

About the Play

Finding Meaning in *Waiting for Godot*

WHEN GOOGLE-ING *WAITING FOR GODOT*, one will come up with approximately 885,000 entries. Many of these entries are attempting to find hidden meaning in the play. Indeed there is many a doctoral thesis on the subject of meaning in *Waiting for Godot* gathering dust on the shelves of libraries worldwide.

First of all, is it worth it to delve into the play to find hidden meaning? Beckett certainly did not intend that and was very clear that he had put into the play all that he knew about the characters and their situation.

On first glance it is easy to assume that the character of Godot* who never appears, is "God". The names are similar—in English that is. But the play was written in French

and in that language the word for God is "Dieu". Beckett later regretted calling the absent character "Godot" because it opened a Pandora's box of theories. When Roger Blin, director of the first production of the play, asked Beckett who or what Godot stood for, Beckett replied that it suggested itself to him by the slang word for *boot* in French, which was *godillot* or *godasse*, because feet play such an important part in the play.

When the play was being cast for London, Beckett wanted the great actor Ralph Richardson to play Pozzo. The play was sent to Richardson who read it and sent a letter back to Beckett saying how much he liked the play, but "who is Godot?" Beckett immediately rescinded the offer.



Human beings are naturally inquisitive and we, as the audience want to speculate on Godot's identity. We want answers. Beckett suggests that the identity of Godot is a rhetorical question and perhaps it is wiser to stress the 'for' in the title of the play and see the purpose of the action in the two men who are waiting. We want to know how Gogo and Didi got there and why, and we have to content ourselves as the audience with accepting that that is not the important issue in this play. This is a hard concept to deal with as we are used to, in drama, getting the answers.

The identity of Godot is irrelevant. "Why", "how" and "who" are irrelevant. The important element in the play is the act of waiting for someone or something that never arrives.

Waiting in the play induces boredom as a theme. The existentialist writer Albert Camus, believed that through boredom or waiting, people think seriously about their identity. This is similar to the idea that meditation allows individuals to think clearly. Through repetition of action and dialogue, Beckett illustrates this. The two tramps are always asking questions: Who is Godot? Where are Gogo and Didi? Who beats Gogo? These are questions which will never be answered. The tramps repeatedly inspect the inside of their bowler hats. Why? What are they searching for? Perhaps this action symbolizes mankind's search for answers within the vacuum of the universe.

Camus and other existentialists suggested that trying to answer questions about one's own identity could drive one to the brink of insanity. In *Waiting for Godot*, the tramps are continuously trying to prove their existence in order to retain their sanity.

The play is filled with Christian stories and imagery. Some critics are convinced that the play is Beckett's commentary on faith: that the tree symbolizes the Tree of Knowledge and the Cross. Didi and Gogo are Everyman and his conscience. The relationship between them symbolizes marriage. Some have even said that the two tramps symbolize the two thieves crucified with Christ. Beckett himself

repudiated these and all such theories. He was not a particularly religious man so, would he really write a play with sacred undertones?

Other interpretations abound.

Those looking for political connotations see the play as a commentary on the cold war or the French resistance or Ireland's view of Britain. Graham Hassell writes "where society has ever been blighted by a greedy ruling elite keeping the working classes passive and ignorant by whatever means."

Psychological interpretations of the Freudian kind include Bernard Dukore's theory that Didi, Gogo and Godot represent Freud's description of the psyche in *The Ego and the Id* written 1923. And the Jungian view is that the four personalities are reminiscent of the four aspects of the soul grouped in pairs: the ego (Pozzo) and the shadow (Lucky), the masculine persona (Vladimir) and the soul's feminine image (Estragon).

Some see *Waiting for Godot* as a biographical sketch documenting a journey into Roussillon that Beckett and his wife took during the war when they slept in haystacks during the day and traveled by night.

Some say that play's casting of only males and few references to women could be symbolic of a homosexual relationship. Beckett's play was staged with all-female casts in several productions the 1980's. Beckett was unhappy with this and even took a Dutch theatrical company to court over the issue. He lost the case, but he felt so strongly about male casting for this play that it a clause is now included in the license that every theatre company has to sign stating that only males will be cast in the roles.

We as the audience are wiser after seeing a performance of this play. Not necessarily secure, but wiser. We all are waiting for a Godot somewhere in our lives. It is how we wait and what we do with that time that makes the difference. ❖

*As a footnote, there has always been a discrepancy regarding the pronunciation of "Godot". In Britain and Ireland it is pronounced with the stress on the first syllable. In the US, it is usually pronounced with the stress on the second syllable. Beckett himself said that the emphasis should be on the first syllable and that the US pronunciation was incorrect.

Summary of the Play:

Waiting for Godot begins with two men on a barren road by a leafless tree. These men, Vladimir and Estragon, are often characterized as "tramps," and we soon see that the world of this play is operating on its own set of rules, its own system where nothing happens, nothing is certain, and there's never anything to do. Vladimir and Estragon, we soon learn, are waiting for Godot, a man or perhaps a deity. The tramps can't be sure if they've met Godot, if they're waiting in the right place, if this is the right day, or even whether Godot is going to show up at all. While they wait, Vladimir and Estragon fill their time with a series of mundane activities (like taking a boot on and off) and trivial conversations (turnips, carrots) interspersed with more serious reflection (dead voices, suicide, the Bible).

The tramps are soon interrupted by the arrival of Lucky, a man/servant/pet with a rope tied around his neck, and Pozzo, his master, holding the other end of the long rope. The four men proceed to do together what Vladimir and Estragon did earlier by themselves: namely, nothing.

(The members of the audience, meanwhile, scratch their heads and look around to see if everyone else gets what's going on. At least, we guess that they do. We sure did the first time around.)

Lucky and Pozzo then leave so that Vladimir and Estragon can go back to doing nothing by themselves. Vladimir suggests that this is not the first time he's met with Lucky and Pozzo, which is surprising, since they acted like strangers upon arrival. Then again, Estragon can't even remember a conversation ten lines after it happens, so we're not going to depend on memory in this play. So the nothing is interrupted by the arrival of the Boy, who reports to Vladimir that Godot isn't coming today, but will be there tomorrow. Yippee! Except not, since Vladimir's comments suggest the Boy has said this before.

Estragon and Vladimir talk about suicide some more and then resolve to leave the stage, since it's nightfall and they no longer have to wait for Godot. Of course, having resolved to leave, neither man moves, and the curtain closes on Act I.

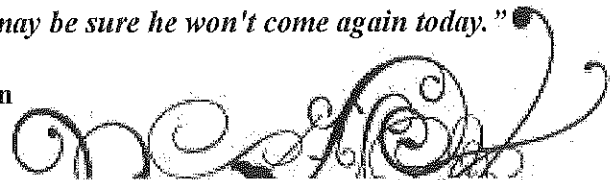
The curtain opens for Act II which you will soon see is remarkably like Act I. The men still sit around waiting for Godot and try to fill the idle hours in the meantime. Lucky and Pozzo show up, only this time Lucky has gone mute and Pozzo is blind. They putz around the stage for a while, and Pozzo declares that, having lost his eyes, he now has no sense of time. Lucky declares nothing, because he's mute.

Vladimir gets rather poetic in the meantime, wondering if maybe he's sleeping, agreeing with Pozzo's claim that life is fleeting, and concluding that habit is the great deadener of life. Pozzo and Lucky leave again, just in time for the Boy to show up right on cue and tell Vladimir that Godot isn't coming today, but will be there tomorrow. Vladimir and Estragon contemplate suicide, but have no rope (they have in mind to hang themselves from the barren tree, since it's the only prop around that could lend itself to such an endeavor). The men resolve to leave, since it's nightfall and they no longer have to wait for Godot, but neither man moves and the curtain falls.

The play ends, but we think everyone knows what happens next. And after that. And after that. Et cetera.

"If he came yesterday and we weren't here you may be sure he won't come again today."

-Estragon





Themes:

Choices:

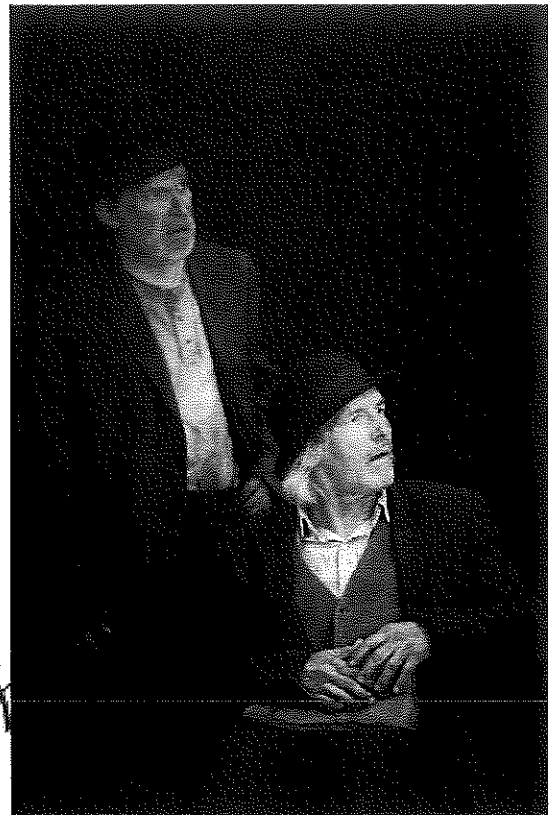
Waiting for Godot consists of two men unable to act, move, or think in any significant way while they kill time waiting for a mysterious man, Godot. The characters fail to realize that this very act of waiting is a choice; instead, they view it as a mandatory part of their daily routine. Even when these men manage to make a conscious decision, they can't translate that mental choice into a physical act. They often "decide" to leave the stage, only to find that they are unable to move. Such inaction leads to stagnancy and repetition in the seemingly endless cycle of their lives.

Philosophical Viewpoints- The Absurd Theme:

Waiting for Godot is hailed as a classic example of "Theatre of the Absurd," dramatic works that promote the philosophy of its name. This particular play presents a world in which daily actions are without meaning, language fails to effectively communicate, and the characters at times reflect a sense of artifice, even wondering aloud whether perhaps they are on a stage

Truth:

Waiting for Godot is a play driven by a lack of truth – in other words, uncertainty. Characters are unable to act in any meaningful way and claim this is so because they are uncertain of



the consequences. Without the presence of objective truth, every statement is brought to question, and even common labels (color, time, names) become arbitrary and subjective.

Life, Consciousness, and Existence:

The portrait of daily life painted by *Waiting for Godot* is a dismal one. It is repetitive and stagnant. It lacks meaning and purpose and entails perpetual suffering. The solution (which none of the characters take) would seem to be action and choice *despite* the ever-presence of uncertainty, and an awareness of one's surroundings and past actions. As one character says, "habit is a great deadener" – our actions should stem from conscious choice rather than apathy.

Time:

Time presents a slew of problems in *Waiting for Godot*. The very title of the play reveals its central action: waiting. The two main characters are forced to whittle away their days while anticipating the arrival of a man who never comes. Because they have nothing to do in the meantime, time is a dreaded barrier, a test of their ability to endure. Because they repeat the same actions every day, time is cyclical. That every character seems to have a faulty memory further complicates matters; time loses meaning when the actions of one day have no relevance or certainty on the next.

Religion:

Religion is incompatible with reason in *Waiting for Godot*. Characters who attempt to understand religion logically are left in the dark, and the system is compared to such absurd banalities as switching bowler hats or taking a boot on and off. Religion is also tied to uncertainty, since there is no way of knowing what is objectively true in the realm of faith.

Friendship:

Friendship is tricky in *Waiting for Godot*, as each character is fundamentally isolated from every other. Relationships teeter between a fear of loneliness and an essential inability to connect. This tension is central to the play. The problems that keep characters apart vary from physical disgust to ego to a fear of others' suffering.



Freedom and Confinement:

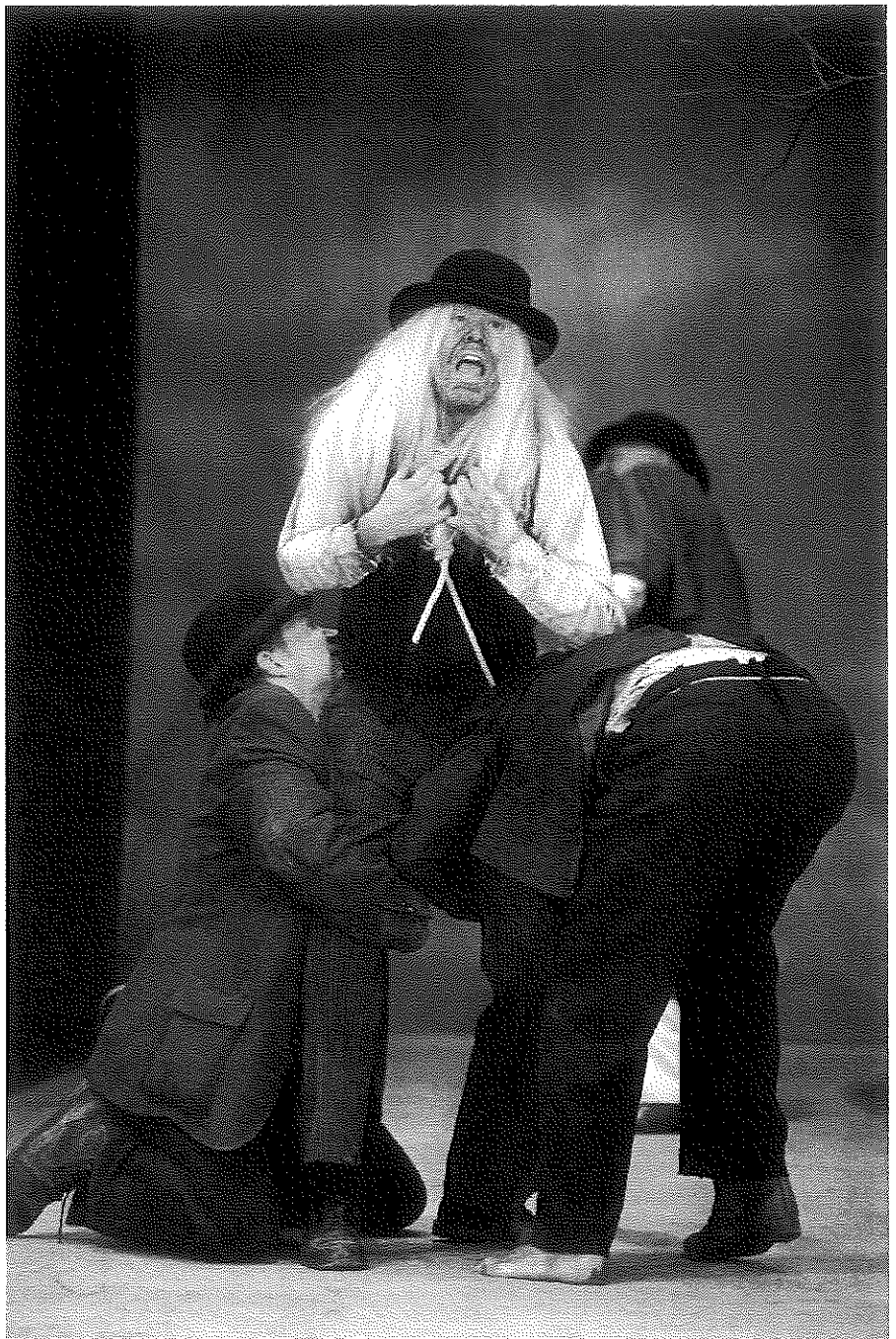
Every character in *Waiting for Godot* seems to live in a prison of his own making. Each is confined to a state of passivity and stagnancy by his own inability to act. The one character who is literally the slave of another is no more restricted than those who are technically free; in fact, he may be more free because he is at least aware of his imprisonment.

Mortality:

None of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* shy away from the fact that death is inevitable. In fact, death becomes at times a solution for the inanity of daily life. The main characters contemplate suicide as though it were as harmless as a walk to the grocery store, probably because there's nothing in their life worth sticking around for anyway. They ultimately do not commit suicide because they claim not to have the means, but also because they are uncertain of the result of their attempt (it may work, it may fail). Because they can't be sure of what their action will bring, they decide on no action at all.

*I don't remember exactly what it was,
but you may be sure there wasn't a
word of truth in it.*

-Pozzo



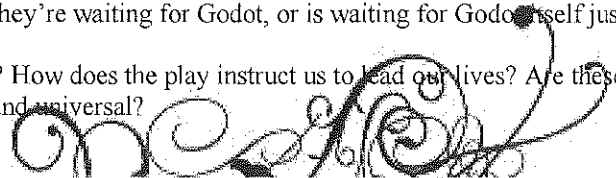
Discussion Questions:

1. What is the barrier between the decision to act and action itself in *Waiting for Godot*? Why are the men unable to move after they've decided to do so?
2. Are Vladimir and Estragon condemned to wait for Godot, or is the act of waiting a choice itself?
3. Does Lucky's position as a servant seem to be a choice on his part?
4. Vladimir and Estragon's situation is so absurd that it doesn't resemble any reality we're familiar with. How is it possible, then, that the play can comment on our own lives? Does Beckett suggest a level of absurdity in the real world?
5. Do Estragon and Vladimir recognize that their actions are absurd? Or does everything seem "normal" to them?
6. How do the absurd characters of Pozzo and Lucky comment on Gogo and Didi? Who seems more rational?
7. At one moment is the play meta-fictional? In other words, where do the characters seem to reveal an understanding (or at least a suspicion) that they are part of a contrived reality? How does this affect the way we see the play?
8. *Waiting for Godot* is a play driven by a lack of truth – in other words, uncertainty. Characters are unable to act in any meaningful way and claim this is so because they are uncertain of the consequences. Without the presence of objective truth, every statement is brought to question, and even common labels (color, time, names) become arbitrary and subjective.
9. Characters in *Waiting for Godot* repeatedly forget the events of yesterday. If memory is faulty and one cannot remember past actions, do these actions have any meaning?
10. Can we trust Vladimir and Estragon's memories of events that have supposedly occurred before the start of the play?
11. Does time pass any differently in Act II than it does in Act I?
12. If Godot is a representation of God, what do Vladimir and Estragon expect will happen if he does finally show up?
13. What is the best term to describe Vladimir and Estragon's relationship? Are they friends? Companions? Master and slave? Mere acquaintances?
14. Vladimir and Estragon constantly ask whether they would be better off without each other. So... would they?
15. Of Vladimir and Estragon, which man is more eager to draw closer, and which man is more hesitant?
16. Why do Estragon and Vladimir want to kill themselves?
17. Why don't they?



Advanced Questions:

1. Do the men in *Waiting for Godot* have any sort of character arcs? Do they evolve at all, or learn anything, or change in any way from the beginning to the end of the play?
2. Why discuss philosophical ideas in a work of fiction instead of a treatise?
3. If it's true that nothing or less than nothing happens in *Waiting for Godot*, how is it that we manage to be entertained as the audience/reader?
4. Do you think the play would function differently if the characters were all female instead of male?
5. Do Vladimir and Estragon stand around killing time because they're waiting for Godot, or is waiting for Godot itself just an act to fill the void?
6. If *Waiting for Godot* is moralistic in nature, what is the moral? How does the play instruct us to lead our lives? Are these lessons subjective and personal for each viewer, or objective and universal?



Waiting for Godot

Classroom Activities

Questions for before and after the performance

Reading *Waiting for Godot* is one thing and seeing it is another. As an exercise, ask your students the following questions before they see the play and then again following their visit to A Noise Within. How did their answers differ?



1. *Waiting for Godot* is labeled as a 'tragicomedy'. What elements of the play are comic? What tragic? How do they work together to give the play meaning?
2. What do Vladimir and Estragon represent?
3. What characteristics differentiate the two characters?
4. What does the tree symbolize? The tree is bare in the first part of the play. On the second day, Beckett instructs in his stage direction that the tree has four or five leaves. What do the leaves symbolize?
5. What or who does Godot represent? (Keep in mind that Beckett himself could not answer this, so it is really a rhetorical question.) Does it matter?
6. What is the structural purpose of having Pozzo and Lucky in the play?
7. What is the purpose of having those characters appear altered in the second act?
8. Beckett was particular about his stage directions. Choose a section of *Waiting for Godot* and write a completely different set of stage directions, but keep the dialogue the same. How does this alter the meaning of the play?
9. If the two parts of the play were reversed how would that effect your interpretation of the play?

Waiting

We all have periods in our life when we are waiting for something that never seems to come: the bus, an important phone call, text message or email, the end of a particularly boring class...

Describe one of these occasions in as much detail as possible. Describe your surroundings. Were you inside or outside? What was the weather like? Did the weather add to your anxiety? Did you have time to kill or were you in a hurry? What did you do while you were waiting? Did you meet someone who helped you pass the time or were you alone while you were waiting?