

## Theatre of the Absurd

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### Abstract

Harold Pinter is the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 2004 – for his contribution in the field of DRAMA. The type of drama to which he contributed his lot is known as “THEATRE OF THE ABSURD”. The same of the other writers of his times were Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Kafka and others. As the popular phrase goes “ ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny “ Harold Pinter’s time and his personal experiences have certainly contributed to the style of his writing – which in general, has termed as “The Theatre of the Absurd World Wide”.

**Keywords:** Harold Pinter, Theatre of the Absurd, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny

On 19 November 1957, a group of worried actors were preparing to face their audience. The actors were members of the company of the San Francisco Actors’ Workshop. The audience consisted of fourteen hundred convicts at the San Quentin Penitentiary where no play had been performed in forty-four years. The director Herbert Blau and the actors were apprehensive as they were to face one of the toughest audiences in the world with a highly obscure, intellectual play that had produced near riots among a good many highly sophisticated audiences in Western Europe. The play was: “Waiting for Godot”.

Blau, in his introductory speech compared the play to a piece of jazz music to which one must listen for whatever one may find in it. He appealed the audience to find some meaning-some personal significance for each member from the play.

One curtain parted as the play began. What had bewildered the sophisticated audiences of Paris, London and New York was immediately grasped by an audience of the convicts. San Quentin News put it in the columns of the Prison Paper thus:

“The trio of musclemen, I biceps overflowing.....Parked all 642 lbs on the isle and waited for the girls and funny staff. When this didn’t appear they audibly decided to wait until the house lights dimmed before escaping. They made an error. They listened and look two minutes too long and stayed. Left at the end, all shook ....”

The convicts did not find it difficult to understand the play. One prisoner told a reporter, “Godot is society,” Another said, “He is the outside,” A teacher at the prison was quoted as saying, “They know what is meant by Waiting and they knew if Godot finally came, he would only be disappointment.”

The play was a symbolic expression to avoid all personal error and that each member of the audience had to draw his own conclusions. It asked nothing in point; it forced no dramatized moral on the viewer, it held no specific hope..... We’re still waiting for Godot and shall continue to wait”. When the scenery gets for drab and the action too slow, we’ll call each other names and swear to part forever – but then, there’s no place to go!”

The reason why a Play of the supposedly esoteric avant-garde made so immediate and so deep an impact on an audience of convicts is that the play confronted them with a situation in some ways analogous to their

own, or perhaps they were unsophisticated enough to come to the theater without any preconceived notions and ready-made expectations, so that they avoided the mistake that trapped so many established critics who condemned the play for its lack of plot, development, characterization, suspense, or plain common sense. Plays written by Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, and others – which were so often superciliously dismissed as nonsense or mystification – have something to say and can be understood and hardly been defined. Usually, plays of this type when judged by the standards and criteria of another would be regarded as impertinent and outrageous impostures.

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these plays had not story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and presented the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play had to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often had neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play was to hold the mirror of the mannerisms of the age in finely.

Observed sketches, there were no such things; if a good play relied on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, the plays of the above dramatists consisted of incoherent babblings.

The type of plays, concerned here pursue ends quite differently from the conventional plays and therefore use quite different methods, they can be judged only by the standards of the Theatre of the Absurd. The dramatists whose work is clubbed as The theatre of the Absurd, however do not form part of any self – proclaimed or self-conscious scholar movement on the contrary each of the writers is an individual who regarded himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private world, Each has his own personal approach to both subject matter and form; his own roots, sources, and background. If they have a good deal in common, it is because their work most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the Western world.

Theirs are however, not the representative of mass attitudes as any age cannot represent a homogeneous pattern. The period to which the authors such as Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter belonged, the mid and late twentieth century, was the age of transition which displayed a bewilderingly stratified picture: medieval beliefs still held and overlaid by eighteenth century nationalism and mid-nineteenth-century Marxism, rocked by sudden volcanic eruptions of prehistoric fanaticisms and primitive tribal cults. Each of these components of the cultural pattern of the age finds its own artistic expression. The Theatre of the Absurd, however, can be seen as the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our own time.

While explaining about the Absurdity of human beings, Albert Camus, in his famous *The Myth of Sisyphus*, said:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the home of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity. \*1

Absurd originally means 'out of harmony', in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: 'Out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical'. In common usage, 'absurd' may simply mean 'ridiculous', but this is not the sense in which Camus uses the word, and, in which; it is used when we speak of the Theatre of the Absurd. In an essay to 'Kafka', Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows : Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.\*2

A similar, sense of the senselessness of life, of the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose, is also the theme of much of the work of dramatists like Sartre, Camus, John-Osborne, and many more,. Yet, these writers differ from the dramatists of the Absurd in an important respect that they presented their sense

of irrationality of human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning, while the Theatre of the Absurd strove to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. While the formers repressed the new content in the old convention, the Theatre of the Absurd went a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these were expressed.

Writers like Camus, Arthur Miller and Bernard Shaw tried to express the disillusioned age through elegantly rationalistic and discursive style of an eighteenth century moralist, in well-constructed and polished plays. They presented plays based on brilliantly drawn characters who remain wholly consistent and thus reflect the old convention that each human being has a core of immutable, unchanging essence, an immortal soul. Their beautiful phrasing and argumentative brilliance proclaimed that local discourse can offer valid solutions and that the analysis of language will lead to uncovering of basic concepts – Platonic ideas.

The dramatists of the Absurd, on the contrary, tried by instinct and intuition rather than by conscious effort, to overcome and resolve. The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it is his striving for integration between the subject matter and the form in which it is expressed that separates the Theatre of the Absurd from the Existentialist Theatre.

The Theatre of the absurd is also different from the poetic avant-garde theatre of dramatists in the sense that, although both the theatres rely on fantasy and dream reality, and disregard the traditional axioms such as the basic unity and consistency of each character or the need for a plot, the poetic avant-garde represents a different mood: it is more lyrical, and far less violent and grotesque. The poetic event-grade uses conscious poetic speech in which images are composed of rich web of verbal associations.

**Martin Esslin writes:**

“The Theatre of the Absurd is thus part of the ‘anti-Literary’ movement of our time, which has found its expression in abstract painting, with its rejection of ‘literary’ elements in pictures ; or in the new novel in France, with its reliance on the description of objects and its rejection of empathy anthropomorphism..”

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