

**:: STRUCTURE ::**

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**7.1 OBJECTIVE**

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In this unit we shall

- Study the concept of absurd
- Understand the absurd movement and how is expressed through the form of drama
- Understand how the theme of absurdity is highlighted in life

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**7.2 INTRODUCTION**

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Theatre of the Absurd is the post-World War Two phenomenon and is applied to European playwrights of the late 1950s. The style of theatre evolved from their plays resulted into decline in faith in religion, nationalism and political ideologies. Martin Esslin was probably the first to introduce the term 'Absurd' in his essay 'The Theatre of the Absurd' which was written in 1960. However, the mood and dramaturgy of absurdity were practiced as early as 1896 in Alfred Jarry's French play '*Ubu roi*' (Ubu the King).

The ideas that construct these plays decide their structure. Absurdist playwrights, therefore, did never bother about the logical structures offered by traditional theatre. There is little or almost negligible dramatic action which is otherwise found in a traditional drama. However,

characters in these plays seriously play their parts, their seriousness into action emphasises that nothing, which is extraordinary, happens which can alter or bring about change in their existence. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), there is no action in the play and at the same time whatever little action the play presents is almost timeless and of circular quality. The play presents two lost humans, usually played as tramps or vagabonds spend their days waiting, but without any certainty of whom they are waiting for or of whether he, or it, will ever come.

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### 7.3 WHAT IS ABSURD?

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Absurd originally means 'out of harmony', as 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 one speaks 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. (Bijoya Chandra Padhy)

The 'Absurd' in the absurd plays represents a person's reaction to the world, which seems to be without meaning or meaningless. Absurd plays also portray human as a puppet controlled and guided by some invisible external forces. Characters in these plays are caught in hopeless situations and are compelled to indulge in repetitive or meaningless actions. All these things lead to many significant interpretations, which are beautifully discussed by absurd playwrights. It would be incorrect to assume that these playwrights intended to solve the issue of man's meaningless existence. In fact, these writers offer no solution to the problem, which in itself suggests that the question of existence is not answerable at all. And perhaps, therefore, many critics consider these plays as 'anti-plays'.

According to Ali Assi Hussien, the theatre of absurd seems to be a reaction to the "collapse of moral, religious, political, and social structures" following the two World Wars of the Twentieth Century. (History of Theatre of the Absurd in Literature)

Albert Camus propagated a philosophical idea that life essentially is without any meaning. This may be considered as existential philosophy. Camus' philosophy with absurd is experimented in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), first published in French, in which the punishment of Sisyphus, the protagonist, continues for ever. Camus probably wants to establish the situation of mankind through Sisyphus's punishment. However, amidst such ruthless situation lay hope for mankind, hope for ultimate meeting with God. Thus, theatre of absurd not only propagates mankind's hopeless situation and nothingness, but it also believes in the existence of God. Thus, this theatre is an answer to earlier scientists and

philosophers like Frederik Nietzsche who had declared that the world is Godless and if at all there is the one, God is dead. (Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, 1). Writers like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov etc. presented a world full of struggle, disparity, extremity, hopelessness and endless wait. Martin Esslin comments, "Basically, the theatre of the Absurd expresses the loss of feeling that the world makes sense, and can be reduced into an integrated system of values – which is due to religion – that had been apparent since the end of the First World War ... disillusionment of the period after the Second World War." ('Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf as the Theatre of Absurd', 2)

The Theatre of the Absurd exhibits and shows the absurdity and illogicality of the world we live in. According to this theatre, there is nothing which is settled, pre-decided and fixed, no conclusions can be made and whatever few actions mankind is involved in, are meaningless. Absurdity gets reflected in human actions which are circular and repetitive in nature. For example, in *The Bald Soprano*, the man attempts to tie his shoe, a mundane act, is presented as a fantastic act, whereas the appearance of rhinoceroses is not at all significant. In *Waiting for Godot*, aimless running around and searching by Pozzo and Lucky are least important than Vladimir and Estragon's sitting idly doing nothing and waiting.

In his book *Absurd Drama* (1965), Martin Esslin explains the purpose and meaning of absurd clearly and unambiguously thus:

"The Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy... (and) brings (audience) face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it... It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly... because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation."

The theatre of the absurd shows and proves that the world is an incomprehensible place. The spectators see the happenings on the stage entirely from the outside, without ever understanding the full meaning of these strange patterns of events, as newly arrived visitors might watch life in a country of which they have not yet mastered the language. The confrontation of the audience with characters and happenings which they are not quite able to comprehend makes it impossible for them to share the aspirations and emotions depicted in the play.

In absurd, the world is being shown as complex, harsh, and absurd and as difficult to interpret as reality in itself. The audience is yet forced on to

attempt their own interpretation to wonder what it is all about. In that sense, audience / readers are being invited to school their critical faculties, to train themselves in adjusting to reality. As the world is being represented as highly complex and devoid of a clear-cut purpose or design, there will always be an infinite number of possible interpretations. (www.semanticscholar.org, 13)

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these plays have 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, there were no such things. If a good play relied on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, the plays of the absurd dramatists consisted of incoherent babblings.

These types of plays pursue ends quite differently from the conventional plays and therefore use quite different methods. They can be judged only by the standards laid down for the theatre of the absurd. The dramatists whose works are considered and categorized as the theatre of the absurd, however, do not form part of any self-proclaimed or self-conscious scholar movement. On the contrary, Bijoya Chandra Padhy argues that each of these 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.

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## **7.4 THEMES**

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A wide variety of subject matter is dealt by absurdist plays. However, there are certain themes or ideas which reoccur time and again. The themes which occur frequently in the plays of these playwrights are meaningless world and isolation of an individual. They, in all probability, present the mood, behaviour as well as reaction of the people of the time, mostly Europe. These themes perhaps testify, in the words of Martin Esslin, that the “certitudes” and “assumptions” of previous generations had “been tested and found wanting, that they [were] discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions” (Esslin, p 23).

Absurd playwrights were perhaps not conscious of being part of a movement during the course of writing their plays. They each thought of oneself as “a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in [his own] private world” (Esslin 22). This seems to be the reason why most of the plays focus on isolation of the individual, or man’s inability to connect with

others. For example, the best known, appreciated and performed play is perhaps *Waiting for Godot* (1952) by Samuel Beckett. Both the main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are tramps that while away their time aimlessly on the outskirts of society. Despite in the company of each other, they feel isolated from one another. One of the indications of their potent sense of isolation is their inability to converse with each other effectively.

### **Meaningless World:**

Decline in religious faith is largely responsible for the belief that life is purposeless and that there is no meaning beyond human life. Eugene Ionesco, in *The Chairs*, suggests this meaninglessness through two characters that are busy in preparing chairs for invisible guests. These invisible guests are visiting to learn about the meaning of life. The orator, who ironically is deaf-mute, himself, declares all these things.

### **Isolation of an Individual:**

Almost all the absurd plays focus on isolation of the individual, or in other words, a human being's incapability to connect with others. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), excellently explores this idea. The two protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, are never able to adequately communicate with each other and with the world outside and their conversation becomes repetitive, monotonous and meaningless.

In absurd dramas, repetition, circular structure, static quality, absence of cause and effect, and lack of apparent progression suggest monotony and purposelessness in the modern world. These plays present chaos and basic disorientation of modern man. Works of the writers of the theatre of the absurd are characterized by lack of logic, unconventional dialogue, rejection of conventional characterization and plot. They all express the idea that human existence is essentially meaningless and that in this world true communication is impossible. The idea of the absurd implies that this world is meaningless and that human existence itself is essentially meaningless.

Everything that happens seems to be beyond rational motivation, happening at random or through the demented caprice of an unaccountable idiot fate. Yet, these wildly extravagant tragic farces and farcical tragedies, although they have faced a lot of protests and scandals, do arouse interest and are received with laughter and thoughtful respect.

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## **7.5 PLAYWRIGHTS**

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Playwrights who practiced the theatre of absurd are Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, Luigi Pirandello, Tom Stoppard, Edward Albee, etc. Eugène Ionesco play's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) helped a great deal in popularizing the absurd movement.

The absurd movement seems to be a Paris-based phenomenon. Some of its exponents, such as Jean Genet, Boris Vian and Jean Tardieu, were born in France. Many other absurdist activists came from other countries to live in France: for example, Samuel Beckett from Ireland; Eugène Ionesco from Romania; Arthur Adamov from Russia; Alejandro Jodorowsky from Chile, Fernando Arrabal from Spain, etc. As the influence of the absurdist playwrights spread to other countries, many playwrights started experimenting with the techniques. In England, exponents of the theatre of the absurd were Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, N. F. Simpson, James Saunders, David Campton, and others. In America, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, Jack Gelber, and John Guare are some of the playwrights who are involved with the theatre of absurd. In Poland, Tadeusz Różewicz, Sławomir Mrożek, Tadeusz Kantor, etc. practiced absurd theatre. In Italy Dino Buzzati and in Germany Peter Weiss, Wolfgang Hildesheimer, and Günter Grass experimented with theatre of absurd.

These playwrights were influenced by certain movements and genres, for example, Elizabethan tragicomedy, formal experimentation, pataphysics, surrealism, Dadaism, and most importantly, existentialism.

#### **Elizabethan Tragicomedy:**

Martin Esslin considers William Shakespeare as an important influence on absurd theatre. Shakespeare's tragicomedy has attracted these playwrights. Friedrich Dürrenmatt argues: "Comedy alone is suitable for us ... indeed, many of Shakespeare's tragedies are already really comedies out of which the tragic arises." ('Problems of the Theatre'). Plays like Ionesco's *Macbett* and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* prove the point.

In *Endgame*, Nell ponders, "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness ... it's the most comical thing in the world".

#### **Formal Experimentation:**

As an experimental genre, many absurd playwrights employ techniques borrowed from earlier innovators. Luigi Pirandello, author of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, is regarded as theatrical experimentalist who desired to collapse the fourth wall. According to W. B. Worthen, *Six Characters* and other Pirandello plays use "Metatheatre — roleplaying, plays-within-plays, and a flexible sense of the limits of stage and illusion — to examine a highly-theatricalized vision of identity".

#### **Pataphysics, Surrealism, and Dadaism:**

Pataphysics, surrealism, and Dadaism are the three movements closely connected with each other and not easily separable. Pataphysics means "the science of imaginary solutions". Alfred Jarry, the author of *Ubu*, experiments with this technique in 1890s. Surrealist playwright

Artaud's 'The Theatre of Cruelty' is an important philosophical treatise exploring this genre. Artaud believed that the true strength of theatre was in its visceral impact. Dadaism is based on irrationality and negates the accepted laws of beauty. Playwrights who experimented with Dadaism were Tristan Tzara, Adamov, Arrabal, Paul Eluard, André Breton, etc.

### **Existentialism:**

Many absurd playwrights followed Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy presented through *Being and Nothingness* (1956). Sartre believed that good is only an illusion and evil is a nothingness which arises upon the ruins of Good. However, absurd playwrights like Ionesco firmly believed that there is a difference between existentialism and absurd in that the theatre of absurd suggests failure of a human being without suggesting any solution for the failure. Samuel Beckett seems to believe that life is repetitive where end-result of everything is going to be the same and everything is meaningless, whatsoever and howsoever important it may look like.

The plays of Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Eugene Ionesco have been performed with astonishing success in France, Germany, Scandinavia, and the English-speaking countries. These plays confront their public with a bewildering experience, a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical events that seem to go counter to all accepted standards of stage convention. In these plays, some of which are labelled "anti-plays", neither the time nor the place of the action are ever clearly stated.

Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is combination of realism and the absurd. The dialogue in these plays consists of meaningless clichés and the mechanical, circular repetition of stereotyped phrase.

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## **7.6 CHARACTERS**

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Characters in the absurdist plays are hardly recognizable human beings and are not convincingly motivated. The characters hardly have any individuality and often even lack a name. Moreover, halfway through the action they tend to change their nature completely. Pozzo and Lucky in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for example, appear as master and slave at one moment only to return after a while with reversal in their respective positions.

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## **7.7 LANGUAGE**

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Absurd playwrights seem to believe that language cannot convey the human situation exactly as it is. They claim that language is empty and communication is meaningless. That is why the dialogues in absurdist plays often seems to be meaningless babble. Martin Esslin suggests that "The theatre of the absurd is to a very considerable extent concerned ...

devoid of meaning. The conversation at the party ... is suddenly revealed as an exchange of mere meaningless banalities. The people talking about the weather... anything at all. In other words, from being a noble instrument of genuine communication ... filling empty spaces”.

Language of these absurd plays is often dislocated, clichéd, full of pun, repetitions and non-conclusive. For example, characters in Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano* (1950) talk while sitting, repeating everything to the point from where it looks utter nonsense. The purpose of this is to expose incompetency of verbal communication. The outwardly ridiculous and purposeless behaviour and incompetent talk arouse sense of farce. However, inwardly there is a serious message of psychological chaos and suffering. This reflects the influence of comic tradition presented by commedia dell’arte, vaudeville, and music hall along with such theatre arts as mime and acrobatics. Moreover, the impact of ideas as expressed by the Surrealist, Existentialist, and Expressionist schools and the writings of Franz Kafka is evident.

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## 7.8 LET US SUM UP

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Thus, theatre of the absurd realized the world about the purposelessness of purpose of life. It also revealed artistically that life is meaningless and there is no purpose in finding a meaning to it. The absurd playwrights deliberately collapsed structure, characters and language to prove that there is no meaning to anything in this life except meaninglessness. Indeed, these were greatly and superbly presented artistic works presented at the time when the questions about existence of God were raised.

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## 7.9 KEY WORDS

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**Absurd** Not in consistent with reason, logic and common sense  
**Incoherent:** Illogical, not meaningful  
**Collapse** Break down, shatter, unconventional  
**Structure** Unity, coherence, construction, meaning, arrangement

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## 7.10 BOOKS SUGGESTED

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- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber and Faber, 1956. Print.
- David Wesley M. *Teaching\_Waiting\_for\_Godot.pdf*. 3 July, 2020. Print.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. USA: Penguin Books, 1961. Print
- Hussien, Ali Assi. ‘History of Theatre of the Absurd in Literature’. 2020.
- Ionesco, Eugene, ‘Dans les armes de la ville’, Cahiers de la Compagnie. Work in French.



- Jose, Nirmal. 'Theatre of the Absurd'. <https://www.academia.edu/search?Web>.
- <https://sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/the-theatre-of-the-absurd>
- Padhy, Bijoya Chandra, 'Theatre of the Absurd'. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol.1, No.2, 2011. Print.
- 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf as the Theatre of Absurd'. Web.
- <[https://www.academia.edu/6943152/The\\_theatre\\_of\\_absurd](https://www.academia.edu/6943152/The_theatre_of_absurd)>
- Wilson, Keith. 'Is It Absurd to Deny Bivalence?' Web.
- <<https://www.academia.edu>>

- **Check your progress 1:**

**Q.1 Answer the following questions based on your reading of the unit.**

1. Explain what is absurd with support of various examples.

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2. Write in detail about various themes dealt by absurd playwrights.

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3. Write a note on the characters presented in absurd plays.

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4. Choose correct alternative from those given below each:

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**Q.2 choose the correct options from the given below.**

1. Who is the author of the essay 'The Theatre of the Absurd'?
  - a. Jacob Martins
  - b. Martin Esslin
  - c. Luke Esslin
  - d. Martin Luther
  
2. Samuel Beckett is known for which famous absurd play?
  - a. Birthday Party
  - b. Bad Soprano
  - c. Waiting for Godot
  - d. Chairs
  
3. Albert Camus' which work philosophises absurd?
  - a. Letter to Kafka
  - b. The Myth of Pozzo
  - c. Seven Character in Search
  - d. The Myth of Sisyphus
  
4. Eugene Ionesco's which play has earned fame as an absurd play?
  - a. The Chairs
  - b. Upside Down
  - c. A Doll's House
  - d. Endgame
  
5. 'The science of imaginary solutions' means.....
  - a. Metaphysics
  - b. Pataphysics
  - c. Metamorphosis
  - d. Tetrphysics

**Answers:**

Q.2 Key to the MCQ:

1. b 2. c 3. d 4. a 5. b