

## Approaching 'Waiting for Godot'



The critical reception that greeted Beckett's first major play, and his first major success as a writer, was anything but ordinary. Some people seemed to recognize that a major talent had arrived on the scene, that they had witnessed the birth of a masterpiece in *Godot*, while others were completely baffled. Bewilderment best describes the feeling those first sophisticated theater-going audiences experienced; and that's a feeling we may still have in the presence of this play today. At its opening in Paris in 1953, however, despite the bewilderment, it caused an immediate and deep sensation.

You can feel the bewilderment right from the start in this *New York Times* review—Mr. Atkinson declares in his opening sentence that we shouldn't expect him to "explain" the play, which is fair enough. But then he goes on to call it "a mystery wrapped in an enigma," which makes the play sound about as inaccessible, as remote and impenetrable as can be. To be fair, it must have seemed that way to audiences who were expecting one thing and then received something completely other. But if the play were really that inaccessible then it would strike no one as a work of "genius," and it wouldn't have catapulted Beckett into worldwide literary fame. With an open mind, an open eye and open ear, I think you find this play is anything but inaccessible. It's immediately accessible. The images, the tableau, are so accessible they're unforgettable. Nothing could be more spare and stripped of mystery and illusion and "fiction" and "hidden symbolism" than this play.

Like Ibsen and Brecht before him, and even more radically, Beckett completely changed our expectations for what can happen on a theater stage. Until Beckett audiences expected the "well-made" play, though they had learned to accept Ibsen's "problem plays" and had even experimented, perhaps, with Brecht's "alienation effect." They were even hip to a "theater of ideas," though these plays could be dull. Most people, even today, are pretty conventional in their expectations for drama, for what they expect to see when they go to the theater or to a film. They expect a well crafted, clever plot with interesting foils, intrigues and sidestories that amplify the

main narrative. They expect narrative, storytelling. They expect characters they can “relate to” or “identify with”—people who are constructed to resemble people in real life. These people can be unusual, eccentric, quirky and interesting, but they should be life-like characters. It’s an expectation that goes all the way back to Aristotle, who demanded that the hero of tragedy be, among other things, “life-like.” People going to the theater expect elaborate scenery designed to evoke an illusion of reality. They expect verbal inventiveness, dialogue that “reveals character” and “provides exposition.” By all of these things have audiences traditionally been wooed into believing that the fiction they are witnessing is real.

But Beckett withholds all of these things, without exception. He strips the set down to its absolute bare essence. The set for *Waiting for Godot* is famously stripped of everything that might provide a broader frame of reference, a sense of “reality.” Yet it seems real enough in its way; there’s the road, there’s the tree. We know what those are. We may even begin, or try to begin, to see them, bare as they are, as profoundly “symbolic.” We’re trained that way—making meaning is an ingrained, thoroughly familiar and usually rewarding activity—and besides, *nothing else appears*, so we have to make *something* out of it. Because what Beckett does to his set, he also does to character, story, and dialogue. There’s no character “development.” There’s no fictional “story.” There’s no linear action or dialogue that leads anywhere. There’s absolutely nothing to distract us from the unsettling tragicomedy of the characters’ fundamental *thereness*, the painful existential condition they keep returning to. As an audience, we are trapped in the web of their meaningless (but provocative) conversation. Is it meaningful, we wonder? We’re tempted to work at making it mean something. (Some of us are more tempted and more diligent than others.) But ultimately we return to an acute awareness of the essential absurdity of the condition we’re witnessing. Is *that* the point then, we wonder? What is the *point*, we may wonder, exasperated.

But if reviewers are unwilling to “explain” the point—and they’re the experts, supposedly—should we even expect a point? And if we find one, should we try to “explain” it?

Perhaps *Waiting for Godot*, like the poem in Archibald MacLeish’s “Ars Poetica” “should not mean but be.” It just is. This place and these characters are just there, expressing their “thereness.” They don’t mean anything so much as they are an image of an experience; looking at them is like looking at a way of seeing, of seeing the way Beckett sees, just as looking at a painting you see the thing the way the artist has seen it. The play may be, as MacLeish describes poetry, an image of “heaven and earth in the cage of form.” I would rather say, though, that it’s an image of human suffering in the cage of form.

When this play was performed in 1957 at San Quentin—the first play to be performed there since 1913—the prisoners “understood” it right away. There are some audiences that respond immediately and sympathetically (empathetically) to Didi and Gogo’s absurd paralysis. These audiences may even start to wonder—does

this whole thing represent *our condition*? Do these clowns, this existential Laurel and Hardy act, represent *us*, they wonder? Could it be?

One critic said memorably, and scathingly, of this play, “Nothing happens twice.” That may be true. But is it true? Can it be true and at the same time not true? Nothing would be more postmodern. If nothing happens, then how does a director fill a two hour film, or a writer a 109 page manuscript?

What happens in this play? Might watching the film be a less disorienting, less bewildering experience if we lay some groundwork?

### **WHAT HAPPENS?**

The play’s main characters are Gogo (Estragon) and Didi (Vladimir) who are two destitute tramps—homeless, rootless, penniless, frequently beaten. They are physically suffering from various ailments but not critically, frequently confused, disoriented and forgetful, but not deranged. They are long-time friends, who are passing the time together, waiting together, though Gogo periodically wonders whether it might not be better for them to part. Why are they waiting? They are hoping for a solution to their present condition—Godot, they think, will help them by providing food and shelter (a loft in a barn, with hay). If they don’t wait for Godot, they imagine there will be a punishment. What do they want from Godot? Their needs seem simple enough. Food and shelter is about all they ask for, all they hope for, but Godot never appears. It’s not certain he ever will appear, since he keeps putting off their “meeting” for a tomorrow that never arrives. The futility of their “waiting” seems unbearable at times—their lives have no meaning or purpose. There’s “nothing to be done” (a frequently repeated refrain). The only solutions are “salvation” or “suicide,” both of which are considered and re-considered. But neither seems possible and they are still waiting at the end of the play, wanting to go somewhere “far away,” but powerless to do so.

The play’s symbolic resonances (since we can’t wholly avoid thinking in these terms) should seem immediate and obvious. Did is talking about “salvation” as the play opens, and “Godot” may come to represent “God” in many viewers’ minds, or perhaps the absence of God. The waiting tramps are “faithful” in their perseverance, as the Christian interpretation goes....Didi’s kindness and friendship is Christian charity.... BUT to interpret the play this way, critic Martin Esslin explains, you’d have to ignore the ever-present uncertainty of the supposed appointment with Godot, not to mention Godot’s seeming unreliability. You’d have to bury your awareness of the futility of the hope attached to this fruitless waiting that the play enacts. If Godot is God, then the condition of waiting for God is made to seem essentially *absurd*<sup>1</sup>. What Gogo and Didi really *want* to do is commit suicide, but since they can’t they are waiting for Godot; their “waiting” is really a rationalization to cover up their inability to act decisively or effectually. This would make it not only absurd but

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<sup>1</sup> **Absurd:** inconsistent with reason or logic or common sense; the condition or state in which humans exist in a meaningless, irrational universe wherein people’s lives have no purpose or meaning.

inauthentic, in existentialist terms. They really are just waiting out of habit. “Habit is the great deadener,” Didi declares—it rescues us from the painful awareness of suffering, but it is not in and of itself meaningful or purposeful or authentic in the existentialist sense of the word. Occasionally, despite the deadening effect of habit, of routine, our boredom is pierced by an awareness of suffering, our own, and others’.

There’s enough reason to agree with *Times* reviewer that *Waiting for Godot* is about the “lost souls of the earth” who “go on living without knowing why.” But to call it “uneventful, maundering, loquacious” (in the pejorative sense) is to do it an injustice. Nothing was ever constructed more meticulously, artfully. No dialogue ever pared down so economically. What it adds up to is not “nothing” but an extraordinarily powerful vision of existential truth, an awareness of the essential meaninglessness of existence and the uncertainty of “truth,” an awareness of the problems inherent in living and the fact that there are no magical solutions to these problems. This is something perhaps not very difficult to explain, but painful to explain.

Beckett’s philosophical muse is, after a dour pessimist—Arthur Schopenhauer, who describes life as a “task” and as “drudgery” filled with

...universal need, ceaseless cares, constant pressure, endless strife, compulsory activity, with extreme exertion of all the powers of body and mind...the tumult is indescribable. But the ultimate aim of it all, what is it? To sustain ephemeral and tormented individuals through a short span of time in the most fortunate case with endurable want and comparative freedom from pain, which, however, is at once attended with ennui; then the reproduction of this race and its striving. In this evident disproportion between the trouble and the reward, the will to live appears to us from this point of view, if taken objectively, as a fool, or subjectively, as a delusion, seized by which everything living works with the utmost exertion of its strength for something that is of no value. But when we consider it more closely we shall find here also that it is rather a blind pressure, a tendency entirely without ground or motive.<sup>2</sup>

*Waiting for Godot* seems inspired by these sentiments. The play is almost as ruthless as Schopenhauer in its catalogue of problems that are imagined as tragic and comic by turns: boredom, monotonous repetition, meaninglessness, despair, futility, mental and physical pain and suffering, illusion, delusion, and paralysis.

We may have trouble explaining *Waiting for Godot* in the traditional ways we talk about theme and “meaning” because the play is so unconventional. Development is circular rather than linear, and this frustrates our linear, logical minds. Time moves repetitiously rather than progressively, frustrating another of our ordinary expectations. The characters, rather than developing in the traditional sense, have the echo the same conversation again and again; language is mystifying and meaningless, futile rather than fruitful (especially when Lucky “thinks”). All action in *Waiting for Godot* is mere distraction; it doesn’t lead anywhere other than to the central awareness with which it began, though by the play’s end we see it all the more distinctly: “Nothing to be done.”

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<sup>2</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur qtd. in Bloom, Harold. “Introduction.” *Modern Critical Interpretations: Samuel Beckett’s ‘Waiting for Godot.’* New York: Chelsea House, 1987. 2.

