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“You’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!” Absurdist Literature as Sociopolitical Commentary
and its Continued Significance

By

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Preface

Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd delve into some of the bleakest aspects of human cognitions and existence, with particular attention given to suffering and our own struggles with life and death. Perhaps, however, we can look beyond this profound suffering and use it to better understand ourselves, as well as the tumultuous worlds we create for ourselves.

This thesis examines three plays that have a foothold in both Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd: *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco, *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett, and *No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre. It seeks to analyze how these plays might provide social or political commentary in the times in which they were written, as well as how such commentary may mold to present events and sentiments. To provide context and background, an introduction to some of Existentialism's overarching features will be provided, along with its relation to the Theatre of the Absurd (the two share significant areas of overlap). Then, an analysis of the aforementioned plays will be given with attention to social, political, temporal, and philosophical implications.

To conclude, the enduring relevance of these Absurdist and Existential pieces will be contextualized, with the argument that these disciplines extend far beyond mere entertainment or obscurity. Lines such as "If I could drag myself down to the sea! I'd make a pillow of sand for my head and the tide would come" capture the often-despairing and ambiguous natures of these literary traditions, yet they continue to provide insights into the societies we create and our intrinsic self-awareness (Beckett 61).

Existentialism: A Diagnosis for Modernity

Existentialism's popularity peaked in the mid-twentieth century in Europe, particularly during and after World War II (WWII), leading some to observe that it was a cultural fad of a "post-war age" (Cooper 11). It surfaced in notoriety as a response to the horrors of WWII: how could a modern, rational society such as Europe or the West be at the center of such brutality? (Baert 627) The perspectives of rationality, progress, and objectivity, which were prevalent at the time, were thus discredited; Existentialism, meanwhile, became a popular feature of the "cultural climate" as citizens grappled with uncertainty and despair (Baert 627).

Despite its short-lived popularity in the post-war West, the tradition of Existentialism as a philosophy (or rather, a way of perceiving life) extends back millennia. Indeed, Existentialism, "if a philosophy at all— [...] has been independently invented by millions of people simply responding to the emergency of life in a modern world" (Carruth v). Although perceptions of human experience and confronting modernity cross cultures, Existentialism's roots are most closely affiliated with the West. Some of its suggested precedents include the Hebrew and Hellenistic divide of faith and reason; Christian scholarship on mortality, faith, and suffering; and the tumultuous modernization of Europe, which brought about societal and paradigm shifts (Barrett). In all of these time periods, there are opposing perspectives of faith and logic, instinct and rationale, absurdity and explanation; these visceral divides are where Existentialism resides, making it greater than a post-war fashion and much more intrinsic to the human experience (Barrett). Although characterizations have been diverse over historical periods, and an absolute definition is thus impossible, there are some overarching features of Existentialism that make it a recognizable school of thought.

Existential values coincide with the notion that “we are reduced to helpless pawns in a huge gamble, arranged by unknown, meaningless powers, to which we must submit” (Roubiczek 15). Unlike the post-Enlightenment West’s views of rationalism, Existentialists reject the idea that our lives have a purpose that will be discovered by progress or reason; Existentialism likewise rejects the ability to create complete happiness in such a society (Cooper 8; Roubiczek 1). Instead, we must confront some of the most pervasive issues plaguing the human condition: anguish, suffering, loss, unhappiness, despair, and the inevitability of death (Olson 14). That there is no clear meaning to life, and that we are in a chaotic void-like universe, is the plight of humanity alone to realize; this leads to existential anguish (Olson 2). These circumstances of meaninglessness and despair indicate a departure from rationalism, since their essence transcends that which can be explained. Existentialism thus seeks to make people cognizant of the despair and instinctive emotionality that was lurking in their unexamined lives (Olson 3).

These circumstances may seem bleak, but Existentialism is not simply a lament of despair. Rather, it continues humankind’s quest for holistic meaning by attempting “to grasp the image of the whole man, even where this involves bringing to consciousness all that is dark and questionable in his existence” (Barrett 22). From such depths, Existentialism advocates the importance of realizing and accepting the nature of human experience; only then can our lives have any meaning (Olson 18). Rather than being a nihilistic or pretentious fad, Existentialism seeks to engender action, freedom of thought, newfound meaning, and free expression. Perhaps this explains part of its eruption in popularity during the WWII era: it became known as “a way to reassert the importance of human individuality and freedom” through free will and lived experience, which indeed are among Existentialism’s fundamental values (Malik & Akhter 88).

Thus, Existentialism as a philosophy can perhaps be characterized as a response to change in a modern landscape, a confrontation with our own finitude, and ultimately searching for a more fulfilling meaning to our seemingly meaningless lives (Carruth v). Antecedents to Existentialism further bring to light these confrontations with despair, particularly in the face of our own weakness:

When we think to attach ourselves to any point and to fasten to it, it wavers and leaves us; and if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips past us, and vanishes for ever. Nothing stays for us. This is our natural condition, and yet most contrary to our inclination; we burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereon to build a tower reaching to the Infinite. But our whole groundwork cracks, and the earth opens to abysses (Pascal 20).

Such is an excerpt from *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal's (1623-1662) seminal work on the emptiness of man and the fullness of God. Pascal was a brilliant Christian scholar who saw religion as the only cure to a dissatisfactory life; such morbid and poignant writing points to the Existential exigence that extends back centuries (Eliot xi-xii). However, some of the most notorious modern Existentialists came centuries later, each with their own unique addition to the philosophy's perception.

Among the most influential modern Existentialists, four are often at the center of discussion and scholarship: Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre (Barrett; Olson). Kierkegaard (1813-1855) focused on faith and visceral spirituality in the face of a vain, corrupt modern society; Nietzsche (1844-1900), meanwhile, pointed to the vices of modern society and humans' lust for desire and power, which engenders nihilism, or the loss of values (Barrett; Roubiczek 44). Both criticized the ills of modern culture:

that is to say, the rampant vanity, corruption, mass mentality, and contrived definitions of morality. Nietzsche in particular exposed the “contented, mild, short sighted, self-satisfied egoists of modern culture, consumers of the modern myth that the very meaning of history was to create humanity” (Lampert 324). Kierkegaard, contrary to Nietzsche, focused on the salvation of faith in the face of despair.

Heidegger and Sartre were also popular in making Existentialism a culturally talked-about philosophy. They discussed the nature of being and human experience methodically and extensively, helping to catapult Existentialism into scholarly and cultural notoriety. Heidegger (1889-1976) defined the human condition as anxious, since nothingness threatens to drown us at any moment, but argued that death is the “only thing that nobody can do” for someone else, thereby giving us purpose and individuality (Olson 197). Sartre (1905-1980) focused on Existentialism as an impetus to take action: humanity has free will and the choice to say no to corruption, injustice, and so on (Barrett 241). To Sartre, in an absurd universe that does not care for us, our will to act is the basis by which we create our freedom (Barrett 247). Indeed, many Existentialists developed urgent, even political implications in their works due to the “political awakening” many experienced in war camps, resistance groups, and the exigence of promoting individuality (Salamun 226; Sikka 371). They injected methodology and scholarship in the societies they lived in, with Sartre and Heidegger among the most popular of these philosophers.

Today, Existentialism is not so much a cultural movement or critiqued philosophy, but its ideas are thriving in various disciplines nonetheless. Its ideas that place an exclusive focus on human selfhood are prevalent in diverse areas of study, from feminism to psychopathology (Crowell). Additionally, several scientific scholars are considering “the role of existential

commitment in scientific practices as truth-tracking practices,” alluding to Existentialism’s skepticism and heightened awareness of internal and external phenomena (Crowell). Existential thought has also begun to manifest differently in the “terra incognita” of our modern society and global relations: “conspiracy theories, war rhetoric, the denial of scientific facts, and an increase in surveillance measures” all make Existential premises of confronting anguish and uncertainty more salient (Dege). The philosophy itself is thus presented in a contemporary, multifaceted way.

Existentialism thus boasts far more than postwar despair; it is a moving tapestry of how people respond to the societies and conditions of their lives, and its purpose is elastic. Though there is no way to define or characterize it succinctly, Existentialism represents a constant response to modernity, a departure from the absoluteness of rationalism, and emphasis on individual human experience. Indeed, it balances hope and hopelessness by telling us that “our thoughts must be continually born to us out of our pain, and we must, motherlike, share with them all that we have in us of blood, heart, ardour, joy, passion, pang, conscience, fate and fatality” (Nietzsche 7).

On this visceral note, it is evident that Existential thought has acknowledgements of both anguish and hope. This duality, so crucial in conceptualizing the human condition, has inspired many facets of popular culture and literature, each with their own contributions for relating Existentialism to a modern context. One of the most notorious of these literary movements became known as the Theatre of the Absurd, a subculture of theater most popular in post-WWII Paris that had significant Existential overlap (Esslin). Although it has striking similarities with Existentialism, and each addresses despair and anguish in unconventional ways, the two are distinct cultural phenomena that continue to inform our cognitions and life perspectives.

“A play where nothing happens”: The Theatre of the Absurd

In the years following WWII, a new tradition of literature and drama began to popularize chiefly in the West, especially in Paris, France. Within the confusion of postwar despair and cautious hope, these works of drama captured the turbulent emotionality that many people were still experiencing, but they did so in a way unlike any before it. They were odd and bizarre, often criticized as “a search for novelty at all costs,” but they resonated with millions of people nonetheless (Esslin 16). More specifically, they became notorious (perhaps even infamous to some) for experimentation with language, dual elements of tragedy and comedy (i.e. tragicomedy), and ridiculous or even nonexistent plots (Bennett 19). This collection of theatre became known as the Theatre of the Absurd, which served as both a postwar sentiment and an attitude toward the human condition upon its inception.

When this dramatic tradition first arose in the late 1940s and 1950s, it was not always received well, and there were several doubts about the Theatre of the Absurd’s legitimacy (Bennett 4; Esslin 16). The plays’ lack of exposition and formal dramatic elements, minimal settings, unorthodox uses of language, and otherwise lack of context made many theater-goers skeptical about their merits (Bennett 4). Such doubts were augmented by the fact that few of these playwrights verified any meaning or message to their works (Esslin). They were criticized as uninspired and attention-seeking, but these plays drew off several respectable literary traditions, including Existential thought from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Esslin 16). Thus, the Theatre of the Absurd was situated in a much broader context than mere novelty.

The label “Theatre of the Absurd” was popularized by Martin Esslin, a critic and scholar of drama who sought to make these plays more understandable to a wider audience (Esslin 23).

The title of absurdity was influenced by French-Algerian writer and philosopher Albert Camus, who saw absurdity as “the divorce separating us from our own creations” in a world that had seemed to lose its values and unshakeable belief systems (e.g. religion, nationalism, etc.) as a result of calamitous war (Camus). Camus was one of the most popular intellectuals in France at the time, so Esslin used absurdity as a way of “continuing an already recognized literary trend, thereby extending the legitimacy [...] and making a relevant connection” (Zarhy-Levo 318). This condition of absurdity, which manifested itself in nuanced ways through different authors, was thus popularized by Esslin, who created a cultural context that grouped playwrights together (Zarhy-Levo 316).

In this dramatic collection, absurdity was called an expression of “metaphysical anguish” at the human condition, a portrayal of disillusionment with modernity, and a loss of purposeful values and purity (Esslin 16; 24). Esslin argues that Absurd theatre expresses many of the anxieties and emotions characteristic of the West; that is to say, it represents a modern age of confusion and transition (22-23). While Esslin argues that the Theatre of the Absurd is a nuanced expression of anguish, however, there are some criticisms of this interpretation. Michael Bennett’s recent assessment of the Theatre of the Absurd, for example, focuses not so much on the totality of anguish, but on parable-like lessons of how to make life meaningful from these seemingly meaningless plays (17). Life may have no inherent meaning, and yet it goes on: this duality of sentiment is one of the most prominent elements of Absurdist plays.

Although it surfaced in postwar Europe, it must be stressed that, like Existentialism, the Theatre of the Absurd was not a wholly postwar reaction. Rather, it deals with how to live in a modern society that is reflective of both despair and hope (Bennett 35). While the wreckage of WWII was profound and devastating, and although the Cold War prompted new waves of

conflict, people also started to see rays of light in economic comebacks and cultural revivals in the postwar years (Bennett 36-39). The notion of absurdity thus offered a timely condition in which to view life, particularly in the West. It portrayed the apparent meaninglessness of life, since many illusions of peace and faith had been shattered by war, but it also injected resilience and comedy into its literature (Bennett 35). The kairos of WWII made its popularity all the more notorious, but its implications extend well beyond a specific time period. Just as Existentialism offers rays of hope and calls to action in the midst of despair, the Theatre of the Absurd speaks to both darkness and light in life.

Inevitably, the Theatre of the Absurd has been closely associated with Existentialism; further, each has been associated with a post-WWII sentiment. It is true that they grapple with similar themes: disillusionment with faith and rationalism, the loss or absence of life's inherent meaning, and confronting anguish in a forlorn, absurd universe (Esslin 23-24). However, the two differ in presentation: a significant portion of Existentialism addresses the absurd in a methodical manner, while Absurd theater presents life's absurdities through instinct and spontaneity (Esslin 25). Additionally, Existentialism presents despair in modern humanity, but it sometimes aims to confront them through action and choice; Absurd theatre supports or advocates no such action (Esslin 24-25). Thus, Existentialism is more argumentative and logically-based than Absurd theater (with the possible exceptions of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and some of their predecessors, who were more abstract and poetic in their philosophies). Some playwrights actually disliked Sartre and Heidegger's philosophies, arguing that they were too formulaic and did not address Existential questions of life in any understandable sense. The connections with Existentialism, both topically and in a kairotic sense, are therefore not synonymous but undeniably significant (Bennett 10).

Although Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd waned in general popularity around the 1960s, the influence they hold today is evident. The concepts of absurdity, meaninglessness, and nothingness are still utilized in popular culture, from television shows to books and plays (Bennett 116-124). The Theatre of the Absurd's tradition has also inspired many social and culturally nuanced renditions in recent years (Bennett 116-124). While these two disciplines were dominantly authored by European-male collections, cross-cultural and cross-demographic renditions indicate that their resonance transcends a specific event or group: absurdity is universal, and it cannot be defined rigidly (Bennett 115). The scholarship of Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd is such that they can be applied to a myriad of contexts, and their language speaks to an array of historical events, phenomena, and feelings.

Here, perhaps, a note should be made on the cultural specificity of Existentialism and Absurdism in this paper. This thesis focuses primarily on Western (i.e. European, American, etc.) perspectives of Existential thought because this is where most of the research and association resides. However, audiences should keep in mind the importance of considering the presence of multiple cultural perspectives. One of Existentialism's strengths is that it "has worldwide appeal because people are constantly attempting to understand their life and the purpose of existence, specifically from their worldview" (Sterner 160). Accordingly, Existentialism dictates no absolute view on reality, since reality is subjective according to the individual (Sterner). Keeping this in mind, this present thesis focuses on largely Western perspectives, since this is where the literature is most established; future research, however, may warrant more cross-cultural analyses of these philosophies and literary pieces.

Although several of the dramatists associated with the Theatre of the Absurd admittedly did not wish to be associated with any societal, political, or philosophical movement, many

critics and analyses have made salient connections. These playwrights had different personal styles of writing, rather than speaking to a public message, but their works continue to demand the attention of readers, viewers, and scholars alike (Esslin 22). It could be argued that this ambivalence renders any analysis of these works superficial, but the elasticity of interpretation is precisely what gives them power: they are not confined to a specific context or event, and they yield diverse and enduring messages. As unique perspectives within the contexts of politics, culture, and society, Absurdism and Existentialism provide intriguing insights into how people perceive such phenomena.

With all of this said, it should be noted that this contextual introduction is by no means a complete account of the premises of Absurdist theatre and Existentialism, nor is it a complete representation of their overlap. These two traditions of literature and philosophy are expansive, and this is merely to provide a basic understanding to better conceptualize the following analyses of literary pieces. These analyses draw off of connections made by scholars, critics, casual readers, and the authors themselves, all of whom can derive a more concrete meaning from these texts in societal or political events. Such texts, we will see, are far greater than searches for novelty: they explore the human condition in nuanced ways that have the power to speak to broad societal perceptions. On that note, we turn now to *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco, a tale of ideological contagion, conformity, and autonomy in a setting that often mimics our own reality.

“Life is an abnormal business”: Mass Mentality and Ideological Contagion in *Rhinoceros*

Rhinoceros: Introductory Background

“People who try to hang on to their individuality always come to a bad end!” (Ionesco 107) Thus claims Berenger, the main character and dubious protagonist of Eugene Ionesco’s play *Rhinoceros*. This line, perhaps, lends itself to perceptions of Ionesco as a playwright, since he was criticized by some for writing “nonsense plays” with no clarity or wisdom (Esslin 129-130). There was also controversy over some claims that he never wanted his works to allude to any particular societal issues: he argued that his plays truly only explored the human condition, and that “no society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living” (Esslin 129; Ionesco). That is to say, politics and societies have diverse merits and vices, but the human condition of anguish has remained constant. While Ionesco may have remained steadfast in this argument, the language of *Rhinoceros*, paired with Ionesco’s own experiences, makes a compelling case that this play is rich with allegorical interpretations on political systems, individual identity, and conformity in a modern society.

In some ways, Ionesco’s life mirrors the premise of *Rhinoceros*: he had long been a writer who has challenged traditional conceptions of theatre, and he was constantly “taking on the human situation” with intellectual yet nonconformist prowess (Esslin 130). Even if his products were criticized for being nonsensical, Ionesco did not consciously change his style of play-writing to appease critics or audiences. His life history is also telling for the creation of *Rhinoceros*: born on November 26, 1909 in Romania to a French mother and Romanian father, Ionesco spent most of his life in France and grappled with his identity for much of his life (Quinney 38). At age thirteen, he returned to Romania and stayed to finish school; this period was one where Romania was “particularly receptive to fascism,” anti-Semitism, and nationalist

fervor, and Ionesco witnessed an astonishing number of people join these growing political movements (Quinney 38-39). These mass transformations of reasonable people thus consciously and unconsciously mirrors the conversion event of *Rhinoceros*. The unrest stayed with Ionesco as a catalyst for writing this play, which helped give him international acclaim (Calinescu 393).

Rhinoceros is a play that follows conventions common to the Theatre of the Absurd's tradition: a circular or lacking plot, an element of ridiculous hilarity, and the duality of tragedy and comedy (Bennett 19-20). Set in a "small provincial town" in France, the play opens with Berenger and his friend Jean meeting at a shop for a drink; Berenger is a weary working man who drinks frequently and feels out of place in his life, while Jean is a well-to-do man with a focused mind and ambition (Ionesco 3). Around them, a host of characters, including a cafe waitress, proprietor, and logician, go about their business as well (Ionesco 3-5). Jean and Berenger have hardly begun their conversation—in which Jean notices Berenger's takenness with alcohol—when a rhinoceros barrels down the street, alarming all but Berenger, who seems nonchalant or even unaware of its presence (Ionesco 8). After the first one appears, the characters register their shock and later engage in absurd arguments, even debating whether the rhinoceros had one or two horns; before long, another appears (Ionesco 25).

From this little town square, the play moves to Berenger's work at an office, Jean's house, and finally Berenger's house; all the while, people are turning into rhinoceroses with dizzying rapidity, to Berenger's increasing consternation and terror (Ionesco). One of Berenger's transformed coworkers shows up in front of the office, and when Berenger later visits Jean, he watches in horror as his uncharacteristically-hot tempered friend metamorphosizes before his eyes (Ionesco 52; 68). By the final act of the play, Berenger is alone in his house as the only human left; everyone else, no matter how rational or clear-minded they seemed, has transformed

into a rhinoceros. The surrounded and panicked Berenger first laments that he cannot turn from a human— “I’ve gone past changing. I want to, I really do, but I can’t, I just can’t”—then abruptly changes his mind, declaring that he’ll take all of the creatures on without capitulating (Ionesco 107). However, it is not clear whether Berenger capitulates or not: the play ends at this shifty defense, creating a tragicomic end in which Berenger is neither heroic nor noble, but merely alone (Esslin 183).

Before and after the onslaught of “rhinocertitis,” as it has been dubbed by some scholars, Berenger struggled to conform: before, it was in a bustling modern Western setting, and after it was in a society seized with a herd-like frenzy that gripped people left and right (Rosenzweig). As Berenger was the only man left, the play’s conclusion—indeed, if it can be called a conclusion—is tragic, in that it laments both conformity and individuality (Esslin 183). What is to be done in such a world, one in which excessive individuality is garish, mass thinking seems inescapable, and choices’ consequences are ambiguous? Although *Rhinoceros* does not answer these questions, it makes their significance more pressing. While Ionesco argued that his works were, first and foremost, examinations of the human condition, there are undoubtedly elements of societal criticism that augment his works’ relevance. As *Rhinoceros* became an international success, and as Ionesco himself said that specific events and sources inspired this play, it is indeed a statement with far-reaching social and political implications.

“Mass opinion, dogmatism—they’re just words!” Social phenomena and implications in Rhinoceros

The transformation into a rhinoceros is a bizarre, ridiculous concept—a staple of the Theatre of the Absurd—but it is indicative of more concrete social phenomena (Bennett 19-20).

Berenger's friends, coworkers, and peers in society transformed into rhinoceroses for varied reasons, but that they did so at all manifests the "herd thinking" that Nietzsche and Kierkegaard so vehemently despised. However, Berenger is the lone human by the end of the play, both savoring and lamenting his individuality throughout his "final stand" (Ionesco 107). Throughout its duration, *Rhinoceros* speaks to the pervasiveness of conformity, the speed and power of group thinking, and the multifaceted interpretations of individuality, particularly in a modern society.

The characters in *Rhinoceros* transformed for multiple reasons: the sake of not being different, to be with their loved ones, to understand the creatures' thinking, or to let go of their human feelings and duties (Esslin 182). All of these motives help provide insights into the phenomena of conformity and the price of being an individual. In the beginning of the play, there are relatively few rhinoceroses, so much of Act I and Act II (with the exception of Jean's transformation) is characterized by hilarity, with people speculating why there are four-legged creatures suddenly running through the streets (Ionesco). However, when Mrs. Beouf, one of Berenger's coworkers, arrives at the office, she says that she was chased there by a rhinoceros; as the creature appears outside, she recognizes it as her husband, and she desperately flings herself on top of the creature to be with him (Ionesco 52). It is this scene that makes the characters realize that these rhinoceroses were indeed people, and that the situation is not contrived or a series of rumors. Mrs. Beouf sacrificed her individuality to be with her husband and the rhinoceroses, which would soon become the majority as more and more people turned.

While Mrs. Beouf wanted to join her beloved husband, different characters had other motives. Another one of Berenger's coworkers (and his ultimately unrequited love interest) named Daisy left him near the end of the play, simply because the rhinoceroses appealed to her in their uniformity. She thought that they were beautiful, even "godlike," in their power, and she

could not bear being “other” in their transformed world (Ionesco 104-105). Moments before, she had promised Berenger she would resist and never leave him, but she deserts him seconds later (Ionesco 104). Other characters who boasted of their steadfastness and rationality—among them Jean, Berenger’s coworkers Dudard and Botard, and a logician—turn as well, despite their supposed clarity of mind (Ionesco). Such alarming transformations were justified by a need to “move with the times” (Botard), give the creatures a chance to be understood (Dudard, logician), or to escape the stifling task of keeping human emotions and responsibilities in check (Jean) (Ionesco 89).

All of these choices reflect a stunningly complex portrayal of conformity and individuality. Almost every character in the play has a motive to join the rhinoceroses that is rationalized in some way, despite the apparent oddity of the situation. Conformity, or adopting others’ behaviors from “external pressure [...] to conform to norms, standards, and other people’s opinions” has positive or negative ramifications based on circumstance, but in *Rhinoceros* it is clearly portrayed as an absurd concept (Alquist, Ainsworth, and Baumeister 84). The notion of individuality is thus contested: the characters are unique from one another, but their individuality is not so strong as their compulsion to conform with the absurd, faceless mass (Esslin 183). Whatever their specific motivations are, the characters’ differences are soon lost to the new society they conform to.

Individuality is further lamented through Berenger’s plight (Esslin 183). Even in the play’s beginning, Berenger was expressing his inability to be engaged with the culturally enlightened, bustling modern society to the point of self-pity: “I feel out of place in life, among people [...] I’ve been tired for years” (Ionesco 17). Later, contrary to Berenger’s anguish and forlornness, his problem of individuality—that is to say, his conception of himself—is

challenged by the onslaught of rhinoceroses that he faces at the end of the play. Throughout *Rhinoceros*, he has never turned: being an outcast of sorts, he managed to retain his human identity, but he is now completely alone amidst an overwhelming herd of rhinoceroses that were once people (Ionesco). This tragic end “mocks the individualist who makes a virtue of necessity in insisting on his superiority” (Esslin 183). Berenger is abandoned in his anguish, while those who were always boastful of their rationality and power of mind transformed.

Perhaps this criticism of individual identity, as well as the absurd horrors of conformity, points to an explanation of why everyone but Berenger transformed; part of the explanation lies in the modern societal situation. The characters who changed into rhinoceroses represented the bulk of a modern Western society, one in which “those who have the most to lose are among the first to join” (Calinescu 430). That is, those who have the most to lose by society’s standards—their livelihoods, reputations, appearance, and so on—succumb to “rhinoceritis,” thinking that they are playing “a critical role in society,” or that their decisions to join are well-justified (Calinescu 430). Berenger, however, does not fit this description of being an involved member of society: he is not like his well-to-do friend Jean, his work and profit-obsessed boss Papillon, or his ambitious coworker Dudard (Ionesco). His anguish, therefore, is damning in the pre-rhinoceritis society, but it ultimately cements his enduring uniqueness in the society that has succumbed to herd mentality.

Ionesco’s popular play addresses the complexities of conformity and the multifaceted perceptions of individuality with a bizarre yet haunting tale; such concerns with identity and social relations are among the most disorienting and tragic. Indeed, one of Ionesco’s inspirations was Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, in which main character Gregory Samsa wakes up as a massive cockroach that repulses his family (Calinescu 393). Samsa cannot function in society, he

cannot work, and he is despised by his family; this mirrors *Rhinoceros* in a sense, as Berenger cannot bring himself to fully integrate with the society and people around him. Both are outcasts: Samsa is damned as the vermin he becomes, while Berenger is alienated by the rhinoceroses and humans that ultimately leave him. The metaphorical transformations in each represent a “mental mutation,” and absurdity is exacerbated in each by an alarmingly frequent tendency to rationalize the situation, or to cease to think critically (Calinescu 397).

Indeed, this inability to think critically about the society in which one lives may point to larger issues of mass mentality and a fixation on self-serving desires. When one of his coworkers shows up at the office door as a rhinoceros, Berenger’s boss exclaims “Well! That’s the last straw. This time he’s fired for good!” (Ionesco 50). This may point to an obsession with progress and a lack of empathy toward anyone outside the self. Further, Berenger’s other coworker Botard first sees the rhinoceros stampede as “the sheerest madness” and a propaganda-filled mystery, but later transforms to “move with the times” (Ionesco 51; 89). This rapid shift in perspective indicates the power of conformity and group mentality, just as it implicates the rapidity of such transformation in a society lacking true self-awareness.

It is this tragic character of Ionesco’s dystopian Western society that has failed the characters in *Rhinoceros*. Berenger’s resistance, while it may seem reassuring, is negated by the fact that we do not know if he really resisted, and that his defense was not to invoke pride for humanity in any sense (Ionesco). Is humanity in this society worth defending? Especially in a society that so often echoes our own? Despite the lack of clear answers, *Rhinoceros* gives telling insights into the pitfalls and eccentricities of social conformism, as well as the social forces affecting identity. These societal and interpersonal issues bleed into the politically-charged sentiments this play also carries, many of which Ionesco experienced firsthand.

“How can it be possible in a civilized country...?”: Political Undertones of Ideology and Contagion in Rhinoceros

In addition to *The Metamorphosis*, another source that inspired *Rhinoceros* was a different (yet equally chilling) piece: a published diary of Denis de Rougemont, a Swiss writer who witnessed a Nazi rally in Germany, greeting its then-Führer Adolf Hitler with a “religious nature” (Calinescu 393; de Rougemont). Years later, *Rhinoceros* resonated with the absurdity of submission and adherence to a political ideology. At the play’s first performance in Germany, audiences were struck by the characters who were pulled to conformism, as when they had felt they “could not resist the lure of Hitler” in the 1930s (Esslin 182). This is but one example of how there are salient political elements in *Rhinoceros* that Ionesco himself credited as inspiration. The inexplicability of totalitarian regimes, the proliferation of radical regimes in wartime Europe, and the dissolution of identity under divisive ideologies are all observed in scholarship on *Rhinoceros*, as well as in the responses of audiences and readers.

In a retrospective on his works, Ionesco wrote of *Rhinoceros*: “My play is not even a satire; it is a fairly objective description of [...] the birth of a totalitarianism that grows, propagates, conquers, transforms a whole world and, naturally, being totalitarian, transforms it totally” (Calinescu 397; Ionesco 176-188). A nonconformist in political ideology, Ionesco wrote his play as an examination of humanity when faced with an extreme totalitarian regime (Calinescu). Other great intellectuals of the time period—Sartre and Heidegger, for instance—dabbled in the sometimes-extreme ideologies of Communism and Nazism, respectively. Ionesco, however, possessed little inclination or involvement; *Rhinoceros* does not single out one ideology to be wary of, but examines the pervasive and transformative nature of political movements, regardless of affiliation (Esslin 182). Subsequent scholarship on

Rhinoceros, along with Ionesco's own life experiences, reflect varied examples of how political ideology can warp society and perception.

Perhaps Ionesco's personal experiences helped inspire the particular anxiety of *Rhinoceros*, particularly in the final acts where Berenger, disillusioned and aghast, witnesses his peers transform with all humanity literally forgotten (Ionesco). When Ionesco returned to his native country Romania in 1922 at thirteen years old, nationalist fervor was quickly spreading in the country, and a fascist movement known as the Iron Guard would later sweep the country in the coming years (Calinescu 405). Ionesco, a man with a split national identity (French and Romanian), witnessed an alarming number of people—many of them young intellectuals—subscribe to this domineering ideology (Calinescu 395).

The Iron Guard, or the Legion of Archangel Michael, was the most popular fascist movement in Romania that was first led by ultranationalist Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (1899-1938) in 1927 (Ioanid 421). Its main features coincided with Romanian fascism as a whole, i.e. supreme nationalist ideals, anti-Semitism, racism, belief in ethnocentrism, the “cult of the supreme leader and of its own elite, mysticism, the social diversion, and finally anti-Communism” (Ioanid 419). However, the Iron Guard was unique in its fusion with Orthodox Christianity, as well as its hearkening to archaic Romanian ancestry (Ioanid 420-423). Thus did the Iron Guard seek to make the Romanian political system and religion sacrosanct, untouchable, and above all other belief systems. It also seemed to prize its ideal people above all others.

Indeed, the Iron Guard's opposition to any belief system that was not its own was so impassioned that it made incorrect characterization of its targets. Ionesco, for instance, was discredited for being an anti-Romanian Communist, even though Ionesco possessed no

Communist affiliation (Ioanid 449). Its promises of creating a new Iron Guard citizen, on creating “men who are solidly rooted in [our] soil, in [our] history, in the national consciousness, adapted to the national necessities” controlled the obsessive mentality of its rule (Ioanid 449). All other belief systems, religions, or nationalities were inferior, and this sweeping movement seized a dizzying number of Romanian citizens. Questions such as “How can young intellectuals be led to a sub-intellectual political movement of militants? The rituals and requirements?” thus directly inspired *Rhinoceros* (Calinescu 395). How can supposedly civilized and enlightened people subscribe to exclusive, potentially discriminatory movements that fragment identity?

Rhinoceros is a manifestation of these questions, and it demonstrates through both comedy and tragic nightmare the frenzy for superiority, the “ideological contagion” that seized WWII and postwar Europe (Calinescu 395). The aforementioned performance of the play in Germany led to many viewers recalling the frenzy and initial popularity of Hitler’s rule, when thousands coalesced to form a mass group (Esslin 182). Additionally, the opposing pulls of Communism and capitalism after WWII, in the throes of the Cold War, brought to light a new kind of “rhinoceritis” phenomenon (Calinescu 398-399). The two ideologies were in direct opposition of each other, and each lived in fear of the other dominating the globe; thus, the pulls of antithetical ideologies gripped millions of people in a frenzy (Calinescu 398-399). This clinging to ideology was not as vehement as, say, Stalinism or Iron Guard fascism, since fear now mitigated the fervor, but it became more prevalent as the Cold War progressed (Calinescu 399). Thus did the issue of “rhinoceritis,” the subscribing to an absurd group or belief system, continue in altered circumstances, magnifying the play’s allegorical contexts.

There may well have been precedents for these attitudes of nationalist superiority to occur, however. In some scenes, *Rhinoceros* hints at the inclination of people to submit to such

extreme affiliations, as well as attitudes of disagreeability and superiority. For example, the shopkeepers and townspeople in Act I, once they witness two rhinoceroses charge down the street, partake in an argument on whether each rhinoceros was African or Asiatic (Ionesco). Later, in Act II at Berenger's work, the characters are engaged in a debate on why appearance is or is not important: Botard argues that "the colour problem is one of the great stumbling blocks of our time," while his boss and the others insist that skin color is not the issue at hand (Ionesco 40). These fixations on appearances may well be alluding to some of the racism and attitudes of superiority that came to characterize radical ideologies in wartime Europe. Such prejudices were present, of course, before the radical movements emerged, but these scenes magnify their mirrors to reality. In Ionesco's experience, the fascist Iron Guard of Romania may have been an embodiment of these amplified prejudices that swept WWII and postwar Europe.

Rhinoceros undoubtedly has sharp political insights into the ideology-torn landscape of Europe in the mid-20th century. In a modern landscape, it entertains such questions as "How does ideology appear? From where does it spread? Who are its victims? How can one refuse, if one so chooses?" (Calinescu 430). *Rhinoceros* raises many questions that are essential because they remain salient today—they do not merely apply to the political-ideological craze of the 20th century West. Recent renditions of *Rhinoceros*, paired with the remarkable political landscape of today, point to the continued significance of this play.

In a 2016 performance of *Rhinoceros* in Massachusetts, one theater-goer remarked "This is a scary play, because 300,000 of my fellow Massachusetts residents just voted for Donald Trump!" (Rosenzweig) Political affiliations aside, this comment portrays the features and effects of the play's take on conformity and extremism. One viewer cannot fathom how such a large group of people subscribes (seemingly mindlessly) to a leader or ideology that is inexplicable to

the other (Rosenzweig). It also demonstrates how the fragmentation of unity, due to a totalizing ideology or polarization, can lead to horror and division. After outlining the play's plot and referencing its relations to conformism and Fascism, Rosenzweig goes so far as to say, in reference to the 2016 presidential election, "may we all have the courage to vote the right way for the future of our country." To Rosenzweig, *Rhinoceros* represented the extreme political polarization in America and the "correct" way to think was evident, but reality is always much more intricate. As to which view is right or wrong, *Rhinoceros* does not specify, but its pertinence clearly continues to mold (and be molded by) political phenomena in the present day.

Whichever ideology is prominent in political spheres—Nazism and Fascism in wartime Europe, partisan party divides in modern America, Communism and capitalism in the Cold War—*Rhinoceros* depicts the consuming influence of such affiliations. It speaks to the multifaceted ways in which seemingly sensible people join a herd, but it is also a testament to the bewildered reactions of dissidents and bystanders (Calinescu 404). Berenger was not in any sense heroic or special—indeed, he seemed unperturbed as his fellows registered their shock in the play's beginning—but his increasing dissonance represents his perception of the madness of ideological contagion (Esslin 183). He ultimately defends his humanity, acting on instinct and intuition rather than being influenced by other people or movements, rather like Ionesco resisted the Iron Guard and radical movements in Europe (Esslin 183). Ionesco was an "imperfect individual who was conscious of the fragility of the human condition," and this fragility shielded him from conformity in the end: the illusions of knowledge, rationality, and purposeful uniformity could not compare (Calinescu 404).

It is true that *Rhinoceros* was brought to fruition by the turbulent wave of radical ideologies, many of them divisive and totalitarian, sweeping Europe in Ionesco's youth.

However, its remarks on individuality, herd thinking, and the frenzied manner in which people join radical political movements transcend single events or time periods, as is evidenced in the 1959 German performance or the 2016 adaptation. It is not limited to a purely political, philosophical, or societal context, since it integrates elements of all of these realms. It is, in short, a “central metaphor to designate suggestively, memorably, and succinctly a range of political-moral phenomena such as ideological radicalism, totalitarianism, fanaticism, imitation, herdlike behavior, extremism, collective self-persuasion, self-hypnosis, ‘political correctness,’ and so forth” (Calinescu 399).

**“What in God’s name could there be on the horizon?” The Decimation of Modern Society
in Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame***

Endgame: Background and an Introduction to Beckett

While *Rhinoceros* is set in a crowded town to magnify despair and absurdity, *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett does the same by stripping the setting bare. This one-act, repetitive play takes place in a bare, bleak room with two small windows to look out of, and the only four characters are confined to this room for the entirety of the play (Beckett). Although there is no cohesive plot or discernible conflict (which is the norm for many plays in the Theatre of the Absurd), the resonance of this simple play is shocking (Bennett 19-20). Like much of Beckett’s works, *Endgame* represents a confrontation with humanity’s “deepest fears and anxieties”: that is, the confrontation with mortality and sensations of hopelessness, even deadness (Esslin 70). The very title “endgame” is a chess reference, a move in which the necessary actions to finish the game must be observed, even though these moves do not affect the irreversible outcome (Barth 34). This inevitability, and the quiet despair partnered with wry humor, is a feature of Beckett’s works that manifest themselves in a way that grips scholars and everyday audiences alike.

One of the most well-known playwrights of the twentieth century, Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) was born in Ireland but lived in Paris for a great deal of his life. The Irish playwright and writer studied widely in his youth, at one point forming a close relation (personal and academic) with James Joyce, another influential Irish writer; Beckett quickly became known as a brilliant and introspective scholar (Esslin 30-32). Despite the avalanche of scholarship and critical analyses of his works, Beckett always maintained that he was no philosopher, and his works should not be limited as such. Rather, his works are “a search for the reality that lies behind mere reasoning in conceptual terms” (Esslin 89). In conversation, he has said that

Existentialist philosophers “may be right, [I] don’t know, but their language is too philosophical for [me]. [I] am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that is simply a mess” (Cohn 33; Driver 22). While this statement certainly captures Beckett’s place in the Theatre of the Absurd, Beckett was shrewd in his observations: he was widely read, he has been associated with many philosophers and their ideas, and his works capture the essence of many Existential ideas, *Endgame* certainly among them.

Throughout *Endgame*, four characters move the play along with dialogue that “becomes a mere game to pass the time” (Esslin 87). Hamm, an immobile and withered old man who lives in his wheelchair; Nell and Nagg, Hamm’s pathetic parents who live in dustbins in a corner of the room; and Clov, a servant who tends to Hamm and his parents, are all together in the blank room (Beckett). The play begins with Clov examining his surroundings, apathetically repeating an ominous opening line: “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished” (Beckett 1). Although *Endgame* is punctuated with entertaining (yet ultimately fruitless) interactions—Clov wheeling Hamm about in his wheelchair, Hamm asking repeatedly for painkiller medication, all the characters reminiscing on memories—these repetitions of despair are never far behind (Beckett). Indeed, a frequent refrain throughout is that “Something is taking its course,” and one of Hamm’s opening lines is “it’s time it ended and yet I hesitate to—to end” (Beckett 3; 13). These unknown passages taking their course are never identified, but it is widely interpreted that they allude to the steady march toward death; the confrontations with meaninglessness; and a life of instincts and desires with no complete happiness or fulfillment (Menon 169). Such are the themes of several of Beckett’s works.

Although there is no cohesive plot in *Endgame*, this does not deter from the significance of the play: indeed, its circular motions and repetitive dialogues make it all the more indicative

of Beckett's embodiment of emptiness, of the fated march toward death and despair. The entirety of the play is riddled with hints toward this inevitability (e.g. "I'm tired of our goings on, very tired"), and much of the language and allusions are ambiguous in nature (Beckett 76).

The play concludes with all characters absent but Hamm, who eventually throws his bloody old handkerchief over his face before becoming motionless (Beckett 84). This listless, despairing play speaks to universal burdens of anguish and resignation, and it has resonated with many audiences since its publication. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Beckett's universal appeal has also engendered parallels in societal and political areas of scholarship. *Endgame's* overtones of hopelessness, deadness, emptiness, and fruitless endurance are indicative of many features of modern society and existence itself.

Futile Persistence: The Barrenness of Modern Society and its Features in Endgame

Although *Endgame* consists of a single room and four characters within its confines, its societal and personal ramifications are telling; the absence of a vivid setting does not hinder the visibility of these social dimensions. While *Rhinoceros* is chaotically bustling with people (and pachyderms) throughout, *Endgame's* minimal setting provides more time for often-mournful reflections on the self and one's place in a modern world. Beckett constructs an empty setting that works to his advantage: the bleak room and unknown outside carry striking societal implications that speak to humanity's ruinous confrontation with modernity (Menon 172). The four characters can be considered microcosms of modern existence, along with the emptiness that eventually becomes manifest in Existential literature (Menon 171-172). Several aspects of the play—characters, setting, dialogue—weave an intricate tapestry of a modern society, one in which the characters embody some of the most uniquely human emotions and experiences.

It has been theorized by some that *Endgame* is a monodrama, or a dramatic act that takes place within a human: the characters embody the eventual cognizance of time passing, as well as the absurdity of their wretched condition (Esslin 66). With Clov doing all of Hamm's sensory functions; Nell and Nagg lamenting their memories as they wither in their dustbins; and Hamm sitting motionless, the atmosphere seems representative of a personal deterioration (Esslin 66). In their repetitive sensations and actions, all of the characters find moments to wearily wonder "Can there be misery loftier than [mine]?" (Beckett 2; Killeen) Indeed, each character possesses elements of introspection and resignation that speak to the Existential realization of emptiness in their complacent existence.

Nell and Nagg, Hamm's "accursed progenitor[s]," are grossly sentimental as they remember the years in which they felt happy, along with regaling old stories that no longer captivate (Beckett 9). Nell reflects on when they went cycling in the Ardennes and when they went rowing on Lake Como after they got engaged: she repeatedly says of the lake that "you could see down to the bottom," more dejected with each repetition (Beckett 21). While she focuses on these tangible details with increasing gloom, Nagg recalls jokes and stories he used to tell, sadly observing that he tells each worse with time (Beckett 22). Both characters graze the surfaces of their more fulfilling memories, but they desist quickly, falling back into routine and languishment. Nell and Nagg could represent an attitude of elegiac nostalgia that is widespread in personal and societal existence, as well as the futile memories of life and love (Esslin 76; Menon 168). Their diminished existence has thus become akin to "the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more" as life and feeling come to a close (Beckett 19).

If Nell and Nagg represent the magnified processes of lamenting memories in an individual, Clov is more rational and conscious in comparison (Esslin 74; Golden 445). Throughout the play, he does everything Hamm asks of him, caters to Nell and Nagg, observes his surroundings with resignation, and finally makes to leave Hamm at the end of the play (Beckett). He displays an interesting juxtaposition of self-awareness and the hopelessness that is pervasive in *Endgame*: he laughs at Hamm's suggestion that their lives have meaning, but later tries to return to his conscious existence and senses (Beckett 33). Clov attempts to "express himself and not his socialization" and concentrate on his own situation, asking himself why he stays with Hamm and does everything for him (Golden 445). Only at the end of the play does Clov make to leave to liberate himself, but it is unknown whether he truly leaves and what is awaiting him: he persists in his trivial actions, but realizes that "When I fall I'll weep for happiness" (Beckett 80).

Hamm, finally, is an old man who is selfish and domineering over Clov; he is blind and sedentary, and he is cognizant of his own deterioration. In his barren room, he ruminates on his inevitable end with a cyclical perspective that "the ending is the beginning is the ending" (Menon 168). He likens his diminished existence to chess, beginning his lines with "Me...to play"; repeatedly asks Clov if he has not had enough of their tired existence after bossing him around; and reflects on what his life used to be, thinking of what he could have done better in his now-miserable existence (Beckett 2). While he is selfish and needy, though, he is also philosophical and aware of his fate. Despite his obsession with his remaining material possessions, he sees that "man is tossed about in a flood of instinct and desires, and never reaches peace or satisfaction," and he resents his parents for throwing him into such a decrepit

world (Menon 169). He is somewhat in between Nell and Nagg, who portray sentimentality and reflecting on memories, and Clov, who attempts to be rational and precise.

Each of these characters thus portray some of the most universal features of confronting oneself and the emptiness in society: mourning, nostalgia, rationalization, realization, anxiety, confusion, and despair. They represent some of the intangible, yet exhausting, conditions that have been philosophized for centuries in the modern Western society they inhabit. Hamm, Clov, Nell, and Nagg spend the entirety of the one-act play in their lifeless room, which is in fact another manifestation of the world outside. Indeed, it “depicts a society that has reached its end; social revolutions are, if not impossible, futile” (Barth 34). They portray some of the feelings that are unique to humanity alone, those that fill us with consternation and despair at the state of our lives (Olson 2).

The house’s empty quality is double-edged: it is a bleak, confined space that nonetheless is the only place we know about. The world outside has been speculated to be destroyed, emaciated, lifeless, or merely a portrayal of complacency and fear (Menon 168). Whether this is true or not, this quality of bleakness is legitimized by its obscurity, and the house can be perceived as another representation of a modern society. It is one expression of “modern man’s endeavor to come to terms with the world in which he lives,” one that is bogged down by petty ideologies, the loss of faith, the pervasiveness of vanity and materialism, unsatisfactory explanations of life, and disillusionment with reality (Menon 172). The setting, then, can be viewed as a realization of this emptiness: this deadness is not unseen to the characters, who have realized the futility of living in a shallow, empty society that many Existentialists despised.

Even without Clov’s observations (from looking out the two small windows of the room) that all outside is “corpsed,” the descriptions of the setting represent one of the more jarring

confrontations with modernity and despair (Beckett 30). The destruction and emptiness that is felt in modern society spares no one, and Beckett uses the recollection of setting as a portrayal of this realization. In a memory, Hamm recalls his interactions with a person in an asylum:

I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! [...] The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes. He alone had been spared [...] It appears the case is...was not so...unusual. (Beckett 44)

Thus do the elements of setting—found in memories, descriptions, and observations—contribute to the dissolution of modern society and its features. Barth goes so far as to call this blank setting and circular play a representation of life in a “modern capitalist society”; such a characterization, while useful, is not ultimate (34). It is a society, encapsulated in four characters and a vacant house, that has reached the endgame on both an individual and collective level.

However, the characters' endurance in their diminished and dying state should perhaps be admired (Menon 171). Despite them being “in the face of the end” and fluctuating between their fear and acceptance, they are able to talk to one another, remember pockets of happiness in their lives, and think (Menon 171). Similarly, the house and unknown outside world may not be decimated at all, and they may represent humanity's ignorance and fear of the unknown; even the characters introduce this possibility (Killeen). Indeed, Hamm goes so far as to hope that there is still life outside: “[...] we're down in a hole. But beyond the hills? Eh? Perhaps it's still green. Eh?” (Beckett 39) Of course, this could be senility or introspection, but the notion of hope is nonetheless entertained: that is, the perseverance of a doomed fate in a world of chaos, instincts, desires, and war (Menon 172). The situation of the play, as is the situation of our own modern lives, is indeed tragic, but Beckett's humor and poignancy make it one of the most potent

tragicomedies that depict the duality of our modern society and, indeed, the Theatre of the Absurd itself.

“I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed I only see my feet”: Political rhetoric in *Endgame*

Despite the circumstances of *Endgame*—that it does not allow us to see the outside world, that there are just four characters, and that the conventional setting and plot have been stripped bare—it carries striking insights of the politics of the time in which it was written. Its political undertones continued to carry resonance in years later, and they may persist even today in our present reality. The atmosphere of lifelessness has led some to infer that some warfare or human-induced catastrophe has taken place; there is also a salient observation of oppressor-oppressed rhetoric in Hamm and Clov. Despite Beckett’s insistence to remain ambiguous and not to comment on any specific political situation in his works, *Endgame* can serve as a powerful allegory of several features in modern politics, from rulership to the consequences of war.

The invisibility of the world outside the house in *Endgame* has both societal and political implications: it alludes to humanity’s emptiness, perhaps from sheer Existential anguish or self-inflicted destruction. The interpretations of this lifeless quality are numerous, and many of these analyses focus on its relation to humanity’s destructive capabilities in the wake of WWII. In 1957, when the play was initially performed, the barren and apocalyptic setting was taken to be the result of a nuclear disaster, fitting in with the post-WWII ruins and ongoing Cold War sentiment (Killeen). Some speculate that “[we] are to imagine a fallout shelter, perhaps, and the

last hours of the last morsels of human life after an H-bomb explosion,” reflecting more speculations about the human consequences of nuclear war (Menon 168).

The deserted, bleak setting has thus been understood as a culture or society decimated by war or some great catastrophe, most likely orchestrated or exacerbated by humans (Barth 36; Esslin 62-63). In each of these scenarios, the politics of war and its subsequent disasters are responsible for such a dreary setting, making *Endgame* a dramatic manifestation of humanity’s self-inflicted decimation. Multiple aspects of the play make it an outlet of “the dehumanizing nature of post-war capitalist society”: its cyclical actions that progress with no perception of time, the repetitions of the characters’ dialogue, and the unconventional form and content that suggest a stagnant condition (Barth 33). These dramatic images of capitalism and war point to complex relationships and the vices of modernity in such a condition.

Another striking understanding of the bleak setting in the play has been that the characters are in the only world that is left: one that is self-created, or merely the “remnants of the results of exploitation” and oppression (Golden 445). In this interpretation, there is also an observed pattern of oppression and dependency in the characters themselves, particularly Hamm and Clov. In addition to the political ramifications of the setting, the characters represent a further dimension of political salience that has been observed in several analyses. Since Hamm is entirely dependent on Clov, commanding him around with his domineering personality, several have observed that there is a pattern of rhetoric that can characterize trends of colonialism and imperialism. Naturally, Beckett never affirmed these observations, but “its vague suggestions of, yet resistance to, any specific cultural readings or singular [...] interpretation warrant the need to try and come to terms with the play’s relevance [...] to both global and local histories” (Pearson 216).

Throughout *Endgame*, Hamm and Clov are reminiscent of the relationship between an oppressor and the oppressed, or a master and the servant. Clov, despite his frequent wishes to leave, never does so: “Do this, do that, and I never refuse. Why?” (Beckett 43; Esslin 62-63). Hamm, his selfish and emotional master, gives Clov a series of menial orders that Clov follows, such as awakening his parents or looking out the window (Beckett). Although these seem like minor or even trivial orders that Hamm cannot complete due to his immobility, a rhetoric of subservience and domination exists in Hamm and Clov. Hamm is the owner and Clov the conditioned yet restless worker; Hamm is dependent on Clov’s labor, and the two are tightly bound together by a psychological relation between oppressor and oppressed (Golden 445). It has even been posited that Hamm represents the bourgeoisie capitalist while Clov is the lowly proletariat worker (Golden 444). In each comparison, Hamm and Clov represent a dichotomy of classes that are dependent on the other, even if this relation is maimed by inequity, oppression, disparity, and subservience. Such a volatile relationship has been likened to the histories, echoes, and lasting effects of imperialism and colonialism across the world (Pearson 216).

This dependence, predictably, has consequences for each character and the implications of the play itself. Hamm represents the “imperial consciousness”: he has conditioned Clov to believe that he will languish without Hamm, that he was once like a father to Clov to thematize the “civilizing” of colonial subjects, and that there is perhaps no solution to their condition (Pearson 221-224). However, he remains in need of Clov’s services and company, and it is indeed Hamm who cannot survive without Clov. Clov is the subject who does Hamm’s bidding and answers him promptly, almost as if he has memorized his role, but he sometimes stops and wonders why he continues to comply (Pearson 224). Hamm answers that it is some kind of compassion, or that Clov will simply not understand it, but Clov is not convinced; he nonetheless

completes Hamm's task and even asks his master why he still obeys, magnifying the rhetoric of dependency (Beckett 76).

Thus does Beckett's play lend itself to the colonial remnants of dependency, superiority, and oppression. Hamm insists that "outside of here it's death" to Clov, but he is afraid because he has become so dependent on him and his labor; meanwhile, Clov is attached to Hamm because he has been conditioned to be, and his efforts to liberate himself are never fully realized (Esslin 66; Beckett 70). Before Clov's final exit from stage, he embodies this duality of consciousness and weariness: "I say to myself [...] Clov, you must be there better than that if you want them to let you go—one day. But I feel too old, and too far, to form new habits" (Beckett 81). His lines throughout the play are perhaps an ultimate victory for his consciousness and self-awareness, but they are encouraged and engendered by Hamm's presence (Pearson 231).

While Hamm may feel some kind of empathy or guilt about these circumstances, he does so only as sincerely as "the enlightened ex-imperial intellectual who wants the other to speak, somehow, 'without being asked'" (Pearson 232). Repeatedly he goads Clov into dialogue with him, and he frequently switches from speaking rather amiably to commanding (Beckett). He says that he is obliged to Clov's services at the end of the play despite his harsh treatment, however, and he regrets seeing his company leave; in anguish, he also laments the good he could have done, or the different path he could have taken in his superiority (Beckett 68; 81). Perhaps here he experiences momentary remorse, even an epiphany. Nonetheless, he knows somewhere that redemption in their bleak residence is far gone, and that they are nearing the end. *Endgame* may not have been written with the intention of becoming a multidimensional tale of political oppression, but the rhetoric and situation of the characters speak to the ghosts of imperial or

authoritative systems in a fading society (Pearson). Its significance is, therefore, undoubtedly not confined to the stage.

Indeed, some have observed this master-slave rhetoric outside the confines of this fictional play and in Beckett's life. Beckett chose to write *Endgame* in French despite his Irish nationality, leading some to draw a comparison with Clov, who realizes he can speak "only within the language and structures of thought that he has been taught by his master, Hamm" (Lyons 189). This French composition of the play thus takes on the persona of a different personal history, one that is unfathomable to an outsider. Beckett's decision to write in French reflects the notion that English is a language of colonizers, and that these language differences constitute "an internalised oppressor that would dominate the writer" (Lyons 189). Beckett's nuance is further observed in the often-ridiculous dialogue between Hamm and Clov, for "what begins as a lesson in grammar [...] becomes an indoctrination of what to say and, therefore, to think" (Golden 448). Thus do Beckett's stylistic and linguistic choices contribute to more implicit, yet significant, political applications of *Endgame*.

These observed dichotomies—master-slave, colonizer-native, ruler-subject, oppressor-oppressed—are perhaps not so overt as the political undertones in *Rhinoceros*, nor do they seem to allude to any specific historical situation. However, they are part of the political discourse surrounding and characterizing *Endgame*, in that they indicate broader sentiments to break free of such systems. As a drama, this "anti-realist" play expresses a disenchantment with the status quo, and it reveals the injustice of the cemented system that mirrors our own (Barth 37). Indeed, the master-slave angle has been analyzed extensively, but the play in fact encompasses broader situations, such as those in "many contemporary liberal, intellectual, and artistic attempts to speak for the oppressed" (Pearson 216). The characters see no answers or

alternatives to their lives because they only perceive their world as manifestations of the history or system they know (Pearson 233).

Despite this stagnation, there is perhaps an occasion for hope in these unsatisfactory circumstances. Just as in *Rhinoceros*, *Endgame* does not yield answers or revolutions that absolve the societal ills observed, but its nontraditional structure allows us to acknowledge and question these predicaments (Barth 38). The validity of existing political systems is scrutinized in the barren *Endgame* universe, which magnifies these systems' "harmful effects and vacancies" (Barth 38). The observations of master-slave, ruler-subject, or bourgeois-proletariat rhetoric point to this "binary thinking" of the status quo and its flaws: an alternative or solution cannot be found in such a limited, narrow, and stagnant system (Pearson 235). In such an entrenched status quo, the theatrical uniqueness of *Endgame* represents an attempt at liberation, not only from the ruler-subject paradigm but from "the larger snare of [...] paradigms that assume, explain, and perpetuate political and cultural hierarchies in general" (Pearson 237). It serves as a crucial deviation that at least brings to light these unsettling or unsatisfactory realities, augmenting its political significance as both an allegory and a tale of caution.

“There’s no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is—other people!” Stratified Society and Humanity as Hell in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*

Introduction: Sartre and No Exit

Of the plays analyzed within this paper, *No Exit* by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is the only one that is a purely Existentialist work, rather than a product of the Theatre of the Absurd. Indeed, parallels between *No Exit* and many of his nonfiction philosophical works (e.g. the tremendous *Being and Nothingness*) have led some to speculate that this play is a “literary expression” of Sartre’s philosophies (Delahoyde). Sartre is one of the most prominent names in modern Western Existentialism, and he played a tremendous role in popularizing the philosophy throughout France and the West. He achieved this notoriety in part by writing extensively and placing himself in public spheres of information; explaining his philosophies with a methodical precision; and becoming more outspoken in the sociopolitical climate of the twentieth century (Sikka 370-371). *No Exit* is considered one of his most iconic and popular works, featuring stunning windows into our own vices and the infamous line that “Hell is—other people!” (Sartre 26).

The play begins with one of the main characters, Joseph Garcin, being directed by a valet into what he discovers is Hell. To Garcin’s consternation, the valet leads him to a Second Empire-style drawing room that resembles a worldly, familiar bourgeois setting; in confusion, he asks where the torture instruments are, along with the “racks and red-hot pincers and all the other paraphernalia” (Sartre 3). The valet only laughs at Garcin’s preconceived notions from living people’s “cock-and-bull stories,” though he concedes that Garcin’s expectation is shared by almost all of the deceased who go to Hell (Sartre 2). Garcin realizes that he will not be able to sleep, rest, clean himself, or even blink his eyes; once the valet leaves him, he tries to call for

someone and exit the room, then sits down on a sofa (Sartre 4-5). However, his momentary reverie is quickly interrupted as the valet brings in the instruments of torture picked for Garcin.

The first person to be escorted into Garcin's room is a hostile woman named Inez Serrano, who believes Garcin to be the torturer; shortly after, the valet brings in a beautiful and banal woman named Estelle Rigault (Sartre 5-6). Once the valet leaves, the three introduce themselves: Garcin and Estelle first speak cordially and politely, but Inez is aware of their situation, just as she is aware of the deliberation of their pairing (Sartre 7-8). Garcin first thinks their situation may be a fluke, and Estelle tries to save face by saying she has arrived in Hell by "some ghastly mistake," but Inez condemns their contrived innocence, and eventually the characters' damnable crimes are revealed to each other (Sartre 9).

Garcin acted as a coward in life, running from military service in the war (perhaps WWII) and getting shot down in his escape, but he also treated his wife horrifically, drinking heavily, abusing her, and cheating on her with other women (Sartre 14). Inez, a lesbian (which was widely condemned at the time of publication and perhaps by Sartre himself), stole a man's wife from him and seduced her into loving Inez, but the wife later killed Inez and herself in a guilt-driven murder-suicide (Sartre). Estelle, meanwhile, married a rich older man because her family had little money; once her reputation had been saved, she took a lover who was her age but rebuffed him to save her class and status (Sartre). However, the two had had a child together, and Estelle, not wanting the child nor her lover, threw the baby over the side of a balcony, after which her lover shot himself on her account (Sartre). Morbid as these crimes are, the characters (except perhaps Inez) were hesitant to divulge their crimes because of their denial: Garcin was a coward and brute, Estelle was vain and shallow, and Inez was manipulative and hostile.

Such damning acts, however, are not absolved in *No Exit*; if anything, the characters' worldly and malicious crimes are made more believable as the three are trapped together. To Inez's horror, Garcin drops all pretense with the vain Estelle as the two force themselves onto each other: "Why trouble about politeness, and decorum, and the rest of it?" (Sartre 14) It is Inez, however, who commands Garcin's attention in the long term, because she alone understands "what wickedness is, and shame, and fear. There were days when [you] peered into yourself, into the secret places of [your] heart, and what [you] saw made [you] faint with the horror" (Sartre 24). Through the characters' constant attacks and advances and rejections, they realize that the torture in their Hell is each other. As deplorable and wicked as their lives were, they gradually realize that there is no more excruciating pain than that lingering presence, as well as the knowledge that they cannot forget or change their crimes.

As one of the iconic texts from Sartre, *No Exit* holds potent philosophical premises that mirror his longer, more complex works; this piece makes several of his Existentialist thoughts more accessible and comprehensible. He introduces a notion of absurdity and despair with his setting of Hell; his characters reflect the pain and, sometimes, malice of individual consciousness that is dependent on others' presence; and the characters' perceptions and surroundings reflect our own "finiteness and worldliness" in a chaotic universe (McMahon 61). *No Exit* also holds insights into the social and political climate of the 1940s, when it was first written and performed. However, there are several contextual differences, one of the most important being that Sartre was not only a playwright, but a philosopher. This is a wholly Existential piece that differs slightly from the Theatre of the Absurd's ludicrous settings, bizarre conversations, and absence of logic. *No Exit* and its characters are hauntingly reminiscent of our world; therein, perhaps, lies its visionary power.

“You’ll find that living in a Second-Empire drawing room still has its points”: *Worldly Settings and Shallow Characters in No Exit*

No Exit, in several ways, resembles the twentieth-century West, particularly Europe. From its architecture to its characters and setting, there are several allusions to societal features that Sartre scrutinized throughout several of his works. Some of these societal commentaries are overt, but others are more subtly veiled within setting and dialogue. Among the social features observed in *No Exit*, some especially salient ones include the characters’ vanity; the obsessions with objects that represent Western materialism and capitalism; and the characters’ dialogues that dually reflect expectations of propriety and the unraveling of such decorum. Also significant is the characters’ cursed dependence on each other in a Hell that reminds them of their stratified existence. Indeed, several of these interplays and conversations echo elements of Sartre’s own Existentialist philosophies.

From the outset, there is a stratified social system in place. The presence of the valet who escorts Garcin, Inez, and Estelle to their room echoes a well-known bourgeois setting on Earth, one that differentiates one group of people from one another (Barth 31; Sartre 2). Additional elements of the setting, namely the Second Empire-style room and contemporary decor, make these social and class-related differences more concrete through aesthetics; they also amplify the “bourgeois self-absorption in the characters” (Barth 31; Sartre 2). The distinction among cultures and groups of people is also acknowledged: when Garcin asks if all rooms in Hell are like his, the valet responds that “We cater for all sorts [...] What use would they have for a Second Empire chair?” (Sartre 2) Thus do the setting and valet magnify the characters’ own societal features reflected in their personalities; they also distinguish different groups of people from societies that are not the bourgeois European.

This establishment of social systems is further propelled by the presence (or lack thereof) of objects. The characters are all vain, as is reflected by the room and their fixation on objects; Estelle in particular is shallow (on her desire for a mirror: “When I can’t see myself I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist”) (Sartre 11). Garcin initially asks for supplies such as toothbrushes before realizing he has no use for them; he examines the center bronze mantelpiece with intrigue; and in desperation he rings the broken bell several times at the beginning and end of the play, placing his faith in the system of objects and stratified order (Sartre 4; 23).

The characters themselves also reflect vanity and shallowness based on desire. Inez is the first to be honest about her shallow attraction to Estelle, and Garcin and Estelle later confront each other in their superficial attractions to one another. Inez notes that they had been disguising their desires earlier under the pretense of politeness in Estelle’s case, and solitude in Garcin’s case (Sartre 13-14). Such desires, of course, along with the characters’ reliance on material objects, reflect the vanity of both themselves and the society from which they came. For all of the imagination on “death and the life to come,” *No Exit* shows that many of us are remorseless in our worldliness and vanity, even after our departures from life (McMahon 61). Through characterization and objects, *No Exit* reflects a worldly and vain society that is reflective of many parts of the modern West and, indeed, the world at large.

As evident as these worldly desires and instincts may be, however, the characters sometimes go to respectable lengths to disguise their true intentions of callousness and shallowness. Garcin enters Hell as a seemingly well-mannered, bemused man who balks at Inez’s guess that he is a torturer, and Estelle insists on the characters giving polite introductions to each other, for “the great thing is to keep as cheerful as we can” (Sartre 7). Garcin and Estelle also do not reveal the extent of their crimes in the beginning of the play, along with the morbid

personalities that landed them in Hell; indeed, they seem to present as socially acceptable, if not “pleasantly banal,” humans (Church & Jones 90). Inez is the most cognizant of their situation and wickedness, and it is arguably she that brings Garcin and Estelle into the light; gradually, the characters’ interactions become more callous, and the propriety-dictated facade is dropped. These realizations, brought on by the characters’ interactions, reveal the duality of their dialogue that defines both premises of the play and Sartrean Existentialism: social interaction with other humans is “torturous, inescapable, yet essential” such that it defines ourselves and others (McMahon 58).

Despite the presence of an obvious solution for the characters—that it would be better to sit in silence, with their own thoughts as their company that would help “work out [our] salvation”—they do not take such absolvent initiatives (Sartre 11). Of course, such “salvation” would be arbitrary since they are damned, with no opportunity for forgiveness or second chances. In any case, *No Exit* shows the characters in a Hell that reminds us of a perplexing feature of human social interaction: that “while consciousness is essentially (sometimes painfully) individual, humans are still fundamentally social” (McMahon 60). Garcin, Inez, and Estelle bring out the worst in themselves through their scathing language and actions—they show their vanity, their cowardice, their wickedness, and their selfish malice—but they do not leave each other alone. The setting of Hell as a confined room, with no company for the characters but themselves, illustrates the more unsatisfactory (yet nonetheless essential) features of social existence (McMahon 61).

These extremes of social propriety, contrived politeness, dependence, and finally brutal honesty are indicative of the duality of communication and language in such a setting. The elasticity of language has yielded “positive and negative consequences related to sharing,

transmitting, and corrupting” information in various settings, from philosophies to popular culture, and *No Exit* is no exception to this observation (Church & Jones 84). In the play, communication is used as a “double-edged sword,” which coincides with Sartre’s notion that Existentialism should feature responsibility for one’s existence; indeed, the characters spend most of the play grappling with this accountability (Church & Jones 88). Garcin presents himself as a pacifist gentleman, and Estelle seems pleasant and oblivious, if not a little materialistic. Inez, however, bluntly reminds the two deniers that “[We’re] in hell, my pets; they never make mistakes, and people aren’t damned for nothing” (Sartre 10). The characters’ continued interactions and psychological attacks ultimately reveal a societal microcosm of malice, veiled by a thin layer of decorum (Church & Jones 90-91). Inez references herself but speaks for them all when she says “[I] can’t get on without making people suffer. Like a live coal. A live coal in others’ hearts. When [I’m] alone [I] flicker out” (Sartre 15).

All of these morbid qualities of the characters and the societies they died in may, understandably, portray *No Exit* as a solely pessimistic play. While it certainly magnifies the worst of many people and societies, however, there are also some observations to be gleaned from Sartre’s Existentialism, such that awareness and change may be possible. *No Exit*, with its believable dialogue and familiar setting, are indicative of Sartrean Existentialism, which acknowledges humanity’s limitations while offering some merits of action.

“You are—your life, and nothing else” (Sartre 25). As one of Inez’s final lines, this employs a sort of cruel irony: Inez is dead and in Hell, and she can no longer atone for her sins (which, given her character, she probably would never have done in the first place) or live again. Despite the apparent resignation, however, this line succinctly captures part of the essence of Sartre’s Existentialism that was so popular in mid-twentieth century Europe. *No Exit* describes

“both a setting and our condition”: as humans, we are aware of our confinement to a limited space with a limited amount of time, and this may be attempted to be compensated for with callousness and temptation (McMahon 61). Other traditional readings of *No Exit* identify features of the play that mirror Sartrean Existentialism: a duality of would-be realism and absurdity, the confrontations and epiphanies of death, accountability, the autonomy and will of humanity, and the unattainable liberty found in independence from others (Delahoyde).

These features all emphasize a certain urgency in our finite lives: in our limited amount of time on Earth, in our absurd lives, we must make the most of it in the most holistic way possible “rather than wishing our lives away to be somewhere else” (McMahon 61). Sartre’s philosophy suggests that with every choice and action, we form ourselves, society, and humanity; therefore, it is with subtlety that the play unveils its social and personal messages in our bourgeois antagonists. Indeed, the cold and hostile Inez shares a more universal truth when she says a word of both affirmation and caution: “It’s what one does, and nothing else, that shows the stuff one’s made of” (Sartre 25).

“Then war broke out. What was I to do? Everyone was watching me”: Cowardice, Perspectives of War, and Political Criticisms in *No Exit*

First published and performed in 1944, *No Exit* was a predecessor to the Theatre of the Absurd that lived within the timeline of WWII. Sartre began his philosophical writings as a disinterested bystander in the political realm, possessing only a casual sympathy for the Communist Party in Russia (Sikka 370). However, following his service in the French Army, his year in a German prisoner-of-war camp, and his involvement in the French Resistance after his 1941 release, he became much more outspoken (Sikka 370). Additionally, his philosophies

became less conceptual and more concerned with the volatile, often dehumanizing and demoralizing, atmosphere that pervaded the years during and after WWII. Indeed, *No Exit* was written during WWII, and it has been popularly interpreted as a commentary on the ramifications of the wartime and postwar eras: that is, hell being representative of the horrors of the war executed by humans.

Like many of its Existentialism-influenced companions in theatre and philosophy, *No Exit* has a popular association with WWII and its aftermath. From the stratified bureaucracy in Sartre's Hell—complete with a subservient valet and a bourgeois locale—to the prevalence of human antagonists, the characteristics of the play echo a dissonant climate that was salient before, during, and after WWII (Sartre). Garcin's initial characterization as a "pacifist gentleman," followed by the revelation that he is really a brutal, sensuous, and unscrupulous coward, further amplifies a process of disillusionment (Church & Jones 89-90). For all the splendor of modern Western civilization and its contrived attractiveness, many wartime and post-war perspectives struggled with reconciling the deplorable world wars. *No Exit*, with its distinctly human portrayal of Hell, reflects this dichotomy in a hauntingly recognizable way. The famous declaration that "Hell is—other people!" is thus a succinct summation of the disillusionment found in human-orchestrated calamity such as WWII (Sartre 26).

Aside from the features within *No Exit*, the political climate and events surrounding its publication influenced several popular connotations. To many, it is a "crucial text applying the philosophical concepts that dominated the post WWII era," namely Existentialism and the fall of reason (Amiri 15). Similarly, *No Exit* attempts to "artistically express an unreasonable, absurd, and alienating world in the wake of the political crisis and humanitarian horror of World War II," reflecting the sense of hopelessness in the wake of devastating war (Barth 28). Many of the

understandings obtained from this play thus reflect a prominent philosophical trend that would connect Existentialism and, later, the Theatre of the Absurd to depicting WWII.

In the case of *No Exit*, these connections to WWII are not baseless. Indeed, Sartre's choice to make the play one act was so that audiences would not be kept past the German curfew during WWII, since Germany had been occupying Paris upon *No Exit's* 1944 publication (Delahoyde). The play also had to be approved for distribution by German censors, so its publication was also scrutinized for political purposes (Delahoyde). Thus, one popular interpretation of the play, with its callous characters and earthly characterization of Hell, is that it is Sartre's endeavor to "make sense of the moral and metaphysical implications of the German occupation of France during WWII" (Amiri 15). Some have gone so far to say that it was a sociopolitical example of Paris during WWII, and the German occupation was perceived as Hell; in a historical context, hell was symbolic of France during WWII, and the "others" represented the Nazis (Mahdi 133; 136). *No Exit* therefore has a specific background of political influences and events, and its stylistic features—its singular act, its European-esque setting, its dialogue, and its philosophical connections—further help gain perspective of an often-absurd wartime atmosphere.

However, some have argued that Sartre's presentation of his Existentialist philosophy, manifested in *No Exit*, does not reflect absurd conditions but rationalizes and undermines them. Sartre's critics have refrained that his methodical, apparently logical and precise descriptions of anguish or absurdity negate the nature of his discussions. That is to say, absurdity in a postwar world, or any world suffering from sociopolitical ills that lend themselves to angst and despair, can never be explained through rationality or methodology. Sartre, however, attempts to rationalize this chaotic state of existence (Barth 33; Adorno & McDonagh 7-8). In *No Exit*, it has

been remarked that the clearly articulated language and comprehensible form hinder its effectiveness as a political text, and especially obstructs its legitimacy as a portrayal of absurdity (Barth 32).

An enduring interpretation of *No Exit* is the aforementioned literary expression of the implications of WWII, as well as the resultant alienation, disillusionment, and hopelessness (Barth 28). In such an inexplicable setting, it would be an apt portrayal if the characters and setting were also obscure, perhaps even confounding, but this is not the case (Barth). Sartre's use of language is articulate and logical as the characters describe their despicable selves and uncover the nature of their torture; additionally, the plot is described as linear, since there is a clear flow of events (Barth 32). The characters arrive, initially surprised, but they soon discover that they are indeed in Hell, that they can see the actions of the living but cannot do anything, and that they are each other's torturer (Sartre). There is little ambiguity, little cyclical rumination, and little sense of hopeless resignation as the characters grapple with their eternal damned condition. Barth likens this approach of Sartre's to Beckett, who in contrast uses obscurity to his advantage to make an effective and elastic play (32).

In addition to the perceived stylistic limitations of the play to create efficient commentary, the banal and hostile characters represent the nastier sides of humanity, as well as the ill-disguised attempts to conceal that they were "rotten to the core" (Sartre 17). The characters themselves, however, have been perceived as another limitation: they deserved their punishment and sentence to Hell, and their hopeless states are the result of their own actions rather than an absurd universe or irrational unpredictability (Barth 32). This may undermine the political undertones of the play; just as the antagonists' intrigue and characterization captivate audiences, they run the risk of losing the messages of absurdity and the "inadequacy of reason"

in the wake of war (Barth 33). Thus, the linear realist structure of *No Exit*, its emphasis on morality and dramatic intrigue, and its resemblance to methodical explanations have been observed as obstacles to its effectiveness (Barth 33; Adorno 8). Indeed, “Sartre has to seek recourse in a flat objectivity, subtracted from any dialectic of form and expression, that is simply a communication of his own philosophy” (Adorno & McDonagh 8).

Is it prudent to agree with such criticisms and discredit *No Exit*? True, the play possesses a more recognizable plot structure than *Endgame* or *Rhinoceros*, perhaps even to a point of being didactic. However, Sartre was also a philosopher, unlike Beckett or Ionesco; additionally, *No Exit* is not an Absurdist play, so it naturally does not follow all of Absurdism’s unorthodox conventions. He became one of the most well-known Existentialist philosophers in modern history, and especially after WWII, Sartre became incredibly outspoken and prominent. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that *No Exit* and its characters bear resemblances to a reality we know rather than an ambiguous or chaotic setting. Whatever its limitations may be, there is no denying that Sartre has penned one of the most iconic Existentialist pieces of the mid-twentieth century: its significance as a historically salient play endures today, and it continues to capture the not-so distant imagination of hell as ourselves.

“In the end, the shadows, the murmurs, all the trouble, to end up with”: The Importance of Remembering and Reimagining

The texts analyzed here, while they are merely pieces of expansive philosophical and theatrical traditions, all inquire about human existence in ways that can be applied to sociopolitical (and cultural) events of history. Even now, scholarly and journalistic articles on Existentialism are being published to suit our modern burdens and endeavors. The coronavirus pandemic, the 2020 United States presidential election, music, and psychotherapy are just a few places where Existential ideas have been (and continue to be) applied. The phrase “existential crisis,” interpreted as a questioning of one’s purpose in a seemingly meaningless world, is commonplace in daily conversations (Johnson). Existential implications can be found in a myriad of situations that transcend time: as a philosophy that has been shaped for thousands of years, even influencing and inspiring a major theatrical tradition, its resonance continues to remold itself even today.

The profound events surrounding the publications of *Rhinoceros*, *Endgame*, and *No Exit*— particularly modernization, WWII, and catastrophic humanitarian crises—continue to mold our understanding of the finitude of life. They also help visualize the lasting implications of such sociopolitical decisions, events, and changes. Existentialism became prominent during the mid-twentieth century, especially in the West, where reason, innovative progress, and worldliness were suddenly thrown into disarray. People were left to grapple consciously with the unprecedented absurdity of their lives, the jarring inevitability of death, and the shocking volatility of the societies they lived in: Existentialism was notoriously well-equipped to give voice to these struggles. Today, it continues to influence how people might perceive themselves and the world around them.

From allusions in popular culture to deriving meaning from global events, literary expression works to make Existentialism's implications more plain to wide numbers of people. The notion of absurdity in particular has garnered a large presence in many facets of popular culture (Bennett 115-116). In recent years, television shows such as *Seinfeld* ("a show about nothing" with fourth-wall breaks and self-aware jokes) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (one in which actor Larry David plays himself, dealing with daily hassles) echo the sentiments of absurdity with their self-awareness in an otherwise mundane, ordinary society (Bennett 125-126). These shows, while mostly comedic and lighthearted, are only a few examples of how absurd and Existential ideas have continued to influence spheres of information and entertainment, even if their presence may be more subtle as society evolves.

The persistence of Existentialism has not endured in comedy or popular culture alone, but also in relation to recent sociopolitical events. Just as plays such as *Rhinoceros* came to be affiliated with political movements sweeping Europe in the twentieth century (e.g. the rise of Fascism in Romania and the complicity of many citizens during this ascension), readers have found associations with these literary pieces in modern situations. There is little doubt that the endurance of these pieces, therefore, captures feelings and sentiments that are beyond any time period or situation.

Terrence Killeen, writing for the Irish Times, argues that Beckett's *Endgame* almost flawlessly captures the experience and nature of lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic (Killeen). He notes that the initial interpretation of the play was the aftermath of some nuclear destruction, aligned with the Cold War during the mid-twentieth century; however, the "sense of timelessness" and lack of progression, he argues, can also be applied to the pandemic, especially when it was unfolding in late spring (Killeen). Observed is a "simultaneous claustrophobia and

awareness of the outside world” in *Endgame*’s universe, as in our own reality during the pandemic (Killeen). Similarly, Rosenzweig recalls a viewer of *Rhinoceros* who found the 2016 rendition “scary” despite its nonsensical premise and warped language: this was because of the large number of people in their state that voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election (Rosenzweig). They had perceived this mass of voters as appalling, and as echoes of the stampeding rhinoceroses that were once shop owners, businesspeople, and youth (Ionesco). The continued salience of these literary pieces, and the fact that they can still inspire terror, understanding, meaning, humor, and connection to modern events suggest that their use as commentary can be observed from multiple perspectives.

Contemporary renditions further extend how we perceive these works of literature. In the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, several journalists, along with Killeen, liken a play such as *Endgame* to one that “releases [you] into the light with a sense of catharsis from having confronted [your] nightmares” (Brantley). Similarly, a recent rendition of *No Exit*, performed by theater students, was streamed online via Zoom (a platform for video communication) as a result of the pandemic, altering the physical and interpretive space of the stage (Valcourt). Director Delaney Molnar says this timely rendition of *No Exit* raised internal questions for her, such as “something definitely that we’re looking at now, in the time of COVID and everything [...]—do you do things selfishly, because it makes you happy? Or do you sacrifice things that make you happy for the good of everyone else?” (Valcourt) Such intrinsic questions, essential to our perceptions of moralistic principles, are thus being reimagined because of our own experiences and performance modalities.

It is prominently recognized as a Western philosophy or perspective, but Existentialism, along with the Theatre of the Absurd, holds a universal foothold in the human condition. It

represents an attempt to elucidate “the tragic sense of life [...] while boldly depicting its horrors,” acknowledging the limitations of reason and the inevitability of anguish (Olson 2). Such anguish should give rise to acknowledgement and, eventually, acceptance, as we try to glean understanding from the events that shape our lives (Olson 14). The suffering highlighted in Existential philosophy and Absurdist theater extends beyond obscure anguish and takes the form of fundamental questions to life, such as “What is the meaning of [my] life? What purpose does life have?”

Ultimately, Existential thought seeks to make us more aware of our existence, through both lived experience and individual assertion. These processes help facilitate a cultivation of awareness: awareness of our place in life, cognizance of different people, and acknowledgement of our lives’ finitude. The realization of human suffering may be an integral component of Existentialism and Absurdism, but it engenders introspection that can extrapolate to our communities; this process of learning to think within and beyond ourselves is thus invaluable. The traditions of Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd remain illuminating windows through which to view societal trends, political upheavals, and the ever-present reminder that our lives are a fluent juxtaposition of worldliness and mortality, happiness and dread, life and death that must ultimately be faced.

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