

Existential Angst in ‘Endgame’ and ‘Krapp’s Last Tape’**Arya S Nair¹**Full Time Research Scholar, Dept of English, AVVM Sri Pushpam College
(Autonomous), Poondi, Thanjavur.**Dr J Uma Samundeeswari²**Research Guide, Assistant Professor, Dept of English, AVVM Sri Pushpam College
(Autonomous), Poondi, Thanjavur.**Article Received:** 16/09/2025**Article Accepted:** 14/10/2025**Published Online:** 16/10/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.10.299**Abstract:**

Absurd plays are those plays, that works on the principles of irrationality and illogicality. As part of literature, absurd plays have carved their own place in world drama, through its unique portrayals of characters and situations. Existential angst is a prominent feature of absurd plays. ‘Existential’ refers to the existence of human beings on Earth. ‘Angst’ refers to the extreme sadness one encounter due to the problems in life. The basic reason why angst existed for human beings at that time was due to the effect of first and second world wars. Samuel Beckett through his writings have portrayed the notion of ‘existential angst’ of the world war times. This article will explain the ‘existential angst’ in ‘Endgame’ and ‘Krapp’s Last Tape’.

Introduction:

Literature is a multi facted phenomenon. It explores life to the fullest with the skill and expertise of imagination. There are different aspects to literature, that enhances its beauty. Experiencing life to the zenith is the heart throbe of literature. Similarly, there are different genres in literature to express the multiplicity. Of all genres of literature, drama occupies a prominent position since ancient times. Drama is the encapsulation of oral and written words. Greece is believed to be the cradle of drama in the western world. In ‘Curtain : Theatre Studies’,

‘Drama is not mere a play, but a very serious thing. An actor becomes perfect only when there is absolute concentration, memory and understanding of the situation like a child. An actor in a drama should be careful of two things – one, a character an actor handles must do whatever the character should do without any hesitation. Secondly, he should be unaware of himself and the spectators. Actually, drama is a creativity blended with imitation of the reality and imagination. Drama takes something from nature as a raw material, but, it is not a recreativity, that is something in another form. For example, we can draw a picture or make a statue but the life can be

portrayed only through drama. Drama includes place and time of occurrence' (Pillai 14).

Of all genres of drama, modern drama is noted in world literature for the absurdity and its various elements. Being absurd means being foolish with meaninglessness. Alienation and angst are the two distinct features of absurd dramas. Absurdism as a major philosophy came up after the world wars. Of all centuries, the twenty first century was the most disastrous and the notorious century, mankind has ever seen.

In 'The Western Drama',

'In The Penguin Dictionary of Theatre (1966) John Russell Taylor writes : 'Absurd Theatre of theapplied to a group of dramatists in the 1950's who did not regard themselves as a school but who all seemed to share certain attitudes towards the predicament of man in the universe : essentially those summarised by Albert Camus in his essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (1942). This diagnoses humanity's plight as purposelessness in an existence out of harmony with its surroundings (absurd literally means 'out of harmony'). Absurd theatre is timeless, universal and speculative. The expression of the absurd was distinct in the works of Sartre and Camus. Yet these writers differ from the dramatists of the absurd in an important respect as they depict their sense of the illogical and irrational of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning but the Theatre of the Absurd attempts to depict nothingness of human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices like plot - construction, characterization, dialogue , discussion and other accessory elements' (Tallur 58, 59).

Absurdism is a philosophy of life associated with the element of nothingness and meaninglessness. In absurdity, the existential crisis can be seen and felt. The philosophy that deals with existence is known as existentialism. Existentialism is a major philosophy that owes its birth to the philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard (1813 - 1855). Kierkegaard was a man of many talents like Leonardo Da Vinci. Soren Kierkegaard is popularly known as the 'father of existentialism'. The term 'existentialism' too was coined by Soren Kierkegaard. The main tenet of existentialism is that the existence of human beings is more important than the essence of human beings.

There are two types of existentialism - monological existentialism and dialogical existentialism. Monological existentialism is the existentialism that deals with one person or one situation. It is also popularly known as strict existentialism. Dialogical existentialism is the type of existentialism that deals with the multiple levels of society and different people. Both these kind of existentialism are present in societies everywhere in the world. There are four kinds of pillars to every kind of existentialism. They are death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness.

Death is the main pillar of the theory of existentialism. Everything becomes dark and empty in death. Everyone has a belief that everything in life comes to an end with death. Some philosophers are of the opinion that death is another journey that takes us to another level of living. Along with death, comes the concept of freedom of life. Freedom, the central tenet of life gives the option of choice to everyone. If no freedom exists in society, dictatorship will prevail.

Along with death and freedom, comes the concept of isolation. Every human being in one form or another form faces loneliness. Loneliness is almost same as isolation. Along with isolation, comes the concept of meaninglessness. All these four pillars of existentialism - death, loneliness, ,meaninglessness and freedom add meaning to the context and life of the individual.

Samuel Beckett, the Irish - French writer has carved a niche for himself in world literature. He is known around the globe for his absurd dramas of alienation and existential crisis. In *'Diverse Pursuits : Essays on drama and theatre'*, 'Samuel Beckett who died at 1989 at the venerable age of eighty six was an iconic and one of the most written about avant garde writers of the twentieth century. The body of critical scholarship on him is as diverse in approach as it is enormous in size. During his lifetime itself, he was described variously : as a formalist, a modernist, a post modernist, an existentialist, an absurdist, and so on. Psychoanalytical critics had their own take on him as did the theological ones who saw strong and persistent Christian motifs in his writings. More recently, a French scholar, Pascale Casanova has come up with an interesting thesis suggesting that Beckett strove to achieve in literature the kind of abstraction that is found in avant garde painting and music. The remarkable thing is that Beckett's work lends itself readily to all these diverse readings' (Malick 174).

'Endgame' is a famous one act play of Samuel Beckett. It tells the story of Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell. Hamm, the protagonist of the one act play is blind and paralysed and is in wheel chair. His servant, Clov is the only moving character in the one - act play. Nell and Nagg are the parents of Hamm and are found in ashbins. All these characters seem to be existing in a sphere of total alienation from the society. In total alienation, existentialism also exists.

The one - act play, 'Endgame' is often portrayed as a 'postwar apocalyptic play'. Apocalypticism in itself carries the element of existential angst. All the characters seem to engage in meaningless talks. They are not engaged in any sort of physical activities of any sort. Along with this, the proverb, 'An ideal mind is a devil's workshop' is to be connected. God cannot live in an ideal mind. For example,

'Nell : Perhaps, its a little vein.

Nagg : What does that mean?

Nell : That means 'nothing' (Beckett 7).

The absurdity of life through the concept of nothingness is reflected through these dialogues. The concept of 'nothingness' fills the entire one act play. In 'Modern Criticism',

The dialogues of 'Endgame' are complicated, in such a way that the entire play seems to be in absurd st'As H P Grice observes, the successful conduct of linguistic interaction is possible only on the basis of a joint commitment to the communicative objective. Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are, characteristically to some degree at least, cooperative efforts: and each participant recognises in them to some extent a common purpose or set of purposes or at least the mutually accepted direction. Grice formulates this as a global conversational rule, which he names the 'conversational principle' : 'make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage of which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange'. What he argues is that the exchange is regulated by indispensable principles of decorum allowing coherence and continuity. These principles are stated as maxims implicitly governing the participants contributions -

- (i) the maxim of quantity,
- (ii) the maxim of quality,
- (iii) the maxim of relation
- (iv) the maxim of manner' (Rollasm 118).

Towards the end of the one act play, 'Endgame', the absurd talking continues by the characters. The characters seem to face the 'endgame' of life - death in its totality. Similar is the case with Samuel Beckett's another one act play, 'Krapp's Last Tape'. It is a play that focus on 'memory' of human beings. 'Memory spaces' are those spaces that exist because memory plays a huge role in the lives of human beings. Through memory spaces, the existential angst, experienced by the protagonist, Victor Krapp comes into being. He has experienced lot of failures like the death of his mother, love failure, business failure etc. He has nobody in life to wait for. Once, the tape is played, Krapp remembers everything about his life clearly. In '*What About Theory*',

'Memory is also an important aspect of trauma and testimony. Trauma and testimonies are most often the products of memory. There are different kinds of traumatic memories. Alison Landsberg's concept of 'prosthetic memory' is an example. It is a concept put forward by Alison Landberg in her article, 'Prosthetic Memory : Total Recall and Blade Runner'. As Landberg explains, 'by prosthetic memories, I mean memories which donot come from a person's lived experience in any strict sense. When someone views for example, a film or television program, they have a memory of the narrative events which transpired without actually having experienced those events in any manner' (Vallath 254).

As already explained, the memory of human beings play a huge role in their lives, especially when linked to life in general. Existential angst exist in the one act

play of 'Krapp's Last Tape'. In 'Krapp's Last Tape', Victor Krapp has no other option, except to listen to the tape recorder and connect his life to the incidents being said in the tape. Existence is the basis of life on Earth.

'Existential angst' can also be linked to the concept of trauma. There are two types of trauma - mental trauma and physical trauma. Mental trauma relates to the mind of the individuals and physical trauma relates to the trauma related to the human body. In case of Krapp, it is a mental trauma that affected him. He has nobody to care and to share his feelings. Loneliness has grabbed his sole life. To conclude, existential angst occurs in the one act plays - 'Endgame' and 'Krapp's Last Tape'.

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