

Carleton University
Fall 2025 Preliminary Course Outline
Department of English

**ENGL 4609A/ENGL 5900F: Global Stages and Theories/
Selected Topics in English Studies I**
Theatre of the Absurd

Prerequisites: 4th year standing, or permission of the Department

Instructor: Prof. Janne Cleveland (she/her)
Email: janneclleveland@cunet.carleton.ca

***** This is a preliminary syllabus only—texts and assignments are subject to change.
A complete version will be available closer to the start of the term. *****

(Preliminary) Course Outline:

Theatre critic Martin Esslin coined the term Theatre of the Absurd in 1961, in a close examination of works by Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and others. In this course we will explore the form, the context of its development, and a selection of plays that are understood to exemplify it in order to understand its extraordinary influence on 20th century theatre-making. Esslin suggested in part, that Theatre of the Absurd referenced a world that was devoid of meaning, and thus presented a struggle for finding reasons to continue. Students will sign up for a seminar presentation at the beginning of the term from a list of possible topics provided. You will be expected to consider such questions as why did this style of writing and staging emerge then, after the Second World War? In examining the context in which this style emerged, one might expect this to be a time of celebration that such a global trauma had ended. How then, does the philosophy of Existentialism contribute to the development of Theatre of the Absurd? We will consider the social and political landscape in which the style came to represent a new theatrical form that signaled the postwar era following World War II in order to think about its influence later in the 20th century. We will consider whether and how Theatre of the Absurd continues to be influential in dramatic staging in the 21st century. What can we learn from earlier practitioners of the style in terms of posing meaningful questions about the world we live in now, inundated as we are with questions of the meaning of our existence against the backdrop of war, pestilence, and plague? How does humour, with which Theatre of Absurd is associated, work to navigate such anxiously fraught scenarios? We will especially consider how the seeming contradictions contained in the form become part of the strategy for making social and political commentary about the world we inhabit now. We will look at how Theatre of the Absurd takes the position exemplified by Samuel Beckett in his famously quoted “You must go on. I can’t go on. I’ll go on.”

NOTE: The plays in this course may be seen as bleak, depressing, and dispiriting when NOT read within the Absurdist context. As you read them, remember there is also a great deal of humour – ironic and/or dark though it may be.

Course Objectives:

1. To develop a familiarity with a variety of cultural contexts within which the writing and staging of Theatre of the Absurd drama takes place.
2. To explore the function of particular performance and staging methods utilized by this form.
3. To discover the context and histories out of which Theatre of the Absurd emerges.
4. To develop and fine-tune a critical analysis of the form and the narratives that represent it.
5. To refine the skills of research.
6. To become comfortable presenting research with confidence.
7. To develop a deeper understanding of how drama reflects and informs the cultural concerns of the social worlds we inhabit.

Required Reading:

Ubu Roi Alfred Jarry (1896)
No Exit Jean-Paul Sartre (1944)
Endgame Samuel Beckett (1957)
Rhinoceros Eugene Ionesco (1959)
The Birthday Party Harold Pinter (1958)
The American Dream Edward Albee (1961)

There will also be a selection of **essays** that will be assigned each week on the Brightspace schedule. It is your responsibility to consult Brightspace and read all assigned materials each week prior to class time.

- **Readings/plays may be subject to change. Check the final syllabus on Brightspace prior to the beginning of classes**

Evaluation:

CuPortfolio (30%)

Students will be provided with access to cuPortfolio, in which they will create 4 portfolio pages to track their own progress across the term (due dates vary, so check the course calendar). For example, students will produce a bio page (5%), a post-seminar report (10%), a reflection on the annotated bibliography assignment (10%), and a course evaluation (5%). Prompt questions for each portfolio page will be provided.

Seminar Presentation (20%)

Students will prepare a presentation on the materials assigned for one of the weeks during the term. You may use the topic of the seminar to build your final research paper. Presentations will be scheduled at the beginning of class and should take 15 - 20 minutes. There will be time for discussion and questions following each presentation.

Annotated Bibliography (20%)

This assignment is the foundation of your final paper. You will present a proposal for your final research paper that includes a thesis statement (argument), and a list of citations that you will use as evidence to support your argument. Undergraduate students in the course must include **7 - 9** scholarly sources; **Graduate students must include 10 – 12 sources**. Each source will be properly cited and annotated in **MLA format*** and will contain a **brief** summary of each article used (no more than 2 sentences), plus a paragraph of a careful explanation of how each resource supports your position, along with how you will use it in your paper. We will go over how to do an annotated bibliography in class, but here are also very good resources to help you:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/1/>
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

Final Paper (20%)

This is a **formal writing assignment**. Using feedback from the thesis/outline assignment and the paper workshop, undergraduate students will present a polished, carefully crafted final paper of **10 – 12** pages (excluding Works Cited page) in **MLA format** with a coherent, arguable thesis supported by evidence from the text and scholarly sources, a conclusion that responds to and resolves the argument. **Graduate students will be expected to produce a paper of 12 – 15 pages**. The most important aspect of your paper is **critical analysis**; in other words, not just what your topic is, but why it is important. As well, elements of writing such as rich vocabulary, proper use of citation style, correct punctuation and grammar, and sentence structure (syntax) will be taken into account. Further, structural elements, such as the logical progression of ideas that form the basis of your argument, will be expected. This assignment is your opportunity to demonstrate what you have learned in the course. Don't be afraid to show your excitement about your discoveries!

Essay Topics: Choose one of the topics/texts in connection with the reading schedule to produce a carefully crafted argument. You may choose to develop the argument from your seminar presentation. You are encouraged to discuss your topic, and your approach, in advance with the instructor.

Class Participation (10%)

This is a seminar class, so it is important to take part in discussions. However, students who are naturally quiet or have difficulty operating in a public speaking format will not be penalized. There are many models for learning and contributing to the learning of others. In-class activities

like the paper workshop at the end of the term will count toward your participation grade. This class provides you with the opportunity to share your ideas and learn from others in a safe, supported environment. Take advantage of the chance to use your voice!

All assignments will be submitted on Brightspace.

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.

NOTE: All assignments must be completed in order to be eligible to pass the course. Failure to hand in all assignments may result in a grade of “F”. Assignments submitted after the course has ended will NOT be accepted.