




THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD: THE BASICS



The term 'Theatre of the Absurd' was coined by Martin Esslin in his 1962 book by that title. It refers to the work of a loosely associated group of dramatists who first emerged during and after World War II.



Theatre of the Absurd came about as a reaction to World War II.


The global nature of this war and the resulting trauma of living under the threat of a nuclear annihilation put into stark perspective the essential precariousness of human life.




It takes the basis of existential philosophy.


The playwright of the absurd views life existentially and expresses the senselessness of it.

Most of the plays express a sense of wonder, incomprehension, and at times despair at the meaninglessness of human existence. Since, they do not believe in a rational and well-meaning universe, they do not see any possibility of resolution of the problems they present, either.




The absurdist playwrights give artistic expression to Albert Camus' existential philosophy, as illustrated in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that life is inherently meaningless. *The Myth of Sisyphus* is the harbinger of the theatre of the absurd.

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- Sisyphus, punished by the gods, must roll a huge rock up a hill, and once he reaches the summit, he must throw it down and start all over again. Sisyphus forever rolls a stone up a hill and is forever aware that it [the stone] will never reach the top. The absurdity here is the why and also the how: The senselessness.





Camus argued that humanity had to resign itself to recognizing that a fully satisfying rational explanation of the universe was beyond its reach; in that sense, the world must ultimately be seen as absurd.


The Theatre of the Absurd does not argue *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being via concrete stage images.


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- It creates a style of theatre which presented a world which cannot be logically explained.
 - It uses techniques that seemed to be illogical to the theatre world. The arbitrary structure of the plays reflects the arbitrary and irrational nature of life.

- Structurally, in contrast to a well made play with a beginning, middle and a neatly tied up ending, the plays by the absurdist playwrights often start at an arbitrary point and end just as arbitrarily. The plots often deviate from the more traditional episodic structure, and seem to be cyclic, ending the same way it begins. It rejects narrative continuity and the rigidity of logic.
- The scenery is often unrecognizable.
- The dialogue never seems to make any sense. Language is seen as a futile attempt to communicate. In short, the communication is impossible.


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- The general effect is often a nightmare or dreamlike atmosphere in which the protagonist is overwhelmed by the chaotic or irrational nature of his environment.
 - Most absurdist intermix farce and tragedy in which the poignantly tragic may come upon the funny, or vice versa.
 - Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard can be said to be the primary playwrights of the absurd.


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- The Theatre of the Absurd was also anticipated in the dream novels of James Joyce and Franz Kafka who created archetypes by delving into their own subconscious and exploring the universal, collective significance of their own private obsessions.


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- Unlike the traditional theatre which attempts to create a photographic representation of life as we see it, the Theatre of the Absurd aims to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams. The focal point of these dreams is often man's fundamental bewilderment and confusion, stemming from the fact that he has no answers to the basic existential questions: why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice and suffering.



Ionesco defined the absurdist everyman as "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots ... lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, and useless."

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- The Theatre of the Absurd, in a sense, attempts to re-establish man's communion with the universe. The Theatre of the Absurd hopes to achieve this by shocking man out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical and complacent. It is felt that there is mystical experience in confronting the limits of human condition.

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- One of the most important aspects of absurd drama is its distrust of language as a means of communication.
 - Language is nothing more than a vehicle for conventionalized, stereotyped, meaningless exchanges.



The Theatre of the Absurd shows language as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. Absurd drama uses conventionalised speech, clichés, slogans and technical jargon, which it distorts, parodies and breaks down. By ridiculing conventionalised and stereotyped speech patterns, the Theatre of the Absurd tries to make people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically.




Absurd drama subverts logic. It relishes the unexpected and the logically impossible.




Theatre of the Absurd has some stylistic precursors as in the following:


- Tragicomedy: The mode of most 'absurdist' plays is tragicomedy. Writers associated with the theatre of the absurd have been particularly attracted to tragicomedy. Tragicomedy is a form of drama that combines tragic and comic elements. Sudden reversals, averted catastrophes, and happy endings were the standard ingredients of the form.




Dadaism: Many of the Absurdists had direct connections with the Dadaists. Dadaism or Dada is a post-World War I cultural movement in visual art as well as literature (mainly poetry), theatre and graphic design. The movement was a protest against the barbarism of the War and what Dadaists believed was an oppressive intellectual rigidity in both art and everyday society; its works were characterized by a deliberate irrationality and the rejection of the prevailing standards of art. Dada began as an anti-art movement, in the sense that it rejected the way art was appreciated and defined in contemporary art scenes.



Surrealism: Surrealism style uses visual imagery from the subconscious mind to create art without the intention of logical comprehensibility. The movement was begun primarily in Europe, centred in Paris, and attracted many of the members of the Dada community. Influenced by the psychoanalytical work of Freud and Jung, there are similarities between the Surrealist movement and the Symbolist movement of the late 19th century.




Antonin Artaud's 'The Theatre of Cruelty' was a particularly important philosophical treatise. Artaud claimed theatre's reliance on literature was inadequate and that the true power of theatre was in its visceral impact. Artaud rejected realism in the theatre, calling for a return to myth and magic and to the exposure of the deepest conflicts within the human mind. He demanded a theatre that would produce collective archetypes and create a modern mythology.




It was no longer possible, he insisted, to keep using traditional art forms and standards that had ceased being convincing and lost their validity. The Theatre of the Absurd is as Ionesco called it "anti-theatre". It was surreal, illogical, conflictless and plotless. The dialogue often seemed to be complete gibberish. And, not surprisingly, the public's first reaction to this new theatre was incomprehension and rejection.


Existentialism: The Theatre of the Absurd is commonly associated with Existentialism. Existentialistic ideas came out of a time in society when there was a deep sense of despair following the Great Depression and World War II. There was a spirit of optimism in society that was destroyed by World War I and its mid-century calamities. Existentialism was a philosophy born out of the Angst of post-war Europe, out of a loss of faith in the ideals of progress, reason and science. If not only God, but reason and objective value are dead, then man is abandoned in an absurd and alien world. The philosophy for man in this "age of distress" must be a subjective, personal one. A person's remaining hope is to return to his "inner self", and to live in whatever ways he feels are true to that self. The hero for this age, the existentialist hero, lives totally free from the constraints of discredited traditions, and commits himself unreservedly to the demands of his inner, authentic being.




This despair has been articulated by existentialist philosophers well into the 1970s and continues on to this day as a popular way of thinking and reasoning (with the freedom to choose one's preferred moral belief system and lifestyle). An existentialist could either be a religious moralist, agnostic relativist, or an amoral atheist. Kierkegaard, a religious philosopher, Nietzsche, an anti-Christian, Sartre, an atheist, and Camus an atheist, are credited for their works and writings about existentialism. Sartre is noted for bringing the most international attention to existentialism in the 20th Century.



Human life is in no way complete and fully satisfying because of suffering and losses that occur when considering the lack of perfection, power, and control one has over their life. Even though life is not optimally satisfying, it nonetheless has meaning. Existentialism is the search and journey for true self and true personal meaning in life.



Most importantly, it is the arbitrary act that existentialism finds most objectionable-that is, when someone or society tries to impose or demand that their beliefs, values, or rules be faithfully accepted and obeyed. Existentialists believe this destroys individualism and makes a person become whatever the people in power desire thus they are dehumanized and reduced to being an object.



Existentialism then stresses that a person's judgment is the determining factor for what is to be believed rather than by arbitrary religious or secular world values.

Existentialism is a 20th century philosophy concerned with human existence, finding self, and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility.



without the help of laws, ethnic rules or traditions.


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Existentialism takes into consideration the underlying concepts:


- Human free will,
- Human nature is chosen through life choices,
- A person is best when struggling against their individual nature, fighting for life,
- Decisions are not without stress and consequences,
- There are things that are not rational,
- Personal responsibility and discipline is crucial,
- Society is unnatural and its traditional religious and secular rules are arbitrary,
- Worldly desire is futile.




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- Friedrich Nietzsche: Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the most influential of all modern existentialist and postmodernist thinkers. He is considered the father of Nihilism, which teaches that there is no ultimate meaning to human existence. His attempt to expose the motives of Western religion and philosophy sent a clear and blunt message to theologians, philosophers, psychologists, and all modern thinkers. His written critiques about human existence, religion, morality, modern culture, and science challenged and questioned the value and objectivity of truth and how life should be interpreted.


- Nietzsche
- Popularized the idea that God is dead.
- Insisted that without God, life is meaningless.
- Was convinced that Christian virtues made weak people. That meekness was a liability.
- Did not believe in values or truth.
- Believed that all people should strive to be a superman.
- Believed personal power was essential.
- Logically disputing and discriminating truth from opinion and error was his esteemed virtue.
- Believed good and evil kept the world as it was and in a state of eternal occurrence.
- Praised the Greek ideals of Dionysius who exalted life in its most irrational and cruel features, and that the proper task of the superman was to exist beyond and not effected by good and evil.
- Viewed that freedom and greatness is desiring to love self and life as it is, was, and embracing the fate of what self and life will be in the future to come.


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- Søren Kierkegaard (pronounced Kyer'-kuh-gohr) (1813-1855): He was a Danish religious philosopher, passionate Protestant theist, and non-practicing ordained minister. His legacy was his belief that our response to God should be one of unrestrained passion toward our beloved.
 - He perceived God and existence of life from a humanistic view emphasizing the total autonomy of man.
 - Many refer to him as the father of existentialism even though he did not even use the term
 - Kierkegaard's influence is not only acknowledged for existentialism but also for postmodernism, nihilism, and different strands of psychology as well.


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- no one could hide behind church membership for their salvation.
 - In an attempt to change Protestant rationalistic theology, he wrote and published his religious philosophy in eighteen *Edifying Discourses* for churches to adopt but met resistance by clergy.
 - He argued that the church had become corrupt through secular and political involvement, that the Bible wasn't to become a person's final authority until they authorize it to be by volitional choice, and that the individual is fully responsible for their faith in God without doctrinal influence.



The Theatre of the Absurd departs from realistic characters, situations and all of the associated theatrical conventions. Time, place and identity are ambiguous and fluid, and even basic causality frequently breaks down.

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- Meaningless plots, repetitive or nonsensical dialogue and dramatic non-sequiturs are often used to create dream-like or even nightmare-like moods. There is a fine line, however, between the careful and artful use of chaos and non-realistic elements and true, meaningless chaos. While many of the plays described by this title seem to be quite random and meaningless on the surface, an underlying structure and meaning is usually found in the midst of the chaos.


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- According to Martin Esslin, Absurdism is "the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose" (Esslin [1961] 24). Absurdist Drama asks its audience to "draw his own conclusions, make his own errors" (Esslin [1961] 20). Though Theatre of the Absurd may be seen as nonsense, they have something to say and can be understood" (Esslin [1961] 21).

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- Esslin makes a distinction between the dictionary definition of absurd ("out of harmony" in the musical sense) and Drama's understanding of the Absurd: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose.... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (Esslin [1961] 23).


- Characters: The characters in Absurdist drama are lost and floating in an incomprehensible universe. Many characters appear as automatons stuck in routines speaking only in cliché. Characters are frequently stereotypical, archetypal, or flat character types. The more complex characters are in crisis because the world around them is incomprehensible. Characters in Absurdist drama may also face the chaos of a world that science and logic have abandoned. Characters may find themselves trapped in a routine. The plots of many Absurdist plays feature characters in interdependent pairs, commonly either two males or a male and a female. The two characters may be roughly equal or have a begrudging interdependence (like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*). One character may be clearly dominant and may torture the passive character (like Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*); the relationship of the characters may shift dramatically throughout the play.

- Plot: Plots are frequently cyclical: generally, begins where the play ended – some lines at the beginning responding to some lines at the end – and it can be assumed that each day the same actions will take place. Plots can consist of the absurd repetition of cliché and routine, as in *Godot*. Often there is a menacing outside force that remains a mystery. Absence, emptiness, nothingness, and unresolved mysteries are central features in many Absurdist plots: for example, the action of *Godot* is centred around the absence of a man named Godot, for whom the characters perpetually wait. The plot may also revolve around an unexplained metamorphosis, a supernatural change, or a shift in the laws of physics.

- Language: Despite its reputation for nonsense language, much of the dialogue in Absurdist plays is naturalistic. The moments when characters resort to nonsense language or clichés—when words appear to have lost their denotative function, thus creating misunderstanding among the characters (Esslin [1961] 26)—make Theatre of the Absurd distinctive. Language frequently gains a certain phonetic, rhythmical, almost musical quality, opening up a wide range of often comedic playfulness. Distinctively Absurdist language will range from meaningless clichés to Vaudeville-style word play to meaningless nonsense.




Characters would exchange empty clichés that never ultimately amounted to true communication or true connection. Absurdist characters go through routine dialogue full of clichés without actually communicating anything substantive or making a human connection. In other cases, the dialogue is purposefully elliptical; the language of Absurdist Theatre becomes secondary to the poetry of the concrete and objectified images of the stage.




Many of Beckett's plays devalue language for the sake of the striking tableau. Harold Pinter—famous for his "Pinter pause"—presents more subtly elliptical dialogue; often the primary things characters should address are replaced by ellipsis or dashes.

SAMUEL BECKETT:


Samuel Beckett is probably the most well known of the absurdist playwrights because of his work *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's plays seem to focus on the themes of the uselessness of human action, and the failure of the human race to communicate. He had quite a normal upbringing in an upper-middle-class Irish family, and excelled in both school and the sport of cricket. He attended the University of Dublin Ireland where he received his M.A. in modern languages, he then taught for a short time, explored parts of Europe and eventually settled in Paris.




In the 1930's and 40's Beckett published many works in the form of essays, short stories, poetry, and novels, but very few people noticed his work. His post-war era fame only came about in the 1950's when he published three novels and his famous play, *Waiting for Godot* which is probably the most famous absurd play to date.




He wrote *Eleutheria*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, the novels *Malloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnameable*, and *Mercier et Camier*, two books of short stories, and a book of criticism.




Samuel Beckett's first play, *Eleutheria*, mirrors his own search for freedom, revolving around a young man's efforts to cut himself loose from his family and social obligations. His first real triumph, however, came on January 5, 1953, when *Waiting for Godot* premiered at the Théâtre de Babylone. In spite of some expectations to the contrary, the strange little play in which "nothing happens" became an instant success, running for four hundred performances at the Théâtre de Babylone and enjoying the critical praise of.




Perhaps the most famous production of *Waiting for Godot*, however, took place in 1957 when a company of actors from the San Francisco Actor's Workshop presented the play at the San Quentin penitentiary for an audience of over fourteen hundred convicts. Surprisingly, the production was a great success. The prisoners understood as well as Vladimir and Estragon that life means waiting, killing time and clinging to the hope that relief may be just around the corner: If not today, then perhaps tomorrow.



Beckett secured his position as a master dramatist on April 3, 1957 when his second masterpiece, *Endgame*, premiered (in French) at the Royal Court Theatre in London. Although English was his native language, all of Beckett's major works were originally written in French--a curious phenomenon since Beckett's mother tongue was the accepted international language of the twentieth century. Apparently, however, he wanted the discipline and economy of expression that an acquired language would force upon on him.



Beckett's dramatic works do not rely on the traditional elements of drama. He trades in plot, characterization, and final solution, which had hitherto been the hallmarks of drama, for a series of concrete stage images. Language is useless, for he creates a mythical universe peopled by lonely creatures who struggle vainly to express the inexpressible. His characters exist in a terrible dreamlike vacuum, overcome by an overwhelming sense of bewilderment and grief, grotesquely attempting some form of communication, then crawling on, endlessly.



Beckett was the first of the absurdists to win international fame. His works have been translated into over twenty languages. In 1969 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He continued to write until his death in 1989, but the task grew more and more difficult with each work until, in the end, he said that each word seemed to him "an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness."

Samuel Beckett's primary focus was on the *failure* (poverty, failure, exile and loss — as man is a 'non-knower' and a 'non-can-er') of man to overcome absurdity.


Full Time Over GODOT






THE CONCEPT OF TIME AND THE SETTING


Life has two absolute truths, birth and death. The momentary experiences and memories that define what lies between these two truths have been structured into a linear progression of the human mind into the concept known as time. If one accepts this existentialist view of existence, then the concepts of fate and predestiny simply cannot exist. Each moment of life is dictated by chance and circumstance, bestowing fortune on some while misery on others.



In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* Beckett represents the world of Vladimir and Estragon as one of chaos, devoid of any meaningful structure or pattern. Time cannot be applied in this world where day can end without notice and where one cannot remember their actions from the previous day. Time is essentially meaningless, as it is only experienced by a terminal repetition of waiting with no end in sight, except death. The mundane process of this wait is cyclical and almost totally repetitious, however in the second act variations in the repetition become apparent.



These variations are most noticeable in Pozzo and Lucky during their second meeting with Vladimir and Estragon. Because of time's relationships with the cohesion of moments in one's life and its representation as a futile concept within the play, a conclusion can be drawn that life as well is just as insignificant. The dramatic changes that occur in Lucky and Pozzo are a manifestation of the meaninglessness of time and therefore life, the blind forces of chance and circumstance that indiscriminately wield themselves upon the human race making time and life insignificant and powerless, and the ultimate universality of the individual.



Estragon and Vladimir's individual existence and role in the world are thus blurred due to their inseparable lives and consciousness. Their lives are so interweaved that a unique and individual perception is nearly impossible. They must on each other every day to remember what they did and where they did it. Their voices often ring together in one common voice during language games they play to pass the time, proclaiming the universality of their existence:

- Estragon: Oh, I say!
Vladimir: A running sore!
Estragon: It's the rope.
Vladimir: It's the rubbing.
Estragon: It's inevitable.
Vladimir: It's the knot.
Estragon: It's the chaffing. (17B)

These games work to show the triviality of their lives and to portray the similarity in their perceptions. They must play these games because silence means a definite stop in the passing of time and their lives. It leaves them in the state between being and not being, as they only know they exist through interaction with one another, and between life and death. These language games mimic the human perception of time's fluency, and makes time pass away faster to the only true ending in sight, death. Vladimir says, "We have time to grow old... but habit is a great deadener" (43A). This statement only perpetuates the meaninglessness of their existence because they are aware that the actions they partake in are to "deaden" the reality of their lives and their perpetual wait. They confront time only when there is a break in the games and they can feel that they are simply waiting. These men experience time as a meaningless and stagnant state of passivity and repetition; thus their lives mimic this state accordingly.




Circular Movement

A life, which is characterised by a complete aimlessness, may be said to have become a "life without time." What we call time springs from man's needs and from his attempts to satisfy them. Life is temporal only because needs are either not yet satisfied, or goals have already been reached, or objectives are still at one's disposal. Now, in Estragon's and Vladimir's lives, objectives no longer exist. For this reason in the play time does not exist either; and it is for this reason, and quite legitimately, that events and conversations are going in circles; after a while this circular movement gives the impression of being stationary, and time appears to be standing still.


"Killing" Time

If time still survives here, it is due to the fact that the activity of "killing time" has not died out yet. The two tramps try to produce merely the sequence of time. When they decide to leave, they remain; when they wish to help, they hardly lift a finger. Even their impulses of goodness or indignation stop so suddenly that their sudden disappearance gives the effect of a *negative* explosion. And yet they resume their "activity" time and again, because this kind of activity keeps time moving, pushes a few inches of time behind them, and bring them a few inches closer to the supposed Godot.




Time is something which cannot be controlled, and at the same time it is a fluid concept. Time does not seem to move at a constant pace (although we assume that it must) therefore, time itself can be subjective.

This is demonstrated in Vladimir and Estragon's conversation after Pozzo and Lucky have departed for the first time. Vladimir claims that their visit helped to pass the time, but Estragon claims it would have passed anyway. Estragon counters "Yes, but not so rapidly."



In addition, time in *Waiting for Godot* is cyclical. This is largely achieved through repetition. Some argue that the second act of the play is merely a repeat of the first. There are many uses of repetition throughout the play, such as the line "Nothing to be done".



Time, as aforementioned, is meaningless in this play due to the fusion of the past and present, as well as the forgotten. There is no orderly sequence of events.


World has no meaning if it is guided by chance and random occurrences and can be toyed with by, what in Pozzo's case is called, "Fortune".

The triviality and insignificance of one's life and its relationship to time is represented in the ideals of the universality of the individual.



Life is a lengthy period of waiting, during which the passage of time has little importance.

The amount of time that they had already spent doing this and the amount of time that would do so in the future is unknown, but neither is important because time was meaningless for them.



The overall theme of the meaninglessness of time presented itself many times throughout the play, often during what seemed to be silly arguments between Vladimir and Estragon. Only by looking at the deeper meaning of these often illogical conversations and by combining them with other supporting details of the play can one discover how these logic problems relate to the whole.

'Waiting for Godot' has been referred to as the play where nothing happens, twice. When nothing happens, time is empty. And when time is empty, it cannot be felt to pass. In this way Pozzo validates all of his measurements of time by his watch, using this tool not so much to measure as to define time. Later he denies Vladimir's assertion that "Time has stopped" by confirming that his watch is ticking. Seemingly, blind people have no sense of time (as he vehemently insists) because they cannot watch any timepieces, mechanical or astronomical. In Act Two, when Pozzo is blind, he asks Gogo and Didi what time it is. The way he sees it, time is an illusion to "make us feel we exist".

Our Existence, A Mere Playing of Games

The two tramps improvise and invent games to pass the time. They borrow activities from the vast store of everyday actions and transform them into play in order to pass the time.


Estragon plays the game of taking his shoes off and putting them on; by doing so he does not exhibit himself as a fool but exhibits us as fools: he demonstrates through the device of inversion that our playing of games has no more meaning than his.

Pozzo and Lucky as Champions of Time

However shy Vladimir and Estragon may feel when first facing Pozzo and Lucky, there is one thing they cannot conceal: that they regard the new pair as enviable. Themselves sentenced to “being without time,” Vladimir and Estragon look upon Pozzo and Lucky as privileged beings because they are the champions of time. Pozzo, the master, is enviable because he has no need to “make time” by himself, or to advance by himself, not to speak of waiting for Godot, for Lucky drags him forward anyway.

SETTING


Beckett's own script notes can best describe the setting of "Waiting for Godot": "A country road. A tree". There is an otherworldly alienation in this sparse setting. It could be anywhere, in any country of the world. No visible horizon exists; no markers of civilization are present. The setting is constant; the only change occurs between Act I and Act II, when the barren tree of Act I gives birth to five or six leaves in Act II.



The historical setting is unspecified. The time frame is most likely two days, one of which is probably a Saturday. The only visible reference to the passage of time occurs at the end of Act II when the sun sets and the moon rises. There are verbal references to the passing of time, such as when the characters make mention of yesterday and the previous evening.



LANGUAGE




Beckett's plays are concerned with expressing the difficulty of finding meaning in a world subject to change. His use of language probes the limitations of language both as a means of communication and as a vehicle for the expression of valid statements, an instrument of thought.


His use of the dramatic medium shows that he has tried to find means of expression beyond language. On the stage one can dispense with words altogether (for instance, in his mime-plays), or at least one can reveal the reality behind the words, as when the actions of the characters contradict their verbal expression. "Let's go", say the two tramps at the end of each Act of *Waiting for Godot*, but the stage directions inform us that "they don't move".

Ten different modes of the breakdown (or disintegration) of language have been noted in *Waiting For Godot*.


They range from simple misunderstandings and double-entendres to monologues (as signs of inability to communicate), clichés, repetitions of synonyms, inability to find the right words, and telegraphic style (loss of grammatical structure, communication by shouted commands) to Lucky's farrago of chaotic nonsense and the dropping of punctuation marks, such as question marks, as an indication that language has lost its function as a means of communication, that questions have turned into statements not really requiring an answer.



But more important than any merely formal signs of the disintegration of language and meaning in Beckett's plays is the nature of the dialogue itself, which again and again breaks down because no truly logical discussion or exchange of thoughts occurs in it either through loss of meaning of single words or through the inability of characters to remember what has just been said. In a purposeless world that has lost its ultimate objectives, dialogue, like all action, becomes a mere game to pass the time.




Beckett's use of language is thus designed to devalue language as a vehicle of conceptual thought or as an instrument for the communication of ready-made answers to the problems of the human condition. And yet his continued use of language must, paradoxically, be regarded as an attempt to communicate the incommunicable.




He may have devalued language as an instrument for the communication of ultimate truths, but he has shown himself a great master of language as an artistic medium. He has moulded words into a superb instrument for his purpose.


In *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, plays drained of character, plot, and meaningful dialogue, Beckett has shown that such a seemingly impossible feat can in fact be accomplished.




What Beckett is above all conscious of is the dialectical relationship between the object to be expressed (theme, subject matter) and the mode of expression (form of language, style). Regarding the latter as constitutive of the former, he foregrounds the comic absurdity of their dissociation into two non-interacting elements, whilst maintaining the dialectic through the overall theatrical form. However, because Beckett does not regard language as a self-sufficient system of concepts exoteric to the theme it is bound to express, the imposition of dramatic form is in turn problematized. By radically subverting such a notion of language Beckett sets all elements of his drama into a type of free-play. It is the movement within this free-play, taking in all previously fixed points (self, language, material reality, etc).




In *Waiting for Godot* Beckett embodies these specific binary oppositions in the very structure of the play. Didi and Gogo stand in opposition to Godot much as presence stands in opposition to absence. In line with our expectations Beckett thus deals with the structure and operation of language both at the level of dramatic speech and at the level of dramatic form in sceptical view of perception. Only insofar as they can be seen can Didi and Gogo be sure about their own presence, their own existence. *Waiting for Godot* is built upon such a composite. Didi feels lonely when Gogo sleeps because so long as the perceiver (Gogo) does not see, then the perceived (Didi) cannot be sure if he lives.




The repetition of the word 'nothing' ('nothing to be done,' 'nothing to show' etc.) does not, then, express their actual situation, so much as their desire to become the nothing. Their language is constructed out of an abiding awareness of the nothing, their acceptance of an essential negativity which nullifies any hope of absolute meaning.



In *Waiting for Godot*, the catalysts of speech are 'Silence' and 'Pause,' the very elements which undermine the emotions to which the characters lay claim and which prevent them occupying any decisive area of commitment. Silence breaks the continuity of words and conveys meaning in its totality. Beckett stages the sounds of silence, the other side of language, and Didi and Gogo, in their yearning for accuracy, aspire to the point of overlap, to the zero, to the point where all difference is obliterated. It is a form of death-wish. The dead voices are heard inside their silences talking of the past, of dreams and hopes; presence is once again matching with absence.



Didi and Gogo play incessantly with words; they treat the same word as its opposite, they find synonyms, they use scientific terms because they sound bombastic, they rhyme. But at the same time they dismantle language into fragments of religious, moral and scientific thought.



A word like 'unhappy,' for example, a word which inevitably bears an enormous sentimental burden, is too definite to remain unrefuted:


Estragon: I'm unhappy.

Vladimir: Not really! Since when?

Estragon: I'd forgotten.

Vladimir: Extraordinary the tricks that
memory plays!

SYMBOLS




Waiting for Godot is not completely a symbolist play. That is not to say that it does not have symbols. There are symbols galore in the play which are more elusive. However; it is not a pose, for Samuel Beckett's drama implies –rather than expresses- an attitude toward man's experience on earth; the pathos, cruelty, comradeship, hope, corruption, filthiness and wonder of human existence.

THE TREE

The tree is the only distinct piece of the setting. The tree has biblical stuff; Jesus was crucified on a cross, but that cross is sometimes referred to as a "tree," as in, "Jesus was nailed to the tree." That Vladimir and Estragon contemplate hanging themselves from the tree is likely a reference to the crucifixion, but it also parodies the religious significance. If Jesus died for the sins of others, Vladimir and Estragon are dying for nothing. Moreover, we can think the two men not as Jesus, but rather as the two thieves crucified along with Jesus.





There is more. Vladimir reports that he was told to wait for Godot by the tree. This should be reassuring-It questions whether the men are in the right place or not. As Estragon points out, they are not sure if this is the right tree. And come to think of it, they cannot even be sure if this is a tree or not. It looks like a kind of shrub.

Now what we find to be completely baffling is the tree's random sprouting of leaves between Act I and Act II. This is regeneration-it is hopeful, it is growth, it is life! And that doesn't sound anything like Waiting for Godot, especially when you look at how everything else degenerates from Act I to Act II (We are thinking in particular of Pozzo's going blind and Lucky's mute, as well as Gogo and Didi's increasing uncertainty and suffering). Also, the tree's sprouting leaves could be an ironic symbol pointing out that, far from fulfilled desires, hopes have been deferred

THE BOOTS


Each character is involved in a comedic action from the play's beginning. Estragon is struggling with a tightly fitting boot that he just cannot seem to take off his foot. The meaninglessness of Godot is further explained through its connection to Estragon's boots. The action continues in the second act when the two discover that Estragon's boots have been changed. This situation is great combination of the tragic and the comic; the situation is hilarious for its absurdity, but dismal at the same time. Every thought or action to discover the meaning of Godot is ridiculous. The interpretations of the name vary, but, just as in the boots, there is nothing inside. Whereas the boots in the first act were too tight, Estragon decides that these are "too big" and concludes the discussion frustrated, saying "That's enough about these boots."



THE ROPE

- Interpersonal relationships in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* are extremely important, because the interaction of the dynamic characters, as they try to satiate one another's boredom, is the basis for the play. Vladimir's and Estragon's interactions with Godot, which should also be seen as an interpersonal relationship among dynamic characters, forms the basis for the tale's major themes. Interpersonal relationships, including those involving Godot, are generally couched in rope images, specifically as nooses and leashes. These metaphors at times are visible and invisible, involve people as well as inanimate objects, and connect the dead with the living.





➤ The only rope that appears literally is the leash around Lucky's neck that Pozzo holds. In terms of the rope, the relationship between these characters is one of consistent domination. The stage directions say that "Pozzo drives Lucky by means of a rope passed round his neck." Lucky is whipped often. He is essentially the horse pulling Pozzo's carriage in a relationship that seems cruel, domineering and undesirable. For the first time in the text, Pozzo is dependent on Lucky for direction; Lucky is dependent on Pozzo for the same reason, though this relationship is one of emotional, rather than physical dependence. The shortness of the rope, necessary because of Pozzo's blindness, affects their relationship. Although the length of the rope is not literally changed, there is clearly an equilibrium length which must separate Pozzo from Lucky figuratively in order for their relationship to proceed naturally; any longer or shorter and there would not be the proper amount of domination and submission.

THE HAT

- Actions are restricted by absurd rules in *Waiting for Godot*. The bowler hat itself is an already comic symbol, thanks to Charlie Chaplin. The bowlers and others broadly comic aspects of their personas have remained modern audiences of Laurel and Hardy who occasionally played tramps in their films. The hat-passing game in *Waiting for Godot* and Lucky's inability to think without his hat on are two obvious Beckett derivations from Laurel and Hardy.



THE CARROT

- Carrots and turnips are in one sense just a gag reel for Vladimir and Estragon's comic bits. The carrot probably is not about the meaning of life. But it could be a hint as to the differences between the way Vladimir and Estragon live their lives. And we were interested in their disagreement over the vegetable: "Funny," Estragon comments as he munches, "the more you eat, the worse it gets." Vladimir quickly disagrees, adding that, for him, it's "just the opposite." On the one hand, this could be a completely meaningless conversation – the point is simply that Vladimir is in disagreement, playing at opposites, adding to the bickering duality between himself and Gogo.



DUALITY

- Another symbol in *Waiting for Godot* is duality. In the text, there are full of pairs, such as Estragon and Vladimir, the boy and his brother, Pozzo and Lucky, Cain and Abel and of course the two acts of the play itself. With these pairs comes the repeated notion of arbitrary. If Vladimir and Estragon try to hang themselves, the bough may or may not break. One man may die, one man may live. Godot may or may not come to save them. In the Bible, Cain's sacrifice was rejected and Abel's accepted for no discernible reason. Even the tone of *Waiting for Godot* is filled with duality: person arguments, back- and-forth questions, disagreement-agreement, question and answers.

NIGHTFALL AND THE RISING MOON


- While Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot, they also wait for nightfall. For some reason, they don't have to wait for him once the night has fallen. The classic interpretation is that night=dark=death. The falling of night is as much a reprieve from daily suffering of a lifetime. There is also the issue of the moon, as its appearance in the sky is the real signal that night has come and the men can stop waiting for Godot. Time passes in an absurdly inconsistent manner in *Waiting for Godot*; while the characters decay (Pozzo goes blind, Lucky loses the ability to speak), the tree goes in the other direction blossoming in a single night.

SMELL

- Estragon is repeatedly repelled by smells in *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir stinks of garlic, Lucky smells like who knows what, and Pozzo reeks of a fart in Act II. It seems every time Estragon tries to get close to a person, he is repelled by their smell. It looks to us like smells represent one of the barriers to interpersonal relationships. Estragon is not just repelled by smells– he's repelled by the visceral humanity of those around him. There's something gritty and base about the smell of a human body, and for Estragon it's too much to handle.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GODOT?

- The range of possible religious interpretations is virtually endless. There is still no definitive answer as to whom or what Godot represents and the writer has denied that Godot represents a specific thing despite a certain ambiguity in the name. Though he seems to create greater symbolism and significance in the name Godot, Beckett actually rejects the notion of truth in language through the insignificance of the title character's name. By creating a false impression of religious symbolism in the name Godot Beckett leads the interpreter to a dead end. In the opening moments of the play, Vladimir asks "Hope deferred make something sick, who said that?". The real quotation "Hope deferred make the heart sick" comes from proverbs of the Bible. Shortly after, Vladimir asks if Estragon has ever read the Bible and continues on a discussion of the Gospels, the "Saviour," and the two thieves surrounding Christ during the Crucifixion.



➤ By inserting religious discussions in the first few moments of play, the playwright encourages the interpreter to assume. The play's themes are greatly connected with religion. Then, when the discussion turns to Godot, Estragon associates their request from Godot with "A kind of prayer". The connection between God and Godot is seemingly firmly established, leaving room for a variety of interpretations.



Themes

Choices

Waiting for Godot consists of two men unable to act, move, or think in any significant way while they kill time waiting for a mysterious man, Godot. The characters fail to realize that this very act of waiting is a choice; instead, they view it as a mandatory part of their daily routine. Even when these men manage to make a conscious decision, they can't translate that mental choice into a physical act. They often "decide" to leave the stage, only to find that they are unable to move. Such inaction leads to stagnancy and repetition in the seemingly endless cycle of their lives.

If Vladimir and Estragon realized they had the freedom of choice, they could break their daily cycle of habit and inaction. The problem is one of consciousness and the uncertainty surrounding the result of any potential action prevents them from breaking the stagnant cycle of their waiting

Philosophical Viewpoint

Waiting for Godot is hailed as a classic example of "Theatre of the Absurd," dramatic works that promote the philosophy of its name. This particular play presents a world in which daily actions are without meaning, language fails to effectively communicate, and the characters at times reflect a sense of artifice, even wondering aloud whether perhaps they are on a stage.

The play has all the traits of existentialism both Vladimir and Estragon represent the man in general who is facing the problems of his existence in this world. They are interdependent like all other man. Hope for salvation is the subject of play and is the problem faced by the whole human race. Representing the man in general, the two tramps realize the futility of their exercise and we note that they are merely filling up the hours with the pointless activity. Hence their

Truth

Waiting for Godot is a play driven by a lack of truth – in other words, uncertainty. Characters are unable to act in any meaningful way and claim this is so because they are uncertain of the consequences. Without the presence of objective truth, every statement is brought to question, and even common labels (color, time, names) become arbitrary and subjective.

Life, Consciousness, and Existence

The portrait of daily life painted by *Waiting for Godot* is a dismal one. It is repetitive and stagnant. It lacks meaning and purpose and entails perpetual suffering. The solution (which none of the characters take) would seem to be action and choice despite the ever-presence of uncertainty, and an awareness of one's surroundings and past actions. As one character says, "habit is a great deadener" – our actions should stem from conscious choice rather than apathy.

The barren setting of *Waiting for Godot* is proof that Vladimir and Estragon will never be able to break their cycle of inactive waiting; it negates the possibility of life or creation.

Time

Time presents a slew of problems in *Waiting for Godot*. The very title of the play reveals its central action: waiting. The two main characters are forced to whittle away their days while anticipating the arrival of a man who never comes. Because they have nothing to do in the meantime, time is a dreaded barrier, a test of their ability to endure. Because they repeat the same actions every day, time is cyclical. That every character seems to have a faulty memory further complicates matters; time loses meaning when the actions of one day have no relevance or certainty on the next.

Religion

Religion is incompatible with reason in *Waiting for Godot*. Characters who attempt to understand religion logically are left in the dark, and the system is compared to such absurd banalities as switching bowler hats or taking a boot on and off. Religion is also tied to uncertainty, since there is no way of knowing what is objectively true in the realm of faith.

Waiting for Godot operates on one damning, principal contradiction: the men can only be saved if their personal god, Godot, were to appear. However, since a commonly accepted interpretation of God is that he is without extension (meaning he doesn't occupy space), Godot's presence would mean that he is not God. This renders Vladimir and Estragon's waiting absurdly futile.

Estragon compares himself to Christ when he decides to go barefoot. When Vladimir tells him not to compare himself to Christ, Estragon responds that "all my life I've compared myself to him."

Friendship

Friendship is tricky in *Waiting for Godot*, as each character is fundamentally isolated from every other. Relationships teeter between a fear of loneliness and an essential inability to connect. This tension is central to the play. The problems that keep characters apart vary from physical disgust to ego to a fear of others' suffering.

Human relationships are existential: Pozzo and Lucky are literally tethered by a cord in a master-slave relationship. Pozzo who seeks friendship from Estragon and Vladimir ends up forming a meaningless friendship with them, much like his meaningless relationship with Lucky, which dehumanizes both of them.

The friendship between Vladimir and Estragon seemingly overcomes the existential when Vladimir wakes up Estragon because he "felt lonely" (9). Estragon and Vladimir are tethered by an invisible bond in a relationship that can best be characterized as friendship. While at times they hate each other, they cannot live without one another or they would die of boredom.

Waiting for Godot Theme of Suffering

Suffering is a constant and fundamental part of human existence in *Waiting for Godot*. Every character suffers and suffers always, with no seeming respite in sight. The hardship ranges from the physical to the mental, the minor to the extreme. It drives some men to find companionship (so as to weather the storm together), causes others to abuse their companions (to lessen the suffering of the self), and for still others leads to self-isolation (since watching people suffer is a kind of anguish on its own).

Vladimir and Estragon suffer not for lack of happiness, but for lack of certainty. It is worse to not know whether or not they are miserable than to be certain of their anguish.

Waiting for Godot Theme of Mortality

None of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* shy away from the fact that death is inevitable. In fact, death becomes at times a solution for the inanity of daily life. The main characters contemplate suicide as though it were as harmless as a walk to the grocery store, probably because there's nothing in their life worth sticking around for anyway. They ultimately do not commit suicide because they claim not to have the means, but also because they are uncertain of the result of their attempt (it may work, it may fail). Because they can't be sure of what their action will bring, they decide on no action at all.

Estragon and Vladimir put the label of "waiting for Godot" on what is really just a systematic waiting for death.