

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett

Context

Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin in 1906. He befriended the famous Irish novelist James Joyce, and his first published work was an essay on Joyce. In 1951 and 1953, Beckett wrote his most famous novels, the trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnameable*.

Waiting for Godot, Beckett's first play, was written originally in French in 1948 (Beckett subsequently translated the play into English himself). It premiered at a tiny theater in Paris in 1953. This play began Beckett's association with the **Theatre of the Absurd**, which influenced later playwrights like Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard.

The most famous of Beckett's subsequent plays include *Endgame* (1958) and *Krapp's Last Tape* (1959). He also wrote several even more experimental plays, like *Breath* (1969), a thirty-second play. Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1969 and died in 1989 in Paris.

Summary

Two men, Vladimir and Estragon, meet near a tree. They converse on various topics and reveal that they are waiting there for a man named Godot. While they wait, two other men enter. Pozzo is on his way to the market to sell his slave, Lucky. He pauses for a while to converse with Vladimir and Estragon. Lucky entertains them by dancing and thinking, and Pozzo and Lucky leave.

After Pozzo and Lucky leave, a boy enters and tells Vladimir that he is a messenger from Godot. He tells Vladimir that Godot will not be coming tonight, but that he will surely come tomorrow. Vladimir asks him some questions about Godot and the boy departs. After his departure, Vladimir and Estragon decide to leave, but they do not move as the curtain falls.

The next night, Vladimir and Estragon again meet near the tree to wait for Godot. Lucky and Pozzo enter again, but this time Pozzo is blind and Lucky is dumb. Pozzo does not remember meeting the two men the night before. They leave and Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait.

Shortly after, the boy enters and once again tells Vladimir that Godot will not be coming. He insists that he did not speak to Vladimir yesterday. After he leaves, Estragon and Vladimir decide to leave, but again they do not move as the curtain falls, ending the play.

Characters

Vladimir - One of the two main characters of the play. Estragon calls him Didi, and the boy addresses him as Mr. Albert. He seems to be the more responsible and mature of the two main characters.

Estragon - The second of the two main characters. Vladimir calls him Gogo. He seems weak and helpless, always looking for Vladimir's protection. He also has a poor memory, as Vladimir has to remind him in the second act of the events that happened the previous night.

Pozzo - He passes by the spot where Vladimir and Estragon are waiting and provides a diversion. In the second act, he is blind and does not remember meeting Vladimir and Estragon the night before.

Lucky - Pozzo's slave, who carries Pozzo's bags and stool. In Act I, he entertains by dancing and thinking. However, in Act II, he is dumb.

Boy - He appears at the end of each act to inform Vladimir that Godot will not be coming that night. In the second act, he insists that he was not there the previous night.

Godot - The man for whom Vladimir and Estragon wait unendingly. Godot never appears in the play. His name and character are often thought to refer to God, changing the play's title and subject to *Waiting for Godot*.

Act I: Introduction & Pozzo and Lucky's Entrance

Summary

Estragon is trying to take off his boot when Vladimir enters. The two men greet each other; Vladimir examines his hat while Estragon struggles with his boot. They discuss the versions of the story of the two thieves in the Gospels, and Vladimir wonders why one version of the story is considered more accurate than the others.

Estragon wants to leave, but Vladimir tells him that they cannot because they are waiting for Godot, who they are supposed to meet by the tree. They wonder if they are waiting in the correct spot, or if it is even the correct day.

Estragon falls asleep, but Vladimir wakes him because he feels lonely. Estragon starts to tell Vladimir about the dream he was having, but Vladimir does not want to hear his "private nightmares." Estragon wonders if it would be better for them to part, but Vladimir insists that Estragon would not go far. They argue and Vladimir storms off the stage, but Estragon convinces him to come back and they make up.

They discuss what to do next while they wait, and Estragon suggests hanging themselves from the tree. However, after a discussion of the logistics, they decide to wait and see what Godot says.

Estragon is hungry, and Vladimir gives him a carrot. They discuss whether they are tied to Godot when they hear a terrible cry nearby and huddle together to await what is coming.

Commentary

The beginning of the play establishes Vladimir and Estragon's relationship. Vladimir clearly realizes that Estragon is dependent on him when he tells Estragon that he would be "nothing more than a little heap of bones" without him. Vladimir also insists that Estragon would not go far if they parted. This dependency extends even to minute, everyday things, as Estragon cannot even take off his boot without help from Vladimir.

The beginning of the play makes Vladimir and Estragon seem interchangeable. For example, one of the characters often repeats a line that the other has previously said. This happens in the very beginning when the two characters switch lines in the dialogue, with each asking the other, "It hurts?" and responding, "Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!" In addition to demonstrating the way that the two characters can be seen as interchangeable, this textual repetition will be found throughout the play as an indicator of the repetitiveness of life in general for Vladimir and Estragon.

Vladimir's discussion of the story of the two thieves brings up the question of textual uncertainty. He points out that the four gospels present entirely different versions of this story, and wonders why one of these versions is accepted as definitive. This question about the reliability of texts might cause the reader (or audience) of this play to question the reliability of this particular text. Also, the repetition of the story by the four gospels might allude to the repetitiveness of the action of the play.

The repetitiveness of the play is best illustrated by Estragon's repeated requests to leave, which are followed each time by Vladimir telling him that they cannot leave because they are waiting for Godot. The exact repetition of the lines each time this dialogue appears, including the stage directions, reinforces the idea that the same actions occur over and over again and suggests that these actions happen more times than the play presents. In this beginning section we get the only clue of the nature of Vladimir and Estragon's relationship with Godot. They mention that they asked Godot for "a kind of prayer...a vague supplication," which he is currently considering. This creates a parallel between Godot and God, also suggested by their similar names, and it seems that Vladimir and

Estragon do consider Godot a kind of religious figure when they mention coming in on their hands and knees.

Act I: Pozzo and Lucky Scene

Summary

Pozzo enters, driving Lucky ahead of him by a rope around his neck. Vladimir and Estragon wonder if Pozzo is Godot, but he tells them that he is Pozzo and asks if they have heard of him. They tell him that they have not. Pozzo commands Lucky to put down his stool, and sits down and begins to eat some chicken. While he eats, Vladimir and Estragon circle around Lucky, inspecting him. They notice a sore on his neck and begin to ask him a question, but Pozzo tells them to leave him alone.

Estragon asks Pozzo if he can have the bones from his chicken, and Pozzo tells him that Lucky gets priority over them. Estragon asks Lucky if he wants the bones, but he does not reply, and Pozzo tells Estragon that he can have the bones. He comments that he has never known Lucky to refuse a bone and hopes that he is not sick.

Vladimir suddenly explodes with anger at Pozzo's treatment of Lucky, but then seems embarrassed at his outburst. Pozzo decides to go, but then decides to stay and smoke another pipe. Vladimir wants to leave, but Pozzo reminds him of his appointment with Godot.

Estragon begins to wonder aloud why Lucky does not put down his bags. Pozzo begins to answer the question, after much preparation involving his vaporizer spray, but gives a convoluted and contradictory response. Vladimir asks Pozzo if he wants to get rid of Lucky; Pozzo responds that he does and is taking him to the fair to sell him.

Lucky begins to cry, and Pozzo hands Estragon a handkerchief to wipe away his tears.

Estragon approaches Lucky, but Lucky kicks him in the shins. Pozzo tells Vladimir and Estragon that he has learned a lot from Lucky, and that Lucky has been serving him for nearly sixty years. Vladimir becomes angry that Pozzo is going to get rid of Lucky after so much time, and Pozzo gets upset. Vladimir then gets angry at Lucky for mistreating Pozzo. Pozzo calms down, but he realizes that he has lost his pipe and begins to get upset again. While Estragon laughs at Pozzo, Vladimir exits, apparently to go to the bathroom. He returns, in a bad mood, but soon calms down. Pozzo sits down again and begins to explain the twilight. When he finishes, he asks them to evaluate his performance and then offers to have Lucky perform for them. Estragon wants to see Lucky dance, while Vladimir wants to hear him think, so Pozzo commands him to dance and then think.

Lucky dances, and Estragon is not very impressed. Pozzo tells them that he used to dance much better. Vladimir asks him to tell Lucky to think, but Pozzo says that he cannot think without his hat. Vladimir puts Lucky's hat on his head and he begins to think aloud, spouting a long stream of words and phrases that amount to gibberish. As he goes on, the other three suffer more and more and finally throw themselves on him and seize his hat to make him stop. Pozzo tramples on the hat, and the men help Lucky up and give him all the bags.

Pozzo is about to leave, but finds that he cannot. He decides that he needs a running start, so he starts from the opposite end of the stage and drives Lucky across as they exchange good-byes.

Commentary

Pozzo's statement about his pipe, that the second pipe is never as "sweet" as the first, can apply to experience in general—it suggests that feelings and events dull with repetition. Repetition of events in the play is emphasized by further textual repetition. When Vladimir and Estragon alternate short lines back and forth, Estragon often repeats himself at the end of a string of lines. This occurs for the first time in this exchange: "**Estragon:** The circus. **Vladimir:** The music-hall. **Estragon:** The circus." This same trope will recur

several times in a row at the beginning of the second act, always with Estragon repeating himself.

We see here that Vladimir supports Estragon after Estragon is kicked by Lucky: when he cries that he cannot walk, Vladimir offers to carry him, if necessary. This illustrates Vladimir's attempt to protect and take care of Estragon.

Vladimir is often very quick to change his mind. When he learns of Lucky's long term of service to Pozzo, he becomes angry with Pozzo for mistreating his servant. However, when Pozzo gets upset and says that he cannot bear it any longer, Vladimir quickly transfers his anger to Lucky, whom he reproaches for mistreating his master after so many years. This illustrates how Vladimir's opinion can be easily swayed by a change in circumstances.

In this section we see the first suggestions that Vladimir and Estragon might represent all of humanity. When Pozzo first enters, he notes that Vladimir and Estragon are of the same species as he is, "made in God's image." Later, when Pozzo asks Estragon what his name is, he replies "Adam." This comparison of Estragon to Adam, the first man, suggests that he may represent all of mankind; and this link between Estragon and Adam also relates to the idea of Godot as God.

Pozzo's inquiry about how Vladimir and Estragon found him suggests that Pozzo is giving a performance. This notion is reinforced when he has Lucky perform for them. It seems that Pozzo and Lucky appear primarily to entertain Vladimir and Estragon—after Pozzo and Luck leave, the other two men comment that their presence helped the time pass more rapidly.

Pozzo's failure to depart anticipates the way that Vladimir and Estragon remain waiting at the end of each of the acts, after saying they will depart. However, even after saying, "I don't seem to be able to depart," Pozzo does actually manage to leave. Pozzo moves on while Vladimir and Estragon remain fixed even as the curtain falls at the end of each act.

Act I: Pozzo and Lucky's Exit to Conclusion

Summary

After Pozzo and Lucky depart, Vladimir once again tells Estragon that they cannot leave because they are waiting for Godot. They argue about whether Pozzo and Lucky have changed, and Estragon suddenly complains of pain in his other foot.

A boy enters timidly, saying that he has a message from Mr. Godot. Estragon bullies the boy, who reveals that he has been waiting a while but was afraid of Pozzo and Lucky. When Estragon shakes the boy, badgering him to tell the truth, Vladimir yells at him and sits down and begins to take off his boots.

Meanwhile, Vladimir talks to the boy. He asks him if he is the one who came yesterday, but the boy tells him that he is not. The boy tells Vladimir that Mr. Godot will not come this evening, but that he will surely come tomorrow. Vladimir then asks the boy if he works for Mr. Godot, and the boy tells him that he minds the goats. The boy says that Mr. Godot does not beat him, but that he beats his brother who minds the sheep.

Vladimir asks the boy if he is unhappy, but the boy does not know. He tells the boy that he can go, and that he is to tell Mr. Godot that he saw them. The boy runs off the stage and, as he goes, it suddenly becomes night.

Estragon gets up and puts his boots down at the edge of the stage. Vladimir tells him that the boy assured him that Godot will come tomorrow. He tries to drag Estragon offstage to shelter, but Estragon will not go. Estragon wonders if they should part, but they decide to go together. As the curtain falls, they remain still.

Commentary

This section begins with the most commonly repeated dialogue in the play, in which Estragon wants to go and Vladimir tells him that they are waiting for Godot. This section provides evidence for a religious reading of the play as Estragon compares himself to

Christ when he decides to go barefoot. When Vladimir tells him not to compare himself to Christ, Estragon responds that "all my life I've compared myself to him."

Vladimir's statement that he pretended not to recognize Pozzo and Lucky suggests that he has met them before. This indicates that the actions presented in the first act of the play may have happened before, calling attention to events that occur outside the frame of the play. The same thing occurs when Vladimir asks the boy if he came yesterday, revealing that they were waiting yesterday with the same result. This suggests that the same events have been going on for some time; the two acts of the play are merely two instances in a long pattern of ceaselessly repeating events.

The end of Act I establishes Vladimir and Estragon's hopelessness. Even when they both agree to go, and Vladimir says "Yes, let's go," the two men do not move. Even their resolution to go is not strong enough to produce action. This inability to act renders Vladimir and Estragon unable to determine their own fates. Instead of acting, they can only wait for someone or something to act upon them.

Act II: Introduction & Pozzo and Lucky's Entrance

Summary

Act II takes place the next evening, at the same time and place. The tree now has four or five leaves on it. Estragon's boots and Lucky's hat remain onstage when Vladimir enters, looks around, and begins to sing. Estragon enters and suggests that Vladimir seemed happier without him. He says that he does not know why he keeps returning to Vladimir, since he too is happier alone, but Vladimir insists that it's because Estragon does not know how to defend himself.

Vladimir suggests that things have changed since yesterday, but Estragon does not remember yesterday. Vladimir reminds him about Pozzo and Lucky, and they begin to argue about whether Estragon has ever been in the Macon country. Estragon once again says that it would be better if they parted, but Vladimir reminds him that he always comes crawling back. They decide to converse calmly but soon run out of things to say, and Vladimir grows uncomfortable with the silence.

Vladimir looks at the tree and notices that it is now covered with leaves, although yesterday it was bare. Estragon says that it must be spring, but also insists that they were not here yesterday. Vladimir reminds him of the bones that Pozzo gave him and the kick that Lucky gave him and shows him the wound on his leg. He asks Estragon where his boots are and—when Estragon replies that he must have thrown them away—points out the boots on the stage triumphantly. Estragon, however, examines the boots and says that they are not his. Vladimir reasons that someone must have come by and exchanged his boots for Estragon's. Vladimir gives Estragon a black radish, but since he only likes the pink ones, he gives it back. Estragon says he will go and get a carrot, but he does not move. Vladimir suggests trying the boots on Estragon, and they fit, but Estragon does not want them laced. Estragon sits down on the mound and tries to sleep. Vladimir sings him a lullaby, and he falls asleep, but soon wakes up from a nightmare.

Vladimir is pleased to find Lucky's hat on the ground because he believes it confirms that they are in the correct place. He puts on Lucky's hat and hands his to Estragon, who takes off his hat and hands it to Vladimir. This switch occurs several times until once again Vladimir wears Lucky's hat, and Estragon wears his own hat. Vladimir decides that he will keep Lucky's hat, since it bothered him. They begin to play Pozzo and Lucky's roles, with Vladimir imitating Lucky and telling Estragon what to do to imitate Pozzo. Estragon leaves, but quickly returns because he hears someone coming.

Vladimir is sure that Godot is coming, and Estragon hides behind the tree. He realizes that he is not hidden and comes out, and the two men begin a watch with one stationed on each side of the stage. When they both begin to speak at once, they get angry and begin insulting

each other. After they finish their insults, they decide to make up and embrace. They briefly do some exercises and then do "the tree," staggering around on one foot.

Commentary

Vladimir's song about the dog who stole a crust of bread repeats itself perpetually. The two verses follow each other in succession so that it can be sung forever, although here Vladimir only sings each verse twice. This song is a representation of the repetitive nature of the play as a whole and of Vladimir and Estragon's circular lives. Like the verses of the song, the events of their lives follow one after another, again and again, with no apparent beginning or end.

The hat switching incident is another illustration of the endless, often mindless, repetition that seems to characterize the play. Like Vladimir's song at the beginning of Act II, the hat switching could go on perpetually and only stops when Vladimir decides arbitrarily to put an end to it.

Vladimir and Estragon's discussion about the noise made by "all the dead voices" brings back the theme of Estragon repeating himself to end a string of conversation. Three times in a row, Estragon repeats his phrase, with silence following each repetition. Estragon's repetition of the phrases "like leaves" and "they rustle" emphasizes these phrases, especially since Estragon comes back to "like leaves" in the third part of their discussion. In this section we see again Vladimir's desire to protect Estragon. He believes that the primary reason Estragon returns to him every day, despite his declarations that he is happier alone, is that he needs Vladimir to help him defend himself. Whether or not Vladimir actually does protect Estragon, Vladimir clearly feels that this duty and responsibility defines their relationship.

Estragon's statement that he will go and get a carrot, followed by the stage directions "he does not move," recalls their immobility in Act I's conclusion, and is another illustration of the way that the characters do not act on their words or intentions. Vladimir recognizes this problem after he decides that they should try on the boots; he says impatiently, "let us persevere in what we have resolved, before we forget." Vladimir's clear awareness of his own problem makes his inability to solve it—to act and to move—seem even more frustrating and unfathomable.

Act II: Pozzo and Lucky Scene

Summary

While Vladimir and Estragon stagger about pitying themselves, Pozzo and Lucky enter. Pozzo is blind and runs into Lucky, who has stopped at the sight of Vladimir and Estragon. They fall, along with all the baggage. Vladimir welcomes their arrival since it will help to pass the time. Pozzo calls for help while Vladimir and Estragon discuss asking him for another bone. Vladimir decides that they should help him, but first he and Estragon discuss how they have kept their appointment.

Pozzo continues to cry for help, and eventually Vladimir tries to assist him. However, he falls also while trying to pull up Pozzo. Estragon threatens to leave, but Vladimir begs him to help him up first, promising that they will leave together afterward. Estragon tries to help him up, but ends up falling as well.

All four men now lie on the ground, and Vladimir and Estragon begin to nap. They are woken shortly by Pozzo's shouting, and Vladimir strikes Pozzo to make him stop. Pozzo crawls away, and Vladimir and Estragon call to him. He does not respond, and Estragon decides to try other names. He calls out "Abel," and Pozzo responds by crying for help. He wonders if the other one is called Cain, but Pozzo responds to that name as well, and Estragon decides that he must be all of humanity.

Vladimir and Estragon decide to get up, which they do with ease. They help Pozzo up and hold him, and Pozzo tells them that he does not recognize them since he is blind. They tell

him that it is evening, and then begin to question him about the loss of his sight. He tells them that it came upon him all of a sudden and that he has no notion of time. Pozzo asks the men about his slave, and they tell him that Lucky seems to be sleeping. They send Estragon over to Lucky, and Estragon begins kicking Lucky. He hurts his foot and goes to sit down. Vladimir asks Pozzo if they met yesterday, but Pozzo does not remember. Pozzo prepares to leave, and Vladimir asks him to have Lucky sing or recite before they leave. However, Pozzo tells him that Lucky is dumb. They exit, and Vladimir sees them fall offstage.

Commentary

Here again Vladimir seems to recognize the problem of inaction when he decides that they should help Pozzo. He becomes suddenly vehement and shouts, "Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! Let us do something, while we have the chance!" This call to action seems like an urgent rally against the trend of inaction he and Estragon have been following throughout the play; however, Vladimir still takes plenty of time to begin to help Pozzo to his feet. This suggests that, even with good intentions and resolution, the habit of inaction cannot be broken immediately.

In this speech Vladimir also declares that at this point, "all mankind is us, whether we like it or not." This continues the theme of Vladimir and Estragon's representation of mankind as a whole and shows that Vladimir is himself aware of this comparison. Estragon also illustrates the parallel between the two men and the rest of humanity when he tells Vladimir that "billions" of people can also claim that they have kept their appointment. In this case Vladimir attempts to distinguish them from the rest of mankind, but Estragon insists that they are actually the same.

Another biblical allusion is presented here through the comparison of Pozzo and Lucky to Cain and Abel. However, when Pozzo responds to the names Cain and Abel, Estragon decides that "he's all humanity." This suggestion indicates once more that the characters in the play represent the human race as a whole.

Vladimir's need of Estragon's help in order to get up is somewhat of a role reversal. For a brief exchange, Estragon holds the power in the relationship as Vladimir calls to him for help. However, when Estragon does finally stretch out his hand to help Vladimir up, he only falls himself. This seems to indicate that Estragon does not belong in this position of power and responsibility and cannot act to fulfill it.

Act II: Pozzo and Lucky's Exit to Conclusion

Summary

After Pozzo and Lucky leave, Vladimir wakes Estragon. Estragon is upset at being woken up, but Vladimir tells him that he was lonely. Estragon gets up, but his feet hurt, so he sits down again and tries to take off his boots. Meanwhile, Vladimir reflects upon the events of the day. Estragon dozes off again after unsuccessfully struggling with his boots.

The boy enters and calls to Vladimir. Vladimir recognizes the routine and knows what the boy is going to say before he says it. They establish that the boy was not there yesterday, but that he has a message from Mr. Godot saying that he will not come this evening, but definitely tomorrow.

Vladimir asks the boy what Mr. Godot does, and the boy replies that he does nothing. Vladimir asks the boy about his brother, and the boy tells him that his brother is sick. Vladimir asks if Mr. Godot has a beard and what color it is. The boy asks Vladimir what he should tell Mr. Godot, and Vladimir tells him that he should say that he saw him. The boy runs away as Vladimir springs toward him.

The sun sets. Estragon wakes up, takes off his boots, and puts them down at the front of the stage. He approaches Vladimir and tells him that he wants to go. Vladimir tells him that they cannot go far away, because they have to come back tomorrow to wait for Godot. They discuss hanging themselves from the tree, but find that they do not have any rope.

Estragon says that they can bring some tomorrow. Estragon tells Vladimir that he can't go on like this, and Vladimir tells him that they will hang themselves tomorrow, unless Godot comes. Vladimir tells Estragon to pull up his trousers, which have fallen down when he removed the cord holding them up in order to determine whether it would be suitable for hanging. They decide to go, but once again do not move as the curtain falls.

Commentary

By this point in the play, the dialogue about waiting for Godot has been repeated so many times that even Estragon knows it. Every time he asked Vladimir to go previously, they went through the entire dialogue about why they could not go. However, this time, Estragon goes through a miniature version of this dialogue by himself: "Let's go. We can't. Ah!" It seems that the numerous repetitions of this dialogue have finally impressed its hopeless resolution upon Estragon's mind.

Similarly, by the time the boy arrives in Act II, Vladimir already knows what he will say, and the boy does not have to tell him anything. This suggests that this dialogue has occurred many times before and furthers the indication that the play is just a representative sample of the larger circle that defines Vladimir and Estragon's lives. The play's conclusion echoes the end of Act I. Even the stage directions reflect this similarity: after boy's exit and the moonrise, the stage directions read, "as in Act I, Vladimir stands motionless and bowed." While a live audience would not read these directions, they serve to emphasize the parallel between the two acts for readers and for actors performing the play.

The repetition of the final two lines from the previous act at the play's conclusion shows the continued importance of repetition and parallelism in *Waiting for Godot*. However, the characters have switched lines from the previous act, suggesting that ultimately, despite their differences, Vladimir and Estragon are really interchangeable after all.

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