

THEATER OF THE ABSURD

Although audiences had already been introduced to modernist, experimental modes of theater before Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* appeared in 1953, this is the play that had the most profound and wide-ranging impact. This is the play that started a trend which became known as "theater of the absurd." Before this play, audiences could expect the "well-made" play-life-like, psychologically realistic characters, witty dialogue, and well-crafted, causal plots with neatly tied up beginnings, middles, and ends. But the theater of the absurd subverts these expectations at every turn. The characters are unfamiliar, weirdly motivated; their dialogue is filled with non-sequiturs and "blather," seeming nonsense. The movement of the plot is arbitrary; there's no identifiable beginning, middle, and end – no "Freytag's pyramid" to help us get a grip on the plot.

Most strikingly, 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 circularity of *Waiting for Godot* is highly unconventional. Even today, it's not what we expect at all. But it's very common in the tradition of the theater of the absurd.

Martin Esslin writes very lucidly about how the theater of the absurd works like poetry rather than narrative. Traditional narrative drama tells a story, develops dynamically. The characters grow and change before our eyes, and that is the point of the story-to-reveal that growth, that change. We reflect on why it happened, what it implies, how we relate to it ourselves, what it means. But the theater of the absurd doesn't aim for traditional narrative because it rejects such narratives as too artificial, too contrived. The world isn't really as neat and tidy as all that. Things happen by chance, at random. Chaos and irrationality describe reality better than rationality and order. So the aim is not to create artificially causal plots, but to reveal for audiences a powerful image, which can be literal, metaphorical, analogical, or allegorical-like poetry. The ambiguity of the poetic image, then, replaces the dynamic development of traditional narrative in theater of the absurd. The image *Waiting for Godot* evokes, then, is poetic and lyrical in essence rather than narrative; like a lot of theater of the absurd, it's both tragic and comic in nature. The play is therefore referred to as a tragicomedy, or "black comedy." The tragedy is the futility – Vladimir's desperation, his growing awareness of the absurdity of his situation; Gogo's frustrated desire to leave. The comedy is everything else.

In Beckett's work, too, we are aware of how the imagery (everything from plot to character to dialogue to set) is characteristically stripped to bare essences. His plays take on an abstract quality which many compare to a kind of abstract expressionism for the theater.

So we come back around to the question: why are these artists so unconventional? Why be abstract? Why not tell a story in the traditional way? Martin Esslin takes up this question in *Absurd Drama* (Penguin, 1965):

Why should the emphasis in drama have shifted away from traditional forms towards images which, complex and suggestive as they may be, must necessarily lack the final clarity of definition, the neat resolutions we have been used to expect? Clearly because the playwrights concerned no longer believe in the possibility of such neatness of resolution. They are indeed chiefly concerned with expressing a sense of wonder, of incomprehension, and at times of despair, at the lack of cohesion and meaning that they

find in the world. If they could believe in clearly defined motivations, acceptable solutions, settlements of conflict in tidily tied up endings, these dramatists would certainly not eschew them. But, quite obviously, they have no faith in the existence of so rational and well ordered a universe. The "well-made play" can thus be seen as conditioned by clear and comforting beliefs, a stable scale of values, an ethical system in full working condition. The system of values, the world-view behind the well-made play may be a religious one or a political one; it may be an implicit belief in the goodness and perfectibility of men (as in Shaw or Ibsen) or it may be a mere unthinking acceptance of the moral and political status quo (as in most drawing-room comedy). But whatever it is, the basis of the well-made play is the implicit assumption that the world does make sense, that reality is solid and secure, all outlines clear, all ends apparent. The plays that we have classed under the label of the Theatre of the Absurd, on the other hand, express a sense of shock at the absence, the loss of any such clear and well-defined systems of beliefs or values.

Bottom line: these artists have lost faith in a well ordered, rational universe. The world is a place where things happen randomly, by chance. You live or you die by chance. The conditions you endure, you endure by chance. There is no well-crafted plan, no scheme of justice by which the universe operates.

Recall the Dante we found in Canto I of the Inferno. He was lost in just such a dark wood of meaninglessness. Didi and Gogo are equally lost in a dark wood, but Godot, unlike Virgil, never arrives.

NIHILISM and EXISTENTIALISM

Nihilism is a radical philosophy of meaninglessness. Wikipedia tells us that it is a "belief in nothing." The world and all the humans in it exist without meaning, purpose, truth, or value. Any system of belief, or artistic expression, that denies or drains away meaning can be described as "nihilistic." Nietzsche famously accused Christianity of being a nihilistic religion because it drained meaning away from earthly life and kept its followers focused on a hope-for afterlife. His declaration that "God is dead" reverberated throughout the 20th century.

It's not too hard to understand why nihilistic philosophy, which eventually gave way to a very un-nihilistic existentialism, threatened to overwhelm us in the mid-20th century. The waning of religious faith which really began in the Enlightenment and grew even stronger with the steady rise in our faith in the sciences was helped along by Nietzsche and the Holocaust. The devastation of WWI put a huge damper on the liberal ideals of secular social progress, and revolutionary movements like communism lost a lot of steam in the wake of Stalin's totalitarianism. Hitler had plunged Europe into barbarism and genocide, justifying mass murder as the "civilized thing to do." Atomic bombs demonstrated how fragile and insignificant human life could be. In the prosperous West, a kind of spiritual emptiness descended. Under these conditions, nihilistic philosophy and art flourished.

Existentialism is a progressive step up from nihilism, because whereas the nihilist asserts meaninglessness out there and leaves it at that (justifying any behavior at all), the existentialist asserts meaninglessness (out there) but goes on to assert that it's the responsibility of the individual to create meaning (in here)-that to create meaning, as Dante created The Divine Comedy to rescue his world from meaninglessness, is our

human purpose. Of course it's more complex than that, but that's a bird's eye view of their relationship.

A thoughtful question to ask of *Waiting for Godot* is whether it expresses a nihilistic or existentialist perspective. And to kick that into high gear, you could ask whether or not it is a postmodern play.

<http://brainstorm-services.com/wcu-2004/godot-notes.html>

REVIEW

April 20, 1956

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Don't expect this column to explain Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which was acted at the John Golden last evening. It is a mystery wrapped in an enigma.

But you can expect witness to the strange power this drama has to convey the impression of some melancholy truths about the hopeless destiny of the human race. Mr. Beckett is an Irish writer who has lived in Paris for years, and once served as secretary to James Joyce.

Since *Waiting for Godot* has no simple meaning, one seizes on Mr. Beckett's experience of two worlds to account for his style and point of view. The point of view suggests Sartre - bleak, dark, disgusted. The style suggests Joyce - pungent and fabulous. Put the two together and you have some notion of Mr. Beckett's acrid cartoon of the story of mankind.

Literally, the play consists of four rattish characters, an innocent boy who twice arrives with a message from Godot, a naked tree, a mound or two of earth and a sky. Two of the characters are waiting for Godot, who never arrives. Two of them consist of a flamboyant lord of the earth and a broken slave whimpering and staggering at the end of a rope.

Since *Waiting for Godot* is an allegory written in a heartless modern tone, a theatre-goer naturally rummages through the performance in search of a meaning. It seems fairly certain that Godot stands for God. Those who are loitering by the withered tree are waiting for salvation, which never comes.

The rest of the symbolism is more elusive. But it is not a pose. For Mr. Beckett's drama adumbrates - rather than expresses - an attitude toward man's experience on earth; the pathos, cruelty, comradeship, hope, corruption, filthiness and wonder of human existence. Faith in God has almost vanished. But there is still an illusion of faith flickering around the edges of the drama. It is as though Mr. Beckett sees very little reason for clutching at faith, but is unable to relinquish it entirely.

Although the drama is puzzling, the director and the actors play it as though they understand every line of it. The performance Herbert Berghof has staged against Louis Kennel's spare setting is triumphant in every respect. And Bert Lahr has never given a performance as glorious as his fatterdemalion Gogo, who seems to stand for all the stumbling, bewildered people of the earth who go on living without knowing why.

Although *Waiting for Godot* is an uneventful, maundering, loquacious drama, Mr. Lahr is an actor in the pantomime tradition who has a thousand ways to move and a hundred ways to grimace in order to make the story interesting and theatrical, and touching, too. His long experience as a bawling mountebank has equipped Mr. Lahr to represent eloquently the tragic comedy of one of the lost souls of the earth.

The other actors are excellent, also. E. G. Marshall as a fellow vagrant with a mind that is a bit more coherent; Kurt Kaszner as a masterful egotist reeking of power and success; Alvin Epstein as the battered slave who has one bitterly satirical polemic to deliver by rote; Luchino Solito De Solis as a disarming shepherd boy – complete the cast that gives this diffuse drama a glowing performance.

Although *Waiting for Godot* is a "puzzlement," as the King of Siam would express it, Mr. Beckett is no charlatan. He has strong feelings about the degradation of mankind, and he has given vent to them copiously. *Waiting for Godot* is all feeling. Perhaps that is why it is puzzling and convincing at the same time. Theatre-goers can rail at it, but they cannot ignore it. For Mr. Beckett is a valid writer.

a – *New York Times* on the web

ON THEME

Human Condition

In this richly evocative "story" about two men who wait for another who never comes there are so many possible themes it is difficult to enumerate them. Those that are readily apparent include the issues of absurdity, alienation and loneliness, appearance and reality, death, doubt and ambiguity, time, the meaning of life, language and meaning, and the search for self. But one theme that encompasses many of these at once is the question of the human condition—who are we as humans and what is our short life on this planet really like?

<http://www.enotes.com/waiting-godot/themes>

One of the complexities of Literature of the Absurd is that it is often difficult to define a theme, since the very absurdity of the work is focused (usually) on man's inability to make sense of things. Given that, however, there are some discernible threads of theme in *Waiting for Godot*. First, the human condition is 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.

The parallel between God and Godot is not simply verbal (in the spelling and pronunciation of names), but also in the references to long white beards, shepherds, and supremacy. Godot has saving power; Godot has all the answers to questions that have not been asked. Godot is selective in his punishments and rewards, as God was with Cain and Abel. In connection with this theme is the virtual impossibility of man's ever having an understanding of or relationship with God. It seems impossible.

<http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmWaitingForGodot20.asp>

Hope
Search for Meaning
Dependency
Monotony

Symbolism: Questions to Consider

Author Beckett reportedly denied that he intended any person, thing, or idea in the play as a specific symbol. However, the reader is free to interpret the play—and the mind of Beckett. At the very least, the reader or playgoer may wish to consider the following questions:

Do Vladimir and Estragon represent humankind as fallen children of Adam and Eve and their original sin? The motif of redemption occurs several times in the play—notably, when Vladimir speaks of Christ as the "Saviour." On the last page of the play (in most texts), Estragon asks what will happen if Godot comes. Vladimir answers, "We'll be saved."

Is the tree intended to be a symbol of the cross on which Christ was crucified? Keep in mind that Vladimir and Estragon discuss the thieves crucified with Christ. The tree is bare when Vladimir and Estragon meet near it on the first day. However, on the second day, author Beckett says in his stage directions, it has "four or five leaves." Do the leaves symbolize hope? New life?

Does Godot represent God, as some essayists maintain? Bear in mind that at least a dozen French words (not counting suffixes, prefixes, and inflectional forms) begin with the first three letters of this name, including godasse, godelureau, goder, godailler, godet, godiche, godichon, godichonne, godille, godiller, godillot, godron, godronnage, and godronner.

When Pozzo asks who Godot is, Estragon answers, "Personally I wouldn't even know him if I saw him." Estragon appears to be answering truthfully. Nevertheless, is his answer intended to mimic the apostle Peter's answer when he was asked whether he knew Christ?

<http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides3/Godot.html#Symbolism>

We can't fail to miss the theme of uncertainty in *Waiting for Godot*. Uncertainty is pervasive throughout the play: the uncertainty of purpose, of time, place, emotion, relationships, truth, and hope. Existence is the only certainty the play allows. The Cartesian dictum "I think, therefore I am," is challenged, but essentially hold true. Didi and Gogo are themselves vivid dramatic representations of the Descartes' body/mind

split. Didi is all mind, Gogo all body. Thinking and inexhaustible talking may not be the same thing, but in the absence of the one the other will do. Throughout the play thinking is associated with doubt, with uncertainty, weariness, or absurdity. Clearly, the image of our ability to think is challenged in this play.

Related to this critique of our rational capabilities is the play's critique of language as meaningless blather and chatter on the one hand and oppressively authoritarian on the other. At times it is coercive; other times it's rhetorically empty, full of hot air-worse than blather-hypocrisy, or mystification. Only rarely does it serve us well, leading us to truth or beauty, but we can't sustain those functions very well. Pozzo's poetic description of the twilight may be true and even beautiful, but it peters out – "And that's how it is on this bitch of an earth." Or we may run from the truth we've brought it to express, as Didi does near the end of the play—"What have I said?"

The critique here seems to stem from a deep, postmodern distrust of the efficacy or absoluteness of language. We place our trust in it, but should we? Language is the source of all our illusions, the source of all the mythic fictions we've invented to console ourselves from an awareness of our real condition. These fictions have blinded us to the reality, the truth of our existence. The only truth is this present moment, and to waste it by hoping for some future "salvation," by waiting for a Godot that never comes, is tragic and absurd.

The language of the play is stripped bare, scaled down to its naked essence. You won't find a writer more capable than Beckett in this regard. The beauty of Beckett's language is in its absolute economy. It's a tight little fist that punches hard. The language of this play forces us to reflect on how we use language, really. Is it as neat and tidy as we think? Are we really that concerned about being logical or rational? Do we really describe "reality," and how rational or logical is reality? How much of what we say is emotional, illogical, and ambiguous?

In all of its aspects, including its language, *Waiting for Godot* confronts the absurdity of existence and challenges us to figure out who we are and what we're doing here. In this random universe, where everything who lives and who dies, who's up and who's down, is a matter of pure chance, and the odds aren't necessarily in our favor, what do we do? What's our purpose? The existentialist would say that our purpose is to confront our existence, our being, to be aware of and a part of every passing moment—to make choices, to act—to live authentically, in good faith, aware of our essential freedom and responsibility. This is what Didi can't or won't do, and he persuades Gogo to keep him company while he continues to wait for Godot, while he pins his hopes on a future that may never arrive. His futile waiting is either absurd or heroic, depending on your own interpretation.

Beckett was interested, it seems, in the relationship between hope and despair. Are Didi and Gogo in despair? Or do they have faith?

There's quite a lot more we could observe in terms of theme, though having said so much already, I think meaning in this play is probably best approached subjectively. How do you talk about the meaning of a circle? My observation of the play and everything I've read about it leads me to conclude there is very little objective interpretation which will make this play mean much more than it means quite obviously on the surface. Two tramps are waiting for someone they think will help them, but this person, Godot, never arrives. It seems reasonable to assume that Godot

will never arrive, but Didi and Gogo go on waiting, perhaps because they hold out hope that he will, perhaps because they have nothing better to do.

But what is this play really about? What does it all mean? What does it all have to do with us? Some audiences see immediately how they, like Gogo and Didi, are waiting, too. Maybe not for "Godot," but for something. A little help, a little push, a little sunshine, a little windfall. The play takes pains not to be specific, to provide the space to read into it any way we want to. It does not preach a "message." But when you think about it even a little bit, you realize that, just like Gogo and Didi, we're waiting all the time, too. Think about it: aren't we waiting for the war in Iraq to end, waiting to catch Osama bin Laden, waiting to win the war on terror? We're waiting for President Bush to smoke out the evil-doers. If you're a banker or a stockbroker you might be waiting for an end to bankruptcy court or class action suits or social security or taxes. Or an end to racism...an end to poverty, drug abuse, domestic violence... Many of us are waiting for environmental disaster, the next world war, the next flu epidemic, the next school shooting, the next terror attack... we're waiting for security, good times, that great vacation, that better job, that better wardrobe, that better car, that smaller computer, smaller cellphone; we're waiting for the perfect soul mate, the perfect body, the perfect moment... we're waiting for our hopes to be heard, our prayers to be answered, our wishes to be granted... we're waiting, and meanwhile, we're....here.

Waiting for Godot is a poignant play about such waiting, about the repetition, the meaninglessness, the absurdity of waiting, of feeling (and being) suspended in time instead of moving forward in a meaningful direction. It's not necessarily about the absence of God, or about Christian salvation, or existential despair, or nihilistic meaninglessness, or postmodern critiques of language, though interpretation is a subjective enterprise, and we can interpret literature how we choose. Still, many critics agree that a sensitive understanding of this play includes the awareness that it's really an abstract play about waiting, about waiting for the possibility of a better future that we are not quite fully convinced will never arrive.

How do we arrive in this seemingly absurd state of waiting? Laying an existential interpretation atop the play, we might say that this play confronts an unpleasant truth about the human condition. As human beings we're all clinging to the hope of some kind of salvation, some kind of Godot to come and save us from our intolerable suffering-our poverty, our disease, our boredom, our quiet desperation. This hoping, this waiting, removes us from the potentially liberating awareness that the moment we're actually suspended in, this moment between birth and death that glows so briefly, is ultimately more important than any vague "better future" we might desire.

Everything in the play points to suspension: suspension of time, suspension of progress, suspension of reason, suspension of purpose. As drama, every convention has been suspended; the characters and their dialogue dance around in the ether of a nearly empty stage. There's no shortage of void, as Didi declares. It seems the only thing that's not suspended is our disbelief. These absurd characters are, ironically, so believable, so ultimately realistic, that it's barely necessary to remind ourselves we're in an imaginary world.

<http://brainstorm-services.com/wcu-2004/godot-notes.html>

A Definition of the Absurd

Excerpted from Murfin, Ross and Supryia M. Ray. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998: 2.

Absurd, the (absurd, literature or theater of the): A phrase referring to twentieth-century works that depict the absurdity of the modern human condition, often with implicit reference to humanity's loss or lack of religious, philosophical, or cultural roots. Such works depict the individual as essentially isolate and alone, even when surrounded by other people and things. Although drama has been the medium of choice for Absurdist writers, the term may be applied to any work of literature that stresses an existential outlook, that is, one depicting the lonely, confused, and often anguished individual in an utterly bewildering universe.

Because writers associated with this movement believe that the only way to represent the absurdity of the modern condition is to write in an absurd manner, the literature of the Absurd is as bizarre in style as it is in subject matter. Conventions governing everything from plot to dialogue are routinely flouted, as is the notion that a work of literature should be unified and coherent. The resulting scenes, action and dialogue are usually disconnected, repetitive, and intentionally nonsensical. Such works might be comic were it not for their obviously and grotesquely tragic dimensions.

The genre has roots in such literary movements as surrealism and expressionism and owes a great debt to the works of Franz Kafka. It developed in France during the 1940s, in the novels and philosophical writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The theater of the absurd emerged around 1950 with Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1958) (*La Cantatrice Chauve*, 1954), in which, not surprisingly, there is no soprano. let alone a bald one. Equally influential was Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1954), in which two tramps wait in vain for someone who may not even exist—and with whom they are not even sure they have an appointment.

Several novels written during the 1950s and 1960s in Great Britain and the United States contained Absurdist elements, but most Absurdist works have been written as plays. Harold Pinter was primarily responsible for developing British Absurdist theater; Edward Albee is America's leading Absurdist playwright.

FURTHER EXAMPLES: Jean Genet's *Le Balcon* (1957) (*The Balcony*, 1958), Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1965), and Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* (1959). Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) is at once a popular novel and an Absurdist work.

Characteristics of Theatre of the Absurd

Listed below are some characteristics of Theatre of the Absurd. Not all plays will include all these elements. You should determine the extent to which a playwright uses each of these techniques and decide how it relates to the appearance/reality theme which is common in Absurdist plays.

- Investigation of the relativity of truth
- Futility
- Humanity's vain struggle against fate
- Inadequacy of communication
- Use of small talk and understatement
- Non-sequiturs
- Instability of characters/ lack of definite characterization
- Lack of definite plot structure
- World bent on destruction
- The absurdity of attempting to control one's fate