


Plot Summary: Waiting for Godot

 DISCovering Authors, 2003

Introduction

Though difficult and sometimes baffling to read or (even) view, *Waiting for Godot* is nonetheless one of the most important works of our time. It revolutionized theater in the twentieth century and had a profound influence on generations of succeeding dramatists, including such renowned contemporary playwrights as Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard. After the appearance of *Waiting for Godot*, theatre was opened to possibilities that playwrights and audiences had never before imagined.

Initially written in French in 1948 as *En Attendant Godot*, Beckett's play was published in French in October of 1952 before its first stage production in Paris in January of 1953. Later translated into English by Beckett himself as *Waiting for Godot*, the play was produced in London in 1955 and in the United States in 1956 and has been produced world-wide. Beckett's play came to be considered an essential example of what Martin Esslin later called "Theatre of the Absurd," a term that Beckett disavowed but which remains a handy description for one of the most important theatre movements of the twentieth century.

"Absurdist Theatre" discards traditional plot, characters, and action to assault its audience with a disorienting experience. Characters often engage in seemingly meaningless dialogue or activities, and, as a result, the audience senses what it is like to live in a universe that doesn't "make sense." Beckett and others who adopted this style felt that this disoriented feeling was a more honest response to the post World War II world than the traditional belief in a rationally ordered universe. *Waiting for Godot* remains the most famous example of this form of drama.

Plot

Act I

On a country road, at evening, near a tree with no leaves, a middle-aged man named Estragon (nicknamed Gogo) sits on a low mound struggling to remove his boots. He is soon joined by his friend, Vladimir (nicknamed Didi), who is glad to see him again and who recalls the story of the two thieves crucified with Christ and wonders whether it was true that one of them was chosen to be saved.

Estragon suggests that they leave this place but Vladimir reminds him they must stay because they are waiting for Mr. Godot. They debate whether this is the right place or time for their meeting, but their discussion tires Estragon and he falls asleep. After Vladimir wakes Estragon they decide that they might pass the time while they wait by hanging themselves, but the lone tree in sight seems too frail to hold them and they argue over who should hang himself first.

Two more characters enter—man named Lucky, who carries a heavy load and has a rope around his neck, and a domineering man named Pozzo, who whips Lucky forward. The frightened Estragon and Vladimir huddle together and Estragon asks if Pozzo is Mr. Godot, but Pozzo, who claims to own the land they are on, intimidates Estragon and Vladimir into disavowing their connection with Godot. Pozzo proposes to stay with these two men and orders Lucky to provide what he needs to sit and relax. As Pozzo eats chicken, Estragon and Vladimir inspect Lucky; Estragon sees the chicken bones that Pozzo has thrown on the ground and is given permission to gnaw on them. Pozzo explains that he is taking Lucky to the fair to sell him, and when Lucky hears this he begins to weep, but when Estragon brings Lucky a handkerchief for his tears Lucky kicks Estragon violently in the shin.

Vladimir exits to urinate, and, after he returns, Pozzo asks if Estragon and Vladimir would like Lucky to entertain them by "thinking," but Lucky's thinking turns out to be a long, almost nonsensical monologue. Pozzo and Lucky announce their departure, do not move, but then finally manage to leave, and Vladimir and Estragon comment on how the visit from Pozzo and Lucky helped pass the time while they waited for Godot. Finally, a boy enters, addresses Vladimir as Mr. Albert, and delivers the message that Mr. Godot will not be coming this evening but will surely come tomorrow. After the boy leaves, Vladimir and Estragon also decide to leave but, after declaring their resolve, do not move.

Act II

The next day, at the same time and place (the tree now has four or five leaves), Vladimir enters in an agitated state and sings a circular kind of song about a dog. Estragon enters, feeling gloomy about the beating he reports he has suffered, and he and Vladimir agree to say that they are happy, though they do not appear to be. They rededicate themselves to waiting for Godot, and Estragon suggests they could pass the time by contradicting one another or by asking one another questions. After a number of diverting exchanges, Vladimir sees Lucky's hat, left from yesterday, and he and Estragon do a vaudeville "bit" exchanging hats until Vladimir throws his own on the ground. Vladimir suggests they pretend to be Pozzo and Lucky, which they do with limited success, but when the game sends Estragon offstage, he quickly returns, frantically announcing that "they" are coming. Vladimir thinks this means that Godot is coming but Estragon's fear finally overtakes Vladimir as well and they look for a place to hide. The tree offers little in the way of cover. Estragon calms down and suggests that they simply watch carefully. They then discover another game, calling one another names, and they insult one another until Estragon comes up with the ultimate insult, calling Vladimir a "critic." After this game ends, they explore other diversions until they are interrupted by another visit from Pozzo and Lucky.

On this visit, Pozzo is blind and bumps into Lucky after they enter, knocking them both down. Estragon asks if it is Godot who has arrived, but Vladimir is simply happy that they now have company as they wait for Godot. Pozzo is quite helpless, unable to get up from the ground, and Vladimir engages in a long philosophical discourse on whether he and Estragon should help Pozzo get up. In attempting to lift Pozzo, Vladimir falls himself and when Estragon attempts to help Vladimir up both end on the ground. With all three seated and unable to rise, Vladimir announces that "we've arrived . . . we are men." Vladimir and Estragon's next effort to rise is effortless and they help Pozzo to his feet, supporting him on each side. Pozzo begs them not to leave him. In response to Pozzo's question, "is it evening," Vladimir and Estragon scrutinize the sunset and conclude that they have indeed passed another day. Pozzo asks about Lucky, his "menial," who seems to be sleeping, and Estragon advances toward Lucky somewhat fearfully, remembering the kick in the shins he received the day before. For revenge, Estragon kicks the sleeping Lucky but hurts his foot in the process as Lucky awakes. Estragon sits and goes to sleep. Vladimir engages Pozzo in conversation and Pozzo claims no memory of a visit the day before. As Pozzo prepares to leave, Vladimir asks him what

he does, blind, if he falls where no one is there to help him. Pozzo says, "we wait till we can get up. Then we go on." Vladimir asks if Pozzo will have Lucky sing or "think" again before they leave, but Pozzo reveals that Lucky is now "dumb," or mute, incapable of making sounds—"he can't even groan." Vladimir is confused because it seems to him that just yesterday Lucky could speak, but Pozzo is aggravated by the concept of time. For him, time is a meaningless concept; he says that the moments of our lives are like a light that "gleams an instant, then it's night once more." With those words, Pozzo and Lucky leave. Soon after they leave the stage, they fall down again.

Vladimir wakens Estragon, who is annoyed because he was dreaming that he was happy. Vladimir wonders how much of what he takes to be true is maybe some kind of dreaming. A boy enters, addressing Vladimir again as Mr. Albert, and announces that Godot will not be coming this evening but will be coming (without fail) tomorrow. The boy says he wasn't the one who came yesterday, though he seems to be to Vladimir. When Vladimir makes a sudden leap at the boy, the boy is frightened and runs off. Immediately, the sun sets, the moon rises, and Estragon awakes. Estragon talks of leaving but Vladimir reminds him they must wait for Godot to come tomorrow. They notice that everything is dead except the tree. They speculate again on the idea of hanging themselves but see that they lack a proper rope for it. When they try to use Estragon's belt for a rope, his pants fall down to his ankles. When they test the belt, it breaks. They decide that they can bring a stronger rope tomorrow. Vladimir says, "Well? Shall we go?" and Estragon ends the play by saying, "Yes, let's go." The final stage direction says, "They do not move."

Characters

Estragon, also known as Gogo : Estragon is one of the two men (often referred to as "tramps") who are waiting for Mr. Godot. He is the first to appear in the play and is more docile and timid than his friend Vladimir; Estragon usually follows Vladimir's lead. At times assertive, Estragon is more emotional and volatile than Vladimir but less engaged—he gives up more easily, does a lot of sleeping, likes to dream, and forgets more easily. He even forgets Godot's name at one point. He is confused more frequently than Vladimir and is more frequently afraid—perhaps because he is the one more often beaten and physically abused by others. He has bad feet, which hurt him in his too-small boots and which smell when he has his boots off. He is more skeptical and questions more than Vladimir, doubts Godot more, and is more often anxious to leave or to travel separately from his friend. Estragon, along with Pozzo, does the eating in the play. If Estragon and Vladimir are Laurel and Hardy, Estragon is Stan Laurel, the skinny one who is frequently confused, frightened, and whiny.

Vladimir, also known as Didi, Mr. Albert : Vladimir is the more forceful, optimistic, and resilient of the two "tramps" waiting for Mr. Godot, but he is also sensitive, easily hurt, and quickly frustrated. He is extremely caring and protective of his friend, Estragon, and he more courageously expresses his outrage at Pozzo's mistreatment of Lucky. He usually leads Estragon in their games to "pass the time" and he initially represents the pair when strangers like Pozzo and the boy appear. Vladimir is the one most confident that Godot will appear and the most insistent that they meet their obligations by waiting. He is more of a thinker and philosopher than Estragon and he remembers the past much more clearly, though his memory frustrates him when other people don't remember things the way he does. He sometimes becomes angry in these situations but occasionally doubts his own certainty. This more intellectual quality leads Vladimir to be more deeply brooding and gloomy but also more persistent than his friend. Vladimir has stinking breath and kidney problems. If Estragon and Vladimir are Laurel and Hardy, Vladimir is Oliver Hardy, the fat one who does the "thinking" but is frequently dead wrong.

Pozzo : Pozzo is the bald, brutal, insensitive, and overbearing figure who intimidates Estragon and Vladimir in the first act of the play after he drives his "slave," Lucky, onto the scene. Pozzo is a sadistic bully with a large body and a huge voice who violently abuses Lucky, both physically and psychologically, forcing Lucky with whip and halter to serve his every whim and need. In the first act Pozzo seems wealthy, self-assured, and powerful. However, in the second act, Pozzo is blind and a much different person. He still has Lucky on a rope and calls him his "menial," but Pozzo now is timid, frightened, vulnerable, and helpless as he falls to the ground and cannot rise without assistance.

Lucky : Lucky is the miserable slave or "menial" whom Pozzo drives on stage in Act I and blindly follows in Act II, but while Pozzo's fortune and character changes Lucky's remains fairly similar. In the first act he is an abused beast of burden, an automaton carrying a huge load and suffering from neck abrasions where Pozzo violently jerks his halter. Lucky is understandably sad and quiet, but he is also loyal to Pozzo, eager to please, and violent himself when Estragon gets near enough to be kicked. His "thinking" seems full of a desperate energy that may come from an attempt to communicate his sadness. In the second act Lucky is mute and mostly sleeps. Lucky has long white hair that falls down around his face.

Boy : The messenger who arrives near the end of each act to inform Vladimir and Estragon that Mr. Godot will not arrive is simply called "boy." Timid and fearful, he addresses Vladimir as Mr. Albert and admits in the first act that Pozzo and his whip had frightened him and kept him from entering sooner. He claims that he tends goats for Mr. Godot and that Godot is good to him, though he admits that Godot beats the boy's brother. On each visit the boy claims to have not seen Vladimir and Estragon before. In the second act the boy reports that he thinks Godot has a white beard.

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