

Theatre of Absurd

The Theatre of Absurd is a term derived from Albert Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), and clear and lucid thoughts on the subject of absurdist drama is found in Martin Esslin's book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). It is a term applied to a group of dramatists in the 1950s who did not regard themselves as a school but who all seemed to share certain attitudes towards the predicament of the man in the universe: essentially those summarised by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It was Albert Camus (1913-1960) who first realized the absurdity of existence during the second world war and gave a vociferous expression to the meaninglessness of in his novels and drama. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Albert Camus defined the absurd as the tension which emerges from man's determination to discover purpose and order in a world which steadfastly refuses to evidence either. He diagnosed humanity's plight as purposelessness in an existence out of harmony with its surroundings. Awareness of this lack of purpose in all we do produces a state of metaphysical anguish which is the central theme of the writer's in the Theatre of the Absurd, most notably Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter.

The absurdist playwrights believe that our existence is absurd because we are born without asking to be born, we die without seeking death, we live between birth and death trapped within our body and our reason, unable to conceive of a time in which we were not, or a time in which we will not be — for nothingness is very much like the concept of infinity: something we perceive only in so far as we can not experience it. Thrust in to life, armed with our senses, will and reason, we feel ourselves to be potent beings. We never perceive anything completely. We are permitted to entertain committedly only one perspective of any object, fact, or situation: our own. We labour to achieve distinction and

permanence only to find that our assessments are perspectively incomplete and therefore never wholly effective. All of our creations are doomed to decay as we ourselves are doomed to death. We create in order to identify ourselves in some semblance of permanence, but our creations become autonomous facts the instant we have created them and do not identify us except in so far as we pretend what they do. Therefore, the more we strive for definition and permanent distinction, the more absurd we are. Yet the only value we can affirm with certainty is a self-defeating complex that we do not understand our life.

An absurdist playwright is one who is predominantly thematic in his dramaturgy. That is to say, these are dramatists of a philosophical bent who place the greatest value on their thematic statement. Consequently, their plays are constructed and polished in such a fashion as to call attention to their intellectual content, and this in spite of the fact that their thought refuses to be narrowly systematized. This tends to make their works more presentational than the works of authors less concerned with universals and more inclined to create a drama of sensuous experience, or realism.

Main Characteristics of Absurd drama

1. Life is essentially meaningless, hence miserable.
2. There is no hope because of the inevitable futility of man's efforts.
3. Reality is unbearable unless relieved by dreams and illusions.
4. Man is fascinated by death which permanently replaces dreams and illusions.
5. There is no action or plot. Very little happens because nothing meaningful can happen.
6. The final situation is absurd or comic.
7. Absurd drama is not purposeful and specific as it solves no problems. It is like an abstract painting.