Absurdism Study Guide

Absurdism

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Introduction

Absurdism, and its more specific companion term Theatre of the Absurd, refers to the works of a group of Western European and American dramatists writing and producing plays in the 1950s and early 1960s. The term "Theatre of the Absurd" was coined by critic Martin Esslin, who identified common features of a new style of drama that seemed to ignore theatrical conventions and thwart audience expectations. Characterized by a departure from realistic characters and situations, the plays offer no clear notion of the time or place in which the action occurs. Characters are often nameless and seem interchangeable. Events are completely outside the realm of rational motivation and may have a nightmarish quality commonly associated with Surrealism (a post-World War I movement that features dream sequences and images from the unconscious, often sexual in nature). At other times, both dialogue and incidents may appear to the audience as completely nonsensical, even farcical. However, beneath the surface the works explore themes of loneliness and isolation, of the failure of individuals to connect with others in any meaningful way, and of the senselessness and absurdity of life and death.

The writers most commonly associated with Absurdism are Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, and Edward Albee, as well as a number of lesser-known dramatists. The avant-garde nature of absurdist writing contributed in part to its short life as a literary movement. Features of the plays that seemed completely new and mystifying to audiences in the 1950s when absurdist works first appeared, soon became not only understandable, but even commonplace and predictable. With the exception of Ionesco, most playwrights abandoned the absurdist style after the 1960s; however, many of the individual plays are now considered classics of European and American drama.

Themes

Absurdity

Absurdity is the most obvious theme explored in Absurdism. Absurdity characterizes a world that no longer makes sense to its inhabitants, in which rational decisions are impossible and all action is meaningless and futile. Absurdity also describes many situations and events that take place in plays associated with the movement, such as orators who speak in gibberish (*The Chairs*), a clock that strikes seventeen (*The Bald Soprano*), or a rhinoceros that walks across the stage (*Rhinocéros*).

Cruelty and Violence

Beneath the nonsense and slapstick humor of Absurdism lurks an element of cruelty, often revealed in dialogue between characters but occasionally manifested in acts of violence. Pinter's plays are noted for the latter. In *The Room*, a blind man is brutally beaten; in *The Birthday Party*, the celebration becomes an interrogation and eventually an abduction; and in *The Dumb Waiter*, a pair of assassins are involved in an apparently random murder. Similarly, in Ionesco's *The Lesson*, a professor frustrated by his students' inability to understand his meaningless lessons, savagely kills them one after another. The seemingly innocent, child-like characters created by Arrabal engage in unspeakable acts of torture, even murder. On a less physical level is the cruelty hiding behind the apparently humorous dialogue in Beckett's *Endgame*, which features a master/servant relationship in which Hamm dominates Clov. Hamm, in turn, has suffered from the cruelty of his parents when he was a child. His father recounts how the youngster would cry because he was afraid of the dark, and their response, according to the father, was "We let you cry. Then we moved out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace."

Domination

Several well-known absurdist works feature pairs of characters in which one is dominant and the other the dominated. Some of these are quite literally master/servant relationships, such as in Genet's *The Maids* or Beckett's *Endgame*. Others reproduce the master/slave relationship within marriage, as in Albee's *The American Dream* where Mommy dominates the spineless Daddy character or within the traditional teacher/student dynamic, as in Ionesco's *The Lesson*.

Futility and Passivity

The futility of all human endeavor characterizes many absurdist works, such as Adamov's *Ping- Pong* in which two promising students abandon their studies and devote their lives to the appreciation of pinball machines. Adamov's earlier play *La*

Parodie (1947) shares the idea that individuals are powerless to direct their own lives; it does so by presenting two characters, one who refuses to live and one who embraces life with joy. The fate of both is ultimately exactly the same. Havel's early plays, such as *The Garden Party*, deal with the inability of even the most ambitious individual to make any headway against a self-perpetuating bureaucracy. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* suggests that human effort is meaningless and leads to nothing in the end. Beckett's characters are so ineffective and doomed to failure that they are unable even to commit suicide successfully despite two attempts. Their passivity, established by their interminable waiting, is even more famously illustrated by the closing scenes of both first and second acts, in which each stands rooted to his spot on the stage despite having made the decision to leave.

Language

The failure of language to convey meaning is an important theme in the literature of Absurdism. Language is either detached from any interpretation that can be agreed to by all characters, or it is reduced to complete gibberish. A play entitled *The Bald Soprano*, for example, has nothing to do with a soprano, much less a bald one. The standard philosophical discourse is mocked by the nonsensical dialogue in *Godot*; although it is meaningless, it bears a strong resemblance to the structure of the real thing. The language of religious fervor is employed by Adamov in *Ping-Pong*, but the object being venerated is a pinball machine. The characters in Havel's plays speak in clichés and slogans, from which all real meaning has been drained.

Loneliness and Isolation

Many absurdist works illustrate the loneliness and isolation of individuals, resulting from the nature of modern life and, in some cases, from the impossibility of effective communication between humans. Albee's *The Zoo Story* offers a prime example of this theme, featuring a character so eager to make a connection with a complete stranger that he is willing to die in order to do so. If the two men are unable to achieve contact in life, at least the man is able to involve the stranger, however unwillingly, in his death. Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* explores the same theme with a husband and wife who are so isolated from each other that they fail to recognize their connection in a social setting and have only a vague sense of having met before.

Materialism

Materialism is criticized in Albee's *The American Dream*, where even relationships between family members are subject to the terms of profit and loss statements. A woman marries a man she does not love simply because he is wealthy, and they buy a baby to complete their family. The baby dies, leaving them to mourn their financial loss rather than their emotional loss. Adamov's characters in *Ping-Pong* devote their lives to

the worship of a thing, which some critics consider a critique of capitalism and materialism.

Style

Character

Absurdism often abandons traditional character development to offer figures who have no clear identity or distinguishing features. They may even be interchangeable, as are the supporting characters in *Waiting for Godot* who appear as master and servant in the first act and trade places when they return for the second act. Role playing causes confusion among the characters in Genet's *The Maids* where the audience initially thinks the figure onstage is the lady of the house being served by her maid Claire, but then realizes that Claire is impersonating the mistress and the other maid, Solange, is impersonating Claire. These exchanges continue throughout the play which deprives the audience of any stable sense of character identity.

Denouement

In conventional literature or drama, the denouement serves to tie up the loose ends of the narrative, resolving both primary and secondary plot conflicts and complications. Since so little happens in most absurdist works, the denouement has little to resolve. Thus endings tend to be repetitious, such as the nearly identical ending of both acts of *Waiting for Godot*. Such repetitive actions reinforce the idea that human effort is futile, which serves as a prominent theme of Absurdism. In Ionesco's *The Lesson*, which features the murder of a student by a professor, the audience learns that it is the fortieth such murder that day. Since the ending of the play consists of yet another student arriving for yet another lesson, the audience has every reason to believe the newly arrived student will meet the same fate.

Dialogue

Since the ability of language to convey meaning is called into question by Absurdism, dialogue is of special importance in absurdist works. Artificial language, empty of meaning, consisting of slogans and clichés, is a hallmark of the movement. Many of the texts contain dialogue that appears to be meaningless but that mimics the style of educated or sophisticated speech. Often there is a marked contradiction between speech and action, as in *Godot* when the characters claim they are leaving but actually stay.

Plot

Absurdism at its most extreme abandons conventional notions of plot almost entirely. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* has been described as a play in which nothing happens. Its opening line is "Nothing to be done," and the characters proceed to do just that□nothing. Although the characters do engage in various actions, none of those

actions is connected in any meaningful way, nor do the actions develop into any sort of narrative or logical sequence of events.

Setting

The use of setting is one of the most unconventional stylistic features of Absurdism. Typically, an absurdist play will be set in no recognizable time or place. Stage settings tend to be sparse, with lots of vacant space conveying the sense of emptiness associated with characters' lives. The empty chairs of Ionesco's *The Chairs* serves as an example, as does *Waiting for Godot*'s nearly bare stage with a single spindly tree as the only prop. But the setting can also be cramped and confining, such as the claustrophobic single room of Beckett's *Endgame*.

Historical Context

Although the roots of Absurdism can be traced to the beginning of the twentieth century, the movement reached its peak in the years immediately following World War II, a war of catastrophic proportions that saw the armies of fascist Germany overrun most of Europe and the Japanese attack the United States at Pearl Harbor. An estimated 48 million people in Europe were killed and millions more became refugees. Bombs turned cities to rubble. As the Allied Forces liberated the concentration camps at the end of the war, Europeans and Americans were confronted by the enormity of the Holocaust, Germany's final solution for Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and political prisoners. Faced with the evidence of evil on such a grand scale, people were often overcome by feelings of pessimism and helplessness. At the same time, the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 introduced the reality of nuclear war and the possibility of a future nuclear disaster that could potentially eliminate all human kind. The change to using nuclear weapons ushered in the Cold War of the 1950s as the United States and the Soviet Union, former allies against Germany, became enemies. The two sides entered into an arms race and began stockpiling nuclear weapons. Thus, the achievement of peace after World War II was clouded by the specter of an even more horrific war to come, and this sense of the future led to feelings of hopelessness and futility.

The continental United States, however, was untouched physically by the war. Returning soldiers were more optimistic than their European counterparts and were anxious to pursue the American Dream. They married in record numbers and began having children, producing the well-known postwar baby boom, lasting from 1946 to 1964. Cities and schools became overcrowded and many urban families, aided by the prosperity of the postwar years, eventually moved to the suburbs.

Women had worked in a variety of jobs during the war, filling in for the men who were fighting overseas and contributing to the war effort by producing weapons and supplies for the troops. The idea of women working in factories was popularized by the poster image of Rosie the Riveter as a capable worker doing her patriotic duty. After the war, however, these same women were encouraged to return to their homes and care for their husbands and children, thereby giving up their places in the job market to the returning soldiers. The nuclear family of husband, stay-at-home wife, and small children living in a single-family home in the suburbs became the 1950s idealization of the American Dream.

In the arts, the social and community concerns of the Depression years and the war years gave way to introspection and individual visions. In some cases, artists began to concentrate on form rather than content. Abstract art□Cubism, Surrealism, Expressionism□with its emphasis on individual expression replaced artistic modes tied to political themes. In Hollywood, the optimistic and patriotic films of the war years were replaced in the late 1940s and early 1950s by *film noir*, a dark, gritty, urban genre that exposed the menacing underside of American life. The Cold War also inspired a host of monster and horror films that served as allegories for potential invasion by a foreign

enemy; perhaps the most famous of these was *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1955).

Movement Variations

Philosophy

Absurdism is often linked to Existentialism, the philosophical movement associated with Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, among others. Although both existentialists and absurdists are concerned with the senselessness of the human condition, the way this concern is expressed differs. The philosophers explored the irrational nature of human existence within the rational and logical framework of conventional philosophical thought. The absurdists, however, abandoned the traditional elements of literature in general and theater in particular setting, plot, character development in order to convey a sense of absurdity and illogic in both form and content.

In general, the two movements also differ in the conclusions each seems to draw from the realization that life is meaningless. Many absurdist productions appear to be making a case for the idea that all human effort is futile and action is pointless; others seem to suggest that an absurd existence leaves the individual no choice but to treat it as farce. The existentialists, however, claimed that the realization that life had no transcendental meaning, either derived from faith or from the essence of humanity itself, could (and should) serve as a springboard to action. An individual's life, according to the existentialists, could be made meaningful only through that individual's actions.

Politics and Social Change

Because many absurdist works have no temporal or spatial setting, they are often considered apolitical, that is, they are neither criticizing nor endorsing any country's culture, society, or political system. There are, however, exceptions. Václav Havel's plays, for example, are concerned with the dehumanizing effects of government bureaucracy, particularly within Communist Czechoslovakia. The works apparently hit their target, since the government banned them and imprisoned the playwright. Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinocéros* could also be considered political, since the author claimed that the inspiration for the play was the gradual acceptance of Nazi fascism by an antifascist friend. Based on a 1940 entry in Ionesco's journal, the play opens with a rhinoceros charging past as two friends converse. Although everyone ignores the rhinoceros at first, eventually most of the characters accept its presence, and one by one they even decide to become rhinoceroses themselves. A lone individual is determined to fight the growing herd. Ironically, Ionesco's play varies from the usual plotless, apolitical style of most absurdist dramas to offer a powerful critique of mob mentality and conformity. The individual who decides to fight rather than join the herd is also unusual, since most absurdist characters are anonymous, passive, and ineffectual certainly not given to heroic actions.

The failure of most absurdist works to call for any meaningful action may also account for the almost total absence of women playwrights involved in the movement. Toby

Silverman Zinman, in "Hen in a Foxhouse: The Absurdist Plays of Maria Irene Fornes," suggests that although female dramatists shared the "deep disillusionment" common to most practitioners of Absurdism, most of them were committed to changing the conditions that led to that disillusionment. While they may have employed some of the formal elements associated with Absurdism, they rejected its bleak vision that human effort is futile.

Representative Authors

Arthur Adamov (1908-1970)

Arthur Adamov was born August 23, 1908, in Kislovodsk, Russia, to Sourene and Helene Bagatourov Adamov, wealthy Armenians who were in the oil business. The family moved to Paris when Adamov was twelve, and he was educated in Switzerland and Germany. Although he wrote poetry, essays, and an autobiography, Adamov is most famous as a playwright. In the early part of his writing career, he was associated with Surrealism and Absurdism. His plays, written in French, focused on the loneliness and isolation of all humans, on the limited ability of individuals to make meaningful connections with others, and on the inevitable and meaningless nature of death. His most famous play from this period of his life is *Le Ping-Pong* (1955; translated as *Ping-Pong* in 1959). After the mid-1950s, Adamov rejected Absurdism and began writing plays that were more realistic, more optimistic, and more concerned with individuals in social and political contexts. As he revealed in his autobiographical writings, he was plagued by guilt and neuroses all his life. He drank heavily and towards the end of his life his mental and physical health failed to the point where he could no longer work. He died March 16, 1970, from an overdose of barbiturates.

Edward Albee (1928-)

Edward Albee was born on March 12, 1928, in Virginia, to unknown parents who gave him up for adoption shortly after his birth. His adoptive father was Reed Albee, who owned part of the Keith- Albee theater circuit, and his adoptive mother was the former Frances Cotter. Albee was raised in a wealthy home in Larchmont, New York, with his parents and his grandmother. He made frequent trips to the city to attend the theater during his childhood, and his parents often hosted a variety of theater people in their home. Albee attended Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1946-47, but did not earn a degree. He wrote poetry in the early part of his career, but with little success. He turned to drama and in 1958 published his one-act play *The Zoo Story*, which premiered the following year in Berlin and shortly thereafter in New York. In 1959, Albee wrote *The Sandbox* and in 1961, *The American Dream*, both of which opened in New York during 1960-61. Although Albee has written many more plays, these first three are the ones critics generally associate with the Theatre of the Absurd. All three are spare, single-act dramas featuring few characters and are concerned with the isolation of the individual and the artificial nature of American values. Albee's dramas have received numerous awards, among them three Pulitzer Prizes: in 1967 for *A Delicate Balance*, in 1975 for *Seascape*, and in 1994 for *Three Tall Women*.

Fernando Arrabal (1932-)

Fernando Arrabal was born in Melilla, Morocco, on August 11, 1932, to Fernando and Carmen Teran Arrabal Ruiz. As a child, Arrabal lived in Spain in the early days of the reign of Francisco Franco, the fascist dictator. He was educated at the University of Madrid, and in 1958 he married a professor, Luce Moreau; the couple had two children. In 1967, Arrabal was imprisoned in Spain for his political views. His release was accomplished through the efforts of P.E.N., an international organization of writers. Although Arrabal's work was strongly influenced by Surrealism and Absurdism, the designation with which he preferred to describe his drama was "Theatre of Panic." His work has a nightmarish quality involving insanity, brutal violence, and sadistic sexuality. He is noted for creating gentle, child-like characters who are paradoxically responsible for the most unspeakable acts of brutality and degradation.

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)

Nobel Prize winner Samuel Beckett was born in Foxrock, Dublin, Ireland, on April 13, 1906, to William Frank Beckett, a surveyor, and Mary Jones Roe Beckett, a nurse. He attended a Protestant public school and earned a bachelor of arts degree from Trinity College in 1927 and a masters of arts degree in 1931. Although Beckett taught for a short time, he hated the teaching profession and soon resigned his position. He began traveling in Europe and eventually settled in Paris in 1937. Beckett did most of his writing in French; his work included poetry, critical essays, and novels. However, he is perhaps most famous for his dramas, particularly his masterpiece *Waiting for Godot* (1954), considered by many critics the defining work of Absurdism. The two-act play presents two men who engage in apparently pointless conversation while waiting by the side of the road for Godot, who fails to appear on two successive evenings. It is a play in which virtually nothing happens. The same could be said of Beckett's 1957 play *Endgame*, considered by some critics an even bleaker view of human existence than *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett continued to write plays, novels, and other prose works into his eighties; he died in Paris on December 22, 1989, of respiratory failure.

Jean Genet (1910-1986)

Jean Genet was born in Paris on December 19, 1910, to an unknown father and a mother who immediately abandoned him. His early years were spent in an orphanage, and he was later turned over to a foster family, who accused him of stealing from them. He spent some time in a reformatory for adolescents from which he escaped; he then joined the French Foreign Legion, from which he deserted. He wandered around Europe for the next twenty years, supporting himself through thievery and prostitution. Genet began writing in prison, where he was serving a life sentence. His supporters in the literary world were eventually able to secure a presidential pardon in 1948, after which Genet devoted himself to his writing, to the arts, and to political activism. He was an admirer of the Black Panther Party and soon became a cult figure, in part because of Jean-Paul Sartre's essay which characterized Genet as a saint and a martyr. Genet's

first writing consisted of poetry, novels, and a fictionalized autobiography. In 1947, while still in prison, he wrote his first play, *The Maids* (1947), and after his release he continued writing dramas, many of which became major productions. His most productive and successful period as a playwright was the late 1950s and early 1960s. Beginning in 1970 Genet lived in the Middle East among the members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), whose cause he supported. He died in Paris on April 15, 1986, from throat cancer, and his memoirs offering an account of his years with the PLO were published later that year.

Václav Havel (1936-)

Václav Havel, playwright, political dissident, and current president of the Czech Republic, was born in Prague on October 5, 1936, to Václav M. and Bozena Vavreckova Havel. He was educated at a technical school and at Prague's Academy of Art and served in the Czech Army in 1957-59. Throughout the 1960s, Havel worked with theater groups in Czechoslovakia, serving in various capacities from stagehand to playwright-in-residence. He gained success with his early plays, *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum*, both of which deal with the dehumanizing effects of government bureaucracy. When the former Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, Havel was imprisoned and his plays were banned. But his international reputation grew as his works were successfully staged outside Czechoslovakia. Within his own country, he became well known as a spokesman for human rights. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Havel saw his plays return to the Czech stage; he was elected president of Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic) that same year, an office he continued to hold as of 2002.

Eugène Ionesco (1912-1994)

Eugène Ionesco was born in Slatina, Romania, on November 26, 1912. His parents were Eugène, a lawyer, and Marie-Therese Icard Ionesco. He became a French citizen and spent most of his life in Paris. Ionesco was a painter and a playwright; a number of his plays are associated with the Theater of the Absurd, among them *The Bald Soprano* (1950), *The Lesson* (1951), and *Rhinocéros* (1959). Ionesco used black humor to criticize social and political institutions, insisting that the only possible response to an absurd world is laughter. Nonetheless, he claimed he was not an Absurdist, and he preferred the term "Theatre of Derision" to Theatre of the Absurd. One of his favorite targets for derision, especially in his early plays, was language itself, which he considered ineffective in helping individuals communicate and even dangerous and harmful when used to manipulate. Ionesco's work enjoyed great success in the 1950s and 1960s, but his later plays were not as well received. He turned away from drama and began to concentrate on his painting and on publishing his nonfiction. Ionesco died March 28, 1994, in Paris.

Harold Pinter (1930-)

Harold Pinter was born October 10, 1930 in a working-class neighborhood in Hackney, London, England, to Hyman and Frances Pinter. His otherwise happy childhood was marred by the nightly terror of the London air raids during World War II. He attended the Hackney Downs Grammar School where he excelled in acting, writing, and sports. In 1948 he began studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and over the next several years he worked as an actor with a variety of repertory companies. In 1957, his first play, *The Room*, was produced in Bristol, England; it was followed by *The Birthday Party* (1958), *The Dumbwaiter* (1959), and numerous other plays, radio and television dramas, and screenplays. Pinter is considered one of the most important playwrights of the post-World War II generation, and his plays have enjoyed success with both audiences and critics.

Representative Works

The American Dream

A long one-act play by Edward Albee, *The American Dream* (1961) targets the artificial values of family life and features plot events that are not only absurd, but grotesque. The main characters are Daddy, who is weak and ineffectual, and Mommy, who is domineering and cruel. All relationships in the play are governed by material considerations. When the couple adopts a baby, or their "bumble of joy" as they call him, they are actually buying him. Mommy and Daddy gradually destroy the baby as they discover he is less than perfect, depriving him of eyes, hands, tongue, sexual organs— every possible means of communicating with others. When the baby dies, the couple frets over the loss of their investment, regretting that he's already been paid for. Albee also uses humor in *The American Dream* to attack the phony language and stage cliches of sentimental theatrical productions. For example, Mommy, describing the cause of Grandma's death, says "It was an offstage rumble, and you know what that means." The play, along with Albee's other early one-act plays (*Zoo Story* and *The Sandbox*), was successful both commercially and critically, although some critics believe all three are too heavily influenced by the work of Ionesco. The three plays were especially well received on American college campuses during the 1960s.

The Bald Soprano

The Bald Soprano, written originally in French (*La Cantatrice Chauve*) in 1950 and translated into English in 1958, was Eugene Ionesco's first play. It features such absurdist elements as a clock that strikes seventeen and a married couple who fail to recognize each other in a social situation. The Martins are guests at the home of the Smiths. They engage in polite conversation, each feeling they have met before. A series of questions and answers between the two reveals that they live in the same house and are, in fact, husband and wife. Although the dialogue of *The Bald Soprano* has been described as hilariously funny, the play as a whole is considered a tragedy as Ionesco attacks the stilted, artificial quality of language that hinders communication between individuals.

The Chairs

Written in 1952, Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* features the breakdown of language as well as one of the playwright's most famous metaphors for absurdity: the multiplication of inanimate objects. As an elderly couple sets up chairs for an invisible audience arriving to hear an important speech, the chairs begin to multiply until they fill the entire stage. Meanwhile, the orator delivering the speech, which the old man has written to convey an important message to the world, is unable to produce anything except

guttural sounds. *The Chairs* makes the point that language and communication are illusions; it is one of Ionesco's most highly acclaimed plays.

Endgame

Samuel Beckett's one-act play *Endgame* (1957) is not as famous as *Waiting for Godot*, but is an even darker work dealing with the master/slave relationship. The setting is sparse and claustrophobic, the dialogue is often comic, and the activities of the characters resemble slapstick comedy. Yet overall, the interaction of the principles is characterized by cruelty and bitterness, and the tone of the work, despite its humorous moments, is grim and pessimistic. *Endgame* made its U.S. debut at New York's Cherry Lane Theatre in 1958. The play's reception was mixed; many critics who had praised *Waiting for Godot* were disappointed in the bleak view of humanity Beckett seemed to be presenting in *Endgame*.

The Garden Party

Originally *Zahradni Slavnost* (1964), Václav Havel's *The Garden Party* (1969), targets the nature of bureaucracy and its dehumanizing effect on individuals. Havel creates a world where language is not a tool in the service of the individual but rather acts as weapon by which the individual is controlled. The play's main character speaks in cliches and slogans and is unable to accomplish anything within a bureaucratic system that perpetuates itself and defies humans' attempts to intervene in its operation. *The Garden Party* was Havel's first play, and while it was a critical success, it was banned in Czechoslovakia after the Soviet invasion of 1968.

The Homecoming

Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, written in 1965, was the playwright's third full-length drama. The story involves a London working-class family whose eldest son has lived in the United States for several years where he is a professor of philosophy at a university. He returns, along with his wife Ruth, to his father's home, but when he later goes back to the United States, she refuses to accompany him. Instead, she plans to stay behind and care for her husband's father, uncle, and brothers, and to earn her living as a prostitute. The play features several absurdist elements but is also characterized by violence, both emotional and physical, between the family members. *The Homecoming* has generated a great deal of controversy because of the shocking nature of the plot. Critical debate has usually centered on the possible motivation for Ruth's bizarre decision. *The Homecoming* was revived on Broadway in 1991.

The Maids

In Jean Genet's second play, *The Maids*, the writer for the first time explores a world outside the prison, a setting he used in all of his earlier works. The characters are Claire

and Solange, maids to an elegant lady who mistreats them. They take turns playacting the roles of mistress and servant whenever the real mistress is away. Fearful that their plot to have their mistress's lover imprisoned is about to be discovered, they determine to poison the lady, but she leaves before they carry out their plan. The two maids lapse into their usual role-playing, and Claire, assuming the part of the mistress, takes the poison and dies in her place. The world represented in the play has been likened to a hall of mirrors, where identities and perceptions are reflected back and forth between characters switching roles between master and servant. Questions of identity and impersonation were further complicated by Genet's insistence that all of the female parts be played by young men. *The Maids* was commissioned and produced by Louis Jouvet in 1947, making it one of the earliest dramas to be associated with the Theatre of the Absurd.

Ping-Pong

Critics consider Arthur Adamov's *Ping-Pong*, originally produced in French in 1955 and translated into English in 1959, the masterpiece of his early absurdist plays, with its emphasis on futility. The play's two characters are young students, Victor and Arthur. Although they are initially studying medicine and art respectively, they become obsessed with every aspect of pinball machines, from the mechanics of their operation to the details of their distribution and maintenance. Reality, including personal relationships, is viewed through possible associations to pinball. At play's end Victor and Arthur appear as old men, close to death, who have wasted their entire lives on their obsession. Although Adamov typically refused to assign a temporal or spatial setting to his early plays, he was more or less forced to do so by the subject matter in this work. Choosing a contemporary pastime like pinball as the centerpiece of the drama necessarily called for a contemporary urban setting. Critics praised *Ping-Pong*, but Adamov himself ultimately rejected it, along with his other absurdist plays. Towards the end of his career, he began writing realist dramas concerned with social and political issues.

Waiting for Godot

The most famous and most critically acclaimed work associated with Absurdism is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, produced in 1953 in Paris as *En Attendant Godot* and translated into English a year later. The setting is sparse, almost vacant, and the characters are two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, who do little except wait, on two successive nights, for someone who never appears. While waiting they engage in a series of apparently random discussions, some involving philosophy, and a variety of antics—from taking off their shoes to eating a carrot—that seem vaguely reminiscent of a comedy routine or a vaudeville act. They also attempt suicide twice but fail each time. At the end of the play, when Godot has still not appeared, the characters agree to leave, at least according to their limited dialogue, but the stage directions contradict their words by insisting that "they do not move." One of the most important productions of *Waiting for Godot* took place in San Quentin prison in 1957, performed by the members

of the San Francisco Actors' Workshop. Several critics have commented on the enthusiastic reception the prisoners gave the play, suggesting that they seemed to instinctively grasp its meaning at the same time audiences apparently more educated and more sophisticated were confused by the play's unconventional nature. Many critics believe *Waiting for Godot* is Beckett's most important work, citing its influence on the Theatre of the Absurd and on contemporary drama in general.

The Zoo Story

Edward Albee wrote his first drama *The Zoo Story* (1959), in three weeks. Uncluttered, even sparse, the play features two characters, working-class Jerry and middle-class Peter, who meet in Central Park. Jerry pours out his life story to Peter, and it is a life characterized by loneliness, alienation, and failure. Peter refuses to connect with Jerry and does not want to hear any more of his tale. Provoking Peter into a fight, Jerry kills himself on a knife he gave to Peter, thus involving him, despite his objections, in another's death if not in his life. Albee employs the diction of small children in *The Zoo Story*, a device he used in many of his later plays. The one-act play won an Obie Award in 1960 and established its author as a promising American playwright.

Critical Overview

Some critics trace the roots of Absurdism back to the beginning of the twentieth century, but for most, the movement itself began at mid-century. Ruby Cohn, for instance, makes a claim for 1950□the year Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* first appeared on the French stage□as the starting point of Theatre of the Absurd. Martin Esslin, who in 1961 identified and labeled the movement, begins with *Waiting for Godot* and many critics follow his lead. Written in 1950 but not staged until 1953, Beckett's most famous drama is also considered by many scholars to be the most representative of the movement. Esslin originally identified three other practitioners of Absurdism: Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov, as well as a number of lesser-known playwrights. In later editions of his landmark study, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin elevated Harold Pinter from minor to major figure and devoted an entire chapter to his plays.

As the scholar who defined the movement, Esslin takes pains to point out that the writers he discusses would not necessarily associate themselves with Absurdism. Many of them, in fact, rejected the label completely; Ionesco preferred Theatre of Derision, and Arrabal chose Theatre of Panic to describe his plays. Esslin acknowledges that of the playwrights he discusses "each has his own personal approach to both subject-matter and form; his own roots, sources, and background." He maintains, however, that at the same time they "in spite of themselves, have a good deal in common." Those common elements are, for Esslin:

"Pure" theatre; i.e. abstract scenic effects as they
are familiar in the circus or revue, in the work of
jugglers, acrobats, bullfighters, or mimes
Clowning, fooling, and mad-scenes
Verbal nonsense
The literature of dream and fantasy, which often
has a strong allegorical component

There is a certain amount of overlap among these categories, and individual playwrights employ the separate elements in different ways, but all employ them in ways that differ from older theatrical traditions and in ways that made Theatre of the Absurd "shocking and incomprehensible" to its earliest audiences.

That ability to shock theatergoers resulted from the movement's abandonment (or rejection) of traditional plot, character development, setting, dialogue, and denouement. For Esslin, this amounts to innovation and experimentation and is an indication of an art form's vitality, necessary in a changing world. As he puts it: "Under such conditions no art can survive that complacently falls back on past traditions and standards. Least of all the theatre, which is the most social of the arts and most directly responds to social change." Thus, Esslin views Absurdism as a positive development in the history of the theater.

Where Esslin sees vitality, however, other critics have seen decadence. Avadhesh K. Srivastava in "The Crooked Mirror: Notes on the Theatre of the Absurd," considers Theatre of the Absurd excessively concerned with inward reality "without the stabilizing influence of a moral perspective" and, therefore, decadent. The playwrights identified with the movement, Srivastava claims, have nothing in common with each other except their rejection of traditional theatrical conventions. Their agreement is based on a negative, therefore, "runs counter to the text-book aims of drama. It is neither cathartic nor edificatory; neither suspense nor spectacle." As such, Srivastava suggests that a certain amount of fraud and manipulation is involved. By calling itself theater, Theatre of the Absurd is setting up its audiences to expect something which it then fails to deliver.

Esslin acknowledges that the play that started it all was "scorned as undramatic" originally, but he points to its overwhelming popularity with audiences all over the world and its eventual acceptance by critics, dramatists, and scholars. The same could be said for other plays associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. Although they were initially considered incomprehensible, they soon became familiar and highly acclaimed. While Absurdism itself was short-lived as a movement, its influence, particularly in the realm of popular culture, has continued into the twenty-first century.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Dewsbury is a writer and instructor of English and American Studies. In this essay, she examines Absurdism's short life as a formal movement and its long-range effects on Western culture.

Critic Martin Esslin identified the common elements shared by a number of dramatic works of the 1950s and provided the label "Theatre of the Absurd" to those works. At first, audiences found these works incomprehensible; viewers left the theaters not knowing what to make of these plays that defied all the traditional elements of staged drama. The textbook case, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, had no plot, a setting that consisted of only a bare tree, and two characters whose actions resembled slapstick more than theater. It was produced on stage for the first time in 1953, and for the first time in London in 1955 where critics and audiences alike considered it "completely obscure." Nine years later, Esslin reports, *Godot* was revived in London. Although it was generally well received, by this time the work "had one great fault: its meaning and symbolism were a little too obvious." In an age of mass communication, the revolutionary quality of avant-garde art quickly fades. That which shocks the public one minute bores it the next, and this, in part, accounts for the short life-span of Theatre of the Absurd.

Another reason for the movement's demise may be that drama must eventually have a plot. If nothing happens in absurdist productions, there are only so many times a theater audience is willing to attend the staging of nothing. What new observations or insights into nothing are available? Once the point has been made that life is meaningless and all effort is futile, what more can be said? If human endeavor amounts to nothing, if as Esslin puts it, "strenuous effort leads to the same result as passive indolence," then what would be the point of bothering to attend a play or, for that matter, bothering to write one?

Many of the practitioners of Theatre of the Absurd apparently felt the same way since, with few exceptions, they turned to dramas grounded in realist conventions, and to works that offered some possibilities for action. Harold Pinter provides one example. Many of his early works, often associated with Theatre of the Absurd, have been called "comedies of menace," but the source of the menace in question is mysterious and unmotivated. In Pinter's later plays, those written in the 1960s and after, the menace often arises from the desire of certain characters to dominate others. While still complex, these later works are more accessible than those he wrote in the 1950s because they provide recognizable character development and motivation.

Arthur Adamov is another playwright whose works are often divided into two distinct periods, with 1957 as the year of demarcation. Plays written before that date exhibit the characteristics of Surrealism and Absurdism; those written after 1957 are realistic and politically committed. Adamov himself made a formal break with the past and publicly rejected his earlier work that treated the individual as hopeless and helpless in favor of characters with free will.

For all these reasons, Theatre of the Absurd as a formal movement began to dissolve by the early 1960s, but its effects on Western culture, particularly popular culture, endured and are still being felt today. Since the 1960s individual elements of Absurdism have been incorporated with increasing frequency into film, television shows, and music videos.

An early example is Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1966), a satiric look at the nuclear arms race. The film's premise is that nuclear weapons have been programmed by both the United States and the Soviet Union in ways that render humans helpless to disarm them. Thus, when an insane American general sets off the signal to attack Russia, the U.S. government is powerless to recall the bombers. Russia, meanwhile, has built a doomsday machine that will automatically retaliate with enough force to destroy the world. The only possible purpose of such a device is deterrence, of course, but the Russians have not quite gotten around to telling the world about it□creating an absurd situation that renders human action futile.

The film's dialogue, too, is reminiscent of Absurdism, when Merkin Muffley, the American president, and Dimitri Kissoff, the Soviet premier, discuss the impending end of the world like two petulant children arguing over which of them is more sorry about the situation: "Don't say that you're more sorry, Dimitri, I'm just as capable of being sorry as you are," complains the president. He then has to call Information to get the number for Russia's Air Defense Headquarters in order to provide them with the coordinates to shoot down the B-52s. In yet another absurd situation, when the rogue general has been subdued, the officer who has obtained the code to call off the attack must try to get through to the president on a pay phone. He does not have sufficient change and must call collect; however, the White House refuses to accept the charges. In *Dr. Strangelove* the fate of the world resides in the hands of ineffectual individuals embroiled in absurd situations.

Theatre of the Absurd often employed elements of farce and black humor, and in this sense, the films of Mel Brooks might also be included in its legacy. *The Producers*, originally a film and later a successful Broadway play, treats the horrors of World War II as farce, involving the production of a musical called "Springtime for Hitler." Similarly, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) interrupts a brutal torture scene to threaten the victim with an even worse fate, that is, the loss of his credit rating. *Brazil*'s absurdity centers on the meaninglessness of language and the individual's powerlessness against government bureaucracy, much like the plays of Václav Havel. Foolishly optimistic platitudes and double-speak slogans are everywhere in *Brazil*. Individual agencies of the bureaucracy compete rather than cooperate, resulting in the arrest and murder of an innocent citizen.

Although television rarely treats such dark subjects as the Holocaust or government brutality, Matt Groening's long-running animated comedy *The Simpsons* occasionally comes close. Its main character, Homer Simpson, is either ineffectual or farcical, both as a worker and as a family man. Like Beckett's tramps, he spends most of his time doing nothing. When he does act, the results are usually disastrous, suggesting that the consequences of action are even worse than the consequences of passivity. The fact

that Homer works with radioactive materials in his job at a nuclear power plant creates the same doomsday scenario as *Dr. Strangelove* with the fate of Springfield in the hands of inept or ineffectual workers in absurd situations.

The Simpsons typically features random visual elements, like toasters that become time machines or animals in unusual contexts that possess attributes not usually associated with their species. Reminiscent of Ionesco's rhinoceros traversing the stage, a huge swordfish lands on the hood of Homer's car as he drives down the street. On another occasion, the family dog is replaced by a killer badger who disembowels Homer. In a segment involving Homer's attempt to become a farmer, an elephant is used as a measuring device to determine the height of the corn crop, in an obvious allusion to the musical *Oklahoma*, however, in this case the elephant is carnivorous. *The Simpsons* recalls Esslin's description of Theatre of the Absurd: "grotesque, frivolous, and irreverent," although the show's more serious fans might argue that the show is never frivolous.

Another television program that evokes the style and themes of Absurdism is the long-running situation comedy *Seinfeld*. The show is set in Manhattan and features four characters: Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer, each of whom lives alone. They are less involved in plots than in situations. In fact, *Seinfeld*'s producers repeatedly described the program as a show about nothing. Little happened to change the characters' lives over the course of several years; much like *Godot*'s tramps, the characters seemed to be hanging out waiting for something to happen to them. The farcical element was provided by Kramer, whose bizarre antics were clownish and slapstick.

The world of popular music adapted many of the features of Absurdism even, or perhaps especially, in the names chosen for groups. In the pop group The Bare-Naked Ladies, there are no ladies, much less bare-naked ones□just as there were no sopranos, much less bald ones, in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*. The same might be said for the Violent Femmes and the Dead Milkmen. Absurd names are often assumed by individual artists, such as Jello Biafra, or given to album names, like Primus's *Pork Soda*.

Music videos have long made use of absurdist elements, from the bizarre, seemingly unconnected images of 1980s videos, usually featuring so-called "alternative music," to the more recent efforts of Missy Elliot, where the artist calmly removes her head, or the Crystal Method video in which an inflatable doll turns killer (and the witness explaining the situation to the police is another inflatable doll). Many music videos are very conventional. They consist of mini-narratives, concert footage, or vanity pieces featuring the recording artists in a variety of scenes illustrating conspicuous consumption□expensive clothes, expensive cars, and scantily clad members of the opposite sex. In other videos, bizarre elements, such as props, costumes, and images may be featured, but they are usually loaded with sexual symbolism□ making them more a part of the surrealist tradition than the absurdist movement. The videos of Madonna or The Red-Hot Chili Peppers might fit into this category. But in a great many other, more sophisticated music videos, elements of Absurdism abound, but they no longer carry the same meaning, which in Theatre of the Absurd was to point out that

there was no meaning. A half-century after the movement's peak, acknowledging life's absurdity seems to be an accepted part of postmodern life. It is no longer particularly disturbing; it just makes for some interesting visual moments. And the popular culture is only too willing to mine the art of the past in order to create those moments.

Source: Suzanne Dewsbury, Critical Essay on Absurdism, in *Literary Movements for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Carpenter discusses the nature of absurdity in Pinter's play, concluding that most critics ignore the work's true power in trying to penetrate the meaning of the playwright's absurdist touches.

Pinter's *Homecoming* may be the most enigmatic work of art since the Mona Lisa, an image its main character, Ruth, evokes. At the turning point of the play, Ruth's professor-husband, Teddy, watches intently as she lies on the living-room couch with one of his brothers while the other strokes her hair. His father, Max, claiming he is broadminded, calls her "a woman of quality," "a woman of feeling." Shortly after Ruth frees herself she asks Teddy, out of the blue: "Have your family read your critical works?"

This provokes the smug Ph.D. to a slightly manic assertion: "To see, to be able to *see!* I'm the one who can see. That's why I can write my critical works. Might do you good . . . have a look at them . . . see how certain people can view . . . things . . . how certain people can maintain . . . intellectual equilibrium." His reaction to this intensely disconcerting moment parallels that of Pinter critics who, like Teddy, refuse to let themselves be "lost in it." This is, of course, the natural reaction for people whose public image depends upon maintaining their intellectual equilibrium. But it is hardly the appropriate reaction either for Teddy, who restricts his protestations to eating his pimp - brother Lenny's cheese-roll, or for people genuinely experiencing a Pinter play.

Whatever else this response may involve, it must surely involve letting oneself be "lost in it." The jolt to one's intellectual equilibrium - what Bert States has dubbed "the shock of nonrecognition" [see his essay "Pinter's *Homecoming* The Shock of Nonrecognition," *Hudson Review*, Autumn 1968] - must be acknowledged as a validly evoked response. The urge for rational illumination that so often follows - the nose-tickle crying for a sneeze - must be regarded as an integral second stage of that evoked response. In experiencing these repeated "Pinteresque" moments, we are put precisely in the dilemma of Camus's "absurd man" described in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. We are confronted with bewilderment, disruption, chaos, what Beckett referred to as "this buzzing confusion." In response, we involuntarily reach out for clarity, understanding, Godot: the little explanation that is not there. We become like Ionesco's Detective in *Victims of Duty*, who lays its underpinning bare: "I don't believe in the absurd. Everything hangs together; everything can be comprehended . . . thanks to the achievements of human thought and science." Camus's hero, the true believer in absurdity, acknowledges this recurring double take as a poignant byproduct of the absurd human condition, and in so doing, Camus says, reveals his "lucidity." Moreover, he becomes capable of reveling in the actual impact of the situation: the rich dark comedy of it, if you will. Sisyphus grows happy with his stone.

At these moments, in life or at a Pinter play, bizarre actions and reactions, churning with apparent meaning but inherently unexplainable, trigger the automatic desire for explanation built into us. An earlier pivotal incident in *The Homecoming* put the idea in

the form of a graphic enigma. Before her outright defection, Ruth invites her all-male audience to watch her as she moves her leg, but warns them that even though their minds may stray to the underwear that moves with it, all she is doing is moving her leg. She continues: "My lips move. Why don't you restrict . . . your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant. . .than the words which come through them." What do Ruth's words mean? Be strict phenomenologists! Pay no attention to the inadvertently moving underwear, on which I have taken pains to rivet your attention; consider what I am saying insignificant - though I have made it surge with significance. Her words are of course absurd, since they cancel themselves out logically. But can we resist taking the lure and, on impulse, groping for the significance so deviously implied? Only the dull or jaded could. What we can try to avoid, however, is blurring the moment by detaching ourselves from the play in a face-saving quest for comprehension.

Glance at a more flagrant example. Soon after Ruth meets Lenny in Act I, he abruptly asks her if he can hold her hand. She asks why, and he says, "I'll tell you why." He then spins an involved story about being approached under an arch by a lady whose chauffeur, a friend of the family, had tracked him down. Deciding she was "falling apart with the pox," he spurned her advances, "clumped her one," and stopped short of killing her only because of the inconvenience. "So I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that." A baffling reason for wanting to hold Ruth's hand! If at this point we care more about recovering our intellectual aplomb than about letting the play carry us along in its inexorable absurd flow, we will wrench ourselves away from its grip on us; assume the pose of the Critic-Detective; and forget that the scene, in spite of its spray of beckoning clues (partly because of them, in fact), will finally defy comprehension, and that the play, by its nature, is chuckling at our knee-jerk response to one of its more transparent brain-teasers. In Camus's terms, the extent to which we avoid the role of public explainer and acknowledge the way the play has "caught" us becomes the genuine measure of our lucidity.

That avoidance and acknowledgment also give us a much better chance to enjoy the play - to relish the delectable, audacious absurdity of such moments. The distinctive power of *The Homecoming* derives largely from the bizarrely disconcerting quality of the things that happen to characters depicted as real people in the real world. Think of what typical first-nighters probably tell their friends about the play: a professor visits his grubby home after several years abroad and brings his wife, about whom he has not even told his family. The repulsive father calls her a whore, and the two repulsive brothers treat her like one. She does not seem to mind, and after a little bargaining accepts a deal to stay on as the family pet. The husband stands by complacently, smirk on his face, and finally leaves. If these spectators get around to elaborating on the play, they probably recall more and more incidents that involve "absurd" actions and a dazzling variety of reactions: Ruth making Lenny "some kind of proposal" soon after she meets him; Max lurching from extreme to extreme in his treatment of Ruth; Joey emerging after two hours of "not going any hog" with Ruth upstairs; Lenny getting the bright idea of putting her "on the game" in a Greek Street flat and Ruth raising the ante extravagantly before accepting; everyone ignoring uncle Sam's traumatic revelation - and prone body - at the end. Untutored spectators are not apt to lose sight of what

makes the play so eccentric and electric; as they reflect rather idly on their experience, they are more than likely to keep focusing on those bizarre moments that amused, shocked, fascinated, and above all puzzled them.

But what can trained literary analysts do that "mere" playgoers cannot? Some will warp and deface this perspective; others will develop and refine it. Those who take the latter path may begin simply by noting more or less covert instances of bizarre behavior which have to be perceived to be appreciated: when Teddy chats with Lenny in scene one, for example, he does not mention the existence of Ruth (who has gone for a 1:00 a.m. stroll), and he goes to bed before Ruth returns, in effect leaving her to Lenny. An especially profitable avenue is open for critics with a penchant for close analysis: focus on details that lend themselves readily to facile interpretation, such as Max's stick or Lenny's comment to Teddy that his cigar has gone out, and demonstrate their immunity to interpretation.

Ruth's enigmatic farewell to her husband, "Eddie... Don't become a stranger," is a manageable example. As Bernard Dukore notes, the fact that Ruth calls him Eddie suggests that "Teddy" is meant as a nickname not for Theodore but for Edward - a suggestion which invites comparisons to the similarly cuckolded stuffed shirt named Edward in *A Slight Ache.* But she may also be symbolically withdrawing from him by muffing his name; or she may be knocking the "Theo" - the divinity - out of what is left of him; or she may be hinting he is no longer her teddy bear - or Teddy boy, for that matter. The rest of her statement, "Don't become a stranger," must be easier; the heavy odds are that she means the opposite of what she says. Or, after all, does she still want to keep a line open to her own children, even though she now has a new set? Or is her pleasantry, as a scholar sitting beside me in the British Museum once assured me, the way a London prostitute says, "So long - come again" to her clients? Surely the play's obtrusive "homecoming" metaphor must be hiding in there somewhere. Or does Ruth mean, Teddy, don't make yourself becoming to a stranger! it must be more sensible to grant the incomprehensibility of such conundrums than to flail for "the solution" and thus flout their essential nature. In a play like this, we know - to a certain extent - that we cannot know.

A full-fledged analysis concentrating on the play's bizarre and disconcerting effects, or at least trying not to dissipate them, might well aim to project what Kelly Morris has deftly termed [in her essay "*The Homecoming*," *Tulane Drama Review*, Winter 1966] "the suction of the absurd." As the play progresses, characters and audience alike get caught up in this suction. Take as a central example Lenny's victimization - or manhandling, if you prefer - by Ruth. In Act I she toys frivolously with him, countering his macho moves with an audaciousness that throws him off kilter. From his lightly mocking "You must be connected with my brother in some way. . . . You sort of live with him over there, do you?" and his leering offer to relieve her of her drink, he is reduced by a little seductive bullying to shouting: "What was that supposed to be? Some kind of proposal?" No doubt he is conscious to some degree of having been manipulated, and alert spectators will have observed the Venus' flytrap in action, so that both he and the audience have a chance to shake off the disconcerting effect of Ruth's bizarre behavior.

Relief gets harder as the "suction" intensifies in Act II. When Teddy is present, Ruth joins Lenny in ruffling his proud feathers enough to convince him that he had better grab Ruth and flee if he is to avoid being "lost" in the situation. After Lenny prompts him to absurd evasions of a few philosophical basics ("What do you make of all this business of being and not-being?"), Ruth calls attention to the elegant reality of her leg. Then she declares Teddy's adopted land full of rock, sand, space, and insects. Lenny may believe he has gained an ally, or even a potential filly for his stable, since he pretends to leave with Max and Joey but reappears the instant Teddy goes upstairs to pack. In sharp contrast to his first encounter with Ruth, this time he is low-keyed and conciliatory. Again he digresses about a lady, but he gave this one a flowery hat instead of "a short-arm jab to the belly." When Ruth reminisces dreamily about her life as a nude model (I assume) before she went off to America, Lenny seems to read her behavior as confirmation that she is making him "some kind of proposal."

Whether or not Lenny does, when Teddy comes downstairs to take Ruth home, he steps into the most bizarre auction scene in all domestic drama, and it is engineered by Lenny. The jaunty pimp puts on some jazz, asks Ruth for "just one dance" before she goes, receives full compliance, kisses her a few times, hands her over to Joey for a bit of mauling, parts them with a touch of his foot, and pours drinks for all to celebrate the realignment. Though it is Teddy who visibly strains against the pressure of absurdity at this moment, Lenny has actually set himself up for a subtle comic downfall. Ruth's siege of deep-felt nostalgia - not about "working" as any kind of sex object but about posing for photographers at a genteel country estate - was entirely introspective and self-directed. To put it graphically, Lenny may have gathered that she was showing him her underwear when she was really just moving her leg. By the time she responds to his advances, he is deceived into thinking he has her pegged and will endure no more tremors from her behavior. He is thus a prime candidate for a shake-up.

Ruth administers the shake-up in two salvos, turning Lenny's cockiness as a shrewd exploiter of women into the sullen acquiescence of a man conned by one. It would be misleading to represent this as a conscious plot on her part, however; view it rather as the effect of her disturbing actions, whatever their roots. First, she somehow manages to play mother-beloved instead of whore to Joey, the test case client Lenny has arranged. Lenny covers up his anxiety quite well when he learns this, but is clearly jolted by the realization that Ruth may be a mere tease. Joey snorts that he can be happy "without going any hog," but what will the paying customers say? Second, Ruth responds to the idea of paying her way as a prostitute by making exorbitant demands that Lenny thought he could handle but cannot. he had said to the men: "I know these women. Once they get started they ruin your budget." Ruth reduces him to:

LENNY. We'd supply everything. Everything you need. [Note the qualification - everything you *need*
RUTH. I'd need an awful lot. Otherwise I wouldn't be content.
LENNY. You'd have everything. [Qualification dropped.]

Lenny does not squirm perceptibly during his public humiliation, even when it also becomes clear that Ruth will most probably refuse to "pull her weight" inside the house (no homecoming for Max and Lenny either). But as the final tableau implies, Ruth has effectively thrust him into the background whadow, big bear-enforcer Joey at her side. Whether Lenny becomes a cover-up-at-all-costs stoic or he is rendered catatonic as this barrage of the unmanageable shatters his delusion of firm control, he is certainly caught up in the "suction of the absurd" - no less than Teddy, in fact, and Teddy can at least escape. The audience, caught in the same suction (though with the cushion of aesthetic distance), leaves with heads buzzing: no escape but in the critics' explanations. Why Ruth carries out these strikingly unexpected acts of apparent self- gratification, by the way, is a wide-open question, but her spate of nostalgia for the best moments of the old life may have served vaguely as the impetus. Or perhaps it was simply her way of thanking Teddy for offering her the opportunity to help him with his lectures when they return.

This brief essay does not pretend to be a fully developed interpretive argument about *The Homecoming*. It is meant to exemplify the direction that might be taken by critical analysis which tries to be faithful to the genuine absurd experience of the play as it unfolds. The finely crafted progression of bizarre and disconcerting events might be approached from many other points of view. Mine, for example, completely neglects the two crucial offstage presences, Jessie and MacGregor, and fails to address Sam's important role. Nor does it do justice to one of the most prominent effects on that average first-nighter on whom I stake so much: the raunchy, ugly, gorgeous vulgarity of the piece. "What I mean," Lenny twits Teddy, ". . . you must know lots of professors, head of departments, men like that. They pop over here for a week at the Savoy, they need somewhere they can go to have a nice quiet poke. And of course you'd be in a position to give them inside information.... You could be our representative in the States." This excites Max: "Of course. We're talking in international terms! By the time we've finished Pan American'll give us a discount." There. I haven't neglected that.

It seems unfortunate as well as symptomatic that few critics in the past fifteen years have taken an approach that accepts and even relishes the absurdity of Pinter's depicted world. Precious few have resisted the urge to chase the will-o'-the-wisp of a solution to the mind-bending indeterminacies. *The Homecoming* in particular exudes. The gradual drift of criticism away from the reality of the play is marked by the actual titles of three early studies: the earliest, "Puzzling Pinter" [Richard Schechner, *Tulane Drama Review*, Winter 1966]; the others, "A Clue to the Pinter Puzzle" [Arthur Ganz, *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 21, 1969]; and "Not So Puzzling Pinter" [Herbert Goldstone, *Theatre Annual*, Vol. 25, 1969]. Ionesco's Detectives have been at work. What they have accomplished often seems dazzling in its perception and profundity. Some of it even seems inevitable when one is immersed in it. But if it violates the inherent nature of the play by trying to defuse its stunningly absurd time bombs, then what it is doing is busily explaining away the chief source of the play's power and of its richly deserved stature.

Source: Charles A. Carpenter, "'Victims of Duty'? The Critics, Absurdity, and *The Homecoming*," in *Modern Drama*, Vol. XXV, No. 4, December 1982, pp. 489-95.

Adaptations

A video recording of *Waiting for Godot*, featuring Burgess Meredith and Zero Mostel and directed by Alan Schneider, was made for Grove Press Film Division, 1971.

Eugene Ionesco's *The New Tenant* was filmed for Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation, 1975.

Jean Genet's *Balcony* is available on videocassette from Mystic Fire, 1998.

Edward Albee's *Zoo Story* is available on audio CD, Universal Records, 2001.

Waiting for Godot, by Samuel Beckett, is available on audio cassette, featuring a performance by Joe Dinicol for CBC Radio, 2000.

A website on the Theatre of the Absurd can be found with links to other sites and a chat room at http://vzone.virgin.net/numb.world/rhino. absurd.htm.

A useful web site on Beckett is "The Samuel Beckett On-Line Resources and Links Page" at http://www.samuel-beckett.net/ which contains numerous reviews and scholarly articles on Beckett's life and work, as well as reviews of books about Beckett.

Topics for Further Study

Some critics have referred to situations in absurdist works as "Kafka-esque." Read Franz Kafka's *The Trial* or view the 1962 film adaptation by Orson Welles and determine whether the work fits the category of Absurdism.

Absurdist works were avant-garde, even shocking, in the 1950s. By the 1980s, however, elements of Absurdism had found their way into music videos, television commercials, and print ads. Find examples of these elements in two or three music videos and/or advertisements and discuss the way the features of Absurdism are being used today.

The French surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel teamed up with surrealist artist Salvador Dali to produce the 1928 film *Un chien andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*), featuring a scene in which a man drags a pair of pianos filled with dead donkeys across a room. Try to obtain a copy of *An Andalusian Dog* from a public or university library or read about Buñuel's film in *The Branded Eye: Buñuel's Un chien andalou*, by Jenaro Talens, University of Minnesota Press, 1993. How do such surrealistic film scenes compare with Theatre of the Absurd?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: In the midst of the Cold War, Americans are fearful of a nuclear attack by the Soviet Union. Fallout shelters are designed and built, and school children regularly practice "duck and cover" procedures in the event of an air raid.

Today: After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., many Americans live in fear that terrorists may strike again at any time, anywhere in the country. Security firms offer classes for civilians in how to disarm a potential terrorist on an airplane.

1950s: The Soviet Union and the United States engage in a Cold War as two enemies with nuclear capability, each stockpiling weapons in an attempt to achieve nuclear superiority.

Today: The Soviet Union has separated into individual countries; the largest of these, Russia, is now an ally of the United States in the space program and in the war against terrorism.

1950s: Soldiers returning from World War II are eager to resume a normal life by marrying and starting families, leading to the postwar baby boom. Prosperity and family life are celebrated in popular culture, particularly television shows like *I Love Lucy*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Leave It to Beaver*, all of which feature stable, nuclear families.

Today: As women have delayed marriage to concentrate on careers and as the divorce rate skyrockets, television situation comedies are more likely to focus on single life rather than on families consisting of father, mother, and young children. Some examples are *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Will and Grace*.

What Do I Read Next?

Just as the playwrights of Absurdism rejected existing theatrical traditions, the poet e. e. cummings departed from the norms of traditional poetry with his unconventional use of grammar, syntax, and punctuation. His collection *100 Selected Poems*, published in 1989 by Grove Press, contains such poems as "anyone lived in a pretty how town," "next to of course god america i," and "my sweet old etcetera."

Some of the most famous images of artist René Magritte, like the green apple or the black bowler hat, are often described as absurdist. Robert Hughes's *The Portable Magritte*, Universe Publishers (2001), provides an illustrated study of Magritte's work.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, Dell Publishing (1969), draws on the author's own experiences as a prisoner of war in the German city of Dresden during the World War II Allied firebombing that killed hundreds of thousands of German civilians. In many ways, the novel shares Absurdism's sense of futility in the wake of mass destruction.

Many music videos employ the elements of Absurdism, and a number of books are available on music video as a popular art form. Among them are: *Thirty Frames per Second: The Visionary Art of the Music Video* by Steven Reiss, Neil Feineman, and Jeff Ayeroff, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers (2000); *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture* by E. Ann Kaplan, Methuen Drama (1987); and *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture* by Andrew Goodwin, University of Minnesota Press (1992).

Further Study

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Beckett's two-act play about two tramps who wait in vain by the side of the road for Godot to arrive is perhaps the most famous example of Absurdism.

Cohn, Ruby, *Casebook on "Waiting for Godot,"* Grove Press, 1967.

Cohn's book features reviews and interpretations of Beckett's most famous play and offers an assessment of its impact.

Lamont, Rosette C. *Ionesco: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, 1973.

Lamont presents a collection of scholarly essays ranging from an interpretation of *The Chairs* to an analysis of the structure of *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson*.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literary Movements for Students (LMfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LMfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LMfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LMfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LMfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LMfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LMfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literary Movements for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literary Movements for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literary Movements for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LMfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LMfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literary Movements for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literary Movements for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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