Lesson 4, Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot"

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)

En attendant Godot (published 1952, performed, 1953)

Vivian Mercier described Waiting for Godot as a play which "has achieved a theoretical impossibility—a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What's more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice."

In lessons that deal with this famous play, there may be various ways to approach it.

We focus on the modernist aspects of the play and the characteristics that Samuel Beckett has emphasized. We propose to consider ten Points in order to reach the conclusion.

I. Getting to know the author.

II. What is the Theatre of the Absurd ?

III. Language and style

IV. Themes

V. Literary techniques and modernism

VI. Setting

VII. Why can we say that there is a Religious dimension in the play?

VIII. What are some of the most Ridiculous situations?

IX. Characters

X. Possible Interpretations

XI. Conclusion : How to face the Absurd ? and Quotes from the play

I. Getting to know the author.

Samuel Beckett is an Irish avant-garde novelist, playwright, poet, theatre director, essayist who lived in Paris for most of his adult life and wrote in both English and French. (Not from the lost generation USA) Beckett studied French, Italian, and English at Trinity College, Dublin from 1923 to 1927. Despite being a native English speaker, Beckett wrote in French because—as he himself claimed—it was easier for him thus to write "without style." Beckett translated all of his works into English himself, with the exception of Molloy,

Why is he notorious in terms of modernism?

He is widely regarded as among the most influential writers of the 20th century. Beckett's work offers a bleak, tragicomic outlook on human existence, often coupled with black comedy and gallows humour, and became increasingly minimalist in his later career. He is considered one of the last modernist writers, and one of the key figures in what Martin Esslin called the "Theatre of the Absurd".

Beckett is one of the most widely discussed and highly prized of 20th-century authors, inspiring a critical industry to rival that which has sprung up around James Joyce. He has divided critical opinion. Some early philosophical critics, such as Sartre and Theodor Adorno, praised him, one for his revelation of absurdity, the other for his works' critical refusal of simplicities; others such as Georg Lukács condemned him for 'decadent' lack of realism.

Clarification of terminology:

tragicomic: the blending of aspects of both tragic and comic form.

black comedy: is a comic work that employs black humor, which makes light of otherwise serious

subject matter. Black humor corresponds to the earlier concept of gallows humor.

gallows humour: jokes or humorous remarks that are made about unpleasant or worrying subjects such as death and illness

minimalist: The style of minimalism is an approach that is characterized by austerity and laconism in decoration. It is mainly achieved through the use of functional furniture only or geometric shapes and a combination of usually not more than two basic colors. In the case of the play under study, the setting is minimalist. Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, Beckett's works exhibited an increasing tendency towards compactness. This has led to his work sometimes being described as minimalist.

Two important events in the development of Samuel beckette's production:

- Beckett was introduced to renowned Irish author James Joyce by Thomas MacGreevy, a poet and close confidant of Beckett .This meeting had a profound effect on the young man. Beckett assisted Joyce in various ways.

- In 1945, Beckett returned to Dublin for a brief visit. During his stay, he had a revelation in his mother's room. The entire future direction in his literary production appeared to him. Beckett had felt that he would remain forever in the shadow of Joyce, certain to never best him at his own game. His revelation prompted him to change direction and to acknowledge both his own stupidity and his interest in ignorance and impotence. The revelation "has rightly been regarded as a pivotal moment in his entire career." Beckett fictionalised the experience "I realized that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in

control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. Beckett's earliest works are generally considered to have been strongly influenced by the work of his friend James Joyce. They are erudite and seem to display the author's learning merely for its own sake, resulting in several obscure passages. But Beckett says: 'I realized that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in

subtracting rather than in adding." After World War II, Beckett turned definitively to the French language as a vehicle. It was this, together with the "revelation" experienced in his mother's room in Dublin—in which he realized that his art must be subjective and drawn wholly from his own inner world—that would result in the works for which Beckett is best remembered today.

Knowlson argues that "Beckett was rejecting the Joycean principle that knowing more was a way of creatively understanding the world and controlling it ... In future, his work would focus on poverty, failure, exile and loss – as he put it, on man as a 'non-knower' and as a 'non-can-er.'"

II. What is the Theatre of the Absurd ?

A form of drama that emphasizes the absurdity of human existence by employing disjointed, repetitious, and meaningless dialogue, purposeless and confusing situations, and plots that lack realistic or logical development.(pay attention to all modernist elements) There are numerous patterns of thesis and anti thesis throughout the play.

What made En attendant Godot (1953) (Waiting for Godot) an achievement?

It is a Plotless play announced in the opening with nothing to be done in the 1st line of the play The central character Godot never appears. Is it a Play or not a play? The term Play comes from action, yet here it is actionless. Let's go is the way both acts end BUT no move. Silence and no action

Silence = a breakdown of thought, is as important as dialogue

Philosophical interpretation: Presence of an absence is transmitted to the audience

It was not welcomed at the beginning: In the 1950s, theatre was strictly censored in the UK, to Beckett's amazement since he thought it a bastion of free speech. Lady Dorothy Howitt wrote to the Lord Chamberlain, saying: "One of the many themes running through the play is the desire of two old tramps continually to relieve themselves. Such a dramatisation of lavatory necessities is offensive and against all sense of British decency."

The play was a critical, popular, and controversial success in Paris. It opened in London in 1955 to mainly negative reviews, but the tide turned with positive reactions from Harold Hobson in The Sunday Times and, later, Kenneth Tynan. In the United States, it flopped in Miami and had a qualified success in New York City. After this, the play became extremely popular, with highly successful performances in the US and Germany. It is frequently performed today.

What does the play deal with?

The play deals mainly with the subject of despair and the will to survive in spite of that despair, in the face of an uncomprehending and incomprehensible world. Beckett has said the title was suggested to him by the slang French term for boot: "godillot, godasse". The second story is that Beckett once encountered a group of spectators at the French Tour de France bicycle race, who told him “Nous attendons Godot” — they were waiting for a competitor whose name was Godot.

III. Language and style

There is no real conversation. Mercier once questioned Beckett on the language used by the pair: "It seemed to me...he made Didi and Gogo sound as if they had earned PhDs. 'How do you know they hadn't?' was his reply." High frequency words and simple language, basic and simple, everyday speech and common idioms.

IV. Themes

Unability to move

· Truth

· Inexistence

· Setting isoutsideoftherealworld.

Time and timelessness. No specific time but only waiting.

inaction. Test. dependency, habits, enslavement

· Nothingness: Place is nowhere. No place resembles that place

· Religion incompatible with reason. Uncertainty

· Friendship.

Isolation of each character.

· Tension

· Freedom and confinement. Prison of their own making

· Suffering. Hardship physical and mental.

· Mortality. Death is inevitable

· Forgetfulness is very present in the play

-Names are not remembered : Pozzo’s name is not remembered , Godot is not remembered .

-Little boy and second little boy/Forgot whether he came the previous day

-Forgot the bible

Contrasts of time and timelessness:

Vladimir and Estragon are not even sure what day it is. Throughout the play, experienced time is attenuated, fractured, or eerily non-existent. Contrarily, the character Pozzo, prominently wears and takes note of his watch.

Lack of Action: the pair ramble and bicker pointlessly.

The act of waiting is a significant element of the play; during the waiting, the characters pass time idly.

-Waiting hopelessly. The audience waits just like the two tramps wait for something to happen . Vladimir rouses Estragon from sleeping but then stops him before he can share his dreams—another recurring activity between the

two men. They then speculate on the potential rewards of continuing to wait for Godot, but can come to no definite conclusions

Emptiness, uncertainty, and nothingness: Racine writes: "All creativity consists in making something out of nothing." Estragon : nothing to be done.

Vladimir reminds him that they must stay and wait for an unspecified person called Godot—a segment of dialogue that repeats often

The pair cannot agree on where or when they are expected to meet with this Godot + broken spirits+

They quarrel, embrace, and are mutually dependent

The increasingly jaded, world-weary, discontented, Estragon suggests that they hang themselves, but they abandon the idea when the logistics seem ineffective.

Leaves appear on the tree that seemed to be a dead tree yet this little change does not bring any resolution.

V. Literary techniques and modernism

Aspects of modernism:

- Participation of the reader: Decoding and interpreting the tree. Suicide by hanging at the tree. Not religiously accepted .

-Can it be a classical Play? Balanced in 2 acts. (no complication and resolution)= Two mirrors for 2 acts reflecting endlessly repeated images

-Open ended play

-Fragmented dialogue rather than full text : fragmentation in the lack of continuity and accomplishment = fragmentation in Estragon who wants to hear an old joke, which Vladimir cannot finish without going off to urinate, since every time he starts laughing, a kidney ailment flares up.

-Action makes forget about waiting and time. To be aware of the passage of time through action not silence or idleness . Yet this is a play that contradicts the meaning of ‘play’ which is ‘action’.

interior monologue: Lucky's monologue

-irony

-humour

-sarcasm

-allusions

-Nonsense :waiting interrupted and on again

-attempted suicide and non accomplishment. -Committing suicide to spend the time

-Estragon got beaten but unreal and then real

-loss of memory , lack of biographical details all adding to a general "vaguening

-Stuttering and Repetition of same words

-Lucky does speak but fragmented speech that means nothing

-List of words said one after the other

-Play games to fill up the time

-Speaking to avoid thinking

-Wait why waiting, let’s hang ourselves

-Keeps looking in his hat

Epiphany: Vladimir appears to have a small epiphany in a song.

VI. Setting

There is only one scene throughout both acts. Two men are waiting on a country road by a tree. The men are of unspecified origin, though it is clear that they are not English by nationality. The script calls for Estragon to sit on a low mound but in practice—as in Beckett's own 1975 German production—this is usually a stone. In the first act the tree is bare. In the second, a few leaves have appeared despite the script specifying that it is the next day. The minimal description calls to mind "the idea of the lieu vague, a location which should not be particularised". Other clues about the location can be found in the dialogue. In Act I, Vladimir turns toward the auditorium and describes it as a bog. In Act II, Vladimir again motions to the auditorium and notes that there is "Not a soul in sight." When Estragon rushes toward the back of the stage in Act II, Vladimir scolds him, saying that "There's no way out there." Also in Act II, Vladimir comments that their surroundings look nothing like the Macon country, and Estragon states that he's lived his whole life "Here! In the Cackon country!"

The unity of place is equivalent to the setting of prisons; solitude is caused by te fact that there is nothing there. This is an outdoor scene of two bedraggled companions. Lack of fertility and production is indicated by the barren tree which is leafless and then some hope can be indicated in the leaves that appear. It is an anonymous location in terms of a country road, a tree. The place is unspecified. It could be anywhere; all is indefinite. It could take place at anytime .

VII. Why can we say that there is a Religious dimension in the play?

The first suggestions that Vladimir and Estragon might represent all of humanity: When Pozzo first enters, he notes that Vladimir and Estragon are of the same species as he is, "made in God's image." Later, when Pozzo asks Estragon what his name is, he replies "Adam." This comparison of Estragon to Adam, the first man, suggests that he may represent all of mankind; and this link between Estragon and Adam also relates to the idea of Godot as God.

"all mankind is us, whether we like it or not."

This continues the theme of Vladimir and Estragon's representation of mankind as a whole and shows that Vladimir is himself aware of this comparison. Estragon also illustrates the parallel between the two men and the rest of humanity when he tells Vladimir that "billions" of people can also claim that they have kept their appointment. In this case Vladimir attempts to distinguish them from the rest of mankind, but Estragon insists that they are actually the same.

Another biblical allusion is presented here through the comparison of Pozzo and Lucky to Cain and Abel. However, when Pozzo responds to the names Cain and Abel, Estragon decides that "he's all humanity." This suggestion indicates once more that the characters in the play represent the human race as a whole.

Vladimir's need of Estragon's help in order to get up is somewhat of a role reversal. For a brief exchange, Estragon holds the power in the relationship as Vladimir calls to him for help. However, when Estragon does finally stretch out his hand to help Vladimir up, he only falls himself. This seems to indicate that Estragon does not belong in this position of power and responsibility and cannot act to fulfill it. There is humour and comedic tenderness. They reflect some moral basis of Christianity, that life and strength is found in an adoration of those in the lower depths where God is concealed.

Much of the play is steeped in scriptural allusion. The boy from Act One mentions that he and his brother mind Godot's sheep and goats. Beckett's inclusion of the story of the two thieves from Luke 23:39–43 and the ensuing discussion of repentance. Some see God and Godot as one and the same. Vladimir's "Christ have mercy upon us!" could be taken as evidence that that is at least what he believes.

This reading is given further weight early in the first act when Estragon asks Vladimir what it is that he has requested from Godot:

VLADIMIR: Oh ... nothing very definite.

ESTRAGON: A kind of prayer.

VLADIMIR: Precisely.

ESTRAGON: A vague supplication.

VLADIMIR: Exactly.

VIII. What are some of the most Ridiculous situations?

When Estragon declares his hunger, Vladimir provides a carrot (among a collection of turnips), at which Estragon idly gnaws, loudly reiterating his boredom.

Act I.

"A terrible cry" heralds the entrance of Lucky, a silent, baggage-burdened slave with a rope tied around his neck, and Pozzo, his arrogant and imperious master, who holds the other end and stops now to rest. Pozzo barks abusive orders at Lucky, which are always quietly followed, while acting civilly though tersely towards the other two. Pozzo enjoys a selfish snack of chicken and wine, before casting the bones to the ground, which Estragon gleefully claims. Having been in a dumbfounded state of silence ever since the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky, Vladimir finally finds his voice to shout criticisms at Pozzo for his mistreatment of Lucky. Pozzo ignores this and explains his intention to sell Lucky, who begins to cry. Estragon takes pity and tries to wipe away Lucky's tears, but, as he approaches, Lucky violently kicks him in the shin.

Pozzo then rambles nostalgically but vaguely about his relationship with Lucky over the years, before offering Vladimir and Estragon some compensation for their company. Estragon begins to beg for money when Pozzo instead suggests that Lucky can "dance" and "think" for their entertainment.

Lucky's dance, "the Net", is clumsy and shuffling; Lucky's "thinking" is a long-winded and disjointed monologue—it is the first and only time that Lucky speaks. The soliloquy begins as a relatively coherent and academic lecture on theology but quickly dissolves into mindless verbosity, escalating in both volume and speed, that agonises the others until Vladimir finally pulls off

Lucky's hat, stopping him in mid-sentence. Pozzo then has Lucky pack up his bags, and they hastily leave.

Vladimir and Estragon, alone again, reflect on whether they met Pozzo and Lucky before. A boy then arrives, purporting to be a messenger sent from Godot to tell the pair that Godot will not be coming that evening "but surely tomorrow". During Vladimir's interrogation of the boy, he asks if he came the day before, making it apparent that the two men have been waiting for a long period and will likely continue. After the boy departs, the moon appears and the two men verbally agree to leave and find shelter for the night, but they merely stand without moving.

Act II

It is daytime again and Vladimir begins singing a recursive round about the death of a dog, but twice forgets the lyrics as he sings. Again, Estragon claims to have been beaten last night, despite no apparent injury. Vladimir comments that the formerly bare tree now has leaves and tries to confirm his recollections of yesterday against Estragon's extremely vague, unreliable memory. Vladimir then triumphantly produces evidence of the previous day's events by showing Estragon the wound from when Lucky kicked him. Noticing Estragon's barefootedness, they also discover his previously forsaken boots nearby, which Estragon insists are not his, although they fit him perfectly. With no carrots left, Vladimir is turned down in offering Estragon a turnip or a radish. He then sings Estragon to sleep with a lullaby before noticing further evidence to confirm his memory: Lucky's hat still lies on the ground. This leads to his waking Estragon and involving him in a frenetic hat- swapping scene. The two then wait again for Godot, while distracting themselves by playfully imitating Pozzo and Lucky, firing insults at each other and then making up, and attempting some fitness routines—all of which fail miserably and end quickly. Suddenly, Pozzo and Lucky reappear, but the rope is much shorter than during their last visit, and Lucky now guides Pozzo, rather than being controlled by him. As they arrive, Pozzo trips over Lucky and they together fall into a motionless heap. Estragon sees an opportunity to exact revenge on

Lucky for kicking him earlier. The issue is debated lengthily until Pozzo shocks the pair by revealing that he is now blind and Lucky is now mute. Pozzo further claims to have lost all sense of time, and assures the others that he cannot remember meeting them before, but also does not expect to recall today's events tomorrow. His commanding arrogance from yesterday appears to have been replaced by humility and insight. His parting words—which Vladimir expands upon later—are ones of utter despair. Lucky and Pozzo depart; meanwhile Estragon has again fallen asleep. Alone, Vladimir is encountered by (apparently) the same boy from yesterday, though Vladimir wonders whether he might be the other boy's brother. This time, Vladimir begins consciously realising the circular nature of his experiences: he even predicts exactly what the boy will say, involving the same speech about Godot not arriving today but surely tomorrow. Vladimir seems to reach a moment of revelation before furiously chasing the boy away, demanding that he be recognised the next time they meet. Estragon awakes and pulls his boots off again. He and Vladimir consider hanging themselves once more, but when they test the strength of Estragon's belt (hoping to use it as a noose), it breaks and Estragon's trousers fall down. They resolve tomorrow to bring a more suitable piece of rope and, if Godot fails to arrive, to commit suicide at last. Again, they decide to clear out for the night, but, again, neither of them makes any attempt to move.

IX. Characters

There are no physical descriptions of either of the two characters. They are never referred to as tramps in the text, though are often performed in such costumes on stage. The only thing is that they're wearing bowlers.'" " The play only indicates that the clothes worn at least by Estragon are shabby. When told by Vladimir that he should have been a poet, Estragon says he was, gestures to his rags, and asks if it were not obvious. The bowlers and other broadly comic aspects of their personas such as the fact that Vladimir is possibly the heaviest of the pair have reminded modern audiences of Laurel and Hardy, who occasionally played tramps in their films. "The hat-passing

game in Waiting For Godot and Lucky's inability to think without his hat on are two obvious Beckett derivations from Laurel and Hardy –

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. The weary Estragon cannot remove his boots from his aching feet . He recalls having been beaten the night before. suddenly, he decides to leave but eventually, dozes off

The relationship in the pair: Throughout the play the couple refer to each other by the pet names

"Didi" and "Gogo", although the boy addresses Vladimir as "Mister Albert". Both characters struggle with delusions and split personality disorders. Their lives are dependent on outside forces over which they have little control.

Vladimir stands through most of the play whereas Estragon sits down numerous times and even dozes off. "Estragon is inert and Vladimir restless." Vladimir looks at the sky and muses on religious or philosophical matters. Estragon "belongs to the stone", preoccupied with mundane things, what he can get to eat and how to ease his physical aches and pains; he is direct, intuitive. He finds it hard to remember but can recall certain things when prompted. For instance, when

Vladimir asks: "Do you remember the Gospels?" Estragon tells Vladimir about the coloured maps of the Holy Land and that he planned to honeymoon by the Dead Sea; it is his short-term memory that is poorest and points to the fact that he may, in fact, be suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Al Alvarez writes: "But perhaps Estragon's forgetfulness is the cement binding their relationship together. He continually forgets. The philosophical Vladimir

continually reminds him; between them they pass the time." They have been together for fifty years but when asked–by Pozzo–they do not reveal their actual ages.

Vladimir's life is not without its discomforts too but he is the more resilient of the pair. "Vladimir's pain is primarily mental anguish, which would thus account for his voluntary exchange of his hat for Lucky's, thus signifying Vladimir's symbolic desire for another person's thoughts." They clearly have known better times, a visit to the Eiffel Tower and grape-harvesting by the Rhône; it is about all either has to say about their pasts, save for Estragon's claim to have been a poet, an explanation Estragon provides to Vladimir for his destitution.

Pozzo - He passes by the spot where Vladimir and Estragon are waiting and provides a diversion. Little is learned about Pozzo besides the fact that he is on his way to the fair to sell his slave, Lucky. He presents himself very much as the Ascendancy landlord, bullying and conceited. His pipe is made by Kapp and Peterson, Dublin's best-known tobacconists (their slogan was 'The thinking man's pipe') which he refers to as a "briar" but which Estragon calls a "dudeen" emphasising the differences in their social standing. He confesses to a poor memory but it is more a result of an abiding self-absorption. "Pozzo is a character who has to overcompensate. That's why he overdoes things ... and his overcompensation has to do with a deep insecurity in him. These were things Beckett said, psychological terms he used." Pozzo is a stout man, who wields a whip and holds a rope around Lucky's neck, which he jerks and tugs if Lucky is the least bit slow.He seemingly controls Lucky.

In the second act, he is blind and does not remember meeting Vladimir and Estragon the night before.

Lucky - Pozzo's slave, who carries Pozzo's bags and stool. Lucky is the absolutely subservient slave of Pozzo and he unquestioningly does his every bidding with "dog-like devotion". He struggles with a heavy suitcase without ever thinking of dropping it. Lucky speaks only once in the play and it is a result of Pozzo's order to "think" for Estragon and Vladimir.

When Beckett was asked why Lucky was so named, he replied, "I suppose he is lucky to have no more expectations..." Lucky's long speech is a torrent of broken ideas and speculations regarding man, sex, God, and time. Lucky has always been the intellectually superior but now, with age, he has become an object of contempt: his "think" is a caricature of intellectual thought and his "dance" is a sorry sight. Despite his horrid treatment at Pozzo's hand however, Lucky remains completely faithful to him. Even in the second act when Pozzo has inexplicably gone blind, and needs to be led by Lucky rather than driving him as he had done before, Lucky remains faithful and has not tried to run away; they are clearly bound together by more than a piece of rope in the same way that Didi and Gogo are "[t]ied to Godot".

In Act I, he entertains by dancing and thinking. However, in Act II, he is dumb. The only model of Camus' absurdist hero who is the only one to know that life is pointless but who can find a point in life but as he says to Vladimir and the audience, no one can understand what he means. This is in the closing lines of the play. The relationship in the pair: It has been contended that "Pozzo and Lucky are simply Didi and Gogo writ large", unbalanced as their relationship is. However, Pozzo's dominance is noted to be superficial; "upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that Lucky always possessed more influence in the relationship, for he danced, and more importantly, thought – not as a service, but in order to fill a vacant need of Pozzo: he committed all of these acts for Pozzo. As such, since the first appearance of the duo, the true slave had always been Pozzo."

Pozzo credits Lucky with having given him all the culture, refinement, and ability to reason that he possesses. His rhetoric has been learned by rote. Pozzo's "party piece" on the sky is a clear example: as his memory crumbles, he finds himself unable to continue under his own steam. Pozzo and Lucky have been together for sixty years and, in that time, their relationship has deteriorated.

Beckett's advice to the American director Alan Schneider was: "[Pozzo] is a hypomaniac and the only way to play him is to play him mad."(Hypomania is

usually described as a mood state or energy level that is elevated above normal, but not so extreme as to cause impairment)

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.

The boy in Act I, a local lad, assures Vladimir that this is the first time he has seen him. He says he was not there the previous day. He confirms he works for Mr. Godot as a goatherd. His brother, whom Godot beats, is a shepherd. Godot feeds both of them and allows them to sleep in his hayloft.

The boy in Act II also assures Vladimir that it was not he who called upon them the day before. He insists that this too is his first visit. When Vladimir asks what Godot does the boy tells him, "He does nothing, sir." We also learn he has a white beard—possibly, the boy is not certain. This boy also has a brother who it seems is sick but there is no clear evidence to suggest that his brother is the boy that came in Act I or the one who came the day before that. Whether the boy from Act I is the same boy from Act II or not, both boys are polite yet timid. In the first Act, the boy, despite arriving while Pozzo and Lucky are still about, does not announce himself until after Pozzo and Lucky leave, saying to Vladimir and Estragon that he waited for the other two to leave out of fear of the two men and of Pozzo's whip; the boy does not arrive early enough in Act II to see either Lucky or Pozzo. In both Acts, the boy seems hesitant to speak very much, saying mostly "Yes Sir" or "No Sir", and winds up exiting by running away.

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. The identity of Godot has been the subject of much debate. "When Colin Duckworth asked Beckett point-blank whether Pozzo was Godot, the author replied: 'No. It is just implied in the text, but it's not true.'"

"Beckett said to Peter Woodthorpe that he regretted calling the absent character 'Godot', because of all the theories involving God to which this had

given rise. "I also told [Ralph] Richardson that if by Godot I had meant God I would [have] said God, and not Godot. This seemed to disappoint him greatly." That said, Beckett did once concede, "It would be fatuous of me to pretend that I am not aware of the meanings attached to the word 'Godot', and the opinion of many that it means 'God'.

But you must remember – I wrote the play in French, and if I did have that meaning in my mind, it was somewhere in my unconscious and I was not overtly aware of it." (the French word for 'God' is 'Dieu'.) However, "Beckett has often stressed the strong unconscious impulses that partly control his writing; he has even spoken of being 'in a trance' when he writes."

What does Godot mean?

God? Society? Science? The world?

Who or whatGodot is?

X. Possible Interpretations

"Because the play is so stripped down, so elemental, it invites all kinds of social and political and religious interpretation" wrote Normand Berlin in a tribute to the play in Autumn 1999, "with Beckett himself placed in different schools of thought, different movements and 'ism's. The attempts to pin him down have not been successful, but the desire to do so is natural when we encounter a writer whose minimalist art reaches for bedrock reality. 'Less' forces us to look for 'more,' and the need to talk about Godot and about Beckett has resulted in a steady outpouring of books and articles.

Throughout Waiting for Godot, the audience may encounter religious, philosophical, classical, psychoanalytical and biographical – especially wartime – references. There are ritualistic aspects and elements taken directly from vaudeville and there is a danger in making more of these than what they are: that is, merely structural conveniences, avatars into which the writer places his fictional characters. The play "exploits several archetypal forms and situations, all of which lend themselves to both comedy and pathos." Beckett

tired quickly of "the endless misunderstanding". As far back as 1955, he remarked, "Why people have to complicate a thing so simple I can't make out." He was not forthcoming with anything more than cryptic clues, however: "

Peter Woodthrope [who played Estragon] remembered asking him one day in a taxi what the play was really about: 'It's all symbiosis, Peter; it's symbiosis,' answered Beckett." Beckett directed the play for the Schiller-Theatre in 1975. Although he had overseen many productions, this was the first time that he had taken complete control. Walter Asmus was his conscientious young assistant director. The production was not naturalistic. Beckett explained, Over the years, Beckett clearly realised that the greater part of Godot's success came down to the fact that it was open to a variety of readings and that this was not necessarily a bad thing.

Political

Although the play can in no way be taken as a political allegory, there are elements that are relevant to any local situation in which one man is being exploited or oppressed by another." "It was seen as an allegory of the Cold War" or of French Resistance to the Germans. Graham

Hassell writes, "[T]he intrusion of Pozzo and Lucky [...] seems like nothing more than a metaphor for Ireland's view of mainland Britain, where society has ever been blighted by a greedy ruling élite keeping the working classes passive and ignorant by whatever means."

Vladimir and Estragon are often played with Irish accents, as in the Beckett on Film project. This, some feel, is an inevitable consequence of Beckett's rhythms and phraseology, but it is not stipulated in the text. At any rate, they are not of English stock: at one point early in the play,

Estragon mocks the English pronunciation of "calm" and has fun with "the story of the Englishman in the brothel".

Jungian

"The four archetypal personalities or the four aspects of the soul are grouped in two pairs: the ego and the shadow, the persona and the soul's image (animus or anima). The shadow is the container of all our despised emotions repressed by the ego. Lucky, the shadow, serves as the polar opposite of the egocentric Pozzo, prototype of prosperous mediocrity, who incessantly controls and persecutes his subordinate, thus symbolising the oppression of the unconscious shadow by the despotic ego.

Lucky's monologue in Act I appears as a manifestation of a stream of repressed unconsciousness, as he is allowed to "think" for his master. Estragon's name has another connotation, besides that of the aromatic herb, tarragon: "estragon" is a cognate of oestrogen, the female hormone (Carter, 130). This prompts us to identify him with the anima, the feminine image of Vladimir's soul. It explains Estragon's propensity for poetry, his sensitivity and dreams, his irrational moods. Vladimir appears as the complementary masculine principle, or perhaps the rational persona of the contemplative type."

Philosophical, Existential

Broadly speaking, existentialists hold that there are certain fundamental questions that every human being must come to terms with if they are to take their subjective existences seriously and with intrinsic value. Questions such as life, death, the meaning of human existence and the place of (or lack of) God in that existence are among them. By and large, the theories of existentialism assert that conscious reality is very complex and without an "objective" or universally known value: the individual must create value by affirming it and living it, not by simply talking about it or philosophising it in the mind. The play may be seen to touch on all of these issues. While inherent meaning might very well exist in the universe, human beings are incapable of finding it due to some form of mental or philosophical limitation. Thus humanity is doomed to be faced with the Absurd, or the absolute absurdity of the existence in lack of intrinsic purpose.

l Just after Didi and Gogo have been particularly selfish and callous, the boy comes to say that Godot is not coming. The boy (or pair of boys) may be seen to represent meekness and hope before compassion is consciously excluded by an evolving personality and character, and in which case may be the youthful Pozzo and Lucky. Thus Godot is compassion and fails to arrive every day, as he says he will. No-one is concerned that a boy is beaten. In this interpretation, there is the irony that only by changing their hearts to be compassionate can the characters fixed to the tree move on and cease to have to wait for Godot.

Autobiographical

Waiting for Godot has been described as a "metaphor for the long walk into Roussillon, when Beckett and Suzanne slept in haystacks [...] during the day and walked by night [... or] of the relationship of Beckett to Joyce."

XI. Conclusion : How to face the Absurd ?

What is life? Fill life with pleasure · No meaning in life · Live life and pretend it has a meaning · Become another kind of artist from who you already are as an artist · Become a political person · Acceptance that life is pointless but you are compelled to find meaning anyway ·

Quotes from the play

"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."

_____

"Estragon: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?

Vladimir: Yes, yes, we're magicians."

_____

"Je suis comme ça. Ou j'oublie tout de suite ou je n'oublie jamais."

I'm like that. Either I forget right away or I never forget. "

_____

"Vladimir: Did I ever leave you?

Estragon: You let me go."

"Nothing happens. Nobody comes, nobody goes. It's awful."

_____

"Let's go." "We can't." "Why not?" "We're waiting for Godot."

_____

"There's man all over for you, blaming on his boots the faults of his feet."

_____

"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 one the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say? 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 reflexion, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets. But that is not the question. What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in the immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come--"

_____

"ESTRAGON: I can't go on like this.

VLADIMIR: That's what you think."

— Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot

Time and Modernism in Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" by Lindsey McIntosh, 2013

Q. Time was of great importance to modernist authors. How does this preoccupation emerge in their prose, poetry and/or drama?

At the turn of the 20th century, a crisis in Enlightenment humanism had began to emerge; from the ashes of a dying romantic era, a cultural revolution known as the modernist movement arose as 'a progressive force promising to liberate humankind from ignorance and irrationality' (Taket and White, p. 869). Weary from the weak, unchanging patterns of Victorian writing, a collection of writers sought to break away from pre-existing 'dead-end' methods of creating literature by exploring new styles which were expressed in their prose and poetic works. Placing a greater emphasis upon experimentation, modernist writers took a great interest in purposely disorientating their readership with fragmentation and elements of the absurd. A conscious experimentation with language to express both its powers and limitations became apparent components in a vast body of modern literature. Whilst the previous era embodied a strong connection to nature in the belief this relationship was crucial for man's development as an individual, modern writers displayed little interest towards the natural world. Instead, an established vein of modern thought developed that progress as an individual was dependent upon directing the eye inward.

One particular modernist who became fascinated with the idea of the individual and perception was to be the Irish playwright, Samuel Beckett. A key piece of his work which has been heralded as a defining piece of modernist literature is his abstract play, *Waiting for Godot.* Frequently noted for its minimalist style, Beckett's absurdist play has invited a multiplicity of possible interpretations. Whilst *Godot* does technically still reside in the 'modern' bracket of literature, elements of a postmodern nature can also be subtly detected within Beckett's work - the characters of Vladimir and Estragon for example, have been noted to resemble the tragic comedic figures Laurel and Hardy, as their methods of

'passing the time' act as a pastiche to classic American Vaudeville routines (Kalb, p.24). The play thus appears to swing between both modern and postmodern attitudes to form a wholly complex and unique piece of work.

Within Beckett's play, a palette of primarily modern features can be identified as the two primary protagonists await the arrival of an absent character named 'Godot.' Awaiting this absent person, Vladimir and Estragon perform an array of activities to pass the time, from silly things such as playing games and swapping hats, to darker matters such as contemplating suicide. The serious matters within the play are treated with the same gravity as the trivial; this dissolution between the serious and the comic earns the plays title as a 'tragicomedy in two parts' (Faber, p.620) and is a feature distinguishable in a number of Beckett's other works (Beckett's 1965 *Film* for example, uses a comic figure in the form of Buster Keaton to highlight the tragic nature of the protagonist 'O' as he tries to escape his own self-perception). As highlighted in the production title, the theme of 'waiting' provides the core of the play, as time becomes the underlying force which propels the production forward; that is, if the play is to move forward at all. Beckett's bizarre piece explores the concept of time and its effects upon the protagonists involved.

Discussing the subject matter of time, Henri Bergson asserts in his treatise *Duration and Simultaneity* that 'no question has been more neglected by philosophers than that of time; and yet, they all agree in declaring it of capital importance' (Bergson, xxviii). Bergson's theory of time is rooted in the belief that to approach the subject regarding it as 'an absolute, objective phenomenon' is a fallacy, as it fails to capture its 'true essence' (Bergson, DAS, p.vi). In *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics,* he accounts for the scientific misrepresentation of time and the limitations it has been given; rather than addressing the subject of time as a metaphysical issue, the french philosopher critiques the way it has become rationalized into a 'succession of points and instants' within the faculty of physics (Bergson, AITM, p.12). Upon a first reading, it may that these particular notes have very little to do with modernism, let alone to do with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot.* However, several features within the play would appear to suggest a turn away from previous Newtonian concepts of time and instead follow Bergson's position that time is a more complex issue which simply cannot be rationalised by science.

If one were to assess and breakdown the physical components of *Waiting forGodot*, it can be seen that it functions with a series of duplicates and

'mirrors'. James Acheson makes this mirroring connection in his essay, *The Shape of Ideas* (Acheson, p.115) , but it is simple enough for the audience to pick out these details for his or herself: the play is split into two acts and consists of two major protagonists. Awaiting the title character, these two come into contact with another pair of characters who also find themselves 'tied together' in this absurd world. The theme of duplicity is not solely confined to exploration within the characters however, but also within time. In Bergson's treatise *Time and Free Will,* he introduces a notion known as duration (*durée*) and argues of two possible conceptions of this. Whilst the first concept of time corresponds with the idea of space, the latter Bergson accounts is encountered when 'consciousness refrains from separating its current state from previous states' (quoted in Bergson, DAS, pvii). This struggle to separate current states from previous ones can be identified within Beckett's production in the form of memory, as the past struggles to isolate itself from the present.

The primary figures within the play display on a number of occasions a poor recollection of the past. In Act I, Estragon questions Vladimir about what they were doing the previous day; although Vladimir insists that they were doing something besides waiting for Godot, he cannot verify what it was or where it took place. Their attempts to reconstruct a basic idea of the past and regain some sense of time are feeble and leave them disorientated in a present where they are not even fully aware which day it is: '...And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? [Pause.] Or Monday? [Pause.] Or Friday?' (WFG, p.7). In *Concerning the Nature of Time*, Bergson states that 'without an elementary memory that connects two moments', there can only be one or the other and 'no before or after, no succession, no time' (Bergson, DAS, p.33). With this in mind, it could be suggested that the failure of memory within *Waiting for Godot* equates to the seeming lack of progression within the play; if the characters cannot successfully recall the past, how can time then progress towards a future? Unable to confirm the relationship between the past and present, the role of memory could thus be established to be of grand importance as it effectively keeps the play in a state of arrested development. A struggle to remember may also be remarked to tie in with the unstable nature of identity within the play, as Estragon fails to identify his own boots the following day. His inability to identify objects which are supposed to define himself could be used to represent Estragon's failure to affirm his own identity in the world of the play and may be a reason why the two characters find it so difficult to part further on.

As the play progresses, time becomes an issue of further complexity.

This complex relationship between time and *Waiting for Godot* is prominently marked by a variety of changes which appear to miraculously take place overnight; although Beckett's Act II directions mark 'Next Day. Same Time. Same Place', the tree which appeared to be dead in the first act now bears several leaves. Pozzo, the character they come into contact along with his slave Lucky in Act I, has also inexplicably gone blind when he returns to the same location the next day. When Vladimir questions this bizarre occurrence, Pozzo angrily replies 'Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind' (WFG, p.82). He is unable to confirm the relationship to Vladimir between time and his unfortunate predicament. Neither of these two events are able to be successfully traced back onto a stable and linear time scale, helping the play to move into a modern territory of literature as it breaks away from a pre-modern Newtonian understanding of time and duration.

A key reason why time has been remarked to be an interesting component in Beckett's play is due to its effect upon the characters; rather than stabilizing the protagonists' experiences within the world, it effectively erodes it. Eugene Webb asserts that part of the reason *Waiting for Godot* is regarded as a strong example of modern literature is due to Beckett's breakdown of time. As it is regularly regarded as a stable pattern which both shapes individual experience and keeps it on track, to see time fragment is a disturbing notion (Webb, p.35). The character of Pozzo in the first act provides the play's only real physical attachment to a classical concept of time; upon meeting Vladimir and Estragon in Act I, he has possession of a watch and a schedule which he uses to form a stable pattern within his daily existence. He becomes discomforted by Vladimir's remark that 'time has stopped' and speaks personally to his watch saying, 'Don't you believe it, Sir, don't you believe it... Whatever you like, but not that' (WFG, p.29). To Pozzo, the very possibility of losing a continuous pattern of time is a matter which is incomprehensible; yet one which he will have to adapt to when he does lose his watch. This devastating loss for Pozzo unravels his method of understanding, as the loss of the watch is symbolic for the loss of time and Pozzo's method of comprehension within the play.

With Act I foreshadowing a disintegration of time, Act II follows by allowing the notion of time to collapse completely. The following day, Vladimir agitatedly searches for Estragon who appears to have disappeared; during this brief absence, Vladimir is able to pass the time by reciting a song to the audience. Upon the surface, this song could appear to be just another of the character's silly tasks to pass the time but upon closer inspection it displays a

greater symbolic purpose. The song travels around in circles, ending awkwardly before being repeated again by Vladimir. Beckett's stage directions indicate [He stops, broods, resumes] when Vladimir reaches 'And dug the dog a tomb' (WFG, p.48). The song acts as an allegory for the entire production; the repetition of language mirrors the repetition of events. Similar to the fate of the dog in the song, these events are remarked by Webb to be travelling towards one eternal event: death.

[...]