Waiting for Godot Study Guide

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett

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Introduction

Though difficult and sometimes baffling to read or (even) view, *Waiting for Godot* is nonetheless one of the most important works of our time. It revolutionized theatre in the twentieth century and had a profound influence on generations of succeeding dramatists, including such renowned contemporary playwrights as Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard. After the appearance of Waiting for Godot, theatre was opened to possibilities that playwrights and audiences had never before imagined.

Initially written in French in 1948 as En Attendant Godot, Beckett's play was published in French in October of 1952 before its first stage production in Paris in January of 1953. Later translated into English by Beckett himself as Waiting for Godot, the play was produced in London in 1955 and in the United States in 1956 and has been produced worldwide. Beckett's play came to be considered an essential example of what Martin Esslin later called "Theatre of the Absurd," a term that Beckett disavowed but which remains a handy description for one of the most important theatre movements of the twentieth century.

"Absurdist Theatre" discards traditional plot, characters, and action to assault its audience with a disorienting experience. Characters often engage in seemingly meaningless dialogue or activities, and, as a result, the audience senses what it is like to live in a universe that doesn't "make sense." Beckett and others who adopted this style felt that this disoriented feeling was a more honest response to the post World War n world than the traditional belief in a rationally ordered universe. *Waiting for Godot* remains the most famous example of this form of drama.

Author Biography

Samuel Beckett was born near Dublin, Ireland, on April 13,1906. During his school years he was more interested in athletics than in academics, but he became excited about the study of French and Italian near the middle of his university career at Trinity College, Dublin, and ultimately graduated with honors in December, 1927. After graduation Beckett attempted to teach school but found teaching very unpleasant. He then sought to make his living as a writer but gained only modest success with his poetry, criticism, and prose during the 1930s and 1940s. However, at the end of 1948, as a diversion from his work on a novel, Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* in less than four months and the tremendous impact of this and subsequent plays in the 1950s turned him into an international celebrity. His monumental career as a playwright was born and it continued to overshadow his highly respected work as an experimental novelist.

In 1928, when Beckett had taken up residence in Paris as a school teacher, he met the great Irish short story writer and novelist James Joyce, author of *Dubliners, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*, For a number of years in the 1930s Beckett worked closely with the already famous Joyce as Joyce labored on his revolutionary masterpiece, *Finnegans Wake.* Joyce's erudition, esoteric word play, and elusiveness of meaning were qualities that Beckett was striving for in his own work, and when Beckett turned to drama as his major form of expression these aspects of his style intensified. *Waiting for Godot* stunned audiences with its bare set, unusual dialogue, slight plot, and bizarre characters, but subsequent plays became even more unusual. Throughout his writing career, Beckett was most interested in "minimalism," the attempt to create the greatest artistic effects with the least means possible. Beckett's plays got shorter and shorter until he eventually wrote a piece called *Breath* that lasted forty seconds and consisted of the sound of a single inhalation and exhalation of breath accompanying the rising and falling of the lights on a littered stage.

During World War n, Beckett lived in southern France and was active in the French Resistance, an underground movement fighting against the German occupation of France. Some have seen *Waiting for Godot* as a reflection on this period of Beckett's life. Beckett died of respiratory failure in Paris on December 22, 1989, and is considered by many to be one of the most innovative, daring, and revolutionary dramatists of the twentieth century. In 1969 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for "a body of work that, in new forms of fiction and the theatre, has transmuted the destitution of modern man into his exaltation."

Plot Summary

Act I

On a country road, at evening, near a tree with no leaves, a middle-aged man named Estragon (nicknamed Gogo) sits on a low mound struggling to remove his boots. He is soon joined by his friend, Vladimir (nicknamed Didi), who is glad to see him again and who recalls the story of the two thieves crucified with Christ and wonders whether it was true that one of them was chosen to be saved.

Estragon suggests that they leave this place but Vladimir reminds him they must stay because they are waiting for Mr. Godot. They debate whether this is the right place or time for their meeting, but their discussion tires Estragon and he falls asleep. After Vladimir wakes Estragon they decide that they might pass the time while they wait by hanging themselves, but the lone tree in sight seems too frail to hold them and they argue over who should hang himself first.

Two more characters enter a man named Lucky, who carries a heavy load and has a rope around his neck, and a domineering man named Pozzo, who whips Lucky forward. The frightened Estragon and Vladimir huddle together and Estragon asks if Pozzo is Mr. Godot, but Pozzo, who claims to own the land they are on, intimidates Estragon and Vladimir into disavowing their connection with Godot. Pozzo proposes to stay with these two men and orders Lucky to provide what he needs to sit and relax. As Pozzo eats chicken, Estragon and Vladimir inspect Lucky; Estragon sees the chicken bones that Pozzo has thrown on the ground and is given permission to gnaw on them. Pozzo explains that he is taking Lucky to the fair to sell him, and when Lucky hears this he begins to weep, but when Estragon brings Lucky a handkerchief for his tears Lucky kicks Estragon violently in the shin.

Vladimir exits to urinate, and, after he returns, Pozzo asks if Estragon and Vladimir would like Lucky to entertain them by "thinking," but Lucky's thinking turns out to be a long, almost nonsensical monologue. Pozzo and Lucky announce their departure, do not move, but then finally manage to leave, and Vladimir and Estragon comment on how the visit from Pozzo and Lucky helped pass the time while they waited for Godot. Finally, a boy enters, addresses Vladimir as Mr. Albert, and delivers the message that Mr. Godot will not be coming this evening but will surely come tomorrow. After the boy leaves, Vladimir and Estragon also decide to leave but, after declaring their resolve, do not move.

Act II

The next day, at the same time and place (the tree now has four or five leaves), Vladimir enters in an agitated state and sings a circular kind of song about a dog. Estragon enters, feeling gloomy about the beating he reports he has suffered, and he and

Vladimir agree to say that they are happy, though they do not appear to be. They rededicate themselves to waiting for Godot, and Estragon suggests they could pass the time by contradicting one another or by asking one another questions. After a number of diverting exchanges, Vladimir sees Lucky's hat, left from yesterday, and he and Estragon do a vaudeville "bit" exchanging hats until Vladimir throws his own on the ground. Vladimir suggests they pretend to be Pozzo and Lucky, which they do with limited success, but when the game sends Estragon offstage, he quickly returns, frantically announcing that "they" are coming. Vladimir thinks this means that Godot is coming but Estragon's fear finally overtakes Vladimir as well and they look for a place to hide. The tree offers little in the way of cover. Estragon calms down and suggests that they simply watch carefully. They then discover another game, calling one another names, and they insult one another until Estragon comes up with the ultimate insult, calling Vladimir a "critic." After this game ends, they explore other diversions until they are interrupted by another visit from Pozzo and Lucky.

On this visit, Pozzo is blind and bumps into Lucky after they enter, knocking them both down. Estragon asks if it is Godot who has arrived, but Vladimir is simply happy that they now have company as they wait for Godot. Pozzo is quite helpless, unable to get up from the ground, and Vladimir engages in a long philosophical discourse on whether he and Estragon should help Pozzo get up. In attempting to lift Pozzo, Vladimir falls himself and when Estragon attempts to help Vladimir up both end on the ground. With all three seated and unable to rise, Vladimir announces that "we' ve arrived... we are men." Vladimir and Estragon's next effort to rise is effortless and they help Pozzo to his feet, supporting him on each side. Pozzo begs them not to leave him. In response to Pozzo's question, "is it evening," Vladimir and Estragon scrutinize the sunset and conclude that they have indeed passed another day. Pozzo asks about Lucky, his "menial," who seems to be sleeping, and Estragon advances toward Lucky somewhat fearfully, remembering the kick in the shins he received the day before. For revenge, Estragon kicks the sleeping Lucky but hurts his foot in the process as Lucky awakes. Estragon sits and goes to sleep. Vladimir engages Pozzo in conversation and Pozzo claims no memory of a visit the day before. As Pozzo prepares to leave, Vladimir asks him what he does, blind, if he falls where no one is there to help him. Pozzo says, "we wait till we can get up. Then we go on." Vladimir asks if Pozzo will have Lucky sing or "think" again before they leave, but Pozzo reveals that Lucky is now "dumb," or mute, incapable of making sounds "he can't even groan." Vladimir is confused because it seems to him that just yesterday Lucky could speak, but Pozzo is aggravated by the concept of time. For him, time is a meaningless concept; he says that the moments of our lives are like a light that "gleams an instant, then it's night once more." With those words, Pozzo and Lucky leave. Soon after they leave the stage, they fall down again.

Vladimir wakens Estragon, who is annoyed because he was dreaming that he was happy. Vladimir wonders how much of what he takes to be true is maybe some kind of dreaming. A boy enters, addressing Vladimir again as Mr. Albert, and announces that Godot will not be coming this evening but will be coming (without fail) tomorrow. The boy says he wasn't the one who came yesterday, though he seems to be to Vladimir. When Vladimir makes a sudden leap at the boy, the boy is frightened and runs off. Immediately, the sun sets, the moon rises, and Estragon awakes. Estragon talks of

leaving but Vladimir reminds him they must wait for Godot to come tomorrow. They notice that everything is dead except the tree. They speculate again on the idea of hanging themselves but see that they lack a proper rope for it. When they try to use Estragon's belt for a rope, his pants fall down to his ankles. When they test the belt, it breaks. They decide that they can bring a stronger rope tomorrow. Vladimir says, "Well? Shall we go?" and Estragon ends the play by saying, "Yes, let's go." The final stage direction says, "They do not move."

Act 1, Pages 1-10

Act 1, Pages 1-10 Summary

In the first part of Act 1, Didi and Gogo are alone on stage. Gogo is sitting on the mound of earth trying to remove one of his boots and complaining about his feet, which are painful. He is having a great deal of trouble removing his boot. Didi and Gogo discuss where they have recently been. While Gogo's affliction is with his feet, Didi has bladder problems and pain. While their conversations keep coming back to these two physical ailments, they interject philosophical topics as well. They discuss the Bible and Biblical topics such as maps of the Holy Lands and the Gospels. Didi asks where Gogo spent the night, and Gogo replies that he spent the night in a ditch, but that he was not beaten. They discuss a past time in which they were among the first of those who stood together on top of the Eiffel Tower. Gogo continues to struggle with his boot. His foot is quite painful. He points out to Didi that his fly is unbuttoned, and Didi buttons it.

Didi then becomes preoccupied with his hat. He takes the hat off, peers into it, shakes it several times and repeats the process. He seems to be looking for an object inside the hat, but there is nothing in the hat. Gogo finally gets his boot off. He follows the same process Didi did with the hat. Gogo looks into the boot, shakes it, peers into it again, and then stares ahead of himself off into space. Didi and Gogo continue to discuss the Bible as they deal with boot and hat. They talk about going to the Holy Land where Gogo says they will swim and be happy. Didi tells Gogo he should have been a poet. Gogo, referring to his disreputable appearance says, "I was. Isn't that obvious?" Didi turns the conversation to the two thieves and Our Savior being crucified at the same time. Gogo is not responsive to this line of conversation and begins to talk of leaving. At the end of this section, on page 10 of the play, Gogo again says directly that they should leave this spot where they have been waiting for Godot. Didi says they can't leave. When Gogo asks why, Didi reminds him that they are waiting for Godot.

Act 1, Pages 1-10 Analysis

There are five characters in "Waiting for Godot." The primary characters are two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir. They are known throughout the play as Gogo and Didi. Two more characters, Pozzo and Lucky, join Gogo and Didi about half way through each of the two acts of the play. Pozzo is a wealthy landowner, and Lucky is his servant. Toward the end of each act, a boy enters, purportedly with a message from Godot, who never appears on stage. The message both times is that Godot will not meet Gogo and Didi that day, but will come tomorrow. In both acts, when the boy leaves, night falls. Both acts take place along a country road in the late afternoon or early evening. There is a mound of earth and a single tree on stage to represent the spot along the road where Gogo and Didi are waiting for Godot.

Didi and Gogo contend with pains and problems, as do most human beings. Beckett seems to be setting up the human condition in this first section of the first act. His characters have infirmities and human frailties. Didi and Gogo believe think that solutions to their problems are coming. They believe that Godot will provide those solutions for them. Didi and Gogo discuss ideas and concepts, but keep coming back to their basic life construct, which is waiting for something outside themselves to occur which will change their conditions. They appear to be uncertain when this will come, or even exactly what it is, but they are "Waiting for Godot." They are unwilling to leave the place where they are waiting for Godot. They do not take it upon themselves to solve their problems or even to seek solutions.

When Gogo gives up trying to put on his ill-fitting boot, he says, "Nothing to be done," referring to the fact that the boot does not fit and hurts his foot. But Didi hears "Nothing to be done," and responds in a more philosophical and abstract way. He says, "I'm beginning to come around to that opinion. All my life, I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable. You haven't yet tried everything." Beckett is setting up the comic interactions between these two characters as well as introducing a primary theme for the play. Didi and Gogo are simply resigned to waiting for Godot. In the midst of their conversations about their ailments and their garments, they keep coming back to a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Gogo asserts that there is "nothing to be done." And Didi confirms that he, too, may be coming around to that opinion.

Act 1, Pages 10-14

Act 1, Pages 10-14 Summary

At the beginning of this section, Gogo and Didi seem to notice the tree, which they identify as a willow, and a weeping one at that. They begin to discuss whether or not they are actually in the right physical location to meet Godot. They confer about what they will do if he does not appear, which is to come back again to wait for him some more. They do not discuss any proactive alternative in which they will go off to seek Godot. They argue about their plans. They question not only whether they are in the right location, but whether they are there on the correct day. Didi makes a show of looking for some kind of written confirmation of their assignation with Godot, but finds only miscellaneous rubbish in his pockets. As is his want, Didi sits down and nods off to sleep while Gogo paces in great agitation trying to assess their situation.

As soon as he notices that Didi is asleep, Gogo abruptly wakes him. Didi was dreaming, and wants to discuss his dream, but Gogo is not interested. Didi then attempts to regale Gogo with a bawdy tale, but Gogo will not listen to that either. They are angry at one another, but do make up. They then decide to consider ending their discomfort and limbo state by hanging themselves from the small tree on stage. They are at first pleased by the idea that attempted hangings may give them erections. Then they decide that the tree can't hold both of them. In the midst of these considerations, they discuss what they expect from Godot when he finally arrives. They are very uncertain as to what they will ask for, or whether Godot will consent to their wishes. They suddenly hear something off stage which momentarily frightens them. Gogo declares that he is hungry, and Didi offers him a carrot, but gives him a turnip instead, for which he apologizes. He searches for a carrot, finds one, and gives it to Gogo, telling him it's their last one. Didi and Gogo begin to discuss their present situation as Gogo eats the carrot. Gogo asks if they are "tied" to Godot. They talk hopelessly of their situation, declaring that there is no use struggling, and that their essential condition will not change.

Act 1, Pages 10-14 Analysis

Didi and Gogo are exploring their options. They are not sure they are in the right place, the place where they are to meet Godot. They are not sure what they want if and when Godot appears. They look for written guidance. One of them finds scraps of paper in a pocket, but these scraps are not the written guidance they see, and are not helpful. The two tramps consider another way out, of hanging themselves from the tree. They discuss how this would work, and seem to be uncertain as to how to proceed with hanging themselves. They are pleased that this act could result in erections for them, but discard the idea because it is unlikely they have enough rope or a strong enough tree to proceed in such a way that both of them could successfully participate. In other words, they are unwilling to be separated. They decide to wait for Godot.

Did and Gogo are again waiting for something to impact them from the outside rather than taking some kind of action themselves, particularly an action which could separate them even though they appear to bicker quite regularly. They are experiencing the uncertainty people feel when they are "stuck" in an uncomfortable position in their lives. They can't decide what to do or even what they want, so they remain in the same unproductive place. They disagree. They make up. They are in turmoil, but unwilling or unable to take steps to move forward. They express continuing hopelessness about their situation. They also refer to Godot as having the ability to grant their wishes or solve their problems. Beckett may be inferring that Godot represents God, or some form of Supreme Being, or the ultimate "answer" men have turned to for generations. It is interesting, however, that Didi and Gogo are so very uncertain as to how to connect with Godot. For an assignation so very important, it is odd that they are unsure they are waiting in the right place, or even on the right day. In addition, they have no clear definite idea of what they will ask of Godot if he does ever arrive. In other words, they are uncomfortable with where they are presently, but completely unable to move out of their current situation. Not only that, they don't even know where to begin as to what they actually want instead of what they are now experiencing.

Act 1, Pages 15-19

Act 1, Pages 15-19 Summary

This is the section of the first act in which the next two characters appear. Pozzo is a wealthy man, a landowner, and Lucky is his servant. Pozzo has a long rope around Lucky's neck, which has made an ugly sore on the neck. Lucky is laden down with carrying many parcels and possessions for Pozzo. Strangely enough, Pozzo is driving Lucky before him with a whip instead of leading him with the rope. When Gogo and Didi see them enter the area, they are frightened and huddle together. Lucky enters first with Pozzo behind holding the rope-leash. Pozzo snaps the whip off-stage. In response, Lucky crosses the stage and exits the other side. But when Pozzo sees Didi and Gogo he stops and jerks the rope to bring Lucky back. Lucky falls for the first of many times. Didi and Gogo are frightened, but want to assist. Didi actually begins to move towards Lucky, but Gogo stops him. Pozzo warns them that Lucky is dangerous, particularly with strangers. Gogo asks Didi if this man is Godot. Gogo seems not to remember the name of the man for whom they have waited so long. Pozzo introduces himself. Didi and Gogo confirm that he is not Mr. Godot. The three of them discuss Pozzo's name and confirm that they don't know one another. Pozzo questions them as to who Godot is. They describe Godot as a kind of acquaintance. They say they probably wouldn't recognize Godot. Pozzo asks about the fact that the two tramps are waiting for Godot on his (Pozzo's) land. Didi and Gogo say they meant no harm, and were just waiting along a public road, which they all concur is acceptable. Pozzo notices that Lucky, who has fallen to the ground, is asleep. He jerks Lucky's rope and commands him to get up. He issues several commands to Lucky to present him with various objects or articles of clothing. For each individual command, poor Lucky has to put down everything he's carrying to oblige. He then delivers the requested item to Pozzo, returns to his place, and picks up each parcel again to wait for the next command from his master.

When Pozzo wants the next item, he again commands Lucky to bring it to him. Once more, Lucky deposits all his burdens on the ground and brings Pozzo the one item he has asked for. This process is repeated whenever Pozzo wants something. Pozzo does not ask for more than one single item at a time, but repeatedly forces Lucky to go through this complicated ritual to retrieve and present items one possession at a time to his master. Pozzo dines on chicken and wine from one of the parcels Lucky carries. Lucky is so exhausted that he falls asleep standing up. Didi and Gogo are curious about Lucky and begin to walk all around him, inspecting him while Pozzo dines. Lucky begins to sag to the ground, startles himself awake, and begins the process again. Gogo and Didi ask one another what may be the matter with Lucky and why he does not put the bags and parcels down. They notice the sore on his neck from the rope. They continue to discuss Lucky's appearance. They try to speak to Lucky. Pozzo, who is finished eating by now, demands that they leave Lucky alone because Lucky wants to rest. Yet Pozzo continues to command Lucky to bring him objects, one at a time.

In between each demand, Lucky stands holding all the remaining parcels and objects he is carrying. Pozzo has left a pile of chicken bones from his meal, and Gogo is eying them greedily. Gogo timidly asks Pozzo if he can have the bones. Pozzo admits that he no longer needs them. Surprisingly, he defers to Lucky as the carrier of the bones. He says that Lucky should be consulted as to whether or not Gogo may have the bones. At Pozzo's direction, Gogo asks Lucky if he may have the discarded chicken bones. Lucky does not respond. Pozzo prompts Lucky, who still does not respond. Pozzo then pre-empts Lucky's supposed authority in the matter and tells Gogo he may take the bones, which he does. Didi expresses outrage at how badly Lucky is being treated by Pozzo. Gogo, while still chewing the newly-acquired bones, agrees with Didi. Pozzo remarks that this assessment is harsh and asks Didi how old he is. When he does not get an answer, he asks Gogo what Didi's age is. Gogo responds that Didi is 11. Pozzo decides to move on after smoking a pipe and knocking out the ashes on the ground. Gogo pockets the chicken bones. Didi suggests that he and Gogo leave. Gogo demurs. Pozzo continues to make constant demands on Lucky for various services. Didi again, more forcefully, states that he wants to leave. Pozzo says he hopes he is not driving them away, and Gogo assures him they are in no hurry. Didi asserts once again that he will leave.

Act 1, Pages 15-19 Analysis

When Pozzo first appears, Gogo seems to have forgotten the name of the man he and Didi are waiting for, and the three of them have some confusing conversation about who Pozzo is, the fact that they don't know Pozzo, and the fact that they would not recognize Godot, the man upon which they are pinning their future, if he did appear. Again, they seek answers outside themselves, but are not at all sure what those answers will look like when and if they appear. Didi and Gogo are faced with others, Pozzo and Lucky, in seemingly similar hopeless situations. Lucky is an exhausted, bullied, and ill slave. Pozzo is a cruel master who declares that he (Pozzo himself) is made in God's image. He continually calls Lucky names and makes unreasoning demands on him. But when Gogo and Didi become too curious about Lucky, Pozzo challenges them. He does not want any interference with his power and authority. As to the comment that Didi is 11 years old: this may be a reference to a child-like quality in both Didi and Gogo and to their apparent inability to make decisions about their own futures. Neither of them is willing to assert his own needs to direct or control his own future. Both of them just keep "Waiting for Godot."

When "Waiting for Godot" is performed on stage, each of these four primary characters wears a bowler hat, oddly enough. When you think of the names of the four primary characters, you are struck by the fact that they seem to reflect various ethnic or national backgrounds. Vladimir, or Didi, is a Russian name. Estragon, or Gogo, appears to be French. Pozzo appears to be an Italian name. And Lucky is a name often associated with a pet dog, or a nickname of some kind for a person. It appears that Beckett may be suggesting that these four characters, often in bowler hats on stage, represent the human condition in its many forms. Individual, yet similar in wants and needs. The human condition that Didi and Gogo reflect has to do with their very common infirmities.

Gogo has swollen, painful feet, which apparently prevent him from walking comfortably. His feet are so painful, in fact, that he has trouble even removing his boots. Didi suffers from what could well be prostate problems. He also walks stiffly. Many times during the play, he has to absent himself to go off stage to the toilet.

The ailments of these two are different, but result in both of them being very uncomfortable walking or moving about a great deal. Hence another reason they may be staying in one place, waiting for Godot. Pozzo and Lucky do move around more, yet Beckett has them in bowler hats on stage as well. The fact that Lucky has a name far more commonly associated with a pet dog than a man is significant. The word "Pozzo" means "well" or "hole" in Italian. This could be a reference to Pozzo's seemingly insatiable demands on Lucky to provide him with things---a bottomless pit of sorts, perhaps meaning a very needy person. In the end, all four actors wear similar hats on stage, and it is believed that Beckett is identifying them, one and all, as various representations of the human condition.

Act 1, Pages 19-22

Act 1, Pages 19-22 Summary

Didi has expressed, again, his desire to leave. Pozzo says Didi can no longer endure his (Pozzo's) presence, but declares that he doesn't care. He points out that it is still daylight, which he takes to mean that there is still an opportunity to accomplish something. He asks about their impending appointment with Godot who Pozzo characterizes as having the future of Didi and Gogo in his hands. Didi questions Pozzo as to how he knows this. Gogo, still fretting about Lucky, asks why Lucky does not put down his bags. Pozzo ignores the question and says he would also be happy to meet Godot. He asserts that he becomes more enriched with each new person that he meets, even (rather unflatteringly) these two old infirm tramps. Gogo again asks why Lucky does not put the bags and parcels down when they are not actively traveling. Pozzo says he would be surprised if Lucky did so and does not answer the question. Didi reiterates the question. Pozzo chides them for their questions, but they persist. Dramatically, Pozzo prepares to answer their questions. Pozzo says that Lucky wants to impress his master, so that Pozzo will keep him. Pozzo explains that he is on the way to sell Lucky at the fair, although Pozzo declares that a more effective way to rid himself of Lucky would be to kill him. Lucky begins to cry, which the others notice. Pozzo gives Gogo a handkerchief with which to comfort Lucky. Gogo hesitates, and Didi volunteers. The two squabble childishly over the handkerchief and which one of them will go to Lucky with it. Gogo eventually approaches Lucky and wipes Lucky's eyes with the handkerchief. Lucky kicks Gogo violently in the shin, and Gogo, howling, hobbles around the stage. Pozzo commands Lucky to return the handkerchief, which he does. Gogo complains about Lucky, and Pozzo reminds Gogo he was warned that Lucky is dangerous to strangers. Gogo complains dramatically about his bruised shin, and Didi insincerely volunteers to carry Gogo on his back if necessary. Pozzo notes that Gogo has replaced Lucky as the one crying. He comments that everyone weeps at one time or another, and that sorrow is universal. Didi suggests that Gogo try to walk. Gogo does so, and walks over and spits on Lucky.

Act 1, Pages 19-22 Analysis

The encounter that Didi and Gogo have with Pozzo and Lucky is a sharing of the human condition and sort of universally experienced human difficulties. In asking about Godot, Pozzo declares that he is enriched by all he meets, even tramps like Didi and Gogo. Pozzo points out that it is still daylight, a reference to the fact that there is still time for Didi and Gogo to take some action. Pozzo seems to have as one role the voice that urges Didi and Gogo to take some action. Pozzo also theorizes that all human beings share a variety of sorrows, and take turns weeping like Gogo and Lucky did, for different reasons. Beckett seems to be saying that no matter what the station in life, all of us will experience these kinds of difficulties. Gogo and Didi are puzzled as to why Lucky continues to hold all the parcels he carries, even when he and his master are not

traveling. When Pozzo finally responds to this inquiry it is in quite dramatic fashion and after asking, "Is everybody ready? Is everybody looking at me?" He at last reveals that he is on his way to sell Lucky at the fair. Pozzo says that Lucky is being so accommodating in the hopes that Pozzo will not sell him.

Act 1, Pages 22-31

Act 1, Pages 22-31 Summary

In this section of Act 1 of the play, further examination of the relationship of Pozzo and Lucky takes place. Surprisingly, Pozzo credits Lucky with teaching him wonderful things. He then demands his hat of Lucky, and the same process is repeated as when Pozzo has asked for other things. Lucky has to put down all the parcels he carries, bring the hat to Pozzo, and then return to his place and pick up all the items once again. Didi and Gogo criticize Pozzo for his plans to sell such a faithful servant. At this point, Pozzo begins to lament that he is in great discomfort and going mad because of Lucky. Didi and Gogo now turn on Lucky as responsible for this situation. Pozzo then reverses himself and says to forget all he said. He looks for his pipe as Gogo and Didi talk together about what a terrible evening this has been. Didi exits to use the bathroom. Pozzo thinks he's left for good, and protests. Gogo explains that Didi is in the bathroom, and Pozzo is pacified. Gogo invites Pozzo to come to look at something. They look off into the distance, and Gogo comments "it's all over." Didi returns, sullenly, and pushes Lucky out of the way. Pozzo notices his mood. Gogo says it's a pity that Didi missed what they saw, although what they saw is not stated. The atmosphere becomes suddenly calm, and they all look at the sky, which is still not dark. Pozzo comments that were he waiting for Godot, he would not leave. After some additional banter, Pozzo says that he does have to leave. Didi, still depressed, says that time has stopped.

Gogo remarks to Pozzo that everything seems dark to Didi that day. Pozzo comments that this may be so, except for the sky, which is still not dark. They continue to look at the sky. They continue to wait, and Didi and Gogo say they are used to waiting. Pozzo asks how they feel about him, which surprises them greatly. They assure him their feelings are positive, and Pozzo thanks them most sincerely. Pozzo asks how he could assist Didi and Gogo in their tedious wait. Gogo suggests money, and Didi declares the two are not beggars. Pozzo decides to have Lucky entertain them. Pozzo tells Lucky to dance, which he does. The three discuss Lucky again, and end up at questioning why he continues to carry such a burdensome load. Pozzo tells Lucky to think, and gives him his hat, which he apparently needs in order to think. Didi carefully puts the hat on Lucky from behind, careful not be kicked. Pozzo commands Lucky to think. Lucky resists to some degree, but the others attack him, and Lucky recites his text. It is a long, unintelligible monolog. When Lucky slows down, Didi seizes the hat, and Lucky falls silent. The others are relieved and panting. Pozzo tramples the offending hat. Lucky is so weak that he falls if not supported by the others. He eventually regains his senses and can walk and carry his parcels again. After many goodbyes, Pozzo and Lucky move off. Lucky falls and Pozzo abuses him with curses and names. Once Gogo and Didi are alone, Gogo again suggests that they leave, too. Didi again says they can't leave. When Gogo asks why, Didi again states that they are still waiting for Godot.

Act 1, Pages 22-31 Analysis

All four characters persist in their usual behavior and stay stuck in their usual roles. Even when Lucky "thinks" aloud on command, his efforts are so damaging to him that he can barely function. In the short time that Didi is in the bathroom, he supposedly misses something significant. He is tending to his primary condition, and so misses a worthwhile event. In one way or another, all of them continue to be relegated to their original roles. Pozzo remains the master, and Lucky the abused servant, even though he was at one time Pozzo's mentor or teacher. It is interesting that Pozzo so reviles Lucky and then appears to treasure what Lucky has taught him. He then again reverts to his initial poor treatment of Lucky. It appears that whatever one's condition, role, or station, there is still the same hopelessness and strife for mankind. Pozzo again points out that it is not yet dark. This appears to be a hint to Didi and Gogo that they still have time to take some kind of action, yet they do not. Yet Pozzo declares that he would continue to wait for Godot, were he they. When Pozzo and Lucky do finally move on, Lucky is again the abject servant, and Pozzo the bullying master. Didi and Gogo continue to assert that they can't move on because they must continue to wait for Godot. Each man stays in his role, in other words.

Act 1, Pages 31-35

Act 1, Pages 32-35 Summary

Gogo and Didi discuss their perception that Pozzo and Lucky have changed. Gogo says he did not know them before, implying that the idea of noticing change in them would be nonsense since they have only just met the two for the first and only time. Didi says they did know them, and that Gogo just forgets everything. Gogo begins to have pain in his good foot. He sits on the mound. A boy calls to him, and enters. He asks if Didi is Mr. Albert, to which Didi replies for some reason that he is and invites the boy to approach. Gogo asks what he wants. The boy is hesitant, and Didi commands him to come forward. The boy mentions Mr. Godot. Didi asks if the boy has a message from Godot, and the boy replies that he does. Both Didi and Gogo are asking the boy questions, and the boy becomes confused. The boy says he was afraid, and that he has been there for some time, apparently listening to and observing Didi, Gogo, Pozzo, and Lucky. They establish that he was afraid of Pozzo's whip. The boy attempts to speak, but Gogo and Didi interrupt and converse with one another. Didi tells the boy to speak. The boy informs Didi and Gogo that Mr. Godot will not come this evening, but will surely come tomorrow. Didi asks if that is all, and the boy says yes. Didi asks the boy what he does. The boy relates that he minds the goats, that he is not beaten, and that he is fed fairly well. They ask where he sleeps, and he says that he sleeps in the loft with his brother, who is beaten. They dismiss him. He asks what he is to tell Mr. Godot. They tell him to tell Godot that he saw them. The boy exits. Didi seems relieved. Gogo leaves his boots, saying they are for someone with smaller feet. Didi protests that Gogo can't go barefoot. Gogo retorts that Christ did. Didi challenges this comparison to Christ. Didi encourages Gogo saying that everything will be better tomorrow because the boy said that Godot will surely come tomorrow. They discuss moving off, separately. They decide not to after 50 years together. They decide to go. However, they do not move. They stay in the same comfortable, albeit undesirable, place once again.

Act 1, Pages 32-35 Analysis

Didi and Gogo have yet another disappointment. The boy, purportedly a messenger from Godot, says Godot will not come tonight, but will surely come tomorrow. The boy stayed out of sight when he first arrived out of fear for Pozzo's whip. Pozzo continues to move Lucky forward with the whip, and he continues to comment to Didi and Gogo that it is still light. The fact that it is still light implies that these two still have some time to take action, which they do not do. The boy explains his station in life and that of his brother. This boy is not beaten, but his brother is. Perhaps this is because the present boy stays away from the risk of change represented by Pozzo. The boy asks what message he should give to Godot. Instead of telling the boy to ask when he is coming, or whether they could come to Godot, or any of a number of useful questions, Didi and Gogo simply tell the boy to tell Godot that he (the boy) saw them. Didi and Gogo again resist a way forward by not sending any kind of useful message to Godot. Didi and

Gogo discuss changing their lives by separating. They do not separate. They discuss old events, but nothing changes. They say they will leave, but do not. In other words, they stay in the same place, still waiting for a future that still has not come and taking no positive action to put that future in motion.

As to the boy asking for Mr. Albert, it is interesting that Didi did claim to be Mr. Albert. It is also interesting that neither he or Gogo made any effort to make sure the message the boy had was actually for them. They did not question the boy as to the whereabouts of Godot, but asked him questions about his own human condition, as it were. This seems to be yet another indication that Didi and Gogo are actually pretty resistant to the change Godot may represent, as they are doing nothing at all in their own interests to make sure they do meet with him. Instead, they do nothing proactive to support their situation, and they do not even ask any relevant questions. They persist in maintaining the status quo of their human conditions, even if they are doing so relatively passively.

Act 2, Pages 35-44

Act 2, Pages 37-44 Summary

Act 2 opens with Gogo examining his boots. Lucky's hat is still on stage. The tree, which was bare in Act 1, now has 4 or 5 scrawny leaves on it. Gogo goes to each side of the stage and appears to be looking for something off in the distance. Didi mentions a dog, and Gogo begins to sing loudly about a dog which was beaten to death for stealing a crust of bread from the kitchen. He sings the song several times. He becomes agitated and begins to move around the stage. He peers off stage, both to the left and right. Didi sees him and offers to embrace him, but Gogo pushes him away. Didi questions Gogo. Gogo retorts with commands not to touch him, not question him, but also not to leave him. They finally embrace. Didi keeps asking Gogo who beat him, but Gogo does not answer. They talk idly about how they feel when they are together, and when they are apart. Gogo says he feels better away from Didi, and Didi asks why he comes back if that's the case. Gogo says he does not know. Didi says it's because Gogo can't defend himself. Gogo protests that there were 10 men assaulting him. Didi says he meant that he would keep Gogo from doing whatever it was that offended those who beat him.

Gogo asserts that he did nothing, and Didi asks why, then, was he beaten? They bicker back and forth. Didi says that Gogo must be glad to be back with him. They declare that they are both happy. Gogo asks what they will do now that they are both happy. Didi says they will wait for Godot. Gogo groans, but Didi says things are different than yesterday. He points out the tree, which now has leaves. He asks if Gogo remembers Pozzo and Lucky. They discuss Pozzo and Lucky, although Gogo is not at all convinced their encounter was just yesterday. They talk about where they are, in the same place. They talk about how others live their lives, and that every man has his cross. Again, Gogo asks what they should do now, and the answer is again, "Wait for Godot." They have conversation about what they will do, what they will think about, and that they continue as always. They notice the tree, which now has leaves. They argue about whether or not they were really there, in that same place, the day before. They say they were not, so they try to figure out where they were. They decide that they were in the same condition, and have been so, talking about the same issues for 50 years. They discuss Lucky and Pozzo. They look at the wound on Gogo's leg. Didi asks where Gogo's boots are, but Gogo does not know. Didi finds the boots, which Gogo appears not to recognize and denies are his. He puts them on and they fit. He declares that someone else took his tight boots and left these in their place. Gogo suggests they leave. Didi says they can't leave because they are waiting for Godot.

Act 2, Pages 37-44 Analysis

Didi and Gogo have apparently been separated for a time in the night, but are reunited in the very same spot the next day. Gogo's song about the unfortunate dog seems to be about a creature that stepped out of his place and was murdered for doing so. They

discuss splitting up, but do not. Gogo tells Didi not to touch him, not to question him, but also not to leave him. Beckett seems to be illustrating some building tension in the characters as they appear to be coming closer to a decision to move on. Such a decision, which would move them out of their little space in the world, could be as deadly to them as the dog's pilfering was to him. The two tramps discuss Pozzo and Lucky, who have moved on. But Gogo and Didi still do not move on because they are still waiting for Godot, still expecting that something in their lives will change from an external, not an internal means. The tree now has leaves, indicating that some kind of change may be possible. The two tramps appear agitated and look off into the distance quite a bit, which they have not done before. They appear to be experimenting with the frightening idea of looking beyond themselves.

Gogo's boots, which he declares are not his boots, still fit him, and he put them on. The absurd notion that a stranger left boots which were tight for him and took Gogo's boots which were tight for Gogo, confuses Gogo. (If the boots were tight for Gogo, and the stranger left boots which are not tight for Gogo, then Gogo's boots would be tight on the stranger!) The change in the tree, the looking off into the distance and their agitation seem to indicate that they may finally be ready to move on. Even the obstacle of Gogo's tight boots seems to have been dealt with. With boots who are no longer too tight, Gogo could walk comfortably. These two again talk about leaving, and yet finally say once again that they cannot, because they are waiting for Godot. The characters remain stuck in their same roles in their same places, right down to their boots.

Act 2, Pages 44-54

Act 2, Pages 44-54 Summary

Gogo is in despair that they are still in the same place. Didi offers him a radish and tells him they have radishes and turnips, but no carrots. Gogo accepts a radish, but it is black. He complains that it is not pink and gives it back to Didi. Gogo says he will go get a carrot, but does not move. Didi puts on his boots with Gogo's help. He admits they do not hurt, and even says they are too big. Gogo sits down and tries to sleep, but Didi is singing loudly. Eventually Gogo sleeps, but wakes with a start. Didi comforts him. They walk about. Gogo says they should go. Didi replies that they cannot, because they are waiting for Godot. They discuss that it is not yet night, but when night falls, they can leave. They find Lucky's hat, which reassures them that they are in the right spot for their meeting with Godot. Didi and Gogo trade hats back and forth several times, each time adjusting the hats they are wearing. They model the hats and walk back and forth wearing them. Didi suggests they play Pozzo and Lucky.

Didi pretends to be Lucky sagging under the weight of parcels and bags. He invites Gogo to curse him. Gogo does so and they laugh and continue their game of imitation. Suddenly, they hear someone approaching and declare that it must be Godot at last. They attempt to hide behind the tree, which does not hide them. Gogo asks what he should do. They decide that one of them will move off to the extreme left and one to the extreme right of the stage instead of huddling together as they have done in the past. They do not see anyone coming. They become annoyed with one another and begin to call one another names. Finally, they stop their spat and fall into one another's arms once again. They decide to do exercises to pass the time. Pozzo and Lucky reappear, but Pozzo is now blind and Lucky is now mute. Lucky has all the same burdens. The rope Pozzo holds is shorter now so he can follow Lucky more closely now that he, Pozzo, is blind. The two of them fall together amongst their bags and parcels. Gogo asks if it is Godot who has joined them at last. Pozzo calls for help. Gogo and Didi are delighted and think Godot has arrived and that their waiting is over. Then Didi recognizes Pozzo and explains to Gogo that this is not Godot after all. Pozzo continues to call for help. Didi points out that Pozzo can't get up. Once again, Gogo says they should leave. Didi says they cannot because they are waiting for Godot.

The two tramps wonder if Pozzo has any more chicken bones and plot to bargain their help for favors. They have some concerns that Lucky, now known to be dangerous, might intervene. Pozzo still calls for help as they contemplate beating Lucky in his sleep to neutralize his danger. They discuss their situation waiting for Godot while Pozzo continues to call for help. Didi goes on and on about the long hours and the fact that they have valiantly kept their appointment where others would not have done so. Pozzo again calls for help and this time offers to pay for it. Didi and Gogo finally respond to this last overture and begin to bargain with Pozzo. Eventually, they help him to his feet, and he falls again. Gogo says he is leaving, but Didi begs him to stay. They finally agree to leave together and to go to the Pyrenees Mountains. But this plan does not last long.

Didi and Gogo both fall to the ground where Pozzo still is. Pozzo eventually crawls away from Didi and Gogo who are still on the ground. They decide to call for Pozzo, who does not answer. They try calling Pozzo by the name of Abel, and he responds by calling for help. Then they call for Cain, and Pozzo again calls for help in response. Didi and Gogo discuss getting up off the ground, and Pozzo continues to call for help. Gogo suggests that they leave. Yet again, Didi says they cannot because they are waiting for Godot.

Act 2, Pages 44-54 Analysis

Didi and Gogo continue to stay where they are and to wait for Godot. They bicker, argue, and decide again, to leave. Yet again, they assert that they cannot leave because they are waiting for Godot. They have a pattern of falling out with one another and then making up again, just as they have a pattern of saying they will leave and then declining to leave because they must wait for Godot. Pozzo and Lucky return, but both are now seriously and newly disabled. Gogo and Didi finally help Pozzo when he offers to pay them. Pozzo, unable to see, has become more dependent on Lucky, but Pozzo still treats Lucky badly. Lucky is now more in charge, yet still allows himself to be mistreated. (And we know that Lucky is capable of physical violence. He just does not direct it at Pozzo). Note that even when Pozzo and Lucky were quite significantly changed (now blind and mute) they retained their same Master and Servant roles in relationship to one another, again maintaining the status quo.

It would have been quite simple for Lucky to run away from a blind master, but he does not go. He stays in his present position. Beckett also makes Lucky mute, which would make it more difficult for him to assist a blind master. Yet Lucky and Pozzo continue to travel together. Perhaps Beckett is pointing out that even when things change significantly, people often don't change their roles in relationship to one another. Didi and Gogo are far more fit and able than Pozzo and Lucky, yet Pozzo and lucky continue to move about and Didi and Gogo still stay where they are because they are waiting for Godot, the "something" outside themselves which will change their conditions. Beckett has even removed at least one of their barriers to travel in the fact that Gogo's boots are finally comfortable for him.

It is also interesting that Beckett has Gogo and Didi call to Pozzo as Able and then Cain. The Biblical reference appears to be, again, to "everyman" and the fact that all people, regardless of station or wealth, share suffering as the common denominator of the human condition.

Act 2, Pages 54-58

Act 2, Pages 54-58 Summary

Didi and Gogo help Pozzo up. They explain who they are and congratulate themselves for helping Pozzo, who was concerned they were highwaymen. They realize that Pozzo is blind. Pozzo asks if it is evening, and Didi and Gogo puzzle over this and argue the point with one another. They assist Pozzo, who says his blindness came on suddenly. He asks where they are and where they are going. Didi and Gogo describe the very same place they have been throughout the play. Pozzo asks for his servant, wondering why Lucky did not respond when he was called. Pozzo asks that Didi and Gogo check on Lucky to see if he is all right. They decide to send Gogo after Lucky. Gogo sees that Lucky is breathing and begins to kick him. He hurts his own foot, and Lucky rouses. Pozzo asks what is wrong. Didi tries to explain to Pozzo that they all met yesterday, but Pozzo denies meeting anyone yesterday. Pozzo commands Lucky to get up and pick up all his burdens. Pozzo again goes through the exercise of asking for one item at a time, which necessitates Lucky putting all his bundles down, finding the object in question, and then picking them all up again. He has to repeat this tedious process over and over again with each separate request from Pozzo. Didi asks that Lucky sing or recite before they go. Pozzo becomes irritated, explaining that Lucky is dumb just as he himself is now blind. They leave. Didi watches them go and announces when they are off stage that they have fallen once again. Didi realizes Gogo is asleep and shakes him awake. Gogo complains. They wonder if Pozzo is really blind. They even wonder if Pozzo is really Godot. Gogo is again struggling with his boots, but eventually falls asleep again.

Act 2, Pages 54-58 Analysis

Again, Pozzo and Lucky retain their roles as master and servant, even when their infirmities could have made it possible for Lucky to leave. Pozzo is far more dependent on Lucky for guidance and protection. Lucky could survive as a mute without Pozzo, but it is doubtful Pozzo could survive without Lucky's assistance and even protection. Perhaps this indicates that Pozzo will no longer try to sell Lucky, and Lucky realizes that his position is safe, so he elects to stay with Pozzo. Pozzo continues his practice of asking for one item at a time, to which Lucky responds as before. Gogo continues to fall asleep whenever he sits down. Gogo continues to struggle with his boots. The status quo is maintained, even though significant changes have occurred in that Pozzo is now blind and Lucky is now mute. When Pozzo and Lucky exit, they again fall together in a heap with all their parcels as they have done before. Beckett is saying that even when dramatic changes take place in our personal conditions, we, as human beings, tend to maintain the status quo. Didi even asks that Lucky sing for them as he did before. Pozzo impatiently replies that Lucky cannot sing because he is now mute. But Didi had expectations that things would be the same as they were when and Gogo first encountered Pozzo and Lucky.

Act 2, Pages 58-60

Act 2, Pages 58-60 Summary

The boy who visited Didi and Gogo in the clearing yesterday comes back again, and again asks for Mister Albert. Didi asks if the boy does not recognize him, which he says he does not. He says this is his first time coming, and affirms that he does have a message from Mr. Godot. Didi guesses that the message is that Godot won't come tonight, but will tomorrow, supposedly without fail. The boy confirms this. Didi asks if the boy met anyone on his way to them, and he says he did not. He asks the boy what Godot does. The boy responds that Godot does nothing. Didi asks if Godot has a beard. The boy says he does, and that the beard is white. The boy asks what message he is to give Mr. Godot. Didi says to tell Godot that the boy saw him. The boy runs off stage. Gogo wakes and asks what is wrong. Didi replies that nothing is wrong. Gogo says he is leaving, and Didi says he is too. Gogo asks how long he was asleep, but Didi does not know. They discuss where to go. Gogo wishes to go far away, but Didi says they cannot because they have to come back tomorrow to wait for Godot. They discuss the tree again and the option of hanging themselves again comes up. They don't have rope, however, and Gogo's belt is too short. They discuss various options. They decide to bring more rope when they return tomorrow. They discuss splitting up again. They decide to hang themselves the next day unless Godot comes. They agree to go, but again do not move from where they are standing.

Act 2, Pages 58-60 Analysis

Didi and Gogo have discussed a variety of options of what to do with their lives, but they remain in the rut of waiting for Godot. They even plan to bring more rope to hang themselves the next day, but they don't leave the roadside, so it's clear they won't be getting more rope! The boy, when questioned about what Godot does, responds that Godot does nothing. Yet Didi and Gogo are counting on Godot to quite literally change their lives. But if Godot is someone who does nothing, as his emissary has stated, then Didi and Gogo do not have a hope of his intervention changing their conditions. Beckett also has us see Godot with a long white beard per the boy's description. This could be a reference to God (Godot).

Beckett may be telling us that Godot will do nothing for us. It is up to us to shape our own lives, not to wait for divine intervention to solve our problems and make us "happy." It is interesting that when the second encounter with the boy happened, Didi was the only one who spoke to him. Gogo was asleep. Again, the boy asked, "What am I to tell Mr. Godot, Sir?" Didi replies, "Tell him… (hesitates)..tell him that you saw me." (Pause. Didi advances and the Boy recoils. Didi halts, and the boy halts. With sudden violence, Didi continues): "You're sure you saw me, you won't come tomorrow and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me!" At this point, the sun has set and Gogo awakens. It is

significant that Gogo then moves forward and places his boots in exactly the same place they were before, center front of the stage.

At this point, Didi and Gogo have a conversation about their belief that they would be punished should they leave, perhaps in order to justify their continuing unwillingness to move on. Their discussion of options again includes hanging themselves from the tree. In repeating several bits of conversation and even motion that the audience has now seen several times, Beckett seems to be confirming that Didi and Gogo will not move on, will not change their condition. They bicker if usual. They discuss hanging themselves as they have done previously, and even decide to bring more rope tomorrow, another repeated idea. They peer into hats, as they have done several times before. They have been together for 50 years or more, still unhappy, still struggling, still waiting for Godot. When Act 2 ends, they agree to leave, but do not move as the curtain closes. They do not alter the human condition they represent.

Characters

Mr. Albert

See Vladimir

Boy

The messenger who arrives near the end of each act to inform Vladimir and Estragon that Mr. Godot will not arrive is simply called "boy." Timid and fearful, he addresses Vladimir as Mr. Albert and admits in the first act that Pozzo and his whip had frightened him and kept him from entering sooner. He claims that he tends goats for Mr. Godot and that Godot is good to him, though he admits that Godot beats the boy's brother. On each visit the boy claims to have not seen Vladimir and Estragon before. In the second act the boy reports that he thinks Godot has a white beard.

Didi

See Vladimir

Estragon (Es-tra-gon)

Estragon is one of the two men (often referred to as "tramps") who are waiting for Mr. Godot. He is the first to appear in the play and is more docile and timid than his friend Vladimir; Estragon usually follows Vladimir's lead. At times assertive, Estragon is more emotional and volatile than Vladimir but less engaged he gives up more easily, does a lot of sleeping, likes to dream, and forgets more easily. He even forgets Godot's name at one point. He is confused more frequently than Vladimir and is more frequently afraid perhaps because he is the one more often beaten and physically abused by others. He has bad feet, which hurt him in his too-small boots and which smell when he has his boots off. He is more skeptical and questions more than Vladimir, doubts Godot more, and is more often anxious to leave or to travel separately from his friend. Estragon, along with Pozzo, does the eating in the play. If Estragon and Vladimir are Laurel and Hardy, Estragon is Stan Laurel, the skinny one who is frequently confused, frightened, and whiny.

Gogo

See Estragon

Lucky

Lucky is the miserable slave or "menial" whom Pozzo drives on stage in Act I and blindly follows in Act n, but while Pozzo's fortune and character changes Lucky's remains fairly similar. In the first act he is an abused beast of burden, an automaton carrying a huge load and suffering from neck abrasions where Pozzo violently jerks his halter. Lucky is understandably sad and quiet, but he is also loyal to Pozzo, eager to please, and violent himself when Estragon gets near enough to be kicked. His "thinking" seems full of a desperate energy that may come from an attempt to communicate his sadness. In the second act Lucky is mute and mostly sleeps. Lucky has long white hair that falls down around his face.

Pozzo (Po-dzo)

Pozzo is the bald, brutal, insensitive, and overbearing figure who intimidates Estragon and Vladimir in the first act of the play after he drives his "slave," Lucky, onto the scene. Pozzo is a sadistic bully with a large body and a huge voice who violently abuses Lucky, both physically and psychologically, forcing Lucky with whip and halter to serve his every whim and need. In the first act Pozzo seems wealthy, self-assured, and powerful. However, in the second act, Pozzo is blind and a much different person. He still has Lucky on a rope and calls him his "menial," but Pozzo now is timid, frightened, vulnerable, and helpless as he falls to the ground and cannot rise without assistance.

Vladimir (Vlad-eh-meer)

Vladimir is the more forceful, optimistic, and resilient of the two "tramps" waiting for Mr. Godot, but he is also sensitive, easily hurt, and quickly frustrated. He is extremely caring and protective of his friend, Estragon, and he more courageously expresses his outrage at Pozzo's mistreatment of Lucky. He usually leads Estragon in their games to "pass the time" and he initially represents the pair when strangers like Pozzo and the boy appear. Vladimir is the one most confident that Godot will appear and the most insistent that they meet their obligations by waiting. He is more of a thinker and philosopher than Estragon and he remembers the past much more clearly, though his memory frustrates him when other people don't remember things the way he does. He sometimes becomes angry in these situations but occasionally doubts his own certainty. This more intellectual quality leads Vladimir to be more deeply brooding and gloomy but also more persistent than his friend. Vladimir has stinking breath and kidney problems. If Estragon and Vladimir are Laurel and Hardy, Vladimir is Oliver Hardy, the fat one who does the "thinking" but is frequently dead wrong.

Themes

Human Condition

In this richly evocative "story" about two men who wait for another who never comes there are so many possible themes it is difficult to enumerate them. Those that are readily apparent include the issues of absurdity, alienation and loneliness, appearance and reality, death, doubt and ambiguity, time, the meaning of life, language and meaning, and the search for self. But one theme that encompasses many of these at once is the question of the human condition who are we as humans and what is our short life on this planet really like?

We appear to be born without much awareness of our selves or our environment and as we mature to gradually acquire from the world around us a sense of identity and a concept of the universe. However, the concept of human life that we generally acquire may be fraught with illusions. Early in his life Beckett dismissed the Christian concept of God and based his concept of the human condition on the assumption that human existence ends in the grave, that our most monumental achievements are insignificant measured by the cosmic scales of time and space, and that human life without illusions is generally difficult and sad. Vladimir and Estragon live in a world without comforting illusions about human dignity, the importance of work and achievement, the inevitability of justice, or the promise of an afterlife of eternal bliss. They live in a world where almost nothing is certain, where simply getting your boots off or sleeping through the night without having to urinate is a pretty significant achievement. They live in a world where violence and brutality can appear at any time, often victimizing them directly. They live without amenities, find joy in the smallest of victories, and are ultimately quite serious about their vague responsibility to wait for this mysterious figure who may or may not come and who may or may not reward them for their loyalty. It is a life lived on the razor's edge of hope and sadness.

Strangely enough, Pozzo often voices most clearly what Beckett might have called the reality of this world. In Act I, for example, Estragon feels pity for the abused and weeping Lucky, who is sobbing because Pozzo has said aloud that he wants to "get rid of him." As Lucky sobs, Pozzo brutally says, "old dogs have more dignity." But when Estragon goes with a handkerchief to wipe his tears, Lucky kicks him violently in the shins and it is now Estragon in pain. Pozzo then offers this observation: "he's stopped crying. [To stragon.] You have replaced him as it were. [Lyrically.] The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. [He laughs.] Let us not then speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its predecessors. [Pause.] Let us not speak well of it either. [Pause.] Let us not speak of it at all."

As Beckett dismissed what most of us take for granted, he eventually dismissed language itself as a reliable source of security. Ironically, this man of words ultimately mistrusted them. He knew that the word could never be counted on to convey meaning

precisely and that linguistic meaning was always an approximation. Thus he shows Vladimir and Estragon spending most of their time dancing around words, attempting vainly to pin them down, to use them as guiding stars as best they can. At the end of the play, for example, Vladimir is struck by Estragon's suggestion that much of what Vladimir "knows" might be as unreliable as Estragon's dreams, and Vladimir launches into a poetic monologue that begins, "Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now?" But when he ends this lyrical moment of introspection he simply says, "what have I said?" This is a world where even words fail to wrestle our lives into consistently coherent patterns of meaning, a world where the human condition is radically insecure but where the struggle to find meaning is perhaps the only nobility left for us.

Friendship

It is tempting to see Beckett as a "nihilist," as someone who believed that there was nothing of value or meaning in human life, but the friendship of Estragon and Vladimir clearly offers us something positive and even uplifting in the difficult world of Beckett's play. In the unconventional banter of these two men it is sometimes easy to miss the intensity of their symbiotic relationship, but close attention to the theatrical qualities in their exchanges will show that they care deeply for one another and in many ways need one another to survive in their inhospitable world. Beckett, of course, is not sentimental about friendship he is stubbornly realistic about everything he sees but on the whole the relationship between Estragon and Vladimir is an important focus for understanding Beckett's most famous play.

In many places in the action Vladimir and Estragon bicker, misunderstand, and even ignore one another, but in other places their relationship is clearly tender, such as in the moment of Act II when Vladimir covers the sleeping Estragon with his coat. But if one were to focus on one moment in detail the most logical place to start might be the entrances of the two men at the beginning of the play. As the play begins, Estragon is sitting on a mound trying to take off his boot, Estragon and Vladimir have been separated overnight, but Beckett doesn't expect us to worry about why they have separated, any more than he expects us to give a moment's thought as to how they first met or how long they have known one another. It is enough to know that they are friends and that as the play begins Estragon is alone on this country road struggling to get his boots off. He finally gives up, saying "Nothing to be done," and at that moment Vladimir enters and responds to his friend's words as if he had been there from the start of Estragon's struggle "I'm beginning to come round to that opinion," says Vladimir. The ease with which they are together again, as if they never were parted, is indicated deftly in the seamlessness of that second line of the play. Vladimir then says, more directly, "I'm glad to see you back. I thought you were gone forever" and though the line is spoken casually the clear implication is that losing Estragon forever would have created a very considerable hole in Vladimir's life. Vladimir expresses concern over Estragon's beating, then quickly shifts into one of his annoyingly condescending roles as Estragon's protector. Vladimir talks, almost as if he simply enjoys hearing the sound of his own voice, while Estragon resumes the struggle with the boot. Eventually, Estragon

succeeds in removing his boot and it could easily be suggested that he does so in part because of the mere presence of his friend. It is certainly no accident that just as Vladimir echoes Estragon's opening phrase, "Nothing to be done," Estragon "with a supreme effort succeeds in pulling off his boot." The removal of the boot, of course, is mundane. As Vladimir says, "Boots must be taken off every day." But in Beckett's careful art, the removal of the boot with the indirect emotional support of a friend is a metaphor for anything we attempt to do in our lives. In this life we face difficulties in the simple execution of daily affairs and ultimately we must face them alone or in the company of others who struggle as we do.

Style

Theatre of the Absurd

The seemingly endless waiting that Estragon and Vladimir undertake for the mysterious Godot has made Beckett's play one of the classic examples of what is called Theatre of the Absurd. The term refers both to its content a bleak vision of the human condition and to the style that expresses that vision. The idea that human life lacks meaning and purpose, that humans live in an indifferent or hostile universe, is frequently associated with Existentialist writers like the French philosophers Albert Camus (Kam-oo) and Jean-Paul Sartre (Sart). But when these two writers expounded their ideas in novels and plays, they generally used traditional literary techniques that is, life-like characters; clear, linear plots; and conventional dialogue. But with writers like Beckett or the French dramatist Eugene lonesco (E-on-es-co), the style is not an arbitrary choice but rather a necessary complement to the vision itself.

Beckett and those who adopted his style insisted that to effectively express the vision of absurdity one had to make the expression itself seem absurd. In other words, the audience had to experience what it felt like to live in an absurd world. Thus, the familiar and comforting qualities of a clear plot, realistic characters, plausible situations, and comprehensible dialogue had to be abandoned. In their place Beckett created a play where bizarre characters speak in what sometimes appears to be illogical, banal, chit chat and where events sometimes appear to change with no apparent logic. In *Waiting for Godot*, for example, this quality is embodied in its most extreme form in Lucky's first act monologue where he demonstrates his "thinking." For two full pages of text, Lucky goes on like this: "I resume alas alas on on in short in fine on on abode of stones who can doubt it I resume but not so fast I resume the skull to shrink."

Many of the play's original audience members and critics probably came to *Waiting for Godot* expecting something more traditional than Lucky's speech and were not able to adjust to what they were confronted with. Even today's reader may need a gentle reminder about expectations. As Hugh Kenner suggested at the outset of his book *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett*, "the reader of Samuel Beckett may want a Guide chiefly to fortify him against irrelevant habits of attention, in particular the habit of reading 'for the story.'" For, as Martin Esslin explained in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, " *Waiting for Godot* does not tell a story; it explores a static situation. 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.'" Or, as Kenner put it, "the substance of the play is waiting, amid uncertainty. To wait; and to make the audience share the waiting; and to explicate the quality of the waiting: this is not to be done with 'plot.'"

Black Humor

Perhaps the easiest and also the most difficult thing to experience clearly in *Waiting for Godot* is its sense of humor. It's the easiest thing to experience because once one

accepts the play on its own terms *Waiting for Godot* is wildly funny. But the play's humor is also the hardest thing to experience because the reputation of Beckett's play has created another set of expectations that its dark vision must be taken with utmost seriousness.

However, a quick look at the subtitle of the play reveals that Beckett called it "a tragi-comedy in two acts," and this delicate balance between tragedy and comedy is probably the most essential ingredient in the play. Numerous critics have pointed out that *Waiting for Godot* is full of pratfalls, classic vaudeville "bits" like the wild swapping of hats in Act n, and the patter of comedians such as this from Act I:

Estragon: [Anxious] And we? Vladimir: I beg your pardon' Estragon: I said, And we? Vladimir: I don't understand. Estragon: Where do we come in? Vladimir: Come in' Estragon: Take your time. Vladimir: Come in? On our hands and knees Estragon: As bad as that1?

Hugh Kenner has even discovered what appears to be a "source" for the farcical dropping of trousers that ends the play. He pointed out that in Laurel and Hardy's film Way *Out West* (1937) this dialogue occurs:

Hardy Get on the mule. Laurel: What? Hardy: Get on the mule

At the end of *Waiting for Godo*t we have:

Vladimir: Pull on your trousers. Estragon: What? Vladimir- Pull on your trousers Estragon' You want me to pull off my trousers9 Vladimir: Pull ON your trousers Estragon: [Realizing his trousers are down] True. [He pulls up his trousers.]

Black Comedy is laughter that is generated by something truly painful. When we are led to laugh at tragedy or real suffering like death or the genuinely horrific, we are in the world of Black Comedy. In *Endgame* Nell says, "nothing is funnier than un-happiness." Beckett leads us to laugh because it may be the only viable response to extreme anxiety. In *Waiting for Godot*, of course, what follows the "trouser" passage above is the quite serious and even solemn concluding lines of the play "they do not move."

Historical Context

The French Resistance Movement during World War II

Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* in the late months of 1948, three years after Allied forces had liberated France from German occupation, and some scholars suggest that his war experience might have served as an inspiration for the play. After German military forces had successfully invaded and occupied Northern France in the spring of 1940, a nominally free French government had been established in the South at Vichy and an underground French Resistance movement arose that attempted to frustrate and undermine German control of France. Beckett joined the Resistance movement in Paris in September of 1941 and helped pass secret information to England about German military movements. When an infiltrator began uncovering the names of Resistance members in Beckett's group, Beckett and his companion (later his wife) Suzanne had to flee Paris and travel into the South, where they eventually found refuge in the small village of Roussillon, near Avignon. In the French version of the play, this village is named as the place where Vladimir and Estragon picked grapes, an activity that Beckett and Suzanne actually engaged in. This has led some scholars to suggest that Vladimir and Estragon can, at least in part, represent Beckett and Suzanne in flight from Paris to Roussillon or the two of them waiting in an extremely dangerous form of exile for the war to end. In Roussillon, Beckett earned food and shelter by doing strenuous manual labor for local farmers, eventually working for a small local Resistance group, and trying to keep his identity hidden from the Germans occupying outlying areas. After the war, Beckett was awarded two French medals, the Croix de Guerre and the Medaille de la Reconnaissance, for his contributions to the war effort.

Indeterminate Time and Place in Beckett's Play

More importantly for Beckett's art, however, is that *Waiting for Godot*, on the whole, clearly detaches itself from particular aspects of the historical and cultural context in which Beckett wrote in order to universalize the experience of Vladimir and Estragon. And it achieves this universal quality initially by placing the two figures in an indeterminate setting and time. As the play opens, the setting and time is simply described as "A country road. A tree. Evening." In the second act, the description is simply, "Next day. Same Time. Same Place," This backdrop is left unspecified in order to emphasize that the action of the play is a universal "situation" rather than a particular series of events that happened to a particular set of characters.

At one time in our century this waiting could have stood for South Africans waiting for apartheid to end in their native land. More than a half century after the unleashing of atomic energy, this waiting could still represent our fears of nuclear catastrophe. On a more personal level, many know what it is like to wait for news of a test for cancer. But all of these specific situations reveal how specificity can reduce the poetic

evocativeness of Beckett's waiting to a mundane flatness. The unspecified nature of what Vladimir and Estragon wait for is what gives Beckett's play its extraordinary power.

The peculiar quality of Vladimir and Estragon's waiting, of course, is that they wait with only the vaguest sense of what they are waiting for and that they wait without much hope while still clinging to hope as their only ballast in an existential storm. But even this narrower description of the play's "waiting" leaves many possibilities for corresponding situations. For example, one of the most famous productions of *Waiting for Godot* perhaps reveals most clearly how the indeterminate time and place of the play permits it to speak to a wide variety of audience experiences. In *The Theatre of the Absurd* Martin Esslin examined the famous 1957 production of *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin penitentiary. Prison officials had chosen Beckett's play largely because it had no women in it to distract the prisoners, but the San Francisco Actors' Workshop group that was performing the play was obviously concerned that such an arcane theatrical experience might baffle an audience of fourteen hundred convicts. Much to their surprise, however, the convicts understood the play immediately. One prisoner said, "Godot is society." Another said, "he's the outside." As Esslin reported, "a teacher at the prison was quoted as saying, 'they know what is meant by waiting... and they knew if Godot finally came, he would only be a disappointment.'" An article in the prison newspaper summarized the prisoners' response by saying, "We're still waiting for Godot, and shall continue to wait. When the scenery gets too drab and the action too slow, we'll call each other names and swear to part forever but then, there's no place to go!" Esslin concluded that "it is said that Godot himself, as well as turns of phrase and characters from the play, have since become a permanent part of the private language, the institutional mythology of San Quentin." In 1961, one member of that convict audience, Rick Cluchey, helped form a group that produced seven productions of Beckett's plays for San Quentin audiences from 1961 to 1964. Cluchey later earned his release from San Quentin and had a distinguished career acting on stage and in films, especially as an interpreter of Beckett roles.

Critical Overview

After nearly a half-century, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* remains one of the most important, respected, and powerful plays in the history of world theatre. Given its radically innovative style and great degree of difficulty, it is no surprise that audiences and critics have generally reacted to it in extremes either of love or hate, admiration or disgust. Its original director, Roger Blin, recalled in an article in *Theater* that the reaction to the first production in January, 1953, in a small Paris theatre was "a sensation actually: wild applause broke out from some in the audience, others sat in baffled silence, fisticuffs were exchanged by pros and cons; most critics demolished play and production but a handful wrote prophetically."

Among those who wrote prophetically was the play's first reviewer, a relatively unknown critic named Sylvain Zegel, who proclaimed in a review in *Liberation* that the production was "an event which will be spoken of for a long time, and will be remembered years later." With amazing prescience, Zegel simply asserted that this first-time playwright "deserves comparison with the greatest." A more famous French critic at the time, Jacques Lemarchand, added an awareness of the play's dark humor, observing in *Figaro Litteraire* that *Waiting for Godot* "is also a funny play sometimes very funny. The second night I was there the laughter was natural and unforced." He added that this humor "in no way diminished" the play's profound emotional intensity. Internationally acclaimed playwright Jean Anouilh (On-wee) was also one of *Waiting for Godot's* early commentators and in *Arts Spectacles* simply proclaimed it "a masterpiece." As James Knowlson summarized it in his *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, the play's "success was assured when it became controversial," The critical and popular enthusiasm, though not universal, was widespread, and the production ran for four-hundred performances before moving to a larger theatre in Paris.

This process whereby ambivalence to the play ultimately evolved into popular and critical success was repeated when the play moved to London in August of 1955 for its first production using Beckett's English translation. Opening in a small "fringe" theatre (London's version of Off Broadway), "the play created an instant furore," according to Alan Simpson, writing in 1962, and quoted in Ruby Cohn's 1987 compilation, *Waiting for Godot: A Casebook*. Simpson added that "[a]lmost without exception, the popular press dismissed it as obscure nonsense and pretentious rubbish. However, it was enthusiastically championed by Harold Hobson and Kenneth Tynan" (two of the most influential drama critics in London) and the play once again became controversial and thereby successful, eventually moving to a West End theatre (London's Broadway) and a long run. In February of 1956 an unsigned review in the London *Times Literary Supplement* by distinguished author G.S. Fraser asserted that the play was clearly a Christian morality play. This essay led to weeks of spirited exchange in the *Times* with some critics countering that the play was anti-Christian, others that it was Existentialist, and others that it was something else altogether. Characteristically, Beckett was mystified by the controversy, saying, according to Knowlson, "why people have to complicate a thing so simple I can't make out."

The first American production of the play, on the other hand, was quite uncomplicated; it was an unmitigated disaster. In January of 1956, director Alan Schneider opened what was to be a three-week preview run of the play in Coral Gables, Florida, near Miami, with popular comic actors and personalities Bert Lahr and Tom Ewell in the lead roles. As Schneider recounted (as quoted in Ruby Cohn's 1967 compilation, *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*), the production was a "spectacular flop. The opening night audience in Miami, at best not too sophisticated or attuned to this type of material and at worst totally misled by advertising billing the play as 'the laugh sensation of two continents,' walked out in droves. And the so-called reviewers not only could not make heads or tails of the play but accused us of pulling some sort of hoax on them." The production did not even finish the three week preview run, but months later the production did move to Broadway, with a new director and cast (retaining only Bert Lahr as Estragon). In New York, producer Michael Myerberg took a new tack on pre-production publicity, this time asking in his advertisements for an audience of "seventy thousand intellectuals." This time the production was a success, though still drawing divided opinions from critics and audience. The show ran for over 100 performances and sold almost 3,000 copies of the play in the theatre lobby.

There have been so many important productions of *Waiting for Godot* in our century that it is difficult to even list, much less summarize, them. An all-black production of the play on Broadway ran for only five performances late in 1956, with Earle Hyman as Lucky. There was a West Berlin production early in 1975 that Beckett himself directed. In a production in 1976 in Cape Town, South Africa, waiting for Godot seemed to suggest waiting for the end of apartheid. In 1984 there was a San Quentin Drama Workshop production involving Rick Cluchey, former inmate of San Quentin and audience member of the famous 1957 San Quentin production of the play. In 1988 Beckett went to court in an attempt to stop an all-female Dutch production, believing as he did that the characters in *Waiting for Godot* were distinctively male (Beckett and his lawyers lost in court). Also in 1988 there was a production at Lincoln Center in New York City, in which Estragon and Vladimir were played by well-known contemporary comedians Robin Williams and Steve Martin.

According to Martin Esslin in his *The Theatre of the Absurd, Waiting for Godot* had been seen by over a million people within five years after its first production in Paris and by the late 1960s had been translated into more than twenty languages and performed all over the world. Audiences coming to it without an awareness of its nature or history are perhaps still baffled by it, but the play can no longer be dismissed as it was by *Daily News* contributor John Chapman, one of its first New York critics, who, as quoted by the *New Republic's* Eric Bentley, called *Waiting for Godot* "merely a stunt."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Niehuis is an associate professor of English at Western Carolina University. His essay discusses how Waiting for Godot *can best be understood in musical terms such as repeating themes and motifs*.

Waiting for Godot has been and may always be a difficult work to read or view. However, much of the difficulty that readers and audiences have had with the play seems to have come from false expectations. If audiences come to a production expecting a traditional theatre experience featuring a clear plot, realistic characters, and conventional dialogue, they are doomed to frustration and may not be able to adjust and simply experience what the play does have to offer.

The traditional play tells a story and the movement of a story is usually in a more-or-less forward line from beginning to end. The movement in Beckett's play, however, is more like a circle. The play has a beginning, but the beginning seems somewhat arbitrary because what happened before the beginning does not seem to be important. The play has an end, but the end seems to recall the beginning and create a sense of circularity rather than the traditional sense of closure that conventional stories generally provide. So Beckett's play could perhaps be described as "all middle." This, of course, reinforces the Absurdist or Existentialist idea of human life as having no clear purpose or direction, of life being an interminable waiting for a sense of purpose or closure that is not likely to ever arrive. Seen clearly, life seems to these thinkers as something we simply do while we are waiting to die, and the illusions human beings create to give their lives a sense of teleology or purpose will not finally sustain the thoroughly reflective twentieth-century human being.

In a way, these Existentialist ideas in *Waiting for Godot* are encapsulated in the first image and line of the play. As the lights rise on the stage, the audience sees Estragon in a bleak landscape, sitting on a low mound, struggling to remove his boot. He tries, gives up, rests exhausted, tries again, gives up again, repeats the process, and finally says, "nothing to be done." That, in a sense, is the whole play in a nutshell. In an indifferent universe, human beings struggle with the simplest of activities, are tempted to give up, but can do nothing to alter their fate except persist. It can be said, as Hugh Kenner did in his *A Reader's Guide to Samuel* Beckett, that the rest of the play simply repeats this observation: "insofar as the play has a 'message,'" said Kenner, "that is more or less what it is: 'Nothing to be done.' There is no dilly-dallying; it is delivered in the first moments, with the first spoken words, as though to get the didactic part out of the way." The rest of the play could be seen as a set of "variations" on this theme, much as a jazz or classical musical composition announces a theme or motif and then enlarges upon that theme, modifying it and adding additional themes and motifs until the composition has succeeded in fully presenting its mood, tone, or idea. In the opening moments of *Waiting for Godot* this kind of musical quality is most obvious when Vladimir finally repeats Estragon's opening line, saying himself, "Nothing to be done." At the end of the second page of the script and then near the end of the third, Vladimir's repetition of this

opening line echoes like a musical refrain and establishes the main idea of Beckett's play.

To adjust the expectations one brings to the reading or viewing of *Waiting for Godot* it may be useful to think of the play as something like a musical composition. Linda Ben-Zvi explained in her *Samuel Beckett* that Beckett "bemoaned the fact that his characters could not be portrayed as musical sounds a simultaneity of sounds played at one time: 'how nice that would be, linear, a lovely Phythagorean chant-chant solo of cause and effect.'" Ben-Zvi went on to observe that "the theatre, while it still may not explain characters, can do what prose cannot: present the 'chain-chant' directly to audiences who are free to react without the necessity of explanation, who can apprehend life being presented." In his *The Theatre of the Absurd* Martin Esslin quoted Herbert Blau, the director of the 1957 San Quentin production, who attempted to prepare the convict audience for the play by comparing it "to a piece of jazz music 'to which one must listen for whatever one may find in it.'" Peter Hall, the director for the first London production, reported in an interview on the BBC's *Third Programme* that neither he nor his actors really understood the play but that he "was immediately struck by the enormous humanity and universality of the subject, and also by the extraordinary rhythms of the writing, and it was these rhythms and almost musical flexibility of the lyricism which communicated itself to me and which I tried to pass on to the actors.1' And in a famous letter (quoted in Steven Connor's *Waiting for Godot and Endgame: Samuel Beckett*) to director Alan Schneider, who was preparing a production of *Endgame*, Beckett wrote: "my work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin."

Thinking of the play in terms of a jazz or classical musical composition can solve a number of the problems readers and audiences traditionally have with *Waiting for Godot*. The play's apparent "meandering" quality is accounted for, as well as its obvious repetition and circularity. The quick, stichomythic exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon, as well as their abrupt shifts in topics become as important for their sound and rhythm as they do for their sense, full as they are of crescendos and diminuendos. The numerous pauses and silences also become crucial as they contribute to the dialogue's rhythm. Like a "quartet" the play is a series of voices, all different but all eventually complementary, elaborate variations on the theme of "nothing to be done." Beckett's primary concerns are with mood and tone, using rhythms in language and numerous examples of repetition to create something very much like melody.

Even Lucky "s monologue, which exists as the play's greatest frustration when one is expecting traditional "sense" in dialogue, becomes more meaningful when one hears the "sound" of it. When we first see Lucky, he is a pathetic figure sagging under a tremendous load of baggage, tethered by a cruel rope to a whip-wielding figure still offstage. Working silently, like an automaton, Lucky is disgustingly abused but still subservient to a Pozzo who is obviously inflated and unworthy of Lucky's devotion. When Lucky weeps at the mention of his being sold at the fair, he is a moving symbol of human misery, but when he kicks the solicitous Estragon we feel his anger and wonder at the apparent inappropriateness of his response. All of our complex feelings about this

figure are gathering momentum, just as perhaps his are, and these feelings find their most powerful expression in the culminating moment of Lucky's monologue. The monologue is breathless, one long shouted sentence without punctuation, as if to express in his heroic effort to "think" all of his suffering, degradation, and yet determination to survive. In the theatre it can be a moment of transcendence, not so much because of what the words "mean" (there are brief flashes of "sense") but because of how the words "sound." James Knowlson recounted in his *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* that in the 1984 San Quentin Drama Workshop production of the play, "a small, bald-headed actor named J. Pat Miller" played Lucky at a number of performances and "built the speech into so overwhelming and searing a performance that Beckett, hearing him for the first time, sat totally transfixed, tears welling up in his eyes. After the rehearsal, he told Miller that he was the best Lucky he had ever seen."

As another example of how essentially musical the play is, consider the way sound communicates the difference between Pozzo's two appearances in the play. In the first act Pozzo is mostly volume and bluster as he attempts to dominate everyone around him. In the second act, he is a small voice simply crying "help" repeatedly. From his entrance and fall where he lies helpless on the ground, Pozzo cries "help" or "pity" eleven times while the foreground sound is of Vladimir and Estragon debating what to do. Pozzo is thus like a recurrent sound from the percussion section until he offers to pay Vladimir and Estragon to help him up. As Vladimir attempts to help Pozzo up, Vladimir is dragged down and then joins in the refrain of "help" until all three of them are on the ground. Obviously comic, the scene also generates an enormously effective pathos. At one point Pozzo and Vladimir cry "help" in successive lines as Estragon threatens to leave, with the richness of the theatrical experience lying mostly in the different way those two calls for help sound.

Beckett was a poet in the theatre, more interested in the evocative quality of his words than their declarative quality. Declarative language is easier to understand but evaporates very quickly. In simple, declarative language we can say that Shakespeare's Hamlet is a sensitive young man who is so hurt by his father's death and his mother's hasty remarriage that he contemplates suicide in his famous "to be or not to be" speech. But the lasting value and pleasure of that speech lies not in the mere identification of its declarative meaning. Its lasting power lies in the elusive but evocative quality of its images, diction, and rhythms. In all of his art, Beckett sought to emphasize the evocative quality of his language by reducing the appeal of its declarative aspects. Thus, *Waiting for Godot* purposely frustrates the audience's dependence on declarative language in order to force it to pay more attention to the dialogue's evocative quality. Thus, in the simplest of exchanges we can find great poetry. For example, Vladimir gives Estragon a carrot in Act I and while Estragon chews on it Vladimir asks, "How's the carrot?" Estragon replies simply, "It's a carrot," and Vladimir adds, "So much the better, so much the better. [Pause.] What was it you wanted to know?" Here there are rhythms and tones in the dialogue that not only mirror the sense of the lines but can even stand in for them. The rising tone of Vladimir's question, so full of hope, is countered by the gently falling tones of Estragon's response. Hope and expectation fall back to the earth in simple fact. Life is what it is. Nothing more and nothing less. And the

repetition of Vladimir's "so much the better" is as crucial as the phrase itself, as is the pause that follows. "What was it you wanted to know?" is the sound of "resuming" after recognizing that there is "nothing to be done."

Source: Terry Niehuis, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997

Critical Essay #2

In this excerpt from his book, Hayman speculates on the symbolism o/Waiting for Godot's *stasis of characters and action, concluding that, despite the play's more opaque moments, it is nonetheless an entertaining work*.

The action of most plays can be summed up in a few sentences, but not the action of *Godot*. Vivian Mercier's summary of the plot is: 'Nothing happens, twice.' But how can we describe the nothing that happens? *The act of waiting is itself a contradictory combination of doing nothing and doing something*. Vladimir and Estragon don't actually do anything and they are agreed right from the beginning that there's nothing they can do. 'Nothing to be done' is the play's opening line and although Estragon is talking about his boot, which he's trying to take off, Vladimir's answer immediately makes the line we've just heard into a general pronouncement about their situation in life:

I'm beginning to come round to that opinion All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle.

But now that he has tried everything, or thinks he has, at least everything he's capable of trying, there's nothing left to do except wait for Godot. Which is the same as doing nothing, except that if you're waiting, you aren't free to go. Estragon keeps forgetting that and wanting to go, and each time Vladimir has to stop him. They have the same exchange of lines each time, like a refrain:

Let's go

We can't

Why not?

We're waiting for Godot

Ah"

They wait for Godot both days that we see them and they're going to come back to wait for him again the next day, and no doubt the day after that and we can be family sure they were waiting for him on the previous day and the day before that and the day before that. Godot will never come but they'll never be sure that he's not coming because there will always seem to be some reason for hoping that he'll come tomorrow. And there'll always be the possibility that he came today and that they failed to recognize him. Perhaps Pozzo was Godot. It's even been suggested (by Norman Mailer in *Advertisements for Myself*) that Lucky was Godot. But in any case Vladimir and Estragon are trapped. There's nothing to force them to stay but there's no incentive to make them go. The only way out is death and the only relief is night. They keep talking about suicide but they're incapable of taking any action or even of really wanting to. So

in effect waiting for Godot is waiting for your life to be over, waiting for night to fall, waiting for the play to end.

The tensions of the normal play are constructed around the interaction of the characters and the ignorance of the audience about what's going to happen next. In *Waiting for Godot* they soon get to know that nothing is going to happen next and that there's no chance of any development of character through relationships. The characters are not characters in this sense. There are many passages where it couldn't matter less who says which line:

ESTRAGON: They talk about their lives

VLADIMIR: To have lived is not enough for them,

ESTRAGON: They have to talk about it

VLADIMIR: To be dead is not enough for them

ESTRAGON: It is not sufficient (Silence)

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like ashes.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

But although it's not a play in the conventional sense, it's very much a play in the literal sense of the word 'play'. Having nothing to do with their time, Vladimir and Estragon are rather like children who have time to play games and have to play games to pass the time. 'What shall we do now?' is in effect what they're always saying to each other and some of their improvisations are very much like what children might think of to do. They play a game of being Pozzo and Lucky, they play at being very polite to each other, at abusing each other, at making it up, and they stagger about on one leg trying to look like trees. The audience is involved most directly when they look out in horror at the auditorium, but in fact the audience is involved in the game all the way through because Beckett is playing around with the fact of having actors on a stage playing parts, and playing around with the idea of a play. Instead of working to keep the audience guessing about what's going to happen next, he manages to give the impression of having written the play without himself knowing how he was going to go on. We feel that it's not only Vladimir and Estragon but also Beckett himself welcoming Pozzo and Lucky's second entrance as providing a diversion just at the right moment. There is an air of improvisation about the writing, and though the final script is one that wouldn't allow any improvisation from the actors it calls for great precision in performance it has an engaging resemblance to the patter of a well-read conjurer. The tricks are simple ones but the rapid changes of conversational gear are masterly. Anything that appears so

spontaneous must have been well rehearsed. And for Beckett, of course, the rehearsal was *Mercierand Gamier*.

But what about the tricks? The most important trick in the style and structure of *Waiting for Godot* is the old music-hall trick of protracted delay. No question can be answered and no action can be taken without a maximum of interlocution, incomprehension and argument. You never go straight to a point if you can possibly miss it, evade it, or start a long discussion about a short cut. Vladimir and Estragon ask Pozzo why Lucky doesn't put down the bags. Pozzo is delighted at having a question to answer but it takes two pages of digression, repetition, incomprehension, cross-purpose dialogue and farcical preparations like spraying his throat before he actually answers it. Then a few minutes later, he wants to sit down, but he doesn't want to sit down until someone has asked him to sit, so Estragon offers to ask him, he agrees, Estragon asks him, he refuses, pauses, and in an aside asks Estragon to ask him again, he asks him again and finally he sits.

There is also a great deal of vaudeville business with hats and boots and prat-falls. The bowler-hats that all four characters wear belong to the tradition of Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy. Vladimir has a comic walk and a comic disability that makes him rush off to pee in the wings each time he's made to laugh, and Lucky has elaborate comic business with all the things he has to carry, dropping them, picking them up and putting them down. Although there's very little action, there's an enormous number of actions which the actors have to perform, and in which they're instructed meticulously by stage directions:

(Lucky weeps) ESTRAGON: He's crying

POZZO: Old dogs have more dignity

(He proffers his handkerchief to Estragon.)

Comfort him, since you pity him.

(Estragon hesitates)

Come on.

(Estragon takes the handkerchief.)

Wipe away his tears, he'll feel less forsaken

(Estragon hesitates,)

VLADIMIR: Here, give it to me, I'll do it

(Estragon refuses to give the handkerchief.

Childish gestures)

POZZO: Make haste, before he stops

(*Estragon approaches Lucky and makes to wipe his eyes. Lucky kicks him violently m the shins Estragon drops the handkerchief recoils, staggers about the stage howling with pain*.)

Hanky!

(*Lucky puts down bag and basket, picks up the handkerchief gives it to Pozza, goes back to his place, picks up bag and basket*)

Another important trick is the way Beckett uses interruption. Almost everything in the play gets interrupted Lucky's big speech, Estragon's story about the Englishman in the brothel, and Vladimir interrupts his own song about dogs digging a dog a tomb. But it's a song that circles back on itself, so, as with Lucky's speech, we welcome the interruption because we feel that otherwise it would have gone on for ever.

All in all, though, the play's brisk rhythm depends less on the frequent interruptions than on the shortness of the speeches. There are very few long speeches and these are judiciously placed at the points where they are most useful as a variation on the basic staccato. The average length of the speeches in *Waiting for Godot* must be less than in any other play that's ever been written. Together with the rapid changes of topic, this builds up an impression of great speed. If Vladimir and Estragon are doing nothing, at least they're doing it fast....

With all the provocative gaps that there are in *Waiting for Godot* between the matter and the manner, between the half-statements and the half-meanings, it invites so much comment that it's easy to leave the most important point of all relatively unstressed that It's consistently so very funny. In production, of course, there's a danger of getting bogged down in portentousness and letting the effervescence go out of the dialogue if the pace is too slow. But the script provides the possibility of an evening in the theatre which is never less than entertaining and often very much more.

Source: Ronald Hayman, in his *Contemporary Playwrights: Samuel Beckett*, Hememann Educational Books, 1968, pp. 4-8,21.

Critical Essay #3

A drama critic for the New York Times, *Schumach examines* Waiting for Godot's *character motivation in this article, drawing on the perceptions of the actors who appeared in the play's original Broadway run*.

Now that *Waiting for Godot*, a two-act tract with four men, one boy and countless interpretations, has been repatriated to Europe as part of the United States drama program at the Brussels World's Fair, an international signal has gone out to extol or deride the most controversial play since World War II, of which its author, Samuel Beckett, said: "I didn't choose to write a play. It just happened that way."

Other things that have happened since the play's stormy Paris debut in 1952 called by Jean Anouilh "as important as the premiere of Pirandello in 1923" include a ban against any stories or advertising of the show in Spain; near-cancellation in the Netherlands averted by the furious resistance of the cast; successful runs in almost every important city of Europe. And on sophisticated Broadway, where it arrived in 1956, it created one of the most extraordinary phenomena in American show business. For, after the final curtain on many nights, the audience remained and, joined by interested literary figures and laymen, debated die play's meaning and merit. In these debates clergymen were sometimes pitted against each other on whether *Godot* was religious or atheistic. Its continued viability is proved by twenty productions of *Godot* given this year in as many states.

On the surface there is little in this plotless drama to rouse the multitudes. It seems little more than a tale about two derelicts who wait vainly, on a bleak set that features a gnarled tree, for a Mr. Godot to appear and lessen their misery. While they wait, they hold long conversations, generally in short sentences, about their physical, mental and spiritual troubles. Their anxiety is diverted and intensified by the antics of a bully and his slave, and by a boy who twice brings them the message: "Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening, but surely tomorrow."

Occasionally the pace of *Godot* is changed by comic turns, done by the two derelicts, that range from old-fashioned pratfalls to kicks. The longest speech in the play, a stream-of-consciousness outpouring, is delivered by the slave, who is otherwise mute.

That the force of arguments about *Godot* has not waned appreciably was shown earlier this month at its latest New York revival by the San Francisco Actor's Workshop, which has since taken the play to Brussels. At many of the performances spectators were asked to write comments on *Godot*. At least one-quarter of the 200-odd returns were unfavorable, another third bewildered or undecided, and the rest favorable. Those for *Godot* used such adjectives as stimulating, provoking, enlightening, superb, excellent, magnificent, poetic. Ranged against *Godot* were senseless, boring, vulgar, sacrilegious, hideous, repulsive, decadent. And even some who liked the play thought it unwise to send it to Brussels to represent the nation's regional theatre the theatre outside New York City.

Almost as interesting as the reasons for argument about *Godot* are the lures that bring crowds to see it. Many undoubtedly come because they love the theatre and the play has caused a stir. Others are intellectuals who are curious about a play that is said to have a deeper meaning than that in most dramas. Finally, there are those who are drawn by a sort of egghead snobbery.

Godot has been much easier to blame or praise than to explain. One difficulty for its defendants is that the play's Irish-born author, who created the work in French, has not helped them in the few comments he has made about *Godot*. Thus, when a publisher wrote to him asking for his explanation of the play's symbols, he replied: "As far as I know, there are none. Of course, I am open to correction." And when Sir Ralph Richardson, the British star, asked him if Godot represented God, he replied: "If by Godot I had meant God, I would have said God, not Godot."

Thornton Wilder, leader of the proGodotians who scrutinize the play's sixty-one pages with the fiery reverence of cabala students, calls the play "a picture of total nihilism" and a "very admirable work." But, adds Mr. Wilder whose Pulitzer-prize-winning *The Skin of Our Teeth* also caused a furor, "I don't try to work out detailed symbolism. I don't think you're supposed to." Michael Myerberg, who first produced the play in this country, says: "It very much reflects the hopelessness and dead end we've run into. What he's trying to say is: 'All we have is ourselves each other and we may as well make the best of it.'"

Bert Lahr, who was in the original Broadway production as Estragon, the derelict who does not know why he's waiting, originally did not know what the play meant. Now he has some unusual interpretations.

"The play," he says, "is very complex and has many analyses. But mine is as good as the rest. The two men are practically one one is the animal side, the other the mental. I was the animal. So far as Pozzo and Lucky [master and slave] are concerned, we have to remember that Beckett was a disciple of Joyce and that Joyce hated England. Beckett meant Pozzo to be England, and Lucky to be Ireland."

Mr. Lahr recalls vividly the post-performance seminars: "I remember one night a lady jumped out of her seat screaming: 'What's the difference? What's the difference? We were entertained, weren't we!'" Then there was a woman who came to his dressing room one night. The actor held out his hand to greet her, but all she did was to say: "Oh, Mr, Lahr " and run off crying.

"No, I haven't read anything by Beckett since that play," says Lahr."I'm not that erudite."

E. G. Marshall, whose performance as the other derelict, Vladimir, was as memorable as Mr. Lahr' s, attended only one after-theatre symposium. "Then I ran like a frightened deer. I listened to them and thought: 'My God. Is that what the play means?' Every time a mouth opened, out came a different interpretation. That's no good for an actor."

In reaching his own interpretation, Mr. Marshall went through a process somewhat different from Mr. Lahr's. "The first time I read the play I thought it was wonderful. That

was about a couple of years before I was in it. Then I saw it in London. It was a hit there. But I thought: 'What the hell did I ever see in that play? It's so boring. It's probably nice to read, but it won't play.'

"Then Mike Myerberg asked me to be in it here. I went through an evolutionary process. At first we actors used to have violent arguments about what the play meant. And then we'd have violent agreements. Eventually, I saw it in black-and-white terms, I was the intellectual in the play. The play, we agreed, was a positive play, not negative, not pessimistic. As I saw it, with my blood and skin and eyes, the philosophy is: 'No matter what atom bombs, hydrogen bombs, anything life goes on. You can kill yourself, but you can't kill life.'

"I don't know if it" s a great play. But it is a real theatre piece. Not something that has to be molded and hacked to fit in a theatre. The theatre today is too flaccid, too passive, too dull. It is good to have it stirred up by a play like this. I think *Waiting for Godot* will remain in the theatre and will mean something to succeeding casts and to succeeding audiences."

Members of the San Francisco troupe have a variety of ideas about the play. One calls it "a play of despair in which a man is seeking salvation, frustrated in finding it, and incapable of coping with waiting." Another says: "This is a fairly modern state of mind, existential, in which man tries to remove despair and find some strength." A third recalls: "At first I thought it trite. Then I realized that Beckett is a tremendous humanitarian. He does not condemn humanity at any time. He asks mankind to look at itself." A fourth sees Lucky, the slave, as "the sensitive artist in modern society."

Those who admire the play for its beauty cite the following speech by Vladimir, when he is urging Estragon to help the fallen Pozzo, the bully:

"Let us do something while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say? (*Estragon says nothing*.} It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species. The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners without the least reflection, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets. But that is not the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come."

Those who see Beckett as a satiric sage cite the following: "There's man all over for you, blaming on his boots the faults of his feet." Or: "We always find something *** to give us the impression we exist." Or: "The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. Let us not then speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its

predecessors. Let us not speak well of it either. Let us not speak of it at all. It is true the population has increased."

Despite its triumphs in Paris, where it was called *En Attendant Godot*, and London, *Waiting for Godot* had to wait for production in the United States and very nearly died on the doorstep. When Myerberg first saw the script, he dismissed it as impossible to produce. Six months later, in London, he changed his mind, while watching a performance. At first he tried it in Miami. It failed dismally. One estimate is that more than half the opening-night audience failed to return after the intermission. But Myerberg, a stubborn man and a gambler, assembled the cast of Lahr, Marshall, Kurt Kasznar and Alvin Epstein, with Herbert Berghof as director.

With considerable showmanship, he brought it to Broadway, preceding its opening on April 8, 1956, with an advertisement in this paper which reads: "This is a play for the thoughtful and discriminating theatregoer. We are, therefore, offering it for a limited engagement of only four weeks. I respectfully suggest that those who come to the theatre for casual entertainment do not buy a ticket to this attraction." The show extended its run to twice the original four weeks. Author Beckett, in one of his rare comments, wrote to the producer: "It is gratifying to learn that the bulk of your audiences was made up of young people. This was also the case in Paris, London and throughout Germany. I must, after all, be less dead than I thought."

Though Beckett might be gratified that the San Francisco troupe doing his play in Brussels is also young, he may not think as much of the reason that prompted the company to choose his play. It happened to be the least costly play in the troupe's repertory and the State Department was footing no bill for transportation. The San Francisco company, however, has learned to make ends meet during its trying existence since it was formed in 1952. Nearly all of its ninety-two members only ten have gone abroad have to support themselves with other work. Productions are usually presented only on week-ends.

Mr. Beckett, too, has faced some tough times. Born in 1906, a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, where he later took his M. A. and lectured in French, he began wandering around Europe in 1932, settling finally in Paris. He remained in France during World War n, but moved to the Unoccupied Zone. During 1945-46 he was a storekeeper and interpreter with the Irish Red Cross in bombarded Normandy. Before he wrote *En Attendant Godot*, he did a collection of short stones, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, a collection of poems, *Echo's Bones*: a trilogy of novels *Molloy, Malone Meurt* and *L'Inuomable*. Since *Godot* he has been represented in the theatre by *Endgame*, a play that has not notably increased his following.

Since Beckett is curious about what the young think of *Godot*, the 8 year-old who plays the part of the boy with the San Francisco troupe was asked his interpretation of the play. He replied:

"Two men are waiting for Godot. They want to hang themselves. Lucky and Pozzo come in, Lucky is the slave and Pozzo is the master. Then I come in. I give them a message.

Then I go off. So next day they still want to hang themselves. Pozzo is blind. I come in with the same message."

"What do you think," the boy was asked, "happens to the two men afterward?"

"I think," he replied, after a short pause, "that at the way, way, way end, they hang themselves."

"Do you think," the boy was asked, "there is a Godot?"

"No. There is no Godot," he replied, then picked up his toy battleship and wandered off.

Source: Murray Schumach, "Why They Wait for Godot" in the *New York Times Magazine*, September 21,1958, pp 36, 38,41.

Adaptations

A 1990 videotape production of *Waiting for Godot* is available from The Smithsonian Institution Press Video Division as part of a trilogy that includes productions of *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape*. Performed by the San Quentin Drama Workshop, the production of *Waiting for Godot* includes Rick Cluchey as Pozzo. Act I on the first tape lasts 77 minutes and Act II on the second tape lasts 60 minutes. The whole trilogy is presented under the title Beckett Directs Beckett but only because it is based on Beckett's original staging for theatre.

The 1987 film *Weeds*, starring Nick Nolte, is based loosely on the experience of Rick Cluchey in San Quentin prison. Sentenced to life imprisonment without parole for kidnapping, robbery, and aggravated assault, Cluchey witnessed the famous San Quentin production of Beckett's play, became an actor, organized a prison drama group, and was eventually released after twelve years to become an accomplished interpreter of Beckett's characters on stage and in film.

A 45-minute black and white version of Act II is available from Films for the Humanities (Princeton, NJ, 1988; orig. 1976) and features Zero Mostel, Burgess Meredith, and Milo O' Shea in a production directed by Alan Schneider, director of the ill-fated American premiere in Miami.

A 50-minute lecture by Bert States entitled *"Waiting for Godot*: Speculations on Myth and Method," was recorded on audiocassette in 1976 by the Cornell Literature Forum.

A 36-minute lecture on audiocassette by Kathryn Ludwigson entitled "Beckett's View of Man in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*," was made in 1972 by King's College. Part of a series entitled Christianity and Literature Cassettes, this lecture compares Beckett's description of modern man as lost and disoriented with the biblical view of man and points out passages in the dramas analogous to biblical texts.

A 35-minute audiocassette program on the play by Lois Gordon as part of the Modern Drama Cassette Curriculum series was created m 1971 by Everett/Edwards of Deland, Florida.

On June 26,1961, a British television production of the play was broadcast with Peter Woodthorpe as Estragon and Jack MacGowran as Vladimir and directed fay Donald McWhinnie. Beckett was not pleased with the production, feeling that the containment of the action in the small television frame misrepresented the drama of "small men locked in a big space."

A 24-page musical score for a 10-mmute performance entitled "Voices," based on the play, was published in 1960 by Universal Edition (London) and attributed to Marc Wilkinson. The score features a contralto voice singing in English and German and an instrumental ensemble of flute, clarinet, bass clarinet, and violoncello.

Topics for Further Study

Research the following three topics: the French Resistance during the German occupation of France in World War II, Beckett's personal role in that Resistance movement, and interpretations of *Waiting for Godot* that suggest Beckett is using the play to reflect on his war experience.

Research the production of *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin penitentiary in November of 1957 and discuss the conditions under which unsophisticated audiences can understand and respond enthusiastically to Beckett's play.

Find places in the text of *Waiting for Godot* where the play is clearly funny. Then find places where the humor is less obvious but still quite rich. Finally, research the concept of "black humor" and describe the sense of humor that you find in *Waiting for Godot*,

Research as many different productions of *Waiting for Godot* as you can and classify what these productions reveal about differences in presentation and interpretation. Then describe the features of a production that you would undertake.

Compare the Existentialist and Christian interpretations of the play and decide which one seems to you more faithful to the text that Beckett wrote.

Compare and Contrast

1954: Less than a decade after the U.S. military unleashed the frightening power of the atomic bomb in 1945, Russia and the United States began harnessing nuclear energy for peaceful uses. The first nuclear power station began producing electricity for Soviet industry and agriculture on June 27 at a station 55 miles from Moscow at Obninsk. In August, the U.S. Congress gave the approval for U.S. private industry to participate in the production of nuclear power.

Today: The production of electricity through nuclear power plants has grown tremendously but has failed to become the dominant power source it was envisioned to be, in part because of the perceived dangers of nuclear power plants. Nuclear accidents at Three-Mile Island near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1979 and at Chernobyl near Kiev, Russia, in 1986 increased opposition to reliance on nuclear energy production.

1954: Large corporations begin to use computers to facilitate business activities.

Today: The world has been transformed by computers as they power and guide everything from wrist watches to space shuttles. The World Wide Web has virtually interconnected everyone on the globe by creating an "information super highway."

1954: The first color television sets are introduced into the United States by RCA. Color reception is of unreliable quality but RCA will dominate the new market until 1959, when Zenith and others use the courts to challenge RCA's virtual monopoly.

Today: The black and white television is almost a collector's item and the transition is being made in the United States to the new digital television technology that will eventually make analog television sets obsolete. Digital television will provide a revolutionary clear image that delivers a "movie" quality picture.

1954: Ray Kroc, a milkshake salesman in California, discovers a very successful but small California hamburger chain. He buys franchising rights from the owners, the McDonald brothers, and begins building his golden arches fast-food empire.

Today: McDonald's is the largest fast-food chain in the world with nearly 20,000 restaurants in approximately 100 countries.

1954: France asks the United States to help French troops surrounded at Dien Bien Phu in Indochina (Vietnam). President Eisenhower acknowledges the importance of containing Communist aggression in Southeast Asia but refuses to provide U.S. airpower to help relieve the siege.

Today: The United States was gradually drawn into the Vietnam conflict {while the French withdrew) until the United States under President Lyndon Johnson severely escalated U.S. involvement in the mid-1960s. Public anti-war sentiment ultimately forced American politicians to withdraw from the war without winning it militarily and the

United States perhaps still suffers psychologically for its perceived defeat in the Vietnam.

What Do I Read Next?

Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) features a more antagonistic pair of men in an even drearier situation, while Beckett's *Happy Days* (1961) demonstrates his focus on women and *Come and Go* (1966) represents how "minimalistic" Beckett would eventually become in his drama.

Joseph Heller's *Catch22* (1961) is afamous dark comedy in novel form that deals with the absurdity of the military in World War II.

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) is often seen as a play that consciously imitates Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Eugene lonesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950), *The Lesson* (1951), and *The Chairs* (1952) all epitomize the Theatre of the Absurd and provide interesting similarities and contrasts with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*,

Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* (1944) shows how Existentialist ideas can be presented in a more traditional dramatic form.

Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942; English translation 1955) was an enormously influential philosophical essay that posed the essential question for the Existentialists what do human beings do if they reject suicide as a response to a meaningless universe. Camus's *The Stranger* (1942; English translation 1946) is a classic Existentialist novel.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, editor. *Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot,"* Chelsea House, 1987.

Part of the Modern Critical Interpretations Series, this collection of modern critical commentary is designed for the college undergraduate.

Fletcher, John and Beryl S. *A Student's Guide to the Plays of Samuel Beckett*, Second Edition, Faber and Faber, 1985

Most valuable to the student because the book's section on *Waiting for Godot* includes notes explaining especially important or difficult details in the text of the play.

Gussow, Mel *Conversations with and about Beckett*, Grove Press, 1996.

A collection of transcriptions and interviews, some involving Beckett who generally refused to talk about himself and his work in public others involving his artistic collaborators.

Schlueter, June, and Brater, Enoch, *Approaches to Teaching Beckett's "Waiting for Godot*," MLA, 1991

A rich and varied collection of teachers' approaches to teaching the play, valuable for students as well.

Worth, Katharine *"Waiting for Godot" and "Happy Days"- Text and Performance*, Macmillan, 1990

Focusing on the play as a text for theatrical production, this book is aimed specifically at the senior high school and college undergraduate reader, discussing both traditional views of the play and its continued relevance.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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