

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
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Lecture - 53
Modern Drama

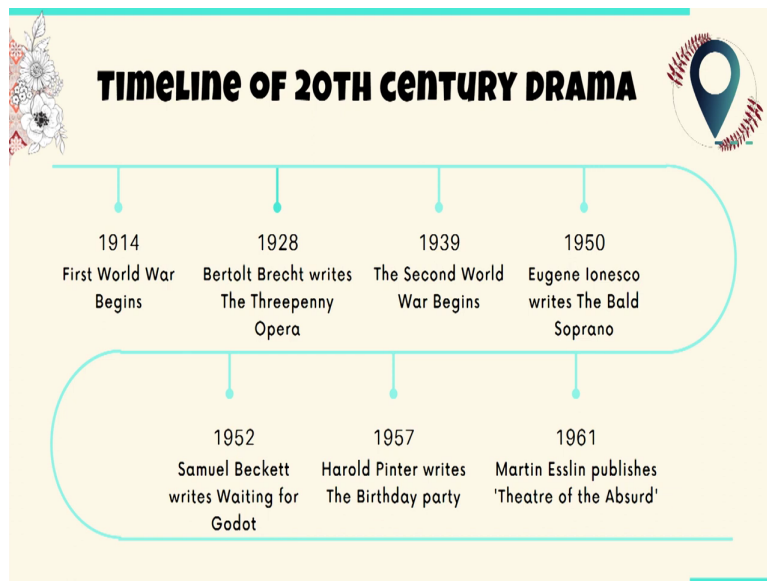
Hi, welcome again to our ongoing discussion on drama. In the last class we covered a rather a wide ground, beginning with classical Greek drama because that is the foundation of Western drama. We discussed how you find the origins of drama in the choral performances. And, then with the addition of one character by Thespis, then by Aeschylus another character, and then Sophocles another character and then Euripides.

And, in the meanwhile they reduce the number of people in chorus, lot of structural transformation that undergo. So, we discussed all of them in Greek drama and then we moved on to discuss Roman drama and from there English morality plays. And, we discussed Elizabethan drama and very briefly we discussed the drama in 17th, 18th and 19th century.

So, for an introductory course we have covered a very wide ground or even a very long stretch of drama. And, as I have been highlighting the intention is not to give you an exhaustive picture of anything. On the other hand, it is to draw your attention towards these remarkable gems and to pique your interest. It is, if I can use this metaphor, just to tantalize you with whatever is in store for you if you actually go to them. So, the intention is to drive you towards those plays, towards those genres, towards those writers, not to exhaust it. With that let us come to discuss Modern Drama in this class.

So, when we say modern drama for the sake of convenience, we locate it in the sense of time in the 20th century, especially in the European context. Next week we can take up a discussion of Indian drama in detail, but now modern drama.

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So, here is a kind of a broad timeline for 20th century drama. So, whenever we discuss drama, this timeline should definitely help you. You have the First World War; it begins in 1914. How is that important for modern drama? That is important for modern drama as much as it is important for modern poetry, modern fiction because that plays a major role, because, the World War changes the very nature of humanity, it alters the societal perception towards existence and other things. Therefore, it brings about an epochal change, an epochal transition not just in the structures of society, but also in the structures of human consciousness. That is why these World Wars play an important role, especially when we are discussing 20th century literature.

In 1928, just less than 2 decades into that, we have Bertolt Brecht: an exemplary playwright. He writes *The Three Penny Opera* and that inaugurates a new school of drama called *Epic Theatre*. From 1928 you have again 1939, beginning of the Second World War, that too is a very important one for reasons similar to the First World War.

It brings about an epochal transition in human society, human consciousness and humanity's outlook towards polity, administration, culture, existence. So, it is a greatest geopolitical shift that takes place through these wars.

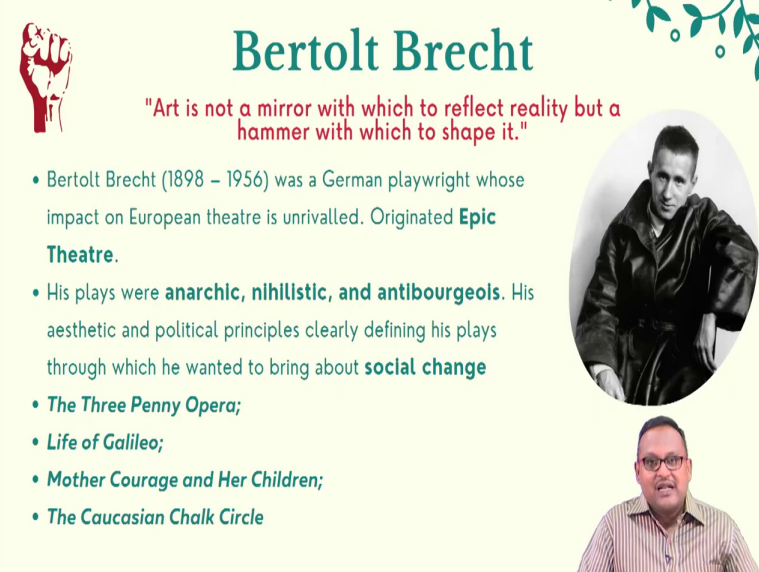
Then, in 1950 you have Eugene Ionesco, again a very important Romanian based, Paris settled playwright. He writes *The Bald Soprano*, which seems to inaugurate another new chapter in the history of drama. We are going to discuss that in a very short while, but for

time being you can call it inauguration of the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. And, then to strengthen that in 1952, you have Samuel Beckett publishing *Waiting for Godot*, a remarkable play.

And, in 1957 you have Harold Pinter publishing his *Birthday party*, Harold Pinter is a Nobel laureate too. And in 1961, you have Martin Esslin, a renowned journalist, a playwright and a sort of philosopher, almost giving a name for this particular theatre, he calls it officially 'Theatre of the Absurd'; the naming ceremony happens in the 1960s.

The seeds were sown sometime in the 1950s and the naming ceremony happens in 1961 with Martin Esslin's *Theatre of the Absurd*. He used the term for the first time there in a book of an eponymous title. So, this is a broad outline that we can keep in mind while discussing 20th century drama.



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Bertolt Brecht

"Art is not a mirror with which to reflect reality but a hammer with which to shape it."

- Bertolt Brecht (1898 – 1956) was a German playwright whose impact on European theatre is unrivalled. Originated **Epic Theatre**.
- His plays were **anarchic, nihilistic, and antibourgeois**. His aesthetic and political principles clearly defining his plays through which he wanted to bring about **social change**
- *The Three Penny Opera*;
- *Life of Galileo*;
- *Mother Courage and Her Children*;
- *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*



Now, we said Bertolt Brecht plays a major role because almost until the modern drama, until Bertolt Brecht, the sway and influence of Greek drama on the entire continent of Europe was very solid. In other words, until the 20th century the influence of Greek drama was very tight. Therefore, even during Shakespearean drama, you find lot of a unity. The unity of action that we talk of, unity of time and when it comes to the characters, protagonists being of noble birth, all of them remain intact. Therefore, it has had a very strong influence until the beginning of the 20th century. Greek drama, I mean the entire European drama is under the tight grips of a its under the tight grips of Greek drama.

So, you find a fresh breeze when Bertolt Brecht does his experiments. For the first time he says that the purpose of art is not exactly to mirror society, because if it's just a reflection of society that we find in literature, why should we read literature at all, we can just watch society. Therefore, he believed that especially in theatre, more than reflecting the reality what you need is a hammer with which you can shape reality.

So, he considered literature especially drama and theatre as shaping agents, or agents that bring in transformation into the structures of society. And, he calls that "Epic Theatre". A well-known German playwright and his influence on European theatre especially in the 1920s or 30s is something significant. His plays celebrate anarchic, nihilistic, anti-bourgeois sentiment.

So, to a certain extent you can find influence of Marxism in his plays, but more than that his plays display a grand disillusion with a grand narrative called humanity and its positive ending. We have already witnessed the First World War and we have seen how the world has been put in a great disarray and how nihilism has crept in, how the world has been thrown into the grips of anarchy.

So, his plays explore all that both structurally and thematically. Therefore, you can say that his aesthetic productions were shaped to a large extent by his political principles, his political ideologies. That is the reason why he said that his theatre, his plays, his drama is meant not so much to reflect society, but to change society from within. That is why he begins using drama as an agent to bring about structural transformations in society.

The *Three Penny Opera*, *Life of Galileo* are very important works. In fact, it is through that particular work that we come to know the trials, the travails of Galileo and how an individual is pitted against society. Galileo, major philosopher and scientist, who held a radically different opinion about the nature of the universe, about the nature of the planet, about the nature of the solar system, about the entire cosmic existence, and how that radically upset the church and its doctrine as a result of that. Though truth was on his side, he had to undergo lot of pain, trauma and eventually even death. So, the travails, the struggles of an individual pitted against society is beautifully explored in *Life of Galileo*. You have *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Today Bertolt Brecht's name is almost synonymous with *Mother Courage*, one of the most performed plays, you can call it. And, you also have an experimental play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. These are some of his well-known works.

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CONCEPTS OF EPIC THEATRE

- ✓ **DEFAMILIARIZATION**
Verfremdungseffekt, also called alienation effect - a dramatic technique which makes the everyday appear surprising in order to enable a spectator to interrogate each dramatic event rather than regard it as part of a 'natural' order.
- ✓ **META-THEATRE**
Brecht's plays constantly tried to break the 'fourth wall' between the audience and the actors - forcing the audience to take cognizance of on-stage actions as real.



And, he introduces lot of radical concepts, one is 'defamiliarization'. We have identified 'defamiliarization' as a technique of alienation, wherein he believes that the purpose of art should be to defamiliarize, not to make the audience familiarize with what is happening on the stage, but to bring a certain distance between art and society. So, that the audience can look at society from a fresh perspective.

Once when you introduce the gap, that is why he did not encourage until his epic theatre, almost all theatres encouraged audience identifying themselves with the actors and the characters that they were performing on stage. empathy, oneness with the characters.

So, for the first time Bertolt Brecht revolted against that kind of empathy. He said I do not want the audience to be moved by the flow of emotions that are being performed on stage. I want them to distance themselves, they have to keep their logical apparatus intact in order to assess what is happening here.

Therefore, whenever he felt that the audience is about to be moved by the pathos of the play, he introduced some funny element. Later we can discuss, there is a particular term he uses for that.

And, then 'meta theatre'; well, what is meta theatre? We have discussed this as a fictional technique, 'breaking the fourth wall', the genesis of that concept can be found in epic theatre.

Well, for the first time he wants his audience not just to be passive seekers of what is being performed there, but an active interpreter, he wants his audience to be active interpreters. Therefore, many a times you find actors or characters performing on the stage directly addressing the wall, audience is called the fourth wall. And, when you break that, when you make a character speak directly with the audience, it is called breaking the fourth wall, that is the concept of meta theatre.

So, he introduces that particular technique; he wants the audience to retain the critical ability to analyze logically and rationally critique what is happening on stage. So, this is as part of that he introduces alienation effect in meta theatre.

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CONCEPTS OF EPIC THEATRE

- ✓ **'GESTUS'**
An original theatrical principle and technique which in German implies both 'gist' and 'gesture' - it is a piece of physical action on stage that reveals attitude of character.
- ✓ **HISTORICIZATION**
Rather than representing human nature as universal and unchanging, Brecht portrays every incident as a unique response to a given historical situation.

And, 'gestus', that is a theatre technique I said. So, what does he do? 'Gestus' is a beautiful a portmanteau term in German. So, it means clubbing just the essence of it with 'gesture'. So, it is a kind of a performance technique. We discussed several performance techniques in one of the previous classes, please recall that.

'Gestus' is one such technique where through a certain physical action on stage, the attitude of the character is revealed. Usually, action on stage does not reveal the attitude of the character as much as plots and story. But, here this physical movement of the actor can bring out the attitude of the character that he is performing, the role that is he or she is performing.

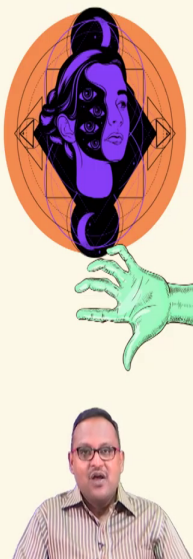
And, historicization that is again his political belief and philosophical belief, what does he believe in. Usually, what does literature do? Literature tends to universalize everything, human nature as a universal and unchanging component. But Brecht believed that human nature is basically a product of a particular historical situation.

So, if the historical conditions that produce reality change, then automatically human nature also changes. Now, imagine what is the historical situation that we are talking of? The First World War and he saw firsthand the transformations in the structure of consciousness, human consciousness. Therefore, he believed that human nature is by and large determined by the contours of history, that is historicization.

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Theatre of Cruelty

- French playwright Antonin Artaud (1896-1948); **'The Theatre and its Double'** (1938) introduced the concept.
- Theatre is not performance; it's a practice, which "wakes us up. Nerves and heart; "Cruelty is not sadism or causing pain, but a violent, physical determination to shatter a false reality.
- Artaud believed in - **'theatre must disturb the spectator profoundly, pierce him heart and soul in such a way as to free unconscious repressions and oblige men to view themselves and their state of being as what it really is'**
- **Mime, gesture and implicit meanings** are more important than words - presenting a **visual spectacle** which exploits the full range of the 'theatrical'



These are some remarkable contributions of Brecht to drama. From Brecht let us go to 'Theatre of Cruelty', another significant concept introduced in 1938. The thick shades of world war, Second World War are already there, they are looming large. We discussed the timeline and Antonin Artaud in his book *The Theatre and its Double*, its English translation, introduced the concept 'Theatre of Cruelty' for the first time.

He radically transforms or redefines the very notion of theatre, theatre is not what is being performed, not just a performative component like we understand, theatre in its traditional sense, for him theatre meant practice, a practice where the purpose of this practice was to awaken human beings, human consciousness and the way they feel, the way they react.

So, therefore, theatre is a space of practice more than a space of performance; theatre offers a scope or a space for practice to bring in a changed consciousness, consciousness raising activity. And, usually cruelty has a very negative shade of meaning. For him cruelty is not something like to cause pain or some kind of sadistic or masochistic element, nothing like that.

On the other hand, he meant by cruelty a violent shaking up, a physical determination to shatter a false reality or to thrust open the false hopes in which humanity seeks its shelter so that they awaken to the new reality. The violence refers to the force with which you make the audience get up, you make this audience sit up and understand the radical shifts that are happening in society, that is meant by 'Theatre of Cruelty'.

Therefore, when somebody asks them what is the purpose of Artaud, he said that my theatre is meant to disturb the spectator, not to make them complacent but to disturb them profoundly to such an extent that my performances or even my plays should pierce the heart and soul in such a way as to free the unconscious repressions.

The unconscious repressions that are there, in when we say unconscious repressions society will have played a major role, family, society and historical forces will have played a major role in the unconscious repressions of an individual. So, therefore, he wants to unleash that, that is the purpose. So, in order to achieve that, he believed that more than dialogue the spectacle was very important.

Therefore, he exploits using techniques of mimes, gestures and implicit meanings so as to create a very vibrant visual spectacle. This is in a nutshell 'Theatre of Cruelty' for us.

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What is the 'Theatre of the Absurd' ?

Absurdist theatre responded to the destruction and anxieties of the 20th century by questioning the nature of reality and illusion and a fascination with absurdity in all its forms – philosophical, dramaturgical, existential, emotional

Where did it originate?

A Phrase coined by **Martin Esslin**, to refer to primarily European drama written in the 1950s and 1960s by writers including **Samuel Beckett**, **Eugène Ionesco**, **Jean Genet**, **Harold Pinter**, **Tom Stoppard** et al



From here we go to ‘Theatre of the Absurd’. In fact, ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, it held its influence almost throughout Europe and even into India until let us say the late 60s. From 30s to 60s for about 3 to 4 decades approximately. It was like a kind of a cannibal variety of drama because in the glory of this particular type of drama, other types of drama almost vanished out of sight. Therefore, ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ was a canonical type of drama.

What do you mean by ‘Absurd Theatre’ or ‘Theatre of the Absurd’? Again, it is a phrase coined by Martin Esslin; a philosopher, a minor playwright, more than that a journalist. Martin Esslin coins this term in order to describe the play is written by iconoclastic writers such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard and Edward Albee and others.

He describes their plays as ‘Absurd Theatre’. This absurd theatre was hugely influenced by the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard and Sartre and even philosophy of Heidegger, Nietzsche more than others. Existentialism played a role in shaping the broad contours of absurd theatre. Therefore, you find existentialism creating the silhouette of absurd theatre.

And, what is existential philosophy? In order to understand absurd theatre, we need to know existential philosophy because it is the philosophical tenet of existentialism that shapes absurd theatre. That is the reason why we need to know existential philosophy. Existential philosophy believes that behind the creation of human beings, there is no apparent purpose.

Now, in order to better understand this, now look at this: behind the creation of a chair, an object there is a purpose.

When a carpenter creates a chair or when the first carpenter created the first prototype of chair, there must have been a clear purpose in their head. It is meant to sit therefore, a chair is created, later many designs come, but ultimately behind the creation of a chair there is a purpose, behind the creation of a table too there is a purpose. So, there is a purpose behind the creation of everything in this universe except the creation of human beings.


Therefore, they believe that human beings have been thrown on to the stage and they do not know what their purpose is, that is why we feel an existential void, boredom. So, in order to overcome that tragedy because human life by birth is tragic because we do not know what our purpose is existentially. When you say purpose, we are not talking in terms of a materialistic purpose.

I want to become a doctor, an engineer or a scientist: not in that sense; what is the existential purpose? What is the philosophical purpose behind the creation of human beings here? What is the existential purpose? So, therefore, in order to fend up that is why they said that the entire human journey is the journey from cradle to grave, is a journey of a being from being to becoming.

Our existential journey is a journey of from being to becoming something. So, each of us has to find the purpose on our own and that is a very a futile task. At the end of the day, it becomes a futile task. And we have had several World Wars here, that have almost destabilized the world order, that have destabilized the grand notion of God. You find many philosophers, great novelists declaring the death of God.


Death of God because if God were to exist would we have world wars, would we have these kinds of pandemics? What is the purpose? Is there any purpose at all behind any of them, are they just chance factors? So, all of them are in the backdrop of that. Therefore, the plays explore it; Theatre of the Absurd. So, in the backdrop of this we find the entire life futile, useless, purposeless. So, that is why the plays explore it, their dramatic productions explore it.

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**Martin Esslin -
"The Theatre of the Absurd"**

- Martin Esslin first coined the term "The Theatre of the Absurd" in his eponymous book (1960)
- Esslin attempts to identify and classify this new 'absurd' trend in drama, putting together a range of dramatists who emerged in the 1950s, chiefly Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov and Genet.
- Most of them were **exiles** living in Paris – Beckett hailed originally from Ireland, Ionesco from Romania, Adamov from Russia and this **sense of estrangement** colors their work
- He identifies how **absurdist writers drew on a tradition that went back to mime, clowning and nonsense verse and the French 'nouveau roman'**



We have already identified Martin Esslin as the person to have given the nomenclature the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. Before this nomenclature was given in the 1960s, already Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, Genet, Albee were writing very well and their plays explored these concepts, only the naming happened in the 60s, that is all.

And, it is not as if this group was a motley crowd, they were living in exile in Paris. So, Paris provided all these radical writers a fertile home. That is why you have a Beckett. He was a French. Basically, he hailed from Ireland, settled in France. Similarly, you have Ionesco, Eugene Ionesco from Romania settled in Paris, you have Adamov from Russia settled in there. So, Paris provides all of them an extraordinary ground.

So, they did not write in conjunction with each other. Their plays explored this absurd condition, that is why you club them together and call them absurd playwrights.

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The Nature of 'Absurdism'

- A world devoid of meaning - born from the ashes of Post-war Europe
- A world typically 'absurd' : a frightening and illogical place where human existence seemed futile and precarious
- Distrust of language as a means of communication
- A godless postwar Europe - rejection of institutionalized religion

The slide features several abstract illustrations: a purple sphere with two protrusions at the top left; a yellow cloud-like shape with red squiggly lines inside at the top right; a purple and blue circular pattern with a central eye-like shape at the bottom left; and a small inset photo of a man with glasses and a striped shirt at the bottom right.

And, say for instance, some well-known features of absurdism are: they believe that the world lacks meaning, the world lacks meaning, that is why we have discussed the post war Europe, how it has to be reborn out of the ashes. And they also did not believe in the efficacy of language as an effective mode of communication because if language were to be an effective mode of communication, then would not we avoid great catastrophes that befell the entire planet, especially something like World War? So that means, the very purpose of language as a mode of achieving communication between two societies or two individuals has failed. So, against the backdrop of all that they begin writing these kinds of plays.

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Aspects of Modern Absurd Drama

- Flouts all theatrical conventions - which are turned on its head
- Conventional narrative structures of plot are completely subverted
- Non - linear and cyclical approach to narrative; repetitive and boring action
- Meaning is ambiguous - in the absence of coherent dialogue or action!
- The plays assume a dream - like state without any cause and effect relationship between scenes
- The characters are void of any personality, purpose, or development

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And therefore, as a result, they flout all the norms of traditional Greek drama. So, in the traditional Greek drama, let us say for instance you have a beautiful beginning, a rising middle and a very convincing ending. So, if you pick up any absurd drama, the play begins in a very absurd way and in the middle of something.

It begins in the middle of something, say for instance Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, it begins in the middle of almost a godforsaken place. *Waiting for Godot*, again probably pun is intended on Godot. And, when the play happens, there are two characters sitting and they have been speaking randomly and irrationally, and they are they are waiting by a roadside, maybe there is just a tree.

They do not know why they are waiting, all that they can vaguely recall is they are waiting for a person called Godot. They do not know anything about him, they do not even know whether it is a person, whether it is a man, a woman or a thing or a God, they do not know anything about it. They do not know when this person would come and they do not know why they are actually waiting, why they need to meet him, but they are simply waiting.

Now, does not it look absurd? Does not it look irrational? And you Eugene Ionesco's play, where it begins with two families talking randomly, incoherent things. When the play begins, you have, let us say, Smiths and you have Martins and there they speak quite randomly. What this guy says, this guy reacts in some other way, and what that guy says, this guy reacts in a random way; you and I may not even be able to watch this play if we do not understand the

conditions under which it was produced. It is incoherent, illogical, it flies in the face of reason. That is why when they were first produced including Harold Pinter's *Birthday Party*, it did not even survive a theatrical performance of beyond 6 to 8 shows; that means, less than a week.

It was only later, probably decades later, that Harold Pinter was considered a genius and even later a Nobel committee also honoured him with the greatest prize. But, during its initial stage all that it had was just a one-week performance, that is all. It was almost shunted out of the theatre in which it was performed, because audience could not identify what was happening here.

So, was the case with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, but comparatively it was better. Because in Harold Pinter, more than dialogue, pauses play a very important role whereas, in the Samuel Beckett dialogues play an important role. Therefore, the saving grace in Beckett was the dialogues. Therefore, they began picking up a flavor of absurdism through the dialogues.

So, how do they flout the are conventional narrative structures? In a conventional one you have an introduction, rising action, here there is nothing like that. The play begins with two guys interacting, talking, talking, talking and ends with that and there is no meaning, even the dialogue does not lead them anywhere.

In fact, it is even cyclical, it is not even linear, non-linear narrative, cyclical approach. As I said when the play begins, it begins with two tramps. Let us say for instance two tramps and discussing something about waiting for this guy, they do not know the reason, they do not know when this guy would come, but they are eternally waiting. And, when the play ends, they are still waiting and by the time the play ends; in fact, it is just two acts.

And, one of the characters even forgets who he is waiting for and why they have come here and he has even forgotten how they have come here. A loss of communication, a loss of even any meaningful approach towards life, because how do we construct life out of the ashes that the entire human society has been reduced after the World Wars? How do we construct meaning?

The entire life has lost meaning; that is why these plays are born out of void. And how do they fill the void? By addressing the void in its entirety. So, therefore, there is no clear-cut

character, there is no clear-cut plot, there is no clear-cut story, there is no clear-cut dialogue, that is why you find absurd drama, many critics calling 'absurd drama' and 'anti-drama'. It is not even drama at all because, there is no dramatic elements. See, a drama is a drama because of certain dramatic elements. These elements constitute drama. So, when those elements are missing, how can you call it drama? Therefore, it can be called an anti-drama. If you are interested in this, please pick up any play by Samuel Beckett, especially his play *Waiting for Godot*, or you have Eugene Ionesco, you have Harold Pinter, Edward Albee; all of them are remarkable playwrights. So, this particular drama held its sway for almost 3 to 4 decades. Although other forms of drama were performed here and there, they did not gain much prominence.

Again, I hope you really enjoyed this lecture as well. For a detailed understanding of this you will have to go in; these classes are not substitutes for you to reading them originally because nothing can take away the beauty, elegance and the first handed nature of knowledge accumulation and wisdom gathering than going into the plays. You need to go into the plays and experience what they are saying.

Again, at the cost of repeating, let me say this, that the purpose is definitely to help you to move towards these original plays, to draw your attention towards the extraordinary elegance and beauty of all these writers so that you can go there and explore whatever you like.

So, probably in the next class, let us come and discuss one of the modern plays so that we can see all these components of drama that we have learnt. Until then enjoy, we will see you in the next class with the play.

Thank you.