Bertolt Brecht and the Theatre of the Absurd: A comparison

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BERTOLT BRECHT AND THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD:
A COMPARISON

BY

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Introduction

Of the serious plays that have been produced in Europe and America in the last twenty years, a great many of those considered significant have been referred to by critics and the press as belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd. They are plays that are different enough in their production from "conventional" dramas to present their audiences with more than the usual problems of interpretation. Even sophisticated playgoers, versed in symbolism and aware of themes being expressed in many ways by contemporary writers, are not able always to produce complete explanations of these plays. To a reader of the plays they sometimes appear to be meaningless, whimsical, and even carelessly written. Some resemble "slice of life" dramas, although at some point the lives depicted cease their likeness to those portrayed in realistic drama. But a good performance of one of these "absurd" plays seemingly has a moving effect on an audience, leaving them with the feeling of having shared in the exploration of depths of meaning below the surface of the separate events of the play. Some of these plays are parables, of which the truth for any individual spectator must depend on the experiences he has had of the feelings underlying the themes expressed. Some are allegorical, and yet the allegory is not usually in simple terms that can be interpreted in an absolute way. One reason these
plays cannot be subject to an easy analysis is that they deal, more than do conventional plays, with forces and tensions which are below the level of speech and are ordinarily never communicated in words. It is for this reason that they are valuable as an expression of the feelings of modern man that cannot be shown as clearly in any other way than through created dialogue, actions, and other devices of the theatre.

Although the Theatre of the Absurd is regarded as avant-garde at the present time, the techniques used by its playwrights to present their themes are those which have been in use at various times since the earliest Greek dramas. By isolating certain of those devices and by contrasting the general method of those plays with more familiar ones, it is possible to find elements that can help to interpret their meaning and significance. By an examination of the themes used by other modern playwrights, one can find similarities that increase his understanding of the enigmatic content of even the most obscure of the contemporary dramas.

A study of plays written by Bertolt Brecht reveals several underlying themes which seem to anticipate problems that are the concern of playwrights today. In these plays Brecht used a variety of dramatic devices, some of which are evident in productions of the last two decades. It is hoped that pointing out some of these themes and techniques and comparing them with ideas and methods discovered in more modern plays will contribute to an understanding and evaluation of the Theatre of the Absurd. A study of Brecht's aims for the theatre
reveals similarities with purposes expressed by contemporary playwrights as well as significant contrasts which may help to make clear the aims of modern theatre.
Brecht's Theatre

A sensitive poet, Bertolt Brecht was deeply aware of injustice and evil. Having served, at twenty, as a medical orderly in World War I, he had seen the worst side of war and reacted to it by becoming a pacifist. His second play, *Drums in the Night*, shows his cynicism regarding war.

His first play, *Baal*, which he wrote when he was twenty, displays his rejection of sentimentality. Partly autobiographical, it is the story of an amoral poet, Baal, whose love of life and nature is countered by his lack of feeling for people.

Brecht's philosophy at this time has been described as nihilistic. However, his writing shows that he had an underlying optimism and felt that what was evil in society could be corrected. One of the agencies for social change, he believed, was the theatre, not the "culinary" theatre, as he called it, that appealed primarily to the senses and the emotions, but a new type of drama which he hoped would provide as much enjoyment by appealing to the intellect. This he called "epic theatre," and as he wrote and directed plays, he evolved theories which he published later, revising them as his opinions changed regarding drama.

The term "epic" derives from the distinction made by Aristotle in his *Poetics* between epic and tragedy. Tragedy to Aristotle meant
the imitation of an action which aroused in the spectator the emotions of pity and fear and effected a purification or "catharsis" of these emotions.

An epic, on the other hand, was a narrative related by a poet, of events which had happened in the past and which was able to present a larger picture of life than that portrayed in a tragedy. Brecht believed that by presenting events on the stage as a narrative of past events, he could give spectators a wider perspective of society than was possible with plays which aimed at a more personal point of view. An audience, he hoped, could be moved to action by an appeal to their reason when they had seen depicted injustice which could be corrected through a change in the behavior of people or through fundamental changes in society.

That society can be altered, that people can be changed for the better, was a basic belief of Brecht. This optimism helps to explain why he was attracted to the philosophy of Marxism, which postulates that a change in the economic system will produce a change in the nature of people. He made a deep study of Marxist theory between 1926 and 1928 and for several years after that devoted himself to promoting the ideas of Communism, writing didactic poems, essays, and plays designed to further the cause of the workers who were to bring about the proletarian revolution.

In order to make people see clearly this need for a changed society it was necessary to present events on the stage in such a way that they would be viewed objectively and critically. Brecht wanted
his audience to realize constantly that they were being told a story which required them to think rather than to feel. He was insistent upon increasing the aesthetic distance between the audience and players in order to prevent the former from becoming emotionally involved in the action or identified with the actors to the point where their critical faculties were neglected. His aim was to create a Verfremdungseffekt, sometimes called "V-effect," of which he wrote a great deal in his essays on dramatic theory, and which has been translated as "effect of estrangement," or "distantiation." To achieve it he divided his plays into many short, separate divisions or scenes, breaking up the action further with songs, choruses, or remarks by a commentator to the audience. In some plays, expository observations were flashed on a screen between scenes. He insisted upon more illumination in the auditorium than was ordinarily used and that the stage itself be brilliantly lighted. Lighting equipment and other stage devices were always in evidence. His settings, while usually "foreign," could not be identified as representing specific places; the implication was to be that the action could take place anywhere.

Most important in achieving the distanitation he wanted was the type of acting that he encouraged. It was directly opposite to the Stanislavsky method which had achieved considerable fame and was recommended in the realistic theatre. Instead of an actor's becoming absorbed in the role he was playing to the point where he merged himself in the character, Brecht's actor was to remain aware of the fact that he was playing a role and by his way of playing it, to keep the audience
aware that they were seeing a story enacted, that they were not to be deceived into thinking they were participating in real life. This kind of acting required that the actor study his part critically and be able to see different ways of interpreting it, that his speech be terse and direct, and that he act as if he were demonstrating what he had seen and was relating it to his listeners. He was to portray the character as a type more than as an individual.

Brecht expounded his theory of dramatic presentation in many essays and published "model books" containing pictures from the actual productions of plays to show later producers how they should be done. His methods have never achieved the popularity of those of Stanislavsky, but an examination of the acting and production of the Theatre of the Absurd would show that acting devices in these plays resemble the practices of Brecht much more than they do those of the Russian director. Likewise the stark settings, the short scenes, and the asides of the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, and other contemporary playwrights, show a continued departure from the methods of realistic drama, a trend in which the plays of Brecht were among the forerunners.
The Theatre of the Absurd

The plays of Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and others, that are referred to as belonging to the "Theatre of the Absurd" have similarities to the view of life expressed in existentialism. In their apparent formlessness there is a resemblance to the concept of "total freedom" associated with that philosophy. Both existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd seem to deny the existence of a pattern or plan in life, and both reject the idea of fatalistic determinism. Parallels in their points of view are evident in Sartre's explanations of Genet, and Camus has been compared with Beckett in his concept of the absurd. That the two have been linked together at times was evident when a series of lectures presented by the University of California as "Existentialist Drama" explored the plays of Ionesco, Genet, and Beckett, as well as those of Jean-Paul Sartre.

The word "absurd" as applied to these contemporary plays is used in the same sense as it was by Albert Camus in his essays, "The Fact of Absurdity," and "Absurd Freedom," in The Myth of Sisyphus, published in 1942. It is a condition which must be felt to be understood, a realization that there are no certainties except that "I exist and I am mortal." The sense of absurdity is in the conflict between man's being aware of meaninglessness in his life and his innate desire
and tendency to search for meaning and certainty.

This longing is expressed by Camus in his play of 1938, Caligula, in which the mad emperor is obsessed with the idea that the world is meaningless. In such statements as these Caligula and the others portray the conflict:

Caligula: If the Treasury has paramount importance, human life has none.

This world has no importance; once a man realizes that, he wins his freedom.

Leave me, Cherea; and you, too, Scipio, to—for what is friendship?

Men weep because ... the world's all wrong.

I knew that men felt anguish, but I didn't know what that word anguish meant.

No, it's something higher, far above the gods that I'm aiming at, longing for with all my heart and soul. I am taking over a kingdom where the impossible is king.

I've learned the truth about love; it's nothing, nothing!\(^1\)

Cherea: To lose one's life is no great matter; ... But what's intolerable is to see one's life being drained of meaning, to be told there's no reason for existing. A man can't live without some reason for living.

all I wish is to regain some peace of mind in a world that has regained a meaning. What spurs me on is not ambition but fear, my very reasonable fear of that inhuman vision in which my life means no more than a speck of dust.\(^2\)

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\(^2\)Ibid., pp. 824, 825.
A similar feeling of meaninglessness is expressed in a play by John Osborne who, like Camus, writes in a more conventional style than do the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd. Jimmy Porter in Look Back in Anger echoes the lament of Caligula:

There aren't any good brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It'll just be for the Brave New-nothing—very-much—thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus.  

The main difference between such plays and the Theatre of the Absurd resembles the difference between the essays of Sartre, Camus, and other existentialist philosophers, and the Theatre of the Absurd as noted by Martin Esslin:

They present their sense of the irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning, while the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. While Sartre and Camus express the new content in the old convention, the Theatre of the Absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed.  

The plays of the Absurd, then, attempt to make the playgoer experience this absurdity by presenting aspects of life in greatly simplified form, or with tremendous exaggeration.

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3Tbid., p. 1097.

so that the spectator will, in some part of his being, affirm
"it really is like that," even though his conscious mind may try
to tell him, "This is utterly ridiculous; there's no meaning here."

It is a stimulating experience to attend one of these plays, and
the small but increasing audience for avant-garde theatre is
discovering the pleasure in drama that heightens one's awareness
and that offers new and illuminating perspectives of reality.
Comparison of Technique in Brecht’s Drama and the Absurd

The drama of both Brecht and the Theatre of the Absurd shows the influence of elements seen in various other schools of dramatic art. Brecht acknowledged his debt to the German folk theatre, to the Noh dramas of Japan, to the commedia dell’arte, imported from Italy into France, to Chinese poems and theatre, and to the early silent films, particularly those of Charlie Chaplin. Likewise, the plays of the Absurd use devices that have been seen for centuries in comedy from Aristophanes to Shakespeare and down to the present day in the performances of circus clowns and motion picture comedians. It is in the combination of comic techniques with serious or tragic themes that they confuse the spectator and sometimes create an impression of disunity. It is inevitable also that more recent playwrights in this century, such as Brecht and the avant-garde writers would have been influenced by the surrealists, the Expressionists, and the Dadaists, who experimented in countless ways with dramatic presentations and some of whose plays survive in textbooks on drama.

An explanation by Martin Esslin of the Epic theatre can be applied as well to the Theatre of the Absurd. This concept forms the basis for many of the practices of the latter type of drama as well as those of Brecht:
The study of human nature is thus replaced by that of human relations. Not the characters but the story in which they are involved becomes the main concern of the epic, narrative, historical theatre.5

It is obvious that in the Theatre of the Absurd there is great emphasis upon relationships or the lack of relationship between people. Contributing to this importance is the de-emphasis of settings. There are few elaborate, realistic stage sets in either of the two types of drama. Certain exceptions may be found, as in Genet's The Baloney and Edward Albee's Tiny Alice, in which the setting is an important part of the play. But in general the backgrounds are starkly simple and make no pretense of providing an illusion of reality.

Although most of the plays in the Theatre of the Absurd are divided into two or three acts, rather than into many scenes as Brecht's are, there is usually little conventional rising action and no foreseeable climax to produce suspense in the spectator. Brecht tried to accomplish the same end in some of his plays, such as Mother Courage and Her Children, by having scene headings on stage which told the events that were to occur in each scene.

Brecht used commentators and choruses speaking directly to the audience to increase the aesthetic distance between audience and players and thus to avoid the illusion of reality. In The

Caucasian Chalk Circle and in The Elephant Calf he has a "play within a play." Jack Gelber's The Apple uses the same device, but its play has constant interruptions by players commenting on the fact that they are putting on a performance and by actors coming up out of the audience or conversing with other actors in the audience. In Ionesco's Victims of Duty there is a smaller play enacted, and in other plays of his characters discuss the theatre and even Ionesco himself. Genet's dramas are "plays within plays."

The cast of The Blacks often refers to the audience. Instead of an increase of aesthetic distance in The Balcony, conversely, there is an attempt at a decrease of this distance by the placing of a mirror on the stage, reflecting a bed, to give the audience the illusion of being inside the brothel depicted.

Speech in the plays of Brecht is more poetic and apparently more purposeful than in the Theatre of the Absurd and is often broken up by poems commenting on the events. Dialogue in the later plays is more imitative of everyday speech but is often desultory and circular, seemingly aimless, especially in the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter.

Brecht frequently made use of songs in his dramas, but in the avant-garde plays there is seldom any music. The Connection is an exception; jazz is closely interwoven into the theme of this play.

The most striking difference in the production of Brecht's plays and those of the Theatre of the Absurd is that (with a notable exception, In the Swamp), there is a more connected narrative in
Brecht's dramas. Although in neither of the two types is there much attempt to indicate motivation by presenting the background of the characters involved, in the Theatre of the Absurd audiences are more often left wondering just what has happened and how it relates to other events on the stage.
Common Themes in Brecht and the Theatre of the Absurd

Situationality

In the plays of Bertolt Brecht and in those of the Theatre of the Absurd there is an emphasis upon the plight of man as being caught up in a web of circumstances over which he has little control. In conventional plays there is a consciousness of some specific conflict with which the hero must deal. But in Brecht and in the Absurd there is more of a sense of an overwhelming and frustrating set of conditions in which the characters are trapped. This concept relates to existentialism again in being an expression of "situationality," a term used by certain philosophers to denote one of the limiting conditions of human freedom, the fact that we are born into and always remain in some dynamic environment not of our own choosing. The idea probably best is exemplified by the images of Samuel Beckett. In Waiting for Godot the two tramps are seen in a limbo of inaction, going through the motions of a kind of living, but unable to make any purposeful moves. A third character, Lucky, is actually held on a leash by another, Pozzo, who seems to represent forces of brutal insensitivity. This impression of confining circumstances is made more concrete in Happy Days, in which a woman goes through motions of inconsequential moment, rummaging in her purse, making up her face, and talking to her husband, while she is buried
up to the waist in a low mound on a stage that is otherwise empty.
In the second act she continues to talk but is then buried up to her neck. In *Endgame* the four characters appear to be confined in a room, two of them (representing aged parents) remaining in dustbins as they reminisce about the past, a third immobilised in a chair, with only the fourth person able to climb up to the small window and report on the world outside. In *All That Fall* an old Irish woman is on the way to the station to meet her husband. Her difficulty in moving is increased by her heaviness; she is trapped in fat. There is an atmosphere of heaviness in the play itself as she makes her way, encountering various persons surrounded by their individual problems, and an impression of horror with the gradual realisation that a child who fell out of the train may have been pushed by her husband.

Brecht's characters are similarly caught in frustrating enveloping situations. Beal, the central character of his first play, is a victim of his unconfined appetites and seems unable to free himself of them. The title of Brecht's second play, translated as *In the Swamp* by Eric Bentley, and as *In the Jungle of the Cities* by Martin Esslin, implies an entrapment and is the story of a man who becomes a prisoner of the whims of another. *A Man's a Man*, written in 1935, tells of the gradual taking over of a man's personality in a situation he is helpless to control. In this play Brecht depicts brainwashing techniques that can be seen in a much later play by Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party*, written in 1958, in
which again one man is transformed by other men and is seemingly unable to escape their domination. The heroine of The Good Woman of Setzuan finds herself in a constricting situation, unable to follow the generous impulses that seem right to her and forced to transform her personality in order to dominate the situation. She is still in a dilemma at the end of the play. The cooie in The Exception and the Rule is a victim of the distrust that is taken for granted as being the nature of man. And in The Caucasian Chalk Circle the peasants Grusha and Andak find themselves in situations not of their own choosing but in which they must remain, to deal with as best they can. Andak, obeying his kindly impulses, has let a nobleman escape during a revolution. He confesses, asks to be judged, and for his honesty is made a judge himself. Grusha finds herself holding the child of an escaped noblewoman and in the predicament of having to care for it. In all these plays there is more emphasis on plot than on character, and the idea of men struggling against a sea of frustrating social conditions is implied in the action.

The characters in the two plays by Jack Gelber seem, in a somewhat different way, to be caught in an endless round of existence, portrayed in The Apple as an improvised play that continues night after night and in The Connection as a dull waiting for a "fix." In Act One of the latter play Jaybird puts the feeling into words:

Remember: for one night this scene swings. But as life it's a damn bore. When all the changes have been played we'll all be back where we started. We end in a vacuum.
And Solly states the theme explicitly:

We are waiting. We have waited before. The connection is coming. He is always coming. But so is education, for example.\(^7\)

In *The Apple* Ajax defines existence:

Eat, sleep, and work. What else do you have? Oh, yes, an occasional rape or beating.\(^9\)

Anna continues in a speech to the audience:

Come over to our side. You're not doing anything important. What do you do all day? Read the papers? You have a job! And you vote! You really make up your own mind? You don't know who you are until you're dead. Wouldn't you like to know? Life is so apathetic' Everything in your life changes from day to day.\(^9\)

In the plays of Jean Genet there is an implication of futile existence as the characters attempt to escape in elaborate ritual and play-acting. In the brothel in *The Balcony* "little" people take on roles that seem to them important in contrast to their own colorless lives. Claire and Solange of *The Maids* despise themselves and their situations as servants, and in acting out the roles of their mistress and each other, are able to express some of their true feelings of hatred. Negroes in *The Blacks* take a perverse pleasure in pretending to be whites and

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exaggerating their own images as they feel the whites see them, the commentator Archibald explaining their feelings:

They tell us that we're grown-up children. In that case, what's left for us? The theater! We'll play at being reflected in it, and we'll see ourselves—big black narcissists—slowly disappearing into its waters.¹⁰

Genet's Deathwatch reveals the inescapable situation of the three convicted criminals. But even in the prison cell they evade the harsh reality of their fate by building up illusions of power and status in re-living their crimes.

The situations in Ionesco's plays seem more comic than tragic. The ridiculous exaggerations are accompanied by casual "small talk," and the settings are familiar ones, ordinary living and dining rooms, offices, a square in a small village. But their theme of situationality, of inescapable circumstance, is clearly evident. In Amedée, or How to Get Rid of It, a middle-aged couple are constantly aware of their own dead love, which has taken the form of a monstrous corpse that is growing larger and that finally forces them to remove it. Madeleine, the wife, negative and nagging, comments on their years together:

Happy... happy... As if we could make up for all that lost time! All those wasted years, they're a dead weight... always with us...¹¹

The husband, Amedée, escapes at the end by becoming light and


floating away, saying in mid-air:

Madeleine, I promise you, you can really believe me, I didn't want to run away from my responsibilities... It's the wind, I didn't do anything... It's not on purpose! Not of my own free will!\(^{12}\)

In *The Bald Soprano* the emptiness of everyday life is parodied through ordinary conversation, exaggerated in its dullness, the commonplace situation becoming more and more ridiculous as the dialogue becomes increasingly nonsensical. And the circularity of existence is emphasized by having the play begin again as it ends, with another conventional couple taking the place of the first one.

Harold Pinter's plays, similarly, take place in conventional settings, and the people appear to be quite ordinary. In place of the ridiculous humor of Ionesco, however, all of his plays have a tone of dread gradually building up. Although in *The Dumb Waiter* there is humor in the contemplation of two hired murderers caught in a situation where they must fill orders of food that come to them on the dumb waiter, and they argue over what to do about a note asking for "liver and onions, jam tart," there is a sinister feeling throughout as the audience realizes the two men are marking time before doing their next "job."

In all these plays of the Absurd the emphasis is not on individual characters and their development, but on the circumstances in which they find themselves, situations which usually

appear hopeless and which end on a note of circularity, in which there is no resolution of conflict because no clear-cut conflict has developed. Whereas in a conventional play, events take on relative significance as they are recognised as being part of the development of a plot line, in the Theatre of the Absurd the events of a play are often not readily identifiable as part of a plot. Since the plays do not present any clear-cut problems and solutions, but instead simply give a view of a troubled existence, it seems that such drama would move an audience to ask, "What is the meaning here?"
The Dehumanization of Man

Brecht was keenly aware of forces that tend to make men become more animal-like than human and more like machines than human beings. His experiences in World War I brought him to a hatred of war as one of these forces. Later, as a student of Marxism, he realized the alienating effect of an industrialized society upon workers and the brutalizing effects of both poverty and greedy affluence. These feelings are reflected in many of his plays.

In the Theatre of the Absurd the dehumanizing forces of conformity, materialism, and dull routine are implied. This is especially true of the plays of Ionesco, such as The New Tenant, which begins conventionally enough with a conversation between a woman caretaker and a gentleman moving into an apartment. He calmly directs the movers as they bring in his furniture. They continue to bring furniture until the room is completely full. Then they inform the tenant that they cannot get the rest of it through the door, that "the staircase is jammed from top to bottom," that "the yard is cram-full too. So is the street," and that the furniture is "cluttering up the whole country," and damming up the rivers. This strange one-act drama is described by Martin

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13Ionesco, Ionesco, p. 114.
Esslin as "a play of objects on the move, objects overwhelming man, stifling him in a sea of inert matter."\textsuperscript{14}

Word images of animals are used by both Brecht and the avant-garde playwrights to convey an impression of dehumanisation. In Baal there are references to bestial aspects of his nature. When Baal rejects one of the women he has seduced, his friend Eckart remonstrates with him, saying, "I haven't got your elephant's hide."\textsuperscript{15} In this play Baal is nicknamed "the elephant," and there are references to his being "strong as an elephant." As the rangers following Baal review his life, one of them says, "A man like that has no soul. He belongs to the animal kingdom."\textsuperscript{16} In the second act of The Three-Penny Opera there is a song which comments on Brecht's philosophy about the tendency of man to become less than human:

\begin{quote}
How does man keep alive? Because his fellows
Are persecuted, tortured, plundered, strangled and die.
Man only keeps alive because he well knows
How to suppress his own humanity.
For once you must not try to shirk the facts
Man only keeps alive by bestial acts.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Brecht depicts these bestial acts in Saint Joan of the Stockyards when owners of the slaughterhouse have no regard for the workers there and are as unfeeling toward their needs as beasts are for

\textsuperscript{14}Absurd, p. 111.


\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 118.

\textsuperscript{17}Quoted by John Willett, The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht (New York, 1959), p. 72.
each other. The workers, too, to the horror of Joan, lose all feelings of family affection in their hunger and greed, agreeing to forget the injustice to their families—even the death of a husband—in exchange for free meals. In *The Good Woman of Setzuan* the need to renounce one’s humanity in order to survive in a materialistic society is the main theme of the play. The heroine, Shen Te, is willing to help all of her family and acquaintances by giving them of her store of food and of her hospitality but finds that she will be quickly deprived of everything she has unless she assumes another personality and becomes as hard and money-conscious as her relatives are. In *Mother Courage*, likewise, the title character seems to lack the tender feelings associated with motherhood. The traits she displays are those necessary to making a living. She considers war as only another means of trading since it is a necessary condition to her occupation as sutler. Her sons must act as beasts of burden as they pull her cart and at the end, when her children have all been killed, she harnesses herself to the cart, stoically continuing her trading, a beast of burden herself. And Brecht’s poetic image poetic image of man’s tendency to be thick-skinned in *The Swamp* anticipates Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*:

**Shlink:** . . .Human skin is by nature too thin for this world, that’s why man takes such pains to make it grow thicker. The procedure would be unexceptionable if one could only stop it growing.18

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and in a later scene of the same play:

The Worm: Speaking from experience, let me
tell you that all humanity with its horse hair
and rhinoceros hide, is a prey to paper dreams.19

Man's reversion to an animal nature is suggested in a few
plays of the Absurd. In The Apple, for instance, actors wear
animal masks during part of the action. Producing children is
equated with the production of eggs in Ionesco's The Future is
in Eggs, and Roberta crows like a rooster.

In Rhinoceros, however, men actually turn into animals
on mass. Among those becoming rhinoceroses is Jean, whose
transformation almost occurs on stage, and whose qualities are
contrasted with those of his less-disciplined friend Berenger,
who alone is determined to resist the pressures of what Ionesco
calls "rhinoceritis." One of the characteristics of the rhinos
is obviously a desire for conformity. In commenting on this play,
however, the author states that it is an attack on ideologies:

Automatic systematized thinking, the idolization
of ideologies, screens the mind from reality,
perverts our understanding and makes us blind.
Ideologies too raise the barricades, dehumanize
men and make it impossible for them to be friends
notwithstanding; they get in the way of what we
call co-existence, for a rhinoceros can only come
to terms with one of his own kind, a sectarian
with a member of his particular sect.20

This tendency to mass action is satirized again in a very short play

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19 Ibid., p. 34.

20 Eugene Ionesco, Notes and Counter Notes (New York, 1964),
p. 207.
by Ionesco, The Leader, in which the "bleating" crowd hysterically awaits the arrival of the leader, who turns out to be a man with no head.

Pressures of conformity are seen as dehumanizing influences in Harold Pinter's play The Birthday Party in which there is the implication that McCann and Goldberg, the sinister men who come to remove the musician, Stanley, from his refuge at a rundown boarding house, represent brutal forces molding Stanley to accommodation with conventional society.

One of the evidences of dehumanization in society is the interchangability of people. In war time or in other situations when men become tools to be used, they lose their individuality and can be easily replaced by any other man. Brecht dealt with this idea in an anti-war play in 1936, A Man's A Man. Galy Gay, a mild-mannered little man who is on an errand to buy some fish, meets three members of a machine-gun unit who have lost the fourth member and need someone to take his place. They brainwash Galy Gay into believing he is Jeriah Jip, a soldier, and he becomes a supersoldier and a hero. In the discussions by the soldiers, Brecht emphasizes the attitude which devalues personality:

\textbf{Uriah:} Give me your identity cards . . .Because a man can be replaced any time but nothing is sacred any more unless it's identity cards.\textsuperscript{21}

The others continue on the same theme:

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{21}Brecht, \textit{Real}, p. 128.
\end{flushright}
Jesse: There's got to be a new Jip. Why all this fuss about people? One's as good as none at all...

Polly: But will it work, Uriah? Turning a man into another man?

Uriah: Yes. One man's as good as another.²²

Another character in the play sings a song on the theme:

You can do with a human being what you will
Take him apart like a car, rebuild him bit by bit.²³

Instances of interchangeability of people, with an implication of loss of personality or dehumanization are found in several of the avant-garde plays. Two couples are replaced by two others at the end of The Bald Soprano, the exchange emphasizing the lack of meaning in their superficial lives. Again, in The Leader, Ionesco parodies romantic love by having the lovers change partners but continue to carry on their sentimental loving patter. Madeleine and the Detective in Victims of Duty become entirely different characters, and there is a suggestion that Choubert has replaced Mallet, a former tenant, even though the detective asserts that "Mallet must be found." The shallowness of the relationship between Choubert and Madeleine may be inferred from her transformation into Choubert's mother, as the detective becomes his father. In Jacques, the number of characters with the same name and the exchange of one fiancé for another underlines the theme of bourgeois lack of

²² Ibid., p. 158.
²³ Ibid., p. 160.
individuality. When the rather shallow husband of Pinter's A Slight Ache is exchanged by his wife for a ragged, silent match-seller, a certain absence of feeling in the original husband-wife relationship is suggested.

The dehumanization of man, anticipated by Brecht in several of his plays, is in general an underlying theme of many of the plays in the Theatre of the Absurd, apparent in the lack of individuality of the characters of Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter, in the masquerading of Genet's characters, and in the lack of purpose of those in Gelber's plays. In Brecht, however, the dehumanization is more closely identified with the economic factors of life than it is in the avant-garde plays.
Satire and the Attack on War

When there is direct satire in the Theatre of the Absurd it is often the customs of our conventional society that are brought into the light of ridicule, as in Albee’s The American Dream, which focuses on ridiculous aspects of family life, and Ionesco’s The Future is in Eggs, which is another satire on conformity to family pressures and which pokes fun at the conflicts with in-laws, at sex, parenthood, sentimentality, and displays of excessive grief. His short play The Leader ridicules our tendency to hero worship and our faith in romantic love. The Bald Soprano, in particular, and other of Ionesco’s plays ridicule the inanity of ordinary speech, and some of Pinter’s plays, notably A Slight Ache, likewise point up the absurdity of much of what passes for conversation. The common need for a belief in illusions is satirized by Beckett in Waiting for Godot, and the exposure of this need is a basic theme in the plays of Genet. There is an explicit comment on it in a conversation in The Balcony:

Irene: Would you like to get married?
Carmen: Orange blossoms, tulle...
Irene: Wonderful! To you, getting married means masquerading.24

When Brecht employs satire, however, it is in his attacks

on war that he is most eloquent and biting. In the prologue to

A Man's A Man the Recruiting Song is an ironic commentary on the
exigencies of war:

Join the army, Johnny
We're off to Calcutta tonight!
Snow isn't snow, Johnny,
And black is white.
Pack your kitbag, Johnny,
And fight, fight, fight,
For right is wrong, Johnny,
And might is right. 25

Brecht's other anti-war plays, although they have touches
of irony and satire, are more serious in tone than A Man's A Man.
His second play, Drums in the Night, emphasises the tragic conseq-
ences of war on the individual, and Schweik in the Second World
War, a soldier's cynicism about fighting for false ideals. But in

Mother Courage his attack on war is most direct:

Chaplain: All very touching, my dear Cook, but
to fall in this war is not a misfortune, it's a
blessing. This is a holy war. Not just any old
war but a religious one, and therefore pleasing to
God.

Cook: Sure. In one sense it's a war because
there's fleeing, bribing, plundering, not to
mention a little raping, but it's different from
all other wars because it's a holy war. That's clear.
All the same, it makes you thirsty. 26

Mother Courage herself is equally cynical:

To hear the big fellows talk, they wage the
war from fear of God and for all things bright
and beautiful, but just look into it, and you'll

26Block, p. 851.
see they're not so silly: they want a good profit out of it, or else the little fellows like you and me wouldn't back 'em up. 27

The entire play attempts to show the futility of war, its twelve scenes covering twelve years of war and showing the greed and opportunism associated with it while pointing up the acceptance of its inevitability by Mother Courage as when she says:

Be sensible, the war'll go on a bit longer, and we'll make a bit more money, then peace'll be all the nicer. 28

and later in a song she sings:

A war is just the same as trading
But not with cheese—with steel and lead! 29

The action of the mute Catherine is eloquent as she bangs down the glasses she is carrying, stares at the Chaplain, and runs out after hearing his apology for war:

Well, I'd say there's peace even in war, war has its... islands of peace. For war satisfies all needs, even those of peace, yes, they're provided for, or the war couldn't keep going. In war—as in the very thick of peace—you can take a crap, and between one battle and the next there's always a beer, and even on the march you can catch a nap—on your elbow maybe, in a gutter—something can always be managed. Of course you can't play cards during an attack, but neither can you when plowing the fields in peace-time; it's when the victory's won that there are possibilities. And can't you be fruitful and multiply in the very midst of slaughter—behind a barn or some place? Nothing can keep you from it very long in any event. And so the war has your offspring and can carry on.

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27 Ibid., p. 851.
28 Ibid., p. 860.
29 Ibid., p. 861.
War is like love, it always finds a way. Why should it end?30

Although direct satire is not characteristic of the plays in the Theatre of the Absurd, it has been used in some of them. Neither is it a major technique of Brecht, though he has used it effectively in certain plays, employing it primarily in expressing anti-war ideas.

Man's Isolation and the Failure of Communication

In 1923 Brecht published a play whose theme has become common in the literature of our time, that of man's isolation and his desire for relationship with his fellows. In the Swamp has been said to anticipate Beckett and Ionesco "by insistence on the impossibility of communication." 31 It is the story of George Garga, a clerk in a rental library who comes under the domination of Shlink, a Chinese timber dealer. Shlink first comes into the library and inexplicably offers to buy Garga's opinion of a book. Then he continues to harass and try to dominate him and, to continue their struggle on more even terms, transfers his lumber business to Garga. The latter goes to jail after ruining the business. The two become more and more entangled in family affairs until finally Shlink is killed and Garga escapes to New York. This work has been called Brecht's only "absurd" play. Actions are unexplained, and events do not form a continuous narrative as in his other plays. Martin Esslin sees in this "motiveless action" the reason for the lack of relationship between the people in the play:

As they cannot understand their own actions they cannot communicate with each other. 32

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In the dialogue of the play man's need for communication is discussed in a conversation between Garga and Shlink:

Garga: You went on being lonely?

Shlink: Forty years.

Garga: Now, at the end, you fall victim to the black mania of this planet—the mania for contact.

Shlink (smiling): Through enmity?

Garga: Through enmity.

In the same scene Shlink comments again on the impossibility of communicating by words:

But the union of organs is the only union, and it can never bridge the gap of speech. Still, they come together to beget new beings who can stand at their side in their inconsolable isolation. And the generations look coldly into each other's eyes.  

A play by Edward Albee, The Zoo Story, published in 1958, carries out this same idea of the need for communication even if it must be through conflict. A lonely and unkempt young man encounters a prosperous, conventional-looking business man in a park and tries to engage him in conversation. After many attempts at verbal contact with him, the young man insults the business man, enrages him, tosses him his knife, and forces a struggle in which the young man is stabbed and dies. In another of Albee's plays, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? the difficulties of the two couples

32 Esslin, Brecht, p. 242.

33 Seven Plays, p. 61.
obviously result partly from a failure of communication at the right time.

Samuel Beckett's plays depict the impossibility of communication in a variety of ways. It is felt in the desultory attempts at conversation between Vladimir and Estragon in Waiting for Godot and between Hamm and Clov in Endgame. They talk to each other endlessly, but the dialogue is not always coherent. Occasionally they comment on this fact, as when Clov says to Hamm:

I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything any more, teach me others.  

And later in a soliloquy Clov says:

Good, it'll never end, I'll never go. Then one day, suddenly, it ends, it changes, I don't understand, it dies, or it's me, I don't understand, that either. I ask the words that remain—sleeping, waking, morning, evening. They have nothing to say.

In Happy Days Winnie babbles on and on to Willie of inconsequential matters, but their exchange of words is as superficial as the conversations in Ionesco's plays. A clue to the meaning of the title comes when Winnie says at one point:

Oh, you are going to talk to me today, this is going to be a happy day.

In Ionesco's plays the failure to communicate is underlined and parodied by what appears to be an exaggeration of the banal ordinary conversation that is heard every day, and by apparently

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34 Block, p. 1111.
meaningless statements interjected without undue notice into the stream of talk. There is this rather unusual report of an asphyxiation, for instance, in The Bald Soprano:

Fire Chief: For instance, a young woman asphyxiated herself last week—she had left the gas on.
Mrs. Martin: Had she forgotten it?
Fire Chief: No, but she thought it was her comb. 37

Non-sequiturs, cross conversations in which two dialogues are interchanged, puns, nonsense rhymes, and meaningless alliteration are used by Ionesco to emphasize the meaninglessness of much everyday speech. The Bald Soprano carries the absurdity of speech that carries no meaning to its most ridiculous limits:

Mrs. Martin: Cacao trees on cacao farms don't bear coconuts, they yield cocoa! Cacao trees on cacao farms don't bear coconuts, they yield cocoa! Cacao trees on cacao farms don't bear coconuts, they yield cocoa!
Mrs. Smith: Nice have lice, lice haven't nice.
Mrs. Martin: Don't ruche my brooch!
Mr. Martin: Don't smooch the brooch!
Mr. Smith: Groom the goose, don't goose the groom.
Mrs. Smith: Groom your tooth. 38

In Amedee a hint of the cause of the problem faced by the couple is given when Madeleine comments on their lack of relation with others:

No one has been to see us for fifteen years. We've lost touch with everybody. 39

The insistent garrulousness of the caretaker in The New Tenant is

37 Block, P. 1126.
38 Ibid., p. 1130.
39 Amedee, p. 21.
almost as oppressive as the proliferation of furniture. In *The Future is in Eggs* the mangling of words ("Heartiest condolences!" repeated several times, "Peave me in lace!" "Glat up!" "Youthful floollies") satirizes ordinary carelessness in the use of language. "The things my characters say are usually very dull," Ionesco writes, "because banality is a symptom of non-communication. Men hide behind their cliches." 40

In the Theatre of the Absurd the isolation of man is felt in the breakdown of his language. In contrast, in a more conventional play by John Osborne, *The Entertainer*, the lack of understanding between three generations is shown as they put into words their separate ways of looking at life. And instead of being presented obliquely as concepts are in the Theatre of the Absurd, the point of view of the youngest generation is declared explicitly when Jean says:

> Here we are, we’re alone in the universe; there’s no God, it just seems that it all began by something as simple as sunlight striking on a piece of rock. And here we are. We’ve only got ourselves. Somehow, we’ve just got to make a go of it. We’ve only ourselves. 41

In an earlier scene she remarks on a lack of communication:

> That you could love somebody... and then suddenly find that you’re neither of you even living in the same world. 42

In Pinter’s plays everyday, commonplace exchange of talk

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40 *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 227.


appears to cover up the real conflicts which are not discussed. This avoidance of a confrontation with realities adds to the feeling of something ominous below the surface of the talk. In *The Rope* Rose carries on a monologue in the form of a conversation with her husband, though he says nothing in reply to her questions and comments. When the young couple come in, Rose asks them about the basement, "What was it like down there?" and adds that she was down there "a long time ago," thus building up an atmosphere of mystery about the basement and the house itself. In *The Dumb Waiter* constant small talk about the cafe and an amusing exchange about whether you "light the kettle" or "light the gas" actually reveal, though their apparent purpose is to conceal, the nervousness of the two men about "the next job" they are to do. They perform a kind of ritual as they rehearse verbally the steps they will go through in doing the job, as if saying them over and over they take away some of their fear of the act.

One feels the loneliness of the characters of Genet’s plays. Lefrançais in *Deathwatch* tries desperately to isolate Green Eyes from Maurice and from the outside world and to achieve a kind of communion with him. After he has murdered to achieve status in the sight of Green Eyes and finds he has not succeeded, he realizes suddenly his isolation:

*I really am all alone!*  

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And it must be presumed that the persons who come to the house of illusions in *The Balcony* are lonely people, as they must escape from their real lives into a make-believe world.

Man's isolation from society and from other individuals is seen most acutely in the lives of the drug addicts in *The Connection*. Among those who realize their need for communication is Ernie, a musician who has pawned his horn for narcotics:

I'm lonely! Not for you or anybody on this stage. I know these people. I've known them a long time. Too long.44

This theme of non-communication has been a dominant one in the Theatre of the Absurd. Bertolt Brecht, on the other hand, becoming more and more conscious of economic evils and influenced by political ideas, never again, after the one early play, took the problem of loneliness and lack of communication as a major theme for a play.


44Jack Gelber, *The Connection*, p. 44.
Other Common Themes

Among other themes that can be found in the plays both of Brecht and of the Theatre of the Absurd are those of the misfit in society and the divided self. Beal, who is inhuman in his treatment of women, who cheats, drinks excessively, and has no regard for keeping his word, is also a sensitive poet who loves nature and is attractive to women. He is alienated from himself and gradually becomes alienated from society. The sergeant in A Man’s A Man, nicknamed "Bloody Five," is another divided soul. Strictly disciplined otherwise, Bloody Five is a victim of his sexual passions. He finds the solution by castrating himself.

In another of Brecht’s plays, The Private Tutor, the leading character attempts in the same way to solve a similar problem. Self-castration is also the fate of the revolutionary, Roger, in The Balcony. Roger is a divided person; no longer interested only in the revolution, he has become obsessed by power, and just before his final gesture says:

If the brothel exists, and if I’ve a right to go there, then I’ve a right to lead the character I’ve chosen to the very limit of his destiny. . .no, of mine. . .of merging his destiny with mine. . .

Genet has the missionary in The Blacks, who comes to a sudden realisation of his impotence, scream:

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*Genet, The Balcony, p. 112.*
Castrated! I’ve been castrated! I’ll be canonized high, stiff and firm.  

The Good Woman of Setzuan provides the best example of the misfit and divided self in Brecht’s plays. Shen Te, who personifies selflessness and wants to help everyone who comes to ask her for money, finds herself alone in her dilemma, that is, how to be generous and yet keep enough of her money to maintain a business and continue to live. She is obviously an alien in the world of profit and loss, and cannot survive in it unless she allows herself to be dominated by some less sensitive, more practical person.

Other characters of Brecht’s find it necessary to divide themselves and find difficulty in adjusting to their worlds. Galy Gay’s personality becomes completely divided; he becomes another person when he is dragged into military life and must assume the hardness of Jeriah Jip. Brecht’s Galileo is a misfit in the narrow world of Renaissance Italy. This play offers conflicting interpretations since it was revised somewhat after the 1938 publication. Galileo, in both versions, though, is devoted to science and to seeking truth. This dedication does not prevent him from committing a deception on the doges of Venice by pretending that the telescope he has copied from a Holland import is the “product of seventeen years research at the University of Padua.” Galileo’s passion for seeking truth and his desire to pass on his knowledge come into

s clustered. The feelings are put into poetic form.

But for only a short time, when the realness that the black dream of Joan Hunter, who represents the singularity complex, is
contacted, a strong and powerful sensation of the character, the other characters in the same play have been subjected to a mental
halt. Have become contacted, and the sensation began to form them.

the strange; it becomes apparent, that the two are drifted in her background.

The barrier of faith. Joan of the strange development becomes an
on the surface of motion, to be sounded out of the country.

solve the dilemma by making an entire, secret copy of the development
the expositions have control of the writing, called partially
thought be denounced himself for the commendable in appearance to let

get's through as we push through.

it is the truth, would make the same mistake as

If little black! You don't think that the truth,

In exchange for an easy life and no persecution:

him by the authorities, not meddling with the fate of the people

mean not an interference with the decay of Rome. In the seventh

conflict with the practical necessity for self-preservation, and
The theme of the misfit in society can be discovered in many of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd. Stanley in The Birthday Party is obviously an alienated artist finding escape from society. The silent matchseller of A Slight Ache appears as an outcast in contrast to the other two members of the cast who are a typically middle class couple. The characters in The Connection are all misfits and outcasts from conventional society, as are those in Genet's Deathwatch. Most obviously a misfit is Berenger in Rhinoceros. Sloppy, unpunctual, easy-going, immoderate, self-critical, and sensitive, he hates his office job and has difficulty in analysing his feelings of alienation:

I don't know exactly; it's a sort of anguish difficult to describe. I feel out of place in life, among people, and so I take to drink. That calms me down and relaxes me so I can forget. 48

His friend Jean, who has the opposite traits from those of Berenger and so is marvelously well-adjusted, has a neat diagnosis of Berenger's trouble: "You try to escape from yourself."

Samuel Beckett's plays have been interpreted as portraying the divided self. In Waiting for Godot Vladimir is said to represent

47 Seven Plays, p. 368.
48 Ibid., p. 256.
Intellect and Estragon, Body. Lucky and Pozzo could be seen as personifying the same division. Hamm and Ciev of Endgame, if not aspects of one personality, are at least complementary persons. In Krapp's Last Tape there is the sense of division of one person, the past self preserved on the tape of the recording machine while the present self tries to regain some sense of unity with the person he has been.

Perhaps the best examples of the divided self in the Theatre of the Absurd appear in the plays of Genet. Negroes in The Blacks take the part of whites whom they both envy and hate. Claire and Solange in The Maids impersonate their mistress, and the whole theme of The Balcony is that of persons' becoming others whose positions they envy. Jean-Paul Sartre has made an analysis of the play acting in The Maids, seeing it as a reflection of the role-playing of Genet himself. In his plays Genet uses the device of actors playing actors in dramas within plays to explore and expose the nature of reality itself. The maids, Sartre says, are creations of their mistress, "low, hypocritical, disagreeable, and mean because their employers dream them that way...the way Southerners create Negroes."51 The maids, he adds, are relative to everything and everyone. They are already fake. Only by assuming roles other than their own selves can they express their real feelings toward

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50 Block, p. 1103.
51 The Maids, p. 18.
themselves, each other, and their mistress. It is "a whirligig of appearances," and "in these patient fakings, appearance is revealed at the same time as pure nothingness and as cause of itself."

Human passivity and the domination of one person by another is central to In the Swamp and to A Man's A Man. This theme is seen, too, in Mother Courage, as she—through necessity—keeps control over her three children until one by one they assert themselves and are lost to her. The theme of domination also pervades Genet's drama. Solange tries to overpower Claire, Lefranc wants to gain domination over Green Eyes, the characters in The Balcony act out fantasies in which they are masters in a master–servant relationship, and those in The Blacks play roles in which, as whites, they give orders to their black slaves.

There is a similarity in theme between The Good Woman of Setzuan and The Caretaker involving the reactions of characters to domination. Aston, in the latter play, brings a seedy old man to the room he shares with his brother, offers to let him stay there, and lends him money. When the old man is offered a job as caretaker by the brother, he bullies and berates Aston. After Aston stands up to his insults and rebuffs him, the old man becomes very subservient, just as the relatives of Shen To become obsequious when she assumes the harsh personality of Shui Ts.

It is interesting to note that in none of these plays are

52 Ibid., p. 31.
there any meaningful love relationships between men and women. In
Rhinoceros Berenger, who loves Daisy, attempts to have her resist
the change into animal form, but Daisy succumbs to the appeal of the
majority, leaving him alone, the only one who resists. There are
conventional married couples in Ionesco’s plays but no evidence of
any feeling of love between them. The Future is in Eggs parodies
the billing and cooing of newlyweds, and The Leader satirizes the
illusions of romantic love. Pinter’s plays contain only a suggestion of
love as an answer to the world’s absurdity, in A Slight Ache, but the
love projected is all on one side. Beckett’s characters show a
dependency on each other, but no real affection. Perhaps the
nearest thing to real love in Genet’s plays is that of Chantal for
Roger in The Balcony. She leaves the brothel to join Roger and
his revolutionaries. But Roger gives way to suggestions that he
make Chantal a symbol of the revolution and use her pictures and
her voice to glorify and unify the struggle. Chantal is killed,
and Roger goes over to the other side when he comes to The Balcony
to play the Hero in the role of the Chief of Police. Martin Esslin
has pointed out that Village and Virtue are lovers in The Blacks
and that they remain alone on the stage at the end of the play:

And Village tries to learn the gestures of love,
hard though they may be to learn. This is the
first gleam of hope in Genet’s dark theater—two
of his characters who have found the courage to
break out of the vicious circle of daydreaming
and establish genuine human contact through love.53

53 Absurd, p. 163.
In Albee’s *Tiny Alice* romantic love is the means of corruption of the priest, and in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the facade of marriage is brutally torn off, exposing the hatred that lies beneath it.

In Brecht’s plays love between a man and a woman is not a saving value either. Shen Te of *The Good Woman of Setzuan* falls deeply in love with Yang Sun, but he uses her love to further his own ambitions. The love of Gruska and Simon in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is lasting and faithful, but it has little to do with the story. In *Mother Courage* sexual love is merely opportunism with Yvette, the camp follower, and a rather sordid story as Mother Courage reveals glimpses of her own past. The love story in *Galileo* ends unhappily when Ludovico rejects Galileo’s daughter Virginia (after their eight-year engagement) because of her father’s persistence in his scientific writing. George Garga’s love for Jane is destroyed by the major struggle of *In the Swamp* when she becomes a prostitute through the machinations of Shlink and his henchmen. Baal himself is the instrument of destruction of the young woman, Johanna, who is engaged to Johannes and who drowns herself after being seduced by Baal.

In contrast to the emphasis on romantic love found in the popular theatre of today, Brecht’s plays do not suggest a love relationship as the solution to the ills of the world nor do the plays in the Theatre of the Absurd find it a source of meaning in a meaningless world.
The Triumph of the Individual

In spite of Brecht's conscious rejection of the Aristotelian hero, one of the characteristic themes that emerges in his plays (and often is in evidence in their titles) is that of one person who resists the tide of circumstance and achieves a certain nobility in his resistance. Despite his desire to have the audience take away the idea of a social system that needs improvement, Brecht often threatened this goal by creating a character whose conscious choice in an oppressive situation gives him a kind of immortality and whose personality overshadows the social lesson of the play. Faith in the individual, which was at war with the Marxist idea of history as made by inevitable forces, is expressed in the play in which Brecht created a warmly human Galileo who says:

I believe in the human race. The only people that can't be reasoned with are the dead. Human beings are intelligent... The evidence of your own eyes is a very seductive thing. Sooner or later everybody must succumb to it. 54

Galileo's own personality in the play is one that runs counter to the trend of the time and is partly explained when the Pope says of him:

He has more enjoyment in him than any man I ever saw.

54 Seven Plays, p. 349.
He loves eating and drinking and thinking. To excess. He cannot say no to an old wine or a new thought.\textsuperscript{55}

Galilee himself is aware that he is a giant among a race of pygmies and shows that he knows well the attitude of smaller men than he:

The only way a man like me can land a good job is by crawling on his stomach.\textsuperscript{56}

\textbf{The Good Woman of Setzuan}, though it is a parable which attempts to show the futility of selflessness in a materialistic society, praises the resourcefulness of the individual when the gods, who are quite ineffectual, assert their faith in Shen Te:

We firmly believe that our good woman will find her way on this dark earth. The heavier the burden the greater will be her strength.\textsuperscript{57}

Shen Te is in a quandary at the end of the play, but she is not defeated; she is still fighting against circumstance.

The title character in \textit{Mother Courage} goes with the tide of events; she is the victim of necessity and habit. And although her persistence in the face of misfortune makes her memorable, it is her daughter Catherine whose act of rebellion achieves for her a nobility that erases the memory of her former passivity. She knowingly goes to her death in the act of warning a village against the onslaught of soldiers, putting into action the prayer of the peasants whose first regard is for their own safety.

The actions of the heroine of \textit{Saint Joan of the Stockyards}

\textsuperscript{55}Ibid., p. 368.

\textsuperscript{56}Ibid., p. 350.

\textsuperscript{57}Block, p. 295.
appear futile. She is trying to inspire the workers in the
slaughterhouse to strike against the owners, but they lack the
courage to follow her. The Society of Black Straw Hats, to which
she gave her allegiance in her first attempts to alleviate the
suffering of the workers, sells out to the owners. And her canon-
ization, announced by Slift, one of the owners, is a mockery:

She shall be our Saint Joan of the Stockyards!
The fact that she is shown under our auspices will
prove that we hold humanity in high regard.\textsuperscript{58}

But Joan’s defiance, her refusal to compromise in spite of the
weakness of her colleagues and of the workers she wanted to help,
in spite of her feeling that her efforts have been futile, has a
quality that transcends the events. The simplicity of her words
keep her speech from being melodramatic:

Oh, let nothing be counted good, however helpful it may seem,
And nothing considered honorable except that
Which will change this world once for all; that’s what it needs.
Like an answer to their prayers I came to the oppressors!
Oh, goodness without consequences! Intentions in the dark!
I have changed nothing.
Vanishing fruitless from this world
I say to you:
Take care that when you leave the world
You were not only good but are leaving
A good world!\textsuperscript{59}

Another of Brecht’s versions of the Joan of Arc story,
The Visions of Simone Machard, centers around an eleven-year-old
girl in France during the advance of the Germans in 1940. Simone

\textsuperscript{58} Seven Plays, p. 250.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 251.
dreams of herself as Joan of Arc and that her brother appears as an angel calling her to save France. Her dream impels her to burn the gasoline supplies so the Germans cannot get them and to open cellars and supplies of the hostelry to the villagers. These actions which, along with her visions, comprise the plot of the play, are praised by one of the villagers:

That child was the only person in this hostelry who carried out her duties; nobody besides her lifted a finger. And Saint-Martin won't forget that... 60

The fact that afterwards she is certified insane and taken to a mental hospital does not cancel the worth of her act nor the fact of her courage.

Grushe, the peasant girl in The Caucasian Chalk Circle, is another who rises to heroic stature when she is forced by circumstance to make decisions that show her willingness to forget herself in helping a child left in her care. That she will not compromise what she considers right is evident when she-scolds the Judge, Andak:

You bribe taker. I've no respect for you. No more than for a thief or a robber with a knife. 61

Even more than the persons in the foregoing examples, the title character of Brecht's The Mother illustrates his conviction that the positive values in society are maintained and the world


61 Seven Plays, p. 582.
improved by the actions of enlightened or instinctively selfless individuals.

It is in these assertions of the worth of the individual and the importance of his choice that the plays of Brecht differ greatly from those of the Theatre of the Absurd. Such statements presuppose a rational world in which evils exist which are definable and can be corrected by human efforts. That the correct course of action can be prescribed and that the world is perfectible are the inferences that must be drawn from such an assumption. This is the basis of socialist realism and the point which sharply divides the drama of Bertolt Brecht from the Theatre of the Absurd.
Summary

The dramas of both Bertolt Brecht and the Theatre of the Absurd differ considerably from conventional theatre. There are similarities in their themes and techniques, and each attempts to present a true picture of reality and to bring the audience to an acceptance of this truth. But they represent two opposing views of life that are in conflict today.

It is significant that Brecht’s early plays, *Baal*, *A Man’s* A Man, and *In the Jungle of the Cities*, for instance, resemble the Theatre of the Absurd much more than do his later plays, written after he had studied Marxism. A consciousness of the economic basis of society pervades most of his later plays. They begin from the Marxist premise that there are logical laws operating in society and that humans can master these laws to exercise control over their world. Characters can, by rational thinking and correct action, contribute to the establishment of an order which will alleviate much of the misery that prevail in a selfish world. Society itself can be transformed by a reorganization of its economic foundations and by a mastery of the laws under which it operates. The conflicts in Brecht’s later plays center around economic problems and attempts to promote justice and equality. Fortunately, his artistic sensitivity usually prevented his being
heavy-handed and allowed him to produce plays that are highly entertaining and have great poetic beauty, even though their message may not produce the impact Brecht hoped it would have.

Brecht was never able to free himself from a deep-seated conflict between the theory that the transformation of society must be accomplished by violence and his own distrust of violence, his pacifist conviction. This conflict between the means and the ends emerges in his plays, whether or not he consciously intends it to be there, and produces a tension which is one of the artistic values of his work. In *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, written in 1929, Joan says at one point:

"What's done by force cannot be good,"

and a little later:

"Only force helps where force rules."

The conflict between means and ends was never resolved in Brecht, nor in his plays. He was always able to see the two sides of a dilemma at once. His absorption of dialectics is reflected in the themes of plays such as *The Good Woman of Setzuan* in which selflessness has to be balanced by a calculating practicality in order for one to survive, and in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, in which justice is tempered by human considerations, perhaps a humane injustice. In *Galileo* devotion to truth is linked in the main

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62 *Seven Plays*, p. 228.

character with the need for self-preservation. That progress cannot be achieved by non-violent means is the message of Saint Joan of the Stockyards—and yet when men are influenced by courageous idealists such as Joan, things change. To succeed or even to survive in a brutal world one must deny his tender emotions as in Mother Courage and The Good Woman of Setzuan, but there is a lasting value in the human sympathy of Catherine and Shen Te.

Even before he studied dialectics, though, Brecht was able to see and present the conflict of opposites as in Baal when he portrayed the good and evil that exist together in intense personalities. This denial of absolutes seemed to be inherent in Brecht's way of thinking and while it caused him personal suffering in his attempt to adhere to the policies of the Communist Party, it is the source of much of the universality of his dramatic work.

The Theatre of the Absurd has probably been more successful than Brecht was in a departure from the Aristotelian concept of theatre, that is, in preventing identification with characters—in order for the spectator to keep his critical faculties alert. There are no Grushas nor Saint Joans nor Vlassovas in the Absurd with whom one feels empathy. It is impossible to feel great pity for the plight of Nell and Nagy or of Winnie or Amedee or the New Tenant. Their situations are too utterly ridiculous for the audience to identify with them. Likewise, one does not absorb the terror that is implicit in Deathwatch or The Maids, The Room, or The Birthday Party. The spectator is aware of an ominous situation, but he has not come close
enough to identification with the characters to feel terror for their fate. And the characters themselves seem unaware of impending disaster. (Berenger, in Rhinoceros, is an exception.) More relevant, perhaps, the audience for these plays is too busy trying to find out what is happening to be able to feel empathy.

The lack of clearly drawn plots is an important factor in preventing the subverting of reason to emotion. Relationships between the characters and their situations are not clear enough for the spectator to identify himself with them and become emotionally involved in the struggle. Such relationships are made clear early in the plays of Brecht, except for the one play that has been called "absurd," In the Jungle of the Cities.

In the Theatre of the Absurd the setting is not so definite as it is in the drama of Brecht. Although Brecht's aim was to de-emphasize the setting, to underline the concept that the story could have happened anywhere, he always gives the audience a notion of where they are on the globe. In many of the works of Beckett, Ionesco, Gelber, Genet, and Pinter this is not so apparent. These plays could more easily be placed "anywhere."

Brecht's plays have a narrative thread that can be picked up and followed through the dialogue. In the Theatre of the Absurd the dialogue is not necessarily connected with a narrative. The exchanges of talk in All That Fall, for example, about the troubles that Maddy Rooney has with the various ones she meets on her way to the station, though they have a cumulative thematic relevance, have
no immediately discernible relation to the fact that she will meet her husband, who will make a statement that has a sinister significance in relation to the fact that a child has been killed. The dialogue in The Apple is merely about the production of the play that is in progress and is in the manner of an improvisation, as is that of The Connection. Similarly, in The Blacks, there is intermittent comment about the play that is being produced, as if it is being done spontaneously:

Village: Then who? . . . Well, who? Now that she's dead, do you want me to open the coffin and repeat what I did with her when she was alive? You realize I'm supposed to re-enact it. I need a straight-man. Who'll help me? Who? After all, it doesn't much matter who. As everyone knows, the Whites can hardly distinguish one Negro from another.

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Felicity: This evening, you're the dead woman. Take your places. 61

In the plays of Ionesco dialogue is often quite pointless, merely small talk, for instance, in the case of Amadeo and The Bald Soprano, or the usual conversation between a renter and owner in The New Tenant. The conversation progresses from being merely pointless to being ridiculous.

In the Theatre of the Absurd, moreover, the audience is often not sure of the significance of the occurrences on stage, whether or not they are of importance to the theme—or to what plot

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61 The Blacks, p. 53.
another era of the absurd, of which Antonin Artaud has written,

'...to mark the theatricality and with a sense of humor.

likewise, to accept the absurdity of the human condition and in doing
like the theatre to lose the audience to look at the world without
play's portray the world as meaningless, one of the acts of the
and reality in gestures, words, and the deaf and dumb of pictures
portrayed in the and Beckets' dream, the concreteness of illusion.
the banality presented in Ulysses' play, the doctrinarity and monotony
fore modern man in the absurd condition, the exaggerated stage and
contemporary playwrights are able to give form to the ears which
continuing on themes of estrangement, alienation, and reality
the absurdity of the life is the only truth which can be posted.
In the concreteness of the pre-acted course of action, the concreteness of
are no fixed values, no certainties—expect that of death—and
by the playwrights, according to the masters of the play...the play's
of the absurd as manifestedness of the view of the world held
of themselves and indistinctness, which characterize the theatre
The streets of the experimentality and strangeness of
and dejection—clear to himself.

and to make all the elements of the play—setting, detachment, action,
from more realistic theatre, the audience is often involved in trying
is not immediately aware of what has happened. And as a spectator
play, and yet it is accomplished no matter that the spectator
matter in a different age, for example, is the key action in the
there is...the exchange of places of the husband and the match—
is to return drama to its religious and mythical origins, "to express life in its immense, universal aspect."\textsuperscript{62} "Artaud... wished to reject both plot and character, and even dialogue, in favour of spectacle."\textsuperscript{63} This aim of presenting drama that would affect man on a far deeper level than would any realistic representation is described by Ionesco:

Another kind of drama is still possible. More powerful and far richer. Drama that is not symbolist, but symbolic; not allegorical, but mythical; that springs from our everlasting anguish; drama where the invisible becomes visible, where ideas are translated into concrete images, into reality, where the problem is expressed in flesh and blood; where anguish is a living presence, an impressive witness; drama that might puzzle the sociologists but could stimulate and quicken all that is unscientific in the scientist; and, reaching beyond his ignorance, the common man.\textsuperscript{64}

From the Marxist point of view the Theatre of the Absurd represents a step backward from confronting the real problems to which a socially responsible artist must be committed:

It offends no defender of the status quo to be told that his world is corrupt, meaningless, inhuman, irrational and absurd, but securely eternal.\textsuperscript{65}

Brecht's first plays presented a view of the world which resembled that of the Absurd, but his later works reflect the Marxist theory

\textsuperscript{63}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{64}\textit{Notes and Counter Notes}, p. 229.
that works of art should present a realistic picture of social
conditions in order to stir people to social action.

Although the Theatre of the Absurd is a loosely inclusive
label for playwrights whose points of view and styles are highly
individual, most of them would probably subscribe to Ionesco's
statements that drama which seeks to promote a doctrine is not art.
At the source of his own plays, he says, is a mood, not an ideology.\textsuperscript{66}

He suggests a purpose of his drama, however:

To feel the absurdity or improbability of
everyday life and language is already to have
transcended it; in order to transcend it, you
must first saturate yourself in it.\textsuperscript{67}

Which of the two views of drama, that of Brecht and social
realism, or that of the Absurd, has more validity is a subjective
question and must depend for its answer on the philosophical
orientation of the viewer.

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Notes and Counter Notes}, p. 164.
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 165.
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