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# Waiting for Godot

— Samuel Beckett —

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# Author Biography

## Samuel Beckett's background:

- Beckett grew up in Dublin, attended the Trinity College in Dublin and later taught in Paris before moving back to Ireland
- In 1931, he travelled around Europe and eventually moved to Paris in 1937
- In 1939, he joined French Resistance forces when Nazi occupation began to occur across Europe
- He composed *Waiting for Godot* in 1949 and it premiered in Paris in 1953 (it was originally written in French)
- Beckett's literary works garnered great attention throughout the 1960s and he was later awarded a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969
- He died in 1989 and was buried in Paris

# Context

**Text type:** Waiting for Godot is a two act tragicomedy, which is regarded as a true innovation in regards to drama and Absurdist theatre

**Context of composition (historical context):** The play is set in a strange, unspecified time period and does not revolve around any historical events. The play does however reflect on the pessimistic, nihilistic nature of humanity (which many have argued is a 'nod' to horrors seen in World War II)

**Literary period:** Modernism, postmodernism

**Genre:** Drama, tragicomedy, Theatre of the Absurd

# Plot

The play is set in a bleak, sparse setting. It largely consists of back-and-forth conversations between Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting for the arrival of Godot. As the play develops, Godot sends them messages that he will appear, yet the play finishes and Godot still has not appeared.

The duo eventually encounter Lucky and Pozzo, who discuss their troubles and lots in life. At one point, Lucky and Pozzo consider hanging themselves, yet they continue wait.

Despite their depiction as a pair of tramps, Vladimir and Estragon are in fact humans that throughout the play, ponder the point of life. Eventually after great contemplation and struggle, they decide that their must be a point to life and look to Godot for wisdom and enlightenment.

Due to their ability to wait and keep their hope, the play finishes with the characters acquiring an air of nobility that allows them to surpass their futile existence.

# Genre Overview

**Drama:** The conflict of the play is expressed in emotion-revealing drama

**Modernism & Surrealism:** Relating to the play's lack of plot and break from narrative traditions

**Philosophical Literature:** due to the play exploring absurd, philosophical questions such as existentialism, purpose and consciousness of actions and thought

**Tragicomedy:** Due to the exchanges between characters that are both absurdly comic discussions, yet often extremely bleak

# Characters

## Vladimir:

- A main character who is often referred to as 'Didi' by Estragon, or 'Mr Albert' by the boy
- He is depicted as the more responsible and mature of the two main characters

## Estragon:

- The second main character that is referred to as 'Gogo' by Vladimir
- He is portrayed as weak and helpless, relying on Vladimir's protection and support
- He suffers from poor memory, with Vladimir having to remind him of events from days and nights prior

## Pozzo:

- He is introduced in the second act as the blind character who passes by the spot where Vladimir and Estragon are waiting
- He provides a diversion in the scene

# Characters continued

## Lucky:

- Pozzo's slave who carries Pozzo's belongings, he is treated similarly to an animal and lacks human dignity as a result of his slavery
- He provides entertainment by dancing and thinking in Act I, however he is lame in Act II

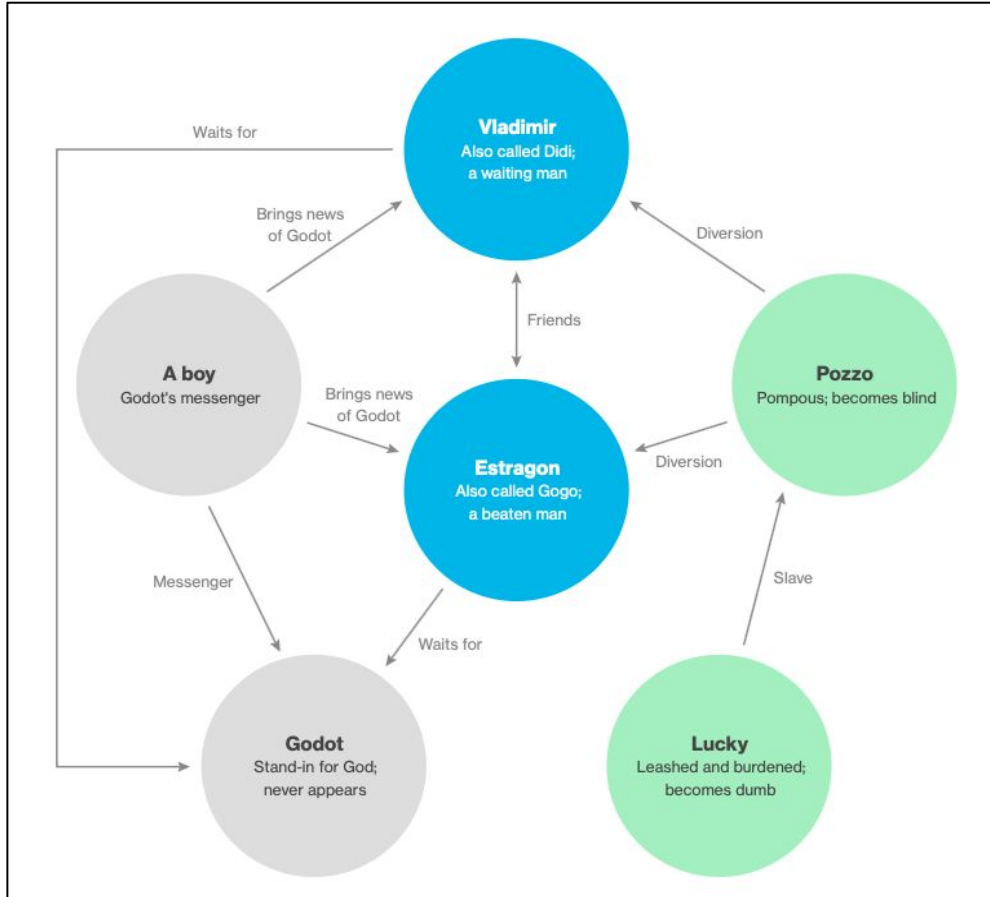
## Boy:

- He appears at the end of the play to inform Vladimir that Godot will not be able to appear in the night
- In the second night, he argues that he did not visit Vladimir the previous night

## Godot:

- The man that Vladimir and Estragon perpetually wait for and never appears
- His name and character are often thought to be representative of God

# Character Map

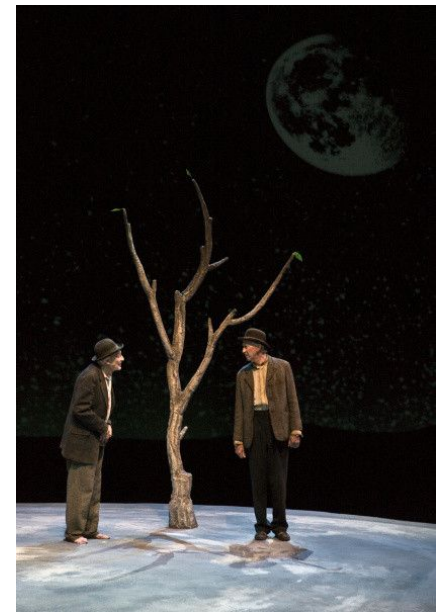




# Setting

## A country road - unknown time and place:

- The play is set in a barren landscape, with a single tree - depending on how the director chooses, the set may be ornate or simple
- The barren, sparse setting is implemented in order to disorientate the audience and further highlight the uncertainty of when the play is set
- The historical setting is unspecified, with the play presumed to occur over two days (with one day probably being a Saturday)
- The only reference to time is at the end of Act II, when the sun sets and the moon rises



# Tone

## A bleak, comic tone:

- The bleak-comic tone within the play occurs in a symbiotic way
  - What is meant by this is that; the play is bleak because it is comic and comic because of the bleak absurdity
- Beckett depicts life within the play as comic due to the absurdity of discussing conversations (as bleak as) carrots and turnips in immense detail

# Themes

## **Waiting, boredom and nihilism:**

- The central act of the play is waiting, yet despite waiting, nothing ever happens
- The act of waiting ultimately creates boredom, with the characters repeating that there is “nothing to be done” and “nothing to do”
- The experience of boredom and waiting is similarly experienced by the audience (with this effect intended by Beckett)

## **Humour and the absurd:**

- The play is filled with various nonsensical lines, wordplay and meaningless dialogue
- The absurd nature of the play, similarly heightens the humour within the play and makes a tragic scene ‘lighter’ through the use of absurd humour
- Beckett’s use of both tragedy and comedy allows for the play to be referred to as an absurdist piece

# Themes - Continued

## Modernism and Postmodernism:

- The play is regarded as a modernist play in the sense that it pushes the boundaries of a literary genre, representation and typical etiquette
- The play is also a postmodernism play, as a result of it being a play that abandons tradition and questions the notions of norms and authority (particularly religious authority and religious teachings)

## Humanity, companionship, suffering and dignity:

- The play sees characters experience a great deal of pain, including physical, mental and emotional pain
- The constant pain and suffering has even been argued to dehumanise the characters and rob them of their dignity
- Yet despite the pain and suffering, the characters are seen displaying their humanity and companionship towards one another. Vladimir and Estragon help each other and develop a friendship
- Further, despite the tragic circumstance in which the pair are in, they continually search for signs of hope and continue to wait for Godot

# Symbols

## Hats:

- Vladimir, Estragon Lucky and Pozzo all wear hats and are quite fascinated by them
- Hats are often used throughout the play in order to think, or as a mechanism to allow a character to fluidly change their identity

## Names:

- Names throughout the play are often revealed to have hidden meanings
- Godot: evokes similarity to God for many readers yet it has been argued that Beckett chose this name to 'confuse' and 'tease' the audience
- Estragon: meaning "tarragon" (a plant) within French - minimal significance for character
- Pozzo: Italian for water well - minimal significance for character
- Lucky: the name is ironic as Lucky is the character who suffers the most out of all characters
- It can be argued that the character's names are meaningless and therefore further illuminate the nihilistic worldview presented within the play

# Essay Questions

1. The most prominent characters within the plays are in pairs. Does this create significance for the boy who appears alone?
2. How does the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon compare with the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky? What is the effect created by the contrast in these characters?
3. Does the play warrant a religious reading? Can Godot be considered a Christ figure or simply a religious figure? What is implied by his failure to appear? Respond, with reference to the play's biblical allusions
4. Beckett referred to his play as a "tragicomedy". Do you agree with this classification?
5. What are the role of memories in the play? What is the purpose of having one character remember what all the others forget?
6. What is the overall tone of the play?
7. Critics have argued that Vladimir and Estragon remain together due to their complementary personalities, arguing that each fulfills the qualities that the other lacks, rendering them dependent on each other. Think about what evidence there is in the play for this type of interpretation.

# Quiz

Test your knowledge!

[https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/godot/context/?quickquiz\\_id=1971](https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/godot/context/?quickquiz_id=1971)

<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/w/waiting-for-godot/study-help/quiz>

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