

THE
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE
TO SAMUEL BECKETT'S



Waiting for Godot

“Not only do these guides increase the enjoyment of
the great classics, but they explain the pleasure to be
found in all works of literature.”

JULIAN FELLOWES

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
PLAY IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Sophie Ratcliffe

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Samuel Beckett's*

Waiting for Godot

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Beginnings

In a small Parisian apartment in the winter of 1948, a little-known Irish novelist was suffering from writer's block. Having reached what he felt was an "impasse" with his prose works, he opened a notebook and began something new. After four months, he reached the final line. The result was *En Attendant Godot*, a play for a cast of five, which he later translated into the two act tragic-comedy, *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett himself once joked that the play was "a mess". The public felt differently, and the impact of this drama, which shattered conventional expectations of form and meaning, is still being felt today. As Mary Bryden notes, "despite his non-appearance", the character of Godot has proved an enduringly popular fictional touchstone – a kind of "pop culture ghost" who "materialises" in the most unexpected places, from cartoons to adverts for car insurance. The play itself has a darker history. While praised for its control and linguistic beauty, readers and critics agree that like much of Beckett's work, it is difficult. Interpreting the text can be confusing, and inconclusive. As a vision of life it seems, at first, to be both depressing and harsh.

Some critics have dwelt on its complex textual history. While *En Attendant Godot* was published in 1952, American audiences had to wait two years for their Godot – translated by Beckett himself –

while a version only reached British bookshelves in 1965. Although Beckett's mother-tongue was English, he often chose to write in French. He then put himself through what he termed the "wastes and wilds of self-translation". The existence of two different, but equally valid, versions of the same work creates multiple difficulties for readers. Others have been perplexed by the plot of the play itself. Is this tale of two men waiting for an appointment with a mysterious Mr Godot meant to symbolise something – a parable, or metaphor perhaps, for the condition of mankind? Does the road they wait on stand for the journey of life?

Not so long ago, before the first production, Beckett and his romantic partner Suzanne spent their own lives on the road, as they escaped from the Gestapo. They were forced from Paris and went to Vichy, France. Knowing this biographical background, one can pick up on elements within the play which reflect an atmosphere of the world at war. Characters endure long waits, crossed wires and low resources. Strange, tyrannous figures appear. There is even a brief mention of Vaucluse, the region in which Beckett and Suzanne waited for the liberation of Nazi-occupied France. However, a simplistic biographical reading of the play is near impossible, as well as unrewarding. Beckett carefully preserved the anonymity of his tramps (or clowns, as they first appeared). Their provenance is never made clear and the play

purposely takes place in an indefinite location.

Indeed, the fact that Beckett does not, in this, or any work, appear directly to address historical and political concerns led critics such as György Lukács to feel that his work is escapist. Beckett's purported failure to use the theatre as a tool for social change – together with the agonising positions that he puts his characters in, as well as his actors – has attracted the charge that his theatre is uninteresting, or even inhumane.

Such accusations certainly bear no relation to Beckett's life. Born on Good Friday, 13 April 1906, he was a brilliant student destined for a great academic career. However, after spending a year teaching in Paris, he rejected the secure life of academia for a precarious existence reviewing, writing and travelling in Europe. He eventually settled in Paris – and, when the Germans invaded, Beckett began to work for the French Resistance, narrowly escaping capture. His quiet heroism during the war led to him being awarded the Croix de Guerre in 1945, and he went on to work for the Irish Red Cross in Normandy.

A careful viewing, or reading, of *Waiting for Godot* reveals Beckett's sense for the devastations of his time that he had witnessed, which he referred to as a vision of "humanity in ruins", and an exploration of what a human drama might have to offer. It is, as critic William Saroyan writes, "an important play, perhaps one of the most important of all times".

What happens in *Waiting for Godot*?

The plot itself seems designed to disappoint the audience. Two men sit under a tree on a country road, waiting for a meeting with a Mr Godot. Their names are Estragon and Vladimir, though they refer to each other by the diminutives Gogo and Didi. At the end of both the first and the second act, a small boy arrives to let them know that Mr Godot will not come. Though they are interrupted by a man named Pozzo, who is accompanied by his servant, Lucky, nothing of great significance appears to happen. At the end of each act they decide to leave, but do not move from the stage

The play, which is a struggle to understand, begins with its own small struggle. As the curtain opens on a near-empty stage, we watch a man attempting to remove his boot with little success, pulling at it, panting, failing, resting, resuming, only to try again. But the failure is not his alone. As the man, Estragon, speaks, the audience, too, are placed in difficulties. Who is he? Where is he? When he speaks the play's opening line – “Nothing to be done” – is he referring to the state of his footwear, or is he making a more general comment on life? Vladimir's entrance promises some clarity at first, as he addresses his companion with an air of familiarity – “so there you are again”. However, Estragon's bewildered and cynical response – “Am

I?” – jokes with the audience, plunging us into an unfamiliar world of philosophical confusion about the nature of being (Act 1). Does Estragon, in fact, exist at all? Our uncertainty is increased further as they begin to discuss the fact that Estragon has spent the night in a ditch, being beaten by a group of people. Who are these people? Why are they hurting him?

Beckett's stage set raises more questions. It is intentionally minimal. The road is the empty stage itself, its only ornaments are a leafless tree and a “low mound”, which was changed by Beckett to a rectangular stone in later productions. It is, in short, a play in which, as critic Vivien Mercier famously said: “Nothing happens twice” – in Act 1 and then again in Act 2.

Did Beckett intend the play to fail?

Such a drama does not seem designed to thrill an audience. But Beckett didn't mind if his productions flopped. He decided to ask the French actor-director Roger Blin to take on the first production of *Godot*, partly because Blin's previous production had been commercially unsuccessful. Blin may not have been crowd-pleasing, but, for Beckett, a director who would not sacrifice artistic integrity for audience numbers was a find.

Blin had to wait three years to get the funds together and *En Attendant Godot* was first performed at the Théâtre de Babylone, Paris, on 5th January, 1953.

The reaction was mixed. One of the original actors claimed that the first night was “the theatre event of the world”. However, the cast had to put up with criticism. At one performance, the curtain even had to be dropped early, as the audience hooted and whistled their way through Lucky’s extraordinary, incomprehensible monologue. Soon, however, murmurs of approval spread, and with the public’s appetite for controversy, Beckett’s play became the must-see show of Paris’s Left Bank, spawning versions in Spanish and German that same year.

Concerned that somebody would soon attempt a poor, pirated English translation, Beckett quickly set about the job himself, and Peter Hall’s British production opened in London in August 1955. Although two reviewers found it exceptional, the play was not well received. As Peter Bull, the actor who played Pozzo, said: “Waves of hostility came whirling over the footlights, and the mass exodus, which was to form such a feature of the run of the piece, started quite soon after the curtain had risen. The audible groans were also fairly disconcerting.” Audiences in America were equally difficult to please. Director Alan Schneider wrote to Beckett to apologise for his disastrous production in Miami, in which a large number of the audience walked out. Beckett told Schneider

that he wasn’t disappointed. Failure, it seems, was part of the way in which he thought about art. He had, he claimed, “breathed deep” of its “vivifying air” for his entire career.

Most audiences, of course, expect to be a little disorientated at the beginning of a dramatic production. They are used, perhaps, to being initially confused about the location, the relationship between the characters, and the plot. However, they expect that all will soon be revealed, and that their efforts will be rewarded by a story that makes sense. But in Beckett’s play, no such revelations take place. In this manner, *Waiting for Godot* struck its first audiences as a scandalous dramatic outrage. Many of his audiences in the 1950s, and many readers today, still expect what was known in the 19th and early 20th century as a “well-made play” – one which will quickly set up the relationships between the characters and establish the story so far, offering a climax, a denouement, and, most importantly, a moral.

This may be what tradition demands, but, as Vladimir remarks at the end of the play, “habit is a great deadener” (Act 2). If we are to adopt Hamlet’s idea that a play holds up a mirror to nature, then a “well-made play” implies that reality is, in important ways, well-made. It suggests that the world, like the play, has a plot, a moral, and is shaped according to some design. In playing with Shakespeare’s thoughts on dramatic mimesis, Beckett offers his audience a new kind of world,

shaking them out of their habitual, deadened modes of thought.

Though perfectly constructed, *Waiting For Godot* defies our conventional expectations of theatre-going. Beckett claimed that if it was performed the way that he desired, it “would empty the theatre”. The comment can be read in two ways. Beckett might be suggesting his drama is so complex and difficult that people would want to leave before the interval; or he might be suggesting that if they stayed they would be given the sense that the idea of theatre itself has been hollowed out, emptied of its potency, and of its gravitas. Emptied, perhaps, of everything but its humour.

How funny is *Waiting for Godot*?

One thing often forgotten in critical discussions of *Waiting for Godot* is the fact that the play is very funny. While at University in Dublin, Beckett frequently attended Vaudeville theatre, and loved watching the films of Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy and Harold Lloyd. The influence of their slapstick antics is clearly evident in *Godot*, and recent productions have frequently cast comedians in the lead roles, from Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmonson to Robin Williams and Steve Martin. Vladimir and Estragon seem oddly and comically, similar,

both dressed like tramps, with matching bowler hats. They are, however, distinguished by their specific health complaints. Vladimir has some sort of problem with his prostate gland, causing a weak bladder. As a result, he becomes, quite literally, a running joke over the course of the play, frequently ducking towards the exit to relieve himself. Estragon, meanwhile, is preoccupied with taking off his boots because he has problems with his feet. Pain, however, brings them into a strange kind of harmony.

ESTRAGON:

[Feebly.] Help me!

VLADIMIR:

It hurts?

ESTRAGON:

Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!

VLADIMIR

[Angrily.] No one ever suffers but you. I don't count. I'd like to hear what you'd say if you had what I have.

ESTRAGON:

It hurts?

VLADIMIR:

Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts! (Act I)

In *Waiting for Godot* laughter often coincides with pain, indignity or obscenity. Take the combination of scatological and slapstick humour when Vladimir is told that his trouser fly is still undone,

or Estragon's excitement when he hears that he might get an erection from hanging himself. Such moments jostle with more complex forms of verbal humour, as when Vladimir ponders why he waits until the last moment before going to the toilet:

VLADIMIR:

[Musingly.] The last moment ... [He meditates.] Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that?

ESTRAGON:

Why don't you help me?

VLADIMIR:

Sometimes I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer ... How shall I say ... Relieved and at the same time ... appalled. (Act 1)

As in most of Beckett's prose and dramatic works, the gags are clever. A subtle pun on the idea of physical relief (emptying the bladder) and emotional relief (getting off-stage in time) is woven into a biblical reference. Here, Vladimir puts a comic twist on Proverbs 13: 12: "Hope deferred makes the heart sick: but when desire cometh it is the tree of life." Early audiences commented that Vladimir and Estragon's biblical banterings resembled a weary, well-worn comic routine.

Elsewhere, the comedy is dark. At the moment, for instance, when the abused and downtrodden



A performance of Waiting for Godot at the Theatre Royal, Bath, in 2005

Lucky begins to cry, the audience might begin to wonder quite what species of drama they are watching. Estragon goes over to Lucky to wipe away his tears, but Lucky returns this gesture by kicking him violently in the shins. This sudden switch from compassion to brutality seems both comic and disturbing. Beckett's note that he is writing in the hybrid genre of tragi-comedy should be borne in mind here. Laughter, as the French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote, can immunise us to pain – it provides "a momentary anaesthesia of the heart".