

AP English Literature and Composition

Major Works Data Sheet

<p><b>Title:</b> Waiting for Godot</p> <p><b>Author:</b> Samuel Beckett</p> <p><b>Date of Publication:</b> 1952 (French) 1954 (English)</p> <p><b>Genre:</b> Absurdist Play, “Tragicomedy”</p>	<p><b>Biographical information about the author:</b>          Samuel Beckett was born in Foxrock, Ireland on April 13, 1906. He began to play music when he was six, and he played sports as a youth. He also published articles in a school newspaper. He received his B.A. from Trinity College, where he met author James Joyce, who influenced his life and his work. In 1930, he became a lecturer at Trinity College, but he resigned at the end of 1931 and began to write. Beckett joined the French Resistance during the German occupation. He began to write <i>Waiting for Godot</i> after the war. In 1969, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He continued writing for the rest of his life. His last work, the poem “What is the Word,” was written in 1988, and he died in 1989 of respiratory problems.</p>
<p><b>Historical information about the period of publication:</b>          Originally written few years after the end of World War II and the Holocaust.          There was the recent development and use of the atom bomb during World War II. Also, there was the development of the more powerful hydrogen bomb.          Written soon after the beginning of the Cold War.</p>	<p><b>Characteristics of the genre:</b>          Absurdist theatre abandons focuses on the senselessness of the human condition. It often lacks a plot, and it does not have a moral or a message, leaving the audience to find their own meanings. The occurrences are not logical. Characters lack a sense of purpose. Absurdist plays are often humorous.</p>
<p><b>Plot Summary:</b>          The play opens with Estragon sitting on a low mound, trying to remove his boot. Vladimir shows up, and the two begin to talk. The two are homeless and well acquainted. They are waiting for Godot, though Estragon thinks that they waited for Godot the day before. The two later realize that they are unsure of the appointed day, the current day, the past, and whether the man’s name is Godot. Vladimir repeatedly decides that there is “nothing to be done.” Unsure what to do, Estragon tries to tell a dream, and Vladimir objects. They consider hanging themselves on a nearby tree, but they decide not to. Vladimir gives Estragon a carrot, after handing him a turnip. Pozzo and Lucky appear. Pozzo is drives Lucky with a rope and a whip and calls him “pig.” Pozzo eats chicken, and Estragon claims the bones from Lucky. Estragon and Vladimir ask to see Lucky dance, and he does so. Then they ask to hear him think, and Pozzo tells them to give Lucky his hat. When they do, he enters into a long, absurd monologue and the other three suffer. They take his hat, and Lucky falls. Eventually he recovers, and Pozzo and Lucky leave. A boy appears, and says that Mr. Godot will come the next day. Estragon leaves his boots on the ground. The two decide to leave, but they do not move.          The next day, at the same time and place, Vladimir is singing when Estragon appears. They continue to wait for Godot. Estragon has forgotten almost everything from the previous day, and from his own past. They banter for a while, and then Vladimir notices that the nearby tree is now covered with leaves. Estragon wants a carrot, but he decides not to get one. Estragon tries on the boots that have replaced his own. They fit fairly well. They find Lucky’s hat and exchange hats for a while. Vladimir ends up with Lucky’s hat, while Estragon ends up with his own hat. Vladimir suggests that they play Lucky and Pozzo, but it ends quickly. Estragon panics and thinks that they are surrounded. They perform some poses to relax. Pozzo and Lucky appear, but Pozzo is blind. Lucky and Pozzo fall. Pozzo calls for help and offers to pay the two, and Vladimir tries to help him and falls. Estragon tries to help Vladimir, and he falls. Eventually, the two get up. They discuss Pozzo’s blindness with Pozzo. It seems to have occurred in the night. In addition, Lucky is dumb now. Lucky and Pozzo leave. A boy appears. He and Vladimir have the same conversation, but the boy seems to have forgotten that he ever saw Vladimir. They think about hanging themselves. The two decide to leave, but they do not move.</p>	

<p><b>Describe the author's style:</b>          Samuel Beckett uses many aspects of the Theater of the Absurd, discarding traditional plot, characters, and actions to create a play with many different interpretations. Beckett uses simple diction, but the characters often divulge into meaningless conversations. His style is marked by repetition of such phrases, which he uses to emphasize the tediousness of the characters' lives. The characters' conversations almost seem philosophical, but are not logical, creating a "sense of senselessness of the human condition" which characterizes the play.</p>	<p><b>An example that demonstrates the style:</b>          "Pozzo: The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. (He laughs.) Let us not then speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its predecessors. (Pause.) Let us not speak well of it either. (Pause.) Let us not speak of it at all." (Act I)</p>
--	---

**Memorable Quotes**

Quote	Significance
<p>"Estragon: Nothing to be done.          Vladimir: I'm beginning to come round to that opinion." (Act I)</p>	<p>Although here Estragon is referring to his boots, this quote represents the hopelessness in the main characters mundane and repetitive lives, and their struggle to pass the time as they wait for the mysterious Godot.</p>
<p>"Vladimir: We met yesterday. (Silence)          Do you not remember?          Pozzo: I don't remember having met anyone yesterday. But to-morrow I won't remember having met anyone to-day. So don't count on me to enlighten you." (Act II)</p>	<p>The forgetfulness of characters of time, objects, and each other, promotes a nihilistic view, where the characters are unsure of their existence. Vladimir is the only character that retains his memory throughout the play, but he often questions the validity of his memories.</p>
<p>"Vladimir: Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (Pause. Vehemently.)          Let us do something while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us!" (Act II)</p>	<p>This quote characterizes Vladimir as the most philosophical and least materialistic of all the character in the play. It also reflects Beckett's theme of hope because Beckett calls for people to grasp hope by their actions, and seize the opportunities presented to them.</p>

Characters			
Name	Role in the story	Significance	Adjectives
Vladimir (Didi or Mr. Albert)	One of two main protagonists; masculine protagonist	Vladimir is the paternal figure in the play. He is responsible and wary, and interestingly, stands through most of the play, whereas his partner, Estragon, sits. Vladimir, the logical individual, is often restless and preoccupies himself with religious or philosophical matters. While Estragon's pain is physical hurt, Vladimir's is mental anguish. He suffers every day in the same situation, which is magnified because he is the only character who remembers the past. He is the most "normal" of the characters in the play.	Responsible, cautious, remembering, restless, thoughtful
Estragon (Gogo)	One of two main protagonists; feminine protagonist	Estragon is the infantile figure in the play. Always seeking Vladimir's protection, he is weak, helpless, and whiny throughout. No figment of higher reasoning crosses Estragon; he preoccupies himself everyday with mundane thoughts: what he can eat or how to ease his physical pain. Like the other characters, Estragon, possibly suffering from Alzheimer's disease, forgets what happened every day. His amnesia might symbolize the futility of time and life.	Weak, helpless, forgetting
Pozzo	Rich gentleman who owns a servant	Pozzo occasionally passes the spot where Vladimir and Estragon wait every day. He provides a diversion every day for Vladimir and Estragon. Pozzo treats his servant, Lucky, very harshly, but their relationship is complex. There are hints that their relationship was better in the past. The dynamics between Pozzo and Lucky could be an extreme exaggeration of that between Vladimir and Estragon. Like Didi and Gogo, Pozzo and Lucky are bound by decades of intimacy. In the first act, Pozzo is functional, but in the second act, he is blind and does not remember meeting Vladimir and Estragon the night before. However, his poor memory may be more of a result of self-absorption and deep insecurity.	Brutal, pompous, self-righteous, condescending
Lucky	Pozzo's old, worn slave	Lucky carries Pozzo's bags and stool. In the first act, Lucky sings and dances, but in the second act, he strikes dumb. He spews into a monologue during which his voice increasingly trembles until he can no longer speak without shaking. Such is a possible symptom of Parkinson's disease, which Beckett's mother had. It is evident that in the past, Lucky had more influence in his relationship with his master. He even thought in order to fill the vacant need of Pozzo. Although Lucky was intellectually superior to Pozzo, he is now an object of contempt, but is nevertheless faithful. When Pozzo falls, he does not run away, but instead helps his master.	Servile, stupid, stubborn, slow, mulish
Boy	Young lad, goat herder	At the end of each act, the boy informs Vladimir that Godot will not be coming that night. He too forgets the previous day and insists that he was not there previously. The boy has a brother who is a shepherd and whom Godot beats. The boy plays the role of a messenger in the story, or to those who take the Christian perspective, he plays the role of an angel.	Shy, wary, ingenuous, simple
Godot	Man for whom Vladimir and Estragon wait indefinitely	Above all, Godot is mysterious. His identity has been subject to much debate. Those who see the play as a religious allusion assert that Godot is God, an accusation Beckett denies. In the story of the two thieves crucified with Jesus, only one was saved, just as only one of the boys working for Godot is safe from beatings and only one of Estragon's feet was saved. Perhaps if Godot came, either Vladimir or Estragon would have to suffer; only one would be saved. Then it might be better if Godot never came.	Mysterious, dilatory, reluctant

Setting	Significance of the opening scene
<p>The setting of “Waiting for Godot” is a non-descript plain. The only object that is detailed is a dead tree (which mysteriously grows leaves the next morning). In their discussion, Vladimir and Estragon mention a ditch that Estragon hides out in. Presumably then, the landscape is made of some rolling hills. The barren emptiness of the setting echoes the emptiness of the duo’s existence. Vladimir and Estragon endlessly wait for Godot, a representation of God. In that sense, they are in purgatory. The setting is perfectly neutral, an absolute equilibrium between heaven and hell. In this stillness, Vladimir and Estragon live and wait. The only sign of civilization is the road on which Pozzo and Lucky enter, suggesting that life is a journey.</p>	<p>Vladimir and Estragon immediately establish the hopelessness of their situation with the statement “Nothing to be done.” However, they also express joy at their reunion, implying the passage of time and joy in the present. Thus, Beckett introduces the essential paradox of living: the reality of bleakness paired with the feeling of expectation. Estragon’s struggle with the boot is a foreshadowing of the conflict to come, one that the reader will ultimately face. The boot joins the human to the earth and the anticipation to the facts. While Estragon continues in ignorance, the reader will ultimately have to question his or her conception of life and try to reconcile existence with misery.</p>
<p><b>Symbols</b></p>	<p><b>Significance of the ending/closing scene</b></p>
	<p>The ending scene directly parallels the opening scene. Once again, Estragon and Vladimir meet in a field, and once again, they try to hang themselves out of boredom. They decide to try and hang themselves, but like the day before, they fail. The similarities between the first and second act underscore the repetitive nature of Vladimir and Estragon’s existence. While suicide would serve as an escape from the cycle, the duo is unable to complete the act, suggesting that they will never leave. Interestingly, Estragon completely forgets the events of the day before, leaving Vladimir to question his own shaky memory. Even the Boy, repeating the same directives, seems to have forgotten his and Vladimir’s last meeting. Vladimir is determined to make the boy remember his existence, indicating the depths of Vladimir’s fear. More than anything else, he fears being forgotten, but Estragon’s amnesia hints that Vladimir’s fears are realized with the dawn of each new day. In the very last lines, Vladimir and Estragon agree to leave and to metaphorically break the cycle. Instead, they stand motionless, and the cycle continues.</p>
<p>The tree (dead in Act I but thriving in Act II) represents the omnipotence of nature. Although Vladimir and Estragon remain trapped in the same events, the tree grows. While humans with their supposed “free will” repeat the same day, the tree has the capacity to change. The hats that Pozzo, Lucky, Vladimir, and Estragon pass around represent civilization, the distinction between animals and humans. When Pozzo, Estragon, and Vladimir exchange hats, no change occurs. When Lucky is given a hat, however, he is suddenly capable of speech and thought. Lucky’s speech is a sad reminder that most of human “thought” is actually stolen snippets of others’ ideas. Although the diction is high, the syntax of Lucky’s speech is jumbled and nonsensical. He speaks but does not communicate. Like the rest of existence, he makes no sense. Godot is also a symbol for purpose and meaning. Whenever he appears, he will give direction to Pozzo and Lucky. However, Godot’s absence demonstrates the meaningless of life.</p>	<p><b>Old AP Questions</b></p>
<p><b>Possible Themes</b></p>	
<p>To apply reason to life is to try to impose a square on a circle; life has no meaning.</p> <p>Humans are oblivious to the patterns of their existence.</p> <p>Life is a series of endless repetitions.</p>	