AN EXAMINATION OF MARTIN ESSLIN'S CONCEPT OF
THE ABSURDIST THEATRE AS AN EXPRESSION
OF CAMUS' CONCEPT OF ABSURDITY SET
FORTH IN "THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS"

THESIS

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Sandra Page Turney, B. A.
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This work is an effort to investigate the relationship between Albert Camus' philosophic concepts of the absurd presented in "The Myth of Sisyphus" and the Absurdist Theatre as defined by Martin Esslin. Included in this thesis is a discussion of each of the above concepts. Focus is placed upon the characteristics of the Absurdist Theatre which constitute the basis for the label "Absurdity." The conclusion indicates that while the playwright's personal experiences and philosophies correspond to Camus', their plays fail to communicate or express that concept of absurdity satisfactorily. The major emphasis is on the lack of concrete reality used to communicate a concept based upon concrete reality.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 1961 Martin Esslin published a book entitled *The Theatre of the Absurd*, in which he attempted to define and explain a new convention in drama associated with the names of Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and others. This book has become the basis of further work on the subject of Absurdist Theatre and has proved to be the most definitive text on the subject. In seeking to give reason and meaning to this new type of drama, Esslin has drawn upon the philosophy of the existentialists. In particular, Esslin has used one philosophical work by Albert Camus to aid him in his definition and explanation. Indeed, the name for the Absurdist Theatre is born of the use of "the absurd" by Camus in his essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus."¹

This study examines the relationship between the concept of absurdity in "The Myth of Sisyphus" and the philosophic basis of the Absurdist Theatre, and evaluates the degree to which that theatre expresses and communicates Camus' idea of the absurd. Evaluation of the communication aspects is made through report of early critical reaction to Absurdist plays in the United States.
Evaluation of expression is made through examination of selected Absurdist plays with respect to Camus' work and Esslin's interpretation of the genre.

Esslin proposes in his book that the theories and premises of Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus" are found in Absurdist works and that the feeling of absurdity which Camus describes is the same feeling of absurdity which Ionesco, Beckett, and others express.

Camus defines the feeling of absurdity:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusion and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of hope of a promised land to come. The divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity.²

Here, Camus has described a world which is deprived of the age-old values and assumptions, where the beliefs that man has had about his world and even his God are severely shaken.

This feeling has indeed been echoed by the Absurdists. Eugene Ionesco, for example, in "Notes and Counternotes," explains his sensation when he and the world confront one another:

Sometimes it seems to me that the forms of life are suddenly emptied of their content, reality is unreal, words are nothing but sounds bereft of sense, these houses and this sky are no longer anything but facades concealing nothing. . . .³

Ionesco is not alone in the experience nor the expression of absurdity among the writers of this genre.
"This sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition is, broadly speaking, the theme of the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco . . ." and others, according to Esslin. 4

Esslin describes the feelings expressed in The Theatre of the Absurd as follows:

The Theatre of the Absurd expresses the anxiety and despair that spring from the recognition that man is surrounded by areas of impenetrable darkness, that he can never know his true nature and purpose, and that no one will provide him with ready-made rules of conduct. 5

To clarify this feeling, Esslin again quotes Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus":

The certainty of the existence of a God who would give meaning to life has a far greater attraction than the knowledge that without him one could do evil without being punished. The choice between these alternatives would not be difficult. But there is no choice, and that is where the bitterness begins. 6

The actual thrust of "The Myth of Sisyphus" is put directly and succinctly by Camus early in the essay:

The subject of this essay is precisely the relationship between the absurd and suicide, the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd. 7

Though the question of suicide is answered in the course of the work, it is not that question which concerns Esslin nor the Absurdist Theatre. What Camus describes and discusses during the course of the investigation does concern them. Shortly after posing the question of suicide to his readers, Camus puts that question aside
as he describes coming to the realization of the absurd, the absurd itself, and the consequences of coming to that realization. He deals with "an absurd sensitivity that can be found widespread in the age." It is this sensitivity which Esslin feels is analogous to the sensations which prompted the plays of the Absurdist. More, it is this same sensation which is reflected in the plays themselves. "The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about absurdity; it merely presents it . . .".

And yet, does the Theatre of the Absurd actually present the absurdity discussed in the existentialist philosophies? If it does, does that absurdity correspond to the absurdity that Camus presents? "Man, according to Camus, experiences the Absurd at the same time that he notes its existence and combats it." Do Absurdist show that realization and the combatting of it, or do they only show a small portion of Camus' concepts—the absurd experience, for example? Camus makes it clear that, for him, the absurd is neither a conclusion nor an end, but a starting point and a point of departure. Do the Absurdist too, present the absurd as a starting point, or is it an end in itself?

Camus has compiled a detailed and indepth essay on the absurd and what the absurd entails. Esslin has found in "The Myth of Sisyphus" adequate material to both clarify and define the philosophic basis of the Absurdist Theatre,
and has apparently found it so satisfactory that the name for the genre was taken from it. However, Esslin has drawn upon only portions of the essay in his book, and has not dealt with the concepts of Camus in totality. Yet, by using Camus' work in such strategic positions in his book, Esslin has led his readers to believe that the one is analogous to the other, in so far as a theatre can be analogous to a philosophy.

In order to better understand the relationship between the two works, certain questions must be answered. To what extent does the Absurdist Theatre express the absurdity of life? Does the absurd experience in totality as defined by Camus, correspond to the Absurdist's approach? If "The Myth of Sisyphus" can be used to define the sensations that are the basis of the Absurd Theatre, can the Absurd Theatre prove to be an adequate expression of the concept of absurdity as defined by Camus? Or, are only portions of the essay applicable to the theatre, and if so, what portions?

Procedure

This thesis consists of three other chapters. Chapter II consists of a discussion of Camus' essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus," and concentrates on the concept of the absurd developed in this work.

Chapter III examines the Absurdist Theatre and its philosophic basis. Three plays by three different authors
categorized as Absurdist by Esslin, are investigated as expression of the absurd as defined by Camus.

Chapter IV investigates the relationship between the two works by, firstly, citing critical reactions to the plays, and secondly, discussing individual aspects of the plays that either support or detract from the premise that these plays express the absurd as defined by Camus. There is also a short section included on philosophy as drama and the chapter ends with a conclusion and comment.
NOTES


5Esslin, p. 374.


8Camus, p. 2.

9Esslin, p. 6.


11Camus, p. 2.
CHAPTER II

CAMUS AND THE ABSURD

Camus’ first major philosophical essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus," was an attempt to express a personal view of a widespread sensation of his time; that of the absurdity of the human condition. Camus was one voice among many who were expressing a certain awareness, a certain realization that life had become absurd and meaningless. "His automatic assumption that life has no meaning, his denunciation of hope, his determined refusal of any comforting transcendence exactly fitted the mood of the time."¹

Camus was a product of his age, a child of the despair and anguish thrust upon mankind by the atrocities of two world wars and the development of weapons that could destroy all life. The mass destruction of the wars, the disillusionment of the people, forced thinking men to concern themselves with the true meaning of existence, with the ultimate meaning of man’s action on this earth. These questions were not new ones, but the children of the 1940’s were directed away from familiar answers, particularly the ones that revolved around a God or a supernatural being that in some way gave life a meaning and a purpose. These answers no longer proved satisfying, and, indeed, began to
appear as an escape from the real problems instead of an answer to them. Camus, his predecessors, and his contemporaries were concerned with the experience of the absurd, a certain nausea that confronted man in his search for the meaning of his relation to his world and his life in that world.

In approaching the absurd, Camus essentially described three phases of its development, consisting of the absurd experience, or the process by which the absurd is recognized, facing this absurd condition, and the consequences of recognizing the absurd. It is the consequences of the absurd that most interested Camus, and it is in his discussion of these consequences that Camus showed himself to be unique among his contemporaries. Though his description of the absurd seemed particularly pessimistic and despairing, Camus was able to move from the absurd to happiness. He described and delineated a completely hopeless condition, and yet, "Camus found that the absurdity of the world was, paradoxically, an invitation to happiness." The absurd was, to Camus, a point of departure. His descriptions and discussions of absurd experiences were only preliminaries to his ultimate goal--the creation of human values in a world devoid of hope or meaning.

"At a time when the absurd was synonymous with gloom and misery, Camus had, without denying the gloom and misery, given it a new resonance and a source of possible happiness."
Therefore, Camus must stand as a figure of hope in a despairing age.

Absurd Experiences

To Albert Camus, the basic philosophical question concerned the worth of life and the value of continuing to live. It is with that question in mind that Camus, in his essay, broached the problem of suicide. When man is faced with the possible worthlessness of life, one of his options for action is suicide. If the mind chooses suicide as an escape, it implies a realization that there is no profound reason for living, that all is useless, particularly the suffering that accompanies life. A belief that God does not or might not exist only adds to the despair of one questioning the value of life. Without God, man's traditional values and ways of living cease to have meaning, and without meaning life becomes purposeless. Thus comes the decision and the choice of whether or not to live. The realization that comes before that choice is made is essentially a realization of the absurd nature of life. Before encountering the absurd, man continued to live with aims, with a concern for the future, and with the belief that life should be directed and purposeful. He lived in the innocent belief that he was meant to fulfill some plan, that his actions had some value. That same life became senseless when balanced with the ultimate reality of death and the possibility of nothingness beyond it. The contemplation of death and its finality
can thrust man unmercifully into the grasp of the absurd. There is no prior experience of death, and lives are lived as if there were no end, as if they would go on forever. Yet, in facing the certainty of death and in realizing that there may be no afterlife, nothing to correspond to any form of religiously oriented salvation, man asks what reason he has for living his life as he does. Many actions, motivations, values and choices are dependent upon the reward or punishment of an afterlife. With these concepts destroyed, what meaning is there to life itself? Yet, one need not contemplate suicide or death in order to experience the absurd.

The realization of the absurd can come to man in numerous and varied forms. Many familiar sensations, many fleeting experiences can be as indicative of the absurd as a major turning point in a life. The realization begins as man begins to think. "Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined." To begin to think about self, the world, and the relationship between the two, can result, finally, in the realization that life is absurd. That realization is not necessarily the product of a long period of meditation or contemplation; the absurd can strike at any moment, any place, any time. The instant that the mind ceases to accept, removes itself and views the surroundings in a critical, new light, the absurd is given birth.
The mechanical nature of life can itself become the basis for awakening. The routine which deadens in its progression; the endless repetition of waking, eating, working, sleeping; the same action day after day, can stop momentarily, and questioning can begin. The routine which lulled man into passive acceptance can also be the springboard for questioning, the reason that, one day, man stops and questions the reason for his existence. That sudden instant when he wonders what all his actions are for, what his life means, is the beginning of the absurd.

The absurd can also begin with the discovery of time in its purest form--the actual realization of time as a passing, "destructive element." Time leads us further and further along an abruptly ending path. Paradoxically, man had tied himself to the future, to someday, to later on, and it is this thing he longs for which ultimately destroys him. Camus states, "Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it." The confrontation between man and his own desires can be sudden and piercing. This, too, constitutes a feeling of absurdity.

There are moments, too, when man can feel alienated from the world in which he lives. Suddenly, even if just for a moment, the world divests itself of the characteristics and attributes man has assigned. The world becomes exactly what it is, devoid of interpretation, divorcing itself from man's understanding. The beauty of nature may be
overcoming, or the simple complexity of a stone may be suddenly remote from man's understanding. "The world evades us because it becomes itself again," says Camus. And as the world becomes itself, man can feel detached in an unfamiliar setting.

This divorce, this separation, can occur with other human beings as well as with the world in general. At certain moments a sense of isolation or distance overcomes and renders familiar things unknown. A loved friend, a wife, a husband, can suddenly appear to be a stranger. "Everything that surrounds them appears ridiculous." The normal behavior of man, the actions that constitute daily existence, seem stupid and without sense or reason. Man is confronted with the horribly revealing picture of what he is. Sometimes man's own image in a photograph or a mirror can disquiet him and make him uneasy, because he, at certain moments, feels estranged from the physical being that houses him. This revelation can lead to the alienation of man from himself.

Camus, in enumerating the absurd experiences, was not seeking to define the absurd, but only to describe it:

The feeling of the absurd is not . . . the notion of the absurd. It lays the foundation for it, and that is all. It is not limited to that brief moment when it passes judgement on the universe . . . It is alive; in other words, it must die or else reverberate.

Having thus been awakened and begun questioning, man can find no ready answers that are truly satisfying. His
insulated life, heretofore undisturbed by questioning is now
destroyed. The old answers no longer work, and yet, at the
same time man feels a nostalgia for the familiar, for what
he once seemingly understood so well. The world, once so
comprehensible, is rendered confusing by the new, critical
light man has adopted when looking at himself and the world.
Thus, man, in seeking to find what is true and what is not
ture, what is and is not reality, is still drawn to the
familiar precisely because it is known and comfortable. 

Yet, what does man ever really know for certain? With all
of the means man has developed to aid him in his search for
the final truth, and with all of the paths that he has fol-
lowed to reach the final solution, he still remains unsatis-
fied. Even science failed its initial expectations as the
key to ultimate knowledge, and it supplied, instead of an-
wers, hypotheses. Science "can only explain the world
though enumeration of phenomenon." 

Man, himself, can
only describe what he perceives, and like science, his be-
lief in what is true can only be an hypothesis. Yet the mind
still hungers for answers, for clarity in a world where no
answers are given, and where nothing is really clear. Man
can find little to reconcile him in his search for happiness
and for understanding. It is these two elements, man's
longing for clarity and the silence of the world that con-
stitute the absurd. The absurd is "neither the one nor the
other of it's two terms; it arises from their confrontation."
The absurd is a divorce, it is a tension between two opposing forces, between a desperate need for answers and a total lack of explanation or solution.

Facing the Absurd

The absurd, being a confrontation between two elements, is totally dependent upon those two elements for its existence. The absurd "cannot be divided. To destroy one of it's terms is to destroy the whole. There can be no absurd outside of the human mind." And there can be no absurd outside of the world.

Camus suggests that man, when confronted with absurdity, has traditionally had two courses of action open to him. He can commit either physical or philosophical suicide. If, in finding life meaningless, man chooses to kill himself, he escapes the tension and destroys the confrontation between his need and the world's indifference. The absurd, too, is destroyed, for one of it's elements, man's reason, is removed.

It is, however, philosophical suicide that is the course of action most frequently taken, according to Camus. Generally, philosophical suicide is acceptance of an explanation of the world or universe. Even though the world itself has supplied no answers, man fabricates some explanation to satisfy his need. Explanation, once given and accepted, implies that the world has a meaning, a purpose, or at the very least, can be understood. An explanation of the world, then, changes the nature of the problem, and thus dismisses the absurd.
If man can be reconciled in his search, then the longing for clarity is negated and the absurd is destroyed.

Camus then refers to the "existential attitude as philosophical suicide" in his essay. He discusses Heidegger, Jaspers, Chestov, Kierkegaard, and Husserl, and finds in all their philosophies a destruction of the absurd. They take what is referred to as a "leap into an irrational explanation." Each of them find a forced explanation of the world that has a religious or mystical nature about it. Either God or some essence or meaning transcends life and gives it purpose in their philosophies. These explanations are referred to as a "leap" because one must assume a great deal in order to accept them. Their explanations are not founded on logical reasoning. All of them started "from a philosophy of the world's lack of meaning" and ended up "by finding a meaning and a depth in it." By finding meaning the absurd is dismissed, but not really dealt with. "The absurd cannot be transcended, for it requires no other universe than our daily world, our earth, our fellow human beings, and ourselves," Camus warns.

The problem that concerns Camus is knowing whether it is possible to "live without appeal." The human mind itself has brought the absurd to consciousness. Human intelligence is responsible for its birth. How can the mind, then, negate itself by dismissing or diluting the problem it brought to light? It is here that Camus introduces a third course of action.
In order to live, Camus suggests that man must face the lack of answers, and must accept the silence of the world. "Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it." To Camus, the only action is to preserve the absurd. The absurd man must do everything to keep the absurd before him so that he is continually conscious of it, continually faced with its existence and, therefore, constantly aware of the limitations it implies. Man must accept the limitations and absurdity itself and must conquer it through that acceptance. Conquering the absurd does not constitute an overcoming of it, but, instead, conquering through total realization of it. Once man has determined that his life is governed by absurdity, that his relationship with the world constitutes the absurd condition, he must "sacrifice everything to these certainties, and . . . must see them squarely to be able to maintain them." Camus characterizes the action of preserving the absurd as decent. If one ignores or chooses to disregard the truths the mind has brought to light, he is being basically weak, denying that which he knows to be true, finding solace in escape. Camus' major concern is, after all, to find a manner of living which is compatible with the knowledge of the absurd. What Camus tries tenaciously to avoid is any diluting or veiling of the absurd. One must face life as it is, and also learn not to make demands of it. Above all, Camus' position advocates an integrity, a strength and a courage that is absent from the attitude adopted by his contemporaries.
The Consequences of the Absurd

If man, upon recognizing the absurd, chooses to deal with it and refuses to escape it, what consequences does this decision entail? The first consequence, according to Camus, is revolt. In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus seemingly presents revolt as a logical outcome of the absurd. Logical outcome or simply choice, to Camus revolt is vital. Recognizing the absurd is essentially recognizing life without hope, life with no meaning or purpose. Revolt, then, is "the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it." It is by means of revolt that man is able to deal with the absurd. Given a meaningless world and knowledge of the limitations of the absurd, revolt seems to be the only means by which man can be made certain of his existence. The revolt must be constant, because the preservation of that most precious knowledge of being depends upon it. Man, facing what he has determined to be true, and facing himself as he really is, must also constantly revolt against it. "To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience." Acceptance would be physical or philosophical suicide. Camus' inquiry necessitates that the very thing that crushed man should be preserved in order that he may be able to respect its essential elements. Camus is actually defining his inquiry as "a confrontation and an unceasing struggle." Everything that
dilutes or devalues the absurd renders all of man's discoveries on that plane pointless. "The absurd has meaning only in so far as it is not agreed to." To be certain that one's condition is hopeless and yet to continue in spite of it's hopelessness is what restores dignity to life. Revolt involves the "simultaneous awareness and rejection of death." The fight to maintain lucidity is continuous. Only by being constantly aware can man hope to deal with absurdity and begin to confront life in the present. From the recognition of the absurd "man wins his own strange victory." What revolt and awareness ultimately do is to show man his own destiny, stripped of illusion and permeated with light. All alternative ways of dealing with the absurd are, in essence, escapes from it, actually resulting in a dilution of reality itself.

The absurd is man's extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and that day-to-day revolt, he gives proof of his only truth which is his defiance.

Man revolts, therefore, he exists. He continues to fight against the knowledge that he believes to be true. "To continue to live is to accept the world for what it is and to reject it through action."

The second consequence of the absurd is freedom. Man is freed of the responsibility associated with an afterlife, and thus his freedom of action in the present is magnified. It is a freedom which can be lived and
experienced in the here and now. Having tied his life to the future, man is aware, now, that the future is his enemy, that it implies being closer to death, and ultimately the ending of any existence. Thus planning for the future, even the future itself, is annihilated. "The absurd chooses the present over the future, the certitudes of earth and flesh over the elusive and hypothetical soul." Having no God, no transcending purpose to life means that no action is more valuable than another. The absurd renders "all actions equally unimportant and insignificant." The set of values that once governed man's life are now stripped of any importance and he is freed from any set system of value. Every action, every decision is focused upon the only consideration that absurdity knows—the present. Aims of the future are abolished and attention must now concentrate on "the will to live." The absurd man had once thought himself free, but he had also imagined some sort of purpose to his existence, some kind of goal which he was striving to achieve. Removing oneself from one's own life, viewing it objectively and reasonably, offers in itself, a "principle of liberation." The absurd in itself can free man from the illusions that once burdened him. Absurd freedom is certainly not without limits. Indeed, life itself limits this freedom—it, like all else, ends in death.

Knowing that absurdity permeates life itself, and that the freedom absurdity gives is limited by death, what matters
most is not the quality of life, but the quantity. The most living, the most experience, results in an absurd happiness which is born of limits and is without hope. "What is gained through revolt is a greater intensity of life, a determination to draw from life all that is available." Revolt expresses the refusal of the individual to succumb to the fact of death, and by this refusal man gains a greater appreciation of all experiences, an almost desperate need to capture life itself.

One must recall here that value judgements have been cast aside with the belief of a transcending being and an afterlife. Therefore, preferring quantity to quality cannot logically be considered immoral or decadent. And yet, Camus was speaking here more of being open to and aware of the experiences that do occur in one's life than of actually seeking to fill one's life with as many experiences as possible. If man is constantly faced with the absurd and all that that entails, he will become more aware of what experiences he does encounter. He will, in fact, develop a passion for living, for being, and for feeling. This is the third consequence of the absurd. "Man must be conscious of each of his experiences, for only through his awareness can he live to the maximum." Life alone is precious. The flame, though flickering, becomes priceless, all-meaningful, and filled with passion. Man is freed from illusions and bent on exhausting life itself.
Absurd Man and Absurd Creation

The absurd man has certain characteristics which have already been determined. He is one who maintains awareness and lucidity, is freed from the future, and knows the limits of his freedom. He is constantly in revolt against the certainty of his fate and accepts no judgement or value system built upon the rewards of an afterlife. Above all, he is the man who devours life with a passion for sensation. But does being an absurd man mean that he is free to do everything? After all, no morals, or values bind him. Camus finds that though everything is allowed that that "does not mean that nothing is forbidden."47 The absurd simply makes all actions equal. Every action still has its consequences, though those consequences are tied to the present and not to the future. To commit crimes, for instance, would be foolish. The absurd does not pass a judgement on crime, but it renders the criminal action futile. Naturally, every action, criminal or not, is ultimately futile, but "the point is to live."48

Absurd freedom is not necessarily a pleasure. Dostoevsky referred to this kind of freedom as "the terrible gift."49 It is much easier to live in a world in which right and wrong are clearly established, in which a purpose to life is the guiding factor. Given a choice, man will always prefer to hope. "But there is no choice, and that is where the bitterness comes in."50 Thus, man must turn
to himself, his own resources, in order to know what action
to take. It is possible that what is learned in past action
will be transferred to future action. Immediate consequence
will become the teacher. However, in the absurd world, it
is impossible to expect that a set of ethics will result.
Nothing more can be expected than "illustrations and the
breath of human life." 51

By way of describing the absurd man, Camus uses three
examples, the lover, the conquerer, and the actor. He does
not propose that the illustrations be models. He merely
seeks to underline what absurdity necessitates and dic-
tates. Certainly Camus does not mean to suggest that only
these types can be absurd men. If a clerk has the same con-
sciousness of his own fate as the conquerer does, then he is
equal to him. But in his essay, Camus chooses men who "have
the passion to exhaust everything given." 52 All continue
their action in the knowledge that everything they do is
utterly useless. They are all in a position to concentrate
on their singular passions and experiences. All have an
opportunity to experience great variety of sensation within
their own choice of activity. Each seek only momentary hap-
piness and expect nothing more. What gives them their
freedom and their happiness is their "honesty toward life,
this consciousness of the uselessness of their lives ..." 53
They realize that their longings will never be satisfied,
that they will forever be frustrated in their search, and
yet they take joy in the exhaustion of the moment. Again and again they return to the instant that they know they exist, and draw from it everything possible. They have ceased to hope, and yet they do not despair. Instead, they revolt against their hopelessness by devouring their lives with passion. None of them deviate from the limits set by their absurdity. Yet, Camus has a final character, one who epitomizes the absurd man—-the creator.

What of the one who creates works of art in the absurd world? Camus considers the creator the most absurd character. Instead of escaping or eluding the reality of the absurd through creation, Camus sees creation as a chance of keeping the consciousness alive. "Creating is living doubly." But, as in philosophies, Camus finds few works of art which remain true to the absurd. Explanation of the world, or the assignment of deeper meaning, must be avoided for the work to be truly absurd. The artists must be true to the lucid thought which initiated the work. That which he describes must "signify nothing more than itself." The artist must realize that his creation changes nothing and signifies nothing. His action of creation is as unimportant as any other action. The absurd dictates this.

What is difficult is to avoid hope. It is so much easier to hope than to live without it. Knowing this makes it imperative that unfailing consciousness must prevail all life and all works of art. To create and know that it is
all for nothing, is the burden of the absurd man. And yet, he continues to create. Much more is asked of the creator, the artist, for aside from concentrating effort upon maintaining awareness, he must transfer this awareness to his own creations. "It calls for daily effort, self mastery, a precise estimate of the limits of truth, measure and strength." 57

Sisyphus

Condemned to forever rolling a rock to the top of a mountain and watching the rock fall back to the bottom, Sisyphus is the absurd hero. This is the punishment that the gods dealt him for actions of his own choice. He is condemned to hopeless labor.

Camus sees Sisyphus as achieving a consciousness when he begins this journey back down the mountain. He knows "himself to be the master of his days." 58 He knows no hope of every succeeding, yet he continues. Everything is not exhausted, for life does go on, and, after all, Sisyphus' fate has been his own doing. He alone, with his actions, has created his own destiny. He is free from transcending hope or reason. Camus imagines Sisyphus happy. "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart." 59

The Significance of "The Myth of Sisyphus"

When "The Myth of Sisyphus" was first published, it was one among various works by different authors dealing
with the absurd and absurd experiences. The mood of the time was such that the public acceptance of these ideas was widespread. Yet, a public conditioned to receive essays on the absurdity of the human condition failed to understand Camus' "total intention." The description of the incoherent world became the reason for the essay's popularity, even though this was only one aspect of Camus' work. Most of the reading public failed to perceive the positive side of his concepts. His purpose was not to describe the absurd, but to find a way to live with it. Camus was essentially affirming life and the value of life in itself. What many saw as another description of despair and anguish was Camus' expression of a chance for happiness. Camus was using the experience of the absurd as a point of departure only. Camus' concept of the absurd can almost be seen as a process by which man can achieve freedom, happiness and dignity.
NOTES


2 Thody, p. 8.


4 Thody, p. 28.

5 Camus, p. 3.

6 Camus, p. 5.

7 Camus, p. 42.

8 Camus, p. 4.


10 Camus, p. 11.

11 Camus, p. 11.

12 Camus, p. 11.

13 Camus, p. 11.

14 Camus, p. 21.

15 Camus, p. 13.


17 Camus, p. 21.


19 Camus, p. 23.
20 Thody, p. 5.
21 Camus, p. 31.
22 Rhein, p. 27.
23 Camus, p. 24.
24 Camus, p. 31.
25 Rhein, p. 27.
26 Camus, p. 39.
27 Camus, p. 40.
28 Thody, p. 6.
29 Camus, p. 16.
30 Camus, p. 16.
31 Cruickshank, p. 45.
32 Camus, p. 40.
33 Camus, p. 40.
34 Camus, p. 23.
35 Camus, p. 25.
36 Camus, p. 40.
37 Rhein, p. 80.
38 Camus, p. 41.
40 Rhein, p. 28.
41 Quiliot, p. 96.
42 Thody, p. 17.
44 Camus, p. 44.
45 Thody, p. 10.
46 Rhein, p. 29.
47 Camus, p. 50.
48 Camus, p. 11.
50 Camus, p. 50.
51 Camus, p. 50.
52 Rhein, p. 29.
53 Rhein, pp. 29-30.
54 Camus, p. 68.
55 Camus, p. 70.
56 Camus, p. 72.
57 Camus, p. 85.
58 Camus, p. 91.
59 Camus, p. 91.
60 Rhein, p. 24.
62 Parker, p. 110.
CHAPTER III

MARTIN ESSLIN AND THE ABSURDIST THEATRE

Martin Esslin took a prominent place in the world of theatre literature with the publication of *The Theatre of the Absurd* in 1961. He presented the world with much needed definition and at least some understanding of the avant-garde drama of the 1940's and 1950's. When playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Harold Pinter first presented their plays, the world was confronted with totally new forms of theatre. What was considered the traditional structure of drama was, in fact, ignored by these playwrights, and even the subject matter of their works was difficult to comprehend. Thus, this new drama was in need of critical evaluation. Esslin defined the new theatre in terms of the absurdity of the human condition, taking from the Existentialists, and in particular Albert Camus, reasons for and understanding of what the avant-garde drama was presenting to the world. In naming the movement the Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin provided a label, or a title, that tied that theatre to a philosophy of life that was becoming increasingly popular. Esslin's nomenclature was to prove equally popular and captivating.
Esslin claims that the early rejection of these plays was due to the lack of appropriate criteria to judge them. The unique and unconventional dramas of men like Beckett, were so far afield from traditional structure and subject matter that when judged by old standards the plays were most certainly found wanting. With the publication of Esslin's book, he tried to develop the proper criteria, because, far from dismissing these plays as nonsense, he found them valuable enough to warrant a new system of judgement. This new system makes it imperative that the Absurdist plays be judged within their own frame of endeavor. It was Esslin's purpose, in writing about Absurdist Theatre, to develop criteria and to clarify what the playwrights were trying to do.

Why the Term Absurdist Theatre

According to Esslin, the Absurdist are so called because they each, personally and individually, came to realize the absurdity of existence and because they seek to express this sensation in their work. Esslin includes among the Absurdist, Arthur Adamov, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Edward Albee, Jean Genet, Arthur Kopit, Dino Buzzati, and a host of others. These artists are not grouped together because they use the same structure in their plays or because their subject matter is the same. The expressions of these playwright's sensations are as personal and individual as the sensations themselves.
Yet, Esslin found enough common concerns and common means of expression in these men and their works to warrant their categorization as Absurdists.

Generally speaking, the theme of the plays written by such authors is "the sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition." ¹ Few, if any of these playwrights consider themselves part of a movement or school. ² What has become the Theatre of the Absurd is essentially a reflection of the state of the world, which, to these playwrights, is fragmented, unreasonable, and meaningless. Each playwright naturally perceives the human condition and expresses that perception in a slightly different manner. They still, however, function in a framework based on the absurdity of life.

The purpose of this paper is not to examine each individual Absurdist or play, but to examine their common bases and expressions in reference to Camus' concepts. Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Harold Pinter will be taken as sufficiently representative of the Absurdists to be examined as part of a whole, and thus their particular philosophies and plays will have focus. Nonetheless, they will be continually considered as representative and will be discussed in terms of Esslin's definition of Absurdism.

Eugene Ionesco, among the most articulate of the Absurdists, recounts what have been, to him, absurd experiences, in two works, *Fragments from a Journal*, and *Notes*
and Counternotes. He shares with the reader his sense of anguish and despair when confronting existence and the knowledge of life's futility. "What obsesses me personally, what interests me profoundly, what I am committed to is the problem of the human condition as a whole." Ionesco, like Camus, has become acutely aware of time and the passing of time: "When did I first notice that time 'passed'? The sense of time was not at first associated with the idea of death." Later, the two were to become inseparable to Ionesco, for as time passed death drew closer, a fact that was impossible to deny. With the awareness of death comes the possibility that beyond death lies nothingness. This is the nothingness of which Camus speaks and which Ionesco echoes: "A fear of Nothingness. How can I describe it? I clutched my breast to make sure that I was still there." Ionesco is not drawn in to the endless march towards death, but, instead, tries to recover the essence of life in the present. He is torn between the knowledge and the awareness of death and yet at the same moment feels an urgent desire to live.

These recollections of sensations are indeed echoes of the Absurd experience. Not only has Ionesco felt time as a destructive element, become aware of death and nothingness, and sought the present, but he has also experienced a divorce from life itself, an ability to view it critically. In Notes and Counternotes, Ionesco describes a feeling of
being totally alienated from the world around him, finding familiar things unfamiliar and viewing creatures and surroundings as though he was seeing them for the first time.\footnote{7}

Samuel Beckett, too, has sensed the absurd, the meaninglessness of the world. He, like Ionesco, has found the world to be without a centre, without God, and "not finding that presence, he cannot escape the conviction that such a world is worthless."\footnote{8} Even with such a conviction, it is clear that Beckett refuses to succumb to the devastating weight of that knowledge, but continues to live and more importantly, continues to write. Believing as he does, that life has no purpose, and yet continuing to create in spite of that knowledge, constitutes what Camus refers to as absurd revolt. Beckett's works are permeated with a "compassion, an intense and moving regard for man's condition in this world from which meaning is withheld and mortality \footnote{9} the one certainty."\footnote{9}

Beckett, like Ionesco and Camus, has found no answers. The universe remains as silent for him as for the others, and he, too, refuses to assign a meaning to men's lives. Beckett will not allow himself to "take any of the irrational leaps of faith that might tempt him. He refuses, in fact, to commit what Camus called 'philosophical suicide'."\footnote{10} Believing as he does, Beckett can only describe his sensations, without putting order to them or creating solutions for the problems his mind knows to exist. To
do so would be paramount to denying what he knows to be true, in fact, living what Beckett himself knows to be a lie. He prefers to face the truth, however painful that may be.

Harold Pinter, along with his contemporaries, shows "a genuine perplexity about the nature of our experience of the world . . ."11 This perplexity springs from the same questioning which has tormented many others, the need to find reasons, and still Pinter can find no meaning to the world or to life itself. The nothingness that pervades the lives of Beckett and Ionesco is also found in Pinter's world. His plays are essentially commentaries on the lack of fulfillment when man questions his existence.12 Pinter chooses to begin his commentary, his investigation and descriptions of the world by reducing man to the core of his existence, to man facing the certainty of death and the possibility of Nothingness.13

The themes that recur in the work of these three men and, by definition, in the world of all Absurdists, are naturally reflective of their perception of the world. That perception generally manifests itself in terms of loneliness, isolation, despair and suffering in an indifferent world. Ionesco focuses also on society and protests against the mechanical civilization, the loss of values and the "resulting degradation of life," that, to him characterize the present age.14 When dealing with these themes, Ionesco describes a different absurdity, one not reaching
to the limits of mankind, but confined to societies and civilizations of man's making, to the atrocities men create and live with. Still, however, the overwhelming sensations of Ionesco's plays is despair. Ionesco is concerned with a dual absurdity, one arising from the pressures of society and then embraced in the total absurdity of existence itself. Certainly, to deal with either one separately is to describe despair and suffering but to deal with both together can only paint a picture of devastating anguish.

Pinter's plays are often classified as "comedy of menace." They contain a kind of horror that is peculiar to Pinter. That horror is based on the unknown, the unknowable, or unseen force that constitutes a "constant threat to the individual personality...." Pinter's concern seems to often parallel that of Ionesco in his attention to individuals who are threatened or who must conform to society. It is Pinter's conviction that nothing is certain in present times, everything is relative and that we are surrounded by the unknown. The uncertainty of what the force is and exactly what threat that force poses to man is the source of menace in Pinter's plays.

Beckett, on the other hand, generally remains within the realm of the absurdity of life itself. His works basically convey "their author's sense of mystery, bewilderment, and anxiety when confronted with the human condition."
Beckett's major concern is the human condition and all subordinate themes are still within the framework of the absurdity of existence. Most of Beckett's works are permeated with "a negative awareness of the Deity. . . ."20 This negative awareness is, after all, what makes life meaningless, and this theme naturally prevades his work.

The Absurdist plays must be seen as testimonies, the playwrights as witnesses to a disjointed world. As Camus describes the Absurd Man, he must be one who prescribes no answers, for none exist. Therefore, these playwrights in perceiving the world as absurd and in choosing to express that perception, must only describe what they feel and see. Ionesco says that that is all a playwright can do, that he cannot offer any kind of message or any type of instruction.21 Esslin, too, claims that no member of the Absurdist Theatre is concerned with conveying information, ideologies, or messages.22 These Absurd plays tell no story, in the traditional sense, but, instead, seek to communicate a "sense of being."23

Esslin points out that the playwrights of the absurd share the metaphysics of Camus and Sartre. Both Camus and Sartre wrote about the same sense of absurdity that concerns the avant-garde playwrights, but they framed their plays in traditional structure, while the new playwrights express absurdity in structure as well as subject matter. Esslin says that in many ways, the Absurdist Theatre is a more
adequate expression of the absurd philosophy than the theatre of Sartre and Camus. If the world has lost its purpose and reason, then expression of that world through rational, reasonable thought, dialogue and action, is less adequate than a theatre that breaks down structure to show a structureless world.

The Form of Absurdist Drama

In trying to communicate a sense of being, these dramatists have developed a new form of playwrighting. The subject matter of the Absurdists, the human condition, and the form in which that subject matter is expressed are inseparable. If it were the subject matter alone that defined Absurdists, then any who concern themselves with metaphysical anguish in a world devoid of purpose would be Absurdists, including Camus and Sartre. This is not the case, for what distinguishes this group is a "striving for integration between the subject matter and the form in which it is expressed. . . ." Thus, neither the form nor the subject matter, but both working together to form one image create Absurdist drama.

The structure of the Absurdist drama includes no story or plot, no beginning or end, characters who are often unrecognizable, appearing as "mechanical puppets," unmotivated action and dialogue consisting of incoherent language, resulting in what seems to be "reflections of dreams or nightmares." It is definitely clear that
these plays do not follow conventional structure and that older standards of criticism are not applicable to them.

Characters

The characters of the Absurdist drama have, in themselves, unique qualities. Though characters are not a major component in Absurdist Theatre, they are major components of theatre itself. The problem of character has been dealt with in innumerable ways throughout the history of theatre. Playwrights have been noted for their depth of characterizations, their superficiality, their realistic delineation, their use of characterization to achieve certain ends, and other endless methods of handling characters. With the Absurdist Theatre comes the dehumanized character. They are, as stated above, more puppet-like than human-like, generally incapable of thought. Audiences are confronted with characters with whom they cannot identify, and therefore, the audiences' view of the characters and the situation is more objective than in traditional theatre. This process of creating puppets rather than people advances, for the Absurdists, the feeling of the present human condition--the absurd.

The Poetic Image

Esslin uses the concept of poetic images in relation to the form of Absurdist works because poetry is associative and ambiguous, and corresponds well to what the
Absurdists create. What is captured in poetry is not necessarily new, but it is presented in such a way as to arouse in the reader an experience of what the poet is writing about. This is one means, says Esslin, by which "we can, however imperfectly, communicate the reality of our intuition of the world." The poetic image is designed to evoke concrete visions of what the author is trying to communicate. All of the elements of theatre, the characters, the action, the dialogue, the set, the subjects, are put together, in the Absurdist Theatre, in such a way as to communicate images that the audience can perceive and comprehend instantly, much in the same manner that one sees an abstract painting. The sense of reality and the sense of being that the Absurdist plays try to communicate would probably best be understood in a single vision, an instant perception, like a painting. However, due to the nature of the medium, plays must occupy time and must not only communicate a vision, but entertain and stimulate as well. Thus the playwrights of this theatre continue an uphill battle. Not only do they continue to write when they know their work can have no effect on the world they know to be meaningless, but they choose to communicate their visions in a medium that prevents the ideal, instant perception of those visions. Yet, this is the challenge--a medium that combines and utilizes all mediums, used to communicate a sense of being. These plays must be
apprehended in their totality, for as Beckett contends, "the
work of art as a whole is its meaning, what is said is indis-
solubly linked with the manner in which it is said, and cannot
be said any other way." 31

It is because the structure and subject are so tied
together in Absurdist Theatre, that it is impossible to
find a key to understanding them. They cannot be dissected
in the traditional manner for that very dissection would ne-
gate the plays themselves. The poetic image is dependent
upon all parts being assembled together to create one vision.
For this reason, Beckett's plays are really "the intense
centre of a play" in which "it is possible to pass behind
the level of conceptual thinking." 32 Pinter's plays are
a "lyrical vision" which communicates the author's sense
of being though a "complex structure of verbal and situa-
tional imagery." 33 Ionesco's world is communicated in
much the same way, for he depicts a world gone mad that
can only be "represented by a theatre equally mad, where
the only certainty is death, the final act of absurdity,
where symbols have to be found to express the total mad-
ness. . . ." 34

The images that the audiences of Absurdist drama are
confronted with lack of definition and clarity, and yet
this, the Absurdists contend, is precisely what the au-
diences must see. Because there are no longer any clear-
cut answers, and because no system of values can fully
explain the present world, it is the playwright's duty to avoid putting definition or clarity in a situation where there simply is not any. The Absurdist Theatre, in fact, expresses the lack of any "generally accepted cosmic system of values." 35

Reality

Throughout the history of theatre, particularly from the 1800's to the present, the definition of reality has been constantly altered. For some, reality and truth were only found within the vision of the mind, for others reality was only what was observable, what could be perceived through the five senses. Then, of course, artists concerned themselves with psychological reality, individual reality, and ad infinitum. The Absurdists, too, are concerned with a particular reality, and, to them, as to all who have dealt with the concept of reality, theirs is the truer picture. 36

What is different about the Absurdist's reality is the scope of their vision. They have discarded all external, and to them superfluous incidents and circumstances, and concentrated on man in his most basic state. The Absurdists recognize that men have always had, and will continue to have the same basic emotions and fears that, in fact, make human beings what they are. Men have always felt love and hate, have always suffered isolation and loneliness, and also have always sought answers. What the Absurdists concern themselves with and express could well be, they feel,
an expression of every age. As Ionesco states, "People died of love a hundred years ago, and also from the fear of death. They still do today." Narrowing the scope of reality in this way, the Absurdists also narrow the potential problems of existence. Problems "of life and death, isolation and communication," are basically few, according to Esslin. The reality of each Absurdist drama is necessarily different from others of its genre. However, the majority of the plays show characters who have very little, if any background and whose circumstances are definitely limited to the moment that is captured in the play. Again, Absurdists' plays cannot be dissected in the usual sense, for all components are dependent upon each other. Therefore, to discuss character or dialogue, or any other part of the plays is to also discuss the reality captured in these plays. Because there is no conventional development, there is no exposition, and thus, all the audience knows about the characters or the situations is what is seen onstage. What is seen onstage is characters that very little is known about. The audience sees no particular motivation for the actions that are taken, and they know little about the psychological state of the characters, where they came from or where they are going. The audience knows only what the characters do in the immediate, given environment, in the moment that they are caught onstage. That moment in these characters lives is essentially what the play
communicates, whether it be a state of being or choices made in the absurd world.

Pinter argues that the traditional well-made play is less real than those of his creation. The problem with the former style is "precisely that it provides too much information about the background and motivation of each character." That opinion is based on the observation that in everyday life, no one knows much more about any situation than Pinter presents in his plays. Various events between people are witnessed and the only things known about the people are what is seen in that moment. The action and environment are often seen, but the reasons for such action, the motivating factors of the participants, are rarely known. There is another concept here, and that is that even if reasons are given by the characters themselves, the Absurdists feel that no one can really know if those reasons or motivations are the true ones. So complex is man's reasoning and individual personality that it is impossible to know, perhaps even for the characters themselves, what motivates them. The fact is, that regardless of the reasoning behind choices or actions, the actions are still made and that is what the Absurdists portray onstage—man stripped of accidental circumstance, of definitive description, seen only as they are, doing only what they are doing.

To the Absurdists, traditional plays, by giving too much superfluous information, are really watering down
reality. By showing backgrounds of characters, and concentrating on philosophical, social, religious, economic or political conditions, the playwrights of traditional drama have indirectly or directly portrayed these circumstances as having genuine meaning and value. To Absurdists, having come to the realization that life itself is meaningless, any concentration on those conditions is essentially concentration on insignificant factors. By the same line of thought, those more traditional plays have a climax and a discernable ending and are supporting the conviction that solution, in some form, is possible. The Absurdists, naturally, know that no solutions exist. Therefore, it is the well-made play that is concerned with make-believe.

The reality that the Absurdists deal with, interestingly, does not exclude what is unreal. What they mean, essentially, by reality, is what is true. The Absurd reality is one that deals with the true questions of life, of existence, and of the human condition. However, to Absurdists, what is real and what is unreal can be equally true. Playwrights of older styles and methods are still viewed as dealing with reality, yet the Absurdists maintain that their own presentation of reality is the truer picture. What is unreal is often considered to be truer than what is real. This definition of reality, of truth, is certainly more subjective than objective, and yet, the Absurdists maintain that their subjective presentation must
be given as much credibility as an objective one. Each individual playwright has his own view of what is real and what is true. It is because the Absurdists regard man in his basic state as true and real, that they are grouped together.

Creative Imagination

It is highly probable that the form of Absurdist dramas comes, in part, from the way in which the plays are written. What becomes an Absurdist play spring from the inner anxieties and sensations of the playwrights and not from mechanical thought. There is no pre-planning, no particular theme or statement that the authors set for to make. There is no regard for story, plot, situation or believable characters. And thus, the effort to find the key to these works is even further frustrated, for no key exists, not even in the initial conception of the play. This concept of spontaneous creation seems to be reminiscent of the process of automatic writing used by the Dadaists and Surrealists. Esslin insists that the spontaneous character of these plays in no way detracts from the validity or truth contained in them. As regards Ionesco, Esslin feels that he has so mastered the technical aspect of writing that there need be no mechanical or conscious effort in order for Ionesco to write a validity constructed play. Ionesco seems to deal more directly with this concept than other playwrights and insists that his creations are totally spontaneous and
uncontrived: "I have no ideas before I write a play. I have them when I have written the play or while I am not writing at all. I believe that artistic creation is spontaneous. It certainly is so for me." Because the absurd dramas are not written to tell a story, but to communicate a sense of being, the act of writing is not mechanical but can be seen as almost spiritual. This act is accompanied with a strong belief that the imaginative responses of the playwright are truer pictures of the sense of being than any mechanical effort to capture those sensations can be.

The imagination is not easily freed, according to Absurdist belief, because our society is so dependent upon rational explanation and scientific means of reasoning. Thus, to free the imaginative process, one must also free himself from the need for rational answers and the belief in God and his reason.

Thus, Ionesco shuns the reasoning and mechanical processes that would in any way be connected with a scientific or rational manner of thought. "The free development of the imagination must not be restricted. There must be no canalization, no directives, no preconceived ideas, no limits."

Beckett, too, rejects reason and explores his world with a spiritual intensity. He confronts the world without regard for the reasons that events occur, but
instead, with an effort to perceive it through sensation. In order to change the picture of the world given to audiences, the perception of that world must also change. Though these feelings of creative spontaneity are not articulated by all Absurdists to the extent that they are by Ionesco and Beckett, Esslin leads his readers to believe that any Absurdist play is written in this manner. Esslin maintains that it is far more difficult to write an Absurdist work than one in which there is a basis in reality. The Absurdist must create a world complete in itself, with no counterparts found in everyday life, one that is not only founded in the imagination, but that is also total in the sense that it has its own "logic and consistency." 

The Absurdist dramas that are not successful attempts are marked by incomplete transition from reality to imagination. This lack of transition is evidenced by the "negative quality of lack of logic," still showing a tie to reality, instead of a total break in which the creation "makes imaginative sense in its own right." 

The basis of creation is what Esslin feels makes the Absurdist works genuine and valid expressions, as apart from mere exercises of the imagination. Because these playwrights have themselves experienced the sensation which they recreate onstage, and because the visions are extensions of the playwright's reality, Esslin claims that those visions are immediately recognizable as true and valid.
Only when its invention springs from deep layers of profoundly experienced emotion, only when it mirrors real obsessions, dreams, and valid images in the subconscious mind of the author, will such a work of art have the quality of truth, of instantly recognized general, as distinct from merely private, validity.

Therefore, the Absurdist creations are considered true and realistic pictures of the playwrights preoccupations, and are genuine reflections of the absurd world, both in content and in manner of creation.

Language

The use of language in the Absurdist Theatre is, like all other components, totally unlike what is seen in the well-made play. Absurdist have viewed language not as the major component of the play, but as equal to and sometimes less valuable than any other component of the play. Characteristically, Absurdist dialogue is often "incoherent babblings." Language as a means of communication is totally devalued in this theatre. Seldom do characters say what they mean, and often the dialogue completely contradicts what is happening onstage. By devaluing language, the other components of the play are heightened in significance, and by such a move it is more possible to create a solid, unified vision. That vision is made real through concrete images rather than through descriptive or explanatory language.

The problem of language is inherent in the absurd world. In a world that has no ultimate meaning, how can
words conduct meaning? The language of everyday life only serves to cover up the truth, that is, daily streams of words and conversations are tied to the senseless belief that actions are purposeful, that life itself has value in some ultimate dimension. With a new perception of the world, language has lost its place as a valid means of communication.

The Absurdists, too, have taken to task a realization that has long been in the present world. People usually do not say what they mean. Even if, in rare instances they do, man is not prepared to accept their communication as such. The present world is so bombarded with words that they have lost their significance. What people do manage to listen to, as apart from the mechanical function of hearing, they seldom take as absolute truth. Man continually looks for the meaning behind what is said, or more exactly, listen to what is not said. These ideas do not even take into account the polite conversations of the social world. Automatic ejaculations such as "How are you?" are met with equally automatic responses such as "Fine." In most instances, neither communication is a true or valid one. Conversations during parties and social gatherings are equally insidious, not to mention the endless words spouted in homes, among families, that have little meaning.

Therefore, it is of little surprise that Absurdists, in endeavoring to deal with the ultimate realities of the
world, would find language an already disintegrated element. And with language, as with other aspects of the world, the Absurdists are mercilessly truthful in presenting their perception.

The breakdown of language is shown in various ways. Ionesco, in *The Bald Soprano*, directly attacks, "the absurdities of polite society and bourgeois conversation." 50

The majority of Absurdist plays, including Ionesco's, deal with language in a more subtle fashion. Language itself is generally altered little from what is found in daily life. Words are not changed to create a more dramatic effect, though perhaps their intent is somewhat altered. The situation and characters that accompany the situation are created in such a way as to underline the inconsistencies of words. Actions betray speech, either physically or psychologically, as the audience becomes very aware that what is said onstage does not reflect the genuine state of mind, or state of being of the characters. What happens, then, is that language literally makes a critical evaluation of itself.

Language is perhaps one of the most consciously attacked problems in the Absurdist Theatre. Ionesco claims that:

The problem is to get to the source of our malady, to find the non-conventional language of this anguish, perhaps by breaking down this 'social' language, which is nothing but chiches, empty formulas, and slogans. 51
Samuel Beckett, too, very consciously wrestles with words. In fact, most of Beckett's plays are not written in his native language, English, but in French. This act puts the problem of language very much on an individual and intimate level. The decision to write in a foreign language is, for Beckett, extremely purposeful. In order to discipline himself and to insure that the words say what he wants them to say, he chooses a language that makes him conscious of the words he uses. Therefore, he can free himself of any subconscious concern with literary polish or embellishment.  

Beckett's dialogue is nonetheless realistic. By being forced to be literarily economical, Beckett's dialogue is stripped of superfluous or unrealistic characteristics. The realistic nature of his dialogue is essential for its self-criticism. By portraying characters who continue to depend on the rational characteristics of language in a world that is not at all rational, language disintegrates itself.

Harold Pinter seems to be equipped with an ability to reproduce, with unfailing accuracy, the inanities of daily speech. He captures what people actually say, in the manner in which they say it, and not what people would like to believe they say. After seeing a Pinter play produced, it is not uncommon to notice Pinteresque dialogue abounding in the everyday world. He records
all the "repetitiveness, incoherence, and lack of logic or grammar" that are part of ordinary speech. From this use of language arises problems that also arise in reality, such as misunderstandings, and the inability to comprehend certain words. Pinter feels that people are very much able to communicate, but that they simply avoid it:

Communication itself between people is so frightening that rather than do that there is continual cross-talk, a continual talking about other things, rather than what is at the root of their relationship.

Pinter's dialogue is sprinkled throughout with pauses and silences, again with very realistic accuracy. Yet, analysis will reveal that silences in Pinter's dialogue are not merely moments in which nothing is heard:

There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. . . . It is a necessary avoidance.

There is multi-level communication in Pinter's plays, as in all the Absurdist plays. Much is said in silences, much is said with words, and comment is made continually, though indirectly, about the lack of communication through the means of words.

It is language, perhaps, that the Absurdists are truly masters of. Their commentaries on communication and language, both within and out of the context of the absurd world are valid and thought-provoking.
Laughter

Despite the sombre and sobering subject matter of the Absurdist plays, they are characteristically comic. There was, of course, no initial conception of these plays as comedies, and for all practical purposes they are not comedies, but they do have comic dimensions. The laughter of these plays is not that which is free flowing and unconditional, but that which allows audience members to escape, if only momentarily, from that which they know to be true. As Ionesco says, "... we laugh so as not to cry."56

Most of the comic aspect of Absurdist plays comes from the nature of the characters. They are so mechanical and grotesque that the audience is prohibited from identifying with them. The audience knows little about what motivates their actions, and they speak a language that, though familiar to audiences in daily life, appears odd onstage.

Inability to identify with the characters allows the audience to view the entire situation in a more objective manner. This effect is what Bertolt Brecht tried to achieve with his theory of alienation. Brecht, however, was not entirely successful, for despite his efforts, he created very humanistic and sympathetic characters with whom the audiences easily identified.

Having no background of the characters, and no exposition or even story line in these dramas, the audience
is effectively prohibited from identification. Objective perception allows the audience to laugh at the situation and the characters. The characters' actions are generally futile in these plays. Regardless of what they do or what they attempt to do, the situation rarely changes and, in fact, many Absurdist plays leave the impression that the action will continue again and again, forever repeated. Being able to see the futility, audiences laugh.

However, there are broader and deeper implications to the laughter of the audience. Objectively recognizing the puppet-like characters, the audience is also recognizing their own puppet-like and mechanical existence. The futility of the characters' actions are no more futile than any action that the spectators themselves may make in the absurd world. The audiences watch the characters talk and create meaning to their lives with words. But the words are founded on nothing and say nothing. The situation onstage becomes a farce, a metaphysical farce, and the audiences' laughter is one of recognition. Esslin believes it to be "the laughter of acceptance." In the absurd world, as in absurd dramas, all things are reduced to equal unimportance. Man, too, is unimportant, having no more purpose or reason for existing than a tree or an animal, and thus the things that man clings to desperately, the things he feels most important and meaningful, are not only rendered absurd, but ridiculous and funny. The only
tragedy that could exist would come from a belief that man and existence should and could have meaning. But in the absurd world, there can be nothing genuinely tragic or comic. The two merge, but only the tragic can be seen by those who refuse to relinquish hope and expectation of fulfillment. The Theatre of the Absurd "combines laughter with horror." 58

Hope

Esslin claims that the "number of people for whom God is dead has gradually increased since Nietzsche's day," and that man has become aware of the falseness of the lives they lead. 59 With the rapid and widespread decline of religion, and the acknowledged death of God, man is faced with the need to fill a terrible void. The centre of the universe has been found by many to be nothing more than a great hole, masked by words, which in themselves, have no meaning. There are no longer any valid rules of behavior and nothing which constitutes right and wrong actions. Thus, man begins to search to find a new way to relate to his world, his universe and his own life. "The Theatre of the Absurd is one of the expressions of this search" according to Esslin. 60

In a world bereft of values, the traditional art forms, the conventional theatre, is guilty of perpetuating misconceptions, for it still presents a world where solutions are possible, where things such as political and
social backgrounds matter. For the Absurdists, then, traditional theatre steeps itself and its participants in illusion. The Absurdists, themselves, face the realities of the human condition, and their works are efforts to shake man loose from his complacency and make him more aware of the absurdity of his existence. For this reason, Esslin insists that the Theatre of the Absurd "does not reflect despair or a return to the dark, irrational forces." Each Absurdist can be seen as purveyors of truth. They do not embellish the absurd, nor couch it in more appealing terms, but recreate their visions with all of the sense of loss and anguish that they personally felt when the sensations came to them.

Esslin feels that facing the despair and the anguish constitutes an ability to overcome them. Once man has truly relinquished his belief in purpose or meaning and has faced the absurd, he can then deal with life on a very realistic level. This is why Esslin believes Ionesco is not pessimistic, but strongly urging man to release his illusions and "make existence authentic, fully lived." The world, in fact, desperately needs writers like Camus, Beckett and all of the Absurdists to continually remind man that he must change his beliefs, must relinquish his illusions, and must begin to live again on a new and more realistic level.

Relinquishing the past need not be a traumatic and devastating move, but should be a purging, a release, and
a starting point for a new happiness. This is what Esslin believes the Absurdists communicate. He attributes Beckett's success to the total experience of his plays which "constitutes the process of catharsis and liberation."65 He sees the plays as works of life and a new freedom, far from black and despairing. Esslin believes as Camus did, that the absurd only leads to absurd freedom and absurd happiness, and allows man to live his life to the fullest extent. He also insists that this is the ultimate message of the Absurd plays:

For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it fully, without fear, without illusions—and to laugh at it.
That is the cause to which, in their various individual, modest, and quixote ways the dramatists of the absurd are dedicated.66

Three Plays

In order to see what Absurdist plays consist of, three plays by three different authors are discussed. First a synopsis of the major action is presented and then a discussion of the play in light of the absurd concepts follow.

Waiting for Godot. Waiting for Godot was written in 1952 by Samuel Beckett, and is perhaps the most well known and most examined play of the Absurdist genre.

As the play opens, Estragon and Vladimir, two tramps, are waiting on a road; the single set piece is a tree. They call each other by nicknames, Gogo and
Didi, and converse about various things and about nothing in particular, from their boots to religion. The audience soon learns that the tramps are waiting for someone named Godot. They are not sure when they are to meet him, the reason for the meeting, and they are not really sure that that is the right place, but they are sure that they have an appointment with him. In the course of their wait, Gogo and Didi exchange comic lines, reflect on the person of Godot, talk about suicide, are happy, sad, and begin to wonder what they did yesterday, and where they were yesterday. They have a curious relationship. They are almost opposite in nature, Vladimir being the stronger, more serious one, Estragon being weaker and more dependent. They seem at once to be both totally dependent on one another and yet they are constantly fighting and threatening to leave the other one.

Two additional characters, Pozzo and Lucky, enter later. At first Gogo and Didi are afraid of them, and then, thinking that one of them might be Godot, they begin to talk to the two strangers. Pozzo is very rich and powerful, while Lucky is extremely weak and obviously Pozzo's slave. Lucky carries all of the baggage and is lead around on a rope, much like a pack animal. He follows Pozzo's commands obediently, dancing for him, talking when commanded, and even thinking out loud when told to do so. It seems that at one time Lucky could think very
beautifully, but now his thinking is meaningless babble:

. . . God quaquaqua with white bread quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphsia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell . . .

After Lucky and Pozzo leave, a young boy appears and informs them that Godot would not be there that day, but that he would come the next day. The boy leaves and the conversation of the two tramps returns to boots and Christ and as they settle down to wait again:

Estragon: Wait! I sometimes wonder if we wouldn't be better off alone, each one for himself.

Vladimir: It's not certain.

Estragon: No, nothing is certain.

Vladimir: We can still part if you think it would be better.

Estragon: It's not worth while now.

(Silence)

Vladimir: No, it's not worth while now.

(Silence)

Estragon: Well, shall we go?

Vladimir: Yes, let's go.

(They do not move)

Curtain

Thus the first act ends, much in the same way it began. Nothing has really happened. Nothing has changed.

Act Two opens in the same place and now the tree has a few leaves on it. The tramps once again engage in a
series of conversations, seemingly saying anything that comes to mind. Beckett occasionally creates some beautiful poetry in the dialogue between these two characters:

Estragon: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.

Vladimir: You're right, we're inexhaustible.

Estragon: It's so we won't think.

Vladimir: We have that excuse.

Estragon: It's so we won't hear.

Vladimir: We have our reasons.

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

(Silence)

Vladimir: They all speak at once.

Estragon: Each one to itself.

(Silence)

Vladimir: Rather they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

Estragon: They rustle.

(Silence)69

And they wait for Godot.

Presently Pozzo and Lucky enter again, only this time Pozzo is blind and Lucky cannot speak. They are still tied
together. Again Vladimir and Estragon mistake them for Godot. Again comic lines are exchanged and presently Vladimir asks how long Lucky has been dumb. Pozzo answers:

Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb and one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? They give birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.70

And Pozzo and Lucky exist.

The young boy appears again but does not recognize the tramps. He has the same message: Godot will not come that day, but he will be sure and come the next day. The tramps discuss suicide once more, but nothing comes of their talk. Act Two ends with:

Vladimir: Well, shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go.

(They do not move)

Curtain71

Waiting for Godot is extremely rich in possible interpretation. No doubt, that is what makes the play so baffling at first and also what has made it such a popular subject of dissection. The play and it's meaning are very complex and that, certainly, reflects Beckett's view of life which is a "mess as he has said."72 The play has been seen to exhibit many themes including, human frailty, non-communication, religion, and most consistently Waiting
for Godot has been seen as a play about time. The major concern here is the relation of this play to the absurd, and in that light, too, the play is fruitful. Beckett, in this single play, manages to comment in numerous ways on man in his most basic state, in his relationship to the world.

There are endless interpretations of the character Godot; who is he, what he is, and if, indeed, he will ever come. Esslin insists that Godot's true identity is really of slight importance, that the subject of the play is "not Godot, but waiting, the act of waiting, as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition." Beckett has done the seemingly impossible by writing an entire play about waiting, and making it successful. He has captured moments in the lives of every audience member, because everyone waits for something. It is here, too, that Beckett has captured one of the basic tenets of the absurd—time. Both Camus and Beckett discuss time and the experience of time. Beckett uses the device of waiting to heighten the experience of time passing. As Esslin says, "... it is in the act of waiting that we experience the flow of time in its purest most evident form." And it is with the realization of time according to Camus, one also realizes the absurd.

Through the act of waiting the tramps move between activity and passivity, and yet their environment never changes, even their active moments become repetitious,
and the people who pass through their lives do not really change. Roles may change, words may change, but there is always a sameness, an inescapability, a continuation of the same basic situation. The overwhelming sensation of this play is the inescapability of time itself, that regardless of what is done or what insignificant changes are made, time continues. The very power of time renders all that happens within its bound insignificant, so that the changes that do take place are really infinitesimal happenings. Beckett has captured the meaninglessness of man's activity beautifully.

This incredible play says much more than a statement about time and man's activity within it. Why do the tramps continue to wait, and what is the real significance of Godot? Here, Beckett touches on a very real aspect of human life—hope. Whether Godot is meant to have religious significance, whether he is mythological or factual in origin, the basic experience of the two tramps is not only waiting, but hoping. They not only hope that Godot will come, but there seems to be a certain conviction that when he does come, something will be decided, something will be resolved, or at least relieved. Yet, the waiting would also be relieved by giving up on Godot's possible arrival, too. The tramps still continue to wait after repeated disappointment, and they continue to hope. There is undeniably a need to continue. Beckett seems
to be saying that hoping for some kind of salvation, whether it is immediate or eternal, is something that man cannot or will not do without. Hoping and waiting are inextricable elements in these tramps' lives, and yet it is precisely the actions that occur while waiting, the habits that are designed to occupy time, that dull their senses and keep them from ever fully realizing their predicament.  

Despite the tramps' seeming naivete, they are presented as clearly having more consciousness than Pozzo and Lucky. Vladimir and Estragon do, at times, appear somewhat aware of their circumstances. They do tire of waiting, and are occasionally conscious of the habitual and insignificant character of their lives. Yet, they are incapable of not waiting and simultaneously incapable of truly believing their insignificance and starting from there. They do consider suicide, which would certainly solve their problems. Both tramps consider the act of suicide "preferable to waiting for Godot."  

And yet they never end their lives, and it seems that their contemplation of suicide does not make them more conscious of the meaninglessness of their lives, as Camus suggests it does, but instead emphasizes the need to continue waiting for Godot. They, unlike Camus' Absurd Man, unlike perhaps Beckett himself, do not realize the lack of purpose in life and decide to go on in spite of, but still with that realization. Their choice to continue does not lie in a
noble and conscious decision, but in their inability to
genuinly decide, and their incompetence to execute the
act of ending their lives. Their actions have become so
pointless, so deadened with habit, so insignificant, that
even their attempt at suicide is futile, just as all their
actions are futile. The tramps go on, continue living,
because of the deadened character of their lives and their
action, not in spite of it.77

What Beckett presents are men who are basically
helpless, who are insignificant in the infiniteness of
time, whose habits and hopes have dulled their perception
of themselves, and who are incapable of existing without
hope. Beckett does not present nihilism, but "the in-
ability of man to be a nihilist."78

Beckett leaves his audience with many uncertainties.
Throughout the course of the play the audience has been
confronted with very few real events. The tramps repeat
themselves, indulge in music-hall exchanges, and often
overtly contradict what they say with what they do. The
playwright successfully uses all of the characteristics
of Absurdist drama, from backgroundless characters to
meaningless dialogue, from a plotless structure to a
carefully created poetic image on time. He manages to
make countless statements on countless subjects and never
really say anything directly. No doubt Waiting for
Godot will be interpreted and dissected for years to
come.
The Birthday Party. Harold Pinter wrote The Birthday Party in 1958, and it was first produced at the Arts Theatre in Cambridge. The play failed at first, but after several revivals, The Birthday Party began to be accepted by a few critics. The play did not reach Broadway until 1967.

The Birthday Party takes place in one room of an old, run-down, seaside boarding house. The single boarder is a man named Stanley Webber, in his thirties, who apparently is hiding from something or someone and has found the boarding house to be a kind of refuge from the world. The house is run by Meg and Petey, who are elderly and obviously of the lower class. Petey is a kind gentleman, apparently oblivious to the world and its inhabitants. He is a very simple man, content with his life, or at least, the audience never sees any kind of inner questioning or conflict. Meg is also very simple, unable to look beyond the surface, but she does have an overwhelming maternal nature which she unleashes in full force on Stanley, and to some extent on Petey. The relationship between Meg and Stanley is a peculiar one, moving from mother and child to woman and lover. Stanley's rather brusque manner both shocks and delights Meg, who interprets what he says any way she pleases:

Stanley: Succulent.
Meg: (Backs off) You shouldn't say that word.
Stanley: What word?
Meg: That word you said.
Stanley: What, succulent?
Meg: Don't say it!
Stanley: What's the matter with it?
Meg: You shouldn't say that word to a married lady.

In fact, Stanley was referring to the breakfast as succulent, and not Meg.

Pinter reveals his talent for catching dialogue at its most senseless moments, at the beginning of the first act, through exchanges between Meg and Petey:

Meg: Is that you, Petey? (Pause) Petey, is that you? (Pause) Petey?
Petey: What?
Meg: Is that you?
Petey: Yes, it's me.
Meg: What? Are you back?
Petey: Yes.

Pinter continues to examine the meaninglessness of daily language throughout the play.

During the first day, Meg announces to Stanley that two more visitors will be arriving. This news obviously disquiets Stanley. Meg goes to the store and a tramp by the name of Lulu enters and carries a parcel which is probably Stanley's birthday present. Meg thinks that it is Stanley's birthday, but he continually denies this.
Lulu tries to make Stanley clean himself up and go on a picnic with her. Her efforts are fruitless, since Stanley seems incapable of being motivated to do anything. He does, however, enjoy teasing Lulu, as he does Meg, entirely with words:

Stanley: How would you like to go away with me?
Lulu: Where?
Stanley: Nowhere. Still, we could go.
Lulu: But where could we go?
Stanley: Nowhere. There's nowhere to go. So we could just go. It wouldn't matter.
Lulu: We might as well stay here.
Stanley: No. It's no good here.
Lulu: Well, where else is there?
Stanley: Nowhere.

Lulu leaves and the two visitors, Goldberg and McCann enter. Stanley hides. They seem very business-like and apparently have some dark reason for being there, though that reason is not clear. Meg enters and claims again that it is Stanley's birthday. The two men want to give Stanley a birthday party, and once settled, they go upstairs to their rooms.

Stanley enters and is so upset by the news of the visitors and the party, that Meg gives him his present early. It is a boy's toy drum. Stanley, still dazed, eventually puts the drum around his neck and begins beating it slowly and rhythmically, then wildly. This savage drum beating ends Act One.
Act Two concerns the party itself. Stanley, after being forced to stay, resigns himself to the events. First McCann and Goldberg question him and Stanley defensively insists that he has led a very quiet life and has not ever been far from there. This is in contrast to his story to Meg in the first act that he has been a concert pianist and travelled the world. The conversation becomes increasingly sinister and McCann hits Stanley in the stomach while Stanley insists that they have made a mistake. Still the audience is not certain of the purpose of the two men's visit, or of their relationship to Stanley. They continue to harass Stanley up until and throughout the party. Questions are asked with great force and menace, though the questions themselves have little meaning. Goldberg and McCann make sordid and demeaning observations about Stanley's life:

Goldberg: You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're nothing but an odour... 

By this time Stanley is completely disoriented and reacts by making animal-like sounds and screaming.

The party begins quietly at first with a relief in action and intensity. Petey cannot attend but Lulu comes and the four of them eventually become drunk. Stanley is extremely quiet and removed. The party and action pick up again, culminating in a game of blindman's bluff. The lights go off immediately after the party has taken a menacing turn. McCann breaks Stanley's glasses and Stanley
begins to strangle Meg. McCann finds a flashlight and Act Two ends as the two strangers converge on Stanley.

The third act takes place the next morning. The beginning dialogue between Petey and Meg is almost the same as the dialogue in the beginning of Act One. She wants to awaken Stanley, but Petey quickly intervenes, revealing a nervousness. Meg is frightened by a big car parked outside and asks Petey if there is a wheelbarrow in it. In Act One Stanley had tormented her with the idea that men were coming in a van to take her away in a wheelbarrow. Apparently this is a great fear of Meg's.

McCann and Goldberg come downstairs and Meg leaves to go shopping. Petey inquires about Stanley's condition and the nature of the conversation reveals that Stanley has had some kind of breakdown. McCann and Goldberg know someone who can help him and are going to take him there. Petey exits, and later Stanley enters. He is now very neatly dressed and shaven, though he wears his broken glasses. He is in a near catatonic state, staring motionlessly. When he does finally utter sounds, it is precisely that—sounds with no meaning. Still, McCann and Goldberg harass him:

Goldberg: You look anaemic.
McCann: Rheumatic.
Goldberg: Myoptic.
McCann: Epileptic.
Goldberg: You're on the verge.

McCann: You're a dead duck.83

Petey enters and, for a moment, tries to prevent the two from taking Stanley, but quickly backs down. The three leave. Meg enters and asks if Stanley is up yet. Petey says that he is still asleep. Meg talks briefly about the party and insists that she was the belle of the ball, and Act Three ends.

Unlike Beckett, Pinter can be easily taken for a realistic writer. Though Esslin groups Pinter among his "parallels and proselytes," he seems to support Pinter's realistic tendencies far more than his absurd ones. True, Pinter's characters are generally without background and discernable motivation, and yet, The Birthday Party, along with other Pinter plays, genuinely have a story line. Something does happen in The Birthday Party, and the play follows the development of a well-made play far more closely than that of an absurd play.

Pinter's dialogue is indeed unique, and probably his forte as a playwright. Yet, it too, contains more realism than absurdism. His ability to capture daily speech ties him more closely to realism, though it may be a kind of selective realism or suprarealism.

Pinter concerns himself with the more immediate type of absurdity--that of man's civilization and societies. The real statement of a Pinter play, and particularly this play, is one of menace and fear. These are actions taken
by men on other men, in environmental situations. Environment is a great part of the Pinter story and style. His setting are extremely confining to the characters he places in them, and their very confinement is often the impetus for action. The confrontation and resulting terror from Pinter's environments make life seem "not so much absurd as it is a game that can be sinister, savage, pathetic, compassionate and comic."  

The Birthday Party can and has been interpreted in many ways. The play has been seen as an "allegory of the pressures of conformity..." and as an "allegory of death..." The latter view ties the play more directly to absurd concepts, making the statement one in which man is "snatched away from the home he has built for himself" by "the dark angels of nothingness."  

Pinter's claim to realism lies in his selectiveness. In areas of character, plot and dialogue he chooses only those aspects which further the intent of the work. He does not concern himself with creating a complete whole but selects moments--climatic moments--in the lives of his characters. His choice of words are designed to convey a suprarealistic atmosphere, which does, at moments, appear unfamiliar and unnatural. Yet, as said before, Pinter dialogue is often found to be alarmingly commonplace.

Pinter himself characterizes his plays as realistic:
I'm convinced that what happens in my plays could happen anywhere, at any time, in any place, although the events may seem unfamiliar at first glance. If you press me for a definition, I'd say what goes on in my plays is realistic.\textsuperscript{87}

Pinter's classification as an Absurdist relies upon interpretation of his plays, the personal realizations that he expresses, and the use of certain Absurdist elements in his works. Esslin continues to classify Pinter as an Absurdist because of the lack of motivation of his characters and because he "questions the very nature of reality" thus giving it an "unverifiable" atmosphere.\textsuperscript{88} The horror in Pinter's plays is seen by Esslin to represent the "horror of the human situation," the realization that life is based on "illusions and self-deception."\textsuperscript{89} These characteristics can be interpreted to correspond to more realistic levels. For instance, the horror that Pinter concerns himself with could well be seen as a social statement on the forcefulness of society. Esslin has also set forth a number of descriptions and definitions of an Absurdist play that are difficult to reconcile with Pinter's style.

\textbf{The Chairs.} Eugene Ionesco wrote \textbf{The Chairs} in 1951, and it was first produced in the Theatre LANCEY in 1952. The play takes place in a circular house, completely surrounded by water. There are only three characters in this play, the third entering only at the end of the story. The main characters are an Old Man and an Old Woman who are in their mid-nineties. They converse, calling each other darling,
and the Old Woman asks the Old Man to tell her the story again. But he is tired of the story, having told it every single evening for seventy-five years:

Old Man: . . . you've made me imitate the same people, the same months, . . . always the same . . . let's talk about something else.90

And then he tells the story.

They are waiting for the arrival of a large crowd who have been invited to hear the message of the Old Man. This message is the end result of a long life and he wants to pass on what he has learned.

When the people start arriving, the couple brings in chair after chair to accommodate them. But the people are imaginary and though the old couple carry on conversations with them, they are really talking to empty chairs. Most of the conversation is of the polite, party type, as in the case of the Lady:

Old Man: Yes, you're quite right.
Old Woman: Yes, yes, yes . . . Oh! surely not.
Old Man: Yes, yes, yes. Not at all.
Old Woman: Yes.
Old Man: No!? 
Old Woman: It's certainly true.91

The old couple are smiling and even laugh, apparently enjoying the story that the Lady is telling.

Eventually, the crowd becomes so dense that when the Emperor, also an imaginary character, comes, the couple
have to stand on their toes atop stools in order to see him.

And then the Orator enters. Ionesco describes him as:

... a typical painter or poet of the nineteenth century: he wears a large black felt hat with a wide brim, loosely tied bow tie, artist's blouse, mustache and goatee, very histrionic in manner, conceited; just as the invisible people must be as real as possible, the Orator must appear unreal.92

The couple, in exhaltation, thank everyone for coming, and, content that the Orator will deliver the message to the crowd as planned, throw themselves out of the window.

The Orator, who has not spoken, now turns to the crowd. Horribly, he reveals that he is a deaf-mute. He utters sounds: "he, mme, mn, mn. Ju, gou, hou, hou. Heu, heu, gu, gou,queue.93 He seems hopeless, and then, still trying to communicate, he writes his message on the chalkboard: ANGELFOOD. Then he adds. NNAANNN

NWNW V.

Still not satisfied that he has been understood he writes: AADIEU ADIEU APA.

Ionesco describes the Orator's reaction: "... faced with the absence of the hoped for reaction, little by little his smile disappears, his face darkens; he waits another moment; suddenly he bows petulantly . . . descends from the dias... ."94

After the Orator's exit, the invisible crowd can be heard for the first time. They murmur, laugh, talk, and
the sounds, at first weak, grow louder and louder and then weaker again. The curtain falls.

Ionesco has defined the subject or theme of *The Chairs* as:

... the chairs themselves; that is to say, the absence of people, the absence of the Emperor, the absence of God, the absence of matter, the unreality of the world, metaphysical emptiness. The theme of the play is *nothingness* ... 95

It is, of course, with this interpretation in mind that the play becomes Absurd. Ionesco does manage to say a number of other things in the play as well, ranging from the futility of human existence to man's inability to communicate. The characters live in a building surrounded by water which makes their livelihood seem improbable but also makes some of the actions extremely difficult if not impossible to realistically execute. Having thus clarified his position as to realistic staging, Ionesco proceeds to validate his Absurdist label. The characters, though not without background, are captured in the most climatic period of their lives. The fact that these characters do have a background and that their actions are motivated, if somewhat unrealistically, are integral parts of the story. *The Chairs* does indeed have a story line, though not in the traditional sense, with exposition, climax and resolution. The play totally leaves the realm of the realistic with the proliferation of empty chairs and the entrance of the Orator.

The subject of the play is not alone responsible for its Absurd label. Esslin feels that what Ionesco tries
to communicate is not the stated subject of the play, but "what it feels like to be in the situation." Ionesco's emptiness, then, his belief that Nothingness prevails, is or should be felt in like manner by audience members. This aspect of Ionesco's work is related to the concept of the poetic image that Esslin finds so essential to Absurdist works. Like Beckett who captures the feeling of waiting, and Pinter who instills in his audience a feeling of menace, Ionesco strives to make the audience feel the futility of life. Of course, playwrights of all time have endeavored to create sympathetic characters in situations that the audience could empathize with and thus feel what the characters feel. However, the major difference between these attempts and Absurdist plays lies in the totality of the experience, not in the sympathetic response to one or two characters. As stated before, the audience should not identify with the characters in Absurdist plays, but their identification and understanding should be with the play as a whole, as one image, reflective of the playwright's own sensations.

There are, certainly, numerous other playwrights whom Esslin groups as Absurdist and in whose plays Absurdist characteristics are evident. The men and plays discussed here were chosen for their diversity in approach to their plays and their subject matter. According to Esslin's description of the characteristics of Absurdist plays,
Samuel Beckett achieves a greater success in blending all the elements than Pinter or Ionesco. Pinter appears to incorporate only a few of the elements in his predominantly realistic style, while Ionesco's own philosophies and statements about his plays are the significantly absurd factors in his works. Nevertheless, all these artists are related in their personal experiences of the absurd, many of which are strikingly similar to the absurd experiences enumerated by Camus. Certainly, these men have themselves faced the absurd and are, ostensibly, dealing with it daily. They have each qualified as absurd men, perhaps the most absurd men, for they are creators and continue to create despite their knowledge. The question still remains, however, whether these playwrights are successful in expressing and communicating the absurd. Is the style that they have chosen sufficient to encompass the absurd, and do the images the Absurdists create remain constant with Camus' conception of the absurd?
NOTES


2 Esslin, p. 4.


6 Ionesco, Fragments, p. 21.

7 Ionesco, Notes, p. 136.


9 Robinson, p. 299.

10 Robinson, p. 299.


13 Esslin, Wound, p. 27.

14 Esslin, Absurd, p. 162.

15 Esslin, Absurd, p. 165.

16 Hinchcliffe, p. 40.

17 Hinchcliffe, p. 40.

18 Esslin, Absurd, p. 239.


21 Ionesco, *Notes*, p. 90.


32 Robinson, p. 241.


37 Ionesco, *Notes*, p. 126.


39 Esslin, *Absurd*, p. 239.

40 Esslin, *Absurd*, p. 239.

41 Esslin, *Absurd*, p. 239.


44 Ionesco, Notes, p. 124
45 Robinson, p. 30.
46 Esslin, Absurd, p. 370.
47 Esslin, Absurd, p. 310.
49 Esslin, Absurd, p. 4.
50 Esslin, Absurd, p. 373.
51 Ionesco, Notes, p. 92.
52 Esslin, Absurd, p. 19.
53 Esslin, Absurd, p. 240.
55 Catharine Hughes, "Pinter Is as Pinter Does," Catholic World (December, 1969), 125.
56 Ionesco, Notes, p. 118.
57 Hinchliffe, p. 31.
58 Esslin, Absurd, p. 361.
59 Esslin, Absurd, p. 350.
60 Esslin, Absurd, p. 350.
61 Esslin, Absurd, p. 377.
62 Esslin, Absurd, p. 375.
63 Esslin, Absurd, p. 164.
64 Fletcher, p. 140.
65 Esslin, Absurd, p. 164.
66 Esslin, Absurd, p. 377.
68 Beckett, p. 35.
70 Beckett, p. 57.
71 Beckett, p. 60.
72 Fletcher, p. 140.
73 Esslin, *Absurd*, p. 29.
74 Esslin, *Absurd*, p. 29.
76 Esslin, *Absurd*, p. 35.
78 Anders, p. 144.
80 Pinter, p. 9.
81 Pinter, p. 26.
82 Pinter, p. 55.
83 Pinter, p. 86.
84 Hinchcliffe, p. 33.
87 Harold Pinter, "Writing for Myself," *Twentieth Century* (February, 1961), 174.
88 Esslin, *Wound*, p. 44.
91 Ionesco, Plays, p. 124.
92 Ionesco, Plays, p. 154.
93 Ionesco, Plays, p. 160.
94 Ionesco, Plays, p. 160.
96 Esslin, Absurd, p. 159.
CHAPTER IV

THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD VERSUS

CAMUS' CONCEPT OF THE ABSURD

Camus' concept of the absurd and the characteristics of Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd have been presented separately, and now must be examined together in their relationship to one another. The intent and reasoning behind Esslin's nomenclature for the avant-garde theatre of the fifties has been established. There is little question that Absurdist playwrights are deeply involved in the philosophies of Camus, Sartre and other existentialists who propound theories of the absurd. The playwrights discussed by Esslin have themselves made clear their personal view of the world and man's purpose in it. By means of analysis and interpretation, Esslin has sought to establish that the plays of this genre are reflections of the absurd realizations experienced by their authors. Esslin also claims that these plays are recognizable to audience members as works concerning themselves with man at the limit of his being, in confrontation with the world. The questions of how well these plays do what they set out to do, in particular, change the audience's perception of reality and express the concept of the absurd, remain. First,
critical reviews of these plays is discussed, and then possible reasons for such reaction is taken into consideration.

The Early Critical Reaction to Absurdist Plays in the United States

Initial reaction to Absurdist plays presented in the United States was generally poor. Two of thirty articles surveyed were supportive of what the Absurdists were trying to do. Even these two, however, were not totally positive, because the critic did not agree with the playwright's theories, and did not believe that the subject was universal. Therefore, the Absurdists failed to change the critic's perception of reality. The other twenty-eight criticisms were negative in most aspects, and though all are not discussed here, a sampling of response is sufficient to establish the general mode of reaction.

Waiting for Godot. Harold Clurman, in the Nation magazine, was the only critic to positively review this play. He not only enjoyed the play, but also made thoughtful comment on the form that Beckett used:

I was utterly absorbed by and thoroughly enjoyed Samuel Beckett's already famous Waiting for Godot...

The form is exactly right for what Beckett wishes to convey. Complete disenchantment is at the heart of the play, but Beckett refuses to honor this disenchantment by a serious demeanor. Since life is incomprehensible...it is proper that we pass our time laughing at the spectacle...

... Beckett's experience is almost commonplace by now to the middle-class European intelligensia and valid by virtue of that fact alone...
Finally, I do not accept what Waiting for Godot says. When it is over, my innermost being cries out 'taint so.'

Edwin Kennebeck of Commonweal was not so positive:

... Neither edifying nor purgative, the play none-theless has an effect, it is appalling and desperate, and not false and pretentious. What an audience could say about it after the final curtain I can't imagine, unless it be something like the respectful words of Jean Anouilh, quoted on the jacket: 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it is terrible'

Though not totally negative, Kennebeck establishes that to him, at least, the Absurdists have failed to establish a conscious recognition of the absurd and the possibility that, once recognized, life can be happy.

Richard Hayes, also of Commonweal recognizes Waiting for Godot for its theatricality, but feels that it fails as a philosophic work:

... for all the elegiac intelligence with which "Godot" makes it statement, for all it's austere poetry of desolation, the drama has finally no sustaining sense of life.

... I take the excellence of "Godot" to reside not in its metaphysical pretensions but in the grasping power and domination of its images.

As unnamed critic in the Theatre Arts magazine had a similar reaction:

He has composed something eminently playable, though his stature as philosopher is, on the evidence at hand, somewhat less of a sure thing.

And, reflecting on the cast, the critic had this to say:

More than any of them, however, Burt Lahr gave the play its link to life on the other side of the footlights. On that score at least, he is way ahead of Samuel Beckett.
Burt Lahr played Estragon, and is often mentioned as the saving grace of the New York production.

Then there were reactions such as that of Wolcott Gibbs, writing for *New Yorker*:

... remarkably hard to follow ... 
... I have seldom seen such meagre moonshine stated with such inordinate fuss.

It is a very sad and confusing situation all around.

Very few critics condemned the Absurdists plays so completely. Most found at least some saving grace in *Waiting for Godot*. None deny that these playwrights are genuinely trying to introduce a new form instead of perpetrating a hoax on the public. However, few critics seemed aware of the real basis for these plays.

*The Birthday Party*. Again, Harold Clurman in *Nation* was positive in his reaction to Pinter's play:

Pinter ... is not obscure; what he intends us to understand can be readily understood. The play is a parable placed in circumstances and couched in language that may pass as "realistic."

Do I "agree" with Pinter? ... No, I do not "agree" with him, and his truth is not universal.

John Simon writing for *Commonweal* had this to say:

The play ... is so plucked clean of needed information, so sprinkled with quasi-symbolic non sequiturs, as to invite cocktail-party metaphysicians to do their worst.

Pinter once boasted to Kenneth Tynan that he could write a perfectly valid play about a glass ashtray without reference to social or economic conditions. I would willingly concede that most of his plays are about glass ashtrays, and would never accuse them of having the slightest social, economic, or other implications.
Theophilus Lewis in America does find one aspect of Pinter's play that is noteworthy:

The play is obscure, apparently deliberately so, and the author doesn't explain. But it has one clear distinction. Pinter's dialogue is brilliantly orchestrated.

The play... is a gangster-type story pretending to be a cerebral drama. 9

John McCarten of the New Yorker has some very pointed things to say about Pinter's characters:

Personally, I didn't find the piece entertaining, enlightening, or edifying. Mr. Pinter, it seemed to me, has indulged in altogether too many aimless obscurities here, and I'm afraid that his characters... failed to interest me in various dilemmas. I don't think an author is well advised to employ what are essentially subhuman specimens to describe a melancholy phase of the human condition.... 10

An unnamed author writing for Time echoed these feelings about Pinter's characters, and added some pertinent comments:

Squalid, vicious, mean and stupid, Pinter's characters may seem to deserve all the bad things in life. They are certainly an unsympathetic lot...

... Pinter's characters harbor a potential tendency for violence. In a sense they are socio-historical drop-outs; except for their psychological quirks and fears, they are never placed in any context beyond the stage.

What endows Pinter with his immense theatricality also seems to stunt the scope of his mind and art. All the world's a stage, but the stage is not all the world.... 11

The Chairs. Ionesco's play seems to have a harder time getting across its message than the other two plays did. An anonymous author in Theatre Arts was genuinely confused:
Obscure he may be, but hardly a charlatan. For a charlatan could not compose works that are so genuinely theatrical. It is a fairly clear expression of nihilism, if anything about Ionesco could be called "clear." Wolcott Gibbs of the New Yorker most probably did not enjoy writing this one:

When an artistic experience is totally beyond the capacities of the observer, it is probably best just to report the facts.

The unnamed Time critic wrote that The Chairs:

... calls for greater imaginative pressures, and that it has no really tragic underside to its surface drollness. ... Ionesco's seems an agreeable but thin talent, with a kind of philosophic-puppet show appeal.

Obviously, initial reaction to these plays was not overwhelmingly positive. One must remember, too, that these plays had already fought their battles in Europe and that even when Europe was beginning to interpret themselves into an understanding of these works, America was still unable to extract much meaning from them.

Why did these plays fail, initially, to communicate absurdity to their audiences? What aspects of the Absurdist Theatre prohibit the plays from reaching their audiences with clarity and understanding? What aspects of the plays of this genre fail to communicate Camus' concepts?

The Purpose

Esslin claims that the greatest source of error in evaluating Absurdist plays is the false belief that the
plays were written to accomplish some specific purpose. He maintains that the Absurdists are merely giving free expression to inner feelings. Due to the way in which the plays were written—the spontaneous creative process—even if a purpose was in mind, the final result may not be what the author had originally intended. Therefore, it would be an impossibility to deduce whether or not the playwright actually achieved his intent or purpose. Many of these playwrights suggest that they had absolutely no purpose in mind when they began writing, but let the play almost create itself. Supposedly, the act of writing is, in itself, the end to which these playwrights strive. "The act of writing is a cure for inner conflict, a salve for obsession. . . ." The expression, then, of their own sensations, in this case the sensations of the absurdity of life, are what the playwrights seek to achieve. Viewing the situation from that standpoint, one could hardly fail to achieve his goal, or at least no one could dispute the truth of the expression. The fact remains, however, that these men have not been writing diaries, they have been writing plays. The choice of that medium in itself implies that there is, indeed, a purpose or intent to these works, and, if nothing else, that that intent is communication. If Esslin claims that these plays are reflections of the playwright's sense of being in a world devoid of purpose, then the communication must be one of that sensation, or
in essence, the absurd. Having named the movement, Esslin has conceded that what the playwrights are trying to communicate is the absurd. Esslin, also, was apparently so struck by the similarities between these playwright's feelings and Camus' descriptions in "The Myth of Sisyphus" that he chose his title from the essay. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that not only do these plays have a purpose, but that purpose is to express and communicate the concept of absurdity that, at the very least, is quite similar to Camus'.

The Dream Quality

Esslin himself has described Absurdist plays as seeming to be "reflections of dreams and nightmares." Throughout the research available on the Absurdist Theatre, the terms "dreams," "fantasy," "illusion," and "nightmare" recur. Whether for or against the Absurdist efforts, authors do not hesitate to use such terms to describe the plays. Supportive efforts, however, maintain that though the plays may appear as dreams, their genuine concern is reality. In fact, in reference to Ionesco, Doubrovsky has said that "If Ionesco's theatre is viewed as compounded of 'the stuff dreams are made of', it will loose all its force and be neutralized."

This dream-like quality is due, at least in part, to the spontaneous nature of the creations. Given free rein, the faculties of imagination and "inspiration," along with
drawing from the subconscious, naturally gives some dream-like quality to any work. The crux of the matter actually lies in interpretation of those dream-like characteristics. When Ionesco claims that "only the imaginary is true," it is clear that his definition of truth, and incidentally, reality, is one that precludes the more common definition. Doubrovsky adds:

If Ionesco's works appear at first so strange and disconcerting, and seem so fond of the weird and the monstrous, it is not because they are immuned within the universe of dream or delirium, but precisely because they open out into our own world. Certainly the truth or validity of that statement depends entirely on one's perception and interpretation. Unless individual audience members readily accept that the real world is indeed strange and monstrous, he will doubtless see Ionesco's works as unrelated to reality, a concept that can be easily generalized to include all Absurdists. Ionesco argues that the theatre must use "shock tactics" to jolt the audience into a "new perception of reality." The reviews at the beginning of this chapter suggest that he has failed to change anyone's perception of reality.

Dreams presented as reality onstage must, finally, fail to convince anyone that what is seen onstage is more real than what the audience enters as it leaves the theatre.
The problem is that dreams are not under control, their intensity can momentarily shatter our grasp of reality, but reality does intrude. As reality intervenes, it shatters that line of belief in what is occurring onstage. Just as any dramatic presentation hopes to hold the audience and make it believe that the events onstage are really happening, the Absurdists try to achieve this, but they go a step further in trying to change the audience's perception of reality. By so radically altering the complexion of reality in their plays, Absurdists lose contact with the reality that exists day to day. Thus, the transference of absurd concepts from the theatre to daily life cannot be assured.

Esslin has said that the Absurd Theatre perceives the world as "a hall of reflecting mirrors... where reality merges imperceptibly into fantasy." The one is indistinguishable from the other and thus the line between fantasy and reality no longer exists. If reality and fantasy merge, man will have a difficult time finding a solid base from which to deal with the world as it exists, and with life as it is lived.

The dream quality of these dramas do an injustice to the absurd concept. Absurdity occurs not in dreams and nightmares, but in real life, the life that is lived everyday. The world which man confronts, and which his reason comes in conflict with, is the world of nine to five and getting ahead and looking toward the future. If one
removes this basis, the conflict becomes one with a dream world and this would destroy the absurd.

Obscurity

Esslin has characterized Ionesco's works as "obscure and enigmatic." He has referred to Waiting for Godot as "a highly obscure and intellectual play." Similar statements are made by various authors when discussing the Absurdist plays, for few seem hesitant to concede the confusing and ambiguous nature of them. Certainly, the fact that these works are open to numerous interpretations can be seen as an attractive characteristic. Such plays can be many things to many people, unlike works that are more narrowly directed to a single purpose. Yet, the obscurity of a play can be detrimental to it too. A confused public will revolt as Esslin demonstrated by referring to early reaction to Waiting for Godot as "bewildered" and producing "near riots." Without benefit of critical comment or analysis, the popular audience becomes lost in that dream world of Absurdist drama. Yet even Ionesco himself has stated: "Asking the author for information is a sign of some deficiency in the work or failure in understanding on the part of ... the audience."27

Clearly the plays of the Absurdist genre are dependent upon some sort of interpretation for the audience to understand them. If the Theatre of the Absurd is seeking to reestablish awareness, as Esslin claims, it must above
all do so with clarity. As William Oliver said: "Until the absurd is recognized it does not exist." How can the Absurdists make the audience more aware of the human condition when their plays deal with an esoteric reality that is presented by obscure means?

The Absurdists' lack of clarity in communicating an already difficult concept hinders audiences from fully grasping the meaning of the absurd. Their failure to lead their audiences slowly and coherently into their world and their concepts result in failure to communicate the strength of their convictions. The absurd need not be obscure, and indeed, cannot be so if any kind of true comprehension is to take place.

Mindless Characters

Camus states: "There can be no absurd outside the human mind." Without the human mind, one of the two vital components of the absurd, the absurd cannot exist. By presenting a world inhabited by mechanical characters without the capabilities of though or reason, the Absurdists have created a world devoid of a vital part of the absurd condition.

Audiences are not only presented with situations that are more akin to their dreams than their daily lives, but they also see characters who have little resemblance to them. The Absurdists' characters have no power of reason and above all, lack any kind of freedom. Cohn says, "In
the Theatre of the Absurd, man rarely possesses the freedom to make himself and to make an impact on the world." Yet, Camus, and incidentally, almost every other existentialist philosopher, claim that absurdity and awareness of that condition lead to freedom. Far from being more restricted in the world, the absurd man is released from standard structure and belief and is free to create his own life on very realistic terms.

Absurd characters, aside from being without intellect or freedom, are rarely seen in revolt against their condition. Camus saw revolt as a natural outcome of absurd awareness and indeed, the thing that gave man the assurance that he lived. Revolt "protests against absurdity, suffering and injustice." In the absurd world revolt is a force striving for clarity. Clear comprehension of the absurd world and the limitations it imposes is a constant focus of revolt. Yet, without revolt, absurdist characters are unable to attain any kind of clarity in their situation. "To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem," as Camus has said. Certainly the characters of the Absurdist Theatre have not only abolished revolt, they have abolished the problem. These characters cannot even be accused of philosophical suicide, for they have never been sufficiently aware of the problem to consciously find and assign a meaning to their lives.

In the world which Absurdists create, particularly the world of Ionesco and Pinter, they often depict man
as the oppressed and society and life as the oppressors. In the true absurd world there are no oppressors, there is only the stark reality of the absurd. The realization of that condition is only a beginning, something that can be dealt with and conquered through comprehension. Revolt, and the conscious will to survive against a know fate, results in winning a kind of victory. Yet, in Absurdist plays, the characters do not win because they do not fight and their defeat is not from choice but precisely because they have no choice. This is the picture of the world and man presented to audience members and through this presentation, Absurdists, incredibly, are striving to reawaken man and help him to overcome his situation.

Despair and Pessimism

Camus admits that once absurdity is recognized and accepted, the absence of hope must be accepted too. Yet, he warns that the absence of hope has nothing to do with despair. Why, then, should the Absurdist Theatre concentrate on darkness, anguish, despair, and pessimism? Esslin characterizes Beckett's works as being "filled with anguish, torment, and the deranged fantasies of human beings being driven to the limits of suffering." Esslin characterizes Beckett's works as being "filled with anguish, torment, and the deranged fantasies of human beings being driven to the limits of suffering." The state of being that Ionesco communicates, according to Esslin, is "one of despair." Pinter's plays have again and again been characterized as comedies of menace.
Esslin claims that "by facing anxiety and despair . . . anxiety and despair can be overcome." He also sees the Absurdist plays as vehicles which present man with his true predicament and therefore enable him to overcome his situation. Thus, in accordance with what the Absurdists present, man's true situation must be regarded as a dream-like state, the mood of which is sombre, the atmosphere of which is dark and menacing, and in which man is despairing, full of anguish, and without a functioning mind. Certainly, these characteristics fulfill the absurd's dictum regarding the absence of hope. Yet, what of Camus' call to happiness? There is no evidence of that concept in the Absurdist Theatre. Happiness and the possibility of it are hidden by the overwhelming force of despair.

As expression of personal views of the world, the situations the Absurdists create cannot be challenged. But, as expressions of the absurd, particularly Camus' concept, the Absurdists have missed the major focus--freedom and happiness. For Camus, "pessimism exists only as a point of departure. . . ." For the Absurdists, pessimism is the end product, despair the total picture.

Communication

The initial critical reaction to some early Absurdist plays has been presented. To say that the public was bewildered by Absurdist dramas when they were first presented would be an understatement. To say that present day audiences
fully understand and accept the Theatre of the Absurd would be an overstatement. The public has long been conditioned to the standards and forms of the traditional theatre, and they depend upon critical evaluation and analysis as much as their own impressions to define their reaction. Therefore, much re-learning was necessary before the public was even prepared to accept Absurdist drama as a valid art form.

As is true of a public that considers itself knowledgeable in the arts, once a new concept has been critically recognized it becomes popular with them simply because it is a new and fashionable thing to do. A large percentage of early audiences of Waiting for Godot have been guilty of this phenomena, of "pretending to like a play they did not even begin to understand, just to appear in the know," as Esslin has put it. The statement may well be applicable to audience reaction.

What Absurdist plays have to say has been said in analysis and interpretation, but rarely through the plays themselves. Interpretation battles interpretation, playwright's own statements about their plays are seized and used to support various sides, resulting in almost a complete eclipse of the plays themselves. Yet even Ionesco believes that a work should explain itself. That statement leads one to wonder whether it would not be best to
disregard all interpretation and let the plays express what they will to audience members. Unfortunately, that is impossible now.

If the plays are accepted as personal expression of deeply felt absurd sensation, can they also be seen as arousing some awareness in the audience of that same personal sensation? Doubtless they can if the audience member has himself experienced similar feelings. Yet, Camus says that "... the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression." Simply watching one person's rendition of his perception of the world most probably will not result in a comprehension of that world. This is particularly true in the case of the Absurdists, for their plays delve immediately and completely into a dream-like state of anguish and obscurity. The audience sees no transition from the world they know into the world of the absurd, and they are prohibited from entering that world through sympathetic response to the characters. Perhaps more relation to concrete reality would at least make Absurdist situations a human possibility. For the present, however, communication of the absurd is dependent upon critical commentary rather than the plays themselves.

Philosophy of Drama

It is doubtful that drama and philosophy will ever express one another satisfactorily. The nuances of a
thought, the balance between logical reasoning and rhetorical exercise are not adequate material for a play. When theatre begins to express ideologies it can do little more than popularize them, for it simplifies them to the point that they are barely recognizable. This may well be the case with Absurdist Theatre. Simplifying a philosophy so dependent upon its totality for meaning seems insulting to both philosophy and philosopher. As Cohn said: "One may ask whether . . . it is time to see absurd plays as plays." The incredible amount of interpretation needed to complete the communication process of Absurdist plays supports Cohn in the effort to regain sense and clarity.

Conclusion and Comment

Camus' theories and concepts of the absurd and what the absurd entails are largely dependent upon two things: man's reason and the world in which he lives. Consequences such as revolt and freedom are natural outcomes of the confrontation between those two elements. Camus' concept of Absurd Happiness is entirely his own, and is what sets him apart from other philosophers of his type. Yet, even if one were to disregard the concept of happiness, which frankly seems to be deduced not from logical reasoning but from willful manipulation of the material, the Absurdist Theatre would still fall short of communicating the concept of the absurd. The Absurdists are too removed from the concrete reality which its audiences function in,
and, which more importantly, makes the absurd a possibility. Even if Camus were discarded as the basis for judgement and another existentialist substituted, the results would not vary. Absurdist Theatre may often deserve its name, but only rarely in relation to a philosophic concept. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* comes closest to realizing a communication of absurd experiences. He has created a masterpiece of images and very real statements about time and man's insignificance. Even Beckett, however, does not and probably cannot, awaken audiences to the absurdity of their lives, nor does he present the other sides of absurdity, like freedom and revolt.

Martin Esslin has given some meaning to this type of drama, but it seems that, as theatre, these plays have failed to communicate what they are about, or at least what Esslin has said they are about. Mainly, it seems these playwrights have experimented with style and with subject matter and their experiments have resulted in the style overshadowing the subject matter. Somehow, the concept of the absurd becomes lost among the theatrical devices that were supposed to jolt the audience into a new perception of reality. If one has to analyze and interpret in order to call a play Absurdist, it appears that theatre has lost its place as a communicator. Doubrovsky has said:

*Analyses of 'absurd' has been horizontal rather than vertical, proceeding by extension rather than inclusion.*

This seems to be the case with Absurdist plays.
Absurd experiences seem to be the only point of a correlation between Camus' concept and the Absurdist Theatre. There is no facing the absurd, nor is their a revolt against it, and certainly, there is no freedom or happiness in the world of Absurdist Theatre. Camus' work is far from analogous to the works of the Absurdists, and though the common basis of thought is recognized, that basis is lost almost immediately in the playwrights' efforts to communicate their sense of the absurdity of the human condition.
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32. Camus, p. 40.

33. Lumley, p. 218.

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37 Esslin, Absurd, p. 375.
38 Esslin, Absurd, p. 377.
39 Thody, p. 18.
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