

Study Guide: *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett

I. Beckett Biography (Know It!):

- The Irish-born playwright and novelist Samuel Beckett, b. Dublin, Apr. 13, 1906, d. Dec. 22, 1989, is best known for the absurdist drama *WAITING FOR GODOT* (1952; Eng. trans., 1954) (see *ABSURDISM*). First performed in Paris on Jan. 5, 1953, the play received worldwide acclaim and became the first of a series of critical successes, some of them written earlier.
- **Life:** Beckett came from a Protestant Anglo-Irish family, but much of his work was first written in French. After graduating with a degree in Romance languages from Trinity College, Dublin, Beckett spent two years (1928-30) in Paris as an exchange lecturer. Here he met James JOYCE and became a member of his circle. In 1930, Beckett returned to Trinity as a lecturer. The academic life did not agree with him, however, and he left after only four terms to become a free-lance writer. He traveled in Europe and England, settling finally in Paris, his intermittent home since 1937.
- **Writings:** Beckett's entire literary output, the narrative prose as well as the dramatic works, reduces basic existential problems to their most essential features. Thus his concerns are fundamental, but never simplistic--the evanescence of life; time and eternity; the individual's sense of loneliness and alienation as a result of the impossibility of establishing genuine communication and contact with others; the mystery of self.
- Beckett's major early works constitute a trilogy of interior monologues: *Molloy* (1951; Eng. trans., 1955), *Malone Dies* (1951; Eng. trans., 1956), and *The Unnameable* (1953; Eng. trans., 1958). Here Beckett explores the paradox of the self that can never know itself; in the very act of observing itself the self splits in two, an observing consciousness and an object that is being observed. The self perceives itself as a stream of words, a narration. Each time it tries to catch up with itself, it merely turns into another story, thus putting before the reader a succession of storytellers. Beckett's other prose works also view in various ways the entrapment and anguish of the individual in increasingly grotesque situations and the self's quest for identity from within. These include *Murphy* (1938; Eng. trans., 1957); *Watt* (1953), his last novel in English; and, *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (1955; Eng. trans., 1967), a collection of short stories.
- Among his principal plays, pioneering works in the *THEATER OF THE ABSURD*, are *Endgame* (1957; Eng. trans, 1958), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1959), *Happy Days* (1961), *Play* (1964), *Not I* (1973), *That Time* (1976), and *Footfalls* (1976). He has also written radio and television plays. In his later stage and television plays, Beckett's style is so concise that each work is ultimately reduced to a highly compressed and immensely powerful image.
- Beckett received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969. His 16-volume *Collected Works* were published in 1970.



II. Absurdism (Know It!): root of which is a term used originally to describe a violation of the rules of logic, has acquired a diverse and wide connotations in modern theology, philosophy, and the arts, in which it expresses the failure of traditional values to fulfill man's spiritual and emotional needs.

- **Philosophy:** The term "absurd" was first used with its modern implications in the work of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. He described Christianity as absurd because no man could comprehend or justify it according to rational principles. The concept of the absurd recurred in the work of the French and German existentialists and was used by Martin Heidegger to describe Christian faith. Jean-Paul Sartre used this term to characterize the apparent pointlessness of life and the terrors of "nonbeing." Albert Camus used absurdism to express the disparity between "man's intention and the reality he encounters." Karl Jaspers saw it as an indication of the manner in which reality repeatedly "checkmates" the individual. Gabriel Marcel as a symbol of the "fundamental mystery" of life. All of these ideas are themes, which Beckett uses in his works.



- **Fiction:** Novels of the absurd have major antecedents in the work of Rabelais, Laurence Sterne, and James Joyce, a close personal friend of Beckett. Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) was one of the first conscious attempts to illustrate absurd metaphysics in fiction. Greater departures from conventional tone were made by Beckett and most of the American novelists who adopted the preposterous, anti-realistic methods of absurd literature. The latter include the generation of "black humorists" who came to prominence in America after World War II--most notably John Barth, Joseph Heller, James Purdy, and Thomas Pynchon. A far more pessimistic tone characterizes the work of William Burroughs, who also demonstrates the major hazard of absurd literature--its tendency toward over-embellishment and incoherence.
- **Theater:** In the "theater of the absurd," human experience is seen as fragmented and purposeless. The search for truth characteristic of romantic drama is rejected. The movement has affinities with the work of Nikolai Gogol and Bertolt Brecht and with the techniques and philosophies of Dadaism and surrealism in art. Alfred Jarry's grotesque *Ubu Roi* (1888) anticipated the movement in the French theater, and Jarry is credited with originating some of the concepts on which it rests. Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet are among the foremost European adherents. In Beckett's plays, life itself seems to have come to a halt, and his characters typically engage in fruitless and repetitive actions that underscore the meaninglessness of their existence. The surface of Ionesco's plays is often more overtly comic, but he also emphasizes man's inability to control and order experience and repeatedly shows man as the victim of modern technology and bourgeois values. In Genet's work, illusion and reality are often violently and erotically fused to suggest the painful absurdity of contemporary life. In the English-language theater, John Osborne presents a similar vision of society, although in form his plays are more conventionally realistic. Both Harold Pinter and Edward Albee reveal the inversion and corruption of conventional patterns of friendship, love, and family allegiance and the terrifying process whereby language becomes a barrier rather than an aid to communication.

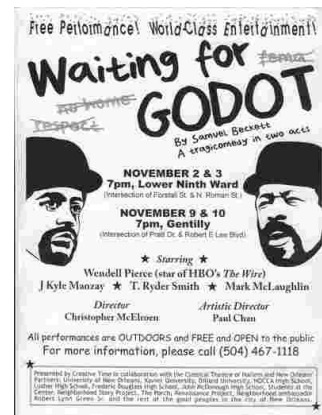
III. Existentialism (Know It! Also consult Existentialist “Borges” Handout):

- Existentialism is a term that designates a concern in philosophy, literature, and art with the irreducibly personal and subjective aspect of human existence. Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche are often considered the “fathers” of existentialism; other prominent names associated with existentialism are Fyodor Dostoevsky, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir (who might be called the “mother” of feminist existentialism and of feminism at large). Contemporary expressions of existentialism can be found in the novels of Milan Kundera (e.g., *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), some of the films by Woody Allen (e.g., *Crimes and Misdemeanors*), and Peter Shaffer's play *Equus*.
- The following is a list of themes that often are found in existential work. Not all existentialists are concerned with all of these issues, and certainly they do not deal with the issues in the same way. Rather, these themes bear a family resemblance that existentialists tend to share with each other.
 - An emphasis upon the individual
 - A critique of current society and its goal for individuals of a comfortable existence as merely part of the “herd”
 - An emphasis upon human freedom and choice
 - An anti-Hegelian, anti-Enlightenment attitude: human existence cannot be adequately or fully captured by Reason, objectivity, or the System, and thus an account of human existence must include passion, emotion, and the subjective
 - A focus on death and its role in human life
 - An emphasis upon anxiety and its role in human life
 - An emphasis upon the dynamic and incomplete versus the static and complete

IV. Comedic Influences at work in *Waiting for Godot*:

Comedy Teams: **Watch Videos.**

- Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, "[The Devil's Drink](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyoPb-amgb5)"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyoPb-amgb5>
- Charlie Chaplin, "[The Fight](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG-rxwppoms)"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG-rxwppoms>
- Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, "[Who's On First](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sShMA85pv8M)"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sShMA85pv8M>
- I Love Lucy (Lucille Ball TV show), "[The Chocolate Factory](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NPzLBSBzPI&feature=related)"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NPzLBSBzPI&feature=related>



V. Questions for Consideration (Do ALL 12 for Each Act!):

1. How is the setting of the drama reflective of the content?
2. What do the names Vladimir and Estragon mean? Outside research necessary. What is the relationship between Didi and Gogo? Discuss what they represent/symbolize/mean as individuals and as a pair.
3. What is the relationship between Lucky and Pozzo? Discuss what they represent/symbolize/mean as individuals and as a pair.
4. What is Lucky's “Big Think” all about? Attempt some interpretation.
5. How do the characters use the few props like hats, carrots and boots? What may the symbolic significance of these objects?
6. What function(s) does abuse serve? Locate and analyze several textual examples as evidence. What does Beckett think of the ways humans abuse each other?
7. How do the character use or not use their memories? How does memory or the lack thereof function in the play?
8. How does Beckett use traditional spirituality? Locate and analyze various examples of religious imagery, allusion and/or symbolism (Three per act). What does Beckett seem to think of traditional spirituality?
9. What archetypes exist and what do they mean?
10. How is *Waiting for Godot* reflective of the theater of the absurd genre? Locate and analyze several textual examples as evidence.
11. How does *Waiting for Godot* reflect an existentialist view of human reality?
12. What themes arise from *Waiting for Godot*? Identify and explain at least two.

VI. Connection (Due on Final Discussion Day):

The BIG Question: **Who is Godot?**

- Write up your initial theory, interpretation, and/or philosophy on the question that haunts all *Godot* readers and watchers. Response should be between 1 1/2 - 2 pages in length and must provide textual support, which, of course, means a Work Cited page, MLA format applies.

Careful: “If Godot were God, I would have called him that,” was Samuel Beckett's curt response on the enigmatic Godot.

VII. Goofy Extra: *Waiting for Godot*, performed by Guinea Pig Theatre: <http://www.musearts.com/cartoons/pigs/godot.html>