

The values of the theatre of the absurd in beckett and ionesco



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Samuel Beckett, in *Waiting for Godot*, and Ionesco, in *The Bald Prima Donna*, both embody the values associated with "Theatre of the Absurd". This is achieved through their use of language, characterisation, and stage direction in order to portray the universe as being arbitrary and meaningless. By using techniques such as false syllogism, repetition and disjointed dialogue, Beckett and Ionesco manage to convey the Absurdist ideals of a random universe and dislocation, depicting life as purposeless and human beings as inexplicable. This is further demonstrated by features which are common to both works, such as a lack of plot and lack of character development. These features combine to reflect the values associated with this genre of literature. Works from the "Theatre of the Absurd" genre tended to portray the universe as arbitrary and meaningless. This is seen through Beckett's tendency to reduce reality to simple, paradoxical situations which seem to lack any final explanation. One example of this is the problem of Godot's arrival. Perhaps he will finally arrive...but then again, perhaps he will not. Godot's arrival seems to be very much left to chance. This is a reflection of the Absurdist value that the world is a random and purposeless place. Vladimir hopes to be "saved" by Godot, yet contemplates the fact that "he'd punish us". This exposes the ambiguity of Godot's character; he could be good, but then again, he might not be. In much the same way, Pozzo finds no precise solution to the problem of pleasure and pain. He considers that the fact that somebody has ceased to weep does not necessarily mean that the world has changed, saying: "The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops." In this quote, Pozzo implies that there seem to be just as many people beginning to weep as there are people ceasing to weep, and it is thus <https://assignbuster.com/the-values-of-the-theatre-of-the-absurd-in-beckett-and-ionesco/>

impossible to say whether or not the world has improved. This type of indefinite conclusion is characteristic of Absurdism, which held that there is no definite conclusion to anything in life. The characters of Pozzo and Lucky also embody this idea of chance. Pozzo remarks, " I might just as well have been in his shoes and he in mine, if chance had not willed it otherwise." The fact that Lucky is the slave and Pozzo is the master is hence attributed to mere probability, more than anything else. This is consistent with the Absurdist belief that a person's condition is to a large extent the consequence of chance, rather than action or decision. The Theatre of the Absurd also endorsed the belief that words were meaningless, thus dismissing the previously-held idea that the meaning of a word is determined by its use. One of the most interesting features found in *The Bald Prima Donna* is false syllogism. The opening paragraph finds Mrs Smith saying " We had a very good meal this evening. And that's because we are English, because we live in a suburb of London and because our name is Smith." Obviously, the fact that they are English and named Smith has nothing to do with the quality of their meal in this context, thus reflecting the Absurdist belief that people, place and time are all irrelevant. Ionesco also uses false logic, reminiscent of Descartes' " I think therefore I am" philosophy, when the Fire Chief mentions that all the Marys he knew were blonde, and Mr Smith remarks " Since she's a blonde, she must also be a Mary." This type of faulty logic is used throughout the play, creating humour for the audience, as the conclusions are so ridiculous that they are funny. Ionesco also employs neologism such as " Gibbertiflippet" and " Pistletoe", which have absolutely no meaning. These words lead to extremely disjointed conversations. For example: Mrs Smith: Cock, you're fowling us
Mrs Martin: I'd rather lay an egg
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than steal an ox. Mr Smith: Mucky duck! Mr Martin: Let's go and slap Ulysses. The dialogue quickly descends into absolute absurdity, heightened by Ionesco's use of non-sequiters, as shown when Mr Smith is talking about agriculture: Mr Martin: No wheat and no fires. Fire Chief: Not even any floods. Mrs Smith: But there is some sugar. These types of conversations further the notion that people, place, and time are irrelevant, and that life itself generally does not make sense. Writers of the Theatre of the Absurd often played on the human need to find meaning in a world of chaos and anarchy. This is shown by Vladimir and Estragon's inclination to complicate trivial matters in *Waiting for Godot*. For example, when talking about dead voices, the following dialogue occurs: Vladimir: Rather they whisper. Estragon: They rustle. Vladimir: They murmur. Estragon: They rustle. The impression given is that these two characters are attempting to analyse the voices: they go on to compare the voices to various items, such as "leaves" and "ashes". Similarly, Pozzo's comments to Vladimir and Estragon exemplify the human need for companionship. Pozzo admits that he "cannot go for long without the society of my likes," confesses that "I don't like talking in a vacuum," and encourages Vladimir and Estragon to comment on his speeches, since he has "such need of encouragement." The latter sentence has particularly existentialist overtones, stressing the fact that human beings are isolated in an indifferent universe and thus have a natural desire to feel that they have some purpose in life. The Absurdist value that the nature of humanity inevitably leads to a quest for meaning is also demonstrated by Beckett's tendency to juxtapose idle discourse with random philosophising. Through Lucky's long tirade, for example, Beckett satirizes this aspect of human nature by using language to explore meaning where there is none. He does <https://assignbuster.com/the-values-of-the-theatre-of-the-absurd-in-beckett-and-ionesco/>

this by employing nonsense speech (e. g. “ quaquaqu”) and ridiculously bombastic words (e. g. “ as demonstrated by Fartov and Belcher in Essy-on-Possy”). Beckett also juxtaposes sequences of brief exchanges with moments of highly elaborate or poetic language. In the opening of Act 1, Vladimir’s sarcastic use of formal language is followed by an exchange in which he and Estragon echo and contradict each other’s rapid statements: Vladimir: May one enquire where His Highness spent the night? Estragon: In a ditch. Vladimir: A ditch! Where? Estragon: Over there. Vladimir: And they didn’t beat you? Estragon: Beat me? Certainly they beat me. Vladimir: The same lot as usual? Estragon: The same? I don’t know. An examination of the rhythmic dimension of this dialogue reveals what the audience hears: a ditch/a ditch!, Where?/there, beat you?/Beat me?, the same?/The same? This sequence gives the audience the impression that these characters are getting nowhere. The echoes on each word suggest a ping-pong of ideas, where each concept is thrown back and forth, the repetition constituting a lack of progress. As with most of the play’s dialogues, this conversation does not lead anywhere, and this particular dialogue ends in a typically inconclusively manner: with the words “ I don’t know.” Beckett uses repetition to convey the cyclical nature of life. Firstly, the structure of the play itself is cyclic, in that the events of Act 2 largely parallel those found in Act 1. Act 2 is set during the next day, but at the same time and place. The only difference is that the tree now has four or five leaves. This could be a statement about the fact that time has no sequence, and that place is irrelevant in this supposedly meaningless world. The two acts of Waiting for Godot therefore appear to be parts of an endless series, as Vladimir seems to realise when he comments, “ Off we go again.” This view of life is further

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demonstrated by the circular arguments that characterise all of the play's dialogues. This is often a result of the fact that the characters are attempting to converse merely for the sake of conversing. Within these circular arguments, we find a striking degree of repetition: Vladimir: They whisper. Estragon: They rustle. Vladimir: They murmur. Estragon: They rustle. Estragon keeps revisiting the same arguments, and thus the conversation keeps returning to its origins, as is epitomised when Vladimir says, "Let's start all over again." These discourses are inevitably followed by a "silence" or "long silence" after which someone says, "Say something! Say anything at all!" This repetition is also shown by the actions of the characters, often in a Charlie Chaplin-like comedy routine. When the audience first meets Lucky, for example, he is characterised by a cyclic routine in which he is forever "sagging" and then "straightening up". This is also shown through Estragon and Vladimir's hat routine, where they keep adjusting the same hat on the same head. This form of repetitious action endorses the cyclical nature of life that is associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. Ionesco provides the audience with a very strong sense of dislocation in *The Bald Prima Donna*. This is primarily demonstrated by the conversation between Mr and Mrs Martin, who have been married years and live together, yet still cannot recognise each other when they meet at the Smiths'. This dislocation is also achieved by the characters' tendency to contradict their own statements. For example: "She's too tall and well built...A trifle too short and too slight, perhaps". This is once again representative of the meaninglessness of life. Through his use of language, Ionesco portrays the world as absurd, and the human condition as equally inexplicable. Likewise, Beckett's use of language reveals the typically Absurdist doubts regarding mankind's ability to

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understand or explain his condition. Vladimir and Estragon frequently confuse words, such as “ Pozzo” and “ Bozzo” and “ on and “ off”, and continually contradict each other’s definition by using terms such as “ turnip” and “ carrot”. Vladimir finds these tendencies rather annoying, and complains to Estragon that “ nothing is certain when you’re about,” thereby epitomising the notion that life is inexplicable and essentially absurd. Perhaps Beckett is exposing the inevitable contradictions that occur when two people try to define the same reality. Beckett could also be making a statement about the way humans prefer to pass their time “ blathering about nothing in particular”, perhaps in order to avoid being surprised by sudden moments of anguish in which they are “ restored to the horror of their situation.” Thus, Beckett could be implying that humans prefer to ignore reality, as is shown when Estragon frequently suggests ways in which he and Vladimir can play with language, saying, “ Let’s ask each other questions,” or “ Let’s contradict each other,” or even “ Let’s abuse each other.” It is, however, interesting to note that the characters seem to realise that they are talking nonsense, as is shown when Vladimir remarks, “ This is becoming really insignificant,” to which Estragon replies “ Not enough.” This could imply that humans are actually highly intelligent beings who strive to be as insignificant as possible, perhaps because they have been conditioned to do so by the arbitrary nature of the world. The fact that humans cannot understand their condition is further demonstrated by the way the characters question their own judgments. Vladimir, for example, ponders, “ Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now?” In this passage, Vladimir gives voice to the innate fear that life may be nothing more than a dream. Vladimir and Estragon also appear uncertain about their

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relationship with each other. They are sometimes pleased to see one another, but at other times they wish to part. Likewise, they sometimes wish to embrace one another, while at other points they refuse to interact. For example, Estragon pleads, " Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!" Once again, the audience gets the impression that neither character understands his place in the universe, and is therefore unsure about how to approach nearly every situation. Although the Theatre of the Absurd was a genre of the 1950s, it maintains its relevance for today's audience because the values associated with the Theatre of the Absurd epitomise the 20th-century feeling that life is meaningless, and that either God doesn't care about humanity, or He doesn't exist. In a century that has seen two major world wars and the rapid advancement of technology, it is unsurprising that many people began to question the meaning of life.

Technology has forced humanity to recognize the inherent uncertainty of this life, and the fact that many events are attributed to chance. We can thus relate to the situations that the characters in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Bald Prima Donna* find themselves in. Although this genre is essentially a very pessimistic one, tension is released by the humour that inevitably results from the absurd situations and dialogue. Thus, the audience can laugh at the comic aspect of this genre, while pondering its tragic elements. The genre forces the audience to think about their place in life, and to focus on the universe as a whole. It is also possible that the attraction of this genre lies in its universality and the fact that it can be interpreted in any number of ways. One can choose to draw mere enjoyment out of it for its humour, or conversely, analyse what each statement is saying about life. Beckett's play,

Waiting for Godot, and Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna* both embody the <https://assignbuster.com/the-values-of-the-theatre-of-the-absurd-in-beckett-and-ionesco/>

values of the Theatre of the Absurd. This is seen through the continual references to chance found in both plays, which serves as indicators of an arbitrary universe, the use of non-sequiters and neologism, to indicate a sense of purposelessness, and the circular arguments and repetition, which create the idea of the cyclical nature of life. The pessimistic outlook associated with these ideals is released by the humour that is created by the absurd situations and dialogue, maintaining modern interest in this genre. The theatre of the Absurd epitomises the 20th-century conception of life through the values that are presented in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Bald Prima Donna*.