

# The Myth of Identity in Modern Drama



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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

“All the ancient Gods reappeared as demons at a later date, The dwellers in Olympus became evil spirits.”

– August Strindberg, “Tribulations”

“In vain do I fulfill the functions of a cafe waiter. I can be he only in the neutralized mode, as the actor is Hamlet, by mechanically making the *typical gestures* of my state and by aiming at myself as an imaginary cafe waiter through those gestures taken as an ‘analogue.’ ”

– Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

Transformation, epiphany, renewal. Gods and mortals alike are capable of undergoing modification and indeed are *compelled* to undergo intermittent metamorphoses not only in physio-psychological terms, but in terms of their very essences, their beings. Strindberg’s comments on the conversions of gods attest only to the inescapability of change for humans and for gods, who being immortal, must necessarily undergo more transformations than their mortal counterparts while they live for eternity. In fact, all existent beings, or subjects, must transform themselves at all times, as each thought and each moment of existence bring change. For Sartre, it is the gestures of an actor which actualize these transformations not only for thespians but for all subjects. Unlike the gods and mortals of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, however, what is significant about these alterations is not the change itself. The incessant renewal involved in each particular change is what is significant: each state of being is chosen each instant because subjects are never complete or stable. Even an epiphany is not an isolated incident to be experienced and then remembered as something complete and unalterable. With each moment of his life, each subject undergoes the radical reformation of his entire being. For gods and mortals alike the creation of an essence is never completed once and for all, it is created with each thought and action and in each moment of existence. The gods of Olympus constantly metamorphose into evil spirits. Greek and Roman mythology is rife with their mischief.

The manner in which any being remakes himself in each instant, with each action and for the entirety of his life, reveals much about how subjects ontologically fashion an essence out of the existence thrust upon them by a force they do not understand and did not ask for. This force is one that according to philosophers including Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, is contingent and unjustifiable; in short, this force is one they do not comprehend and did not want. Being is already there for each individual. According to Heidegger (1985), each subject is thrown into existence by an unknown force (321). Each subject turns up without any guidance, without being programmed with a mission, and without intuition or instinct. There are no guidelines that explain why being is there or what the subject should do with it. Being is like a vast ocean. It overflows the subject, no one can explain exactly how it formed, and it is larger than any individual subject.

In the modern world more so than in the ancient, value systems that once guided their adherents have fallen away as valid avenues for self-creation. According to theorists including Albert Camus and Martin Esslin, in many ways, religion, politics, and even knowledge itself have lost their credibility because the horrors of the twentieth century's world wars, holocausts, and genocides rendered them moribund or outmoded. As a result, the pure raw material of existence compels existent subjects to fashion some kind of essence which enables them *to be* in ontological terms and without the benefit of the guidance provided by traditional values. This process of making and remaking is perceptible through the actions of a given subject, which is why drama—and especially modern drama, because of its adept explorations of states of being—is the ideal genre in which to explore how consciousness and action work in tandem to fashion some kind of essence, some class of characteristics for each subject in ontological terms or for each character in dramatic terms. The term essence as it will be used here, may be considered as that individual conglomerate of characteristics which may also be called a personality, or to put it ontologically, a collection of actions and states of being.

Picture if you will a child with a cartoon flip book. Each page of his book contains, say, an image of an anthropomorphized mouse sweeping a floor. Each image is strikingly similar to the next with only slight variation. When the child rapidly flips the pages of the book, the mouse appears to sweep the floor. The child considers not each image in succession because he considers the animation of the images together as presenting the mouse in action. Now consider if you will each image of the mouse as each of the mouse's embodiments; in other words, separate



embodiments (akin to those of Sartre's waiter) of the mouse comprised of his actions, thoughts, and speech acts. Now consider that these embodiments put together and taken in totem make up a consciousness. Each being's consciousness is in constant flux because that consciousness must continually embody itself through thoughts, speech and acts. And like each subject, each character in fiction chooses how to embody herself through what she does and how she presents herself to herself and others.

Like each character, each subject's consciousness is divided. Sartre (1984) writes that conflict is at the heart of otherness (477). This conflict is obvious in the struggles between subjects for sustenance, shelter, and affection. What is less obvious is how this conflict manifests itself in intra-conscious relations, i.e. within a single subject. Because a subject through her consciousness is able to reflect upon that consciousness, to meditate on her own thought patterns and to examine her own habits, it is necessarily divided into what Sartre calls the reflective and pre-reflective consciousness. But because each subject constantly decides what it will be, consciousness is also divided into the constructive and destructive tendencies which exist on a plane apart from the reflective and pre-reflective consciousnesses. These tendencies are more than mere physiological impulses; they are ontological forces that impel the subject to create his essence out of the raw material of existence. And just as each subject must remake himself simply because he lives in a material and ontological world, so must the characters in literature, and more specifically modern drama, do the same. Each character remains compelled to simultaneously build up and tear down his entire being at every instant. Because this book will focus on the characters in the plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Jean-Paul Sartre, it will address the process of embodiment in terms of actual subjects but will focus for the most part on how this process is evident among characters. *The Myth of Identity in Modern Drama* will focus primarily not on how characters embody themselves in relation to performance studies or on any physical dimensions within the world of fiction. Rather, this book will concentrate on embodiment as an ontological and characterological phenomenon as a metaphysical, rather than a physical, reality. The realms in which the characters and their actions are considered are in metaphysical, ontological spaces rather than in any physical ones. In other words, how these phenomena interact with bodies or with how actors perform them on the stage is another book, not this one. This book focuses on dramatic literature and how characters within this fictional world make themselves who and what they are.

## A New Way to Consider Characters

Characters can embody themselves authentically or inauthentically. If they embody themselves in ways in which they focus on their own beings by concerning themselves primarily with themselves and their embodiments, they have a greater level of authenticity than if they are focused on outward phenomena. Or, if their embodiments make obvious their lack of interest in interfering with the embodiments of others (for example, by courting others' approbation), they can be said to possess a more authentic embodiment and therefore a more thorough ontological self-knowledge. This self-knowledge in turn enables them to form a worldview or system of values uniquely their own, one unencumbered by ready-made mores or values they may not fully accept upon thorough examination, an examination only possible with a thorough ontological self-knowledge. This does not mean that any character can or should completely remove himself from the company of others. In fact, this is impossible. So no character can ever achieve full or complete authenticity. He can, however, achieve a higher or lower level of authenticity when compared to that of other characters. Complete detachment or escape from others or from society or ideas is not possible; so to some extent, a small measure of inauthenticity is natural and inescapable. The authenticity level of the characters' embodiments is obvious via their actions and speech in an absurd world. And while this authenticity is related to bad faith when bad faith is considered as a lie to oneself through which a being seeks to escape the responsible freedom of Being-for-Itself (Sartre 1984, 800), it is not the same thing.

The absurdity of these plays, according to both Camus's and Esslin's conceptions of the absurd, is especially crucial because it represents those phenomena of existence beyond the control of the individual at least in any physical or ontic way. Things in the universe rarely make sense. It is up to the subject to make sense. How each character makes sense and how each character acts toward another character, the words they speak to one another, their characteristics in general, are all indicative of their level of authenticity.

Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (1989) assert that the twentieth century's new technologies, new forms of organizing labor, new class configurations, and methods of social control ushered in an era which Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer called the "end of the individual" (Adorno and Horkheimer qtd. in Bronner and Kellner, 8-9). This era would be a time when societies were essentially one-dimensional

and without internal opposition. This time in turn led to an age in which working-class individuals failed to live examined lives in the Socratic sense, an age of what Heidegger calls “they” in which ready-made ideologies were plentiful and readily accepted. World Wars I and II, the Holocaust, the Great Depression, and other events of the past hundred years forced individuals to capitulate many of their freedoms as Fascism, Communism and Nazism swept Europe and influenced many people to think more of their society and less of themselves. Eugene Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* is a play in which this loss of individuality takes shape on the stage.

The stage space or the printed page is a laboratory in which these series of embodiments are obvious to the viewer or reader. Consider for example Clov, the beleaguered servant to the overbearing Hamm in Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957). Clov’s every thought and action indicate the ways in which he embodies his ontological being through these actions and to what extent each embodiment is authentic and therefore productive rather than detrimental to his ontological self-knowledge. For example, because Clov embodies his being with his own subjecthood in mind rather than focusing his ontological energies on someone else, he has a greater level of authenticity and comes to find a greater ontological self-knowledge by the end of *Endgame*. Although Clov remains in a frozen tableau at the culmination of the play, and though this stasis renders problematic any final assessment of his authenticity, if he does escape, it is his ontological self-knowledge which empowers him to free himself from the control of his overbearing master, Hamm. If this stasis means he fails to escape, he nevertheless gains some measure of authenticity. This can be seen in his assertiveness against Hamm’s numerous clamorings and his final refusal to heed his master’s call<sup>1</sup>. After all, each character, because of his intra-conscious split between the constructive and destructive tendencies, is unstable in ontological terms. He is therefore forced at each and every moment to tear down and simultaneously rebuild his ontological make-up, i.e. his essence. It is in the spaces between each embodiment of each character (like the pages in the cartoon flip-book) and in the totality of these embodiments that these characters can be better understood. Because the identity of each character is so unstable and nebulous, an understanding of embodiment and authenticity will help the discerning scholar realize that these so-called identities are series of embodiments

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<sup>1</sup> For Evan Horowitz’s argument that Clov simultaneously stays and goes, see page 114.

which are necessarily precarious and even capricious. According to Sartre (1984),

The principle of identity can be said to be synthetic not only because it limits its scope to a region of definite being, but in particular because it masses within it the infinity of density (120).

No characters are in-itselfs, they are for-itselfs.

As defined by Sartre (1984), the in-itself is never anything other than what it is (29). In other words, it is complete and stable, like the table in front of me is a table. It can't refrain from being a table and will never be anything else. The in-itself is all positivity in the sense that there is no lack associated with it (Sartre 1984, 135). "It is a fullness" (Sartre 1984, 120). For-itselfs are characterized by lack because there is always something they are not which they can become. The barista who prepares my iced tea, unlike an in-itself, is not a barista in the same way that my laptop is a laptop. The barista can later become a Nobel laureate or an ignominious hooligan. All living things are for-itselfs until they die, at which point they finally become in-itselfs.

So what this means for the present study is that because all characters are for-itselfs, they are always adapting and changing. Because of these necessary alterations, they are forced to embody themselves at all times in embodiments that are either authentic or not. For example, while Clov attains some measure of authenticity, other characters like Estelle of Sartre's *No Exit* (1944) fail to achieve it. In *No Exit*, in which a trio of characters find themselves in Hell, Estelle's projections of her ontological energies are not on herself but on Garcin and Ines. Because she incessantly courts their approbation, her embodiments are less authentic because so focused outwardly. She examines her own being very little, instead seeking approval from her two cellmates and thereby seeking to have an essence assigned to her. Therefore, her level of ontological self-knowledge is minimal and rather than creating her own essence she unquestioningly accepts one from other subjects. She is unable to question her belief systems because her focus is on others and how those others view her rather than on herself.

The importance of considering fictional characters in light of the preceding process lies in its ability to help us understand characters better. If we can comprehend that each character's identity is not identity at all, but a series of embodiments, we can more thoroughly realize that identities are a myth, that what we once considered identities are conglomerations of

embodiments chosen by the characters based on the needs of each moment and their own self-knowledge. If characters and their identities were fixed and stable, no character would ever grow or change and Clov would never be able to stand at the door of his hovel ready to leave. If we consider each character as he or she is written in the play and not how the characters may come to life on the stage, (and this approach is the one used in this book), it will become clear that each fictional instant brings unique needs and challenges for each character to deal with as best he can. (To consider directing, acting and staging and how these extraliterary arts interact with the present analysis would open up a completely different dimension to the present investigation). In the literary realm, at least, a character's motivations are not supposed to be uniform or predictable. Characters are not forced to do anything or to act in any prescriptive manner. They choose how they are and how they exist in their fictional world just like real-life subjects. If the discerning scholar can peer into the spaces between successive embodiments, he can better comprehend how and to what end each character embodies herself.

## The Absurd and Modern Drama

In his preface to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argues that the worldwide destruction which resulted from the total war of World War II brought to the fore what he calls the feeling of absurdity and the problem of suicide.

[*The Myth of Sisyphus*] attempts to resolve the problem of suicide, as *The Rebel* attempts to resolve that of murder, in both cases without the aid of eternal values which, temporarily perhaps, are absent or distorted in contemporary Europe (Camus 1983, v).

Written in 1940, the year in which the Nazis invaded France and the year after they took over Poland, Camus's essay offers an argument in which the debunking of traditional religious and moral values is taken for granted. Despite this loss of hope, Camus argues that suicide is not a valid method of dealing with the absurdity of existence even for those who do not believe in God.

Although *The Myth of Sisyphus* poses mortal problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert (Camus 1983, v).

The creation Camus mentions is not merely artistic creation, although it is part of his vision. This creation can be considered as the ontological

creation of the self so obvious in the plays of the absurdist genre, which sprang up in France in the aftermath of World War II. Camus's desert is nothing less than the arid landscape of twentieth-century existence in which advances in technology, the mystification of language through propagandism, and the destruction brought on by two world wars destroyed the viability of those things people once believed.

The socio-historical events of world wars, genocides, and advances in technology, particularly those advances, like the atomic bomb which enabled devastation on a scale previously unimagined, necessitated changes in the philosophical temperaments of many. These events and the concomitant loss of faith in traditional value systems have resulted in what Camus termed absurdity. During World War II, Camus (1983) wrote,

That universal reason, practical or ethical, that determinism, those categories that explain everything are enough to make a decent man laugh (21).

Killinger (1971) takes a similar tack as he comments,

Whatever the cause of the absurdity, revolution or passage from innocence to experience, the sensing of man's loss of control is an important dimension of absurd existence. Movements, insurrections, times whirl around him. They are not of his making—though he may indeed have contributed to them—and he cannot stop them (81).

This utter powerlessness is obvious in the plays of Sartre, Beckett and Ionesco as characters appear defeated, lugubrious, and dispirited, tortured like Sartre's victors, beaten like Beckett's tramps, or turned into pachyderms as in Ionesco's town dwellers. Other characters, however, realize that their lives are very much as they make them, that they create their own essences via authentic embodiments that focus not on outward phenomena but on their own being creations which enable them to avoid the pitfalls of hegemony and blind faith. The loss of control of which Killinger writes is also why the theories of Heidegger and Sartre are so crucial to readings of modern drama. The ideas of these existential philosophers can greatly explicate otherwise difficult texts because of their focus on meaning creation in a world in which meaning is difficult to acquire. Although Michael Bennett (2011) contends that many absurd plays revolt against existentialism and that these plays are ethical parables (2), I believe the plays considered here neither endorse nor revolt against that philosophical system. Rather, there are certain existential concepts which can aid the reader in understanding the plays and their characters. Furthermore, Bennett is right to declare that absurd plays are not about

meaninglessness, as was initially believed by many scholars, but are about meaning creation (8).

Because it has been so influential on modern drama and so influenced by his existential predecessors and contemporaries, Camus's essay deserves a more thorough treatment here. Camus contends, "We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking" (8). What is this habit other than Heidegger's "they"? What is it other than that mode of habit in which the subject finds herself unaware that she creates her own essence, her own meaning through the embodiments she wills before her own consciousness and those of others? This habit is detrimental, as Camus argues, to thinking, and in turn, to that ontological self-knowledge which is the key to an existence unfettered by interference from others and their ready-made (though often outmoded) belief systems. Camus's "habit of living" is explored adeptly by Beckett, who offers up characters, like the tramps Vladimir and Estragon, who in *Waiting for Godot* (1953) are so encumbered by their unthinking habits, they can remember nothing, at times not even their own names. Vladimir at one point calls habit "a great deadener" (105). What is perhaps more significant is that Vladimir and Estragon see no real alternative to the meaningless lives they lead; they remain unaware of their own freedom to embody themselves as they see fit, unaware that they can do something else besides wait for Godot. Camus would argue that this results in subjects who refuse to confront the absurdity of existence.

Camus's oft-quoted definition of the absurd shows not only the subjective aspect of this absurdity—that it is experienced and combated on an individual level—but its theme of disillusionment as well.

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity (6).

These "bad reasons" are the outmoded value systems upon which subjects formerly relied for guidance and meaning creation. This "divorce between man and his life" resulted from historical events including the Holocaust which destroyed the old values.

Esslin (1969) explains how the Theatre of the Absurd is an attempt to shock the unthinking subject into realizing the realities of his condition, to

instill in him that lost cosmic wonder at the universe, and to jostle him out of his trite, mechanical, complacent existence (351), an existence similar to the habit-ridden one of which Camus wrote. And while Sartre is not generally considered a playwright of the absurd, his scenes of Hell and torture and his philosophical treatises on existence can just as easily shock unthinking theatregoers. And what is even more significant to the present study is Esslin's comment that this type of theatre satirically castigates the absurdity of lives lived unconscious and unaware of ultimate reality (351). This quality of being unaware is—like Heidegger's "they," and like the lives of Beckett's tramps—that state of unquestioning oblivion in which those subjects who embody themselves inauthentically are mired. Through the absurd, the playwrights of this genre, as well as Sartre, seek to awaken audience members to the fact that they may be living their lives unaware of this absurdity and of the necessity for authentic embodiments to deal with it.

Esslin, who coined the phrase that is the title of his book, offers a thorough exploration of several of the movement's playwrights and their works. He also explains how the historical phenomena Killinger and Camus saw as the catalysts for the devaluation of traditional beliefs have influenced absurd drama. Esslin (1969) argues in perhaps his famous reduction that a sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of existence is the theme of Beckett's and Ionesco's plays (5). Sartre and Camus, on the other hand, treat this theme just as much as Beckett and Ionesco, but do so through lucid and logically constructed reasoning. Beckett and Ionesco, on the other hand, employ avant-garde dramatic techniques (Esslin 1969, 6). The difference between Theatre of the Absurd and what Esslin calls Existentialist theatre which expresses the absurd is best explained by Esslin himself:

While Sartre or 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 (6).

So, although Sartre is not strictly speaking an absurdist, his philosophy and his plays are crucial to understanding the Theatre of the Absurd and modern drama because they sprang from the same tradition of disillusionment and anxiety that inspired the works of Beckett and Ionesco.

After the defeat of the Nazis ushered in the Cold War, Esslin would make correlations between history and art in his landmark work *The*



*Theatre of the Absurd*. Esslin astutely sets the context for the rejection of outmoded value systems:

The Theatre of the Absurd, however, can be seen as the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our own time. The hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war (4-5).

The devastation of World War II was too much for many who endured that period of six years during which some 55 million people, soldiers and civilians, were killed in combat and genocide. As a result, not only religion, but the value systems built around progress, jingoism, and totalitarianism also failed in the eyes of those who once believed. This shattering of faith, according to Esslin, opened the door to acceptance of nontraditional drama, which sprang up first in Paris, one of the many European capitals devastated by the war. The new lack of viability of old beliefs influenced not just art but philosophy. This is why the Theatre of the Absurd can so easily be read with existential philosophy in mind.

The technical apparatuses which make a particular play absurd are in many ways reflective of the confusing, contradictory, and fragmented ethos of the twentieth century. Esslin (1969) contends that those works considered absurd generally showcase the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. They also lack plot, development, characterization, and suspense, and have no beginning or end in traditional terms. They rely on scenes reflective of dreams and nightmares and feature dialogue like *non sequiturs* and rambling that parody the devaluation of language which resulted largely from the propaganda of two world wars (3-7). Esslin also lists those theatrical traditions which influenced the Theatre of the Absurd, including pure theatre (scenic effects as they appear in the circus, revue, or acts of jugglers, acrobats, and mimes), clowning, verbal nonsense, and the literature of dream and fantasy (282). All these elements help the playwrights of the absurd craft works in which the exploration of their absurd universe makes sense in its nonsense.

Because philosophers like Camus and Sartre were propounding new ways of existing via philosophy, playwrights took some of these ideas into

their drama in order to render tangible the belief that each subject creates his own existence. Esslin contends,

[The Theatre of the Absurd] bravely faces up to the fact that for those to whom the world has lost its central explanation and meaning, it is no longer possible to accept art forms still based on the continuation of standards and concepts that have lost their validity ... (350-351).

To Esslin, changing times lead naturally to changing aesthetic temperaments.

As a result of this lack of viability, subjects found themselves forced to create their own subjective meaning in a world without meaning. The method by which each subject and indeed each character must fashion an essence is that of ontological embodiment. I have termed it thusly because of Sartre's (1963) assertion that "Men do not act: what we call their acts are simple attributes of the substances they embody" (75). These substances are the essences of each subject rendered discernible only through embodiment. Heidegger and Sartre theorize ontological being in their treatises on subject formation, otherness, and the raw material of existence, but theorize little on how succeeding embodiments of a single subject result in that subject's ontological essence.

This book will add to this body of knowledge with a system based specifically on how ontological embodiment operates within a single consciousness and in the face of other subjects. This proposed system will show that more authentic embodiments (those focused by a character specifically on himself and without any desire to influence the embodiments of others) lead to a greater level of ontological self-knowledge, that knowledge which enables the character to create an essence unfettered by what Heidegger termed the "they." "They" is, according to Heidegger, that entity—consisting of for example a society, a particular demographic, a family unit—which prescribes one's state-of-mind and determines a subject's belief systems. In his discussion of authentic reality, Herbert Marcuse (1989) stipulates that something is authentic when it is self-reliant and able to preserve itself (61), while Sartre writes in *Saint Genet* (1963),

... we are tempted to regard the information of our consciousness as dubious and obscure. This means that we have given primacy to the object which we are to Others over the subject we are to ourself (43).

Being part of a “they” is desirable to many because of the security it provides in the form of basic needs. Furthermore, it is impossible for the subject to break free in any complete sense from the “they” though he may still become a free-thinking and enlightened individual through authenticity. Subjects may, however, break away from the “they” enough to survive without the protection they gain by being part of a family or society. For example, the man stranded on a desert island may survive for years, but on his own, he will not live a fulfilling life in the most general sense.

Furthermore, authentic embodiments lead to an essence through which the subject places himself in a better position to question the value systems he is exposed to throughout his existence, the value systems that according to John Killinger, have lost their efficacy. In his discussion of the Theatre of the Absurd, Killinger (1971) writes

With the displacement of God and the traditional kind of religious hope has come a consequent displacement of the meaning of time and ordinary reality; these are obviously inventions of the mind, contrivances for handling the world more easily, now rendered silly and meaningless” (11-12).

The displacement Killinger sees as a catalyst for absurd conceptions of the universe also results in the creation of modern drama and of philosophical theories designed to deal with this displacement. The loss of feasibility of traditional belief systems (including religion) results in the void of values which necessitates Heidegger’s and Sartre’s theories on the subjective creation of meaning for each subject and Beckett’s and Ionesco’s dramas that explore new conceptions of time and space.

As such, I will examine embodiment not as scholars like Anna McMullan (1997), who theorizes the body as a locus of identity and subjectivity do (354), but in primarily ontological terms in conjunction with thorough examinations of selected modern plays. This drama is ideal for an examination of these ideas because it is largely the product of the devaluation of traditional belief systems and because it focuses on explorations of states of consciousness, most notable in Beckett’s plays. The works of Sartre are important here because of their stress on theatrical action, and in Ionesco’s because of their emphasis on language as a tool of inter- and intra-conscious communication. The incessant embodiments of characters upon the stage can teach us much about embodiment in general. Plays, because they are self-contained (in that they have beginnings and endings) and viewable or readable works, offer characters who embody their beings with their every thought and action. This idea of embodiment, in tandem with the examinations of selected plays, will through their foci

on characterological and ontological exegesis, offer an awareness of new avenues of self-creation.

## **A Revolution in the Theatre**

Writing in 1938, Antonin Artaud (1958) called for a radical restructuring of modern drama in his seminal *The Theatre and its Double*. In that work, Artaud expounds on what he saw as the need for a Theatre of Cruelty, a new form of drama which would dispense with the hackneyed plots and characters of the well-made play made famous by Henrik Ibsen and others, the problem play of which George Bernard Shaw was a prolific author, and the realistic works of Anton Chekhov and others. What all these types of plays have in common, according to Artaud, is their utter lack of efficacy in a world in which realism as an artistic method has become predictable and trite.

If people are out of the habit of going to the theater, if we have all finally come to think of theater as an inferior art, a means of popular distraction, and to use it as an outlet for our worst instincts, it is because we have learned too well what the theater has been, namely, falsehood and illusion

he writes (76). Artaud saw the twentieth century as an age during which theatre had lost its place among the ranks of the arts, a time in which drama became simply another distraction for the theatregoing public. What Artaud calls descriptive and narrative, or psychological theatre, had been practiced in theatres throughout the world since at least the time of Shakespeare and, as a result, was played out. What Artaud's work effectively accomplished was more than a simple rethinking of drama; it was a treatise that has influenced experimental and avant-garde theatre even to the present day.

To combat the psychological plays of dramatists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a drama Artaud believed rendered plots and characters quotidian and obvious—Artaud famously called for a Theatre of Cruelty. This theatre would not be cruel in terms of violence perpetrated upon one character by another, but would shock spectators out of their complacent viewing and thinking habits. Artaud writes,

I propose then a theater in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theater as by a whirlwind of higher forces. A theater which, abandoning psychology, recounts the extraordinary, stages natural conflicts, natural and subtle

forces, and presents itself first of all as an exceptional power of redirection (82-83).

With this, Artaud defines his Theatre of Cruelty as one of shock, a theatre of new techniques, storylines, and characters which would induce its viewers to think in new ways about drama and artistic creation.

The trends to which Artaud was reacting were the realism of the box set and the well-made play which gave way to the naturalism of Emile Zola and the early works of Strindberg. The turn of the twentieth century saw the rise of the working classes, urbanization, advances in technology and the overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and disease that went with them. To combat these problems, dramatists and others employed the conventions of realism to inculcate a didactic message to their audiences in the hopes of bringing about improvements to social conditions (Wilson and Goldfarb 1983, 403). Closely related to realism, naturalism presented “slice of life” dramas which focused on the lower classes and the environments which shaped them (407).

These types of plays competed with the expressionist drama which gained popularity early in the twentieth century, after naturalism entered a state of crisis about the turn of the century, according to Bert O. States (1985, 85). Of naturalism States declares, “... [T]here was nothing *new* it could do, as a mature style, without repeating itself to death” (86). In a book published 10 years after his *Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin (1971) offered an analysis of new forms in the theatre in which he wrote that a lack of new things to do was not the only reason realism lost much of its appeal.

Plays with a rationally constructed plot that start from the exposition of a problem, moral, social, or philosophical, and then proceed toward a solution presuppose a world order that is rational and known to man (6).

Like Camus and Killinger, Esslin rejects the idea that things are rational. As a result, drama can no longer be rational. And so realism and naturalism gave way in large part to expressionism and other avant-garde art forms, forms which de-emphasized the traditional techniques of drama, including plots with fully articulated *denouements*, developed characters with clear motivations, and settings generally reflective of the middle-class home or work environment. These expressionist dramas, including those Artaud wrote, have much in common with those of the absurdists in their extreme subjectivity and their focus on seemingly unrelated series of incidents presented from the point of view of a single consciousness.

But the dramatic-aesthetic evolution toward the avant-garde modern theatre is not simply one of throwing away the traditional structures and techniques of the old ways. It is also a turn toward introspection, much like Rene Descartes's turn inward via his insistence on subjective rational doubt, which inaugurated modern philosophy. Robert Brustein (1962) argues that the modern dramatist is one who evinces a certain self-consciousness in his writing:

Whether involved as an idea or a character, the modern dramatist is continually exploring the possibilities of his own personality—not only representing but exhorting, not only dramatizing the others but examining the self (13).

One of the forms this self-examination may take and in which it may be represented on the stage is in what Brustein calls existential revolt, which he defines as that drama in which the playwright examines the metaphysical life of humanity and protests against it (26). This type of drama is no doubt the product of the turn inward which began with expressionism as the dramatic form in which thoughts, feelings, and states of being of the individual psyche became fodder for dramatic presentation. This turn toward the individual subject's states of consciousness is also the reason modern drama is the ideal type of drama through which to explore ontological embodiment.

Another important dramatic theorist who, though he may not have directly influenced Sartre, Ionesco, or Beckett, made the theatre an avenue for the exploration of metaphysics, is Jerzy Grotowski. Published in 1964—the year during which Sartre famously declined his Nobel Prize, and five years before Beckett sent his publisher to accept his—Grotowski's "The Theatre's New Testament" (1968) acts as an argument in favor of exploratory theatre with virtually no boundaries. This new type of theatre, limitless and boundless, is one in which states of consciousness can be more adeptly explored because it calls for a theatre in which new ways of perceiving the world may be presented to its audience. Grotowski declares that the traditional conception of what is considered theatre is inherently flawed, that theatre can exist without costumes, sets, music, lighting, and even a text (31). In fact, this latter element is a relatively new addition to theatre, which in its beginnings as a religious ceremony had none. The definition of theater, according to Grotowski is very simple: it is what happens between a spectator and an actor (31). Grotowski's revolutionary statements effectively pave the way for many types of new theatre

including environmental theatre, the happening, and other types of avant-garde drama.

The Theatre of the Absurd, according to Esslin (1971), has renounced any effort at telling stories, discussing ideas, or solving problems. As a result,

... it has been able to concentrate on the presentation of what is essentially a *sense of being*, an intuition of the tragicomic absurdity and mystery of human existence. As such the Theatre of the Absurd is an existentialist theatre which puts a direct perception of a mode of being above all abstract considerations ... (9).

Ionesco himself writes (1964) that

A play is a construction made up of a series of states of consciousness, or situations, which grow more intense, more concentrated, and then knit together either to be unraveled or to end in inextricable and unbearable confusion (244).

This is why modern drama, including but not limited to Theatre of the Absurd, is the dramatic genre best suited for an exploration of how subjects embody their beings incessantly in order to establish relations with their selves and others. The absurdists focus not on plot, characterization, or problem solving in the traditional sense; they create an atmosphere and a mood that is indicative of their efforts to explore inner states of consciousness. The existentialist playwrights, including Sartre, may use traditional plots and motifs but do so in an effort to investigate the problems of existence and being.

Sartre is among the most prolific practitioners of these new techniques in drama and philosophy. In addition to being a philosopher and playwright, Sartre was also a critic. In 1945 he founded *Temps Modernes* with the express purpose of promoting *litterature engagee*, or engaged literature. This type of writing is committed to a purpose beyond literature for its own sake, according to Steven Ungar's introduction to "*What is Literature*" and *Other Essays* (1988, 7). In his voluminous critical work, Sartre argues that one of the chief motives for artistic creation is the need of the artist to feel he is in a relationship to the world. Because the world at large is itself the raw material out of which the artist constructs his art, the creative act aims at a renewal of the writer's world and his totality of being as it finds itself in this world. What is new in this is that artists are now able to realize that their totality is in their hands. This concept of

renewal is doubtless a product of Sartre's philosophy, with its focus on the renewal and self-determination of the individual. In "The Humanism of Existentialism" Sartre writes (1999) that

Subjectivism means, on the one hand, that an individual chooses and makes himself; and, on the other, that it is impossible for man to transcend human subjectivity (37).

Emmanuel Levinas (1987) directly addresses the problem of committed literature in "Reality and its Shadow." He argues that the problem of this type of art is that it requires understanding and true art feeds on obscurity.

Does not the function of art lie in not understanding? Does not obscurity provide it with its very element and a completion *sui generis*, foreign to dialectics and the life of ideas? (3).

He seems to ask whether or not committed literature is art at all. "... Art does not belong to the order of revelation. Nor does it belong to that of creation, which moves in just the opposite direction" (3). Committed literature requires that its reader understand its didactic. This would make it something less than art, at least to Levinas. Sartre, however, believes not only that art can be didactic, but that it must be.

Because the artist remakes himself while simultaneously creating his works, and because the artist cannot escape his subjectivity, one is inextricably linked to the other; the artist can never be totally removed from his work. As a result and particularly for Sartre, the work of art must always be socially relevant. As a survivor of German captivity, a committed Marxist, and an advocate for human rights in colonial Algeria, Sartre rejected art for art's sake, arguing that each work must have some form of didactic. Adamantly opposed to this doctrine, Ionesco believed art should remain unbiased in order to guarantee truly unfettered expression, while Beckett remained stubbornly reticent on aesthetics, especially those of his own works, much to the chagrin of critics around the world.

In his essay "What is Literature?" Sartre (1988) writes "... although literature is one thing and morality a quite different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative" (67). Sartre believed literature could enact real and meaningful changes not only in the belief systems of its readers but in the realm of socio-political systems as well. The reason class-based inequalities have been allowed to continue for centuries, he argues, is that those in power convince the powerless that



there are no such things as classes, that every misfortune is an accident and not the product of the class system (107). With this, Sartre calls for literature which offers a message, which enlightens its readers as to how the social world operates.

This is why Sartre believes the fate of literature is tied to the fate of the working class (205), those who are most often oppressed, who because of this oppression are most in need of expression. This does not mean, however, that Sartre advocates propaganda as a method of combating oppression. On the contrary, because the twentieth century was in many ways the age of propaganda, Sartre sees true literature as that which seeks to disabuse its readers of the erroneous notions brought about through propaganda. Because this propaganda was used so much during both world wars, Sartre concludes that war alienates literature because it demands that writing serve the aims of propaganda (215).

Starkly opposed to Sartre's *litterature engagee* stand Ionesco's theories. An equally successful playwright and one of the earliest practitioners of the Theatre of the Absurd, Ionesco was also a critic. At odds with Sartre and his socially conscious drama, however, Ionesco (1964) rejects any and all forms of didactic message in the theatre as a vulgarity: "Drama is not the idiom for ideas. When it tries to become a vehicle for ideologies, all it can do is vulgarize them" (24). Although German playwright Bertolt Brecht was more frequently the target of Ionesco's attacks, of Sartre, Ionesco writes, "It is the Sartres of this world who are responsible for alienating our minds" (1964, 231). This alienation, Ionesco believed, resulted from Sartre's reliance on socially conscious drama, which the former playwright believed deadened the abilities of the individual to think for himself. In this alienation, Ionesco saw the possibility of the Heideggerian "they" to overpower the artistic drive of modern playwrights. Ionesco (1964) dismisses Sartre and Brecht as authors of political melodramas and representatives of left-wing conformism (91). He argues that not all social problems are *purely* social problems (135). As a result, social drama tends to obfuscate the truth by making every problem appear social. Art must be created by an individual and not by an ideology, Ionesco argues, and political or social art is not individual because ideologies are always second-hand (34-35). Politics can never be a source for true art because it relies on the type of unquestioned acceptance of second-hand beliefs against which Heidegger, Camus, and others warn. Furthermore, politics is only one example of a social system which if left unexamined by the individual, can result in that individual's loss of self-knowledge.

Another problem with committed or didactic art, according to Ionesco, is that it takes into account the subjectivity of its creator, but not that of its patrons (44-45). “If you wish to speak to everybody, you will really speak to no one: the things which interest everybody in general have very little interest for each man in particular” (45). Anguish and solitude characterize the conditions of man, he argues (78). He sees life as “nightmarish, painful, and unbearable, like a bad dream” (110). As a result, it is natural for individuals to seek refuge from this bitter loneliness in society, the “they,” or a crowd of theatergoers. The danger in this, just as Heidegger warns, is the concomitant sacrifice of individuality and as a consequence, of ontological self-knowledge.

Specifically of Brecht, Ionesco says,

I dislike Brecht just because he is didactic and ideological. He is not primitive, he is elementary. He is not simple, he is simplistic. He does not give us matter for thought, he is himself the reflection and illustration of an ideology, he teaches me nothing, he is useless repetition (134).

He dismisses Brecht’s characters as flat and his dramas as overly social and insufficiently metaphysical. There is an entire dimension of the subject which Brecht leaves out, according to Ionesco: his ontological aspects. Ionesco argues that his art is more complete because it addresses the entire human condition, its metaphysical as well as its social aspects. Because Brecht fails to address both these aspects of the human condition, he writes theatre for the unenlightened (Ionesco 1964, 221).

Brecht (1964), for his part, counters that art can be both aesthetically pleasing and didactic: “Theatre remains theatre even when it is instructive theatre, and in so far as it is good theatre it will amuse” (73). In the same treatise, he argues that art must feed knowledge, which in turn fosters the appreciation of that art. The more enlightened one is, the more she can better appreciate the art she experiences. Brecht further contends that in his works, the moral arguments are only second in priority to their aesthetic qualities, and that their aim is less to instruct than to observe the human condition (75). Essentially, Brecht believes the theatre is a moral institution much the same way Sartre sees literature as having morality as its *sine qua non*.

What Ionesco advocates, rather than political or didactic drama, is uncommitted art. “Dramatic creation satisfies a mental need, this need must be sufficient in itself” he writes (1964, 43). In the same passage, Ionesco compares the work of art to a tree in that both are natural because

they seek nothing other than to be what they are. A tree does not seek to explain itself and neither should a work of art. Complementing this belief that a play should have no other reason for its existence than to be a play is Ionesco's desire—similar to that of Grotowski—to be limited by nothing other than the limits of stage technology.

... I should like to be able to strip dramatic action of all that is particular to it: the plot, the accidental characteristics of the characters, their names, their social setting and historical background, the apparent reasons for the dramatic conflict, and all the justifications, explanations and logic of the conflict (217).

Ionesco compares his ideal theatre to a sporting event, with its live antagonism, dynamic conflicts, and motiveless clash of wills (232). It is obvious to anyone who has seen a production of *The Bald Soprano* (1950), that Ionesco succeeded. Its nonsensical dialogue, lack of plot, distortion of social mores, and complete disregard for traditional dramatic conventions testify to the playwright's success in achieving his vision.

Ionesco writes much more favorably of Beckett's work than he does of Brecht's. This is perfectly natural given the similarities in style and structure of the playwrights' works. Beckett's uncommitted, unexplained, stripped-down drama fits in with what Ionesco considers exemplary theatre. He lauds Beckett for his treatment of the whole of the human condition, rather than that of a particular subject in a particular society (as in Brecht's plays).

Beckett poses the problems of the ultimate ends of man; the picture of history and the human condition this author gives us is more complex, more soundly based (than that of Brecht) (135).

In another article, Ionesco calls Beckett an exciting new dramatist (52). Beckett (1984) returned this praise, writing to director Alan Schneider that he was in good company when *Endgame* played at the same theatre in Vienna as one of Ionesco's dramas (109).

While the aesthetic views of Sartre and Ionesco are relatively transparent, much more difficult to pin down are the aesthetic theories of Beckett himself on his own works and those of others. Unfortunately, Beckett never wrote much about his plays, rarely did interviews, and when forced to answer questions about his work, replied cagily. In a 1954 letter to New York publisher Barney Rosset, Beckett (2004) wrote of his frustration at being questioned by actor Sir Ralph Richardson.

Too tired to give satisfaction I told him that all I knew about Pozzo was in the text, that if I had known more I would have put it in the text, and that this was true also of the other characters. ... I also told Richardson that if by Godot I had meant God I would [have] said God, and not Godot. This seemed to disappoint him greatly (qtd. in Knowlson, 372).

In another famous missive, Beckett (1984) wrote to director Alan Schneider in 1957, "If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin. Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, together as stated ..." (109). Beckett apparently believed that all that needed saying about his plays was in the plays themselves. Disappointed by Beckett's lack of forthrightness about his works are generations of critics who still puzzle over the meaning of his dramas. Beckett was simply not interested in answering questions about his enigmatic works. In a 1953 letter to publisher Jerome Lindon, Beckett (2004) instructed him to refuse all requests for interviews (354). By the 1960s, Lindon would still have to tell reporters and critics that Beckett never did interviews (484). The playwright's most famous dodge of the spotlight was perhaps his refusal to accept his 1969 Nobel Prize in person. Lindon accepted it on his behalf (507).

What can be surmised about Beckett's aesthetic beliefs via his plays, however, is that he, like Ionesco and unlike Sartre and Bertolt Brecht, rejected the need for didactics in the theatre. The difficulty in interpreting any of Beckett's plays testifies to this. Critics and scholars have struggled so persistently in deciphering Beckett's characters, settings, and style that the extraction of any type of lesson from them is rendered all but impossible. And although according to Knowlson, Beckett was deeply committed to human rights, liberty in Eastern Europe during the Cold War, and the abolition of apartheid and racism (21), none of this appears overtly in his plays. Had Beckett advocated didactic drama, he would have been more forthcoming about his plays. What Beckett does explore in his works, however, are states of being. In his preface to Beckett's authorized biography, Knowlson writes that Beckett's later works explore the nature of being and that consequently they are less concerned with the superficial and transitory (21). Although Knowlson addresses only Beckett's later work specifically, this reading of his works can be applied to all his drama and to that of other dramatists, absurd and existential alike, as is shown in the comments of Esslin and Ionesco.

And while Beckett's and Ionesco's abandonment of didactic drama allowed them to adeptly explore consciousness, language, and reality

itself, Sartre's insistence on engaged literature failed to stop him from treating many of the same themes despite his realistic style. Because Sartre's drama is so infused with his philosophy and because this philosophy is so concerned with being and existence, he was able to explore existential states of being despite his insistence on realistic technique.

Sartre, Ionesco, and Beckett all created dramas—whether didactic or not—which adeptly explore the nature of being and consciousness in the twentieth century. The old belief systems lost plausibility because of the worldwide loss of faith in reason and religion brought about by two world wars and other historical phenomena. These three playwrights, much like Artaud before them, saw a need for plays which would do more than simply tackle social problems. The real problem for humanity was no longer a product of the sociopolitical realm. It was an issue of being, which while not completely divorced from the corporeal world, was nevertheless one worth exploring as new philosophies addressed new crises of belief. Sartre contributed an important philosophy which shines through in his realistic drama, which Esslin referred to as existential drama. Ionesco as arguably the first practitioner of the Theatre of the Absurd and Beckett as its most famous proponent offer plays which, because of their de-emphasis of plot and characterization, are well-prepared to explore states of consciousness stripped of virtually all corporeal interference.

What theorists like Artaud and Grotowski and playwrights like Sartre, Ionesco, and Beckett did was affect a revolution in the theatre which turned it away from the problem play to the existential and absurd play. This latter is not metaphysical or ontological simply because it is experimental, though the type of experimentation called for by Artaud and Grotowski and practiced by the three playwrights discussed here makes the exploration of particular states of consciousness more easily accomplished because unbounded by traditional structure. When playwrights are less concerned with plot and characterization, they can be more concerned with the exploration of being and, more particularly to the present study, with how successive and incessant embodiments of ontological energies create the essence of a particular subject in a manner which renders this embodiment either authentic or not.

## A Revolution in Philosophy

For the present study, the plays of Beckett, Ionesco and Sartre will best reveal how characters attain or forgo ontological self-knowledge via their successive embodiments. This investigation will in turn allow us a new opportunity to understand how characters create their own identities through their words and actions. Although Camus is an important theorist and playwright, especially for his ideas on absurdity, Beckett, Ionesco and Sartre and their plays will be the focus here, the former two for their absurdity and the latter for his influence thereon, as well as for his tremendous influence on theories of essence creation. In order to better understand the plays of these authors, their relation to the times during which they were written, and how they relate to ontology, developments in the history of modern philosophy must be read in light of their interrelatedness to each other and to the history of modern drama. The idea of ontological embodiment is the product of the ideas of disparate theorists, each of whom has built a system influenced by his forebears.

Mark C. Taylor (1987) investigates the work of some of these theorists in a sort of history of modern philosophy. He argues that modern philosophical thought began with Descartes's inward turn to the subject (xxii). With Descartes, the focus of philosophical inquiry turned from the outward ideals of Aristotle to the inner realm of each individual subject. Indeed, Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" (1998, 18) can be considered one of the greatest turning points in philosophical inquiry. Taylor comments that "through a dialectical reversal, the creator God dies and is resurrected in the creative subject" (xxii). With this, Taylor tells us, like Camus and Esslin before him, that the burden of meaning creation in a world in which old values are outmoded values, is on the subject, not on any external system or idea. This shifting of the labor of creating individual and subjective meaning was arrived at through Descartes's reliance on doubtful questioning of everything through individual empiricism as the avenue to self discovery. Nearly four centuries after his famous maxim, Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" could be just as accurately rephrased as "I create myself, therefore I am." As characters in plays re-create themselves, they fashion themselves and their identities anew with each thought and action.

Descartes recounts how as a youth he became disillusioned with the traditional disciplines of knowledge and so abandoned them in favor of a more individualized and subjective pursuit of truth. He writes,