

Major Themes in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

Title/Allegory/Symbolism

The action, or whatever there is in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, can be summed up very briefly. At evening on a country road, two men named Vladimir and Estragon—part tramp, part clown, of indeterminate age—talk fitfully about their thwarted lives and expectantly of an appointment to meet someone named Godot. While they pass the time and wait, two strangers appear, an imperious landowner called Pozzo and at the end of a rope him animal-like servant, Lucky. After a bizarre, increasingly mystifying conversation, the master and his man move on. A boy appears to announce that Mr. Godot will not come this evening but 'surely tomorrow'. When night falls Vladimir and Estragon contemplate suicide, decide to leave, but at the first act curtain they do not move. In Act II the basic action is similar. The next day, same time, same place, Vladimir and Estragon pass the time and wait. Pozzo and Lucky—now respectively blind and dumb, again arrive and depart; the boy reappears to deliver essentially the same message and after again considering suicide, the two men prepare to go but at the final curtain do not move.

Such a summary, though obviously inadequate, points to something essential for an understanding of why many early theatregoers perceived the play as systematically symbolic. Stripped to its bare outline Beckett's play certainly does sound like an allegory: a dramatic action in which events, characters and settings represent abstract or spiritual meanings. Even for a French audience for whom the play was originally intended, the name Godot would appear to have God in it. The cyclical plot, showing on successive days two men waiting for and failing to meet a shadowy figure of authority, is very close to fable. The temptation to interpret this theme in terms of something else is naturally often irresistible. Moreover, the dialogue has several conspicuous allusions to events in the life of Christ as recounted in the New Testament. Six or seven minutes into the play, Vladimir asks Estragon if he has ever read The Bible, particularly the accounts in the Gospels of the two thieves. When his companion says no, Vladimir proceeds to lecture him on the mysteries of salvation and damnation. Later on Estragon compares himself to Christ when Vladimir observes, 'We are not Saints, but we have kept our appointment.

How many people can boast as much?', some listeners are likely to note an allusion to the parable of the Wise and the Foolish Virgin in the Gospel of Matthew. Throughout the play there is much talk about prayers and supplications, of goats and sheep, and of a personal God with a long, white beard.

The title, the sense of universal present time, the shape of the plot and of the characters, the pointed allusions— these obviously invite allegorical interpretation. Moreover, when *Waiting for Godot* was first performed in the 1950s, arguments about systems of meaning were often influenced by a large body of philosophical and fictional writing, generally known as 'Existentialist' which seemed at first glance to have marked similarities with Beckett's work. The Existentialist writers were preoccupied with many of the same vital issues, most notably the problem of discovering belief in the face of radical twentieth-century perceptions of the meaninglessness or absurdity of human life. A characteristic Existentialist response was to accept nothingness, absence and absurdity as givens and then explore the way in which human beings might self-consciously form their essence in the course of the lives they choose to lead. Though individual Existentialist philosophers differed in their views, it was generally agreed upon that a radically negative experience may contain the embryo of a positive development. The pervasiveness of Existentialist thinking in the 1940s and 1950s was so great that any work about an individual's waste for purpose and order in life especially in relation to an absent or a present divinity was likely to be discussed in the context of current controversies about existence, essence, personal freedom, responsibility and commitment. Many philosophers who were not Existentialists were also absorbed by the same questions. For instance, Simone Weil published a widely read book, *Waiting for Godot*, just at the time Beckett was trying to stage the French version of *Waiting for Godot*. Yet there seems to be no direct connection between the two. The issues were in the air.

Though many Existentialists interpreted Beckett's play in terms of their philosophy, it is now clear that it is futile to look for a systematic allegory in the play. Beyond question, the teasing title, the fable-like action and the religious allusions are essential for an understanding of the play, but not in the way some avid interpreters have originally conceived. Beckett says, 'Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar, so I naturally use it.' On another occasion he said, 'I'm interested in any system. I can't see any trace of any system anywhere.' *Waiting for Godot* resists not only systems

but abstract ideas as well. Yet even if one agrees *Waiting for Godot* is not allegorical in the sense that events and characters relate to specific systems of thought and belief, there is no doubt that the details and shape of the work feel like forcing us to generalise about its significance. In this process of generalisation, the title is an important pointer. The word 'waiting' in the title suggests a basic truth about the human condition— that we are only waiting for something that does not happen. As such the play gives artistic expression to the irrational state of unknowingness wherein we exist. The play is a dramatisation of what it means to exist in a state of radical unknowingness. Approaching in this way, the situation in which the characters find themselves and how they respond moment by moment in gesture and dialogue are more absorbing and suggestive than any overall symbolic meaning that can be formulated.

Beckett has said of *Waiting for Godot* that it is 'a play striving to avoid definition'. It is certainly a play that limits the closure of stable symbolic meaning. The play's evasion or avoidance of definition appears most of all in the impossibility of defining Godot. The characters have received the message, 'wait', an imperative injunction. Unlike Beckett's interpreters who are anxious to discover what Godot means, Vladimir and Estragon's anxiety stems from this fear of failing to be present at the appointed time and place. The play is therefore not structured as a progressive unveiling of the meaning of Godot but rather as a process of waiting for him. Godot in fact is a void that interpreters and audiences attempt to feel. God, Death, Humanity, crisis of consciousness, Waiting, object of Desire— the list of overlapping definitions for Godot is as interminable as Beckett's characters' wait. In a structural sense Godot is the absent signified of Beckett's play.

Comic Elements/Tragicomedy

It is only in the English translation that Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is described as a 'tragicomedy' in two acts. According to the standard definition, a tragicomedy is a play combining the qualities of a tragedy and comedy, or containing both tragic and comic elements, a play mainly of tragic character, but with a happy ending. Jacobsen and Mueller point out 'the constant simultaneity of tragedy and comedy' in *Godot*. According to them, if the bareness situates the tragedy then its construct makes possible the comedy. Other critics speak of 'part tragedy part comedy' in

the play. It will be best to the question why *Godot* is not a tragedy, in spite of overtones of tragedy in it. It cannot be called a tragedy in traditional or any other sense because it lacks the kind of sublimity which is believed to be the common attribute of most tragedies. Yet we observe that *Godot* depicts a despair which in view of slenderness of hope in it is nothing short of 'heroic' in the manner of 'robust optimism'. Estragon & Vladimir will come back and wait for *Godot* day after day, although through their daily experience they should know in their hearts that *Godot* will never come that there is little hope that can look forward to. Besides it will not help if he comes and is willing to grant their request for they did not ask him to do anything tangible for them. What they said to him was only 'a sort of prayer' a vague supplication.

Waiting for Godot is also a dramatic statement of the human situation itself. The play is a metaphor of one's tragic awareness of one's own self—the self that caught up in the endless process of decay and destruction. But in spite of a tragic scenario building up, the play successfully avoids being a tragedy. Beckett deals with the fundamentally tragic situation of human life comically & thus offers us a subdued form of comedy to illustrate Nell's profound dictum is endgame: 'To laugh at our own misery is the only way we have found of coming to terms with it. Like Chekhov earlier, Beckett had also discovered that nothing is funnier than happiness. The two tramps invent various games to fill the 'void' that their life is. This is amply illustrated by Vladimir & Estragon when they make such statements all the following: 'We are inexhaustible' and 'we always find something... to give us the impression we exist.' This innovative skill of theirs introduces an element of comedy into the play.

Furthermore, Beckett uses various devices to camouflage the tragic nature of their situation. It has been pointed out that Beckett has skilfully used in the play elements from different kinds of comic entertainment. The dialogue of the play reveals a profound scepticism about the medium of language itself. Thus Vladimir thrice qualifies his admission of ignorance about the nature of the free: 'I don't know, 'he asserts adding at once a willow.' An analogous hesitation perhaps explains why some of the play's many questions terminate in a full stop rather than a question mark. But questions differently put are one thing: questions long held in suspense are another thing altogether. Much of the dialogue in fact imitates the inconsequential spontaneity of everyday speech, in which different participants tend to pursue a line of thought independently of each other. Beckett

counterpoints resulting misunderstandings with comic subtly, as in the exchange which precedes Lucky's speech, when Estragon supposes that Pozzo is offering them money whereas Pozzo has in mind is a free performance by his servant. Such comic misunderstandings are pure vaudeville. A typical example is 'I must have their thrown them away' when 'I don't know' why 'I don't know why I don't know.' The dialogue owes a great deal in fact to the tried and trusted stichomythia of music-hall cross-talk routines, in which a straight man is placed opposite a 'funny' man who delights the audience by becoming embroiled in the complexities of some problem his partner is attempting to elucidate for his benefit. Estragon tries to explain to Vladimir that since he is the heavier of the two, he should logically try hanging him from the bough first. 'If it hangs you it'll hang anything', he concludes with some exasperation. The comedy of this is heightened when the initial premise itself is brought into question: 'But am I heavier than you?' The question asked by Vladimir who is usually cast as a thin and nervous man opposing Estragon's stouter physique.

Another music-hall gag in the play is mirrored repetition. Both Estragon & Vladimir, for example, almost simultaneously shake and feel about inside a favourite object, Vladimir his hat & Estragon his boot. A speciality of music-hall comics was the monologue. In *Waiting for Godot* it is Pozzo who practises this art, in his disquisition on the twilight which ends with comic gloominess, 'that's how it is on this bitch of an earth. 'The circus is another source of *Waiting for Godot's* unique brand of humour. The totters, the tumbles, Estragon's trouser-dropping, Vladimir's duck-waddle, Lucky's palsy & Pozzo's cracking of his ring master's whip are all lifted straight from the repertoire of the circus. The swapping of hats between Vladimir & Estragon is not only comical but the hats themselves are tribute to the masters of silent film comedy, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, and their successors in sound movies, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, for each whom their characteristic headgear was a kind of trademark. All of this is taken from the most popular & unpretentious forms of entertainment that resides in a work unjustly thought of as gloomy and boring. The entire movement of the play consists of a modulation from one tone to its opposite Pozzo's declamation on the night for instance shifts almost violently from the false sublime to the prosaically ridiculous. As a tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot*, continually effects such modulations of tone

Pozzo and Lucky

The most enigmatic figure in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is of course Godot himself whose significance expands in different ways. On interim Pozzo is mistaken for Godot and several traits make the error plausible: the similar sounding names, the trappings of authority, the fact that someone is tied to him. But Pozzo and Lucky import enough meaning by themselves. From the moment they appear, the bellowing master and his shackled slave stand as contrasts to the impoverished other couple and seem to embody much that is absent in their personalities and situation. If Vladimir and Estragon are defined by their tenuousness, by what they and we do not know of their histories and purpose, Pozzo and Lucky announce themselves immediately as substantial creatures of context and direction.

The flamboyant master exudes force and authority; the encumbered servant finitely display submissiveness. 'I present myself: Pozzo... made in God's image!', the whip wielding figure says and then acts with an overbearing mixture of callousness and civility that appears to reflect a thousand years of inherited rule. He quizzes the two strangers about Godot, is magnanimous when he learns of their trespassing on his land and settles down ostentatiously to enjoy his dinner and his pipe. His speech is marked by imperatives, exclamations and aphorisms and he moves back and forth between fluster and elocutionary set pieces about the fears of the world. The slave at the end of his rope fetches and carries on order, nearly swoons but never doubts his place. Vladimir and Estragon are instantly diverted and terror-struck, drawn out of their anxious waiting into the fabulous display of calculated self-presentation. This must be what the world outside is really like: all spectacle and fixed purpose. 'I am bringing him to the fair', says Pozzo of Lucky, 'where I hope to get a good price for him'. Pozzo's authority is quickly revealed to be imposed, factitious and not genuine. His answer to Estragon's question about why Lucky does not put down his bags is a drawn-out parody of a logical explanation. His outburst about the slave 'killing him' is more evidence of the emptiness of his own claims to power. One by one he misplaces his pipe, his atomizer, his precious watch—possessions associated with the sense of mastery. Pozzo tries to recover his authority by playing the role of impresario and authority to do something to entertain 'these honest fellows who are having such a dull time', but his offer to have Lucky to dance or sing or

recite turns out to be the invitation that exposes his own impotence and leads ultimately to his rout.

Interestingly the first attention of Vladimir and Estragon is rather for Lucky. The response is a mixture of compassion and contempt. Pozzo intercepts their attempt to address his slave, carefully making himself the focus of their attention. The short term reward of collaborating with Pozzo is a wealth of conversation and story to fill the time. His audience can even share the sense that time's passing is in his control. Then there is Lucky's speech, an encyclopaedic overview of all the shreds of untruth that Lucky and his fellow jesters in the European tradition have produced. It is punctuated by references to learned authorities, so called guarantors of its accuracy which are increasingly comic and obscene. It mixes fact and fiction. As distressing as Lucky's vision of death's abiding presence in life is the death of language and logic by which that vision has been constructed. The nuts and bolts of the creaky old machine are not only showing through but coming apart. Words and phrases like 'given', 'considering', 'as a result of', 'it is established', 'beyond all doubt', all implying the ability to order, discuss and conclude, are shown to be empty and powerless. This is rubbish which Lucky and his like have often repeated for Pozzo and his like. There can be nothing left after this but departure, though even departure is almost more than human beings can manage. Even Pozzo finds it hard. But Pozzo can leave eventually as long as he has Lucky and his whip to help him advance.

When Pozzo and Lucky return in Act II, Pozzo is blind and so the rope that ties Lucky to him is shorter. The weaker the master, the tighter his rein. Pozzo and Lucky show like Vladimir and Estragon that each human being is driven to some kind of relationship with others, by need, greed, and sometimes by compassion. A solitary existence is a material impossibility. But relationships can be of very different kinds. Pozzo and Lucky, master and slave, are joined artificially and by force, with their rope, while the partnership of Vladimir and Estragon, though not a voluntary one, seems to be based on genuine mutual need and relative equality. Even so, all the relationships between characters are to different degrees based on the exploitation and abuse that Beckett observed in contemporary Europe. Vladimir and Estragon make use of each other to ward off the fear of loneliness or the unknown. In the Pozzo-Lucky pair, there is no cooperation. Lucky is the paid entertainer who does all the work, while Pozzo takes all

the credit. Pozzo's attitude is infectious. Vladimir and Estragon quickly learn to despise Lucky and enjoy watching him forced to perform for them. Vladimir even wants to play-act their degrading relationship afterwards. The symptoms appear in them of the violence that exploitation thrives on and breeds. Pozzo's rope scars Lucky's neck, Lucky kicks Estragon, Estragon kicks Lucky when he is down. As Estragon comments in Act II, after the pair had gone, crucifying one's neighbour seems to be normal practice.

Poverty, scarcity and lack have left their mark on all characters except the Pozzo of Act I. And things are getting worse. In Act II even Pozzo is under threat. Food, the basic material of survival, is a doubtful quantity. In Act I Pozzo gets roast chicken while the others are lucky to share the bones. The objects that the signs of Pozzo's wealth and status such as pipe, whip, watch are mysteriously lost. The character's own physical and mental faculties are in decay. Estragon has one foot in Act I and two in Act II. Lucky, practically worn out when he first appears is even worse in Act II and dumb to boot, while Pozzo has gone blind. No one is very firm on his feet at any point and in Act II all end up collapsed in the same heap. All the characters, but particularly Pozzo and Lucky, demonstrate that little confidence can be placed in memory and the powers of reason and even loss in language.

In 'Waiting for Godot' nothing happen twice/Waiting itself becomes an action/Does the play have any action?/In what sense can Waiting for Godot can be called an anti-play?

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* has been termed an 'anti-play', in a highly questionable catch-phrase which underlies its reduced 'dramatic' qualities: its lack of plot and logical movement from exposition through turning-point to catastrophe, its digressions and so on. But no one has suggested that the scenes of the play should be shuffled, that we should perform it starting from the middle or the end. If such randomness sounds like non-sense, it can at least make us reflect on the play's peculiar tautness of design; how balanced and interlinked are its scenes and its digressions along the axis of the two acts, with repetition and variation and its overall symmetry. *Waiting for Godot* parodies what we expect from drama & the theatre, playing on our expectations by changing and counter-pointing them. Even the two-act structure, the repetition of two

cycles because of which a witty reviewer said that in the play 'nothing happens twice', exploits are expectations of a 'dramatic' curve of action, relentless movements towards the final goal as we know it from realist drama and from several Shakespeare plays .

According to Martin Esslin, it is the physical action of waiting in the play, rather than who or what Godot represents, that should be thought of as the focal point of the play. Esslin draws on Beckett's own critical exposition of Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, to emphasize the illusoriness of 'identity' and other narrative structures that impose meaning on our existence in the world. As Vladimir & Estragon wait for Godot to arrive in order to liberate them from brute existence into the paradise of significance, the concrete space in which they are waiting reveals the true nature of being in time. Whether Godot is meant to suggest the intervention of a supernatural agency, or whether he stands for a mythical human being whose arrival is expected to change the station, or both of these possibilities combine, his exact nature is of secondary importance. The subject of this play is not Godot but waiting—the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. Throughout our lives we always wait for something and Godot simply represents the objective of our waiting— an event, a thing, a person, death. Moreover, it is in the act of waiting that we experience the flow of time in its purest most evident form. If we are active we tend to forget the passage of the time we pass. But if we are merely passively waiting, we are confronted with the action of time itself. As Beckett points out in his analysis of Proust, 'there is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow, nor from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us or been deformed by us.' The flow of time confronts us with the basic problem of being—the problem of the nature of the self which, being subject to constant change in time is in constant flux and therefore ever outside our grasp. Being subject to this process of time we are, at no single moment in our lives, identical with ourselves. Hence we are disappointed at the emptiness of what we please to call attainment. Attainment is the identification of the subject with the object of his desires. The subject has died, and perhaps many times on the way. Because Godot serves as the object of Vladimir's & Estragon's desire, he seems naturally ever beyond their reach. It is significant that the boy who acts as the go-between fails to recognise the pair from day to day. We are meant to conclude that we can never be sure that the human beings we meet are the same today as they were yesterday. When Pozzo & Lucky first

appear, neither Vladimir nor Estragon seems to recognise them; Estragon even takes Pozzo for Godot. But after they have gone, Vladimir comments that they have changed since their last appearance. In the second act, when Pozzo & Lucky reappear, cruelly deformed by the action of time, Vladimir and Estragon again have their doubts whether they are the same people they met on the previous day. Nor does Pozzo remember them; 'I don't remember having met anyone yesterday. But tomorrow I won't remember having met anyone today'. Waiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is itself an illusion. The ceaseless activity of time is self-defeating, purposeless and therefore null and void. The more things change the more they are the same. Much of the tension in waiting comes from the audiences expectations of a dramatic pattern. The rise/fall is expected and is disappointed, and so is the fall/rise. What we then get is a wholly new pattern appropriate to a new kind of tragicomedy. The repeated acts also underline the endless action-in-non-action cycles, suggesting an infinite series. The end of the play could be the beginning of the third act, leading on to a fourth and fifth act so ad infinitum. But the economy of the two-act structure does its work well enough, pointing to potential infinity. We might think of Vladimir & Estragon as turning with a revolving stage that brings them back at the end of each act to the place they started from. Their space-time is cyclic and they cannot opt out of their slow revolutions any more than the actor can leave off a role, step off the revolving stage. The broad scenic units of the play— two appearances of Pozzo & Lucky, effecting a climax in each act— are so constructed as to underline the repetition. Many other lesser units of construction help to emphasize this circularity, notably Vladimir's round song about the dog at the opening of Act II, which could go on 'forever'. The sense of time's inexorable movement is integrated into the cyclic structure. Internal references to time further underline this time consciousness.

Beckett does not use the empty stage as fully and elaborately as Pirandello does in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. In *Waiting for Godot* the main function of staging the stage itself as the setting of the action is, to underline its emptiness: a space to be filled with words and images. Nothing quite like that has ever been attempted. Drawing attention to the stage has the further benefit of distancing the action from the audience and pointing to players, roles, contrived moments, speech— making the perpetual rehearsal of an impoverished text that gets fixed. Imagination creates everything

out of airy nothing. Jokes and jocular allusions keep the physical obviousness of the stage continuously before the audience. The reference to pantomime, music hall and circus, sharpens awareness of the circus clown antics of Vladimir and Estragon, and the music-hall pattern in their dialogue can be distinctly heard. The inward-pointing theatre metaphors are intensified in Act II where the enclosed but 'spacious' space of the theatre is used as an analogy for a place without exit, hell. In a triumphant moment the sounds heard off-stage are taken to announce the coming of Godot 'at last'. Vladimir calls out to Estragon and drags him towards the wings on the right, but Estragon gets lost through his exit. Vladimir runs to meet him on the extreme left, but Estragon re-enters on the right. It is then that he cries out 'I'm in hell', in a context that makes it clear that all the exits have been blocked.

LIFE OF THE DRAMATIST

Samuel Barclay Beckett was born in April 1906, incidentally on Friday the thirteenth. He was born at Foxrock, a place near Dublin, and was the second son of William Frank Beckett and Mary Beckett. His father was a prosperous and well-respected businessman in Dublin and they belonged to a Protestant minority in a predominantly Catholic society. Samuel was a keen student and excellent sportsman and his parents provided him with the finest education they could access— at first, Earlsfort House preparatory in Dublin, followed by the Protestant boarding school Portora Royal, one of the top and more expensive high schools in the country, and finally, Trinity College where he read French and Italian. His first job was as a teacher of English in the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. In 1931, he returned to Ireland as a lecturer in French literature, and he received his masters degree in French from Dublin and subsequently returned to Paris as a teacher in 1932. He has made Paris his home since that time, except for visits abroad and a retreat to the Unoccupied Zone in Vichy, France, during 1942–44.

Beckett found teaching uncongenial to his creative activities and soon turned all of his attention to writing. During the 1930s and 1940s, his writing consisted of critical studies (Proust and others), poems, and two novels (*Murphy* and *Watt*), all written in English. In the late 1940s, he changed from writing in English to writing in French. Part of the reason for this was his basic rejection of Ireland as his homeland. When asked why he found Ireland uncongenial, he offered the same explanation that has been given by other famous Irish expatriates, such as Sean O'Casey and James Joyce. He could not tolerate the strict

ensorship of so many aspects of life, especially the arbitrary censoring of many works of literature by the Catholic clergy. In addition, the political situation created an oppressive anti-intellectualism. Even after he became famous, he refused to allow some of his plays to be presented in Ireland. In 1958, during the International Theater Festival in Dublin, a play of his compatriot O'Casey was banned, and Beckett, in protest, withdrew his plays, which have not been seen in Ireland since then.

Since the major portion of his dramas were composed in French and first presented in Paris, many critics find difficulty in classifying Beckett's works: should he be considered a French or an Irish writer? The nature of his characters, even when named Vladimir and Estragon, seems to be more characteristically Irish than any other nationality. Essentially, it should be a moot question because Beckett, when composing in French, was his own translator into English and vice versa. Thus his works do not suffer from another translator's tampering with them, and his great plays now belong to the realm of world literature.

EXISTENTIALISM AND BECKETT'S THEATRE

One of the greatest inspirations in literature, Beckett himself was heavily influenced by the French existential philosophy of Sartre and Camus. In a nutshell, existential philosophy held that we human beings are simply creatures that exist in a universe or space that does not have any overarching moral order or apparent meaning. We are not essentially good or evil, we are what we make of ourselves, and we become what we choose to believe in or support. The way Beckett interprets this philosophical position can be called a little extreme. He believed that in a world that has lost its sense of location in any larger order, any location outside ourselves is only distracting scenery. Thus, his stage is as bare as can be, compelling the actors and the spectators to view themselves only in relation to empty space or void and theatrical time. Beckett plays ruthlessly with almost every aspect of theatrical convention and experience. If the actors are on a bare stage, acutely aware of themselves as actors without any sense of location except the stage and theatre, so are the members of the audience aware of themselves as spectators looking at the actors. The relationship between the audience and the actors is therefore problematized just like the relationship between fiction (or theatre) and reality. The audience and actors are made aware of their 'real' status because, ironically, they are made aware of the nature of theatrical transaction, of its fictional nature and the 'willing

suspension of disbelief' that the audiences are invited to make. This makes us realize that all of us are actors, all of us are audiences to each other, and the world suddenly is a non-referential stage that has no relation to any other higher order or moral reality. Beckett's plays explore the limits of both theatrical/real action and theatrical/real language. The plays have limited characters, almost no setting, and no actions of the kind that audiences would recognise. One of the last lines of his play *What Where* is, 'Make sense, who may'. And this is indeed the precise challenge faced by any reader of the Beckett plays.

CHARACTERS OF VLADIMIR AND ESTRAGON

In spite of the existential concept that man cannot take the essence of his existence from someone else, in viewing this play, we have to view Vladimir and Estragon in their relationship to each other. In fact, the novice viewing this play for the first time often fails to note any significant difference between the two characters. In hearing the play read, even the most experienced theater person will often confuse one of the characters for the other. Therefore, the similarities are as important as the differences between them.

Both are tramps dressed in costumes which could be interchanged. They both wear big boots which don't necessarily fit, and both have big bowler hats. Their suits are baggy and ill-fitting. (In Act II, when Estragon removes the cord he uses for a belt, his trousers are so baggy that they fall about his feet.) Their costumes recall the type found in burlesque or vaudeville houses, the type often associated with the character of the 'Little Tramp' portrayed by Charlie Chaplin.

The Chaplinesque costume prepares us for many of the comic routines that Vladimir and Estragon perform. The opening scene with Estragon struggling with his boots and Vladimir doffing and donning his hat to inspect it for lice could be a part of a burlesque routine. The resemblance of their costumes to Chaplin's supports the view that these tramps are outcasts from society, but have the same plucky defiance to continue to exist as Chaplin's "Little Tramp" did.

Another action which could come directly from the burlesque theatre occurs when Vladimir finds a hat on the ground which he tries on, giving his own to Estragon, who tries it on while giving his hat to Vladimir, who tries it on while giving the new-found hat to Estragon, who tries it on, etc. This comic episode continues until the characters— and the audience— are bored with it. Other burlesque-like scenes involve Vladimir's struggles to help Estragon with his boots while Estragon is hopping awkwardly about the stage on

one foot to keep from falling; another scene involves the loss of Estragon's pants, while other scenes involve the two tramps' grotesque efforts to help Pozzo and Lucky get up off the ground and their inept attempts to hang themselves. Thus, the two characters are tied together partly by being two parts of a burlesque act.

In any comic or burlesque act, there are two characters, traditionally known as the "straight man" and the "fall guy." Vladimir would be the equivalent of the straight man. He is also the intellectual who is concerned with a variety of ideas. Of the two, Vladimir makes the decisions and remembers significant aspects of their past. He is the one who constantly reminds Estragon that they must wait for Godot. Even though it is left indefinite, all implications suggest that Vladimir knows more about Godot than does Estragon, who tells us that he has never even seen Godot and thus has no idea what Godot looks like.

Vladimir is the one who often sees religious or philosophical implications in their discussions of events, and he interprets their actions in religious terms; for example, he is concerned about the religious implications in such stories as the two thieves (two tramps) who were crucified on either side of Jesus. He is troubled about the fate of the thief who wasn't saved and is concerned that "only one of the four evangelists" speaks of a thief being saved.

Vladimir correlates some of their actions to the general concerns of mankind. In Act II, when Pozzo and Lucky fall down and cry for help, Vladimir interprets their cries for help as his and Estragon's chance to be in a unique position of helping humanity. After all, Vladimir maintains, "It is not everyday that we are needed . . . but at this place, at this moment in time," they are needed and should respond to the cries for help. Similarly, it is Vladimir who questions Pozzo and Lucky and the Boy Messenger(s), while Estragon remains, for the most part, the silent listener. Essentially, Vladimir must constantly remind Estragon of their destiny — that is, they must wait for Godot.

In addition to the larger needs, Vladimir also looks after their physical needs. He helps Estragon with his boots, and, moreover, had he been with Estragon at night, he would not have allowed his friend to be beaten; also, he looks after and rations their meager meals of turnips, carrots, and radishes, and, in general, he tends to be the manager of the two.

In contrast, Estragon is concerned mainly with more mundane matters: He prefers a carrot to a radish or turnip, his feet hurt, and he blames his boots; he constantly wants to leave, and it must be drilled into him that he must wait for Godot. He remembers that he was beaten, but he sees no philosophical significance in the beating. He is willing to beg for money from a stranger (Pozzo), and he eats Pozzo's discarded chicken bones with no shame.

Estragon, then, is the more basic of the two. He is not concerned with either religious or philosophical matters. First of all, he has never even heard of the two thieves who were crucified with Christ, and if the Gospels do disagree, then "that's all there is to it," and any further discussion is futile and absurd.

Estragon's basic nature is illustrated in Act II when he shows so little interest in Pozzo and Lucky that he falls asleep; also, he sleeps through the entire scene between Vladimir and the Boy Messenger. He is simply not concerned with such issues.

Estragon, however, is dependent upon Vladimir, and essentially he performs what Vladimir tells him to do. For example, Vladimir looks after Estragon's boots, he rations out the carrots, turnips, and radishes, he comforts Estragon's pain, and he reminds Estragon of their need to wait for Godot. Estragon does sometimes suggest that it would be better if they parted, but he never leaves Vladimir for long. Essentially, Estragon is the less intelligent one; he has to have everything explained to him, and he is essentially so bewildered by life that he has to have someone to look after him.

POZZO AND LUCKY

Together they represent the antithesis of each other. Yet they are strongly and irrevocably tied together — both physically and metaphysically. Any number of polarities could be used to apply to them. If Pozzo is the master (and father figure), then Lucky is the slave (or child). If Pozzo is the circus ringmaster, then Lucky is the trained or performing animal. If Pozzo is the sadist, Lucky is the masochist. Or Pozzo can be seen as the Ego and Lucky as the Id. An inexhaustible number of polarities can be suggested.

Pozzo appears on stage after the appearance of Lucky. They are tied together by a long rope; thus, their destinies are fixed together in the same way that Pozzo might be a mother figure, with the rope being the umbilical cord which ties the two together.

Everything about Pozzo resembles our image of the circus ringmaster. If the ringmaster is the chief person of the circus, then it is no wonder that Vladimir and Estragon first mistook him for Godot or God. Like a ringmaster, he arrives brandishing a whip, which is the trademark of the professional. In fact, we hear the cracking of Pozzo's whip before we actually see him. Also, a stool is often associated with an animal trainer, and Pozzo constantly calls Lucky by animal terms or names. Basically, Pozzo commands and Lucky obeys.

In the first act, Pozzo is immediately seen in terms of this authoritarian figure. He lords over the others, and he is decisive, powerful, and confident. He gives the illusion that he knows exactly where he is going and exactly how to get there. He seems "on top" of every situation.

When he arrives on the scene and sees Vladimir and Estragon, he recognizes them as human, but as inferior beings; then he condescendingly acknowledges that there is a human likeness, even though the "likeness is an imperfect one." This image reinforces his authoritarian god-like stance: we are made in God's image but imperfectly so. Pozzo's superiority is also seen in the manner in which he eats the chicken, then casts the bones to Lucky with an air of complete omnipotence.

In contrast to the towering presence exhibited by Pozzo in Act I, a significant change occurs between the two acts. The rope is shortened, drawing Pozzo much closer to his antithesis, Lucky. Pozzo is now blind; he cannot find his way alone. He stumbles and falls. He cannot get along without help; he is pathetic. He can no longer command. Rather than driving Lucky as he did earlier, he is now pathetically dragged along by Lucky. From a position of omnipotence and strength and confidence, he has fallen and has become the complete fallen man who maintains that time is irrelevant and that man's existence is meaningless. Unlike the great blind prophets of yore who could see everything, for Pozzo "the things of time are hidden from the blind." Ultimately, for Pozzo, man's existence is discomforting and futile, depressing, and gloomy and, most of all, brief and to no purpose. The gravedigger is the midwife of mankind: "They give birth astride the grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more."

As noted above, Lucky is the obvious antithesis of Pozzo. At one point, Pozzo maintains that Lucky's entire existence is based upon pleasing him; that is, Lucky's enslavement is his meaning, and if he is ever freed, his life would cease to have any

significance. Given Lucky's state of existence, his very name "Lucky" is ironic, especially since Vladimir observes that even "old dogs have more dignity."

All of Lucky's actions seem unpredictable. In Act I, when Estragon attempts to help him, Lucky becomes violent and kicks him on the leg. When he is later expected to dance, his movements are as ungraceful and alien to the concept of dance as one can possibly conceive. We have seldom encountered such ignorance; consequently, when he is expected to give a coherent speech, we are still surprised by his almost total incoherence. Lucky seems to be more animal than human, and his very existence in the drama is a parody of human existence. In Act II, when he arrives completely dumb, it is only a fitting extension of his condition in Act I, where his speech was virtually incomprehensible. Now he makes no attempt to utter any sound at all. Whatever part of man that Lucky represents, we can make the general observation that he, as man, is reduced to leading the blind, not by intellect, but by blind instinct.

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. What is the first thing the audience sees Estragon doing?
 - a. Standing still
 - b. Making a noose
 - c. Taking off his boot**
 - d. Sleeping
2. Which characters of the New Testament's Gospels are Estragon and Vladimir discussing at the beginning of the play?
 - a. Joseph and Mary
 - b. The two thieves**
 - c. Lazarus and Zacchaeus
 - d. The Apostles
3. Where are Estragon and Vladimir supposed to meet Godot?
 - a. By the tree**
 - b. Near the stream
 - c. In the desert
 - d. At the top of the hill

4. After Vladimir storms off and then returns, what does Estragon suggest they do while waiting?
- a. Leave together
 - b. Take off their boots
 - c. Hang themselves**
 - d. Exit
5. In Act I, after Estragon complains he is hungry, what does Vladimir give him?
- a. A carrot**
 - b. An apple
 - c. A radish
 - d. An orange
6. In Act I, once Pozzo and Lucky enter, what does Pozzo start eating?
- a. Carrot
 - b. Sandwich
 - c. Steak
 - d. Chicken**
7. What does Estragon ask Pozzo for that Pozzo offers to Lucky instead?
- a. Bones**
 - b. Stool
 - c. Rope
 - d. Bag
8. What does Pozzo do after announcing that it's time to go?
- a. Leaves
 - b. Smokes a pipe**
 - c. Makes Lucky dance
 - d. Starts arguing
9. What does Lucky do when Estragon tries to wipe the tears from his eyes?
- a. Kicks him**
 - b. Thanks him
 - c. Falls over
 - d. Exits
10. Pozzo tells Vladimir that Lucky can't think without his _____:

- a. Bag
- b. Pipe
- c. Glasses

d. Hat

11. What is different about the tree Vladimir and Estragon stand by at the beginning of Act II?

- a. There is a noose
- b. It has been cut down

c. It has leaves

- d. It's been burned

12. What is the reason Vladimir gives for why Estragon keeps returning to him?

a. He cannot defend himself

- b. They must wait together
- c. They are friends
- d. None of the above

13. After seeing the tree, what time of year does Estragon say it must be?

- a. Summer
- b. Winter

c. Spring

- d. Fall

14. What is the first vegetable that Vladimir offers to Estragon in Act II?

- a. Orange carrot
- b. Purple carrot
- c. Pink radish

d. Black radish

15. What item of Pozzo and Lucky's does Vladimir find on the ground after Estragon wakes from his nap?

- a. Bag
- b. Stool

c. Hat

- d. Rope

16. In Act II, as Pozzo enters, what stops him in his tracks?

a. Lucky's body

- b. Estragon calling his name
- c. His chair
- d. The smell of food

17. After Pozzo enters, what do Vladimir and Estragon discuss asking him for?

- a. Luck
- b. His chair
- c. His bag

d. Another bone

18. As Pozzo crawls away, what is the first name Estragon calls him that Pozzo responds to?

- a. Cain

b. Abel

- c. Lucky
- d. Job

19. After Vladimir and Estragon are finally able to help Pozzo up, why can't Pozzo recognize them?

- a. He has forgotten them
- b. He hates them

c. He is blind

- d. He is sick

20. After Pozzo and Lucky leave the stage, what does Vladimir see them do in the distance?

- a. Begin running

b. Fall

- c. Ascend to heaven
- d. Kill each other