



EDUCATION GUIDE

What is Theater of the Absurd?

Theater of the Absurd is theater that highlights those uncomfortably strange yet real moments in life, when things just don't make any sense.

As humans, we're drawn to understand everything that is happening. We expect everything that happens for a reason and that something caused it. We look for explanation and purpose. Why did this person just do that? Why is this situation the way that it is? And if we don't understand, we get uncomfortable and even anxious; we go to asking questions until we find an answer or solution that satisfies us. And when we do, we relax because now it makes sense- we understand why it happens and what it all means.

Theater of the Absurd presents characters caught in the ongoing cycle of life's meaningless moments. It challenges the audience to experience the discomfort and humor of when characters or situations don't seem to make any sense at all. It is here that the audience is asked to draw their own conclusions.

Common Traits of Theater of the Absurd

Cyclical Situations: During an Absurdist play, you often observe people in a situation with no clear ending. Instead of finishing, the events begin again. In *Endgame*, does the cycle of the characters' situation ever end?

Repetition: Directors sometimes say, "in Theater of the Absurd, characters need a very short memory." In Absurdist plays, characters can repeat the same language or action multiple times with little variation over the course of an hour and a half performance! Often, this helps highlight the absurdity of the situation.

Physicality and Comedy: Many Absurdist plays feature lots of broad physical movement and comedy. Samuel Beckett in particular was influenced by clown work and vaudevillian comedy (think the Three Stooges and the Marx Brothers).

Anti-Literary: This means that, especially when they were written, *Endgame* and other Absurdist plays were very different than the other plays and books of their time. Beckett and other writers were trying to do the opposite of what was considered "literary;" they were purposely testing the limits of theater and storytelling.

Written in the 1950s: Most absurdist works were written in the 1950s. Playwrights had survived World War II and were living in the midst of the Cold War. Not only had they all just endured one of the most devastating moments of human history, they were all now living in fear of an imminent nuclear attack. Many believe that this environment drove artists to absurdism; a world in which very little makes sense.

Who are the Characters in *Endgame*?

Hamm- short for “hammer”

Hamm is blind, elderly, and confined to a wheelchair. He is immobile unless his servant, Clov, is available to push him around the room. Hamm is tyrant of sorts who manipulates through comedy and word play. Contemplative, self-pitying, and needy, Hamm sits in the same room for the entirety of the play, waiting for death or some other force to break the cycle of his situation.

Clov- from the French “clou” for “nail”

Clov a younger man in his mid-twenties or thirties. Unknown leg issues give him a “stiff, staggering” walk and the inability to sit down. Clov came to live with Hamm as a child and now acts as a servant. A quiet, submissive man with simmering resentment and frustration, Clov teeters on the verge of despair and giving up on life. He is often passive aggressive in his actions and uses humor and sarcasm to defuse the pressure of his anger.

Throughout the play, Clov threatens to leave Hamm. This departure would spell a death sentence for all the characters of the play, but also end the unbearable cycle of their situation. Can he muster up the courage to go?

Nagg and Nell- from the German (“nagel”) and English for “nail”

Nagg and Nell are the parents of Hamm. Legless, they sit in sand-filled, adjacent trash cans. Sentimental and still in love, Nagg and Nell reminisce about the past and tell each other stories. When he does not want to hear them speak, Hamm instructs Clov to “bottle” Nagg and Nell by placing the lids on their trash cans.

A seemingly self-centered old man and at times a spoiled brat, Nagg is not afraid to stand up to his son. He fights to be ‘king’ of the room. Nell is a sympathetic realist who has weathered disappointment. Detail oriented with facts and memories, she can get wistfully lost in the past.

Setting

Endgame takes place in a very bare, nearly empty room within a larger house. The outside world is visible through two windows on either side of the room. Through the windows one can also see the sea, the ocean, the desert, and everything “pole to pole.” According to Clov, all he sees out this window is “zero” and “gray.” Some disaster has occurred in the past and the characters in *Endgame* believe themselves to be the only survivors.

The Meaning of the Term “Endgame”

The title of the play comes from the game of chess. This is the moment where there are very few pieces left on the board. In the world of *Endgame*, there are very few players; the four characters we meet might very well be the last humans on the planet. We meet them in their endgame and watch as it slowly plays out. While Clov refers to their situation as “nearly finished,” Hamm often refers to their existence as a game. He wakes up at the top of the show and states “me to play.”

Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin in 1906. The son of a middle-class quantity surveyor, Beckett attended Portora Royal Boarding School and then Trinity College. After school, Beckett moved from Ireland to Paris where he was mentored by the author James Joyce. Occasionally, the almost-blind Joyce would dictate passages of his book, *Finnegans Wake*, to Beckett. Many believe that his relationship with Joyce loosely served as the inspiration for Hamm and Clov’s relationship in *Endgame*.

During World War II, Samuel Beckett joined the underground, anti-Nazi resistance in Paris. When the war was over, he spent some time in Ireland before returning to France. Upon this return, Beckett entered an extremely productive period of time in which he wrote many of his major works, including plays such as *Eleutheria*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *Endgame*. Although his first language was English, Beckett wrote mainly in French. Writing in a less familiar language required Beckett to think harder about the words he chose to put on the page. It also discouraged him from indulging in long-winded wordiness and embellishment.

Glossary

A

Anemometer: an instrument used to measure the speed of wind

The Ardennes: A region of forests in France

Aside: when, in a play, a character says something to the audience that the other characters onstage cannot hear

B

Bonny: Pretty or attractive

C

Catheter: a tube put into canals in the body to help liquids enter or exit a person

Ceres: Roman Goddess of agriculture, grain crops, and fertility

E

Engender: to father or have offspring

F

Farce: a silly and ridiculous play

Flora: plant life

Fontanel: the soft spots on a baby's skull

G

Gaff: a stick with a hook used for catching fish

Guffaw: a loud laugh

H

Heliometer: a telescope used for finding the difference between two stars

Hygrometer: an instrument used to measure the moisture in the atmosphere

L

Lake Como: a lake in Lombardy, Italy

Lumbago: pain in the muscles of the lower back

M

Manna: in the Bible, food that fell from the sky and fed the Israelites in the desert

Meerschaum: a tobacco pipe made out of a soft, white claylike material

Millet: small-seeded grasses and grains

P

Pomona: Roman Goddess of fruitful abundance. Her name comes from the Latin "ponum" for "fruit"

Pap: bland soft food that is eaten by babies or invalids

Progenitor: a direct ancestor

Glossary

S

Sedan: a township in France

Shank: a part of the human leg between the knee and the ankle

Smithereen: a little piece

Soliloquy: when a character onstage speaks their thoughts aloud, often to themselves or when they are alone; a device often used by Shakespeare

Spratt's Medium: a brand of dog biscuit.

Stancher: a person or thing that stops a flow

T

Tandem: a two-person bicycle

Turkish Delight: A type of candy

U

Underplot: a secondary storyline in a play, book, or movie

V

Vesta: a short match

W

Whelp: born of a dog

Theater Etiquette

During this performance of *Endgame*, we ask that you remember some of these etiquette guidelines:

Before the performance:

- Turn off cell phones and any other electronic devices.
- Dispose of all food and drink.
- Spit out any gum.
- Visit the restroom.

During the performance:

- Try to remain still in your seats during the show. If you have to leave, exit during intermission.
- Do not speak during the performance. It can be very distracting to the actors.
- Do not kick or put your feet up on the back of the chairs in front of you.
- Please DO laugh or respond appropriately during the performance.

Discussion Questions

- What comes to mind when you hear the word “absurd?”
- Describe a time you felt trapped in a situation? Or trapped in a cycle of behavior?
- Most absurdist works were written after World War II or during the Cold War. Why do you think playwrights were drawn to the absurd during this era?
- Have you ever tried writing in a language that you do not primarily speak? What were the benefits and drawbacks/what could the benefits and drawbacks be?
- Samuel Beckett wrote novels, stories, and poetry in addition to plays. Why do you think he chose to tell the story of *Endgame* as a piece of live theater?
 - Do you think this piece would be as effective on screen as it was on stage? Why or why not?
- Have you ever had to take care of someone else? A child, sibling, parent or grandparent? What are the challenges and joys of caring for a family member?
- Some catastrophe takes place and you and your family are the last surviving humans on earth. How would you feel? Where would you and your family go? What would you do?
- Why do you think Samuel Beckett chose the title *Endgame*?
- How does it feel when you know that someone is counting on you? How does it feel to depend on someone else?
- Could you survive without a community?
- Why do you think theater matters? Why do people agree to gather together and bear witness to a story being told?