

World of the play

Definitions

Existentialism – A (mostly) twentieth century approach that emphasises the primacy of individual existence over any presumed natural essence for human beings. Although they differ on many details, existentialists generally suppose that the fact of my existence as a human being entails both my unqualified freedom to make of myself whatever I will, and the awesome responsibility of employing that freedom appropriately, without being driven by anxiety toward escaping into the inauthenticity or self deception of any conventional set of rules for behaviour, even though the entire project may turn out to be absurd.

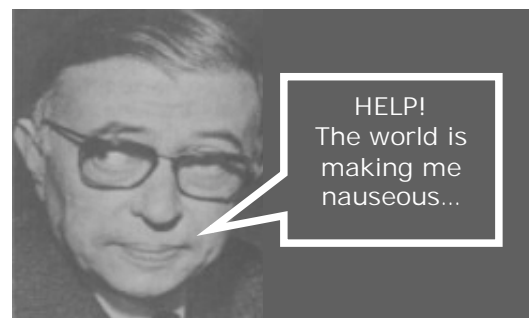
Theatre of the absurd – A form of drama that emphasises the absurdity of human existence by employing disjointed, repetitious, and meaningless dialogue, purposeless and confusing situations, and plots that lack realistic or logical development. Something that is absurd is contrary to reason or beyond the limits of rational thought; paradoxical, nonsensical or meaningless. According to Camus, Sartre and other existentialists, absurdity is an inescapable consequence of any sensitive effort to live in the face of an indifferent reality.

Alienation – The process whereby people become foreign to the world that they live in. The concept is deeply embedded in all the great religions, and social and political theories of the civilised epoch – namely the idea that some time in the past people lived in harmony, followed by some kind of rupture that left people feeling like foreigners in the world. However some time in the future this alienation would be overcome and humanity would again live in harmony with itself and nature.

Existentialism

The following extract is from *Nausea*, one of the most famous works of leading existentialist Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980).

The Nausea hasn't left me
and I don't believe it will
leave me for quite a while;
but I am no longer putting up
with it, it is no longer an
illness or a passing fit: it is
me ... I had this revelation. It



from Te Kete Ipurangi (TKI), The Arts Online, 'Waiting for Godot'
http://www/tki.org.nz/r/arts/artspd/implementation/godot/worldplay_e.php

took my breath away. Never, until these last few days, had I suspected what it meant to 'exist'. I was like the others, like those who walk along the seashore in their spring clothes. I used to say like them: 'The sea is green; that white speck up there is a seagull', but I didn't feel that it existed, that the seagull was an 'existing seagull'; usually existence hides itself. It is there, around us, in us, it is us, you can't say a couple of words without speaking of it, but finally you can't touch it... We were a heap of existents inconvenienced, embarrassed by ourselves, we hadn't the slightest reason for being there, any of us, each existent, embarrassed, vaguely ill at ease, felt superfluous in relation to the others.

And I – weak, languid, obscene, disgusting, tossing about dismal thoughts – I too was superfluous. ... I dreamed vaguely of killing myself, to destroy at least one of these superfluous existences. But my death itself would have been superfluous. Superfluous, my corpse, my blood on these pebbles, between these plants, in the depths of this charming park. And the decomposing flesh would have been superfluous in the earth which would have received it, and my bones, finally, cleaned, stripped, neat and clean as teeth, would also have been superfluous; I was superfluous for all time.

Why do I exist?

Nausea is one of many texts that tackle the tricky problem of our existence. At some point in our lives most of us ask, "Why do I exist? What does it all mean? What's the point after all?"

After thinking about it for a few minutes, we realise these are difficult questions, which we probably can't answer, and so we get on with the very messy, arguably nauseating business of life. But for some philosophers and writers, this is not good enough. We have to think about existence and then, after we have thought about it, we have to think about it some more. Like Jean Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett was one of these remarkable people.

Existentialism is the branch of philosophy that deals with the problem of our existence. Arguably the first existentialist philosopher was a Dane by the name of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855).

Kierkegaard was a deeply religious man. He could not, however, overlook the fact that parts of Christianity are illogical and that one's belief in the bible cannot be based on rational principles. Believing in God and the bible was a leap of faith. That was precisely Kierkegaard's point; because there is no rational basis for

God, religion or even our existence, because a religion riddled with paradoxes was absurd, faith is of paramount importance.

Thinkers like Sartre and Albert Camus (1913–1960) wrestled with this question of our absurdity. What do we mean when we say that life is absurd? Essentially it means we can find no reason or purpose for our existence. Simply, we are here, we suffer, and finally we die, without having any idea what purpose it serves. Camus argues that humanity has to resign itself to the fact that a satisfying rational explanation of the universe is completely beyond its reach and therefore the world must be absurd.

Something rather than nothing

If you find this all a bit depressing, you can at least take comfort in the following question, posed by arguably the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976): “Why is there something, rather than nothing?”

The more you think about it, the more you realise that is a surprisingly optimistic question. You cannot escape the fact that you are here, we do exist and that, even though there could have been nothing, there is something.

Theatre of the absurd

The playwrights loosely grouped under the label of ‘absurd’ convey in their works a sense of bewilderment, anxiety, and wonder in the face of an inexplicable or absurd universe.

Absurdist plays have an unreal and dreamlike quality, and the fantasies and nightmares of these plays often portray the inner emotional conflicts of the characters rather than actual events in the world. These plays are less concerned with sociology than they are with metaphysics. By this we mean that the central problem of these plays is **being** or **existing**.

So what does it mean to exist? What is being? These are enormously complicated questions that have dominated European philosophy for nearly a hundred years. People like Heidegger have written some of the most obscure and difficult-to-understand philosophy about these very questions.

We cannot attempt to look at the multiplicity of answers that have been given but just being aware that these sorts of questions underpin *Waiting for Godot* is a good start to understanding the play.

History of absurdism

So when did this all begin? People like Beckett and Sartre were certainly not the first to recognise the absurd. Many writers from the Ancient Greeks to Shakespeare have pondered on the absurd nature of our existence, and their influence can certainly be seen on the likes of Beckett.

What differentiates absurdist writers is that the question of existence is the central theme of the play. It is in the work of people like Antonin Artaud that we see the emergence of what we commonly call 'theatre of the absurd' today.

Artaud defined the two major purposes of his work as:

- bringing humanity face to face with the apprehension of his own dark nature
- drawing our attention to the implacable, cruel forces that threaten us all the time.

Sartre would reject the notion that humanity necessarily has a dark nature, as he was one of the greatest champions of free will. However, he and other writers of the absurd would have had a great deal of sympathy for the notion that humans are a victim of cruel and implacable forces. That we are at the mercy of forces that are beyond our control and understanding could be another definition of 'absurd'.

Though many writers have the central theme of the absurd in common, each writer's works are coloured by their particular view of humanity and the world. The themes that these works usually deal with are:

- a sense of humanity's alienation
- the cruelty of existence
- the futility of conventional objectives
- the futility of struggle
- a strong vein of fantasy.