

Waiting for Godot

Study Guide by Course Hero



What's Inside

👁 Book Basics	1
🕒 In Context	1
📖 Author Biography	2
👤 Characters	3
📄 Plot Summary	6
🔍 Section Summaries	10
“” Quotes	19
🦋 Symbols	21
📖 Themes	21
📄 Motifs	22
📖 Suggested Reading	23

👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

Samuel Beckett

FIRST PERFORMED

1953

GENRE

Drama

ABOUT THE TITLE

The two central characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait for someone named Godot, who, as a stand-in for God, never arrives. The title focuses the audience on the futility of human

existence. The meaning of the name *Godot* is debated among scholars. Although Beckett wrote in French, it is possible that he wanted his audiences to consider the presence of the English word *God* in the name of the character who never shows up. (The similarity between the words *Godot* and *God* does not exist in the original French, in which God is *Dieu*.) It is possible, however, that Beckett named the character for a French bicyclist called Roger Godeau—or for a French slang word for boots.

🕒 In Context

Waiting for Godot, like most of Samuel Beckett's works, contains little in the way of historical context. He wanted his audience to experience the play without the expectations and assumptions attached to a particular people, place, or time. The play is not entirely free from cultural context, however, containing references to the Bible, Shakespeare, and ancient Greek mythology, as well as a number of allusions to Christianity.

World War II

Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* shortly after World War II ended, and the conflicts and horrors of the war were fresh in his memory. He lived in occupied Paris, working with the French Resistance until he and his companion, Suzanne Déschevaux-Dumesnil, had to flee to avoid being arrested by the Germans. He and Déschevaux-Dumesnil spent the remainder of the war in a region of the French countryside not under German control. After the Allied victory in Europe, Beckett volunteered for the Red Cross, witnessing firsthand the consequences of war and the results of Nazi brutality.

Modernism and Postmodernism

Waiting for Godot displays characteristics of both modernism and postmodernism. The modernist period in literature, which began around the turn of the 20th century, saw writers respond negatively to the Industrial Revolution and the horrors of World War I. Modernism's goal—to create something completely new—sparked much experimentation by merging psychological theory with the creation of many new forms and styles. Characteristics of modernism include the following:

- focus on the inner self or consciousness
- concern with the decline of civilization and the effects of capitalism
- characterization of technology as cold and unfeeling
- alienation and loneliness of the individual
- first-person narrators
- stream of consciousness style
- deviation from traditional plot structures

Postmodernism, which arose after World War II, turned away from modernism's insistence on entirely new literary forms. Instead, postmodern art, including literature, often reflected numerous traditional styles within one work. Characteristics of postmodernism include the following:

- parody, paradox, or pastiche (imitation of another work)
- fragmentation
- interest in flattened emotions
- focus on an anonymous or collective experience
- self-reference or recursion (the use of repeating elements)
- unreliable narrators

Both modernist and postmodernist works reject traditional values and generally accepted meanings for texts.

The Theater of the Absurd

Waiting for Godot was a defining work in what came to be known as the Theater of the Absurd, plays in which a lack of purpose and logic create uncertainty, hopelessness, ridiculousness, and humor. The absurdity of characters' words and actions reveals the absurdity of human existence. The characters may call one another by childish, almost clownish,

nicknames and engage in conversations and interactions straight out of slapstick comedy. Though not a formal movement, the absurdist plays of Beckett, along with those of Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and some other playwrights of the mid-20th century had in common a pessimistic view of an essentially purposeless human existence. As in *Waiting for Godot*, absurdist plays break with traditional structures and use of language to convey images and ideas that have no clearly defined meaning or resolution.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the human condition is depicted as ridiculous and without purpose. Beckett labeled the play a "tragicomedy," emphasizing both the humor to be seen in the absurdity of existence and the anxiety and hopelessness resulting from a lack of purpose. Many also see the play as an illustration of the views of existentialism, especially the philosophy of French writer Jean-Paul Sartre, whose proposition that humankind "first surges up in the world—and defines [itself] afterwards," argues that there is no inherent meaning in human existence. Beckett warned audiences, however, against making religious or philosophical deductions, saying, "the key to the play was the literal relations among its surface features not any presumed meanings that could be deduced from them."

Author Biography

Samuel Beckett was born on April 13, 1906, in Foxrock, in County Dublin, Ireland. As a youth, Beckett experienced severe bouts of depression that kept him bedridden; he reflected, "I had little talent for happiness," an observation that would later provide an undercurrent in much of his writing. From 1923 to 1927, he studied Romance languages at Trinity College in Dublin, and in 1928 he moved to Paris to teach. In Paris, he became a friend of another Irish author for a time, James Joyce. Beckett briefly returned to Ireland to teach in 1930. After traveling in Europe, he settled in Paris, France, in 1937. When World War II broke out, Ireland remained neutral, so Beckett was able to stay in Paris even after the Germans invaded. He became active in the French Resistance and, after members of his resistance group were arrested, he and his then-companion (later wife) Suzanne Déschevaux-Dumesnil fled to rural France for the remainder of the war, surviving on Beckett's farm work.

Returning to Paris after World War II, Beckett produced many

of his best-known works. *Waiting for Godot* was originally written in French (*En attendant Godot*). Beckett felt his mastery of the conventions of English concealed what he was trying to express, and the French tongue offered him a better medium for his ideas. He later translated *Waiting for Godot* into English himself.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett addresses an essential question of existence in two acts that mirror each other: Why do humans exist? Vladimir and Estragon, because they are logical beings, assume there is a point to their lives. With no confirmation, they have made an appointment with Godot, who may or may not be real. The audience is presented with two sets of characters: one pair—Vladimir and Estragon—waits passively, and another pair—Pozzo and Lucky—fills the time with purposeless journeying. Beckett claimed his works begin where the implied happy endings of other literary works leave off. He strips away the false rewards of power, wealth, or marriage to present concentrated sparseness as a means of exploring existential questions. The absurdity and humor in his works are meant to liberate his viewers from the angst of these questions. He intends to free his viewers from the experience of trying to make sense of the senseless.

The original French version of the play, *En attendant Godot*, was performed in full for the first time in Paris at the Théâtre de Babylone in 1953. Despite Beckett's inexperience in theater, this first play required only superficial revisions during the rehearsals. Early audiences were bored, confused, and even angered by the play. Some critics disliked its rejection of purpose and meaning. Others, however, immediately recognized the play's revolutionary importance. Sylvain Zegel, who wrote the first review of the production, observed that Vladimir and Estragon represent all of humanity, trying to achieve at least the illusion of living.

It didn't take long for the play's popularity to spread. In 1953, an inmate of Lüttringhausen prison in Germany, having gotten a copy of the script, translated it into German and performed it with his fellow inmates. He wrote to Beckett that the harshness of life and the endless waiting depicted in the play resonated strongly with the prisoners. The first English-language performance, directed by Peter Hall at the Arts Theatre in London in 1955, was received with mixed reviews. Despite Hall's opinion that the dialogue was "real dramatic poetry," critic Philip Hope-Wallace called the language flat. Fortunately, the critic for the *Sunday Times*, Harold Hobson, was hooked, and the public soon caught what Hall later called

"Godotmania."

Since then, *Waiting for Godot* has been performed in many different ways around the world. Beckett famously insisted that productions of the play remain faithful to his original dialogue, setting, and stage directions. Actors and directors, however, continue to put their own spin on performances. In a 1988 production at New York's Lincoln Center, superstar comic Robin Williams, playing Estragon, couldn't resist interrupting Lucky's monologue with antics and verbal outbursts. Also in 1988, the Dutch Haarlem Toneelschuur Theater staged an all-female production, despite Beckett's objections. A Classical Theater of Harlem production in 2006 set the play in flooded New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Beckett, a master of form, strove throughout his life to produce plays, poetry, and prose pared down as much as possible to address essential questions of human existence. *Come and Go* (1967) contains only 121 words; "Lessness" (1970) comprises only 30 sentences, each appearing two times; and *Rockaby* (1980) runs for a duration of 15 minutes.

Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969. He died on December 22, 1989, in Paris.

Characters

Estragon

Both Estragon and Vladimir are essentially Everymen, representing all of humanity, but they also contrast in some ways. Estragon is primarily concerned with feelings, particularly his own suffering, rather than intellectual thoughts, and he has trouble understanding much of Vladimir's logic and philosophy. He displays intuitive leaps, however, that go deeper than Vladimir does with his logic. If the two primary characters represent two parts of a person, Estragon is the body. The beatings Estragon says he receives represent the suffering that afflicts and traps humanity. There is nothing noble about this suffering—Estragon's complaints about it are self-pitying, and the fear of another beating keeps him locked in the endless waiting.

Vladimir

Vladimir is the more logical and intellectual of the two primary characters. He is the only character who remembers most events from one day to another, and he works the hardest to fit those events into a logical time frame, despite conflicting evidence. He tries to explore philosophical ideas logically, but often misses deeper truths Estragon seems to grasp instinctively. If Estragon represents the body, Vladimir represents the mind, with all its ability to deceive itself.

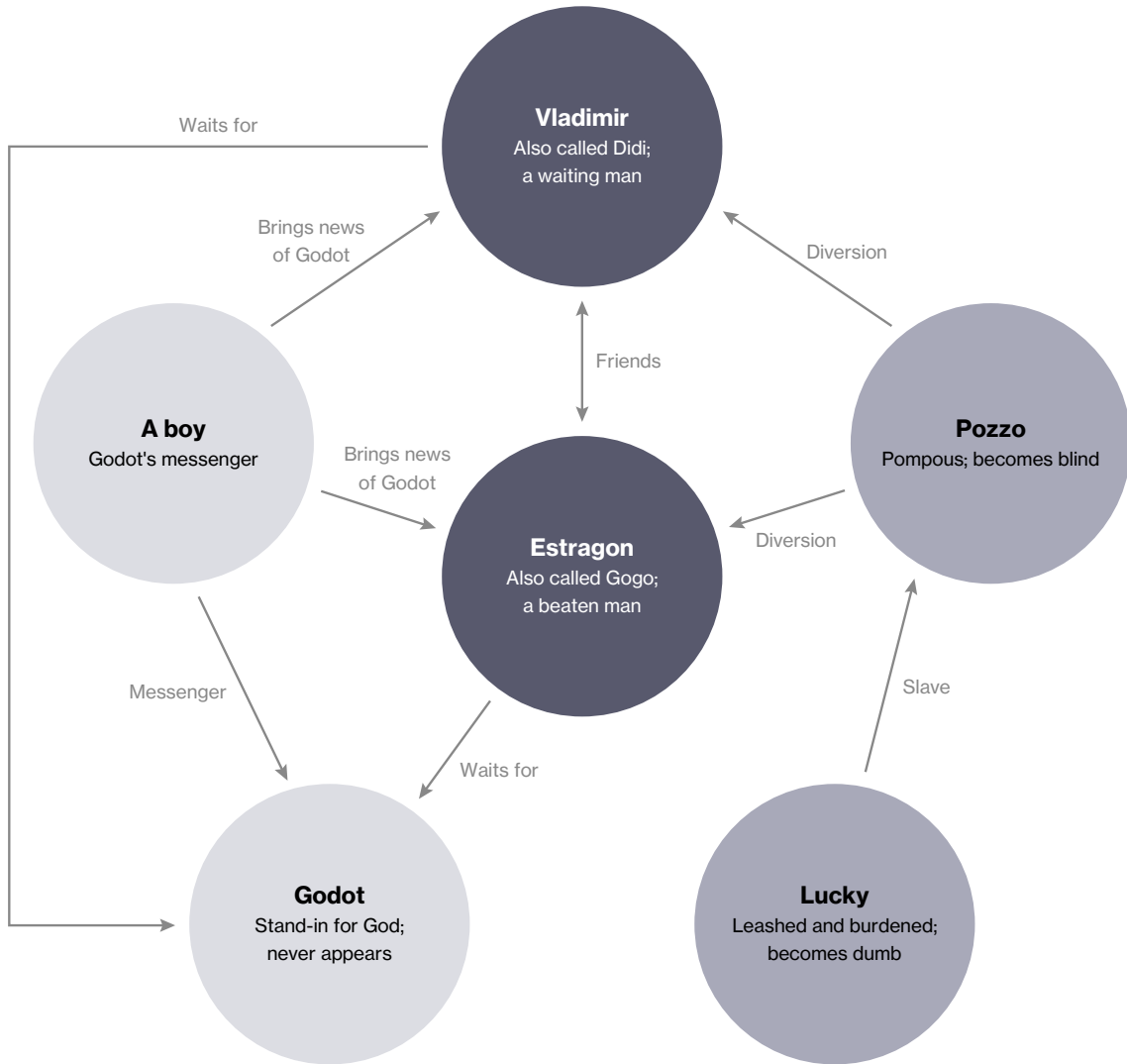
Pozzo

In contrast to the other characters, Pozzo is a wealthy landowner with power and resources. He clearly sees Vladimir and Estragon as beneath him but condescends to talk with them anyway. His concern with appearances and social conventions is ridiculous, pointing out their meaninglessness. Pozzo uses his power over Lucky to abuse him horribly. But his power and resources are ultimately useless—they don't give his life meaning or protect him from misfortune. When he becomes blind, he must rely on his slave, Lucky (who was previously merely a convenience and for entertainment) to help him navigate life, becoming pitiful in a single stroke of fate.

Lucky

As Pozzo's slave, he must constantly carry burdens that are not his own. His body is constrained, much like his free will. This might be why he seems not even to consider leaving when Pozzo becomes blind, losing most of the power he had wielded over Lucky. However, Lucky demonstrates some willpower during his long speech in Act 1, and he is upset by the prospect of Pozzo selling him, which suggests he may choose to remain in his role. There is a dependency between Lucky and Pozzo that seems related to, but not limited to, their inequality.

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Estragon	Estragon, called "Gogo" by Vladimir, is a man who is beaten every night.
Vladimir	Vladimir, called "Didi" by Estragon, is a man trying to make sense of the world.
Pozzo	Pozzo is a pompous man who believes he is in control.
Lucky	Lucky is Pozzo's leashed and burdened slave.
Godot	Godot, a possible stand-in for God, is the titular character of the play, yet he never appears on stage.
A boy	A boy comes twice (or perhaps two boys come, once each) as a messenger from Godot.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Two shabby men who seem to be old friends meet on the side of a country road near a leafless tree. The first, Estragon, has been beaten up, and the second, Vladimir, suffers from groin pain and frequent urination. They consider repenting, though they don't know what for, and they discuss the different views in the Bible of the two thieves crucified with Christ. Getting bored, they consider leaving, but Vladimir says they are waiting for Godot. They have asked him for something, though they aren't sure what, and they are waiting for a response. They consider hanging themselves as a diversion to pass the time or to speed up time, but they worry about one of them surviving alone. In the meantime, there is "Nothing to be done."

Vladimir and Estragon hear a "terrible cry" just before two travelers arrive. Pozzo, a wealthy landowner, stops to eat and talk to the two men but mostly takes pleasure in hearing

himself talk. He roughly orders around and abuses Lucky, a slave whom he keeps on a rope. Lucky is unresponsive except when following Pozzo's orders, and kicks Estragon when he tries to comfort him. When he is ordered to think, however, Lucky produces a jumbled speech that verges on profound meaning. He becomes increasingly passionate until the others angrily attack him to make him stop. Lucky collapses, and to be revived, he must be reacquainted with the burdens he carries. After the sun sets, he and Pozzo continue on their journey.

Vladimir reveals that he and Estragon have met Pozzo and Lucky before—at least he thinks so. A boy arrives with a message from Godot—he will not come this evening, but "surely tomorrow." It seems the two friends have also heard this message before, although the boy claims not to have come yesterday. Their questions about Godot reveal how little they know about the person they've been waiting for. They ask the boy to tell Godot he has seen them. The moon rises, and they decide to find a place to sleep, but neither moves.

Act 2

When Vladimir and Estragon return, the tree has a few leaves on it, which is astounding for Vladimir and confusing for Estragon. Estragon has been beaten again, and he is angry that Vladimir, who is feeling better, seems happy without him. He suggests they part ways, but Vladimir discourages him. Vladimir reminds Estragon of their encounter with Pozzo and Lucky "yesterday," of which Estragon has only vague recollections. Estragon sees the world as a "muckheap," and their conversations—to pass the time—linger on describing the dead, who "make a noise like feathers." They also debate the value of thought, ultimately deciding it has little worth.

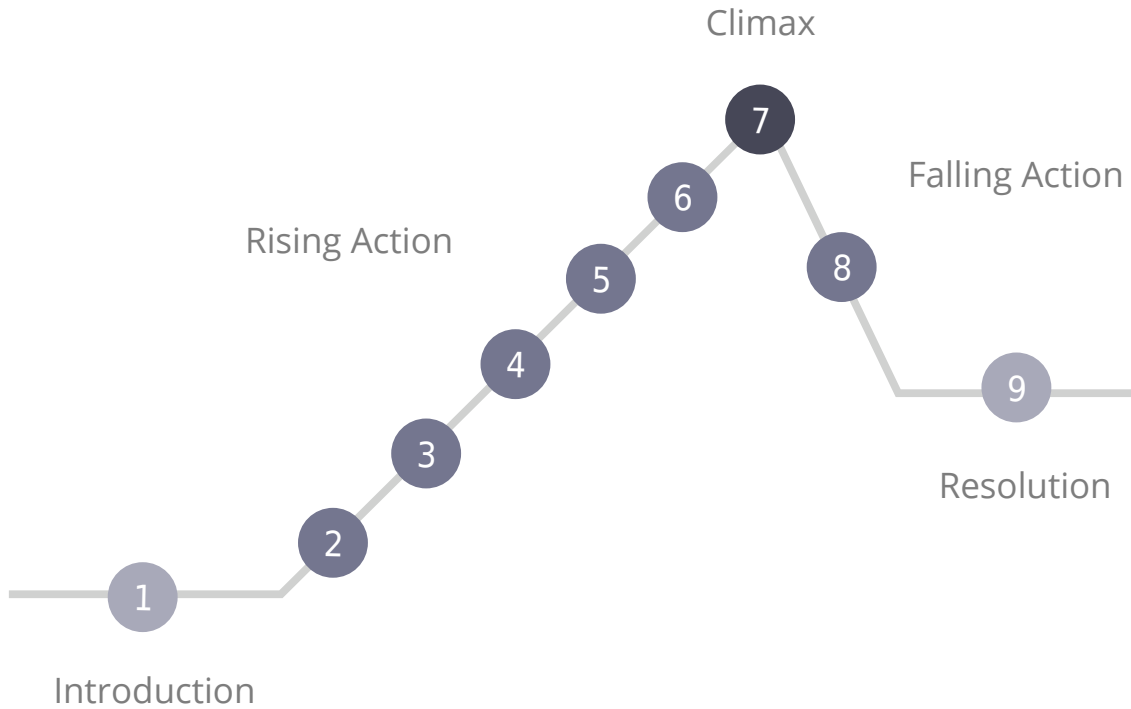
When Vladimir points out the change in the tree, Estragon denies that they were in this place yesterday. Certainly all is not exactly as they left it, including Estragon's boots, which he claims are now a different color and size. Estragon becomes increasingly bored and wants to go, but when he does leave, he returns immediately, fleeing from someone who seems to be coming from all directions. When Vladimir looks, however, he sees no one. After Estragon calms down, they continue their random conversations and activities to pass the time as they wait for Godot.

Lucky and Pozzo arrive again, but they are much different. Pozzo has gone blind, which turns him into a pitiful figure who

must rely on Lucky's guidance and support. He falls whenever Lucky does. Indeed, both fall as they arrive and seem unable to get back up. When Vladimir and Estragon try to help them, they also fall and cannot get up, until a passing cloud distracts them. They help Pozzo up and suggest that Lucky might perform for them again. But Lucky has been struck dumb (left unable to speak). Pozzo also has no memory of any previous meetings with Vladimir and Estragon. After letting Estragon avenge himself on Lucky, Pozzo and Lucky continue on, falling down again as they go.

While Estragon naps, a boy arrives with the same message from Godot: he cannot come tonight but will tomorrow "without fail." The boy says he did not come yesterday and doesn't know if his brother, who is sick, did. Vladimir again asks the boy, more desperately this time, to tell Godot that he has seen him, but the boy runs away without confirming that he has seen him. Night falls and Estragon wakes up. He and Vladimir again consider hanging themselves, but once again they have no rope. They resolve to bring some tomorrow when they return to wait for Godot, and agree to go for the night. Neither moves.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Estragon and Vladimir arrive to wait for Godot.

Rising Action

2. Pozzo stops to talk to Vladimir and Estragon.
3. Pozzo has Lucky dance and think.
4. A boy arrives with a message: Godot will not come tonight.
5. Vladimir and Estragon arrive again to wait for Godot.
6. Pozzo and Lucky fall down as they arrive.

Climax

7. Vladimir and Estragon help Pozzo get up.

Falling Action

8. A boy arrives with a message: Godot will not come tonight.

Resolution

9. Vladimir and Estragon decide to wait for Godot tomorrow.

Timeline of Events

Later

Lucky and Pozzo arrive; Pozzo stops to talk to Vladimir and Estragon.

After sunset

A boy delivers a message: Godot won't be coming tonight, but surely tomorrow.

Most of the evening

The friends barely avoid boredom through random conversation and activities.

Just before sunset

A boy delivers a message: Godot won't be coming tonight either.

Evening

Estragon and Vladimir meet, talk, and consider hanging themselves while they wait for Godot.

After a while

Pozzo offers to have Lucky think before they leave.

The next evening

Vladimir and Estragon arrive again to wait for Godot.

Later

Lucky and Pozzo arrive again, much changed; all four fall and cannot get up.

After nightfall

Vladimir and Estragon decide to wait again, and perhaps hang themselves, tomorrow.

🔍 Section Summaries

Waiting for Godot has two acts without scenes. For the purpose of analysis, the acts have been further divided into sections based on character entrances and exits and significant events.

Act 1 (Estragon and Vladimir)

Summary

Estragon sits on a mound under a leafless tree, unsuccessfully trying to remove his boot. Vladimir arrives and greets him as an old friend, learning that Estragon was beaten up, apparently again, as he slept. Vladimir also suffers, apparently from some ailment that involves groin pain and urinary symptoms. Estragon asks for help with his boot, but Vladimir ignores him and tries to remember a quote about "hope deferred" while looking for something in his hat. Estragon finally gets his boot off and seems to search it as well. Both find nothing.

Vladimir suggests that they repent, but they don't know what of—perhaps being born. Vladimir states that one of the two thieves crucified with Christ was saved, but according to only one of the four Gospels of the Bible. Why believe only that one? Confused and bored, Estragon suggests they go, but Vladimir reminds him they are waiting for Godot. Uncertain whether this is when and where they are supposed to wait, they examine the tree, debate the day of the week, and wonder if they waited here yesterday. During a lull, Estragon falls asleep. Vladimir soon wakes him because he is lonely but then refuses to hear about Estragon's nightmare or tell a story he requests. When Estragon persists, Vladimir leaves angrily. However, he returns shortly, and they make up.

To pass the time, the two consider hanging themselves. They are excited that hanging can cause an erection but worry that the branch will break, leaving one of them alive alone, so they decide to ask Godot when he comes. Vladimir reminds Estragon that they asked Godot "a kind of prayer," and Godot has to think it over. Vladimir suggests they should bow down to Godot because they have gotten rid of their rights. Distracted by hunger, Estragon eats a carrot, which is satisfying at first but then loses its appeal. Vladimir says he experiences the

opposite, getting "used to the muck" as he goes. Estragon wonders if they are tied to Godot. Vladimir says yes, for the moment, but there is nothing to be done about it.

Analysis

Estragon's first words in the play, "Nothing to be done," sum up the play as a whole: nothing meaningful ever happens, and nobody ever takes any meaningful action. At first, it seems Estragon is simply talking about his boot, but Vladimir's response that he is "beginning to come round to that opinion" but hasn't "yet tried everything" makes it a broader philosophical statement. "Nothing to be done" expresses a major theme of the play—life is essentially without purpose. That doesn't stop the two men from holding out intermittent hope that they might find something worthwhile if they keep trying, or waiting. However, their fruitless searches of their hat and boot illustrate the folly of seeking meaning in life.

The characters are left purposely undefined. Vladimir and Estragon are described as shabby and no longer respectable, but they are never called tramps, as they are often depicted. Most other details are left to the director's and the audience's imaginations. Both characters are Everymen, representing all of humanity, and they are also, in a sense, representing two different aspects of humanity. Estragon is more in tune with bodily concerns—pain, hunger, and the senses. His boots are his primary prop, showing his more grounded nature. He has intuitive insights, such as understanding that the lighter person must hang himself first, but he has great difficulty expressing his ideas in words. Vladimir is more intellectual and philosophical, examining big ideas, which Estragon has trouble understanding. He is more concerned with his and others' hats, which are, of course, worn on the head. This mind/body parallel is confirmed in Act 2 when Estragon explains that Vladimir "has stinking breath and I have stinking feet."

The setting is equally undefined. As the characters are Everymen, characters who represent ordinary individuals with whom the audience may easily identify, the setting is every place. A few details tie Vladimir and Estragon to France at some time in the past, but their present location could be anywhere. The leafless tree gives a feeling of barrenness that symbolizes the lack of purpose and meaning in life.

The characters' enthusiastic consideration of suicide is simultaneously comic and disturbing. They seem most

interested in the temporary benefit of sexual gratification, but underneath it is a sense that they are seeking a way out of the never-ending waiting they are trapped in. However, they decide against hanging themselves because neither of them wants to risk being left waiting alone. It is later revealed that they also have no means to hang themselves.

Virtually nothing in the play is certain. Estragon remembers very little of past events, absurdly demonstrating the human tendency for self-serving, selective memory. Vladimir often seems more definite (or over-definite, insisting that everyone he encounters is someone he and Estragon have met before), but when questioned, his certainty often breaks down as well. Beckett himself expressed no definite idea about the meaning of his play, saying, "All I knew I showed. It's not much, but it's enough for me, by a wide margin." The only certainty is they are waiting for Godot.

Suffering in the play is often met with indifference. From the very beginning, Estragon's boot causes him pain. However, Vladimir is indifferent to his repeated requests for help, focusing instead on his own pain. Estragon is repeatedly beaten as he sleeps, but he and Vladimir seem to accept it as an unpleasant given, suggesting that suffering is inevitable and the cause isn't significant because Estragon can't even remember who beat him. There are hints of human connection—the two men clearly depend on each other, and Estragon often wants to embrace Vladimir. However, as soon as Estragon does so, he is disgusted by Vladimir's smell, distancing and isolating the characters from each other.

Religion clearly plays some role in the play, but the nature of the role is, again, debatable. Vladimir ponders the story of two thieves from the New Testament of the Bible, pointing out inconsistencies in the accounts of different Apostles. This calls into question the validity of religion. If a single religious text can't agree on a single story, how can religion be relied upon? The quote about hope Vladimir cannot remember is also from the Bible: Proverbs 13:12, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life." It is unclear whether the characters want such a hope or fear it. The barren tree can be seen as an allusion, or indirect reference, to Christianity because the cross is sometimes called a tree. That the two consider hanging themselves on their tree perhaps equates them to the two crucified thieves in Vladimir's story.

There are also religious overtones in the pair's references to Godot. They seem to remember that their request to him was

possibly a prayer, and they seem to think he should be approached on hands and knees, traditional for a ruler or a deity. Certainly they view him as some sort of authority. Many extend these religious references to conclude that Godot is God. Beckett, however, denied this, saying, "I don't know who Godot is. I don't even know (above all don't know) if he exists. And I don't know if they believe in him or not—those two who are waiting for him."

Act 1 (Lucky and Pozzo Arrive)

Summary

Vladimir and Estragon run and cower when they hear a "terrible cry." Lucky arrives, loaded down with baggage and trailing a long rope, which is tied around his neck. He is followed by Pozzo, who, holding the rope and a whip, whips Lucky and jerks his rope, making him fall down. Estragon initially thinks Pozzo might be Godot, mishearing his name as such. Pozzo warns the others to stay away from Lucky because he is vicious. Then Pozzo declares that he needs company. Lucky mindlessly follows Pozzo's orders, setting up a stool for him and serving him as he eats, drinks, and smokes his pipe. Vladimir is mortified when Estragon asks for the chicken bones Pozzo has discarded.

Fascinated and disgusted, Estragon and Vladimir examine Lucky, and Estragon wonders why Lucky never puts down his bags. Pozzo makes a big production of preparing to speak, finally claiming that Lucky chooses not to put down his burdens so Pozzo won't get rid of him—they are on the way to sell him at a fair. When Pozzo says it would actually be best to kill him, Lucky weeps. Estragon tries to wipe away his tears and gets kicked viciously in the shin for his trouble. Crying that he will never walk again, Estragon begins to weep. Vladimir becomes enraged that Pozzo would use and discard Lucky but then turns on Lucky when Pozzo breaks down, crying that Lucky is driving him mad. Pozzo recovers himself, and Vladimir exits to go to the bathroom.

Analysis

The arrival of Lucky and Pozzo finally provides Vladimir and Estragon with a distraction, but the change is not entirely

welcome. When Pozzo begins speaking pompously, Vladimir wants to leave. (Of course, he never succeeds in doing so.) The two new characters are of two drastically different statuses: Pozzo seems to be wealthy and claims to own the surrounding land, whereas Lucky is a slave with no power. Pozzo and Lucky are going somewhere, in contrast to Estragon and Vladimir who are stuck in this spot, although their inability to leave seems also to temporarily infect Pozzo when he tries to depart.

Pozzo expects his high status to be recognized, and his behavior is obviously artificial, based on how he thinks a man of his social rank should act. At one point, he struggles to find a pretext for sitting back down when he changes his mind about leaving. He cannot simply change his mind without a socially acceptable reason, revealing the absurdity of social conventions. He speaks to Vladimir and Estragon as near equals (he calls them his "likes," emphasizing their equality), although he clearly sees himself as superior, while he abuses Lucky with little regard for his feelings. Even his religious references are contrived, referring to Greek mythology rather than a living religion, as well as being incorrect (Atlas is not the son of Jupiter). Pozzo's lofty status is shown to be meaningless when he points out that his and Lucky's situations could have been reversed.

In contrast, Lucky seems completely without his own will, his only independent action being to kick Estragon when he tries to dry his tears (another example of an act of humanity being met with negativity). Both the baggage that Lucky carries and the rope Pozzo uses to control him are highly symbolic. Lucky never puts down the items he carries except when absolutely necessary to fulfill one of Pozzo's orders, always picking them up again immediately, even when there is no purpose to holding them. This echoes the human tendency to be slaves to our burdens, holding onto them even when doing so is unnecessary and doesn't serve us. Pozzo's rope physically controls and restrains Lucky, representing all the obstacles to freedom that are part of the human condition. As the play goes on, the obstacle the rope represents to Lucky's freedom proves to go beyond the physical.

Estragon and Vladimir continue to be uncertain about Godot, admitting that they "hardly know him" and wouldn't recognize him if they saw him, even mistaking Pozzo's name for his. (Beckett pronounced *Godot* with more emphasis on the first syllable, making the similarity more obvious.)

A motif of duality runs throughout the play. Each character has a logical counterpart. Vladimir and Estragon are two equal halves of a whole, and Pozzo and Lucky appear to be opposites. Likewise, Vladimir's biblical story features a pair of thieves. The play itself is dual in structure, with the second act mirroring the first.

Act 1 (Lucky Thinks)

Summary

While Vladimir is gone, Estragon and Pozzo watch the sun set. When Vladimir returns, Pozzo makes sure he has their attention before delivering a long speech about the twilight sky, which he forgets the conclusion of, until he says it turns to night. After fishing for compliments for his performance, Pozzo expresses a desire to do something for "these honest fellows who are having such a dull, dull time." Appearing not to hear Estragon's request for money, he offers to have Lucky perform for them; Vladimir and Estragon request that he dance and think.

Lucky's brief dance is ridiculous, suggesting to Estragon and Vladimir that he is in pain, perhaps from a hard bowel movement. Forgetting that Pozzo has already answered the question, Estragon again asks why Lucky can't put down the bags. Because he is not currently holding them, however, the question is declared invalid. After Lucky's hat is replaced (he can't think without it), he gives a long speech that sounds like nonsense, filled with repetition and disjointed thoughts. His speech seems to pain and anger the others, and they attack and drag Lucky down—pulling off his hat—as he shouts out the end of his performance of thinking.

After Lucky is revived and returns to his role as slave, Pozzo declares his watch missing. Unable to hear it by listening to Pozzo's heart, Vladimir and Estragon agree it is lost. Pozzo finally decides he left it at home, apparently forgetting that he had it earlier. He says goodbye to Vladimir and Estragon but is unable to leave until he backs up and drives Lucky forward with the whip. With much shouting from Pozzo, they continue on their way.

Analysis

Time, or lack thereof, comes to the forefront in this section. When Pozzo references his schedule and says he has to leave, Vladimir declares, "Time has stopped." Time does seem to have stopped for Estragon and Vladimir—they wait for Godot today as they waited "yesterday" and have perhaps been waiting for months or years. By the end of the section, time seems to have stopped for Pozzo as well: he can't find his watch (which he last placed in his pocket) because he, Vladimir, and Estragon can't hear it ticking, perhaps because it has stopped. The characters' uncertainty about time will increase in Act 2.

Lucky is completely silent in the play, except for his thinking in this section. As a slave, he literally has no voice of his own except when commanded. Even though expressing himself seems to break him out of his silent slavery—showing hints of independence and passion—doing so overwhelms him, and he must be reminded of his role as a slave to function again.

Lucky's speech sounds like complete nonsense, but it actually contains elements of satire and a profound philosophical statement. In a parody of scholarly communication, he begins with a proposition: "Given the existence ... of a personal God" He goes on to describe God with three qualities: "divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia."

- **Apathia** is a synonym of *apathy*, or lack of caring.
- **Athambia** is the quality of being imperturbable, or unable to be bothered.
- **Aphasia** is a language disorder caused by brain damage that can result in problems of speaking, including using made-up words and stringing them together with real words without making sense, which impairs communication and understanding. (Lucky's speech demonstrates aphasic qualities.)

In Christianity, God is associated with threes, and the three qualities above may parody the three traditional divine qualities of omniscience (knowing all), omnipotence (being all powerful), and omnipresence (being everywhere). They also show Lucky's initial proposition to be verbally ironic—he is actually describing the lack of a caring, personal God.

Lucky quickly goes from describing God to focusing, in the middle of his speech, on destruction (the blasting of "hell to heaven") and decline (pining, wasting, and dwindling). In other

words, the loss of God is leading to humanity's decline and death. The final section of Lucky's speech is filled with bleak imagery of cold water, barren earth littered with stones (the Irish region of Connemara is notoriously stony), and skulls (the ultimate symbol of death). The structure of Lucky's speech likewise declines as he goes on, until he is primarily repeating a collection of words over and over.

The names mentioned in the speech are mostly parodies of scholars and their ideas. Two names, Fartov and Belcher, call to mind the gaseous outputs from the two ends of the digestive tract. Some of Lucky's repeated sounds also resemble slang words for feces. These names, combined with Lucky's rambling and random speech patterns, form a stinging commentary on the nature of academic discourse—it consists primarily of nonsensical, even made-up, ideas couched in incomprehensible language, ultimately amounting to human excrement. Humanity's search for meaning has produced nothing but waste and is destined to fail.

Act 1 (A Boy with a Message)

Summary

After Pozzo and Lucky depart, Vladimir comments that they have changed, claiming they had met before and he only pretended not to recognize them. However, when Estragon questions him, he becomes less certain of his claims. A boy arrives and delivers a message from Godot—he will not come this evening, but "surely tomorrow." The boy claims not to have come yesterday, although it seems the men have heard this message before. The boy says he tends Godot's goats and his brother tends the sheep. Godot beats his brother but not him. Vladimir asks the boy to tell Godot he has seen him and Estragon, confirming he has indeed seen them, and the boy runs away.

As the moon rises, Estragon says it is pale from the effort of climbing the heavens and gazing on "the likes of us." Having removed both his boots, he decides to leave them where they are. He defends his decision by saying Christ went barefoot—he says he has always compared himself to Christ. They consider waiting by the tree until tomorrow but decide they must find shelter. As they prepare to leave, Estragon asks to be reminded to bring rope tomorrow. He then reminisces

about a time when Vladimir saved his life and how long they have been together, wondering if they would have been better off alone, but it is too late to part now. After Vladimir says, "Let's go," neither moves.

Analysis

The arrival of the boy with a message from Godot only increases the uncertainty. He calls Vladimir "Mr. Albert," raising the possibility that the message isn't even meant for Vladimir or Estragon (or that they aren't actually named Vladimir and Estragon). Their questions reveal how little they know about Godot, and the boy's answers are equally unenlightening. Much of the time, the boy merely confirms answers Vladimir has suggested with his questions (what would be called "leading the witness" in a courtroom). This raises the question of whether they are actually learning anything about Godot or simply confirming their own assumptions.

Another Biblical allusion appears in this discussion about Godot. The boy tells them he watches Godot's sheep and his brother watches the goats, seeming to reference the New Testament allegory in which Christ separates the sheep, representing people who will be saved, from the goats, representing people who will be damned. But the play seems to reverse the allegory. It is the boy's brother, who tends the "blessed" sheep, whom Godot beats, while the boy who tends the "damned" goats, is not beaten. This reversal could suggest that Godot is not God—perhaps even that he is God's opposite—or simply emphasize the pointlessness of religion and concepts of salvation and damnation.

Vladimir's message to Godot—that the boy has seen them—seems simple but reveals that one of the things Vladimir and Estragon are hoping for from Godot is proof of their own existence. If Godot sees and acknowledges them, their existence is confirmed and their waiting has meaning. Because Godot never comes, their existence remains uncertain.

Although Estragon and Vladimir agree they must leave for the night, Act 1 ends with them absurdly standing motionless by the tree. They must leave at some point, because we see them both arrive again at the beginning of Act 2, but how or when they depart is left obscure, and it doesn't really matter anyway because they inevitably return. They are tragically trapped in this place and in time, waiting for someone or something that never comes and may not even exist. They are essentially

trapped by their own expectations.

Act 2 (Vladimir and Estragon Return)

Summary

As Act 2 begins, Vladimir arrives and examines the tree, which now has four or five leaves, and Estragon's abandoned boots. While he waits for Estragon, he sings a song about a dog that is beaten to death. When Estragon arrives, he is angry at Vladimir for letting him go—he has been beaten again—and for seeming to be happy without him. They wonder if they should part, but Vladimir says Estragon needs him. He would have stopped the beating by stopping Estragon from doing whatever it was that caused it. They declare themselves happy, even if it's not true. What to do? Wait for Godot.

Vladimir reminds Estragon of Pozzo and Lucky, whom he barely remembers, and of a time they supposedly picked grapes in the Macon area of France, which Estragon denies. Perhaps they should part. Estragon suggests Vladimir just kill him, "like the other." They talk so they don't hear "all the dead voices," but they soon run out of things to say. They continue to wait. Passing the time, they make nonsensical statements, contradict each other, ask questions, and debate whether it is terrible to have thought, concluding they "could have done without it."

Analysis

The motif of duality embedded in the structure of the play becomes apparent from the opening of Act 2, which is essentially a replay of Act 1. In many ways, this new day is a mirror image of the previous day—this time, Vladimir arrives first. The reflection is not exact, however. Estragon, more emotional this time, gives in to the embrace Vladimir offered in Act 1, and for the first time an emotional display is not followed by a rejection.

The song Vladimir sings is recursive—he traps himself in a circular structure in which the first stanza leads to the second stanza, which leads back to the first stanza—echoing how he and Estragon are trapped in their routine of waiting for Godot.

Each day is the same, as if the same day is repeating again and again. Because Vladimir can never finish the song, it trails off into nonsense, illustrating the lack of meaning and purpose in life. In another way, the song reflects Vladimir's feelings about Estragon being beaten over and over again.

Vladimir and Estragon might be two halves of a whole, but they don't always get along. Much of the dysfunction in their relationship is evident in this section. In a way, Vladimir seems happier without Estragon and casually insults him when he is around, although he shows concern for him and misses him as well. He seems to feel responsible for Estragon, whom he considers unable to take care of himself. (He is sure Estragon did something to deserve being beaten, absurdly blaming the victim.) They repeatedly consider parting ways but never manage to do so. Estragon says, "The best thing would be to kill me, like the other"—mirroring Pozzo saying in Act I, of "creatures" like Lucky who can't be driven away, "The best thing would be to kill them." Estragon's statement suggests that only death can part him and Vladimir.

Estragon's conversation is noticeably focused on decay and death at the beginning of Act 2, beginning with his song about the dogs building a tomb for a dog that was beaten to death by a cook. When Vladimir starts to point out changes in their location, Estragon says "Everything oozes" (rather than "changes") and speaks of pus. He refers to the world as a pile of garbage and asks Vladimir, "Tell me about the worms!" The decline of religion seems to be implied again when Estragon suggests that Vladimir kill him "like the other ... Like billions of others," and Vladimir replies, "To every man his little cross. ... Till he dies. ... And is forgotten." They both seem to fear and be disgusted by death, but they acknowledge that staying together comforts them. They talk both to fill the time and to not hear the dead voices.

Their conversation about thought, aside from the dark images of misery and corpses, is absurdly contradictory. Vladimir maintains, "What is terrible is to *have* thought." After deciding, however, that they "must have thought a little," he decides "it's not the worst ... But we could have done without it." They conclude the conversation by repeating "que voulez-vous" (French for "what do you want").

Act 2 (Conversation Kills Time)

Summary

Estragon and Vladimir struggle to keep up the conversation, and Vladimir finally remembers his earlier observation about the tree—it now has leaves. Vladimir believes it was bare when they were there yesterday, but Estragon maintains that yesterday they were "in another compartment ... there's no lack of void." Estragon only vaguely remembers Pozzo and Lucky. Vladimir points to the festering wound on Estragon's shin from Lucky kicking him and Estragon's boots as proof of his theory. But Estragon finds the boots are a different color and no longer pinch him. Vladimir suggests that someone else took Estragon's boots and left his own boots there. Estragon takes a nap but quickly is awoken by a nightmare, which Vladimir refuses to hear about. Bored, Estragon wants to go, but Vladimir reminds him they are waiting for Godot.

After Vladimir snaps at him, Estragon decides to leave anyway, but he is distracted when Vladimir finds Lucky's hat. Following a comical circular exchange of the three hats between the two of them, Vladimir ends up wearing Lucky's hat while Estragon wears his own. Vladimir plays at being Lucky, causing Estragon to finally leave. He returns almost immediately, however, afraid "they're coming" from all directions. Vladimir is excited it might be Godot but doesn't see anyone, placating Estragon. They maintain their conversation by being excessively polite, insulting one another, making up, awkwardly exercising a bit, and finally crying to God to pity them.

Analysis

Vladimir's observation that the tree now has leaves calls into question how much time has passed since Act 1. He insists it was only yesterday, but it seems enough time might have passed for a change of season. Some things, however, seem enough like the end of Act 2 to support Vladimir's theory: Lucky's hat and Estragon's boots are pretty much where they were left, although Estragon thinks the boots are different. Vladimir tries to supply a theory for how Estragon's boots changed, but the theory is illogical—only a person with smaller feet would fit in Estragon's boots. Later in the act, the "new" boots fit Estragon, making the point that neither character is equipped or has the energy to really understand reality.

Estragon's relatively fresh wound also seems to point to the shorter time frame, unless he has recently had another encounter resulting in a similar wound. Maybe he is always wounded.

Ultimately, the question of time remains unresolved and uncertain. Estragon retains almost no memory of events from Act 1 and claims they were in "another compartment" yesterday. His follow-up comment, "There's no lack of void," shows a momentary recognition that existence is essentially without meaning or purpose. Wherever they were, there was nothing there, and the idea of a compartment being in a void is illogical; a void by definition has nothing in it, just empty space.

There is an interesting discrepancy between the description of the leaves on the tree in the stage directions at the beginning of Act 2 and Vladimir's description in this section. Vladimir says the tree is "covered in leaves," while Beckett's stage directions are that it have only "four or five leaves." It's possible the differences arise from different purposes. The sparse distribution of leaves in the stage direction continues the feeling of barrenness created by the bare tree in Act 1, whereas Vladimir's description emphasizes the change from Act 1. And the disconnection between the visual reality and the description causes another element of absurdity.

In a postmodern gesture, Vladimir calls attention to the play as something made up. The effect is one of extending the play's uncertainties into the audience. Estragon makes several attempts to leave—to the right, then left, then backstage—each time forced back by numerous others who are visible only to him. Vladimir suggests trying to escape in the only other possible direction, the front. "There! Not a soul in sight!" says Vladimir of the theater before them, casting doubt on the existence of the audience. In a more traditional play, characters do not typically acknowledge the audience. In Bertolt Brecht's modernist *The Threepenny Opera*, a character talks directly to the audience about the play's happy ending, in order to draw a contrast with the audience's real world. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir looks right at the audience and refuses to see them; the act calls attention to the artificiality of theatrical make-believe, while also suggesting that the audience's real world is like the play's world: a void offering no confirmation that existence is real.

Indeed, Vladimir has been searching for proof of his and Estragon's existence throughout the play. His latest use of reason and evidence to establish a concrete timeline is another

attempt to establish proof, while Estragon seems to acknowledge that—at least temporarily—their existence may not be provable. Then, even Estragon seems to seek recognition from a higher power a moment later, when he asks, "Do you think God sees me?"

Act 2 (Lucky and Pozzo Return)

Summary

Lucky and Pozzo arrive again. Lucky wears a different hat, and Pozzo, who is now blind, follows him on a rope that's much shorter than before. Seeing Vladimir and Estragon, Lucky stops. Pozzo runs into him, and they both fall down. As Pozzo pleads for help getting up, Estragon suggests they first demand more chicken bones. Vladimir suggests they help him in hopes of a reward, and then he delivers a monologue that argues for helping on the basis of shared humanity. He then gets sidetracked, praising himself and Estragon for knowing their purpose—to wait for Godot—though it might just be a habit to keep their sanity. Either way, they must not waste the distraction.

Seeming not to hear Pozzo's large offers of money (many times what Estragon asked for in Act 1), they proceed in turn to try to help Pozzo. Trying to lift him up, Vladimir falls and is also unable to get up. Estragon tries to help Vladimir up, but he also falls and gets stuck on the ground. When Pozzo's pleas disturb Estragon, Vladimir beats Pozzo. Pozzo crawls away, and they call to him but cannot reach him.

After contemplating a cloud, Vladimir and Estragon easily stand up, and then lift up and support Pozzo. He does not recognize them because of his blindness and doesn't remember their previous interactions. He cannot define when he went blind, saying the blind have no concept of time. When they request that Lucky sing or think for them, Pozzo reveals that Lucky is dumb (unable to speak). Estragon gets his revenge on Lucky, kicking him until he hurts his own foot. He retreats to take a nap. Pozzo recovers himself enough to order Lucky to rise and take his burdens, which include a bag of sand. Pozzo and Lucky continue on their journey, apparently falling again shortly after their exit.

Analysis

Lucky and Pozzo return (again) significantly changed since their appearance in Act 1. As if viewed in a mirror, part of their dynamic has been reversed. The suddenly blind Pozzo is now pitifully dependent on Lucky and simply keeps up the appearance of being in control. He actually drops Lucky's rope when they fall, and a number of minutes pass before he orders Lucky to return it to him. While they lie in a heap on the ground, Lucky is called Cain and Pozzo answers to the name Abel, a biblical reference further suggesting that they have exchanged the roles of victim and aggressor. This seems to be Lucky's opportunity to free himself from his restraints, but he shows no inclination to do so, obediently returning the rope to Pozzo so they can continue on as they were.

That Lucky and Pozzo are tied together by more than the rope is further demonstrated by the loss of Lucky's voice and Pozzo's sight. Pozzo even predicts that they will die "the same day, the same second," though Pozzo seems also to be saying that everyone's life is so short their birth and death occur simultaneously. Lucky seems, in a way, to rely on his role as a slave to function, staying passively on the ground until Pozzo orders him up. Neither Pozzo nor Lucky ever seems to question his role, suggesting that Pozzo's rope might be a symbol of those things humanity uses to restrain and oppress itself as much as the external oppression of slavery.

Most of the action in this section centers on the characters' absurdly being unable to get up for no apparent reason after falling. In addition to being a humorous bit of slapstick comedy, this could represent how these four characters are trapped in place by nothing more tangible than their own expectations. When Estragon notices a cloud above them, he asks, "Let's pass on now to something else, do you mind?" And just like that—they are able to get up—suggesting they could also free themselves from their endless waiting for Godot by simply passing on to something else. Estragon seems very close to doing so, more and more frequently urging Vladimir to just go, even briefly exiting the stage. But without Vladimir's support, he never successfully leaves. Unfortunately, Vladimir cannot give up his expectation that Godot will come and provide them with purpose and meaning, and they remain trapped in their current circumstances.

Vladimir's monologue about whether to help Pozzo get up contains some of the most positive and inspiring statements in the play, but it is unfortunately rooted in self-delusion. He

argues it is not every day that he and Estragon are personally needed, and they should show the best of humanity by helping before they miss their chance. Pozzo's cries for help are made to "all mankind," and here and now "all mankind is us, whether we like it or not." They are indeed Everymen and have a responsibility to act with humanity. Vladimir goes on to reason that he and Estragon are "blessed" because they know their purpose is to wait for Godot. This statement is of course incongruent, absurd, and illogical, because the audience can see it's this "purpose" that is trapping them in endless waiting so intolerable that they regularly consider suicide.

Time again becomes an issue when Vladimir tries to confirm his theory that they were all in the same place only a day ago, asking Pozzo when he went blind. Pozzo reacts violently, saying the "blind have no notion of time." Of course, this is true in a very concrete way; those without any sight are cut off from the cycles of light and dark that humans use to literally define their days. Estragon fancifully hopes Pozzo's blindness allows him to see the future, like prophets in Greek myth. (In another Greek reference, Estragon exclaims that they are holding up Pozzo like caryatids, or columns carved into shapes of female figures.)

Vladimir's pestering him about time prompts Pozzo to make a famously dark summary of human existence: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." This picture of birth leading directly to death, with life (the gleam of light) not lasting long enough to accomplish anything, suggests that humanity's whole existence is meaningless.

Act 2 (Different Boy, Same Message)

Summary

Once Pozzo and Lucky are gone, Vladimir wakes Estragon from his nap. Vladimir thinks Pozzo might not have been blind—he seemed to look at him—and Estragon wonders if he was actually Godot. Vladimir says no but with declining certainty. Vladimir speaks to himself, thinking he is perhaps sleeping. He wonders what he will remember tomorrow about today and asks, "in all that what truth will there be?" Life is

difficult and painful, but "habit is a great deadener." Meanwhile, unable to remove his boots, Estragon falls asleep again.

A boy arrives—he doesn't recognize Vladimir and says he didn't come yesterday. Again using leading questions, Vladimir prompts the boy to deliver the same message as the previous night: Mr. Godot cannot come tonight, but will tomorrow "without fail." When questioned, the boy thinks Godot "does nothing" and has a white beard. He says his brother, who may or may not have come before, is sick. Vladimir again asks the boy to tell Godot he's seen them, demanding a confirmation that he has, but the boy flees without replying.

The sun sets, the moon rises, and Estragon wakes up. Learning that Godot once again didn't come, he suggests going far away and dropping (giving up on) him, but Vladimir replies, "He'd punish us." They again consider hanging themselves from the tree, but the cord Estragon uses as a belt breaks when they test it. Estragon doesn't seem to notice that without a belt his pants have fallen down. Estragon suggests again that they part ways, but Vladimir declares they will return tomorrow with a rope to hang themselves—unless Godot comes to save them. They agree to go, and neither moves.

Analysis

While Estragon struggles with his boots and takes a nap, Vladimir delivers one last monologue, pondering their existence. After Estragon's suggestion that Vladimir dreamed Pozzo could see, Vladimir wonders if he really might be sleeping—perhaps this place and their purpose don't exist. He ponders what he will remember tomorrow, if tomorrow is real, recognizing that they will repeat their same pattern over again. Maybe existence really is as Pozzo described it. And the audience may realize ultimately that Vladimir and Estragon are not real; they are made-up characters in a play.

Vladimir restates the birth-to-grave image, except with more time between the two—the gravedigger has time to linger over his forceps (instruments of birth), and "we have time to grow old." Unfortunately, this additional time doesn't add any meaning or purpose to existence; it allows only for cries of suffering before habit deadens the pain. This is their existence—they are suffering and want to escape, but habit deadens the pain enough to keep them waiting for Godot. Watching Estragon sleep and pitying Estragon's inability to remember, Vladimir considers that someone else may have

that perspective on *him*, pitying Vladimir for his unawareness: "At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping." As Vladimir says these lines, the audience is looking at him; who, then, is watching the audience, pitying them for *their* incomprehension of existence? Vladimir's thought thus opens a recursive prospect, just like his endless song of the dog at the beginning of the act. At this point he cries out that he can't go on and then exclaims, "What have I said," perhaps rejecting this view of existence for being too painful to bear.

If there were any doubt before, the boy's arrival with the message that Godot will not come tonight makes it clear that the promise that Godot will arrive "tomorrow" is empty. Perhaps he doesn't even exist and is just some sort of shared delusion. The boy's description of Godot having a white beard again seems to call to mind classical depictions of God (and Lucky's depiction of God in his Act 1 speech), but the boy may be simply fulfilling Vladimir's expectations. Vladimir once again tries to confirm his existence by asking the boy if he has seen him, but his desperation frightens the boy off without answering his question, leaving him with no reassurance whatsoever.

Vladimir believes Godot will punish them if they try to drop (abandon) him. However, his belief is the only hint of potential punishment, suggesting that his own expectations rather than some actual threat of punishment are keeping them waiting. Vladimir also says that when Godot comes they will be saved, although from what is not defined. Tragically, they could save themselves from the endless waiting by simply leaving. But by investing all his fears and hopes in Godot, Vladimir has actually trapped them, eloquently demonstrating the folly of seeking some sort of larger meaning in existence.

Beckett turns a classic comedy gag on its head with Estragon's fallen-down pants. In traditional comedy, this kind of indecent exposure usually causes extreme social embarrassment, but Vladimir and Estragon take no notice of it whatsoever. It is a final demonstration of the absurdity of their existence that they continue to talk about hanging themselves, even testing the cord that was Estragon's belt, with Estragon's pants around his ankles. Estragon is so oblivious that he thinks Vladimir is telling him to take his pants off when he finally tells him to pull them back up.

They will return again to waiting for Godot tomorrow, guaranteeing that they will remain stuck in their purposeless

cycle of waiting, probably endlessly, into the future. They remain unmoving, despite having agreed to go, until the curtain falls, powerfully illustrating the absurd nature of their purposeless existence.

“” Quotes

"We can't ... We're waiting for Godot."

— Vladimir, Act 1 (Estragon and Vladimir)

Vladimir's reply to Estragon, who wants to get up and leave with his friend, is repeated numerous times throughout the play. It perfectly encapsulates their situation: they cannot leave because of hope that this Godot will appear and "save" them. However, he never comes, trapping them in endless waiting.

"What exactly did we ask [Godot] for? ... A kind of prayer."

— Estragon, Act 1 (Estragon and Vladimir)

Vladimir and Estragon don't really remember what they asked Godot; it may not have even been a defined request, which calls into question the value of any answer they could get in return. None of that, however, is going to stop them from waiting forever for the answer. The description of their request as a prayer seems to indicate they are seeking a larger meaning to existence. That an answer never comes strongly indicates that no such meaning exists.

"We got rid of them."

— Vladimir, Act 1 (Estragon and Vladimir)

When Estragon asks whether he and Vladimir have lost their rights, Vladimir gives an uncharacteristic reply: Vladimir often blames Godot's restrictions on why they can't leave, such as

claiming he will punish them for dropping him. Here, however, he seems to recognize, at least for a minute, that they are the only ones restricting what they can and cannot do.

"The tears of the world are a constant quantity."

— Pozzo, Act 1 (Lucky and Pozzo Arrive)

Observing that Estragon begins to weep as Lucky stops, Pozzo pronounces this pompous conclusion. He even goes on to say that laughter is the same way. This statement sounds profound but is actually ridiculous—there is no restriction on the number of people in the world who can cry or laugh at the same time—pointing out the meaninglessness of philosophical "truths."

"Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!"

— Estragon, Act 1 (Lucky Thinks)

Estragon breaks out this extremely accurate summary of their circumstances, and indeed the whole play, as they wait for Lucky to begin thinking. It's a bit absurd that he chooses a time when someone has actually come and something is about to happen to complain about nothing happening and nobody coming, but it doesn't diminish the larger truth of his statement.

"They all change. Only we can't."

— Estragon, Act 1 (A Boy with a Message)

After Lucky and Pozzo leave, Vladimir comments that they have changed since the last time he saw them. Indeed, when they return in Act 2, they have changed significantly again. Estragon, however, correctly observes that he and Vladimir remain essentially the same throughout the play, and presumably beyond. Estragon suggests they are incapable of change, which doesn't bode well for their chances of

eventually giving up waiting for Godot.

"All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery!"

– Estragon, Act 2 (Vladimir and Estragon Return)

Mud here does not signify degradation or immorality, but rather total stultifying uniformity. Vladimir is trying to remind Estragon how the tree looked "yesterday," but, to a man for whom all places are indistinguishable, such details of scenery are meaningless, and even angering.

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

– Estragon, Act 2 (Conversation Kills Time)

Estragon considers, at least for a moment, the possibility that they don't actually exist and that all their struggles are simply to give themselves the impression that they do. Vladimir, in particular, is concerned with making the uncertain concrete, attempting to define the passing of time. What they are waiting for from Godot might be recognition of their existence. Because Godot never comes, their existence remains uncertain.

"But at this place, at this moment ... all mankind is us, whether we like it or not."

– Vladimir, Act 2 (Lucky and Pozzo Return)

When Pozzo and Lucky fall down, Vladimir and Estragon are the only ones around to help them. They at this moment are representing all of humanity and, as such, they have a

responsibility to help. This is by far the most humanitarian impulse displayed by anyone in the play. (Its characters are usually focused on their own pains and struggles.) The results, however, are less than inspiring. When Vladimir and Estragon try to help Pozzo get up, they also fall and get stuck on the ground.

"We are all born mad. Some remain so."

– Estragon, Act 2 (Lucky and Pozzo Return)

Vladimir has been trying to determine whether the waiting is making them lose their reason, but Estragon goes straight to the heart of the matter. Everyone is born mad (meaning crazy, or without reason), and some never escape it. Despite all of Vladimir's thinking and reasoning, he and Estragon may not have escaped the madness of existence. Of course, the audience realizes their endless waiting is crazy and completely without reason.

"They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more."

– Pozzo, Act 2 (Lucky and Pozzo Return)

Unlike Vladimir, Pozzo doesn't care about time, claiming he has no concept of it since he has gone blind. He sees existences flashing nearly instantaneously from life (represented by light) to death (represented by night), with nothing in between.

"The air is full of our cries. ... But habit is a great deadener."

– Vladimir, Act 2 (Different Boy, Same Message)

Vladimir continues Pozzo's birth-to-grave metaphor, except he includes that humans have more time for suffering,

demonstrated by the cries in the air, between birth and the grave. But habit deadens the pain of living. That might seem like a good thing, but habit is also one of the major forces keeping Vladimir and Estragon in a limbo of waiting.

Symbols

Leafless Tree

The tree, near which Estragon and Vladimir meet, is completely bare of leaves at the beginning of the play. It represents the only organic element in the setting, and it is dead or dormant. This tree portrays the world as barren and lifeless, emphasizing the lack of purpose and meaning the characters must contend with. The apparent growth of leaves on the tree in Act 2 does nothing to ease the sense of meaninglessness; it only adds to the characters' uncertainty about the place and the passage of time. The staging is telling in this regard: despite Vladimir's description of the tree as "covered with leaves," the stage directions specify only "four or five" leaves, leaving it mostly barren.

Some point out that the cross on which Christ was crucified is sometimes called a tree. Vladimir and Estragon do discuss the tree and hanging themselves in Act 1 shortly after talking about the two thieves crucified along with Christ. This could support the interpretation that hanging from the tree draws a parallel between them and the thieves. Beckett, however, said he was puzzled by people trying to take away "a broader, loftier meaning" from the play, making it unlikely that he intended any broader religious symbolism.

Lucky's Baggage

Lucky never puts down the items he carries, except when it is necessary to fulfill one of Pozzo's orders. Then he immediately picks them up again, even when he has not been told to do so and there is no purpose in it. This action echoes the human tendency of enslavement to burdens, holding onto them even

when doing so is unnecessary. The baggage Lucky carries seems to consist mostly of items for Pozzo's comfort. In Act 2, however, one of the bags, which is never opened in Act 1, is revealed to contain only sand. Other than his hat, none of what Lucky carries is for himself and may not even be useful. Yet he takes it up again and again—another example of a character "deadened" by habit, fulfilling the task mindlessly and without purpose.

Pozzo's Rope

Pozzo's rope is the only rope that physically appears in the play, and it represents the balance of power in the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky. In Act 1, Pozzo dominates Lucky with a rope half the length of the stage: "Pozzo drives Lucky by means of a rope passed around his neck," and Lucky is often the recipient of Pozzo's whip. Yet Lucky accepts this balance of power without question, as if he cannot envision any other state for himself. By Act 2, however, the rope is shortened, and the balance of power in Pozzo and Lucky's relationship is less clear. Pozzo, now blind, depends on Lucky for direction, and Lucky, still slavish, depends psychologically on Pozzo.

By extension, there are a number of figurative ropes in the play. Vladimir and Estragon, like Pozzo and Lucky, are similarly tied to each other in a relationship based on domination and submission. The pair is also tied to Godot and the dominating belief that his arrival will provide a meaning for their lives. Vladimir and Estragon also entertain the idea of hanging themselves with a rope. While suicide is never a real option, its discussion provides the pair a diversion from the act of waiting for Godot. The rope here becomes a symbol of submission to an illogical belief.

Themes

Absurdity of Existence

One of the most noticeable features of the play is utter

absurdity: Vladimir and Estragon dress shabbily, engage in physically inept actions, and partake in clownish nonsensical conversations. They absurdly wait endlessly for an unchanging situation to change when it is clear Godot will never come. They occasionally discuss ending their wait by hanging themselves or simply leaving, but absurdly, they never take any action. Although they agree there is "nothing to be done," they work absurdly hard to fill the time while they wait. The unavoidable conclusion is that human existence itself is absurd. Beckett's emphasis on the absurdity of human behavior shows both the tragic and comedic sides of the existential crises.

Purposelessness of Life

None of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* has a meaningful purpose. Waiting for Godot might seem to give Vladimir and Estragon a purpose, but the fact that Godot never arrives renders their waiting meaningless. Likewise, Pozzo and Lucky might seem to be traveling toward something, but their travels are ultimately shown to be equally purposeless. Pozzo initially professes to be taking Lucky to the fair to sell him, but this purpose is never fulfilled. The second time they pass by, they express no purpose at all—they are simply moving from one place to another. Their traveling may even be counterproductive because they cannot seem to go any distance without falling down.

The messages from Godot delivered by the boy are equally purposeless. Godot will never come, and it is not at all clear the messages are even meant for Vladimir and Estragon—the boy calls Vladimir "Albert." All the characters seem to be trapped in their purposeless roles by little more than habit, which Vladimir calls "a great deadener." The idea that life has no purpose is a recurring theme in the Theater of the Absurd, which *Waiting for Godot* helped define.

Folly of Seeking Meaning

Although it is unclear who or what Godot represents, by waiting for him, Vladimir and Estragon are clearly seeking

some type of meaning outside themselves. In Act 1, they remember making a "kind of prayer" to Godot, expecting it to give them some direction, and they decide it is safer to wait and see what Godot says rather than die by hanging themselves. Godot, however, never comes, representing the futility and folly of such a search for meaning in an inherently meaningless existence.

Uncertainty of Time

Time is a slippery thing in *Waiting for Godot*. It seems to pass normally during the period the characters are on the stage, with predictable milestones, such as the sunset and moonrise, although the characters are sometimes confused about it. But the intervals between the two acts and various events are wildly uncertain. When Vladimir and Estragon return at the beginning of Act 2, the growth of leaves on the tree suggests a longer period of time has passed than the one day Vladimir claims it has been. Estragon and Pozzo retain little or no memory of their encounter the "previous" day, and other changes have mysteriously occurred "overnight." Estragon and Vladimir have no firm idea of how long they have been together or how long ago they did other things, such as climb the Eiffel Tower or pick grapes in Macon country.

The characters also seem to be trapped by time, endlessly repeating essentially the same day again and again. This creates a despair that leads them to repeatedly contemplate suicide, although they never remember to bring the rope they would need to actually hang themselves. Time is one of the main ways people organize their lives and memories, so the uncertainty of time in the play contributes to the feeling of meaninglessness.

Motifs

Duality

Duality is everywhere in *Waiting for Godot*. Every character has a counterpart, and the paired characters often complement and contrast each other. Vladimir and Estragon seem nearly

identical at first, but contrasting characteristics show them to be essentially two different parts of a whole. Pozzo and Lucky are opposites in status, but they also share a mutual dependence. The boy, although written as one part played by a single actor, may actually be two brothers, one of whom tends the sheep while the other tends the goats. Even people who are simply discussed often come in twos, such as the two thieves from the Bible (one is saved, the other is damned). The only character without a counterpart is the one who never appears: the ambiguous Godot.

The whole play is dual in structure, consisting of two acts depicting nearly the same events. Act 2 mirrors Act 1 (for example, Estragon arrives first in Act 1, while Vladimir is the first to appear in Act 2), with the events of Act 2 seeming to reflect a bit more darkly the events of Act 1. It is also clear that the two days seen in the play are reflections of many days in the past and days that will continue, endlessly, into the future.

Hats

Hats are worn by Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky, and Pozzo and are a vehicle for the characters to show their identities. For example, Lucky needs his hat in order to think; Pozzo shows his power over Lucky by taking his servant's hat off. Vladimir, the "thinker" of the two main characters, is fixated on his hat, while Estragon, who is more realistic, thinks first of his boots. In Act 2, Estragon and Vladimir have a long "bit" in which they exchange their hats along with Lucky's; an aimless attempt to make time pass as they wait.

Suggested Reading

Ackerley, C.J., and S.E. Gontarski. *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Works, Life, and Thought*. New York: Grove, 2004. Print.

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Brater, Enoch. *The Essential Samuel Beckett: An Illustrated Biography*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003. Print.

Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. New York: Simon, 1996. Print.