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**Rajan**  
Ex-MA Scholar, Himalayan  
Garhwal University, Dhaid  
Gaon, Pokhra, Pauri Garhwal,  
Uttarakhand, India

## An analysis of existentialism and the unconventional theme of absurdity in the ludicrous plays of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Eugene Ionesco

**Rajan**

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### Abstract

This essay explores how Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* ignore the tropes of conventional theatre and examines how ludicrous these plays are. In Paris, the absurd drama movement grew. During the time, France was regarded as the global hub for art. The discord between humanity and the outside world is depicted in absurd drama, which defies the established forms of conventional drama, which have a tradition with deep roots. The ludicrous drama minimises all the visually appealing and delicate features on stage. Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, and Arthur Adamov are the most well-known dramatists who critique traditional play and its components in their works, either directly or indirectly, and make them challenging while attempting to reveal their unique understanding of theatre.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, ludicrous, meaninglessness of life, nothingness, theatre of the absurd

### Introduction

The study focuses on the ways in which Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter convey the existential ideas of absurdity, genuineness, annoyance, and futility of human existence in their plays like *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Birthday Party* (1957), and *Rhinoceros* (1959). The play *Rhinoceros* literally conceived as a "universal parable" on the issue of "conformism", the play is a parody, not on any ideologies to which man may feel the urge to conform, but exclusively on the Nazi philosophy. The key idea of the drama is the way in which man's intellect betrays him. Every time he tries to use the appearance of rationality to explain the unreasonable, he is betrayed by the illusion. Ionesco expresses the existential worry that moral responsibility rather than conformance is where true meaning might be found. He investigates the idea only through the pursuit of independent thought and unrestricted individualism.

The notions behind the absurd drama and the logical structure of classical theatre are not used by playwrights, who instead shape the form and structure of their works. Throughout their works, there aren't many common dramatic actions. For instance, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* has no storyline. Two aimless characters spend their time waiting in an atemporal and circular setting, although they are unsure of for whom or what as the play progresses. The characters in these works use colloquial language, just like the pointless exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon and Meg and Petey. The language used in absurd theatre is corrupted and full of puns, repetitions, and irrelevant speeches.

### Existentialism

Existentialism is a negative way of thinking that looks at the world with dread and dismay. The predicament of humans is described in this philosophical discourse as one of the lost souls roaming around the boundless seas of misery with no hope in sight. They perceive the cosmos that is home to the Human sapiens species as a void from which there is no escape. When an existentialist discusses the human situation under the guise of "Absurdism," the detached existence of humanity, which is rotting away beneath the sands of agony and despair, takes comfort in their arms.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Rajan**  
Ex-MA Scholar, Himalayan  
Garhwal University, Dhaid  
Gaon, Pokhra, Pauri Garhwal,  
Uttarakhand, India

Absurdity aims to convey humanity's indomitable will to live on despite there being no logical necessity for it. This philosophical predisposition highlights the meaninglessness of existence by emphasising the pointless excesses of poor people. The Second World War served as a backdrop for the existentialist narrative's emergence as a philosophy of existence. At this terrible turning point in human history, humanity had given up on the possibility of salvation. We had no motive to strive for existence because our previously held pillars of country and religion had let us down. Existentialism stepped in to fill the hole when the devastating effects of WWII exposed it.

### Theatre of the Absurd

A term used to characterise a form of theatre that originated in the 1950s and 1960s is "theatre of the absurd." It is characterised by a sense of the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence, which is frequently conveyed through absurdly convoluted stories, speech, and actions. The most well-known pieces in this genre include Harold Pinter's "The Birthday Party," Eugene Ionesco's "Rhinoceros," and Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot." The ideas and methods of the Theatre of the Absurd have had a profound influence on modern theatre, and playwrights and directors are still influenced by them today. Playwrights like Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett are some of the well-known individuals connected to the Theatre of the Absurd. Characters confined in meaningless settings and with communication difficulties frequently appear in their plays. The plays often defy conventional theatrical standards and incorporate techniques like repetition, non-linear storylines, and free-verse language. The Meaninglessness of Life in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*: - Language is used to pass the time in Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* rather than as a medium of communication. Act 1 of *Waiting for Godot* opens with Estragon saying, "Nothing to be done" (Beckett 5). This is how Beckett expresses his nihilistic views. The exact figure then states, "There's nothing to display," a few pages later (7). The writer seems to believe that since human life is ludicrous, so too must be the works that depict it. The location is where nothing can be done, observed, or demonstrated. Hope for the two aimless characters comes from waiting for Godot. Through the use of absurd characters, Beckett conveys to the viewer the meaninglessness of life.

*Waiting for Godot*, a play by Samuel Beckett, serves as the best example of this story of utter pessimism and lack of belonging. This artistic masterwork, which is known as the "play which altered the face of modern theatre," is actually a true verbal picture of the existential struggle of the modern person who is desperately trying to find relevance and meaning in everything. Estragon and Vladimir are two characters from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, who is well-known in both the field of literary studies and casual reading. They are involved in an absurd struggle to give meaning to their meaningless lives. Estragon and Vladimir, the two protagonists, appear to be most pertinent to the existentialist storyline at this point.

The two men consider the true purpose of their existence in a painfully funny way as they sit next to a dying tree and wait eternally for the enigmatic creature Godot. The reader is perplexed by their banal gestures, seemingly meaningless

movements, and futile discussions as they try to make sense of this whirlwind of odd behaviour. But, the drama actually provides a precise and in-depth analysis of the predicament of modern people, who face comparable identity problems every day.

Vladimir and Estragon, the two main characters, don't appear to leave their starting spot at any point during the drama. They remain immovable in a world without a clear timeline, dedicated purpose, or even established systems. In fact, doubt and uneasiness are at the centre of the entire storyline. The two protagonists do very little to change their fate in the middle of this cacophony of nothingness. They seem to be mindless conformists being swept away by the ruthless current of time. They don't genuinely try to give their existence any meaning or purpose; they just exist. This play is a fantastic classic of absurdist theatre in particular and a reflection of philosophy because of the high level of plot absurdity.

*Rhinoceros*, a play written and performed by French dramatist Eugene Ionesco (1909–1994), exploits the ludicrous to attest to its marvels. He tried to reveal his own world by explaining the incomprehensible. One of Ionesco's most socially and politically conscious plays is *Rhinoceros*, which he wrote in 1959. It is a representation of existentialism since it shows the conflict between a true person and the group. Ionesco sought to capture the lovely, absurd, and terrible aspects of individualised human life in humorous and tragic ways of experience. By showing how language, cultural customs, political conformism, and intellectual idealisation trap people, he was successful in presenting these characteristics in this drama.

In Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros*, the first amusing phenomenon of men turning into rhinoceroses becomes unsettling and even dangerous. Every character in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (with the exception of one) changes into a dangerous animal, which makes the play unsettling and even horrifying. The audience stays in the mood of joy or sorrow in classic comedies or tragedies. The audience is left in the middle of *Rhinoceros*, more conscious of life's peculiar intricacy but unclear of what to do or think about it. The play is ludicrous in many ways, not just because of its premise; characters make spectacularly illogical claims that are obvious to anybody watching or reading when they are put to the test. Through these bizarre situations, the play suggests that life is absurd and unfathomable rather than something that can be clearly studied.

*The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter, which was published in 1965, dramatises the existential conflict by highlighting the issues in the relationships between the play's protagonists. Meg and Petey's relationship exhibits considerable coolness. Petey is reserved and evasive, while Meg is chatty and curious. Petey frequently responds in monosyllables and with much reluctance, and what Meg says is unnecessary. The fundamental theme of Harold Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* is an existential crisis. Existence is the issue at hand in the play. Characters experience existential suffering. To discover their individuality, they relocate frequently. Characters have a solitary appearance.

The play *The Birthday Party*'s central theme is the problem of identification. Characters are unable to freely convey their mission. It's because they don't know one another. An obsession drives the protagonists to understand their own pasts after being imprisoned. The darkness prevents the

characters from seeing one another. The main character Stanley in the drama "The Birthday Party", is forced to deal with his own problem.

The Birthday Party, like all of Pinter's earlier plays, is filled with suspenseful scenarios and a tone of why and what. For illustration, Goldberg and McCann, in *The Birthday Party*, is without context for their issue. The drama leaves open questions about their purpose. Stanley, the focal point of the party and the one who keeps insisting from the play's outset that it is not his birthday and that he has nothing to do with the celebration, is another of the play's most enigmatic characters. The Birthday Party lends credence to the insanity concept by having its protagonists wander around searching for their identities. According to Ronald Knowles, Pinter was commonly identified with Beckett and Ionesco's absurdism and the social realism of the "Angry Young Men" because of his extraordinary achievement by the early 1960s.

The state of Goldberg and McCann is similar to Stanley's. In *The Birthday Party*, Goldberg and McCann also don't have any professional experience. They themselves, as well as the spectator, are kept in the dark about who they are employed by because of the manner the mystery is weaved. Characters are clearly in an enigmatic state. All of the characters' voices are characterised by mystery. As a result, their purpose is a mystery throughout the play.

The protagonists are forced to live in a meaningless world when they experience communication problems and identity crises because they are unable to recognise any purpose in their surroundings. Pinter uses a style of repetitious and ambiguous discourse to show the absurdity of life throughout the play. In the play, Meg overhears Stanley, one of the most significant and emblematic characters, remaining completely mute. It demonstrates how contained the crisis is. The actions do not come together to form a singular identity for the play. All of the play's characters seem to speak in a monotonous, stereotypical manner that is punctuated by long pauses and silences, which borders on ridiculousness.

The futility of all activity and the senselessness of all directions are obsessions in Pinter's plays, which make up the theatre of the absurd. The silences and the words that are not said are as vital in Pinter's and Beckett's works; they are just as important as the ones that are said. In actuality, Pinter's world depicts the sad and inevitable conflict between man and the world, which is undergoing an arbitrary and independent process of renewal and annihilation. He constructs a universe that is meaningless and ludicrous in the existential sense. The characters in his works are tragically humorous.

### Conclusion

Existentialism frequently examines the human condition by concentrating on issues like death, freedom, and the purpose of life. Existentialist theatre frequently draws from absurdist or existentialist concepts. The fundamental meaninglessness of life and the human experience of angst or worry in the face of this meaninglessness are frequently explored in these ideologies. Special effects and other tools are frequently used in existentialist theatre to evoke a sense of discomfort or even horror. In addition, psychology and psychotherapy have been greatly influenced by existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd. Numerous psychotherapy strategies have included an emphasis on the patient's subjective

experience, their distinctive worldview, and the significance of choice and responsibility.

Finally, existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd are essential philosophical and artistic trends that have questioned accepted notions of human existence and stimulated original thought. Their beliefs have shaped how we view ourselves and the world around us, and their influence may still be felt in modern culture.

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