



CONTEMPORARY THEATRE IN ENGLISH

WORKSHEET 2 – SAMUEL BECKETT'S *WAITING FOR GODOT* (1953/1955)

I. The Theatre of the Absurd and Beckett: An Uneasy Relationship

Waiting for Godot has traditionally been connected with the 'theatre of the absurd', even though Beckett felt that the label encased and simplified his work, and ultimately implied a reductionist vision of the world. Read Martin Esslin's pages from *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) and answer the following questions:

1. Where does the 'theatre of the absurd' label come from and what picture of the human condition does it portray? Find out about the contexts in which it emerged and discuss their implications.
2. "The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images" (p. 25; emphasis in original). Bearing this quote in mind, how does the theatre of the absurd view differ from that of the Existentialists? What is theatrically significant about the theatre of the absurd?
3. Esslin describes the absurd as portraying "a universe deprived of what was once its centre" (p. 399), "a disintegrating world that has lost its unifying principle, its meaning, and its purpose – an absurd universe" (p. 414). In what way/s does *Waiting for Godot* reflect such concerns?
4. What does Hans-Thies Lehmann mean when, in his book *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006) he asserts that, for postdramatic theatre, unlike for the theatre of the absurd, "the disintegration of ideological certainties represents no longer a problem of metaphysical anguish but a cultural given" (p. 54)?
5. Find out about Beckett's uneasy relationship with the theatre of the absurd and about Esslin's later reassessment of the label. In what other, perhaps more productive ways, can Beckett's plays be read nowadays?

II. *Waiting for Godot*: Moving towards the Postmodern

Preliminaries

1. What is your general reaction to the play? Did you like/dislike it? Why, in each case? What is the play about? What is the relationship between the play's subject matter and its form? Try to articulate your thoughts while looking for an answer and be as explicit as possible.

2. Is *Waiting for Godot* a naturalistic/social-realist play? Which of the paradigms studied would you apply to the play?

3. Let us think about the title. Who/what is Godot? How is he/it depicted in the play and why is he/it so important for Vladimir and Estragon? How does the play reflect this situation structurally?

4. Read Martin Esslin's depiction of the staging of the play at San Quentin (pp. 19-21). What was the reaction of the convicts? Is this helpful to our understanding of the play? Find out about other stagings of the play in different, non-ordinary environments.

5. What genre does the play belong to and what effect does it have on the spectator? Why is that significant?

6. What are the most immediate historical and socio-political contexts to the play? Read Ronán McDonald's pages from his book *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett* (2007) and enumerate them.

7. In 1949, Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor W. Adorno famously said that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Cultural Criticism and Society*, 1983, p. 34). In what way can this be applied to *Waiting for Godot*?

8. While Beckett repeatedly denied any associations between the figure of Godot and the Christian God, the play is paradoxically full of references to Christianity. Make a list of all religious references you can find and discuss the possible meaning of Beckett's strategy.

Dramaturgical Strategies

1. Find out about the type of plays being performed in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century. How was theatre gradually changing and which playwrights and companies can be associated with that change? What international influences can you name, other than Beckett?

2. As you know, *Waiting for Godot* was very controversial when it opened in Britain. Kenneth Tynan, one of its few defenders, famously said that the play made him "re-examine the rules which have hitherto governed the drama; and, having done so, to pronounce them not elastic enough" (*The Observer*, 7 August 1955). Why do you think *Waiting for Godot* caused so much controversy and which traditional rules of drama did the play invite spectators to "re-examine"? In terms of formal experimentation, which elements would you identify as being particularly relevant, and why?

3. In what ways is the use of structure/dramatic shape experimental?

4. Elaine Aston and George Savona, in their book *Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance* (1991, p. 25), state that "Traditionally, a first scene needs to supply us with story-line information: setting the scene, introducing characters and establishing the

beginnings of an action". How do these words apply to *Waiting for Godot's* opening scene? Similarly, think about how the opening words of the play, "Nothing to be done", may be understood. Are they equally interpreted by Vladimir and Estragon? How can this be read by the spectator?

5. How is language used in *Waiting for Godot*? Which of its main functions are disrupted and what kind of implications do such disruptions have? In this respect, analyse Vladimir and Estragon's exchange on the story of the two thieves early in act I to help you illustrate this. Then contrast such use of language with that of the drawing-room comedies of previous decades. In what way/s is such a use different? For a critical look at this issue, you may find C.W.E. Bigsby's chapter from his book *Contemporary Drama in English* (1981) useful.

6. Analyse the use of time in *Waiting for Godot*. Is it formally experimental? Why (not)?

7. Compare/contrast Vladimir and Estragon. Who are they? Why are they waiting for Godot? Why are they in that specific road? Why don't they ever abandon their waiting? Are they equally dependent on Godot?

8. There are several moments in *Waiting for Godot* in which the play itself foregrounds its own theatricality by having Vladimir and Estragon replicate a theatrical situation. Find some of these moments and discuss the implications behind the use of such a technique. What effect does this have on the spectator?

9. Make a list of the different language games that Vladimir and Estragon play while waiting for Godot. Why do they resort to playing these specific games and what outcome do they have? Read Jeffrey Nealon's "Samuel Beckett and the Postmodern: Languages, Games, Play and *Waiting for Godot*" (1988) and discuss his interpretation (also in relation to the use of time in the play) according to which this is a postmodern strategy. What does Nealon identify as Vladimir and Estragon's main shortcoming in their playing?

10. Estragon: "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?". Discuss Estragon's words in the light of Nealon's reading of the play.

11. Discuss Mark and Juliette Taylor-Batty's reading of the play as showing the transition from modernism to postmodernism in their book *Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot* (2009). What are the main aspects of such a transition and how does the postmodern sensibility reflect in the play?

12. Bearing in mind the central position in the play of games/role-playing and the music-hall or circus routines, which acting style is used in the play and how does it contribute to the creation of meaning? What effect does it have on the spectator?

13. Compare/contrast Pozzo and Lucky. What kind of relationship is established between the two? How can they be read in comparison with Vladimir and Estragon? Is it possible to establish any associations between the four of them? As part of this, analyse the way in which Pozzo uses language and assess its implications.

14. Lucky has been described as the most enigmatic figure in the play. Read his 'Think' soliloquy, watch the clip in Michael Lindsay-Hogg's filmed version of the play (*Beckett on Film*, 2001) and try to find a pattern in the speech: which words and ideas are repeated? Do you agree with Nealon when he identifies Lucky's words as "perhaps the key to the entire play"? In this connection, read how he analyses it (pp. 523-525) and discuss its implications.

15. Discuss Pozzo and Lucky's change in act II and assess its possible meaning. As part of this, analyse Pozzo's speech on Time, just before he leaves for the second time ("Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time!") and relate it to Vladimir's response to it ("I don't know what to think any more"). What other changes take place between acts I and II? Who/what do they affect and in what ways do they contribute to the play's intelligibility?

16. Read and watch the encounters between Vladimir and the Boy at the end of acts I and II, discussing their main differences and analysing their implications.

17. Analyse the endings of both acts. How can they be read? Note the particular use of stage directions. In what way do they contribute to the creation of meaning? Look for other instances of a similar use of stage directions in the play and further discuss its implications.

18. Discuss the use of the stage picture. What are its most defining elements? What are its implications? Watch Lindsay-Hogg's filmed version and analyse the way in which it is rendered.

Reference List

- Adorno, T.W. (1983). Cultural Criticism and Society. In *Prisms*. (S. and S. Weber, Trans.) (pp. 17-34). Cambridge: MIT.
- Aston and Savona Aston, E. and Savona, G. (1991). *Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bigsby, C.W.E. (1981). The Language of Crisis in British Theatre: The Drama of Cultural Pathology. In C.W.E. Bigsby (Ed.), *Contemporary Drama in English* (pp. 11-51). London: Edward Arnold.
- Esslin, M. (1980). *The Theatre of the Absurd* (3rd ed.). London: Penguin.
- Lehmann, H.T. (2006). *Postdramatic Theatre*. (K. Jürs-Munby, Trans.). London and New York: Routledge.
- McDonald, R. (2007). *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett* (pp. 21-28 & 29-43). Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Nealon, J. (1988). Samuel Beckett and the Postmodern: Languages, Games, Play and *Waiting for Godot*. *Modern Drama* 31(4), 520-528.
- Taylor-Batty, M. and J. (2009). *Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot* (pp. 30-34). London: Continuum.
- Tynan, K. (1955, August 7). [Review of the play *Waiting for Godot*, by S. Beckett]. *Observer*.

Visual Material

Lindsay-Hogg, M. [Director]. (2001). *Waiting for Godot*. In *Beckett on Film*. Germany, Ireland, United Kingdom: Blue Angel Films, Tyrone Productions, Radio Telefís Éireann, Channel 4, Board Scannán Na hÉireann.