
*Waiting for Godot* is one of the most influential theatrical works of the post-war period. Vladimir and Estragon, two old men, possibly tramps, are caught in each of the two acts in an apparently endless waiting for a mysterious figure called Godot. While they wait, they engage in a series of verbal games to give themselves “the impression they exist”. They have three visitors: Pozzo, who comes on the stage driving the deeply depressed Lucky* by means of a rope (=corda) and a whip (=frusta), and later a boy, with a message from Godot:”he won’t come this evening”.

Godot, however, never comes and at the end of the play Vladimir and Estragon are left waiting.

Their waiting, in ignorance, fear, despair and occasionally hope, is Beckett’s image of the human condition.

*In the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky it could be seen a class relationship, of the slave-master type.*

**The language**

The language is full of repetitions, it is composed of ready-made phrases. Lots of silences and pauses are interspersed with the characters’ utterances. Each has experienced a universe through his five senses and is not interested in communicating it to the other.

Several words are repeated throughout the play. They all stand for the inconsequential spontaneity of everyday speech. The usual cues(=battute), repeated several times, create expectation, but they also underline the idea of repetitiveness linked to human experience.

The stage directions mostly refer to the actors’ movements and to the absence of real communication. They sometimes contradict the words spoken by characters. “Silences” and “pauses” are repeated several times; they isolate words and remind us how communication is meaningless and impossible in such a world.

The drama in *Waiting for Godot* consists of conversation: the dialogue never leads to action and is interrupted by small scenes which resemble music-hall routines. But the talk seems like a conversational vacuum, a succession of phrases and sentences to pass the time, to mitigate the agony of waiting, which is the essence of the play itself. The two characters wait, and fill the vacuum of waiting-and of life- by means of conversation which is in continual need of finding a reason, a pretext for continuing, and which comes to a halt with the central question: the waiting for Godot.

**The message**

Nothing can be done by contemporary man but waiting. Beckett’s aim was to make the audience share the waiting of the two tramps and understand the quality of this waiting.

The aspects which may have had an influence on Beckett’s view of human life are:

- The social revolution and changing values of Britain in the 1950s
- The certainties and basic assumptions of the previous age swept away by Two World Wars
- The decline of religious belief
- The mistrust in rationalism as a means to explain reality
- The disillusionment with socialist ideals, brought about by totalitarianism
• The materialism and consumerism of contemporary society
• A general mood of frustration, alienation and futility

Beckett’s theatre denies the existence of a solution for the present alienating human condition. He uses the technique of humour and estrangement, but it is the whole life to be alienating.

His theatre is concerned with man’s loneliness, which is made more bitter by difficulty in communication, it has no real ending but follows a circular pattern and the language employed is nonsensical and irrational.

**General Features and Notes**
With “Waiting for Godot” Beckett completely rejected the kind of play whose success depends on clearly characterized roles and a meaningful plot. Instead, “Waiting for Godot” shows two old men waiting on a country road – though also clearly on a stage – on two seemingly consecutive evenings, in a state of almost perpetual restlessness and anxiety.

Desperate to avoid silence or feelings of solitude, Vladimir and Estragon talk and talk like many old married couples and keep irritating each other and then making up, altering feelings of cruelty and care.

**Christianity**
Beckett always insisted that the frequent references in his work to the Bible and the Christianity were simply a literary device: “Christianity is a mythology with which I am familiar, so I naturally use it.

When Vladimir mentions the two thieves at the Crucifixion, there are constant visual and verbal reminders of Christ’s suffering and without its references to Christianity the play would lose much of its power.

**The theatre of the Absurd and post-war French Intelligentsia.**
In 1961 Martin Esslin (later Professor of Drama at Stanford University) coined the phrase “Theatre of the Absurd” which he characterized by “its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away”, and he added that “decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies”.

All this was shattered by World War II. But even before the end of the war the French thinker Albert Camus in 1942 was already putting the question why, since life has no meaning, man should not seek escape in suicide; and in “The Myth of Sisyphus”, Camus tried to diagnose the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs. He wrote: “in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity”.

After the war, in the theatre, this sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition was the theme not only of writers and dramatists like Beckett and Ionesco* but also of more conventional dramatists like philosophers Sartre and Camus.

What characterized the dramatists of the theatre of the absurd was the fact that they renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it presents it in being, in terms of concrete stage images. Sartre states that existence comes before essence and that
human personality can be reduced to pure potentiality and the freedom to choose itself may occur at any moment.
For Sartre and Camus existentialism was inseparable from the vocabulary of political commitment, engagement and responsibility, whereas Waiting for Godot shows a world where no meaningful choice is possible but only waiting and doubting.

*Ionesco’s play The Chairs (Les chaises), 1952, is a tragic farce about the futility and failure of human existence, made bearable only by self-delusion or the admiration of an uncritical partner. The real “nothingness” of the play’s old couple is shown when they fill the stage with chairs for guests to listen to a message about the meaning of life. But Nobody comes.

**Beckett and Philosophy**
Beckett always denied allegiance to any philosophical system and he considered any philosophical explanation of his work as unnecessary.
When asked in 1961 if his work had existentialist foundations, he replied: “If the subject of my work could be expressed in philosophical terms, there would have been no reason for my writing them.” Nevertheless he was widely read in philosophy as well as literature; and he was particularly attracted by many philosophers (Descartes, Kant, Schopenhauer). For example, in the case of Schopenhauer, he wrote: “I am reading Schopenhauer. Everyone laughs at that. But I am not reading philosophy, nor caring whether he is right or wrong or a good or worthless metaphysician. And it is a pleasure also to find a philosopher that can be read like a poet...” One example is Schopenhauer’s allegory comparing human social relations with those between porcupines: while wishing to be close for mutual warmth, they cannot stay too close for fear of pricking each other. This is an effective summary of the relationships in Waiting for Godot between Gogo and Didi.

In Beckett can be found explicit echoes of Leopardi and Schopenhauer. On the one hand there is an awareness of the infinite vanity of everything; on the other hand is the belief that life is a punishment for the original sin of being born. For Beckett’s characters, as for Ungaretti’s creature, death is expiated by living.
Birth does not represent an entry into life, but an exit, an expulsion from a state of being far preferable to earthly existence. It is an original sin not in the Christian, but in the Schopenhauerian sense, so that man’s greatest crime is having been born.
The pessimistic and for someone intolerable idea of a human condition marked by suffering and by the absence of the sense of life itself remains basic.
In Beckett’s work there is a perfect confirmation of his belief that the contemporary work of art can do no other than assert the negativity of the present and reveal its positivity precisely in its affirmation of the negative, which implies the necessity for a utopian other world. Beckett’s negativity constitutes an antidote to the cynicism, the materialism and the greed of our age. In a world preoccupied solely with money and success at whatever cost, desirous only of being confirmed in its own vulgar and egotistic certainties, Beckettian negation forces us in some way to begin again from zero, to think again, in the light of his secular spirituality, about the sense – or better, the absence of sense- of the world in which we live.

**Characters**
In many ways Vladimir and Estragon are opposites in character. Estragon tend to be pessimistic, sceptical, bitter, aggressive, in a bad mood, self-absorbed, ready to die, whereas
Vladimir has greater hopes of Godot’s coming, and of being saved; he is kinder, more curious and more sociable and he comforts Estragon. “Estrago” means destruction or devastation in Spanish; Vladimir ruler of peace, bringer of order in Russian.

But they are also interdependent and they often seem to be interchangeable, as though they simply represent aspects of all of us in different moods. They are sometimes referred to as a “pseudocouple”, as though they were really a single Jekyll-and-Hyde figure.

Who is Godot?

As with other aspects of the play, there are many possible answers and no final answer. Of its many possible meanings the most obvious is a combined reference to the Christian God (in English) – Christian rather than pagan because of the capital letter – and to the French diminutive “ot” in names like Charlot, which is how Charlie Chaplin was often referred to in French.

However, Beckett said that the name was suggested by “godillots” or “godasses” both French slang words for boots. That was perhaps to make us accept that there is no certainty about the meaning of things, of words.