

THE THEMES IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S PLAY WAITING FOR GODOT

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ABSTRACT: *Waiting for Godot, is a play that prompts many questions, and answers none of them. As the title suggests, it is a play about waiting: two men waiting for a third, who never appears. 'And if he comes?' one of Beckett's tramps asks the other near the end of the play. 'We'll be saved', the other replies, although the nature of that salvation, along with so much else, remains undefined: for both characters and audience, Waiting for Godot enforces a wait for its own. The two central characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait for someone named Godot, who, as a stand-in for God, never arrives. The title focuses the audience on the futility of human existence. The meaning of the name Godot is debated among scholars. Although Beckett wrote in French, it is possible that he wanted his audiences to consider the presence of the English word God in the name of the character who never shows up. (The similarity between the words Godot and God does not exist in the original French, in which God is Dieu.) It is possible, however, that Beckett named the character for a French bicyclist called Roger Godeau—or for a French slang word for boots.*

KEY WORDS: observation, Absurdity, Existence, moonrise, emphasizing.

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Beckett was born on April 13, 1906, in Foxrock, in County Dublin, Ireland. As a youth, Beckett experienced severe bouts of depression that kept him bedridden; he reflected, "I had little talent for happiness," an observation that would later provide an undercurrent in much of his writing. From 1923 to 1927, he studied Romance languages at Trinity College in Dublin, and in 1928 he moved to Paris to teach. In Paris, he became a friend of another Irish author for a time, James Joyce. Beckett briefly returned to Ireland to teach in 1930. After traveling in Europe, he settled in Paris, France, in 1937. When World War II broke out, Ireland remained neutral, so Beckett was able to stay in Paris even after the Germans invaded. He became active in the French Resistance and, after members of his resistance group were arrested, he and his then-companion (later wife) Suzanne Déschevaux-Dumesnil fled to rural France for the remainder of the war, surviving on Beckett's farm work.

Returning to Paris after World War II, Beckett produced many of his best-known works. *Waiting for Godot* was originally written in French (*En attendant Godot*). Beckett felt his mastery of the conventions of English concealed what he was trying to express, and the French tongue offered him a better medium for his ideas. He later translated *Waiting for Godot* into English himself.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett addresses an essential question of existence in two acts that mirror each other: Why do humans exist? Vladimir and Estragon, because they are logical beings, assume there is a point to their lives. With no confirmation, they have made an appointment with Godot, who may or may not be real. The audience is presented with two sets of characters: one pair—Vladimir and Estragon—waits passively, and another pair—Pozzo and Lucky—fills the time with purposeless journeying. Beckett claimed his works begin where the implied happy endings of other literary works leave off. He strips away the false rewards of power, wealth, or marriage to present concentrated sparseness as a means of exploring existential questions. The absurdity and humor in his works are meant to liberate his viewers from the angst of these questions. He intends to free his viewers from the experience of trying to make sense of the senseless.

The original French version of the play, *En attendant Godot*, was performed in full for the first time in Paris at the Théâtre de Babylone in 1953. Despite Beckett's inexperience in theater, this first play required only superficial revisions during the rehearsals. Early audiences were bored, confused, and even angered by the play. Some critics disliked its rejection of purpose and meaning. Others, however, immediately recognized the play's revolutionary importance. Sylvain Zegel, who wrote the first review of the production, observed that Vladimir and Estragon represent all of humanity, trying to achieve at least the illusion of living.

It didn't take long for the play's popularity to spread. In 1953, an inmate of Lüttringhausen prison in Germany, having gotten a copy of the script, translated it into German and performed it with his fellow inmates. He wrote to Beckett that the harshness of life and the endless waiting depicted in the play resonated strongly with the prisoners. The first English-language performance, directed by Peter Hall at the Arts Theatre in London in 1955, was received with mixed reviews. Despite Hall's opinion that the dialogue was "real dramatic poetry," critic Philip Hope-Wallace called the language flat. Fortunately, the critic for the *Sunday Times*, Harold Hobson, was hooked, and the public soon caught what Hall later called "Godot mania".

Since then, *Waiting for Godot* has been performed in many different ways around the world. Beckett famously insisted that productions of the play remain faithful to his original dialogue, setting, and stage directions. Actors and directors, however, continue to put their own spin on performances. In a 1988 production at New York's Lincoln Center, superstar comic Robin Williams, playing Estragon, couldn't resist interrupting Lucky's monologue with antics and verbal outbursts. Also in 1988, the Dutch Haarlem Tonee Ischuur Theater staged an all-female production, despite Beckett's objections. A Classical Theater of Harlem production in 2006 set the play in flooded New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Beckett, a master of form, strove throughout his life to produce plays, poetry, and prose pared down as much as possible to address essential questions of human existence. *Come and Go* (1967) contains only 121 words; "Lessness" (1970) comprises only 30 sentences, each appearing two times; and *Rockaby* (1980) runs for a duration of 15 minutes. Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969. He died on December 22, 1989, in Paris.

SUMMARY

Act 1

Two shabby men who seem to be old friends meet on the side of a country road near a leafless tree. The first, Estragon, has been beaten up, and the second, Vladimir, suffers from groin pain and frequent urination. They consider repenting, though they don't know what for, and they discuss the different views in the Bible of the two thieves crucified with Christ. Getting bored, they consider leaving, but Vladimir says they are waiting for Godot. They have asked him for something, though they aren't sure what, and they are waiting for a response. They consider hanging themselves as a diversion to pass the time or to speed up time, but they worry about one of them surviving alone. In the meantime, there is nothing to be done.

Vladimir and Estragon hear a "terrible cry" just before two travelers arrive. Pozzo, a wealthy landowner, stops to eat and talk to the two men but mostly takes pleasure in hearing himself talk. He roughly orders around and abuses Lucky, a slave whom he keeps on a rope. Lucky is unresponsive except when following Pozzo's orders, and kicks Estragon when he tries to comfort him. When he is ordered to think, however, Lucky produces a jumbled speech that verges on profound meaning. He becomes increasingly passionate until the others angrily attack him to make him stop. Lucky collapses, and to be revived, he must be reacquainted with the burdens he carries. After the sun sets, he and Pozzo continue on their journey.

Vladimir reveals that he and Estragon have met Pozzo and Lucky before—at least he thinks so. A boy arrives with a message from Godot—he will not come this evening, but "surely tomorrow." It seems the two friends have also heard this message before, although the boy claims not to have come yesterday. Their questions about Godot reveal how little they know about the person they have been waiting for. They ask the boy to tell Godot he has seen them. The moon rises and they decide to find a place to sleep, but neither moves.

Act 2

When Vladimir and Estragon return, the tree has a few leaves on it, which is astounding for Vladimir and confusing for Estragon. Estragon has been beaten again, and he is angry that Vladimir, who is feeling better, seems happy without him. He suggests they part ways, but Vladimir discourages him. Vladimir reminds Estragon of their encounter with Pozzo and Lucky "yesterday," of which Estragon has only vague recollections. Estragon sees the world as a "muckheap," and their conversations—to pass the time—linger on describing the dead, who "make a noise like feathers." They also debate the value of thought, ultimately deciding it has little worth.

When Vladimir points out the change in the tree, Estragon denies that they were in this place yesterday. Certainly all is not exactly, as they left it, including Estragon's boots, which he claims are now a different color and size. Estragon becomes increasingly bored and wants to go, but when he does leave, he returns immediately, fleeing from someone who seems to be coming from all directions. When Vladimir looks, however, he sees no one. After Estragon calms down, they continue their random conversations and activities to pass the time as they wait for Godot.

Lucky and Pozzo arrive again, but they are much different. Pozzo has gone blind, which turns him into a pitiful figure who must rely on Lucky's guidance and support. He falls whenever Lucky does. Indeed, both fall as they arrive and seem unable to get back up. When Vladimir and Estragon try to help them, they also fall and cannot get up, until a passing cloud distracts them. They help Pozzo up and suggest that Lucky might perform for them again. But Lucky has been struck dumb (left unable to speak). Pozzo also has no memory of any previous meetings with Vladimir and Estragon. After letting Estragon avenge himself on Lucky, Pozzo and Lucky continue on, falling down again as they go.

While Estragon naps, a boy arrives with the same message from Godot: he cannot come tonight but will tomorrow "without fail." The boy says he did not come yesterday and doesn't know if his brother, who is sick, did. Vladimir again asks the boy, more desperately this time, to tell Godot that he has seen him, but the boy runs away without confirming that he has seen him. Night falls and Estragon wakes up. He and Vladimir again consider hanging themselves, but once again they have no rope. They resolve to bring some tomorrow when they return to wait for Godot, and agree to go for the night. Neither moves.

The Theme of the play

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett builds his themes through the minimalist setting and the characters' absurd conversations and actions. Characters represent humanity, the setting represents human existence, and words and actions demonstrate larger truths about the human condition.

Absurdity of Existence

One of the most noticeable features of the play is utter absurdity: Vladimir and Estragon dress shabbily, engage in physically inept actions, and partake in clownish nonsensical conversations. They absurdly wait endlessly for an unchanging situation to change when it is clear Godot will never come. They occasionally discuss ending their wait by hanging themselves or simply leaving, but absurdly, they never take any action. Although they agree there is "nothing to be done," they work absurdly hard to fill the time while they wait. The unavoidable conclusion is that human existence itself is absurd. Beckett's emphasis on the absurdity of human behavior shows both the tragic and comedic sides of the existential crises.

Purposelessness of Life

None of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* has a meaningful purpose. *Waiting for Godot* might seem to give Vladimir and Estragon a purpose, but the fact that Godot never arrives renders their waiting meaningless. Likewise, Pozzo and Lucky might seem to be traveling toward something, but their travels are ultimately shown to be equally purposeless. Pozzo initially professes to be taking Lucky to the fair to sell him, but this purpose is never fulfilled. The second time they pass by, they express no purpose at all—they are simply moving from one place to another. Their traveling may even be counterproductive because they cannot seem to go any distance without falling down.

The messages from Godot delivered by the boy are equally purposeless. Godot will never come, and it is not at all clear the messages are even meant for Vladimir and Estragon—the

boy calls Vladimir "Albert." All the characters seem to be trapped in their purposeless roles by little more than habit, which Vladimir calls "a great deadener." The idea that life has no purpose is a recurring theme in the Theater of the Absurd, which Waiting for Godot helped define.

Folly of Seeking Meaning

Although it is unclear who or what Godot represents, by waiting for him, Vladimir and Estragon are clearly seeking some type of meaning outside themselves. In Act 1, they remember making a "kind of prayer" to Godot, expecting it to give them some direction and they decide it is safer to wait and see what Godot says rather than die by hanging themselves. Godot, however, never comes, representing the futility and folly of such a search for meaning in an inherently meaningless existence.

Uncertainty of Time

Time is a slippery thing in Waiting for Godot. It seems to pass normally during the period the characters are on the stage, with predictable milestones, such as the sunset and moonrise, although the characters are sometimes confused about it. But the intervals between the two acts and various events are wildly uncertain. When Vladimir and Estragon return at the beginning of Act 2, the growth of leaves on the tree suggests a longer period has passed than the one day Vladimir claims it has been. Estragon and Pozzo retain little or no memory of their encounter the "previous" day, and other changes have mysteriously occurred "overnight." Estragon and Vladimir have no firm idea of how long they have been together or how long ago they did other things, such as climb the Eiffel Tower or pick grapes in Macon country.

The characters also seem to be trapped by time, endlessly repeating essentially the same day again and again. This creates a despair that leads them to repeatedly contemplate suicide, although they never remember to bring the rope they would need to actually hang themselves. Time is one of the main ways people organize their lives and memories, so the uncertainty of time in the play contributes to the feeling of meaninglessness.

Symbols

Beckett famously refused to interpret Waiting for Godot, letting his writing speak for itself. "No symbols where none intended"—the last line of Beckett's novel Watt—is often read as a warning against assigning symbolic meaning to objects in his writing. This doesn't mean that no symbolism was intended; only that audiences should be careful about assigning meanings not supported by words and actions in the play.

Leafless Tree

The tree, near which Estragon and Vladimir meet, is completely bare of leaves at the beginning of the play. It represents the only organic element in the setting, and it is dead or dormant. This tree portrays the world as barren and lifeless, emphasizing the lack of purpose and meaning the characters must contend with. The apparent growth of leaves on the tree in Act 2 does nothing to ease the sense of meaninglessness; it only adds to the characters' uncertainty about the place and the passage of time. The staging is telling in this regard: despite Vladimir's description of

the tree as "covered with leaves," the stage directions specify only "four or five" leaves, leaving it mostly barren.

Some point out that the cross on which Christ was crucified is sometimes called a tree. Vladimir and Estragon do discuss the tree and hanging themselves in Act 1 shortly after talking about the two thieves crucified along with Christ. This could support the interpretation that hanging from the tree draws a parallel between them and the thieves. Beckett, however, said he was puzzled by people trying to take away "a broader, loftier meaning" from the play, making it unlikely that he intended any broader religious symbolism.

Lucky's Baggage

Lucky never puts down the items he carries, except when it is necessary to fulfill one of Pozzo's orders. Then he immediately picks them up again, even when he has not been told to do so and there is no purpose in it. This action echoes the human tendency of enslavement to burdens, holding onto them even when doing so is unnecessary. The baggage Lucky carries seems to consist mostly of items for Pozzo's comfort. In Act 2, however, one of the bags, which is never opened in Act 1, is revealed to contain only sand. Other than his hat, none of what Lucky carries is for himself and may not even be useful. Yet he takes it up again and again—another example of a character "deadened" by habit, fulfilling the task mindlessly and without purpose.

Pozzo's Rope

Pozzo's rope is the only rope that physically appears in the play, and it represents the balance of power in the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky. In Act 1, Pozzo dominates Lucky with a rope half the length of the stage: "Pozzo drives Lucky by means of a rope passed around his neck," and Lucky is often the recipient of Pozzo's whip. Yet Lucky accepts this balance of power without question, as if he cannot envision any other state for himself. By Act 2, however, the rope is shortened, and the balance of power in Pozzo and Lucky's relationship is less clear. Pozzo, now blind, depends on Lucky for direction, and Lucky, still slavish, depends psychologically on Pozzo.

By extension, there are a number of figurative ropes in the play. Vladimir and Estragon, like Pozzo and Lucky, are similarly tied to each other in a relationship based on domination and submission. The pair is also tied to Godot and the dominating belief that his arrival will provide a meaning for their lives. Vladimir and Estragon also entertain the idea of hanging themselves with a rope. While suicide is never a real option, its discussion provides the pair a diversion from the act of waiting for Godot. The rope here becomes a symbol of submission to an illogical belief.

Duality

Duality is everywhere in *Waiting for Godot*. Every character has a counterpart, and the paired characters often complement and contrast each other. Vladimir and Estragon seem nearly identical at first, but contrasting characteristics show them to be essentially two different parts of a whole. Pozzo and Lucky are opposites in status, but they also share a mutual dependence. The boy, although written as one part played by a single actor, may actually be two brothers, one of whom tends the sheep while the other tends the goats. Even people who are simply

discussed often come in twos, such as the two thieves from the Bible (one is saved, the other is damned). The only character without a counterpart is the one who never appears the ambiguous Godot.

The whole play is dual in structure, consisting of two acts depicting nearly the same events. Act 2 mirrors Act 1 (for example, Estragon arrives first in Act 1, while Vladimir is the first to appear in Act 2), with the events of Act 2 seeming to reflect a bit more darkly the events of Act 1. It is also clear that the two days seen in the play are reflections of many days in the past and days that will continue, endlessly, into the future.

Hats

Hats are worn by Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky, and Pozzo and are a vehicle for the characters to show their identities. For example, Lucky needs his hat in order to think; Pozzo shows his power over Lucky by taking his servant's hat off. Vladimir, the "thinker" of the two main characters, is fixated on his hat, while Estragon, who is more realistic, thinks first of his boots. In Act 2, Estragon and Vladimir have a long "bit" in which they exchange their hats along with Lucky's; an aimless attempt to make time pass as they wait.

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which premiered in 1953, is one of the most enigmatic theatrical works ever composed. Featuring an ensemble of only five characters, the play is a cornerstone of Absurdist Theater. The titular Godot, though heavily discussed throughout the play, never appears onstage. It is his absence that has led audiences to interpretations of the play as everything from a Cold War commentary to a Christian allegory.

Beckett was very straightforward regarding how he wanted *Waiting for Godot* to be staged. The only scenery of note in the stage directions is a tree and a stone or mound on which Estragon sits. The barrenness of the set, along with the play's complicated classification as a tragicomedy, has caused scholars to study and theorize about the play. Beckett's literary and theatrical immortality was confirmed when *Waiting for Godot* was voted the most significant English-language play of the 20th century in a poll conducted by the British Royal National Theatre.

Lucky is often viewed as a Christ figure.1

Beckett stated explicitly that Christian allegory was not intentional in *Waiting for Godot*. However, many critics view Lucky as comparable to Christ, in both how he carries the constant burden of Pozzo's bags and how he is treated like a subjugated prisoner.

Beckett didn't support the idea of an all-female ensemble performance of *Waiting for Godot*.

When questioned about his opinion of an all-female cast performing *Waiting for Godot*, he expressed his distaste for the idea by replying, "Women don't have prostates." This was in reference to the number of times Vladimir has to leave the stage to urinate during the play.

Beckett appreciated prison productions of *Waiting for Godot*.3

Prisoners in Lüttringhausen, German, undertook the staging of the play in 1954 with input from Beckett himself. Beckett generally approved of the play being staged in the prison environment. Later when he was discussing pictures taken from a performance in 1957 at San Quentin prison in California, he stated, "I saw the roots of my play".

There were attempts to ban *Waiting for Godot* in the 1950s.4

In 1950s England, strict censorship was applied to theatrical performances. The Lord Chamberlain at the time received a letter in favor of banning the play for its use of bathroom humor. The letter read, "One of the many themes running through the play is the desire of two old tramps continually to relieve themselves. Such a dramatization of lavatory necessities is offensive and against all sense of British decency".

Many famous acting duos have portrayed Vladimir and Estragon.5

In 1979 Geoffrey Rush and Mel Gibson—who happened to be roommates at the time—appeared in a production as Vladimir and Estragon, respectively. Steve Martin and Robin Williams appeared in the iconic roles during a 1988 performance. However, perhaps the most interesting combination took the stage in a London performance where the sketch comedy actors from *Totally Tom*—Tom Stourton and Tom Palmer—took the stage, "Sporting Adidas tracksuit bottoms, hoodies and five-day stubble".

An online adaptation of *Waiting for Godot* stages the play among New York's homeless population.

Entitled *While Waiting for Godot*, the web series is described as, "Giving backdrop to the play—and a sharp commentary on the issues of poverty and the urban homeless population." Each episode is between five and eight minutes long. In 2014 the web series won Best Cinematography at the Rome Web Awards.

An unauthorized sequel actually features *Godot*.7

The "sequel," entitled *Godot Arrived*, was written by the Yugoslavian playwright Miodrag Bulatović in 1966. Beckett did not encourage this sequel to be composed, but he did not take any sort of action against Bulatović or openly disapprove of him writing it.

Beckett likely intended the name *Godot* to refer to feet.8

Rejecting the notion that the word *Godot* is a play on *God*, Beckett noted in an interview that the character's name was derived from the French word for boot: *godillot* or *godasse*. This is a distinct possibility, since feet and boots do play a prominent role in the play, but another story claims that a man named *Godot* was the last competitor to pass Beckett as he was observing a bicycle race in France.

Lucky was originally portrayed as suffering from Parkinson's Disease.9

French actor Jean Martin, who played Lucky in the premiere of *Waiting for Godot*, decided to play the character with the constant trembling and quivering symptomatic of Parkinson's.

Martin consulted a doctor to mimic the attributes of the condition properly. Not wanting to confirm or deny anything about the characters' personal histories, Beckett refused either to approve or disapprove of the interpretation, although Beckett himself had only recently lost his mother to Parkinson's.

Sesame Street featured a spoof of *Waiting for Godot*.¹⁰

Oddly, the PBS children's show parodied Beckett's play in a skit called "Waiting for Elmo" (1992). The parody appears in the show's "Monsterpiece Theater" segment, which pays homage to the adult PBS program Masterpiece Theater. In the parody, Grover and Telly Monster wait for Elmo near a tree. Fed up with the never-ending waiting, the tree abandons the characters to join the cast of the musical *Okalahoma*!

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