PGEG S3 02

Modern Drama

SEMESTER III

ENGLISH

BLOCK 3

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Subject Experts

1. **Prof. Pona Mahanta**, Former Head, Department of English, Dibrugarh University
2. **Prof. Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami**, Former Srimanta Sankardeva Chair, Tezpur University
3. **Prof. Bibhash Choudhury**, Department of English, Gauhati University

Course Coordinator : Dr. Prasenjit Das, Associate Professor,Discipline of English, KKHSOU

SLM Preparation Team

UNITS	CONTRIBUTORS
11-13	**Dr. Prasenjit Das**
14-15	**Dr. Manab Medhi** Department of English, Bodoland University

Editorial Team

Content (Unit 11-13)	:	**Dr. Manab Medhi**
(Unit 14-15)	:	**Prof. Robin Goswami**, Former Senior Academic Consultant, KKHSOU
Structure, Format and Graphics	:	**Dr. Prasenjit Das**

Reprint, January, 2022

ISBN : 978-93-87940-38-3

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Printed and published by Registrar on behalf of the Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University.

Head Office : Patgaon, Rani Gate, Guwahati-781017; Web : www.kkhsou.in/web_new
City Office: Resham Nagar, Khanapara, Guwahati-781022

SEMESTER 3
MA IN ENGLISH
COURSE 2: MODRN DRAMA
BLOCK 3: BECKETT AND PINTER

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BLOCK 3: INTRODUCTION

This is the third Block of the Course on Modern Drama. Our main purpose here is to discuss the history and characteristics of Absurd Drama with reference to two important Absurd Plays—*Waiting for Godot* and *The Caretaker*. The theatre critic Marin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) probably coined the phrase 'Theatre of the Absurd' to refer to the works of a group of dramatists who were active in the 1950s. The important names include—Arthur Adamov, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter. In the early 1950s, the concept of the absurd began to be resolved and articulated in a series of remarkable plays which dramatised the kind of vision of human beings struggling with the irrationality of experience, in a state of 'metaphysical anguish' as projected by the French writer Albert Camus. The so-called absurd plays lack a formal logic and conventional plot structure to support what may be called the absurd predicament. Some of the world's major Absurd plays are—*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days* by Becket, *Rhinoceros* by Ionesco; *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, *Landscape and Silence* and *No Man's Land* by Pinter. This Block consists of five units, which are as the following:

Unit 1: This unit should be read as an introduction to Absurd drama, its history and major exponents. Therefore, as you finish reading this unit, you will be able to discuss the history and background of Absurd drama, which shall further help you to discuss the plays *Waiting for Godot* and *The Caretaker,* which are prescribed for your study.

Unit 2 In this unit, we shall have a look at the life and works of Samuel Beckett, one of the greatest exponents of the 'Theatre of the Absurd.' As a writer playwright, Beckett believed that the recognition of the triviality, senselessness, and the ultimate meaninglessness of life must be able to free and liberate human beings from their concern with senselessness and futile objectives. As you finish reading this unit, you will be able to appreciate both Beckett and his play *Waiting for Godot* in the context of the 'Theatre of the Absurd.'

Unit 3 This unit is based on a reading of the various important aspects of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* that is often considered one of the greatest absurd plays of the 20th century. Beckett, through his characters and landscapes in the play, presents a vision of the collapse and decay of western philosophy, culture and society. This vision, no doubt, has its origins in the contemporary war-ridden western world, but it belongs also to a tradition of dramatic innovations of the 20th century.

Unit 4: This unit is based on Harold Pinter who is one of the best-known theatre activists of the 20th century. Although, he has been a poet, a novelist, a playwright, a screenwriter, an actor, and an able director on both the stage and the screen, it is mostly as a dramatist that Pinter is widely known to the world. Pinter's preoccupation with confined spaces, small habitats with constraining circumstances and brief events provides a scope for exploring the complexities of life, the instability of verbal interactions, the changing social realities, and the inability to communicate properly, as to be found in the play *The Caretaker*.

Unit 5: This unit is based on Pinter's play *The Caretaker* which presents a simple story of the two brothers and a tramp. With this story, the play deals with themes like the distance between reality and fantasy, family relationships, and the struggle for power. It also touches on the subjects of mental illness and the plight of the destitute. Pinter in this play takes recourse to elements of both comedy and tragedy in order to express complex meanings about human existence, life and being, which in turn elicits complex reactions among the audience.

While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in "LET US KNOW" along with the text. We have kept "CHECK YOUR PROGRESS" questions in each unit. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We strongly advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the "FURTHER READING" which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know the world of literature and criticism is too big, we strongly advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you read the original texts of the authors prescribed as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

UNIT 11: INTRODUCING ABSURD DRAMA

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 Absurd Drama According to Martin Esslin

11.4 Important Theorists and Playwrights of the Absurd

11.5 Reception of Absurd Drama

11.6 Let us Sum up

11.7 Further Reading

11.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

11.9 Possible Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- define the absurd drama and explain their characteristics
- trace the history of Absurd drama in the 20th century
- make a list of the important practitioners and playwrights of the Absurd
- explain their specific contributions of the absurd playwrights to the world of modern drama.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 3 of the course on modern drama. In this unit, we shall discuss the history and characteristics of Absurd drama. We shall also try to look at the practitioners of absurd drama in some detail. Marin Esslin who wrote the seminal book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) probably coined the phrase 'Theatre of the Absurd'. The term Absurd is applied to the works of a group of dramatists who were active in the 1950s: Adamov, Beckett, Genet, Ionesco and Pinter. Among the less known playwrights were Albee, Arrabal, Gunter Grass, Pinget and N. F. Simpson. In the early 1950s, many diffused conceptions of the absurd began to be

resolved and articulated in a series of remarkable plays which dramatised the kind of vision of human beings struggling with the irrationality of experience, in a state of 'metaphysical anguish' as projected by the French writer Albert Camus. The so-called plays lack a formal logic and conventional structure, so that both form and content support (while emphasising the difficulty of communicating) the representation of what may be called the absurd predicament. Some of the major works of absurd plays are—*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days* by Becket, *Rhinoceros* by Ionesco; *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, *Landscape and Silence* and *No Man's Land* by Pinter. As you finish reading this unit, you will be able to discuss the history and background of Absurd drama, which shall further help you to discuss the plays *Waiting for Godot* and *The Caretaker,* which are prescribed for your study.

11.3 ABSURD DRAMA ACCORDING TO MARTIN ESSLIN

The term 'theatre of the absurd', coined by **Martin Esslin** for the title of his study of post-Second World War French theatre, came into vogue in the 1960s at a time when the so-called 'absurd' dramatists had written their major works and were already experimenting in other directions. The following is an attempt at exploring the history of Absurd drama. In his book *Absurd Drama*, Esslin wrote:

The Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. However, the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.

The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of World War II by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the World War II. By 1942, Albert Camus put the question why, since life had lost all meaning, man should not seek escape in suicide. In one of the great, seminal heart-searching stories of our time–*The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus tried to diagnose 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. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity." This view of Camus became Instrumental in popularising the concept of the 'absurd'.



LET US KNOW

The Meaning of the term 'Absurd':

'Absurd' originally means 'out of harmony', in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: 'out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical'. In common usage, 'absurd' may simply mean 'ridiculous', but this is not the sense in which Camus uses the word, and in which it is used when we speak of the Theatre of the Absurd. In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows: 'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose…Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.'

However, in the context of modern theatre the 'absurd' suggests a kind of unconventional mode of representation. The absurd plays are sure to frustrate the desire of watching a well- organised play expected by the conventional playgoers. However, critics would like to club some of these theatrical variations with other labels such as—'theatre of

revolt', 'theatre of derision', 'anti-theatre', or 'Meta theatre'. However, these labels also help to understand what is common between the plays because they appear to share a certain theatrical moment and movement.

Esslin further states that the sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition is, broadly speaking, the theme of the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, and some other writers. But it is not merely the subject-matter that defines what is here called the Theatre of the Absurd. A similar sense of the senselessness of life, of the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose, is also the theme of much of the work of dramatists like Giraudoux, Anouilh, Salacrou, Sartre, and Camus himself. Yet these writers differ from the dramatists of the Absurd in an important respect: they present their sense of the irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning, while the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.

While Sartre or Camus express the new content in the old convention, the Theatre of the Absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed. In some senses, the *theatre* of Sartre and Camus is less adequate as an expression of the *philosophy* of Sartre and Camus - in artistic, as distinct from philosophic, terms - than the Theatre of the Absurd. But, the Theatre of the Absurd is essentially French. It is broadly based on ancient strands of the Western tradition and has its exponents in Britain, Spain, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Eastern Europe and the United States as well as in France. Moreover, its leading practitioners who lived in Paris and wrote in French were not themselves Frenchmen.



LET US KNOW

In the preface to his book, Martin Esslin writes:

- "Thus the type of theatre discussed in this book is by no means of concern only to a narrow circle of intellectuals. It may provide a

new language, new ideas, new approaches, and a new, vitalized philosophy to transform the modes of thought and feeling of the public at large in a not too distant future."

- "Moreover, an understanding of this kind of theatre, which is still misunderstood by some of the critics, should, I believe, also cast light on current tendencies of thought in other fields, or at least show how a new convention of this sort reflects the changes in science, psychology, and philosophy that have been taking place in the last half-century. The theatre, an art more broadly based than poetry or abstract painting, without being, like the mass media, the collective product of corporations, is the point of intersection where the deeper trends of changing thought first reach a larger public."
- "There has been some comment on the fact that the Theatre of the Absurd represents trends that have been apparent in the more esoteric kinds of literature since the 1920's (Joyce, Surrealism, Kafka) or in painting since the first decade of this century (Cubism, abstract painting). This is certainly true. But the theatre could not put these innovations before its wider public until these trends had had time to filter into a wider consciousness. And, as this book hopes to show, the theatre can make its own very original contribution to this new type of art."

However, while dealing with the 'Theatre of the Absurd' following World War II, we should note that it emerged as a rebellion against the essentialist philosophy regarding human culture and art—the belief that human beings are fairly rational creatures who lived in an at least a partially intelligible universe. This philosophy also stressed the essential idea that human beings are an integral part of an ordered social structure and hence capable of heroism and dignity even in most terrible situations. However, the existentialist philosophy that emerged out of some philosophical works such as Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) and George Gadamer's *Truth and Method* came as a challenge to such an essentialist positioning.

Writer- Philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus viewed human life as an isolated existence that was cast into an alien universe. They viewed the universe as possessing no universal truth and meaning. Human beings, according to them were moving from nothingness to nothingness. Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) best captures the absurdity of modern human civilization by stating, "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile…The divorce between man and his life, the actor and the setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity". Similarly, Andre Breton's "Manifesto on Surrealism" (1924) launched Surrealism as a unified movement in France. The main idea was to overthrow logical reasoning, standard morality and social and artistic conventions in order to liberate art from the restrains of free creativity. For that purpose, they even advocated 'automatic writing'. Thus, Existentialism and then Surrealism captured the attention of the sensitive artists who rendered a visible influence on the emergence of Absurd drama as opposed to the idea of 'canonical' art.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Name some of the important absurdist plays.

Q 2: How does Martin Esslin view the 'absurd' in 'absurd plays'?

Q 3: State the significance of Camus' essays *The Myth of Sisyphus.*

11.4 IMPORTANT THEORISTS AND PLAYWRIGHTS OF THE ABSURD [Adapted from Claude Schumacher's essay "The Theatre of the Absurd"]

The origins of this form of drama are obscure, but it would be reasonable to suppose that its lineage is traceable from Roman mime plays, through the aspects of comic business and techniques in medieval and Renaissance drama and commedia dell'arte, and thence to the dramatic works of Alfred Jarry, August Strindberg and Bertolt Brecht. The work of Jarry is vital and the possibilities of a theatre of the absurd are already apparent in *Ubu Roi* (1896), *Ubu Coca* (1897-8) and *Ubu enchatnd* (1898).

Moreover, it is conceivable that the increasing popularity of nonsense verse from about the mid 19th century onwards is connected with this concept of the absurd. Almost certainly, **Dadaism** and **Surrealism** influenced the development of the theatre of the absurd, and did Antonin Artaud's theories on the 'Theatre of Cruelty.'

In the evolution of a new vision of mankind in relation to his environment and the universe, one may expect to see a large number of cross-fertilising influences. Clearly, the idea that man is absurd is by no means new. An awareness of the essential absurdity of much human behaviour has been inherent in the works of many writers. Aristophanes, Plautus, Terence, Chaucer, Erasmus, Cervantes, Moliere, Swift, Pope, Samuel Butler, Anatole France, Balzac, Dickens, Goncharov, Thurber, Chesterton, Belloc, Damon Runyon—have all shown an acute feeling for man's comicality. However, the concept of 'Homo Absurdas' has acquired a rather more specific meaning in the last hundred years or so. This is partly owing to the need to provide an explanation of man's apparent purposeless in a universe, which is popularly imagined to have no discernible reason for existence.



Dadaism: An artistic movement in modern art that started around World War I. Its purpose was to ridicule the meaninglessn--ess of the modern world.

Surrealism: A 20th century avant-garde movement in art and literature, which sought to release the creative potential of the unconsci--ous mind, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images.

However, we shall try to discuss the history of the emergence of absurd drama in terms of the extraordinary works of some writers and playwrights. For example, in his *La Tentation de l'occident* (1926), the French novelist **Andre Malraux**, who deliberated at length about the human condition, remarked that at the centre of European man, dominating the great moments of his life, there lies an essential absurdity. The theme recurs in a number of works by Malraux himself, and is apparent, particularly, in the works of **Jean Paul Sartre** and **Albert Camus**. The latter's collection of essays *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) contains some of the most interesting statements on the theme. Camus expounded in some detail a vision of life, which was essentially absurd, without apparent purpose, out of harmony with its surroundings, sad to the point of anguish, and at the same time, in a laconic fashion, funny. He stresses the destructive nature of time, the feeling of solitude in a hostile world and the sense of isolation from other human beings.



Mathematically, absurd is that which cannot be expressed in finite terms of ordinary numbers or quantities. Hence, irrational rather than ridiculous. It is in the mathematical sense that the 'philosophy' of the absurd has been mostly expressed. However, it is also seen as a pervasive attitude rather than a system of thought.

Claude Schumacher in his article "The Theatre of the Absurd" provides an interesting analysis on the emergence of Absurd drama, its characteristics and practitioners. He views that theatre is the most social of art forms and, as such, requires a great many conventions so that the theatrical event, on and off the stage, can take place in an orderly fashion. You know already that it was in Ancient Greece that the theoretical foundations of our Western theatre were laid and that Aristotle is still invoked in the discussions concerning the structure of drama. Then, the Renaissance dramatists including Shakespeare gave a proper shape to classical drama. The influence of Shakespeare could be traced through the rules that came to govern French 17th century theatre (unities of time, place and action; unity of tone; verisimilitude, decorum etc.) aimed at creating an orderly, coherent, harmonious, rational dramatic poem.

The same rules came to embody the ideal of playwriting throughout the western world after neo-classicism established itself as the dominant aesthetic norm in the 17th century. A good play was a play with a strong, straightforward plot moving relentlessly to its logical, tragic or comic, conclusion, with clearly drawn and highly individualised characters, with well-written, rhetorical dialogue, to be clearly and evocatively spoken by actors. The actors are to convincingly portray their roles in a familiar setting or in some easily identifiable exotic locations. Such were the ideals upheld by all dramatists hoping to have their plays performed in the theatre, from Aeschylus to Ibsen. It can be said that, before the 20th century, the dramatic form was eminently logical and rational (even when dealing with extraordinary events) and that it aimed at providing spectators with an authentic picture of their world. When some modern playwrights recognised that the world was in a state of chaos, and the artists started aiming to construct meaning out of that same chaos, to create order out of disorder, to give shape to what is shapeless, their 'New Theatre' soon came to be known as 'the theatre of the absurd', which overturned twenty-five centuries of tradition by rejecting all rules and by facing the chaos head-on.

A more radical onslaught on Western culture in general and Western theatre in particular was launched by **Antonin Artaud** in a series of

programme notes, pamphlets, lectures and essays, collectively published in 1938 as *Le Théâtre et son double (The Theatre and its Double)*. Artaud's ideas were to become the basic tenets of the 'new theatre', which, from the outset, defined itself in total opposition to tradition. For Artaud, theatre must operate 'by every means at its disposal', but such means must be reassessed and new theatrical techniques must be invented. He stated clearly that he did not 'intend to do away with dialogue, but to give words something of the significance they have in dreams.' But, above all, he insisted on the concrete nature of the stage, on the importance of the physical presence of the actor: 'it seems to me that on stage, above all a space to be filled, somewhere something happens, word language must give way to sign language, whose objective aspect has the most immediate impact on us.' Artaud advocated a liberation of the subconscious and gave free rein to the imagination. He succeeded only partially in putting his ideas into practice, with his production of Shelley's verse drama *The Cenci* (Paris, 1935), and the task of bringing such innovative ideas to fruition was left to the next generation of playwrights and directors.

However, the harbinger of the 'absurd' era was **Eugene Ionesco's** *The Bald Prima Donna.* It has no plot, a deceptively naturalistic set, no consistent characters; it is based on an ever-shifting ground of nonsense dialogue, of arbitrary entrances and exits, of unexplained appearances. Chance rules supreme and everything is equally important (or unimportant). First seen in Paris on 16 May 1950 at 6 p.m. Ionesco was well aware of breaking new ground with this play:

The Bald Prima Donna which I had subtitled 'antiplay' (which frightened quite a few people) is a short burlesque comedy. Six vaguely English characters are under the delusion that you need only open your mouth to say something. In reality Mr and Mrs Smith, their guests the Martins, the fire-brigade captain and the maid have nothing to say. That's why they talk and talk. Their speech full of clichés is a parody of speech, just as the play is a parody of theatre. The world appeared to me to be improbable; the behaviour of my characters must also appear improbable in its ordinariness. My aim is to make the commonplace look strange. (Ed. Latour, 1986, p. 57)

Ionesco reveals that the idea of the play *The Bald Prima Donna* came to him when he read the absurd phrases given as examples in language primers, e. g. 'the ceiling is above and the floor is below', which insidiously find their way into everyday speech. He also tells of his amazement when the 'antiplay' turned out to be a very effective comedy, since he thought he had written *the* 'tragedy of language'. A critic of the first night's performance warned, more than a decade before Esslin's book was written, "*The Bald Prima Donna* is exclusively for those spectators who are not frightened by the Absurd" (*Arts,* 19 May 1950) and another called it "a deliciously poetic absurdity." (*Match,* 24 June 1950).

The impossibility, together with the necessity of communicating, is the subject of Ionesco's masterpiece, *Les Chaises* (*The Chairs,* 1952). At the end of their lives, a couple of retired lighthouse keepers (he 95, she 94) invite 'distinguished people' to their lonely round tower in order to pass on the old man's 'message' to the world. The couple is garrulous beyond belief and there is no cliché that they do not use in the incessant jabbering between one another or to the crowd of invisible guests that, little by little, fill the stage: the people are invisible, but a chair is brought in as each guest enters. When eventually the end has arrived, the Emperor himself, no space remains for the hosts who jump into the sea secure in the belief that the professional speaker they have hired will expertly deliver *the* message. The 'Orator' is the only other real character, but he is only capable of uttering inarticulate sounds and of scribbling meaningless signs on a blackboard. In the programme note for the first production, Ionesco wrote, "At times the world seems to me to be void of meaning, reality to be unreal. It is the feeling of unreality, the search for an essential reality, forgotten, unnamed that I am trying to express through my characters who wander aimlessly, having nothing to call their own apart from their worries, their failures, the emptiness of their lives. People drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque; their suffering can only appear tragic by derision." In addition, he adds,

Since I am unable to understand the world, how could I understand my own play? I hope someone will explain it to me' (ed. Latour, 1986, p. 260). The Orator's message is as grotesque, derisory and tragic as the final image of the play: an actor who has forgotten his lines tries lamentably to communicate

something to an absent audience! However, something seems to emerge from the empty gibberish: 'ADIEU' or 'A DIEU' ('Goodbye' or 'To God'). Is Ionesco, in extremis, affirming not only the impossibility of communication, but also the impossibility of communicating in a world without God?

God was often invoked by the critics of **Beckett's** first play *En attendant Godot* (Paris, 3 January 1953) as they tried to explain the meaning of the play and the symbolic significance of 'Mr Godot' whose arrival is so eagerly expected by the two tramps, Didi and Gogo, but who fails to appear. 'In Godot, there is God', asserted one bold critic, but Beckett refuses to ratify that comment and the equation must remain 'Godot=X', 'X' being the highly speculative suggestion that each spectator or reader might honestly put forward. All that Beckett is prepared to say is that his plays are 'a question of fundamental sounds': a 'new play' is not a story 'about' something, IT IS. The performance is the event and does not refer to another, pre-existing reality that is somehow recreated on stage. In *Godot,* Didi and Gogo are waiting.

However, Beckett merely presents us with two men waiting and shows us *how* they are waiting and how they pass the time while they are waiting. He does not tell us *why* they are there. *Waiting for Godot* presents two tramps in a waste place, fruitlessly and all but hopelessly, waiting for an unidentified person, Godot, who may or may not exist and with whom they sometimes think they remember that they may have an appointment; as one of them remarks, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful." Like most works in this mode, the play is absurd in the double sense that it is grotesquely comic and also irrational and nonconsequential; it is a parody not only of the traditional assumptions of Western culture, but of the conventions and generic forms of traditional drama, and even of its own inescapable participation in the dramatic medium. *Godot* confronts us with the theatrical image of man 'in situation', with the 'human condition' as Beckett understands it here and now—not for all times, not for all mankind, but as he and many of his contemporaries perceive the position of the individual lost in a hostile world. The situation of the individual in the world, invariably lost and unable to comprehend the meaning of his presence on earth in the face of the hostility of every other being or manifestation, is also

the problem of Beckett's other plays, of the early plays of Genet and Adamov, although the latter gradually abandoned the 'absurdist' approach and adopted a more 'Brechtian' or political stance.

A similar evolution can be traced in the career of many 'absurd' dramatists, in France and elsewhere. For instance, **Harold Pinter** wrote his early plays (*The Birthday Party,* 1958; *The Caretaker,* 1960) under the direct influence of Beckett and *Godot,* but gradually he turned away from telling ambiguous, mystifying and confusing tales and in *Betrayal* (1978), he charts the course of an adulterous affair in a direct, hard-hitting manner, although the story is told in flashbacks. His more recent plays *One for the Road* (1985); *Mountain Language* (1988) are straightforward political statements, the first dealing with state torture and the second with genocide. Like Sartre, Genet and Adamov—all in their different ways, Pinter has left behind metaphysical speculations about man's place in the universe to grapple with the more immediate problems of how to live and survive in a precarious political situation.

Edward Albee, the chief American exponent of the theatre of the absurd, also started by starkly stating the absurdity of the world and the impossibility of human companionship in plays such as *The Zoo Story* (1958); *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wool*? (1962), but has come to try and make sense of the chaos. Two Swiss playwrights deserve to be mentioned among the masters of the absurd: **Friedrich Dürrenmatt** and **Max Frisch**. Dürrenmatt's plays—*The Visit* (1955) and *The Physicists* (1962) are technically dazzling, using every theatrical trick, but they present a grotesque, meaningless, nihilistic world peopled by dangerous, self-seeking lunatics. Frisch's plays *The Fire Raisers* (1958) and *Andorra* (1961) are an even harsher and bleaker indictment of bourgeois complacency, racism and indifference to man's cruelty to man. Although both writers are directly inspired by problems facing Swiss society, their plays have universal significance and appeal.

Arthus Adamov (1908–1970) was yet another foremost exponent of the Theatre of the Absurd. He came from a wealthy, French-speaking, Armenian family who had fled the Russian revolution. The consequences

of political exile and of his father's addiction to gambling landed him penniless in Paris in the early twenties. He began to write plays at the end of the Second World War, under the influence of Strindberg's theatre to which he was to devote a very perceptive study. His first play, *La Parodie* (*The Parody,* written in the late 1940s), a series of tableaux depicting feelings and moods which reflect isolation and a breakdown in communication, was not produced by Roger Blin until 1952, although his adaptation of Büchner's *Danton's Death* was staged at the Avignon Festival in 1948.



LET US KNOW

The plays of Tom Stoppard, such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) and *Travesties* (1974), exploit the devices of absurdist theatre more for comic than philosophical ends. There are also affinities with this movement in the numerous recent works, which exploit black comedy or black humour: baleful, naive, or inept characters in a fantastic or nightmarish modern world play out their roles in what Ionesco called a "tragic farce," in which the events are often simultaneously comic, horrifying, and absurd. Examples are Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963), John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978), and some of the novels by the German Günter Grass and the Americans Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and John Barth. Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* is an example of black comedy in the cinema.

Thus, the history of Absurd drama needs to be traced through the portrayal of man's helplessness in the face of the absurd as practised in the 'new theatre' by some modern playwrights from Europe and America.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What is Ionesco's play *The Bald Prima Donna* all about?

Q 5: What type of a play is *Waiting for Godot*?

Q 6: Name the world's greatest absurd playwrights.

11.5 RECEPTION OF ABSURD DRAMA

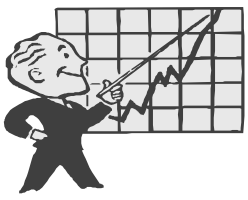
Today the foremost playwrights in the Western world combine in their work a concern for the political issues of the day and an awareness of the artistic and aesthetic problems that dramatists, directors and actors have grappled with for almost half a century. The aesthetics of the 'new theatre' or the 'theatre of the absurd' have now been integrated into mainstream dramatic writing and theatrical presentation. However, playwrights have grappled with the notion of the absurd since the beginning of our civilization. In *Oedipus,* Sophocles dramatises the search for the ultimate meaning of life, whereas in *Herakles,* Euripides posits the ultimate absurdity: Herakles, the absent father, returns home in the nick of time to save his children from certain death, only to kill them minutes later in a fit of madness, believing them to be dangerous and monstrous enemies. Shakespeare often paints a bleak and meaningless world, and never more so than in *King Lear* ('As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, /They kill us for their sport') or in Macbeth's 'it is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, /Signifying nothing'. Jan Kott, in his influential *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), convincingly argues that Shakespeare, although belonging to the Renaissance, is the most modern playwright, 'violent, cruel and brutal; earthly and hellish; evok[ing] terror as well as dreams and poetry; most true and improbable, dramatic and passionate, rational and mad, eschatological and realistic' (p. 223). What, however, differentiates the absurdists from Shakespeare is their dramaturgy: they strive to symbolise the 'chaotic state of existence by a corresponding anarchy in the construction' of their plays.

Jean Paul Sartre stressed what he termed 'the three essential refusals in the contemporary theatre', namely, 'the refusal of psychology, the refusal of plot and the refusal of all realism'. The refusal of psychology has meant the death of the consistent, fully 'rounded' character who, seemingly, possessed all the attributes of humanity. The new hero is an anti-hero, only partially conceived, often with no past or any discernible future. Characters in contemporary plays are often parodic, grotesque,

incomplete, self-contradictory. They do not understand who they are, they do not understand the world around them, they are baffled by all the events that occur while they are on the stage. As far as the actors are concerned, the traditional Stanislavskian identification with the role is no longer possible and a greater degree of playfulness, of invention, of fantasy is the key to a satisfactory 'portrayal'. A play without a plot seems to be a contradiction in terms, or so it seemed until *Waiting for Godot*.

Sartre's third point, the refusal of all realism, stems from the twin conviction (a) that realism/naturalism is an outmoded and reactionary aesthetic category and (b) that an artistic creation must create its own reality. In the case of 'new theatre' that reality is often fantastic, grotesque, oneiric; the action takes place in non-defined locations, within surrealist, distorted, subjective, dream-like settings; characters behave arbitrarily, without motivation, according to a principle of discontinuity; they are prone to parody themselves or one another. The dialogue follows its own logic and has recourse to interior monologues, streams of consciousness, rhythmic repetitions, flat contradictions, sudden ruptures, logorrhoea interspersed with long aphasia-like silences. Sartre's description of the theatre of the fifties and sixties still applies to the best of today's theatre.

Although strictly speaking the 'Theatre of the Absurd' already belongs to history (*Godot* and *The Bald Prima Donna* have long since acquired the status of 'classics'), it has successfully exerted profound influences on contemporary writers and directors. This type of plays has shattered the illusion that dramaturgical conformity can yield a satisfactory theatrical artefact or that an orderly discourse can make sense of this world of ours.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Do you think that elements of the absurd can also be found in ancient and traditional plays too?

Q 8: How does Camus view the 'new' characters in the 'New Plays'?



11.6 LET US SUM UP

As you finish reading this unit, you have learnt that the 'Theatre of the Absurd' is a post–World War II terming of a kind of plays or fiction focused largely on the idea of existential hopelessness and on what happens when human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down. The absence of logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and to its conclusion, silence. Critic Martin Esslin, who in fact, coined the term in an essay he wrote in 1960–"Theatre of the Absurd" reiterated that these plays based on a broad theme of the Absurd, are similar to the way Albert Camus uses the term in his 1942 essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus." The Absurd in these plays takes the form of man's reaction to a world apparently without meaning, and/or man as a puppet controlled or menaced by invisible outside forces. This style of writing was first popularised by the 1953 Samuel Beckett play *Waiting for Godot*. Though the term is applied to a wide range of plays, some characteristics coincide in many of the plays such as—broad comedy, horrific or tragic images, characters caught in hopeless situations forced to do repetitive or meaningless actions, dialogue full of clichés, wordplay and nonsense, plots that are cyclical or absurdly expansive etc. These plays are shaped by the political turmoil, scientific breakthrough, and social upheaval going on in the world around the playwrights during these times. While the often absurdists believed that life is absurd, they also believed that death and the "after life" were equally absurd if not more, and that whether people live or not all of their actions are pointless and everything will lead to the same end (hence the repetitiveness in many of these absurdist plays).



11.7 FURTHER READING

Benedikt, Michael and Wellwarth, George E. (1964). (EDs.). *Modern French Theatre.* Dutton, New York.

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Brustein, Robert. (1962). *The Theatre of Revolt.* Methuen, London.

Esslin, Martin. (1968). *The Theatre of the Absurd.* revised and enlarged edn. Penguin.

Hinchliffe, Arnold P. (1969). *The Absurd.* Methuen, London.

Schumacher, Claude. "The Theatre of the Absurd." in *Encyclopaedia of Literature and Criticism* by Martin Coyle, Peter Garside, Malcolm Kelsall, John Peck.

Websites and Electronic Resources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_the_Absurd

11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days* by Becket, *Chairs, Rhinoceros* by Ionesco; *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, *Landscape and Silence, No Man's Land* by Pinter and so on.

Ans to Q 2: The Absurd aims to shock its audience out of complacency… …it is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity… … because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world… …comforting illusions may be painful as it leaves behind a sense of freedom and relief… …the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.

Ans to Q 3: The essay contains some of the most interesting statements on the themes.... …a vision of life, which was essentially absurd, without apparent purpose, out of harmony with its surroundings, sad to the point of anguish, and at the same time, and funny. He stresses the destructive nature of time, the feeling of solitude in a hostile world and the sense of isolation from other human beings.

Ans to Q 4: It has no plot, a deceptively naturalistic set, no consistent characters; it is based on an ever-shifting ground of nonsense dialogue, of arbitrary entrances and exits, of unexplained appearances.

Ans to Q 5: *Waiting for Godot* presents two tramps in a waste place, fruitlessly and all but hopelessly, waiting for an unidentified person, Godot, who may or may not exist… … they think and remember that they may have an appointment with Godot… …one of the characters remarks, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful"… … the play is grotesquely comic, irrational and non-consequential.

Ans to Q 6: Playwrights commonly associated with the Theatre of the Absurd include Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Luigi Pirandello, Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Edward Albee, Arthur Adamov and so on.

Ans to Q 7: Yes… …In *Oedipus,* Sophocles dramatises the search for the ultimate meaning of life… …in *Herakles,* Euripides posits the ultimate absurdity… …Shakespeare often paints a bleak and meaningless world, and never more so than in *King Lear* ('As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, /They kill us for their sport') or in Macbeth's 'it is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, /Signifying nothing'.

Ans to Q 8: The new hero is an anti-hero, only partially conceived, often with no past or any discernible future… …the characters are often parodic, grotesque, incomplete, self-contradictory… …they do not understand who they are, or the world around them… …they are baffled by all the events that occur while they are on the stage.



11.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the history and characteristics of Absurd drama with particular reference to the plays by some of the great absurd playwrights.

Q 2: Provide a detailed idea of the origin and development of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'.

Q 3: Who, according to you, are the most significant absurd playwrights of the modern world? Discuss the works of at least three of them.

Q 4: In what way, is an absurd play different from a traditional play? Discuss by making a comparison between the characteristics of the traditional plays and absurd plays.

Q 5: Claude Schumacher in his article "The Theatre of the Absurd" provides an interesting analysis on the emergence of Absurd drama, its characteristics and practitioners. Discuss.

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UNIT 12: SAMUEL BECKETT: *WAITING FOR GODOT* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 Samuel Beckett: The Playwright

12.4 Sources of the Play *Waiting for Godot*

12.5 The Play's Repetitive Structure

12.6 Critical Reception of Beckett

12.7 Let us Sum up

12.8 Further Reading

12.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

12.10 Possible Questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of Samuel Beckett, one of the greatest absurd playwrights of the world
- relate Beckett's ideas with the unique intellectual and socio-political climate of the time
- see Beckett's unique way of dramatic representation in modernist drama
- appreciate the various philosophical issues raised in the play *Waiting for Godot*

12.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall have a look at the life and works of Samuel Beckett, one of the greatest exponents of the 'Theatre of the Absurd.' Then we shall also very briefly touch upon his play *Waiting for Godot.* Together being a novelist, critic and playwright, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969, Samuel Barclay Beckett was born in the suburb of Dublin. His works are shaped by the early experience of a society made of violent

contradictions and layers of oppression and repression. He could very well apprehend the presence of contradictory forces of nationalism, and growing religious intolerance between the Catholic and the Protestant. In spite of his courageous handling of the ultimate mystery and despair of human existence, he was also a comic writer. As a writer playwright, he believed that the recognition of the triviality, senselessness, and the ultimate meaninglessness of life must be able to free and liberate human beings from their concern with senselessness and futile objectives. The laughter would ultimately arise from a self-imposed preoccupation with illusory ambitions and futile desires. Consequently, far from being gloomy and depressing, the ultimate effect of watching or reading a play like the *Waiting for Godot* is one of cathartic relief. After going through this unit, you will be able to appreciate both Beckett and his play *Waiting for Godot* in the context of the 'Theatre of the Absurd.'

12.3 SAMUEL BECKETT: THE PLAYWRIGHT

His Life:

Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1906. He was the second son of middle-class parents who were a part of the Protestant minority in a predominantly Catholic society. He received excellent education graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, with a major emphasis in French and Italian. His first job was as a teacher of English in the Ecole Normale Superiéure in Paris. In 1931 however, he returned to Ireland as a lecturer in French literature, and then received his Master's Degree in French from Dublin and subsequently returned to Paris as a teacher in 1932. He has made Paris his home since that time, except for visits abroad and a retreat to the Unoccupied Zone in Vichy, France, during 1942–44.

However, Beckett found teaching very much uncongenial to his creative activities and soon turned all his attention to writing. During the 1930s and 1940s, most of his writings consisted of critical studies on Proust and others, poems, and two novels *Murphy* and *Watt*, all written in English. In the late 1940s, he changed from writing in English to writing in French.

Part of the reason for this was his basic rejection of Ireland as his homeland. When asked why he found Ireland uncongenial, he offered the same explanation that has been given by other famous Irish expatriates, such as Sean O'Casey and James Joyce. He could not tolerate the strict Irish censorship on various aspects of life, especially the arbitrary censoring of many works of literature by the Catholic clergy. In addition, the political situation created an oppressive anti intellectualism. Even after he attained fame, Beckett refused to allow some of his plays to be presented in Ireland. In 1958, during the International Theatre Festival in Dublin, a play of his compatriot O'Casey was banned, and Beckett, in protest, withdrew his plays, which have not been seen in Ireland since then.

Since the major portion of his dramas were composed in French and first presented in Paris, many critics find difficulty in classifying Beckett's works: should he be considered a French or an Irish writer? The nature of his characters, even when named Vladimir and Estragon, seems to be more characteristically Irish than any other nationality. Essentially, it should be a moot question because Beckett, when composing in French, was his own translator into English and vice versa. Thus, his works do not suffer from another translator's tampering with them, and his great plays now belong to the realm of world literature. With the appearance of *En Attendant Godot (Waiting for Godot)* at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris in 1953, the educated world was shocked by the appearance of a drama so different and yet so intriguing that it virtually created the term— "Theatre of the Absurd", and the entire group of dramas which developed out of this type of theatre is always associated with the name of Samuel Beckett. While other dramatists have also contributed significantly to this genre, Beckett remains its single and towering figure.

You will note that in viewing the plays integral to this movement, we must forsake the theatre of coherently developed situations. Conventional characterisation is avoided, the settings do not bear an intrinsic, realistic, or obvious relationship to the drama as a whole, and the audience is forced to forget the use of language as a tool of logical communication and the cause-and-effect relationships found in traditional dramas is not maintained.

With the use of a number of puzzling devices, these playwrights have gradually accustomed their audience to a new kind of relationship between theme and presentation. In these seemingly perplexing plays, the external world is often depicted as menacing, devouring, and unknown; the world itself seeming incoherent, frightening and strange, but at the same time, it remains hauntingly poetic and familiar. However, very often, the viewers takes note of only the basic similarities and fails to note the distinctive differences in each dramatist. Since these writers do not belong to any deliberate or conscious movement, they should be evaluated for their individual concerns, as well as for their contributions to the total concept of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. In fact, most of these playwrights consider themselves lonely rebels and outsiders, isolated in their own private worlds. Each playwright has developed along his own unique lines; each in his own way is individually and distinctly different.

Therefore, it is important to see how Beckett both belongs to the "Theatre of the Absurd" and, how he differs from the other writers associated with this movement. First, let us note a few of the basic differences. For example, one of Samuel Beckett's main concerns is the polarity of existence. In plays like *Waiting for Godot, Endgame,* and *Krapp's Last Tape,* we have such characteristic polarities as sight versus blindness, life vs death, time present vs time past, body vs intellect, waiting vs not waiting, going vs not going, being vs not being, and many more. Thus, Beckett often characterises man's existence in terms of these polarities. To do this, he groups his characters in pairs; for example, we have Vladimir and Estragon, Didi and Gogo, Hamm and Clov, Pozzo and Lucky, Nagg and Nell, and Krapp's present voice and past voice. Essentially, however, Beckett's characters remain a puzzle, which each individual viewer must solve. In contrast to Beckett, for example, Eugene Ionesco's characters are seen in terms of singularity. Whereas Beckett's characters stand in pairs *outside* of society, but converse with each other, Ionesco's characters are placed in the midst of society—but they stand alone in an alien world with no personal identity and no one with whom they can communicate. For example, the characters in *The Bald Soprano* are in society, but they scream

meaningless phrased at each other, and there is no communication. In the same way, Jean Genet's characters almost revile the audience from the moment that they appear on the stage. His theme is stated more openly. He is concerned with the hatred, which exists in the world. In *The Maids,* for example, each maid hates not just her employer and not just her own sister, but also her own self. Therefore, she plays the other roles so as to exhaust her own hatred of herself against herself. This revulsion derives partially from the fact that Genet's dramatic interest, so different from Beckett's and Ionesco's, is in the psychological exploration of man's predilection to being trapped in his own egocentric world, rather than facing the realities of existence. You will do well if you can trace such differences while reading or watching those absurd plays.

His Works: [Adapted from Wikipedia]

Beckett's literary career as a writer is divided roughly into three periods: his early works until the end of World War II in 1945; his middle period, stretching from 1945 until the early 1960s, and his late period, from the early 1960s until Beckett's death in 1989.

More Pricks than Kicks (1934) is one of Beckett's early works and it seem to be strongly influenced by the works of James Joyce. His first published novel *Murphy* (1938) also explores the themes of insanity and chess (both of which would be recurrent elements in Beckett's later works). The opening sentence of the novel hints at the somewhat pessimistic undertones and black humour that animate many of Beckett's other works, "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new." *Watt*, written during World War II, is similar in terms of themes but less exuberant in style. It explores human movement as if it were a mathematical permutation, presaging Beckett's later preoccupation—in both his novels and dramatic works—with precise movement. In 1930, he wrote an essay called *Proust,* which was strongly influenced by Schopenhauer's pessimism and laudatory descriptions of saintly asceticism.

After World War II, Beckett decided to turn to the French language as a vehicle. He realised that his art must be subjective and drawn wholly

from his own inner world—that would result in the works for which Beckett is best remembered today. During the 15 years following the War, Beckett produced four major full-length stage plays: *En attendant Godot* (written 1948–1949; ***Waiting for Godot***), *Fin de partie* (1955–1957; ***Endgame***), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), and ***Happy Days*** (1961). These plays, which are often considered, rightly or wrongly, to have been instrumental in the so-called "Theatre of the Absurd"—deal with a humorous way with themes similar to those of the roughly contemporary existentialist thinkers. When Esslin coined the "Theatre of the Absurd", Beckett and *Godot* were at the centre stage. Esslin argued that these plays were the fulfilment of Albert Camus's concept of "the absurd" and this is one reason Beckett is often falsely labelled as an existentialist.

Beckett's outstanding achievements in prose during the period were the three novels ***Molloy*** (1951), *Malone meurt* (1951; ***Malone Dies***) and *L'innommable* (1953: ***The Unnamable***). In these novels—sometimes referred to as a "trilogy", though this is against the author's own explicit wishes—the prose becomes increasingly bare and stripped down. *Molloy*, for instance, retains many of the characteristics of a conventional novel (time, place, movement, and plot) and it makes use of the structure of a detective novel. In *Malone Dies*, movement and plot are largely dispensed with, though there is still some indication of place and the passage of time. Finally, in *The Unnamable*, almost all sense of place and time are abolished, and the essential theme seems to be the conflict between the narrator's drive to continue speaking so as to continue existing. Despite the widely held view that Beckett's work is essentially pessimistic, the will to live seems to win out in the end, as it is evident in the final phrase of *The Unnamable*: "I can't go on, I'll go on."

After these three novels, Beckett struggled for many years to produce a sustained work of prose, as evident in the brief "stories" later collected as *Texts for Nothing*. In the late 1950s, however, he created one of his most radical prose works, *Comment c'est* (1961; ***How It Is***). An early variant version of *Comment c'est*, *L'Image*, was published in the British arts review, ***X: A Quarterly Review*** (1959), and is the first appearance of the

novel in any form. This work relates the adventures of an unnamed narrator crawling through the mud while dragging a sack of canned food. Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, Beckett's works exhibited an increasing tendency—already evident in much of his work of the 1950s—towards compactness. This has led to his work sometimes being described as minimalist. The extreme example of this, among his dramatic works, is the 1969 piece *Breath*, which lasts for only 35 seconds and has no characters (though it was likely intended to offer ironic comment on *Oh! Calcutta!*, the theatrical revue for which it served as an introductory piece).

Of the theatre of the late period, the play called *Play* (1962) is important and it consists of three characters immersed up to their necks in large funeral urns. The television drama *Eh Joe* (1963), is animated by a camera that steadily closed in to a tight focus upon the face of the title character. The play *Not I* (1972) consists almost solely of, in Beckett's words, "a moving mouth with the rest of the stage in darkness." Following from *Krapp's Last Tape*, many of these later plays explore memory, often in the form of a forced recollection of haunting past events in a moment of stillness in the present. Beckett's most politically charged play *Catastrophe* (1982) was dedicated to playwright Václav Havel, and it deals with the idea of dictatorship. Beckett's prose pieces of his later period were not so prolific as his theatre. He experienced something with the novella *Company* (1980), which continued with *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1982) and *Worstward Ho* (1984), later collected in *Nohow On*. In these three 'closed space' stories, Beckett continued his preoccupation with memory and its effect on the confined and observed self, as well as with the positioning of bodies in space, as the opening phrased of *Company* make clear: "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine."

In the hospital and nursing home where he spent his final days, Beckett wrote his last work, the 1988 poem "What is the Word" ("Comment dire"). The poem grapples with an inability to find words to express oneself a theme echoing Beckett's earlier work, though possibly amplified by the sickness he experienced late in life.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Write a note on the works of Samuel Beckett.

Q 2: Why did Beckett state that Ireland was uncongenial for creative activities following which he left Ireland?

Q 3: What is the nature of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'?

Q 4: Why following the World War II, did Beckett decide to turn to the French language as a vehicle?

12.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* sometime between 1948 and 1949 in France and the play was first performed on 5th January 1953 at the Theatre de Babylone in Paris. However, it seems that Beckett draw the idea of the play from various sources. The history of the *'New Theatre'* can be an interesting starting point to read *Waiting for Godot*. Almost all Post-war European dramas responded to a world that seemed to be falling apart and becoming increasingly meaningless in the wake of capitalism, rampant individualism and the consequent loss of community feelings, large scale devastations of the two World Wars, threats of nuclear holocaust, the destruction of the liberal tradition of hope and faith in man's innate goodness, rationality and progress, and so on. Its ideological influence is reflected in the feelings of angst, boredom, alienation, meaninglessness that prevailed over the whole literary tradition of Proust, Musil, Kafka, Camus, Sartre and of course, Beckett.

In the aftermath of World War II, there emerged Surrealism unprecedentedly affecting the cultural ideas as well as the arts. The intellectual changes that occurred brought a critique of the ideological foundations of the entire Western civilization, and traditional values were fading away. Surrealistic thoughts and ideas resurfaced following the War making a direct appearance in a work like *Waiting for Godot*. The Surrealist poets were interested in "moments of intense perception that free the self from its bondage to ordinary consciousness". In Beckett's play, this can be

seen in certain moments such as Lucky's speech, when a stream of consciousness takes the characters away from their monotonous lives for a moment.

There is however another probable source for the play. In the Post War France, there was occurred a crisis of moral order. Moral standards had flip-flopped more than once with the occupation and exit of the Nazis in France. The eventual elimination of the Nazi-influence led to some vague, undefined, and unique philosophies of morality. The two sides in World War II had extremely different ideas about what was right and wrong for the human race. Such widespread rejection of the traditional organisation of morality also reflected in the philosophy of Post-structuralism, which focused on the instability of the human sciences. At this time, many established ideas of order themselves came to be seen as the cause of problems of injustice rather than a solution to problems of injustice. Beckett's unique portrayal of humans in *Waiting for Godot* therefore invites many different interpretations, and the complexity of the characters may prevent the audience from giving them an order, just as the human complexity prevents us from fully inspecting and recognising ourselves.

Beckett's writings are replete with allusions to a multitude of literary sources. The dominating influence however came from the Italian poet Dante, the French philosopher Rene Descartes, the 17th century French philosopher Arnold Geulinex, and finally his fellow Irishman James Joyce. But, towards his later life, he became more popular as a playwright. In between 1957 and 1961, he produced three very significant plays *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Happy Days* (1961) describing the trivialities of life. However, it was in the trilogy of narrative prose works—*Molloy, Mallone Dies* and *The Unnamable* where he raised the problems of self-identity.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What, according to you, could be the various sources of the play?

12.5 THE PLAY'S REPETITIVE STRUCTURE

As you have got sufficient hints, Samuel Beckett's plays created a great deal of confusion among the early critics. No definite conclusion or resolution can ever be offered to *Waiting for Godot* because the play is essentially circular and repetitive in nature. Again, you may look at the sections as well as the structure of each act, which looks exactly alike. A traditional play, in contrast, has an introduction of' the characters and the exposition; then, there is a statement of the problem of the play in relationship to its settings and characters. However, in *Waiting for Godot,* we never know where the play takes place, except that it is set on "a country road." Furthermore, in a traditional play, the characters are developed, and gradually we come to see the dramatist's worldview; the play then rise to a climax, and there is a conclusion. This type of development is called a linear development. In the plays of the 'Theatre of the Absurd', the structure is often exactly the opposite. We have, instead, a circular structure, and most aspects of this drama support this circular structure in one way or another.

The setting is also the same, and the time is the same in both acts. Each act begins early in the morning, just as the tramps are awakening, and both acts close with the moon having risen. The action takes place in exactly the same landscape—a lonely, isolated road with one single tree. Only in Act II, there are some leaves on the tree. We are never told where the road is located; all we know is that the action of the play unfolds on this lonely road. Thus, from Act I to Act II, there is no difference either in the setting or in the time and, thus, instead of a progression of time within an identifiable setting, we have a repetition in the second act of the same things that we saw and heard in the first act. More important than the repetition of setting and time, however, is the repetition of the actions.

There are many lesser actions that are repeated in both acts. At the beginning of each act, for example, several identical concerns should be noted. Among these is the emphasis on Estragon's boots. Vladimir, when first noticing Estragon, used virtually the same words: "So there you are



"Nothing to be done" are the opening words of *Waiting for Godot,* and the line characterises the entire drama. Likewise, the opening words of *Endgame:* "Finished, it's finished…" set the theme for this drama. These are the last words that Christ murmured on the cross: "It is finished." It is the end of the game.

again" in Act I and "There you are again" in Act II. At the beginning of both acts, the first discussion concerns a beating that Estragon received just prior to their meeting. At the beginning of both acts, Vladimir and Estragon emphasise repeatedly that they are there to wait for Godot. In the endings of both acts, Vladimir and Estragon discuss the possibility of hanging themselves, and in both endings, they decide to bring some good strong rope with them the next day so that they can indeed hang themselves. In addition, both acts end with the same words, voiced differently:

ACT 1: ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?
VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go.

ACT II: VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?
ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

And the stage directions following these lines are exactly the same in each case: *"They do not move."* With the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky in each act, we notice that even though their physical appearance has theoretically changed, outwardly they seem the same; they are still tied together on an endless journey to an unknown place to rendezvous with a nameless person. Likewise, the Boy Messenger, while theoretically different, brings the exact same message: "Mr. Godot will not come today, but he will surely come tomorrow." Vladimir's difficulties with urination and his suffering are discussed in each act as a contrast to the suffering of Estragon because of' his boots. In addition, the subject of eating, involving carrots, radishes, and turnips, becomes a central image in each act, and the tramps' involvement with hats, their multiple insults, and their reconciling embraces—these and many more lesser matters are found repeatedly in both acts.

You should therefore note that all the repetitions make the two acts almost look alike, circular in structure, and the fact that these repetitions clearly display Beckett's manner of breaking away from the traditional play and of asserting the uniqueness of his dramatic art.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: In what way, do you feel that the play *Waiting for Godot* contains a circular structure?

12.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF BECKETT

By now, you must have realised that of all the modernist writers, Beckett's work represents the most sustained attack on the realist tradition of the previous ages. Because, he opened up the possibility of theatre and fiction that dispense with conventional plot and the unities of time and place in order to focus on essential components of the human condition. Playwrights such as Václav Havel, John Banville, Aidan Higgins, Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter and Jon Fosse have publicly stated their indebtedness to Beckett's example. Besides, Beckett also had a wider influence on experimental writing since the 1950s. His works also influenced numerous international writers, artists and filmmakers such as Edward Albee, Paul Auster, J. M. Coetzee and many others.

Beckett is one of the most widely discussed of the 20th century authors, inspiring a critical industry to rival that. Even James Joyce had divided critical opinions on Beckett. Some early philosophical critics, such as Sartre and Theodor Adorno, praised him, one for his revelation of absurdity, the other for his works' critical refusal of simplicities. Whereas others such as Georg Lukács condemned him for 'decadent' lack of realism in his work.

Since Beckett's death, all rights for performance of his plays are handled by the Beckett estate, currently managed by Edward Beckett (the author's nephew). The estate has a controversial reputation for maintaining firm control over how Beckett's plays are performed and does not grant licensed to productions that do not adhere to the writer's stage directions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: In what way, do you think, Beckett rendered a significant influence on the successors?



12.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you read about the life and works of Samuel Beckett, the French playwright commonly associated with the theatre movement known as the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. You have learnt that this movement was not a consciously conceived movement, and it has never had any clear-cut philosophical doctrines. Each of the representative playwrights of the movement seems to have developed independently of each other. The playwrights most often associated with the movement are Samuel Beckett himself, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov. The early plays of Edward Albee and Harold Pinter fit into this classification, but these dramatists have also written plays that move far away from the basic elements of 'Theatre of the Absurd.' You have learnt that when *Waiting for Godot* was first performed at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris in 1953, the educated world was shocked by a drama so different and yet so intriguing that it virtually created the term— "Theatre of the Absurd", and an entire group of dramas which developed out of this type of theatre is always associated with the name of Samuel Beckett.



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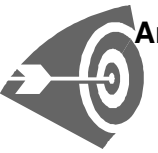
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12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Beckett's early publication included two essays on James Joyce and French novelist Marcel Proust… …in 1930, he wrote his slim volume of poetry *Whoroscope*… …in 1934, he wrote *More Pricks than Kicks*, and in 1938, he published his *Murphy*… …in-between 1946 and 1949, while staying in Paris, he produced his major prose narratives-*Molly*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnameable* and his ground-breaking *Waiting for Godot*.



Ans to Q 2: Beckett could not tolerate the strict Irish censorship on various aspects of life… …the arbitrary censoring of many works of literature by the Catholic clergy… …the political situation created an oppressive anti-intellectualism… …Beckett refused to allow some of his plays to be presented in Ireland… …In 1958, during the International Theatre Festival in Dublin, a play by O'Casey was banned, and Beckett, in protest, withdrew his plays too.

Ans to Q 3: Conventional characterisation is avoided… …the settings do not bear an intrinsic, realistic, or obvious relationship to the drama… …the audience is forced to forget the use of language as a tool of logical communication… …cause-and-effect relationships found in traditional dramas is not maintained… …use of a number of puzzling devices… …the external world is often depicted as menacing, devouring, and unknown… …the world itself seeming incoherent, frightening and strange.

Ans to Q 4: He realised that his art must be subjective and drawn wholly from his own inner world… …Following the World War II, Beckett

produced four of his major stage plays: *Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), and *Happy Days* (1961)… …these plays became instrumental in the so-called "Theatre of the Absurd"

Ans to Q 5: The history of the *'New Theatre'*… …all Post-war European dramas responded to a world that was falling apart and becoming increasingly meaningless… …rise of capitalism, rampant individualism and the consequent loss of community feelings… … havocs cause by the two World Wars, threats of nuclear holocaust… …the destruction of liberal tradition of hope and faith in man's innate goodness, rationality and progress… … feelings of angst, boredom, alienation, meaninglessness that prevailed over the whole literary tradition of Proust, Musil, Kafka, Camus, Sartre and Beckett.

Ans to Q 6: The setting and time in both the Acts is the same… …each act begins early in the morning, just as the tramps are awakening, and both acts close with the moon having risen… …the action takes place in exactly the same landscape—a lonely, isolated road with one single tree… …only in Act II, there are some leaves on the tree… …also important is the repetition of the actions.

Ans to Q 7: Beckett's work represents the most sustained attack on the realist tradition of the previous ages… …his works dispensed with conventional plot and the unities of time and place to focus on essential components of the human condition… …playwrights such as Václav Havel, John Banville, Aidan Higgins, Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter and Jon Fosse have publicly stated their indebtedness to Beckett… …Beckett also influenced numerous other writers, artists and filmmakers such as Edward Albee, Paul Auster, J. M. Coetzee.



12.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Write a note on the major achievements of Beckett as a playwright of the Absurd.

Q 2: As a writer playwright, Beckett believed that the recognition of the triviality, senselessness, and the ultimate meaninglessness of life must be able to free and liberate human beings from their concern with senselessness and futile objectives. Discuss.

Q 3: Discuss how Samuel Beckett both belongs to the "Theatre of the Absurd" and, how he differs from the other writers associated with this movement?

Q 4: No definite conclusion or resolution can ever be offered to *Waiting for Godot* because the play is essentially circular and repetitive in nature. Discuss.

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UNIT 13: SAMUEL BECKETT: *WAITING FOR GODOT* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Introduction

13.3 Act wise Summary of the Play

13.4 Critical Commentary on the Play

13.5 Major Characters

13.6 Critical Reception of the Play

13.7 Let us Sum up

13.8 Further Reading

13.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

13.10 Possible Questions

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- make an Act wise summary of the play *Waiting for Godot* and retell the story
- discuss the important themes and aspects of the play
- identify the various characters and explain the role they play in the world of the play
- appreciate the play which made an important breakthrough in the field of absurd drama

13.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is based on a reading of the various important aspects of the play Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* that is often considered to be one of the greatest absurd plays of the 20th century. You have learnt from the previous unit that the post-war disillusionment and scepticism influenced the contemporary intellectuals as well as the European playwrights. Although they did not consider themselves belonging to a formal movement, they did share certain common themes such as—the futility of

human in their writing. They felt that human condition was entering into a state of 'absurdity'—a term coined by the French existentialist philosopher and novelist Albert Camus. As you finish reading this unit, you will learn that Beckett, through his various characters and landscapes in this play, presents a vision of the collapse and decay of western philosophy, culture and society. This vision, no doubt, has its origins in the contemporary war-ridden western world, but it belongs also to a tradition of dramatic representation. Beckett called this play a tragicomedy, and therefore, we can perhaps, translate the term 'absurd' as both 'comic' as well as 'tragic.'

13.3 ACT WISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

Waiting for Godot is now considered a classic of the modern theatre. In January 1953, when it was first performed in Paris, most spectators were confused and many left before the performance had ended. Those who stayed had difficulty in understanding what this new type of theatre was about. The normal dramatic structure had totally changed. The language very often did not have a sequential rational pattern; communication among the characters was difficult and they frequently resorted to incomplete, childish sentences in order to make themselves understood. At times, the visual actions spoke more directly than words. The set was composed only of a mound of dirt and a bare tree. Finally, there seemed to be no plot, nothing appeared to be happening. In the first Act, we are introduced to two elderly men, Vladimir and Estragon, who could be tramps. They are awaiting the arrival of one Mr. Godot, who is going to save them. Pozzo and Lucky pass by and, eventually, a young boy appears and says that Mr. Godot will not arrive that day, but will surely come the day after. This complete reversal of the traditional theatre techniques announced a major change in modern drama. The following is an attempt at reading what happens in both the Acts of the play.

Act I

The play opens with Estragon struggling to remove his boot, which he soon gives up saying "Nothing to be done." Estragon tells Vladimir that he has spent the night in a ditch where he was beaten but now there are no signs

of assault. When Estragon finally succeeds in removing his boot, he looks inside but finds nothing. Just before this, Vladimir has also checked inside his hat. They discuss the plight of the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus, and the fact that only one of the Gospel writers mentioned that one of them had been saved. Vladimir quickly expresses his frustration with Estragon's limited conversational skills: "Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you, once in a way?"

LET US KNOW



When Beckett brings in the reference to *'the thieves'* he is actually pointing to one of the chief tenets of Christianity—that human beings are essentially sinful, and that it was Jesus Christ who came to the earth to obliterate sin from us. Thus, the depiction of Christ as a saviour is central idea of this speech. In this line, Vladimir ruminates about the thief who was saved by Jesus Christ when they were both being crucified.

The reference here to the Bible seems to be deliberate in order to create some kind of hope among the characters as well as the audience. It is a hope of deliverance from this absurd world. The root of this hope is an unquestioning faith. It is only this faith, which can provide them the hope of salvation. Beckett's deliberate use of the Bible's reference no doubt generates humour.

Estragon stares at the audience and comments on the bareness of their surroundings. Estragon wants to leave but he is told they can't because they have to wait for Godot. However, the problem is also that they cannot agree that they are in the right place or on the right day. The only thing they are sure of is that they were to meet by a tree. Estragon doses off but when he wakes up, Vladimir is not interested in hearing about his dream. Estragon wants to hear an old joke about a brothel (one of the play's very few allusions to women) which Vladimir starts to tell, but he has to cut his story short to rush off and urinate, and does not even bother to finish it when he comes back. He asks Estragon what else they might do to pass the time. Should

they hang themselves as doing so might give them erections but they quickly abandon the idea because they might not be able to successfully kill themselves; and the notion of being left alone is intolerable. They decide to do 'nothing'. For once, it is Vladimir who struggles to remember, "Oh …nothing very definite." Estragon suddenly says that he is hungry and Vladimir provides a carrot, which he eats without much appreciation. This section ends, as it began, with Estragon concluding that they still have 'nothing to do'. However, the passing of a master and his slave Pozzo interrupts their waiting and Lucky who may, according to Beckett, "shatter the space of the play" but they also provide much needed distraction and entertainment.

"A terrible cry," heralds the entry of Lucky who crosses half the stage before his master appears holding one end of a long rope, the other of which is tied around Lucky's neck. Pozzo treats Lucky as a slave but is social to the other two. Vladimir and Estragon first mistake him for Godot but they do not recognise him. He condescends to rest a while and enjoy a meal of chicken and wine. When finished, he casts the bones aside and Estragon jumps at them arousing Vladimir's embarrassment. They want to know why Lucky does not put down his load. Pozzo explains that Lucky is trying to mollify him so, he won't be sold. At this, Lucky begins to cry. Pozzo provides the handkerchief, but it is Estragon who gets kicked in the shins, for trying to wipe away his tears.

Before leaving, Pozzo asks if he can do anything for the pair. Estragon tries to ask for some money but Vladimir cuts him short saying that they are not beggars. They nevertheless accept an offer for Lucky to dance and think. The dance turns out to be a clumsy shuffling; everyone is disappointed. Then, begins Lucky's starts his soliloquy relatively coherently, but it quickly dissolves into cacophony. Broadly speaking, Lucky's speech falls into four parts; "the first describes an impersonal and callous God; the second asserts that man 'wastes and pines'; the third mourns an inhospitable earth and the last attempts to draw the threads of the speech together by claiming that man diminishes in a world that does not nurture him." The following is an attempt and summarising a part of Lucky's speech:

[A]acknowledging the existence of a personal God, one who exists outside time and who loves us dearly and who suffers with those who are plunged into torment, it is established beyond all doubt that man for reasons unknown, has left his labours, abandoned, unfinished.

The presentation becomes increasingly garbled, frenetic, unintelligible and only ends when Vladimir rips his hat–which he cannot think without–from his head. Once Lucky has been revived, Pozzo has him pack up his things and they leave.

At the end of the day, a boy messenger arrives. He purports to be a messenger sent from Mr. Godot to tell them that he will not be coming that "evening but surely tomorrow." Vladimir asks him if he came the day before, giving us an impression that they have been waiting for an indefinite period and will likely keep on waiting *ad infinitum*. They decide to leave but remain still.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: How do you feel that the play is different from the other plays you have watched or read?

Act II

Act II opens with Vladimir singing on a dog, which serves to illustrate the cyclical nature of the play's universe. Vladimir is trying to understand the world they are trapped in, and although there is a notional evidence of linear progression, it seems that he is living the same day over and over again. Once again Estragon mentions his night-stay in a 'ditch' and beating by "ten of them", but this time too, without any sign of injury. Vladimir tries to talk to him about the change in the tree (the sprouting of leaves) and the proceedings of the day before, but he has only a vague recollection, as his memory deceives him. Vladimir tries hard to make Estragon remember Pozzo and Lucky, but all he can remember are the bones of chicken and memories of getting kicked. With some difficulty, he gets Estragon to show him his leg. There is a wound, which is beginning to fester. It is then Vladimir notices that Estragon is not wearing any boots.

Vladimir discovers the pair of boots, which Estragon insists are not his. Nevertheless, when he tries them on they fit. There being no carrots left, Vladimir offers Estragon the choice between a turnip and a radish. He opts for the radish, but it is black and he hands it back. He decides to try and sleep again and adopts the same position as the previous day. Vladimir even sings him a lullaby. Shortly after this, Vladimir notices Lucky's hat and he decides to try it on. This leads to a chaotic hat-swapping scene. They try to imitate Pozzo and Lucky but Estragon can barely remember having met them and simply does what Vladimir asks. They fire insults at each other and then make up. Then they attempt some physical jerks, which do not work out well, and even an attempt at a single yoga position fails miserably.

After this, Pozzo and Lucky arrive again, but both of them have undergone significant changes, Pozzo is now blind and he insists that Lucky is dumb. The rope is now much shorter and Lucky–who has acquired a new hat leads Pozzo, rather than being driven by, him. He has lost all notions of time, but assures them he cannot remember meeting them the day before. Nor can he expect to remember the current day's events, which were over now. They fall in a heap at one point. Estragon sees an opportunity to extract more food or to take revenge on Lucky for kicking him. Pozzo offers them money but Vladimir sees more worth in their entertainment value since they are compelled to wait to see if Godot arrives anyway. Eventually though, they all find their way onto their feet.

Since Posso has become blind, he appears to have gained some insights. His parting words–which Vladimir elaborates later–eloquently encapsulate the realities of human existence, "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." Lucky and Pozzo depart. A boy arrives, possibly the same boy (typically played by the same actor), to inform them not to expect Godot that day, but he would definitely arrive the next day. The two tramps again contemplate on committing suicide but their rope, which served as Estragon's belt, is not up to the job. His trousers fall down but he does not notice it until Vladimir tells him to pull them up. They resolve to bring a more suitable piece and hang themselves the next day, if Godot fails to arrive. Again, they agree to

leave, but neither of them makes any movement and the play comes to an end.

Although the play is divided into two Acts, one cannot find any structural difference between them. In the previous unit, we have discussed the circular structure of the play. The circularity of the pattern provides a very prominent insight into the understanding of the play. In each Act, we are offered basically the same sequence: the two tramps wait, reunite, contrive ways of passing time, encounter Pozzo and Lucky, receive Godot's disappointing massage, contemplate suicide, decide to leave but do not move. Some variations like the leaves on the tree and change in the roles of the wayfaring duo do occur. However, they fail to bring in the change in the essential 'sameness' of the situation.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: What would you like to say on the structure of the play?

13.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE PLAY

Since the time of its first production in Paris in 1953, Waiting for Godot has been translated into many languages and performed all over the world. Perhaps the most striking feature of this play is its innovative design. Fascinated by modernist experiments with form and style, Beckett wanted a perfect fusion of structure and content. His relentless quest for a form led him to adopt a style in his fictions which systematically eschewing all references to the external world of social and historical experiences, became increasingly interiorised and auto-referential. This play is designed in such a way that, on the one hand, there is a certain emptiness in terms of plot, character, dialogue and setting; on the other, the emphasis moves from an immediate dramatic interest to some philosophical contemplation beyond history and society.

Like Henric Ibsen and Bertolt Brecht before him, Beckett too drastically changed our expectations for what can happen on a stage. Until

Beckett's arrival, people still expected the 'well made plays' although they were already familiar with Ibsen's 'Problem Plays' and Brecht's 'Alienation Effect. The contemporary audience expected a well-crafted, clever plot with intrigues and side-stories that amplify the main narrative. However, Beckett withheld all such expectations. There is no character 'development', there is no fictional 'story'; there is no 'linearity' in terms of action or dialogue that leads anywhere. As an audience we too are trapped in the web of their meaningless conversations and activities. However, towards the end, we actually realise the essential absurdity of the condition we are witnessing.

'Silence' plays a vital role in Absurdist drama. In addition, if we look at the play carefully, we can feel that Beckett too has used 'silence' for a number of times. As far as the stage direction is concerned, 'silence' is an integral part of experimental drama. It helps the audience to involve themselves in a stage situation. 'Silence' is also relevant thematically as it means 'no speech' but can be more meaningful than spoken language. In a world where words have lost their relevance, 'silence' definitely works as a potential medium of expression.

When we are reading or watching the play, the sudden arrival of Lucky and Pozzo on the stage arouses confusion in the mind of the audience. The relationship between the two is ambiguous and can be interpreted in a number of ways. Lucky does not seem to have any command over the language system, but he can make certain sounds when he put on the 'thinking' hat. Lucky's long speech is either full of meaning, or has no meaning at all—it leads us to rethink the systems of communication that we use as a vehicle to express our feelings and emotions. His speech is a negation of language itself and hence he uses a language that is really no language.

Reading the pay minutely, we can also say that the entire play is based on the notion of 'waiting' itself. The overriding importance of 'waiting' nullifies not only what we are doing but also the time in which we are doing it. It erases the 'past' and diminishes the significance of the 'present' by producing a sense of helplessness in terms of waiting. To Didi's comment, "Things have changed here since yesterday," Gogo replies, "everything ooses." The idea of 'yesterday' itself is a vague one. Only the audience can

remember the difference between 'yesterday' and 'today'. Because, as they arrive in Act II from Act I, they are almost sure that Godot will not come 'today'. This leads us to consider 'time' as an elusive category in this play, and that each character has his own way of relating to it.

Once Beckett stated, "I am interested in the shapes of ideas even if I do not believe in them… It is the shape that matters." Ruby Cohn has listed the incidence of doubling in the play. There are two Acts, two days, and two similar sets of incidents within the play. Moreover, the characters are also in pairs. They are couples of the opposite natures. This doubling is given a physical presence on the stage. If we look at the play from this perspective, we will find that Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* is a carefully structured play. Here we confront an unfamiliar pattern, which repeatedly forces us to make sense out of the nonsense. Perhaps this is the one of the most interesting ironies associated with avant-garde theatre.

Their only hope for salvation from this nothingness is the arrival of Godot, who is expected to provide the sense of coherence and purpose they lack. While waiting for Godot, the characters are forced to go through their suffering but hoping for salvation. One of the ways that Didi and Gogo get through their suffering is by following a series of habitual routines that allow them to "pass the time" without thinking too much. Yet, in spite of their many activities, nothing really changes and they have moments when they are agonisingly aware of this. All they can do is to wait for the salvation that they hope Godot will bring. At the same time, their lives sometimes assume an arbitrary brutality.



LET US KNOW

Although Beckett's works are essentially comic, his characters are 'antiheroic'. Besides, his themes are evocative of the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence. He is widely recognised by his followers as having a keen sense of the condition of modern life, especially the impotence and ignorance of a world that has purportedly reached an advanced stage of technological and intellectual sophistication. A 'non-hero' or

the antithesis of a 'hero' is one who is capable of heroic deeds, who is dashing, strong, brave and resourceful. But, an anti-hero is a type who is incompetent, unlucky, tactless, clumsy, stupid, buffoonish and so on. An antihero is one who is given the vocation of failure. There are various examples of fictional anti-heroes the best of which may be the eponymous knight of *Don Quixote*. With the emergence of Absurd drama, the notion of an antihero got some new impetus in the field of drama also.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: In what ways is Beckett different from Ibsen and Brecht?

Q 4: Mention the significance of the use of 'silence' in the play *Waiting for Godot*?

Q 5: What idea of salvation do you derive from your reading of the play *Waiting for Godot*?

Q 6: How do the characters in the play look anti-heroic?

13.5 MAJOR CHARACTERS

The following are the important characters in the play *Waiting for Godot.*

Godot

The identity of Godot has been the subject of much debate. His identity indeed, the very reality of his existence is doubtful. Throughout the play, he has been perceived as the saviour, God, a vindictive tyrant, a rich employer or somebody who holds the 'future' of the two tramps. In order to solve the mystery regarding Godot's identity, critics have delved deeper into Beckett's own life history to know who Godot might be. Beckett's own angry response to it is that if he knew who Godot is, he would have said so in the play. Actually, Godot cannot be made to represent any one idea, ideal or person, precisely because he is believed to have represented the notion of an 'absence'.

Vladimir

Vladimir is the one who constantly reminds Estragon that they must wait for Godot. All implications suggest that Vladimir knows more about Godot than does Estragon, who tells us that he has never even seen Godot, and thus has no idea what Godot looks like. Vladimir often sees religious or philosophical implications in their discussions of events, and he interprets their actions in religious terms; for example, his concern over the stories of the two thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus. Vladimir correlates some of their actions to the general concerns of mankind. In Act II, when Pozzo and Lucky fall down and cry for help, Vladimir interprets their cries for help as his and Estragon's chance to be in a unique position of helping humanity. Nevertheless, Vladimir maintains, "It is not every day that we are needed…but at this place, at this moment in time," they are needed and should respond to the cries for help. Similarly, Vladimir questions Pozzo, Lucky, and the Boy Messenger, while Estragon remains, for the most part, a silent listener. Essentially, Vladimir must constantly remind Estragon of their destiny—that is, they must wait for Godot. In addition to the larger needs, Vladimir also looks after their physical needs. He helps Estragon with his boots, and had he been with Estragon at night, he would not have allowed his friend to be beaten. Besides, he also looks after and rations their meagre meals of turnips, carrots, and radishes.

Estragon

In contrast to Vladimir, Estragon is concerned mainly with matters that are more mundane. He prefers a carrot to a radish or turnip, his feet hurt, and he blames his boots. He constantly wants to leave, and it must be drilled into him that he must wait for Godot. He remembers that he was beaten, but he sees no philosophical significance in the beating. He is willing to beg for money from a stranger (Pozzo), and he eats Pozzo's discarded chicken bones with no shame. Estragon, then, is the more basic of the two. He is not concerned with either religious or philosophical matters. First, he has never even heard of the two thieves who were crucified with Christ, and if the Gospels do disagree, then "that's all there is to it," and any further discussion is futile and absurd. Estragon's basic nature is illustrated in Act

II when he shows so little interest in Pozzo and Lucky that he falls asleep; also, he sleeps through the entire scene between Vladimir and the Boy Messenger. He is simply not concerned with such issues. Estragon, however, is dependent upon Vladimir, and essentially, he performs what Vladimir tells him to do. For example, Vladimir looks after Estragon's boots and his food, he comforts Estragon's pain, and he reminds Estragon of their need to wait for Godot.



LET US KNOW

As you read the play, both the similarities and differences you notice in the two characters is important. Both are tramps dressed in costumes, which could be interchanged. They both wear big boots, which don't necessarily fit, and both have big bowler hats. Their costumes recall the type found in burlesque or vaudeville houses, the type often associated with the character of the "Little Tramp," portrayed by Charlie Chaplin. Throughout the play the couple refer to each other by pet names, "Didi" and "Gogo". However, their relationship is full of contradictions and confusions. They are perceived, 'at this place, at this moment of time,' not as two distinct personalities but as two truncated and generalised images of all 'mankind'. Incapable of any meaningful action or initiative, they imply an utterly pessimistic view of man as a helpless victim of existential circumstances.

When Beckett started writing this play, he perhaps, did not have an image of these two. They are never ever referred to as tramps in the text. There are no physical descriptions of either of the two characters however; the text indicates that Vladimir is likely to be the heavier of the pair. They have been together for fifty years but when asked by Pozzo they do not reveal their actual ages. Vladimir stands through most of the play whereas Estragon sits down a number of times and even doses off. Estragon's defeatist nature and sense of despair and his preoccupations with various physical needs like hunger and sleep are contrasted to Vladimir's optimism and intellectual preoccupation s with philosophical questions.

Pozzo

Pozzo appears on stage after the appearance of Lucky. A long rope ties them together; thus, their destinies are fixed together in the same way that Pozzo might be a mother figure, with the rope being the umbilical cord, which ties the two together. Everything about Pozzo resembles our image of the circus ringmaster. However, Vladimir and Estragon first mistook him for Godot or God. Like a ringmaster he arrives brandishing a whip, which is the trademark of the profession. In fact, we hear the cracking of Pozzo's whip before we actually see him. Also, a stool is often associated with an animal trainer, and Pozzo constantly calls Lucky by animal terms or names. Pozzo commands and Lucky obeys. In the first Act, Pozzo is shown as an authoritarian figure. He lords over the others, and he is decisive, powerful, and confident. He gives the illusion that he knows exactly where he is going and exactly how to get there. When he arrives on the scene and sees Vladimir and Estragon, he recognises them as human, but as inferior beings. Pozzo's superiority is also seen in the manner in which he eats the chicken, and then casts the bones to Lucky with an air of complete omnipotence.

In contrast to the towering presence exhibited by Pozzo in Act I, a significant change occurs between the two Acts. The rope is shortened, drawing Pozzo much closer to his antithesis, Lucky. Pozzo is now blind; he cannot find his way alone. He stumbles and falls. He cannot get along without help; he is pathetic. He is no longer in command now. Rather than driving Lucky as he did earlier, he is now pathetically dragged along by Lucky. From a position of omnipotence and strength and confidence, he has fallen and has become the complete fallen man who maintains that time is irrelevant and that man's existence is meaningless.

Lucky

Lucky is the obvious antithesis of Pozzo. At one point, Pozzo maintains that Lucky's entire existence is based upon pleasing him; that is, Lucky's enslavement is his meaning, and if he is ever freed, his life would cease to have any significance. Given Lucky's state of existence, his very name "Lucky" is ironic, especially since Vladimir observes that even "old dogs have more dignity." All of Lucky's actions seem unpredictable. In Act I, when Estragon attempts to help him, Lucky becomes violent and kicks him

on the leg. When he is later expected to dance, his movements are as ungraceful and alien to the concept of dance as one can possibly conceive. We have seldom encountered such ignorance; consequently, when he is expected to give a coherent speech, we are still surprised by his almost total incoherence. Lucky seems to be more animal than human, and his very existence in the drama is a parody of human existence. In Act II, when he arrives completely dumb, it is only a fitting extension of his condition in Act I, where his speech was virtually incomprehensible. Now he makes no attempt to utter any sound at all. Whatever part of man that Lucky represents, we can make the general observation that he, as man, is reduced to leading the blind, not by intellect, but by blind instinct.



Let Us Know

Together both Pozzo and Lucky represent the antithesis of each other. Yet they are strongly and irrevocably tied together—both physically and metaphysically. Any number of polarities could be used to apply to them. If Pozzo is the master (and father figure), then Lucky is the slave (or child). If Pozzo is the circus ringmaster, then Lucky is the trained or performing animal. If Pozzo is the sadist, Lucky is the masochist. Or, Pozzo can be seen as the Ego and Lucky as the Id. An inexhaustible number of polarities can be suggested.

When Beckett was asked why Lucky was so named, his reply was, “I suppose he is lucky to have no more expectations…”Although it has been contended that Pozzo and Lucky are simply Didi and Gogo writ large” there is a different kind of dynamics at work here. Pozzo may be mistaken for Godot by the two tramps but, as far as Lucky ‘thinks’, Pozzo is *his* Godot, which is another reason for his being lucky. Their association is not as clear cut as it first seems however, it becomes evident that Lucky always rendered more influence in the relationship, for he danced, and more importantly, thought – not as a part of his service, but in order to fill a vacant need of Pozzo. Pozzo credits Lucky with having given him all the culture, refinement, and ability to reason that he possesses.

The Boys

The boy in Act I, a local lad, assures Vladimir that this is the first time he has seen him. He says he was not there the previous day. He confirms that he works for Mr. Godot as a goat herder. His brother, who is coincidentally beaten by Godot, is a shepherd. Godot feeds both of them and allows them to sleep in his hayloft.

The boy in Act II also assures Vladimir that it was not he who called upon them the day before. He insists that this too is his first visit. When Vladimir asks what Godot does, the boy tells him; "He does nothing, sir." We also learn he has a white beard–possibly, the boy is not certain. This boy also has a brother who it seems is sick but there is no clear evidence to suggest that his brother is the boy that came in Act I or the one who came the day before that.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: How is the character called Godot perceived in the play?

Q 8: What are the similarities one observes between the characters—Vladimir and Estragon?

Q 9: How is the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky?

13.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE PLAY

The critical reception of *Waiting for Godot* met with both appraisal and intense criticism. Though the play was received with suspicion, nobody could ever imagine that this play would revolutionize theatre and theatrical history for all time. The first staging of the play in Paris in 1953, caused immediate sensation. Gradually, later audiences started to respond more sympathetically to Didi and Gogo's absurd paralysis as they began to think that it represented 'our condition'. One critic memorably said that 'nothing happens twice' in the play. And, the theatrical vitality and versatility of the play have been demonstrated by various performances throughout the world.

It was only after the 50s, it had received popular acclaim among the literary artists and filmmakers for its immense possibilities. Miodrag

Bulatoviæ in 1966 in his *Godo je došao* (*Godot Arrived*) presents Godot as a baker who ends up being condemned to death by the four main characters. Another example was Ian McDonald's 1991 novel *King of Morning, Queen of Day* (partly written in Joycean style). Two main characters were clearly meant to be the original Vladimir and Estragon. Another unauthorised sequel was written by Daniel Curzon in the late 1990s: *Godot Arrives*. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, written by Tom Stoppard and first staged in 1966, contains a set of characters whose dialogue and themes seem to have been strongly influenced by the characters in *Godot*. *Waiting for Guffman* is a film co-written and directed by Christopher Guest. The plots share enough similarities Godot here is meant to reveal things about Guffman.



13.7 LET US SUM UP

As you finish reading about the play and its different aspects in the various sections of this unit, you have learnt that Samuel Beckett happened to be writing at the same time as a number of other dramatists, all independently transforming the shape of theatre, writing plays that would later be classified under the rubric of the 'Theatre of the Absurd', the New Theatre or Anti-theatre. All of these new playwrights were expressing the absurdity, meaninglessness and hopelessness of the human condition, and Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* took the lead.



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Websites and Electronic Resources:

http://brainstorm-services.com/wcu-2004/godot-approaching.pdf

13.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: *Waiting for Godot* does not contain a plot in the Aristotelian sense… …the play just displays babbling and loitering around of two men under a tree, near a mound, and passing of time in vain…. …the play does not have any structure and the action does not lead to any logical sequence… …dialogue is also enigmatic and leads nowhere.

Ans to Q 2: The play has a circular structure… …you will also look at the various repetitions used in both Acts of the play.

Ans to Q 3: Until Beckett's arrival, people still expected the 'well made plays' although they were already familiar with Ibsen's 'Problem Plays' and Brecht's 'Alienation Effect… …the audience expected a well-crafted, clever plot with intrigues and side-stories that amplify the main narrative… …Beckett withheld all such expectations… …there is no character 'development', 'story', and 'linearity'… …he made his audience remain trapped in the web of their meaningless conversations and activities.

Ans to Q 4: 'Silence' plays a vital role in Absurdist drama… …'silence' has always been integral to the experimental drama… …it helps the audience to involve themselves in a stage situation… …'silence' also means 'no speech' but can be more meaningful than spoken language… …in a world where words have lost their relevance, 'silence' definitely works as a potential medium of expression.

Ans to Q 5: Their only hope for salvation from this nothingness is the arrival of Godot, who is expected to provide the sense of coherence and purpose they lack… …While waiting for Godot, the characters are forced to go through their suffering but hoping for salvation… …in spite of their meaningless activities, nothing really changes and they have moments when they are agonisingly aware of this… …all they can do is to wait for the salvation that they hope Godot will bring.

Ans to Q 6: An anti-hero is a type who is incompetent, unlucky, tactless, clumsy, stupid, buffoonish… …an antihero is given the vocation of failure… …Beckett's works are essentially comic, his characters are 'antiheroic'… …his themes are evocative of the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence… …he had a keen sense of the condition of modern life, especially the impotence and ignorance of a world of technological and intellectual sophistication.

Ans to Q 7: The identity or existence of Godot is doubtful… …throughout the play, he has been perceived as the saviour, God, a vindictive tyrant, a rich employer or somebody who holds the 'future' of the two tramps… …Godot cannot be made to represent any one idea, ideal or person, precisely because he is believed to have represented the notion of an 'absence'… …Beckett's own angry response to it is that if he knew who Godot is, he would have said so in the play

Ans to Q 8: Much similarities… …both are tramps dressed in costumes, which could be interchanged… …both wear big boots, which don't necessarily fit… …both have big bowler hats… …the couple refer to each other by pet names "Didi" and "Gogo"… …they are perceived 'at this place, at this moment of time,' not as two distinct personalities but as two truncated and generalised images of all 'mankind'… …both are incapable of any meaningful action or initiative.

Ans to Q 9: As they appear on stage, a long rope ties them together… …Pozzo resembles our image of the circus ringmaster brandishing a whip which is the trademark of the profession… …Pozzo commands and Lucky obeys… …in Act I, Pozzo is shown as an authoritarian figure, he is decisive, powerful, and confident… …however, a significant change occurs in Act II… …Pozzo is now

blind; he cannot find his way alone…. …he stumbles and falls… …he is now pathetically dragged along by Lucky… … this is suggestive of the fact that time is irrelevant and that man's existence is meaningless.



13.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What ideas do you get about the Theatre of the Absurd from your reading of the two Acts of the play *Waiting for Godot?*

Q 2: Comment on the critical reception of the play *Waiting for Godot* with particular reference to the various devices that Beckett adopts for showcasing his concerns.

Q 3: Would you consider this play as a representation of the bizarre reality of the contemporary age? Discuss in detail.

Q 4: Make a comparison between *Waiting for Godot* and any of the traditional plays that you have read. What are the differences you find in your reading of both the plays?

Q 5: What makes the play *Waiting for Godot* so popular that it was adopted for so many later productions? Can we say that the later adaptations have increased the popularity of the play? Give a reasoned answer.

Q 6: Comment on Beckett's characterisation in the play *Waiting for Godot*? How do you feel that the characters are related to eachother? What according to you, do the characters mostly represent?

Q 7: 'Silence' and 'Waiting' play an important role in the play *Waiting for Godot*. Elaborate.

Q 8: As we read the play, both similarities and differences between characters strike our mind. Justify your answer.

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UNIT 14: HAROLD PINTER: *THE CARETAKER* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 Harold Pinter: The Playwright

14.4 Sources of the Play *The Caretaker*

14.5 Critical Reception of Pinter

14.6 Let us Sum up

14.7 Further Reading

14.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

14.9 Possible Questions

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- gain fare idea about the life and works of Harold Pinter
- discuss Pinter as a great playwright and thinker of his time
- read the text of the play in its other possible contexts and identify the different philosophical and aesthetic ideas implicit in the play
- appreciate the play in its nuanced totality

14.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with Harold Pinter who is one of the most widely read, performed and best known theatre activists of the world in the last century. Beginning his literary and theatrical ventures in the late forties, Pinter remained an active performer at various creative disciplines till his death in 2008. His creative career spans across half a century in different fields like films, theatre, radio-plays, television etc. He has been a poet, a novelist, a playwright, a screenwriter, an actor as well as an able director on both the stage and the screen. However, it is mostly as a dramatist that Pinter is widely known to the world, and his experiences in other creative

and critical disciplines have always been contributory to the development of the dramatist in him. As you finish reading this unit, you will learn that Pinter's preoccupation with confined spaces, small habitats with constraining circumstances and brief events provides a scope for exploring the complexities of life, the instability of verbal interactions, the changing social realities, and the inability to communicate properly, as found in the play *The Caretaker*. Pinter is preoccupied with human fear and anxiety rather than with hopes. This idea makes the plays of Harold Pinter masterpieces of modern times.

14.3 HAROLD PINTER: THE PLAYWRIGHT

His Life:

Harold Pinter was born in a lower middle class family on 10th October 1930 at 19 Thistle Waite Road in Hackney, North London. His parents were Jack and Frances Pinter. Jack Pinter was a Jewish tailor. During his childhood, Harold was an athlete and loved to play cricket. In 1939, when the World War II broke out, the family was evacuated to Caerhays, near Mevagissy in Cornwall. He saw some of the bombings in his city by the German army, and this firsthand experience of war and destruction had a lasting impression on his young mind. During the war, they often had to stay outside London. In 1944, Pinter was admitted to Hackney Down Grammar School where an excellent English teacher named Joe Brearley, had rendered a remarkable influence on the developing mind of Pinter.

Pinter's passion for theatre drew public attention in his school days when, in 1947, the *News Chronicle* reviewed his performance as Macbeth in a school level production. In the autumn of 1948, he joined the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), but in October, he was called for National Service and registered as a conscientious objector. In 1949, he was brought before a military tribunal, arrested twice and fined. Dropping out of RADA, he decided to stay at home and engage in literary activities and to search for acting jobs. On September 19, 1950, he made his debut in professional performance in a play called *Focus on Football Pools.* Meanwhile, he started

playing small roles in BBC Radio. In the same year, two poems were published in *Poetry London.* In the first half of 1951, he spent two terms at Central School of Speech and Drama, and in August 1951, he was engaged in Anew McMaster's company for a six-month tour playing Shakespeare and other classic dramas in Ireland. In 1954, he changed his stage name to David Baron. In the following few years he worked for Huddersfield Repertory company, Colchester repertory, the repertory company in Torquay.

On 14 September 1956, he married Vivien Merchant who used to act with him. In 1957, he wrote a short play called *The Room* and started working for his first full-length drama, *The Birthday Party*. *The Birthday Party* was first premiered in London in 1958 only to be greeted with savage reviews. The play was closed within a week. However, despite adverse criticism Pinter continued trying his hand in playwriting, acting and directing. His plays were performed throughout the major cities of Europe and the United States. Gradually he extended his hands to the radio and television, and later to film. Apart from engaging himself within the creative practices like writing, directing, acting, Pinter started to meet his social commitment through political activism. He was critical of Britain's involvement in the Iraq War. He was not hesitant to term both U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair as terrorists. His concern for the contemporary world's socio-political situation is expressed in the form of outrage in some of his poems, particularly in the collection called *War* (2003). His life-long engagement with the world of creativity has earned him laurels and recognitions as well as several awards like David Cohen British Literature Prize (1995), S. T. Dupont Golden Pen Award for a Lifetime's Distinguished Service to Literature (2001), Companion of Honour for services to literature (2002), Wilfred Owen Poetry Prize (2004), European Theatre Prize (2006), Légiond'honeur (2007) etc. In 2005, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. For some people, the Nobel Prize to Pinter, who is an antiwar campaigner, is a strong political statement. Pinter was not well enough to accept the prize in person; so he delivered his Nobel lecture in a pre-recorded video played at the event.

Pinter brought to the stage another best regarded of his works, the drama *Betrayal* in 1978. This play tells the tale of infidelity and marital

meltdown. Critics sense that this story in the play reflects some aspects of the writer's life. Pinter, by that time, had been involved with Lady Antonia Frasier, a talented writer and the wife of a member of the Parliament and a mother of six children. The lovers eventually come out of their existing marital bonds by shedding their respective spouses and get married in 1980. The couple, with their own accord and credibility in literature, became very popular in the contemporary literary circles.

Harold Pinter established the notion of Absurd theatre in the world of the English stage. The essence of the European Absurd theatre finds a new dimension his play because they show the inherent drawbacks and tension in the social life of the modern world. His dramatic style and techniques have certainly given a novel direc-tion to the drama in subsequent periods. His later works exhibit Pinter's growing concern for world politics. For instance, a short play called *Mountain Language* (1988) makes a bold portrayal of and protest against the oppression of the Kurdish people in Turkey.

In 2001, Pinter had been diagnosed with cancer. However, he continued working for the stage, television and cinema, apart from raising voices in socio-political affairs, both domestic and international. Finally, he succumbs to cancer on December 24, 2008, in London. At the time of his death, he left behind his second wife (Antonia Fraser, who is a writer), his son Daniel (from his first marriage), and six stepchildren. He was laid for the eternal sleep at Kensal Green Cemetery, London.

His Dramatic Career:

Pinter started his dramatic career with a short play called *The Room* in 1957. His first full-length drama was *The Birthday Party*, first premiered in London in 1958. The play did not get any desired welcome as it faced severe criticism from the theatregoers and critics. It was however, with his *The Caretaker* (1960) that Pinter met with the first experience of success. The Royal Shakespeare Company first performed his *The Homecoming*, which is considered by some to be one of his masterpieces in 1965. The play explored familial tensions in a way no playwright had ever done before. The play tells the story of a man who brings his wife to meet his father and

brothers after a long estrangement. The wife, at the end leaves him and decides to stay with his family. In 1967, the drama was taken to **Broadway**, where it won the Tony Award, which is Pinter's only Broadway honour. *The Homecoming* was later adapted into a film which featured many of its original cast, including the great actors like Ian Holm, Terence Rigby and Vivien Merchant.

By this time, Pinter had also extended his domain to film, radio and television. He started writing screenplays for his own works as well as for others' films too. He wrote *The Servant* (1963) and *Accident* (1967), both directed by Joseph Losey. They worked together for another film called *The Go-Between* (1970), starring Julie Christie and Alan Bates. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), starring Jeremy Irons and Meryl Streep, is perhaps one of Pinter's best-known screen adaptations. His engagement with radio (especially BBC) is marked by the plays like *A Slight Ache* (1959), *A Night Out* (1960), *The Dwarfs* (1960), *That's Your Trouble*, *That's All*, *Applicant*, *Dialogue for Three* (all in 1963), *The Birthday Party* (1970), *Acts in Monologue* (1975) and many more productions. His television serials and other programmes include *A Night Out* (1960), *Night School* (1960), *Monologue* (1973), *Old Times* (1975), *No Man's Land* (1978), *The Hothouse* (1982), *One for the Road* (1985), *The Dumb Waiter* (1985), *The Birthday Party* (1987) and many more productions.

Harold Pinter has achieved the distinction for a living dramatist. He has made his own adjective 'Pinteresque', which is generally applied to a situation fraught with menace in which common speech camouflages a ferocious battle for territory. However, there is much more to Pinter than masked conflict and hidden threat. His pervading theme is memory: the way our existence is haunted by a recollection, however fallible or imaginary, of some vanished world in which everything was secure, certain and fixed. The wordplay in Pinter is striking. Questioning, self-doubt and distrust of values amongst the characters constitutes some other major preoccupations in the play.



LET US KNOW

It will be interesting to draw a parallel between the worlds of Franz Kafka and Pinter. Both deal with experiences, which at first glance seem commonplace, even paltry. However, all of these turn out to be battles for high stakes, for sanity, for life itself. Both share a conviction that the essential aspects of experience are ambiguous. In addition, their characters are preoccupied with anxiety or fear rather than hope. Like Kafka's *The Trail,* Pinter's *The Birthday Party* begins with the hero's birthday and ends with two men taking him away.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Who is Harold Pinter?

Q 2: What connection can you make between Pinter and the "Theatre of the Absurd"?

Q 3: Mention briefly about the significant plays of Harold Pinter.

14.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY *THE CARETAKER*

Pinter had his inspiration for the play from a real-life experience of his youth that relates to his acquaintance with two brothers who lived together. One of the brothers brought an old tramp to their house in order to provide shelter. Pinter somehow identified himself with the tramp as he had very little money and was almost a tramp. The two brothers and the old tramp takes Pinter closer to the mysterious play between reality and fantasy, complexities of family relationships, and the struggle for power. Michael Billington has stated in his book *Harold Pinter* that Pinter very often discussed the details about the *The Caretaker's* origins in relation to images dawn from his own life. As Billington notes Pinter claims to have written the play while he and his first wife Vivien Merchant were living in Chiswick. As Pinter himself claimed: "The flat was a very clean couple of rooms with a bath and kitchen. There was a chap who owned the house: a builder, in fact, like Mick who had his own van and whom I hardly ever saw. The only image of

him was of this swift mover up and down the stairs and of his van going…Vroom…as he arrived and departed. His brother lived in the house. He was a handyman…he managed rather more successfully than Aston, but he was very introverted, very secretive, had been in a mental home some years before and had had some kind of electrical shock treatment…Anyway, he did bring a tramp back one night. I call him a tramp, but he was just a homeless old man who stayed three or four weeks." According to Billington, Pinter described Mick as the most purely invented character of the three. (*Harold Pinter* 114–17).

The Caretaker, opened in London in 1960 but later moved to Broadway, was acclaimed as a critical success. It has been described as Pinter's most naturalistic play. The British theater critic Kenneth Tynan called it "a play about people," which, in Pinter's case, marked a significant turn in his approach to theater. Unlike his early works such as *The Room* (1957) and *The Dumb Waiter* (1959), which are laden with symbolism and heavily influenced by playwrights Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, *The Caretaker* instead focuses on the lives of the three characters, presenting the action realistically and in a naturalistic fashion. Perhaps, here lies the significance of Pinter's play *The Caretaker.*



LET US KNOW

Stage History of the Play *The Caretaker*

- The play *The Caretaker* was first performed by the Arts Theatre Club in association with Michael Codron and David Hall at the Art Theatre, London, on 27th April 1960.
- On May 30, 1960, Michael Codron and David Hall at the Duchess Theatre, London, presented the play. This performance was directed by Donald McWhinnie. With this group, later in the run, Pinter played Mick. This performance brought Pinter the Evening Standard Drama Award, 1960.
- On March 2, 1972, Christopher Morahan directed at a revival of the play at the Mermaid Theatre, London.

- In January 1976, the play was presented at the Shaw Theatre under the direction of Kevin Billington.
- On June 20, 1991, Harold Pinter directed the play in a Triumph Proscenium Production at the Comedy Theatres.
- The play was adapted into a film in the year of 1963. The film, directed by Clive Donner, was showed in the Berlin Film Festival.
- In the United States, the play was released as the *The Guest* in 1964.
- The play was revived in a National Theatre production in November 1980, and was broadcast by the BBC in March 1981.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Write a note on the stage history of the play *The Caretaker*?

14.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF PINTER

Harold Pinter is one of the most influential personalities in British theatre. Out of all the experiments with the form of drama in the mid-20th century, like the verse drama, the new theatre, the angry drama, it is the theatre of the Absurd which could worthily represent the human condition of the time, and thus influence public imagination; the theatre of the Absurd fared better than the others, because it flourished in many forms, developing its own traditions since Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Pinter has played a mighty role in the development of this form and thus contributing to the development of European contemporary drama. Throughout his career, Pinter tried to maintain that his plays are not intricate but easy to grasp. He does not cherish the presence of any allegory in his plays. Pinter's dialogues are marked by wit and brevity; this characteristic encourages the possibility of multiple readings for meaning. The reader or audience of his plays cannot always arrive at any definite meaning of the puzzling dialogues; one is always free to draw many alternative ideas from them. Following the traditions of the Absurd theatre, Pinter has debunked the excessive stress on language

and logic. Unlike many of his contemporary playwrights, his plays have got a suggestive power.

One of the greatest drama critics Martin Esslin has placed him among the great masters of the avant-garde Theatre of the Absurd. Nonetheless, categorising and labelling his works, though helpful to some readers in understanding them, do not and cannot limit Pinter's multi-dimensional approach to modern life. The multiplicity of his outlook towards life and his unique method of presenting this multiple outlook must not be ignored by the reader who is looking for truth and meaning in his works.

The critics of *Encore,* the foremost radical theatre journal of the time, found in Pinter's plays significances of which Pinter himself was unaware. But, from *The Birthday Party* (1958) to *The Homecoming* (1965), Pinter's plays are subjected to long and serious criticism and it was the *Encore* Publishing Company that produced the first edition of *The Birthday Party,* which it advertised as 'not only pungently funny and disquietingly macabre, but rich with concerned about the state of our society.' There was however one lonely voice who praised Pinter's works. His name was Harold Hobson who proclaimed that that–"Mr. Pinter, on this evidence of this work, possesses the most original, disturbing and errasting talent in theatrical London." Dealing with *The Birthday Party,* he further said, "One of the greatest merits of this play is the fact that no one can say precisely what it is about, or gives the address from which the intruding Goldberg and Meccann came, or say precisely why…Stanley is so frightened…it is exactly in this vagueness that its spine chilling quality lies."

Accused sometimes of retreating into private worlds, Pinter from the mid-1980s onwards, has answered his critics and expressed his sense of moral outrage with a series of pungent, political plays dealing with abuse of human rights as found in *One For The Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988), *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) and so on. Pinter is now recognised as one of the most widely performed and best-known dramatists in the contemporary world. An active Pinter Society in the US is producing a Pinter Record annually. Even in India, a group of young energetic academics and scholars of Literatures in English, under the care and guidance of some eminent university faculty of literature, have formed the PINTER SOCIETY

OF INDIA after the name of Harold Pinter (1930–2008) who along with some of his peers overwhelmingly changed the contemporary theatre scenario. They publish original, ardently researched articles on various facets of contemporary creative literature in the global perspective. Thus, there is a formidable body of Pinter studies. Contemporary British Playwrights are mostly used to being a part of the Pinter Canon.



14.6 LET US SUM UP

After going though the various sections of this unit, you have learnt that Pinter exhibits in his works strong influence of Beckett. For the Absurdists like Beckett, humanity is waiting for the appearance of the ideal order, which the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot* anticipate. The question when will Godot come is not different from the question when will a better society come into existence. Pinter has adopted the Beckettian model of expressing the existential suffering of humanity, though the depiction of the individual experience of despair is certainly different from that of the other practitioners of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. Pinter's first successful *The Birthday Party* shows the struggles of man against the influence of the past. The play deals with the philosophical ideas like will power, anxiety and fear. This play makes a telling comment on the experiences of individuals in the modern world. His *The Dumb Waiter* is an exposition of the nature of menace, and how others in turn menace the menac-ing persons. Pinter extensively explores silence, as an important device for communication, in this play. In *The* Caretaker, Pinter has shown the individual search for compassion and help in a world devoid of human sensibility. You will get an opportunity to read about this play in sufficient details in the next unit.



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14.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Harold Pinter is one of the most widely read, performed and best known theatre activists of the world in the last century… …his creative career spans across half a century in different fields like films, theatre, radio-plays, television etc… …he has been a poet, a novelist, a playwright, a screen-writer, an actor as well as an able director on both the stage and the screen.

Ans to Q 2: Harold Pinter established the notion of Absurd theatre in the English stage. The essence of the European Absurd theatre finds a new dimension his play because they show the inherent drawbacks and tension in the social life of the modern world.

Ans to Q 3: In 1957, he wrote a short play called *The Room… …*his first full-length drama was *The Birthday Party*, premiered first in London in 1958…. …with *The Caretaker* (1960) Pinter met with the first experience of success… …his *The Homecoming,* often considered a masterpieces, was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1965, the play explored familial tensions in a way no playwright had ever done before… …*Betrayal* (1978) tells the tale of infidelity and martial meltdown.

Ans to Q 4: The play was first performed by the Arts Theatre Club on 27 April, 1960… …on May 30, 1960, the play was presented by Michael Codron and David Hall at the Duchess Theatre, London… …on March 2, 1972, Christopher Morahan directed at a revival of the play at the Mermaid Theatre, London… …In January, 1976, the play was presented at the Shaw Theatre under the direction of Kevin Billington…. …on June 20, 1991, Harold Pinter directed the play in a Triumph Proscenium Production at the Comedy Theatres and so on.



14.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: What are the specific qualities of Pinter as a modern dramatist?

Q 2: Do you find any common themes in the plays of Pinter? Discuss.

Q 3: What according to you are the reasons behind Pinter's acceptance as one of the leading dramatists of the contemporary world?

Q 4: Comment on the critical reception of Harold Pinter as a playwright of the 20th century.

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UNIT 15: HAROLD PINTER: *THE CARETAKER* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Act wise Summary of the Play

15.4 Critical Commentary on the Play

15.5 Major Themes

15.6 Major Characters

15.7 Let us Sum up

15.8 Further Reading

15.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

15.10 Possible Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- make an act wise summary of the play to discuss how the play *The Caretaker* presents a simple story of the two brothers and a tramp
- discuss the major themes of the play
- enlist the major characters and explain the role they play
- comment critically on the significance of the *The Caretaker* as a modern play.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

The Caretaker is the first major play by Harold Pinter. It brought him nation-wide recognition as well as huge commercial success. Being staged for the first time at the **Arts Theatre** in London on April 27, 1960, this play was an instant hit with audiences and critics celebrating Pinter's accomplishment. Most of the newspapers published favourable reviews on the play. In the same year, the play received the 'Evening Standard Award' for best play. In the following years, till the present time, the play has occupied

a revered space among the theatre activists across the world, across linguistic, cultural and national borders. It has been translated into various languages, performed with different stage-techniques, adapted for television as well as film. Besides, it has dominated the literature and theatre syllabuses in colleges and universities across the globe. *The Caretaker* presents a simple story of the two brothers and a tramp. With this story, the play deals with themes like the distance between reality and fantasy, family relationships, and the struggle for power. It also touches on the subjects of mental illness and the plight of the destitute. Pinter takes recourse to elements of both comedy and tragedy in order to express complex meanings about human existence, life and being, which in turn elicits complex reactions among the audience. The complexity of the play, Pinter's masterful use of dialogue, and the depth and perception shown in Pinter's themes—all contribute to *The Caretaker*'s being considered as a modern classic. It has been unanimously accepted that his breakthrough as a dramatist came with *The Caretaker* (1960), and since then, he has been one of the most eminent British playwrights of contemporary times. By the time you finish reading the unit, you will find that his surreal, nightmarish, disturbing plays can be called 'comedy of menace'. His art seems to be formalist, but exposes down psychological motivation and rationalisations, revealing drives and instincts.

15.3 ACT WISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

The Caretaker is a three-act play where the entire action takes place in a single room. The play comprises three characters: A mentally challenged man called Aston, his younger brother called Mick, and a tramp called Davis, who are involved in a series of interactions. One evening Aston, a man in early thirties, brings the old tramp Davis to his room in the house owned by his brother, Mick, who is in his late twenties, and allows the old man to stay in his room. With the progress of time, both brothers ask Davis to be the caretaker at the house. However, situations compel them to throw the old man out. The play touches on the subjects of mental illness, jealousy, greed and need, power and politics as well as the plight of the poor. The

use of both comic and tragic elements in the play induces complex reactions in the audience. The complexity of this reaction combining with Pinter's compelling dialogue, the depth of perception contributes to the complexity of the simple plot of the play.

Act I

The **first scene** of Act I begins with a wintery night. Pinter provides a detailed description of the room where the action takes place. It is a big room with two beds, a fireplace, a good number of boxes, cupboard, buckets, vases and sacks. Besides, it contains all sorts of miscellaneous things like kitchen sink, stepladder, coal bucket, lawn-mower, shopping trolley, drawers, gas stove, suitcases, a blow-lamp, a rolled carpet, a wooden chair, ornaments, planks of wood, electric toaster, newspapers piled and scattered all around the room. The first impression that comes out is that the room is not well maintained.

The play begins with Mick sitting alone in his room, looking at each object in the room in silence, then with an expressionless face looking out. This brooding composure is disturbed by the entry of Aston and Davis into the room. Davis is an old tramp and has been invited into his apartment by Aston who rescued him from a bar fight. Davis starts commenting on the apartment, emphatically criticising that it is untidy and dirty. Aston tries to get a pair of shoes for Davis but Davis does not show any interest in it, rather he rejects all offers. He rejects a pair that does not fit well enough and then another pair with the complaint that the colour of the laces does not match. Davis comes to know that a few Indian families live in the neighbourhood, and shows some interest to know about them. In course of their conversation, Davis reveals to Aston that "Bernard Jenkins", the name under which he is known to everybody, is not his real name, but an "assumed name" taken long ago. His real name is "Mac Davis". The papers that validate his identity and whereabouts are in Sidcup, and he claims that he must return there to retrieve them. He declares that he is ready to go there as soon as he gets a good pair of shoes. Now there is a bit of disagreement between Aston and Davis as they discuss where Davis will be allowed to

sleep. At last, Davis takes Aston's bed while Aston sits repairing an electrical plug. Lights fade out into darkness. The first scene ends here.

The **second scene** begins with the lights coming back after a few seconds. It is the next morning. While Aston gets ready for the day, Davis wakes up. Aston tells Davis that he could not sleep all night because Davis was muttering while asleep. Davis denies this accusation and asserts, expressing his fear for foreigners, that the 'Blacks' were making noise. Aston, while going out, tells Davis that he can stay there if he likes. As soon as Aston leaves his room, Davis begins rummaging through Aston's articles. However, Mick, who arrives unexpectedly, watches Davis' activities and suddenly attacks Davis, interrupts him. Davis screams as they engage in a fight. The first Act ends here.

Act II:

The **first scene** of Act II begins with following what happens in the first act. Mick interrogates Davis about how well he slept the previous night, asks his proper name, and wonders whether Davis is a foreigner. Davis replies that his name is 'Jenkins' and that he was born and bred in the British Isles. However, Mick accuses Davis of being "an old robber […] an old skate", "stinking the place out". To confuse Davis, Mick utters words full of banking jargon, and hyperbolically states that his brother Aston is "a number one decorator". As Mick delivers his final hyperbolic line— "Who do you bank with?" Aston comes back with a bag. The brothers discuss how to fix the leaking roof while Davis asserts his presence by putting some practical questions like: "What do you do . . . when that bucket's full?" to which Aston simply replies, "Empty it". Then in one of the most comic moments of the play, the three fight over the bag that Aston has brought for Davis. After Mick leaves, Aston offers Davis the job of Caretaker. The first scene of act II ends here.

With the **second scene**, "The lights fade to black out. Then up to dim light through the window."

Davis enters, closes the door, and tries to switch the light on, off, on, off. To Davis, it appears that the light has gone; but, it becomes clear

that Mick has removed the bulb in the dark. After a few minutes, Mick also offers Davis the job of a caretaker. Gradually, they turn to the absurd discussion of a "financial agreement" relating to Davis' caretaking or looking after the place for Mick. Then they return to the question of references, and hence the trip to Sidcup to get Davis' papers.

Next morning, Davis starts complaining Aston about various aspects of the apartment. He claims that he did not have a good sleep. Aston asks him to make adjustments, but Davis remains inflexible. Aston narrates the story of how he was given electric shock therapy in a mental hospital, and while trying to escape from the hospital, how he was utterly shocked being left with permanent brain damage. Aston exclaims, "I've often thought of going back and trying to find the man who did that to me. However, I want to do something first. I want to build that shed out in the garden". Here comes the longest monologue in the play by Aston.

Act III:

The **first scene** of Act III is about an afternoon two weeks later. Davis and Mick are found discussing redecorating the apartment. When Mick tells that Aston will live there, Davis starts complaining about every aspect of Aston's behaviour, and that Aston is not social. Thus, Davis begins to treat himself as an accomplice in Mick's attempt at fixing up the apartment without Aston's involvement. Then Aston enters and gives Davis another pair of shoes; Davis accepts it, speaks of going down to Sidcup, and gets the papers. That night, in the **second scene**, Davis elaborates his plan while talking to Aston. He insults Aston by referring to the details of his treatment in the mental institution. This leads Aston to respond: "I . . . I think it's about time you found somewhere else. I don't think we're hitting it off". Aston is shocked and frightened when Davis points a knife at him. At last, Aston orders Davis to leave. Davis in an outraged mood utters that Mick will take his side and throw Aston out instead. Then he leaves aggressively concluding: "Now I know who I can trust".

Later, in the **third scene**, Davis comes back with Mick explaining the fight and complaining about Aston. However, for his disgrace, Mick takes

Aston's side and starts counter questioning. Mick forces Davis to disclose that his real name is 'Davis' and 'Jenkins' is his assumed name. After hearing a few abusive words about Aston, Mick appears to take offense and dismisses Davis from his caretaking job. As Aston comes back, "They look at each other. Both are smiling, faintly". Davis again comes back, using the excuse of taking his pipe, which was given to him by Aston, and begs Aston to let him stay there. However, Aston does not pay heed to it. The play ends here, in long silence, with Aston turning *his back to Davis,* gazing at his garden and makings no response to Davis' plea.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Briefly narrate the story of the play *The Caretaker*?

Q 2: Write a note on the plot structure of the play. Does it affect the overall impression and the central themes of the play?

15.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE PLAY

One would certainly wonder about the possible meaning of the play *The Caretaker.* However, the first thing that a reader comprehends is the absence of a coherent plot in the play. As a mark of innovation, Pinter's *The Caretaker* does not possess a coherent plot. The meaning of the play is often confused in the jumbled structure of the plot. *The Caretaker* opens with Mick, whom we later learn to be Aston's brother. He is sitting on the bed, but as soon as he hears voices outside, he gets up and leaves. The readers are given no information for the cause of this strange behaviour. We, the readers or audience, are never intimidated with the cause of Aston's welcoming of Davis into his house, and later, his offering of the job of caretaker. Any attempt to read such incidents from an absurdist point of view, by associating Pinter with dramatists like Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, may reduce them to mere illogical happenings. However, in Pinter's play, we are challenged to interpret the events the same way we are to deal with language. We have to think beyond what the actions on the stage

show. Unlike most absurdist dramas, the action in this play is open to several interpretations. The particular scene described here may open up many probable meanings in the play. Mick's leaving the room after hearing Aston's voice may refer to the state of their relationship. Despite being brothers, Aston and Mick do not seem indulging in fruitful communications. The audience may connect this observation to Aston's invitation of Davis to be caretaker. The challenge of making sense of the jumbled plot structure that the play poses for the audience registers a lively engagement of both the text and its interpreters.



LET US KNOW

Innovative use of language has been one of the major distinguishing features of Pinter. It is the utter breakdown in communication that his plays try to exhibit, in opposition to the conventional drama where language is treated as an effective means of communication. Pinter's characters often speak in broken sentences, with repetitions and pause without any apparent reason, utter nonsense, and listen to what is not said to them. One can argue that this treatment of language is a departure from the artificiality of conventional dramatic language towards realism. However, realism is not enough as an explanation of his language. The play, at certain points, comprises highly stylised language. Though the play exposes the artificiality of speech and plot in conventional drama, and the lapses in human communication, we cannot confine ourselves to the point that Pinter does so in the sole interest of realism.

The Caretaker is not made of words alone as spectacle and sounds, stillness and movement, noise and silence integrate into the construction of meaning. Such a theatrical construction is particularly applicable in absurdist theatre. These theatrical vehicles of sight, sound, tranquillity, movement, noise and silence, portray the idea of a random and remote world. Life, into which we are thrown all alone and from which we will depart all alone, is a juxtaposition of unrelated events; the use of these symbolic

tools tries to infuse this sensibility throughout the play. The setting in the play is very much symbolic of such ideas, which fabricate the play. A couple of suitcases, a blow-lamp near a wooden chair, boxes, a rolled carpet, a number of ornaments, a clothes horse, planks of wood, kitchen sink, a step-ladder, a coal bucket, a lawnmower, a shopping trolley, boxes side board drawers, small electrical fire, an old electric toaster – all these junk that have been gathered over the years, without have any apparent necessity and connection, do not promise any meaning to the characters' lives. They are like diverse experiences and meanings of life; at one time, each of them seems important, but in course of time they become insignificant. This symbolism of the junk extends to the lives of the characters; they also become insignificant and unconnected to one another's lives. The coexistence of the human beings with these grotesque, lifeless junks relegates their lives to the verge of isolation, meaninglessness and absurdity.

The use of props is essential in adding meaning to the play. The scene of Mick's breaking of the Buddha statue is important in this context. Mick walks to the gas stove, picks up the Buddha and hits it against the gas stove that breaks the statue into pieces. The breaking of Buddha, a symbol of calm and tranquillity, symbolises the destruction of order and integrity. It is a symbol of man's continuous struggle with the universe: the conflict between the wish to order and the universal force towards **entropy** and chaos. However, in the play, this breaking of the Buddha brings chaos. The household, which is reasonably calm and ordered, descends into disharmony as the Buddha is broken and Davis is asked to leave. This episode also makes a telling comment on human emotions. Human emotions often function against human will; Mick's anger disrupts the seemingly ordered world. Again, the broken toaster, another fundamental component of the play, is also symbolic in this context. At the play's beginning, Aston busies himself fixing the broken toaster; within the course of the play also he goes back to fix it; and at the very end he is still fixing the toaster plug. However, the toaster remains unrepaired throughout the play, as if all efforts end in no change. At a metaphoric level, we see that nothing was accomplished in the characters' lives. Each character remains the

same as they were in the beginning; neither do they change anything nor do they achieve anything. The sound of the dripping bucket is also a continuous presence in the play. We can read this dripping sound as a metaphor for the failing down of human sensibility. The sound produced by the leak and the bucket also symbolises the ever-present menace in the world.

Extensive use of silence and pauses in the play serve as an important tool in conveying what language often remains unsuccessful to communicate. Pauses are used tactfully enough to mean and communicate where language remains insufficient. They complement language, and at the same time create meaning contradictory to what is expressed in language by the characters. Thus, silences and pauses open up the possibility of multidimensional interpretations and readings. In this play, silence can be seen as passive aggression. Davis often takes recourse to silence, by not answering and thus resisting Mick, as an act of aggression. These silences and pause develop, at the meta textual level, the feeling of unease and tension pervading the three characters. The world of the three characters is filled with the tensions of miscommunication. The pauses develop the picture that despite intense thought occupying the mind of the characters, nothing is being expressed loud. This lapse of communication resulting in the glooming sense of isolation adds to the absurdity of the play.

Another very important factor is the **underlying sense of humour**. The humour used in the play is often **black**, as the tragic side of the comic pervades the human condition, especially in case of Davis, in the play. Davis is out and out a comic character. He is continually rejected, insulted and abused. Whatever dignity he manages to maintain is by going down to the ludicrous level. To make himself feel any sense of self-esteem he must see and construct himself always as superior to others; it results in the exposition of his racism and vilification of everyone coming into his contact. Now, the sharp contrast between his self-proclaimed elevated construction of himself and his failure in social life comes out as an intrinsically comic strain. This humour is permeated through the play in terms of discontinuities of register, as seen in his account of his visit to the monastery to get a pair

of shoes where the monk tells him to “piss off”. The humour is generated by this discontinuity of register for it is an unexpected behaviour from a monk to use such colloquial language of abuse. The discontinuities of register also contribute to the comic scenes between Davis and Mick. However, the discontinuities of register are not only confined to the comic; they are also used as a tool for exercising power. Mick easily asserts his dominance over the old tramp by simply switching to a register where Davis cannot function: “Of course, we’d have to come to man small financial agreement, mutually beneficial.” Mick moves quickly from one register to another, Davis gets confused in deciding how to respond; and thus power is exercised as Davis reduces to the ludicrous.

Thus, one can assume that *The Caretaker* exhibits an acute relationship between language, meaning and psychology and it is very important to grasp this relationship in order to understand how meaning is imbibed in the play. It is not only in this text, but in all Pinter’s drama, that meaning is not necessarily revealed in the words a character uses. Moving beyond the spoken words, his plays invite questions like: “Why does this character say this?” or “What conditions such an expression?” or “What underlying interests govern this or dialogue?” The conventional relationship between language and meaning is severed. For example, we can take a scene from the second act where Davis and Aston engage in a particularly fractured exchange after the latter suggests to Davis that he might be caretaker. To look at the language in conventional terms will reduce it to mere confusing inarticulacy. But when the question of possible motivation is looked at, by going beyond the semantics of language in orthodox linguistic terms, the exchange becomes open to various interpretations: such as Davis is not interested to commit himself to the job of caretaker; he is playing for time; he cannot understand why Aston should want to do him something good; he is worried that he may fall into the trap if he accepts the proposal. Thus, in this play, the language of the characters does not necessarily relate to what they might mean.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Do you think that communication is possible in the play with the kind of language used by the characters?

Q 4: What thematic resemblance do you find between *The Caretaker* and the theatre of the absurd?

Q 5: What do you mean by the term 'Black Humour'?

15.5 MAJOR THEMES

The following are some of the most obvious themes of the play *The Caretaker.*

The Theme of the Absurd:

Harold Pinter is one of the early practitioners of the Theater of the Absurd, which started in the nineteen fifties. As one of the many different aspects of his works, for Pinter, the absurd functions as a means of getting into the reality. Many critics treat him as a predominant figure of the Theatre of the Absurd; his works have been analysed and interpreted in the light of the theories and doctrines of the Theatre of the Absurd. However, there are contradictions to the view that he is an absurdist, and many critics strive hard to nail home the idea that he differs in many respects from the practitioners of the Absurd drama. Being a voracious reader Pinter has artistically employed tactics derived from Kafka, Hemingway, Beckett, Genet and Ionesco in his dramaturgy. Almost all of the writers who had influenced Pinter were either founders or forerunners of the Theatre of the Absurd. As such, Martin Esslin, in his *The Theatre of the Absurd*, considers Pinter as "one of the most promising exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd... in the English speaking world".

Though Pinter's *The Caretaker* is popularly called an absurd play, as it destabilises the fundamental elements of dramatic structure such as plot, character and the conventions governing the use of language, it does not act as radically as Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot.* In most of his plays, Beckett virtually discards the conventional dramatic forms and

theatrical devices. On the other hand, Pinter, in his plays, and especially in *The Caretaker*, does not completely reject them. There is something in the play that can be taken as a plot, though it appears to be very puzzling. In addition, unlike Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, there are characters too, who have some connection with real world even though their actions and motivations may be too strange to understand.

The absurd in the play is constructed chiefly with the failure of language. Language fails to unite the three characters; the breach in human communication and intentional deviation from it leads the individuals to solitude, and then to the sense of a fearful void. This feeling ushers in bigger questions on the existence of man and his position in the world. Questions are raised on the essential conditions of human existence. What is man? Wherefrom has he come, where does he belong? What does man's existence mean? Does he know the nature of his being in a world where the relationship between being and nothingness is contingent and arbitrary? Attempts to get answers for these questions must take reference to the philosophical explorations of Existentialism. Ideas of **Existentialism** are echoed in the lives of the three characters in the play *The Caretaker* as they symbolically represent man's continual struggle to define his sense of being, find meaning of this being and to determine his position in the universe.

Loneliness and Alienation:

One of the most significant themes that permeate the play is the theme of loneliness and alienation. Though the play does not allow its readers to be certain about any definite meaning, what seems reasonably certain is that there is a common interest in all the three characters to cooperate with each other. The isolated lives of the three characters tend to become unproductive and futile; and despite their attempts, they fail to develop that cooperation. However, a few questions may arise: Could things have worked out otherwise if all the characters changed themselves in relation to situation? Such a change is particularly difficult for Aston and Mick, as both seem to be governed by forces beyond their control: Aston by his mental illness and Mick by his aggression. Davis, however, seems to have the freedom to change with the opportunity of being a caretaker and improves his situation.

However, his freedom is only theoretical; he cannot transcend the influences and circumstances that shape him. Experience has conditioned his narrow self-interestedness. He tries to categorise himself in such a way as to ensure his own sense of superiority over the Brothers, especially Aston. Davis has been as irretrievably shaped by the circumstance of his life just as much as Aston and Mick are shaped by mental or personality factors. They are not free from the constructedness of their beings. Davis' apparent freedom to change his life and become a different person becomes meaningless as the effects of his past and surrounding situations are virtually inescapable. This is a universal human predicament to be doomed by the past and the surrounding situations, which hinders any possibility of change and development. As such, at the denial of movement, the characters return to the original state of insularity. Loneliness pervades the stage as the characters get alienated from one another.

Presence of Davis, the Caretaker:

The appointment of Davis as the caretaker of the house is one of the most significant events of the play. It raises an important question on the two brother's situations behind their selection of a tramp like Davis as the caretaker. Why at all should the brothers think him suitable for the job? We do not find any direct answer to this in the play. A possible interpretation can be made on the fact that there is a breach in communication between Mick and Aston. Aston is mentally challenged, and it seems that his condition is worsened by the electric shocks that he receives as part of his treatment. On the other hand, Mick appears to be a rough minded, high tempered person who is inclined to function only in an aggressively dominating mode. In addition, this attitude cannot make any healthy communication with the mentally challenged Aston. Now, both these brothers are connected by the house they live in. Now, in order to keep order and cooperation between the lives and activities of the two, they need a mediator. At the absence of the mediator, they cannot exchange a meaningful word and, as such, nothing gets done. This interpretation answers our query as to why both brothers offer Davis the job. However, the question of power remains still intact, even after the intrusion of the third party. Mick, at the beginning, seems to

be extremely offensive against the intrusion of an outsider; but surprisingly he too accepts the new man as the caretaker. Despite his early aggression, Mick accepts Davis because he soon realises that it won't be tough to dominate the old man and that his controlling hand in the house will not be affected by him.

Davis, once getting an establishment in the house, starts making his own space and power position. He is not satisfied with the role of the mediator. He plans to play one brother against the other and thus strengthen his hold over the brothers. As he realises that Mick is more powerful and dominant than the other, and that he is not in comfortable terms with his brother Aston, Davis aligns himself with Mick. He starts believing that together they can throw out Aston. Davis' relationship with Aston rapidly deteriorates after Mick offers him the same job. Davis starts dwelling in the delusion that Mick too wants to get rid of Aston. So, despite the efforts made by Aston to establish some kind of empathy with Davis, the latter tries to create conflict with Aston. Aston's gestures of kindness, like giving shoes to Davis, go in vain, as Davis even dares to threaten Aston that he will have to leave the house. However, Mick's discovery of the bad blood between Aston and Davis draws a curtain to Davis' dreams. Mick throws Davis out because he can no longer act as a middleman. As Davis gets expelled from his refuge, the brothers return to their former condition of isolation.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What are the important themes in the play?

Q 7: How did Beckett influence Pinter?

Q 8: How does Pinter illustrate the condition of human isolation in his play *The Caretaker*?

15.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

You have already come to know that there are only three characters—Aston, Davies and Mick in the play. The following is an attempt to briefly explain the role played by each of the characters.

Aston

Aston is the elder brother of Mick. He is shown as having some psychological disorder. When he was young, he had to take electric shock therapy, which left him permanently retarded with a damaged brain. He is a failure in all sorts of human communications, which results in his being misunderstood by his closest ones like his brother. He desperately tries to establish connections with others; however, he ends up dealing with the wrong place and the wrong people resulting in utter helplessness. His efforts to help Davies can be taken as an attempt to reach out to others. Because of his good nature, others easily exploit him. His failure in understanding his acquaintances and inability to communicate at a mutually understandable level renders him isolated. He has a long cherished dream of building a shed. This dream can be seen as a hope to fulfil what he lacks: a feeling of belongingness to and completeness within the established order.

Davies:

Davies is the old tramp who goes to Aston's house for shelter. He is an opportunist, a chameleon, who can change his colour with time and opportunity. However, he is an ambitious fool too, who gets blinded by the sparse flash of elusive power. To Aston and Mick, he narrates the story of his life, often lying or sidestepping some details in order to keep the brothers in dark about himself. His story about his life is conditioned by his approximation of the wishes and likes of the people he is trying to impress and influence. He constructs himself in accordance with the momentary imperatives and the suggestions of people important for his purpose. However, lack of credibility in front of Aston and Mick, over-estimation of his position and misuse of his newly acquired power leads him to go back to where he initially had been. He comes out as a tragicomic figure in the play.

Mick:

Mick is the younger of the two brothers and the co-owner of the house where both live. He is an ambitious fellow who, at times, becomes violent, moody and bad-tempered. Mick is never seen in good humour with his elder brother Aston. Both brothers appear to have distanced from one another from the beginning of the play; they hardly talk. However, by the end

of the play they indulge in small conversations and even exchange a faint smile. He does not approve of Aston's act to bring old Davies to their house, takes Davies to be an intruder into their lives, especially to the personal space of his mentally retarded brother. Right from his early encounter he attacks Davies, severely questions him about his whereabouts, talks in a way beyond Davies' comprehension. His dissatisfaction with old Davies even worsens his relationship with his brother. However, very ambitiously, he sees in Davies a shoulder to shift his responsibility to the mentally disturbed brother. However, the discordance between his lofty dreams and the destitution of Davies results in a series of oppositions in human existence.



15.7 LET US SUM UP

It is expected that after going through the unit, you have acquired some basic ideas about Harold Pinter's play *The Caretaker.* You have learnt that Pinter portrays human condition in its wider modern sense, with all its arbitrariness. If anyone tries to look for some common characteristics to categorise him as an absurdist-existentialist writer, there is enough scope to trace these characteristics in the play about which you have just read. The themes and ideas discussed in this unit surely have provided you with some insights into the play. Treat this knowledge as a door to a better understanding of Pinter and his plays and continue your readings. You have also found that the 'Theatre of the Absurd' concentrates on the absurdity of human actions and lives, as faced by the individual willingly or unwillingly, leading to a never-ending state of despair from which there is no escape. In the plays of Pinter, the glooming experience of fear poses threat to the natural harmony of life. Pinter depends more on the form of comedy than that of tragedy; but this choice of form does not influence the hidden menace against the characters who want to escape from the forces of evil. Through such portrayals, he tries to refer to the tentacles of evil forces that drag the individual into the mire of corruption and nefarious acti-vities. As such, Pinter's plays have been rightly called the comedies of menace.



15.8 FURTHER READING

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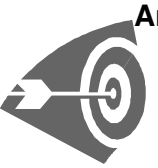
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15.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)



Ans to Q 1: The play has a very simple storyline… …It comprises three characters: Aston, Mick, and Davis… …one evening Aston, a man in early thirties, brings the old tramp Davis to a house owned by his brother, Mick, in his late twenties, and allows the old man to stay in his room…. … with the progress of time, both brothers ask Davis to be the caretaker at the house… … but situations compel them to throw the old man out.

Ans to Q 2: There is no coherent plot… …simple story told in a complex manner… … jumbled structure dislocates meaning… …demands the audiences' continuous engagement… …meaning is beyond what is shown… …the sense of fragmentation and disintegration gets diffused among the characters… …shattered and problematic individual relations… …isolated selves… …absurdity of life… …Pinter's philosophy of life.

Ans to Q 3: In opposition to the conventional drama where language is treated as an effective means of communication, here in this play it is the breakdown of communication… … Pinter's characters often speak

in broken sentences, with repetitions and pause without any apparent reason… …characters often talk nonsense… …departure from the artificiality of conventional dramatic language towards realism.

Ans to Q 4: Influence of the theatre of the absurd on Pinter… …the play lacks a coherent plot… …symbolic use of stage setting… …theme of isolation… …failure of language… … miscommunication among the characters… …futility and limitations of human existence… … puts up questions on the essentials of human existence and so on

Ans to Q 5: 'Black Humour' juxtaposes the morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones to underscore the senselessness or futility of life… …It uses farce and low comedy to make clear that individuals are helpless victims of fate and character…. … André Breton the French Surrealist in 1940, first used the term in *Anthologie de l'humour noir* ("Anthology of Black Humour")… …Subsequently, it was applied to the works of the novelists Nathanael West, Vladimir Nabokov, and Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon and so on.

Ans to Q 6: The theme of the Absurd… …Loneliness and Alienation… …Existential dilemma… …Meaninglessness of life, and so on.

Ans to Q 7: Pinter adopted the Beckettian model of expressing the existential suffering of huma-nity available in his *Waiting for Godot*… … Pinter's first successful play *The Birthday Party* shows the struggles of man against the influence of the past and the experiences of individuals in the modern world… …His *The Dumb Waiter* is an exposition of the nature of menace and how the menac-ing persons are in turn menaced by others…. …*The Caretaker* shows the indi-vidual search for compassion and help in a world devoid of human sensibility.

Ans to Q 8: The characters have difference in interests and difference in conditions: Aston's mental illness, Mick's overt ambition, Davies' dire necessities… …lack of mutual understanding… …failure of language… …rupture in communication… …absence of human sensibility… …everyone's freedom is doomed by individual history… …emotional, intellectual, existential isolation.



15.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: "The Caretaker is a tragedy on human shortcomings and isolation." Explain with reference to the text of the play.

Q 2: Write a note on the structure and settings of the play *The Caretaker*. Do you think that the settings and structures have anything to do with the central themes of the play?

Q 3: Do you consider Pinter as an exponent of the 'Theatre of the absurd'? Support your view with necessary examples from the plays you have read.

Q 4: Do you count *The Caretaker* as an absurd play? How, according to you, has Pinter used elements of the absurd in the line of Beckett?

Q 5: Do you think that there exists complete communication among the three characters in the play *The Caretaker*? Does the portrayal of characters by Pinter have anything to do with his philosophy of human existence? Explain.

Q 6: How do you rate Davies as a caretaker? Why was he initially selected and later rejected as the caretaker of the house? Analyse from your understanding of the play.

Q 7: In what ways, does the play *The Caretaker* reflect the conditions of a modern human being?

Q 8: Connect all the three Acts of the play and try to explain how do they reflect the broader themes of the play?

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