

Characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd

Plays categorized in this movement typically represent human existence as nonsensical and often chaotic. Absurdist works rarely follow a clear plot, and what action occurs serves only to heighten the sense that characters (and human beings in general) are mere victims of unknown, arbitrary forces beyond their control. Dialogue is often redundant, setting and passage of time within the play unclear, and characters express frustration with deep, philosophical questions, such as the meaning of life and death and the existence of God.

In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, the entire play consists of two characters waiting indefinitely for a so-called individual (Godot) to arrive, and their lack of information about who Godot is and when he will arrive supposedly comments upon human uncertainty about whether or not God exists.

Theatre of the Absurd Conventions

The theatre of the absurd was a short-lived yet significant theatrical movement, centred in Paris in the 1950s. Unusual in this instance was the absence of a single practitioner spearheading the form. Largely based on the philosophy of existentialism, absurdism was implemented by a small number of European playwrights

Background

- not a conscious movement
- exponents of the form were a disconnected group of playwrights
- the term *theatre of the absurd* was first coined by scholar Martin Esslin in his 1961 text **The Theatre of the Absurd**
- true absurdist playwrights are few in number: Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet (with some scholars including Arthur Adamov).
- other playwrights whose selected works have been labeled absurdist by others include Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard, Fernando Arrabal, and Peter Weiss (though most deny the label of absurdist playwright)

- the beginnings of absurdism lie in avant-garde experiments of the 1920s and 30s, while some argue absurdist elements exist in plays such as Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896) and even in ancient Greek dramas

Theory

- *theatre of the absurd* is otherwise referred to as *absurdism*
- absurd in the context of absurdism can mean:
 - without purpose
 - illogical
 - out of harmony
 - useless
 - devoid of reason
 - meaningless
 - hopeless
 - chaotic
 - lacking order
 - uncertain
- lying in the background to absurdism is the notion of existentialism
- the atrocities of World War II are considered influential events to the movement, highlighting the precariousness of human existence
- Sartre denied the existence of a God, seeing humans with no choice but to create their own standards and moral code in life (instead of accepting standards offered by the Church, the State, or society)
- Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* sees Sisyphus endlessly pushing a boulder to the top of a mountain, only to see it roll to the bottom again – this futile labor is an analogy for man's meaningless existence, a quality seen in many characters and plots of absurdist plays.

For Camus, the legendary figure of Sisyphus was the prototype of an 'absurd' tragic hero, who rebels against the gods and is punished eternally to roll a rock to the top of a mountain, only to have it roll back down again by its own weight. He continues to push it up again, over and over for all eternity. Despite his suffering, Sisyphus takes a dark joy in his fate: Daily, he walks back down his hillside of failure with full, defiant awareness, and thus strips the gods of their power over him.

Plot and Structure

- anti-realistic, going against many of the accepted norms of conventional theatre

- labeled by some critics as ‘anti-theatre’
- often characterised by a deliberate absence of the cause and effect relationship between scenes
- non-linear plot developments, sometimes cyclical – ending where they began
- occasionally appearing as though there is no plot at all to speak of
- deliberate lack of conflict

Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot is a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What's more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice.

Acting and Characterisation

- sometimes stereotypical
- often an absence of character development
- absurd characters lack the motivation found in characters of realistic dramas, highlighting their purposelessness
- time, place and identity are frequently blurred with characters often unsure about who or where they are
- characters are often out of harmony or out of sync with the world in which they live

Movement

- mixture of realistic and non-realistic
- slow
- illogical
- repetitive
- action sometimes defies logic or easy understanding

Dialogue

- language was devalued as a communication tool (unreliable and distrusted)
- often illogical
- sometimes telegraphic and clipped
- long pauses
- clichéd
- repetitive
- rhythmical
- frequent use of silence
- monotone
- slow dialogue sometimes accompanied by a frenzied, fast-paced monologue (extremes)

Modern Drama in English Literature and Its Characteristics

What is Modern Drama?

The drama which had suffered a steep decline during the Victorian Age was revived with great force at the beginning of the 20th century and the course of six decades has witnessed many trends and currents in the 20th-century drama.

Modern drama is literature that focuses on regular people and everyday problems. It is essentially a drama of ideas rather than action. The stage is used by dramatists to express certain ideas which they want to spread in society. Modern drama is also defined as theatrical plays written in the 19th and 20th centuries by playwrights such as Oscar Wilde, Tennessee Williams, Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, William Butler Yeats, Leo Tolstoy, Samuel Beckett and others.

The drama of the Modernist Movement in England was much less innovative in technique than it was its poetry and novel.

History of Modern Drama

English Drama during the Modernist Period (1845-1945) A.D. falls into three categories:

1. The first and the earliest phase of modernism in English Drama is marked by the plays of G.B. Shaw and John Galsworthy, which constitute the category of social drama modeled on the plays of Ibsen and.
2. The 2nd and the middle phase of Modernist English drama comprise the plays of Irish movement contributed by some elites like Yeats. In this phase, the drama contained the spirit of nationalism.

3. The 3rd and the final phase of the Modernist English Drama comprise plays of T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry. This phase saw the composition of poetic dramas inspired by the earlier Elizabethan and Jacobean tradition.

The three categories reflect the three different phases as well as the three different facets of Modern English Drama.

Modern Drama Characteristics

1-Play of Ideas

Modern Drama is essentially a drama of ideas rather than action. The stage is used by dramatists to give expression to certain ideas which they want to spread in society.

Modern Drama dealing with the problems of life has become far more intelligent than ever it was in the history of drama before the present age.

With the treatment of actual life, the drama became more and more a drama of ideas, sometimes veiled in the main action, sometimes didactically act forth.

2-Romanticism

The earlier dramatists of the 20th century were Realists at the core, but the passage of time brought in, a new trend in Modern Drama. Romanticism, which had been very dear to Elizabethan Dramatists found its way in Modern Drama and it was mainly due to Sir J.M. Barrie's efforts that the new wave of Romanticism swept over Modern Drama for some years of the 20th century. Barrie kept aloof from realities of life and made excursions into the world of Romance.

3-Poetic Plays

T.S. Eliot was the main dramatist who gave importance to poetic plays and was the realistic prose drama of the modern drama. Stephen Phillips, John Drink Water, Yeats, etc were from those who wrote poetic plays.

4-History and Biographical Plays

Another trend, visible in the Modern English drama is in the direction of using history and biography for dramatic technique. There are many beautiful historical and biographical plays in modern dramatic literature.

Shaw's *Caesar* and *Cleopatra* are historical plays of great importance. John Drink Water's *Abraham Lincoln* and *Mary Stuart* are also historical plays.

5-Irish Movement

A new trend in the Modern English Drama was introduced by the Irish dramatists who brought about the Celtic Revival in the literature.

In the hands of the Irish dramatists like Yeats, J.M. Synge, T.C. Murrey etc. drama ceased to be realistic in character and became an expression of the hopes and aspirations of the Irish people from remote ways to their own times.

6-Comedy of Manners

There is a revival of the Comedy of Manners in modern dramatic literature. Oscar Wild, Maugham, N. Coward, etc. have done much to revive the comedy of wit in our days.

The drama after the second has not exhibited a love for comedy and the social conditions of the period after the war is not very favorable for the development of the artificial comedy of the Restoration Age.

7-Realism

8-Impressionism

9-Expressionism