

*WESTERN LITERARY HISTORY*  
*“THEATRE OF THE ABSURD”*

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*The 'Theatre of Absurd' is a term derived from Albert Camus' essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus'. The author developed this thought on the subject of the absurd and something unexpected that gives you a shock under normal circumstances. The clear and lucid thought on the subject of the absurdist drama can be found in Martin Eislin's 'The Theatre of the Absurd'. This term is applied to a group of dramatists of 1950's who didn't consider themselves as a school but who shared certain attitudes towards the predicament of man in the Universe.*

*From 1930's to the mid 50's development of drama was discursive but in the mid 50's drama emerged as a major literary force. Before the mid 50's drama was a middle class or upper middle class activity.*

*The conservatism of the audience put a dead weight upon the drama but in the mid 50's dramatists emerged with a lot of say and theatre which allowed them to say so also came into being. The dramatists said what they wanted to say rather than what the audience wanted to hear. They wrote to give a shock to the conventional audience.*

*The group of Samuel Beckett, Stoppard, Genet, Osborne and Harold Pinter wrote plays in which they expressed the belief that in a godless universe human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down. Logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speed to its ultimate conclusion, silence as in Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot".*

*The Absurdists believe that man's efforts to achieve perfection and permanence are futile. Reality is unbearable unless relieved through drama and illusions. They discard all conventions of dramatic technique. In their opinion, plot of a drama need not to be coherent and similarly, the characters need not to be well conceived with a clear and predictable future.*

*In these plays, there is no sensible pattern in plot and even characters are under-developed. They discarded realism and blended the elements of farce and tragedy to arise laughter and tears simultaneously.*

*“ Theatre of the Absurd overturned the 25 centuries of tradition..”*

*Various elements are invested by the authors :*

- a) Futility*
- b) Humanity's vain struggle against fate*
- c) Instability in characterization*
- d) Inadequate communication*
- e) Loose plots*
- f) Meaninglessness of life*
- g) ending is absurd and comic*
- h) It does not serve any specific purpose*

a) *Futility:*

*It is one of the most important element of any play of absurdity. In such a play every action, if there is any, fails to serve anything. Everything turns out to be a waste and it appears that nothing is and actually nothing serves any fruitful thing in the whole play. Like in Birthday Party, the protagonist tries his best to keep himself low profile and save himself from some threat but at the end all his efforts become futile.*

b) *Humanity's vain struggle against fate:*

*These plays show human struggle against destiny. Characters try to achieve something with all of their might but could not fight against the fate. They struggle throughout the plot but at the end fail to get whatever they need or ask for.*

c) *Instability in characterization :*

*Characters are flat most of the times and could not develop with the movement in plot as they themselves are somewhat confused and unclear in their actions. It is the second weakest point of the plays under theatre of absurd.*

d) *Inadequate communication :*

*Dialogues are incomplete, confusing and incoherent in many cases. It is quite hard to find out what is going on or why the things are like this? Audience finds it very tough to understand the actions and reactions and the reasons behind these as conversations does not serve its purpose clearly. Characters do communicate but its done in such a manner that things either get disturbed or get more troublesome. These add to the complexity of the plot on the contrary.*

e) *Loose plots :*

*Plots are not well-knit as it is very irritating for the audience to read or watch inactivity. Authors of the theatre of absurd never believed in the importance of the plot construction. They actually ignored this aspect of the drama writing. Sometimes, the plot gets dragged and gives the feeling of boredom; while other times, it appears to be missing some important events which could have given fullness to the meaning.*

f) *Meaninglessness of life :*

*Many authors focused on the idea that human world is meaningless. As human life is full of confusions so its very hard for human beings to understand the meaning of the life beyond human sight. People keep on doing things without understanding the real purpose behind it. They look for things and ignore the reality of the life.*

*g) Ending is absurd or comic :*

*In the end, the play suddenly closes giving a sense of betray mixed with laughter to the audience as they fail to comprehend why the dramatist concluded it at this point . The viewer feels betrayed because that ending makes him feel waste as he is unable to understand all the actions so far while he is unable to control his laughter as the final action leads to full on confusion turning the end into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.*

*h) It does not serve any specific purpose:*

*These plays does not serve any particular purpose as such dramas do not carry any themes, lessons and preachings. It is like infinite wait for something to happen; for something to be fruitful; for something of importance to take place but nothing actually takes place. So, these plays do not work as a platform for some sort of illumination.*

*These plays are like abstract paintings which does not contain any specific and definite meaning in ordinary sense.*

***Samuel Beckett**, an Irish novelist and dramatist has been one of the boldest and most efficient writer of the 20th century. The vision of life presented by him in his work is essentially sombre and dark. His Waiting for Godot is considered as one of the best dramas of the Absurd. It puts forth the problem of existence and identity. It is about two tramps who wait for the arrival of a 'god' who will complete anything in an unexplained and mysterious way but in reality that god never appears. They are still waiting for Godot when the play sums up.*

*The play is as absurd as the life is-but if understood in deep, it becomes an indiation towards something which is beyond*

*and meaningful and gives both fantastic as well as disgusting aspect to these plays.*

*Nobody knows What this Godot is. Even the author when once asked, said, "The word 'Godot' sounds like God. That is significant. Who knows God? Who has ever known? When they dont know who this God is, then why are they waiting? Because if you dont wait for something, you fall into inner emptiness. If you are not waiting for something to happen, you have to face your inner vacuum, the inner nothingness. And it is scary, it is death-like. To avoid it, to escape from it , one projects a dream in the future; thats's how future time is created. Future is not part of time , it is part of mind...One of the most basic truth of human life is that nothing ever happens. Millions of things happen but something ever happens.*

*One goes on waiting and waiting and waiting: waiting for godot. Who is this Godot? Nobody knows still one has to project to avoid one's inner emptiness."*

***John Osborne** is another important playwright of the absurd. His play Look Back in Anger has helped to change the scenario in a decisive way. This play has also added two phrases to the vocabulary of Drama "Angry Young Man" and "Kitchen Sink Drama". His Luther and Inadmissible Evidence are successful plays of absurdity. The language in his plays is colloquial and rough. The setting is naturalistic and rebellious voice is quite clear and visible.*

***Harold Pinter** is an eminent name in the theatre of absurd. His plays Home Coming, The Room, Birthday Party, No Man's Land and Landscape are some illustrations of blend of absurdity and menace.*

Harold Hobson described Birthday Party as “absorbing, witty and fascinating”. The vision of life displayed by him in his plays is black as well as funny. His plays presents a blending of tragic and comic elements. Humour is tinged with farce.

Theatre of the Absurd is a movement in which a bunch of renowned playwrights produced plays full of illogical actions, incomplete and out of harmony characters, inadequate conversations, incomprehensible actions or say inactions focusing only and only on existensialism aspect of human life.

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