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### ABSURD DRAMA: THE LONG WAIT FOR GODOT

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#### ABSTRACT

The literature of the Absurd – in particular the Theatre of the Absurd – is of singular relevance to twentieth century thought. Taking its roots from Existentialism, it reflects strongly the philosophies of Lamettrie, Condillac, and Helvetius (late eighteenth century) and, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the doctrines of Spinoza, Bergson, Blondin and Husserl. Spiritualists who claim that all events are subjective, of varying nature to individuals, have adopted Existentialism as a base (Germany: Eucken, England: Bradley, Italy: Croce).

In line with existentialist philosophy per se which rejects the impartial objectivity of materialism and hedonism, Absurd Literature, through individual fictitious characters, puts forth questions which the philosophers themselves dare not ask: What is the essence of existence? Does this essence only create, or does it also govern? If so, according to whose plan? In the lay-theatre-goer's words, what, after all, is Godot?

In his essay *The Demon and the Dove*, Adrian Van Kaam claims that, once the problem of existence is made relevant, the individual begins to feel that his life, built upon questions without answers, begins to crumble. Prominent examples in literature are Shakespeare, Richard II; Goethe, Faustus; Camus, *The stranger* (Meursault); Kafka, *The Castle* (Kaufman) and *The Trial* (Joseph K...), Beckett and Pinter defend that man would rather exist passively, in almost womb-like conditions, rather than be active and face despair. The rub in this case is that, taking the dehumanized mechanicality of the twentieth century in stock, both extreme passivity (Pinter, *The Room*, Rose) and overactivity to the point of abandon (Pinter, *The Dumb Waiter*, Ben and Gus) lead to a state of existence very close to Sartre's *La Nause*. The way out of such intellectual nausea, Sartre and other Existentialists declare, is not to look for divine intervention, but to fight against existential dis-

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possession, as the desire for struggle is synonymous with the desire to survive. Absurdist agree wholeheartedly.

Towards the middle of our century we see the emergence of a strange and often brilliant movement in the theatre, which for lack of a better word, we call the Absurd. The dictionary meaning of absurd is "out of harmony with reason, incongruous, unreasonable, illogical". In common English it is used to mean "ridiculous". But this is not the sense in which the word is used in context with Theatre of the Absurd. Ionesco defined absurd as "... that which is devoid of purpose. . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless".<sup>1</sup> The absurd hero can be compared to a man who, while calmly strolling on a straight, smooth road suddenly falls down a well. Not necessarily suffering physical injuries, he sits at the bottom of the well, lost and rootless, his head still reeling from the shock of being torn from everything he thought would last forever, a tremendous sense of loneliness accumulating in him. His efforts to reach the surface consist of occasional short bursts, and after a time resignation sets in, giving us the image of the "lost" man, which has intrigued writers from Kafka to Hemingway to Camus. Dramatists such as Beckett, Ionesco, and Jean Genet have devoted most of their work to the portrayal of the anguish man feels at the absurdity of his own condition. Absurdist theatre takes a simpler, more literal view in pointing out the senselessness of life, the devaluation of ideas and, inevitably, of purpose. While Sartre and Camus draw portraits of immortal characters by using brilliantly constructed – and obviously highly polished – dialogue, absurd drama tries to present the human condition as it is, vulnerable and highly mortal, using a poetry born of over-simple language. For absurdist it is not the words themselves that are important, but the context in which they are used. "In Ionesco's *The Chairs*, for example, the poetic content of a powerfully poetic play does not lie in the banal words that are uttered but in the fact that they are spoken to an ever growing number of empty chairs".<sup>2</sup> Although the Theatre of the Absurd is, in this sense, anti-literary, it must in no way be confused with the avant-garde, which, contrary to absurdism, relies to a great extent on consciously poetic speech and complex verbal associations.

Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet are considered to be the pillars of this movement. They are fine craftsmen who know precisely how to use the appropriate setting and language. In Beckett we have an almost-bare stage, a barren landscape with, perhaps, a tree or a rock. Movements are reduced to a minimum; the poetry is sparse and concrete, as bare as the landscape. Ionesco handles the stage like a puppet-master; his characters weave back and forth in settings concocted half from dreams and half from reality, their speech deteriorating from profuse outbursts to monosyllables in despair. Jean Genet's characters move from appearance to reality and back, his plays give way to plays within plays, and we get a kaleidoscope of imaginative sets, movement, and language. Notwithstanding their differences in technique,

all three writers gives us "... the contemporary man, who, first reduced to the faintest of hopes, asks the question of what he can do, and then resigns himself to the seeming inevitability of cosmic nothingness".<sup>3</sup> What separates earlier drama from the Theatre of the Absurd is the fact that the latter contains a more serious purpose than the early moderns. This more serious purpose stems from the existentialist concept that man leads a totally purposeless existence. He is trapped among fixed ideas and differing values, acquires habits which are self-destructive, and is thus reduced to a creature for whom language has become a dead thing, limiting his communication and emphasizing his solitude. It was Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) that made this theme accessible to the whole world by being translated into more than twenty languages:

One evening, on a lonely country road near a tree, two elderly tramps await the arrival of someone whom they call Godot. They do not know what this person looks like, any more than they know for certain whether they have come to the right place at the right time. As they while away the minutes they quarrel, make peace, play word-games and indulge in pointless conversation. As night falls and the moon rises and there still is no sign of Godot, they contemplate suicide but change their minds and decide to leave instead. Despite this decision they remain motionless as the curtain falls.

The greatness of the play lies in the shape of the speeches and the poetical style that Beckett has developed to convey the anguish of humanity. A great tenderness and an insistent humour are dominant, so that the two tramps, the more reflective Vladimir and the more instinctive Estragon, instantly attract our sympathy and enable us to see ourselves in a new light. There is time to be filled and the tramps fill it as best they can, by alternating gestures of warmth and hostility, by threatening to leave, by making up games, and by exploring their own capacity for cruelty. The play begins bleakly enough. The stage is bare except for a tree and the light is dim. The opening words fit the setting and are, essentially, the theme of the play:

ESTRAGON. Nothing be done.

VLADIMIR. I am beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle.<sup>4</sup>

Estragon is referring to taking off his boots, Later Vladimir repeats the phrase twice, first referring to his hat, then to the uselessness of mirth. Actually they are both referring to their lives. They do not know how to pass the time. Their situation is hopelessly static.

ESTRAGON. Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody

goes, it's awful.<sup>5</sup>

Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot, with whom they believe they have an appointment. At the end of Act I they are informed by a messenger that Mr. Godot will not come today, but that he is sure to make an appearance tomorrow. Their subsequent attempts at suicide remain only verbal. Vladimir, the more practical of the two, frequently voices his hope that Godot will soon arrive, while Estragon, who claims to have been a poet, remains skeptical and takes refuge in dreams.

Godot himself is just what his name implies — an entity for whom all men wait, hopefully and fearfully, to solve their problems and bring point to their pointless lives. Whether Godot is meant to suggest divine intervention or whether he represents a human being whose arrival will change the situation is of secondary importance. The importance lies in waiting, which is an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. Throughout our lives we always wait for something, no matter what, and the objective of our waiting is always Godot. And it is in the act of waiting that we truly experience the flow of time.

Have you done tormenting me with your accursed time?  
 ...One day we were born, one day we'll die, the same day,  
 the same second... They give birth astride of a grave, the  
 light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.<sup>6</sup>

And Godot never comes. He does not communicate with us and obviously does not feel for us, condemning us for reasons unknown. Faced with this reality, how does one go through life? By force of habit, Beckett tells us; by doing one despite boredom and pain, by talking, by not listening to the silence, absurdly and without hope. Despite the incomprehensibility and cruelty of life, he concludes, man is compelled to go on.

VLADIMIR. Say something!  
 ESTRAGON. I'm trying. (Long silence.)  
 VLADIMIR. (in anguish) Say anything at all!  
 ESTRAGON. What do we do now?  
 VLADIMIR. Wait for Godot.  
 ESTRAGON. Ah!<sup>7</sup>

Pinter, like Beckett, tries to show that there is a great gap between what man hopes life will be like and the life he is forced to endure. Although man is irrevocably tied to time and nature, neither time nor nature are sympathetic to him. As a result, he wavers between despair and hope, past joys and present miseries. In *The Caretaker* the old tramp has to go to Sidcup in order to get his papers and start a new life. As his own shoes have fallen to pieces, he tries on different other pairs, and start

a new life. As his own shoes have fallen to pieces, he tries on different other pairs, none of which fit. As a result he postpones the journey indefinitely, blaming it on the shoes. He is in reality avoiding a confrontation which may turn out to be disastrous; there may after all be no papers in Sidcup, or resuming possession of the papers may not make any difference in his status quo, bringing on his total collapse. Hope, like a thread, is very febrile, and in certain cases kept alive by ignorance; hence the fear of knowing and of being known. B.B.C. drama critic Martin Esslin admits that "like Beckett, Pinter wants to communicate the mystery, the problematic nature, of man's situation in the world. Pinter's plays are . . . almost allegories of the human condition".<sup>8</sup> If Pinter has occasionally been alluded to as child of Godot it is because both his and Beckett's characters lead lives of complex and restless desperation, through which the audience is made to feel the earthly human need for security, recognition and acceptance.

The general image in almost every Pinter play is one of fear and expectation: Two people in a room. What is going to happen to them? Is someone going to open the door and come in? The room is the womb-like refuge of his frightened characters; and like the womb, it is a false and vulnerable refuge: the outside world inevitably bears in, whereas Beckett's single tree suggests loneliness and defenselessness based on distance, vastness and emptiness. Pinter's people are not only threatened by the oppressive stuffiness of four walls, but with the fear that their cell will at any moment be penetrated by some hostile power from without. Thus, by fearing intrusion and remaining within, they slowly suffocate. Divine intervention does not exist, and man, having realized the pointlessness of waiting for any kind of Godot, stumbles through the twilight while nature watches with cold indifference.

HIRST...           The sounds stopped.    It was freezing.  
                          There's a gap in me. I can't fill it. There's  
                          a flood running through me, I can't plug  
                          it. Who's doing it? I'm suffocating.<sup>9</sup>

A true understanding of Pinter's language must begin from an examination of the function of language in stage dialogue. People on stage have always spoken more clearly and precisely than they would have otherwise done, as writers usually concern themselves with ways in which stage language could be made as well-proportioned and to-the-point as possible, disregarding the fact that ordinary linguistic intercourse is neither. It was only recently that a defect in communication between characters was introduced by dramatists. Pinter makes use of this defect to show that, although language is capable of establishing a bond of understanding between human beings, people seldom make use of it for that purpose.

MEG.                   I was the belle of the ball.  
PETEY.                Were you?

MEG. Oh yes. They all said I was.  
 PETEY. I bet you were too.  
 MEG. Oh, it's true. I was.  
 (Pause)  
 I know I was.<sup>10</sup>

Meg's drowning attempt at self-reassurance is futile, as Petey, her husband, does not react to it, showing the existence of a great indifference even in the closest of relationships. As two people sit in a room, exchanging what at first glance is no more than verbal nonsense, love, hate, despair and indifference become very clear, as such absurdities, appropriately used, can illuminate the mental processes that lie behind the words. Meg's broken and repetitive statement that she was the belle of the ball shows her pitiful determination to forget that her attendance was a near disaster. No oration could render this feeling of near-mute despair as effectively.

Accordingly, Pinter tries to show that people in real life do not deliver well-thought out speeches but associate ideas which may or may not be logically connected. In *The Caretaker* Davies is told by Aston that there is a family of Indians living next-door. "Blacks,"<sup>11</sup> Davies mutters and the incident is almost forgotten as he plunges into a story of how he traveled to the monastery at Luton where monks hand out shoes to the poor. Just as his long story reaches its climax, he suddenly reacts:

DAVIES. How many more blacks you got here then?<sup>12</sup>

There is no logic in Davies' train of thought; just the vague association of his hatred for the monk who refused to give him a pair of shoes with his ignorant, white lower-class hatred of ethnics.

It can safely be concluded that Pinter does not waste words; he deals with real speech with the objectivity of an almost-mirror, proving that an audience's interest can be captivated by repetitiveness, haziness about time and place, fading memory and silence which may not only indicate a break in dialogue or a build-up in tension, but the wilful refusal of man to communicate with his fellow creatures. With the long silence<sup>13</sup> at the end of *The Caretaker*, for example, he is telling Vladimir and Estragon to give up their lonely vigil and go home; Mr Godot, man or deity, is not coming today, tomorrow, or for a long time after that.

Pressed as he is by the demands of the world at large, man seeks refuge through total withdrawal. And as the act of leaving the womb is irreversible, he searches for a substitute, a room that will give him shelter, keeping in mind that a territory of one's own is synonymous with a protective shell around one's personality. When that territory is invaded and retreat behind a closed door becomes no more possible, he has no alternative but to retreat into his own self. Man, the dispossessed vagrant of the well-ordered world, struggles to integrate without total loss of personality, and very often

fails. It is upon this failure that Pinter has built his theatre.

Human helplessness is an aspect of life that is easier to ignore than to contemplate. Contemplation brings either a dangerous vitality or a restraining apathy. There can be no ideal medium for the reason that the interdependent nature of a close relationship is beyond modern man: his existence is geared to neither dependence or dominance. The root of this problem, Pinter concludes, lies in communication. The struggle to give experience verbal form suggests the desire to master the meaning of life and the need to communicate that meaning. But speech is often lost in the turmoil of an interrelational struggle, and what begins as an urge to communicate ends in the silence of isolation. The individual is left with no alternative but to fall back on distortion, doubt, and hope to make this reality bearable. For Pinter, therefore, communication is more than simple verbal give and take. It is the factor that regulates the balance between the supply and demand of communication, a groping for a handhold with words, a falling back on verbliness in order to establish an identity. However, as most linguistic intercourse is prompted by self-interest, communication often fails. And if and when communication is successful, one is sure to reveal too much of oneself, triggering the fear of knowing in the other individual, become dangerously explicit and elicit a withdrawal from those around, thus causing inevitable loss of contact. It would be safe to deduce that an individual loses ground just as he seeks to strengthen his position. Man tries to build an identity on verbal establishment. Behind the words lies the struggle for recognition, acceptance and fitting in. The more he strives and fails, the more dispossessed he becomes.

Pinter's drama reflects man's loss of a sense of identity, hence loss of a sense of order in the universe. As man's search for identity centers largely on his sense of place territorial possession becomes synonymous with existence. Defined, a territory is an area of space which a living creature defends as an exclusive preserve. The compulsion to possess and protect such a place is inborn. The four walls therefore take on a crucial importance in a Pinter play: to be inside a room, locked within the monotonous give and take of daily routine, or to be out in the open — the experience each brings and their contrast play an essential part in our emotions, hence our lives. Once out of the strange and supposedly peaceful canopy of the womb, man finds himself forced to cling to an area that offers safety and identity in a basically hostile world. Transcending the physical plane, territory can become verbliness. In any case, material or verbal, territorial possession seems to be under constant threat by some hitherto unknown and undefined menace: Embodied in the person of an intruder, this menace need not necessarily be the intruder himself; it can just as easily generate from within the personality of the victim. In any case, the conflict transcends the rivalry between man and becomes one of man against the universe. When Goldberg in *The Birthday Party* attempts to voice his beliefs about the whys of existence, he becomes "vacant", "des-

perate," and, finally, lost.<sup>14</sup>

Although Pinter unquestionably is a spokesman who gives voice to man's existential uncertainty, it would, for all their thematic resemblance, be erroneous to categorize him with Beckett. Pinter's concern is not with an abstract notion of man but with the concrete experience of being human. His characters are not Everymen on the road of life, discoursing beneath symbolic trees while waiting for superior powers to make their appearances. They are Everymen at home, at work in the street, fighting their everyday battles against inner and outer conflicts, searching for identity through contact, affecting and being affected by others during the process, constantly trying to structure their lives and constantly confronted by chaos. On the edge of their existence, they are beyond conceptualizing or philosophizing. The significance of their actions does not lie in their symbolism but in the fact that they are genuinely being lived. Instead of distorting reality, Pinter offers an honest understanding of it.

In line with his understanding of reality, Pinter has altered stage dialogue to the extent of giving it a new dimension. His language, apparently irrelevant and at first glance seeming to fail, is geared to reveal that what people do to each other through speech is more important than what is actually being spoken. Pinter's characters are in a continuous struggle to stay just ahead of constant silence. Silence is evidence of the total dissolution of personality, a stripping naked of all defenses, helplessness in the face of the universe. Powerlessness can force people to have recourse to too many words or to withdraw into silence: either case culminates in isolation and it is in their isolation that Pinter's characters — hence individuals at large — become most apparent.

It would be safe to conclude that unlike many playwrights who analyse life, Pinter lives it. He does not write with Beckett's clinical detachment, but with the zest of a compassionate craftsman who has no intention of waiting for Godot. Unlike *The Homecoming's* Teddy who is perpetually detached, Pinter shares his characters' urgency. "Something is going on here which is going on in me too"<sup>15</sup> he once told an interviewer. Players experience all the tension of going through an ordeal, and emerge, as a result, with a clearer insight and a renewed resolution for battle. While dispossession gives man something to fight against, the need for security and recognition give him something to fight for, and the willingness to fight is synonymous with the desire to live. Facing up to anxiety gives the individual the strength to face up to the human conditions, breeding the vitality necessary to come to terms with the world in which he lives. In Sartre's *No Exit*, man is condemned to remain within four walls forever. The play ends with one of the characters leaning forward and exclaiming after a taut pause, "Eh bien, continuons."<sup>16</sup> Continuation and the desire that propels it: that is the essence of the Theatre of the Absurd.



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## UYUMSUZ TİYATRO: GODOT'U BEKLEMEK

## ÖZET

Yüzyılımızın ortalarına doğru "uyumsuz" diye adlandırılan bir tiyatro akımının doğuşuna tanık oluruz. Kimi kaynaklarca belirtildiğine göre bu akıma uyumsuz denmesinin önde gelen nedeni daha uygun bir ad bulunmaması. Uyumsuz – özgün terimi ile *absurd* – sözlükte "mantığa aykırı, akıldışı, uygunsuz, gülünç" olarak geçer. Güncel kullanımı ile *absurd* "saçma" demektir. Tiyatro kapsamında uyumsuzluk, akıl almaz bir varoluşa akılcı bir çözüm arayışı olarak ele alınmalıdır. Ionesco bireyin evrensel hiçbir konuda yetke olmadığını ve varoluş konusundaki (*the big WHY*) sorularına yanıt bulabileceği bir düşel (*utopia*)'in kuramsal açıdan olamayacağını savunurken, kuşağının en yetkin yazarı Harold Pinter tüm yüklemelerin temeli olan varoluşun kökenine olaybilimselcilikle inmeyi amaçlamaz, yaşamı bilimci gözüyle inceleyip kuramlara bağlayan oyun yazarlarına karşılık yalnızca duygu ve gözlemlerini sergilemekle yetinir, Godot'lara bel bağlamayanların tanrı-tanımazlığı (*atheism*) ve bilinemezliği (*agnosticism*) içinde verir ürünlerini; zaman ile yer belirsizliği, giderek güçsüzleşen bellek ve uzun susku sonucu *dialogue* kesilir, iletişim çöker ve seyirci evine döner; Godot – kişi ya da tanrı – ne bugün, ne yarı, ne de sonraki gün gelecektir.