

Beckett's novel
achievement:
absurdist comedy in
waiting for godot



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In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the playwright bestows upon his work the veneer of comedy, but invests the heart of it with the "absurd", the tragic. He employs the gags and the routines, the circus comedy and the songs of the "lowbrow" arts, to underline and to sometimes undercut the many themes and ideas which are so apparent throughout. The two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are of course clearly derived from the pairs of cross-talk comedians of music halls, in effect more resembling clowns than tramps. Their dialogue has the peculiarly repetitive quality of the cross-talk comedian's patter, masking the profound ideas throughout within "idle discourse". Beckett uses this comedic format in order to better explore the bleak world of *Waiting for Godot*. To begin with, the world of Christianity is something that Beckett explores throughout the play. The Christian tradition indeed is one of the tragedies of the characters. Their imaginations and thoughts abound with half remembered images, stories and models of behaviour from the Bible: the Dead Sea, pale blue ("I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon"), the two thieves, John the Baptist, Christ's precursor ("I'm leaving my boots there. Another will come, just as...as...as me, but with smaller feet, and they'll make him happy"), Christ himself ("All my life I've compared myself to him"). Beckett expounds upon this theme of God and Christianity at the beginning of the first Act. Vladimir offers Estragon the story of the two thieves at Christ's crucifixion, one supposedly saved and the other damned. This is a "reasonable percentage", he thinks, and he suggests they divert themselves for a time with repenting. Estragon responds to this suggestion however with pointing out that they have nothing to repent for, other than possible "Our Being born". Beckett is suggesting here through Estragon that it is living that

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produces pain and suffering, not sin. This fairly sophisticated, philosophical exchange is ended with a typically crude comedic outburst from Estragon: “People are bloody ignorant apes.” This conversation comes just prior to the first mention of Godot. Beckett is implying at this early stage that there is a connection in Vladimir’s mind between what Christianity offers and what his ‘God-fantasy’ involves, that which he desperately wants from Godot: an authority that will take over his moral responsibilities. ‘Time – a condition of resurrection become an instrument of death’. While this notion was put forward by Beckett in his writings on Proust, the same fundamental idea about time applies to *Waiting for Godot*. In the absurdist universe of the play, time does not exist: it is only one more human, subjective method of attempting to impose meaning on the meaningless. In the first Act, there occurs a series of grotesque entertainments, “all worse than pantomime”, including amusement for Estragon in watching Pozzo’s panic as he finds his pipe is missing, and the fascination of Estragon and Pozzo at the sight of Vladimir peeing painfully offstage. Each of the characters has his own particular way of relating to time, and intermingled in this “lowbrow” comedy, is Beckett’s exploration of this idea. Pozzo in this scene, the professional man, clings to his watch. If he wants to conduct his business efficiently, he must ‘affirm that he controls and regulates time’ – other people’s, as well as his own. When Vladimir proclaims that “Time has stopped”, Pozzo cuddles his watch to his ear, replying with “Don’t you believe it, sir, don’t you believe it. Whatever you like, but not that.” In the second Act, the great tragedy of Pozzo’s blindness is that it leaves him completely dependant on others for the time of day. Vladimir’s equivalent of Pozzo’s watch, the instrument which symbolises his relation to time, are his <https://assignbuster.com/becketts-novel-achievement-absurdist-comedy-in-waiting-for-godot/>

own memories. He tries throughout to convince both himself and Estragon of their veracity. Estragon in both acts must accept Vladimir's version of 'yesterday' for Vladimir to be able to set 'today' in his 'habitual patterns'. Beckett wrote in his essay on Proust: 'There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us...Yesterday is irremediably a part of us.' Therefore, is Beckett merely saying that the past shapes the future? In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett struggles to break free from this notion Vladimir throughout attempts to find purpose and reality in the present through striving to recollect the past. Estragon however has no interest in remembering: "I'm no a historian" 2E It is Vladimir who forces Estragon to remember the past Estragon begins his day relatively content. By the time Vladimir has finished 'spinning his precise recollections' however, Estragon may protest that he has had enough and wants to leave, but it is too late. The pair are now determined and ruled by a vague recollection of what mattered in the past: "We're waiting for Godot".

Beckett's exploration into the theme of death in *Waiting for Godot* comes in two main parts, one in each Act. The first is through Lucky's speech, and connects the theme of death with that of time. Lucky in his tirade evokes the 'dying and decomposition of matter' and the inability of the human mind to keep control of it. Places that named by humans, both cities and the country ("Feckham Peckham Fulham Clapham") give way to undefined plains, mountains, seas and rivers, which in turn break down into the basic elements (water, fire, air, earth). At his conclusion, "stories", "cold", "skull", "grave" death are the 'obsessive images'. Dying and death, Beckett argues, is a fundamental and unavoidable part of living. Lucky's speech also explores the death of language and logic. Words and phrases in the speech like "given", <https://assignbuster.com/becketts-novel-achievement-absurdist-comedy-in-waiting-for-godot/>

“ considering”, “ as a result of”, “ it is established”, “ beyond all doubt” all imply the ability to order and discuss. However, they are shown through the rambling and chaotic nature of the speech to be empty and powerless. The second key moment in the play in which Beckett explores death is once again masked in a comedic element. At the beginning of Act 2, Vladimir sings a song that could be straight out of a music hall production.

Significantly for the play, the pivot of this song is death. It does not however say simply, as Lucky did, that dying is a part of living. Rather, it describes death as something humans are responsible for. In the song, the masters of the world and its resources (the cook), and all their underdogs, “ all the dogs” who “ came running”, join forces to eliminate anyone who upsets the way things are, however great their need stealing a “ crust of bread”. The cook kills the thief and the other dogs ‘ bury him deep and use him as a cautionary tale to bind future generations’. What is striking is that Vladimir sings the tale to himself, warning himself against any kind of rebellion. He is ‘ closing more tightly the doors of his own prison-house’. Thus far, Vladimir and Estragon have evaded death, the “ tomb”, just as in the song. Vladimir comes to the conclusion that keeping to the same routine day in day out is what has saved them from the darkness. Beckett here is expounding upon the folly of this philosophy, that forever succumbing to the trap of habitual routine in order to stave off the inevitable is a cause without hope or point. The entrance of the boy in the first Act introduces a sequence which re-enacts the relationship between the self and the outside world Beckett's exploration of selfhood. Beckett illustrates here the notion that all people ever see in the world outside is merely another version of their own

perceptions. If the Boy then is the unknown future for which the pair is
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longing, it is a future constructed in their own image. Vladimir and Estragon question the boy, eliciting information that seems new but is in fact not, being simply a variation on themes the pair have already discussed. The Boy has a brother, not unlike him, and they both work for Godot. One is beaten and the other is not echoing the different overnight fates of Estragon and Vladimir, and also the fate of the two crucified thieves, one saved and one damned. Throughout the play there is a constant discussion of the nature of humanity all other key themes are connected to it, but in particular Beckett's discussion on the vanity of human wishes. Humanity is shown through the characters in *Waiting for Godot* as forever searching for an assurance and comfort that is simply not there. Vladimir strives throughout to give his existence meaning by trying to recollect the past, and in turn by holding onto a vain hope that Godot will come. This is no different from the eagerness of the faithful to believe the one Gospel-writer who says one thief was saved. Both spring from the same basic need to dispel the apparent futility of one's own existence, to believe in a future that will be better than the present, and to recognise some kind of purpose to life. Beckett thus does what on the surface seems impossible: expounds upon the bleak philosophy of the theatre of the absurd, while constructing a farcical comedy routine at the same time. His black, obscene, pantomime humour is an attempt to bring detachment to a situation that is irredeemably depressing. An absurd world is a frightening one. It has in itself 'no norms, no absolutes, no consoling certainties, no direction'. It is indeed Beckett's novel achievement to succeed in using comedy in order to better describe this world, and to explore the key elements of existence within it: God, time, death, selfhood, and underlying all, human nature. Bibliography Birkett, Jennifer. *Waiting for* <https://assignbuster.com/becketts-novel-achievement-absurdist-comedy-in-waiting-for-godot/>

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