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The theatre of the absurd

Edith Beirne Brooks

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THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

A Thesis
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of the University of Richmond

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by
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THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

PREFACE

To one accustomed to well-made, naturalistic drama the first exposure to the Theatre of the Absurd convinces him that nothing bears a more suitable title. Absurd it is, indeed, to visualize theatre without plot, characterization, catharsis, or purpose. One wonders if it should not be considered an enactment of the preposterous since it lacks the basic fundamentals of established theatre. Even the criteria for sentimental comedy are not fulfilled since it does not amuse mankind, evoke tears, or incite laughter. It is unlike drama seen heretofore, and one is bewildered.

With the advent of "talking pictures" and television the "audience" has adapted to static plots: gushy love stories, eternal triangles, cowboys and Indians, and even the miraculously solved detective story. One watches with some satisfaction the solution of all problems, virtue's continuous triumph over evil, and is relaxed and detached. One is at least "entertained." The Broadway musical with its extravagant spectacle and flimsy plot structure has for at least forty years been the most successful "theatre" in America. Audiences have not desired or demanded any intellectual stimulation
or any personal involvement in the plot or the lives of the characters.

An introduction to the Theatre of the Absurd confronts the viewer with a meaningless, chaotic situation. Ludicrous people mouth meaningless dialogue, and the "plot" seems to move in ever diminishing concentric circles. One is stunned by the nothingness and the void which accompanies the termination of stage action. Why was it written? What was the author trying to convey? These are questions which fill the minds of the audience. The purpose was not monetary, nor was it sensationalism, because both of these could be achieved in a more expedient manner. Thoughtful study and exploration are demanded to answer one's questions and form a "raison d'être" for this form of drama.
CHAPTER I
THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD
A DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF ITS ORIGINS

To many, serious drama has been identified with Aristotle's definition, "imitated human action." His meaning of imitation has always been questioned and there has been doubt as to its full implications. The generally accepted necessary elements in drama have been a story, told in action, by actors who impersonate the characters of the story. (This form admits pantomime although many writers and critics insist dialogue must be present.)

Mr. J. B. Priestly in The Art of the Dramatist stated that a dramatist writes for the theatre and must therefore keep in mind actors and playgoers. The ultimate object is the creation of a "dramatic experience." This allows the mind of the playgoer to function on two levels at one time and further implies that the audience is intentionally out its ordinary mind and is, so to speak, "schizophrenic." By this is meant one realizes the heroine is a real person who has a life of her own;

yet tonight she is Juliet, and one identifies with her as Juliet. The more efficiently the actress can convince the playgoer of her character as Juliet, the better the dramatic experience. Sir Philip Sidney in "An Apology for Poetry"\(^2\) saw drama as an opportunity to perfect nature and thereby serve as a model from which men could pattern their lives. To others it has afforded only an escape from the realities of life. Still others suggest that drama is a mirror reflecting the foibles of a generation.

Although dramatic elements have been combined and emphasized so differently in the history of the theatre as to make an exact theoretical definition difficult, if not impossible, *A Handbook to Literature* provides an objective definition. Drama is "a picture or representation of human life in that succession and change of events that we call story, told by means of dialogue and presenting in action the successive emotions involved."\(^3\) The above implies that plot and characterization are integral parts of drama as developed in the story.


To further elaborate it is necessary to use the example of conventional, well-made plays which lead the audiences to believe that the plot and events are all important. In the well-made play a conviction of reality is a prime necessity; characters must seem true and events plausible. This illusion could be created only if the dramatist followed a firm set of rules specifically designed to capture, sustain, and satisfy the spectator's interest. There is generally an exciting exposition, introducing the situation (Act I); the reasons for the action supply the complication (Act II); the crisis of feeling and the denouement or resolution of the events terminate the play (Act III). The place and time of the action are specifically designated. The characters (human beings) act with more or less acceptable behavior to create a realistic picture of human life. The action is logically developed and the dialogue is comprehensible. This is roughly a description of the technical pattern of conventional drama. This definition, however, excludes the theme which should take precedent over plot or story. The theme involves the real purpose for which a play is written and, whether it is ideological, sociological, or merely aesthetical, the theme cannot be ignored. The well-made dramas of the nineteenth century varied greatly in theme but the treatment created the same
results: the audience remained inquisitive eavesdroppers, and in no real sense did they undergo the same experience themselves.

The Theatre of the Absurd complies with few points of this, or any, definition of conventional drama: it is acted by human beings on a stage and it is a representation of human life by dialogue. Otherwise there are no points of similarity — only differences between it and conventional drama. There is an absence of story, organized plot, and characterization. Everything that happens seems beyond rational motivation, occurs at random, or by an inexplainable sequence of events. The avant-garde dramas omit the period of exposition; from the opening minute the audience is involved in a maze of circumstances which are both horrible and humorous. The action is at times frantic and intricately involved. Actors move without purpose and often act against the dialogue rather than moving with it. Tragedy, which excites pity and terror by a succession of unhappy events, has disappeared in absurd theatre, and has been replaced by the grotesque.

The Theatre of the Absurd is not a formal school of writers but a term given by Ionesco, its major spokesman, to certain playwrights of the mid-twentieth century whose techniques bear marked similarity and who
share a common theme. These authors include Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and Edward Albee. A theme shared by all is the basic problem of man's inability to communicate with his fellow man. This may seem paradoxical since drama is composed of dialogue, but one need only read several plays to ascertain the validity of the statement. The "characters" utter words, but somehow they never portray meaning. The words are secondary to the gestures and stage business which form an integral part of the presentation.

Martin Esslin has described the Theatre of the Absurd in the words of Ionesco: "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." 4 "Absurd" originally means "out of harmony," in a musical context. The dictionary meaning is: "contrary to reason; obviously inconsistent with truth, opinions generally held, or common sense; ridiculously incongruous, foolish, silly, preposterous." The combination of these basic definitions will exemplify some major characteristics of the absurdists though by no means is it implied that these are used in the same manner by all playwrights.

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4 Martin Esslin, Theatre of the Absurd (Garden City, New York, 1961), p. XIX.
The standards of conventional theatre are completely abandoned. The public is confronted with contradictions in speech and actions which defy any logical development. Language is destroyed as a means of communication and speeches often deteriorate into a listing of names. Neither time nor place of action is ever clearly stated. The characters lack individuality and personality and are presented as absolutes or types making identification with them impossible. All laws of probability are dispensed with as the three-nosed lady in Ionesco's Jack or the Submission exemplifies. It is an aggressive theatre in which no crime or sin is shielded from view. The antithesis of catharsis results. The audience is alienated, not filled with pity and fear, and a multiple meaning is the desired effect.

Ionesco's definition includes the connotation that man will be presented stripped of his purpose for existence. He will be divorced from historical, social, and psychological themes. He is alone, left to resolve his problems without consultation of a doctor, social worker, or historian. Everything that happens is beyond rational motivation; it seems to be happening at random or by the fickle finger of fate. Stage effects abound; lights, noises, inanimate objects, disconnected speech, songs, pantomime, and props are amalgamated to present
the picture of man's condition today. The plays contain copious stage directions as opposed to the sparsity of such details found in Greek and Elizabethan drama. No simple **Exit** is found as a direction; the playwright tells in great detail how and where his character should exit. In Ionesco's *The Chairs* there are ten doors, carefully marked in his accompanying sketch, and two windows. The Old Man and Old Woman are specifically directed as to which door should be used as exit and which as entrance. The detailed stage directions make the reading of these plays tedious. The action, however, is very effective in live presentation; e.g., in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* the shifting of hats between Vladimir and Estragon blends beautifully with the spoken word to present the picture of those two lonely people, but in reading, the words are interrupted by directions and the play is more difficult to project. It is to be remembered that this group is primarily theatrical, not literary, and the full significance is acquired through an appeal to all the sensibilities of the audience.

How did all this start, and what does it mean? Those questions recur in one's mind. Historically, the Theatre of the Absurd had its abrupt and sudden beginning
with the play of Alfred Jarry, Ubu Roi,\textsuperscript{5} which was first performed in Paris on December 10, 1896. The avant-garde theatre of the mid-twentieth century began on that evening when the curtains opened and the hero stepped forward to pronounce a word never uttered on the stage before: "Merdre!" Immediately scandal was provoked. Here was enacted an example of dramatic primitivism. It presented a new form of dramatic art which sixty years later is still controversial and unfathomable.

A review and evaluation of Ubu Roi is beneficial in the study of the avant-garde movement in drama. When Jarry wrote Ubu Roi he was rebelling not only against the conventions of current drama but against all customs, society, and life. His intention, apparently, was to shock and provoke scandal. Ubu confronted the Parisian bourgeois with a monstrous picture of its own greed, selfishness, and Philistinism, and was at the same time the personification of the grossness of human nature: "an enormous belly" walking on two legs—a mythical,

archetypal externalization of human instincts of the lowest kind. Thus, this false king of Poland anticipates one of the main characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd: to externalize and project outwards what is happening in the deeper recesses of the mind.6

Jarry's letter as to the staging of Ubu Roi is most illuminating and sets a pattern for future avant-garde theatrical presentations. He states:

It would be interesting to stage the play on the following lines:

Mask the chief character, Ubu . . .

A cardboard horse's head which he would hang from his neck, as they did in the old English theatre, for the only two equestrian scenes, all of whose details are in the spirit of the play.

Adoption of a single set, or rather a plain black cloth, doing away with the raising and lowering of the curtain during the single act. A conventionally dressed character would appear . . . and hang up a placard informing the audience of the location of the scene. (Note that I am certain that the written placard is much more "suggestive" than scenery. Neither scenery nor supers could represent "The Polish Army marching in the Ukraine." )

No crowds; these are a mistake on the stage and hamper the intelligence. Thus a single soldier in the Review scene, a single one in the scrimmage where Ubu says: "what a gang, what a retreat," etc.

The adoption of an "accent," or rather, a special "voice" for the chief character . . .

The costumes should give as little as possible the impression of local color or

chronology (this renders better the idea of something eternal). They should preferably be modern, as the satire is modern; and sordid, to make the play appear more wretched and horrific.7

Since the play began with the thunderbolt of "La Mot d'Ubu," the propriety of society was mortally offended. The utterance of this word on the public stage was a symbol of rebellion against all society and all life. It represented a deep disgust that conventional language was powerless to express. Since words are only symbols and arouse a different meaning in each person, Jarry used this startling expletive to introduce a naively fanciful "plot." The story contains most of the usual versions of a fairy tale but exaggerated with flippant ridicule. The hero -- an ugly, dirty, smelly, grotesquely fat person -- moves through the flimsy, barely outlined plot which mystifies by its apparent simplicity. The audience laughed and yet were bewildered as they watched this drama because they felt they were being fooled. But this play, as well as future ones in the current avant-garde movement, only appear to be simplicity disguised as profoundness. They are, however, profundity disguised as simplicity.

7Quoted by Wellwarth, p. 12.
The term "avant-garde" means "out in front of everybody else." Wellwarth uses the analogy of a person who in front of everyone else is fully exposed to the fire of the enemy. Whether this be from fearlessness or foolhardiness, it is shocking to the timid, the cautious, and the prudent who comprise the majority; all the more so because the majority, instinctively and in all innocence, always considers its position sacred and inviolate. The power to shock is, then, a major characteristic of the current avant-garde drama and at the same time its chief source of strength.\textsuperscript{8}

To so blissfully explain its origin by citing one play of Alfred Jarry would not be presenting a complete picture. There were many precursors and influences to the inception of an Absurd Theatre. Martin Esslin's book\textsuperscript{9} devotes sixty pages of tightly compressed material on this subject. To this there could be added many others without consideration of philosophic and scientific forebears.

\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., p. 2.

\textsuperscript{9}Esslin, Theatre of the Absurd, pp. 229-89.
In discussing the characteristics of these plays mention was made of the lavish use of gestures. The most direct contributors to this were the silent movie stars. The sad-faced little clown, Charlie Chaplin, is a poignant influence with his hat cocked just so, his stick, and his exaggerated walk. The Marx Brothers, the Keystone Cops, Laurel and Hardy, Buster Keaton, and a host of other stars whose pantomimes were the embodiment of the stoicism of man when faced with a world of mechanical devices that had gone out of hand are equally positive influences. These stars grew directly from vaudeville and music halls and they, in turn, from the "commedia dell'arte." The "commedia dell'arte" originated in Italy in 1545 and flourished in central Europe until the eighteenth century. Although it is highly probable that in all ages people delighted in the practice of comic mimetic art, all efforts to trace it from the prehistoric mime and farce through the dark ages have failed. The very young child quickly assimilates funny faces and distorted action for the amusement of his friends and once assured of a responsive audience his repertoire expands. He joins in the laughter of his audience, at times heralds the laughter, or laughs alone. The practice of such comic artistry was unfamiliar in traditional
realistic-naturalistic drama; hence modern audiences have not known how to react. Nevertheless, it seems quite evident that mimes are an integral part of the social and theatrical tradition, and their development through the years should be considered a forebear to the action of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) can justifiably be included in a listing of influences on the Theatre of the Absurd. His play, Les Mamelles de Tiresias, appeared in 1917, and in the preface he labeled it "drama surrealiste." Apollinaire's definition of surrealism is:

To characterize my drama ... I have coined the adjective "Surrealist," which does not mean symbolical ... but rather well defines a tendency of art that, if it is no newer than anything else under the sun, has at least never been utilized to formulate an artistic or literary creed. The idealism of the dramatists who succeeded Victor Hugo sought likeness to nature in a conventional local color that corresponds to the trompe-l'oeil naturalism of the comedies of manner. ...To attempt, if not a renovation of the theatre, at least a personal effort, I thought one should return to nature itself, but without imitating her in the manner of photographers. When man wanted to imitate the action of walking, he created the wheel, which does not resemble a leg. He had thus used Surrealism without knowing it ... 10

Surrealism for Apollinaire was an art more real than reality. He wanted to describe a play in which everything

10 Quoted in Esslin, Theatre of the Absurd, pp. 259-260.
was larger than life, for he believed in an art which was to be "modern, simple, rapid, with the shortcuts and enlargements that are needed to shock the spectator."¹¹

The play is preceded by a prologue in which the director of the company sums up Apollinaire's dramatic creed:

For the theatre should not be a copy of reality
It is right that the dramatist should use
All the mirages at his disposal . . .
It is right that he should let crowds speak inanimate object
If he so pleases
And that he no longer should reckon with time
Or space
His universe is the play
Within which he is God the Creator
Who disposes at will
Of sounds gestures movements masses colors
Not merely in order
To photograph what is called a slice of life
But to bring forth life itself in all its truth.¹²

In Les Mamelles of Tiresias the whole population of Zanzibar is represented by a single actor and the heroine, Thérèse, changes herself into a man by letting her breasts float away. Her husband, Tiresias, then decides to fulfill the functions of Thérèse and produced forty thousand and forty-nine children, simply by wanting them.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 260.
¹² Ibid.
Antonin Artaud's book, *The Theatre and Its Double*, is another major influence on the Theatre of the Absurd. Artaud, one of the most unhappy men of genius of his age, was immensely fertile and original in his inventions and ideas. He diagnosed the confusion of his age as springing from the "rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas that are their representatives."\(^{13}\) He advocated a "Theatre of Cruelty," a ruthless exposure of the human mind, a return to the myth and magic of theatre; the abolition of the psychological and narrative stage with its preoccupation with personal problems; a stage where man could unmask and stand confronted with his naked ugliness, and where archetypes would war with each other.

The theatre will never find itself again ... except by furnishing the spectator with
the truthful precipitate of dreams, in which
his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions,
his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense
of life and matter, even his cannibalism pour
out on a level not counterfeit and illusory,
but interior. In other terms, the theatre
must pursue by all its means a reassertion not
only of all the aspects of the objective and
descriptive external world but of the internal
world; that is of man considered metaphysically.\(^{14}\)

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In 1931 he was stirred by a performance of Balinese dancers and it was from this influence that his dramatic theories were crystallized. The restoration of the language of gesture and movement was advocated in order to make inanimate things play their part in the action, and dialogue (which "does not specifically belong to the stage, it belongs to books")\(^1^5\) was relegated to the background. He called for a true language of the theatre, which would include the wordless language of shapes, light, movement, and gesture.

The theatre should aim at expressing that which language cannot put into words. He did not urge the complete suppression of speech in the theatre but only the change of its role. Words, to him, did not mean everything because their "fixed" meaning arrest and paralyze thought instead of permitting its development. The unspoken language of action, movement and design would, to him, restore the old magic of language. Artaud in the early thirties had formulated some of the basic tendencies of the Theatre of the Absurd, but he never had the chance to put them into practice. His only chance was when he found backers to produce *The Cenci* which was "intriguing but did not convince the audience."\(^1^6\)


\(^1^6\) *Esslin, Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 280.
A rather controversial figure in the history of the tradition of the Absurd is Bertholt Brecht. This controversy surrounds his position; whether he is an absurdist or only an influence.

Martin Esslin states in the consideration of Bertholt Brecht:

In the course of his development from anarchic poetic drama, in the style of Buchner and Wedekind, toward the austerity of the Marxist didacticism of his later phase, Brecht wrote a number of plays that come extremely close to the Theatre of the Absurd, both in their use of clowning and music hall knock-about humor and in their preoccupation with the problem of the identity of the self and its fluidity.17

He further elaborates by noting specific plays in which the technique, theme, and motive are clearly placed in the absurdist tradition. Of these, particular emphasis is given to In The Jungle of the Cities, Man Equals Man, and The Baby Elephant. To his list should surely be added Baal, The Caucasian Chalk Circle, and Drums in the Night.

Kenneth Tynan, dramatic critic for the "London Observer," in the now famous Tynan-Ionesco debate which was published in his paper in the weeks beginning June 22, 1958, feels Brecht should rightfully be included in the tradition of Absurd Theatre. The debate resulted from

17Ibid., p. 271.
the single night performance of Stuart Holroyd's play
*The Tenth Chance*. The play produced a shouting and
frenzied reaction by the audience as a protest to
political implications in its thesis. Tynan maintained
that his opposition to the play was not political but
was based purely on the fact that it was a poor play. In
the ensuing articles Tynan accused Ionesco of being
divorced from "reality." What Tynan meant was "objective
reality" or the facts of life. He explained:

> The broad definition of a realistic play
is that its characters and traits have trace­
able roots in life. Gorki and Chekhov, Arthur
Miller and Tennessee Williams, Brecht and
O'Casey, Osborne and Satre have all written
such plays. They express one man's view of
the world in terms of people we can all recog­
nize.18

Ionesco maintained that Brecht was the embodiment
of the arid ideological theatre, to which he and other
absurdists are at opposite poles. Esslin (who does not
use quotes in formulating his conclusion but apparently
is summarizing the opinion of Tynan) says:

18Henry Adler, "To Hell with Society," *Theatre in
the Twentieth Century*, p. 245-72. (The best summary of
this debate is found in this essay. Other references
to it lack detail.)
the theory of alienation and "gestus" are direct forebears of the stage patterns of the mid-fifties. In his prolific writings on the theatre and in practice he advocated a revolt against the popular theatre of illusion and "Aristotelian" drama. He felt that both of these were disgusting and obscene. The effect of the stage illusion to hypnotize the audience into a state of trance or to encourage identification with characters was indecent. "The culinary theatre," a term he used to describe Aristotelian theatre, merely provides mental food stuffs, to be consumed, and then forgotten. Theatre, to him, must make man think. There should be no emotional appeal, but its appeal should be directed exclusively to the intellect. All illusion of reality must be destroyed, and the audience must be made conscious at every moment that they are not witnessing something that is really happening. They are, instead, to sit back, relax, and reflect on the lessons to be learned from the events of long ago, like the audience who listened to the deeds of Odysseus. The result was "epic" theatre, which is strictly historical as it constantly reminds the audience that they are merely getting a report of past events. The devices he used to achieve this result combined modern technology, such as movie projections, unrealistic sets, cards, obscure costuming, and distorted action. He was influenced in creating some of the effects by Japanese Noh
Theatre, a high stylized performance which has remained essentially unchanged for six hundred years.

The spectator of the epic theatre says:
"I should never have thought so. - That is not the way to do it. - This is most surprising, hardly credible. - This will have to stop. - This human being's suffering moves me, because there would have been a way out for him. This is great art: nothing here seems inevitable - I am laughing about those who weep on the stage, weeping about those who laugh." 21

The Brechtian theatre is a theatre designed to arouse indignation in the audience, dissatisfaction, and a realization of contradictions. It is a theatre supremely fit for parody, caricature, and denunciation, therefore it is essentially a "negative" theatre. There is a lack of positive heroes, the good characters are invariably crushed and defeated. Alienation of the audience was his purpose because it was hoped that through this antagonism they would be roused to action. Although aesthetics cannot be ignored, it should not be an end in itself but only a means. Detachment of the actors was imperative to create the desired result.

"Gestus" (a German word which is apparently almost impossible to translate as it means so much more than the English equivalent gesture) is used by Brecht to express the basic attitudes of human beings. It covers the whole

21, pp. 129-30.
range of the outward signs of social relationships; it is
the clear and stylized expression of the social behavior
of human beings towards each other. Brecht shifts the
emphasis from the inner life of characters to the way in
which they behave towards one another.

The realm of attitudes adopted by the
characters toward one another is what we call
the realm of Gestus. Physical attitudes, tone
of voice, and facial expression are all deter-
mimed by a social Gestus: the characters are
cursing, flattering, instructing one another,
and so on. The attitudes which people adopt
toward one another include even those attitudes
which would appear to be quite private ... These
expressions of a Gestus are usually highly
complicated and self-contradictory, so that
they cannot be rendered by any single word, and
the actor must take care that in giving his
image the necessary emphasis he does not lose
anything but emphasizes the entire complex.22

Although the dream motif in dramatic literature
enjoys a long history, the first to stage the dream world
in the spirit of modern psychological thinking was August
Strindberg. To Damacus, A Dream Play, and The Ghost
Sonata are direct sources of the Theatre of the Absurd.
In these plays there is a shift from objective reality of
the outside world to the subjective reality of inner
states of consciousness. Time and space do not exist, and

22Bertholt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre." 
Playwrights on Playwriting. ed. Toby Cole. (New York,
1960), pp. 95-96.
everything is possible and probable. For the dreamer anything can happen; for him there are no scruples, no incongruities, and no laws. To Damascus leads to a solution of religious faith and consolation; A Dream Play and The Ghost Sonata show a world of grim hopelessness and despair.

Anton Chekhov wrote plays of inarticulacy, of pauses in which lives came together or parted because people had no words or because there were no words. His inarticulacy was the result and expression of a disintegrated society. The impossibility of man to communicate with each other is a dominant motif in Chekovian drama. The broken phrases, use of pauses as part of the motion of the drama, and use of common place things as symbols are three of many similarities. The major difference is the era. Chekhov's desire was for the viewer to look at his own dull, dreary life and find a way to better it. He repeated this aim constantly in his letters; he was depicting life as he saw it not as he wished it to be. Since Chekhov's day the impact of the theories of Freud and Darwin has become more significant. Man is no longer earth bound but can soar to stratospheric heights to render missiles of destruction. The Bomb is an ominous and omnipotent threat to mankind. Chekhov's religious training and deep inner conviction of the
goodness of creation are lacking in the absurdists. Therefore his depiction of "life as he sees it" will be far more horrible, more soulless, and more depressing. Chekhov and the absurdist are depicting different worlds, but the technique is markedly similar. Even the simple language of the 1890's has changed, and to achieve simplicity of diction now one must strip the utterances almost to starkness.

Though novelists have been excluded from this listing of influences for the effect of unity, James Joyce cannot be omitted. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* anticipates the preoccupation of the Theatre of the Absurd with language and the attempt to reach the inner recesses of the mind. *Ulysses* equally serves as an influence in Absurd Theatre, particularly "The Nighttown" episode which Esslin feels is "one of the great early examples of the Theatre of the Absurd."23

Various critics have labeled current avant-garde theatre a Theatre of Revolt, the Angry Theatre, The Theatre of Protest and Paradox, as well as the Theatre of the Absurd. Each of these titles can be justified by specific incidences in the plays which portray the implications of each. The label has little or no bearing,

since each critic had the same playwrights in mind. The movement began in France, following World War II with Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*, written in 1948 and produced in 1950. With the exception of Albee and Pinter the major contributors have been French or immigrants to France.

It should be remembered that there has always been an avant-garde drama. The society dramas of Pinero were considered shocking in their day and the Ibsen-Shaw social dramas were definitely an innovation in their advent. Pinero's drama was an outgrowth of Robertson's physical realism drama. The Ibsen-Shaw drama shocked even more by discussing moral problems seriously instead of suggesting or insinuating them in the manner of Pinero. The current avant-garde drama, however, has no such respectable and direct forebears. Following the explosion of Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in 1896, it grew by diverse and indirect means: the silent movies, Apollinaire, Artaud, Brecht, Joyce, Kafka, and from a host of other literary sources.

The insistence of many modern critics that literature must be divorced from any era and be judged by universal and unchanging standards would make an appraisal and evaluation of the Theatre of the Absurd more difficult and its meaning less significant. Two major world wars and endless conflicts have filled the Twentieth Century; philosophical theories have fallen into meaningless
cliches; materialism has become the disease of the
century; and objective reality has essentially disappeared.
This is the audience for which the absurdist write, and
this is the world they see. Their forebears, all artists
of the twentieth century, were seeing parts of the same
mosaic. Some of these men had the vision to project the
chaos and depression following World War II, but only
those who have seen it all can feel the loneliness of
man without hope.

This history of its origin is by no means
comprehensive, as only the major dramatic forebears have
been included. The next process in an evaluation of the
absurdist is to examine the philosophic concepts of its
artists.
CHAPTER II

PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS

To formulate a list of positive philosophical tendencies from the writings of Ionesco, Beckett, Albee, and Pinter would be an impossibility because the basis for established philosophic concepts is logic. These four playwrights, as noted in the previous section, defy and ignore the laws of logical reasoning in the presentation of figures of loneliness who emphasize the tragedy of man.

Several of the major philosophical systems which have achieved popularity in this century and which are reflected in the Theatre of the Absurd are dadaism, nihilism, fatalism, and existentialism. Technically, there is no true philosophy of existentialism; there are only existentialistic thinkers. The basic reason why it is not a philosophy per se is the diversity of opinions maintained on the belief of a God and His nature; e.g., Gabriel Marcel is a Roman Catholic existentialist whereas Heidegger and Sartre are atheistic existentialists. There is apparently no comprehensive system of thought which can be called the philosophy of existentialism.

24 This opinion is substantiated from a number of sources -- The History of Philosophies and Existentialism and Modern Literature, to cite two.
The primary interest of existentialists is in man and his existence: man feels impelled to give a final account of himself to himself and to explain in absolute terms the meaning of his existence. There is general protest against the view of the world and policies of action in which human beings are regarded as the helpless playthings of historical forces or as wholly determined by the regular operation of the natural processes. Existentialists seek to justify the freedom and importance of human personality and to emphasize will in human nature in contrast with reason. Man's individuality and importance are stressed.

Sartre and Camus, existentialistic playwrights, present these views positively in their dramas, and their arguments are logically developed. The Absurdists, however, cannot properly be termed "existentialist" because their approach is negative, and their method lacks logical or reasonable development. Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* is an example of this. When all civilization had succumbed to animalism, only Berenger tenaciously held to his individuality, his assertions, and his convictions. "I'm not capitulating," and only Berenger maintains his human identity. The repetitious blaming of the "government" for lack of action strips man of his individual responsibility and relegates him to the role of a puppet.
who cannot act without a master's hand.

Another existential appraisal of man in the modern world reveals that a great part of humanity cannot properly be said to be alive at all, -- they merely exist. This arises from the fact that human beings have no self which they could lose. Men even fear self-identification and flee in all directions in their endeavors to escape it. There is evidence of these beliefs in the Theatre of the Absurd; Beckett's characters do not live, -- they only exist while they are waiting for death. In Ionesco's The Bald Soprano, neither the Smiths nor the Martins are "real" people: they do not know themselves. Albee's Zoo Story illustrates people who are breathing but are not "truly alive."

Dadaism, which was primarily an artistic and literary movement, denies objective truth. From this denial it follows that dadaists are equally determined that there is no objective ground for moral principles. The dadaists were later absorbed by the surrealists in the art world. Their ideas were expressed by presenting images without order or sequence, as in a dream. Evidence of their technique can be found in the writings of all the absurdists since much of what happens on stage is presented divorced from any semblance of reality; e.g., in the Bald
Soprano the Martins involved logic to arrive at the conclusion they are man and wife.

Fatalism is the doctrine that all events are determined by necessity, or fate. Ionesco's characters sometimes accuse each other of fatalism as in Rhinoceros (Act 3), and certainly there is strong evidence to support these accusations.

Dudard: Then face the facts and get over it. This is the situation and there is nothing you can do about it.
Berenger: That's fatalism.
Dudard: It's common sense ...

Again, when Daisy asks "What can we do about it?" fatalism is indicated. Beckett's characters, particularly in Endgame and Happy Days, are victims of fate: they are trapped and cannot overcome their destiny.

Nihilism is fundamentally a philosophy of negation of all forms of aesthetics; it advocates utilitarianism and scientific rationalism. Social sciences and classical philosophical systems are rejected as science became the cure-all for all problems. As seen by the nihilist, evil is derived from ignorance which science alone can overcome. Nihilism constituted a revolt against the established order and denied the authority of state, church, and family; it further rejected the duality of man as a combination of body and soul, of material and spiritual substance. Apparently this system is based almost
entirely on negation, as no positive solution is offered. Their creed instead of beginning as the Christian creed with "I believe in" would necessarily begin "I deny" or "I do not believe in." Robert Brustein has labeled the absurdist plays as part of the Theatre of Revolt. Any play will illustrate their rejection of accepted standards of behaviors.

The various other isms, such as relativism, naturalism, materialism, positivism, and determinism, which have been rampant in this century have left man with little consolation that God's still in His Heaven and all's well on earth. The isms question a personal, interested God in Heaven, and it is quite obvious that all is not well on earth.

The modern writer is faced with a baffling problem of picturing a self that seems to have lost its reality. Man no longer knows himself and, as frightening as the knowledge may be, he is obsessed by the desire to obtain self-knowledge. Through this only can he gain an awareness of his role in the world and his ultimate destiny. Without self-knowledge and realization of a goal, man must admit there is no justification for his journey through time. Space frightens him, he stands naked, with no consolation of redemption to console him, "in the midst of Nature that reeks not of his fate, alone under an iron, godless sky ...
Absolutely alone..."25 He has no hope as all life ends in death, and, like all created things, he must be dissolved into the elements of which he is composed. A vision of nothingness is shown by metaphysical despair. The image of life and self which the Theatre of the Absurd presents underlines the farcical fate of man in which death is omnipresent; identity of character and truth are an illusion; the futility of all human acts is emphasized. Man is stripped of personality and individuality; he is a mystery to himself and therefore unable to communicate with others.

Ionesco, particularly, is a disciple of pataphysics, although elements of this supposed philosophy are found in Beckett, Pinter, and Albee. The term is quickly passed over in Martin Esslin's book as originating with Jarry's Gestes et Opinions de Doctor Faustroll and Doctor Faustroll is the chief "spokesman" of the science of pataphysics.26 Ubu was a "doctor of pataphysics" which was intended as a burlesque of science. Faustroll defines pataphysics as:

"... the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments."27


27Ibid., p. 259.
The College de 'Pataphysics was not founded until after World War II by Dr. I. L. Sandomir, and since then "it has developed into one of the most significant 'off-beat' intellectual movements that Western Europe has yet developed." Ionesco is one of its Transcendent Satraps (a leader) and hence an understanding or definition is helpful in understanding his works. The best definition is found in Coe's Eugene Ionesco.

'Pataphysics is the science of the realm beyond metaphysics ... 'Pataphysics lies as far beyond metaphysics as metaphysics lies beyond physics -- in one direction or another. ... \[\text{It}\] marks the extreme point of reaction against the physical sciences as such, and against the mentality which they encourage...
The 'pataphysical attack on science aims straight at the "provisional" quality of experimental evidence. Every phenomenon ... is a law unto itself: 'Pataphysics is the science of the particular, of laws governing the exceptions... the realm beyond metaphysics will not be reached by vaster and vaster generalities -- because generalities merely finish up by obscuring the value and the reality of the particular. In the 'pataphysical universe, every event determines a law, a particular law -- which is the same as saying there is no law... \[\text{It}\] marks an extreme stage in philosophic anarchy; but it is an anarchy of a non-destructive nature...
For 'pataphysics, all things are equal; the scientific and the nonsensical weigh alike in the scale of eternity, since both are arbitrary, both are absurd... 'Pataphysics rejects the search for truth (a generality) in favor of a "voyage of discovery and adventure into what Jarry called eternity -- which

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of course is where we all live." It seeks for reality in terms of contradiction, it rejects all a-priori values. It preaches no rebellion and no acquiescence, no new morality nor immorality, no political reform nor reaction, and certainly no promise of happiness or unhappiness. Above all, 'pataphysics incarnates through its very absurdity, the practical philosophy of the absurd.

'Pataphysics has nothing to do with humour or with the kind of tame insanity psychoanalysis has drummed into fashion. Life is, of course, absurd, and it is ludicrous to take it seriously. Only the comic is serious.29

The summary of this science is quoted in full for whatever value it may have in an understanding of the Theatre of the Absurd. To this writer the explanation only clouds any meaning of the modern avant-garde theatre.

There is surely no comedy in Rhinoceros or The Killer, nor are Vladimir and Estragon comic figures; and Hamm in Endgame is as tragic a figure of man's helplessness as one can imagine. The 'pataphysics bit seems more like a hoax than a serious science; it seems to be what it was originally intended to be, a burlesque on science. By ridiculing the established reasonable sciences a proper evaluation of science and philosophy may be intended. It is incongruous that man, the only being capable of thinking, could so distort and misuse his power to formulate a spurious philosophy of this nature.

29Ibid., pp. 7-9.
It is far more meaningful to present the philosophy which motivates the Theatre of the Absurd as a negation — an unnamed school which reflects the confusion of an age enmeshed in civilization, divorced from its God, and seeking an answer to the purpose of man's existence.

The view of life is most pessimistic; their people, in Beckett's words, are generally "bloody ignorant apes."

Their aim, it is hoped, is that by shocking the audience into surveying their own futility, they may be alerted to combat the "horrific" forces in the world. These playwrights are filled with fear and confusion; their plays present a depressingly morbid picture of man alone, man without faith, hope, or love, man on the abyss of annihilation.
CHAPTER III
SAMUEL BECKETT

Samuel Beckett has provided little more about himself than necessary to renew his Irish passport. He was born in Dublin in 1906, grew up a Protestant in a comfortable middle-class home, and received a respectable education. He is a voluntary exile from Ireland to France and since 1946 has written exclusively in French. We know little about the man, his thoughts, or his philosophy. He has maintained a guarded silence on the "meaning" of his works, and in answer to a pointblank question about the meaning of Waiting for Godot, he closed the conversation with "I take no sides about that."30

It is interesting that Beckett's only critical writing is on Marcel Proust because this reveals some interesting facts which may have shaped some of his thinking. Proust's characters are always in the process of development, change, and continued creation. They are an erotic and mysterious group having little in common with mankind. He emphasizes homosexuality and depicts an

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idle life and ultimate nothingness of the people of his "Salon" world. His characters never stir catharsis because the reader is always indifferent as to their fate. Beckett says of him that his "character explanations are experimental and not demonstrative. He explains them in order that they may appear as they are— inexplicable. He explains them away."31

Undoubtedly Proust exerted influence on the future works of Beckett who comments on the use of botanical images in Proust. The human is portrayed as the vegetal which results in an indifference to moral values and human justices. Since flowers have no conscious will, they are amoral; there is no question of right or wrong. If one ceases to search for will and action in Beckett's characters and sees them as only human vegetables who progress through life at the mercy of their surroundings, Beckett's philosophy clearly reflects the nothingness, the meaninglessness of human existence.

The other author who is known to have influenced Beckett is James Joyce with whom he was associated in Paris. Certainly Beckett does not approximate the style of Joyce by imitation, and lacks his mastery of the English language. The one factor which is recurrent in

Beckett that is found in Joyce is the fragmentary thoughts and feelings of characters. Joyce's works reflect a chaos of society, but remain obscure in their meaning.

Beckett writes in French, not his native tongue, then carefully translates into English. I am sure that is deliberate because of what he attempts to portray: a labored, futile man in an unhappy world. His language has no easy flow and few beautiful effects. Simple Anglo-Saxon words are the basis of his diction. The language is cold, brittle, and aloof which, I believe, must be intentional.

Beckett's philosophy is as debated as the meaning of Godot. A critical opinion can be found to substantiate various philosophical systems. I feel many who read into his plays signs of a Christian approach or signs of compassion do not evaluate properly what is there. If he is a prophet, his cry is one of negation and sterility. He holds no hope to humanity. Thought is useless since it can reveal nothing to us. All ultimate truth is beyond the comprehension of the human mind, and therefore truth does not exist. It is this hopelessness and helplessness in an incomprehensible universe that leads Beckett to an almost complete pessimism. The idea of the uselessness of thought and the consequent pointlessness of human action are constantly repeated in his works.

Beckett has described his characters as "people who seem to be falling to bits," as individuals who "have nothing." Their words and actions substantiate this. Characteristics
Beckett has described his characters as "people who seem to be falling to bits," as individuals who "have nothing." Their words and actions substantiate this. Characteristics generally found in his works indicate that man is essentially incapable of sensible, coherent, and logical communication with himself and his fellow man. Beckett's dialogue is studded with pauses in speech which are as significant to the total effect as the actual word symbols he uses. The characters seem to be overpowered by a sense of futility, tedium, and physical discomfort.

Beckett has written four plays for theatrical performance with dialogue; two two-act plays, *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days*; and two one-act plays, *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape*. The place of the action in *Waiting for Godot* is a country road and two tramp travellers are the major protagonists. The setting for the other three plays is a room. *Endgame* has four characters; *Happy Days* has two, one of whom is rarely seen; and *Krapp's Last Tape* has one character and a tape recorder with the voice of the "hero" of thirty years ago.

Winnie, the central figure in *Happy Days*, is an aging woman who at the beginning of the play is buried to her middle in sand and doing her best to keep from being submerged. As she seeks to distract herself from her plight she engages in endless trivia; she does her nails,
put things in and out of a bag, and even tries to read the writing on a toothbrush. As the play opens Winnie awakens and says:

Another heavenly day ... For Jesus Christ sake Amen ...
World without end. Amen ... Begin your day, Winnie.

The words are broken as indicated with gestures and pantomime. Her monologue through the first act is interrupted only by the short terse remarks from Willie who states some fact from the newspaper or a monosyllabic response to her query. Winnie's activity alternates between waves of despair, recollected joy, bewilderment, and hope.

In Act II the sand now has engulfed all but her head, and it is immobile. At the opening curtain her eyes are closed but at the sound of a bell she says "Hail, holy light." Throughout the act she calls to Willie; when he does not answer, she feels that he too may be dead. When he finally appears he is dressed in formal morning clothes and is unable to walk. He crawls pitifully up to her mound. His only word during this act is "Win" which is spoken near the final curtain. Winnie then regains her happy expression and says "Oh this is a happy day, this will be another happy day! After all. So far." She then sings a happy little song.
Though I may not
What I may not
Let you hear,
Yet the swaying
Dance is saying
Love me dear!
Every touch of fingers
Tells me what I know,
Says for you
It's true, it's true
You love me so!

Of course the title is a paradox as Winnie could
not be spending "happy days" in her state. Beckett's
meaning is as usual obscure, but there are several paths
open for describing his purpose. One likely explanation
is that he is showing the persistent inventiveness of the
human spirit trying to keep the inevitable at bay as long
as possible. Another possibility is the hopeless plight
of man regardless of his activity to avert the inevitable
trap of the "sands of time."

Krapp's Last Tape is performed on a darkened stage.
The only character the audience sees is Krapp, an old,
decrepit man. He is a writer who has been a failure.
Throughout his adult life, he made a magnetic tape each
year of his impressions of the events of that year. He
is listening to his own voice recorded thirty years
earlier; but the voice is a stranger to him. The words
are even unfamiliar as he must consult a dictionary to
know their meaning. At sixty-nine nothing much interests
him that he has heard except the relation of love-making
by the lake. When he attempts to record the current
year, he can only say "Nothing to say, but a squeak."

His "happiest moment in the past half-million" is the episode by the lake, so he returns to this spool. The old tape ends with a summing up: "Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back." As the curtain falls Krapp is staring motionless into space, and the tape runs silently on. The problem of the ever-changing identity of self is graphically demonstrated in this dramatization of a man listening to his voice, his activities, and his ideas of thirty years past. The picture of a lonely old man who no longer has interest in moments of great insight but is only aroused by recalling sensual pleasure is most depressing. To vicariously relive the lost pleasure of his younger days whereas he has "nothing to say" of his present age is a sad commentary on his self-knowledge; he has not grown intellectually or spiritually but has regressed. His journey through life has not revealed any knowledge of himself; he has only been marking time until death. He is alone, pitifully alone, and one wonders if he does not wish to go back when there was a "fire" in him.

Endgame can best be appreciated by assuming that two expository acts have transpired. These reveal that
the dreaded bomb has been exploded in the community and that Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell are the only survivors. Nell and Nagg, the aged, senile, and impotent parents; Hamm, their aging, immobile, blind son; and Clov, the dull, unimaginative grandson, are the sole occupants of a barren basement fallout shelter. They lack motive for survival, motive to build a new life; there is no hope. Clov's first words, "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished," indicate the futility of continued attempts at survival. There is no suspense; one knows immediately that the climactic action has reached a peak comparable to Oedipus' discovery. The intensively grotesque episodes which follow leave one with a feeling of utter and complete tragedy, one which is no less real than those of the great Greek stage. To achieve this participation one must become intellectually involved and decide on the meaning. The author does not dictate his opinions to the audience; it is a personal matter. The idea of the world ending in an atomic blast is repugnant to man: he wants at least a fighting chance or an opportunity for a final word. *Endgame*, however, forces the acceptance of this grotesque ending of human existence. Man's bondage to his surrounding is represented by man-made objects: the impossibility of escape is portrayed by a picture turned to the wall and
windows beyond reach, Hamm confined to a wheelchair portrays human deterioration, and the relentlessness of the nightmare is represented by an empty box of sedatives.

All movement in *Endgame* revolves around the stages of dying. The dialogue of Hamm and Clov has a circular pattern. It reflects pessimism and serves as a diversion which is no more than a prolongation whereby the play continues without action taking place. Nagg rises from his garbage can and asks for his pap, the food of degeneracy. Nagg is but a shell of the paternal image, a nagging mouth to feed. In their state of suspended animation the people, however, are still intelligible:

Hamm:  Scoundrel! Why did you engender me?
Nagg:  I didn't know.
Hamm:  What? What didn't you know?
Nagg:  That it'd be you.

The hatred between progenitor and progeny is the one feeling that binds these people. Only between Nagg and Nell, the stumps in the ash cans, man and wife, is friction less apparent. Between them evolves the dialogue of senility. They have the courage to claim memories and "live" again in the vague figures of life remembered, the sexual urge, and tenderness, climax by the statements of the sentimental sweet-senile Nell whose last words are a whispered, barely audible command to Clov: "Desert!"
Hamm, the central figure, maintains the illusion of existence.

He is engaged in a Penelopean labor of words, dim re-creations of a fanciful past that requires an audience, the respect for certain postures (he desires his wheel chair to be in the exact center) and formal trappings. But his soliloquy outlives the trappings. It ends as the voice of the man alone: the garbage cans no longer respond, nor does Clov. And so the lucid figure performs the "old endgame lost of old" and draws his blood-stained handkerchief over his face. This gesture of waiting extends indefinitely the words of Clov with which the play started.32

The set and mood are the present horror, physically noted: gray light, ash bins covered with an old sheet, Hamm with his blood-stained handkerchief, and so on. "The whole place stinks of corpses," says Hamm. Hamm's ironic comment "no phone calls?" reflects that the bleakness of their vision is not the single spiritual dimension of their prison. The tangible props are an indication of the proximity of its people to their memories; e.g., the sand in Nell's bin reminds her of a youthful trip to Lake Como. Their crippled bodies mix awkwardly with the blind alleys of their questioning.

Still human anguish is expressed. Clov's complaints of pain are against parties unknown. His only notion of

existence is suffering; therefore he tries to account for it:

I say to myself--sometimes, Clov, you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you--one day I say to myself--sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than that if you want them to let you go--one day.

The four characters in this play are capable of sensation and consciousness, but in the play there is little dependency on the support of other human beings. Cruelty is one of the few evidences of such dependency:

Hamm: (his hand on the toy dog's head): Is he gazing at me?
Clov: Yes.
Hamm: (proudly): As if he were asking me to take him for a walk?
Clov: If you like.
Hamm: (as before): Or as if he were begging for a bone. (He withdraws his hand.) Leave him like that, standing there imploring me.

But more often cruelty is a desire to throw off an excess of misery onto another victim.

Nagg: I hope the day will come when you will really need me to listen to you, and need to hear my voice, any voice. (Pause.) Yes, I hope I'll live till then, to hear you calling me like when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark, and I was your only hope.

What Nagg really wants is to return to the days of his own indifference ("We let you cry. Then we moved you out of earshot so that we might sleep in peace") now that he is a victim of his son's indifference. Time being circular,
events remain the same no matter what their outward appearance.

One is aware from the opening tableau to the closing that he is waiting for nothing to happen, since one realizes from the start that everything has already happened and this is the end. Beckett put into his play visual drama, dull colors, painful movements, and extended pantomime, all of which form a part of the work's significance. The visual horror, as well as the gnawing text, constitutes the theatrical effectiveness of the play. All the characters seem cruelly aware of what is happening to them. This is the reason they must talk, find a sounding board in someone, or at least engage in monologue endlessly. They cannot stand to be alone with their own thoughts.

Many critics have enjoyed toying with the linguistics of Hamm's name. Their conclusion only corroborates the belief that Hamm is the central and dominant character of the play. The Hamm-God interpretation is invalid because it is Hamm who asks the others to pray to God. There is no response, and Hamm's angry conclusion is, "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" He excludes God, the absolute, as the final end for man. The ultimate irony is that there is no one left for these sufferers to redeem; they are suffering for themselves alone; their
suffering has no meaning. "Outside of here it's death," warns Hamm twice—but within there is death also.

Nature exists no more, we are told. Clov, looking out the window with his telescope, describes the world as "corpsed."

What in God's name do you imagine? Hamm says violently to a character in the story he is telling. That the earth will awake in the spring? That the rivers and seas will run with fish again? That there's manna in heaven still for imbeciles like you?

There are no more seeds to sprout, no bicycle wheels, no rugs for warmth, no coffins and, of course, no more pain killer. Only two things are left: a flea in Clov's trousers and a rat in the kitchen. Both must be exterminated immediately because "Humanity might start from there all over again!" cries Hamm, perturbed. "Catch him, for the love of God!"

The dominant note is one of tedium. Time and weather never vary. Yesterday is only "that bloody, awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day." One has only a vague feeling that something is transpiring, but what? "Something is taking its course," asserts Clov. "Have you had enough... of this... this... thing?" asks Hamm. The audience never learns precisely what it is that is taking its course, and perhaps even Beckett himself cannot fully understand it, much less define it.
Hence the play seems to stand still and the odor of human suffering is the strongest impression that reaches us.

Readers, spectators, and critics are not alone in hoping to find the meaning in Endgame. Hamm himself asks:

Hamm: We’re not beginning to . . . to . . .
mean something?

Clov: Mean something! You and I, mean some-
thing! (Brief laugh.) Ah that’s a
good one!

Hamm: I wonder. (a pause.) Imagine if a
rational being came back to earth,
wouldn’t he be liable to get ideas into
his head if he observed us long enough?

An intelligent being observing is "liable to get ideas into
his head," but he may complain that the ideas that have been presented lack the necessary theatrical qualities to hold his interest for the duration. It cannot be denied that this play constitutes a profound experience for one who is willing to participate intellectually in the presentation. "It is a terrifying picture of the disintegration of the human race, and a vivid document of an era which has lost its faith in an absolute."33

"You’re on the earth, there’s no cure for that," is repeated by Hamm in the same words twice, but the idea is stated in various forms. The earth is barren and gray without the solace of nature; it is a monstrous beast. It

brings only pain and suffering, the waiting for nothingness to end in nothingness.

The use of linguistics and of verbal and visual symbolism is of such magnitude that it can only be mentioned briefly. I have not seen a complete study on this phase of Beckett's Endgame. The most pathetic symbol noted is the condition of Nagg and Nell. The aged of society in the process of deterioration are relegated to custodial care. In the process of their vegetative states they are stripped of respect, honor, and position, and cast aside as refuse of the world. Age is no longer esteemed and revered but is spit upon, then left in the "sands" of past memories. The aged are given only the barest token offerings to ease the conscience of mankind. This is a horrible thought, we rebel against it; it is unacceptable that we will end this way. But have you thought about the unwanted aged in our society? What happens to those who have "outlived their usefulness?" Homes for the aged (garbage cans) are filled with these senior citizens who sit imprisoned, grateful for the "biscuit" of kindness one may chance to cast them. The basic symbolism in Endgame is realism in all its ugliness.

Estragon opens Waiting for Godot with "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes. It's awful!"
Vladimir joins him and is in complete agreement. The setting is a barren country road and a gray dull sky prevails throughout; the time near dusk. The only prop is a tree, which they believe is a willow, probably because a willow weeps. Vladimir and Estragon, two tramps, are here to wait for Godot who never appears. Godot's structure might be described as circular with the stress on similitude, monotony, and endless repetition. Each of the two acts could be considered complete in itself, but the first without the second would not be conclusively despairing, for we might still hope that Godot will arrive. Act II shows that this monotony will go on forever. The addition of a third act would have been too much.

At the opening of Act II Vladimir sings a song:

Vladimir: A dog came in ----
(Having begun too high he stops, clears his throat and begins again.)

A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread
Then cook up with a ladle
And beat him till he was dead.

Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb -
(He stops, broods and resumes)

Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb
And wrote upon the tombstone
For the eyes of dogs to come.
A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread
Then cook up with a ladle
And beat him till he was dead.

Then all the dogs came running
Etc. . . .

This is an example of the eternal repetition of words without direction or meaning which appear throughout the play. It expresses inescapability and perpetuation. The idea of the endless and meaningless activity of life is portrayed by Estragon's frequent fiddling with his shoes; Vladimir time and again removing his hat, feeling inside, and finding nothing, returning it to his head; Lucky, the slave, constantly putting down and picking up of the objects he carries. The pantomime elaborates and accents the monotony and motionlessness of the situation, but the words stress this most forcefully. Six times during the play the following dialogue takes place:

Estragon: Let's go.
Vladimir: We can't.
Estragon: Why not?
Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot.

It becomes almost a refrain. The idea of endless waiting while engulfed in agonized suffering is paramount in the enactment of the drama. Beckett's genius is presenting a play in which "nothing happens" in a manner which sustains a thread of interest.
The actions of Estragon (Gogo) and Vladimir (Didi) resemble the circus clowns in its pathos. Some critics feel that Beckett has based much of the pantomime on the sad tramp-clown, Charlie Chaplin, but some of the behavior is reminiscent of Laurel and Hardy: the blank face, the exchange of hats in the second act, and their dependence on each other for support. They fall innumerable times which shows similarity to the old slapstick comedy of the silent movie days. Beckett calls this a tragic comedy, and the "comedy" is interwoven with horror. Humor in Beckett's hand possesses an element of cruelty which offers relief from the atmosphere of depression and at the same time heightens the tragic effect.

Both major characters are insecure and are obsessed with playacting. They are compelled to maintain a running conversation in order not to remember their own wretchedness, even if what they say is a lie.

Vladimir: Say you are /happy/, even it's not true.
Estragon: What am I to say?
Vladimir: Say, I am happy.
Estragon: I am happy.
Vladimir: So am I.
Estragon: So am I.
Vladimir: We are happy.
Estragon: We are happy (silence) what do we do now, now that we are happy?
Vladimir: Wait for Godot.
Communication is tedious between these two friends who cannot survive without each other. Vladimir constantly beseeches his friend to "Say something!" They feel the need for verbal intercourse, yet they find it almost impossible. They are alone and their solitude is complete. Vladimir even convinces Gogo they are performing to an empty auditorium when he drags him to the front of the stage, and cries "There! Not a soul in sight." The utter and complete loneliness and isolation of these men is terrifying. The need for love is never satisfied: Gogo rejects Didi's wishes to embrace, and later the actions are repeated vice versa. It is conclusive that the only solace given to humanity is the knowledge that we are in the company of others. Even Pozzo, the master, and Lucky, the slave, prove the fact that they need each other to exist.

One striking example of symbolism occurs in the first act when Pozzo brags about the accomplishments of Lucky: his ability to dance, sing, recite, and "He even used to think very prettily once, I could listen to him for hours." Gogo and Didi wish to see him dance first but the dance is a disappointment to the spectators.
Estragon: Pooh! I'd do as well myself (He
imitates Lucky, almost falls.)
with a little practice.

Pozzo: He used to dance the farandella,
the fling, the brawl, the gig, the
fandango and even the horn pipe.
He capered. For joy. Now that's the
best he can do. Do you know what he
calls it?

Estragon: The Scrapegoat's Agony.
Vladimir: The Hand Stool.
Pozzo: The Net. He thinks he's entangled in
a net.

Shortly after this, when commanded to think, Lucky's
soliloquy is totally unintelligible. Man in servitude
loses his vibrant feeling for expression, becomes entangled,
and is no longer free to express himself. One might
progress a step further and compare the slave to a fish
because of the symbolic use of the word net. Fish
generally have a low degree of mentality and are "cold-
blooded" and unfeeling; the slave eventually loses his
identity, his warmth, and his personality and becomes a
puppet on the end of a line who performs as manipulated.

The two tramps consider and reconsider suicide,
but they lack the strength to follow through. In act one
they remind each other to bring rope the next day and at
the end of act two the conversation is repeated and the
same conclusion: "Then tomorrow we can bring a good
bit of rope." They are hopeless, desolate, and alone—
Godot was the only "hope." After two messengers state
that he will not come today the audience is convinced that
he is not coming. The action closes as Vladimir says, "Well? Shall we go?" Estragon replies, "Yes, let's go." "They do not move. Curtain."

The discussions regarding Godot's identity and whether the symbolism is Christian or not seem pointless. Obviously, Vladimir and Estragon are symbols of man's loneliness, and whatever Godot may be it is obvious he is the reason for their existence and the waiting for him is paramount in their lives; it gives meaning to nothingness. Man exists on a lonely plateau with decay, pain, suffering, confusion, and torture as his constant companions; stinking feet and stinking breath are forever present. The materials which should bring comfort, symbolized by shoes and hats, bring only torture to man's existence.

It is an injustice to the craftsmanship and artistry of Beckett to deny the poetic qualities in his plays and to mask his works in obscurity. He has great talent in linguistics and possesses merit as a poet. *Endgame* can be read and enjoyed as a metaphysical poem. Its effectiveness is not dependent on the spectacle of the theatre. The stage directions and sets are described minutely and a person with creative imagination can visualize the horror, feel the grotesque tragedy, and arrive at a meaning for himself. Hamm's closing monologue
is a particularly pathetic utterance in poetic form.

... You prayed - (Pause. He corrects himself.) You cried for night; it comes - (Pause. He corrects himself.) It FALLS: now cry in darkness. ... You cried for night; it falls, now cry in darkness. ... And now? Moments for nothing, now as always, time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended. (pause) If he could have his child with him ... (pause) It was the moment I was waiting for. (pause) You don't want to abandon him? You want him to bloom while you are withering? Be there to solace your last million moments? (pause) He doesn't realize, all he knows is hunger, and cold, and death to crown it all. But you! You ought to know what life on earth is like, nowadays. Oh I put him before his responsibilities! Well, there we are, there I am, that's enough.

Another passage which can stand alone as a product of poetry is found in Waiting for Godot. I have deleted the speaker's identity and stage directions to better portray the flow of language and the poetic charm.

We are incapable of keeping silent. You're right, we're inexhaustible. It's so we won't think. We have that excuse. It's so we won't hear. We have our reasons. All the dead voices. They make a noise like wings. Like leaves. Like sand. Like leaves. They all speak at once. Each one to itself. Rather they whisper. They rustle. They murmur. They rustle. What do they say? They talk about their lives.
To have lived is not enough for them. They have to talk about it. To be dead is not enough for them. It is not sufficient. They make a noise like feathers. Like leaves. Like ashes. Like leaves. Say something! I'm trying.

He achieves development of emotions and feelings, but the audience does not like what he feels. There is no warmth, no love, or no beauty. Beckett sees and feels sordidness, depression, horror, unrealized hopes, and chaos in his world. Its taste, its odor, and its sensation are distasteful to the spectator who wishes to shake it off, forget it, and pretend it does not exist. He rebels against the restrictions on humanity which are without comprehensible reason and just reward. He paints an ominous picture; the scarlet and golden hues of a renaissance world have changed to the dull grays of modern “isms.” One cannot accept the image as one cannot accept the nuclear bomb. This is rejected by man as Beckett's man is rejected by God and nature.
In the Preface to the Notes and Counter Notes, Eugene Ionesco makes two very pertinent observations.

It is quite clear that for the most part it has been a dialogue between the deaf, for walls do not have ears and people have become walls to one another: no one discusses anything nowadays, as everyone wants to gain a disciple or crush an opponent...

I rather regret that I have tried to give an answer, that I have constructed theories and talked too much, when it was my business simply to "invent" ...I have fallen into the trap...and I have often given way to the temptation of polemics. But a work of art should contain within itself and crystallize arguments of much greater complexity, which it examines and answers far more thoroughly.34

The first summarizes his opinion of people; the second states a fact with which this writer is in complete agreement. His very first sentence, "There are many repetitions in this book," is an honest appraisal of his critical works; he has the knack of being verbose in explaining his theories of drama and is guilty of the ambiguity of which he accuses his detractors.

It is quite evident that Ionesco considers himself the great prophet-savant of drama, the voice crying in the wilderness of modern ideology. In his essay, "The

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Experience of the Theatre," he assures his reader that live-drama repulsed him "from the moment when... I stopped being naive." His learned and sophisticated position in life made him above appreciating existing drama. He found all dramatists equally distasteful: Corneille bored him; Schiller was unbearable; Dumas fils was ridiculously sentimental; Giraudoux was unable to communicate; Pirandello, obsolete; Ibsen, boorish. In fact, after reading Shakespeare and Kleist, he did not enjoy reading a play. Whereas, he could find thousands "of paintings, novels, and poems that still mean something to us," there would at most be thirty plays through the centuries which could still "move an audience." The reason for this, he feels, is that the naivete essential in a work of art is lacking in the theatre; i.e., a simplicity that is lucid, springing from the innermost depths of our being. Drama, lacking in naivete, tried philosophy, psychology, and politics, which could all be better treated by another medium. Then, when these failed, the learned gentlemen tried to make their drama intelligent.

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36 Ibid., p. 23.
37 Ibid.
"They put their thoughts into it, they express their conception of life and the world, and believe that writing a play should be like presenting a thesis in which problems find their solution on the stage." 38 After due deliberation and exploration, Ionesco then knew "what he had to do." 39 It became his duty to establish a new credo for dramatists, and to formulate new aims and new methods which he must set forth and pursue.

To push drama out of that intermediate zone where it is neither theatre nor literature is to restore it to its own domain, to its natural frontiers. It was not for me to conceal the devices of the theatre, but rather make them still more evident, deliberately obvious, go all-out for caricature and the grotesque, way beyond the pale irony of witty drawing-room comedies. No drawing-room comedies, but farce, the extreme exaggeration of parody. Humor, yes, but using the methods of burlesque. Comic effects that are firm, broad and outrageous. No dramatic comedies either. But back to the unendurable. Everything raised to paroxysm, where the source of tragedy lies. A theatre of violence: violently comic, violently dramatic.

Avoid psychology or rather give it a metaphysical dimension. Drama lies in extreme exaggeration of the feelings, an exaggeration that dislocates flat every day reality. Dislocation, disarticulation of language too. 40

38 Ibid., p. 24.
39 Ibid., p. 25.
Once these principles are set forth they are enlarged, and the techniques and methods which have become the criteria of the Theatre of the Absurd are explained. It is presented as something revolutionary, but at the same time he urges the return to the sources of pure drama. Tucked in the midst of the climactic conclusions of his theatre are statements which echo the most profound dramatic criticism since Aristotle's *Poetics*:

It is in the nature of a dramatic masterpiece to provide a superior pattern of instruction; it reflects its own image, it is a mirror; it is soul-searching; it is history gazing beyond history toward the deepest truth. ...Art is the realm of passion, not of pedagogy; in this tragedy of tragedies we are concerned with the revelation of the most painful reality; I learn or reconsider something that has passed from my mind, I learn it is the only way possible with poetry, by an emotional participation that is not distorted by mysticism and has burst through the paper dams of ideology and of a narrowly critical or "scientific" spirit. ...Drama is the eternal and living presence: there is no doubt that it can reproduce the essential structure of tragic truth and theatrical reality.41

At the conclusion of this essay, he says:

The quality of a work of art directly depends on how "alive" philosophy is, on the fact that it springs from life and not from abstract thought. A philosophical system withers away as soon as a new philosophy or a new system goes a step further. Works of art, however, which are live philosophies, do not invalidate one another. That is why they can co-exist. The

41Ibid., pp. 32-3.
great works of art and the great poets seem to find confirmation, completion, and corroboration in one another. Aeschylus is not cancelled out by Calderon, or Shakespeare by Chekhov, or Kleist by a Japanese Noh play. One scientific theory can cancel out another, but the truths found in works of art complement one another. Art seems the best justification for the belief in the possibility of a metaphysical liberalism.\(^{42}\)

It appears that he repudiates his earlier statements by accepting the existence of philosophy in drama. In these statements, Ionesco seems to admit and assert that drama is a universal medium for portraying universal theories. His criticism is devoid of objectivity and filled with purely personal responses to stimuli. The use of language in his prose criticism supports the assertion in his dramas that language is impossible as a means of communicating and explaining ideas. In The Lesson the Professor gives his pupil a lecture on language (neo-Spanish) in which he says: "All the words in all the languages are always the same." But, he says later:

... that which differentiates these languages, is neither the words, which are absolutely the same, nor the structure of the sentence which is everywhere the same, nor the intonation, which does not offer any differences... that which differentiates them is an intangible thing. (The Professor in The Lesson)

The example he supplies is the word "capital." -- "... it takes on according to the language one speaks, a different

\(^{42}\text{bid., p. 36.}
meaning." This ludicrously simple example clearly demonstrates what Ionesco implies in the "Tragedy of Language" that "Words had become empty, noisy shells without meaning."\(^{43}\) It could be logically stated that we should draw no definite conclusion from his prose because our basic ideas and/or frame of reference are so different from his. One can only look at the action and dialogue in his dramas and interpret what it means to the individual viewer. This, too, will vary from one critic to another depending on his basic ideas.

Eugene Ionesco was born in Rumania, on November 26, 1912, and shortly after his birth the family moved to Paris. He remained in France during his early childhood, and his recollections of his youth are filled with "nightmares and strange apparitions." He has further recalled that during his time in the country, he dreamed of becoming a saint, but from religious books he learned it was wrong to seek after glory. So he abandoned this dream and substituted one of becoming a great warrior.

The family returned to Rumania: Ionesco encountered a more brutal world:

\(^{43}\text{Ibid.}, p. 179.\)
I saw a man, still young, big and strong, attack an old man with his fists and kicking him with his boots. ... I have no other images of the world except those of evanescence and brutality, vanity and rage, nothingness or hideous, useless hatred. Everything I have experienced has merely confirmed what I had seen and understood in my childhood: vain and sordid fury, cries suddenly stifled by silence, shadows engulfed forever in the night...

In 1948 he decided to study English, and from the first English primer he created The Bald Soprano, his first play. He set out to copy the sentences with the purpose of memorizing them, and discovered some "astonishing truths." The essay, "The Tragedy of Language," recalls the inception of this drama in which he used the same characters he had found in the textbook. The evolution of the dramatization was because "I wanted to communicate to my contemporaries the essential truths of which the manual of English-French conversation had made me aware." But in the writing, the simple, lucid language lost its identity, expanded, and overflowed. The cliches of speech disintegrated into wild caricature and parody, and in the end language disintegrated into disjointed fragments. For no apparent reason, the Smiths and the Martins engaged in frenzied argument which ended with the following dialogue. Each person speaks a line but here,

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44 Quoted by Esslin in The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 85.
for illustration of the accelerated pace of disjointed language, the names are omitted.

I'm going to live in my cabana among cacao trees.
Cacao trees on cacao farms do not bear -
coconuts, they yield cocoa!
Mice have lice, lice haven't mice.
Don't ruche my brooch. ... 
Go take a douche.
I've been goosed.
Sainte-Nitouche stoops to my cartouche. ...
Robert!
Browning!
Rudyard.
Kipling.
Robert Kipling!
Rudyard Browning.
Silly gobblegobblers, silly gobblegobblers.
Marietta, stop the pot!
Krishnamurti, Krishnamurti, Krishnamurti!
The pope elopes! The pope's got no horoscope. The horoscope's bespoke.
Bazaar, Balzac, bazooka.
Bizarre, beaux-arts, brassieres.
A,e,i,o,u,a,e,i,o,u,a,e,i,o,u,i!
B,c,d,f,g,l,m,n,p,r,s,t,v,w,x,z!
From sage to stooge, from stage to serge!
Choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo,
It's!
Not!
That!
It's!
O!
Ver!
Here!
(all together, completely infuriated, screaming in each other's ears. The light is extinguished.
In the darkness we hear, in an increasingly rapid rhythm)
All together:
It's not that way, it's over here,
It's not that way, it's over here
It's not that way, it's over here
It's not that way, it's over here.
(The words cease abruptly. Again, the lights come on. Mr. and Mrs. Martin are seated like the Smiths at the beginning of the play. The play begins again with the Martins, who say exactly the same lines as the Smiths in the first scene, while the curtain softly falls.)

Ionesco says that while writing this play (he calls it an anti-play, a parody of a play), he frequently felt sick and dizzy because he "could see it [his work] sinking into the abyss; and myself with it." But when he had finished he imagined that he had written something like the Tragedy of Language. When it was acted, however, he was surprised to hear laughter from the audience who took it as a joke. He goes on to say that later critics and scholars interpreted it as a criticism of bourgeois society and a parody of boulevard theatre. Although he accepts this idea, he says:

...but to my mind there is no question of it being a satire of a petit bourgeois mentality that belongs to any particular society. It is above all about a kind of universal petit bourgeoisie, the petit bourgeois being a man of fixed ideas and slogan, a ubiquitous conformist. .../It reveals people/ "talking for the sake of talking," talking because there is nothing personal to say, the absence of any life within, the mechanical routine of everyday life, man sunk in his social background, no longer able to distinguish himself from it. The Smiths and the Martins no longer know how to talk because they no longer know how to think, they no longer know how to think because they are no longer capable of being moved, they have no passion, they no longer know how to be, ... they are interchangeable... A tragic character does not change, he

breaks up; he is himself, he is real. Comic characters are people who do not exist.46

Although the Smiths and Martins are burlesque characterizations, they are rather frightening to watch on stage. That the automation of modern times, the goal of mediocrity, and the stifling climate of social nuances can produce such people who are tragic in their lack of individuality is frightening. Ionesco's characters are indeed tragi-comic, as are many people one meets each day. They live in a world that has lost its mystery and its magic; they no longer possess conscious desires; they are bored. Life for them has no meaning and no purpose.

Jack or the Submission, which Ionesco called a "naturalistic comedy" involves ten characters, six of whom are named Jack, and the Robert family. All the members of the Jack family have succumbed to the renunciation of individuality by the beginning of the play except the "hero," Jack. As the curtain rises, we see Jack sprawled in an armchair, shabbily clad, surrounded by his family who are urging him to conform to society. Mother Jack pleads with him in most biting satire.

But remember, my son, remember that I gave you suck at the bottle, I let your diapers dry on you ... oh, ungrateful son. You do not even remember how I held you on my knees and pulled out your cute little baby teeth, and tore off your toe nails so as to make you bawl like an

46 Ibid., p. 180.
adorable little calf. ... I am a wretched Mother. I've brought a mononster into the world; a mononster, that's what you are.

Father Jack, Jacquelin, Grandmother Jack, and even the senile Grandfather Jack all plead with Jack, but he remains immobile and silent. Finally, all leave and it is Jacquelin who finally penetrates his obstinancy by pointing out to him that he is "chronométrable." He collapses and finally pronounces the family creed, "I adore hashed brown potatoes." 47 In France his acceptance of the bourgeois creed is the signal for marriage and immediately this is the signal for the Roberts' to appear with Roberta, their two-nosed daughter. Jack is rebellious again; two noses are not enough despite her surrealistic characteristics "... green pimples on her beige skin, red breast on a mauve background, an illuminated navel, a tongue the color of tomato sauce, pan-browned square shoulders, and all the meat needed to merit the highest condemnation." So a Roberta II with three noses is produced. She is also unsuitable for the non-conformist Jack. She wins him in the end with a speech about a

47 In French "J'adore les pommes de terre au lard." In the translation by Donald Allen, it is hashed brown potatoes. In the English translation, it is "potatoes in their jackets."
dream in which little guinea pigs flow out of their
mother at the bottom of the bath tub, and finally by a
"description of herself in terms of humidity."\textsuperscript{48} This
is a polite way of describing a very sexual passage which
is punctuated by strategic pauses. The speech in part is:

\begin{quote}
Come on... don't be afraid... I'm moist...
My necklace is made of mud, my breasts are dis-
solving, my pelvis is wet, I've got water in
my crevasses, I'm sinking down. My true name
is Liza. In my belly, there are pools...
\end{quote}

Jacque is now "in ecstasy" as he says: "Cha - a - arming."
This leads to the famous passage in which the two lovers
converse in a long succession of words containing "chat,"
a play on the word chapeau.\textsuperscript{49} At the end of this,
Roberta displays her coup de force, a hand with nine
fingers. They embrace, and Jack kisses each of her noses.
The other characters enter and form a circle around the
lovers and perform an obscene dance. Jack and Roberta
squat on the ground. Ionesco stage directions state:

\begin{quote}
All this must produce in the audience a
feeling of embarrassment, awkwardness, and
shame. The darkness increases.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{48}Esslin, \textit{The Theatre of the Absurd}, p. 98.

\textsuperscript{49}In French this is far more effective because the
play is on the word "chat." In English, the word is "cat"
derived from cap and some of the nuances are lost in
translation.
Weird animal noises issue forth from the stage. Then we hear only moans and sighs. Finally all the characters disappear, and we see only Roberta "her pale face, with its three noses quivering, and her nine fingers moving like snakes." And then, thankfully, the curtain falls.

The meaning is quite obvious: Jack's final and complete submission is to the animal lure of sexual impulses. Man's sexual instincts cause his enslavement and force him into bourgeois conformity.

Jack and The Lesson share a similar theme -- the individual forced into conformity through sexual instinct. The language dislocation and distortion are particularly objectionable. The satire is biting and bitter. The action in both plays becomes more and more violent, sensuous, and brutal. The Professor becomes sadistic in The Lesson; whereas, Jack displays the animalistic urge. The plays are unsatisfying aesthetically and theatrically. The action is almost too horrible; the rhythm becomes too intense as the plays reach the climactic pitch. The one point which they make that may be of value is that man even in a family environment which should promote love and companionship is still alone, afraid, and incapable of satisfactory intellectual or spiritual rapport. In The Bald Soprano the Smiths
have the same experience and their relationship reaches complete boredom. In Jack and The Lesson the action terminates in the demonstration of animal lust in all its brutal form. One feels with the character in Jack when he says: "O words! what crimes are committed in your name."

The Chairs, a tragic farce, is peopled by Old Man, aged 95, Old Woman, aged 94, The Orator, aged 45-50, "and many other characters." The setting (a circular tower on an island) is very similar to Beckett's Endgame. Two old people live here alone, waiting for death. They are expecting a crowd, all the important people in the world, to hear the Old Man's message which he wishes to pass on to posterity. He is no orator, so has hired a professional orator to deliver his message. People arrive, dialogue is addressed to the visitors, chairs are provided, but no one is seen or heard except the old couple. The stage becomes densely populated with the unseen crowd until the Old Man and Old Woman are pinned against the windows at opposite sides of the stage. The glorious Emperor comes in a shaft of bright cold light. The old couple long to be seen and heard by this majestic personage, but the crowd makes it almost impossible for them to catch a glimpse of him. During the dialogue which follows they
assure each other of the orator's coming. He finally does appear -- a real person, and now that he has come the old man says:

... nothing remains for us but to withdraw... immediately, in order to make the supreme sacrifice which no one demands of us but which we will carry out ever so...

The decision is made: they shall die. The Old Man then recites:

Above all I had hoped
that together we might lie
with all our bones together
within the self same skin
within the same sepulcher
and that the same worms
might share our flesh
that we may rot together.

When their sacrifice is completed, the Orator starts to speak; he makes signs of a deafmute. Many unfathomable sounds emerge, and he writes on the blackboard equally meaningless letters. The unseen crowd then is heard: laughter, coughs, murmurs which grow in intensity, then become weaker. "All this should last long enough for the audience -- the real and visible audience -- to leave with this ending firmly impressed on its mind."

There are multiple choices for meaning in this play: the theme of incommunicability of a life's work; the futility of human existence. But neither Ionesco or Esslin is needed to point out the underlying meaning: it is the absence of people, of the Emperor, of God, or
matter -- the unreality of the world -- metaphysical emptiness. The theme of the play is nothingness, the absolute void in a world stripped of metaphysical values.

The Killer and Rhinoceros, two later works of Ionesco, are full-length plays. In these plays Ionesco resorted to a more usual plot development, and they are amazing examples of the author's ingenuity. Berenger is the protagonist in both plays; not that he is the same person, for names are of little meaning as evidenced in his former plays and can serve for many. In The Killer, he, Berenger, represents good in a fearsome, nightmarish struggle with evil. In the beautiful Utopia-like city of Radiance where all is seemingly perfect, a mysterious Killer takes the lives of many people and the Radiance is clouded by fear. When Berenger finally tracks the Killer down, he is too uncertain of the nature of evil to destroy his foe. The final scene is a gruesome example of how logic can destroy. Berenger is alone with the Killer, who never speaks, and only his horrible laughter intersperses the long monologue. Berenger's attempt to convince him that murder is useless and wrong becomes a debate with his own mind. He finds that if there is no reason to kill, then there is no reason not to kill. Panicked by the Killer's awful silence, he
struggles for reason beyond logic: "Maybe you're wrong, maybe wrong does not exist, maybe it's we who are wrong to want to exist." In his failure to understand the mysterious, Berenger loses power over himself, drops his guns, and is a victim of the Killer's knife. He is a victim of logic, and as the Killer draws near, he stammers: "Oh God! There's nothing we can do." Berenger's disintegration is complete; the doubts he expressed earlier when he said,

Often I have my doubts about everything too. But don't tell anyone. I doubt the point of living, the meaning of life, doubt my own values and every kind of rational value,

are now dispelled; he is completely the victim.

Rhinoceros is his most widely known play, but it is not "pure Ionesco." The plot is recognizable in its climactic sequence, and the language is relatively understandable. For this, he was accused of being too direct and of succumbing to the theatre he had so vigorously condemned. There is little question that the play is an attack on conformity, but it is nonetheless a frightening and powerful dramatization. Unlike Kafka's Metamorphosis in which only Gregor Samsa is transformed into a noxious cockroach, in Ionesco's play all of society become beasts. It is a universal epidemic of animality where the new gospel preaches that it is good to change one's skin into
a thick hide, to bellow and trample with the herd.

Both The Killer and Rhinoceros contain Ionesco's themes; intellectual pettiness and pretense, trade unions, bureaucracy, love, sex and, above all, logic are derided and condemned. Berenger is pathetically alone in a world devoid of meaning, surrounded by verbal barrages which aimlessly disintegrate about him.

Ionesco's dramatic world reflects lonely isolated men who have been snared by the loathsome conventions of middle class society. To exist in this smothering society human beings have suffered a disintegration of personality, adopted a cult of mediocrity, and have lost their self-identity.
CHAPTER V
EDWARD ALBEE

There is some question whether Albee's plays belong in the Theatre of the Absurd because of his belief that the role of the playwright is also the role of a social critic. In the article, "Which Theatre is the Absurd One?" Albee placed himself in the avant-garde tradition with Beckett and Ionesco but was "deeply offended" when he misunderstood the remarks which he felt placed him with the "Theatre Uptown -- Broadway." The "absurd" stage meant to him the artificial one: those plays which give imitations of imitations, those which are written and produced to make money. Once he became aware of the meaning of Theatre of the Absurd he happily accepted inclusion in its ranks. He further expounds by saying that unless one understands that the Theatre of the Absurd "represents a group only in the sense that they seem to be doing something of the same thing in vaguely similar ways at approximately the same time," the label is ridiculous.

To him the theatre of the absurd is

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... an absorption-in-art of certain existentialist and post-existentialist philosophical concepts having to do, in the main, with man's attempt to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense -- which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political and social structures which man has erected to "illusion" himself have collapsed. 51

He further feels that the accusations against its obscurity, sordidness, perverseness, destructiveness, and absurdity are a mask used to hide the fact that most viewers do not like it because "it is too depressing, too . . . too mixed-up." Most people he feels consider the theatre a place to relax, to have a good time. This attitude is of course in direct conflict with the purpose of the Theatre of the Absurd--"which is to make a man face up to the human condition as it really is,--that has produced all the brouhaha and the dissent." The avant-garde theatre is, to him, the realistic theatre of our times; the supposed realistic theatre (the term used here to mean what is done on Broadway) presents "a false picture of ourselves to ourselves, and panders to the public's need for self-congratulation and reassurance."

Martin Esslin and George Wellwarth concur with Albee's inclusion in the ranks. Esslin says in the chapter entitled "Parallels and Proselytes" that

51 Ibid.
Edward Albee comes into the category of the Theatre of the Absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundation of American optimism.\textsuperscript{52}

George Wellwarth says in the chapter entitled "Hope Deferred--the New American Drama:"

In the unlikely event that anything like a "movement" of young American dramatists will ever get off the ground, the world premiere of Edward Albee's \textit{The Zoo Story} will undoubtedly be commemorated as its starting point.\textsuperscript{53}

The opinion, then, of such eminent critics for his inclusion cannot be overlooked despite the writer's opinions to the contrary. This writer feels that with the exception of the \textit{The American Dream} (which is debatable) he should not be included in this "school."

Albee was born in Washington, D.C., in 1928. He is the adopted son of Reed A. Albee, who provided him with all the advantages of the upper-middle class American. Edward Franklin Albee never utilized these opportunities; he attended numerous schools and finally became a school dropout in his early college career. He then launched into a career as a misfit and had numerous jobs over the next ten-year period. Among his better jobs was that of a messenger for a Wall Street brokerage firm. During this time he was not guilty of complacency, which subsequently became a theme of his plays. No one has, as

\textsuperscript{52} Esslin, \textit{The Theatre of the Absurd}, p. 225.

\textsuperscript{53} Wellwarth, p. 275.
yet, compiled a biography; so the facts of his life are supplied in sketchy form from newspapers and similar sources.\textsuperscript{54} It is evident, however, that his life was like one of his "heroes" in that he did not know himself or his purpose in life. Unlike Beckett and Ionesco, who seem to write with a purpose, Albee seems devoid of any specific purpose except to express protest against social conventions in a tone of hostility.

The \textit{Zoo Story}, his first play,\textsuperscript{55} was written in 1958. This was followed by \textit{The Death of Bessie Smith} and \textit{The Sandbox} in 1959, \textit{The American Dream} in 1960, \textit{Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe?} in 1961-62, \textit{Tiny Alice} in 1964, and \textit{Malcolm} in 1965. In addition to these he did a theatrical adaptation of Carson McCullers' novel \textit{The Ballad of the Sad Cafe}, in 1963.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{54}Current Biography (New York, 1963) supplied the most comprehensive account.

\textsuperscript{55}In the Preface to \textit{The Zoo Story} (A Signet Book, New York, 1961), p. 7, he tells us that he wrote a three-act sex farce \textit{Aliquean} when he was twelve years old. There is no mention of this in the other literature and a copy of it was unobtainable.

\textsuperscript{56}This play will not be considered in this paper as it is only an adaptation and the theme is not his own. \textit{Malcolm} will not be discussed because a copy is not available. It opened and closed in New York in a week, and the reviews were unanimous in "panning" it.
The Zoo Story had its premiere in Berlin on October 28, 1949. It was "passed around" in New York and then to a friend, William Flanagan, and by a fantastic turn of events it was read by Mrs. Stefani Hunzinger, a publisher, and through her efforts it was produced in Berlin. Eventually with European acclaim, it was produced in America at the Provincetown Playhouse on January 14, 1960.

There are only two characters in the play: Peter, a middle-aged man, self-respectable, a pillar-of-society; and Jerry, a man in his late thirties, seedy, down and out. The scene is Central Park, one Sunday afternoon, in the present. Peter is sitting on a bench and is reading a book when Jerry enters and forces conversation. Jerry takes the initiative throughout; the duologue frequently becomes monologue as Jerry reveals his life. Jerry is portrayed as a social misfit with a schizoid personality: he has never had or experienced contact with other human beings, or with anything for that matter. The closest he ever came to obtaining "love" was with his landlady's dog that he bribed with choice meat. As Jerry relates his story there is a disintegration of his personality which

57Albee, Preface to The Zoo Story, pp. 7-8.
ends in the melodramatic climax when he baits Peter into a fight and becomes the victim of his own knife which Peter is holding.

The play is an absurdist treatment of an "ideological" theme. The audience is skillfully made to sympathize with Jerry and his fate. Society is the great villain. Jerry, another victim of naturalistic determinism whose mother was a whore and whose father was a drunkard, was raised by a sanctimonious aunt "who was given neither to sin nor the consolation of the bottle." Among his possessions were two empty picture frames. They were empty because he knows no one whose picture he wanted. "I've never been able to . . . make love to anybody more than once," he confided in answer to a question about the ladies in his life. Then he admitted that he had been a homosexual when he was young and had been "madly in love" with a Greek boy. He loved the ladies "for about an hour."

His abode was a four-story brownstone rooming-house on the upper West Side. His neighbors were a Negro "queen" who always kept his doors open when he plucked his eyebrows and a Puerto Rican family of unknown number. His landlady was "a fat, ugly, mean, stupid, unwashed, misanthropic, cheap, drunken bag of garbage" who had a dog that guarded the entrance hall. Jerry's life was filled with loneliness
and the realization that he was a misfit.

His revelations about himself were pathetic:

I don't know how to pray, . . .
. . . it's just that if you can't deal
with people, you have to make a start some-
where. WITH ANIMALS . . . WITH GOD WHO IS A
COLORED QUEEN WHO WEARS A KIMONO AND PLUCKS
HIS EYEBROWS, WHO IS A CLOSED DOOR . . . with
God who, I'm told, turned his back on the whole-
thing some time ago . . . with . . . some day,
with people . . . With an idea; a concept. And
where better, wherever better in his humiliating
excuse for a jail, where better to communicate
one single, simple minded idea than in an
entrance hall? Where? It would be A START!
Where better to make a beginning . . . to under-
stand and just possibly be understood . . . a
beginning of an understanding, than with . . .
than with A DOG, Just that; a dog. . . . I have
learned that neither kindness nor cruelty by
themselves, independent of each other, creates
any effect beyond themselves; and I have learned
that the two combined, together, at the same
time, are the teaching emotion. And what is
gained is lost. . . . I am a permanent
transient. . . .

Peter, on the other hand, was a "successful" man.

He lived in a respectable neighborhood, was married, had
two daughters, and made eighteen thousand dollars a year
in the publishing business. He was a cultured, well-read
man and aware only of Jerry's problems in the abstract.

As Albee sees it, our social order is a set of devices
that protect the individual from the realities of the
human condition. It is only an unusual event which brings
an inhabitant of this protected society into contact with
the full agony of knowing what the world is like.
Some critics feel Albee has masterfully achieved the effectiveness of this fantastic story: they say he has managed to make this story entirely believable and understandable. Other critics believe *The Zoo Story* is built on a totally unbelievable situation; namely, it is highly improbable that a sane, average type person would be a passive spectator to behavior, obviously headed toward destructive violence. Why does Peter just sit there while Jerry works himself up to suicide? No psychological explanation for Peter's passivity has been written in the play. Other critics feel the passivity of Peter is allegorical and is supposed to point to our general passivity in the presence of the horrible forces in modern life. It does not appear to be a believable situation that a man in Peter's situation would allow himself to be badgered by Jerry. If his compassion for his fellow man is so great as to demand his listening, this same compassion should afford the understanding which Jerry needs. This would not cure Jerry's mental illness, but the very fact that he was able to communicate should give him some hope. The role of "psychiatrist," or fellow-confessor, which Peter fills in the play is inadequately portrayed. Or, if Peter represents the unfeeling, brutal force of society, it is equally unbelievable that he would ever sit and listen for thirty or forty minutes.
Neither *The Death of Bessie Smith* nor *The Sandbox* is worth much comment in a discussion of the Theatre of the Absurd. Although *The Sandbox* is skillful writing in the avant-garde vein, it is essentially a preliminary sketch for *The American Dream*, several of whose characters it duplicates. *The Death of Bessie Smith* is Albee's impression of the circumstances surrounding her death. In the execution of his play, it is not clear what his purpose is. If his purpose is to arouse the social conscience of the audience, the admission nurse in one of the hospitals which refused Bessie treatment is an entirely incredible character. She is one whom most Southerners would consider "poor white trash." If his purpose is to display the contrast between the reckless life and terrible death of Bessie Smith and the nurse who is the central character, this too fails because we never know enough about Bessie to have a clear picture.

Albee says that he made many alterations as he was writing the play and that the "characters I had elected to carry the tale were wrestling it from me, I discovered that I was, in fact, writing about something at the same time slightly removed from and more to what I had imagined." He wonders if his alterations made the play "more diffuse and directionless." Of one thing he is certain: "the play
is ... most exactly what I had to say."\textsuperscript{58} The plan then is more the dramatist's personal revulsion for a system that allows a "white" hospital to refuse treatment for a "nigger." He paints the "white" people in very black tones, and it is obvious that he feels Bessie, Jack, and the orderly were superior to the white characters. Dramatically the play is a failure in the absurd tradition; it is realistic social criticism.

Esslin says about \textit{The American Dream} that "Albee has produced a play that clearly takes up the style and subject matter of the Theatre of the Absurd and translates it into a genuine American idiom."\textsuperscript{59} This play is generally acclaimed as his best in the style of the avant-garde.

Albee noted in the Preface to \textit{The American Dream} that several critics "went all to pieces over the (to their mind) nihilist, immoral, defeatist content of the play."\textsuperscript{60} He adds in the next paragraph that he considers those critics who act as "a judge of the matter and not the manner of a work,"\textsuperscript{61} no longer critics but censors. This latter statement may have been added because he cannot tolerate adverse criticism. Historically, critics

\textsuperscript{58}Quoted on the back cover of \textit{Three Plays} (New York, 1960).

\textsuperscript{59}Esslin, \textit{The Theatre of the Absurd}, p. 226.

\textsuperscript{60}Quoted in \textit{Two Plays} by Edward Albee (New York, 1961), p. 52.

\textsuperscript{61}Ibid.
through the centuries have concerned themselves with matter as well as manner. The matter, by his own admission, was intended "to offend."62 "The play is an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen."63

The play shows an American family -- Mommy, Daddy, Grandma -- in the grotesquely distorted form he feels they have assumed, and indeed they have assumed the distortion. Mommy is a nagging, frigid wife; Daddy is a devitalized money supplier; Grandma, to Mommy and Daddy, is a bother -- a sub-human being they must tolerate until she dies. To this "happy" family Mrs. Barker, the efficient go-getter, enters in answer to a summons from Mommy and Daddy. Neither she nor they remember why she has come. Her activities are so numerous that she cannot keep them straight. In a scene reminiscent of Ionesco's Bald Soprano when the Martins go through the long chain of inductive reasoning to discover they are married, Mrs. Barker has to probe for her purpose there. It is Grandma

62Ibid., p. 54.
63Ibid., pp. 53-4.
who finally enlightens her that she is there in the
capacity of a field worker for an adoption agency.

Some twenty years ago Mommy and Daddy had adopted a boy.
The boy did not fulfill their ideals: first, he cried
his heart out; then his eyes were gouged out by Mommy.
Next his sexual explorations were halted by first emascu-
ating him and then by cutting his hands off. Later, his
tongue was cut out. Then Grandma adds:

As it got bigger, they found out all sorts of
terrible things about it, like: it didn't have
a head onto shoulders, it had no guts, it was
spineless, its feet were made of clay ... just
dreadful things.

The boy died, and Mommy and Daddy now want their money back
or a replacement.

At this point the "American Dream" enters -- a big,
muscular, handsome, Hollywood-type, who would do anything
for money. He is utterly brainless, but he has not always
been this way. He remembers a separation from his twin
brother, and since that time he has been declining. He
describes the same pains which relate to the butchery
of the "adopted bumble": a pain in his heart, burning
eyes, pain in the groin and in the hands. He is now
incapable of feeling: "I cannot touch another person
and feel love ... I have no emotions. I have been drained,
torn asunder ... disemboweled."
Grandma conceives the idea of persuading Mrs. Barker to give the young man to Mommy and Daddy as their new son, and then departs to live elsewhere on her $25,000 prize money. The play ends with Mommy, Daddy, and their new son quite happily united. Grandma says, "Let's leave things as they are right now ... while everybody's happy ... while everybody's got what he wants ... or everybody's got what he thinks he wants. Good night, dears."

The play is tiring to read because of the sing-song baby-talk tone of the language. Theoretically it may be most effective since it is language stripped to starkness. The cliches are even more insipid than the Madison Avenue slogans one hears on television. One critic said that the technique was handled with a "disarmingly childlike and sardonic freshness." This is a polite way of saying it is childishly and bitterly unique. To one accustomed to the pre-school child's vocabulary and sentence structure, the dialogue does not denote "freshness in technique" but emphasizes the decadent state of American speech. The juvenile language enhances the bitterness and makes the situation more ludicrous.

Grandma, whom some critics see as Albee's "most memorable character," deserves some comment. The writer takes issue with this critical platitude because it is not
sufficiently elaborated. Admittedly, Grandma is the only character in the play who is aware of what is happening; her eighty-six years have not caused any appreciable mental senility despite her "johnny habits, enema bags, and tissue drying." Albee treats the aged in a most pathetic manner: he portrays Grandma as an unwanted, unloved, human being; there is no place for her. Mommy maintains control over her with the constant threat of "putting her away" if she does not conform. This is a sorry commentary on our culture, but a true one. Beckett in *Endgame* and Ionesco in *The Chairs* depict the aged in the same state. Medicine has discovered ways to prolong existence, but these aged citizens do not happily participate in life.

Albee asks the question "Is this play nihilistic, immoral, defeatist?" The question can be answered only in affirmative. Nihilism is reflected by the revolt against the authority of the Father as head of the family. That immorality is present cannot be contested: the sadistic dismemberment of a human with the resulting death is presented as the only course of action to follow. While defeatism is evident first, in the character of Daddy with his submissiveness to the domineering Mommy, it is more positively found in the portrayal of the
"American Dream" (the boy who enters), a hollow shell for whom "it will always be thus." Albee's answer is "... that The American Dream is a picture of our time—as I see it, of course." It is his hope that its message transcends "the personal and private, and has something to do with the anguish of us all."64

Whitney Balliett, drama critic for the New Yorker, says:

The play is not realistic but neither is it purely illusory. It is, in the fashion of a comic nightmare, fantasy of the highest order ... This is a play for the resilient young and wise old. All those paunchy, sluggish targets in between had best stay away.65

Since the writer does not fall into the two categories for which the play is intended, but belongs to the "paunchy in between" group, the underlying message is more obscure. The sluggish complacency that our age breeds is definitely jolted by such a presentation of life. Whereas the false values which America has established may justify the satirical implications, few plays have displayed the sterility of the society in which they were written as savagely as does Albee's play.

64 Preface to The American Dream, p. 54.
65 Quoted in Albee, Two Plays, pp. 54-5.
Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe? is so well known and has enjoyed such popular acclaim that the plot and characters need no elaboration from this critic. The "message" of Mr. Albee's play couldn't be more terrible: life is nothing, and we must have the courage to face our emptiness without fear. The absence of a feasible explanation of how people like George and Martha, or Nick and Honey, came to be is the essence of a modern social indictment; things are shown to be so irrevocably bad that there is no longer any use in searching for social or personal casualties. Truth and illusion are so intermingled that one doesn't know the difference.

Mr. Albee's characters are not inhabitants of the underworld as are Genet's. His bohemians' obscenities are more shocking because they are spoken by people of the highest education who are free to move into our most respected posts. This privileged position of Mr. Albee's characters permits the audience to identify with a supposedly superior class in our society, and the success of the play may rest in this point: that if college professors and their wives react as they do, it is an unimpeachable authority for the rest of society which has not had their advantages to act and behave in a similar manner.
Mr. Albee, as most absurdists, is loath to speak of the meanings of his plays. He answers queries as to meaning by saying:

"Who's afraid of Virginia Wolfe?" means "Who's afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?" means "Who's afraid of living life without false illusions?"

This kind of answer is bound to be arresting to the average man, because it suggests that he read the play as an appeal on behalf of reality. Certainly, modern literature should arrest any doubt on the "reality" of the characters in Virginia Wolfe. But when these characters are stripped of false illusion there is nothing left but irremediable pain. Martha is pathetic in her stammered answer, "I ... am ... I ... am... ," to George's question, "Who's afraid of Virginia Wolfe?" Some critics feel the last scene offers hope and this fact would exclude it from Absurd Theatre. From reading and viewing the drama, there is no hope for Martha: she cannot live in a world of reality, she needs "illusions" or hallucinations to exist. The reality of her life is too painful to face. At age fifty-two her only accomplishment is the seduction of men and now that she realizes her sexual attractions are fading she has nothing.

Critical comment on the Electra theme in *Virginia* Wolfe is amazingly sparse. Martha's Father, though unseen, is a motivating force not only on the character development of Martha but as a contributing force to the ineffectuality of George. The College President has ruled their lives in a most tyrannical manner. Martha's constant effort to please Daddy and thereby win his affection is something she should have outgrown in puberty. The play is peopled by four sick characters and Daddy, the power behind them. Similarly, the Electra theme is also depicted in Honey as well as her sexual difficulties and pseudo-pregnancy. Throughout the play, there is the suggestion that some of the major characters are homosexual, if not overt more than just a touch latent. If Albee's claim of presenting "life as he sees it" is true about *Virginia* Wolfe, the society he sees is indeed sick. Immaturity, physical and intellectual frustrations, latent homosexuality, sexual promiscuity, the Electra complex, and basic insecurity are the exterior manifestations of this sick society. Is his vision of the particular of sufficient magnitude to be presented as a generality? plagues the mind of thinking viewers. If this is a generality, the impact of so shocking a message should jolt the audience into an acute awareness of a social
condition which needs correction. The opposite effect has been achieved; audiences have received some cathartic result from its presentation. Mrs. Trilling presents the following projections as a possible explanation:

... we bring to the theatre some sense of betrayal by, or at least disappointment in, our fates; Mr. Albee's grim view of the world, while it confirms us in the sense of victimization, also alleviates the guilt we have been taught to feel for our conspiracy in the defeats we suffer. ... We also have Mr. Albee's word for it that where we do transgress we have nothing to be ashamed of; it is not our fault. The bad condition, personal no less than social, of modern man is an inevitability, it is his destiny, for which no cause need be named. Ugliness and emptiness are the way things are and are bound to be. ...

No one is shaken by Mr. Albee's play. At most they are disquieted, which is a different order of emotion ... Generally it is not even disquiet but a quite opposite emotion, reassurance -- the perhaps embarrassed comfort we experience when evidence is given us that we are not alone in what we had thought to be misconduct and therefore need not judge ourselves harshly.67

Virginia Wolfe exemplifies the artistry of a playwright who has skillfully disguised sordidness and immorality in appropriate wrappings so as to be tolerated by the "intellectual and affluent" American. He has caused no repulsion to Martha, George, or the malignant lies on which their lives are based; quite contrarily, he

67Ibid., pp. 214-16.
has led his audience to accept her adultery and his vindictive drinking as acceptable social behavior. Without the shock element which should lead one to evaluate the society that causes such conditions to exist, the result is a fatalistic view of our world over which we have no control.

_Tiny Alice_, his second most recent drama, is still too new to have received a detailed critical study which it needs. Albee says in the introductory remarks that he had planned to write a preface "clarifying obscure points in the play" ... but has "decided against creating such a guide because I found that the play is quite clear." He does add that "Tiny Alice is less opaque in reading than it would be in any single viewing."68 It is unfortunate that a viewing was not possible because his "meaning" may have become more clear. This is particularly true of Act III where the manner in which the lines are delivered would clarify its meaning. The dissatisfaction does not start that late in the drama, for very early in Act I, Scene I, the conversation between religion and business, personified by the Cardinal and the shrewd lawyer, reveals

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68Edward Albee, _Tiny Alice_ (New York, 1965), Author's note.
no differences in the materialistic, vitriolic nature of these two men. It is possible that this reader may be sufficiently "Victorian" or prejudiced not to admit the spiritual and physical corruption of a Cardinal, a prince of the church. It seems incongruous that a man of God could passively stand by and speechlessly watch the spiritual sacrifice of a fellow clergymen. The play is as "sinister and blasphemous as a black mass, more depraved than any drama yet produced on the American stage."69 It is apparent from a reading of all available reviews by dramatic critics that the effectiveness of the play is largely dependent on the theatre (sets, lights, manner of speech); in a word, every device of dramaturgy is called into play to create the "massive" result.

In the review in *Time* the critic says that in this "quasi-metaphysical suspense drama," Albee practices mystification. "He brings the play-goer through the Nietzschean revelation that God is dead to the Sartrean discovery of the absurdity of human nature."70 It is

69 Quoted on the back flap of *Tiny Alice*. Ellis Norton, "Boston Record American." (no date supplied — copy of paper unavailable locally).

also referred to as a drama of "post-Christian mentality," but ironically its only emotional vitality derives from Christian symbolism and experience; e.g., when Julian is shot, Miss Alice (according to the critics) is wearing a blue cape and dress, the symbolic color for Mary the Mother of Jesus. She cradles Julian in her arms; "they create something of a Pieta." In the final scene the Christian symbolism is demonstrated most forcefully. The dying Julian for the first time calls the name Alice instead of Miss Alice, and says "The bridegroom waits for thee, my Alice ... is thine. ... I accept thee, Alice, for thou art come to me. God, Alice ... I accept thy will." His arms stay wide in the crucifixion, he bows his head and dies. In the final death scene the words of Miss Alice now have meaning to Julian:

    You have felt her warmth through me,
touched her lips through my lips, held her
hands, through mine, ... You are hers. ...
- Then have done with forgery, Julian;
accept what's real. I am the ... illusion.

He realizes that he is not the bridegroom of Miss Alice, but is the bridegroom of "Tiny Alice," who is, for him, a symbol for Mary, the Mother of God. The coldness he felt when Miss Alice held him is now gone; his rebellion too has disappeared and now he can accept God's will.

71 Albee's stage directions.
Julian is the victim of the sacrifice, an innocent victim of the Satanic forces personified by the Lawyer, the Butler, and Miss Alice.

There are several possible themes evident in the play through which Albee gives his message: that man is alone; the universe is a void; and whatever replica of faith man invents to quiet his spirit and find peace in accepting the inevitability of his fate is symbolic or illusionary.

The Faustian theme is most pronounced. The Cardinal sells out to the devils for two billion. (It is assumed this two billion is in dollars, but the text never specifically states the exact nature of the material gain.) The Cardinal, a symbol for Religion, when faced with the prospects of material gain willingly sacrifices one of his staff. Brother Julian, the victim, is an innocent, yet holy and sincere, man who is blindly obedient to the authority of his superior and acts with faith that he is doing God's will. The Cardinal received the reward and Julian was sacrificed. Julian can be a symbol for the laity in a formal religious structure. He is not an ordained priest and as a lay brother represents the unfortunate victims of hierarchical evils. The identity of the lawyer, the butler, and Miss Alice as Satan's embassaries is established in Act III. The lawyer speaks:
(Sarcasm is gone; all is gone, save fact)

Dear Julian; we all serve, do we not? Each of us of his own priesthood; publicly, some; others ... within only; but we all do -- what's-his-name's special trumpet, or clear lonely bell. Predestination, fate, the will of God, accident ... All swirled up in it, no matter what the name. And being man, we have invented choice, and have; indeed, gone further, and have catalogued the underpinnings of choice. But we do not know. Anything. End prologue. ...

No matter. We are leaving now, Julian; agents, every one of us -- going. We are leaving you ... to your accomplishments: your marriage, ... your wife, your ... special priesthood. ... What is so amazing is the ... coming together ... of disparates ... left-fielding, out of the most unlikely. Who would have thought, Julian? Who would have thought? You have brought us to the end of our service here. We go on; you stay ... We are surrogates; our task is done now. ...

Miss Alice in the seduction scene wears a "black negligee with great sleeves," symbolic garb for Satan when he assumes the role of a bat. She encircles and moves about the stage in bird-like manner, a bird of prey. When her victory is assured, she "takes her gown and spreading her arms slowly, opens the gown wide; it is the unfurling of great wings." She is clearly Satan's embassy.

The replica of the great mansion serves a purpose as the material representation of an illusionary world. As a diminutive of a real place, it reverses the microcosm-macrocosm relationship which envisions the world as part of the larger universe of God. The position of the replica, in the center of the action, underlines the reversal -- "God's" universe is an unreal and miniature
part of materialistic reality. "Tiny Alice" (to Julian the Blessed Mother) is a creation of man's imagination and an illusion.

The real message may be that man is a fool to put his faith in God, an intangible unknown. He lives and dies alone, victimized by that in which he has faith. Whatever Albee's basic intentions and purposes were in writing this play, Tiny Alice is a staggering dramatization of evil which approximates Satanism.

As noted in the introductory remarks in this chapter there is doubt in this writer's mind as to the inclusion of all these plays in the Theatre of the Absurd tradition. The horrible picture they paint of our world should be surveyed and judgment formed to see if America has really become a barren, sterile, wasteland which is devoid of morality, religion, and love.
George Wellwarth says that "nothing more clearly demonstrates that the avant-garde movement is essentially a French movement than the work of Harold Pinter."

Pinter is England's only major exponent of the avant-garde technique in playwriting, yet his works are patterned quite specifically on a particular work of one or another of the French avant-garde authors. This is not necessarily a condemnation of his work; nor, is it intended to be an accusation of plagiarism but only to note that aside from his particular use of the British idiom the situations and developments are patterned on French dramatists.

Harold Pinter was born in Hackney in East London in 1930. The son of a Jewish tailor, Pinter studied acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and later at the Central School of Speech and Drama. For ten years he worked in touring companies and provincial repertory theatre under the stage name of David Baron. In 1957 he started work on a novel which he never completed. In that year a friend requested that he write a play in a week's time. Pinter refused, but four days later he had completed The Room. This one-act play was produced

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72 Wellwarth, p. 197.
at Bristol University in May, 1957. The room, the central and chief poetic image of the play, is one of the recurring motifs in Pinter's work. This play, as several others (notably, The Dumb Waiter), deals with two people in a room. Pinter sees this situation as posing a very potent question: "What is going to happen to these two people in the room? Is someone going to open the door and come in?"73

Esslin elaborated on Pinter's statement and projected that Pinter's use of drama is a return to some of the basic elements of drama: "The suspense created by the elementary ingredients of pure, pre-literary theatre: a stage, two people, a door; a poetic image of an undefined fear and expectation." It is agreed that his elements of theatre are reduced to a minimal situation, but it is also unlikely that the symbolism of the room with its single opening to the outside would be as significantly meaningful to the pre-Freudian age. In his major plays -- The Room, The Birthday Party, The Dumb Waiter, The Slight Ache, and The Caretaker -- the room serves as a microcosm of the world. In this room people feel safe and warm: it is a womb in which people can feel secure. The conflict in all of Pinter's plays is when an outside force penetrates into

73Quoted by Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 199.
the room and disrupts the security of its occupants. Rose, the central character of The Room, never leaves, and only the intrusion of the Negro causes her disintegration. All of his central characters are absorbed completely in the problem of the self -- to resolve the basic problem of their inability to confront reality. His people are not involved in politics, ideas, or even sex; they are at the "extreme edge of their living, where they are living pretty much alone."74

Pinter, like Albee, feels his drama is far more "realistic" than conventional drama where too many details are supplied about the background and motivation of the characters. In real life, our association for the large part is with people whose early history, family relationship, or psychological motivations are unknown; e.g., our interest in people is aroused if we see a fight on the street even if we do not know what the fight is about or the people involved. Pinter feels that there is a strong possibility that one can never know the motivation of another person's actions because the complexity of the psychological make-up of the individual makes verification impossible. In a program note at the performance of one of his plays, Pinter said:

74Harold Pinter quoted by Esslin in The Theatre of Absurd, p. 216.
The desire for verification is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. The thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true or false. The assumption that to verify what has happened and what is happening presents few problems I take to be inaccurate. A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behavior or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives, is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. The more acute the experience the less articulate its expression.

Pinter's characters around whom the action revolves are all afraid. He maintains that they are "scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room there is a world bearing upon them which is frightening." This fear can be demonstrated not only in the character of Rose, but in Aston and Davies in *The Caretaker*, Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*, Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, and Edward in *A Slight Ache*. To conclusively explain the fear by a single motivating influence would be impossible and ludicrous. Each of these characters is basically insecure and immature; each is a simple non-intellectual person without a cognizant purpose for his life. He has not answered the question "Who am I?" for himself to himself. He is directionless.

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75 Ibid., p. 206.
76 Ibid., p. 199.
and aimless and therefore totally frightened of the darkness surrounding his protective womb-like shell. The enlarged picture that Pinter draws of him is equally frightening to the viewer. How many citizens of our society live in this constant terror of themselves and their world? How many suffer the agonies of his characters?

Pinter's ten years of actual stage experience have enhanced his ability to perceive what will make "good" theatre. He demonstrates an acute ear for speech patterns of ordinary people. The repetition and monotony of his dialogue is recognizable to the audience. In the use of speech patterns, he owes much to Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*; but where Ionesco extends his monotony to caricature, Pinter stops precisely where real-life speech patterns do. His people register the entire range of the small talk of everyday speech: the slower thinker is replying to one question while the faster has moved on to something else; the misunderstandings which are from not listening, incomprehension, or mishearings; false anticipations; repetition; and a dull routine vocabulary composed largely of monosyllables and slang. Pinter denies that he is trying to show man's inability to communicate with his fellow man, but instead he shows that there is a "deliberate evasion of communication. Communication itself between people is
so frightening ... that there is continual cross-talk, rather than what is at the root of their relationship." In his use of dialogue there is marked similarity to Beckett, whose people frequently talk without meaning because they cannot stand to "not talk." The vacuum created by silence is too intense so words, not communicable language, are used to fill the void.

The Dumb Waiter, his second one-act play about a room occupied by two people, is a more effective drama than The Room. In The Room, though the entrance of the Negro causes Rose's collapse, it mars the mood of horror created in the opening scene. The blind Negro (maybe a death symbol), the savage beating he receives from Rose's husband, and Rose's own blinding are melodramatic devices which are out of tune with the skillfully built terror in the beginning. Pinter does not make this mistake a second time. Ben and Gus, the occupants of the shabby room in The Dumb Waiter, are hired killers under orders from a mysterious organization. They skillfully inform us through dialogue of their situation and how they usually function. Gus is the slower thinker of the pair and is constantly being left behind Ben's questions and orders.

77Ibid., p. 207.
Their sanctuary is pierced first by steps which are heard delivering matches for them to make tea, and then by the rumbling noise of the dumb waiter. They grab their guns but when the origin of the noise is determined and the door opened, they find an order for "Two braised steaks and chips. Two sago puddings. Two teas without sugar." The dumb waiter comes again and again, each time with more exotic food orders. The absurdity of the situation is stressed by the fact that they are unable to boil the water to have a cup of tea. Pinter uses the device for all it is worth to lead to the shock of the climax. Gus goes into the next room (in Pinter's system out of the safe world), and Ben receives some instructions through the dumb waiter's speaking tube. Gus is stripped to his shirt and his gun is gone when he re-enters the room. As the curtain falls the audience is aware that Ben has been ordered to kill his partner.

The small talk, which the two men use to hide their growing anxiety, is ably handled and reflects that they are talking merely to avoid what preoccupies their minds: who will be their next victim and why? They chat about soccer teams, about whether to "light the kettle" or "light the gas," about trivial matter in the newspaper and even about who cleans up the mess when they are finished.
There is a great deal of stage business reminiscent of *Waiting for Godot*: pantomime, removing and shaking shoes, opening and closing the door, folding newspapers, and holstering guns, to cite a few.

There is evidence of the influence of conventional drama in Pinter's use of suspense and the element of surprise not only in this play but in his others. In *A Slight Ache*, although the collapse of Edward when faced with the silent presence of the Matchseller parallels Ionesco's treatment of Berenger and the silent Killer, the surprise ending is a "conventional" device. When Flora embraces the Matchseller and chooses him in preference to Edward, the audience is surprised despite the fact that Edward's monologue has revealed his inner emptiness.

*The Birthday Party*, Pinter's first full length play, combined some of the characters and situations of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*. Meg has many of the features of Rose; and the two gunmen Ben and Gus appear as Goldberg and McCann, two sinister strangers. Petey has the reticence of Bert in *The Room* but lacks his brutality. The safe room now becomes a shabby seaside rooming house, and Stanley has sought refuge from the hostile world in this shelter. Stanley dreamed of a world tour as a pianist, but after his first concert
he found himself shut off from future success. He resides, cut-off from the world, under the too-motherly protection of Meg. McCann and Goldberg disrupt the tranquility. They obviously came there for Stanley but the reason is never given, nor does it particularly matter. Their plan for a birthday party for Stanley (who insists it is not his birthday) materializes. Meg, who remains aloof from the actual happenings, has a wonderful time. Stanley withdraws more and more under the pressure of the brain-washing of Goldberg and McCann. Lulu, who at first may be considered Stanley's girl, becomes sexually attracted to Goldberg. In a game of blindman's bluff, Stanley reaches the breaking point and attempts to strangle Meg; his glasses on which he is dependent are willfully broken; Stanley's disintegration is complete. The next morning he appears garbed in formal funeral attire and is led by the strangers to the waiting black car with a "trunk just big enough."

The play speaks plainly of the individual's pathetic search for security, of the terrorism in our world often as glazed with bravado and brutality as Goldberg, of secret dreads and amenities, and of the tragedy that results from the lack of understanding between people. Meg cannot reach Stanley with her warmth
and love because he despises her stupidity. Petey cannot express his warmth because he is too dumb to find the words.

The Caretaker, to this writer, is Pinter's most artfully executed play. A room, again a place of security and comfort, is the scene. It is to this room that Aston brings Davies, an old tramp, who has lost his place in the world and is homeless. He has also lost his "identity." In this play Pinter leaves the macabre world of his previous plays and takes us to a Beckett-like static drama about three men who are waiting for something that will never come. The room, cluttered with all types of things, is on the top floor of a run-down building which is owned by Mick. Aston, his older brother, is taking care of the house. Aston is a kind, gentle man who has security in his room, finds satisfaction in tinkering with electrical plugs, and dreams of building a wonderful tool house in the yard. At one time he had been sent to a mental institution where he had electric shock. The passage in which Aston tells Davies of his confinement and shock therapy possesses genuine poetic charm. The ending of the speech is perhaps the most effective.
I got out of the place ... but I couldn't walk very well. I don't think my spine was damaged. That was perfectly all right. The trouble was ... my thoughts ... had become very slow ... I couldn't think at all ... I couldn't ... get ... my thoughts ... together ... uuuuh ... I could ... never quite get it ... together. The trouble was, I couldn't hear what people were saying. I couldn't look to the right or the left, I had to look straight in front of me, because if I turned my head round ... I couldn't keep ... upright ... Anyway I feel much better now. But I don't talk to people now. I steer clear of places like the cafe. I never go into them now. I don't talk to anyone ... like that. I've often thought of going back and and trying to find the man who did that to me. But I want to do something first. I want to build that shed out in the garden.

Mick, the younger brother, had drifted apart from his brother. He, too, has dreams and aspirations which have not been shared. To the tramp he reveals the dream of turning his house into a palace by completely remodeling it, using teal-blue, copper, and parchment linoleum squares.

Davies is a belligerent, vain, complaining, hostile man. He whines constantly about going to Sidcup to get the papers to prove his "identity," but he never leaves. Either the fact that the weather is too bad or he does not have proper shoes deters the trip. He cannot resist the temptation to play the two brothers against each other and thereby to obtain security for himself. Paradoxically, all he succeeds in doing is bringing the
two brothers closer together. At the end he is left
tearfully pleading with Aston for another opportunity
"to belong."

But .. but ... look ... listen ... listen
here ... I mean ...
What am I going to do? (Pause)
What shall I do? (Pause)
Where am I going to go? (Pause)
If you want me to go ... I'll go. You just
say the word.
I'll tell you what though ... them shoes ...
them shoes you give me ... they're
working out all right ... they're all
right. Maybe I could ... get down ...
(Aston remains still, his back to him, at the
window.)
Listen ... if I ... got down ... if I was to
get my papers ... would you .... would
you let .... would you ... if I got down
... and got my ...
(Long Silence)
(Curtain)

Like all Pinter's plays this is a story of a room
and its occupants; and as cluttered, run-down, inefficient
as it may be, it is a haven to the three occupants. To
Davies the tragedy exists that by his own malicious acts
he does not qualify for a place. To Aston it is a refuge
from a world of reality with which he cannot cope. To
Mick, although he does not live there, it is a place which
he keeps in reserve, a place to fall back on. All three
men are waiting, marking time through life, and fostering
hope in an unobtainable ideal: Aston to build the garden
house, the symbol of his recovered sanity; Mick to make
a millionaire's palace; and Davies to go to Sidcup and recover the papers which will prove his "identity." The audience is aware that none of these things will ever happen, but the men, we also know, will go on thinking about them because through these ideals they create the illusion of a purpose in life. Without a purpose, life would be impossible, and since man is he must supply an illusion where there is no reality.

Esslin says of Pinter:

His mastery of language, which has opened up a new dimension of English stage dialogue; the economy of his technique; the accuracy of his observation; the depth of his emotion, the freshness and originality of his approach; the fertility of his invention; and above all, his ability to turn commonplace lower-class people into a profoundly poetic vision of universal validity justify the very highest hopes for his future development.

Whereas this praise may be too elaborately excessive, the merits of Pinter's plays as literature surpass that of

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Albee. Pinter possesses and exemplifies a masterful artistry in the use of language and poetic skill in expression and use of themes. Only one of his plays, The Dumb Waiter, has been viewed in production, but from that presentation one would be safe in saying that theatrically he is at least equal to, if he does excel Albee. His view of life is still a depressing one, but he is not obsessed with morbid sordidness. His people are more believable. There is, too, some vague hope that salvation of this horrible world is possible and that its people are worth the effort.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this thesis, which to this point has shown the origins of the Theatre of the Absurd and its use by various playwrights, is to evaluate its significance through an understanding of the aims. The choice of playwrights and plays for discussion are governed by a conviction that these men, although from different parts of the world, have worked in somewhat the same manner to reflect a world that is "out of harmony." It is to be recalled at this point that Martin Esslin in labeling these plays "The Theatre of the Absurd" did not mean they were ridiculous. The Absurd plays are intended as serious drama written by dramatists who have consciously renounced arguing in the conventional manner and have presented the absurdity of the human situation as they see it. Although the world they see is a depressing, "out-of-harmony" world and the presentation of it at times is shocking, the Absurdities express modern man's endeavor to come to terms with the world in which he lives. To this Martin Esslin has added:

It attempts to make him modern man face up to the human situation as it really is, to free him from illusions that are bound to cause constant maladjustment and disappointment ... For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness, to
accept is freely, without fear, without illusions -- and to laugh at it.80

Each of the playwrights in this movement shares the conviction that the theatre must express the senselessness and irrationality of all human actions. Each believes the theatre must confront audiences with that sense of isolation which is a irremediable part of the human situation. In such a world communication is almost impossible, and the language in each play reflects man's inability to express his basic thoughts and feelings.

"For the Absurdists, tragedy and comedy are both manifestations of despair, of the act which exists, exists alone in its own unmotivated isolation, unmeaningful and absurd."81 The recognizable here, the well-knit plot, and the logically motivated heroine, which all give meaning to the act, are purposely omitted in absurd theatre. It is the belief of these playwrights that this illusory, distorted, or spurious meaning robs the drama of its elemental meaning, which lies in the absurdity. Tragedy is an impossibility for the absurdists who seemingly have arrived at the same conclusion which Eugene

80Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 316.
O'Neil expressed in 1939:

It struck me as time goes on, how something funny even farcical can suddenly without apparent reason, break into something gloomy and tragic ... A sort of unfair non sequitur, as though events, though life, were manipulated just to confuse us. I think I'm aware of comedy more than I ever was before -- a big kind of comedy that doesn't stay funny very long. 82

"When man is forced to admit that the absurd is more inherent in human existence," 83 he moves from tragedy to comedy which supposes an unformed, up-side down world. A special kind of comedy is needed to express a world in which man resides amid so many irreconcilable and hostile forces. Man has no firm convictions of religions; he no longer sees the world as a reflection of an Almighty and benevolent God in his surroundings. He sees instead suffering, struggle, failure, and chaos. The "comedy of the grotesque" is the means whereby art can "encompass the paradoxical and express the form of the unformed, 'the face of a world without a face.'" 84

Other art forms have reflected this "face of the world without a face" by strong and drastic means:

Surrealism replaced classical and renaissance balance and

82 quoted by Robert Corrigan, ibid., p. 13.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
harmony in painting and sculpture; "Modern" dancing replaced classical ballet; and the musical harmony and rhythm of a more orderly world has been replaced by cacophony and syncopation. Joyce, Kafka, and Dostoevski reflected the dissonance of society in their novels much earlier. Only the theatre still used patterns devised to express a well-made world which no longer existed. John Mason Brown notes that the past ten years have produced a new generation in the Theatre and that its coming was needed and its impact has been healthy.85 This new generation writes in a different manner, with a different purpose, form a different point of view of man in his altered world. Although their plays have been a force only on the fringes of the theatrical world, they have awakened the theatre to an awareness that it had become middle-aged. The world of the 1950's and 60's is no longer the "well-made" world of Victoria's days; nor is it the same as in the exuberant twenties and angry thirties. The Theatre of the Absurd, the product of the "new generation," is the dramatic expression of the modern world. Lack of form in the conventional sense, defiance of logic, and apparent senselessness are devices which

portray the chaos of cosmic disorder.

A further insight into the understanding of the avant-garde movement was found in the introduction of Jan Kott's Shakespeare our Contemporary. In this Martin Esslin states:

History, however, deprived of the goals towards which it is supposed to be moving—progress, the millennium, or the last judgment—could be apprehended only as a process whose sole meaning is its meaninglessness. (This is also the view of the French existentialist whose spokesman currently has been Jean-Paul Sartre). No wonder Kott sees the great Shakespearean historical cycle, the Roman plays, and the tragedies as akin in their ultimate sense to the contemporary Theatre of the Absurd... For the Theatre of the Absurd, as I see it, marks the emergency and contemporary art of a position beyond absolutes, beyond even the possibility of philosophical systems. It represents a position closely related to that of the post-Marxist thinkers of eastern Europe. And if the Theatre of the Absurd can be regarded as being particularly of our time, then the particular impact of Shakespeare on our time springs from a deep inner connection between the themes of Beckett and Shakespeare's subject matter. It is John Kott's achievement that he saw this relationship with such force and clarity that for him Hamlet and Lear shed their cliche existence as romantic heroes and became members of the family of Vladimir, Estragon, and Chaplin's little tramp, that even Prospero's breaking of his staff became for him an expression of timeless existential despair.86

At first the very suggestion that our great and immortal Shakespeare should be grouped with twentieth

86Jan Kott, Shakespeare our Contemporary (Garden City: 1964), p. xix.
century avant-gardists seemed an incongruous comparison. A reading of Kott's work, however, proved the universality of Shakespeare's appeal and presented a fascinating study of authors separated by four hundred years.

In the chapter entitled "King Lear and Endgame" Kott reviews the history of the productions of Shakespearean drama in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and proves the incongruity of these attempts. Even in the return to the so-called "authentic" Shakespearean Theatre, King Lear, a demented old man tearing his long white beard, became ridiculous. He should have been a strikingly tragic figure but he no longer was. Even when realistically treated Lear remained too ridiculous to appear a tragic hero. The cruelty of Lear (truly a philosophical cruelty) was to the Elizabethans a contemporary reality, but neither the romantic nor the realistic theatre could show philosophical cruelty; only the avant-garde theatre can. In the theatre there are no characters, and the tragic element has been superseded by the grotesque which is more cruel than tragic. 87

The grotesque has not replaced old drama or the comedy of manners. It deals with problems, conflicts and

87Ibid., pp. 87-124.
themes of tragedy, such as human fate, the meaning of existence, freedom, and inevitability, the discrepancy between absolute truths and the fragile human order. In the final instance tragedy is in the cradle of human fate, a measure of the absolute. The grotesque is a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience.

That is why tragedy brings catharsis while the grotesque offers no consolation.

Thus it appears the grotesque has replaced what we formerly knew as tragedy on the modern stage. The scene of tragedy had mostly been that of a natural landscape—nature played a significant part in the action. Modern grotesque drama takes place in civilization. Nature has disappeared or evaporated completely from man's existence. Modern man is confined to a room and surrounded by inanimate objects, which have been raised to the status of symbols of human fate. Sartre's hell is a vast hotel consisting of rooms and corridors. Ionesco's hell is arranged on similar lines. Man becomes surrounded, engulfed, and finally lost in a world of inanimate objects: furniture, chairs, wardrobes, etc. In Beckett's Endgame a room exists with inanimate objects; even the picture hangs face to the wall. All that remains of nature is sand in the dustpan and a flea on the man's body. In the
dialogue which ensues Hamm and Clov decide that nature has forgotten them.

The extravagant and sometimes grotesque tragic forces of the Theatre of the Absurd arouse interest and are received with laughter and respect. One explanation of this phenomenon is that these plays are a prime example of "pure theatre." They prove that the magic and wonder of the stage can exist and persist without the structure of rationality. The existence of lights and shadow, contrast and costume, voice, gait and behavior can suggest tension, conflict, arouse laughter or gloom, and present an image of poetry even if the meanings are not understandable to the audience.

There is the possibility that the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd have substantial content and meaning, and that they give expression to some of the basic issues and problems of our age in a meaningful manner. The avant-garde theatre requires an intellectual activity on the part of the audience in order to "solve" the meaning for the individual. Since it is impossible to identify with a character that one does not understand and whose motives remain unfathomable, emotional identification is replaced by puzzled yet thoughtful attention.

What happens on the stage, though it may seem
absurd, remains recognizable as related to real life with its absurdity. The spectators are brought face to face with the irrational side of their own existences. As an example, it has been noted that the dialogue in these plays consists of meaningless cliches and the mechanical repetition of stereotyped phrases. The reader is asked to recall the last cocktail party he attended and to remember the nothingness of the conversation, the cliches, the pauses, the stereotyped niceties of "polite" conversation. Is there any inconsistency in the dialogue on stage and that of the people we meet in real life?

The Absurdists seem in unanimous agreement that the language of the theatre had reached an impasse. Hence instead of the word taking precedence, the gesture has been promoted to primary importance. Mention has been made of the scrupulous details given for the actions and gestures of the characters in the plays, but it should be emphasized that these gestures are an integral part of the presentation. Audiences had lost some of their imaginative power, and words alone were unable to reach those incapable of receiving a mental image through spoken language. Therefore the exaggerated movements combined with illogical words devoid of didactics are an attempt to shock the viewers
into the ability to visualize, project, and become imaginative; i.e., creative.

The Absurdists may be experimenters in a theatrical form which, if nothing more, is a relief from psychological case histories disguised as drama. On the other hand, they may be attempting to solve the philosophical confusion of a post-Darwin, Freudian, Atomic Age. Ionesco has described the absurd as "that which has no purpose, or goal or objective." Drama by accepted criteria is "imitated human action" and the conclusion of the syllogism may be human action now is without purpose.

Americans have not generally accepted the Theatre of the Absurd and are confused as to its meaning. Central Europeans of the mid-twentieth century have acclaimed it and the meaning seems more clearly understandable to them. This may be plausible because the horrors which transcend tragedy have occurred on European soil in the lifetime of its adults. The grotesque then is more real for them.

I have been of the school in the study of drama that the limit of a play is not what is found in the text alone, or of the theatre that produced it. The proper study of drama must consider the personality of the author and the dominant forces in his life. Even more important is that drama becomes a study of civilization: not only
the things a civilization possesses determine its fate and mold its character, but the dreams that fill its members' heads, the ideals they seek, and the faiths by which they live. These are the basic beliefs that shape the lives of men.

If this premise has validity, then the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter present some interesting speculations on our civilization. The "things" of the twentieth century are too numerous to mention in detail. They have descended upon us in such rapid succession that human beings cannot comprehend these constant miracles. In the field of entertainment, the magnitude of miracles is staggering: from Caruso's records on a manually cranked victrola to stereophonic reproductions electrically powered; from the first crystal earphone radio with more static than sound to pocket transistors with flawless reproduction; from silent movies, mostly melodramas, to cinerama with varied plots and subject matter; and of course television, which was just a dream forty years ago.

These modern inventions have produced a lessened need for personal imagination and wonder because all things are clearly depicted and editorialized for us. Since the development of rockets even the mysteries and
glories of the heavens are now within man's grasp. The dreams, the ideals, and the faith of this civilization afford the next step for consideration for the purposes of the Theatre of the Absurd.

The dreams that fill men's minds. -- Who dreams now except the very young or the demented? This is a cold cruel world of reality with no place for dreams. Would it not have been thrilling to dream of linking this once vast continent by rail? Someone did and it became reality. Our pseudo-psychiatrists tell us "dreaming" is bad. Instead we must train our youth to live in this world of cold brutal facts, this world of reality whose presence is almost suffocating. Even dreaming of God, a loving wonderful Father, is interpreted by some as an escape from this reality.

If one thinks about twentieth century reality too seriously and too long, and evaluates it, only depression can result. Two major World Wars and constant bloody strife with no real victory have pillaged our lives. Communism, Nazi terrorism, the enslavement of millions have been constant threats. Atheistic materialism is the prevalent philosophy. Darwin's theory reduced man's dignity of himself, and Freud further confused man by stripping him of free will and making him a victim of
the world which surrounds him. Where is the stuff of which dreams are made in our world? What fills our minds but fear, loneliness, searching, and rebellion?

The ideals men see. -- The Greeks possessed the gods who served as models for perfection, and Christianity sought imitation of their Saviour, Jesus Christ. Now there are no common ideals that man seeks. The temporal rulers of state often leave much to be desired as models of perfection. The socialistic governments have stripped man of his ideals to pursue personal wealth and fame.

We are subjects of mediocrity; everyone must conform; no one must excel or lag behind. Regimentation in every field of life has forced an open rebellion for some freedom of expression. Man's ideal now may be just to do something unusual: whistle in church, sit in his yard all day without producing one tangible thing, or wade in the gutter after a spring rain.

The faiths men live by. -- Faith is such a beautiful virtue to possess. But Faith, which even the sound of should bring joy, is now considered medieval, or, at best, Victorian thought. Twentieth-Century man knows not what he believes, or why he should believe anything. Trust in one's fellow man is non-existent. Man is alone in this vale of tears searching without hope.
Upon reflection, the observations just cited and other similar ones somehow make one feel that the Theatre of the Absurd is less absurd than it at first appeared. It reflects our civilization whether we like it or not—it reflects reality. Godot then may be man's dream, the ideals sought, faith in oneself, faith in God, or faith in eternal happiness.

These dramas may be dreams of visionary men, the work of revolutionists who are always needed to bring "flux and experiment to the stage and thus save drama from the blight of exhaustion." The theatre of each age is at the mercy of the playwrights and only when their imagination is high and the hot blood of protest is running through their veins can its other artists be given the opportunity to produce their best qualities. Though some people do not admit the glory and magic of the theatre, it still has the power to transform, to influence, to delight, and to instruct.

In this generation when "things are in the saddle, and ride mankind," the avant-gardists are serving a useful purpose by encouraging man to look at his society, to evaluate his surroundings, and to see its absurdity. They offer no road to salvation, no answers to the problems,

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88Brown, p. 462.
no easy victory. They reflect bewilderment, confusion, tension, suffering, death, not the physical death which Christians believe is only a transition to a glorious life, but complete extinction.

The result may be to awaken in man a search for solutions to his problems and for him to develop philosophical answers which will restore to life faith, hope, and charity. The dignity of man needs restoration and by an intelligent viewing of man's plight in *Godot*, *Endgame*, and the others the individual may be encouraged to reason once again, to accept the Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of man, to rise above the animal and vegetal state, and to walk in the realm of the Lord.
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