



The Paradoxes of Being and Time: The Existential-Tragic Poetics of Dramatic Literature

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Abstract

Theorizing conceptual doctrines concerning literature over the centuries has been regarded as a significant intellectual exercise of high degree that has majorly kept the study of literature afloat. The thrust of theory, on this note, is to give perspectives to literature; that is, a conceptual framework for critical investigation of literary texts. In contradiction with this background, the current study has attempted to conceptualize a relatively novel critical framework in dramatic studies which has been referred to as 'existential-tragedy'. The concept is woven around the philosophical nexus of Absurdism and Tragedy with the theoretical assumption drawn from the Nietzschean principle of 'Primal Unity' in *Birth of Tragedy*. It encapsulates human as a being in existence who is caught up in an enclosed journey between creation and annihilation, constantly demonstrating an unconscious awareness to this underlying reality through his or her series of engagements in life. This unconscious phenomenon is contextualized in the present study as 'death anxiety' that silently characterizes humans' struggling life, as actors on the stage. Ultimately, the paper is being established as a move towards theorizing a new conceptual framework and/or critical context, simultaneously in the analysis of tragic and absurdist plays and in literary criticism at a larger scale.

Keywords

Dramatic Literature; Existentialism; The Existential-tragic; Primal Unity; Absurdism

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1. Introduction

The philosophical significance of literature has received immense critical attentions with diverse approaches. Nevertheless the nature of literary studies, of literature itself, has proven to be an inexhaustible space of critical inquiries, thus, lending itself to theorization. To this end, the effort in this theoretical study has been informed by the significant philosophical nexus found between theatre of the absurd, which critics have posited to be an offshoot of existentialism at the literary level, and tragedy, particularly in their insightful penetration into the condition of man in relation to his or her existence.

Relying on the above nexus, the study thus primarily moves to envisage a new but related conceptual critical framework, not only in the analysis of tragic and absurd plays, but also in literary criticism at large, by inhabiting a third space, which is neither tragedy nor absurdity, but rather a hybrid in-between status termed 'existential-tragedy.' The underlying phenomenon that is conceived as the holder of the key to this critical hybrid is death anxiety. It is an existential phenomenon that is "rooted in the realization that life is moving towards death" (Cohn 60). Meanwhile, death anxiety is conceived in this study literally and metaphorically. Literally, it denotes the sense of dying in the real sense. On the other hand, metaphorically, it connotes the sense of heavy and irreparable loss. The two conceptions constitute the abyss of reality into which man unconsciously drives himself in the struggles to enrich his or her existence. Thus, bearing in mind that every individual demonstrates an unconscious awareness to its reality in his or her engagements in life. It is strongly viewed as indeed possessing a considerable filiation with both tragedy and theatre of the absurd, the two being dramatic-theoretical constructs with direct bearings on human existence.

2. Toward the Concept of the Existential-Tragic

In the Western and African theory and criticism, one may identify, out of the rich, diverse and multifaceted investigations into the nature of the art of tragedy and its correlations to the condition of man; his being in the universe, four great and insightful submissions. Aristotle in *The Poetics* described tragedy as,

Tragedy, [...] is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several



kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (23)

The statement refers to the well-known features of tragedy; the united literary form and setting of a tragedy resulting catharsis.

Friedrich Nietzsche in *Birth of Tragedy* observed tragedy in a direct association with individual's existence. He asserts, "This view [...] provides [...] the elements of a profound and pessimistic view of the world, together with the *mystery doctrine of tragedy*" (Nietzsche 74). Nietzsche continued that man's understanding of the existential oneness of things, of his or her perception of the individuation that stands as the primordial cause of evil, and 'of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness'. In this regard, Arthur Miller in "Tragedy and the Common Man" wrote,

[...] I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his "rightful" position in his society. (1461)

What Wole Soyinka in *The Fourth Stage* wrote is in close relation with Miller's statement. Soyinka asserted, "Tragedy, in Yoruba traditional drama, is the anguish of this severance, the fragmentation of essence from self. Its music is the stricken cry of man's blind soul as he or her flounders in the void and crashes through a deep abyss of a – spirituality and cosmic rejection" (284).

The foregoing, in every sense, has theoretically revealed tragedy as an artistic response or reaction to the human situation and/or condition in the universe. Both in its heroic and ironic phases, classical and modern senses, over centuries of theatrical practice, tragedy has been constructed on heroism vis-à-vis communal salvation, as in Sophocles, Shakespeare, Soyinka, Marlowe, etc. and on an artificial social stratification and its attendant struggle, as in Arthur Miller, Athol Fugard, Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, etc. What is considerably central to its realization is individual's anxiety, fear, pain, despair, destruction and death; whether considered tragic in the Western sense or transitional in the African sense, in which the hero or protagonist is usually involved. It follows then that tragedy is "a dramatization of an



individual's sense of life and society as constantly under threat from the arbitrary chances of fate and humanity's own innate savagery." (Childs and Fowler 241)

Similarly, as studies have exposed in theory and practice, over the time drama has been situated between ideology and philosophy. Ideology "includes the 'ideas' instituted by language, by working conceptions of the psychological subject, and by philosophical conceptualization" (Con Davis and Schliefer 35). The ideology of the absurdist in literature, believed to have much in common with the existential philosophy associated with the thoughts of great philosophers, such as Soren Kierkegaard, Freidrich Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Jose Ortega, Rainer Marian Rilke and Jean-Paul Sartre (Kaufmann 50-51), known as existentialism. It is a philosophical principle that interrogates and accounts for the essence of humanity. In other words, existentialism is a philosophical movement that is generally considered a study that pursues meaning in existence, and seeks and queries the value for the existing individual. The existentialists perceive human life "as a drama, where every individual is an actor. Existence thus entails being personally involved in the Drama of Life" (53). In this light, dramatic art precisely employs this philosophical concept mainly "to depict human beings who exist in a state of anguish and absurdity, and who move from a *tabula rasa* and nothingness to oblivion, lacuna, and nihility" (Nwabueze 62).

As Ndubuisi would posit, it has been thus revealed that the existentialist concern at the philosophical and ideological level is what has metamorphosed into an artistic practice known as the 'Theatre of the Absurd', as later coined by the theatre critic Martin Esslin. He claims, "[...] the world of the mid twentieth century has lost its meaning and has simply ceased to make sense. Previously held certainties have dissolved, the firmest foundations for hope and optimism have collapsed. Suddenly man sees himself faced with a universe that is both frightening and illogical – in a word, absurd" (5). To this end, furthermore, in the theory and criticism of the Theatre of the Absurd, one may identify the following submissions in relation to the human condition, or being, in the universe:

The 'absurd' is a very vague notion. Maybe it's a failure to understand something, some universal laws. It [...] is born of the conflict between me and myself, between my different wills, my contradictory impulses: I want simultaneously to live and to die, or rather I have within me a movement both towards death and towards life. Eros



and thanatos, love and hatred, love and destructiveness, it's a sufficiently violent antithesis, isn't it, to give me a feeling of 'absurdity'? (Ionesco 155)

Up to now, what has been revealed is that tragedy and theatre of the absurd, as the theatrical offshoots of existentialism, are species or sub-genres of drama that have something in common in their artistic investigations – the question of humanity, being or essence in the universe. Creating a synergy between both has, therefore, necessitated a search for a phenomenon in existence that will embody a meeting locus between theatre of the absurd, as an aesthetic philosophical outlook, and tragedy, as the artistic world of imitable cosmic reality or illusion of reality.

To this end, a reflection has been taken over the phenomenal end of life vis-à-vis man's unconscious attitudes towards it in the tragic and absurd worlds, bearing in mind that "the inevitability, the irreversibility and permanence of death create anxiety in all individuals at some time in life" (Niemiec and Schulenberg 387). Hence, the investigation has been hung on a metaphysical philosophical and psychological schema which perceives man's engagements in life, his or her struggles with life; ordinate or inordinate, beautiful or ugly, as translatable to his or her unconscious preparations towards his or her end time. In other words, his activities in life amount to mere filling up of the temporal, spatial gap between the time of his emergence into being and the last, unavoidable moment of his existence.

Practically in dramatic texts, what the reader is confronted with, could be observed from two perspectives. On the one hand, it is either the dramatic enactment portraying man as being aware of that 'end' and, therefore, all he or she is doing is simply limited to that long and boring period of his or her existence. In other words, his or her actions are intended to fill that temporal space prior the end time. On the other hand, the dramatization could also be construed as a portrayal of man who, though aware of his end to come, engages in certain activities that are geared towards enriching his lifetime but with lack of the realization that all those activities only constitute, ironically or paradoxically, his preparations for that inevitable 'end'.

The interest in the phenomenon of death is partly to render insignificant, as does Miller, social rank or status, in the realization of tragedy that is prevalent in the classical mode. However, unlike Miller who has perceived the tragic hero as "an individual attempting to gain his rightful position in his society" (1461), death is



viewed here as that which every human being shows or demonstrates certain unconscious attitudes towards as his real state, that is, of non-being, that his coming into being has separated him from. Hence, as the social leveler that levels all men ultimately, every man, regardless of his social status, could be the tragic hero. It is in fact the level of his struggle with life that determines his tragic existence. Since man has substituted the-will-to-live for the real inevitable thing (death), he makes blind choice in his struggle with life, but which ironically translate to the-will-to-die. Therefore, his failure in his conscious state to realize that, as he engages himself with life, also implies simply an unconscious preparation for the end of life is crucial in his existence. This, thus, underscores the paradox of his being; an individual who is caught up in an enclosed journey between creation or existence and annihilation, and who constantly demonstrate an unconscious awareness to this underlying reality in his engagements in life. This unconscious reality is contextualized in this study as 'death anxiety' which silently characterizes his struggles with life, as an actor on the world stage.

3. Tragedy and Existentialism: Toward a Critical Synergy

The present argument is two-dimensional. First, it is a survey of death, in its various conceptions and implications, vis-à-vis how it has shaped the construction of tragedy and theatre of the absurd as well as how the latter has been perceived as a modern development of the former. The last act is tragic, however happy all the rest of the play is; at the last a little earth is thrown upon our head, and that is the end forever. (Pascal 36) In this view, it is an attempt to look at man, being the tragic and the absurdist figure, as essentially a 'being-towards-death,' to employ Heidegger's conception. Secondly, in a similar vein, existential and psychological studies have revealed that, in various dimensions and degrees, there exist certain unconscious attitudes which man demonstrates towards death; a phenomenon that is often referred to as death anxiety. "[...] Death, in this sense, is always present at the core of human existence, is what makes this existence the clearing in which things appear" (Tomer and Eliason 8). Hence, the second dimension assumes a survey of some existential and psychological thoughts on death anxiety.

In his engagement in the debate over the death of tragedy, Bert O. States views death or what he calls end of the road conception as salient in the realization of the



tragic vision (9), despite the propensity to being critically stereotyped within the classical tragic formulation. What is significant to him is the 'tragic vision'; be it classical or modern, and "the power of the artist to evoke the tragic condition, however darkly perceived, as unflinchingly as possible" (8). Consequently, in a response to what appears to be his central argument over what constitutes the universality of the tragic vision, before it gets put into tragic "works," he suggests two foundational propositions that, "in one way or another, are not accommodated by any other vision," but the tragic: the extreme "views" of human experience and the "thrownness" of man into an indifferent world. (9)

The first is relatively significant to this argument. For his exegesis, he relies heavily on Northrop Frye's idea that "the basis of the tragic vision is being in time" (9). According to him, what Frye means by it is the "one-directional quality of life... [wherein] all experience vanishes, not simply into the past, but into nothingness, annihilation"(9). In other words, it is the belief that "Being has no 'other' except Nothingness". In a recap of this, he briefly maintains, in the tragic view "something tugs man toward the terminal realization that nothingness is the likeliest of two possible extremes in any dialectic on human destiny." (10)

Will Slocombe takes a critical look at the form that tragedy and absurd theatre have taken within the twentieth century literature. Drawing on Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, he notes that the two plays assume demonstrations of the historical development of Western tragedy from classicism to what dramaturgy ultimately arrived at towards the twentieth century, that is the "Theatre of the Absurd". His exegesis is hinged upon a nihilistic view of the world. Hence, he contends that absurdity itself entails two possible responses to nihilism – a comic laughter in the face of meaninglessness or a tragic cry for meaning. In a way, this suggests that 'the absurd' emerges as much from the classical definitions of tragedy as it does from twentieth century preoccupation with 'meaninglessness'. This development is linked with the so-called Holocaust and the Second World War. In this regard, he implies that the classical definition of tragedy has ceased to encompass such apocalyptic capacity of humanity. To name the Holocaust as fully 'tragic', or writing a tragedy about it, simply lessens its prominence, and hence its



severity. By implication, an absurd portrayal of it will reveal more its tragic essence. Accordingly, he acknowledges that this conception:

defines the shift between the traditional forms of tragedy and the twentieth century development of the absurd. Tragedy no longer functions artistically, and so 'tragic' art reflects the tragedy of life whilst not necessarily being a 'tragedy'. Here, the absurd comes into play as 'the belief that humans exist in a purposeless chaotic universe'. (Slocombe 203)

In the same manner with the current study, Slocombe has equally attempted to establish a theoretical link between tragedy and theatre of the absurd, using death anxiety as the implication of the purposelessness and/or nothingness that has defined the twentieth century universe. However, unlike the trend in this study, his analysis has tilted towards a phasal or developmental continuum (i.e. from classical tragedy to twentieth century absurdity).

The said purposeless chaotic universe, in which human being finds himself, seems to conform to the fulcrum of Saeid Rahimipoor's and Henrik Edoyan's study of the theme of 'self' and 'identity' in the theatre of the absurd. Using the works of Beckett and Pinter, they engage in a humanistic view of identity, in the light of 'chaotic theory', as one of the main purposes of theatre of the absurd. Accordingly, they point out that:

the question of existence that the individual is often doomed to a turmoil culminating in his loss of his sense of self has been delicately selected as the dominating theme and haunting and obsessing characters in the plays of Pinter advocating his master, Beckett, in the Theatre of the absurd whose major chaotic characteristic is, quoting Esslin, to strive to express its sense of senselessness of the human condition at the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. (Rahimipoor and Edoyan 12)

The ideological symbiosis found in the above and that of Slocombe's could also be placed within that developmental continuum – from tragedy to absurdity; that is, on the perceived inadequacy of the traditional tragic art to appositely reflect the condition of modern human being in his or her arguably meaningless and chaotic universe. More important to the current study is the question of existential reflection of the individual's psychological search (inner turmoil) for identity, which turns out to be his or her end of being.



4. Existentialism and Death Attitudes: An Overview

In a profound exegesis on existentialism and death attitudes, Adrian Tomer and Grafton T. Eliason have posited that it is the examination of human life, its being, and of what meaning it could entail, that has given vent for philosophical reflections on 'death'. This generally reinforces their argument that "reflection on life is impossible without reflection on the end of life". In what we could call a panoramic examination of the concept of death, they offer several thoughts in several existential philosophers like Blaise Pascal, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Soren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, Ken Wilber, Emmanuel Levinas, Ernest Becker, among others.

In Emmanuel Levinas' analysis of death, it is offered that man bears in himself the fundamental knowledge of death as imminent. He maintains that such knowledge is instinctive and it precedes any experience we might have with the death of the "other" (18-19). This view is further acknowledged in Martin Buber's account that our ability to think of the objective being presupposes the presence of death with us, in the present, as a force in the life struggle, and thus helps one to determine one's nature, existence and whole being at the moment in time. (17-18)

For Ken Wilber, his psychological position on death attitude reveals that the existential angst is as a result of the original separation between the organism and its original environment. Hence, the tendency for the appearance of the conscious of fear, i.e. the organism's fear of an inevitable return to its original environment, together with the lack of possibility to acknowledge or accept imminent annihilation (20-21). For Paul Tillich, death is relatively present in our everyday life as an awareness of being contingent, of not having any ultimate necessity. According to him, as much as possible, man tries to evade this anxiety through an attempt to transform it into a well-defined fear, but which is always unsuccessful (21-22). In Albert Camus' reflection on the absurdity of our supposed meaningless world and its consequences, he maintains that the spectacle of death constitutes the clearest example of the absurdity of our situation. This is because all our attempts to construct systems of understanding have miserably failed, i.e. negated by the presence of death with us. (15-16)

In an attempt to understand death attitudes or anxiety, a similar view had been shared by the cultural anthropologist, Ernest Becker in his philosophical examination



of the terror of death. As one of the great discoveries of modern thought, posits Becker, “of all the things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death” (11), which has been viewed as man’s major psychological problem. This conception is further linked with what he calls ‘real heroism’ by maintaining that heroism “is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death” (11).

Significantly, the underlying argument Becker is putting forth is the naturalness of death anxiety or terror in being, as conveyed in his view that “the fear of death is natural and is present in everyone, that it is the basic fear, that influences all others, a fear from which no one is immune, no matter how disguised it may be” (15). On the one hand, the foregoing has revealed the various ways in which human beings unconsciously react to the inevitability of death. Additionally, it has offered an exposition on the phenomenon of death, literal and metaphorical, as the underlying issue that propels the theoretical investigation which, in turn, ultimately assumes the focal point in this study.

5. The Principle of Primal Unity: The Theoretical Assumption

The conceptual framework for this theoretical study is what I have called the principle of ‘primal unity’. It has been conceived via the lens of psychoanalytical theory. It is a Nietzschean concept from the *Birth of Tragedy*. Theoretically, in this study, it seeks to locate a common critical point between the dramatic genres of tragedy and theatre of the absurd on the basis of philosophical reflections on ‘being’. The principle posits fundamentally that the-will-to-live is, in fact, the-will-to-die. That is, it perceives being as an order, a wheel that has been set in motion, and bounded by time, where man’s engagements in life are simply cogs in that existential wheel that ensures its cyclic rotation within the timeframe or bound.

First, there is nature, conceived as the original real state of non-being or emptiness; the very unconscious state from which man came into being or possessing. In this way, it can be asserted that man has once been primordially united with his original source, his state of non-being or emptiness. This unity between man and nature is what has been conceived in this study as the principle of ‘primal unity’. However, with the emergence of man into existence or state of possession, he has thus been separated from that primordial state of non-existence or emptiness. It follows, then, that the separation between the organism or man and its natural



environment, the state of non-being or emptiness is embodied in the phenomenon of existence. Thus, in man's conscious state of his existence, he becomes overwhelmed with the illusion of realities which characterize the new environment, the resultant effect of this is the cause for him certain degree of oblivion of his unity with his primordial state. In his conscious state, the overwhelming illusion of reality causes him to forget his unity with his primordial state. Nevertheless, in his unconscious mind, he is arguably aware of it, which is explainable through the psychoanalytical lens. The activities of his conscious state that seem to imply oblivion of the primal unity are best explainable in his unconscious realm, where his awareness of the unity could be affirmed. Those conscious activities are instrumental to the order in the unconscious realm towards re-uniting man with his primordial state. An analytical correlation has been further found between this phenomenon and Nietzsche's attempt at locating the origin of tragedy in *Birth of Tragedy*.

In his writing, Friedrich Nietzsche presents to us two separate worlds; that of dream and that of intoxication, the Apollonian and Dionysian principles respectively. An understanding of his exegesis reveals that, at first, the two worlds ran parallel but eventually meet at a philosophical point. In the dream world man is confronted with the beautiful illusion of reality, the joyful and necessary experience of which, according to Nietzsche, has been embodied by the Greeks in their Apollo:

Apollo, the god of all plastic energies, is at the same time the soothsaying god. He, who (as the etymology of the name indicates) is the "shining over" the deity of light, is also ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy. (35)

The world of fantasy, that of dreams or mere appearance, informs man's consciousness of nature as the beautiful space, and, thus makes life possible and worth living. However, in the image of Apollo, Nietzsche maintains that "delicate boundary which the dream image must not overstep" (35) are also included; 'crude reality,' the mere appearance, would thus make itself appear. Human being, when viewed in the image of Apollo, is "wrapped" in the veil of illusion; the reality in which he lives and ascertains his being is a mere appearance, of which another quite different reality lies beneath it, as Nietzsche observed. In order to penetrate into this crude reality lying beneath the mere appearance, the world of intoxication of Dionysus needs to be explored. At this level, under the Dionysian influence, man's



emotions are awoken, thereby enhancing him to see beyond the mere appearances, and as he grows in “intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness” (35). In effect, under the charm of Dionysian, “not only is the union between man and man re-affirmed, but nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man”. (37)

Putting forth the above doctrine, one can argue that nature’s alienated status is subsequent to man’s coming into existence. In this way, shifting from nature’s alienation in the world of dreams to the eventual reconciliation in the world of intoxication, where man’s emotions are awoken to what has been considered as crude existential reality; the concept of primal unity is delineated. His perception is enhanced beyond illusory reality, which is his inevitable unity with nature. It is a phenomenon that is explainable only through reference to the unconscious source of motivation.

The present statement has thus revealed that man’s existence is perceptible at two levels; the dreaming, the Apollonian, and the waking and/or intoxicating, the Dionysian. At the Apollonian level, the nature of the individual’s awareness of cosmic reality is illusory in that the individual is found in the world of dream where his or her soul remains blind. Whereas at the Dionysian level – state of intoxication – the individual is found being confronted with what has been described as crude reality. This implies that there is usually an eventual shift in existence from the dreaming state to the waking state. Therefore, this shift of awareness of reality from the ‘illusory’ to the ‘crude’ is perceived as what is represented in a work of art as the existential tragedy of an individual. While the individual consciously operates at the former world, he functions blindly. He is susceptible to making wrong choice(s), which is a key phenomenon that could lead to his downfall regardless of his social status. The downfall, therefore, pushes him into the latter world. At this state he is confronted with another reality; a critical point at which he comes to the realization that he has been living in the dreaming world, and that his perception of reality has been greatly illusory. However, owing to the existentially significant but irreversible passage of time, his final encounter with another reality is incapable of redeeming him. His or her tragedy, whether ‘tragic’ in the Western conception or ‘transitional’ in African



cosmology, is existentially defined within the paradox of his being – his doubled-world.

By inference, what the reader is confronted with in such dramas of life could be observed from two different perspectives: on the one hand, it is either the dramatic enactment that portrays man as being aware of that paradox underlying his being; all he is doing is simply to go away from that long and boring period of his existence. In other words, his actions are intended to fill that temporal space before his transition from the illusory world to the world of reality. On the other hand, the characterization could also be observed as a portrayal of man who, unaware of this existential paradox, engages in certain activities. The activities intended to enrich his lifetime without the realization of the fact that all those activities only constitute, ironically, self-driven mechanisms that draw him, even closer or faster, to the manifestation of the crude reality of his existence.

6. Critical Paradigms in Dramatic Texts: An Overview

Right from the classical tragedy, citing in particular Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus' being is considered to be existentially double-folded. His journey through life, his birth cum the surrounding circumstances significantly point to this. His father, the King of Thebes, Jocaste, the mother and even the messenger to whom Oedipus is given after birth for execution in to avert the prophesied patricide and incest with his mother, all exhibit delusion in their decisions over Oedipus' existential reality which has been primordially conditioned upon his emergence into being. The entire activities, both at the levels of his parents to get rid of him and the messenger-killer's decision to spare him by handing him over to a shepherd, Polybus to take care of, are pointers to their unconscious awareness of a lurking reality, and as such, choose to engage in such quasi-gratifications which only translate to unconsciously self-driven or self-orchestrated mechanisms that ultimately aid the manifestation of that crude reality away from which they are running.

At the father's level, his point of death during his violent encounter with Oedipus, though unknown to him, marks his transition from the Apollonian world to the Dionysian world. At the discovery of Oedipus' true identity of having committed incest by his mother equally marks the woman's transition to the Dionysian world. With this discovery, in the same vein, the messenger-killer also gets transited to the Dionysian



world. It means that all of them have been demonstrating, in their handling of the complex situation, the unconscious awareness of the existential reality. They are blindfolded to this fact in their Apollonian worlds; they are also unable to see beyond illusions of reality rather than stark reality which defines the Dionysian world.

At the level of Oedipus himself, his initial dreaming state opens his eyes to mere illusions in an attempt to avoid the prophesied patricide and incest. He misunderstands the oracle and even the drunken guest wordings that define him as only a foster child to Polybus. This pushes him to flee from Corinth, showing that he still believes firmly at that point that Polybus and Merope are his biological parents; a wrong, fatally miscalculated choice or decision that culminates in his downfall. With it he is moved to the state of intoxication where his eyes become open to the crude reality of his existence. However, his eventual realization cannot redeem his situation.

Similarly in the Shakespearean tragic tradition, the instance of *Macbeth*, the eponymous character is positioned to inhabit these two worlds. In his dreaming state, the veiled and cluttered with illusory atmosphere was created for him by the trio of witches. He becomes consumed by excessive lust for power of the throne of Scotland following the witches' words to him, particularly with the pronouncement by which he is made to be wrongly confident of being unable to be harmed or killed by a being born of a woman. At this point in time, he still inhabits the Apollonian world where his eyes are not open to reality, and he makes devilish choices that are aimed at self-gratification. The choices translate to rather self-orchestrated mechanisms that aid his transition to the Dionysian world where he can be faced with the reality that his lust for the throne is only illusory. He realizes too late in his eventual encounter with Macduff that the latter is born via a cesarean section. This realization comes with his movement into another world (of Dionysus) where he faces the crude reality, as against the illusions. Meanwhile, his great moments have irreversibly gone.

In Arthur Miller's *Death of a salesman*, considered by the critics as an archetypal modern tragic work, the reality of the American society, being the setting of the play, is to a great extent defined by the capitalist system. Willy Loman's being at the Apollonian dreaming world informs his inadequate perception of the system and he thus challenges it illusorily. He subjects himself to a state of an orange and his professional engagement the squeezer. By the time he gets drained by the capitalist



organization, and he is thus abruptly relieved of his job, apparently for lack of productivity any longer, he realizes unfortunately that he has got nothing to fall back on after considerable years in service.

At this point, it can be posited that the reality of the system has dawned on him; he is confronted with the realization that he has spent and hung his professional life on mere optimism and/or utopianism with no concrete actions and measures, but with dreams only. He thus puts in place all that is substantial enough to salvage his situation. His transition from the earlier dreaming world, after the passage of several years, to the world of crude reality unveils him of the initial illusion, albeit too late. At the verge of being officially fired, Willy Loman laments that: "... I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay insurance. You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away-a man is not a piece of fruit" (156). In spite of his being opened to, and consciousness of the reality, he can no longer salvage, at that point, his years of 'empty' pride in taking care of his home as well as his failure to timely realize and deal with the reality of the capitalist system.

In Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, a tragic work that seems to be dangling between classical and modern modes, Elesin's tragic life, as distinguished from that of his son Olunde, is double-fold, where both the Apollonian and Dionysian principles are observed. The illusory state in which he lives during the passage rite (transition), following the death of the king, arguably informs his wrong choice to have a sexual enjoyment with the young girl ultimately prior his departure from the world of the living. Although this can be critically considered as instrumental to bridging the African concept of trio-cyclic worlds of the living, the dead and the unborn, the reality of his existence has been specifically defined. He is going to die, whether he wishes or not, sadly alongside the king. In executing this great and courageous act, he is made to perceive his worth illusorily through the drumming and processions. Instead of seeing his fate as really as it has been starkly (traditionally) defined by the tradition, he feels he can turn around and be adjusted to it by having that last moment enjoyment in company of the drumming and processions. For him the too late realization of the drumming, praises and processions is nothing but a deceptive notion that has veiled him from seeing and confronting the crude reality of his end time. The Dionysian state opens his eyes to this at that point, but the loss of



Olunde, his son, has come a long way irreparable. Even though his death is celebrated in this context, Elesin's would have been more and better celebrated and acknowledged. Unlike the absurdist tradition, and contrary to Beckett in particular, a direct confrontation of man with his being in time defines Elesin Oba (*The King's Horseman*).

Beyond the level of the King's Horseman, the other characters like the head of market women (Iyaloja), Elesin's Praise-Singer, and other women present at the ritual transition process, who are greatly saddened by the eventual turnaround, are equally found amidst such complex movements between the two worlds. Iyaloja's concession to Elesin's demand is evidently illusory, suggesting that she is equally in the Apollonian world. She is thus unable to perceive the underlying reality of that ritual process as a process that is traditionally and significantly bound by the idea of time; otherwise, with the support of other women, she would have remained unyielding to Elesin's demand. Like Elesin Oba, her inability to deal decisively with the situation is largely as a result of the dreaming world in which she is found at that point in time. The uneventful turnaround of the disruption of the process and arrest of Elesin Oba by the colonial administrator in the village Pilkings all assume the point of transition of the woman, as well as others, to the Dionysian world. However, the illusory path they all have treaded turns damagingly irretraceable.

An observable phenomenon from these instances is that the individual here is made to appear as engaging in one thing or another to enrich his existence, but all are understandably embattled with the world of illusions from which their failures to see the stark realities of their existence stems. These previous states in which the specific characters inhabit are heavily reflective of the Nietzschean conception of the Apollonian world. The choices made by them are, in actual fact, choices unconsciously made towards re-uniting themselves with their primordial state, their natural realities to which they are eventually confronted with, upon their transitions to the Dionysian world. In specific terms, in *Oedipus Rex*, *Macbeth*, and *Death and the King's Horseman*, the principle of primal unity is literally ascertained in the circumstances of the major characters, leading to deaths, in the real sense, while it is metaphorically realized in others as huge losses. On the other hand, in *Death of a*



Salesman, the circumstances surrounding the existence of the major character assume a metaphorical reflection of the principle of primal unity.

The organic essence or wholeness, the primal unity is what defines man's existence and that his struggles with life are mere unconscious struggles towards bridging that gap or separation between him and his natural environment, the state of non-being or emptiness, caused by his coming into existence. Ascertaining the unconscious awareness of this phenomenon of primal unity underlying the human existence is thus explainable within the Nietzschean conception of man as a being who inhabits a dual-folded world. The degree of his tragedy in this sense is determinable by the degree of his error of judgment in the Apollonian world vis-à-vis the realization of his existential truth or reality. Ultimately, the paradox of his being, that of his creation and annihilation, of nothingness and becoming, which subtly characterize man's struggle with life, underlies the conceptual frame of 'existential-tragedy'.

7. Conclusion

The thrust of theory, on this note, is to give perspectives to literature; a conceptual framework for its critical investigation. In this way, the function of theory would be the organization of a plurality of perspectives, windows and/or insights through which the literary work could be critically explored. Against this background, this study has attempted to theorize a conceptual-critical frame in dramatic studies, which has been referred to as 'existential-tragedy'. As evident in the selection of texts across cultures, the strength of the concept largely rests on its universal applicability. One way this move could be considered significant is that it is accomplished in what could be presumed as a response to the persistent social demand or search for new variations in both the literary texts and the hermeneutic trends peculiar to literature. Secondly, it has assumed a generic approach to the study of dramatic literature. As posited by Emeka Nwabueze, this critical approach is extensively notable owing to the sheer interests of scholars in "defining the standards for the various genres of drama, as well as examining and assessing how plays measure up to those standards." (65)



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