



## The Significance of Absentee Characters in Selected Modern Drama

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### **Abstract**

*Absentee characters have played a vital role in all forms of writing, ever since the origin of Greek Literature. There are several plays written by several playwrights focusing absentee characters. Absentee characters have been successfully infused in many plays, playing major as well as minor roles. There are several forms of absentee characters. Usually he/she is alive, but he/she can be dead as well. For this paper, dead characters are taken into consideration as absentee characters. An absentee character is a character that does not appear in the play but is relevant to the plot of the play. Absentee characters are a part of the play's story but do not make any physical appearance in the plot of the play.*

*Absentee Characters have had their origin in Greek Drama. In the plays of Sophocles, in Oedipus Rex, Laius, the old king of Thebes is an early example of absentee character and in Antigone, Polynices the elder son of Oedipus is an absentee character. After Greek Literature, there turn about to be a gap of many centuries in use of Absentee Characters in the plays till Modern Drama.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Absentee, play, drama, significance, character, theme, plot, death, presence, story, influence, playwright, modern, device, etc.*

**BODY OF THE PAPER:** Introduction of Absentee Characters in various plays has a serious purpose and dramatic significance. In many plays, they are portrayed as significant and have rendered themselves as the focus of attention. For example, Captain Alving is a significant character and the focus of attention in the play 'Ghosts' by Henrik Ibsen. He does not appear on the stage. Nobody sees him but his son's actions are inevitable result of his immoral unscrupulous life before his death. If Captain Alving had been present on the stage, people would have interpreted him as a corrupt and unethical human being. His absence, however, has relieved him from above interpretation and shown him as an influence on the wife and the son throughout the play. The research focuses on the absentee characters' point of view and their mysteriousness in the plays taken for studies.

Modern drama is obsessed with the presence of the absentee characters. These absentee characters have their own roles. Their structural and thematic aspects have been taken for studies. Study not only deals with major characters like father, mother, king, etc. but also maid-servant, friend, ex-husband, etc.

The studies taken on absentee characters are inadequate. The only book available is Paul Rosefeldt's 'The Absent Father in Modern Drama', (1996) which does not give complete picture of the absentee characters used in Modern Drama. The said work only deals with the absent father and that is the limitation of the book. The work of Paul Rosefeldt does not deal with absentee mother, husband, wife, children (son, daughter), king, author, relatives, friends, husband, wife, etc.

The work purports to examine playwrights and their selected plays in one single thread. The separate books and criticism are available on all the writers but yet nobody brought all sixteen playwrights together with their work from the point of view of absentee characters as here it is taken for my studies. The parameters of the plays including the similarities and opposition in characterization, point of view, treatment to the absentee characters, structural significance of the absentee characters, etc. is considered to fulfill a long-felt need. The absentee characters are used as one of the devices by all these writers. All of them have infused structurally and thematically absentee characters in their plays.

Absentee characters make plays compact. Their perspectives are not shown but it is seen through other characters that have not been fully known to them at all. They are mysterious and the mystery is maintained. We only hear about them from others. With the usage of absentee

characters, larger world is brought to the work. In this paper, dead characters are also considered absentee characters. The concept is used in all the plays with dead and alive characters up to some extent chronologically order has been maintained. In what way these absentee characters have contributed to the nature of the play? How these absentee characters were employed in realistic, naturalistic, absurd and other plays? The evolution and revolution brought by them directly and indirectly affected the play. How the ideas of unities of time, place and action have been infused?

This will be a kind of study in its own way to focus on sixteen writers' under one umbrella from the point of view of Absentee Characters. The study also focuses on absentee characters used in Modern Drama linking to Greek Drama. The Paper hands on the British Drama, European Drama, American Drama and Russian Drama.

Limitation of the paper is that it only deals with drama. The study is related to English and translation of the play in English. It does not deal with the original work of the respective language. Mostly, British, American and European Drama is taken for studies. There is no comparison between the said drama and Indian Drama or any such Drama. The study focuses only to a Greek Model of Absentee Character/s is/are used in Modern Drama.

The introductory chapter begins examine the factors contributing to the origin of Greek Literature where absentee characters were first time used in the drama. The purposes of introducing the absentee characters in Greek Literature and in Modern Drama are discussed in the chapter.

After that many playwrights' tried using this skill or device in their plays but could not remain ceasing as the playwrights' in modern drama. The Middle Ages Drama, Elizabethan Drama to the Modern Drama. Modern Drama is a significant and much ahead compared to any of the drama form. Even the greatest playwright William Shakespeare did not make it out the way Modern playwrights did it. The chapter will in short discuss about all these sixteen playwrights and their play where the significant application of absentee characters and how that absentee characters play an important role in bringing the play to a success.

The study is an examination of the works of sixteen famous playwrights' plays from 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century (Modern Drama). The work examines the selected plays according to the following parameters which these modern plays will encompass.

A) The technique/ways/device of the employment of absentee characters.

- B) Thematic and Structural significance/relevance of absentee characters.
- C) Effectiveness of absentee characters in the plays.
- D) Absentee characters help to economies by relating to the unities of time, place and action.
- E) Presence of the absentee character is felt but not seen.
- F) Up to some extent God is felt in absentee characters.

The playwrights' like Henrik Ibsen's, 'Ghosts' (1882), August Strindberg's, 'Miss Julie' (1888), Anton Chekov's, 'The Cherry Orchard' (1904), and George Bernard Shaw's, 'Heartbreak House' (1913-19) has been taken into consideration for their great technique of absentee characters. They have been brought into playwrights' deal with almost or near same period of their plays. They are the early writers of the Modern Drama. Their influence on modern drama is remarkable. Chronological order of the play is also taken into consideration in this group.

Henrik Ibsen's 'Ghosts' in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century serves as an introduction to the world of modern tragedy, is all about a memorial to the dead of one sort or another. The play deals with two absentee characters one is major that is Captain Alving and another minor that is maid-servant Johanna. The play revolves around the main absentee character that is Captain Alving. It is his ghost that is hounding the son of the family. He is not at all present on the stage or in the script but his significance can be seen and felt throughout the play. He was having an illicit relationship with his maid-servant Johanna who is also dead. The result of their relationship is their daughter who is also maid-servant in the same family in the play Regina. She is having an affair with Oswald who is the son of Captain Alving and Mrs. Helen Alving.

*Miss Julie* is a famous naturalistic play written by Johan August Strindberg in 1888, dealing with class, love, lust, the battles of the sexes and their interaction. The Count, Miss Julie's father, has power over both of them since he is nobleman, an employer and a father. Miss Julie's father, the Count, is never seen on the stage but his gloves and boots are always on the stage marking his presence and power. When the bell sounds, his presence is also noted more strongly. In the story both Miss Julie's mother and father are significant absentee characters. As per the story line Miss Julie hates men because she is highly influenced by her mother. The entire story is written with the focus of Miss Julie's pride of belonging to upper class but without Miss Julie's mother she would not have got this idea. Miss Julie's father and mother are absentee characters who influenced her in her life.

*The Cherry Orchard* is the last play of the Russian playwright Anton Pavlovich Chekhov. The theme deals in *The Cherry Orchard* are a wealthy landowning family forced to sell their estate in order to pay their debts. *The Cherry Orchard* is at one level, a naturalistic play focuses on scientific, objective and details. The play has a significant value as represented by the nature i.e. Orchard, both as something of inherent beauty and as a connection with the past. The play has some significant major and minor absentee characters. They are husband and son of Madame Lyubov Andreiema Ranevskaya. Her lover, who is in France, is also an absentee character. Ranevskaya, Dacheike the daughter of Pishchihand wealthy aunt from Yaroslavl are absentee characters.

George Bernard Shaw wrote '*Heartbreak House*' in 1913, on the eve of the First World War, but had to postpone the production of the play until after the war, in 1921. He gave the play the subtitle 'A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes', thus inviting comparison with the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. The play also deals with absentee characters they are Sir Hastings Utterword who is the husband of Lady Utterword, Captain Shotover's black wife in Ziczibar. He had a white wife. Ellie Dunn's mother Mrs. Dunn is an absentee character. All these playwrights' have made a successful attempt in fulfilling their purpose of using absentee characters in their play.

The playwrights' Jean Giraudoux's, '*Electra*' (1937), Jean-Paul Sartre's, '*The Flies*' (1943) Jean Cocteau's, '*The Infernal Machine*' (1934), T. S. Eliot's, '*Murder in the Cathedral*' (1935), Eugene O'Neill's, '*Desire Under the Elms*' (1925) have been studied and their importance is seen from the point of view of absentee characters in their work. The writers do maintain the period of 1925 to 1943 for their respective plays. They come in this thread because they have successfully employed the myth of Oedipus in their play. They, too, follow chronology in this group.

Jean Giraudoux, a French dramatist, wrote a play '*Electra*' in two acts in 1937. The play is based on the classical myth of Greek Literature. The play opens when the King Agamemnon had been already murdered. He is a significant absentee character, around him the play '*Electra*' revolves. The whole play revolves around the king who is sacrificed his own daughter to please the gods. The plot of the play would not have been existed unless and until the king would not have been murdered. The concept deals with the significant use of the absentee character. Though the king's spirit or ghost does not come to take revenge but its influence is on others made the play to take revenge successfully.

The play *The Flies* was written by Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre in 1943. The play is a modern adaptation of Aeschylus's *The Libation Bearers*, and Sartre makes a number of important philosophical points by changing the details of the original text. The flies were sent to Argos by the gods fifteen years before the action of the play when Aegistheus and Clytemnestra murdered Agamemnon. The flies serve as a perpetual reminder of this original sin, biting the Argives to help them repent. When Orestes and Electra kill their mother and the king, the flies turn into the Furies, the goddesses of remorse. The Furies live to punish sinners, but they have power only over those who feel remorse for their actions. Orestes is immune to the power of the Furies. Electra, on the other hand, willingly surrenders herself to them when they promise that the physical pain they cause her will make it easier for her to tolerate her repentance. The whole play moves around the murdered King Agamemnon who is an absentee character in the play *The Flies*.

*'The Infernal Machine'* by Jean Cocteau is based on the Greek tragedy 'Oedipus the King' by Sophocles. This play is a modern adaptation, almost in the form of a farce, of the Greek tragedy. The myth of Oedipus dates back centuries. Overtime a myth changes in many ways as each author or orator presents their own version. The main plot usually remains intact, but authors add their own style to the tragic story. In the case of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Jean Cocteau's *Infernal Machine* both authors focus on the arrogant nature of Oedipus. Since this quality ultimately has destructive powers, the relationship Oedipus has with other characters demonstrates this arrogance. Although, the two authors portray Oedipus in different ways to emphasize their different themes both use the relationship between Oedipus and Teiresias to demonstrate Oedipus' arrogant nature. The Old King Laius is an absentee character in the play.

*'Murder in the Cathedral'* by T. S. Eliot is a play based on the real-life historical conflict between Archbishop Thomas Becket and King Henry II of England. Becket had risen from low origins to become ambassador, advisor, close friend and loyal servant for King Henry. In 1154 Henry appointed Becket to the chancellor post which was the most powerful secular post in England. King Henry was trying to consolidate England into a nation at that time, which involved his regaining control over its Catholic Church. King Henry II is the absentee character in the play that is alive but far away from the place of the action. But, his influence is seen over his knights to whom he assigned the duty to bring Becket to his side or murder him. The play brings all dimensions of the king through his men directly and indirectly.

'*Desire under the Elms*' is the last of O'Neill's naturalistic play written in three parts with each part split into four scenes. This play is based on Euripides' *Hippolytus*, and Jean Racine's *Phèdre*. In the play it seems that the spirit of the mother who is dead and absentee characters who lingers on as if to take vengeance on Ephraim and perhaps to encourage her son to take his part in that vengeance. She may likewise involve an innocent person in her revenge. Ephraim goes to the barn to sleep on the warm hay to escape her ghostly chill. It is during one of these escapes that Eben and Abbie first make love. The play shows Ephraim going to the barn but there is little said about the spirit in the house. They see a storm and dark sides outside so the room where Eben and Abbie make love appears to be a warm shelter; imagination must link this warmth to that felt by the dead mother for her son. The play has minor absentee characters they are Ephraim's first wife or mother of Peter and Simoee and Peter's wife. These women show their spirit as absentee character throughout the play. The spirit of the mother has seemed to encourage their passion and in this she functions somewhat as Aphrodite, but the fatal decision is the Lover's own. They see again how the decisions operate on two levels. The supernatural and the human, and in this desire Under the Elms resembles Hippolytus.

The playwrights Luigi Pirandello's, 'Six Characters in Search of an Author' (1921), Samuel Beckett (pen name-Andrew Belis), 'Waiting for Godot' (1948-49), Harold Pinter's, 'The Homecoming' (1964), and Edward Albee's, 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' (1962) have been observed in their selected works and the way they implemented absentee characters as a device successfully in their work. These dramatists belong to Absurd Theatre which is different from other theatre. Their plays are realistic and deal with the harsh reality of the society. The group does not show chronological order as one play was written very early. But, in the group it follows chronology.

The play '*Six Characters in Search of an Author*' subtitled 'A Play in the Making' was written in 1920 and published in 1921 by the playwright Luigi Pirandello. The six characters in the play descend upon a team of actors and their producer, while a rehearsal is going on, with a surprising demand: we are looking for an author who is the significant absentee character in the play. The actors are as surprised with this revelation as the audience is and it is not until later that the full realisation dawns upon everyone. These characters want the right for their story to be performed on stage and to this purpose the Father tempts the producer to do away with the need of an author's skills and let them present their own drama. Later, the Father realizes why the

Author who had created them had been unwilling to put them on stage. He perceives that the actors who are to represent them on stage can be nothing but inadequate interpretations of the characters. The incest relationship and the pathos of feelings for all those involved, Father, Stepdaughter and Mother are the main dramatic attractions of the plot. The significant character 'Author' remains an absentee in the play.

Samuel Beckett's play *'Waiting for Godot'* there is no beginning and no end as well as there is no development to be found. The entire action takes place on a country road, near a tree. The two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, idle away their time waiting for Godot, who never turns up to them. There appear two strangers, a cruel master and his half-crazy slave, cross their path and they later depart from the scene. At the end of the Act-I, a messenger from Godot comes and says that he will come tomorrow. In the Act-II, the waiting is continued, the other pair passes by once more, but, now the master is blind and his slave is dumb. They stumble and fall and have been helped on their way by the two tramps. Again, the messenger appears with the same promise that Godot will come tomorrow. At the end, everything remains as it was in the beginning. There is no need to tell that Godot is a significant absentee character in the play.

*The Homecoming* is a play by Harold Pinter. This play falls under the category called the Theatre of the Absurd. It has six characters out of them five are men who are related to each other and one another. Max's wife who is an absentee character would have been alive; things would have changed in the play. As a wife and mother, she might have taught them how to talk and behave with a woman. The play deals with Teddy and Ruth's "Homecoming". Ruth and Teddy's three sons do not appear on the stage or in the script. If they would appear, they might have played a significant part in dealing with the situation. At the same time, Teddy's father and brothers would not have been dared to exploit her in the manner they did. Three sons would have created a very different environment in the family and mother would not have been left to them for other men. The play has absentee characters of Ruth and Teddy's three sons. Another absentee character is Max's wife and his three sons' mother is an absentee character.

Edward Albee is a very well-known American dramatist. His play *'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'* is the first full length play consisting of three acts. An imaginary son and Martha's father are the significant absentee characters used in the play by Edward Albee. The story revolves around the imaginary son when the jealousy and hatred rose between George and Martha. Martha always taunts George for his inability and because of her father who is the president of the



college; he is able to get the job of the Professor. Honey and Nick didn't have children because Honey was afraid of labour pain. An idea stuck to George to trouble Martha, he tells her that he had received a telegram about the death of their son. In this way, Nick does understand that the son is not real but imaginary one. Later, Nick and Honey leave. Martha is completely shattered and broken woman.

The playwrights' Tennessee William's, 'A Streetcar Named Desire' (1947), Arthur Miller's, 'All My Sons' (1947), John Osborne's, 'Look Back in Anger' (1956) are studied for their application of absentee characters. The group deals with only three writers who do not belong to absurd theatre or any other theatre but their plays deal with a different taste. They follow the chronological order in the group.

American playwright Tennessee Williams received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1948, for his work '*A Street Car Named Desire*' written in 1947. The play has one major absentee character that is Blanche Dubois's dead husband. The minor absentee character is Mitch's old and dying mother as well as the 17 year old school boy whom Blanche kissed and that was the reason she was thrown out of the job. The protagonist of the play '*A Streetcar Named Desire*' is Blanche DuBois, thus, the theme of the drama revolves around her directly. Her tragedy is between the two worlds –the world of the past and the world of the present. Her tragedy starts with the death of her young husband, who committed suicide. She moved to her only sister after losing everything that she has had. She moved to New Orleans, on Elysian Fields Avenue; the local transportation that she takes to arrive there includes a streetcar route named "Desire". Blanche's pathetic attempt to find love through sexual affairs with casual acquaintances has only made her situation worse. The attraction for the young boy with whom she had an affair and that cost her school job and she came to road. In the second attempt she kissed the young man who comes to the apartment for newspaper money-this all is her love for her young husband. Her love for her young husband she sees in other young boys. Due to the death of her husband she is restless and unable to find her own niche. Mitch is would be suitor to Blanche. He is lonely too. He only has his mother and he is shortly to lose her.

'*All My Sons*' was written by Arthur Miller and made its first appearance on the stage in January, 1947. The play has two major absentee characters. One is Steve Deever, business partner to Joe Keller who takes the blame and is in jail. He never appears on the stage or in the plot. Another character is Larry, Joe Keller and Kate Keller's elder son who is having reported missing during

the war and having been presumed as dead. The play revolves around these absentee characters directly and indirectly. Annie's arrival brought a crisis in the Keller family. Kate Keller has refused to accept the death of her son Larry. Kate Keller saw Annie's failure to marry anybody else as a proof of similar faith in Larry's being still alive. The planned marriage between Annie and Chris means Kate Keller must abandon her belief of her son being still alive. But, her acceptance of Larry's death also forces her to understand some connection between the death of her son and her husband's guilt. Geroge fails to obtain a confession from Joe Keller. Chris's mother plays her final card in order to stop the marriage which means end to her hope in Larry's survival. Kate reveals her husband's guilt to her son Chris. She and her husband are at last defeated by a letter which Annie now reveals. In this letter the missing son Larry had announced his intention to commit suicide because of his father's dishonest action in having supplied defective equipment to the Air Force. Finding himself forced to accept the truth and the responsibility for his dishonest action, Joe Keller shoots himself.

*'Look Back in Anger'* is a naturalistic play by John Osborne. The play *'Look Back in Anger'* has many significant absentee characters among them, Jimmy's dead father having a lot of influence on him. Hugh Tanner, Jimmy's friend who left to travel world and left his mother alone to whom Jimmy takes care in her last days. Alison's mother has been referred once but not at all appears in the plot of the play. All these characters are absentee characters. They play an important role in the play as without them the play would not have come to this conclusion. They play is centered on the marital problems of Alison and her husband Jimmy Porter who is an angry young man. He is a well educated but belongs to working class and has been making his living by running a sweet stall with the help of his friend Cliff. Jimmy has a great influence of his dead father on him. He is married to Alison who belongs to upper class. They share their flat with Jimmy's friend, Cliff, for financial problems. Their social class leads to have many conflicts between them. Alison, being pregnant on the advice and under the influence of her friend Helena, leaves Jimmy. Later, Jimmy and Helena have an affair. After some ups and downs, Jimmy and Alison are together again. Even though they are not able to resolve their conflicts and hurdles, they try to find out a way together to live and enjoy life.

The conclusion deals with undertake comparative evaluation of sixteen playwrights' who established a new trend of using absentee characters to economies the play and making it more effective from the point of view of absentee characters and with respect to the plot of the play,

characterization, etc.

Absentee characters possess thematic and structural significances in the plays. Without absentee character(s) the theme of the play would turn into futile. In all the plays that involve absentee characters, the focus is on the constant need to reaffirm the presence of a dead or alive character but not present in the play or in the plot. The plays attempt to bring to light the secret guilt surrounding their death or absence especially in their role as sacrificial victims. Thus, the absentee characters become longed for, but haunting presences. Their sacrificial death or absence diminishes the lives of the survivors. If the absentee characters are removed from the play the play will get materially changed. In all the plays that use absentee characters, these characters play a vital role in framing the plot. The removal or addition of the character will affect the plot very badly.

Though all these writers possess their own stamp of individuality and uniqueness in their plays, Ibsen was the inspirer to many writers in the Modern Drama. It is also examined as to what extent these plays sway into this century and it could be called an Absentee Drama.

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