

**UNIT : 8****WAITING FOR GODOT : III****- Samuel Beckett****:: STRUCTURE ::**

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**8.1 OBJECTIVE**

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In this unit we shall

- Discuss various playwrights and philosophers propagating the absurd
- Discuss various plays and theories by these playwrights and philosophers
- Discuss how various elements of absurd are permeated through these writers

After completing the Unit, you should be able to understand

- Absurd Theatre and playwrights involved with it
- Various playwrights and their contribution in the Theatre of Absurd

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## 8.2 INTRODUCTION

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Theatre of the Absurd is the post-World War II 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.

Many absurd playwrights have contributed significantly. Some of them are discussed below. However, since Thomas Beckett is discussed separately and exclusively, this playwright has been omitted from the present discussion. Moreover, many absurd philosophers have attempted to explain the absurd. A few significant of these philosophers are also included here. The playwrights are discussed in alphabetical order and hence do not carry order of any sort.

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## 8.3 ALFRED JERRY

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Alfred Jarry (1873–1907) was a French writer who is best known for *Ubu Roi* (1896). He has the distinction of coining the term and philosophical concept of [pataphysics](#), which means using absurd irony to portray symbolic truths. He wrote novels, poems, short plays, operas, essays and journalism. His texts are considered examples of [absurdist literature](#) and [postmodern philosophy](#).

*Ubu Roi*'s main character is Père Ubu who is a strange and ugly character. He becomes the King of Poland. Ubu symbolizes absolute stupidity and greed as his lust for power drives him to abuse his authority and commit cruelty in the name of principles.

Jarry has subsequently written *Ubu Roi* sequel: *Ubu Enchained* (1900), *Ubu on the Mound* (1901) and *Ubu Cuckolded* (1944).

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## 8.4 ALBERT CAMUS

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Albert Camus (1913–1960) was born in Algeria and then migrated to France. He was a philosopher, an author, and a journalist. He was awarded with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957. He is probably one of the youngest recipients of this award.

Albert Camus wanted to establish the absurdity of the human condition in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. *The Myth of Sisyphus* examines absurdity of man's condition and an attempt to provide a rationale for not committing suicide in the face of such absurdity. Camus's world appears to be "meaningless" as there is lack of absolute.

Camus questions [human condition](#) and discusses the world as an absurd place. In 1942, he published *L'Étranger*. This is the story of a man living an absurd life. He also wrote a play about the Roman emperor [Caligula](#) who seems to be in the pursuit of an absurd logic. Camus's collection of essays, *Noces* ([Nuptials](#)) and *Betwixt and Between*. In these essays, he reflects his experience of the absurd. All these experiences are reflected through novel *The Plague* also.

Camus explains absurd as "confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." (*John Foley*) Camus's *Letters to a German Friend* (1945) are very important explanation of absurdity. *The Revue Libre* (1943), the *Cahiers de Libération* (1944) and *Libertés* (1945) are also important contributions.

Camus cannot see any reconciliation between the existence of God and the existence of unwarranted suffering. In short, reason cannot comprehend how God can exist in the face of such evil. Since there is such evil, God cannot then exist.

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## 8.5 ARTHUR ADAMOV

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Arthur Adamov was born in 1908 in Russia. He studied at Geneva and France. Antonin Artaud's influence on Adamov has been tremendous. Arthur Adamov, along with Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, made efforts to create art of the theatre appealing "histrionic sensibility". (Carlos Lynes, Jr. 48)

Adamov's first play *La Parodie* (1947) was produced in June 1952, at the Theatre de Lancry. The play has a prologue followed by twelve rapid scenes. There are sights and sounds like whistles, the roar of motorcars, police sirens, sudden flashes of light from headlights, etc. They all represent disorder in the society. However, in the backdrop of all these, one comes across a variety of characters who appear to be absurd,

grotesque, naïve, living in mechanical rigidity in bearing, action and speech. The play has almost no story as these people meet without seeing one another, they speak but language remains unclear.

*L'Invasion* (1949) was produced at the Studio des Champs-Elysee, France. The play presents a group of people brought together in a single room which in itself is stuffed heavily with furniture and disorderly piled documents. The play presents an author who is absent and these documents are his manuscript full of illegible notes. At the end of the play, these manuscripts are torn into pieces as they remain unsolved. The characters in *L'Invasion* suffer from solitude and failure of communication. The title “invasion” probably refers to disorder within the characters.

Adamov's third play, *La Grande et la Petite Manuvre* (1950), was produced on November 11, 1950, at the Theatre des Noctambules in Paris. The play presents nightmarish atmosphere of a contemporary police-state city. There is conflict between disorder and brutality, revolutionary action and dictatorial repressive measures etc. The protagonist, representing common human, is caught in the political and social disorder of the day. Such is the human condition.

*Le Professeur Taranne* (1951) presents a university professor who is unable to live up to the public role assigned to him. This professor tries to conceal his insufficiency by imitating and plagiarizing a scholar's work. He then lives under fear of getting exposed. This fear of exposure unbalances even his reason.

The title of *Tous contre tous* (1952) presents political and human tragedy of the time. Here the inhuman reigns supreme, as the government exercises senseless tyranny and maintains absolute authority using “scientific” propaganda techniques supported by ruthless power.

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## **8.6 BERTOLT BRECHT**

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Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was a German theatre practitioner, playwright and poet. The plays written by Brecht during his years in exile have become famous. Some of the important of them are *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941), *The Life of Galileo* (1943), *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1943), *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, etc.

Brecht's early plays are anarchic, nihilistic, and antibourgeois. The playwright seems to present antisocial elements such as adventurers, pirates and prostitutes. After converting to Marxism, Brecht wrote didactic or morality plays. His later plays are combination of Marxist beliefs and realistic characters.

Brecht is also known for epic theatre. He has elaborated theory of epic theatre in *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and in *A Little Organum for the Theater* (1951). Brecht shows difference between epic theatre and the Aristotelian theatre. A dramatic theatre has tightly

constructed plot which helps in creating suspense, whereas in epic theatre there are loosely connected scenes helping the audience focus on the play.

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## 8.7 EDWARD ALBEE

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Edward Albee was an American playwright known for absurd plays. He was awarded with prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Edward Albee's plays are full of sentimentalism. These plays propound an idea that life is very bad and that people are untrustworthy and bad.

Albee's first play *The Zoo Story* (1958) was performed at New York. This established Albee as an absurd playwright. *The Zoo Story* deals with social criticism. The play has themes of isolation, loneliness, miscommunication as anathematization, social disparity and dehumanization in a materialistic world. The characters in this play are just cartoons. The playwright's treatment of romantic theme and gothic violence evade the social issues from which he takes his milieu, his characters and his idiom.

Albee's second drama is *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1959). The play presents a Negro, Bessie Smith, a singer, who is bled to death as Bessie is denied entry into an all-white hospital after an automobile accident. Interestingly, Bessie Smith never appears in the play. Albee's confusion of satire and Gothicism vitiates his characterization and the dramatic events.

*The American Dream* (1961) satirises contemporary life. The crossed American flags dominates the set. The play opens with three familiar characters: Mommy, a man-eater; Daddy, emasculated; and Grandma, a shrewd vernacular heroine. The play's opening exemplifies Albee's connection between social and sexual themes.

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is probably the most famous of Albee's plays. The play presents a bad marriage. The play concerns battle between George, a humanist, and Nick, a scientist. In an Albee style, against backdrop of bad marriage is presented a larger canvas, that of nightmares caused by fear of science. One of the most outstanding features of the play is Albee's rich use of language.

Apart from these plays, Edward Albee has also written plays like *A Delicate Balance* (1966), *All Over* (1971), *Seascape* (1975), *The Lady from Dubuque* (1980), *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1982), *Finding the Sun* (1983), *Marriage Play* (1987), etc., just to name a few.

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## 8.8 EUGENE IONESCO

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Eugene Ionesco (1909–1994) was a Romanian-French playwright. His plays depict solitude and insignificance of human existence. Ionesco can be considered a traditional playwright. His distinction is in his techniques and in exploration of farce and in combining farce with tragedy.

Ionesco's plays are very innovative. His plays are *The Bald Soprano* (1948), *Jack, or The Submission* (1950), *The Lesson* (1950), *Salutations* (1950), *The Chairs* (1951), *The Future is in Eggs* (1951), *Victims of Duty* (1952), *The New Tenant* (1953), *The Killer* (1959), *Rhinoceros* (1959), *Hunger and Thirst* (1964), *Macbett* (1972), etc. Ionesco's plays are often considered "anti-play" because they express feelings of alienation and the impossibility and futility of communication with surreal comic force, parodying the conformism of the bourgeoisie and conventional theatrical forms.

Ionesco's perhaps most celebrated play *The Chairs* describes the end of a marriage. An Old Man of ninety-five years and his wife, ninety-four, open the play with some verbal uninteresting chat. Gradually the author changes the tone and narrows dialogues until the activity reaches a climax. *The Chairs* is a theatricalized portrait of a death.

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## 8.9 EUGENE O'NEILL

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Eugene O'Neill (1888–1953) was an American playwright who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He is one of the firsts to introduce techniques of realism propounded by Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, etc. O'Neill's drama *Long Day's Journey into Night* is considered to be one of the finest plays in the 20th century USA.

Eugene O'Neill is often considered as the founder of modern American theatre as well as the founder of serious American drama. He is the first important American dramatist to explore serious themes and experiment with different theatrical techniques. He combined tragic and comic elements.

Eugene O'Neill is influenced by Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's irrationalism which compelled him to limitations of his country and depict absurdity of modern human existence. O'Neill's absurdity is explored with the help of "repetition", "faithlessness" and "incommunicability". However, the playwright seems to be optimistic about human existence. O'Neill's characters display the indefatigable spirit in their fighting for an authentic way of existence.

Some of his important plays are:

*Long Day's Journey into Night*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Alms*, *The Great God Brown*, *Servitude*, *Anna Christie*, *Strange Interlude*, *Ah, Wilderness!*, *Beyond the Horizon*, etc.

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## 8.10 HAROLD PINTER

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Harold Pinter (1930–2008) is one of the most influential British playwright, screenwriter, director and actor. He has written more than 25 plays. His best known plays are *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Homecoming* (1964), *No Man's Land* (1975), *Betrayal* (1978) and *The Dumb Waiter*.

Pinter presents an individual's fear and explores the cause of disruption developing from emotional crisis. His plays present problem of self and sense of isolation of the human condition. His characters are confronted with the picture of a modern human defeated by societal forces around him/her because of human's inability to communicate with fellow humans. The constant threat of disruption is visible throughout his plays.

Pinter's best known play *The Birthday Party* resembles with Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. An ordinary man is threatened by two strangers for an unknown reason. Harold Pinter does not provide any details about his characters, except age and sex. It is up to readers or audience to learn about relations and motivations of the characters during the play. Uncertain family relationship is one of the often recurring themes in Pinter's plays. Moreover, Pinter extensively uses pauses, silences, repetitions, unusual and illogical talks and linguistic inconsistencies. The fragmented language in his plays makes his drama very intriguing, to the point of making it difficult to interpret plays.

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## 8.11 JEAN GENET

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Jean Genet (1910–1986) was a French novelist, playwright, poet, essayist, and political activist. His prominent works include the novels *The Thief's Journal* and *Our Lady of the Flowers* and the plays *The Balcony*, *The Maids* and *The Screens*.

Genet's plays present struggle between outcasts and their oppressors. In his plays, social identities present a more complex layering of the dramatic fiction and its inherent potential for theatricality and role-play. *The Maids* (1947) is about two housemaids who role-play the murder of Mistress. The action of the play reveal that their fantasy of killing their Mistress is actually their desire of doing the same. Action in *The Balcony* (1957) is located in an unnamed city witnessing a revolutionary uprising in the streets. Almost entire action takes place in a brothel which serves as a [microcosm](#) of prevailing threat in the world outside.

*The Blacks* (1959) exposes racial prejudice while exploring black identity. A troupe of black actors re-enact the trial and murder of a white woman. The play presents a violent assertion of Black identity and anti-white hostility. Jean Genet's *The Screens* (1964) is a political play showing detailed account of the Algerian War of Independence.

Genet's plays are written in the expressionist manner and are designed to shock and implicate an audience of its hypocrisy and complicity. The playwright's Theatre of Hatred attempts to create the maximum dramatic power from a social or political situation without endorsing the political platitudes of either the right or the left.

Jean Genet's other novels are *Miracle of the Rose* (1945–46), *Funeral Rites* (1947) and *Querelle of Brest* (1947).

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## 8.12 JEAN PAUL SARTRE

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Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a French philosopher playwright, novelist, screenwriter, political activist, biographer, and literary critic. He was one of the key figures in the philosophy of existentialism. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964.

Sartre deals with the problem of possibility of human knowledge and describes the world as chaotic, without purpose and irreducible. Sartre has concluded that man is separated from the world she/he lives in. Sartre considers freedom as, "The writer, a free man addressing free men has only one subject – freedom."

A human is merely an object in the world of physical things and is filled with consciousness that automatically separates him/her from this physical world. When a person attempts to view oneself as a thing, he/she is compelled to question one's own existence, and yet by the very nature of his/her consciousness is also compelled, in all integrity, to accept the futility of his/her question. Such is a person's "absurd" situation.

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## 8.13 TOM STOPPARD

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Sir Tom Stoppard (b. 1937) is born in Czechoslovakia and settled in England. He has written plays for television, radio, film, and stage. His plays are *Arcadia*, *The Coast of Utopia*, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, *Professional Foul*, *The Real Thing*, *Travesties*, *The Invention of Love*, and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. His work covers the themes of human rights, censorship and political freedom.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966–67) has gained recognition. His comedies *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968) and *After Magritte* (1970) create humour through reframing and juxtaposition. *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977) is inspired by a meeting with a Russian exile. Apart from *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, *Dogg's Hamlet*, *Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979), *The Coast of Utopia* (2002), *Rock 'n' Roll* (2006), and two television plays *Professional Foul* (1977) and *Squaring the Circle* (1984) deal with themes of censorship, abuse of human rights and state sponsored repression.

Stoppard's later works like *The Real Thing* (1982) discusses meta-theatrical structure to explore the suffering that adultery can produce and *The Invention of Love* (1997) exposes the pain of passion. *Arcadia* (1993) deals with chaos theory, historiography, and landscape gardening.

Tom Stoppard writes about anxiety and confusion of life, helplessness of the individual caught up in forces beyond reason and the loss of identity



and faith. He describes lack of absolute values, problem of freedom and uncertainty of all knowledge and perception through his plays. The playwright's world is almost unbelievable and irrational filled with cruelty and pain. His characters are victims of calamities which ultimately destroy them.

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## 8.14 LET US SUM UP

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After discussing in detail about the absurd play *Waiting for Godot* in previous two units, this unit gives us the idea of Theatre of the Absurd in detail. We have also studied in brief about various playwrights from Briton, U.S.A. and other countries and got the short introduction of their major works.

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## 8.14 KEY WORDS

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<b>Epic theatre</b>	According to Britannica, it is a form of drama presenting a series of loosely connected scenes that avoid illusion and often interrupt the story line to address the audience directly with analysis, argument, or documentation.
<b>Aristotelian theatre</b>	Play with tightly constructed plot creating suspense
<b>Illusion</b>	a misleading image

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## 8.15 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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**Q.1 The questions presented here have answers in the above. Find out answers and write them:**

1. Prepare a note on Albert Camus's contribution to absurd.

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2. Explain what is metaphysics with reference to Alfred Jerry's plays.

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3. Write in detail about Arthur Adamov's absurd plays.

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4. Write a note on Brecht's epic theatre.

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5. Choose correct alternative from those given below each:

**Q.2 Choose the correct option for the questions given below.**

1. Who is the author of *Ubu Roi*?

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|------------------|-------------------|
| a. Jean Genet    | b. Eugene Ionesco |
| c. Harold Pinter | d. Alfred Jerry   |

2. *The Myth of Sisyphus* is written by who of the following?

- |                 |                   |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| a. Edward Albee | b. Albert Camus   |
| c. Tom Stoppard | d. Bertolt Brecht |

3. In which year was *The Zoo Story* written?

- |         |         |
|---------|---------|
| a. 1958 | b. 1959 |
| c. 1960 | d. 1957 |

4. In which country was Tom Stoppard born?

- |                   |            |
|-------------------|------------|
| a. Hungary        | b. England |
| c. Czechoslovakia | d. America |

5. Using absurd irony to portray symbolic truths means .....

- |                |                                |
|----------------|--------------------------------|
| a. Dadaism     | b. Metaphysics                 |
| c. Didacticism | d. <a href="#">Pataphysics</a> |

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**8.15 BOOKS SUGGESTED**

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❖ **Answers:**

**Check your progress 2:**

Key to MCQ:

1. – d
- 2.- b
- 3.- a
- 4.- C
- 5.- d