

The Absurdity of Life: Incorporating Modern Drama into Critical Thinking and English Writing

Abstract

This lesson plan tries to incorporate the relish of modern drama into critical thinking and English writing. Teachers first introduce the format, theatrical elements, and dramaturgical terms to students. A stage performance is not necessarily the prerequisite for the understanding of a play – on one hand, the preparation of a performance can be time-consuming, and on the other hand, online video resources serve as an effective alternative for students to get a general picture of the performance of a play in a short time. With basic understanding about the formal and structural elements of a play, students can analyze the contents of a play and figure out the theme of a literary work.

Textual knowledge should be followed by a deeper understanding about the philosophical aesthetics of literature. After teachers introduce the aesthetics of theater of the absurd, it is time for students to think critically. Students don't have to accept all the philosophical creeds of theater of the absurd; instead, they can develop different positions of their own when it comes to the philosophy of life. Students' opinions should be expressed through writing – composing a styled ending for an excerpt of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*. For Albee, life is absurd, but for others, this may not be the case. Format and thematic coherence are equally important if students are to orchestrate a good ending for a play. After this class, students should have basic understanding about drama, basic competence of analyzing a literary work, as well as the ability to critically evaluate their philosophy of life.

Teaching Objectives

- A. To actively collect and sieve information on the Internet.
- B. To understand the aesthetics of “theater of the absurd.”
- C. To critically evaluate the philosophy of life demonstrated in theater of the absurd.
- D. To write analytical paragraphs about literary characters.
- E. To compose a styled ending for literary works by utilizing some key words.

Grade Level and Difficulty Level

■	■	□	
Senior high freshmen	Senior high juniors	Senior high seniors	
□	■	□	□
Elementary	Intermediate	Upper-Intermediate	Advanced

Time Required and the Number of Students

Class period: two class periods, 50 minutes for each.
Class size: around 40 students.

Teaching Materials and Equipments

- A. Selected passages from Edward Albee’s play *The Zoo Story*.
- B. Selected introductory entries about “theater of the absurd” on *Wikipedia*.
- C. Selected clippings about *The Zoo Story* on *YouTube*.
- D. A screen, a projector, a loudspeaker, and a computer with Internet.

Teaching Procedures

The first period

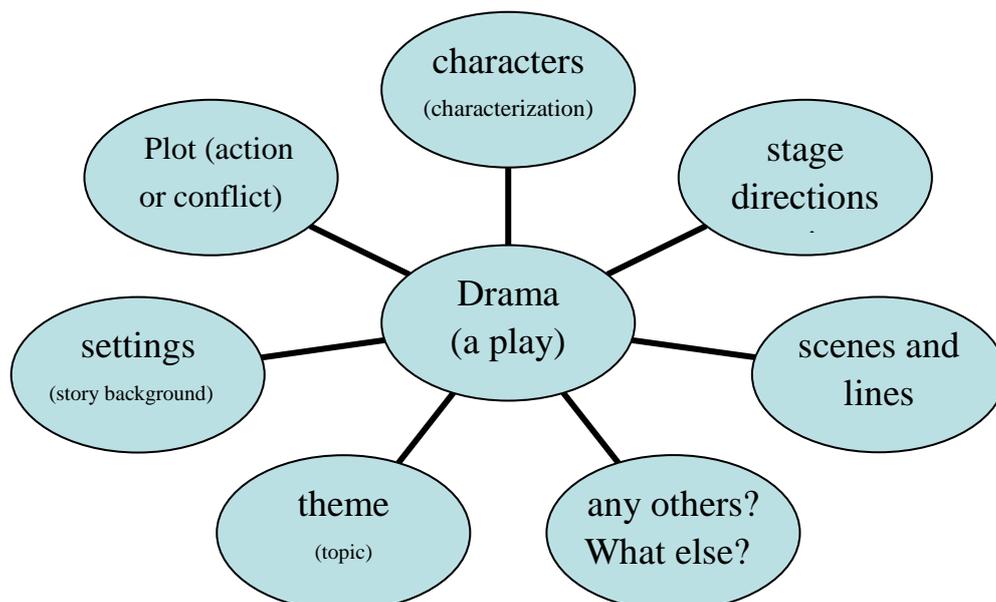
I . Introduce the genre of drama and some dramaturgic terms. (10 mins)

1.1 Observe the format and structural elements of drama.

Classroom instructions: Offer students a sample of modern drama manuscript and ask students to observe the format of a play. A convenient resource for drama manuscript samples is to make use of some lessons in high school textbooks that are written in the form of literary drama. To have more authentic drama materials, teachers can also check out some drama collections from university libraries, then either passing the books to students in groups or using a projector with document camera to project the drama manuscripts onto a screen.

Information for references: The format of a play can be brightly observed in the beginning pages. Usually a literary play begins with a title page and a character/actor list, and the opening scene usually begins with italicized stage directions about the settings and the background of the whole story. Usually stage directions between lines will be put in parentheses.

1.2 Draw graphics and ask students, on the basis of their observations, to provide possible answers for the question: “A play is composed of...?”



Classroom instructions: Ask students to speak up their ideas and map the constituting elements of a play in the graphics by gathering students' random ideas. Teachers can give clues to students by dividing the constituting elements of a play into formal ones and thematic ones. If students do not know how to say the dramaturgical terms in English, teachers can allow students to speak up their ideas in Chinese and then introduce the English term to them by offering definitions.

Purpose statement: Students are required to know the basic key terms about drama because some terms will be used later in the discussion or evaluation of plays. Students should also know the format of a play because they are expected to write an ending for a play in the next period.

II. Read an excerpt of *The Zoo Story*. (20 mins)

2.1 Ask students to read aloud the selected passages on the handout.

Classroom instructions: Assign two students the two roles in *The Zoo Story* and read the play out loud in pair. Teachers can assign a new pair of students to continue reading the play once in a while. In case of difficult words that students can't pronounce or difficult sentences that students might not understand, teachers should help them right away.

Information for references: There are only two characters, Peter and Jerry, in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*. The language of the play is very simple, so it is a good choice for students to read. Sitting alone on a bench in a park, Peter is accosted by Jerry, who is paranoid in telling Peter a story about the zoo, and when Jerry, having stood for a long time, wants Peter's bench, Peter the gentleman is irritated. The recommended part for excerption is from the moment when Jerry wants to tell Peter a zoo story to the moment when Peter is annoyed and cried out for police.

2.2 Listen to a recital version of the play (or ask for two volunteer students to act out a short passage of the play).

Information for references: Teachers can play the recital version of the play on *YouTube* (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuh6Z-F2Ccc>) so that students can feel the emotions and intonations. This clipping approximately covers the recommended excerption of the play.

III. Watch a clipping about *The Zoo Story*. (5 mins)

Information for references: Use “the zoo story” as the key words to search in *YouTube* and we will have many clippings about the performance of *The Zoo Story*. The recommended one is <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpRXYCnT6FY> . This clipping covers the most part of the recommended excerpt. This clipping is spoken in English without subtitles, but since students have read the manuscript, they can sense the dramatic tension between the two characters from the actors’ vivid gestures.



Purpose statement: While practicing listening ability and understanding non-verbal messages, students should have a general picture about the two characters before we analyze the excerpt.

IV. Analyze the characters and themes. (15 mins)

Classroom instructions: Use the following handout and ask students to (1) complete the WH-question graphic organizer, (2) use three adjectives to describe the two characters respectively, and (3) in one or two complete sentences, summarize the conflict and the theme of this episode.

Purpose statement: This handout assesses students' understanding about the play. In addition, it also gives students a chance to critically analyze the theme of a play and to familiarize themselves with such dramaturgy terms as setting, conflict, character/characterization, and theme.

The second period

I. Present *Wikipedia* entries. (20 mins)

1.1 Understand Edward Albee and his theatrical philosophy.

1.2 Evaluate or criticize the aesthetics of theater of the absurd.



Classroom instructions: Give students the following two terms on the blackboard, “Edward Albee” and “theater of the absurd.” Tell students that the play we read last time is by Edward Albee, a playwright noted for theater of the absurd. Give students a Xeroxed copy of the two entries on *Wikipedia*. Give every student a working sheet (see the next page). For part 1, ask students to locate the answers with the help of *Wikipedia* articles. For part 2, ask students to locate the key phrases in *Wikipedia* articles that best describe the features of characters, language and plot in theater of the absurd, and then find corresponding examples in the excerpt we read last time. For part 3, students are required to offer their own opinions and value-judgments about the philosophy of an absurd life.

Purpose statement: After understanding the theatrical aesthetics, students should take sides (agree or disagree) in the philosophy of an absurd life before they are able to compose a self-styled ending for the play later.

班級： _____
 姓名： _____

Edward Albee and Theater of the Absurd (A Working Sheet)



I . Biographical information about the playwright:

- ◆ What is Albee's nationality? ▶ He is an _____.
- ◆ When was Albee born? ▶ He was born in _____.
- ◆ In what city did Albee spend his childhood? ▶ He grew up in _____.
- ◆ List two plays by Albee: ▶ (1) _____
 (2) _____

II . The aesthetics of Theater of the Absurd

- ◆ Find the key phrases to describe the features of the following three items in theater of the absurd, and then examine if *The Zoo Story* has the same characteristics.
 - ▶ characters: In theater of the absurd, characters _____
 🚩 *The Zoo Story* (has doesn't have) characters of this kind.
 For example: _____
 - ▶ language: In theater of the absurd, language _____
 🚩 *The Zoo Story* (has doesn't have) language of this kind.
 For example: _____
 - ▶ plot: In theater of the absurd, plot _____
 🚩 *The Zoo Story* (has doesn't have) a plot of this kind.
 For example: _____

III . A critical reflection on the philosophy of an absurd life

1. The world is incomprehensible. => <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	
2. Human beings are trapped in routines. => <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	
3. Most things we meet are illogical. => <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	
4. Most conversations are nonsense. => <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	
<p>Generally speaking, I (agree/disagree) with the philosophy that human life itself is very absurd, because _____</p> <p>_____</p>	

II . Write a styled ending for the excerpt of *The Zoo Story*. (30 mins)

Classroom instructions: Give students an excerpt of the play. Students have to compose a styled ending for the episode based on their viewpoints about the philosophy of the absurd aesthetics. If students agree with the philosophy of theater of the absurd, they should end the episode in a typically absurd way. If students do not agree, they should end the play in their own way. That is, the ending should be styled – either in an absurd style or, say, in an optimistic style. Besides, the ending should be written according to the proper format of a play.

Information for references: An example of the working sheet is on the next page. Teachers can choose to make this activity an individual work or group work.

Purpose statement: Demanding students to write an ending for a play, this activity assesses the overall result of students' understanding about the formal, structural and philosophical dimensions of drama. After learning the format and structure of drama in the first period and the philosophical aesthetics in the second period, students are required to develop and express their critical opinions through a short piece of literary work.

Assessment and Suggestions

Student works should be assessed in line with their critical evaluation of the philosophical aesthetics. The attitude should be coherent, and the ending must convey the attitude. There should be no dramatic resolution in the ending if students agree with the philosophy of theater of the absurd. For those who disagree, the ending should be resolute, definite, and meaningful, possibly in an optimistic way. The coherence of philosophical attitude is the most important element in the grading criteria of drama. Teachers should also pay attention to the format of student work, especially the format of stage directions, which are supposed to be put in parentheses between the lines.

Supplement: Student works

Name:  蕭詩輝 Class: 二信

Compose an ending for a scene in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*

JERRY: [softly] Get off this bench, Peter, I want it.
 PETER: [almost whining]: No.
 JERRY: I said I want this bench, and I'm going to have it. Now get over there.
 PETER: People can't have everything they want. You should know that; it's a rule; people can have some of the things they want, but they can't have everything.
 JERRY: [laughs] Imbecile! You're slow-witted!
 PETER: Stop that!
 JERRY: You're a vegetable! Go lie down on the ground.
 PETER: [intense] Now you listen to me. I've put up with you all afternoon.
 JERRY: Not really.
 PETER: Long enough. I've put up with you long enough. I've listened to you because you seemed ... well, because I thought you wanted to talk to somebody.

JERRY: Oh, really? I thought you wanted to talk to me, didn't you?

PETER: No, I didn't.

JERRY: All right. But I still want this bench, so you get over there.

PETER: (irritates) Are you kidding? I came here first, and.....

JERRY: (yells) Shut up! (Jerry sits on Peter's legs)

PETER: OH, my god! You smell bad. You are drunk.

JERRY: (delirious) I am not drunk.

(Ring Ring, Peter's cell phone rings and he gets the phone.)

PETER: I need to go and..... (Peter finds Jerry sleeps like a log, so Peter let Jerry lie on the bench and then leave.)

JERRY: (hours later) Where am I?

Name: 世宗高中 Class: 二T班

Compose an ending for a scene in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*

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JERRY: [laughs] Imbecile! You're slow-witted!

PETER: Stop that!

JERRY: You're a vegetable! Go lie down on the ground.

PETER: [intense] Now you listen to me. I've put up with you all afternoon.

JERRY: Not really.

PETER: Long enough. I've put up with you long enough. I've listened to you because you seemed ... well, because I thought you wanted to talk to somebody.

Jerry = Oh, you are so kind!

Peter = I'm glad that you finally know it; then get out here.

Jerry = No! Since you're a good person you should listen to me

Peter = No! No! No! Please! Go easy on me!

Jerry = HA! HA! HA! I'm not a benevolent person like you.

Peter = Hey! Look! Something strange.

Jerry = (Look at somewhere Peter point out.) What?

Peter = (He bring a iron bar down on Jerry's head) Sorry!

Jerry = (He faints but after second he regain consciousness) Sucks
You hit me

Peter = So what! I'm totally fed up with you.

Jerry = Let's have a duel! Coward!

Peter = Ok! You are such a man of bitch.

(Peter and Jerry hit each other until a police come in.)
Polizeman = Your neighbor report to me there are two guys

Peter and Jerry = No! No! We are good friends chatting fights
with each other. Nothing happen. and make
a noise.

Polizeman = Ok! please be quiet! Bye.

Name: 劉書瑜. 薛世如 Class: 2A

Compose an ending for a scene in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*

JERRY: [softly] Get off this bench, Peter, I want it.
 PETER: [almost whining]: No.
 JERRY: I said I want this bench, and I'm going to have it. Now get over there.
 PETER: People can't have everything they want. You should know that; it's a rule; people can have some of the things they want, but they can't have everything.
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 JERRY: Not really.
 PETER: Long enough. I've put up with you long enough. I've listened to you because you seemed ... well, because I thought you wanted to talk to somebody.

Jerry: I just think that you are lonely, so I want to close to you and talk about what I happen today.

Peter: In fact, I do feel the thing what you talk is really boring to me, maybe, we can change our conversation.

Jerry: I suppose that good things should be share with best friend.

Peter: However, First, I don't think I am your friend. Second, we are just passerby.

Jerry: What? we are just a passerby? How can you talk such a fulsome talk?

Peter: I just talk what I want to talk.

Jerry: Okay! Let it be.

Peter: Let it go.

Jerry & Peter: Let it fly to the sky.

Jerry: What a happy ending!

Peter: Yeah