

# Beckett's presentation of memory in waiting for godot



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Throughout *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett uses memory as a means to anchor the isolated setting in the context of some kind of surrounding world, frequently undermining this 'anchor' by presenting the past, and the protagonists' recollections of it, as being fragmented and unclear, much like Vladimir and Estragon's existence in the present. The subversion of such a key element of human existence - memory - questions the significance of actions in a world where seemingly endless cycles of indecision render time itself almost entirely meaningless. This lack of meaning and continuity is reflected in the circularity of the play's two-act structure, perhaps recalling the repetition of a second world war despite the vast human costs of the first - much like the memories' of the two main characters, the lessons of the past had seemingly had no influence on the present. The play's nihilistic setting further increases its relevance to post-war Europe. In this way, Beckett presents memory as being almost entirely irrelevant to the present moment, adding exponentially to his depiction of humanity as being lost in repeating cycles of events beyond their own control.

Furthermore, throughout the play, Beckett links the deterioration of memory to the total deconstruction of the values that underpin traditional society, this time subverting the commonly accepted notion of a linear timeline:

Here, the repetition of the question 'what did we do yesterday?' underscores the hopeless position of humanity in the face of a chaotic, incomprehensible universe. This point is laboured further by the incoherent 'yes' in response, once more highlighting the lack of intelligible answers to questions posed by our surroundings. Furthermore, the deterioration of the two characters' memories poses significant existential questions to the audience,

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challenging notions of time and progress that were so crucial to 20th century understanding of the world - as neither character remembers the events of the previous day, there is no way to confirm that it actually happened, let alone derive something useful from it. The inextricable link between physical deterioration and universal meaninglessness once more lays emphasis on the inherently futile situation of humankind, with the repeated stage direction ('they do not move') at the end of each act helping to reinforce this sense of circularity and inevitable repetition and, in doing so, leaving human progress devoid of any real currency or value. These ideas undoubtedly have their roots in the second world war, where, even despite the vast human cost of world war one, the world still descended into conflict. Furthermore, the second world war also witnessed the destruction of staple contemporary values, degrading ideas of integrity and moral virtue in the same way that Beckett deconstructs time and human purpose.

Beckett places his depiction of a malfunctioning human memory in a direct parallel to the protagonists' physical deterioration, suggesting that the circularity of human existence is as inevitable as the process of aging: 'Estragon: [giving up again] Nothing to be done.' Here, Beckett's use of the word 'again', particularly in the first line of the play, immediately begins to suggest a wider context to the events depicted in the play. However, at no point does Beckett specify what this context might be, giving Estragon's struggle with his boot an almost timeless resonance with humanity as a whole. The finality in the phrase 'giving up' seems entirely at odds with 'again', introducing the idea of humankind being trapped in a perennial struggle, unable to progress even with the most pointless tasks whilst

simultaneously being unable to 'give up'. This ties in heavily with the overall theme of the limitations of a malfunctioning memory, rendering 'events' meaningless as they blend together into a cycle of repetition. Furthermore, the vague, general connotations of 'Nothing to be done' could easily be applied to a wider setting, highlighting the suitability of Gogo's hopeless struggle as a metaphor for his life in general. However, the fact that such an apt symbol of human helplessness comes in the form of Estragon's absurd, comedic behaviour adds another element to the opening line, deconstructing the popular notion of mankind's superiority and, in doing so, pointing out the base absurdity that often lies at the heart of human thought. This form of physical comedy can be seen frequently in the work of Laurel and Hardy, popular comedians of Beckett's era. In referencing seemingly trivial aspects of contemporary popular culture, Beckett again places the absurd on the same plane as wider, more 'serious' thematic elements and, by extension, reduces human attempts to understand the universe to mere farce. In this way, even from the very first line, Beckett places futility at the heart of his presentation of humanity. In a play comprised largely of inactivity, Beckett's decision to place the active verb 'done' in the opening line serves to further this effect, creating a strong sense of stagnation and futility that remains strong throughout the duration of the play.

However, towards the beginning of the play, Beckett's only direct reference to a genuine location demonstrates the extent to which memory, however misled, is integral to the construction of the characters' identities: 'Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were respectable in those days'. Here, the connotations of nostalgia in the phrase 'in those

days' gives the strong impression of a positive memory, whilst its lack of specificity suggests once again that time has lost a great deal of its meaning. However, ideas of companionship in 'hand in hand' depict Vladimir and Estragon's relationship as being cemented largely by the past as opposed to the present - it is their memory which ties them together as much as anything. In this way, even the vague semblance of memory is shown as being vital to humanity's ability to give itself the impression of meaning and purpose, with the connotations of social class in 'respectable' suggesting that an identity cemented in the past is the only way in which the characters are able to validate their existence in the present. Therefore, it becomes clear that the fact of memory is more important than its specific elements, in that it provides the only vaguely stable foundation from which humanity is able to interpret the world. That said, however, it is not true at all that Beckett presents memory as a genuinely 'stable foundation' - his subversion of this stability is crucial to his depiction of human futility in an incomprehensible universe - rather he attempts to demonstrate the inability of humankind to exist without a basic idea of the past.

It is clear, therefore, that through Beckett's presentation of memory in waiting for Godot, he depicts the inevitability of recurring actions as old generations, and their memories of the past, give way to new ones. This repetition is reflected in the post-war environment of the time, as well as in the comic futility of Beckett's own setting within the play, giving his presentation of memory a firm grounding in reality. In this way, he simultaneously laughs at and sympathises with the idea that Vladimir and

Estragon's perpetual struggle to make sense of their situation through memory is, ultimately, as futile and incoherent as memory itself.