MIZORAM UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES
A Refereed Bi-annual Journal
A Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN(P): 2395-7352
eISSN: 2581-6780
Volume XII, Issue 1
June 2026

# *Mimetic Entropy: Mapping Thermodynamics and Girardian Violence in Select Absurd Plays*

**Animesh Giri***

https://doi.org/10.22232/mzujhss.2026.12.01.18

## Abstract

*This article proposes an interdisciplinary framework of Mimetic Entropy to analyze the structural and ontological dissolution in the works of Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet and Eugène Ionesco. By synthesizing René Girard's idea of mimetic desire with the "Second Law of Thermodynamics", it contends that the Theatre of the Absurd acts like a closed system where increasing rivalry reflects the rise of disorder. In the plays Waiting for Godot, The Maids and The Chairs, violence is not just a theme but a result of contending desires, which produce the "waste heat" after their clash. The study looks at three phases in these plays: the intense mimetic clash and sacrifice in Genet's work, the chaotic and confusing state in Ionesco's play, and the final "heat-death" in Beckett's almost lifeless setting. While Girard's theory puts forward that the "Sacrificial Crisis" helps de-escalate social tensions through scapegoat mechanism, this paper explores that the Theatre of the Absurd reveals the failure of this approach. When the system cannot relieve its pressure, it leads to a confusing state of balance. It finds that the Absurd signifies the ultimate end of mimetic desire: a stagnant state where exhaustion of differences makes language, identity and violence lose their meaning.*

* Senior Research Fellow, Department of English & M.E.L., University of Lucknow, Lucknow. ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2347-0747

***Key Words:*** *Mimetic Entropy; René Girard; Thermodynamics; heat-death; scapegoat mechanism*

## Introduction

The mid-twentieth century stage is often depicted as a realm of metaphysical emptiness; however, in the works of Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, it more accurately serves as a closed thermodynamic system. Within these constricting environments— the ritualistic boudoir of *The Maids*, the desolate road of *Waiting for Godot* and the disordered room of *The Chairs*—the principles of physical energy and human desire converge in a disconcerting synthesis. This paper proposes an interdisciplinary reading of violence in the Theatre of the Absurd by synthesizing René Girard's Mimetic Theory with the "Second Law of Thermodynamics". Focusing on Jean Genet's *The Maids* (1954), Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954) and Eugène Ionesco's *The Chairs* (1958) the study argues that absurdist violence functions as a closed system characterized by mimetic entropy. In this entropic theatre, violence ceases to be a traditional dramatic climax and becomes, instead, a form of "waste heat." According to René Girard, human conflict is born not of difference, but of a terrifying move toward sameness—a mimetic rivalry where subjects obsessively imitate the desires of their models until all "degrees" of distinction vanish into the "monstrous double." In thermodynamic terms, this process mirrors the transition toward maximum entropy.

Nevertheless, the defining horror of the Absurd stems from the failure of the heat sink. Traditional Girardian theory suggests that the "Sacrificial Crisis" is resolved through the cooling effect of the scapegoat—a mechanism that alleviates the system's internal pressure and reinstates order. Yet, within the terminal universe of the Absurd, this sacrificial engine has ceased to function. Drawing upon the 1867 English translation of memoirs of Rudolf Clausius, who first predicted the "heat-death"

(Wärmetod) of the universe, this study contends that Genet's sacrificial ritual, Beckett's stasis and Ionesco's material congestion signify a state of total equilibrium. When the sacredness of violence fades, the system reaches absolute zero instead of exploding. Through the progression from the incandescent friction of Genet to the cold dissipation of Beckett, this paper will corroborate that the Absurd is the unavoidable consequence of a world that has depleted the energy required for desire.

As the "Second Law of Thermodynamics", Entropy is the measure of chaos or uncertainty in a sealed system that keeps its energy or matter isolated from its surroundings without allowing any interchange. In the present case, the ritualistic room, the desolate road and the disordered room are the sealed system in which the energy, i.e., the violence, is locked and remains unchanged. It symbolizes the dissipation of meaning and the "waste heat" of non-productive violence. In that sense, it becomes highly relevant to use "Dissipative Structure." The term "Dissipative Structure" was coined by Ilya Prigogine, a Belgian physical chemist, to refer to a structure that maintains itself in an organized state by continually exporting entropy or waste. Thus, ritual acts as a dissipative structure that fails when it can no longer release violence. In high-intensity mimetic rivalry, the distinctions between two opponents blur, making them mirror each other's aggression. According to Girard, as defined in his book *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), "Sacred" means violence that is ritualized to prevent further violence.

The initial days of the Theatre of the Absurd tradition were largely dominated by Martin Esslin's groundbreaking work, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). Esslin's work famously described the violence and linguistic degradation in Beckett, Ionesco and Genet as a "spectacle of the meaningless" that represented a "metaphysical anguish" caused by the collapse of religious and rationalist certainties (Esslin 23). Although Esslin's work provided the basic vocabulary for the genre, his work itself focused on the philosophical implications of the Theatre of the Absurd. This tradition understood violence as a static symbol of a disordered universe

rather than a mechanical result of the interplay of the internal system. However, when understood within the context of René Girard's Mimetic Theory, this violence is understood to be a highly structured, though unsuccessful, ritual. In a post-atomic world where "God is dead", characters are no longer governed by internal desire but by a "mimetic rivalry" that seeks to transform the Other into a model and an obstacle. The use of Girard's Mimetic Theory on the Mid-20th Century drama shifted the emphasis from the existential "nothingness" to the mechanics of desire. René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) revolutionized the understanding of stage conflict by introducing the concepts of mimetic rivalry and the scapegoat mechanism. Girard stated that the sense of "waiting" in Beckett's plays represented a mimetic paralysis, wherein the two rivals were too similar to each other to engage in any action.

Later theorists, like Thomas Cousineau in *Ritual and Repetition in Samuel Beckett* (1990) and Andrew McKenna in *Violence and Difference* (1992), took this idea further by proposing that Absurdist drama represented a "failed ritual." In this context, the violence depicted in the plays is "de-sacralized"—it does not have the strength to reset the social order because the altar has previously been taken away. The bridge between literature and thermodynamics has effectively been made by theorists like N. Katherine Hayles in *Chaos Bound* (1990) and Michel Serres in *The Parasite* (1982). In the latter work, the author examines the transition from the idea of entropy as law to entropy as metaphor. In this context, the Absurd can be seen as representing a thermodynamic system tending towards Information Entropy, wherein the "noise" of communication eventually drowns out the "signal" of meaning. While theorists like Hugh Kenner, in his work *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, have hinted at the "centrifugal" forces present in his prose, but few have made the direct connection between the "Second Law of Thermodynamics" and Girardian mimetic cycle.

In *How Violence Works: An Introduction to René Girard's Mimetic Theory* (2025), John Babak Ebrahimian re-examines Girardian

hermeneutics to demonstrate how human desire is rarely autonomous. Instead, it operates through imitative models that inevitably clash over the same physical or existential objects, generating competitive friction that rapidly escalates into reciprocal violence. While Ebrahimian brilliantly maps this path to systemic crisis, his framework relies on a classical assumption: that escalating conflict will eventually trigger a sacrificial "scapegoat mechanism" to purge hostility and restore cultural order. When it is applied on 20th-century Absurd drama, however, this functional exit clause collapses. In plays where no scapegoat is expelled, mimetic desire cannot release its tension; it remains trapped, continually recycling its own friction within a closed space. In *The Routledge Companion to Performance and Science* (2026), editors Paul Johnson, Simon Parry, and Adele Senior establish that the stage operates as an active, hard-science laboratory. They argue that theatrical environments do not merely portray emotional states, but function as closed physical systems governed by non-equilibrium thermodynamics, cybernetics, and information decay. In this view, concepts like energy conservation, heat dissipation, and signal-to-noise loss act as structural dramaturgical tools. Yet, performance-and-science scholarship tends to favour either ecological performance art or explicit science plays where scientific principles are discussed in the dialogue itself. Consequently, these studies under-theorize how invisible physical laws, particularly the second law of thermodynamics, govern the structural mechanics of non-scientific, avant-garde plays. In *The Routledge Companion to Absurdist Literature* (2024), editor Michael Y. Bennett gathers critical perspectives on post-war dramaturgy—ranging from Linda Ben-Zvi's work on Samuel Beckett's physical stasis to Julia Elsky's reading of Eugène Ionesco's material clutter. Together, these scholars show how Absurdist drama replaces traditional plot progression with static loops, circular dialogue, and physical saturation. However, mainstream Absurdist criticism routinely treats this linguistic degradation and spatial stasis as an

abstract, existential condition rather than the direct, measurable consequence of interpersonal friction inside closed rooms.

No existing study explains how non-resolving mimetic conflict actively causes the thermodynamic heat death of a dramatic system. This paper seeks to fill the void left by these disparate traditions by proposing the framework of Mimetic Entropy. It argues that the violence in Beckett, Genet and Ionesco is the waste heat generated by a mimetic crisis that has no outlet. By viewing the scapegoat as a heat sink and the mimetic double as a state of thermal equilibrium, this research provides a rigorous, interdisciplinary explanation for the terminal stasis of the Absurd.

According to René Girard, the stability of a social system depends on "degree"—the hierarchical distinctions that keep mimetic rivalry at bay. When these distinctions collapse, the system enters a "sacrificial crisis" of total indistinction. "The sacrificial crisis can be defined as a very real loss of degree... As the crisis grows more intense, the rivals become more and more alike" (Girard, 1977, p. 51). The central problem of the Theatre of the Absurd is not merely the absence of meaning, but the failure of the sacrificial machine to export the 'waste heat' of human aggression. While traditional drama utilizes violence as a kinetic force to restore social order, Absurdist playwrights present a closed-loop system defined by Linguistic and Mimetic Entropy.

**Jean Genet and Ritual Violence**

In Jean Genet's *The Maids*, violence is a high-energy byproduct of a "closed-circuit" desire. Claire and Solange are trapped in a state of internal mediation where the Model (Madame) is so physically proximate that the distance required for a stable hierarchy has collapsed. This proximity creates a "mimetic friction" that overheats the system. In this play, two sisters Clair and Solange engage in a repetitive, ceremonial roleplay of murdering their employer to vent their suffocating mimetic hatred. The

ritual ultimately overheats in their closed environment, leading Claire to commit suicide by drinking the poisoned tea intended for Madame.

SOLANGE: "I'm sick of seeing my own image in you. I'm sick of this mirror that throws my own face back at me." (Genet, 1954, p. 39)

The tea is the "sacrificial instrument." When the real Madame escapes, the sisters are forced to turn the ritual inward. Claire's suicide is a mimetic suicide—she dies playing the part of Madame. It becomes a sacrifice that resolves nothing because the real source of their oppression (the social structure) remains untouched.

CLAIRE (as Madame): "My dress! My furs! My jewels! Everything is a pretext. You're trying to rob me of my very self." (Genet, 1954, p. 44)

This quote perfectly illustrates Girard's idea that the "Object" (dresses/furs) is a mere pretext for the real desire: the Being of the Other. Claire and Solange aren't fighting over property; they are vying for the identity of "Madame." In *The Maids*, the dialogue represents compression and friction. Claire and Solange pile metaphors and insults upon one another to sustain the "Madame" illusion. The language becomes increasingly dense and hot. Because the system is closed, this verbal pressure has nowhere to go. It overheats until it results in the physical act of drinking the poisoned tea. Every gesture of imitation—wearing the furs, applying the rouge, mimicking the insults—acts as a kinetic pulse that increases the internal pressure of the room. As the sisters slide into the state of the "monstrous double", their individual identities are literally evaporated by the heat of their rivalry. The violence they perpetrate on one another represents a thermodynamic necessity, a waste heat representing a system that seeks to accomplish the impossible work of becoming the other. When they are no longer able to tell the difference between the "Maid" and the "Madame," the system has reached a flashpoint. When the "Heat Sink" (the murder of the real Madame) fails, the energy is internalized. This results in a sacrificial meltdown, whereby Claire's suicide fulfils the need for the system. According to Girard, violence tends to escalate when people become

"Doubles." The sisters' mutual abhorrence originates in their being too similar. This "symmetrization" is what makes the ritual of sacrifice fail, as one cannot sacrifice something that is essentially themselves.

**Samuel Beckett and Dissolution**

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* represents the final stage of the Girardian crisis, wherein violence has been preserved, though the heat has gone out and the system has reached absolute zero. Vladimir and Estragon are the doubles of the Absurd. Their mimesis represents no longer an active attempt to become the other, but rather a low-energy vibration, representing a state of maximum entropy. The violence they perpetrate on the world around them, represented by the brutalized body of Lucky, symbolises a waste heat which appears as a friction from a dying engine. Lucky acts as a Girardian "Heat Sink" for Pozzo, receiving the kicks and burdens that allow Pozzo to retain his position of higher status. As the play goes on the law of entropy takes over. The energy is spent. Pozzo becomes blind and Lucky becomes mute showing a balance where the difference between Master and Slave disappears. The violence in the play doesn't fix things like it did in ancient rituals; it just makes the characters more exhausted after each exchange. The system is in mimetic "heat-death" where the characters are too entropic to even commit suicide, and they are stuck in a static equilibrium where the potential for change is infinitely deferred.

When Lucky begins his monologue, the physical attack on Lucky by the other characters to stop him is a thermodynamic necessity, as they are trying to stop the leak in the system that is becoming disorganized and losing coherence. The monologue of Lucky serves as an example of the dissipation of signal. The language begins with pseudo-intellectualism "Given the existence as uttered forth…" (Beckett, 1954, p. 28) but loses meaning through repetition and stuttering "for reasons unknown," "the skull," "the stones" (28 – 29). Violence in the play is kinetic and buffoonish, an effect of boredom—Lucky is kicked, Estragon is beaten by

invisible "others," and the physical comedy of the hat-swapping scene approaches aggression. As such, they are in a "Symmetry of the Double" where violence does not act as a means of change, but as the friction of a system that has reached "heat-death." The characters in the play have lost the ability to differentiate themselves from one another. They are no longer agents acting on the world but low-energy particles vibrating in place. Their identity has achieved a state of thermal equilibrium, where the heat of desire has dissipated into the cold of stasis. This is very obviously represented by the following line: "The absence of Godot is not merely a philosophical absence, but a thermodynamic void" (Hayles, 1990, p. 114). Violence here acts as a filler for the absent transcendental signifier (Godot). Since the characters cannot achieve the calm of waiting, they instead engage in the "mimetic rivalry" of bickering and slapstick to assert their presence. Since the characters cannot ignite the sacrificial fire (since the suicide attempt fails because of the broken rope/lack of energy), they find themselves in a state of Permanent Entropic Stasis. The "heat-death" of the absurd is the moment where violence is no longer redemptive, only dissipation.

**Eugène Ionesco and Escalation**

In Eugène Ionesco's *The Chairs*, violence manifests as the total displacement of the human subject by material entropy. The Old Man and the Old Woman are engaged in a Girardian pursuit of a "Mediator"—the Orator—who is expected to validate their wasted lives with a final, sacred Message. However, in their mimetic desperation to occupy their void, they summon invisible guests, manifesting them through the repetitive, mechanical action of bringing out chairs. This proliferation of objects represents a rise in statistical entropy. As the stage fills with chairs, the arrangement of the human space decreases until the subjects are physically pinned against the walls. Here violence exists in the noise and the clutter; it is a structural assault where the distinction between a person and a piece of furniture is blurred. When the Orator finally appears and reveals himself to

be a mute, he enacts the ultimate entropic violence. By providing "Noise" instead of "Signal," he ensures that the system's energy gradient vanishes, leaving the couple with no potential energy left to sustain their existence. Rather it forces them to jump into the undifferentiated tranquillity of the sea.

Ilya Prigogine notes in *Order Out of Chaos* (1984) that in a sealed system, "entropy increases until it reaches its maximum value at equilibrium". This is manifested in Ionesco's *The Chairs*, where the frantic "kinetic" energy of the Old Man and Woman—their movement, their dragging of chairs—eventually hits a ceiling of material entropy. In this play, the "monstrous double" is the chair itself—a rigid, empty vessel that mirrors the characters' own hollowed-out existence. The violence in *The Chairs* is not found in bickering, but in the frantic, kinetic friction of the characters' movements against the ever-increasing density of the chairs. This led to the Old Man and Woman move with a maniacal repetition that mirrors the stichomythia of Beckett, yet their "signal" is constantly drowned out by the physical "noise" of the objects they have summoned. Every new chair brought onto the stage represents a desperate attempt to create a distinction—to prove they are the masters of a grand social event—but the paradox is that the more chairs they add to establish their social dominance, the more they are crowded out, further increasing the entropy of the system.

**The Scapegoat Mechanism**

While traditional Girardian theory suggests that the "Sacrificial Crisis" is resolved through the cooling effect of the scapegoat, the Theatre of the Absurd presents a more harrowing vision: the failure of the heat sink. In *The Maids*, *Waiting for Godot* and *The Chairs*, the ritual of violence is either insufficient, parodied or perpetually deferred. The ultimate manifestation of "heat-death" is the failure of the **s**capegoat mechanism. Girard argues that the scapegoat is a "polarizing" force that resets the

system's energy. However, a system at "heat-death" is too cold to sustain a ritual.

According to Girard, the scapegoat mechanism is a collective act of "generative violence" that restores order by channelling the aggression of all against one. In his words, "Violence is not to be denied, but it must be channelled into ritualistically acceptable outlets" (Girard, 1977, p. 10). He notes that the victim must be perceived as both responsible for the crisis and capable of restoring peace through their death. "The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric. Everything else derives from that" (Girard, 1977, p. 8).

In Genet's *The Maids*, Claire and Solange attempt to use Madame as their scapegoat. By poisoning her, they hope to stop the mimetic friction of their rivalry. However, the mechanism fails because the victim (Madame) is a model they cannot help but imitate. When Madame escapes the trap, the "waste heat" of their violence is trapped within the sisters. Girard observes that when the external victim is unavailable, the violence "turns back upon the members of the community" (Girard, 1977, p. 31). Claire's suicide is the result; she becomes a self-imposed scapegoat, absorbing the system's entropy to allow a momentary stasis. In *Waiting for Godot*, Lucky serves as the most visible scapegoat. He is kicked, burdened, and silenced by the others to generate a sense of affinity between Vladimir, Estragon and Pozzo. In *The Chairs*, when the Orator reveals his muteness, the ritualistic channel is blocked. He is a failed scapegoat because he cannot absorb the system's disorder. Instead of converting "Noise" into "Signal," he mirrors the void.

**Conclusion**

However, both playwrights arrive at the same Girardian "dead end." In *Godot*, the violence is cyclical and leads back to the same "Tomorrow we shall hang ourselves" (which they never do), while in *The Maids*, the violence is reflexive, ending in a suicide that merely mimics the murder they

failed to commit. The violence in *The Chairs* is the erasure of the human with the type of additive and material. Thus, in this theatre violence remains non-cathartic because it occurs in a vacuum where no external authority exists to validate the sacrifice. By mapping the mechanics of thermodynamic decay onto the Girardian mimetic cycle, Absurd cannot merely a philosophical condition, but a physical end-state.

Ultimately, the Absurd suggests that in a secular, post-atomic age, humanity is trapped in a "Symmetry of the Double," where every act of aggression against the Other is a reflexive wound against the self. The silence that follows the dropping of the curtain in *The Maids*, the stillness at the close of *Waiting for Godot* or the silence after the Orator's nonsensical scrawl on the chalkboard in *The Chairs* is not the silence of peace, but the cold equilibrium of a system having spent its ability to create meaning. Thus, the violence of the Absurd serves as a profound warning: in a world without a shared law, the only ritual left to humanity is the ritual of their own slow, mimetic dissolution.

Thus, the violence of the Absurd—whether it be the ritualistic suicide in *The Maids*, the linguistic decay in *Waiting for Godot*, or the material crowding in *The Chairs*—serves as a profound warning for the post-atomic age. It suggests that when the sacrificial engine of society fails to discharge its internal pressure, the only ritual remaining is the ritual of dissolution. Human beings are left in an end-state where the Other is merely a mirror of their own exhaustion, and dropping the curtain marks the arrival of a world sinking into the absolute zero of meaning.

To conclude, in the post-atomic landscape, the Death of God is not a theological event, but a thermodynamic one. It signifies the removal of the ultimate heat sink. Just as the Absurd stage is a closed system of "noise," this digital era often mirrors Mimetic Entropy. When violence is stripped of its "sacred" context and becomes a repetitive, entropic loop (like the endless cycles of digital outrage), living life has become nothing but a failed sacrifice of the 21st century.

**References:**


Beckett, S. (1954). Waiting for Godot: A tragicomedy in two acts. Grove Press.

Bennett, M. Y. (Ed.). (2024). The Routledge Companion to Absurdist Literature. Routledge.

Clausius, R. (1867). “On several convenient forms of the fundamental equations of the mechanical theory of heat”. The mechanical theory of heat (pp. 327–365). John Van Voorst.

Cousineau, T. (1990). Ritual and repetition in Samuel Beckett. Pinter Publishers.

Ebrahimian, J. B. (2025). How violence works: An introduction to René Girard's mimetic theory. Cascade Books.

Esslin, M. (1980). The theatre of the absurd (3rd ed.). Penguin Books.

Genet, J. (1954). The maids and Deathwatch: Two plays (B. Frechtman, Trans.). Grove Press.

Girard, R. (1966). Deceit, desire, and the novel: Self and other in literary structure (Y. Freccero, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Girard, R. (1977). Violence and the sacred (P. Gregory, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Girard, R. (1978). The mimetic desire of Paolo and Francesca. In To double business bound: Essays on literature, mimesis, and anthropology (pp. 1–8). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hayles, N. K. (1990). Chaos bound: Orderly disorder in contemporary literature and science. Cornell University Press.

Ionesco, E. (1958). The chairs (D. Watson, Trans.). Samuel French.

Johnson, P., Parry, S., & Senior, A. (Eds.). (2026). The Routledge companion to performance and science. Routledge.

Kenner, H. (1968). Samuel Beckett: A critical study. University of California Press.

McKenna, A. J. (1992). Violence and difference: Girard, Derrida, and deconstruction. University of Illinois Press.

Prigogine, I., & Stengers, I. (1984). Order out of chaos: Man's new dialogue with nature. Bantam Books.

Serres, M. (1982). The parasite (L. R. Schehr, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Shannon, C. E., & Weaver, W. (1949). The mathematical theory of communication. University of Illinois Press.