
Chapter 1

Introduction: Overview of the absurd

Two men have been waiting on a country road for fifty years for a man named Godot. A woman is buried to her waist in the ground, and then buried up to her head, and continually concludes that this is a happy day. The inhabitants of a provincial French town one by one turn into rhinoceroses, until one man, who is by no means a hero, is left to face them. A transient approaches and harasses a well-to-do man sitting alone on a bench in a park and then the transient kills himself by running into a knife the man eventually holds. While still maintaining his love for his wife, an award-winning architect falls in love with a goat. A maybe former concert pianist, who is living at a seaside boarding house, is visited by two maybe unknown men and is interrogated to the point where the pianist is reduced to producing only grunts, at which point, after his supposed birthday party, the men escort the pianist away in a van. An entire novel with no perceivable plot narrated as a fractured and fragmented monologue by an unnamed, possibly immobile man. These are just some of the plots of absurd literature.

What, then, is absurdism? And what does it mean for a literary or dramatic work to be absurd? As some of the most important writers and thinkers of the twentieth century are *associated* with the absurd – writers such as Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Harold Pinter (all three being Nobel Prize winners in Literature), Edward Albee (winner of three Pulitzer Prizes and four Tony Awards), and (tangentially) Jean-Paul Sartre (who also *won* a Nobel Prize in Literature, but refused to accept it) – surely, many readers of this book will have some conception as to what is meant by absurdism or absurd literature. And the fact that absurd literature is thought to be a literary response to WWII brings a whole host of assumptions about what it means for something to be absurd. As *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*, the reader might be expecting an answer to these questions in a relatively simple and straightforward statement. Regarding that expectation, though some attempt will be made, this book will have to disappoint. The fact remains that there is no *single* answer – and certainly not a simple, straightforward answer – to these questions: much depends upon who you ask, what decade you asked in,

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and in what region of the world you posed these questions. But do not lose hope, as this is exactly much of the reason why the absurd has endured and thrived as a “movement,” if you will, of extraordinary interest over the past six decades. Absurd literature is elusive, complex, and nuanced: it refuses to be pinned down. And this is precisely why these texts associated with the absurd can be studied over and over, reinterpreted over and over, and have spoken for so long (and continue to speak) so powerfully to so many different generations, cultures, creeds, and types of people.

It is appropriate to introduce the absurd and its literary and dramatic equivalents in much the same way, appropriately (given the perceived overlap between existentialism and absurd literature), that Walter Kaufmann introduces his well-known, long-lived, edited anthology, *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*. Kaufmann starts, “Existentialism is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy.”¹ He concludes his first paragraph by stating, “. . . it might be argued that the label ‘existentialism’ ought to be abandoned altogether.”² A very similar thing can be said about philosophy of the absurd, the “Theatre of the Absurd,” and other absurd texts. Absurdism is not a literary “movement,” but “absurd” is a *label* placed upon a number of disparate writers (many of whom were playwrights writing in the 1950s and 1960s) who revolted against traditional theatre in sometimes similar and sometimes widely different ways. It might also be appropriate to suggest that maybe the *label* “absurd” (*placed upon* these literary texts and writers) ought to be abandoned altogether, as well.

The fact that the “Existential Front,” the only real wave of self-declared existentialism (led by Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty), found its way to the front of intellectual life (especially in France) following the horrors of the Holocaust and WWII, and the fact that writers such as Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett were also writing in France shortly following WWII, may or may not be a coincidence. However, what is important is that the two, almost simultaneous “movements,” if you will, were both composed of amorphous, undefined collections of thoughts and practices with none of the writers and thinkers defining themselves by the labels placed upon them (with the exception of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty who self-avowed themselves as “existentialists”). Therefore, when two perceived “movements,” neither of which are self-defined or necessarily a conscious “movement,” are placed in juxtaposition, there is bound to be utter confusion as to how one is to define them, especially the absurdist literary writers, none of whom ever said they were “absurdist.” Despite the challenges posed by these labels, this book will introduce – in a simple, straightforward *manner* – the complex, multi-dimensional, and rich nature of those works and writers associated

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with absurdism, offering the student of absurdism an inroad to these often challenging but very rewarding works and an in-depth path to continue one's exploration.

There is a common notion, however, that while someone may not be able to define absurd literature, one knows absurd literature when one encounters it. It is this very issue that this book attempts to address. The main difficulty is, *is it possible to discuss absurd literature without re-inscribing the "absurd" as a reductive category?* In order to address this, in this book, I focus less on the *themes* of the texts, but rather on the *techniques and aesthetic forms* that works and writers of absurd literature have in common: it is in this way that it is possible to *group* these disparate writers together without having to impose a straightjacket on what these texts mean or are saying to the reader/audience member. And this, importantly, allows each writer and each of their texts under consideration to simultaneously exist on their own, while still being able to understand the context that there was some organic alignment among a number of writers writing, especially, around the 1950s through 1970s. Ultimately, discussing absurd literature without re-inscribing it as a reductive category – by also placing it within larger literary, intellectual, and historical contexts – gives the student of absurd literature the necessary tools to (re)interpret these absurd texts.

Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*

It may be very unusual to start a book on interpreting literature, especially an introductory text, not with the literature itself and its writers, but with specifically *dramatic* criticism that pre-dated almost half of just the *theatrical* "movement": but such is the legacy of Martin Esslin's 1961 book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Christopher Innes, in an article about why Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* is a part of the literary "canon," writes,

that by explaining and popularizing their work, *The Theatre of the Absurd* directly contributed to that success. This is a book that literally created the movement it defined, changing not only scholarly and public perceptions but also the nature of contemporary theatre.³

As implied by Innes, Esslin's reading of the plays in his book is almost as widely known as the plays themselves. And whether or not it is fair to the rest of the literature associated with the absurd – for the "Theatre of the Absurd," while maybe the absurd's most highly crystalized expression, is still just one piece (and one genre) of the absurd – Esslin's vision of these plays

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permeates through advanced high school and college classrooms, through local and national newspapers' theatre reviews, through just about every English and theatre major's conception of the absurd around the world, and even through academic journal articles and books.⁴ Why is this?

We need to step back for a second in order to move forward. Starting in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a few playwrights, most notably Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet, had plays produced first in Paris before the plays moved to other countries. Almost immediately, especially with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (first published in 1952 and first produced in 1953), these plays became a *sensation*: but a "sensation" is not necessarily because the plays were well loved. Almost on the contrary, with the exception of some of the audiences in the initial productions in Paris, the plays of Beckett, Genet, and later in the 1950s, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee (to name a couple) caused almost an outrage among theatre audiences and critics. These plays were *different*. Despite the interest in seeing a whole new and different type of theatre that was emerging in Western Europe (and the United States soon after), for the most part, audiences and critics alike just simply did not understand the plays: *What was going on? Who are these characters? How can the play end there? What type of dialogue is this? Can you even call this dialogue?* Many critics and viewers even thought that these plays were just displays of intellectual snobbery. Even with the heavy-handed negative critiques, plays doing similar things throughout the 1950s from an ever-growing group of playwrights were simply not seeming to go away.

Then, in 1961, the assistant head of the BBC's radio drama department, Martin Esslin, published *The Theatre of the Absurd*. In short, Esslin suggests that audiences are judging plays by the above-mentioned playwrights (and others) against plays of traditional theatre (presumably, Aristotelian drama and theatrical realism). And this, Esslin asserts, is simply not fair to the plays at hand. In other words, one cannot judge the quality of an orange by comparing it to the taste of an apple. As such, Esslin says that we must judge these plays, which fall into the category he labels the "Theatre of the Absurd," not by the standards of traditional theatre, but by the standards of the "Theatre of the Absurd," which Esslin sets out to define. Importantly, Esslin stresses the fact that the dramatists that make up the Theatre of the Absurd "do not form part of any self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement."⁵

Before Esslin defines the "Theatre of the Absurd," he sets out to define "absurd," itself. Esslin turns to the philosophy of Albert Camus, whose *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) is about the human sense of absurdity. Esslin states that WWII shattered all hopes of replacing religion with faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies.⁶ Esslin notes that, "By 1942,

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Albert Camus was calmly putting the question, why, since life had lost all meaning, man should not seek escape in suicide.⁷ Quoting Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Esslin explains Camus' "[diagnosis] of the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs":

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. The divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.⁸

Esslin continues and suggests, stemming in some ways from its dictionary definition, that the common usage of "absurd" meaning "ridiculous," is not how Camus uses the word nor is it the sense as it pertains to the Theatre of the Absurd. Esslin quotes Eugene Ionesco, from an essay Ionesco wrote about Franz Kafka, to define the Absurd: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose . . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all actions become senseless, absurd and useless."⁹

After defining the "absurd," Esslin begins his discussion of what he sees as the theme of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd: the "sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition." Esslin notes that while other writers have the same theme of the "sense of senselessness of life," writers such as Giraudoux, Anouilh, Salacrou, Sartre, and Camus present this same theme in a "highly lucid" manner, using "logically constructed reasoning." The playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, on the other hand, write about this same theme – the "sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach" – but by matching the new content with a new convention: that is, by striving to express this senselessness "by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought."¹⁰ Thus, while Sartre and Camus express their philosophies in their writing, the Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin argues, does a better job of connecting the similar content with an appropriately matching form.¹¹ And while Sartre and Camus argue *about* absurdity of the human condition – which is the approach of the philosopher – the playwrights discussed by Esslin "merely [*present* the absurd] in being."

As such, Esslin is then able to move his conversation away from his thematic approach to a structural approach that examines the form of the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd. That is, what are some of the typical devices in this theatre and what is its form and the manner in presenting its theme? Esslin says these plays "[tend] toward a radical devaluation of language . . . what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by

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Michael Y. Bennett

Excerpt

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the characters.”¹² Earlier in his Introduction, Esslin’s characterization of these plays (in relation to traditional theatre) also gives the reader a list of things typically encountered in this genre: “these have no story or plot to speak of . . . these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets . . . these often have neither a beginning nor an end . . . these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares . . . these often consist of incoherent babblings.”¹³

Esslin’s book clearly struck a chord with the theatre-going public. Esslin published an expanded edition to include more playwrights in 1969, as well. The books (though the same in their essential arguments) is/are considered arguably the most important book(s) of dramatic criticism in that decade. And the fact that a third edition of the book was published thirty-five years later in 2004 demonstrates the staying power of Esslin’s initial readings (which is now in its eighth printing). While this book, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*, is at times critical of Esslin’s book, the importance that Esslin’s book had/has in the minds of the general public and academia, and similarly, its importance in popularizing (and almost immortalizing) quite challenging theatrical texts that would have otherwise probably remained removed from the public’s consciousness, slipping away into near oblivion as a short-lived avant-garde fad, cannot be overstated. Even Esslin’s greatest detractors are highly indebted to Esslin for making these plays not only relevant, but elevating them, in a sense, into high art and philosophy, all the while, making these plays accessible to the general public.

The issue that scholars have had with Esslin’s book is not that he places writers together who do not fit with each other: Esslin is rather spot on, in fact, in placing these playwrights side by side. The issue, instead, has been that by naming/labeling and categorizing a group of playwrights together by the theme of absurdity – a theme Esslin very narrowly defines based upon a specific (mis)reading of the philosopher, Albert Camus – the multiple meanings that generally emerge from “great literature” are generally *reduced* to a single theme. Esslin literally placed a *label* on these plays, as he “attaches” the “name,”¹⁴ “The Theatre of the Absurd.” Furthermore, in suggesting that these plays and playwrights employ “their own convention,” Esslin connotes that there is something formal happening here, as “convention” means, even if these conventions are implicit, that there is general “agreement,” “consent,” and/or the presence of “rules” to follow.¹⁵ Samuel Beckett’s own criticism of the label “The Theatre of the Absurd” is that it was originally constructed as a value judgment.¹⁶ One of Esslin’s main stated goals was to create the category of the “Theatre of the Absurd” so that *these* plays were not being evaluated against the norms of *traditional theatre* (which, if they were to be, they were bound

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to fail). In order to appreciate these plays, Esslin created a label, “The Theatre of the Absurd” which was largely based upon – a theme: the “metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition.” This label, largely, again, by *theme* led to reductionist readings of these plays associated with the absurd, most of these readings still inform our common understanding of these plays and absurd literature as a whole. Despite the fact that Esslin’s theme can clearly be seen in these plays, this *reduction to a single theme*, and then labeling a whole group of disparate writers together based on that one main theme, is not fair to the individual plays and especially these playwrights, whose careers span decades and whose plays explore so many other themes and preoccupations, as well. Edward Albee points out the very problems with “labels” (including the absurd label): “I dismiss all labels. Theatre of the Absurd. Angry Young Man. Playwright of Protest. Labels are so facile, and they’re a substitute for conscientious analysis so much of the time.”¹⁷

While this chapter will explore the nuances and complex lineage of the absurd, demonstrating the difficulty of classifying it as particularly this-or-that, there, however, *are* ways to *describe* what is happening. But how? Or, stated another way (again), *is it possible to discuss the absurd without re-inscribing the “absurd” as a reductive category?* This has been the elusive quest for scholars since Esslin’s book, even by Esslin himself, for much of the rest of his career following the publication of *The Theatre of the Absurd*.

Without any self-declared movement, self-declared name, or literary/artistic manifesto, it is really hard to *simply* “label” or “categorize” these writers (especially the playwrights of the 1950s and 1960s) as “absurdist.” While there is just too much variety and too little concerted effort to place a *label* on what these writers were doing, having said that, it is not, however, entirely wrong (and maybe entirely correct) to *group* the playwrights that Esslin associated with the Theatre of the Absurd together, along with comparable contemporary writers of absurd fiction and poetry, *in the same manner* as to how scholars loosely (though not without problems and controversy), but constructively group *modernist* writers and *postmodernist* writers (i.e., both as a loose temporal grouping and one based upon similarities of techniques, forms, and preoccupations). “Grouping” is far less “systematic” than the act of “labeling” or “categorizing.” The latter two have connotations that things in the same *class* or *category* are similar in many, if not all, aspects, while instead “grouping” requires only the “presence of *some* common feature or property” (*my italics*). That is, there is room for a lot of *difference* among those placed in a “group,” versus much less so, if any difference at all, in a “category” or “class.” As it is difficult to get rid of a label that has stuck for fifty-plus years, and then, some term or word – out of the necessity of communicating ideas through

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language – would need to replace it, suggesting merely *another* “label,” I will refer to this loose group of writers and their works as “absurd” (also using “absurd,” both as an adjective and as a noun, in uses such as, “absurd literature,” “the literary absurd,” “absurd theatre,” etc.). My use of the word, “absurd,” however, also attempts to take into account a far greater sense of the word (both philosophically more diverse and, especially, also capturing the word’s sense in common usage) than how Esslin proposes “Theatre of the Absurd” is used in relation to these plays.

Therefore, in order to (re)describe absurd literature without being *reductionist*, I focus not really on the themes or meaning (as Esslin mostly does), but basically just on the techniques and aesthetic forms that absurd literature has in common: it is in this way that it is possible to group these disparate writers together without having to impose a straightjacket on what these texts *mean* or are saying to the reader/audience member (either in the 1950s, now, or fifty years from now). And this, importantly, *allows each writer and each play to simultaneously exist on their own, while still being able to understand the context that there was some organic alignment among a number of writers writing around the 1950s through 1970s*. This book proposes to address this issue by suggesting that by *grouping* these writers according to some common techniques and similarities of literary form, the often wide differences among these absurd writers and their texts remains intact.

Let us take the two example groups above: *modernist* and *postmodernist* writers. If we think of the most iconic modernist writers, some of the first names that come to mind are T. S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway (and this is not an exhaustive list). But while these “modernist” writers, if you will, share certain techniques of expression, wrote around the same time period, and had similar views towards truth, could we say that “The Wasteland,” *The Great Gatsby*, *A Room of One’s Own*, *Ulysses*, and *The Old Man and the Sea*, respectively, are *about* (thematically speaking) the same things? Not at all! It is the same with the metafiction, pastiche, and the time period of postmodernist writers: Thomas Pynchon (*Gravity’s Rainbow*), Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse V*), and David Foster Wallace (*Infinite Jest*), just to name a few. Are these three books, thematically, *about* the same things? No, of course not. So why would/should we assume/say absurdist literature thematically is *about* the same things? And this is why Esslin’s categorization that the playwrights of the absurd share the common theme of “metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition” is absurd. Can one theme typify Beckett, Genet, Albee, Pinter, and so on? That is where the reductionism of the label, “absurd” (or “Theatre of the Absurd”) originates. Yes, it can clearly

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be seen that the above-named playwrights touch upon this above theme, but to connect writers through a *theme*, or even, maybe more appropriately, through the *meaning* or a *reading* of their texts is typically not done in literary criticism, and for good reasons. Literature, generally, defies a single reading or meaning. Literature almost actively refuses to be *about* this particular thing or that particular thing: it speaks (over the ages) to so many topics, themes, meanings, and so on. Texts like *Hamlet*, *Ulysses*, and *Godot* are re-interpreted again and again and again, and they are still just as elusive and exciting each time they are read (or re-read). *This book thus aims to give the student of absurd literature the background information, contexts, and the tools to (re)interpret these literary works in varied and exciting new ways.*

Common conceptions of the absurd

There are generally three main ideas surrounding the absurd that float around in the public's imagination. These three common conceptions – that absurdism (1) discusses the senselessness and meaninglessness of life, (2) is existential, and (3) has ridiculous plots – are both kind of on target and also kind of misplaced.

Absurd has long been thought of as a literary response to the horrors of WWII and the Holocaust. In a world that, for the most part, sat by and allowed such horrors to transpire, where was God to be found? How else could the world be anything but senseless and meaningless? The (often misunderstood) widely popular and widely read post-WWII atheistic philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus *seemed* to point to the same conclusion. Largely because of the general misunderstandings about Sartre's existentialism and the (generally unknown) fact that Camus revolted against Sartrean existentialism, as Esslin references Sartre and Camus as philosophical backbones of the Theatre of the Absurd, helped the public, both correctly and incorrectly, conflate absurdism with existentialism. Kafka's trials, Godot's absence, the menace of Pinter's dramas, the onslaught of Rhinoceros, and the general confusion and lack of linearity of thought and logic present in these absurd texts all suggest how senseless and meaningless life is. Esslin's pronouncement that these plays of the Theatre of the Absurd discuss the "senselessness of life" immediately helped theatregoers make sense of these plays. Clearly, these texts can readily be read as dwelling on our "metaphysical anguish."

At the same time, however, these texts also point to the need to make one's own life meaningful. The Samsas learn to live life after Gregor's transformation

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in “The Metamorphosis,” Didi and Gogo are each other’s *saviors* and with each other they can “bide one’s time,” Pinter shows where communication fails in hopes that we (the audience/reader) might not fall into the same traps of silence and conversing without really communicating, Berenger holds on to his humanity and cherishes the revolt despite his absurd situation with the onslaught of Rhinoceritis, and the language of the absurd might mirror the senselessness found in our absurd world, but it also creates fertile ground for making meaning ourselves.

Though Esslin was quick to point out that “absurd” should not be understood in terms of its common usage, “ridiculous,” there is clearly an assumption among the general reader that the word, “absurd,” is, in fact, used in this way and the plays, especially, are largely perceived (and maybe rightly so, to a degree) as *ridiculous*. Two men waiting on a desolate “country road” for fifty years for a man who never comes, rhinos running through a small provincial French town (and we find out that it is because the townsfolk are the ones turning into rhinos), and a man awakes one morning as a bug, all surely sound like quite *ridiculous* plots.

Esslin expressly states that it is not the “ridiculous” connotation of the absurd that characterized these plays. Esslin suggests that it is the “divorce between man and his life” that constitutes the absurd. This turn to a well-respected and well-read philosopher, Albert Camus, and his philosophy of the absurd, gave Esslin’s reading of these plays a very solid intellectual thrust. And while absurd texts have been read (countless times) very persuasively through the philosophies of Sartre and Camus – and the philosophical absurd is absolutely integral to absurd literature – it is also ridiculous to say that there is not an element of the *ridiculous* in absurd literature. The first definition of *ridiculous* is “exciting ridicule and derisive laughter; absurd, preposterous, comical, laughable.”¹⁸ While it can be argued that the first part of this definition emphasizes its *ridicul-* root and may not fully apply to the texts of the absurd, “absurd, preposterous, comical, laughable” clearly describes a significant and obvious part of absurd literature. The ridiculousness of absurd literature should not be entirely ignored in order to make these texts simply more philosophical or carry more intellectual weight. The ridiculous element found in these texts not only aptly describes an obvious element of the texts (seemingly more obvious to the general public than academics) and should be cherished for its creativity and inventiveness rather than glossed over *only* in favor of a more intellectually serious notion of the absurd, but the connotations of ridiculous also connect these absurd texts to their lineage stemming from literary nonsense and the hilarity of the *comedy* found within their *tragicomic* texts.