

# Negative Cynicism as Universality Inherent in Kafka's Modern Literary Ideas

Yasuo ISHII

Laboratory of Basic Education, School of Veterinary Medicine, Azabu University,  
1-17-71 Chuouku Fuchinobe, Sagami City, Kanagawa 252-5201, JAPAN

**Abstract:** There is a common, literal essence between Kafka and Beckett. Although they lived in different ages, the creativity found in their novels is based in absurdity and a peculiar form of imagination. Kafka, a German-Jew, lived in Prague which at that time was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and wrote his works in German. Beckett, an Irishman living in Paris, wrote his works in French, later translating them into English. As a member of the German-Jewish minority in Prague, Kafka was in a complicated position among the Czech majority. Beckett on the other hand was a spontaneous exile in Europe, separated from his literary and religious bearings.

Absurdity in the works of Kafka, as Albert Camus suggested, consists of tragedy in everyday life and the absurd logic found in the social system. That of Beckett revolves around the comedy of everyday life and the absurd destruction of description by meaningless words or language. Kafka depicted the inconsistency latent in humans. Beckett tried to express the impossibility of expression through language. Both forms of absurdity are derived from profound insights into the 20th century's society. Cynical negativism is the common literary idea for the two authors and is perfectly reflected in their works. Negative and indeed cruel cynicism as well as comical factors are an inevitable necessity for their literary works as a part of general literature in the 20th century, because there seemed to be no longer credible humanism in public consciousness in the post-war era. Absurdity in modern literature paradoxically reflects merciless modern society and human cruelty in cynical tragedy and comedy.

The purpose of this essay is to re-recognize both authors' peculiar and common literary ideas of absurdity and cynicism, to also explore their differences and to examine their implication for describing humanism in the 20th literature

**Key words:** Alienation, Absurdity, Negative cynicism, Prague.

## 1. General aspects of modern literature

Firstly, it is necessary to recognize the role and general implication of the novel. Prose works such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* had developed the genre since the 17th century and their style was applied to the traditional form of narrated story. Over time, novels assumed responsibility for various roles in each era, addressing issues such as social problems, gender, war, labor and environment, race and class divides. It was natural that authors and novels reflected

such a wide range of aspects of society in general. Until the 19th century, novels surely reflected the society and people who lived in that age. People could obtain great interpretation and understanding of society through reading novels which dealt with the many aspects of social, ethical, and philosophical issues. Realistic description in novels contributed to the spread of fiction which served to represent various features of society and humanity. However, as time passed, the nature of the novel gradually changed, especially in the 20th century. Many authors strived to alter the style of realistic description, developing

and introducing new techniques based on traditional writing styles presented in their works. Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Ferdinand Louis-Cérine, Herman Broch, William Faulkner were all innovators who created revolutionary works in the early 20th century. Without doubt, innovative authors are particularly concentrated in this period, a phenomenon corresponding to similar movements in modern art.

Moreover, there were some authors who left more peculiar and originally progressive works. These include Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett or Maurice Blanchot. Some of their works are regarded as “minor” literature, as suggested by Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-F. Guattari. Although the definition of ‘minority’ might be difficult, it is potentially important that a minor essence is a constituent of their literature. The essence of minority is not only attributed to their race or language, but also to literary ideas and values. For instance, works of Batailles or Blanchot are not always accepted by the majority of readers, for their works contain peculiarly grotesque and bizarre ideas. Beckett and Kafka also contain such ‘minor’ ideas in their works, namely cruelty, grotesque cynicism, violence and destructiveness concerned with the fate of humans. It may be possible that these factors are incorporated into their works as minor literary ideas. But how does minority function as a literary essence?

In the transition from Romanticism to Modernism, the style of description in the novel gradually changed. The age of the early 20th century was the boundary between pre-modern and modern times, when people were forced to alter their way of expression. In particular, World War I seemed to change every cultural aspect of Europe. Expression moved beyond the frame of values based on reason and humanism. As paintings in Europe made progress towards expressionism or cubism, seeking out more innovative form, color, and images, novels and poems were also inclined to more modern styles.

However, in that transition, Kafka was not fundamentally affected by the ideas of modernism. The works of Franz Kafka did not belong to the category of avant-garde. His style of expression was rather prudent after the manner of the traditional form of a novel, for he was basically an author who lived his life at the end of the 19th century

and the early years of the next age. His favorite authors were Charles Dickens, Anton Chekhov, or Thomas Mann, and he himself recognized that his style of a novel had been greatly influenced by the works of Flaubert and Dostoevsky. In that sense, as for the narrative form, Kafka was a writer who followed the established orthodox style. An analysis of his works, *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*) or *In der Strafkolonie* (*In the Penal Colony*) make it immediately clear that the style he adopted consisted of the form of the traditional, realistic novel. His stories were told through intangible plots, with sometimes cruel and destructive effects resulting in absurd impasse. Kafka’s works contain indescribably sardonic cynicism and grotesque cruelty, that is never turbulent but rather calm and silent violence.

Beckett was a writer who was born 23 years after Kafka and was more avaricious investigator of literary expression. Living in a more modern age, Beckett continuously altered his styles of expression in his novels. However, after World War II, Beckett’s works showed remarkable changes. *Trilogy* and *Texts for Nothing* demonstrated a peculiar soliloquy delivered by a first person narrator:

“How many hours to go, before the next silence, they are not hours, it will not be silence, how many hours still, before the next silence? Ah to know for sure, to know that this thing has no end, this thing, this thing, this farrago of silence and words, of silence that is not silence an barely murmured words. Or to know it’s life still, a form of life, ordained to end, as others ended and will end, till life ends, in all its forms. Words, mine was never more than that, than this pell-mell babel of silence and words, my viewless form described as ended, or to come, or still in progress, depending on the words, the moments, long may it last in that singular way”<sup>1)</sup>.

These raucous chains of words as soliloquy became the main feature of Beckett’s prose works after the war. After *Molloy*, ‘babel of floors consisted of silence and words’ was the core of Beckett’s prose style. This style apparently aimed at expressing serious problems related to fundamental human existence, language, or the

fundamental possibility of expression in modern literature. Concerning the problem of human existence, William Currie proposed his views that the characters of Kafka, Beckett and Kobo Abe have a common point in that they are alienated from a society, and become "outsiders" who have lost their identity. The suggestion of "an outsider" is similar to the point of "minority" suggested by Deleuze. The existence of an 'outsider' is defined as a being who has lost his own language, race and country. In this process he becomes an exile of sorts, with an existence that resists society which stands before him, firmly rooted with a common standard or moral precepts<sup>2)</sup>. Some of the characters described by Kafka are certainly outsiders. Depiction of the difficulty of finding a means to self-identification is a motif of their novels. Kafka's characters and Beckett's narrators are frequently positioned at the marginal edge of society which compels them to move away beyond the world. Thus they become alienated and lose their identity, humanity and security, being exposed to the hazards of survival. The literary world is different from that of the former age, as characters tend to be deprived of their identity and humanity. This motif of lack of self-identity is set in the core of their world. As the world inclined towards globalism, international conflicts caused tremendous destruction and gravely affected people's lives and peace of mind. This was intensified in highly urbanized areas, where people became more upset, and afraid of being driven to instability and confusion which might deprived them of their identity of language, race, nations, and existence. Modern literature tended to deal with these issues as its motif. Particularly, in the post war era, living under the Cold War or the terrible threat of nuclear weapons, humans were apt to feel that they could no longer make sure of their safety, survival and existence as humans. People were described as if they were compelled to continue to live without hope of life and God's salvation. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (as a kind of comedy) was interpreted as such a work describing the despair of modern society and people. In the case of Beckett's works, the degree of corruption of the characters is described with peculiar abnormality:

*"I had been living so far from words so long, you understand, that it was enough for me to see my town, since we're talking of my town, to be unable you understand. It's too difficult to say, for me. And even my sense of identification was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate, as we have just seen I think...there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names. I say that now, but after all what do I know about then, now when the icy words hail down upon me, the icy meanings, and the world dies too, foully named. All I know is what the words now, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead. And truly it little matters what I say, this or that or you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept"<sup>3)</sup>.*

Beckett's *Molloy* which is widely considered as one of his masterpieces still retains a form of plot as found in earlier novels. Molloy, the alienated wanderer, is a peculiar character who has lost almost all of his possessions: his town, words, his own life. Most of them become nameless dead things. This idea, "loss of possession," is one of the features of Beckett's characters, who are deprived of things that define identity as a human.

The idea of 'possession' is a symbol of confirmation of identity. This absurd situation, the loss of identity, leads to an impasse for both humans and story itself. Beckett's novels always gravitate towards this helpless impasse. Concerning the idea of 'impasse', Hugh Kenner indicates that Beckett, as a successor to Flaubert and Joyce, is a comedian of impasse, but this means another impasse as an author following Joyce and Flaubert<sup>4)</sup>.

In *How It Is*, the idea of the comedy of an impasse is further developed by Beckett.

The novel consists solely of the voices of Pim and Pom, whose existence is not even clear and who are in the nameless world akin to Dante's *Inferno*. There is no clear relationship between the narrator and the story. Voices are carried in the "mud, unnamable world" that symbolizes

the real world. Beckett does not use the frame of Dante's *Divine Comedia*, but uses the image of inferno. The hollow image is doubled by the meaningless residue of words narrated.

*"no more time I say it as I hear it murmur in the mud I'm sinking sinking fast too strong no more head imagination spent no more breath"*

*"so things may change no answer end no answer I may choke no answer sink no answer sully the mud no more no answer the dark no answer trouble the peace no more no answer the silence no answer die no answer DIE screams I MAY DIE screams I SHALL DIE screams good"*<sup>5)</sup>.

The most impressive characteristic is the effect of voices which have never been used in modern literature, suggesting the most poetic and yet sterile vortex of chaos that is the modern world in the post war era. The narrator tells his story, whispering, sometimes crying, or screaming in the mud, in the silence of infernal landscape. The words have no answer, no end, nor peace without death. In the age of Beckett, there seemed to be nothing that should be described by literature.

The role of modern literature is the description of people and society of the modern era. The more complicated the aspect of modern lifestyles in urban areas, the more difficult and complicated the techniques and styles that authors have used. Mythical method is one such technique, and is observed in the works of James Joyce who made use of classical myth (*Odyseus*) in his own work, *Ulysses*. Giorgio de Chirico similarly introduced the myth of Trojan War and architectures of Rome to his paintings<sup>6)</sup>. Myth was applied to a framework of modern novels and art, serving as a bridge between the Europe of ancient and modern times. In Europe, it has always been necessary to entrust an important task or description to the words of classic, mythical concepts in order to sustain European culture and tradition in the values of European civilization and within the Christian cultural area. Myth is thought to lead to the identity of existence in European civilization. Myth is, to the utmost, used as a form and structure for many works, although the contents are more modern, sophisticated, or

more original fiction<sup>7)</sup>. On the other hand, more pessimistic ideas were also prevalent in Europe.

The main factor was the international conflict which occurred in Europe. The devastation resulting from world war was clearly recognized by the people. For example, Paul Valéry suggested the crisis for European civilization and the spirit of its people in 'La crise de l'esprit', referring to the vulnerability of European culture and intelligence<sup>8)</sup>. It is obvious that World War I caused unprecedented devastation to Europe, and the mentally destructive impact led the intellectual community to melancholic trauma, threatened with the end of European civilization and culture. In the post war era, cultural decadence and economic crisis and panic encompassed Europe. This situation was a cause of the emergence of modern expression<sup>9)</sup>. Modernism is a result brought about by the age of Europe which experienced unprecedented disaster, the cause of which was produced by the self. Europe was placed in a predicament, as if it had lost its confidence as the cultural center of the world. World values were encompassed in uneasiness and perplexity. Some movements and ideological ideas on literature and art emerged out of this age. The form and the contents of the novel had undergone a change through the trend of modernism. A novel did not necessarily aim at describing and reflecting the real world, nor extracting better ethics from the view point of humanism. Literary expression was sometimes challenged by writers who held anti-reason points of view. In effect, literary motives were diversified into various values which included more imaginary, psychotic dreamlike, sexual, or destructive motives. Surrealistic works such as *Nadja* by Andre Breton was an example.

Yet, Kafka, not followed the modern trend, tried to describe humans more introspectively, symbolizing the despair of an individual and creating what may be considered a fable of the 20th century. His form and style were more traditional, closer to those used in the previous century. But his peculiarity and absurdity were embodied in the classical 'stories.'

Beckett's prosaic style more radically headed towards the impossibility of expression through drastic transfiguration

as a novel in the post-war era. Contrary to Franz Kafka who remained in one city, Prague, Samuel Beckett was a spontaneous exile who spoke English as an Irishman. Although he grew up in a family who were Protestant and benefited from education and a family environment in Ireland, he selected life in France and abandoned his job as a college teacher. It seems that Beckett's wish and reason to be an exile reflected his self-sufficiency. Moreover, he held ambitions to become an author like James Joyce. Yet, some factors affected him. Firstly, he was an Irishman who had lost his native language, Gaelic. Secondly, he noticed early on that he was not as competent a writer as Joyce and held reservations about his own talent as a writer. Thirdly, although he was Irish, he did not believe in Christianity. Despite his nationality and love for his country, he could not continue to live in Ireland and to be Irish permanently. What he considered to be peculiar religious customs and society interfered with his ability to think independently and write creative works. Beckett seemed to have thought that he wished to create literary works from global view points, not from narrow views in Ireland. Kafka hid himself in Prague, and Beckett, after a generation, left Dublin.

For many reasons, it was said that Beckett's literary experiment would bring about an ending to literature as most people knew it. Destructive cynicism which includes sadistic violence resulted in a meaningless form of literature and the possibility of language expression which led to an endless and spiral space of words without silence. As was suggested, Beckett's characterization of this destructiveness was intensified after his work *Trilogy* appeared in the aftermath of the war. This was because Beckett realized the limitations of literary expression, and with a developing interest in the art of theater, found new possibilities in staging plays. His last and longest work, *How It Is*, drawing inspiration from Dante's *Divine Commedia*, may certainly be regarded as one which describes a mechanically destructive and sterile world by means of language. In Dante's Inferno, guilty people were soaked in pits of boiling pitch, where they had to regret and recognize their sins in the infinite hell. Beckett's *How It Is* represents what may be thought of as dead language space, realizing a hell of spoken words which express

the destiny of a person who consists of 'words.' In later Beckett's works, it is necessary to recognize that a novel is transfigured into a meta-language novel, and a man is only an existence which is made up of 'words.' This extreme approach by Beckett is surely destructive. As Orga Bernal suggests, (and Maurice Branchot also makes a similar point), Beckett's novels tend towards an end of literature. A man and language have to express something continuously without death, in spite of the fact that he realizes he cannot stop speaking. Falling into silence is impossible; to die is also impossible. Death is also undecided. Meaningless floods of words and a sterile, grimy survival were destined for the characters of Beckett's works.

In the case of Kafka, it is of significance to realize that although his style of novel was based on the conventional tradition which he had inherited from the naturalism of the likes of Fraubert, his cynical, melancholic views of the world emerged from the whole works radially, which, as a result, offered more universality of the human condition. The feeling of alienation, loneliness, fear of existence, the void implied in life and death are cynically expressed in his witty and somewhat cruel descriptions. Such style derives as a consequence of Kafka's peculiar life in Prague and the age in which he lived. Therefore, this negative cynicism requires more detailed and concrete examination. Nonetheless, it can be inferred from his life that the literary idea was attributable to his personality itself.

## 2. Negative cynicism in Kafka's literary ideas

Many explications of Kafka and his works have been made over time. Yet, it is important to continue to point out that Kafka's peculiar literary ideas are of major significance in the early 20th century. His literary ideas are based on essentially deep insights into human beings and societies. Cynical wit and melancholic negativism are found in most of his works. Albert Camus explained Kafka's literary ideas from the point of view of this 'absurdity' in his short essay. Camus thought "*Kafka expresses tragedy by everyday life and the absurd by the logical*"<sup>10</sup>. Camus draws attention to the essential paradox in the peculiar state of absurdity in Kafka's works. On the one hand, there is a tragedy in daily

life, and on the other absurdity in the logic of society or social system. Usually, people live their lives performing routine tasks, with no room for unexpected tragedy that might disturb their daily life. Social systems usually consist of reasonable order and the conscientious morality of civilians. But society depicted by Kafka is encompassed within what may be viewed as an intolerant and melancholic unkindness, revealing a cruel system which imparts malicious destinies to the protagonists. Uneasiness and the indifference of society as expressed in *Der Proceß* (*The Judgment*) disclose such a mechanical system of society, accompanied with even a comical atmosphere. The state in which a seemingly sane person has to live in an insane social system presents comical effects. Joseph K cannot absolutely demonstrate his innocence and establish his identity in such absurd system. As Camus suggests, it is absurdity latent in society. Mystic absurdity which exists in the logic of the social system creates grotesque paradoxes in which characters suffer unavoidable fates. Unavoidable tragedy in everyday life creates gloomy cynicism and nightmare. Joseph K said at last 'like a dog' when he was persecuted, which symbolizes the essence of absurdity. Camus recognizes an essence of Kafka's works, pointing out that "what must be remembered in any case is that secret complicity that joins the logical and the everyday to the logic," referring to *Die Verwandlung*<sup>11)</sup>. While Camus points out the importance which supports Kafka's works is the delicate balance between absurdity and logic, he also suggests the paradoxical universality of Kafka. "His work is universal (a really absurd work is not universal) to the extent to which it represents the emotionally moving face of man fleeing humanity, deriving from his contradictions reasons for believing, reasons for hoping from his fecund despairs, and calling life his terrifying apprenticeship in death"<sup>12)</sup>. This universality is created through Kafka's outstanding imagination. His works are not traditional fables which propose moral stories and beneficial lessons. As for ethical or moral views, there are no allegorical implications in his works. Kafka wrote stories through his negative cynicism and peculiar imagination which led to allegorical realism. Through this peculiar allegorical realism was Kafka's universality created. In 'Vor dem

Gesetz' ('Before the Law') a man from the country in his quest for the law asks a doorkeeper to let him pass through the gate to reach the law. But the doorkeeper would not allow entry, even until the country man's death. The doorkeeper said to him, "nobody cannot enter but you into this gate, because this gate is only for you." It is impossible to determine if "the gate" is the fate of a person and the doorkeeper of the gate is an executioner of the man<sup>13)</sup>.

This short piece 'Vor dem Gesetz' ('Before the Law') which was a part of *Der Proceß* and published in *Ein Landarzt* (*A Country Doctor*) is very symbolic and suggests Kafka's views in regards to humans and human nature. The doorkeeper never allows access through the gate, and the man is frustrated in his quest before the gate until his death. This concept is a common point to *Der Proceß* or *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*). The concept is that humans are only beings who are always left stranded. Everything is beyond human power, and human life is filled with vain effort until the end of life. What is important is the situation of the man who is deserted in a manner of cold aloofness. This is Kafka's negative cynicism that expressed his style of novel. It may be supposed that Kafka's literary idea is created by this cynical and brusque coldness which is at the core of his view to humans and society. Of course, Kafka was regarded as a thoughtful man, but this negative cynicism forms the base of his imagination and encouraged his writing. In 'Der Bau' ('The Burrow') a man, the narrator, lives in a hole that is the place where he has set his pride and trust for his survival. He notices that an unknown animal which is metaphor of pulmonary disease is getting nearer to him. The unknown animal or shadow of death disease threatens his survival, but he never knows what it is. The setting of this story, a dweller in a hole, is grotesque. He feels easiness and security in this grotesque hole, being threatened by the unknown noise. It is obvious that the noise by being unknown is a metaphor of death. A human cannot escape from the destiny of death. The image of cruel death caused suddenly and coldly is frequently found in his works. A man was killed by a vulture that thrust its beak into the man's throat. "Now I realized that it (the vulture) had understood everything; it took wing, leaned far back to gain impetus, and then, like a javelin thrower, thrust its

beak through my mouth, deep into me. Falling back, I was relieved to feel him drowning irretrievably in my blood, which was filling every depth, flooding every shore"<sup>14</sup>). As Joseph K was also killed brusquely at the end of *Der Proceß*, the scene and the image of death are important in Kafka's works and are depicted with indifferent, cruel, brusque description. The way of dealing with the carcass of the hunger artist is a good example: "'Well, clear this out now!'" said the overseer, and they buried the hunger artist, straw and all. Into the cage they put a young panther"<sup>15</sup>). The artist was dealt with like garbage (in the same way as G. Samsa after his death), and instead of him, ironically, an energetic and strong panther served as a replacement in the same cage. The contrast of the killed and the new dweller is expressed cynically. Kafka vividly points out the frailty and vulnerability at the end of life. Kafka always described death and its victims quite indifferently. This negative cynicism precisely reflects Kafka's literary ideas which highlight his peculiarity. Peculiarly cynical and brusque description also include comical essence. Untidy, ignoble death reveals comedy that is effective in expressing absurdity and the merciless reality of human destiny.

While he sustained the traditional and naturalistic form and style, he developed a peculiar imagination which generated allegorical grotesque, melancholic and nightmare-like disaster. This fundamental source of Kafka's imagination is related to his personality which is further linked to the act of writing for him. Because, as M. Blanchot suggests, the act of writing is almost equal to survival for Kafka. Hence, it is necessary to consider his personality more in detail.

It is well-known that Kafka recognized only a number of his works including *Die Verwandlung* as being of value, and told Max Brode that others had to be thrown away. However, this promise was not kept. Kafka spent much time writing these works, whereas he also performed his job as an insurance officer earnestly, which he rather thought it was suited for him<sup>16</sup>). The diary and letters he left suggest that Kafka was a person who persistently engaged in the act of "writing," or he was very fond of writing which alleviated his mind better than anything else. As everyone does, he left the feelings he experienced

in his life in numerous words in letters and diary. (This is quite natural behavior as a person, not especially confined to the case of Kafka.) But Blanchot dares to stress the point that Kafka as a writer lived his life only through the embodiment of an activity of writing something. Blanchot thought that Kafka embodied and practiced the essence of literature, and the act of writing. In short, this may be interpreted as meaning that, for Kafka, writing is equal to the act of living. He refers to Kafka's words "I cannot completely understand that it is possible for a person who tries writing to objectify the bitterness of life in sufferings"<sup>17</sup>). Blanchot thought this impossibility of objectification of man's sufferings became a task for Kafka. Blanchot points out that rather than the expression of the sufferings of human beings, the role of literature is the embodiment of them in another world.

It is interesting that Blanchot thinks that it is important for an artist to recognize the "consciousness of unhappiness." Art derives from this recognition of consciousness of "unhappiness"<sup>18</sup>). Most literary works deal with human unhappiness and sufferings. Helplessness and despair are the important factors for novels. This has been true since the days when Greek tragedies first appeared. Blanchot understands that art is the consciousness of unhappiness, but not compensation for unhappiness. Art has to be created not by self-sufficient imagination, but by creating another world where an author could realize the sufferings and predicament of humans. In that sense, Blanchot regards Kafka as one of the most peculiar and unique beings in the 20th century. He suggests: "Kafka's works belongs to the most dark, most unhappy and prostrated being with grief, which distresses human's hope tragically. This is not because human's hope is executed, but because hope is not led to execution"<sup>19</sup>). Human hope is a factor of literature and the most important essence for human existence. Because it is human hope that includes morals, and the right path as a human being. Kafka's cynicism mercilessly attacks human hope. There is an unhappy and helpless space where characters like 'Gracchus' continue to live without life nor death. Some characters are killed, and others are not absolutely killed, rather exist as an undead person who is suspended between

the dead and the living. Kafka provides such absurdity in another world he created. A sardonic example in the short piece, 'Prometheus,' also suggests Kafka's cynical view: "According to the fourth (legend) everyone grew weary of the meaningless affair. The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed weary. There remained the inexplicable mass of rock. The legend tried to explain the inexplicable. As it came out of a substratum of truth it had in turn to end in the inexplicable"<sup>20</sup>). The legends of Prometheus, the origin of human beings, had caused everyone to grow weary. Every effort came down to meaningless affairs. What remained was inexplicability. The effort of Prometheus was comically helpless. "Growing weary" symbolizes Kafka's view to the essence of humans, incorporated within the negative cynicism of his literary idea in many scenes of his works; Joseph K grows weary of the process of judgement (*Der Proceß*), and Samsa does of the transfiguration of oneself (*Die Verwandlung*), and K does of the impossibility of entering the castle (*Das Schloss*), or the character does of applying immunity to tax ('*Die Abweisung*'), characters do of deep social structure and broadness of the state ('*Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer*'). Kafka probably thought every effort humans made came to meaningless endings which he used to try to make fun of humans allegorically and comically. The way of description of 'growing weary, or tired of' by Kafka's style is so cynical, and sometimes so comical, that readers cannot but feel vague absurdity in his literary view of the world. It is certain that tragic (comical) factors are included in daily life, and absurd factors are included in social system and customs.

Again, the case of 'Der Jäger Gracchus' is of interest. This truly cynical and serious short piece could symbolize the negative cynicism of Kafka. Gracchus who had already been dead is not perfectly dead, and his soul and body do not belong to any world. Although dying, he is unable to go anywhere. He has to live among the living, not being helped by anyone. He deplors his situation and says "the whole earth would become an inn for night", meaning that he is nobody, unknown to anybody, the earth left him, living and being dead. And his most impressive observation is revealed as, "I am here, more than that I

do not know, further than that I cannot go. My ship has no rudder, and it is driven by the wind that blows in the undermost regions of death"<sup>21</sup>). As already suggested, the image of the living dead reflects the soul of Kafka himself. Paradoxical absurdity, a living-dead man wandering among the living, emphasizes Kafka's grotesque cynicism which is common to most of his works. It is likely that this helpless absurdity, Kafka's negative literary ideas, are attributable to the environment and conditions he lived in in his city of Prague. As Parvel Eisner and others point out, his peculiar environment, the life in Prague, is critically important to consider his negative, literary ideas.

### 3. The city of Prague made his personality

Eisner suggests that it was the important factors of Prague that decisively affected personality of Kafka and his whole works throughout his life. Prague was a unique ancient city of central Europe, and in that sense, the personality of Kafka also became inevitably unique. Prague was fundamentally traditional and peculiarly urban city that had once been the cultural and political centre of Europe (one of the largest cities in Europe in the 14th century.) In the age of Kafka, the Czech region belonged to the Austro-Hungarian empire. The majority of people of Prague consisted of Czechs, with the minority German and Jewish, although these held economic and political governorship. The Jewish population lived in what may be described as a ghetto. Franz Kafka was born in this German-Jewish community in the ghetto of Prague. In 1900, the population of Prague was about 450,000. Germany and German-Jewish numbered only 34,000 at that time. By around 1939, the population had doubled, and about one million people were now living in Prague. Among them, Germans made up about 60,000, including 25,000 of German-Jewish extraction. The system of social class had not changed, so the majority Czech were dominated both politically and economically under the economic reign of Germany. The further minority, German-Jewish, consisted of an economically rich class—entrepreneurs, rich merchants, medical doctors, lawyers, bank managers, or college professors, and thus were also members of the upper class



that controlled the urban society of Prague in Kafka's time. Compared with other urban cities in central and eastern Europe, Prague was a prominent city where many rich Jewish people lived upper class lifestyles. This was due to the role of Prague as a historically important central city of Europe, which had developed in the 20th century as the center of industry for Czech's heavy manufacturers. The region was very prosperous in terms of heavy industry, including the munitions industry. Many Jewish people were engaged in trade, import and export entrepreneurship, and financial companies which led to a degree of control of the Czech economy. In this situation they took advantage of their economic profits and enhanced their social status. As a part of the upper class, it was a natural consequence that rich German-Jewish people could gain access to higher education and reap the benefits of their wealth, in contrast to other Czech people who performed manual work.

The fact that Jews could not possess real estate, as farmers nor landowners in urban or country areas, led them to seek sufficient income through occupations which needed no ownership of land. Franz's grandfather was once engaged in processing meat, and his son, Herman, Franz's father, strove to leave small Jewish society and moved to Prague to seek his fortune. Herman's success as luxury haberdasher merchant gave him self-confidence as an entrepreneur who pursued economic profit, factors which played a role in forming his personality. Herman who was proud of his talent as a merchant of luxurious haberdashery was a somewhat obstinate, forceful person and regarded his son, Franz, as weak, and undependable. Kafka himself thought that his personality was inherited from his mother. However, a calm and prudent character was not favoured by his father, for whom realizing economic profit and developing talent as an entrepreneur were the most important things in society in order to survive in their position as Jews in Prague, where it might be supposed that even rich Jewish people would have difficulty thriving. He must have recognized the difficulty and reality of survival as a minority in Eastern (Central) Europe, so Herman wished his son to become a persistent and pragmatic person. In this respect, Herman was probably correct, but Franz did not find the success that his father intended for

him. He worked diligently as an officer at the 'Prague Office of the Worker's Non-life Insurance Association of the Bohemian Kingdom,' in order to find spare time to write his novels. Since the personalities of father and son was so different, there was an element of discord between Kafka and his father. This discord never descended into serious enmity, but Franz felt his father's intolerance, manifested as a lack of recognition of his talent as a writer. For this reason, Franz wished to believe that his character was derived from his mother's family tree. It seems that he was possessed with the idea that he was essentially similar to his mother from the view point that his mother's family was somehow more Jewish and scholarly like himself. This convinced him that he was a writer by nature, not a self-made merchant like his father and he emphatically suggested the same in his diary and in letters to his father (nevertheless his sister, Ottra, and mother did not show the letters to Herman, afraid of his anger.)

According to the Eisner's study, the name Kafka derived from 'Kavka', an alternative pronunciation of the Slavish word 'kava', meaning small crow (= *Corvus monedula*). This name is a typical Czech name, and at the same time, usual for a Jewish family living in Bohemia. This means that the Jewish Kafkas were probably natives of Bohemia or Moravia<sup>22</sup>). Kafka himself clearly recognized his position in Prague as a German-Jew. As Eisner suggests, he was neither German, nor Czech, and indeed, purely Jewish. He used German fluently and wrote his works in German except for the occasional use of the Czech dialect, and yet, he could not possess the attributes of race and language, which led him to feel himself as being apart from the world. It is reasonable to suppose that this attribution to minority as a German-Jew, or as being apart certainly made him feel that he was an alienated person in the Czech region and in Europe (and given the image of his mother's traits, he noticed his Hebrew essence in his spirit.) While he was a superior officer at the insurance company and benefited from the stable income his work provided, he never felt safety nor comfort as a human. It appeared that an impression of alienation attached to him persistently. And this sense contributed to his cynical and negative literary ideas. Alternatively, it might be possible to suppose

that this negativism led Kafka to regard a human as a being of 'failure.' In other words, a human is destined with the fate of failure. As Willy Haas suggests, Kafka's humans are the existence of mistakes before God<sup>23</sup>).

The hunger artist died saying: "I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else"<sup>24</sup>). From the beginning, Kafka and readers alike know the ending: the man's merciless death. He was destined to die from the outset. Kafka's cynicism and cruelty are effective as his literary ideas. The officer in *In Der Strafkolonie* was forced to be killed by the cruel and absurd rules of an execution. Description of man's destiny with death was Kafka's most important theme in his literature based on negativism. In other words, he thought that humans are always threatened with death, as if being among the dead. But they never know what death is, pretending not to know the terror of death while continuing their lives. Although Kafka fortunately avoided the suffering of the 'pogroms' which killed so many Jewish people living in eastern Europe in the 19th century, and also died before the holocaust engulfed European Jews in the 20th century, he knew that humans were always under the threat of sudden death; the cruel destiny of death always lurked behind human life. In fact, most Jews living in Prague were sent to prison under the reign of Nazis, and were mercilessly killed there. His two sisters were also among the Jewish victims killed at Auschwitz. Kafka, who fortunately had not experienced the most horrible massacre, created melancholic and absurd works from his negative imagination. His literary ideas based on cynicism evidently contributed to describing the essence of human beings, the destiny of every time and every place, which led to universality and can be evaluated as modern literary masterpieces.

### Conclusion

Samuel Beckett's literary ideas are based on a peculiar negativism which tended towards extreme negation of function of language and meaning of words, resulting in what may be regarded as a negation of literature. Kafka's negativism, based on more traditional literary form and

styles of novel, created a peculiarly cynical and sardonic world.

Tradition derived from Flauvert or Dostoevsky facilitated Kafka's objective description and was effective in producing a simple and monotonous depiction of a story. Kafka, influenced by pessimistic views from Kirkegor or Nietsche, was a person who had an innate insight for describing the dark side of human beings. Therefore, it is of significance to recognize the individuality of Kafka who lived his whole life only in Prague as a Germany-Jew, which, in a sense, meant that he was deprived of his identity; he was neither a Czech, nor a German, nor a true Jew of Israel in the modern era. Kafka himself understood this critical position in the world. This sense of self-alienation affected his negative, pessimistic philosophical-literary ideas which led to negative cynicism.

As an officer of an insurance agency, he continually saw how people and the world were soaked in sterile, temporary and cruel destiny from this negative perspective. In addition, other personal factors also affected him: the silent serious conflict between him and his father might have keenly affected his character, lending weight to the idea that there was no true understanding and reconciliation between humans in his mind. There is a deep invisible gap between humans, (and between humans and God). Humans cannot but follow their helpless destiny. God cannot notice nor perceive the predicament of people. They are left as they are in oblivion, being symbolized in the character of Prometheus and the hunger artist. Such destiny is, sometimes, rather expressed comically, resulting in sardonic amusement. This cynical negativism derived from Kafka's personality, however, could succeed in revealing universality in modern society, because people in this complicated modern society live their lives in a state of melancholy upset and unbelieving confusion, tending to perceive a fundamental fear of uncertainty. From this point of view, Kafka's negative cynicism can be evaluated as one of the most important literary essences appeared in the 20th century.

Beckett's works introduced further cynical and negative literary ideas to literature. He had no interest in traditional expression form and styles, which resulted in a true

impasse of description and impossibility of literature. Kafka described the impasse of humans incorporated within the traditional story, implying human existence of failure before God in the 20th century.

#### Notes

- 1) Samuel Beckett. 1975. *Texts for Nothing in No's Knife* Calder and Boyars:100.
- 2) William J. Currie. 1975. *Metaphors of Alienation: The Fiction of ABE, BECKETT and KAFKA* Shincho-press: 14-39. Currie suggests the three authors have a common theme 'alienation of a man' referring to Hegel and Erich Fromm. According to Hegel, an individual seeks his identity, considering fragmentation of his mind through alienation from society. The individual, located between reality and ideal existence in society, pursues identity by dialectic consideration of position in the world. Fromm regards 'alienation' in the sense that a man feels himself as an 'other,' that is, the sense of estrangement from 'the self.' Losing identity, the individual cannot contact with society and himself. Currie thinks that these authors deal with characters who feel themselves alienated and lost identity.
- 3) Samuel Beckett. 1976. *Molloy* John Calder: 33.
- 4) Hugh Kenner. 1974. *The Stoic Comedians Flaubert Joyce and Beckett* University of California Press: 70.
- 5) Samuel Beckett. 1964. *HOW IT IS* Grove Press: 103, 147.
- 6) Giorgio de Chirico developed his peculiar idea 'Pittura Metafisica' as one of the mythical methods. Classical, mythical motif was embedded in modern paintings. The world of myth was expressed in landscapes and materials like mannequins. Metaphysical notions transcend the age, and connect ancient times and modern age.
- 7) The use of classics is the same in the Renaissance which aimed at reconsideration of European tradition and cultural recovery. The motif of paintings in Renaissance referred to European myths and the sacred stories of Christianity.
- 8) Valéry defined 'the situation of peace' as being created by creative activity and productive strife, which is more difficult to understand and predict its essence. He thought all creative and productive activities could be reversely transformed into harmful power which would lead civilization to collapse. "Mais l'espoir n'est que la méfiance de l'être à l'égard des prévisions précises de son esprit. Il suggère que toute conclusion défavorable à l'être doit être une erreur de son esprit = But hope is nothing but distrust that an existence shows to precise prediction in the spirit. Hope suggests that a conclusion which is not favorable to the self must be an error caused by human spirit." Paul Valéry. 1924. 'La crise de l'esprit' in *Variété I et II* Gallimard:17., translation into English by the author. This suggestion obviously reveals that Valéry recognized the vulnerability of the human spirit, and attributed his pessimistic and cynical views to human reason and intelligence. The suggestion that hope must be an error caused by human spirit, indicates the point of the face of human's deception. And a human error might be a common point that is referred to later in Kafka's works.
- 9) It is thought that T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound established a firm, political identity. It is easy to infer from the fact that Pound oriented to fascism in Italy, supporting Mussolini. He is an example of an opportunistic man who was attracted to classical ideas and traditional order and power, or a kind of racism in Europe. The movement of modernism included many kinds of people with various aspects who were engaged in literature and art. Surrealists aimed at more avant-garde expression, A poet like W. B. Yeats was interested in occultism, and Pound supported anti-Zionism and idea of Fascism. These aspects reflect chaotic essence of the movement of modernism in the 20th century.
- 10) Albert Camus. 1975. Translation by Justin O'Brien. 'Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka' in *Myth of Sisyphus* Penguin Books: 115.
- 11) Camus. op.cit., 116.
- 12) Ibid., 122.
- 13) Franz Kafka. 1971. Translation by Tania and James Stern. 'Before the Law' in *Kafka the Complete Stories* Schocken Books, New York: 4.
- 14) Kafka. op.cit., 'The Vulture' in *Kafka the Complete Stories* 443. The image of the vulture seems to be derived from 'Prometheus' in which eagles feed on Prometheus's liver. (the vulture) is inserted by the author.
- 15) Ibid., 'A Hunger Artist': 277. This description is similar to the situation when the dead body of Gregor Samsa was put away in *Die Verwandlung*.
- 16) Franz Kafka was an officer at Prague office of the Worker's Non-life Insurance Association of Bohemian Kingdom. He was highly evaluated as an officer, and later was exempted from military service.
- 17) Maurice Blanchot. 1958. Translation by T. Shigenobu *La Part du Feu* Kinokuniya: 12. (Translated into English by the author.)

- 18) Maurice Blanchot. 1981. Translation by N.Awatsu. Kafka et L'exigence de L'uvre in L'espace Littéraire Chikuma: 325. Blanchot writes: "Art is consciousness of unhappiness. What Art describes is humans and their situations; a human who lost oneself, who is no longer able to say 'I', who cannot but obey destiny of banishment, wandering and losing truth of the earth, and who belongs predicament." (Translated into English by the author.)
- 19) Maurice Blanchot.1975. Translation by T.Shigenobu and M.Hashiguchi. *La Part du Feu* Kinokuniya: 142-3.
- 20) Kafka. 'The Hunter Gracchus' in *The Complete Stories*: 432. (legend) is inserted by the author.
- 21) Ibid., 230.
- 22) Pavel Eisner. 1975. Translation by Yu Kanai and Toshio Kobayashi. *Kafka and Prague* Shinbisha: 37.
- 23) Willy Haas. 1977. Translation by Yoshihito Harada. Franz Kafka' in *Kafka Chikuma Shobo The World Literature* 65: 431. Haas suggests a human makes mistakes before God. Kafka came to realize some interest in Zionism, there is little probability that Kafka intended to incorporate religious themes into his works. He tried to depict helpless humans more simply in the world of the 20th century when there was no God after Nietzsche.
- 24) Kafka. op.cit. 'The Hunger Artist' in *The Complete Stories*: 277.