Chapter 5

Theatre of the Absurd

Historical development

The term ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ was coined by Martin Esslin who wrote *The Theatre of the Absurd* in 1961. Broadly speaking, it can be applied to a number of works in drama and prose which suggest that the human condition is essentially absurd. Among other things, the literature has its roots in the fiction of Franz Kafka, the author of *The Trial* and *Metamorphosis*.

Movements that influenced the theatre of the absurd are as follows:

- **Commedia dell’arte**: A form of comic drama developed by guilds of professional Italian actors. It relied on the use of stock characters and situations, plenty of comic situations, and the actors used masks to represent their characters.
- **Expressionism**: An artistic theory of the late 19th century where the subconscious thoughts are presented by a series of nonnaturalistic techniques.
- **Dadaism**: A nihilistic movement in the arts that flourished chiefly in France, Switzerland, and Germany in the early 20th century. The movement is marked by a disgust for bourgeois values and despair over World War I.
- **Surrealism**: Launched as an artistic movement in France by Andre Breton’s *Manifesto on Surrealism* (1924), surrealism can be considered an off-shoot of Dadaism. Gradually this movement had a far-reaching influence on the literature of the absurd, antinovel, magic realism and postmodernism.
- **Silent film comedy**: Actors such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton embodied the alienation of men when faced with mechanical devices and rapid industrialization. Eugene Ionesco even announced that his *The Chairs* was influenced by the works of the Marx brothers.

The most prominent names associated with the theatre of the absurd are: Arthur Adamov, Fernando Arrabal, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Gunter Grass, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard.

Martin Esslin points out the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd which are found even in the traditional art forms as follows:

- Pure theatre: Scenic effects as they are familiar in the circus or revue, in the works of jugglers, acrobats, bullfighters, or mimes
- Clowning, fooling, and mad-scenes
• Verbal nonsense
• The literature of dream and fantasy (Esslin, 282).

The following are the most common features of Absurdist writings:

• Naïve & inept characters
• Fantastic or nightmarish world
• Playing out “tragic farce”
• Events are simultaneously comic, horrifying, and absurd.

**Gogol’s *The Nose* (1836)**

In Nikolai Gogol’s (1809-1852), Kovalev is a junior civil servant with an acute sense of hierarchy. He wakes up one morning to find his nose gone. On his way to inform the authorities about his loss, he is taken aback when he meets his nose dressed in the uniform of a civil servant several ranks above him. He attempts to address it, but is snubbed on the grounds of his inferior rank. Praised for its biting satire, *The Nose* anticipates the tradition of absurd in European literature.

**Pataphysics and absurdism**

The ideas of this system were proposed by Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), who focused on the ‘science of imaginary solutions’. Jarry, the playwright of *Ubu roi* (1896), was a precursor of surrealism and post-World War II, of this system when a group of thinkers formed the *College de Pataphysique*. By its popular definition, the word means ‘beyond metaphysics’. The pataphysicians invented rules and regulations and produced a sort of parody of the conventional college of learning. Pataphysics is the metaphysics of nonsense and the absurd, and is anti-reason. The major names associated to this system are: Eugene Ionesco, Boris Vian, Jacques Prevert, Raymond Queneau, and Jean Dubuffet.

**Existentialism and absurdism**

After the 1940s, the existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Pal Sartre and Albert Camus came to view human beings as isolated creatures, who are thrown in an alien universe, which, in turn, possessed no inherent truth, value, or meaning. The existentialists, particularly on stage, did not set people in their “normal” surroundings. Instead, they removed the dramatis personae to a new context, this displacement leading them to appear in estranged form. Most of Sartre’s works follow this pattern.
Albert Camus (1913-60)

One of the foremost names associated with the philosophy of existentialism, the Theatre of the Absurd owes much to Camus’ beliefs, some of which are:

“But in the end one needs more courage to live than to kill himself.” *Happy Death.*

“There is but one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide.” *The Myth of Sisyphus*

“Who despairs over an event is a coward, but he who holds hope for the human condition is a fool.” *The Rebel* (1951).

At the centre of Camus’s thought is the thesis that human existence is absurd, and that human beings search for meaning in existence. But with the demise of traditional beliefs in religion & ideology, we know that this search is meaningless.

The essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (*The Myth of Sisyphus*), 1942, expounds Camus’s notion of the absurd and of its acceptance with "the total absence of hope, which has nothing to do with despair, a continual refusal, which must not be confused with renouncement - and a conscious dissatisfaction". The final chapter of the essay compares the absurdity of man's life with the situation of Sisyphus, a figure of Greek mythology, who was condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a rock up a mountain, only to see it roll down again. The essay concludes, "The struggle itself...is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

*L’Etranger* (*The Outsider*, 1942) begins as, “Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can’t be sure. The telegram from the Home says: Your mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Deep sympathy. Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could’ve been yesterday,” is noted for its laconic tone, as the news of death arrives on an ordinary day. The lead character, Mersault, lives for the sensual pleasures of the moment and yet ends up accepting responsibility for an accidental killing. He is tried and judged guilty of murder because he failed to cry at his mother’s funeral and because he refuses to embrace Christianity.

For Camus, the absurd was not negative, not a synonym for “ridiculous,” but the true state of existence. Accepting the view that life is absurd is to embrace a "realistic" view of life: the absence of universal logic. This approach to philosophy is more radical than Nietzsche's "God is dead."

Camus’s other major works are:

- Caligula (1944)
- The Plague (1947)
- The Rebel (1951)
- The Fall (1956)
He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature 1957.

Quiz

i. What are the major influences on the theatre of the absurd?
ii. Define pataphysics.
iii. Mention three important features of existentialism.

Major writers of the absurdist movement

In the following section you will be introduced to a few significant names related to the theatre of the absurd:

Samuel Beckett

Born in Ireland, Beckett (1906-1989) was the literary disciple of James Joyce (1882-1941). Later, he settled in France and became a member of the French resistance movement. His well-known plays include Waiting for Godot (1953), Endgame (1957), and Krapp’s Last Tape (1958). These plays challenge the traditional dramatic forms through their depiction of bizarre vaudeville-like characters, in outlandish settings, and speaking outrageous dialogues. There was a total absence of a ‘meaningful’ plot, and characters would exchange frequently nonsensical and illogical dialogues. But all this inventiveness was to highlight Beckett’s view of human existence, suggesting that it was as illogical, purposeless, and absurd, as the dramatic representation. While explaining Beckett’s dramaturgy, a critic says:

In normal human experience, space and time are organically linked. They constitute a continuum. However, in Beckett’s contrapuntal dramaturgy the two coordinates of human experience seem to be in tension. Time (the fourth dimension of space, as a famous definition describes it) seems to be virtually non-existent for the space-bound tramps. With only the haziest fragments of memory and no future prospects, they exist in a static, perpetual present (Malick 1989:21).

Waiting for Godot (1955) presents two tramps in a wasteland waiting for a mysterious person called Godot. The following lines from Waiting for Godot tell us about the meaninglessness of human situation:

**VLADIMIR:**
Well? Shall we go?
ESTRAGON:
Yes, let’s go.
They do not move. (Curtains).

A good example of Beckett’s antihero can be found in his prose fiction, such as Malone Dies (1958) and The Unnamable (1960).

Eugene Ionesco

Born in Romania, Ionesco (1909-94) was a French playwright. While learning English, Ionesco was inspired by the stilted commonplace expressions in the textbooks. This led to the genesis of The Bald Soprano in 1950. One of his earlier works, The Bald Soprano, went unnoticed till Jean Anouilh, Raymond Queneau, and Jacques Lemarchand supported it publicly. With favourable critical and public reception, Ionesco shot into the limelight and soon came up with other important works such as, Rhinoceros, The Chairs, Jack or The Submission, The Lesson, The Killer, Exit the King, Macbeth, and Journeys Among the Dead. His works develop the ‘anti-play’ kind of structure and themes, where he would often dispense with dramatic unity and allow the most spectacular flights of philosophical fantasy.

Case Study

The Bald Soprano by Eugene Ionesco

Mr. Martin: Excuse me madam, but it seems to me, unless I’m mistaken, that I’ve met you somewhere before.
Mrs. Martin: I, too, sir. It seems to me that I’ve met you somewhere before.
Mr. Martin: Was it, by any chance, at Manchester that I caught a glimpse of you, madam?
Mrs. Martin: That is very possible. I am originally from the city of Manchester. But I do not have a good memory, sir. I cannot say whether it was there I caught a glimpse of you or not!
Mr. Martin: Good God, that’s curious! I, too, am originally from the city of Manchester, madam!
Mrs. Martin: That is curious!
Mr. Martin: Isn’t that curious! Only, I, madam, I left the city of Manchester about five weeks ago.
Mrs. Martin: That is curious! What a bizarre coincidence! I, too, sir, left the city of Manchester about five weeks ago.
Mr. Martin: Madam, I took the 8.30 morning train which arrives in London at 4.45.
Mrs. Martin: That is curious! How very bizarre! And what a coincidence! I took the same
train, sir, I too.

**Analysis**

Notice how the conversation is taking place with both characters expressing surprise by using a similar set of phrase, “how bizarre”, “what a coincidence”, “that is curious”, and all the while addressing each other most formally with “sir” and “madam”. Notice how Ionesco repeats the word “too.” Absurdist like Ionesco were extremely suspicious about the nature of the language. Throughout the play, we find the playwright making ample use of clichés. What we find here, therefore, is banality and monotony of everyday conversation and insufficiency of the language as a tool of communication.

Now read on from the same play, as the couple continue their conversation:

**Mr. Martin**: Since coming to London, I have resided in Bromfield Street, my dear lady.

**Mrs. Martin**: How curious that is, how bizarre! I, too, since coming to London, I have resided in Bromfield Street, my dear lady.

**Mrs. Martin**: How curious that is, how bizarre! I, too, since coming to London, I have resided in Bromfield Street, my dear sir.

**Mr. Martin**: I reside at no.19, my dear lady.

**Mrs. Martin**: How curious that is. I also reside at No.19, my dear sir.

**Mr. Martin**: Well then, well then, well then, perhaps we have seen each other in that house, dear lady?

**Mrs. Martin**: It is indeed possible but I do not recall it, dear sir.

**Mr. Martin**: My flat is on the fifth floor, No.8, my dear lady.

**Mrs. Martin**: How curious it is, good Lord, how bizarre! And what a coincidence! I too reside on the fifth floor, in flat No. 8, dear sir!

**Mr. Martin [musing]**: How curious it is, how curious it is, how curious it is, and what a coincidence! You know, in my bedroom there is a bed, and it is covered with a green eiderdown. This room, with the bed and the green eiderdown, is at the end of the corridor between the w.c. and the bookcase, dear lady!

**Mrs. Martin**: What a coincidence, good Lord, what a coincidence! My bedroom, too, has a bed with a green eiderdown and is at the end of the corridor, between the w.c., dear sir, and the bookcase!

**Mr. Martin**: How bizarre, curious, strange! Then, madam, we live in the same room and we sleep in the same bed, dear lady. It is perhaps there we have met!

**Notes**

w.c.: water closet

**Analysis**

By now you must have realized that Mr & Mrs Martin are in fact, husband and wife. Their inability to recognize each other is a metaphor for the disconnect between people. Like all the absurdist writers, Ionesco’s concerns remained exploring the tenuous relationship among people and their surroundings.
Also, remember that Ionesco called the play, *anti-play*, since the play does not really have a plot, which is quite like life that has no beginning, middle or end. Again, absurdists do not spend too much time on character development and stage directions. The devaluation of the language is clear as the speakers talk in clichés and truisms, which, in turn, lead to a mockery, a parody of the spoken word. Though the combination of purposeless behaviour and meaningless conversation gives a comic effect, there is an underlying message of distress and angst.

**Harold Pinter**

Born in Hackney, London, Harold Pinter (1930-2005) was a distinguished playwright, actor, director and screenwriter for several successful films.

His early plays were: *The Room* (1957) and *The Dumb Waiter* (1957), both one-act plays. His first full-length play was *The Birthday Party* (1958). After his radio play *A Slight Ache* (1959) was adapted for the stage, his reputation was secured by his second full-length play, *The Caretaker* (1960).

A critic says of Pinter, “The most complicated exemplification of patriarchal stereotyping is *The Homecoming*. The play has generated wildly divergent interpretations, not least through the tension between naturalist subtexts and more metaphorical or poetic possibilities….Ruth’s acquiescence as the working mother, sexual provider and prostitute for a group of sadistic and misogynist men might fulfil the wishes of this profoundly dysfunctional ‘family’.” (Milne 2001: 204).

His *Silence* (1970) is the most lyrical, most Beckettian, and also the most mysterious and difficult.

In 2005, Harold Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the highest honour available to any writer in the world. In announcing the award, Horace Engdahl, Chairman of the Swedish Academy, said that Pinter was an artist “who in his plays uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression’s closed rooms” (www.haroldpinter.org). In his Nobel lecture, which focused more on politics than literature, Pinter launched a ferocious tirade against Bush and Blair, saying they were responsible for tens of thousands of deaths in the Iraq war.

**Edward Albee**

American playwright Edward Albee (1928- ) is best known for *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962), a scathing examination of illusion and reality in contemporary middle-class life. An astute critic of the notion of the American Dream and American values, his other
works include *The Zoo Story*, *American Dream*, and *The Sandbox*. *Who's Afraid* is particularly remembered for a long night of malicious games, betrayal, insults and confrontations.

**Tom Stoppard**

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), an absurdist play about the two minor characters in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Stoppard revisits the Shakespearean play and re-presents it through the characters who have been marginalized so far. The plot, a conflation of Renaissance and absurdist theatre, goes as: Thrown in an unknown place, the two peripheral characters are at first bewildered, and next threatened by their surroundings. Much of the drama arises from the fact that the audience is aware of the dramatic context in which Ros and Guil are operating. They have very little to do and spend a lot of time reflecting over the meaning (or lack) of life. As minor characters, their lives are caught up in events whose importance they will never grasp.

In one of the brilliant scenes, Stoppard employs the strategy of using ‘question as games; where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern kill time by playing a word game, resembling a game of tennis, where questions should be answered by questions:

- **Guil**: Were you addressing me?
- **Ros**: is there anyone else?
- **Guil**: Who?
- **Ros**: How would I know?
- **Guil**: Why do you ask?
- **Ros**: Are you serious?
- **Guil**: Was that rhetoric?
- **Ros**: no.
- **Guil**: Statement! Two-all. Game point.
- **Ros**: What?
- **Guil**: Are you deaf?
- **Ros**: Am I dead?
- **Guil**: Yes or no?
- **Ros**: Is there a choice?
- **Guil**: Is there a God?
- **Ros**: Foul! No *non sequiturs*. 
We can see how the play is self-consciously theatrical, as the players refer to their verbal repartee as ‘non sequitor’. You may also notice a strong resemblance between Stoppard’s characters and Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon. Quite truly, in the hands of Stoppard, Shakespeare’s greatest tragedy becomes an absurdist farce.

Apart from the above mentioned writers, we have absurd fiction by Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*), Thomas Pynchon (*V*), Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.(his experiences as soldier & pow during the WWII reflected in his writings; ex, *Slaughterhouse V*), John Barth and Gunter Grass.

**QUIZ**

1. Match the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Playwright/Writer</th>
<th>Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a Edward Albee</td>
<td>i  The Caretaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b Harold Pinter</td>
<td>ii  V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c Samuel Beckett</td>
<td>iii <em>The Sandbox</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>d Thomas Pynchon</td>
<td>iv <em>Endgame</em></td>
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**Assignment**

Read Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*. How far can you relate Camus’s ideas to The Bald Soprano? Give reasons for your answers.

**Selected websites**


**Supplementary reading:**


**Answer key**

a-iii; b.-i; c.-iv ; d.-ii