the main characteristics of absurdist drama. Next, before turning to the analysis of specific examples, the possible-worlds framework as applied in logic and in fictionality will be briefly described.

2. The theatre of the absurd

Esslin (1960) introduced the term "Theatre of the Absurd" to describe the pioneering work of some playwrights who appeared in the early 1950s, such as Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet and Arthur Adamov, as well as of the younger generation of playwrights who were inspired by them, including Harold Pinter. With this term, Esslin does not suggest a proclaimed school or an organized movement. Rather, he proposes a common label for those post-war dramatists who express in their work the sense of loss and the futility of existence after the modern human has declined religious faith and is faced with the absurdity of his or her essence. As Ionesco (1989: 45) maintains, Esslin uses the term "absurd" to describe this genre because of the broad discussion around this notion at that time. That is, Esslin sees the work of these playwrights as giving articulation

¹ The principal criterion for the selection of these plays, which mainly justifies the unequal number selected from each playwright, has been the presence of dialogue, since I decided to focus on prototypical plays that consist of interactions between characters. Moreover, the plays are all intended for stage performance. Sketches and very short texts (less than ten pages long) are excluded.

to Camus' philosophy as expressed in his philosophical essays entitled *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942). Camus presents Sisyphus, the archetypal absurd hero², as a reflection of the absurdity that pervades the human condition, namely the alienation of humans from their universe and their condemnation to being pointlessly preoccupied with perpetual action while accomplishing nothing (Simpson, 1998: 35). He thus suggests that life is inherently without meaning. This existential perspective, at first developed in conventionally structured plays that followed logical reasoning, has then become the core of absurdist drama as a genre, which emerged after the horrors of World War II. The innovation of these texts lies in the unique way in which this topic is presented, through the abandonment of the conventions of realism, rather than in the topic itself:

The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images. (Esslin, 1980: 25)

The representatives of absurdist drama aim directly at startling their readers or audience, at unsettling them and shaking them out of their mechanical and trite existence. They protest against the art forms of conventional theatre, which can no longer be convincing in a meaningless and purposeless post-war world. Instead, the playwrights offer an anti-theatre, with plays that lack plot in the traditional sense, consistent characters or conventional use of language and that, consequently, first met with incomprehension and rejection on the part of the audience and the critics. On the other hand, there are differences in the playwrights' stylistic preferences for the creation of absurdity that are indicative of each playwright's different dramatic technique, which guarantees their uniqueness. In this paper I will scrutinize such differences in the fictional world of Ionesco, Pinter and Beckett's selected plays from the perspective of the possible-worlds framework.

3. Possible-worlds theory: From logic to fictionality

The notion of possible worlds can be traced back to the 17th century and Leibniz, who expressed the belief that our actual world was chosen as the best among an infinity of possible worlds that exist as thoughts in God's mind (1969: 333-4 and throughout). This notion has been broadly exploited in the field of philosophical logic in order to deal with some important logical issues to which the one-world model could not provide solutions. Taking the 'actual world' as the only frame of reference creates problems, for example, in the attribution of truth-values to propositions of the type (1) 'The Eiffel Tower is not in Paris', or (2) 'The Eiffel Tower is in Paris and the Eiffel Tower is not in Paris', which should

² According to the Greek myth, Sisyphus was condemned by gods to the interminable act of rolling a boulder up a mountain, watching it fall down and rolling it up again.

thus be described as false. Therefore, logicians adopted a frame of reference where, apart from the "actual world", there is also an infinite number of possible worlds surrounding it that are defined as abstract and complete sets of states of affairs.

Within this system, the classification of a proposition as either true or false is extended, as the system also includes the modal operators of necessity and possibility. Both operators lie beyond the limits of the actual world. Possible truth applies to propositions that are true in at least one possible world, while possible falsity to propositions that are false in at least one possible world. On the other hand, necessary truth applies to propositions that are true in all possible worlds, and necessary falsity to propositions that are false in all possible worlds (Semino, 1997: 59). Seen under this light, proposition (1) is possibly false, because it is false in our actual world, although it may be true in an alternative world, while proposition (2) is necessarily false, since it contains a logical contradiction and thus cannot be true in any logically possible world.

Any attempt to interpret fictional worlds within the framework of traditional logical semantics has led to their treatment either as false or as neither-true-nor-false, since they were situated outside the "actual world" of the readers. A sentence of the type "Emma Bovary committed suicide", even though it accords with Flaubert's book, would have to be interpreted either as false, because it assumes the existence of a fictional character, i.e. a non-existent individual, or as neither-true-nor-false, because it refers to an imaginary entity with no referent in the actual world. Therefore, since the late 1970s literary theorists (Doležel, 1988, 1989; Eco, 1979; Pavel, 1986) have adapted and further extended the notion of possible worlds, and have developed a semantics of fictionality based on the idea that the semantic domain projected by the literary text is an alternative possible world (APW) that acts as actual the moment we are immersed in a fiction. Through this act of "recentering" (Ryan, 1991), which is an essential part of fiction-making, the actual world of the readers becomes only one of the many alternative possible worlds that revolve around the world that the narrator presents as actual. In this sense, the above proposition ("Emma Bovary committed suicide") is true in relation to the world of Flaubert's novel, whereas a proposition of the type "Emma Bovary did not commit suicide" is false, because it does not accord with the plot of the text.

Within the limits of logic, the term *possible* describes those sets of states of affairs that do not break the logical laws of non-contradiction (given a proposition x , it is not possible that both x and $not-x$ are true in a given world) and of the excluded middle (given two contradictory propositions, x and $not-x$, only one must apply in a given world, while the "middle" option where neither x nor $not-x$ is true is ruled out). In crossing over from logic to the field of literary studies, possible-worlds theory has undergone a drastic change so as to deal precisely with impossibility in fiction. Fictional worlds can thus be perceived as possible even when they are 'inconsistent', namely when they violate the laws of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle, whereas in logic such worlds would be considered impossible. It is this broadening of the theory that establishes its applicability to absurdist drama.

4. Possible-worlds theory and absurdist drama

The fictional worlds of absurdist plays are often inconsistent due to the logical impossibilities that they contain. Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna* constitutes an interesting example of an inconsistent world (Ionesco, 1958: 89; turns 27-8). Logical contradictions make their appearance quite early in the text, when the protagonist couple, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, begin to talk about someone called Bobby Watson, who is first discussed as dead. As soon as this has been established, Mrs. Smith asks an odd question:

MRS. SMITH: And when are they thinking of getting married, the two of them?
MR. SMITH: Next spring, at the latest.

Much to the readers' surprise, the two characters refer to Bobby Watson as if he were alive and about to get married, although both have just claimed to have attended his funeral and have talked about his widow. Interestingly, Mr. Smith replies to his wife's question without any objection to the fact that her claim comes in sheer contrast with what they had so far presented as the truth. The fact that a person is discussed as being both dead and alive constitutes a logical impossibility, which results in the projection of a world that includes contradictory states of affairs.

When the conversation revolves around the Watsons' children, logical impossibilities continue and further prevent readers from fully constructing and exploring the fictional world in their minds:

MRS. SMITH: [...] It's sad for her to have been widowed so young.
MR. SMITH: Lucky they didn't have any children.

MRS. SMITH: Oh! That would have been too much! Children! What on earth would she have done with them?
MR. SMITH: She's still a young woman. She may quite well marry again. Anyway, mourning suits her extremely well.
MRS. SMITH: But who will take care of the children? They've a girl and a boy, you know. How do they call them?

(Ionesco, 1958; turns 31-5)

As it appears, the Smiths return to the scenario according to which Bobby Watson is dead. Not only that, but Mrs. Smith first agrees with her husband's statement that the Watsons are lucky not to have any children but then asserts their existence, as the phrase "you know" suggests. Again, the two contradictory versions are discussed as equally true and further establish the logically impossible world-view that the couple shares.

Such impossibilities can best be treated by notions and categories developed within possible-worlds theory. However, by and large, absurdist drama has not been exploited as a source of data within possible-worlds approaches to the study of fiction, although it has often been the focus of stylistic analyses. Even though the particular genre has been

referred to as an example of a textual universe that relaxes the principle of non-contradiction (Ryan, 1991: 32) and therefore the need for a closer look from this perspective has been recognized (cf. Semino, 1997: 227), there has been no extended discussion of absurdist drama in such terms. Post-modernist literature, on the other hand, which also often contains logical incompatibilities, seems to have monopolized the theorists' interest. It is characteristic, for example, that in his typology of impossible fictions, Ashline (1995) draws examples primarily from postmodernist literature. It is the aim of the present paper to compensate for this gap in research.

5. Ryan's typology of accessibility relations and the notion of authentication

Ryan (1991) suggests a typology of fictional worlds that are projected by texts that belong to different genres. She forms her typology with the aim to complement the deficits of previous approaches³ and to provide a theory of fictional genres, since an interpretation of fiction within the limits of logically possible worlds cannot cover the wide range of fictional worlds because it excludes worlds that contain logical impossibilities. In her view, there is no such thing as an impossible fictional world and a world's actuality, possibility or impossibility is rather a matter of degree. In order to avoid talking about an "impossible possible world" in fiction, a wider range of accessibility relations is required. These accessibility relations exhibit the various ways in which the textual actual world (TAW) can be associated with the actual world (AW) of the readers:

In decreasing order of stringency, the relevant types of accessibility relations from AW involved in the construction of TAW include the following:

(A) *Identity of properties* (abbreviated A/properties): TAW is accessible from AW if the objects common to TAW and AW have the same properties.

(B) *Identity of inventory* (B/same inventory): TAW is accessible from AW if TAW and AW are furnished by the same objects.

(C) *Compatibility of inventory* (C/expanded inventory): TAW is accessible from AW if TAW's inventory includes all the members of AW, as well as some native members.

(D) *Chronological compatibility* (D/chronology): TAW is accessible from AW if it takes no temporal relocation for a member of AW to contemplate the entire history of TAW. (This condition means that TAW is not older than AW, i.e. that its present is not posterior in absolute time to AW's present. We can contemplate facts of the past from the viewpoint of the present, but since the future holds no facts, only projections, it takes a relocation beyond the time of their occurrence to regard as facts events located in the future.)

³ As Semino (1997: 80-1) notices, the main deficit of typologies such as Doležel's or Maitre's is that they lack an accurate account of the way in which the readers perceive the distance between the fictional world and the actual world during text processing.

(E) *Physical compatibility* (E/natural laws): TAW is accessible from AW if they share natural laws.

(F) *Taxonomic compatibility* (F/taxonomy): TAW is accessible from AW if both worlds contain the same species, and the species are characterized by the same properties. Within F, it may be useful to distinguish a narrower version F' stipulating that TAW must contain not only the same inventory of natural species, but also the same types of manufactured objects as found in AW up to the present.

(G) *Logical compatibility* (G/logic): TAW is accessible from AW if both worlds respect the principles of noncontradiction and of excluded middle.

(H) *Analytical compatibility* (H/analytical): TAW is accessible from AW if they share analytical truths, i.e. if objects designated by the same words have the same essential properties.

(I) *Linguistic compatibility* (I/linguistic): TAW is accessible from AW if the language in which TAW is described can be understood in AW.

(Ryan, 1991: 32-3; author's italics)

As Ryan suggests, the world of absurdist texts results from the relaxation of logical compatibility, which leads to types of worlds that are described not as wholly impossible but only as logically impossible, because, for example, something has both happened and not happened. In the extracts from *The Bald Prima Donna* discussed earlier, for example, G/logic is violated, because Bobby Watson is discussed as both dead and alive. The absurdity that these contradictory claims create is reinforced by the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Smith appear to share this logically impossible world, since they accept it as completely normal. Moreover, these logical contradictions in the way the characters describe their world make it impossible for the readers to have any reliable access to that world. Consequently, authentication becomes extremely problematic, because virtually nothing can be ascertained about the TAW. With the term "authentication", Doležel (1989) refers to the degree of trustworthiness of a narrator or character's words. As he points out, "the construction of impossible worlds is part and parcel of a more general anomaly of fiction making, the misuse of authentication" (Doležel, 1998: 160). Absurdist plays that contain contradictory accounts are thus rendered logically impossible worlds and prevent the authentication of fictional existence, that is, they cannot be fictionally authentic.

In Ryan's view, the relaxation of accessibility relations that are on the top (A/properties, B/same inventory, C/expanded inventory) or in the middle (D/chronology, E/natural laws, F/taxonomy) of her list results in worlds that do not depart a great deal from the actual world of the readers. Lifting A/properties, for example, results in true fiction, whereas lifting E/natural laws results in fairy tales. However, the discussion of some extracts from Ionesco's *Jacques or Obedience* and *Rhinoceros* will show that absurdist drama can also be associated with the relaxation of these accessibility relations. A further issue that requires exploration is to what extent the relaxation of these relations is responsible for the subsequent absurdity, and whether it is equally exploited by the three playwrights as a technique for the creation of an odd textual world.

6. Other accessibility relations as sources of absurdity

6.1 Relaxing A/properties

Ionesco's *Jacques or Obedience* constitutes a parody of bourgeois society. A great part of the play's plot revolves around the selection of a proper bride for the protagonist, Jacques, after he has succumbed to the family creed ("I love potatoes in their jackets", page 128, turn 60).⁴ Readers are then gradually faced with a textual world that relaxes the identity of properties, because it includes human beings with different properties from those in the readers' actual world.

When Roberta, the bride-to-be, first appears on stage, her face is covered by a white veil and her body is also hidden because of the bridal dress that she wears. Roberta's face is revealed in turn 173, after a long interaction in which the two families, the Jacques and the Roberts, recite her virtues, which turn out to be totally non-human: for example, the green pimples on a beige skin or the red breasts on a mauve ground (page 312, turn 129). The stage directions inform readers that Roberta has two noses and it is the first time that they are actually faced with one of her monstrous characteristics:

JACQUELINE: Come on, then, the face of the bride!
[ROBERT FATHER *pulls aside the white veil that hides ROBERTA'S face. She is all smiles and has two noses; a murmur of admiration from all except JACQUES.*]
JACQUELINE: Oh! Lovely!
ROBERT MOTHER: What do you think of her
JACQUES FATHER: Ah, if I were twenty years younger
JACQUES GRANDFATHER: And me ... ah ... er ... and me!

(Ionesco, 1958: 134; turns 173-6)

One main reason for the creation of absurdity is the fact that the relaxation of the identity of properties takes place in a textual world that otherwise looks entirely realistic, as the setting is reminiscent of a bourgeois interior and the characters are connected with recognizable family bonds. Additionally, and contrary to what readers are highly likely to expect, on seeing Roberta's appearance the other characters express their admiration for her. Desirability is associated with a monstrous appearance, as Jacques Father and Jacques Grandfather actually admit that if they were younger they would fall in love with her. Their attitude is thus a reversal of that expected in the real world, were one to face such a creature. In this sense, the two men's comments further build up the absurdity and potential funniness of the scene.

Jacques's silence may at first be regarded as a reaction to the overall abnormality and thus fool readers into assuming that he shares their assumptions about what is

⁴ The triviality of the issue at hand comes in sheer contrast with the verbal violence that Jacques suffers from his family as long as he refuses to submit.

considered normal regarding one's appearance. As it turns out, however, Jacques is not pleased with Roberta because he wants a woman with at least three noses (page 135, turn 195). The relaxation of A/properties is maintained, as Robert Father appears prepared for this demand and presents a daughter with three noses, although when he first introduced Roberta to Jacques he had claimed that she is their only daughter (turn 134):

ROBERT FATHER: [...] We'd already foreseen this difficulty. We have a second only child at your disposal. And she has her three noses all complete.
(Ionesco, 1958: 136; turn 201)

Of course, logical compatibility is also relaxed at this point, since the Roberts have two daughters, but, according to them, each is their only child. The two claims are contradictory and mutually refuted, since the notions "only" and "second" are incompatible. Yet the fact that the other characters accept this claim as rational does not allow Robert Father's verbal behaviour to be interpreted as a breaking of the maxim of quality (cf. Grice's cooperative principle).⁵ Rather, the notion of "only" expands its actual meaning to serve the characters' purposes and to adjust to the reality of their world.

Even after Jacques is presented with the second potential wife, he keeps complaining that she is not ugly enough and asks for one that is much uglier: "No, she won't do. Not ugly enough! Why, she's quite passable. There are uglier ones. I want one much uglier" (page 137, turn 220). The seemingly realistic world of the play, then, turns out to be totally absurd, not only because it is inhabited by human beings with non-human characteristics, and thus relaxes the identity of properties, but also because the characters share the odd belief that the more monstrous one looks the more beautiful they are considered.

6.2 Relaxing E/natural laws

Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* is another play where the conventional, bourgeois settings, as presented to the readers in the initial stage directions and throughout, raise expectations of a realistic plot but then readers are confronted with the absurd situation where all human beings are gradually transformed into rhinoceroses except for the protagonist, Berenger. The play is thus interesting to analyse from a possible-worlds perspective as it violates physical compatibility.

For the purposes of this paper I will focus on some extracts that are taken from the second half of the play. By the end of the first scene of Act Two, many of the citizens have already transformed into pachyderms but Berenger deals with the situation with surprising calmness. He intends to visit his friend Jean and mend their friendship, which was unsettled after a quarrel they had in Act One. In the second scene of Act Two

⁵ Grice's maxim of quality suggests the following: "Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence." (1975: 46)

Berenger witnesses the metamorphosis of Jean, which takes place in front of his eyes. At first Jean does not accept that there is something wrong with him, but he then considers the changes in him as normal and gets angry with Berenger for pointing them out to him. For Berenger, however, this change is horrifying:

BERENGER: But whatever's the matter with your skin?
JEAN: Can't you leave my skin alone? I certainly wouldn't want to change it for yours.
BERENGER: It's gone like leather.
JEAN: That makes it more solid. It's weatherproof.
BERENGER: You're getting greener and greener.
JEAN: You've got colour mania today. You're seeing things, you've been drinking again.

(Ionesco, 1960: 64; turns 1144-9)

Although Berenger is shocked, the whole process of transforming into a rhinoceros does not shake Jean's complacency. In fact, he uses a series of arguments to rationalize his situation and, as his words reveal, he thinks that being a rhinoceros is a much more preferable situation than being a human being. A few turns later Jean confesses his wish to become one of the pachyderms and accuses Berenger of prejudice for being against these transformations:

BERENGER: I'm amazed to hear you say that, Jean, really! You must be out of your mind. You wouldn't like to be a rhinoceros yourself, now would you?
JEAN: Why not? I'm not a victim of prejudice like you.

(Ionesco, 1960: 68; turns 1220-1)

[...]

JEAN: Keep your ears open. I said what's wrong with being a rhinoceros? I'm all for change.

(Ionesco, 1960: 68; turn 1225)

Once again, it is not the relaxation of physical compatibility itself that creates absurdity but the way the characters deal with the situation of human beings turning into rhinoceroses. Jean has not only accepted this change but is actually looking forward to it, while Berenger, who has so far been calm and indifferent, is shocked for the first time, primarily because he now witnesses the transformation and it is his friend who has chosen to become a pachyderm.⁶ His words as he narrates the transformation to his colleague Dudard in Act Three reveal that he is more surprised by his friend's choice to transform than by the fact itself:

⁶ When Berenger talks about transforming into a rhinoceros with Dudard in Act Three, he refers to it as "a nervous disease" (p. 76, turn 1318).

BERENGER: [...] he was such a warm-hearted person, always so human! Who'd have thought it of him! We'd known each other for...for donkey's years. He was the last person I'd have expected to change like that. I felt more sure of him than of myself! And then to do that to me!

(Ionesco, 1960: 74; turn 1292)

In Dudard's case, the transformation takes place on a moral plane. Although he admits that he cannot find a satisfactory explanation for this phenomenon (page 74, turn 1299), he begins to rationalize the choice of becoming a rhinoceros by mentioning some privileges that these pachyderms have and that human beings lack, much as Jean had earlier done:

DUDARD: Perhaps he felt an urge for some fresh air, the country, the wide-open spaces ... perhaps he felt a need to relax. I'm not saying that's any excuse...

BERENGER: I understand what you mean, at least I'm trying to. But you know – if someone accused me of being a bad sport, or hopelessly middle class, or completely out of touch with life, I'd still want to stay as I am.

DUDARD: We'll all stay as we are, don't worry. So why get upset over a few cases of rhinocerotitis. Perhaps it's just another disease.

BERENGER: Exactly! And I'm frightened of catching it.

(Ionesco, 1960: 75; turns 1301-4)

Referring to both Dudard and Jean, Hoy (1964: 253) suggests that this is the most insidious kind of rationalization, as it serves to cover humanity's retreat into animality. Once again, Berenger's attitude suggests that he does not perceive the situation in his town as absurd. In fact, he even considers the possibility of his catching the disease too, which is a further source of anxiety for him. Dudard accuses Berenger of not having any sense of humour and thus not being able to see the funny side of things (page 78, turn 1345; page 81, turn 1389) and suggests keeping an open mind when judging those who have decided to turn into rhinoceroses (page 83, turn 1417). The moral transformation of Dudard has already begun. His way of facing the people's transformation into rhinoceroses as normal, as a simple decision to change their skin, is indicative of his own gradual infection with what they describe as a spreading disease:

BERENGER: And you consider all this natural?

DUDARD: What could be more natural than a rhinoceros?

BERENGER: Yes, but for a man to turn into a rhinoceros is abnormal beyond question.

DUDARD: Well, of course, that's a matter of opinion...

(Ionesco, 1960: 84; turns 1420-23)

As a response to Berenger's prediction that he is going to follow the rhinoceroses soon, Dudard pleads objectivity and a tendency always to look at the positive side of things. In a totally non-realistic play, his claim that he is trying to be realistic (page 83, turn 1417) sounds ridiculous. After Daisy appears on stage, Dudard continues to support those who choose to become pachyderms, and when he sees them streaming out and crowding the

streets he too runs out and joins them. At the end of the play Berenger is the only citizen left to insist that it is normal to be human and abnormal to be a rhinoceros. Yet he never rejects the whole situation as something impossible to happen. He therefore shares the odd belief that all characters in the play hold, namely that such transformations can in fact happen. Much as in *Jacques*, it is not the relaxation of an accessibility relation as such, in this case physical compatibility, that is responsible for the created absurdity but primarily the fact that it takes place in a seemingly realistic world as well as the way it is dealt with by the characters.

Rhinoceros has often been discussed with relation to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, in which the protagonist wakes up one morning and finds out that he has turned into a giant bug, while the rest of the humanity remains normal (Esslin, 1980: 183; Lane, 1994: 118). In her discussion of the accessibility relations that she proposes, Ryan mentions Kafka's novel as a textual world that lifts E/natural laws while preserving F/taxonomy, and describes it as "realistic fantasy" (1991: 37). Styran (1968: 250), on the other hand, highlights the correspondence between the nightmarish worlds of Kafka and Beckett or Pinter. Besides, when Gregor, the protagonist of *Metamorphosis*, becomes aware of his condition, he is not at all in a state of panic given the bizarre circumstances, as readers might expect. An interesting issue then arising is why *Rhinoceros* is not also described as realistic fantasy, but is considered absurdist. In my view, the world of Kafka is also absurd to an extent. In this novel, however, the other characters never accept Gregor's transformation. On the contrary, his family talks about him with hatred and they want "it" – Gregor as a bug – to be removed. In other words, they consider this odd situation possible but unacceptable and unbearable. In *Rhinoceros*, on the other hand, the characters are not surprised either by the presence of rhinoceroses or by the fact that these animals are in fact their transformed co-citizens. Even when they claim to be afraid because of the sudden appearance of the pachyderms, the trivial conversations in which they become engaged suggest the exact opposite. The examples discussed above are further indicative of this incompatibility between situation and attitude in a seemingly realistic world, and justify the characterization of the fictional world as absurd.

7. The internal structure of fictional worlds

So far, possible-worlds theory has been applied to absurdist plays in order to account for the relationship between their fictional world and the actual world of the readers, and how this can be linked to the creation of absurdity. However, the particular framework can also shed light on the internal structure of fictional worlds; in this respect, in the remainder of this paper I seek to examine to which extent the internal conflicts in the plays under analysis can be associated with the potential absurdist effects that these texts have on the readers.

Most fictional worlds can be described as universes, namely systems of worlds, where one world functions as actual and is surrounded by a variety of possible worlds that function as non-actualized alternatives of this actual world (Pavel, 1986: 64; Ryan, 1985: 719; 1991: 109). These APWs correspond to the private worlds of the characters. The commonest types of private worlds are Knowledge Worlds (K-Worlds), Obligation Worlds (O-Worlds), Wish Worlds (W-Worlds) and Fantasy Worlds (F-Worlds), represented respectively by the characters' beliefs, obligations, wishes and fantasies, dreams or hallucinations. A perfect correspondence between the actual world and the private worlds of the characters creates a situation of equilibrium in the narrative universe. In order for a plot to begin, a situation of conflict must be created within the narrative universe. The nature of the conflict may vary, but in any case it contributes to the creation of a "successful" plot that guarantees the "tellability" of the narrative universe. With regard to absurdist plays, whose main characteristic is the lack of plot, there arises the question whether these conflicts, either between the characters' private worlds and the TAW or between different private worlds, do in fact lead to the undertaking of action on the part of the characters; and whether this action or inaction is associated with the absurdist nature of the TAW.

8. The role of internal conflicts in the creation of absurdity

8.1 Internal conflicts between the actual domain and the characters' private worlds

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* describes a perpetual act of waiting. Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot, a man whom they do not know but whom they have imbued with the attributes of a hero or a Christ-Saviour. The play's two acts have a repetitive structure, as they describe two different days – during which, however, similar activities, events and conversations take place. Throughout the play, the characters repeat the following exchange:

ESTRAGON: [...] [*He turns to VLADIMIR.*] Let's go.
VLADIMIR: We can't.
ESTRAGON: Why not?
VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.
ESTRAGON: [*Despairingly.*] Ah! [*Pause.*] [...]

(Beckett, 1986: 15; turns 91-5)

The two tramps must fulfil an Obligation World, according to which they have to remain in the same place and wait for Godot, who will come and save them from their purposeless and meaningless life. This world, however, comes in conflict with their desire to leave, which reflects their joint Wish World. Each time the two tramps reach a dead end out of desperation, Estragon suggests to Vladimir that they leave, but the thought of

Godot prevents them from actually departing. Moreover, this shared private world does not accord with the actual world of the play, in which Godot never arrives, nor is he likely to do so at some point after the end of the play. At the end of both acts, Godot's emissary, a little boy, enters the stage to inform the tramps that his master will not come that evening, but he will definitely make it the following day:

VLADIMIR: [...] [*Pause.*] Speak.
BOY: [*In a rush.*] Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow.
[*Silence.*]
VLADIMIR: Is that all?
BOY: Yes, sir.
[*Silence.*]

(Beckett, 1986: 49; turns 772-5)

[...]
VLADIMIR: You have a message from Mr. Godot.
BOY: Yes, sir.
VLADIMIR: He won't come this evening.
BOY: No, sir.
VLADIMIR: But he'll come tomorrow.
BOY: Yes, sir.
VLADIMIR: Without fail.
BOY: Yes, sir.
[*Silence.*]

(Beckett, 1986: 85; turns 1648-62)

Both times the tramps' Wish World is frustrated, but the second time Vladimir's disappointment becomes more apparent due to his anticipation of the Boy's lines. Although, quite surprisingly, the Boy fails to remember Vladimir, he recognizes the Boy as soon as the latter enters the stage and can therefore predict the reason for his visit. This further builds up the repetitive character of the play and suggests that the tramps' private World is recurrently frustrated. After this second interaction with the Boy, Vladimir admits to himself that they are waiting in vain. This realization, nevertheless, cannot endure for long, but is rather another glimmer of the truth that they are refusing to face, namely that their life is sterile, purposeless and thus absurd. Thus, the play closes with another rejection on Vladimir's part of Estragon's suggestion to leave, using again as an excuse that they are waiting for Godot. As we come to realize, nothing changes throughout the play, nor do we expect anything to change in the future. The tramps' Wish World will remain in conflict with the actual domain even after the end of the play, but it seems beyond the characters' power to do anything but wait. In other words, the conflict within the fictional universe fails to make the characters undertake an action that will move the plot forward. This odd status of the expectation for Godot to come, the Wish World that is never realized, accounts to a great extent for the created absurdity.

8.2 Internal conflicts between the private worlds of different characters

A different kind of heterogeneity is the one that results from a conflict between the private worlds that different characters possess. I have chosen to discuss Pinter's *Old Times*, because the whole of this play revolves around the different versions of the same events that two characters, Deeley and Anna, offer in order to gain power over Kate, who is Deeley's wife and Anna's old friend and perhaps lover. This play is very interesting in possible-worlds terms in the sense that the boundaries between the real and the unreal seem to have collapsed completely, and as a consequence the contradictory versions of the past are all accepted as true.

The extracts I have chosen to quote here show the contradictory Knowledge Worlds that Deeley and Anna hold with regard to whom Kate saw a film with about twenty years ago, when they were all young and lived in London:

DEELEY: What happened to me was this. I popped into a fleapit to see *Odd Man Out*. [...] And there was only one other person in the cinema, one other person in the whole of the whole cinema, and there she is. And there she was, very dim, very still, placed more or less I would say at the dead centre of the auditorium. I was off centre and have remained so. [...] So it was Robert Newton who brought us together and it is only Robert Newton who can tear us apart.

Pause

ANNA: F.J. McCormick was good too.

(Pinter, 1971: 30; turns 185-6)

[...]

ANNA: [...] For example, I remember one Sunday she said to me, looking up from the paper, come quick, quick, come with me quickly, and we seized our handbags and went, on a bus, to some totally obscure, some totally unfamiliar district and, almost alone, saw a wonderful film called *Odd Man Out*.

Silence

DEELEY: Yes, I do quite a bit of travelling in my job.

(Pinter, 1971: 38; turns 232-3)

As it becomes apparent, a seemingly innocent topic, namely a memory from over twenty years ago, turns out to be a battleground for rivalry between the two competitors. It is interesting that neither openly questions the veracity of the other's story, although they both present their own as the true one. It appears, however, that Anna's story has a stronger impact on Deeley than the other way round. In my view, this is revealed by the fact that after Deeley's turn there is a pause before Anna speaks, whereas after Anna's turn there follows a silence. Tannen suggests that a silence "represents climaxes of emotion in interaction, the point at which the most damaging information has just been introduced into the dialogue, directly or indirectly" (1990: 263).

Based on this claim, one could argue in favour of a more realistic interpretation and say, for example, that Deeley reacts as if he is embarrassed to realize that he is proven

wrong. In my view, however, the “damaging information” is introduced indirectly, and this interpretation of the extract accords with the sense of hidden conflict and the struggle for domination over Kate between Deeley and Anna. In other words, it is not the revelation of the “truth” that disturbs Deeley, but Anna’s insistent effort to recreate her intimate friendship with Kate and to exclude him. This is further supported by the way conversation continues in both cases. After the pause, Anna takes the turn and, based on a rather unimportant detail of the story regarding the protagonist of the film, disagrees with Deeley and expresses her preference for another actor. Thus, with this indifferent remark she diminishes Deeley’s assertion. After the silence following Anna’s silence, however, Deeley leaps to a new topic about travelling around the world on business, and his reaction could be seen as an attempt to “polish” his hurt self-image (Homan, 1993: 169), after Anna’s brief reminiscence, which annihilates his own earlier claim.

9. Concluding remarks

In the present paper I have shown that possible-worlds theory is a powerful instrument in the study of absurdity. The discussion has been two-fold, focusing both on the cases where accessibility relations are relaxed, and on cases of conflicts within the narrative universe. As far as the first issue is concerned, it has been shown that apart from G/logic, absurdist plays also relax accessibility relations that are prototypically associated with fictional worlds that are not very distant from the actual world. As has been claimed throughout the discussion of these examples, it is not the relaxation as such that is responsible for the creation of absurdist effects, but rather the contribution of certain factors. First of all, the lifting of the relations takes place in seemingly realistic settings.

This is where the main difference between absurdist drama and fairy tales or science fiction lies. Although the world of fairy tales results primarily from the lifting of physical laws and taxonomic compatibility, as it includes witches, talking animals or magical transformations, readers are aware that this world is different from their own and they can thus construct it in their mind without considering it absurd. With absurdist plays, on the other hand, readers are faced with a world that is similar to theirs, but all their expectations for a realistic plot are then disrupted. This disruption is further reinforced by the characters’ unexpected reaction to the impossibilities. Their attitude in no way accords with the way one would react in the real world, as characters do not appear to hold the same assumptions as the readers about the laws that govern their world. As a consequence, any attempts on the readers’ part to construct a coherent text world are frustrated. Following Eco (1990: 76), such fictional worlds can only be “mentioned” but cannot be constructed.

Similarly, science fiction worlds relax, among others, F/taxonomy by including different manufactured objects or different forms of life than the actual world (cf. Semino,

1997: 82); yet, readers are again aware that they are faced with a world that is different from their own, and can therefore construct it in their minds.

The discussion about the conflicts within the fictional world has not been exhaustive either. However, it has demonstrated that another crucial factor for the creation of absurdity is the fact that these inter-world conflicts do not lead to the undertaking of action that will move the plot forward. Both plays discussed in these terms are characteristic examples of static drama with no external action. Thus, the failure of this mismatch to lead to action confirms one of the main characteristics of absurdist drama, namely the lack of plot in the traditional sense that is characteristic of conventional plays (cf. Esslin, 1978, 1980).

A comparison of the three playwrights has led to some interesting conclusions regarding the application of possible-worlds theory. First of all, Ionesco exploits the technique of creating absurdity through the projection of possible worlds that deviate from the actual world much more frequently than Pinter or Beckett. In fact, cases of absurdity associated with the relaxation of accessibility relations other than G/logic are found primarily in Ionesco's plays. This suggests that possible-worlds theory can shed light on the "language of images" (Lane, 1994: 12) that Ionesco exploits, primarily in his early plays, in order to reveal the strangeness of the world, since he considers theatre, as it was developing in his times, an inadequate medium of expression. As far as the analysis of Pinter and Beckett's plays is concerned, possible-worlds theory can prove useful particularly as regards the discussion of the internal conflicts of the projected worlds. The relationship between the various worlds in the textual universe never changes and, consequently, these conflicts fail to move the plot forward, which inevitably results in the creation of absurdity.

By conducting the present analysis I do not wish to claim either that these are the only extracts that can be discussed in possible-worlds terms or that this framework is the only appropriate tool for shedding light on the absurdity created in these cases. Schema theory, for example, can also be useful, and the discussion of the extracts has often revolved around the disruption of the expectations that the text world created for the readers. Besides, the logical contradictions included in the plays can raise questions regarding the applicability of Grice's maxim of quality. Nor is it necessary to choose only one theoretical tool, as a combined approach is highly likely to lead to a more thorough interpretation of absurdity. The aim of the present paper has been to compensate for the deficits in the work that has been done so far as regards the possible worlds projected by absurdist plays, and their role in the creation of oddity. At the same time, there have been some interesting findings as far as the dramatic technique of Ionesco, Pinter and Beckett is concerned. This is only a first step in the application of possible-worlds theory to this genre but is indicative of the important role that this theoretical tool can play in the stylistics of absurdist drama.

Although only five plays have been discussed in the light of possible-worlds theory in the present paper, the framework is applicable to many – although not all – of

the plays that are included in the corpus. In Ionesco's *Amédée*, for example, E/physical laws is relaxed, as mushrooms grow in the protagonist couple's living room, whereas a corpse is lying in their bedroom and is getting older and bigger. Ionesco's *The Future is in Eggs* relaxes A/properties, as Roberta gives birth to eggs, which her husband then has to hatch. The projection of logically impossible worlds is very common. In Ionesco's *The Chairs*, the Old Couple both has and does not have a son, whereas in the interrogation scene of Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Stanley is accused of being both a bachelor and a widower, of having murdered his wife and of having never got married. As regards the role of internal conflicts of fictional worlds, in Pinter's *Betrayal* the characters hold conflicting Knowledge Worlds and by the time the play finishes the conflict remains unresolved.

What all this suggests is that the findings are not valid only as regards the specific plays, but can be extended to a range of texts that belong to the absurdist genre. The fact that absurdity cannot always be seen in this light is little surprising, given that the playwrights have a whole 'arsenal' of stylistic mechanisms for the creation of absurdist effects in their plays.

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