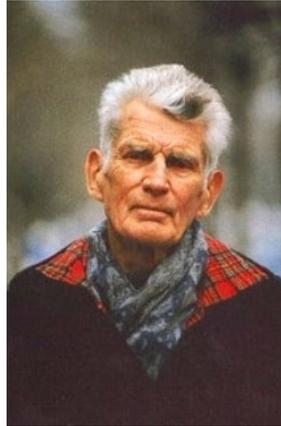


WAITING FOR GODOT

by Samuel Beckett



THE AUTHOR

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) was born in Ireland and attended Trinity College in Dublin. He spent extensive time in Germany and France, where he finally settled permanently. He took part in the French Resistance against the Nazi occupation during World War II. His early works, both poetry and prose, were written in English, but later in his career he turned to writing in French, though he eventually translated his English works into French and his French works into English. His most notable works include *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and *Endgame* (1958). He received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969 and died in 1989.

Beckett was among the mid-twentieth century writers whose work collectively is referred to as the Theater of the Absurd. Influenced by existentialism, they portrayed life as meaningless and produced plays that gave little attention to matters of plot, theme, or characterization. *Waiting for Godot* is perhaps the most well-known example of this despairing view of the human condition.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Estragon (Gogo) - One of two tramps, he is weak and fearful, is obsessed with his physical needs (his sore feet and his hunger), and has a poor memory.
- Vladimir (Didi) - Estragon's companion of fifty years, he is assertive but no more enlightened than his friend. He is more concerned with metaphysical questions than physical needs.
- Pozzo - A cruel man who drives his bearer Lucky with a whip and a rope around his neck. He reappears blind in Act II.
- Lucky - Pozzo's slave, he carries all of Pozzo's gear, but is afraid to leave his master. He speaks once - a long and pointless oration near the end of Act I - but is dumb in Act II.

- Boy - He brings messages to the tramps from Godot, but the message is always the same - Godot will not be here today, but will come tomorrow.
- Godot - The man for whom the tramps wait, he never appears. He is a symbol for God, and is described as an old man with white hair.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Nothing to be done.” (Estragon, Act I, p.7)

“We’re waiting for Godot.” (Vladimir, Act I, p.10)

“We’re not tied?” (Estragon, Act I, p.13)

“One is what one is.” (Vladimir, Act I, p.14)

“Time has stopped.” (Vladimir, Act I, p.24)

“Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful.” (Estragon, Act I, p.27)

“Christ! What has Christ got to do with it? You’re not going to compare yourself to Christ!” (Vladimir, Act I, p.34)

“You see, you feel worse when I’m with you. I feel better alone too.” (Estragon, Act II, p.38)

“We are happy. What do we do now, now that we are happy?” (Estragon, Act II, p.39)

“To every man his little cross. Till he dies. And is forgotten.” (Vladimir, Act II, p.40)

“Yes, now I remember, yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That’s been going on now for half a century.” (Estragon, Act II, p.42)

“This is becoming really insignificant.” (Vladimir, Act II, p.44)

“We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?” (Estragon, Act II, p.44)

“It’s Godot! At last! Gogo! It’s Godot! We’re saved! Let’s go and meet him!” (Vladimir, Act II, p.47)

“Do you think God sees me?” (Estragon, Act II, p.49)

“We are no longer alone, waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for ... waiting. All evening we have struggled, unassisted. Now it’s over. It’s already tomorrow.” (Vladimir, Act II, p.50)

“Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally 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!” (Vladimir, Act II, p.51)

“We are all born mad. Some remain so.” (Estragon, Act II, p.51)

“Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It’s abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? They give birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more.” (Pozzo, Act II, p.57)

NOTES

Act I - The “action,” of which the play has none, opens with two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, sitting by a country road next to a scraggly tree. Estragon is trying to take his boots off, finally removing one. They talk about the thieves on the cross, concluding that, since only one of the Gospels mentions that one was saved, only fools believe in salvation. Estragon suggests leaving, but Vladimir insists they can’t because they are waiting for Godot. They then squabble about whether they have the time and place right. They then decide to hang themselves, but can’t figure out who should go first, and fear that if one succeeds and the other fails then the survivor will be left alone, so they decide to do nothing. Announcing that he is hungry, Estragon asks Vladimir for a carrot. Vladimir gives him a turnip, then finally rummages through his pockets and finds a carrot. As he eats, he asks Vladimir if they are “tied,” and the latter affirms that they are tied to Godot, and that nothing is to be done about it. They prepare to rush offstage, but they are afraid to leave.

At this point Pozzo and Lucky enter. Lucky has a rope around his neck and has his arms full with supplies, and Pozzo carries a whip with which he is driving Lucky. Vladimir and Estragon think Pozzo is Godot, but he assures them that he is not. He asks them who Godot is, but they can’t describe him. Pozzo then indicates that he is the owner of the land on which they are resting, and decides to wait with them for awhile. He orders Lucky to set up his lunch, which the poor unfortunate does, before falling asleep on his feet while Pozzo eats greedily. When Pozzo throws his chicken bones away, Estragon eyes them and asks if he can have them. Pozzo replies that they belong to Lucky, but Estragon takes them and begins gnawing at them. Vladimir explodes in indignation at the way Lucky is being treated. The two tramps ask why Lucky doesn’t put down the large bag he is carrying. Pozzo answers that he wants to impress his master, and is afraid that if he puts the bag down Pozzo won’t keep him as a slave anymore. Pozzo says he is on his way to the market to sell Lucky, but that it would really be more merciful to kill him. Lucky starts crying, and Estragon goes over to wipe his tears with a handkerchief, but Lucky kicks him in the shins. As Estragon begins to cry, Lucky stops crying. Vladimir leaves to relieve himself, then returns quite agitated, but soon calms down. Pozzo asks Estragon his name, and he

replies, "Adam." Pozzo then says he wants to do something for his new acquaintances; Estragon proposes ten francs, but Vladimir is ashamed that he would ask for money. Pozzo decides instead that Lucky should entertain them. Lucky dances a pitiful dance, then repeats it. The tramps ask Pozzo to make Lucky "think" (give a speech), but Pozzo insists that he can't think without his hat. Estragon is reluctant to put his hat back on him because he had gotten kicked before, but Vladimir does it, and Lucky begins a long oration, meaningless blather vaguely intended to represent a theodicy. The other three jump on him and try to silence him, and finally succeed. Pozzo then crushes Lucky's hat so he will not be able to think again. Lucky then resumes his burdens and he and Pozzo leave the stage. The tramps then debate inconclusively about whether Pozzo and Lucky changed, but conclude that they themselves have not.

They then hear a voice, and a boy enters. He has a message from Godot, but was afraid to enter because of the noise made by Pozzo and Lucky and the whip wielded by the former. When the boy finally delivers his message, it is that Godot will not be here to day, but will surely come tomorrow. Estragon and Vladimir pump the boy for information about Godot, but he tells them little - he keeps the goats for Godot, is treated well (though his brother, who keeps the sheep, is beaten), sleeps in the loft and has enough to eat. After he leaves, Estragon finally succeeds in removing his other boot and the two decide to leave and come back the next day, but they don't move.

Act II - The scene is the same, the following day. Vladimir enters and sings a silly song, then Estragon comes in, having been beaten by a group of men for no apparent reason. They discuss their loneliness and why they always seem to come back to one another, but of course they don't know why. Vladimir talks about other places they have been, but Estragon doesn't remember them; he barely remembers Pozzo and Lucky. They then consider why they cannot be silent, and conclude they are afraid to hear the silence of the universe, but thinking only leads to despair. They then notice that the tree has a few leaves on it, but had been bare the day before, and they wonder whether they are indeed in the same place. Vladimir asks Estragon what became of his boots (they are still sitting on the stage), and Estragon says that he took them off and doesn't know where they are. Vladimir sees them on the stage and points them out, but Estragon insist that they are not his boots, but someone else's. Vladimir offers Estragon a radish, pulls out more turnips and finally finds one, but Estragon insists he wants a pink one. Vladimir then tells Estragon to try the boots on to see if they are his - something to pass the time. They fit. Estragon tries to sleep, and Vladimir sings for him. He sleeps briefly, but soon awakens from a nightmare. Vladimir then finds Lucky's hat and tries it on; Estragon then puts on Vladimir's hat, Vladimir puts on Estragon's hat, Estragon puts on Lucky's hat, etc. Vladimir winds up with Lucky's hat and discards his own. They then decide to play Pozzo and Lucky, with Vladimir enacting Lucky's part. Estragon soon can't take it anymore and briefly exits, then quickly returns. Estragon hears someone coming, and Vladimir is convinced that Godot has finally arrived, but Estragon is afraid, and Vladimir tells him to hide behind the tree, but the tree is too scrawny. They look in all directions and realize no one is coming after all. They then decide to pass the time by insulting one another, then making up. They then go through a series of silly exercises.

Pozzo and Lucky then enter, but now Pozzo is blind. Estragon and Vladimir think he is Godot, but then realize it is only Pozzo. Lucky and Pozzo have fallen down in a heap, and the two tramps discuss whether or not to help them. They are afraid of being kicked by Lucky again, but would like more chicken bones from Pozzo. As they debate the question, Pozzo keeps crying

for help. He then offers the tramps money to help him up, but they are too busy talking. Finally Vladimir decides to help as a diversion, but he can't lift Pozzo, and soon falls himself and begins crying for help. Estragon threatens to leave, but finally extends his hand to Vladimir, but he falls as well. Now all four are in the stage in a heap. Pozzo crawls painfully away and the tramps call him, but get no response. They decide to try different names, and call out "Abel," then "Cain." Vladimir and Estragon then get up, but still have nowhere to go and nothing to do. They finally help Pozzo to his feet, and he asks them to find Lucky for him. Estragon has no desire to get near Lucky, but Pozzo tells him to pull hard on Lucky's rope, and kick him in the face or somewhere more painful if necessary. Estragon kicks Lucky, but only hurts his foot. Vladimir asks Pozzo to have Lucky sing or recite again, but Pozzo insists that Lucky is mute. Pozzo and Lucky then exit, and fall almost as soon as they get offstage. Estragon sleeps, and the boy again enters, telling Vladimir that Godot will not arrive that evening, but will surely come tomorrow. Under Vladimir's questioning, the boy describes Godot as an old man with a white beard who "does nothing." After the boy leaves, Estragon wakes up, and the two tramps again consider hanging themselves, but realize that the rope they have is too short and too weak. Tomorrow, they say, they will bring a longer rope and hang themselves - unless Godot comes.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Discuss the nature of the two protagonists in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Are they easy to tell apart? Is this deliberate on the part of the playwright? Is this intended as a commentary on the question of individual identity? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
2. One of the literary techniques used by Samuel Beckett in his *Waiting for Godot* is the repetition of lines of dialogue. What is the significance of this technique? What is the audience to conclude from the fact that certain lines continue to reappear, virtually verbatim, throughout the play?
3. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Godot is generally considered to be a symbol of God. What evidence does the play give to support this interpretation? Be sure to use specific examples from the script, and evaluate Beckett's view of God using these examples.
4. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, do the tramps Estragon and Vladimir represent modern-day Everyman? Why or why not? What indications in the play point toward the intended universality of the two characters?
5. Do you consider Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* a statement of hope or hopelessness regarding human existence? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play, and be sure to show why you do not accept the alternative view.

6. Discuss the problem of inaction in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The characters often speak of doing something, but never actually do it. What is the point Beckett is trying to make here? Analyze the question using specifics from the dialogue and stage directions.
7. Analyze the extent to which Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is influenced by existential philosophy. Give attention to questions of the existence of God, the nature of man, and the nature of morality. Support your analysis with details from the play.
8. Compare and contrast Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*. What do they say about the human condition? about alienation? about God and morality? Can you see any significant differences between the ideas expressed in the two plays?
9. Compare and contrast the relationships in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* between Estragon and Vladimir on the one hand and Pozzo and Lucky on the other. What do these relationships say about alienation and mutual dependence? about freedom and slavery? Be sure to support your arguments with specifics from the play.
10. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* contains many biblical allusions. Choose three of them and discuss their significance to the themes of the play. What is Beckett's view of God, and Christianity in particular?
11. Discuss the view of Christian hope presented in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Give attention to issues such as salvation, the meaning of life, and the Second Coming as they are pictured in the play. What is Beckett's view of Christianity in the light of his treatment of these themes?
12. Discuss the purpose of the detailed stage directions given in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Why are these actions so important to Beckett's message, despite the fact that in the play nothing really seems to happen? Choose three specific stage directions and discuss their significance to the themes of the story.
13. Discuss the role of memory in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. What is the significance of the fact that Vladimir is the only character who ever seems to remember what has happened before? What is Beckett trying to say through these frequently repeated struggles to connect with the past?
14. What was Samuel Beckett's purpose for making *Waiting for Godot* two acts long, especially since the two acts are so similar? Does the structure of the play help to communicate Beckett's message? How? What do you think that message is? Support your conclusions with specifics from the play.
15. Many critics acknowledge that Godot is an intended God-figure in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, but to what extent may the same be said of Pozzo? Analyze the function of this character in the story and discuss his symbolic significance in relationship to Beckett's major themes.

16. Samuel Beckett described his *Waiting for Godot* as a tragicomedy. To what extent is this an accurate description? Would you say the play bears more of the character of tragedy or comedy, or an equal mixture of both? Defend your arguments with specifics from the play.
17. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, if Vladimir and Estragon are so filled with despair over the meaninglessness of life, why are they unable to commit suicide? What is Beckett saying about the nature of human existence through the raising of this issue repeatedly in the play?
18. Discuss the concept of alienation as it appears in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. To what extent are the characters in the story alone? To what extent do they fear to be alone? What is Beckett saying about the human condition through these anxieties faced by the characters?
19. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, to what extent do the two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, represent the body and the soul, respectively? How do their interrelationships support such a symbolic interpretation of the characters? Support your argument with specifics from the play.
20. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a sterling example of a movement called the Theater of the Absurd, which rejected restraints such as characterization, plot, and theme. Discuss how Beckett's play fits the genre with which it is so closely associated, and explain why the playwright might have made the choice to ignore the standard parameters of drama in presenting this work. Be sure to support your argument with specifics.
21. Discuss the view of human nature presented in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Is man presented as a being possessing dignity, or as little more than a beast? What gives man his significance, if he has any? What makes human life worth living, if indeed it is? Support your answers with details from the play.
22. Samuel Beckett once said that "language is what gets us where we want to go and prevents us from getting there." To what extent does this quotation describe the essence of the playwright's *Waiting for Godot*? Is language a means for attaining what we want in life, or a barrier that keeps us from it? How does Beckett answer the question? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
23. Samuel Beckett once wrote a thirty-second play for television entitled *Breath*, which consisted of the lights coming up, revealing a pile of garbage; one then hears a baby cry, and the light goes off. Compare the concept of this mini-play to the ideas expressed in the same writer's *Waiting for Godot*. How do the views of life, death, and existence found in the two plays coincide? Use details from *Waiting for Godot* to support your arguments.

24. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was once described as a play "in which nothing happens twice." What is the meaning of this description? Is it an accurate one? How does the quotation get to the heart of what Beckett was trying to communicate through the play?
25. Great writers address the great questions of human experience, such as, "Who am I?", "Where did I come from?", and "Where am I going?" Evaluate the answers to these questions given in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and contrast them to the answers given in the Bible. Be specific.
26. French mathematician Blaise Pascal, in his defense of the Christian faith, proposed what has come to be called Pascal's Wager. He argued that, in the face of uncertainty, belief was wiser than unbelief, since if the believer was wrong, he would simply die and that would be the end, but if the believer was wrong, he would spend eternity in hell. To what extent is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* a play-length exposition of Pascal's Wager? When the characters decide they would rather wait for Godot than do anything else, is this an indication of faith? Why or why not? Support your argument with specifics from the play.
27. Analyze Lucky's speech near the end of act I in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. What is Beckett's point in this seemingly pointless monologue? Is it intended to be meaningless, or does it have a deeper purpose? Answer the question using a detailed analysis of the language in the speech.
28. In Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, he made the famous pronouncement that "God is dead." Irish playwright Samuel Beckett was influenced by Nietzsche, among others. Does his play *Waiting for Godot* proclaim the death of God, or does he leave the door open for belief? If the former, what does he see as the consequences of the death of God? If the latter, what makes you think so?
29. Existentialist Albert Camus saw in the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus a metaphor for human life. Sisyphus was a man condemned by the gods to roll a huge rock up a mountain every day, only to have it roll back down to the bottom of the mountain after he had gotten it to the summit. Discuss the extent to which Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a picture of the myth of Sisyphus. Does the futility of life portrayed in the story fit the Greek myth? In what ways? Support your analysis with details from the play.
30. French philosopher Rene Descartes, who influenced Samuel Beckett significantly, argued that everything in the world, including man, could be broken down into two kinds of substance - thinking substance (mind) and extended substance (matter). To what extent do the characters of Estragon and Vladimir in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* represent this Cartesian dualism? Explain how one may be thought to represent mind and the other, matter.

31. Discuss the concept of freedom in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Is any of the characters truly free? Be sure to deal with Pozzo and Lucky as well as Estragon and Vladimir. What does the concept of freedom portrayed in the play tell you about Beckett's understanding of the human condition?
32. Throughout the history of the theater, plays have portrayed people, places, and events - the external life of man. The Theater of the Absurd has often been said to cast aside the externals of human existence in order to portray in stark relief the internal workings of the human race. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, we see no plot, a minimal set, and little noticeable character development. Do you agree that Beckett's purpose is to portray the inner life of man on the stage? Why or why not? To what extent is he successful in doing so?
33. The suffering Jeremiah said, "The Lord is good to those whose hope is in Him, to the one who seeks Him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (Lamentations 3:25-26). In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, does the playwright agree? How does his point differ from that of the Old Testament prophet? What kind of "waiting" do the two writers have in mind?
34. To what extent is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* a two-hour exposition of Walt Whitman's poem *A Noiseless, Patient Spider*? Be sure to connect specifics of the two works of literature in your answer.
35. Some critics, commenting on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, have argued that Pozzo really *is* Godot in spite of his denials. Do you think the first appearance of this "owner of the land" parallels the harsh deity of the Old Testament while his second is more like the suffering Savior, and his appearance is like that of a "thief in the night"? Explain why you agree or disagree with this critical assessment of Pozzo's role in the story.
36. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* makes use of three sets of foils - Estragon and Vladimir, Pozzo and Lucky, and the boy and his brother. What about these characters makes them foils? What is Beckett's purpose in structuring his play in this way?
37. Some critics have noted that Amanda Wingfield in Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie*, is "waiting for Godot" as much as the main characters in Samuel Beckett's play of that name. Compare and contrast both the characters involved and the ideas expressed by the playwrights in the two works. Use specifics from both plays in answering the question.
38. Some critics of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* have argued that Lucky is a rather bizarre and distorted Christ-figure. Do you agree or disagree? Be sure to analyze both his behavior and his speech in answering the question.

39. Compare and contrast the picture of the meaninglessness of life found in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Be sure to consider both the ways life is pictured in the stories and the solutions proposed by the authors, if any.
40. Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* have a number of common elements, including being performed on a bare stage and focusing on ideas rather than characters or events. Compare and contrast the ideas expressed in the two plays. Note that the playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd, of which Beckett is an example, often spoke of Wilder's famous play as a formative influence in their approach to drama.
41. Samuel Beckett, the author of *Waiting for Godot*, paid tribute to Samuel Johnson, the author of *Rasselas*, by saying, "It's Johnson, always Johnson, who is with me. And if I follow any tradition, it is his." Compare and contrast the two works. Does Beckett's discourse on the meaninglessness of life demonstrate a deep understanding of Johnson's work or a misunderstanding of it? Support your conclusion with quotations from both works.