**Waiting for Godot** (/ˈɡɒdoʊ/ GOD-oh)

by Samuel Beckett

Study Material by

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Theatre of Absurd.

Life of S. BECKETT,

CHARACTERS,

PLOT.

THEMES.

Martin Esslin called the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’. The concept of ‘absurd’ is the central concern in “The Myth of Sisyphus” [1942], the renowned philosophical essay by Albert Camus

Absurd drama has many characteristic features like:

#Human life is meaningless absurd

 violation of traditional rules of drama no beginning, middle, end

 lack of coherent story and well-made plot

 dialogues are fragmented, meaningless clichés or nonsense noises

 Gesture and posture

 futile actions

 use of fantasy and black humour

 characters are puppet-like and helpless victims of blind fate

 bare and desolate settings

Common themes of Absurd drama are

o Anxiety / Angst

o Alienation

Anxiety and alienation are relatively modern phenomena and major recurring themes in twentieth century literature.

Samuel Barclay Beckett [1906-1989]is an Irish novelist, poet and playwright who wrote in English and French. Born and educated in Dublin, Beckett moved to Paris in 1928 as a school teacher. There he met James Joyce, the famous Irish writer. Their association had a profound impact on his literary career. His first critical essay, “Dante… Bruno. Vico…Joyce.” [1929] justifies Joyce’s unique literary style. His admiration for certain aspects of Joyce’s style is reflected in his works. *Waiting for Godot*, is his first and most famous play. Originally written in French as *En Attendant Godot* [1948],it was first staged in a small theatre in Paris in 1953. Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969. IT’S A tragic comedy.

Important Works

Prose

 *Proust* [1931]

Novels

 *Murphy* [1935]

 *Malone* [1951]

 *The Unnamable*[1960]

3 Plays

 *Waiting for Godot* [1948]

 *Endgame* [1957]

 *Krapp’s Last Tale* [1958]

 *Happy Days* [1961]

**Vladimir** -  One of the two main characters of the play. Estragon calls him Didi, and the boy addresses him as Mr. Albert. He seems to be the more responsible and mature of the two main characters.

**Estragon** -  The second of the two main characters. Vladimir calls him Gogo. He seems weak and helpless, always looking for Vladimir's protection. He also has a poor memory, as Vladimir has to remind him in the second act of the events that happened the previous night.

**Pozzo** -  master of Lucky.

Pozzo is a bald, tyrannical figure who derives a sadistic pleasure in abusing his servant Lucky. He treats Lucky like an animal and controls him with a rope passed around his neck. He passes by the spot where Vladimir and Estragon are waiting and provides a diversion. In the second act, he is blind and does not remember meeting Vladimir and Estragon the night before.

**Lucky** -

The unhappy, but devoted slave of Pozzo, Lucky is portrayed identical in both the acts. His fate does not change for better or for worse

Pozzo's slave, who carries Pozzo's bags and stool. In Act I, he entertains by dancing and thinking. However, in Act II, he is dumb.

**Boy** -  He appears at the end of each act to inform Vladimir that Godot will not be coming that night. In the second act, he insists that he was not there the previous night.

**Godot** -  The man for whom Vladimir and Estragon wait unendingly. Godot never appears in the play. His name and character are often thought to refer to God.

SETTING – A COUNTRY ROAD BY A TREE

Time - Evening

ACT 1

The first act begins in the evening, on a lonely country road, near a tree with no leaves. A middle-aged tramp Estragon is seated on a low mound, struggling to take off his boots. When Vladimir arrives, Estragon gives up his frustrated attempts exclaiming, ‘Nothing to be done’. His words resound throughout the play emphasizing the absurdity of life. They converse on various topics and reveal that they are waiting there for a man named Godot. While they wait, two other men enter. Pozzo is on his way to the market to sell his slave, Lucky. He pauses for a while to converse with Vladimir and Estragon. Lucky entertains them by dancing and thinking, and Pozzo and Lucky leave.

After Pozzo and Lucky leave, a boy enters and tells Vladimir that he is a messenger from Godot. He tells Vladimir that Godot will not be coming tonight, but that he will surely come tomorrow. Vladimir asks him some questions about Godot and the boy departs. After his departure, Vladimir and Estragon decide to leave, but they do not move as the curtain falls

ACT 2

The second act is set in the same surroundings. The tree has sprouted four or five leaves. Estragon had left his boots there the previous night. Vladimir enters agitatedly and starts singing about a dog beaten to death because it stole a crust of bread. Soon Estragon enters barefoot and head bowed. They are waiting for Godot. Lucky and Pozzo enter again, but this time Pozzo is blind and Lucky is dumb. Pozzo does not remember meeting the two men the night before. They leave and Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait.

Shortly after, the boy enters and once again tells Vladimir that Godot will not be coming. He insists that he did not speak to Vladimir yesterday. After he leaves, Estragon and Vladimir decide to leave, but again they do not move as the curtain falls, ending the play.

**The ‘Saviour’**

**Godot**: Godot is described as the sole source of salvation in the entire play. The protagonists’ only aim in life is to wait endlessly for Godot, to come and save them. They firmly believe that only Godot can deliver them from their sufferings. Without the ‘waiting’ it seems as if their very existence is absolutely meaningless. Critics have commented that Godot actually stands for ‘God’. Through the character of Godot, Beckett has illustrated a common human condition.

**Some of the main themes in the play are waiting, anxiety, alienation, torture, existentialism, vain expectancy, boredom, uncertainty, denial, friendship, suffering and so on.**

i. title

ii. absurd drama

iii. tragic comedy.

### Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot as an absurd play

Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* was premiered in 1953 at the Theatre de Babylone in Paris. The play is thought to initiate a theatrical tradition called [absurd drama.](http://www.literary-articles.com/2013/09/an-essay-on-theatre-of-absurd-what-is_4.html) But like any other artistic puzzles, the [theatre of the absurd](http://www.literary-articles.com/2013/09/an-essay-on-theatre-of-absurd-what-is_4.html) cannot be reduced to a single bottom line. It cannot be defined in a single word or by a particular theory. In order to understand the rise, characteristics and popularity of the absurd drama we must look back to the events that took place during the first half of the 20th century in the worlds of politics, literature, philosophy and religion.

The early 20th century witnessed two World Wars .In literature it gave birth to two recognizable literary styles: modernism and post-modernism. In philosophy the rise of existentialism was the most important event and the world also saw the decline of men’s faith in religion. All these happenings paved the way for the theatrical tradition the absurd drama which in fact was a reflection the age. The term was coined by the critic Martin Esslin, who made it the title of a 1962 book on the subject. Esslin saw the work of these playwrights as giving artistic articulation to Albert Camus’ philosophy that life is inherently without meaning, as illustrated in his work The Myth of Sisyphus.

The group of the playwrights whose works came to be known as the absurd plays include Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionescoe, Jean Genet, Edward Albee and Harold Pinter. These writers flout all the standards by which drama has been judged for many centuries. As playwrights they share some theatrical techniques and philosophic ideas. In their plays there is no particular attention spent developing a recognizable plot, no detailed characterization, and no readily definable theme. This bizarre rejection of any recognizable pattern or development gave birth to the term Literature of the Absurd. Philosophically almost all of them share the existentialist philosophy of absurdity and nothingness.

Beckett's Waiting for Godot largely deals with the absurd tradition. The play is without any plot, character, dialogue and setting in the traditional sense.

The setting of the play creates the absurdist mood. A desolate country road, a ditch, and a leafless tree make up the barren, otherworldly landscape whose only occupants are two homeless men who bumble and shuffle in a vaudevillian manner. They are in rags, bowler hats, and apparently oversized boots--a very comic introduction to a very bizarre play.There is a surplus of symbolism and thematic suggestion in this setting. The landscape is a symbol of a barren and fruitless civilization or life. There is nothing to be done and there appears to be no place better to depart. The tree, usually a symbol of life with its blossoms and fruit or its suggestion of spring, is apparently dead and lifeless. But it is also the place to which they believe this Godot has asked them to come. This could mean Godot wants the men to feel the infertility of their life. At the same time, it could simply mean they have found the wrong tree.

The setting of the play reminds us the post-war condition of the world which brought about uncertainties, despair, and new challenges to the all of mankind. A pessimistic outlook laced with sadism and tangible violence, as a rich dividend of the aftermath of wars. It is as if the poignancy and calamities of the wars found sharp reflections in Beckett’s Waiting for Godot.

Next comes the plot. In the traditional sense a plot should concentrate on a single motivated action and is also expected to have a beginning, a middle and a neatly tied-up ending. But it’s almost impossible to provide a conventional plot summary of Waiting for Godot, which has often been described as a play in which nothing happens. It is formless and not constructed on on any structural principles.It has no Aristotolean beginning,middle and end.It starts at an arbitrary point and seem to end just as arbitrarily. Beckett, like other dramatists working in this mode, is not trying to "tell a story." He's not offering any easily identifiable solutions to carefully observed problems; there's little by way of moralizing and no obvious "message." The pattern of the play might best be described as circular.The circularity of Waiting for Godot is highly unconventional.

As per as the portrayal of characters is concerned the play also fits into the absurd tradition. A well-made play is expected to present characters that are well-observed and convincingly motivated. But in the play we five charaters who are not very recognizable human beings and don’t engage themselves in a motivated action.Two tramps, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), are waiting by a tree on a country road for Godot, whom they have never met and who may not even exist. They argue, make up, contemplate suicide, discuss passages from the Bible, and encounter Pozzo and Lucky, a master and slave. Near the end of the first act, a young boy comes with a message from Mr. Godot that he will not come today but will come tomorrow. In the second act, the action of the first act is essentially repeated, with a few changes: the tree now has leaves, Pozzo is blind and has Lucky on a shorter leash. Once again the boy comes and tells them Mr. Godot will not come today; he insists he has never met them before. The play concludes with a famous exchange:

Vladimir: Well, shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let’s go.

They do not move.

In the raditional play is expected to entertain the audience with logically built,witty dialogue.But in this play,like any other absurd play,the dialogue seems to have degenarated into meaningless babble.The dialogues the characters exchange are meaningless banalities.They use langiage to feel the emptyness between them,to conceal the fact that they have no desire to talk to each other anything at all.

The absurd plays deal with the themes of existentialism,especially the existentialist theme of absurdity.The absurd playwrights tried to translate the contemporary existentialis philosophy into the drama. The absurd playwrights also tried to portray the distrassful condition of the humans.In Waiting for Godot the human condition is shown as a dismal and distressful state. The derelict man struggles to live or rather exist, in a hostile and uncaring world. A sense of stagnancy and bareness captivates man, and whenever he tries to assert himself, he is curbed. In Beckett's words, human life is the endurance and tolerance to "the boredom of living" "replaced by the suffering of being." These phrases speak volumes of a philosophy born out of the harsh human realities. Vladimir and Estragon are blissfully and painfully oblivious to their own condition. They go about repeating their actions every day unmindful of the monotony and captivity. They also do not activate their mind to question or brood over their own actions and the motives underlying their actions. The "compressed vacuum" in their lives is constantly disregarded. The idea that God or fate or some Supreme Being with control toys with the lives of men is startlingly clear. Every moment of every day, mankind waits for some sign from God that his suffering will end. And every day, God does not arrive.

So many times in the play, a possibility is suggested then immediately undercut by its unhappy opposite. This technique is used by Beckett to relay his theme that life is uncertain and unpredictable at its best, unfortunate and unending at its worst. To further state this theme, Estragon asserts that "There's no lack of void" in life. It is actually of little importance where they were the previous day, as everywhere everyday the same empty vacuum envelops them. Absence, emptiness, nothingness, and unresolved mysteries are central features in the play.

Thus the play Waiting for Godot contains almost all the elements of a absurd play. The play depicts the irrationalism of life in a grotesquely comic and non-consequential fashion with the element of "metaphysical alienation and tragic anguish." It was first written in French and called En attendant Godot. The author himself translated the play into English in 1954. The uniqueness of the play compelled the audiences to flock to the theaters for a spectacularly continuous four hundred performances. At the time, there were two distinct opinions about the play; some called it a hoax and others called it a masterpiece. Nevertheless, Waiting for Godot has claimed its place in literary history as a masterpiece that changed the face of twentieth century drama

Q:     WHAT IS  SIGNIFICANCE  OF THE  TITLE "WAITING FOR GODOT"?

Q:     IT   IS NOT GODOT BUT WAITING THAT MAKES THE WHOLE PLAY. HOW

CAN YOU MAKE A CONVINCING CASE?

Ans:

Waiting for Godot is a multi—sided play with significant title. Its meanings and implications are complex. It is possible to look upon it as a clever farce or view it as a tragic exposition of human predicament. Its themes have certain topicality but at the same time, they possess a timeless validity and universality. It is an existentialistic play but at the same time mocks at the attitude of existentialism. It seems to have some religious implications even though it seems of be questioning profoundly the Christian concept of salvation and grace.

The title "Waiting for Godot," suggests waiting for a mysterious stranger who has obvious symbolic dimensions and implication. Godot may be a representative, in Beckett's contemporary term of some authority, who has promised protection to the tramps. He may be regarded as a symbol of the hope of the ordinary French citizen in French under Germen occupation or he may be considered as the link in Resistance French Movement with Estragon and Vladimir two resistance workers who have been told to contact him. Obviously their men can come only when the coast is absolutely clear, or waiting for Godot may be a symbol of waiting for a Divine Saviour.

The significance of the title can also be explored in another way, as the fundamental imagery of "Waiting for Godot" is Christian for at the depth of experience into which Beckett is probing, there is no other source of imagery for him to draw on. His heroes are two tramps who have come from nowhere in particular and have nowhere in particular to go. Their life is in a state of apparently fruitless expectation. They receive messages, through a little boy, from local landowner, Godot, who always is going to come in person tomorrow, but never do come. Their attitude towards Godot is partly one of hope, partly of fear. The orthodoxy of this symbolism from a Christian point of view is obvious. The tramps with their rags and misery represent the fallen state of man. The squalor of their surrounding, their lock of a stake in the world represents the idea that here in this world we can build no conducive state to live in.

The ambiguity of their attitude towards Godot. Their mingled hope and fear and the doubtful tone of the boy's messages represent the state of tension and uncertainty in which an average Christian must live in this world, avoiding presumption and also avoiding despair. Yet the two tramps Didi and Gogo, as they call each other, represent something far higher than the other two characters in the play, the masterful and ridiculous Pozzo and his terrifying slave Lucky. Didi and Gogo stand for the

contemplative life and Lucky and Pozzo stand for the life of practical action taken mistakenly, as an end in it.

As for as view of Godot as a Divine Saviour is concerned, it is strengthened by they did not request Godot to do anything definite for them, all they did, was to make a sort of vague prayer or supplication to him. Vladimir says more than once that if Godot comes they would be saved. The resemblance of "God" is too clear to be missed. Moreover, they are also afraid of him, when Estragon suggests that they might drop Godot, Vladimir reminds him that he would punish them if they do that.

Thus Godot may be God, terrible and white beard, as conceived in the Old Testament. The tramps waiting for him may thus be the representatives of human beings who must keep each other's company, quarrelling and foolish talking, until they find a rope to hang themselves, or until final night makes the act of waiting unnecessary. Being poor and unprovided they are typical specimens of common, anti heroic humanity. The tramps like Pozzo and Lucky also seem to symbolize human regression, that is to say, the deterioration or "backward evolution" in human. In this way the title "Waiting for Godot" is applicable to act of Christianity.

As regards the relevance of the title of the play to the German occupation of France, we observe two men waiting for another name, which may not be his real name. A ravaged and blasted landscape, a world that was once ampler and more open, but is permeated with pointlessness now, mysterious dispensers of beating and the anxiety of the two who wait their anxiety to be as inconspicuous as possible in a strange environment. All this reminds the reader and the audience of France occupied by the Germens, in which its author spent the war years. It indicates how much useless waiting must have gone on that bleak world. As such the monotonous waiting is likely to create uncertainty and loss of hope. The tramps in the play are sitting in a similar condition of mind.

This view suggests that "Waiting for Godot" is a play about a mysterious world where two men wait. Only a fraction of human race had experienced the German occupation of France and only of fraction of that fraction waited for some Godot.

Nevertheless, the title of the play is also suggestive of the meaninglessness of life. The way the two tramps pass time his real name is indicative of the boredom and triviality of human activities, the lack of significance in life and the constant suffering which are the results of this existence. It also brings out the hollowness and insincerity of most social intercourse. Estragon and Vladimir question each other, contradict each other abuse each other and reconcile each other with out any serious meanings or intention. All these devices are employed to one end—to the end of making their waiting for Godot less unbearable. Estragon takes off his boots, gropes inside them, and shakes them out expecting something to fall out of them, but nothing happens. Vladimir does the same with hat with the same result. The very essence of boredom and triviality is concentrated in the scene in which Estragon and Vladimir repeatedly put on and take off the three hats their own and Lucky. It is utter lack of meanings which derives Estragon and Vladimir to the thoughts of suicide but the world of the play is one in which no significant action is permitted, therefore even suicide is not within their reach.

"Waiting for Godot" is so to speak, a play about the philosophy, which underscores the incomprehensibility and therefore the meaninglessness of the universe. The anxiety that, man feels upon being confronted with the fact of existence; thereby confirming the suitability of the title.

### Waiting for Godot As a Tragicomedy

In the English edition of Waiting For Godot, the play is described as a tragicomedy. Before going ahead further, it needs to be made clear what a tragicomedy is and how it is different from dark comedy. Tragicomedy is a literary genre that blends aspects of both tragic and comic forms. Most often seen in dramatic literature, the term can variously describe either a tragic play which contains enough comic elements to the lighten the overall mood or a serious play with a happy ending. A dark comedy is a subgenre of comedy that makes light of terrible situations. Waiting for Godot never makes light of terrible aspects life. There are several mentions of death in the play but the characters never make fun of death or for that matter any terrible things in the play. However, there are many incidents in the play that are hilarious and we can laugh watching those hilarious scenes without having any guilt.

The play opens with a negative thought- Nothing to be done. At first when we see Estragon struggling wit his boots, the sentence appears funny, but as the play progresses and godot is nowhere to be seen we gradually grasp the implication of the sentence- the helplessness of the tramps, their frusttrations are all there in that first sentence itself. Thus Beckett quite skillfully mixes both tragic and comic elements even in the dialogues of the characters. There are many ways that Beckett makes waiting For Godot comical. Sometimes it is the wit of the character that amuses us. When Estragon struggles with his boots, Vladimir wittily says- "There's man all over you, blaming on his boots the faults of his feet." This witty single line is capable of eliciting laughter, more because immediately after saying this Vladimir does almost the same thing with his hat. Again the words of the characters are funny to hear. Early in the play Estragon says that 'it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes" thus giving a twist to the familiar proverb: 'strike the iron while it is hot" The short sentences, when said swiftly by the tramps are themselves comical even if there is no funny element in them-

Vladimir- Charming evening we are having.

Estragon- Unforgettable.

Vladimir- And it's not over

Estragon- Apparently not.

Vladimir- It's only beginning.

Estragon- It's awful.

Vladimir- Worse than the pantomime

Estragon- The circus.

Vladimir- The music hall.

Estragon- The circus.

Often, the comedy is alloyed with more serious implications so that the total atmosphere is closer to that in dark comedy. For instance, when Pozzo and Lucky enter in act-I, Pozzo's military-style attitude elicits laughter. However the audence cannot roar with laughter as there is Lucky who is treated mercilessly by Pozzo in the same scene. The return of Pozzo held by Lucky on a rope seems to create a reverse image of the earlier situation. This image brings a certain satisfaction to the audience. The audience may laugh at this reversal of fortune but they are made acutely aware of how fickle fortune can be. Again there is a scene which is inspired from circus where Vladimir and Estragon put on and take off each other's hat as well as that of Lucky again and again. While the act is funny but our laughter fades away when we finally understand that the scene is actually a comment on the repetitive and monotonous cycle of life. We are reminded of the myth of Sisyphus. We cannot judge the border between comedy and tragedy when the cord with the help which the tramps are to commit suicide breaks. The two men are not even given the chance to die in the bleak world where living is a curse.

There are also several moments or situations in the play which are outright sad without any comic touch in them. In the very beginning of the play we get to know that Estragon is regularly beaten by unknown men. And the most tragic thing is, Estragon has become somewhat used to this daily torment. The problems with Estragon's feet and Vladinmir's kidneys do not let them stay in peace. In Vladimir's case, even his laughter hurts him. Theirs is the world in which there is no hopeful to live for and no device to commit suicide by. The only comment that see ms befitting for this world is "Nothing to be done". The situation of lucky too is quite pathetic, especially in view of his glorious past, as Pozzo describes it. However the most tragic thing in the play is the fact that the tramps must wait in order to evade the realization that there is actually no Godot, that there is npthing to wait for, that there is no saving. The conscious realization that they are the ones who have  who have invented their own Godot might just snap the last thread that connects them to the world. Deep down Vladimir and Estragon know that Godot will never come but to have meaning to their existence, they have to wait for Godot.

          Thus, Waiting for Godot never lets us have an uninhibited laugh at the acts of the tramps.We are constantly reminded of their helplessness, their  circular life and the status quo that they are stuck in. But the comic and farcical elements give us the necessary relief. We never feel heavy with all the philosophical implications of the play because of the hilarious activities of Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky. So to conclude we can say tragicomedy is life enhancing because it tries to “remind the audience of the real need to face existence ‘knowing the worst,’ which ultimately is liberation, with courage and humility of not taking oneself or one’s own pain too seriously, and to bear all life’s mysteries and uncertainties; and thus to make the most of what we have rather than to hanker after illusory certainties and rewards” (Esslin, Theater 47). 