The absurd sensibility has profoundly marked writers of many countries and languages since the start of the 20th century. The notion of the absurd is most closely associated with the Theater of the Absurd, launched in the nineteen fifties in Paris by, notably, Beckett and Ionesco, and continued world-wide by such playwrights as Pinter, Albee, Havel, Stoppard, and Frisch. But the preoccupation with the absurd was not limited to the theater; in the immediate post-World War II period, the Existentialists already had posited the absurdity of man’s condition on this earth and works by Sartre and Camus brilliantly explored this philosophic position. The metaphysical anguish at the base of absurdist attitudes stemmed from what Martin Esslin, the author of the landmark *Theater of the Absurd*, called the disappearance of “the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages [which were] swept away…found wanting…and discredited.” Kafka’s work is exemplary and the seminal depiction of the absurd for his century; numerous other writers view the world as fundamentally absurd, including Pirandello, Stein, Gombrowicz, Grass, Heller, Cortázar, Vonnegut, Pynchon, Kertesz, Bernhard. Many filmmakers shared these perspectives, including Antonioni, Resnais, Godard, and more recently, Woody Allen. In a century that witnessed two unbelievably destructive worldwide conflicts, an era that made possible the Holocaust and other genocides, that produced Hiroshima and with it man’s ability for the first time of destroying himself and the entire world, it is no surprise that the absurd would be a dominant stance in viewing the human condition, even if the absurd if often treated with devastating humor.

**Principal texts (available at NYU Bookstore):**
Eugène Ionesco, *Four Plays*, Grove Press  
Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, Schocken Books  
Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Grove Press  
Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Penguin  
Imre Kertesz, *Liquidation*, Knopf  
Joseph Heller, *Catch As Catch Can: The Collected Stories and Other Writings* Simon & Schuster  
Albert Camus: *The Stranger*, Vintage  
Harold Pinter: *Old Times*, Grove Press  
Thomas Bernhard: *Heldenplatz*, Oberon

**All other readings will be available on NYU-CLASSES**

   *All courses that follow are Lecture + Discussion format.*

2. Feb 1   **Franz Kafka: The Trial** (Schocken Books, pages 1-231)

   **E-MAIL 1:** OPAQUENESS IN THE TRIAL

3. Feb 8   **Luigi Pirandello: Six Characters in Search of an Author.** (Penguin, pages 5-66)
Video.
“Introduction, 16-30” in Domenico Vittorini, *The Drama of Luigi Pirandello* Preface to *Six Characters...*(1925 ) in *Naked Masks; Five Plays by Luigi Pirandello*, ed. by Eric Bentley, 363-375

4. Feb 15   **Albert Camus: The Stranger** (Vintage, 123 pages)

5. Feb 22   Camus, continued; Sartre

   **E-MAIL 2:** THE ABSURD IN THE STRANGER

6. Mar 1   **Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot.** (Grove Press, 85 pages)
Video excerpts.
In Tom Bishop: *From the Left Bank: Reflections on the Modern French Theater and Novel*, “Camus and Beckett: Variations on an Absurd Landscape” 212-227


E-MAIL 3: THE 2 ACT STRUCTURE IN WAITING FOR GODOT

MID TERM EXAM

8. Mar 22 Eugène Ionesco: (Four Plays, Grove Press)
   The Bald Soprano (pages 7-42)
   The Chairs (pages 111-161)

in Eugène Ionesco: Notes and Counter Notes, “The Bald Soprano. The Tragedy of Language” 175-180

9. Mar 29 Samuel Beckett: Molloy (Grove Press, 240 pages)


E-MAIL 4: THE RELATION OF THE 2 PARTS OF MOLLOY

10. Apr 5 Joseph Heller: from Catch as Catch Can
    (The Collected Stories and Other Writings, Simon & Schuster)

   “Yossarian Survives” 110-121; “Catch-23 Yossarian Lives” 122-161; “Clevinger’s Trial: A Play in One Act” 238-274; “Joseph Heller talks about Catch-22” 298-313

   in Mosaic: A Journal for the Comparative Study of Literature, “Joseph Heller: At War with Absurdity” by Jean Kennard, 75-87

11. Apr 12 Tom Stoppard: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead
    (Grove Press 126 pages)

    Roger Ebert, “Blow-Up” (Nov 8, 1998) 1-3

E-MAIL 5: THE USE OF HAMLET IN ROSENCRANTZ ....

12. Apr 19 Harold Pinter Old Times (Grove Press, 75 pages)

   in Martin Esslin, The Theater of the Absurd, “Harold Pinter: Certainties and Uncertainties” 239-244; 259-264.

E-MAIL 6: CERTITUDE AND DOUBT IN OLD TIMES

13. Apr 26 Imre Kertesz: Liquidation (Knopf, 130 pages)
in *Imre Kertesz And Holocaust Literature* ed. by Louise O. Vasvari and Steven Totosy de Zepetnek, “The Novelness of Imre Kertesz’s Sorstalansag (Falsness)” by Louise O. Vasvari, 258-268

14. May 3 

**Thomas Bernhard:** *Heldenplatz* (Oberon, 132 pages)


**Film excerpts:** *Woody Allen : Deconstructing Harry*

Students are responsible for choosing 5 of the 6 e-mail assignments. These are due at <tom.bishop@nyu.edu> by 11 pm on the Monday before the date indicated. You should plan on approximately 3 pages of a typical computer page in a 12 point font and normal line spacing.

Articles for reading assignments not from the principal texts (in bold) which you are expected to have, will be distributed or made available online.

**ASSESSMENT:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email assignments</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm (written in class)</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final exam</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Final Exam will take place during the date and time assigned by CAS.