EXISTENTIALISM, THE ABSURD AND CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of

MA by Research

School of English, Drama and Creative Studies

College of Arts and Law

University of Birmingham

October 2023

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Abstract

Over sixty years have passed since the Theatre of the Absurd was first codified by theatre critic Martin Esslin, in that time, many different artistic movements have emerged and shaped theatrical orthodoxy.[1] Furthermore, it has been an equally long time since the playwrights whose work has been characterised as Absurdist and Existentialist defined and expanded upon their own fields. The purpose of this research project is to explore how and why contemporary theatre continues to incorporate core ideas and themes from the Theatre of the Absurd and Existentialism to explore twenty-first century issues.

A definition of 'Absurdism', 'Existentialism', and 'the Theatre of the Absurd' will be provided in the first chapter to establish a foundation for the research. The rest of the thesis will be dedicated to the analysis of fourteen British playtexts, each chosen for the way in which they utilize, incorporate, and apply both the Absurd and existential thought. They include Caroline Horton's *All of Me* (2016); Anthony Neilson's *Realism* (2009); Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (2000), *A* Number (2002), Escaped Alone (2016) and Love *and Information* (2019); Dennis Kelly's *Debris* (2004), *Orphans* (2009), *The Gods Weep* (2010) and *Girls and Boys* (2018); Ella Hickson's *The Writer* (2018), Mike Bartlett's *Cock* (2009) and *Albion* (2017); and Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009). In all, they represent a wide range of differing perspectives that span the last two decades of British contemporary theatre. Structurally, these plays will be divided according to the overarching themes of existential uncertainty, environmental exploitation, patriarchal violence and male toxicity, familial violence, racial tension, and identity, with each theme corresponding with a dedicated chapter.

[1] See Martin Esslin, *the theatre of the absurd* (London: Methuen, 2001).

The thesis concludes that the core themes within Existentialism and the Absurd remain pervasive despite the various theatrical and artistic movements that have emerged since. Furthermore, this thesis will also showcase how both Existentialism and the Absurd can be applied to better understand and tackle twenty-first century issues.

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1: A Definition of the Absurd

The terms 'Absurdism', 'Existentialism' and 'The Theatre of the Absurd' are ideas that occupy tangentially similar spaces. It is not uncommon to hear them spoken in very similar contexts, sometimes interchangeably. This creates an environment where it becomes difficult to ascertain where one term begins and the other ends. As such, the process of defining each of these terms can be a frustrating one, and to a research project planning on utilizing these concepts, it is essential to establish a competent understanding of each term to anchor the analysis moving forward.

In this light, it is perhaps best to start with Existentialism. This is partly because it is the oldest of the three terms, but it should also be acknowledged that Absurdism itself unambiguously borrows many thematic elements from it. Firstly, like many other branches of philosophy, it is difficult to pinpoint a direct origin, primarily because the philosophy now recognized as existentialism evolved gradually across three centuries. The work of Soren Kierkegaard is particularly held up as an early example of existentialism, but John Foley notes that it exists within "the Christian existentialist tradition of… [Karl] Jaspers and [Lev] Chestov," which is an interpretation of existentialism that will only be briefly touched upon in this analysis.[2] As such, the least ambiguous starting point may be with what was considered by Richard Gravil and Mark Addis to be 'the metaphysical watershed of the nineteenth century: Nietzsche's proclamation that God is dead."[3] This statement alone provides the most fundamental piece of context necessary to understanding existentialism: The decline in religious faith as a basis for one's own identity and security. Gravil and Addis argue that amongst Nietzsche's contemporaries and successors, it was increasingly common to believe that "There is no authoritative tablet of stone bearing God's unambiguous commandments for the good life. [And] even if there was

[2] See John Foley, *Albert Camus: from the absurd to revolt* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), p. 1.
[3] See Richard Gravil & Mark Addis, *Existentialism* (Tirril: Humanities-Ebooks, 2007), p. 8.

once such a thing, it no longer had authority for modern men."[4] It was a notion that had the potential to completely undermine institutions and power structures that had existed, almost unchallenged for millennia. Furthermore, the first half of the twentieth century would only exacerbate these growing thoughts and tensions, as Maggie Gale asserts that "all areas of human experience [had] been radically changed by the impact of war, technological advances, economic crises and shifting relationships between the social classes and the individual and the state."[5] It is in this context that existentialism as we understand it, truly begins to take shape.

As a direct response to these societal changes, Existentialism emerges as an especially potent philosophy; one ultimately rooted in the study of human existence. It is a field where academics like John Foley ask, "Why do we exist? [and] What is our purpose in life?"[6] As a result, it can come across as an entirely anthropocentric school of thought. These questions ultimately create a fixation on finding meaning, primarily because, as Gravil and Addis suggest, to an existentialist "our existence… has no purpose… and no value, beyond what we give it. That we exist is absurd: that we die is the crowning absurdity."[7] It is a rejection of the many value systems we have, while also being an open invitation to find a new value system, one rooted in an awareness of this fact. It can seem nihilistic, but despite this, Gravil and Addis insist that "[with] existentialism you chose your own fate… you determine what you (in essence) are."[8] This inevitably encourages a philosophy fixated on the romanticism of personhood and identity. This notion is supported by Thomas Flynn's idea that "[to existentialists] becoming an individual is a task to be undertaken and sustained but perhaps never permanently achieved."[9] It becomes a call to action; rather than submitting to metaphysical bleakness, the existentialist thinker looks at ways to live their life authentically, because that is all they have. In

[4] Ibid.
[5] See Maggie Gale, *The Routledge drama anthology and source book* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. xv.
[6] Compare Foley, p. 3.
[7] Compare Gravil & Addis, p. 23.
[8] Ibid, pp. 7-8.
[9] See Thomas Flynn, *Existentialism: a very short introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 24.

a world where religious certainties no longer hold, this philosophy becomes an effective means of identity anchoring, with Flynn arguing that "a post-postmodernist world, [where] the inherited fragmentation of unifying principles and absolute values constitute a particular challenge to ethical theory and moral practice."[10]

Having now briefly explained existentialism on a thematic level, it is equally important to look at its key practitioners. In this light, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus are all exemplars of this school of thought, regardless of how they viewed themselves. Additionally, these three intellectuals will be especially useful for the purpose of this analysis. Firstly, and most notably, it is important to acknowledge that they were all contemporaries of one another, affording them the opportunity to tackle the same issues while also responding to one another specifically. As a foundation, Gravil and Addis have suggested that the "fiction, theatre and philosophical essays, [of all three] stressed liberty, human responsibility, and the emptiness of all systems of authority, especially in moral and metaphysical matters," which, as alluded to previously, remain core ideas within the existentialist canon to this day.[11] Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and *Nausea* (1938) were seminal works that, to Leo Fretz focused on "an existentialist conception of man, in which the unique individual – essentially still free even when in chains – [is] a master of his own fate."[12] Camus's academic essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), and his novel *The Outsider* (1942) were both intended as "a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert."[13] Camus utilizes both fiction and theory to advocate for a metaphysical rebellion against life's inherent lack of meaning. Simone de Beauvoir is interesting in her own right, while her most famous work; *The Second Sex (1949)* does help introduce feminist ideas into the existentialist canon, Margaret Simons believes that "most

[10] Ibid, p. 123.
[11] Compare Gravil and Addis, p. 10.
[12] See Leo Fretz, *'Individuality in Sartre's philosophy'*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. By Christina Howell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 67-100, (p. 68)
[13] See Albert Camus, *The myth of Sisyphus,* trans. By Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2000), p. ix.

philosophical studies of existentialism have dismissed [her] as [being] merely Sartrean," implying a lack of originality on her part.[14] Judith Butler contrastingly argues that "The Second Sex [is] an effort to radicalize the Sartrean program to establish an embodied notion of freedom," specifically regarding gender.[15] Ultimately, in the context of this analysis, de Beauvoir's value comes from her ability to offer a unique, existential perspective. While her work is closely associated with Sartre, her ideas become especially useful when looking at feminist playtexts. Something that invariably separates her work from her contemporaries.

There are significant overlaps between the themes of these three writers, but that does not mean they were united in their approach. While each have been labelled as existentialists, Foley argues that Camus stubbornly "went to considerable effort to distinguish himself from… Sartrean existentialism."[16] In the eyes of Gravil and Addis, Sartre's own brand of "Existentialism-Marxism" undoubtedly put him at odds with Camus, and their famous falling out over the latter's stance on the Algerian War of Independence only exacerbated these tensions.[17] Furthermore, Gravil and Addis suggest that Beauvoir specifically rebuked Camus' own terminology, "object[ing] to the use of the term [Absurd… with] her preferred term [being] ambiguity."[18] These differences can seem trivial, indicating a petty level of contrarianism between them, but while they originate from the same starting point, the differences between are significant enough to result in three very different interpretations of existentialism. Gary Cox argues that Sartre viewed the world "as an intricate web of interconnections."[19] It is a belief which ultimately asserts that the complicated nature of the world shapes a person's sense of identity, and is a notion that can be applied contemporaneously in an age

[14] See Margaret Simons, *Beauvoir and the second sex: feminism, race and the origins of existentialism*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. 100.
[15] See Judith Butler, *Sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's second sex*, Yale French studies, 72 (1986), 35-49, (p. 38).
[16] Compare Foley, p. 3.
[17] Compare Gravil and Addis, p. 13.
[18] Ibid, p. 24.
[19] See Gary Cox, *Sartre: a guide to the perplexed*, (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 3.

where structures and institutions are being re-evaluated on account of their systemic oppressiveness. To Cox, Sartre ultimately wants people to "face… up to the hard truth that they are limitlessly free human beings."[20] Camus ultimately has a similar aim, yet he contends that "the world is neither so rational or not so irrational. It is unreasonable and only that."[21] Furthermore, Foley states that "Camus's *oeuvre* can be read in a relatively systematic way if we concentrate on two pivotal concepts of his writing: the absurd and revolt," which starts to see our analysis shift from existentialism to the concept of Absurdism, which is equally important to this analysis.[22]

To best understand Absurdism, it is important to start with Albert Camus, who effectively codified Absurdism with his 1942 essay: *The Myth of Sisyphus.* In it, he posits that "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide."[23] To Camus, "the world itself, whose single meaning I do not understand is but a vast irrational."[24] Rather than ascribing malice to our world, he uses his essay to highlight his belief that the world is merely "unreasonable"[25]. Camus argues that there "is a divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints."[26] He tries to normalize the idea that there is a gulf between the expectations of individual people, and the realities of the world in which they live. Camus ultimately calls this "The Absurd", with "The Absurd [itself being] born of [a] confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."[27]

At first glance, *The Myth of Sisyphus* is a morbid text that presents a hostile world that no longer makes sense, mirroring Nietzsche's own observations some four decades prior. Yet what makes

[20] Ibid, p. 91.
[21] Compare Camus, p. 37.
[22] Compare Foley, p. 3.
[23] Compare Camus, p. 5.
[24] Ibid, p. 21
[25] Ibid, p. 37
[26] Ibid
[27] Ibid, p. 21

Camus' interpretation of the Absurd relevant to this analysis, is how he intended "the Absurd, hitherto taken as a conclusion… [to be] a starting point."[28] Camus invites the reader to view this Absurdist awakening as an anchoring point. Despite stating that "everlasting nothingness seems the only reality and irredeemable despair seems the only attitude," what follows in his essay is an impassioned argument for a life lived as authentically as possible, with an awareness of the Absurdity that underpins human existence.[29]

To Camus, suicide becomes one possible reaction to the Absurd. The framing implies that Camus views it as the default reaction. He states that "Death is there as the only reality," suggesting that it is the only concrete nature of human existence.[30] He also posits that "all healthy men have thought of their own suicide," which explains why Camus can so calmy cite suicide as a possible course of action.[31] Ultimately however, this is not the act he encourages most, neither is the adoption of religious faith, which he likewise considers "Philosophical suicide."[32] Camus even seems sceptical towards the use of science for metaphysical meaning, stating that "you give me the choice between a description that is sure but that teaches me nothing and hypothesises that claim to teach me but that are not sure."[33] Camus ultimately rejects any kind of repudiation of the absurd, whether that be religious or scientific. To him, "The Absurd becomes God (in the broadest meaning of the word) and that inability to understand becomes the existence that illuminates everything."[34] Any attempt at trying to explain human existence is ultimately futile to Camus, with him calling the practice "Eluding."[35] Instead, Camus encourages full awareness of the absurd; no attempt should be made towards understanding the universe, nor should the individual obfuscate the absurd with newer

[28] Ibid, p. 6
[29] Ibid, p. 20
[30] Ibid, p. 43
[31] Ibid, p. 7
[32] Ibid, p. 32
[33] Ibid, p. 17
[34] Ibid, p. 26
[35] Ibid, p. 8

systems of meaning. In a step beyond Sartre's desire for authentic living, Camus wants the reader to live in spite of the absurd, to revolt against it. He opines that revolt "is one of the only coherent philosophical positions," which harkens back to existentialism's innate anthropocentrism, along with a newfound sense of mythic heroism.[36] This is ultimately aided by Camus equating human existence with the Greek myth of Sisyphus, asserting that "the struggle towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."[37] In this final declaration, Camus invites the reader to not only see themselves in this mythological figure, but also to take pleasure in revolting against metaphysical futility. In this light, the analysis moving forward will look at a range of contemporary playtexts and see how they differ from or reinforce Camus' idea of the Absurd, alongside Martin Esslin's own definition. Ultimately, what will become apparent is how Camus' own philosophy can still be incorporated into an analysis of work focused on more contemporary issues.

Building on from this, Cornwell notes that Absurdism itself "appears not to be a fully accredited philosophical category."[38] In fact, rather than it being a philosophy *per se*, he argued that Absurdism as a concept represents "a disposition rather than anything approaching an overall concrete twentieth-century movement."[39] This separates it from existentialism, as while they both tackle overtly philosophical ideas, the former is primarily a loose domain for artists to express their subjective interpretations of life, rather than intellectuals nurturing an institutionally respected discipline. Famous literary figures like Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Nikolai Gogol have all likewise been considered Absurdist, with each of their work influencing various writers in the Absurd canon.[40]

[36] Ibid, p. 40
[37] Ibid, p. 89
[38] See Neil Cornwell, *The absurd in literature*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 2.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Cornwell, 2006

Focusing on the philosophical work of Camus is particularly essential to understanding the Theatre of the Absurd, which likewise constitutes a significant portion of this analysis. Moreover, both emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, wherein the collective trauma of the conflict shaped the thinking of an entire generation. Regarding the Theatre of the Absurd, this term was defined by theatre critic Martin Esslin in his book of the same name, published in 1961. It is a book that, to Neil Cornwell "devotes chapters to five major dramatists… [Samuel] Beckett, [Arthur] Adamov, [Eugene] Ionesco, [Jean] Genet and [Harold] Pinter."[41] To Esslin, these five figures were creating theatre that showcased "metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition."[42] Marvin Carlson notes that Esslin explicitly evokes "Camus' book as [its] philosophical touchstone," and groups together a list of playwrights who, in his mind tackle similar themes.[43] It should be noted that while Esslin identifies a group of likeminded playwrights, he stated that "[they] do not form part of any self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement," which in turn harkens back to the previously noted assertion that Absurdism is merely a disposition, rather than a united sect of artists.[44] Carlson notes that the labelling persisted "despite the protests of both the existentialist dramatists… and recipients of the appellation," indicating a level of clear friction between the artists themselves and the academics who interpret them.[45] While almost all of the so-called Absurdist's rejected the label, the term has nevertheless stuck. Esslin himself opined that each absurd dramatist is "an individual who regards himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private world."[46] It also helps serve as a thematic primer, hinting at how Absurdist theatre can revolve around anguished and lonesome individuals struggling against the absurdity of life.

[41] Ibid, p. 127
[42] Compare Esslin, p. 24.
[43] See Marvin Carlson, *Theories of theatre: from the Greeks to the present*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 411.
[44] Compare Esslin, p. 22.
[45] Compare Carlson, p. 44.
[46] Compare Esslin, p. 22.

J.L. Styan contended that the Theatre of the Absurd "was a writer's theatre."[47] As such, this analysis will be structured exclusively around the work of playwrights. It should also be noted that, to Esslin, the Theatre of the Absurd's "leading practitioners… liv[ed] in Paris and [wrote] in French," which explains the lack of diversity within Esslin's grouping.[48] All, baring Pinter were continental Europeans. All, barring Genet were heterosexual, and all were men. This itself becomes an especially useful fact when considering the ideas most frequently explored throughout the absurd canon itself, and while there are some exceptions, especially within the plays written by Jean Genet, there is a genuine dearth of explicitly feminist, queer, or racial themes in the canon. This is undoubtedly influenced by the composition of those associated with the label itself. In truth, this alone represents one of the major avenues in which both absurdism and existentialism can (and already has) been updated for a contemporary age, with a diverse groups of younger writers like Caroline Horton, Jez Butterworth, Dennis Kelly, Anthony Neilson utilizing absurd and existentialist ideas to tackle wholesale, systemic issues that are relevant today. Additionally, before properly exploring the Theatre of the Absurd on an artistic and stylistic level, it is also notable that Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre (both Frenchmen) were also playwrights. Esslin himself refrained from including either of their plays in his analysis, arguing that "in some senses, the theatre of Sartre and Camus is less adequate as an expression of [their own] philosophy."[49] It is undeniable that their legacies as philosophers outstretched their reputation as playwrights. Their plays do fit from a thematic level, but the true differences emerge when looking at Camus and Sartre's stylistic choices, which differ drastically from the work observed by Esslin. The characters created by Camus and Sartre in their theatre remain relatively naturalistic, which is markedly different from the protagonists within the absurdist canon. Building on from this, Esslin suggested that "the Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about

[47] See J.L. Styan, *Modern drama in theory and practice 3*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 125.
[48] Compare Esslin, p. 26.
[49] Ibid, p. 238

the human condition; it merely presents it in being," positioning these absurdist plays as continuations of the work of Camus and Sartre.[50]

When looking at the Theatre of the Absurd itself, it is important not to understate how revolutionary the movement was. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) became the play most heavily associated with the movement, and in-turn became theatrical absurdism's archetypical text. This is thanks to it being considered by academics like Kenneth Pickering "one of the most uncomfortable, provocative, bleak yet sometimes comic stage metaphor[s] ever created."[51] The legacy of this play, and it's influence on the theatre cannot really be understated, nor can it be ignored as the seminal absurdist playtext. Esslin himself stated that "[Beckett's work sprung] from the deepest strata of the mind and probe[d] the darkest wells of anxiety," and as such positioned Beckett's chapter right after the introduction of the absurd in his own book.[52] In a lot of ways, Beckett's early work, particularly that of *Godot,* and *Endgame* (1957) exemplifies many of the core stylistic and structural quirks of the movement. Going on from this idea, Pickering argues that "most plays of the absurd are written in forms that were certainly unexpected in the 1950's and 1960's," which mirrors *Waiting for Godot's* revolutionary nature.[53] To Pickering, the play, like many other absurdist works provide "no denouement, no exposition, and… no sense of development."[54] These absurdist plays can also appear especially obtuse to audiences unaware of their content, as they frequently depict unconventional characters and circumstances, whether that be two dishevelled vagabonds loitering in a road *a la Waiting for Godot*; Two hitmen waiting in the basement of a kitchen in *The Dumb Waiter* (1957), or an entire town's population turning into Rhinoceroses in Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (1959).

[50] Compare Esslin, p. 25.
[51] See Kenneth Pickering, *Key concepts in drama and performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 4.
[52] Compare Esslin, p. 38.
[53] Compare Pickering, p. 5
[54] Ibid

Ultimately, the theatrical stylings within the theatre of the absurd itself were frequently innovative in their application. Cornwell argues that the work of Samuel Beckett incorporated "elements [of] mime, the music hall, circus and *commedia dell'artre*," which gives *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* an especially vaudevillian air.[55] Styan's assertion that "Beckett's stage is always one of simple, almost empty space," demonstrates the way in which an absence of detail was used to establish that very same thing.[56] Additionally, Esslin himself noted that the Theatre of the Absurd has the capacity to "[fuse] tragedy with the most hilarious farce."[57] Many of the canonically absurd playtexts feature especially dark subject matter, while still ostensibly having comedic elements and sequences. Suicide is as much an underlying theme to *Waiting for Godot* as it is in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Likewise, Cornwell states that Jean Genet's entire bibliography frequently contains "grotesque ritual, violent abuse and ceremonial death,"[58] and Harold Pinter often explores "the personal dynamics arising out of territorial conflict in a confined space."[59] Building on from this, Esslin observes that the absurdist canon frequently demonstrates a "radical devaluation of language."[60] Cornwell too asserts that "conversation primer[s] provide truisms and cliches, leading to pseudo-truisms and caricature[s], resulting in eventual disintegration into disjointed verbal fragments."[61] Language is frequently used to reinforce the disconnectedness of our world, with the characters living in these theatrical worlds struggling to rationalise or communicate their issues or beliefs as a result. Cornwell also notes that Pinter tries to "recapture… realistic speech patterns, bringing into relief ambiguity, irrelevance [and] redundancy," both in order to create a more realistic setting, but also to entrench that metaphysical uncertainty.[62] Finally, one last inclination to take note of is Cornwell's belief that "time and space dissolve[s] for an absurdist."[63] Plays like *Waiting for Godot* and *The Dumb*

[55] Compare Cornwell, p. 128.
[56] Compare Styan, p. 129.
[57] Compare Esslin, p. 238.
[58] Compare Cornwell, p. 132.
[59] Ibid, p. 134
[60] Compare Esslin, p. 26.
[61] Compare Cornwell, p. 129.
[62] Ibid, p. 135
[63] Ibid, p. 129

Waiter each demonstrate this sense of timelessness. The characters, utilizing stunted dialogue, repeat themselves frequently, and the happenings within these plays becoming an endless cycle of abject human misery. Much like Camus' observation of the Sisyphean character of human existence, many of the characters in these absurdist plays remain trapped in unendurable positions.

Now that we have established a broader understanding of the terms that will be used throughout this analysis, it is now possible to properly start the analysis itself. The focus of this project is primarily to look at the ways in which contemporary playtexts incorporate, utilize, evoke, and experiment with absurdist thought and techniques, alongside existential philosophy. Esslin's work will specifically inform the analysis, with his definitions and interpretations being used as starting points for absurdist critique. This analysis will hopefully demonstrate the extent to which Absurdism and Existentialism remain popular with contemporary writers, while also showcasing how comparatively old notions such as existentialism and the Absurd can be modernized to reflect the culture of the day, and tackle more contemporary issues.

As a starting point, it needs to be acknowledged that not all contemporary playtexts engage with absurdism in the same way (if at all). This is partly because theatrical absurdism is over fifty years old, and all of the key practitioners are now deceased. In the years since, British theatre has experienced several other influential movements that have each shaped the medium further, moving it both stylistically and thematically away from the Theatre of the Absurd. Any analysis of how contemporary plays explore The Absurd and existentialism therefore becomes quite challenging. Very few of the plays discussed hereafter occupy anything close to a unified movement. The playwrights themselves are from very disparate backgrounds and have different stylistic aims. Even the staging, along with the tones and themes at play vary wildly from piece to piece. As a result, I will be grouping together plays based on their overarching themes, and how they relate to both Existentialism and

Absurdism. Not only does this provide an opportunity for cross-referencing and comparison, it also showcases how contemporary playwrights have been using existential philosophy and absurdist ideas and techniques to tackle the relevant issues of today.

2: The Absurdity of Modern Life

As a starting point for this analysis, it is perhaps prudent to look at plays that explore the most explicitly absurd theme: human existence and the meaning of life. The plays that feature in this section are the most overt in their absurd tendencies. Rather than layering their work with abstract metaphors and allegory like the canon of Beckett and Ionesco, these plays explore existential angst in more identifiable ways. Caroline Horton's *All of Me* (2016) represents a useful example of this. Staged as a one-woman monologue, it is a candid look at the difficulties of human existence in the modern age. It is a play filled with both earnest introspection and vulgar declarations. Furthermore, the play also straddles tones, being comedic in some respects, while also being, to Catherine Love, "unashamedly bleak," in others.[64] Horton presents a story that is intimate, she speaks plainly about her own lived experiences, and how they shape her mental health, blurring the lines between fact and fiction as she speaks directly to the audience. Near the start of the play, she apologises for "making a show from whose material I have no healthy distance."[65] In some respects, there is no fourth wall at all. She apologises multiple times throughout the play and appears incredibly aware of how strange it is to do so, stating that "I wasn't going to apologise – everyone knows you shouldn't apologise at the start of a show – it makes the audience uncomfortable."[66] Love argues that, from these earliest interactions, it becomes clear that the play "is not all that interested in setting spectators at ease."[67] To the audience, it is unclear whether her introductory apologies are part of the play at all, or just a simple disclaimer beforehand. The ambiguity continues throughout, as Horton never "gets into character", instead just meandering from there into the rest of the play.

[64] See Catherine Love, *All of me review – a messy and beautiful look at depression,* (2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/aug/06/all-of-me-review-summerhall-edinburgh-festival-2019> [Accessed: 28 March 2023].
[65] See Caroline Horton, *All of me* (London: Methuen Drama, 2019), p. 5.
[66] Ibid, p. 6
[67] Compare Love

Dan Rebellato suggests that "at [this] more experimental end of playwrighting, one might see the influence of [Martin] Crimp and [Sarah] Kane… [who both] present pure verbal construct and disavow any pretence of fiction altogether."[68] Horton illustrates this, and while there are more experimental plays out there, the way Horton presents her work demonstrates something completely different within an absurdist context. The monologue's conversational tone meshes with the intensely personal subject matter in a way that resembles stand-up comedy. The audience therefore can better relate to a person talking to them directly, rather than fictional characters speaking at each other. *All of Me*, in this light becomes an especially useful starting point for our analysis, as it unflinchingly explores absurd and existential ideas in a format and style completely alien to the absurdist canon itself. Notably, the play is more explicit in its philosophizing than some work within the canon. Littered throughout the play are these dark, yet eloquent existential musings on human existence, the most overt of which being her observation that "everybody's body is falling apart in front of our eyes – our minds are disintegrating."[69] She shifts from saying something that, to then asking "Did I say I love dancing? It makes me happy and so does sex, but not always."[70] Evoking Styan's interpretation of Pinter, who was fixated on "people engulfed in trivia" many of her comments seem inconsequential at first.[71] Yet that conflict between trivia and existentialism is what makes *All of Me* unique, because while Beckett and Pinter both explored similar ideas, they usually layered their work with metaphor complete with exaggerated personas and characters. Vladimir and Estragon discuss existential ideas like Horton, but the former, in Styan's opinion are constantly undermined, presented merely as "comics and clowns who divert themselves… with double-acts of cross-talk."[72] There is a playfulness that disarms their philosophizing, allowing the audience to focus solely on the events of the play and the comedic moments therein. With *All of Me* however, all the audience can do is engage with the

[68] See Dan Rebellato, *Modern British playwriting: 2000-2009* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), pp. 14-15.
[69] Compare Horton, p. 9.
[70] Ibid, p. 8.
[71] Compare Styan, p. 135.
[72] Ibid, p. 126.

philosophy itself. There is nothing else that can distract; No slapstick comedy a la *Waiting for Godot*; no hitman subplot via *The Dumb Waiter*, and no allegory for fascism with *Rhinoceros*. When Horton speaks philosophically, she does so with complete sincerity. By looking directly at the audience and speaking in a colloquial tone, she also makes it seem like she's confessing a secret to them. She evokes Emile Cioran's aphorism that "nothing stops us but the spectacle of the universe decaying before our eyes," and in truth, the play is littered with these poetic, aphoristic phrases.[73] She wishes for "the void to speak, to become eloquent,"[74] and expresses so in verbose language uncharacteristic of plays within the absurdist canon, which typically err towards Esslin's "radical devaluation of language."[75]

That conflict between our own desire for meaning, and the inability of the universe to provide it is classically absurd, and Horton unambiguously tackles it. She states that "maybe the way to stop every other show being about mental illness would be to un-fuck the world?"[76] Her character appears fed up with an existentially uncertain world. She shows intense vulnerability by admitting that "I am tired… mostly of tidying myself up – and of hiding stuff."[77] Following up from this comment, she notes the difficulty in hiding "the frequent sensation of not wanting to be alive or of being too scared to get up in the mornings."[78] The state of her mental health is on full display, making her feel more human than the likes of Estragon, or Gus from *The Dumb Waiter*. Horton's existentialism is propelled by her own mental health, which she speaks about openly. To Love "so much about depression is ugly or simply blank… Horton is able to find a strange magnificence in the darkness."[79] There is a certain defiance to her absurdist musings, and as they continue, now equipped with a reason for speaking up in the first place, she becomes an absurdist hero. She is acutely aware of her own place in the universe,

[73] See E.M. Cioran, *A brief history of decay*, trans. By Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 15.
[74] Compare Horton, p. 16.
[75] Compare Esslin, p. 26.
[76] Compare Horton, p. 5.
[77] Ibid, p. 4
[78] Ibid
[79] Compare Love.

and by extension her own mortality. Aping Camus, she asks "how do we live with the void… how do we live with death?"[80] Here, Horton goes a step beyond the absurdist canon. While Esslin argues that the Absurdist's "renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; [they] merely present[ed] it in being", Horton not only tackles that absurdity directly, but she also provides her own treatise of sorts.[81] She proclaims that "despite our longings for reason, for clarity, our desperate moulding of chaos into something masquerading as meaning, story… has been said before but we forget."[82] She proudly diagnoses the absurd character of human existence via existential musings and becomes content with it. She asks the audience to "look out across the desert… [and] feel small – absurd – temporary – free."[83] Across the entirety of the absurd canon, and all of the plays discussed hereafter, *All of Me* is the only one that evokes both existential philosophy and the Absurd openly and directly.

Vicky Angelaki's assessment that "individuals oscillate between anxiety and hope" rings especially true regarding *All of Me*, with the protagonist doing so throughout the play.[84] Furthermore, her idea that "the persona's and character's we encounter [in the theatre]… are inhabiting that uncertain space of crisis" is also relevant, as Horton's personal crisis becomes interwoven with the many issues facing our contemporary age.[85] Horton observes that "we are all on the same ugly cruise ship built by megalomaniac rich people telling us that art is important and we are all having a truly wonderful time" Her tone completely refutes this notion.[86] This ultimately is where *All of Me* expands upon the absurdist canon. Horton presents a world indistinguishable from our own, which gives the philosophizing more weight. Vladimir and Estragon contrastingly exist in a world of ambiguous

[80] Compare Horton, p. 17.
[81] Compare Esslin, p. 25.
[82] Compare Horton, p. 16.
[83] Ibid, p. 17.
[84] See Vicky Angelaki, *Social and political theatre in 21st century Britain: staging crisis* (London: Methuen Drama, 2018), p. 11.
[85] Ibid, p. 11.
[86] Compare Horton, p. 5.

similarity. Beckett's stage directions merely read "A country road. A tree. Evening."[87] On paper, these words do not suggest anything too abstract, yet when combined with the existence of Pozzo and his slave Lucky, whom he leashes and whips, the play becomes increasingly alien. The existentialist themes within *Waiting for Godot,* and much of the absurdist canon get placed within the context of their own worlds, which are frequently more surreal and violent than our own. Horton however deliberately crafts something unmistakably realistic. The issues she faces are issues that we all face, her concerns are our concerns.

Horton's deep existential dissatisfaction mirrors the dissatisfaction that the main character in Anthony Neilson's play: *Realism* (2011) exhibits. The Absurd becomes apparent through the way in which both protagonists try to manoeuvre around an especially uncooperative world. *Realism* is particularly keen on exploring the consequences of living a stagnating life, filled with regret and worry. Stuart: the protagonist, is a generic everyman. His introduction demonstrates this as he "sits on the couch, in his bedclothes… [and] looks very tired."[88] Much like Horton's protagonist, his vulnerability is disarming, making them both seem relatively unassuming, even if Stuart then also places "one hand down his pants, absent-mindedly squeezing himself."[89] He seems human, warts-and-all. Moreover, much like Horton's protagonist, Stuart is just a normal individual. When he admits that "it's been a fucking hellish week at work and I'm just knackered," it feels relatable.[90] Compounding this, there is a sort of cosmic unluckiness that follows Stuart throughout the play, he "tries to get the toaster to eject the toast but it isn't working,"[91] and upon opening his post, finds only "a bill for the council tax."[92] Additionally, when vignettes of Stuart's past start manifesting onto the stage, it allows the audience a further window into his life, revealing how things had gotten to that point. The tragic death of his

[87] See Samuel Beckett, *The complete dramatic works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 11.
[88] See Anthony Neilson, *Realism* (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), p. 5.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid, p. 7.
[91] Ibid, p. 11.
[92] Ibid, p.24.

mother and the image of Stuart's father "cradl[ing] her in his arms" is particularly evocative and gives the audience valuable context for the personal issues that plague Stuart.[93] Combined, these aspects help flesh out Stuart as a living, breathing person, and helps to present a life that has run aground. In this instance, The Absurd comes from what Camus calls the disconnect between "the mind that desires and the world that disappoints," with the play exploring the life of someone who is consistently disappointed by the world in which they live, which in turn has inspired his existential musings.[94]

The death of his mother; his tiring work schedule and his fraught romantic relationship with Laura flesh out his character with more specific details that Horton opted not to show in her own play. Ultimately, neither playwright frame their protagonists in wholly unsympathetic lights. Both are explicitly presented as victims of an exploitative socio-economic system. The circumstances of their living conditions seem beyond their own control, with the tension of each play stemming from the protagonist's awareness of that fact. Here, contemporary issues are allowed to interface directly with the absurd, inspired by Angelaki's belief that other contemporary work "[has] invested deeply in capturing the… troubled mental states of their protagonists and the extent to which these are tropes of capitalism [in particular]."[95] *Realism* broadly fits into this greater theatrical context. Stuart complains that he "pay[s] a shitload in taxes… and get[s] fuck all in return."[96] He continues by stating that "Smokers were just the next in a long line… [of] state approved scapegoats fed to this fractured, dysfunctional, post-Thatcherite society to lend it some semblance of cohesion."[97] His opinions seethe in a way that only a disenfranchised voice can. Stuart's desire to both be himself and left alone comes under constant scrutiny and obfuscation by a societal structure that demands so much. In the modern age, Angelaki suggests that "individualism has become a fraught term, tied to the narrative of

[93] Ibid, p. 52.
[94] Compare Camus, p. 37.
[95] Compare Angelaki, p. 14.
[96] Compare Neilson, p. 20.
[97] Ibid, p. 21.

neoliberalism;" a societal structure that is now failing Stuart.[98] It is through this context that the absurd truly manifests itself. Unlike Horton's protagonist, Stuart does not wax poetically about the meaning of life, instead Stuart merely exists in his own world, reacting to the things that life has brought him in an especially straightforward way, refusing to acknowledge the existential challenges that confront him. In some respects, Stuart too becomes an absurd hero, as to Camus, "before encountering the absurd, the everyday man lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification… he counts on 'someday.'[99] There is both a complacency and agitation to Stuart's character that is exacerbated by the society he lives in, yet he is completely helpless to change any of it. *Realism* properly showcases the disarming consequence of a world in which, to Cristina Delgado-Garcia, "no feasible alternatives to unjust globalised capitalism and neoliberalism are visible."[100] It is at this starting point that many contemporary plays begin to utilize or explore absurdist and existential philosophy to tackle this conundrum.

Furthermore, it is important to clarify that the play does not only evoke the Absurd on a thematic level. *Realism* is also structured like many plays within the absurdist canon, and unlike *All of Me*, there are multiple characters. *Realism*'s setting is also more naturalistic, despite the "stage itself [being] covered with several tons of off-white sand [and] all of the…. Furniture [being] cut off to varying degrees so as to appear 'sunk,'" which gives the theme of existential stagnation physical form.[101] The vignettes of Stuart's past help to undermine the play's naturalistic flow. These vignettes rush onto the stage without warning and, when coupled with Stuart's bedclothes, give the play a dreamlike quality. Furthermore, his memories intermingle with the events happening in the 'present' in an especially unnaturalistic way. The use of these vignettes help to demonstrate how pervasive

[98] Compare Angelaki, p. 4.
[99] Compare Camus, p. 42.
[100] See Cristina Delgado-Garcia, *Rethinking character in contemporary British theatre: aesthetics, politics, subjectivity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), p. 10.
[101] Compare Neilson, p. 3.

Stuart's regrets are. These memories take living form and seep into his daily life without consent, demonstrating the power that a person's regrets can have. This predilection towards the influence of human regret further evokes Camus' notion that "if only the significant history of human thought were to be written, it would have to be a history of its successive regrets and its impotence's."[102] Human existence in this light appears messy, ill-defined, and frequently prone to error.

Both plays explore the absurdity of modern life through the context of individual people, but such a fixation prevents either play from engaging with the absurd on a macro level. It is here that Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information* (2012) becomes useful to this analysis. Functionally, the play acts as a cross-section of contemporary society. As such the scenes are shorter. Gone are the humanised characters of *Realism* and *All of Me*, replaced instead by unnamed characters with surface-level personalities. The "characters are different in every scene," which removes any semblance of narrative cohesion or character development, forcing the audience to focus on theming instead.[103] Additionally, the dozens of characters weave in and out of the play whenever the scene demands it. As a result, the subject matter of each scene varies wildly; some of the sequences are banal, while others are melodramatic. A character in one scene states that they'd "have liked a day out in Brighton"[104], while another character in a completely unrelated scene asks, "how do you know I'm evil?"[105] The point of this analysis is not to look at each individual scene, but rather to appreciate the combined effect of all scenes holistically. To Angelaki, Churchill opts to create a world which "covers a remarkably broad spectrum," consequently, the play lacks a unified tone.[106] This too is where the absurd manifests itself most clearly, as while *All of Me* focuses intimately on a singular human life; *Love and Information* choses to explore human existence at the macro level. The audience is invited

[102] Compare Camus, p. 16.
[103] See Caryl Churchill, *Love and* information (London: Nick Hern Books, 2012), p. 3.
[104] Ibid, p. 21.
[105] Ibid, p. 24.
[106] Compare Angelaki, p. 31.

to gaze at a wide variety of people and situations in an existential showcase of humanity. They see a person with 'just a rash,'[107] another chastises their friend for having a "computer game"[108] for a romantic partner; someone else believes that participating in a census will let them "know you exist,"[109] another "needs to be looked in the eye [when they] fire me,"[110] and another firmly believes that math's "doesn't mean anything."[111] The play's subject matter is nebulous, with the only notable through-line pertaining to the way characters attempt to communicate with one another, again aping Pickering's observation of a "breakdown of communication."[112]

There is however one sequence that fits within an especially absurdist framework. The scene is merely titled "God," and is focused entirely around two people debating whether "God [has] a higher god to give his [own] existence meaning?"[113] It is a dense existential question framed in a whimsical way that, to Angelaki reminds the audience of Churchill's "intelligent, experimental and often comical writing."[114] The question in general also helps demonstrate how vapid existential discussions can possibly become if taken to the extreme. Yet much like the play at large, there is an earnestness to it. They debate cordially and humour each other's perspective. One character argues that after all "[the stuff God's] done, he might find it all a bit meaningless. I'm a bit surprised he's not depressed," a notion that, while seeming irreverent, seems more sympathetic and altogether human.[115] Their discussion has little stake, and ends nearly as quickly as it begins, with one of the friends asking, "I'm not God am I?"[116] It is a ludicrous suggestion that Churchill caps off by having the

[107] Compare Churchill, p. 50.
[108] Ibid, p. 68.
[109] Ibid, p. 6.
[110] Ibid, p. 19.
[111] Ibid, p. 49.
[112] Compare Pickering, p. 5.
[113] Compare Churchill, p. 50.
[114] Compare Angelaki, p. 19.
[115] Compare Churchill, p. 50.
[116] Ibid.

other character respond that "it makes you really annoying."[117] Despite the comedic tone, this scene represents one of the few examples where characters openly discuss existential ideas.

Traditionally, plays are expected to have a beginning, middle and end, yet *Love and Information* dispenses with that entirely. Angelaki notes that "[Churchill's] textscapes are elliptical, allowing space for spectatorial interpretation and critical initiative."[118] The scenes stop and start with no outwardly understandable reason. All the audience can do is engage with the work presented to them, and when looking at this play in particular, a conflict invariably emerges. How can a play maintain dramatic form and structure, when the very thing it painstakingly tries to depict lacks both? To Carlson, our theatrical expectations are quite reminiscent of the tension that arises from "man's creation of meaning in the face of a world apparently indifferent to it."[119] The stage provides meaning, but what happens when the play resists it? The Absurd itself implies an absence of concrete meaning. What truly is the meaning of *Love and Information*? The title alone suggests a fixation on human affection and conversation, but that downplays the meandering nature of the text itself. From an absurdist perspective, it could be argued that the play naturally depicts Camus' dictum that "the world itself, whose single meaning I do not understand, is but a vast irrational."[120] Human fallibility seems central to this observation. The characters within the play are frequently confused, inquisitive, or argumentative. They bicker over mundane issues and voice trivial concerns. To Angelaki, the play creates this feeling that "lives [are] converging in the moment of crisis both social and political," which is unambiguously absurdist in tone.[121] Ultimately, these three plays, each different in their representations of the absurd, grapple with the notion unambiguously as their primary theme, creating work conscious of the existential challenge of human existence.

[117] Ibid.
[118] Compare Angelaki, p. 19.
[119] Compare Carlson, p. 399.
[120] Compare Camus, p. 21.
[121] Compare Angelaki, p. 30.

3: Humans as Natural Disasters

There has been a growing trend over the past two decades to recontextualize the Absurd to explore the issues of today. Environmental awareness has become an especially relevant topic, with this specific avenue for reinterpretation taking root in the suggestion from Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh that "the Theatre of the Absurd [has an] ability to express an emergent sense of ecological and environmental anxiety that today has become so palpable and potentially catastrophic."[122] For this chapter, I plan on looking at how more contemporary work utilizes both Existentialism and the Absurd to explore the environmental issues of today. There are ultimately two major ways in which contemporary plays typically explore environmental exploitation; the first is through demonstrating the consequences of failing to address the climate crisis; and the second is through showcasing how our own societal systems encourage the wilful degradation of our planet.

Dennis Kelly's *The Gods Weep* (2010) is a helpful starting point because it underpins the various socio-economic systems that encourage environmental degradation and exploitation in the first place. The play begins with a "Board Meeting."[123] Colm: head of both the family and company, is recounting a dream to his underlings, the contents of which jolts him as he openly ponders "If I die… Who have I been and what have I done?"[124] Already within the play's opening moments the Absurd manifests itself as Colm ponders over the existential questions surrounding his legacy. After a lifetime of capitalistic greed, he begins to question his own place within the world, and his impact on it. He expounds further, asking if "we make things that can only destroy, ravenous engines of wealth that can only move in one direction?"[125] Despite appearing as the epitome of capitalistic success, he

[122] See Carl Lavery and Clare Findburgh, *Rethinking the theatre of the absurd: ecology, environment and greening of the modern stage,* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 1.
[123] See Dennis Kelly, *The Gods weep* (London: Oberon Modern Plays, 2010), p. 27.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid, p. 28.

appears dissatisfied with what that success has wrought. In this specific moment Colm appears strangely conscious of the ramifications of his uncontrolled greed, yet is still able to boast that "I took [this company] and shaped it… I made you… I made you into beasts."[126] There is both pride and horror in his statement, suggesting to the audience that while he is certainly becoming aware of the consequences of his actions, he still gets great pride from them too. Parallels can be drawn between his feelings at the start of the play, along with the protagonists of the work of Horton and Neilson, who all demonstrate varying levels of dissatisfaction and angst. The only difference is that while Horton and Neilson's characters are victims of the neo-liberal system we reside in, Colm is a perpetuator and beneficiary of that system, possessing a vested interest in its ultimate survival. Yet despite his relative power, he is still dissatisfied. Flynn argues, from an absurdist perspective that "in [this] post-postmodernist world, the inherited fragmentation of unifying principles and absolute values constitutes a particular challenge to ethical theory and moral practice," wherein people ultimately anchor their own existence to their own belief systems.[127] Camus suggested that "The Absurd becomes god… and that inability to understand becomes the existence that illuminates everything," yet Colm clearly does not see the world in this way.[128] He has attempted to answer the existential questions of his life through being an unashamed capitalist, finding meaning only through the constant acquisition of wealth, regardless of the effect that has on the lives around him. Here Angelaki argues that Kelly "is depict[ing capitalism] as a corrosive force in both familial and social frameworks," only ever capable of bringing ruin.[129] Furthermore, Colm's desire for an ex-employee to be made "unemployable for the rest of his life"[130] demonstrates how, in Angelaki's view, "how capitalist dependencies can lead to the abuse and even sacrifice of human life."[131]

[126] Ibid.
[127] Compare Flynn, p. 123.
[128] Compare Camus, p. 26.
[129] Compare Angelaki, p. 12.
[130] Compare Kelly, p. 31.
[131] Compare Angelaki, p. 82.

Despite Colm's vague existentialism, both he and his underlings remain unrepentant towards the things they have done and ultimately go further. Colm's dividing of territory for both him and his underlings takes on a colonial tone, he states that "I am taking control of Belize… Richard will be responsible for the horn of Africa…. [and] Catherine, you shall take the Americas."[132] They treat the world as their own personal fiefdom and explicitly use the language of colonialism; Ian mentions that "they're all grabbing land in Africa"[133] and Colm speaks of "our sphere of influence."[134] The exploitative nature of their work is explicit, none of them speak euphemistically to mask their intentions. It is ultimately here that the audience starts to see the wilful maltreatment of our planet as these businessmen vie for territory they have never seen and have no connection too.

Instead, their primary concern is whether they can make a profit. Camus' suggestion that "man defines himself by his make-believe as well as by his sincere impulses" shines through most clearly here, as the audience gets to witness Colm's capitalistic impulses overpower any rational thought.[135] To Colm "Belize is important. I want Belize. I'm taking Belize."[136] Because of Colm's position within the capitalistic hierarchy, he will get Belize, despite the dissatisfaction it will ultimately bring him. Furthermore, his interest in Belize borders on an obsession. What follows is what Angelaki calls a "radical adaptation of King Lear" that chronicles the decline of Colm's empire in the face of a corporate power struggle between himself and his underlings who each seek control over the business.[137] The play explores the chaotic nature of capitalism and ultimately suggests that those in control of the mechanisms of power have almost as little control as those beholden to these mechanisms. This aspect in particular is where the Absurd seems most relevant, with even those at

[132] Compare Kelly, pp. 29-30.
[133] Ibid, p. 35.
[134] Ibid, p. 30.
[135] Compare Camus, p. 11.
[136] Compare Kelly, p. 29.
[137] Compare Angelaki, p. 82.

the very top appearing lost, struggling to operate in Cioran's "metaphysics designed for monkeys."[138] Kelly additionally seems to be constructing an antidote to Franz Kafka's bureaucratic hellscapes, with Cornwell arguing that "there is a confusion, or an ignoring, of the legal and the illegal."[139] Whereas Kafka's protagonists are trapped in systems beyond their control, which is reminiscent of Horton and Neilson's work, Kelly intentionally showcases how even those at the top of these systems are just as confused or lost, implying that life, in an absurdist sense, is just a matryoshka doll of confused people all the way down. In turn, this absurdist connection to Kafka is explicit, with Camus himself stating that Kafka's work "offers everything and confirms nothing."[140] Here, Kelly demonstrates the consequences of living in a world that can only confuse and obfuscate. Emboldened by one of Colm's underlings; Richard says that "Society is a type of madness, [and] the trick of being successful in any given society is to promote the kind of madness that is most profitable to your desires at that time."[141]

The play's highly corporatized first act ultimately gives way to a second act fixated on war. The stage directions describe "A hillside, late evening, dark. Soldiers, Militia, noise."[142] At this point, the play endeavours to show the tribulations of the many factions fighting for control of Colm's empire. At first glance, it is somewhat ambiguous whether the events occurring in the latter two acts are actually happening or are merely metaphorical. The corporate war from the first act, situated primarily within the boardroom has now escalated to a literal war, with soldiers, casualties, and environmental devastation. The "confusing welter of battle scenes" as described by Michael Billington contribute to this notion of ecological degradation, with the audience properly seeing the all-consuming nature of the capitalistic thirst for power and wealth.[143] Furthermore, the implied brutality from the first act

[138] Compare Cioran, p. 5.
[139] Compare Cornwell, p. 185.
[140] Compare Camus, p. 100.
[141] Compare Kelly, 2010, p. 99.
[142] Ibid, p. 83.
[143] See Michael Billington, *The Gods weep* (2010) <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/mar/18/the-gods-weep-review> [Accessed: 5 October 2022].

becomes explicit as the warring parties get increasingly desperate. Richard: Colm's son "enters, bloodied, fresh from battle."[144] Being a primary instigator of this conflict, he has little remorse. He suggests to "kill ten men who look weak, wipe blood on your face, find a corpse, eat flesh, eat the brains, find the madness."[145] Richard is ultimately living up to the standards set by his father, lacking both empathy and remorse for his actions. Contrastingly, Colm has changed considerably, stating that "I used to believe that the universe was cruel, that gods made things this way so that cruelty was the only way of existence. But now I see the truth… they watch us and weep.[146] Colm, only after sacrificing so much and seeing his own creation tear itself apart, seems to understand the self-destructive nature of his world, and how it has irrevocably affected those around him. The audience sees the damaging effects of uncontrolled corporate capitalism from the perspective of those carrying it out. Ecological exploitation ultimately becomes the backdrop for their voracious need for profit, with the play demonstrating how this need hurts the planet. As the play reaches its conclusion, and many of the characters have either been killed or taken out of the conflict, the atmosphere begins to change. The stage directions for the final act read: "A hillside, remote, secluded, bushes at the back a tree poking through, all under an overhang. Quiet."[147] As the conflict fades, the scene becomes calmer, implying that the Earth is better-off without these systems of greed, and the people that perpetuate them.

Kelly constructs a play which demonstrates the cruelty of corporate capitalism in the first act and illustrates the ecological consequences that follow that institution in the second. The play's second act also tethers it to the ecologically conscious work of Caryl Churchill. Her plays *Far Away* (2000) and *Escaped Alone* (2016) represent useful examples of ecologically conscious work that can be viewed through an absurdist context. Additionally, Elaine Aston argues they showcase both

[144] Compare Kelly, p. 114.
[145] Ibid, p. 116.
[146] Ibid, p. 122.
[147] Ibid, p. 130.

"Churchill's relentless commitment to questions of equality and social justice,"[148] and her interest in demonstrating "the absurdity of a world enmeshed in values that threaten to devalue all kinds of life."[149] These two notions ultimately help make these plays feel especially humanistic in the face of broad, capitalistic power structures that seek to exploit and destroy. Furthermore, Aston argues that *Far Away* is part of a series of Churchill plays which broadly argue that "to discount the non-human world is to risk a damaged ecology of all forms of life."[150] It is a play that can be read as a warning to those who participate in these exploitative systems. To Aston, the play is structured in "three elliptically formed parts."[151] The first is set at "Harper's house. Night,"[152] the second "Several years later. [At] a hat makers [shop]"[153] and the third is simply set "Several years later."[154] These settings help to establish a naturalistic tone that eventually veers into the absurd as the play continues, mirroring work like *Rhinoceros* and *The Dumb Waiter*. Moreover, much like *Love and Information* and *The Gods Weep* there is this veneer of naturalism that enhances the depiction of cruelty. This is aided by how the locales are overtly domestic and the characters in each play are relatively normal people, who in turn do horrific things. Joan: a young girl overhears "a person screaming."[155] She is dismissed by Harper, an authority figure she looks up to, who asks her "what did you imagine you saw in the dark?"[156] Here, Harper is manipulating Joan, taking advantage of the trust Joan has in her. In turn the audience gets to see how institutions of abuse can encourage the purposeful manipulation of those closest to you, and how this type of behaviour goes hand-in-hand with a wilful exploitation of our planet. When Joan later asks, "why were the children in the shed?" the severity of such a remark helps flesh out the harshness of this world.[157] Eventually, Harper relents and introduces Joan into their

[148] See Elaine Aston, *'Caryl Churchill's dark ecology'* in *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, environment and the greening of the modern stage,* ed. By Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 61.
[149] Ibid, p. 60.
[150] Ibid, p. 62.
[151] Ibid, p. 72.
[152] See Caryl Churchill, *Far* away (London: Nick Hern Books, 2000), p. 9.
[153] Ibid, p. 22.
[154] Ibid, p. 34.
[155] Ibid, p. 12.
[156] Ibid, p. 13.
[157] Ibid, p. 17.

world, explaining that "It's not so bad, you're part of a big movement now to make things better. You can be proud of that."[158] At this point in the play, Harper is ambiguous over what exactly her world is, exacerbating her suspicious nature.

The second act follows Joan, now several years older making hats. Churchill intentionally depicts her existing within the capitalist economic system, working at a job where "the management's corrupt… [and they're] too low paid."[159] Unlike Colm and his kin, who are at the apex of that capitalistic system, Joan, like many others, is at the very bottom. The first act introduces a dark undertone that runs throughout the play, this second act is more content with demonstrating how comparatively mundane economic institutions slot into that broader, crueller world. Reminiscent of *The Gods Weep*, the ecological issues do not become entirely apparent until the final act, wherein Harper and the rest of the cast find themselves "in the middle of a war,"[160] a conflict that quickly takes on surreal characteristics, "Latvia has been sending pigs to Sweden [and] the dentists are linked to international dentistry."[161] It is at this point that the full extent of the play's subject matter becomes apparent. Aston argues that "the Idea of coexistence [with nature is] so unthinkable in a world shaped by the inequalities of a capitalist ecology, that we risk the apocalyptic extinction of all forms of life."[162] Moreover, the play's depiction of this capitalist ecology presents a world where innocent people get forced into perpetuating the same type of violence done to them, leading people down a destructive path. Even people initially critical of this system eventually participate too, just to survive. This is ultimately reflected in the violent tendencies of this world. Harper asks Joan "did you know [cats have] been killing babies?"[163] Todd; another combatant states that "I've shot cattle and children in Ethiopia.

[158] Ibid, pp. 20-21.
[159] Ibid, p. 27.
[160] Ibid, p. 35.
[161] Ibid, p. 37.
[162] Compare Aston, p. 72.
[163] See Caryl Churchill, *Escaped alone* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2016), p. 36.

I've gassed mixed troops of Spanish, computer programmers and dogs."[164] The conflict has grown so pervasive that it has been normalized, with Todd stating that "I liked doing it with my bare hands."[165] Again, Churchill demonstrates this world's wilful cruelty, and how it invariably begets more. This world has completely devolved into all-out war, where the law of the jungle now reigns over anything else. Notably, theatre critic Robert Brustein contemporaneously observed that the play "reflects the way the entire globe is dividing up into Us and Them," which highlights the way in which heightened global tensions encourage conflict and how that conflict affects people and the planet itself.[166] Moreover, Brustein goes further by suggesting that "[*Far Away*] may be the ultimate paranoid fantasy; but like so many paranoid fantasies it is quickly becoming a deadly accurate description of modern life on this planet."[167]

Escaped Alone presents a world in which humanity's position within the global hierarchy has been usurped by nature itself, which in turn creates existential uncertainty. Susannah Clapp considers the play "a light-on-its-feet, elliptical view of apocalypse."[168] The characters; exclusively women "are all at least seventy," and are not involved with the events they are discussing.[169] Mirroring Esslin's view that Harold Pinter's fascination was with "show[ing] people engulfed in trivia," the play appears content with showcasing these women talk about their lives, and the affect that aforementioned apocalypse is having on them.[170] Stories of Vi having "accidentally killed her husband"[171] get intermingled with harrowing tales of intense human misery, where "the obese sold slices of

[164] Ibid, p. 40.
[165] Ibid.
[166] See Robert Brustein, *'Prescient plays'* 227, New Republic, 226 (2002) 27-30, (p. 28).
[167] Ibid.
[168] See Susannah Clapp, *Escaped Alone review – small talk and everyday terror from Caryl* Churchill. (2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jan/31/escaped-alone-caryl-churchill-review-royal-court> [Accessed: 15 September 2022].
[169] Compare Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, p. 4.
[170] Compare Esslin, p. 135.
[171] Compare Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, p. 20.

themselves until hunger drove them to eat their own rashers."[172] Reminiscent of Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, the characters become observers to a world that is slowly unravelling in front of their eyes, with there being little hope of change. "Babies were born and quickly become blind,"[173] "Miscarriages were frequent,"[174] and "chemicals leaked through cracks in the money."[175] The world Churchill creates is one that has suffered many ecological disasters, and while the severity of each may seem fantastical, Clap argues that the play showcases "fantasy intricately wired into current politics.[176] Furthermore, she also argued that the play "is intimate and vast. Domestic and wild."[177] Ultimately *Escaped Alone* takes on this almost recognisable characteristic. Like *Far Away* and *The Gods Weep* there is a logical throughline, wherein the continued actions of our increasingly voracious, capitalist system encourage and entrenches these environmental disasters.

The play is more overtly dystopian than *The Gods Weep* and *Far Away*, primarily because the characters openly discuss the living conditions that they face. Mrs J: one of the elderly women gossiping, mentions that "the hunger began when eighty percent of food was diverted to tv programmes."[178] Such a systemic failure seems unbelievable at first, yet when Richard Partington observes how "Britain's poorest households risk[ed] spending almost half of their disposable income on Gas and electricity bills [in the winter of 2022]," the notion Churchill puts forward appears tangible.[179] Despite not overtly depicting them in either play, the characters within both *Escaped Alone* and *Far Away* are just normal people forced to deal with the decisions made by faceless people in positions of power. The Audience sees how business executives similar to the ones in *The Gods Weep*

[172] Ibid, p. 22.
[173] Ibid, p. 8.
[174] Ibid, p. 17.
[175] Ibid.
[176] Compare Clapp.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Compare Churchill, *Escaped Alone*, p. 22.
[179] See Michael Partington, *Poorest risk spending half disposable incomes on energy bills, UK report says* (2022) <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/sep/22/poorest-risk-spending-half-disposable-incomes-on-energy-bills-uk-report-says> [Accessed: 7 October 2022].

gamble with things they barely understand at the expense of those lowest on the socio-economic ladder. Clapp's observation that "This is a play that remakes the idea of authority" bears fruit here, as previously ironclad institutions have resorted to desperate measures to say afloat.[180] It is here where Absurdism interacts with the environment, as unfeeling institutions and the people beholden to them damage Earth's ecology for their own advantage. Building on from this, Aston argues that "[Churchill] deploys absurdist sensibilities that shapeshift through [her work] to create affectively nauseous theatrical environments."[181] To Aston, what separates Churchill's absurdism from that of Camus and the canon itself, is that the absurdity within *Escaped Alone* specifically is "not the nausea of existential despair, but the sickening feeling that ensues when we are caught up in… both the enduring inequalities of the human-to-not-quite-human and the abject failure to acknowledge the co-existence of the human with the worlds of the non-human."[182] She argues further that this connection is pivotal, as while it separates Churchill from the overt existentialism of the Absurdist canon, it suggests that the Absurd can operate within a slightly different context, with humanity's relationship with nature being of paramount importance. By moving the Absurd away from existentialism and positioning it within the wheelhouse of both environmental and institutional awareness, it presents an entirely different interpretation of the absurd, which in turn may have a more contemporary relevance. In this way, exploring absurdist ideas cease to be purely introspective. The canon itself was intensely focused on this, but the works of Anthony Neilson, Caroline Horton, Dennis Kelly, and especially Caryl Churchill seem to go a step further, Aston points out that "to recognize the absurdity of the inhuman condition under capitalism… is vital to our recovery, to feeling our way back to a democratic pulse."[183] In turn, this requires both artists and people to understand how their own existence is inextricably tethered to the systems and institutions that our society both creates and entrenches, requiring an ever-present awareness of the world in which we live. Aston ultimately

[180] Compare Clapp.
[181] Compare Aston, p. 62.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid, p. 75

argues that an existentially conscious worldview cannot be blind to the consequences of the systems we create, and that, if done correctly, we can return to a more democratic, equitable society. The plays in this analysis so far have developed on this point, showing the effects of an increasingly cruel, authoritarian world where the wishes of the characters are meaningless in comparison to the wishes of wider, socio-economic systems.

4: Patriarchal Violence and Male Toxicity

In looking at how both Absurdism and Existentialism can be used to explore more contemporary work, it is equally important to look at how human beings consciously or otherwise create and enforce their own biases, privilege, and disadvantage. In this light, patriarchal violence and toxic masculinity become useful avenues for this type of exploration. The former has roots in legal precedence, where woman have historically been barred from political participation; the owning of property; and independence from the family unit. The latter is borne from a myriad of societal expectations interfacing with one another to create a broader, more pernicious role that men can utilize to get their own way. As such, these two concepts are symbiotically linked, but distinctly separate.

Considering the vastness of both topics, it is prudent to establish how this chapter will utilize both terms. Firstly, it should be noted that the analysis of patriarchal violence will not cover theatrical instances of familial violence, as this will have its own chapter. In the context of this analysis, Terry Kuper's interpretation of toxic masculinity is used, wherein it is "a constellation of social[ly] regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence.[184] Furthermore, these regressive traits primarily take the form of "ruthless competition, an inability to express emotions other than anger, an unwillingness to admit weakness, or dependency [and the] devaluation of women and all feminine attributes in men."[185] There are other traits that fit within the context of male toxicity, but these traits have specific relevance to the plays discussed hereafter. Additionally, they also underpin what academic James Messerschmidt described as "hegemonic masculinity"[186], which he recognized as a "pattern of practice… that allowed men's power

[184] See T.A. Kupers, *'Toxic masculinity as a barrier to mental health treatment in prison'*, Journal of Clinical Psychology, 61, (2005), 713-724, (p. 714).
[185] Ibid, p. 716.
[186] See James Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic masculinity: formulation, reformation and* amplification, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), p. 28.

of women to continue."[187] What will become apparent through the course of this analysis, is that regardless of intent, the toxic behaviour shown by the male characters in these plays helps to reinforce this type of belief system, and a recognition of this overarching thought process will help to understand why some characters act how they do. This analysis will also explore patriarchal violence in a similar fashion, with much of the focus being on how the male characters in these plays incorporate violence to maintain patriarchal power structures, and how all of this relates to both Existentialism and the Absurd.

When discussing these themes, it is important to recognize that both topics are well-represented within contemporary theatre. For this analysis, the works of Dennis Kelly, Ella Hickson and Jez Butterworth will be looked at specifically. As a starting point, Hickson's *The Writer* (2018) is a play that explores aspects of both overarching ideas, with a fixation on how interpersonal conflict can affect the collaborative process of theatre-making. The play appears to start conventionally on "a bare stage, post-show, worker lights are on."[188] Two characters appear onstage, named merely "Young Woman" and "Older Man." None of their lines are attributed to either character by name, which denies them of any concrete identity over their words. Some of these lines break the fourth wall, with one of the characters stating that "Cara enters – 'thunderously sexual, beat', whatever that fucking means."[189] The other remarks that "with the carpet and the little bits of flesh-coloured tape sticking the mics on – it's like you actually think we're meant to think it's real."[190] This ambiguity over line attribution and the nature of these character's fourth-wall knowledge would be a great example of a postmodernist play toying with dramatic structure, yet Hickson goes in a different direction altogether. Halfway through the first act, it is revealed that everything up until now had been part of a play being rehearsed in front of the eponymous Writer and Director. These two characters then

[187] Ibid.
[188] See Ella Hickson, *The Writer,* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2018), p. 11.
[189] Ibid, p. 13.
[190] Ibid.

spend the second half of the act discussing what they've seen. Here, Jean Genet's *The Maids* (1947) appears especially relevant here, with both plays exploring how the act of roleplay takes on hierarchical and sexualised properties.

Ultimately, the first half of Act One serves as a foundation for many of the ideas featured throughout the play. The conflict between the Young Woman and Older Man demonstrates this most clearly, as they ultimately have very different ideas over what the theatre can and should be. The Young Woman opines that "we're sick to the back fucking teeth of hearing from old men… explain what they consider to be the truths of this world."[191] Here, Hickson gives voice to a very specific form of agitation, wherein a newer generation of writers, creatives and performers feel stifled by the old guard, who cling to both their influence and their understanding of art. To the Young Woman, "the world is imploding."[192] She argues that "with Trump in, with the monstrosities going down, the world is cracking open and what I just saw is meant to heal us? We should be screaming, we should be speaking in tongues, in a fit, in a fucking – rage, naked… arms open, screaming at the sky."[193] This underlying existential pessimism runs throughout the play, while also being reminiscent of *All of Me* and *Realism*. When taken at large, there is this sense, whether articulated by a character within each play or through subtext, that the systems and institutions humanity has created are beginning to fall apart.

Expanding on this idea, Hickson presents the female character as an idealist with a clear vision for her work. When she is specifically asked "What else do you want?"[194] she responds, "I want the world to change shape."[195] She carries the same amount of existential zeal that the protagonist in *All*

[191] Ibid, pp. 14-15.
[192] Ibid, p. 14.
[193] Ibid, p. 15.
[194] Ibid, p. 18.
[195] Ibid, p. 19.

of Me demonstrates. Furthermore, both are deeply conscientious women who become aware of the broader issues that face our world and seek to change them in whichever way she can.

Conversely, the Older Man embodies a different, altogether negative archetype. Much like Colm from *The Gods Weep*, both plays feature a character who either directly profits from these decaying systems, or at the very least appear resistant to changes within them. The Director's position within the theatre affords him an immense amount of influence and privilege within the theatrical world, which he uses to further his own artistic vision. When trying to review the Writer's work later in the play, he asks "What it's trying to say? What's it trying to do? In dramatic terms… I'm not sure it's doing anything."[196] Here, Hickson showcases the problem with institutional privilege; the director's questions, while valid from a strictly artistic sense, posit an orthodoxy over dramatic style and intent. The Director is limited to his own conception of the theatre, making him view any deviation from his ideals in a hostile light. Tension invariably stems from this conflict, as the Director has the power to withhold theatrical access to the Writer merely because he does not subjectively understand the piece of subjective art presented to him. In turn, the Director goes further, explaining that "I endlessly hand out opportunity and no one is grateful for it, everyone thinks it's their God-given right, it's their duty to be difficult… I'm offering you a production… so just compromise a tiny bit."[197] His frustration implies that he has taken her objections as a personal affront to him, showcasing how power can be wielded in overtly emotional ways. Because of his status within the Theatre, his thoughts have more weight than anyone else's, and when he asks for an artistic compromise, he considers it to be a reasonable request. Hickson further implies that, to the Director, he views the production as something only he can give, conveniently ignoring the many other people required to physically put on a show.

[196] Ibid, p. 64.
[197] Ibid, p. 69.

While initially appearing to be a mundane dispute between a writer and director, this conflict demonstrates the two major tensions which run throughout the play: the first being sexual politics. As their argument ramps up, the Writer asks the Director whether "it bothers you that I slept with a woman? / When I didn't sleep with you."[198] In this instance, Hickson is depicting the harsh reality of the entertainment industry. The notion that there are people who will weaponize a new artist's dreams and ambitions for their own personal gain is an extremely pertinent one in the wake of both the Weinstein scandal, and the broader Metoo movement. In turn, this demonstrates Hickson's hyper awareness of the relationship between men and women within creative industries that lack clear pay structures. An artist's value is purely subjective, being based on various factors and criteria. Furthermore, notions of the patriarchy begin to shine through; it has been argued by Benjamin Poore that "[*The Writer*] is highly critical of power structures within the theatre industry and in wider society that make it difficult for women's voices to be heard."[199] The audience sees first-hand how this power structure is preventing the voice of an underrepresented group being heard, while also fostering tension and hostility. Furthermore, Hickson criticizes the way in which a play's content may enforce these imbalances. The Young Woman from Act One states that "[when] I walk on stage; [the] first people think is – how old is she? How hot is she? How fuckable is she? You walk on stage – they think – what's he got to say? What's he going to do?"[200] The sexualisation of women within art becomes a source of contention, and as the two argue, the female character suggests that "I don't see an awful lot of blokes getting fucked in the arse for dramatic flair." [201] With all of these observations and comments, Poore argues that "The Writer thus enacts and embodies feminist criticism of the male canon."[202] The double standards that permeate artistic spheres becomes a clear source of tension for

[198] Ibid, p. 70.
[199] See Benjamin Poor, *'You can't be here: the playwriting dialectic in Ella Hickson's Oil,* Modern Drama, 63, (2020), 21-38, (p. 21).
[200] Compare Hickson, p. 23.
[201] Ibid, p. 22.
[202] Compare Poor, p. 27.

Hickson, who gives her protagonist a sense of awareness to these issues, along with the ability to communicate her thoughts.

The second tension that runs throughout the play is an intergenerational one. The Writer asks whether "it scares [the director] that the future might speak a language that [he] can't understand."[203] The implication is that the changes wrought by time threaten to disempower those within positions of influence. As such, the Director becomes a regressive influence, refusing to fathom that any different approach is possible, because any such change may render him obsolete. The director's agitation takes on existential qualities because he has tethered his entire identity to the malleable world of art and is now resisting that malleability in a way that prevents others from expressing their own identities. Tim Winton argues that "In the absence of explicit, widely shared and enriching rites of passage, young men in particular are forced to make themselves up as they go along. Which usually means they put themselves together from spare parts, and the stuff closest to hand tends to be cheap and defective."[204] The Director has entrenched his identity to something hyper-specific and is utilizing his influence in increasingly toxic ways to protect it from any perceived slights. When the Young Woman and Older Man characters discuss their own play, the latter opines that "You just seem very, twenty-four. That's all."[205] Both the Older Man, and the Director embody the same type of personality; one that is wholly resistant to change, while also patronising the opinions of those they deem invalid. This angers the Young Woman, who warns him not to "be a patronising cunt."[206] Ultimately, her anger is borne out of a lack of respect by those in positions of influence.

[203] Compare Hickson, p. 70.
[204] See Tim Winton, *About the boys: Tim Winton and hox toxic masculinity is shackling men to misogyny,* (2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/09/about-the-boys-tim-winton-on-how-toxic-masculinity-is-shackling-men-to-misogyny> [Accessed: 5 December 2022].
[205] Compare Hickson, p. 15.
[206] Ibid.

While Hickson does attempt to portray the Writer's concerns as well-intentioned, she also showcases the limits of the Writer's own ability. When pressed why the Writer does not touch on race, she fumbles, vaguely stating that "um it's not about race. Although power – I mean, is always about – I take some – I admit that – Sorry."[207] Lacking the lived experience or apparently any cursory research, she completely lacks the language to even discuss race. Here, Poore argues how "The Writer [is] serially reframing its Writer to call each representation into question."[208] There is this sense that the Writer can only credibly write about what she understands or has experienced. Furthermore, this obvious failure of the Writer to address an important issue in its own right presents a limit to theatrical art in general, while also mirroring the way in which writers within the Absurdist canon similarly failed to explore race. Furthermore, Hickson generally avoids romanticising the theatre itself, with the Writer commenting that "there are some devastatingly poor people living pretty nearby… [but] there aren't loads of them in here [in the theatre] though, are there?[209] This sequence ultimately touches upon an unavoidable truth regarding the theatre; chiefly that, regardless of intent, the theatre can be elitist in nature. Expanding on this notion is the observation from Lyn Gardner that the "Theatre is not just default white, it's default able-bodied, middle class and frequently predominantly male too."[210] Going further, she suggests that ultimately "we spend a lot of time making theatre for and with people who are just like us."[211] This idea of the representative limits of the theatre is reminiscent of criticism levied against the Theatre of the Absurd. In the years since the movement's decline, there has become this perception from academics like Michael Bennet that theatrical absurdism has been "an exclusively white male endeavour."[212] It could be argued however that this type of criticism should not be treated as the ending point. As evident in this analysis, there exists a newfound canon of writers, especially

[207] Ibid, p. 34.
[208] Compare Poor, p. 37.
[209] Compare Hickson, p. 19
[210] See Lyn Gardner, *Theatre is default middle-class, white and male. We must diversify or die* (2014) <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2014/mar/03/theatre-middle-class-white-male-diversify> [Accessed: 7 December 2022].
[211] Ibid.
[212] See Michael Bennet, *Reassessing the theatre of the absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 123.

more diverse than the theatre of the Absurd, utilizing Absurdist ideas to tackle contemporary issues. Hickson ultimately does not showcase this blind spot to undermine the Writer, she instead demonstrates that however well-intentioned an artist may be, there will always be a limit to their experience, which in turn necessitates collaboration with others, something made harder by stalwarts like the Director who wield their influence in ways that prevent underrepresented groups from being heard.

When the Writer is explicitly given the opportunity to devise a production matching her dramatic intentions, the results are very different from what the audience has seen before. Her production is described as "an attempt at staging female experience, the director should be aware of avoiding the inherently patriarchal nature of theatre."[213] In this new direction "Female characters do – they are not having things done to them. Bodies are for action, not titillation or decoration. There should be no looking. The protagonist should own the space."[214] The scene the Writer creates empowers women to speak of personal subjects like "having a contraceptive device fitted into your uterus."[215] They have sex that isn't "the semi-devastation that follows sex with men."[216] As they celebrate to the music of Dolly Parton and Todd Baker, "A new state has been achieved. The new world is built."[217] This evolution occurs gradually, without any care for plot or rationality. Here, The Writer's scene deliberately avoids realism because, to Jeanie Forte "realism…. Could not be useful for feminists interested in the subversion of a patriarchal social structure."[218] Ultimately, the Writer's form appears reminiscent of Zachary Apony's observation of "feminist criticism that encourages the

[213] Compare Hickson, p. 57.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Ibid.
[216] Ibid, p. 64.
[217] Ibid, p. 65.
[218] See Jeanie Forte, *'Realism, narrative, and the feminist playwright – a problem of reception*, Modern Drama, 32 (1989), 115-127, (p. 116)

renunciation of patriarchal transmission techniques."[219] In turn, something altogether new is created, something that departs from naturalistic theatrical techniques.

The Director unsurprisingly disapproves, primarily because, to forte, "theatrical institutions… operate to inhibit radicality (e.g. feminism.)"[220] Yet the Writer presents her own rebuttal, suggesting that "two people… standing on stage, intellectual back-and-forth is dialectic, one oppressing the other, it's wordy. It's Stoppard, it's Pinter, it's power struggle, it's patriarchy – it's how it's learnt and how it's meant to be, it's elitist."[221] In this interaction, Hickson presents a different approach for the theatre, while also criticising the way theatre has been done before. She specifically cites two successful writers who represent different ends of the British Theatrical canon and equates it with patriarchy. Once again, the criticism of theatrical absurdism being overtly white comes through, as Stoppard and Pinter were both associated with the Absurd. Furthermore, that criticism evolves into a much broader perception of the theatrical canon being dated and oppressive, constructed in a way that perpetuates regressive power structures. Here, Hickson argues that other means of theatrical expression are possible and may liberate those who have been underserved by the way things currently stand. Tangentially, it is perhaps no surprise that the work of Horton and Churchill also present theatrical art in non-traditional ways. Robert Brustein argues that Churchill's work is "[un]easy to identify, being always ahead of her game in her style and subject matter,"[222] and Poore asserts that "[Hickson's work] like Churchill's highlights the instability of character and de-emphasizes individual agency."[223] It could be argued that the female dramatists and playwrights that have emerged over the past two decades remain some of the most promising proponents of canonical change and advancement, presenting a new vision for where the theatre and theatrical absurdism may go, aided by their experiences as

[219] See Zachary Apony, *Feminist theatre of defiance: examining plays that empower audiences to challenge the patriarchy*, New England Theatre Journal Boston, 31 (2020), 141-166, (p. 156).
[220] Compare Forte, p. 115.
[221] Ibid, p. 67.
[222] Compare Brustein, p. 27.
[223] Compare Poor, p. 34.

women and how they use that to explore the existential questions of the day. Interestingly, this mirrors the way in which Pinter and Stoppard were likewise considered breakers of theatrical conventions, suggesting a duality of sorts.

Creating a play squarely about the politics of gender and male toxicity within the confines of theatrical spaces runs the risk of perpetuating this 'theatre for us and by us' concept that critics like Gardner have observed earlier. As such, Hickson spends time exploring the complicated personal life of the Writer. She states that "I feel like I'm dissolving inside just watching [my boyfriend's] capacity for happiness… I want awe. I feel like I need blood. All the time."[224] The Writer is suffering the same type of angst that the protagonists of *All of Me* and *Realism* are. The mundanities of life become stifling, constricting her hopes and dreams. Unlike Horton's protagonist, who is presented as a solitary person with no one to interact with, Hickson shows how this type of existential wanderlust can strain relationships. The writer notes to her boyfriend how she "do[es] things I don't want to do all the time,"[225] which include "go[ing] for dinner with your mother. Wear[ing] shoes. Eat[ing] anything other than cheese on toast. Speak[ing. And] hav[ing] sex with you."[226] When combined with the Writer's dissatisfaction with her career, and more specifically what is being done to her work, it exacerbates the situation. The writer states that "the story I wrote when I wrote it, was true… And if I turn it into a film, the producers will break it and smash it into this thing that isn't true and that will hurt."[227] The tension between the Director and the Writer becomes all consuming, with their inability to compromise exacerbating the troubles with her home life.

[224] Compare Hickson, p. 51.
[225] Ibid, p. 49.
[226] Ibid, p. 50.
[227] Ibid, p. 43.

The Writer is ultimately suspicious of what those in power will ultimately do to her work, expanding on the idea that powerful, patriarchal voices in her industry will alter her work to fit their own orthodoxy. In this context, the ideas of patriarchal oppression and male toxicity take the form of complete artistic control. Within the context of male toxicity, Winton believes "there's only one way of being a bloke, one valid interpretation of the art, the role."[228] This interpretation revolves exclusively around control, and the need to stifle the creative work of others. Hickson depicts the Writer as principled to a fault, creating the implication that in order for marginalized voices to get their own ideas heard, they have to be assertive. This type of conviction can become a source of contention, however. Her boyfriend, not really understanding his partner's artistic principles yells that "YOU ARE NOT PICASSO. YOU WILL NEVER BE PICASSO. STOP THINKING YOU ARE FUCKING PICASSO. IT IS DISGUSTING."[229] If viewed from the lens of patriarchal oppression, this moment is yet another example of a male figure becoming aggressive in the face of someone trying to break the mould. Here, the audience gets to see how, in Winton's view "[men] are expected to betray their better natures, to smother their consciences, to renounce the best of themselves and submit to something low and mean."[230] The boyfriend shows no pretence of care, no interest is taken towards his partner's feelings. Instead, he suggests that the writer "can't see how grateful [she] should be."[231] An idea that runs the risk of fostering abusive relationships, wherein partners are held in place on the basis that the life they have is good, regardless of the reality.

The question over whether the boyfriend is individually bad, or just a perpetuator of patriarchal social structures is left to the interpretation of the audience, yet when the Writer begins a relationship with a woman, Hickson's depiction of that relationship is equally telling. The stage directions clarify how they have "good sex, the best we've seen. They know what is good and they get

[228] Compare Winton.
[229] Compare Hickson, p. 50.
[230] Compare Winton.
[231] Compare Hickson, p. 53.

it done."[232] Here, Hickson is rebelling against patriarchal norms in a tongue-in-cheek style, yet this celebratory tone does not last. As their relationship advances, the Writer takes on a more assertive role in their relationship, the stage directions reveal that "The Writer start's enjoying [sex]. She's really going for it – there's something strangely aggressive about it… The Writer comes. The Girlfriend does not."[233] This change suggests that patriarchal power is not necessarily linked with the gender someone has been assigned with. Hickson argues that adopting the penetrative role during sex has a profound impact on the relationship that that person has with their partner. Despite the sincere way that Hickson presents her protagonist, she is quick to show how the Writer is ultimately beholden to the same systems that shackle the Director, creating an altogether complex representation of male toxicity and patriarchal violence. Likewise, it should be acknowledged how the play itself is especially complicated and open to interpretation, along various lines of inquiry.

Like *The* Writer, Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009) is another useful example of male toxicity and patriarchal violence. Having been described by Angelaki as "arguably the defining British play of the first decade of the new millennium."[234] It opts to explore how a strict adherence to male toxicity can ultimately lead someone down a self-destructive path. In this light, the plays protagonist: Johnny 'Rooster' Byron becomes the most obvious starting point for this analysis. Byron himself is an enigmatic figure that serves as the play's primary instigator. As a result, the play begins by describing his home, which is situated in "a clearing in a moonlit wood [with] lots of junk… Rubbish. Empty bottles… [and] a smashed television."[235] This abject squalor instantly sets the tone while also helps establish his character. His overall unwillingness to clean or even hide the state of his accommodation demonstrates his contentment. Furthermore, his wilful isolation hints at the first of his toxically

[232] Ibid, p. 78.
[233] Ibid, p. 85.
[234] See Vicky Angelaki, *Contemporary British theatre: Breaking new ground* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 41-42.
[235] See Jez Butterworth, *Jerusalem* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009), p. 7.

masculine traits as defined by Kupers; chiefly a "a dread of dependency."[236] Out of sheer principle he lives on his own terms, regardless of the legality. Fawcett: a council worker, tells Byron that he is breaching the "unauthorised encampment policy"[237] and is therefore being served "notice F-17003 in contravention of the Public Health Act of 1878."[238] Byron is warned that non-compliance will result in the all-but-certain removal of his caravan, ye ignores the local authorities and carries on regardless. There is ultimately an existential quality to his wilful self-destructiveness, as this confrontation with the council showcases two conflicting identities clashing with one another. Byron's toxic independence, and the council's legal framework present two fundamentally different approaches to life. The consequences of this clash disproportionately affect Byron, who lacks the systemic and institutional legitimacy that the council enjoys. In this vein, Butterworth showcases how unsympathetic the local council is towards the possibility of his homelessness. He is treated like a pest to be removed, and through the bureaucratic notices and legal statutes, there is a flagrant lack of care towards some of the most vulnerable in society. Exacerbating this is the natural conflict between Byron's crafted identity and the rigid identity of the council, which is built upon a foundation of law and order. Ultimately, this clash mirrors Cioran's belief that "each institution translates a mission; city halls have their absolute, even as the temples – officialdom, with its rules -a metaphysics designed for monkeys."[239] The audience gets to see how one group's constructing of meaning begins to clash with another, with little care for the consequences. All of this ultimately questions the efficacy of building an identity in spite of a state that does not recognize the legitimacy of that identity. Byron's lawlessness further complicates this, as while not a wholly sympathetic character, Butterworth presents Byron's physical and metaphysical needs as being earnest.

[236] Compare Kupers, p. 717.
[237] Compare Butterworth, 2009, p. 7.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Compare Cioran, p. 5.

It is important to recognise that Byron's entire persona is built around posturing, which becomes especially apparent when interacting with friends, whom he describes as "Outcasts. Leeches [and] Undesirables."[240] Immediately after his dispute with the council, he states how "I aint scared of Kennet and Avon… there's council officials ten years dead, wake up in cold wet graves hollering the name of Rooster Byron."[241] To his band of misfits, Byron's aggressive grandstanding gives him leverage, which allows Byron to position himself as de facto leader. Furthermore, this "readiness to resort to violence," represents another toxic trait observed by Kupers which increases his prestige amongst his friends.[242] As the play progresses, it becomes clear how he wilfully fosters a dense mythology that his followers can fawn over and exaggerate. The assertion that during the "flintlock fair [in] 1978, he jumped thirteen busses" is an example of this, with the utilization of an unverifiable story becoming another crutch which props him up amongst his friends.[243] Overall, the suggestion of violence, combined with the mythologizing and confidence conjures an especially potent aura that the people around him gravitate towards. Some do see through this blatant façade; Lee observes that he is "Wiltshire's biggest bullshitter," but overall, those that associate with Byron appear to either actively like him, or simply enjoy the companionship.[244] The admittance from one of Byron's friends that they were "sat at home in [their] Y-fronts watching telly [with a] pot noodle" suggests that some within his entourage are completely downtrodden, lacking even the slightest semblance of social support, which may explain why some gravitate towards him.[245]

When a young girl named Phaedra goes missing, her stepfather Troy prejudicially suspects Byron, whom he calls a "Gyppo."[246] Notably, Byron is now at the receiving end of violent threats. He

[240] Compare Butterworth, p. 50.
[241] Ibid, p. 24.
[242] Compare Kupers, p. 717.
[243] Compare Butterworth, p. 31.
[244] Ibid, p. 33.
[245] Ibid, p. 23.
[246] Ibid, p. 79.

is explicitly told "You're the lowest piece of shit in this forest, mate… I will beat you into your grave… Gypsy."[247] Troy's threats are notably more graphic than those of Byron's, and the bringing up of Byron's Roma heritage places Troy's toxicity in a completely different context based around racial prejudice. Also, while some of Byron's threats seem especially vapid, Troy ultimately delivers on his. Byron returns after a later encounter with Troy, sporting "broken ribs [and] wrist. He's bloodied. Bleeding from his nose. On both cheeks, charred and bloody X's."[248] This is the first-time in the play that violent imagery is staged, and it clashes directly against Byron's mythologized world of boasting, with him now having to bear the consequences of his actions. Butterworth deliberately pits these toxically masculine figures against one another, with them both engaging in self-destructive behaviour. The reveal of "the trailer door open[ing with] Phaedra, still dressed as a fairy, com[ing] out" demonstrates Byron's willingness to make sacrifices just for the sake of what he believes in.[249] There are undeniably other, more institutionally recognized ways to resolve the situation, but as before, he carries on with what he thinks is best, regardless of the consequences.

As the play reaches its conclusion and the deadline of his impending eviction begins to approach, Byron's life begins to unravel. His group of followers desert him. Fawcett returns and frankly calls him "a drug dealer… [who] deal[s] drugs to minors."[250] Byron's façade begins to unwind, both for him and the audience. The violence that he is capable of comes out, as Fawcett reminds him that he "verbally assaulted [Mr Pickles], stripped him bare, gagged him and locked him in his shed… without food or water for a week."[251] Byron, who could have arguably been seen as a grimy, yet determined individualist ultimately has his most pernicious qualities exposed. Earlier in the play, he regales his troupe over a story about "the lads from the rugby club all turn[ing] out as golliwogs. [With] steel

[247] Ibid, p. 80.
[248] Ibid, p. 104.
[249] Ibid, p. 84.
[250] Ibid, p. 97.
[251] Ibid, p.p. 94-95.

drums [and] frizzy hair."[252] It is an unpleasant story which characterizes Byron as a kind of politically incorrect uncle, coasting off former glory. When taken as a whole, the realisation is that Byron and his friends have been left behind by the passage of time, wholly unable to move forward. Byron's ex-girlfriend Dawn observes this herself, wondering "What happened, Johnny? The world turns… And it moves on and you don't. You're still here."[253] Here, Butterworth showcases the existential issues that arise from basing your identity on something unstable. Ultimately, Butterworth's presentation of Byron is complicated, he clearly demonstrates both toxic and patriarchal traits, yet his position within society rob these traits of their danger. Colm from *The Gods Weep***,** and The Director from *The Writer* both display equally toxic and patriarchal tendencies, but the key difference is their position within the social hierarchy. Bryon lacks the economic power and corporate legitimacy of Colm, and the institutional authority of The Writer, and so embodies the ideals of patriarchal toxicity, but sees no improvement from doing so. Ultimately, each of these men utilize toxic power structures for their own gain, yet none of them truly craft a fulling life for themselves, each one is ultimately destroyed or tarred by their tendencies.

Ultimately, Byron's male toxicity, in addition to his stubbornness enables his self-destructiveness to reach its apex. Rather than accept eviction and having his entire entourage leave him, "he reappears with a can of petrol. [and] splashes it around the inside of the caravan, and on the outside too."[254] This willingness to evoke grave consequences for the sake of his convictions is reminiscent of Meursault: the protagonist and absurdist hero of Camus' novel *The Stranger***,** who is executed after committing a murder. Like Meursault, this embracing of destruction and death takes on an air of final defiance, as Meursault "open[s himself] up… to the tender indifference of the world."[255] It is not unreasonable to suspect that Byron, after living so long on the fringes of an uncaring

[252] Ibid, pp. 19-20.
[253] Ibid, p. 66.
[254] Ibid, p. 108.
[255] Compare Camus, p. 111.

society, feels the same way. The comparisons between the two are not strictly related to this morbid defiance either. As they both become absurdist antiheroes through catastrophic mistakes of undeniably poor judgment, yet defiantly embrace the consequences of their action all the same. Despite coming from one of Camus' novels, rather than his philosophical essays, Meursault arguably represents a more realistic example of an Absurd protagonist, as his actions have significant consequences. Furthermore, Byron's own brand of existential identity anchoring becomes a point of criticism towards the absurdist canon itself. Camus' romantic notion that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" becomes inappropriate in a world where expressing one's identity can result in violent backlash, and while the subject of this chapter's analysis is based around the actions of toxic and patriarchal men, this issue becomes especially pertinent when discussing people of racial, sexual, cultural and gender minorities who face even more types of oppression and stigmatization, oftentimes from a systemic level.[256]

Kelly's *Girls and* Boys (2018) is a play that also explores how male behaviour can reinforce, maintain, and perpetuate male dominated power structures. What ultimately separates this play from *The* Writer and *Jerusalem,* however, is that it goes far beyond the pale of male toxicity. The violent subject matter instead roots the play within the broader context of patriarchal violence, and conversations specifically surrounding male dominated aggression. When discussing this theme, it is important to first recognize that we are talking about violence based around, and validated by patriarchal power structures, which in this context, as defined by Gary Barker "both refers to the greater aggregate power that men have over women – social, political, economic – as well as power hierarchies between individual men and groups of men."[257]

[256] Compare Camus, p. 89.
[257] See Gary Barker, *Male violence or patriarchal violence? Global trends in men and violence*, *Sexualidad, salud y Sociedad,* 22 (2016), 316-330, (pp. 318-319)

The play is structured in a manner not too dissimilar to Horton's *All of Me*. Both are one-woman shows featuring an emotionally vulnerable protagonist confiding to the audience her intimate thoughts and feelings. The key difference between these two plays is that Horton's work ultimately takes a more optimistic look at the human condition, while Kelly's play comes to an altogether nastier conclusion. The play begins innocuously, with the protagonist recounting the story of her marriage; stating how she "met [him] in the queue to board an easyJet flight,"[258] but ends with her telling the audience that her husband "had killed himself by swallowing the broken end of a plastic spoon and forcing bread into his own gullet,"[259] after the murder of their two children. The juxtaposition between these two points, and the slow descent towards the end is what constitutes the bulk of the play's dramatic tension. Additionally, the way Kelly showcases this gradual transformation of a husband into a familial murderer becomes a useful avenue to discuss the ways toxic masculinity and patriarchal violence encourage and validate aspects of his behaviour.

The protagonist's life, ambitions and experiences therefore become the primary way the audience relates to her. Kelly allows the victim's language to carry the audience's attention throughout the play. She starts by explaining how she was "desperate to get into [her] industry after six months trying to scrabble my way in like a rat in a china shop."[260] Her desperation towards getting into an obtuse career makes her feel relatable, while also places judgement on how nepotism and systemic oppression maintain power in the hands of the privileged. She continues by explaining her workplace environment wherein "first you snide about her being tough. Then you snide about her for being tough and childless. Then you snide about her for getting a child, it was disgusting."[261] In this

[258] See Dennis Kelly, *Girls & Boys* (London, Oberon Modern Plays, 2018), p. 1.
[259] Ibid, p. 61.
[260] Ibid, p. 12.
[261] Ibid, p. 27.

instance, Kelly appears acutely aware of the way society mistreats women, and the contradictory position that women are ultimately placed in, being judged for acting in ways that deviate from what Messerschmidt considers a "complementary, compliant, and accommodating subordinate relationship with hegemonic masculinity."[262] Furthermore, there is this sense that she will always be judged, regardless of her actions. Which in turn suggests that she will always be considered an outsider, whose presence must be justified and explained for. Her actions become fair game to scrutinize, even if she complies to her colleague's requests. The toxicity is clear, it is an "aspect… of hegemonic masculinity"[263] as defined by Kupers, which strives for the "devaluation of women," stripping them to their essentialist value.[264] Kelly is also keen to showcase how this occurs in places outside the workplace too. The protagonist sardonically suggests that "[it was] like my dirty little thoughts polluting our perfect nuclear family, infecting it was a darkness that it should not have."[265]

In ultimately understanding the breakdown of their relationship, it is important to acknowledge that her work environment is only one aspect. Another important aspect is the erosion of the relationship between the protagonist and her husband. She opines that there "were the good times. When everything just felt… right."[266] Yet the cracks begin to emerge gradually as she admits that "I don't remember exactly when things… started to go properly wrong,"[267] and how one night he was "sat in [his] chair… still in his suit. Staring at me."[268] This creates a sense of foreboding as the audience has already been told the conclusion. Her husband sending a text message stating that "[she] shouldn't worry because we wouldn't lose the house," also appears suspicious, and combines with other strange occurrences to suggest that the communication between them has properly broken

[262] Compare Messerschmidt, p. 28.
[263] Compare Kupers, p. 716.
[264] Ibid, p. 714.
[265] Compare Kelly, *Girls & Boys*, p. 26.
[266] Ibid, p. 24.
[267] Ibid, p. 37.
[268] Ibid, p. 40.

down.[269] As a result, it leads her to suspect that "he was having an affair," an inference based not on any specific admission, but moreover the complete breakdown of their relationship.[270]

Pickering's observation of Theatrical Absurdism's fixation on "the breakdown of communication," has tragic consequences in this instance.[271] The protagonist comes away with the belief that "I had thought that the man I loved had changed. But this was so much worse. This was realizing that he had never existed in the first place."[272] The slow and silent deterioration of his life becomes the play's enduring puzzle. His wife mistakenly believed that he had his life in order, in part because of his relative silence. In turn, this demonstrates another of Kuper's toxically masculine trait that dooms their relationship, showcasing "an inability to express emotions other than anger [and] an unwillingness to admit weakness, or dependency."[273] Not only has the husband's life gone drastically wrong, but he also lacks a proper means to communicate his problems. The consequences of this societal pressure, and the inability to properly address it becomes tragic, as the protagonist reveals that "my children were stabbed to death."[274] She describes the tragedy with plain and simple language. There are no stage directions to imply any specific characterisations either, creating a cold yet clinical atmosphere. In turn, she gives the tragedy a name: "It's called family annihilation."[275] She explains how "he stabbed [their daughter] eight times,"[276] yet "he didn't kill the dog… Which is unusual, normally they do."[277] The blunt honesty of her account suggests a sense of dejection, with her lacking the energy to do anything other than recount the facts.

[269] Ibid, p. 41.
[270] Ibid, p. 43.
[271] Compare Pickering, p. 5.
[272] Compare Kelly, *Girls & Boys,* p. 51.
[273] Compare Kupers, p. 716.
[274] Compare Kelly, *Girls & Boys*, p. 53.
[275] Ibid, p. 57.
[276] Ibid, p. 55.
[277] Ibid, p. 57.

Before the reveal of what her husband has done, she opines that "we created this incredible thing called society… to keep us alive and stop us from hurting each other."[278] She demonstrates some complacency in this suggestion, possessing a belief that the systems we have constructed are fully capable of preventing the worst of human behaviour. Her logic is faulty as she herself becomes testimony to the fact that awful things can happen to normal people without reason. Camus' assertion that "our epoch is marked by the rebirth of those paradoxical systems that strive to trip up the reason as if truly it has always forged ahead," appears most relevant.[279] The institutions that we have inherited appear ironclad yet are specifically the result of centuries of constant human revision. When those institutions fail to protect someone like the protagonist, she naturally becomes marred with trauma. She cannot rationalise the situation, stating how "he just… melted away out of the world we knew."[280] The protagonist provides no motive for her husband's actions, yet the slow unravelling of his life demonstrates something did occur. The reality is that societal expectations alone can cause someone's identity to unravel, especially when a person's life begins to falter in comparison to the life they are expected to have. The husband, explicitly or not, may have affixed his identity to a role he struggled to maintain, perhaps in an example of Sartrean bad faith. The Husband additionally shows an aspect of self-deception; which Cox considers "involve a person holding two contradictory beliefs one of which he does not notices."[281] In this instance the two beliefs are the individual successes of the husband (which appear non-existent) and the success of his wife, which, through the lens of patriarchy, becomes a source of obvious resentment and tension between the two, even if the husband never openly admits to it. The severity in the breakdown of his crafted identity becomes so great that neither him nor his wife can recognize the severity of the situation until it is too late.

[278] Ibid, p. 23.
[279] Compare Camus, p. 18.
[280] Compare Kelly, *Girls & Boys*, p. 52.
[281] Compare Cox, p. 93.

Furthermore, the protagonist of *Boys and Girls* is unique from an absurdist perspective because she becomes a victim of the world's senselessness in a way that very few characters from the absurd canon ever are. She has recognized, in the cruellest way possible, the absurd character of human experience. Camus' idea that "A [person] who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it" takes the form of unambiguous trauma, and unlike the protagonist of *All of Me*, there is no room for existential questioning or to argue the Absurd, it merely exists.[282] Furthermore, Camus' original notion that "the absurd, hitherto taken as a conclusion [should be] considered… as a starting point," falls apart, as the protagonist's grief becomes all consuming.[283] Ultimately, all three protagonists are absurdist heroes who have treated the absurd as an end point, primarily because the absurd has robbed the Woman of her children, Rooster Byron of his home and the Writer of her integrity. The process of rebuilding in the face of these challenges appears almost impossible. Moreover, neither the Writer or Rooster Byron can properly grapple with the absurd because of the systemic norms and expectations that weigh them down. Conversely, the Protagonist in *Boys and Girls becomes* a victim of these expectations and has the foundation of her own crafted identity stolen. Finally, when ultimately broached with the question of what she does next, she simply states how "I carry on. I put one foot in front of the other.[284] The muteness of her reply says all it needs to, demonstrating the consequences that trauma and tragedy can have on someone's life, especially on an existential level.

[282] Compare Camus, p. 25.
[283] Ibid, p. 5.
[284] Compare Kelly, *Girls & Boys*, p. 61.

5: Violence in the Family

Building on from the chapter about male toxicity and patriarchal violence, this chapter will look primarily at how contemporary plays explore familial violence. Within the context of this analysis, that primarily means violence perpetrated by members within the family unit and the failure of those within to properly care for and support those they are charged to protect. As a result, the work of Dennis Kelly and Caryl Churchill will be specifically looked at, while also incorporating both absurd and existential thought to explore how both encourages or enables this kind of violence.

Described by Rebellato as "a striking piece of urban gothic", Kelly's *Debris* (2004) is a play about two siblings recounting their childhood, and the various tragedies that befell them.[285] To Andrew Davis, the play seems reminiscent of "[Samuel] Beckett and [Harold] Pinter[s]… concentration on the anguished individual."[286] It is a fixation that runs throughout the play, being both relevant to the protagonists and their parents; none of whom appears to be living remotely pleasant lives. Furthermore, the play's opening sequence depicts a homemade crucifixion which sets an irredeemably dark tone. Additionally, the narration is provided by the two siblings, named Michael and Michelle respectively, who blur the line between reality, hyperbole, and fiction. Gardner argues that "[Kelly's] narrators are too unreliable for the audience to ever get a real grip upon the story."[287] The crucifixion sequence demonstrates this quality most vividly, as it begins with Michael retelling the story of how "my father erected a fourteen-foot crucifix in our living room."[288] His father's intensions are obvious: he is attempting to crucify himself, and the process of doing so is described by Michael

[285] See Dan Rebellato, *'New theatre writing – Dennis Kelly',* Contemporary Theatre Review, 17 (2007), 603-608, (p. 603).
[286] See Andrew Davis, *Other theatres: the development of alternative and experimental theatre in Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 174.
[287] Compare Gardner.
[288] See Dennis Kelly, *Debris* (London: Oberon Modern Plays, 2004), p. 9.

in vivid detail, sparing neither his father's dignity or modesty. He describes how "flesh rips, the delicate bones of the palm are pushed aside and splintered as a blasphemous intrusion of steel screams through his hand. Imagine him panting, gasping, muttering to himself, sobbing."[289] The imagery carries the tension of the scene, yet contrastingly, Michael also explains that "my dad – fond of his bacon and eggs – is a fat bastard."[290] The juxtaposition of these two specific sentences, and the bizarre situation itself helps to clarify almost immediately that somewhere, there has been a complete breakdown within their family dynamic. Michael goes further, explaining how "four hours later… I walk in. no presents, no ice cream, no jelly, no vodka… no screaming children singing happy birthday, just a pile of rubble, scaffold, and my dad dying on the cross."[291]

Complicating matters further, Michael sardonically argues that "my old man is not stupid. Think of what he's constructed, what he's achieved."[292] Michael's pride is interwoven with disgust as he gets to see "the contents of his [father's] bowels… sprayed… across the back of his legs and the upright of the crucifix. [As] he wheezes and gurgles."[293] As the crucifixion draws to a close, Michael recounts how "suddenly he looks at me in absolute terror. Slowly, I leave, closing the door behind me."[294] Michael ultimately paints a vivid opening scene that, while sounding completely fantastical has an air of grim authenticity. His retelling is ugly, lacking embellishment. Credit is morbidly given where necessary, with Michael referring to it as "his masterpiece."[295] From a stylistic standpoint, Rebellato argues that Dennis Kelly "has something of Philip Ridley's grotesque imagination, Mark

[289] Ibid, p. 10.
[290] Ibid, p. 9.
[291] Ibid, p. 11.
[292] Ibid, p. 12.
[293] Ibid, p. 11.
[294] Ibid, p. 13.
[295] Ibid, p. 10.

Ravenhill's social satire [and] Martin Crimp's fidelity to language," an argument justified with this opening sequence.[296]

In the context of *Debris*, familial violence takes the form of neglect. Their father's makeshift crucifixion, while not demonstrating parental neglect *per se*, does showcase a dereliction of duty on the part of the father. Furthermore, as the play progresses, it becomes clear that this crucifixion was not the only cruel and unusual thing that befell the two siblings. Michael follows up with the story of how "my mother died of Joy."[297] He describes how she choked to death on a chicken bone while "stagger[ing] around the room like a dying dinosaur about to fall on a car."[298] His language is obscene and meanders between being immensely distressing and whimsical. This, in turn becomes the first example of *Debris* utilizing an absurdist technique observed by Esslin; chiefly an ability to "[fuse] tragedy with the most hilarious farce."[299] The play's tone appears twisted and uncanny in a way not too dissimilar to a Beckett play. Estragon's insistence that they "hang ourselves immediately!"[300] displays a very similar tone as the description of Michael's mother, with them both exploring unambiguously awful situations with a sort of brutish glee.

The tone that Michael takes when referring to his parents death is ultimately a muted one, creating the implication that he has become accustomed to the harsh reality of the world they live in. As Michael continues to talk about his life, examples of familial abuse, neglect, and violence become more frequent and visible. His sister Michelle explains that "after a brief period of mourning my father pushes my mommy off the couch and onto the floor and switches over to the football."[301] Her

[296] Compare Rebellato, *'New theatre writing – Dennis Kelly'*, p. 608.
[297] Compare Kelly, *Debris*, p. 13.
[298] Ibid, p. 15.
[299] Compare Esslin,, p. 238.
[300] Compare Beckett, p. 18.
[301] Compare Kelly, *Debris*, p. 31.

description is apathetic, lacking any kind of emotional embellishment, and as time progresses, Michael in turn observes that by the end, "Little is left of my mother… just a few dirty bones and some brown sludge."[302] Decay, filth and rubbish become themes onto themselves, with the siblings literally living in it. No attempt is made to clean up, and none of the characters seem fazed by their living conditions, demonstrated through Michael's belief that "[babies] construct themselves from rotting leaves, coke cans, syringes and empty packets of monster munch."[303] Their living conditions have effectively been normalized in a similar way to Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* exclaiming how "we could go watch the Villa."[304] Kelly's casual reference to everyday items like Monster Munch makes the world, and the characters that live within it seem recognizable to the audience, yet the grizzly context itself ends up warping these household items, making them seem uncanny. The extent of the abuse and neglect suffered by the siblings is so obscene that it seems unbelievable, yet the grim stories continue. Michelle states that "[in] there I gestate, in my mother's rotting corpse - three months of development yet to go, though I take four seeing as how I'd have to go through the birth unaided."[305] The imagery that Kelly presents completely disarms the fact that such a birth is literally impossible. The unreliability that Gardner observed also helps tether the play to the Absurd, wherein characters like Vladimir and Estragon spin fantastical yarns that push the boundaries of what is real.

Throughout the play, the siblings display a certain level of naivety. After being "grabbed… stuck… in a car and sped off into the cold December night"[306] by a man they refer to as 'UncleArry,"[307] Michael says that he "could tell he was a kind man – he had to be, otherwise why rescue us from our lives."[308] The fact that neither of the siblings can sense any kind of danger demonstrates just how

[302] Ibid.
[303] Ibid, p. 26.
[304] See Harold Pinter, *Harold Pinter plays: 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 121.
[305] Compare Kelly, *Debris,* p. 30.
[306] Ibid, p. 22.
[307] Ibid, p. 22.
[308] Ibid, p. 23.

normalized their lives have become, while also suggesting how desperate they are to be rescued from their current living conditions. In truth, the world that has raised them has had a pronounced impact on their values and their behaviour. When they begin to quarrel with each other, Michael starts strangling his sister, stating that "killing my sister was proving almost impossible, due to the tenacity with which she clung to her life."[309] The calmness of his words demonstrate the irreversible devaluation of human life. Furthermore, the abuse and neglect they endure validates violent behaviour and begins to make the play feel like a tragedy. This sequence ultimately showcases how these siblings begin to perpetuate the abuse that has been delt to them. Here, Kelly implies that broken people, through their own desperate fight for survival, ultimately hurt other broken people, and further establishes a dog-eat-dog atmosphere that underpins much of the play. Once again, this evokes comparison within the absurdist canon, wherein the equally broken characters of *Waiting for Godot* and *the Dumb Waiter* cause more strife for one another.

What further complicates this analysis is the way Kelly ultimately seeks to subvert the roles within their family unit. After deciding not to kill his sister, Michael discovers a baby growing from a pile of rubbish in their home and choses to nurture them. The juxtaposition between the scenes of intense neglect and Michael's parental love is stark. They name the child Debris, and not soon after his discovery, Michael announces that "he fed at my breast. Not milk but blood."[310] Again, that fantastical streak returns, with the baby taking on vampiric qualities. By presenting Michael's baby in this way, the suggestion that Debris is literally leeching off Michael's very essence becomes a morbid allegory of parenting itself. The audience has already seen how the authority figures in their lives have either abandoned them or gave them away. Contrastingly, Michael provides Debris with the one thing that he himself was denied: love. When Michael is ultimately forced to give up his child, he says that

[309] Ibid, p. 19.
[310] Ibid, p. 28.

"every now and then my breath aches and I think of [him]. It's heavy with blood, aching for his lips… and that somewhere he has a mother whose breast, heavy with milk, throbs in time with mine."[311] Michael's parenthood becomes pyrrhic. Despite the cruel nature of their world, Michael was able to show compassion to someone who may never have received it normally. It becomes clear through his verbose language that his care for Debris is genuine, yet like everything else in Michael's life, Debris gets taken from him. This sequence is ultimately optimistic in tone, as even though the siblings have been brought up in a world of immense degradation and neglect, Michael is still able to find someone that he can love. Even when one of the siblings opines that "We now know from that moment on God is no longer watching," there is this sense of dogged defiance, an acknowledgment that with enough determination, it is possible to salvage hope and love in the face of misery, evoking Camus' Sisyphus in a way that none of the other plays discussed in this analysis do.[312]

While *Debris* primarily seeks to explore the ways abuse and neglect within the family unit perpetuate heartache and conflict, *Orphans* (2009) is more concerned with looking at how familial bonds get weaponised when violence is committed by someone within the family unit. While *Debris* features families wilfully abandoning those most vulnerable, the characters in *Orphans* contrastingly sacrifice everything to protect a loved one who has committed a crime. Andrew Dickson describes *Orphans* as "a haphazard story about a knife attack that may or may not have happened, told by a man who may or may not have committed it."[313] Liam; the alleged perpetrator wilfully fosters a sense of ambiguity to protect himself and trick those around him to believe his version of events. Watching his story unravel, and the reactions of those around him to that changing story therefore becomes a major source of dramatic tension. Additionally, the play comes across as especially contemporary in a

[311] Ibid, p. 49.
[312] Ibid, p. 48.
[313] See Andrew Dickson, *Playwright Dennis Kelly: 'I like to feel fear.'* (2009) <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/aug/25/dennis-kelly-orphans-edinburgh-festival> [Accessed: 30 January 2023].

manner not too dissimilar to Pinter's domestic dramas about working class life. Furthermore, Dickson suggests that *Orphans* "carries echoes of Abu Ghraib and hostages in Iraq, but also covers issues closer to home: knife crime, abortion, the alienation of the white working-class [and] the effects of immigration."[314]

Mirroring the domestic locales of *Realism* and *Debris*, *Orphans* is set in "Hellen and Danny's flat. A candlelit dinner, interrupted… Liam stands there having just come in. He has blood all down his front."[315] Also like *Debris*, violent imagery is presented to the audience immediately, yet the context is very different. Unlike the crucifix, Liam's bloody clothes are ambiguous enough to make the audience question the bloods origin. Helen and Danny likewise speculate over this ambiguity, and as the former states that Liam is "covered in blood,"[316] Liam glibly responds "Yeah. Sorry about that."[317] This interaction, while ultimately appearing minor highlights Liam's unfazed temperament. His downplaying of the situation appears equally strange and humorous, juxtaposing violent imagery with his nonchalant attitude. Here, Kelly both establishes what type of person Liam is, while also serving as the play's first meaningful foray into Absurdism. This opening mirrors Esslin's observation of theatrical absurdism's ability to "[fuse] tragedy with the most hilarious farce."[318] Furthermore, Liam's own admission that "[the blood's] not mine, it's this lad's blood,"[319] along with him alleging that he found him "fucking lying, on the pave-, on the tarmac" raises infinitely more concerning questions regarding his involvement.[320] It also begins the long process of Liam continually establishing, reiterating, and tweaking his version of events to save himself. He quips that "this country. It's just… monsters and… it's dark out there" in an attempt at explaining away the situation as ambiguously as possible.[321]

[314] Ibid.
[315] See Dennis Kelly, *Orphans* (London: Oberon Modern Plays, 2009), p. 17.
[316] Ibid, p. 18.
[317] Ibid, p. 19.
[318] Compare Esslin, p. 238.
[319] Compare Kelly, *Orphans,* p. 19.
[320] Ibid, p. 20.
[321] Ibid, p. 21.

Through casting the blame onto an amorphous evil, he can shift suspicion away from himself. Ultimately, this selective divulging of information is useful to Liam as he can rely on his familial connections with both Helen and Danny to assume the best of him. At the start of the play, both want to remain supportive. Liam's initial justification that "I was completely alone. I hugged him" is flimsy at best, but because of the connection that Helen and Danny has with him, they believe him.[322] Danny even goes one step further, declaring that "Liam's innocent, Helen. He hasn't done anything. He has nothing to fear from the police, he is innocent. [but] There is a boy, out there now, hurt. We have to call."[323] Here, Kelly demonstrates how familial bonds can encourage naivety and complacency, especially when an unscrupulous family member takes advantage of this trust. Helen is similarly reluctant to disbelieve Liam, with her hesitation over phoning the police being squarely based on her admission that "he's the only family I've [got]."[324] This unwillingness to do the right thing on account of her own familial bond with Liam becomes dangerous, as it makes her complicit in Liam's actions. What starts as Helen instinctively acting upon information she assumes to be true, devolves into her asserting that "they're the police, Liam, they're paid to be suspicious. [Liam] has a record."[325] The painting of the police as inefficient and dangerous becomes a half-truth, with Helen weaponizing that fact to protect Liam and dissuade Danny.

Contrastingly, Danny is initially the voice of reason. He observes that "say that we know he was going to die… and we took a decision to let him die, then what sort of people would we be?"[326] Regardless of the consequences of the act itself, he seems unwilling to humour them because it may result in the loss of life. As Liam's story begins to falter and his culpability becomes apparent, Danny's apprehension grows. This ultimately attracts the ire of Helen, who begins to behave in increasingly

[322] Ibid, p. 23.
[323] Ibid, p. 37.
[324] Ibid, p. 34.
[325] Ibid, p. 46.
[326] Ibid, p. 65.

absolutist terms, equating the decision to call the police as one about "having a family or not having a family, there's us and them, protect or don't."[327] Because of the timid way Liam is portrayed, it becomes apparent that Helen sincerely wants to protect him. She explains how "the first thing we do is try and clean the evidence," demonstrating the first instance in which Helen's familial loyalty forces her to break the law, regardless of Liam's guilt.[328] As a result, Helen comes across as increasingly toxic as she explains to Danny how much "[he] fucking adores you."[329] Here, Helen begins to take on manipulative tendencies, and when Danny invariably refuses, she labels him "a fucking coward."[330] The fact that Helen equates Danny's unwillingness to break the law with an act of cowardice demonstrates the extent to which familial bonds can be weaponized to downplay criminal behaviour. Furthermore, this also highlights how male toxicity (as discussed in a previous chapter) can interface with familial violence to normalize this kind of behaviour. Danny, as a man is expected to be brave and strong, which runs counter to how a normal person would react in this situation. As the play's intensity ramps up, and the consequences for both action and inaction rise, the stakes get higher. Helen blatantly declares "let's not have this child then."[331] Helen uses her pregnancy as a point of leverage, arguing that because Danny will not protect Liam, he cannot by extension protect their unborn child. This moment likewise demonstrates another clear example of how familial bonds can be used to encourage behaviour that perpetuate violence and abuse.

Going further, in trying to understand the content of Liam's character, it is important to acknowledge that he has been raised on a narrative that emphasizes his position with the broader social hierarchy. Because of his ethnicity and gender, he expects to have a social advantage, yet he very much remains at the bottom of the social ladder. Like Rooster Byron in *Jerusalem*, he exists within

[327] Ibid, p. 85.
[328] Ibid, p. 47.
[329] Ibid, p. 36.
[330] Ibid, p. 66.
[331] Ibid, p. 37.

the confines of a society that is quickly leaving him behind. Neither Liam nor Rooster have anything concrete they can tether their identity to, leaving them vulnerable to self-destructive ideologies. Both also wilfully engage in violence as a default mode of expression. Byron's interpretation of his living situation comes in the form of an intense brand of libertarianism, wherein a person's value becomes based solely on their self-reliance and dogged determination. Liam however does not have a steadfast identity of his own, instead he feels the pull of white supremacy and violence. He is quick to assert that "we're abandoned here. [the] Government? Fucking left us to beasts."[332] That abandonment creates a gulf which he chooses to fill with people like Ian, despite Liam claiming that "I don't even like him, but he's a mate, you know. We was at school together."[333] This in turn underlines an uncomfortable truth. Liam, and many radicalised white men just like him have a genuine sense of abandonment. Mirroring Esslin's observation regarding the theatre of the Absurd, "the certitudes and unshakeable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting."[334] The assumptions that Liam had been brought up with, that our institutional systems are anything but unfeeling and cruel has been proven to be a lie. Liam has nothing he can cling to, no job to occupy his time, no dream he can pursue, and no meaningful relationship he can nurture besides the one he has with Helen and Danny. In order to properly combat this feeling of disillusionment, Liam has to find an identity that is not based on the violent scapegoating of others, which can only ever perpetuate hardship and inequality. Yet he does not, he has no proper incentive to do that, especially when people like Helen seem so willing to cover for him.

As noted previously, Liam appears to be both unreliable and directionless, something that helps obscure his manipulativeness. As the play progresses, it becomes apparent that when his wellbeing is on the line, Liam is perfectly capable of bending the truth for his own benefit and taking

[332] Ibid, p. 42.
[333] Ibid, p. 50.
[334] Compare Esslin, p. 23.

advantage of the insecurities and trauma of other people. Notably, he openly muses over "what happened to Danny."[335] Knowing full-well that Danny too has suffered trauma, he uses that fact to garner sympathy and understanding. As Liam's story changes, and his culpability becomes apparent, Liam suggests that "I think he was one of the lads that did you, Danny."[336] The attempt to both normalize violence as a kind of restorative justice, and the weaponizing of someone's trauma to take advantage of that person's biases becomes the point in which Liam's character takes a darker tone. Here, Liam stops being merely just a victim of white extremism, radicalized to commit a hate crime, now he is actively trying to either justify or downplay his transgression. In truth, he shows a complete unwillingness to accept any amount of responsibility, passing blame onto others. When Helen and Danny stop being cooperative with him, he begins ranting "I don't believe you're… fucking being like... for him? I'm your brother, Helen, and Danny I thought we was, you don't even know what sort of person."[337] This quick turn to anger demonstrates how he does not really care about making amends, and how he expects his family to help him, regardless of the situation, and regardless of any wrongdoing.

The cracks in Liam's façade begin to emerge over the course of the play. The reveal that Liam once assaulted a boy at school comes as a surprise, while also establishing that he is capable of conscious violence. Helen recounts how he "smashed him to a pulp… [hit] him with a brick… [and] broke his fingers."[338] It becomes apparent that Liam's skittish personality, along with his apparently unassuming nature obfuscates genuine rage. The fact that Helen "had to leave a school… I loved" further showcases how familial violence can have an adverse impact on innocent parties merely on the grounds of association, which is doubly interesting given the extent to which Helen protects Liam

[335] Compare Kelly, *Orphans*, p. 24.
[336] Ibid, p. 87.
[337] Ibid, p. 69.
[338] Ibid, p. 76.

throughout the play.[339] She knows what he is capable of yet chooses to stick by her brother regardless. Furthermore, as the play progresses, the acceptability of this approach becomes harder to justify. The audience is informed that Liam has a friend who "collects Nazi memorabilia,"[340] and Liam himself references a "dirty gypo kid [from school] who eats sticks."[341] Liam's outburst begins to take on a radicalized component as these anecdotes start to shape the audience's interpretation of him. The violence that Liam commits appears racially motivated, and while this aspect will not be properly analysed in this chapter, it is important to note that racial bigotry, violence and tension are aspects that underpin much of the familial violence committed by Liam.

Through both *Debris* and *Orphans,* Kelly seeks to explore how violent actions can affect a person's identity. Liam seems to have already been consumed by his violent tendencies, yet in their attempt to defend him, both Helen and Danny are dragged down to his level. Through trying to understand the situation and to protect Liam, Danny goes along with him to find the 'lad' that Liam 'found'. When Danny returns, he "opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out."[342] It is during this lattermost sequence that the extent of Liam's crime becomes apparent. Rather than having stumbled upon this injured man incidentally, Danny reveals to Hellen that "Liam had tied him to his workbench [in] this shitty shed at the end of Ian's garden… Where Liam had stabbed him with a knife."[343] Elaborating further, Danny explains that he was just "some Islamic man… on his way home. Some man with a beard, he wasn't a lad… he had children, he was scared for [them], he was at least thirty-five."[344] Here, the situation gets finally explained, completely destroying the ambiguity that Liam has been able to weaponize in his favour.

[339] Ibid, p. 76.
[340] Ibid, p. 49.
[341] Ibid, p. 75.
[342] Ibid, p. 98.
[343] Ibid, pp. 100-101.
[344] Ibid, p. 105.

The reality is that Liam has been lying to both Helen and Danny constantly, taking advantage of the trust they have in him. Moreover, what started as an unwillingness to abandon a family member has devolved into outright complicity to a hate crime. Here, Kelly's intent is clear, suggesting that blind faith in a person, especially driven along familial grounds can lead to the wilful perpetuation of abuse. To avoid the possibility of Danny going to the police, he is bullied into participating. Danny explains how he "screamed at him. [standing] there in this balaclava and screamed into his face, 'tell me where you live, you paki.'"[345] Throughout the play, Danny has been depicted as a positive force; while open to believing Liam's version of events, he tries to convince both Liam and Helen that contacting the police is the right thing to do. Through most discernible metrics he is in the right, yet is constantly criticized, mocked, and abused for expressing this view. The fact that, by the play's very end, Danny has been strongarmed into participating demonstrates the pernicious nature of familial violence. Neither Helen nor Liam physically abuse him, yet their expectation of complete loyalty makes Danny both a victim and perpetrator. Here, Kelly showcases just how messy these types of situations are. Liam is undeniably a violent abuser, yet there are clear indications that he himself has suffered too. Likewise, Helen has suffered at Liam's hands, and now Danny must bear the brunt.

Ultimately, the play demonstrates parallels between Danny and Meursault in Camus' *The Stranger*. Both men have violent friends, The former is Liam, whose violent tendencies have already been noted, and the latter is Raymond; a pimp described to have "beaten [his prostitute] up badly."[346] It is their association with their problematic friend that leads them to commit a hate crime. Meursault's shooting of an "Arab [who] pulled out his knife" is only possible because of his association with Raymond; Danny would never have abused the Islamic man without having known Liam in the first place.[347] While not absolving either of guilt, it becomes apparent how a toxic friend or relative

[345] Ibid, p. 102.
[346] See Albert Camus, *The Outsider,* trans by. Sandra Smith (London: Penguin, 2012), p.28.
[347] Ibid, p. 52.

can lead a person down a dangerous path. Danny's situation appears especially tragic, as while Meursault frequently behaves in morally ambiguous ways, Danny is consistently framed as a positive force for good. Liam himself notes this, stating that "[a] part of me thinks you should be dragged down off that fucking pedestal and be forced face down into the mud so you can eat the same shit and rotting flesh I've been eating, so that it gets in your mouth… and that you choke on it." [348] Liam, discovering that his path in life may now be set in stone, opts to tear Danny down to his own level, rather than trying to atone. Furthermore, Liam's observation that "I saw you tonight, Danny. I saw you" seems especially insidious, further making Liam irredeemable and Danny appear just as malleable as Meursault.[349]

Unlike *Jerusalem* or *Debris*, *Orphans* has no clear-cut absurdist hero. All three characters have been placed into an unenviable position and, through the perpetuation of their value systems, have made things worse. This is perhaps where the play's most striking similarity with theatrical absurdism lies. Esslin argued that Absurdist plays usually "renounce arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; [they] merely present it in being."[350] The Absurd in this play manifests itself through generalized violence, and how Liam's identity encourages it. Like other Absurd characters from the canon such as Pozzo and Ben, violence is both a natural way, and only way to express their identity. It becomes normalized and invariably drags nonviolent characters in their obit to also participate. Because of Liam's utilization of violence, he likewise finds it difficult to change course. Furthermore, *Orphans*, and other plays within the confines of this analysis opt to demonstrate the consequences that violence can have on a family. In this context violence takes on Absurd qualities through its senseless application. Perhaps mirroring life, it is obviously inappropriate to argue one person's specific blame or guilt, and as such Kelly showcases how they are all jointly responsible for the

[348] Compare Kelly, *Orphans*, p. 109.
[349] Ibid, p. 109.
[350] Compare Esslin, p. 25.

situation they find themselves in. As a result, none of the characters are afforded the opportunity to grow from this encounter; Liam is never willing to succinctly explore the ways in which the neoliberal economic model has let him down, nor is he able to grapple with the bigotry that led him to that violent attack. Helen, after having finally given up, forces Liam to "leave the key."[351] By trying to save Liam from the police, she loses him entirely, and Danny loses a part of his humanity in the process. Additionally, the things that Danny has been forced to do have completely damaged his relationship with Helen. In an instance of dramatic irony, it is Danny who states that "I don't want that child. Get rid of it."[352] Rather than being an example of emotional blackmail, it becomes a sign of Danny's complete apathy. Forced to protect someone from accountability, he has engaged in the same type of racist violence that Liam has. The consequences are stark, with the play's ending creating the implication that their relationship has been irrevocably destroyed.

While *Debris* mainly looks at the way neglect and abuse perpetuate violence, and *Orphans* is about the reaction to violence committed by someone within the family unit, Caryl Churchill's *A Number* (2002) explicitly contains both violence and the threat of it between members of the same family. The abstraction that underpins the two previous plays no longer applies, as the circumstances surrounding *A Number* leads one of the characters to kill a family member. As a starting point, the stage directions read "the play is for two actors. One plays Salter, the other his sons. The scene is the same throughout, it's where Salter lives."[353] In the world Churchill creates, human cloning is physically possible, and she chooses a domestic setting to explore that reality.

[351] Compare Kelly, *Orphans*, p. 113.
[352] Ibid, p. 118.
[353] See Caryl Churchill, *A Number* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), p. 7.

Tangentially, Arifa Akbar notes that the play's first performance was in 2002 "when debates around human cloning were at fever pitch."[354] As such, the play depicts human cloning as a commonplace occurrence, so much so that the protagonist: Salter, has to be chastised for calling these clones "things."[355] The dehumanization is obvious, with Salter arbitrarily denying some clones their humanity, while affirming others. Salter's own son: B2 is a clone himself, yet that fact is obscured from both B2 and the audience. The excuse that Salter gives for his son's similarity with other clones is that there are "copies of [him] which some mad scientist has illegally."[356] Almost instantly, the son wonders if "someone else is the one, the first one, the real one. "[357] Here the boy showcases a level of existential vulnerability. Furthermore, the value of human life is lessened when it becomes possible to literally purchase one, B2 realizes this as well, stating that "Suppose each person was worth ten thousand pounds."[358] Salter quickly interjects, suggesting "a hundred [thousand pounds]" instead, but the process of putting a monetary value on human life, cloned or otherwise already showcases the negative existential effects that cloning has had on this society.[359] Even when the truth is revealed that Salter's original son had "been killed in a carcrash,"[360] and his reason for having an identical child was simply "I wanted one just the same because that seemed to me the most perfect," the understandable grief does not justify what is ultimately a selfish act.[361] B2's identity is undermined from the start, regardless of his thoughts, his opinions or his tastes, he will always share the face of another while desperately wishing to "have been a different person not like him."[362] Furthermore, he notes that "they said none of us was the original," which ironically still matters in a world where cloning is

[354] See Arifa Akbar, *A Number review – Caryl Churchill's clone fable counts cost of progress,* (2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/feb/19/a-number-review-caryl-churchill-roger-allam-bridge-theatre-london> [Accessed 7 February 2023]
[355] Compare Churchill, *A Number*, p. 11.
[356] Ibid.
[357] Ibid.
[358] Ibid, p. 14.
[359] Ibid.
[360] Ibid, p. 20.
[361] Ibid, p. 21.
[362] Ibid.

rampant.[363] This contradiction itself sets up people like B2 to live constantly in the shadows of those that came before, even though there is nothing B2 can do to remedy it.

As the play progresses, it begins to take on the air of what Akbar describes as a "family drama about sibling rivalries and parental abuse."[364] As in *Debris*, the audience gets to see the ways in which the actions of a parent can have a detrimental effect on their children's lives. As such, the introduction of B2's siblings creates a conflict, wherein they must compete for their father's affection. Additionally, these siblings have their own identities which are challenged by the mere existence of the other, ultimately serving as the backdrop for a play which can only end with a violent conclusion. In turn, Akbar argues that this creates a sort of "biblical Caine and Abel story [which] hangs over the brother's rivalrous relationship."[365] While Salter appears to have a good relationship with B2, the same cannot be said for B1. The reveal that Salter "sent [B1] away and had this other one made from some bit of [his] body" explains the reasoning for this, while also demonstrating Salter's own pernicious qualities.[366] This interchangeability demonstrates the lack of care people in this world have towards clones, and how society at large has encouraged both the devaluation and trivialising of human life. Building on from this, if the father of a clone can abandon their child with no consequences, it goes to reason that society can too, and B1's observation that "you never came, nobody ever came" proves this.[367] As has been already explored in this analysis, violence perpetuates itself, and Salter's neglect has fostered in his child an intense resentment that has fatal consequences. B1's growing awareness of the discrepancy between the way Salter treats him and B2 exacerbates this tension, providing him a motive.

[363] Ibid, p. 17.
[364] Compare Akbar.
[365] Ibid.
[366] Compare Churchill, *A Number*, p. 25.
[367] Ibid, p. 31.

Despite the consequences of Salter's actions, it would be inappropriate to frame them as entirely malicious. The reveal that Salter's wife killed herself by going "under a tube train" serves as additional context for Salter's obsession with having the perfect child with the perfect upbringing.[368] Salter has lost someone he truly cares for, creating a sense of genuine trauma that underpins his decision-making, yet the way he grapples with that trauma inadvertently affects the innocent people around him. None of Salter's children consented to their cloning, nor have they expected anything else from him besides love. Yet Salter nevertheless presses on and creates a string of cloned children, each of them denied the individuality necessary to live a healthy life. Salter may be correct in asserting that "I had my moments… I did cook meals now and then and read a story," but that does not excuse the fact that his actions, grief-fuelled or not caused such heartache for completely innocent people.[369] Furthermore, these actions invariably lead to the loss of two lives. B1, being unable to accept the existence of other cloned children decides to kill B2, and later himself. Salter himself wonders if B1 "follow[ed] him or lie[d] in wait."[370] He is strangely curious about the circumstances surrounding B1's homicidal outburst, perhaps wondering why he'd been driven to kill, and how he was able to do it. Despite this, Salter does ultimately show remorse for his actions, arguing that "you should have killed me, it's my fault… Shall I kill myself? I'd do that for you if you like."[371] Notably, this instance of a family patriarch expressing conscious regret for his actions, and a willingness to fully accept the consequences is reminiscent of Colm in *The Gods Weep.* Over the course of both plays, the two men realise the extent to which their actions have caused harm and wish to make amends, yet only Colm is meaningfully able to do so. In his pursuit of redemption, Colm loses both his children and the empire he spent a lifetime building. Salter by comparison sacrifices very little. He loses B2, but in a world where human cloning is both normal and trivial, the weight of that loss seems comparatively lesser.

[368] Ibid, p. 40.
[369] Ibid, p. 42.
[370] Ibid, p. 50.
[371] Ibid, p. 51.

Furthermore, Salter never explicitly swears off the practice of cloning, preventing him from properly turning over a new leaf.

Foley suggests that "Camus's oeuvre can be read in a relatively systematic way if we concentrate on two pivotal concepts in his writing: the absurd and revolt."[372] Furthermore, Camus argues that "if the absurd is not to degenerate into moral nihilism it must rehabilitate itself in the light of revolt."[373] Here, Camus invites the reader to resist against an unfeeling world, yet when analysing *A Number* in this context, it becomes relatively easy to find shortcomings with this belief. Akbar argues that over the course of the play, it becomes apparent that "Salter's desire to have his first son cloned seems to be connected to the parental fantasy of getting it right the second, third or 20th time around."[374] It becomes a selfish act that denies his cloned children proper agency or individuality. *A Number* asks how a person can rebel against something that has been thrust onto them without their consent. When exploring how this effects the play however, Churchill in turn presents several routes through which a person can respond. B2 is both curious and concerned, he understands the consequences of his father's cloning but is comparatively passive. In stark contrast, B1 is bitter and unable to accept the way in which his father has duplicated his son *ad nauseam*. This is ultimately what drives him to kill both B2 and himself in almost sheer spite. Contrasting with this, the audience gets to meet another son named Michael. He appears vastly different from his two siblings, stating that "The job gets me down sometimes. The world's a mess… but you… can't help feeling wonderful can you?"[375] Here, Churchill rejects the idea that the lottery of birth is solely responsible for a person's identity, instead opting to take the Sartrean position that society itself is a key influencer in its own right. While B1 focuses exclusively on his inherited genes, Michael comparatively views the world differently, observing that "We've got ninety-nine percent the same genes as any other person. We've

[372] Compare Foley, p. 3.
[373] Ibid, p. 4.
[374] Compare Akbar.
[375] Compare Churchill, *A Number*, pp. 55-56.

got ninety percent the same as a chimpanzee [and] we've got thirty percent the same as a lettuce."[376] He ultimately notes that rather than that causing him anguish, this fact "makes me feel I belong."[377]

Despite Michael's brief appearance in the play, he is ultimately the closest thing to an absurdist hero. He is fully aware of the circumstances surrounding his creation. He knows that "there's nineteen more of us," yet that doesn't fill him with angst like it does with B1.[378] Furthermore, while the protagonist of *Realism* appears to be at the very beginning of his absurdist journey, and the protagonist of *All of Me* is in the middle of hers, Michael represents someone at the very end. Because of his own existential questioning, he has become conscious of the absurd, and as Camus suggests "A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it."[379] Michael's genetic makeup likewise becomes a testament to this absurdity, forcing him to find meaning beyond his genetic identity. Most importantly though, Churchill herself has created a character who represents an absurdist worldview being used as a source of contentment, rather than angst and heartache, despite the existential ambiguity wrought by his status as a clone. This fact alone separates *A Number* from the majority of the absurd canon, alongside most of the contemporary plays discussed in this analysis, as both cohorts usually explore the absurd itself as an endless journey. Likewise, it also raises the possibility of other plays exploring the outcome of absurdist awakenings. In all, each play discussed in this chapter utilizes familial violence in different ways. They each showcase how the unfeeling nature of the universe takes on a pernicious quality as the protagonists deal with the strain of familial abuse and mistrust. They are existentially challenged by authority figures eager to shape their identities without their consent; and the societal institutions that underpin our world fail to protect these individuals from those who were supposed to protect them. Yet *A Number* is the only play in this

[376] Ibid, p. 62.
[377] Ibid.
[378] Ibid.
[379] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 25.

collection that takes all of these ideas and spins them into a more optimistic form, offering a path that other absurdist heroes often forgo.

6: Racial Tension

This chapter will instead look at the ways contemporary theatre utilize Existentialism and the Absurd to explore both race and racial tension. At the outset, it should be acknowledged that, however well-intentioned and researched this chapter may be, there will always be a gulf between the topics discussed and my own experience thereof. Being white in a society that treats whiteness as default invariably shapes a person's ability to both comprehend and appreciate the issues that people of colour face within our society. As such, the play's chosen for analysis in this chapter have all been written by white playwrights. The reasoning for this is that through the exploration of works written by white playwrights, there is an opportunity analyse how these playwrights explore their own privilege and biases. It is then possible to juxtapose the contemporary writer's self-awareness with much of the work within the Absurd canon which, barring the work of Jean Genet, does not tackle the issue.

Over the course of Kelly's *Orphans*, an all-white cast commits a hate crime, conspires to cover it up and tortures the victim to keep him silent. These events don't happen all at once, and instead occur gradually as the play progresses with Danny and Helen's complicity becoming more apparent as Liam's fictious explanation becomes shakier and more unreliable. In turn, the three characters each represent ways that white people may interact with and engage with racism itself. Liam is the perpetrator of the initial hate crime. Helen's eagerness to protect her brother from the consequences of that crime amount to complicity, and Danny's eventual strongarming makes him a participant. Whether intentional or otherwise, by the play's conclusion each of them have become either accomplices or perpetuators of a hate crime.

Liam's singling out of "some Islamic man… on his way home" is the first unambiguously racist act depicted in the play.[380] He is targeted explicitly because of both his ethnicity and religion. Furthermore, the man's identity is deliberately withheld from both Helen and Danny, with it only coming out due to the participation of the latter. When the truth does emerge, Liam refuses to reflect on his actions, warning Danny that "I can be pushed as well, I have limits."[381] His complete inability to take responsibility demonstrates how disaffected parties may seek to downplay their own transgressions. Ultimately, Liam's strategy is to turn himself into the offended party, stating that "we're abandoned."[382] There's this sense of entitlement that permeates much of his actions, wherein he expects to be absolved on account of his own tenuous position in society. Upon being told he's no longer welcome in Helen's house, he tells her that "I forgive you. I love you and I forgive you," almost as if he is the wronged party.[383] Moreover, Liam's racist tendencies are given more scrutiny when it is revealed that he associates with a "a bad influence… [who] collects Nazi memorabilia."[384] Liam claims to be disturbed by this, conceding that his friend *is* racist and it "makes me fucking sick,"[385] Yet when Danny call's this friend "a bit of prick,"[386] Liam nevertheless defends him, referring to him still as a "mate, though."[387] This casual acceptance of racism and bigotry as if it were a simple character flaw highlights the way that some white people view race in general. He claims to be opposed to racial bigotry, but when presented with a friend who is an unashamed racist, he lacks the conviction necessary to properly call him out or sever ties with him. Here, Kelly demonstrates how this notion undermines all three character's antiracist convictions. Each of them seems sickened by racial violence, but in their attempt to either protect or exonerate Liam, they demonstrate how little they actually care about racial justice. Helen, while initially unaware of the full context of Liam's attack is

[380] Compare Kelly, *Orphans*, p. 105.
[381] Ibid, p. 109.
[382] Ibid.
[383] Ibid, p. 112.
[384] Ibid, p. 49.
[385] Ibid, p. 40.
[386] Ibid, p. 41.
[387] Ibid.

still quick to suggest they "try and clean the evidence."[388] Before the racist nature of Liam's crime becomes clear, Helen is willing to adopt a level of criminality to protect Liam, which is partly because she herself would never be a direct target of it. By taking this especially dogmatic stance, she ultimately stands in the way of the victim getting justice. Expanding on this point further, their response reveals the problem will well-intentioned, yet ultimately disaffected white people. They lack an equally dogmatic drive for racial justice, neither Danny or Hellen view this racialized attack as an affront on themselves or common human decency. Anthony O'Brien's notion that "whiteness seems so much the norm as not even to be a race category" comes through, as from both absurd and existential perspectives, neither are able to see this as an attack on one's own identity.[389] Furthermore, Liam's indifference is only possible because of the way whiteness is treated from an existential perspective; as the default. To Liam, his actions are not racist because race implies something different from him, something different from the norm.

In time, it becomes apparent just how understated and normalized Liam's islamophobia is. He does not explicitly comment on his victim's race or faith, yet his motive is unambiguously clear. When discussing the assailants who attacked Danny, he mentions how they've been "left… to beasts, and that's not blaming it on the Asians, Danny, Coz they're good people some of them… not the cunts that did you… they're scum, they're filth, but some of them… [they're] victims of prejudice."[390] His grandstanding appears muddled. Liam is trying to deny any bias or racism, yet his speech demonstrates that his tolerance only applies when a minority behaves in accordance with Liam's own expectations. If they transgress those values or break the law, he has no problem reducing them to 'scum [and] filth."[391] This casual dehumanisation as a response to criminality is uncontested by anyone

[388] Ibid, p. 47.
[389] See Anthony O'Brien, *'Staging whiteness: Beckett, Havel, Maponya.'* Theatre Journal, 46 (1994) 45-61, (p. 49).
[390] Compare Kelly, *Orphans*, p. 42.
[391] Ibid.

else in the play and ultimately seems endorsed by Helen through her inaction and Danny through his participation.

Furthermore, the play in general seems to reflect a post 9/11 worldview where suspicion and hostility towards Muslims was acceptable within certain white demographics. Marc Helbling and Richard Traunmüller both observed that "Muslim immigrants face a double opposition: they are rejected because of their immigrant status *and* because of their particular type of religious behaviour."[392] While no indication is given over the victim's immigration status or their religiosity, Liam acts squarely based on symbolic signifiers that validate his biases. Danny himself observes that the Islamic man was just "some man with a beard," which becomes a surface level description that reduces the man to a symbol.[393] Ultimately, Liam's obfuscation prevents the establishment of a motive, and while Liam suggests that "I think he was one of the lads that did you, Danny," the possibility that this could be another one of Liam's fabrications is undeniable.[394] In turn, an understanding of Liam's actions can only be properly understood through a recognition of the mindsets that exist within some stratums of contemporary society. Political Scientist Jocelyne Cesari notes that "surveys of public opinion reveal that a substantial number of Europeans hold a negative view of both Muslims and Islam. A closer examination of these sources reveals a persistent linking to Islam to incivic behaviour and terrorism inside and outside European countries."[395] In a vacuum of overtly white demographics, it becomes especially easy to allow ignorance and stereotype to dictate a person's interpretation of wider groups. Liam's attack therefore becomes an instance where his bigoted perceptions of a wider group has enabled him to assault someone.

[392] See Marc Helbling and Richard Traunmüller, *What is Islamophobia? Disentangling citizens' feelings towards ethnicity, religion and religiosity using a survey experiment,* British Journal of Political Science, 50, (2018).
[393] Compare Kelly, *Orphans*, p. 105.
[394] Ibid, p. 87.
[395] See Jocelyne Cesari, *The Muslin stranger: the combined effect of Xenophobia and* Islamophobia, Social Research: An international quarterly, 88, 4 (2021), 895-922, (p. 898).

Liam's complexity comes from the societal neglect he in-turn has suffered. He lacks the qualifications necessary to give him any kind of career prospect and he wilfully associates with people who drag him down towards criminal behaviour. Helen herself notes that "he has a [criminal] record," confirming that this has already happened.[396] The only positive influences in his life are Danny and Helen, and it seems like they aren't enough to protect him either. Furthermore, there is this suggestion that Liam may have been radicalized by white extremists. His problematic friends already embody those views, but when combined with the fact that Liam has difficulties controlling his anger, it becomes easier to recognise how, from a fairly young age, he may have been treated as a troublesome person. Lacking the requisite means to advance one's life in a meaningful way, Kelly suggests that his association with Ian has given him something he lacked. This idea is where the Absurd manifests itself most clearly, he lacks both an education and an occupation, which means he cannot tether his identity to either, representing a failure to grapple with the existential uncertainties surrounding him. As is the case with Rooster Byron in *Jerusalem* and Colm from *The Gods Weep*, they each opt to base their identities around ideas that only ever causes hardship for them and their loved ones, creating a never-ending cycle. Furthermore, the societal neglect that befell Liam demonstrates how the institutions we rely on are fully capable of failing those they are charged with protecting, evoking Camus' interpretation of an "unreasonable" world.[397]

Liam's obfuscation can be read as an example of either malicious self-preservation or abject naivety, yet what turn's Liam into a semi-tragic figure is how the pieces for recovery are there, he just lacks the means to consciously address the forces that have placed him into this position. There is never a moment where he deliberately uses his own lived experience to help him analyse, critique and understand the society that has allowed him to fall through the cracks. Rather than striving for self-

[396] Compare Kelly, *Orphans*, p. 46.
[397] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 37.

improvement like Caroline Horton's protagonist in *All of Me*, he instead associates with people who wilfully scapegoat the most vulnerable in society, all the while anchoring his identity to signifiers that prop up and maintain hierarchical and oppressive power structures. Liam in effect has chosen the easiest route, yet he doesn't benefit from that choice. Much like how, in Pickering's view, the Absurdist canon provides "no denouement, no exposition, and… no sense of development" Kelly likewise does not provide Liam with a proper motive for his crime.[398] This is partially because Liam does not need one, to him, that single Islamic man might as well be a symbolic representation of everything that has gone wrong in his life. Liam blames this man, and every other marginalized community for the problems that have arisen in his own life. The violence that he engages with additionally makes it harder for Liam to exist within legal parameters and invariably sours his relationship with the few loved ones he still has. By the play's conclusion, Liam loses everything, and it is in that harsh reality that Kelly demonstrates the true price of a racist's actions; a loss of both their humanity and everything they hold dear.

Another illuminating aspect of the play is how it depicts initially innocent parties getting drawn into scenarios which test their own morality. Liam's guilt is obvious, his actions are unambiguously wrong and come from a position of bigotry. Helen and Danny however start the play in a completely different position. Given only the word of someone they both trust, they are forced to interact with what later proves to be unreliable information. Helen's defence of Liam is so dogmatic that when presented with Danny's skepticism, she opines that "you are such a piece of shit."[399] What makes this moment ironic is how it contrasts with how Danny himself initially believes that "Liam's innocent… [he] hasn't done anything."[400] This ultimately highlights how both of them are willing to trust the word of someone they love, even in the face of an uncomfortable situation. Exacerbating this is how Liam

[398] Compare Pickering, p. 5.
[399] Compare Kelly, *Orphans*, p. 61.
[400] Ibid, p. 37.

constantly changes the context of the incident, and the precise details themselves. Consequently, neither Helen nor Danny understand the full extent of Liam's actions until it is too late. Danny bears the brunt of this most specifically as he is strongarmed into going with Liam to the scene. Danny explains in candid detail the things Liam made him do, how he "screamed at [the man]… 'tell me where you live… you nasty fucking paki."[401] Notably, with a bit of manipulation, Danny is able to adopt the role of Racist assailant perfectly, engaging in the same type of violence Liam had utilized in the first place. The fact that someone as level-headed as Danny can commit the same act as Liam raises questions around Danny's own identity, and more specifically, the way that identity can be coerced and co-opted into doing something criminal.

Danny is visibly shaken by his actions, the stage directions note that he "opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out," yet this does not absolve him of the fact that he still participated in the act.[402] He incriminates himself further, stating how "I smashed the butt… into his cheek. I did that, me. That's who I was."[403] Here, Danny demonstrates a level of self-awareness that Liam is incapable of, which raises even more questions about Danny's identity. What is the point of self-awareness if it doesn't amount to a change of action? Danny appears traumatised, yet he is still responsible for his actions. Exacerbating this further is how Liam is a victim in his own right, falling prey to radicalisation and societal neglect. Danny however does not have these shortcomings. Up until this point, Danny had been the voice for law-abiding reason. Liam himself is aware of this, stating that "[a] part of me thinks you should be dragged down off that fucking pedestal and be forced down into the mud so you can eat the same shit and rotting flesh I've been eating."[404] This is where Liam's victim-like nature evolves into outright malice, showing clear vitriol in his handling of Danny.

[401] Ibid, p. 102.
[402] Ibid, p. 98.
[403] Ibid, p. 102.
[404] Ibid, p. 109.

Ultimately, The Absurd manifests itself in several different ways. First, there is how societal institutions fail people like Liam. Then there is the Islamic man, who is a victim of a broader system that has also failed to protect him. Danny and Helen wield their own privileged existence in a way that deprives the Islamic man justice. A question therefore arises over the efficacy of nurturing an identity for oneself in the face of systemic oppression. How much existential value can be gleaned in the face of racialised injustice? Ultimately, it is important to recognize that the Absurd canon itself failed to properly address colonialism and the civil rights movement itself. Foley notes that within Camus' *The Stranger*, "far from portraying any kind of philosophical or political truth, the novel in fact promotes a nefarious fiction about colonial Algeria."[405] The novel has colonialist undertones that are neither properly explored or even acknowledged. Furthermore, this criticism can be extended to The Theatre of the Absurd itself, whose "leading practitioners… live[d] in Paris and [wrote] in French."[406] This group of overwhelmingly white writers were either direct beneficiaries of, or conveniently unconnected to that colonial system. Anthony O'Brien levied specific criticism on Samuel Beckett, stating that "Beckett's discussion of power without reference to race underwrites white solipsism in its silence about 'other worlds' even though they are right outside the door of his theatre in the form of French internal colonialism."[407] Contrasting with this, Jean Genet is perhaps the most notable outlier from the Absurdist canon, as his homosexuality firmly positioned him as an outsider. It is notable that his play *The Blacks* (1955) discusses race and racial tension in an uncharacteristically overt way, with Brian Logan noting that "black actors don white makeup in order to confront our most deep-seated racial prejudices."[408] The reality is that an analysis of race and racial tension along absurdist lines cannot strictly rely on the observations of its key practitioners. Furthermore, Camus' foundational notion that

[405] Compare Foley, p. 14.
[406] Compare Esslin, p. 26.
[407] Compare O'Brien, p. 49.
[408] See Brian Logan, *Do the white thing* (2007) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/oct/17/race.uk> [Accessed: 28 March 2023]

"one should imagine Sisyphus happy" is an idea ultimately borne out of privilege.[409] The application of this dictum to any marginalized community becomes ghoulish and therefore incompatible. It represents the most significant shortcoming of Albert Camus' interpretation of the Absurd and demonstrates a clear avenue for contemporary writers to challenge and present alternatives.

Ultimately, *Orphans* demonstrates the senselessness of bigotry, while also showcasing how the privilege of disconnected, white characters encourage a sense of wilful complacency. Despite the protestations and the play's conclusion, Danny and Hellen cannot be absolved of their involvement. Furthermore, Kelly also denies the Islamic man a name or face. The focus is instead strictly on the white characters, who grapple with the realities of their own behaviour. While there is ambiguity over the Islamic man's identity, from an absurdist perspective, it is the white characters who must utilize existentialism to properly address their own identity, with Liam telling Danny that "tonight… I saw you."[410] The implication is that through Danny's direct participation, the mask has slipped, revealing the existence of a nastier Danny, which itself raises questions over the authenticity of Danny and how his own behaviour can be shaped by those around him, for better or for worse. Moreover, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, using hate crimes to tell a story about the moral goodness of white people may appear insensitive, especially if the victim remains absent.

Mike Bartlett's *Albion* (2017) is contrastingly a play about a woman's garden. Audrey: the family matriarch has uprooted her kin to the countryside with the goal of creating and nurturing the perfect garden. Akbar suggests that the story explores notions of "politics, patriotism and the seductions of nostalgia through the prism of family life,"[411] in what has been described as a "State-of-

[409] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 89.
[410] Compare Kelly, *Orphans*, p. 109.
[411] Compare Akbar.

the-nation play.'[412] As the play progresses however, it becomes apparent just how Bartlett's depiction of England's national identity begins to take on nationalistic and xenophobic characteristics. Like *Orphans,* all of the characters within the play are white, and none of them interact with someone from a different Race. As a result, the audience sees the world from an overtly white, English perspective. Perhaps because of this fact, many of the characters appear blatantly unaccustomed to other cultures, and ethnicities. Ultimately, *Albion's* depiction of race and racial tension is based around how privilege itself can inform the way people view the world, and shape how they interact with it.

As a starting point, the stage directions set the scene; "Albion is a garden, now mostly left to ruin… for many years."[413] To Audrey, this garden, in all its ruinous state, mirrors the nation itself, and it is Audrey alone who endeavours to nurture this garden back to health. Audrey's single-minded obsession upends the lives of those around her, demonstrating the lack of consideration she has on anyone else. Zara: Audrey's daughter notes that "All my friends. Work. Opportunity, are [back home]."[414] The move itself has selfish qualities, especially as Zara reveals that she "had the next few years all planned out [when] suddenly Mum sold the house and said we're moving to the country."[415] This interaction showcases how much power Audrey has over her family, and the extent to which she is willing to negatively affect others for her own interests. It is ultimately here where the play's relevance to race and racial tension lies, as Audrey's dominion over both the garden and her family take on both authoritarian and imperialist qualities, both of which inform many of her actions later on in the play. Audrey herself openly wonders "why does everyone who works for me assume I'm a Tyrant?" likewise demonstrating a lack of self-awareness on her part.[416]

[412] Ibid.
[413] See Mike Bartlett, *Albion* (London: Nick Hern Books), p. 8.
[414] Ibid, p. 11.
[415] Ibid.
[416] Ibid, p. 89.

Audrey's imperialist streak is demonstrated most clearly by the way she deals with the locals. Their opposition to some of Audrey's more ambitious plans for the garden are interpreted by Audrey as "bullying and pressure."[417] The implication that Audrey feels threatened by the villagers' actions is clear but gets muddled by the way Audrey chides one of the villages representatives, stating that "You seem to think that I have some kind of civic responsibility… to the village. And the truth is I just don't see it like that."[418] She claims independence from the village yet wishes to take unilateral decisions that will invariably impact it. Her noting that "I'm employing Krystyna, and Matthew full time now… We use the village shop whenever we can, but beyond that," suggests that she expects gratitude from the village, while remaining separate from it.[419] In turn, this presents the paradoxical idea that Audrey can shirk responsibility for her actions within the village, while also benefiting from its resources. The parallels between this approach, and the actions of colonial administrators appears at its least ambiguous, with Audrey acting in an especially exploitative and selfish way because of her complete unwillingness to compromise.

In turn, Audrey's entire personality is built on absolute control and insensitivity. She does what she wants, with little regard for how others may react. Her desire to host a 1920's themed house party demonstrates this in an especially notable way. The inevitable romanticisation of such a deeply unequal time-period reveals the extent of Audrey's own ignorance, yet she resists criticism from those around her. To Audrey, it is merely a period of disconnected nostalgia based on surface level signifiers, and her willingness to roleplay accidentally evokes Jean Genet's play *The Maids* (1947), which see's playacting take on more problematic characteristics. Anna: Audrey's daughter-in-law is less-than supportive, noting that "the 1920's were awful. War across the world, women have to fight for their vote, racism, rape, murder, child abuse."[420] This knowledge is not obscure, yet Audrey's ignorance of

[417] Ibid, p. 65.
[418] Ibid, p. 64.
[419] Ibid.
[420] Ibid, p. 62.

these real issues showcases how being a relatively wealthy white woman in our contemporary era has softened the harshness of other time periods, making them seem distant and unproblematic in their own right. Anna further notes that "They can't wait to dress up as masters and servants, as if that was fun," she understands this blatant appeal to nostalgia and finds it disquieting.[421] In all, this notion also fuels the subtext that Audrey herself cannot let go of the past, with Anna questioning "Why [Audrey's] trying to pretend this whole place hasn't moved on?... this is the twenty-first century. Things have changed for the better."[422] It's a notion that both helps to flesh out Audrey's colonialism, while also demonstrating how she has tethered her identity to a static point in time that is increasingly being left behind.

Ultimately, these conflicting tensions interface with one another to create a complicated existential subtext that runs concurrently with the play. Firstly, there are the consequences that arise from Audrey being stuck in the past, wilfully anchoring her identity to a static point in time that is increasingly being left behind. Secondly, there is the broader existential question regarding the efficacy of creating an identity for oneself in the face of both domestic and systemic bigotry. It is therefore important to note that an understanding and appreciation of one cannot properly exist without the other. Krystyna: a Polish worker whom Audrey employ's best exemplifies the lattermost notion, with xenophobia ultimately robbing her of acceptance within her newfound community. Like Krystyna, Audrey is an outsider, whose identity clashes with the local population. Obviously however, Audrey is ultimately still English. Her accent does not betray her nationality and is likewise acceptable to those around her. Additionally, Audrey is infinitely more privileged than Krystyna, with the former being able to buy property in the countryside seemingly on a whim. Furthermore, Krystyna's appearance in the play places her within a similar context to Rooster Byron in *Jerusalem*, with them

[421] Ibid.
[422] Ibid.

both being the sole minority within their respective plays. As such, Bartlett uses Krystyna as an avenue to explore the ways in which the white, English identity that people like Audrey have created interacts with outsiders. Alina Rzepnikowska argues that "Englishness was often synonymous with whiteness," which in turn reframes the dispute between Krystyna and those around her as one routed primarily in racism and xenophobia.[423] Furthermore, Rzepnikowska observes that "the focus of racist dialogue has shifted to culture and ethnicity… giving rise to… new forms of racism."[424] Krystyna, like the rest of the cast is white, but it is ultimately her cultural and national identity that separates her from everyone else. Rzepnikowska further notes that "the privilege of whiteness disappears once they start speaking [and] while whiteness allows a certain level of invisibility, [the] foreign accent marks Polish migrants as the other," this is ultimately what happens with Krystyna, who is always presented as an outsider.[425]

Notably *Albion, Orphans*, and *Jerusalem* all feature an instance of this sort of othering where an individual gets singled out and commented on. The two lattermost examples fall unambiguously along racial lines, yet Krystyna is notably afforded a more sympathetic personality. Rooster Byron, despite being othered is still presented as an anti-hero, and the Islamic Man from *Orphans*, despite being a victim does not appear in the play at all and is therefore given no proper voice or identity. In direct contrast, Krystyna is not only present and able to speak her mind, but also wholly sympathetic in character. She notes how "I will never be British but I think the truth is there is a respect for money and work here. And that's all that matters."[426] She ultimately understands how those around her may never properly accept her within the community, but still clings to the idea that hard work will eventually give her some level of respect. It is from this comment primarily where Bartlett demonstrates how Krystyna herself is battling against Rzepnikowska's notion that "From 2008… Polish

[423] See Alina Rzepnikowska, *'Racism and xenophobia experienced by Polish migrants in the UK before and after Brexit vote'*, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 45 (2019), 61-71 (p. 70).
[424] Ibid, p. 63.
[425] Ibid, p. 70.
[426] Compare Bartlett, *Albion*, p. 46.

migrants [were] increasingly started to be perceived as an economic threat responsible for societies malaise."[427] Her presence within the play demonstrates how members within marginalized communities are expected to behave in ways that members of the majority are not. Krystyna's work ethic gets framed, not as a credit to her own hardworking personality, but instead as the bare minimum needed to justify her continued presence in the country. Exacerbating this, another of Audrey's newfound employees openly wonders whether Krystyna is "Polish? Or Czech?"[428] to which another worker responds: "I don't know the difference between those ones."[429] This interaction showcases how, to the ignorant mind, two distinct cultural identities with centuries of history can be undermined and viewed interchangeably. Despite all of Krystyna's hard work, in the eyes of those around her she will always be just another migrant from one of the many countries that people cannot be bothered to even remember. Rather than being ashamed or embarrassed by their own lack of knowledge, both workers appear complacent in their own ignorance, seemingly lacking any conscious desire to build upon it whatsoever. The Absurd, in this example comes across in the way that Krystyna does everything in her power to be productive yet is never accepted by the uncaring systems around her. Ultimately, while ignorance of a specific nationality or culture is not problematic itself, Bartlett is keen to demonstrate how this sort of ignorance quickly morphs into insensitivity. Moreover, it is reminiscent of O'Brien's assertion that "in the European context alone, ethnic difference and its political expression in national bullying and recrimination are mostly a matter of land and language, not of 'racial' markers,'" which posits that the tension felt by Krystyna is as much about geopolitics and intercontinental squabbling, as opposed to just racial bigotry. [430]

In turn, the matter of identity weighs heavy over the village with both Audrey and Krystyna being impacted by it for vastly different reasons. Gabriel: another village local says that "I always think

[427] Compare Rezepnikowska, p. 66.
[428] Compare Bartlett, *Albion*, p. 8.
[429] Ibid.
[430] Compare O'Brien, p. 52.

you can tell if someone grew up London… it's like they've got an extra layer. Of skin. [they're] Harder somehow."[431] He sounds complimentary, which differs greatly from the apathetic ignorance that other locals show towards Krystyna's national identity. Ultimately, the primary difference between Audrey and Krystyna is one of privilege. Audrey's identity is not marginalized and she has the resources to place herself in a position of power within the village, Krystyna however has neither of these advantages. That lattermost point raises existential issues that Audrey's privileged identity cannot overcome. As a result of Audrey tethering her identity to the past, it feels constantly unsteady. When discussing the garden, she notes that it is "a constant process. One is always tending, pruning, encouraging and evolving. Never still, never ending, always in flux."[432] This restlessness is what underpins much of her personality. Her willingness to engage in such a Sisyphean task without showcasing a hint of outward dissatisfaction presents a differing view of the Absurd hero. Unlike the Protagonist in *All of Me*, Audrey does not connect the endlessness of her task with overt existentialism. Audrey seems especially oblivious to the damaging nature of her growing obsession. Moreover, this reframing of the Myth of Sisyphus into something self-destructive separates *Albion* from other plays with Absurd subtexts, as Camus' idea that "one should imagine Sisyphus happy" is treated as unambiguously false, with Audrey's quest for existential fulfilment creating unnecessary tension between her, the village and her family.[433]

What compounds onto Audrey's silent dissatisfaction is the way Bartlett presents the other village locals. Paul: one of Audrey's newfound neighbours demonstrates a level of existential comfort wholly unique to him. He observes that, unlike Audrey, "My life has had no purpose and I've been unbelievably happy."[434] This statement alone sets him far apart from any of the characters in either this play, or the others already discussed. He has created a worldview that is paradoxically both

[431] Compare Bartlett, *Albion*, p. 12.
[432] Ibid, p. 90.
[433] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 89.
[434] Compare Bartlett, *Albion*, p. 16.

hopeful and pessimistic. He asserts that "to have a goal simply leaves [you] open to failure and disappointment,"[435] and that "to drift means one can only ever be constantly surprised."[436] Rather than being riddled with insecurity, this comment instead comes across as a notably more content worldview. It contrasts sharply with Audrey, whose pursuit of the perfect garden ultimately ends up alienating everyone around her. Furthermore, Paul appears especially reminiscent of Michael in *A Number*; both demonstrate how an appreciation for one's own purposelessness is not exclusively an issue. Both characters ultimately seem happy with their lot in life, which differs greatly from the existential insecurity on display from the characters they interact with. It is also important to note that neither of these characters are the instigators of their respective play's dramatic tension, suggesting that someone's voracious pursuit of meaning and purpose can create tension where there would not have been any. Camus' goal of having people accept the Absurd, and then use that to live a free life is wholly embodied by both characters, who are notably happier as a result.

Building on from this, the conservation between Paul and Audrey demonstrates how even in the absence of Race, the characters are constantly creating divisions between different groups of people, ascribing values to these generalized groupings. In direct response to Paul's existential disinterest, Audrey argues that "English Protestant morality [is] based on hard work… [Catholics] can be happy without purpose, but for the true English man or woman, that's tantamount to a sin."[437] Her comment is obviously a generalisation based on her own subjective observations, which says more about her own values and perceptions than anyone else's. Her comments also come across as an underhanded jibe at the way Paul lives his life, which further highlights Audrey's overall insensitivity, along with her obliviousness.

[435] Ibid.
[436] Ibid.
[437] Ibid.

This entire exchange serves as the clearest way that *Albion* adheres to both the Absurd and Existentialism. The differences between both Paul and Audrey are stark, betraying to the audience just how out of place Audrey actually is. Paul, perhaps having grown up in the village is infinitely more content with the life that he has, while Audrey goes to extreme lengths to create the life she believes she wants. Yet despite all of Audrey's strife, she still seems existentially unfulfilled. Both her pride, and the denial borne directly out of it prevents her from ever recognizing this truth. It is ultimately through this comparison that the audience properly gets to see Audrey's obsessiveness, which in turn mirrors the resolve that several characters within the absurd canon likewise has. Colm and Rooster Byron from *The Gods Weep* and *Jerusalem* respectively are similarly committed to their own pet projects and have no problem whatsoever dragging their family along with them, despite the misery it causes. In all, *Albion* conjures a conflicting picture. The play's depiction of race and racial tension gets filtered through this all-white cast. Moreover, the ignorance and insensitivity that embodies Audrey and some of her employees demonstrate the impact of a lack of diversity. Krystyna in turn feels like a cautionary post-Brexit warning to well-intentioned foreigners who, regardless of the content of their character, will be beholden to both unfeeling institutions and an uncaring populace. Audrey, in direct contrast however is beholden to her identity, built on an unstable foundation, invariably clashing with those around her.

Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* explores race and racial tension in a similar way. The mostly white cast has the effect of limiting the play's ability to discuss racial tension more broadly. In turn, much like Krystyna's Polish nationality in *Albion*, it is Rooster Byron's Roma heritage that constitutes much of the racial tension therein. As a starting point, Byron is not ashamed of his heritage, nor does he ever try to hide it. Byron ultimately mentions his ancestry multiple times throughout the play, with varying degrees of relevance to the plot. As a result, the audience is afforded the opportunity to see how people react to Byron's heritage and his unadulterated pride in it. Notably, none within his

entourage react negatively to this fact, nor does anyone working for the local council. At face value, it appears that his identity has been accepted by the broader community. The only person who appears to have an issue with his heritage is Troy, whose open hostility to Byron appears to go much deeper than a personal dislike. Similarly to how Liam associates an entire ethnic and cultural identity with filth and criminality in the play *Orphans*, so too does Troy regarding Byron.

It should also be acknowledged that Rooster Byron is othered throughout the play; his living conditions; the people he associates with; and his lawlessness firmly positions him outside of conventional society. While his ethnicity does not primarily contribute to this othering, it may influence his friend's decision to ultimately abandon him. Troy is ultimately the only person who actively brings up Byron's heritage in a negative context. He wilfully labels Byron "[a] Gyppo," with the use of such an unambiguously derogatory term being the first proper instance of the latter's Roma heritage being used as a divider of social standing.[438] Troy's reasoning for bringing up Byron's heritage is an attempt at separating Byron from everyone else in the play. Furthermore, when Phaedra disappears, Byron is quickly scapegoated for her disappearance by Troy. His use of a slur ultimately betrays his intentions and reveals to the audience that Byron's guilt is immaterial to the matter at hand. The violent contempt that Troy shows towards Byron becomes emblematic of how marginalized communities are denied things that the majority take for granted in ways not too dissimilar to Krystyna. Going one step further however, Byron is robbed of the presumption of innocence. His prior history with Troy, alongside the latter's bigotry mesh together to create a complicated motive which comes across as a vendetta. This point is made further evident by the fact that Troy does not accost any other member of Byron's entourage. It is ultimately these specific interactions which separate *Jerusalem* from *Orphans* and *Albion*, as the former openly depicts racial tension between two people. The Islamic Man from *Orphans* is entirely absent and the Tension that befalls Krystyna showcases

[438] Compare Butterworth, *Jerusalem*, p. 79.

more ignorance and insensitivity than tension. Byron and Troy's relationship however seems especially vitriolic, based purely on prior grievances and racial bigotry.

Building on from this notion, what additionally separates *Jerusalem* from *Orphans* and *Albion* is how characters responds to racial bigotry. As the demolition of Byron's caravan appears imminent, he speaks to his son for the last time, telling him that "I've got rare blood… All Byrons have got it. I've got it and you've got it too."[439] This conscious reframing of Byron's Roma heritage as something to be proud of, rather than ashamed presents an alternative to the timid insecurity of Krystyna and the complete absence of the Islamic man. Byron proudly offers no appeasement, he instead places an inherent value on his blood alone, advising his son to "[n]ever worry, because anywhere you go. If you're ever short. Back to the wall. Remember the blood."[440] Ultimately, Byron's approach is characteristic of him, he has spent his entire life conjuring an identity for himself, and even in the face of abject danger, shows no signs of sacrificing that identity for anyone. Despite Byron's idiosyncrasies, it is this approach that may be best for countering institutional and systemic forms of racism and racial tension. An individual like Byron cannot hope to change society singlehandedly, but through his ironclad defiance, he is able to live on his own terms. He ultimately understands that there will always be people like Troy who will never accept him, and that there will always be people seeking to scapegoat him for any reason. Byron understands that his position within broader society is not set in stone, and therefore decides to create his own meaning and identity, regardless of the consequences. The fact that it may very well cost him his life ultimately says a lot about Byron's own personality, while also showcasing a level of cynicism that Butterworth has towards contemporary society; a disenfranchised person like Byron can become so institutionally neglected, resulting in the complete destruction of his way of life.

[439] Ibid, p. 107.
[440] Ibid.

Furthermore, from an absurdist perspective, this defiant act mirrors the same type of pyrrhic determination that is observable in many absurdist heroes. Meursault too dies for his ideals, and while they both exist on opposite ends of the dichotomy of racial tension, they both represent antiheroes who perish because of their values. Furthermore, while Meursault is ultimately executed by the state, Byron is technically afforded the opportunity to die on his own terms, with the final stage directions stating that "he reappears with a can of petrol…. Splash[ing] it around the inside of the caravan, and on the outside too."[441] Even in presumed death, Byron is uniquely able to unapologetically be himself in the face of those who would restrict his identity. Here, Byron demonstrates a level of dogged determination that ultimately evokes Camus' notion that "in a man's attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills in the world."[442] Booster's own attachment to life in this instance refers both to his identity and the autonomy that he has created for himself. It therefore becomes possible to view Byron as an Absurdist hero. Going further, Byron's Roma heritage distinguishes him from the vast majority of the aforementioned protagonists, which provides a different perspective, one primarily built round looking at how racial and cultural identities create barriers for people in broader society. Consequently, it should be acknowledged that Camus' brand of existential rebellion becomes difficult to adhere to in the face of institutional oppression. A question arises over the efficacy of creating an identity in the face of systemic obstacles to the free expression of that identity, especially when the vast majority of characters within all three plays appear especially ambivalent to these identities.

[441] Ibid, p. 108.
[442] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 8.

7: Identity in a Meaningless World

Over the course of this analysis, both Existentialism and Absurdism have been explored through several different lenses and contexts; whether through environmental exploitation, familial violence, Racial tension. There are many ways to incorporate both concepts within plays that explore contemporary issues. Moreover, it is additionally possible to remain faithful to the core ideas with both ideas too. Building on from the previous chapter specifically, this section will be focused around exploring the broader concept of Identity, and how that specifically fits into an absurd world that has no inherent meaning.

If one is to accept Camus' belief that the world "is but a vast irrational," the various institutions and systems we inhabit appear especially arbitrary.[443] Furthermore, genuine harm frequently befalls those who do not live up to the societal expectations of our time. This analysis has already looked at a vast array of characters beholden to these systems, with much heartache and strife rooted squarely in the way these characters resist against or confirm to the expectations thrust upon them in their pursuit of existential certainty. This has in turn revealed an over-arching theme present in all of the plays discussed so far: chiefly that of identity itself. In each play, there is a great amount of agitation and insecurity over one's own identity. The resulting tone is one that relates especially well to Camus' observation that "If only the significant history of human thought were to be written, it would have to be the history of its successive regrets and its impotence's."[444] What ultimately comes through in each play is the anxious nature of human existence. Characters like Stuart and the unnamed protagonist from *Realism* and *All of Me* respectively are placed into positions where they must construct an identity for themselves in the face of societal systems that are themselves trying to change them. Much of the dramatic tension within *Jerusalem* and *Albion* stems from an individual's steadfast desire to actualize their own identity, regardless of the protestations from both those around them and society at large.

[443] Ibid, p. 21.
[444] Ibid, p. 16.

What ultimately becomes clear through all of these examples is how the pursuit of identity itself causes strife and heartache, especially if that pursuit results in the construction of an identity outside of accepted norms and values.

A play that ultimately serves as a great starting point for this type of analysis is Mike Bartlett's *Cock* (2009). Described by Leo Benedictus as being "about sexuality and choice," tension in this play arises from one man's shaky identity and the upheaval that follows his attempts at steadying it.[445] Unlike *Jerusalem* and *The Gods Weep*, which explore identity through the lenses of culture and capitalism respectively, *Cock* instead focuses on protagonist John's sexuality, with the dramatic tension stemming from his experimentation with a heterosexual relationship and the existential wrangling that occurs thereafter. In turn, *Cock* is a play that demonstrates Angelaki's observation that "Bartlett's specific brand combines introspection and the quest for self-knowledge with the individual's efforts… to locate themselves within the bigger picture."[446] John's attempt at clarifying his own sexuality is presented as an especially complex one, this is partly because, in the view of Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack, "sexuality [itself] is a complex and muti-faceted phenomenon. It is not easy to define."[447] Bartlett presents his quest sincerely, but frequently depicts John stumbling at his goal.

From a stylistic perspective, *Cock*, much like *All of Me* and *Love and Information* is minimalistic, featuring some unconventional stylistic choices. The stage directions state that "the Audience is raked down towards the actors. There is no scenery, no props, no furniture and no mime. Instead the focus is entirely on the drama of the scene."[448] Building on from this, John is the only character with a

[445] See Leo Benedictus, *What to say about… Cock* (2009) <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/nov/20/cock-reviews-royal-court> [Accessed 2 May 2023]
[446] Compare Angelaki, *Social and political theatre in 21st century Britain: staging crisis*, p. 55.
[447] See Eric Anderson & Mark McCormark, *The changing dynamics of bisexual men's lives: social research perspectives.* (Switzerland: Springer, 2016), p. 15.
[448] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, p. 4.

conventional name, the other three characters are merely named F, M and W respectively. In all, this creates a stripped-back experience wherein the only thing that matters is the language spoken itself. Angelaki herself goes further, observing that "occasionally, Bartlett's writing is naturalistic, delving into the human psyche, mental and biological urges, triggers and dispositions."[449] As a result, the text itself is littered with informal speech and meandering sentence structures that apes Harold Pinter's early work. Characters ramble and splutter, oftentimes over one another to create an effect that feels unmistakably domestic and naturalistic in tone, connecting the audience to the drama. In turn, Bartlett achieves a merging of both the conventional and the unconventional, as the aforementioned linguistic techniques meld with what is ultimately a domestic drama. To this end, theatre critic Charles Spencer opined that "At heart, [Cock is] a rather old-fashioned play."[450] The play bears some stylistic similarities with *Albion* and Anthony Neilson's *Realism***.** All three plays ultimately present the domestic locale as an arena for tension and disagreement. As such, *Cock's* opening scene offers a window into the lives of a gay couple engaging in an argument of ambiguous origin that will invariably set the tone for the rest of the play.

The initial subject of this argument is ultimately of little consequence to the overall narrative, with it instead demonstrating the types of disagreements that John and his boyfriend M have on a regular basis. Without this starting context, John's indecisiveness over his own identity lacks motivation. As such, M's opening insult, wherein he states that "[you] Can't fucking cook. [You] can't fucking do anything with your hands," demonstrates this initially toxic starting point.[451] In turn, the aggressive nature of this remark feels disproportionate to whatever may have preceded it, and John's

[449] Compare Angelaki, *Social and political theatre in 21st century Britain: staging crisis*, p. 55.
[450] See Charles Spencer, *Cock at the royal* court (2009) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/6604329/Cock-at-the-Royal-Court-review.html> [Accessed 2 May 2023].
[451] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, p. 6.

subsequent silence demonstrates how he desperately tries to avoid confrontation, even if he suffers because of it.

The tirade continues, with M arguing further that John's hands are "like tennis rackets on the end of sticks. Like satellite dishes as the end of fishing rods. They're ridiculous."[452] Both the anger and mockery combine to make an unpleasant opening image where John can be seen as a victim to disproportionate scolding on account of things outside of his control. Within only a couple lines of dialogue, Bartlett has established John as a man sat firmly within an already unsteady environment. When John does try to defend himself, it comes across as both weak and tepid. He asks, "why are you being so nasty to me?"[453] There is a submissive quality to John's question, forfeiting control to M. What ultimately compounds and confuses the situation further is how the argument begins to shift in tone. M attempts to justify his behaviour by explaining to John that "I'm mocking you like this, because that's what brothers do."[454] Again the uneven power dynamic manifests itself in this attempt at reframing their argument towards something more akin to a sibling's quarrel as opposed to romantic abuse. Their relationship appears unhealthy, and the importance of this scene from an Absurdist perspective lies squarely in recognizing it as John's starting point. Camus notes that "before encountering the absurd, the everyday man lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification… He weighs his chances, he counts on 'someday.'"[455] In the eyes of M, John has not encountered the absurd, and in the words of Camus, John "continue[s] making the gestures commanded by existence. [until he] recognizes… the insane character of that daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering."[456] Ultimately, John has already had this moment of awakening, yet for the time being he hides it from M because he fears reprisal.

[452] Ibid, p. 7.
[453] Ibid, p. 5.
[454] Ibid, p. 6.
[455] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 42.
[456] Ibid, p. 7.

Within moments of insulting John, the argument devolves as M informs his boyfriend that "I've missed you today… [I] love you."[457] The juxtaposition of both the affection and scorn that M shows towards John paints a complicated picture, wherein their relationship alternates violently between love and hate. Despite this, John does not appear bitter, he compliments M, stating that "If I got hit by a car, I'd be in pieces… but [if] you get hit by a car… you're… better."[458] John's feelings take on a tone of reverence which also demonstrates the uneven power dynamic between them. The fact that within one moment M can assert that "I'm like a puppy"[459] and then the next can recontextualise his anger by arguing that "I'm not mad… this is energy this is fireworks" showcases M's manipulative qualities, and the way in which John ultimately becomes beholden to them.[460]

Ultimately, at the foundation of their relationship is a remarkedly unhealthy and unequal power dynamic born out of endless bickering and insult throwing. Yet it would be inappropriate to frame John exclusively as the victim. As quickly as their argument deescalates, it escalates once again as John argues that "we're sinking. You and me. I'm taking a lifeboat."[461] The comment feels abrupt but not altogether irrational in tone. Instead, it feels like a natural response to what has presumably been years of arguing. John goes further, asserting that their relationship is "going to be [over] in a week… I can feel it."[462] Here, John's fatalism feels abrupt, especially considering how unassertive he had been up to that point. Additionally, it also shows how John is equally capable of the same disproportionate behaviour that M is. In turn, this entire situation demonstrates Angelaki's assertion that within Bartlett's work, "Often, uncertainty… escalates to anxiety."[463] Their relationship has become especially strained, causing John to cascade into irrationality which exacerbates their strained

[457] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, p. 7.
[458] Ibid, pp. 9-10.
[459] Ibid, p. 7.
[460] Ibid, p. 8.
[461] Ibid, p. 12.
[462] Ibid.
[463] Compare Angelaki, *Social and political theatre in 21st century Britain: staging crisis*, p. 56.

relationship further. The communication between them has begun to breakdown as the couple find new ways to insult each other. John's eventual admittance that he "thinks I'm in love and… need[s] help because she's mad"[464] represents a double revelation, wherein both the affair and the gender of John's mistress comes as a surprise. What ultimately follows is the exploration of a homosexual man falling in love with a heterosexual woman, and the various consequences that come out as a result.

It should be noted that John represents a major diversion from the various protagonists and supporting characters that have featured in this analysis so far. Like Krystyna, the Writer and Rooster Byron, he is a minority within his broader community, but what separates him from these characters is the fact that he is not the only minority within his play. Both John and his boyfriend are different representations of the same LGBT+ community. This distinction allows Bartlett to explore how two especially different people can still be a part of the same community. This provides a nuance to Bartlett's presentation of queer identities simply because he utilizes more members of it. Contrastingly, Krystyna represents the only Polish character in *Albion*, which limits the options available to Butterworth in his characterisation of her. The unique idiosyncrasies that characterise John and M ultimately make Bartlett's representation of Queer identity more complicated, especially as one frequently mistreats the other.

John's retelling of his encounter with W: the aforementioned mistress reveals several key aspects of both men's personalities. For John, it's his unreliability. He offers M an ultimatum, stating that "if you loved me like you're supposed to you'd sit me down and we'd have a conversation."[465] John's wilful manipulation of M's affection notwithstanding, the abrasive nature of such a comment

[464] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, p. 15.
[465] Ibid, p. 18.

inspires M to respond that "We've never sat down like we're supposed to."[466] Building on from this, he asserts that "you've started… making up fictitious and highly optimistic myths about our wonderful relationship which has since passed. We were not happy all the time, we rarely spoke to each other without doing something else… [and] we argued all the fucking time."[467] This sober reflection ultimately feels at odds with M's prior behaviour, but it is important in establishing how John's own perception of events can get especially muddled, contradictory and unreliable. John is possibly acting upon a faulty understanding of events. Moreover, there is this sense of broad obliviousness that underpins much of John's behaviour, with him simply not being able to either comprehend or reconcile with the consequences of his own actions. Overall, John is presented as an unstable person, with so much heartache being the direct result of John not being able to make up his mind. This in turn creates disastrous consequences for everyone around him as he begins to openly question his identity. Here, despite being in vastly different social positions, a comparison can be draw between John and Colm from *The Gods Weep*, who both reach a junction point in their lives, encouraging them to make sweeping changes regardless of the consequences.

Exacerbating John's desire for change is M's thinly veiled misogyny, which comes out in increasingly juvenile ways. He notes that John cheated on him with a "cow [and a] bitch."[468] Whether born of out anger at the situation or just plain bigotry, it becomes obvious that M thinks very little of this woman. Because she is the only female that appears in the whole play, M's disapproval of her begins to take on misogynistic qualities. He refers to her as a "nice little bit of skirt," stripping away her value as a human being and reducing her to an object to be merely gawked at and played with.[469] Additionally, as M continually interrupts John with off-hand remarks and inappropriate observations, it creates the effect that, while still mad at John, M isn't really taking him seriously either. M's

[466] Ibid.
[467] Ibid.
[468] Ibid.
[469] Ibid, p. 21.

willingness to refer to John as a "cuntmuncher… mingediving muffmining wanker," exacerbates this point further.[470] In turn, there's a ridiculous quality to M's comments, and when asking whether John used a condom, M pushes the envelope further, pondering if it was "a hot wet tight fuck?"[471] Again, throughout this sequence the woman has been reduced to an object, but what complicates the situation is how John appeases this kind of behaviour, noting himself that "she was tall… not petite, more like a man really,"[472] which in turn invites M to state that "we've uncovered this fetish of yours for Neanderthal women."[473] Here both men are saying increasingly meanspirited things to make themselves feel better. It comes across as especially callous, and makes John seem especially hypocritical. Furthermore, from an absurdist context, this entire sequence demonstrates how women have their identities challenged on a regular occurrence. Despite having never met her, M wilfully casts aspersions on the woman. John too, despite liking her enough to break up with M, is completely fine with slandering her. The result is the impression that any identity can be undermined and undervalued if enough people are both indifferent to it, and willing to mock it.

What becomes apparent throughout *Cock*'s first section is just how thoroughly communication has broken down between the two men. One minute they're mercilessly insulting one another, and the next they are united in their mockery of someone else. In turn, this creates a complex picture, making it becomes difficult to ascertain what John ultimately wants. This too more broadly mirrors Pickering's observation o theatrical absurdism's fixation towards "the breakdown of communication."[474] M likewise refuses to properly engage with the situation at hand, diverting the conversation with jokes instead. Parallels can ultimately be drawn between *Cock* and *The Dumb Waiter*. Both start with a protagonist refusing to engage with the serious issue at hand; with the former

[470] Ibid.
[471] Ibid, p. 24.
[472] Ibid, p. 24.
[473] Ibid, p. 27.
[474] Compare Pickering, p. 5.

you have M's aforementioned joke-making, and the latter has Gus' jovial conversations regarding "the crockery"[475] or "that disputed penalty."[476] What makes this comparison notable is both the intent behind these trivial statements and the way audience sympathies are reversed. Regarding the former, M's intentions are wholly dismissive in nature, while Gus genuinely seems absent-minded and dim. The latter however is necessary to mention because both John and Gus are framed as the least problematic character within their respective plays. They are both ultimately absurdist heroes representing different ends of the same journey. Gus becomes explicitly aware of the circumstances surrounding his employment and likewise endeavours for answers. John is contrastingly resistant to that absurd awakening, being unable to unambiguously talk about his newfound sexuality, which in turn leaves him existentially unsure.

In time, the couple are able to talk seriously about the situation, the constant tension between M who wants clear answers, and John who cannot properly give them, remains. Their conversation does invariably turn towards the consequences this will have on their relationship, but the most pressing aspect revolves chiefly around John's sexual orientation and how that ultimately impacts his identity. He himself opines that "Maybe it's all more complicated."[477] Here, Angelaki's assertion that "Bartlett's playwriting shows a profound existential drive" seems especially relevant, as, despite all of the tension and heartache that has come from the situation itself, John is still sincerely eager to question his sexuality and invite the possibility of something different.[478] On some level, he needs to explore this on account of his newfound attraction to women, but as with his relationship with M, he struggles to navigate it properly, admitting later on that "I've never found women attractive,"[479] and goes so far as to say, "all my life I've only really looked at men."[480] M openly insults John, opining that

[475] Compare Pinter, p. 115.
[476]Ibid, p. 121.
[477] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, p. 25.
[478] Compare Angelaki, *Social and political theatre in 21st century Britain: staging crisis*, p. 55.
[479] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, p. 36.
[480] Ibid.

"Most people seem to come together pretty well, their atoms hold… but you, you don't seem to have grown coherently, you're a collection of things that don't amount. You're a sprawl. A mob. You don't add up."[481] He unambiguously rejects the idea that John isn't exclusively homosexual, instead opting to frame it as both a momentary deviation and a character flaw. What becomes apparent throughout the play is the way John is consistently described and defined by other people. Ultimately, John's entire identity is built on the observations of other people, which in turn robs him of agency, and when the other characters in the play do ask John for clarification, he can never properly satisfy them. John, in this light is the absurd hero who doesn't even understand the absurd nature of human existence. He unambiguously feels the "divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints," but instead of that feeling becoming the starting point for either an absurdist awakening or existential journey, it is instead held up as a character flaw.[482]

The audience is eventually given the opportunity to see the woman in question, which in turn begins to reveal the various things that separate both M and W. For a start, one of the first things W does is apologize. She also confides in John, stating "Sorry I hope you don't think this is scary but I see you often on the way to work, on the tube, then walking up towards the square. I recognize you, I think."[483] What makes this scene especially significant is the sheer contrast between John's romantic partners; while M asks for "some fucking commitment,"[484] W is polite throughout the play. Additionally relevant is the fact that this newfound couple don't really argue, especially not in the vindictive way that John and M argue. This in all creates a sense of mutual respect and admiration that runs concurrently throughout the play. The pair can confide in each other without worrying about judgment and reprisal. John therefore is finally in a position where the expression of his feelings won't result in a juvenile insult. It is explicitly because of W's temperament that John is now able to openly express

[481] Ibid.
[482] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 37.
[483] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, p. 31.
[484] Ibid, p. 29.

himself in ways completely alien to him before, and with that newfound vulnerability comes a sensitivity that the couple use to discuss their innermost desires. W notes that "[there are] all these couples living the dream in their own world, doing things that couples do, doing the things they think they should do."[485] There is this sense of yearning that characterises her remark, with it being clear that W openly pines for this type of idyllic relationship, borne out of a surface level view of the supposedly happy couples around her. It is obviously a fantasy, but they strive all the same. Moreover, this also relates to Camus' assertion that "you continue making the gestures commanded by existence."[486] W appears to wish for this type of relationship because she imagines the people in those relationships to be happy. It ultimately comes across as both naïve and complacent, with W romanticising the ideal relationship without having a proper means of achieving it. Regardless however, Bartlett uses this scene to provide a clear juxtaposition between John's two relationships. To the audience, John appears happier with W, but as becomes apparent over the course of the play, John's overall feelings are much more complex.

The stark contrast between the two relationships ultimately helps to solidify the core tension of the play, with John being forced to not only decide who he actually is, but also who he wants to stay with. Here Bartlett is demonstrating how a person's identity is not entirely individualistic, with John's own identity being partly informed by the people around him. This is where one can criticise Camus' interpretation of Absurdism. Camus' romanticisation of the individual ignores the reality that most people face. John is not crafting his identity in a bubble, the identity he has, and the potential identity he can adopt is beholden to the society he has been born into. Additionally, John is not the only person impacted by his choices. Throughout the text, Bartlett demonstrates the harsh realities of Identity-crafting, presenting an example of a man whose own situation is exacerbated by his overall

[485] Ibid, p. 33.
[486] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 7.

indecisiveness. What exacerbates all of this is just how indecisive John is. The stakes are comparatively high, yet John walks into crisis after crisis with little agency or apparent agitation.

Moreover, *Cock*'s exploration of identity is not limited to John's sexuality. Halfway through, John speaks of a man he once saw on public transport, noting that "There's this one guy I saw must've been a student… and what he was wearing was like fuck you to the world… and of course he looked stupid but I loved the fact he didn't care."[487] Here, John is openly praising someone for so staunchly being themselves, a character trait alien to John himself. Furthermore, John reveals that "one day he got on the tube, and he was different, he'd had a haircut – and was wearing really normal… boring topman clothes, everything about him had become like everyone else. I never noticed him again after that it was like he disappeared."[488] It's a revealing observation that betrays his actual desires. He wants to be as unashamedly free as the student he praises; he wants to revolt against the expectations of those around him yet is frequently unable. This, in turn creates a sense of dramatic irony, John has enough self-awareness to recognise this gulf between him and the student yet isn't completely able to take the plunge into accepting himself unequivocally. John places an immense amount of stock in this one student's revolt yet does nothing. It is a paradox that sets John apart from other Absurdist heroes who each have existentialist observations like him, yet ultimately act upon them. Camus himself considered revolt to be a "a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second."[489] John himself understands this, with his infatuation being borne from that student's resistance to social norms. John further admits that "of course he looked stupid," yet his admission is not a derisive one; it is something that John invariably respects and admires.[490] In all, the importance of this scene within the broader text is how it properly showcases the vulnerability and futility that characterizes much of

[487] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, p. 31.
[488] Ibid.
[489] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 40.
[490] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, p. 31.

John's personality. There are times where John unambiguously recognizes the absurd, yet his living condition prevents him from properly grappling with it, creating a never-ending cycle of existential angst and personal inadequacy that mars him throughout.

Ultimately however, the primary tension throughout the play is one centred around John's identity, and how everyone around him attempts at changing it for their own benefit. Both W and M have a vested interest in John's identity, and invariably try to nudge him towards a direction that favours them. As a result, John and his identity both feel especially malleable, exacerbated by his own indecisiveness. Tellingly, both M and W partake in the wilful undermining of John's agency and autonomy to get the desired results, forcing him to make an almost impossible, binary choice by the people he loves. Before the climactic dinner sequence, W bluntly states that **"**I'm not going to let you go John," and while obviously intended as a loving remark ultimately reveals how M and W are openly and actively fighting over him.[491] With time, it becomes apparent that even John himself disregards his own agency, opining that "if [M] meets you then he might see how in love we are and he might let me go."[492] To John, his romantic freedom is not something to be taken for himself, but instead surrendered to whoever loves him most, once again cementing the power dynamic between John and M, while also suggesting that in a hypothetical relationship, W too would hold all the power. In turn, the way John speaks about M reveals the extent to which John himself recognises the manipulation and abuse, yet as with most of the circumstances that befall him, John fails to properly articulate himself or resist against those that hurt him.

M's own strategy for wining John back is ultimately what serves as the play's conclusion; a dinner date in M's own home, with the guests being John, W and even M's father: F. The premise is

[491] Ibid, p. 63.
[492] Ibid, p. 50.

farcical in nature, once again mirroring Esslin's observation of the Theatre of the Absurd's capacity to "[fuse] tragedy with the most hilarious farce."[493] Despite the comical circumstances, the subject matter is deadly serious, with the consequences having deep ramifications over everyone involved. In this light, despite wholly understanding the seriousness of such an event, M demonstrates the extent of both his selfishness and pettiness, refusing to greet W at the door. He tells John that "She's your guest… I'm assuming she is technically a female even if she looks like Ray Winstone, no it's your bit of fuckpuppetry John, you open the door to it."[494] Once again, M's frustration and outrage takes on meanspirited and misogynistic qualities, with John flagrantly denying W the dignity and recognition she deserves.

As the final scene begins, it becomes apparent that this is the moment where John's identity becomes the chief concern. This in turn validates Angelaki's own observation that Bartlett's work has a "thematic preoccupation with the individual's sense of insecurity and [their] constant search for identity and purpose, juxtaposed with an alienating social environment."[495] The audience has already seen John stumbling around the topic to both M and W, providing contradictory answers and differing values. Now, as everyone probes John further, the audience gets to see how he ultimately fails to make a case for his own, unique identity separate from anyone else. Furthermore, the audience also gets to see the various techniques and strategies that John's loved ones have devised to win him over. M's tactic is characteristically manipulative, asserting that "I really want to know who turned your head. Turned it right round like that girl from *The Exorcist.*"[496] M completely rejects the notion that John came to this current decision himself, instead suggesting that John has in fact been tricked into his relationship with W. Although framed in a meanspirited way, there is some merit to the idea that John has simply gone along with W's suggestions. John's contradictory behaviour makes it especially difficult

[493] Compare Esslin, p. 238.
[494] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, p. 51.
[495] Compare Angelaki, *Social and political theatre in 21st century Britain: staging crisis*, p. 55.
[496] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, p. 51.

to understand what exactly his thoughts are. Upon W asking John to simply "be yourself," he tries just that, somewhat validating M's own argument in the process.[497]

Up until this point, John has been an especially frustrating absurdist hero. Throughout the text, he demonstrates the "appetite for clarity" that Albert Camus proscribes for those conscious of the absurd yet fails to properly act upon it.[498] Here, Existentialism, Theatrical Absurdism and Philosophical Absurdism mesh together at John's expense, with Pickering's assertion that "Theatre of the Absurd works by cheating and frustrating the expectations of the audience."[499] John's complete inability to speak up for himself brushes up against the audience's expectation of a meaningful climax. So much heartache and strife has been borne out of this inevitable confrontation, yet despite everything, John remains a reluctant absurdist hero, seemingly happy to coast through this existential crisis. What exacerbates this frustration is how John can finally express himself in front of everyone but fails to do so meaningfully. He states that "Everyone else seems to have a personality a character but I've never – I used to do voices… I'd been doing high voices and northern voices and men's voices… I tried to go back down to my own voice but I couldn't remember what it was."[500] Despite sounding declarative, John's comments are ambiguous. John does show an immense amount of vulnerability, finally revealing the crux of his conundrum, but there isn't much that the rest of the cast can properly do with this information. John has effectively revealed that his indecisiveness was borne out of him never being able to flesh out an identity for himself in the first place. Having never had the stability to properly explore his own identity, it becomes apparent that John's current identity is built upon a foundation of complacency, with him coasting through the life that has fallen into his lap. Rather than being the starting point for a broader discussion of John's perplexed identity, it serves instead as a dead-end,

[497] Ibid, p. 63.
[498] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 15.
[499] Compare Pickering, p 5.
[500] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, pp. 63-64.

neither M and W can properly grapple with the realities of such a comment, and as such they chose to practically ignore it, returning to their own manipulative strategies.

Here, Bartlett presents a solution to the crisis of John's identity. F gets straight to the point, openly asking John if he's "telling us you're bisexual."[501] It is the first point in the play where bisexuality is brought up, yet John himself rejects the term, bluntly stating "no."[502] Once again, John's frustrating qualities come through as he rejects the most obvious solution. Towards the end of the play, John bluntly explains that "I just want to be happy," which feels especially ironic considering how John's own actions have contributed to the exact opposite outcome.[503] John is under no obligation to adhere to the expectations of either orientation, and it is ultimately his unacceptance that exacerbates the tension, as without exploring the possibility of either bisexuality or pansexuality, there is no actual solution to John's crisis. It creates the overall impression that John doesn't really understand himself. Exacerbating this is John's later remark that "maybe [sexuality is] not a switch, one way or the other, maybe it's more like a stew, complicated things bubbling up."[504] Once again John has effectively put forward the case for his own bisexuality, yet he resists applying the label to himself. In a way, the entire play can be read as a tragedy, wherein one man's inability to accept or understand himself forces him into a manipulative relationship. Bartlett provides a solution, but John himself remains indecisive even as he evokes ancient history, noting that "the Romans just loved whoever they liked didn't they? They didn't have any of this."[505] John's reluctance is possibly the result of Mariam Fraser's belief that "a (bi)sexual identity *must* be anchored to a self, must reside within, and be expressive of, the self who

[501] Ibid, p. 81.
[502] Ibid, p. 85.
[503] Ibid, p. 89.
[504] Ibid, p. 78.
[505] Ibid, p. 79.

possess it," which is something that John is fundamentally incapable of achieving, lacking the conviction to decide almost anything for himself.[506]

The question regarding John's sexuality appears all encompassing, with John clearly hoping that the solidifying of his sexuality will pacify the other crises that have emerged in his life. It is a naïve idea, especially given Fraser's suggestion that "(bi)sexuality does not always author the self, or at least aspects of it, in the way that lesbian and heterosexuality are frequently perceived to do (whether this is desirable or not.)"[507] His lack of interest in pondering the question of his possible bisexuality forces him to try and navigate two different identities. Bartlett demonstrates that it is not enough for John to merely base his orientation around who he is dating. Instead, Bartlett presents the question of John's orientation as a starting point for a broader project of self-actualisation, which John ultimately squanders.

It is primarily here where *Cock's* most absurd characteristics come through, as John unambiguously represents the Absurdist hero who rejects the Absurd as a starting premise, forcing him to futilely scramble for answers that will never materialise. In this sense, John resembles the people unaware of the absurd who, to Camus "deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them."[508] Here, John's plight relates to Anderson and McCormack's notion that "our monosexual culture is deeply troubling… It denies a person's right to define their own identity, and also imposes a particular way for individuals to interpret their sexual desires and enact them in their sexual lives."[509] John is therefore forced by the monosexuality of others to conform to their standards, regardless of the impact that has on John's own wellbeing. Moreover, John is ultimately able to avoid

[506] See Mariam Fraser, *Identity without selfhood: Simone de Beauvoir and bisexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 24.
[507] Ibid, p. 24.
[508] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 25.
[509] Compare Anderson & McCormack, p. 3.

answering the question of his possible bisexuality altogether if he stays with either partner because, in Anderson and McCormack's view, "bisexuals can find fulfilling sex and relationships in ostensibly heterosexual couplings, benefiting from heterosexual privilege in a manner not possible for gays and lesbians."[510] This in turn further incentivises a rejection of either bisexuality or pansexuality.

Furthermore, from an absurdist perspective John can be viewed as a warped Sisyphus, where he too must labour with the same thing day after day, with John's metaphorical boulder being his broader identity, with his inability to grapple with it causing more and more heartache. Building on from this, John is similar to many of the other absurdist heroes discussed in this analysis but is separated by his ultimate rejection of the absurd. Alongside this rejection of the absurd itself is an equally frustrating rejection of Existentialism too, as John constantly demonstrates a capacity to ask existential questions surrounding his identity, yet properly refuses to act upon them.

As the dinner continues, John is once again afforded the opportunity to express himself, which again reveals the incongruity between his thoughts and actions. In defending his relationship with W, he tells M that "we don't argue, she doesn't make me feel like I'm less than you, she makes me feel intelligent makes me think I can do things with how clever I am, win things, that I'm unusually clever and I've never felt that."[511] It becomes painfully apparent that much of what John values in W is centred around the lack of toxicity in their relationship. The audience has already seen the instability of his relationship with M, and when combined with John's testimony, it becomes clear to the audience which partner John prefers being around. Exacerbating this, he remarks that "she cooks as well [as you]… but it's not from recipes in *The Guardian*, it's proper, she's learnt it from her mum, it's not

[510] Ibid.
[511] Compare Bartlett, *Cock*, pp. 85-86.

posh."[512] Here, Bartlett returns to the broader theme of Identity as it becomes apparent that John ultimately wants a more content relationship. While the question of John's sexuality is what instigates the play's dramatic tension, through embarking on this existential journey John has unearthed questions surrounding other aspects of his relationship that can change.

By the play's conclusion, John's complacency and timidity take proper root, preventing him from solidifying any kind of identity for himself, and in her last attempt at winning John over, W speaks of the life he's missing out on. She explains how "[it's all going] me pregnant easting biscuits… you holding my hand, and jack's born and grows up… later Katherine and later their kids all six of them, gathered together to see us… we're all smiling... until we die together and happy."[513] Here, Bartlet suggests that the differences between M and W are not completely stark with the leveraging of John's desires in an attempt at winning him over feeling especially cruel. As with everything else, John does nothing, yet this time there are finally consequences for his inaction, with W finally walking out on him. Notably, W's veneer finally cracks as she leaves, saying "Good decision John. Well done. Fuck you."[514]

W's departure is significant because it demonstrates how John's indecision eventually results in someone else making the decision for him. John now has no choice but to stay with M in their toxic relationship. John's final comment of the play, wherein he remarks that he's "[M's] fucking trophy," tears back the veneer and reveals to the audience the extent of John's actual self-awareness, despite his relative inability to act upon it.[515] Ultimately, in true absurdist fashion, Pickering argues that by the play's conclusion there is "no denouement, no exposition, and… no sense of development."[516] John is

[512] Ibid, p. 86.
[513] Ibid, p. 93.
[514] Ibid.
[515] Ibid, p. 96.
[516] Compare Pickering, p. 5.

almost in the exact same position he was in during the start of the play, despite the intense amount of stress and conflict that has arisen as a result. Furthermore, in the same way that Camus speaks of a philosophical suicide, it could be argued that there too is a metaphorical one, in which John cedes any and all hope for metaphysical happiness as a result of his indecisiveness. Camus himself noted that "at the end of the [absurdist] awakening comes, in time, the consequences; suicide or recovery," and in this specific instance, John has stumbled into choosing a type of suicide that prevents him from properly achieving either happiness or understanding.[517]

John's journey takes on the qualities of a parable, wherein the Absurdity of life itself is treated as an immutable truth, yet the hero fails to properly recognise this. What underpins this argument is the cosmic indifference to an individual's own identity, forcing themselves to nurture it on their own. From both absurd and existential perspectives there is no inherent value to any of the identities discussed in this analysis, value must therefore come from the people who hold those identities themselves. Considering John's inability to understand his broader identity, he struggles to establish meaning and value. Camus' belief that "The absurd does not liberate, it binds," contrasts against a man who ultimately hopes that his existential wrangling will result in a freedom in of itself.[518] As Camus himself notes, "The absurd man realizes that hitherto he was bound to that postulate of freedom on the illusion of which he was living," which is something altogether alien to John and his indecisiveness.[519]

Building on from this point, John can be viewed as the Absurdist hero who yearns to be a true individual but cannot properly manage it. His story is a tragedy where his own personality leads him

[517] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 12.
[518] Ibid, p. 50.
[519] Ibid, p. 43.

to unwanted conformity, much like the student he admires. In turn, Bartlett has crafted a play which posits that the price for not being oneself is perpetual crisis and dissatisfaction. It mirrors Angelaki's observation that Horton's protagonist in *All of Me* "oscillate[s] between anxiety and hope," where existential wrangling becomes all-consuming.[520] Despite the frustrations that John himself causes, he remains sympathetic, primarily because, as suggested by Anderson and McCormack, "bisexuals… face unique issues when coming out… Bisexuals… have traditionally have been characterized by a constant expectation to defend the legitimacy of bisexuality, particularly that bisexuals are confused, greedy or in denial about being gay."[521] Regardless of the identity that John adopts, in his existential pursuit of meaning, he is beholden to the same scrutiny that bisexual people are, which in turn affects his ability to properly assert himself. Furthermore, comparisons can also be drawn between *Cock* and Ionesco's *Rhinoceros,* which both feature protagonists resisting against forces thrust upon them, but with very different outcomes. Esslin once stated that *Rhinoceros "*conveys… the absurdity of defiance as much as the absurdity of conformism," a notion that is also accurate to *Cock***.**[522] John's own defiance is markedly less successful than Berenger's, with John remaining in the same toxic environment from the play's start. Esslin's own observation that *Rhinoceros* demonstrates "the tragedy of the individualist who cannot join the happy throng of less sensitive people," becomes an ironic statement when applied to *Cock*, which in turn demonstrates the tragedy of the theoretical individualist who cannot escape the throngs of these people.[523]

When looking at *Cock* chiefly through the lens of identity, it therefore becomes apparent how ultimately destructive the pursuit of one's own identity can be, especially in the face of an unfeeling universe devoid of meaning. Like John, Rooster Byron faces challenges from those who seek to shape him into their own image. John's quest for identity becomes muddled in the face of a world that makes

[520] Compare Angelaki, *Social and political theatre in 21st century Britain: staging crisis*, p. 11.
[521] Compare Anderson & McCormack, p. 52.
[522] Compare Esslin, p. 183.
[523] Ibid.

little intrinsic sense. Camus himself asserted that "the world itself, whose single meaning I do not understand, is but a vast irrational."[524] *Cock's* relevance with this observation ultimately rests in the way that, without a concrete rationale for human existence, it therefore becomes imperative that individual people make the effort to construct an identity for themselves that gives life meaning. John ultimately fails to act upon this responsibility. He refuses to take the plunge and define an identity for himself in the face of a universe that paradoxically does not care about him yet tries to shape him in an altogether different image.

[524] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 21.

Conclusion

Over the course of this analysis, many contemporary playtexts have been looked at in an attempt at seeing how each one utilizes and explores both Existentialism and the Absurd. What ultimately becomes apparent is, despite the many differences in tone, theme and subject matter within each specific play, Absurdism and Existential thought are present in all of them. Whether that be via the overtly existential wrangling of *All of Me*; the ecologically conscious work of *The Gods Weep*; or the racially aware *Orphans*, Existentialism and the Absurd are both being utilized by contemporary writers to explore the more contemporary issues of systemic oppression, economic stagnation, political division, and existential uncertainty. This, in turn suggests a universality to both Existentialism and the Absurd that can only be understood when placed within the context of twenty-first century society. Furthermore, the two concepts exist symbiotically; an awareness of The Absurd brings on existential uncertainty, which in turn results in an absurdist journey built upon existential thought. Characters throughout these playtexts question their position within society at-large and go through various trials and tribulations to reconcile the gulf between their expectations and how they fail to live up to them.

In a post-postmodern world, where these aforementioned issues can appear ever-present, it stands to reason that a worldview aware of these realities becomes attractive for utilization. Camus himself placed great significance in viewing the Absurd as a means towards meaning itself, stating that "the Absurd becomes God (in the broadest meaning of the word) and that inability to understand becomes the existence that illuminates everything."[525] Camus asks the reader to recognise the instability of human society and to rebel against an existence built entirely on habit. As such, the works discussed in this analysis each utilize the Absurd as either a solution to the issues

[525] Compare Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 26.

facing our world, or a symptom of these issues instead. What ultimately differentiates how each play depicts the absurd, is how it affects each individual character, and how they chose to respond to that Absurdity. Furthermore, each play features some kind of existential crisis, where at least one character grapples with existential uncertainty, creating strife and heartache for both themselves and everyone around them

The works in this analysis that explore either the absurdity of life or identity itself offer the most obvious avenue for existential and absurdist ideas to come through. They take Camus' premise that "the world itself, whose single meaning I do not understand, is but a vast irrational" and use it to justify the existential journey that their protagonist's may or may not undertake.[526] The world's depicted in these plays mirror our own, making the characters, and their plights seem relatable. *All of Me* features a woman unambiguously struggling against the Absurd. Lacking systemic power, she cannot hope to change the world at large, but choses to resist anyway. *Realism's* protagonist is muddled with regret, angst, and dissatisfaction because of the Absurd. He ultimately lacks the determination to take Camus' advice and rebel. Contrastingly, *Love and Information* forgoes a protagonist entirely, opting instead to explore the absurdity of life on a macro level, showing dozens of individuals caught up in their own tribulations, merely existing in a world lacking cohesion and meaning. In turn, *Cock* returns the focus to an individual, but is keen to demonstrate how a man's journey of self-discovery can get undermined by a world keen on creating an identity for him.

Beyond those four plays however, there is a wide range of playtexts that utilize both the Absurd and Existentialism to explore tangentially different themes. Characters in *The God's Weep*, *A Number*, *The Writer*, *Jerusalem*, *Orphans*, *et al* tether their identities to systems and institutions that

[526] Ibid, p. 21.

only create heartache and strife. Lacking concrete meaning, these characters are adrift "in the very midst of the desert," forced to create an identity for themselves without overt guidance.[527] This quest for a concrete identity is itself a major source of heartache, with many characters suffering because of their associate's absurdist journey. In plays like *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone*, the Absurd comes through as the well-being of the planet, alongside the creatures that live on it get completely disregarded for the sake of both power and capital. In *Jerusalem* and *Orphans*, we see the Absurd through systemic neglect, which results in the shoddy justification of racialized cruelty. In *Albion*, one woman's dogged fixation on the past causes her to uproot her family and an entire village in the process; and in *Debris*, The Absurd manifests itself through the inherent cruelty of the world, wherein the most vulnerable in our society get abandoned by those charged with protecting them.

As stated previously, the subject matter varies wildly from play to play, but that variation ultimately demonstrates how the Absurd can be applied to explore issues far removed from identity, and how existentialism can be utilized to help that process. Furthermore, each play in this analysis has shown characters marred by existential uncertainty; they try (with varying degrees of success) to establish an identity for oneself, while also trying to understand their place in the broader universe. It ultimately becomes apparent how existential wrangling becomes the impetus for the Absurd to manifest itself, with each theme relying on the other to instigate dramatic tension. Additionally, the concerns raised by both the Absurd and Existentialism appear to have relevancies across class, culture, and occupation, creating avenues to explore either idea in earnest. Furthermore, the Absurd is presented as an unavoidable truth, with each playwright offering their characters the choice to either accept or resist against it. Regardless of each character's ultimate choice, there are consequences; Rooster Byron loses his home; Salter loses his children; Danny loses his humanity; and John loses his agency. The only characters who appear completely content with their lives are people

[527] Ibid, p. ix.

like Paul and Michael, who have both accepted the Absurd and chose to live in tandem with it. They too must ultimately face opposition, but that opposition ironically comes from those who have not properly accepted the absurd. The key difference between these content individuals, and their comparatively volatile associates is that the former's acceptance of the absurd gives them existential stability that others lack. They do not overtly suffer in this absurd world, nor are they actively resisting against the forces thrust upon them. Michael and Paul appear at the end of their absurdist journey, having survived their own tribulations, and come out better for it. This ultimately suggests that both the Absurd and Existentialism must be accepted in full, because the consequences for not doing so can be fatal.

In addition, these plays ultimately go beyond both the Absurd and Existential canon itself, exploring systemic injustice, institutional oppression, and ecological degradation in ways that writers like Camus never did. It is here where both the Absurd and Existentialism remain both relevant and prominent within the theatre. The meaning of life can never be truly ascertained, nor can our broader position within the universe be properly settled. The only choice we have is to constantly question and debate these two ideas *ad nauseum*, much like Sisyphus himself endlessly pushing his boulder up a hill. The only thing that will ultimately change is how society choses to answer these questions, which will in turn reflect the values and beliefs held by the population of the day. The Absurd, as depicted within contemporary theatre, looks somewhat different to the Absurd observed by Martin Esslin in the 1960's, and the Absurd codified by Albert Camus in the 1940's. It stands to reason that the Absurd will likewise look very different in the hands of future generations, utilizing it to explain away and give context to the issues pertinent to their own generation. What this analysis has shown, is that both Existentialism and the Absurd remain popular themes within contemporary theatre, primarily because they both can be utilized to tackle the issues of the day. Contemporary playwrights may have deviated from some of the techniques observed by Martin Esslin, but the

intent of the Theatre of the Absurd remains in place, with writers such as Caroline Horton, Dennis Kelly, Caryl Churchill *et al* depicting absurdist heroes embarking on existential journeys in order to give their lives meaning. Furthermore, this evoking of the Absurd helps to give their work a greater sense of existential awareness, and an understanding of the unfeeling systems that can influence and shape human society; and much like the Theatre of the Absurd, which has "renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition, merely presen[ting] it in being," these contemporary plays showcase the Absurd, and the various ways that human society is beholden to it.[528]

[528] Compare Esslin, p. 25.

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