

:: STRUCTURE ::

- 6.1 Objective**
- 6.2 Introduction**
- 6.3 What is Absurd?**
- 6.4 Theme of the play**
- 6.5 Significance of Time**
- 6.6 Characters in the play**
 - 6.6.1 Vladimir and Estragon**
 - 6.6.2 Pozzo and Lucky**
 - 6.6.3 Boys**
 - 6.6.4 Godot**
- 6.7 Conclusion**
- 6.8 Key words**
- 6.9 Books Suggested**
- ❖ Answers**

6.1 OBJECTIVE

In this unit we shall,

- Analyse *Waiting for Godot* as an absurd play
- Understand various aspects of the play like theme, language, etc.
- Interpret various characters

After completing the Unit, you should be able to

- Describe absurd play and how *Waiting for Godot* is an absurd play
- Discuss about the characters
- Discuss about theme, plot and language of the play

6.2 INTRODUCTION

Waiting for Godot is the play written in English by Samuel Beckett. Samuel Beckett is the Irish playwright. This play is Beckett's translation of his own original play, *En attendant Godot*, written in French language. The play in English is subtitled as "a tragicomedy in two acts". The original French text was written between 1948 and 1949 and was published in 1952. The play was directed by Roger Blin and was performed at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris in 1953. The English-language version was first performed in London in 1955.

Waiting for Godot is perhaps the best example of the theatre of absurd which promotes philosophy of the genre. The play presents a world full of uncertainty. It also presents a world into which daily actions are almost meaningless, language fails to communicate, and the characters reflect a sense of artifice in that they are unable to act in any meaningful way and even are uncertain of the consequences borne of their actions.

6.3 LANGUAGE OF THE PLAY

Beckett seems to be greatly influenced by structuralism which emphasises on the importance of language. That seems to be one of the reasons why *Waiting for Godot* uses language and speech to create confused realities. The confusion in the structure of the play, the characters, dialogues spoken by these characters, never compassable time, repetitive nature of action and stage directions and setting of the play, are presented very effectively throughout the play with the help of various symbols.

Since the beginning of the play, it is established that Estragon is dependent on Vladimir when he tells Estragon that without him, Estragon would be "nothing more than a little heap of bones". This is presented by the fact that Estragon cannot even take off his boot without help from Vladimir. Both, in fact, seem interchangeable. For instance, one of these characters repeats a line that the other has just said. For example, one asks the other, "It hurts?" The other responds by saying, "Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!" Such repetition indicates repetitiveness of life in general. Such repetitiveness is best illustrated by Estragon's repeated requests to leave. But they cannot leave as both are waiting for Godot. Such repetition emphasises the idea that similar actions occur over and over again in a person's life without any apparent meaning generated or attached to it. Moreover, the playwright perhaps uses repetition over and over again to ensure that the readers / audience also feel the same monotony and confusion as experienced by the characters on the stage. Such repetition and meaningless dialogues again and again emphasise the existentialist nature of the play.

This play is written in very simple language. Simplicity language helps in creating illusion and confusion required for the theme of the play. The setting of the play in itself is intriguing. The playwright describes “A country road. A tree. Evening”(2). Such straightforward setting is aimed at serving a more complex purpose. In Act II, only five leaves are seen on the tree, yet this over-night change in the tree makes the entire landscape an unrecognizable place for Estragon. The playwright creates a striking contrast through a fully blossomed tree with the hopelessness apparent through both the characters. The philosopher-dramatist perhaps wants to establish despair prevalent during the war time.

Language in *Waiting for Godot* highlights meaninglessness, inefficiency and inadequacy of language in itself. Dialogues and speeches fail to clearly express the idea. That is the reason why characters use repetitive dialogues, which also fail to explicitly express themselves. Interestingly, dialogues are reduced to broken and fragmented phrases, words and expressions leading readers / audiences to believe that language as a tool is ineffective to communicate. Such an idea that language is ineffective contradicts popular belief that language is the tool for subjugation. In fact, the play ushers the idea that silence is often helpful to convey desired effect as well is an escape from external forces reflected by language.

The playwright effectively uses dialogues to form a mundane, static and dull atmosphere where almost nothing happens and nothing changes. Dialogues are forced through characters to indicate the passing of time and to establish that the characters do exist. Through repetitive dialogues, through contradictory dialogues, through meaningless dialogues, the playwright creates desired confusion within the reader about the reality of the situation and the meaning of life.

6.4 THEME OF THE PLAY

Waiting for Godot presents two men who are unable to move, think or even act significantly during their wait for a mysterious man, Godot. These characters little realize that their act of waiting is a choice. Rather, both consider waiting as compulsory part of their routine. Both men are hardly able to decide on some specific thing or aspect, however, both are not able to convert their decision into action. For instance, more than once, these characters decide to leave the stage, but they find that they are incapable to move even an inch further. All these suggest stagnancy and repetition in apparently endless cycle of their lives. In fact, the very life presented through *Waiting for Godot* seems to be a dismal one. It is hopelessly repetitive and stagnant, without meaning and purpose and leads to constant suffering. Suffering seems to be a consistent and basic aspect of human existence, as is proposed by *Waiting for Godot*. Each and every character suffers and suffers consistently, without any apparent respite. These sufferings vary from physical to psychological. Suffering

leads some men to find companionship, some to abuse their companions, and some to isolate them.

The theatre of absurd deliberately seems to reject all the ideas of realism and naturalism applied to theatre. Setting does not correspond to specific time and place. There is an absence of a logical narrative as well as a well-knit plot. The play intends to transform the real world into a kind of make-believe or almost artificial world. However, this is not an illusionary world, rather this is a real world which makes the readers / audience realize as having their own.

During the course of seemingly endless and boring waiting, the only alternative these characters are left with is talk. Their talk, in whatever incoherent manner, can be interpreted as soothing comfort while agonizingly waiting. The playwright also makes effective use of silences and pauses in the play to create necessity and potency to talk, to remove isolation and solitude silences push them to. Both the characters have become so desperate in the absence of any talk that Vladimir suddenly blares out, "Say something!" and "Say anything at all!" (50) The paradox created by the playwright through silences and desperation to overcome these silences is praiseworthy. This paradox helps the dramatist in establishing the central idea of the play, viz. meaninglessness of everything.

In fact, the characters are so much frustrated while waiting that both have started hearing strange voices. The reason for their conversation with each other is to avoid thinking and hearing such strange voices. So, their only purpose of conversation seems to avoid monotony, self-exploitation and disintegration.

Obscurity presented in the play perhaps highlights illusion and confusion of the post-war time. Similar obscurity is also found in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Beckett uses repetition of language to highlight incoherence, incompetence and failure of language, and thus life, to create a meaning. This adds to the obscurity to the theme. Through creation of such language, Beckett's vision of life appears to be pessimistic, bleak, hopeless and full of irony. For instance, Lucky's long speech in Act I appear to be meaningless. However, through such meaningless, the playwright successfully reinforces the theme of the play. Another interpretation of Lucky's speech can be that his incoherent and nonsensical blabbering are Thomas Beckett's reaction and interpretation of war and effect of the war on mankind.

Waiting for Godot presents illusion, confusion, frustration and the fragmentation of an individual. It not only portrays the disturbed and fractured psyche of the post-war individual, but also depicts the most representative task of man, i.e., the futile wait, fragmented memory, and the mundane and unnecessary action. This play is existentialist as the characters are not only indistinguishable from one another, but are also, at times, representatives of mankind. Beckett uses theatrical and literary

devices to create an endless cycle of hopelessness and meaninglessness to represent the post-war situation. The world that the playwright presents seems to be a world where an individual feels stranger, in captivity and into an exile as a person's hopes have vanished, ideals crushed, aspirations vandalized, etc. Thus frustrated individual starts seeing life as meaningless. Such dualism creates a sense of absurdity. The only ray of hope with a person is belief in the existence of God and that the world is driven by God. Such hope once again provides a meaning to life. And hence, absurd plays are not to realize meaninglessness and hopelessness to the world. Rather, they lead towards the acceptance of God as omnipotent supreme authority who ably guides to the world and provides meaning to life. Absurd is not about hopelessness, rather it shows where to find hope and purpose of life.

Vivian Mercier describes *Waiting for Godot* as a play which “has achieved a theoretical impossibility — a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What's more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice.”

6.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF TIME

Beckett uses time as a device for creating confusion. Worton states that though the characters seemingly are aware of time, “they have no sense of its continuity”. Since the characters are unable to make sense of the past, present, and future, their wait for someone named Godot ends in essentially futile exercise.

The very title of the play unravels its central theme, i.e., wait. Both, Vladimir and Estragon, are compelled to pass their time in utter boredom while waiting for the arrival of a certain person, who surprisingly never comes. Because they have nothing to do in the meantime, time becomes a terrible obstacle and tests their endurance. They indulge in repetition the same actions day after day to pass the time. It is interesting to observe that time loses its meaning when the actions of any specific day has no relevance or effect on to the next day.

6.6 CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

Characters in *Waiting for Godot* seem to be engaged into a prison of their own creations. Each character is imprisoned in passivity and stagnancy because of one's own inability to act. According to Furrugh Khan, “Beckett's characters are not unified rational beings rather, they are portrayed as a product of external influences, lacking the ability to control situations, or effect change”.

6.6.1 Vladimir and Estragon:

The entire play is about conversations between Vladimir and Estragon, who are awaiting the arrival of some mysterious named Godot. Instead of meeting these two, Godot continually sends messages that he will appear but, in fact, never does. In the due course of action, both the characters accidentally stumble upon Lucky and Pozzo. Pozzo is going to the market to sell his slave, Lucky. He pauses for a while to talk with Vladimir and Estragon. Lucky entertains them through dance, and thereafter Pozzo and Lucky leave. Moreover, Vladimir and Estragon discuss their miseries and events in their lives. Both also consider committing suicide by hanging themselves. However, both decide to wait, after a short discussion about their possible death. Often considered tramps, Vladimir and Estragon are a pair of human beings who do not know the meaning of their existence upon this earth. Both try to make out some meaning of their existence and they look to Godot for enlightenment.

According to Ismet Toksoz, “It appears that Estragon is psychologically dependent on Vladimir, Vladimir is spiritually dependent on Mr. Godot, and indirectly Estragon is dependent on Godot. Vladimir implies his commitment to Godot in the scene of the discussion to hang themselves or not: “Let's wait and see what he (Godot) says” (Beckett, 2011, 1. 19).

The playwright has provided no physical descriptions of either of the two characters, Vladimir and Estragon. However, one can gather from reading the text that Vladimir is possibly the heavier of the two. Throughout most of the play, Vladimir prefers to stand, whereas Estragon sits down frequently and even sleeps intermittently. Estragon seems to be preoccupied with useless things, for example, what to eat and how to ease his aches and pains. But he finds extremely difficult to recall things. For example, when Vladimir asks, “Do you remember the Gospels?” Estragon talks about all the nonsensical things. The contrasts between these two characters, one cannot remember anything and the other remembers everything, one is lazy, the other is very smart, etc., create difference in-between them. They become distinct individuals and do merely remain types. As they are two different individuals, their respond to a situation differently and thereby allowing alternative point of view. Both the characters call each other by pet names “Didi” and “Gogo”.

6.6.2 Pozzo and Lucky:

It is often discussed that that Pozzo and Lucky are nothing but alternative manifestations of Didi and Gogo. Pozzo seems to be dominating of the two. Lucky, however, is more influence than two because of his ability to dance and think. When both first appear, Pozzo appears to be a true slave. He appreciated Lucky for making him cultured and attributing him with refinement and reasoning. Otherwise, very less is known about Pozzo. Fewer details like, Pozzo is the landlord and he smokes pipe of the best tobacco merchant “Kapp and Peterson” (26). Pozzo, at times, overdoes

things, perhaps because of the self-generated sense of insecurity within him.

Pozzo controls Lucky with an extremely long rope. He jerks and tugs if Lucky slows down a bit. Lucky appears to be the obedient slave of Pozzo does everything. Lucky speaks only once in the entire play in response to Pozzo's order to "think" (32) for Estragon and Vladimir.

6.6.3 Boys:

The boy works for Mr. Godot. He informs Vladimir that they have never met before in the first act. In Act II, the boy tells Vladimir that he did not meet them the day before. That boy was someone else. Through the boy, audiences / readers learn that Godot possesses white beard. Boys appearing in both the acts are polite and gentle. They hesitate in speaking and mostly answer with short replies only.

6.6.4 Godot:

The identity of Godot has been a matter of great debate. There are various meanings attached to the word 'Godot', and the closest and the widely accepted meaning seems to be 'God'. This character remains absent in the play. However, the wait for this character by Vladimir and Estragon makes this absence god-like.

Waiting for Godot can be considered as a post-modern text as it presents a fragmented view of human in somewhat tragic manner. However, the playwright never complains about fragmentation of life rather wholeheartedly accepts it and rather celebrates it. World War II and its aftermath shattered many previously constructed beliefs and were compelled to reconstruct new ones. For example, the play questions the concepts such as God, religion, nation, etc. At the same time, the play asks us to celebrate life, even though it is full of uncertainty and meaninglessness with a ray of hope for good future just as the characters are waiting for Godot.

Thomas Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* looks like an allegory: a dramatic action in which events, characters, and settings represent abstract or spiritual meanings.

6.8 KEY WORDS

Fragmentation	the disintegration, collapse, or breakdown of norms of thought, behaviour, or social relationship
Frustration	something that causes feelings of anger and annoyance
Mundane	boring and monotonous
Paradox	In literature paradox is a self-contradictory statement which is used as a literary device and the purpose of a paradox is to arrest attention and provoke fresh thought.

6.9 BOOKS SUGGESTED

- Atkins, Anselm. "Lucky's Speech in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: A Punctuated Sense-Line Arrangement". Vol.19. John Hopkins UP. 1967. 426. Print.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 May 2014.
- Chaudhuri, Una. Fuchs, Elinor. "All the Dead Voices: The Landscape of Famine in *Waiting for Godot*." *Land/Scape/Theatre*. N.p.: U of Michigan, 2002. 87. Print.
- Dan O. Via, Jr. "Waiting for Godot" and Man's Search for Community" *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Vol. 30, No. 1. Oxford UP. 1962. 35. Print.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land*. Boni and Liveright; New York. 1922. Print.
- Hooti, Noorbakhsh. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: A Postmodernist Study. Iran: Razi University, 2011. Web.
- Korol, Dimitri. "Amnesia and inaccessible text-worlds in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*". U of Fribourg, 2012. 3. Print.
- Mercier, V., "The Uneventful Event" in *The Irish Times*, 18 February 1956. <<https://en.wikipedia.org>>
- Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*. N.p: 1945. Web. 2 May 2014.
- <https://lms.lums.edu.pk>
- Oteiwy, Ghanim Obeyed. Language in *Waiting for Godot*. U of Kufa. N.d. 17.19. Web.
- <<http://www.iasj.net/iasj?func=fulltext&aId=63045>>
- "The Wasteland and Criticism." *Guide to the Nobel Prizes*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc, n.d. Web. 2 May 2014.
- <<http%3A%2F%2Fwww.academia.edu>>
- Theme of Confusion, and Importance of Speech in *Waiting for Godot*.
https://www.academia.edu/13231830/Theme_of_Confusion_and_Importance_of_Speech_in_Waiting_for_Godot. 12 Aug., 2020. 17.50 PM.
- Toksoz, Ismet. Psychoanalytic Analysis of the Characters in Beckett's "Waiting for Godot". Volume 6 Issue 12, December 2017. *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*. 13 August, 2020. 18.18 PM.
- Worton, Michael. "Waiting for Godot and Endgame: Theatre as Text." *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*. N.p.: Cambridge UP, n.d. N. pag. Web. 2 May 2014.
- http://www.samuel-beckett.net/Godot_Endgame_Worton.html

6.10 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

The questions presented here have answers in the above. Find out answers and write them:

1. Write in detail about Waiting for Godot as an absurd play.

2. Explain the theme of the play

3. Critically analyse Vladimir and Estragon as protagonists of the play

4. Explain the significance of time as discussed in the play.

5. Choose correct alternative from those given below each:

1. Beckett's original play *En attendant Godot* is written in which language ?

- | | |
|------------|-------------|
| a. French; | b. English; |
| c. Spanish | d. German. |

2. In which language was *Waiting for Godot* first performed?

- | | |
|---------|---------|
| a. 1957 | b. 1955 |
| c. 1956 | d. 1954 |

3. Who of the following has written *The Waste Land*?

- | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| a. Mathew Arnold | b. T. S. Eliot |
| c. Eugene Ionesco | d. Alfred Tennyson |

❖ **ANSWERS:**

Check Your Progress 1:

1. a 2. b 3. c