

Running on empty



Language and tone in Beckett's
'Waiting for Godot'

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Samuel Beckett's ADVENTURES OF TINTIN



ILLUSTRATION BY TOM GAULD

Just because...

Sartre and Camus

- In late 1940s in France theatre had developed from the plays by Sartre and Camus written during German occupation
- Idea of man as a lonely anxious creature living in a meaningless world coined 'existentialism'
- Man is only existing, no more, until he makes a decisive and critical choice about his future course of action

The Absurd

- Camus takes the idea of existentialism and states it is legitimate to wonder why life is meaningless
- Man as a stranger in an alien world is the sentiment of absurdity
- Suicide is not the answer, you have to proceed beyond nihilism and find clarity
- After the war Paris capital of dramatic art
- Samuel Beckett writes his **Waiting For Godot** in French first (1948), English 1955
- Absurdism of the 1950s seen as reaction to the bomb, Cold War and horrors of WW2, but is this true for Beckett?

Beckett's writing before 'Waiting for Godot'

- Initially and lastingly influenced by James Joyce, 'sat at his knee'
- Early poetry **Whoroscope** and **Echo's Bones** and essays contain traits found in his later drama: broken worlds in which the 'boredom of living' is replaced by the 'suffering of being'
- Stories: **More Kicks than Pricks** (1934) already contain the 'waiting' that is so prominent in his later, famous play
- Clear influence of Dante's **Purgatorio**, in which there is a 'waiting place' for the slothful

Waiting and Hell in Dante's Inferno

- Quote: "It occurred to me" she said "apropos of I don't know what, that you might do worse than make up Dante's rare movements of compassion in Hell." Samuel Beckett, **Dante and the Lobster**, first story in the collection **More Kicks than Pricks**
- In **Purgatorio** the waiting is expectant; in Beckett it reflects the absolute absence of everything
- Assignment 1, a kind of matching exercise in which relevant quotes from Dante are chosen by the participants to match selected scenes from the play, after which we will discuss them

From: "Dead Voices in Waiting for Godot" by Lois A. Cuddy

- Dante's Neutrals mindlessly pursuing anything that will give meaning to existence, Beckett's Man waiting interminably for the answer to come to him.
- Dante's figures are tortured by stinging insects into feeling their sin of emptiness. Beckett : punishments are bladder problems, sore feet, itching head, nocturnal beatings, and neck sores.
- "And where were we yesterday evening according to you?" Gogo answers, "How would I know? In another compartment. There's no lack of void"
- Modern man's inability, or refusal, to make choices defines his Hell

Novels

- **Murphy** 1938: protagonist shuts out the world, wants to be a 'mote in the dark of absolute freedom' and 'waits', for what we don't know, in his rocking chair
- **Watt**, written during the war: protagonist is crippled, in the course of the story his speech becomes shapeless and disordered
- **Molloy, l'Innommable, Malone Meurt**: 1951-1953 trilogy set in wasteland with decrepit characters who do not finish the stories they start to tell

The language of nothingness

- ‘What was I going to say? Never mind, I’ll say something else, it’s all the same’ ‘Words may bring me to the threshold of my story’ (from **Malone Meurt**)
- Beckett has come to the point where he has moved his novels out of the tradition of empirically examining human experience and has erased factuality.
- No plot, no action, syntax collapsing: **my life last state last version ill said ill heard ill recaptured when the panting stops ill murmured to the mud....**

Where to go? To drama

- Is drama the better vehicle for what Beckett has to say? To express the 'running on empty'?
- (His) mistrust of the Word that was steadily deepening throughout the 'forties and the early 'fifties could find in the action and gesture of a stage-piece a further means of undermining language. **Nathan A. Scott 1965**
- (His) novels are honed to such a fine point of bodiless desolation, so technically difficult and so narrow in range that I doubt they would be read by any but devotees and specialists were it not for the plays. **A. Alvarez 1973**

Waiting For Godot features:

- Absurdism in the symbolist tradition: plot is not logical in a conventional sense, this reflects the monotony of human life
- Mime, music hall, circus elements, all to represent everyday life. Tramps lying in a ditch.
- Characters in pairs: clowns with their double-acts
- Action discarded: disorienting experience resembles living in a universe that does not make sense, **why do they keep talking**
- Irrational universe: boy who announces Godot will come tomorrow says the same the next day: is it same boy, is it the next day?

From :Nick Mount **Existentialism in Waiting for Godot**

‘Traditional drama represents actions; Godot is about inaction, about waiting for an action that never comes. Time in Godot isn't concentrated so much as it is irrelevant, undifferentiated, one moment no different from another. The play takes place in a single setting, but a setting almost completely severed from any real-world referent, a place nowhere and everywhere. So Waiting for Godot follows the unity of action in a play without action, the unity of time in a play without time, and the unity of place in a play without place.’

Gogo: **Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes,
it's awful!**

The 'tone'

- Opening words: 'Nothing to be done' 'I'm beginning to come round to that opinion'. They could be talking about the human condition but they are talking about Estragon's boots.....
- Despair but also jokes: Estragon: 'Where do we come in?' Vladimir: 'Come in? ... On our hands and knees'
- Estragon constantly forgets, Vladimir reminds him. This is one of the features to keep the conversation going.
- We experience an unsettling change from ironic laughter at the characters to a 'sickening doubt' that Gogio and Didi infect us with, which Wayne Booth termed 'unstable irony', meaning we have to reject the surface meaning.

Vladimir and Estragon

- Tramps now, what have they been before? Intellectual and poet? Levy and (Russian) Christian? Narrator (Didi from 'dire') and Wanderer (Gogo=go, go)
- Are they, as Chaplin was, the 'little man' in the guise of a tramp?
- Or, are they, as Vladimir says at one point, 'all mankind'.
- They are both victims and abusers (of Pozzo)
- Both suffer from the failures of their bodies, one complains, the other does not
- They seem friends, but they also feel condemned to one another: 'You always come crawling back'

The Chaplinesque tone

Estragon: why don't we hang ourselves?

Vladimir: with what?

Estragon: you haven't got a bit of rope?

Vladimir: no

Estragon: then we can't

Vladimir: let's go

Estragon: oh, wait, there is my belt

Vladimir: it's too short

Estragon: you could hang on to my legs

Vladimir: and who would hang onto mine?

Estragon: true

Do the assignments you find on Worksheet 1

The Story of the Crucifixion; assignments

- Why is Vladimir so taken with the story of the crucifixion and the two thieves?
- What reason does he give Estragon for bringing up this story?
- Estragon pretends he has forgotten about the Bible, but later we get this exchange:
- Vladimir: 'Christ! What has Christ got to do with it? You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!'
- Estragon: 'All my life I've compared myself to him'. Discuss.
- Worksheet 2 for detailed assignments.

Beckett on St Augustine

‘Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved.
Do not presume, one of the thieves was
damned’

That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the
shape that matters.

The shape of an idea appears to be more
important than the idea itself.

‘Verbal expression may be a compulsive need,
but it is self-defeating - in saying anything the
potentially sayable becomes unsayable’.

(Andrew K. Kennedy, in: *Six dramatists in
search of a language*)

Pozzo and Lucky

- Pozzo: nobleman 'made in God's image', sadist
- Lucky: his slave, completely defeated, an automaton
- Pozzo once liked Lucky when he could still 'think' and dance and tell him 'beautiful things', but now he wants to sell him at the 'Fair of Our Saviour'
- Pozzo's speech: a performance
- When they re-appear they have been 'ravaged by time'; Pozzo is blind, Lucky is dumb

Assignment on Lucky's Speech

- 'What was I going to say? Never mind, I'll say something else, it's all the same' 'Words may bring me to the threshold of my story' (from **Malone Meurt**) Is it the same here, does 'saying something else bring Lucky to the 'threshold of his story'? Explain.
- If Lucky is posing an argument here, how does that argument derail?
- Worksheet 3 for detailed assignments.

Literature

The most relevant articles

Lucky's Speech in Beckett's "Waiting for Godot": A Punctuated Sense-Line Arrangement **by** Anselm Atkins

"Waiting for Godot" and Man's Search for Community **by** Dan O. Via, Jr.

"Dead Voices" in "Waiting for Godot": New Inhabitants of Dante's "Inferno" **by** Lois A. Cuddy

History Electrified into Anagogy: A Reading of "Waiting for Godot" **by** Daniel Stempel

Irony and Salvation in Waiting for Godot **by** Karl Popovich

Some books

Samuel Beckett: a collection of Critical essays ed. Martin Esslin

Samuel Beckett, Nathan A. Scott

Beckett, A. Alvarez

Six Dramatists in Search of A Language, Andrew A. Kennedy

Modern Drama in Theory and Practice part 2, J.L. Styan