



## Unit AS 1: Section B

# The Study of Drama 1900-Present

## Beckett: Waiting for Godot.

In this Unit there are 4 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03 and A05.

### A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

*In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of a selected play.*

*This AO involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the play, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently, using appropriate terminology and concepts. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.*

### A01: Textual knowledge and understanding

- **The Plot and Summary of Content**

The play consists of two almost symmetrical acts, which cover events on two successive evenings between twilight and nightfall. The place is the same - a country road near a tree and each act has three main blocks of action but the second act is more intense and faster moving. Vladimir and Estragon are friends who are nearly destitute. They are reunited after some time apart and they spend the time in a variety of activities whilst awaiting their appointment and the arrival of Godot. On both days, another couple, Pozzo and Lucky pass by and spend some time with them before the arrival of a messenger boy who lets them know that Godot has been delayed for another day.

This is not a conventional drama on a well decorated stage and is often seen as a play where nothing happens. However for the characters who are living on the extremities of society there is much to worry about and much to discuss, in what can be seen as a senseless universe. Despite their limitations they try to explain their universe and the audience is drawn into their experiences and also their questions. This brings the emotion to the play and the audience admires the struggles of the characters whilst at the same time feeling the frustration of what is going on around them, the horrors of their existence and at times the humour of the play. Originally written by



Beckett in French, it was translated by him into English shortly afterwards. It was first performed on stage in 1953 to critical acclaim and remains as one of the great plays of a generation. Its first performance in Britain was in 1955.

## Act One

**In the first block** we see **Vladimir** and **Estragon** passing the time discussing their ailments; Estragon's sore feet and Vladimir's bladder are giving them huge cause for concern. Estragon's first comment, 'Nothing to be done', is a significant statement. A discussion on the two thieves crucified alongside Christ follows, which leads into the first discussion on Christianity and the creation. When Estragon suggests leaving, Vladimir reminds him that they are waiting for **Godot** but it soon becomes clear they have no precise details of the appointment and there is a growing feeling of futility at this stage of the play. To pass the time they consider hanging themselves from the lone tree, but they realise the dangers of this (!) and return to a discussion of the mysterious Godot and their subservience to this figure and their fear of him. They try to overcome this fear with the consolation of food; Vladimir gives Estragon a turnip and a carrot.

**In the second block** we see the appearance of **Pozzo** and **Lucky**, the latter carrying Pozzo's luggage with a rope around his neck, held by Pozzo who also holds a whip. There is confusion about the identity of the new arrivals brought about by the fading light, especially as Vladimir and Estragon were expecting Godot. Pozzo holds court in this stage of the play, and he is clearly the dominant figure. He talks about his land, his possessions and shows great self-confidence in contrast to Vladimir and Estragon who sit and listen. At the same time they show sympathy for Lucky, the slave, who has physical afflictions and is clearly suffering. The treatment of Lucky is challenged by Vladimir; however Pozzo shows no sympathy for his slave, threatening to sell him at the fair. Estragon tries to comfort Lucky but is kicked for his troubles, as Lucky needs someone to take out his misfortune on, whilst Vladimir in contrast is critical of Lucky for his lack of loyalty to his 'good master'. Pozzo continues by forcing Lucky to provide some grotesque entertainment for the party. Lucky dances for the group in a dance called 'The Net'. Lucky then considers his plight in a lengthy speech. At this stage, Pozzo decides to leave, hands over the luggage to Lucky and whips him into action. Announcing that he has lost his watch, he departs with Lucky.

**In the third block**, while Vladimir and Estragon discuss whether they have met Pozzo and Lucky before and whether they should move on again, a **Boy** enters with a message informing them that Mr Godot will not be coming this evening but will come tomorrow. The Boy informs them that he is Godot's goatherd and his master is kind to him, unlike his brother, the shepherd boy whom Godot beats. Vladimir asks the departing boy to tell Godot that he has seen them. As the light fails Vladimir and Estragon return to their physical afflictions and the issue of hanging themselves from the tree. Estragon raises the possibility that they would be better off if they separated. Vladimir offers to move on but Estragon suggests they stay together for the time being. They stay put; they cannot move.

## Act Two

**In the first block**, Vladimir and Estragon are in the same place as before; the tree has however sprouted a few leaves. Lucky's hat and Estragon's boots dominate the stage.



Vladimir enters singing a song about death and humans' responsibility for this, and the potential doom of their existence. Estragon enters barefoot, obviously having been beaten. Once again they pass the time in meaningless speech - the potential arrival of Godot, various sceneries and landscapes they have visited and the reasons for the extra leaves on the tree. However there are periods of extended silence. Vladimir discusses the previous day and reminds Estragon what happened on that day as Estragon appears to have forgotten, confirming this by pointing out to Estragon his wound from Lucky's kick. Estragon is clearly distraught and Vladimir sings a lullaby to comfort him which sends him to sleep, but he is awakened by a nightmare. Further discussions take place on whether they should leave and there is a comic exchange of hats and a mimicking of Lucky when his hat is found. They play a game mimicking Pozzo and Lucky and this leads to a series of warnings of Pozzo and Lucky returning, which scares Estragon in particular. They hide and take up a series of watching positions. After several abortive sightings both characters indulge in some physical exercise once again based around the tree.

**In the second block,** Pozzo and Lucky enter again. Lucky is on a shorter leash and Pozzo is now blind, so much so that they fall over as they bump into Vladimir and Estragon. Discussions about mercy and human responsibility feature at this time, alongside financial reward for supporting one another. Pozzo can now only stand if supported by Estragon and Vladimir, although his psychological hold over the two of them remains. Lucky appears dumb, and a discussion on physical affliction now takes place during which Estragon kicks him which further damages Estragon's foot and sends him back to sleep. After this Vladimir tries to remind Pozzo of yesterday's conversation which Pozzo has clearly forgotten. There is extended discussion about eternity before Pozzo and Lucky leave the stage for the last time, soon falling over in the distance once they have left.

**In the third block,** Vladimir attempts to wake Estragon without success and this leads to Vladimir alone discussing the meaning of life in an extended monologue. The Boy then enters reiterating the same message as yesterday, this time more confidently, concerning the non-arrival of Godot. Vladimir's message back is also the same and the Boy departs evading any further attention. However the tone of this exchange is different to that in Act One. The eagerness of Vladimir has gone and there is a feeling of despair and hopelessness. As the sun sets the play reaches its inevitable conclusion, Estragon wakes up and the same conversation about leaving, separating and hanging themselves from the tree occurs once again with no decisions being taken, apart from the importance of returning together tomorrow to wait for Godot. Once again as at the end of Act One, neither moves. This final grotesque and pathetic tableau is left for the audience to ponder as the play ends.

**So what is this play really about?** Here are some initial thoughts and you will no doubt add your own:

- The play is a prolonged and extended metaphor on the meaning of life written in the liberal uncertainty of the 1950's in a world full of violence and despair.
- The play is a modern morality play, full of Christian and religious themes and references, written by an atheist.
- The play is a study of human dignity and the baseness of humanity.
- The play is a study of the boredom of human existence in which sleep is a blessed relief.
- The play is about waiting for something to happen before we are taken away by death.



When **Beckett** was asked this question, he replied,

*'If I knew, I would have said so in the play'.* (Bair)

*'I didn't invent this buzzing confusion, it's all around us and...the only chance of renewal is to open our eyes and see the mess'.* (Bair)

## The Themes

Listed below are a range of themes it would be worth considering.

**The absurdity of the world** - The play is a dramatic re-enactment of the absurd world as viewed by Beckett. To suggest that the world is absurd challenges two great institutions – reason, on which western culture is based, and religion (especially Christianity). The drama is 'absurd' in two ways: firstly that humour and laughter are brought about despite the shadow of death which hangs over most characters, and secondly the level of fear brought about in this world that has no norms and no direction.

**Religion and reason** - both of these are challenged by Beckett in this play. Although there is extensive religious imagery and content in the play with a series of half-remembered stories associated with the Crucifixion and the Dead Sea, Godot does not act as a God and does not bring Estragon or Vladimir the purpose in life they are seeking. In this respect, Beckett is portraying an existentialist view of life where there is no past but only a present and life is what you make it. To a 1950's audience this would have been uncomfortable viewing. The characters in the play are caught on a treadmill, perhaps of their own making, and are almost in a state of 'purgatory'. Likewise, ideas of reason are challenged. Without the two pillars of religion and reason in society, the characters exist in frustration and perhaps madness. The place of man in this godless universe is being challenged in this play.

**The collapse of western culture** - What Beckett is portraying in this play is the decay and collapse of western culture and society. After the horrors of the Second World War and the emergence of the Cold War, society is in ruins, humanity is in decline and there is an innate hollowness. The fear of a nuclear holocaust was at its height at this time and there was a prevalent feeling that society was on the verge of extinction. Although Beckett's views are framed by historical events around him, he is also following the Theatre of the Absurd which was popular in mid-twentieth-century Paris. In the eyes of the Absurdists the illusion of western culture and society is over, the universe is in decline and the quality of existence is uncertain.

**Memory and time** - these two ideas are connected throughout the play. Memory loss is evident throughout (for instance Vladimir forgets what he asked Godot for) and without memory time becomes meaningless. Pozzo although he loses his watch, no longer needs it anyway. Vladimir replaces a watch with his memories which are equally suspect and Estragon has lost interest in remembering and loses his ability to recognise. By the end of the play all mechanisms of memory and understanding of time have been lost.



**Friendship** - The play revolves around the uncertain quality of the friendship between Vladimir and Estragon. They spend a lot of time with one another, rely on one another and care for one another but at other times they appear at odds with one another. Friendship might also be considered in relation to the described early association between Pozzo and Lucky but there is little evidence of this from what we see on stage. The place of Godot as a potential could also be looked at here - will he save Vladimir and Estragon? Will he treat them kindly or beat them as he did the boy's brother? What is perceived and what is real? - this is a leading concept throughout the play. What do the characters see and how real is it? The themes associated with the perceptions of the individual are all concerned with the uncertainty of knowledge. Is the character asleep or awake? Has the character remembered or forgotten things? What is real and what is unreal? These challenges are faced by all the characters on stage.

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## The major characters

### Characterisation in general

There are five characters that appear on stage in the play and another two, Godot and the boy's brother whom we hear about. Each character appears on stage in both acts, at the same place, at the same time on two successive days and the characters share a number of common features. They are all separate and isolated individuals but they are driven into relationships by need, greed, and sometimes by compassion, although for much of the time they retreat into themselves as a defence mechanism. These characters are born out of the exploitation and abuse which Beckett saw around him in post-war Europe. They are lonely, hungry, scared and for the most part out of luck. They are in both physical and mental decay. The characters are interesting not only because of the way they react to one another, but also the way in which they react to the passage of time.

### Beckett's presentation of his characters

Beckett had no intention of making his characters realistic. In the play in general there is no illusion of reality, as Beckett did not want to give the audience the opportunity and comfort of being able to relate to any of the characters on stage. Coherent characters exist in a coherent world, but such a world does not exist in Absurdist Theatre. The characters are merely stereotypes. The use of the 'clown tradition' by Beckett in this play is significant. The depersonalised and grotesque clown who can hide behind a mask, with exaggerated movement which is both ridiculous and pathetic is seen in all the characters in this play.

### Estragon and Vladimir as a couple

The play is dominated by Estragon and Vladimir who are on stage for most of the play.



They are not the tragic heroes of the drama in the classical form, but ‘pathetic clowns’ trying to survive, shabby and teetering on the edge of disaster. Yet an audience can see them as heroic and even admirable, especially considering what is around them. It is important to note that the two characters are presented as equals, as a couple, staving off loneliness, sharing one another’s fears. The symbiotic nature of their relationship is emphasised, suggesting that they are meaningless as individuals. The only time they separate is at night. They represent the two opposite but complementary sides of the individual human subject: in matter and spirit, body and mind. The more intellectual and questioning Vladimir alongside the passive and more silent Estragon; as Ruby Cohn has commented they are ‘symmetrical opposites’ and this is often shown in the costumes they are given. Unlike Pozzo and Lucky who suffer radical physical changes, Estragon and Vladimir remain the same throughout the play. The staging of the two characters emphasises this further with the similarities of their costumes. They use exactly the same phrases when describing their condition and at the end of the play they both comment ‘I can’t go on like this’. There are differences, for example shown in the head (Vladimir’s breath) and feet (Estragon’s smell) and how they react differently to the entrances of Lucky and Pozzo. Vladimir is the more mature, proactive and optimistic alongside the weaker, pessimistic, brusquer, sleepy, passive and forgetful Estragon. Estragon’s physical weaknesses (he is continually complaining about his feet and painful boots) contrast with Vladimir’s intellectual uncertainty. It is often Vladimir who asks the important questions in the play. He is relatively optimistic and critics often see him as the clearest thinker in the play. His benevolence is to be admired and he shows real kindness to both Estragon and Lucky. However, the distinctions although they are apparent, are not absolute.

They both confuse words such as ‘Godot’, ‘Pozzo’ and ‘Bozzo’ and contradict one another’s definitions for example ‘bush’ and ‘shrub’. These confusions reflect the post-modern doubts that man has about his existence and condition. These confusions and doubts allow both characters to pass the time of day playing with language, questioning their own judgements, overcoming the boredom of life while they wait for Godot.

Their communication by gesture is an important feature of the play and Estragon in particular is keen to use gestures rather than words, particularly to show affection. When Vladimir places his coat on the sleeping Estragon there is a feeling of unity and brotherly love which contradicts the pessimism of the rest of the play. There are also pauses to embrace in silence. Significantly, although Vladimir continually suggests that they should part, they stay together and there is a strong feeling of tenderness left with the audience at the end of the play.

**Lucky** – Pozzo’s servant, Lucky appears to be continually ‘sagging’ then ‘straightening up’ and to be on the verge of utter exhaustion and death. His physical appearance as indicated in the stage directions suggests his character. He awaits Pozzo’s instructions as a paid entertainer and as ‘a song and dance man’. He is at the bottom of the pecking order. Beckett writing about Lucky envisaged him as a railway porter, and his name derived from Beckett’s comment that he was ‘lucky’ to have no expectations about life (Bair). He certainly expects very little and he is ‘entangled in the net’ of life and physically tied to his master, Pozzo, who regularly speaks on his behalf. There are suggestions of a more fulfilling past as someone of grace, of some intellect and beauty and as a good dancer, but there is little evidence that this exists during the play and he ends the play becoming dumb, and tied to Pozzo. At this stage, he is only able to think if he is wearing his hat and most of his utterances are incoherent



'tirades'. However he does raise some significant questions in his words about the indifference of heaven, the dwindling of man and the quality of existence where he appears to fulfil the intellectual's role although whether this is deliberate is open to question.

**Pozzo** - Becket writing about the play saw Pozzo as an English gentleman-farmer, and one with authority based on his social position and physical stature which he acquired by 'chance' (Bair). Once again his portrayal would have been familiar to a 1950's audience who would have lived through conflict and dictatorship. He is a person who is powerful, intimidatory, manipulative, and contemptuous of others, and one who can be both vicious and domineering. He likes to be the centre of attention, he seeks company, has a grasp of language which he uses to his advantage, has possessions and rich food. He continually orders others around with his 'terrifying voice'. He is man of property and possessions in contrast to the other characters. But is he as powerful as he claims? He significantly loses things as the play progresses: his pipe, his watch (which controls his life) and significantly by the end of the play, his sight. Critics have commented that his fall is a reflection of the loss of Empire - another talking point in post-war Europe. The loss of his sight also appears to be by chance and raises the question in the play about fate and fortune. Consequently one of his major functions in the play is to illustrate the principle that man's condition is the consequence of chance rather than decision. His relationship with Lucky is based on a mixture of love, hatred and increasing dependence although he is a master. At the end of the play he is physically tied to Lucky, depending on Lucky's sight to guide him. His 'impersonal voice' allows him to discuss many issues of the day such as the brevity of life in his final speech.

**The Boy** – The Boy and his brother the shepherd are minor characters but an important link between the main characters and Godot. The Boy (like many of the other characters) has a bad memory; he is nervous, is at the mercy of others and appears to suffer from many of the afflictions of the other characters. Yet he certainly appears as a fresher character and he appears more alert in both movement and action than the other characters. His reliability should be questioned, although to Vladimir and Estragon he is their potential salvation. Some critics have argued that he is a messenger from God, stressing the religious connotation of his role.

**(Godot)** - Godot does not physically appear in the play but he is mentioned several times. We find out little about him. He has a white beard, does nothing for a living and he beats the Boy's brother. Vladimir appears to be in awe of Godot and hopes to be saved by him and for that reason he is content to keep waiting for his arrival.



## A02: dramatic methods

*In this examination, the candidate should analyse the playwright's use of such dramatic methods as characterisation, structure, language and staging.*

*The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in drama. This means identifying dramatic methods and showing how these methods relate to the key terms of the question.*

*Discussing dramatic methods - advice to teachers and students:*

*As this section is closed book, examiners will be realistic about the amount of detail which can be provided. It is anticipated that the larger-scale features of characterization, structure, language and staging will be most useful in constructing a relevant response in the time available.*

**'The play is an extraordinary example of dramatic craftsmanship, fusing language with action, the aural with the visual, in a beautifully controlled and balanced structure'**.(from *Working with Beckett*, Daily Telegraph 1999)

**'From the idea of boredom, the most genuine pathos and enchanting comedy emerges'**. (GS Fraser)

A few general features:

**Language and Conversations** – Language plays a double role in this play. It is a way of communication between the characters but it is also way of showing how they have totally lost their way in the world around them. They go on speaking despite this, for words are all they have. Much of the dialogue is ego-centric, uttered by characters who are self-absorbed and have little interest in the views of others. The circular or static conversations which 'go nowhere' are an important feature of the play. Language is empty and meaningless, lacking clarity, reality and precision and exemplifies the misery of the characters on stage. As the play progresses in Act Two, language becomes increasingly false and full of deceit, as shown particularly in the responses of Pozzo. Vladimir and Estragon rely on language to see them through the day but their language is full of repetition ('Nothing to be done'), often without explanation or illumination, and at regular intervals it falls to pieces with a series of confusions as shown in the various descriptions of the tree. In terms of form and content these are typical of the Post-Modernist approach to language. The repetition of certain symbolic images such as the hats emphasises this. However at times there are examples of highly elaborate and poetic language, often from Vladimir, and these act as a clear contrast to the simple and brief exchanges. There are also occasional speeches about the true nature of reality, such as Lucky's tirade or Vladimir's final speech, which are rare outbursts of concentrated thought. The language of the play is sometimes tragic in tone, at other times defiant and at certain times humorous. What is interesting here is that the audience see the plight of the characters all too clearly in this breakdown of language, something that the characters on stage are only dimly aware of. Simple phrases stand out, pauses and silences can be deafening and at times the language of Beckett's characters is deliberately pruned down to a minimum. Silence has been part of the theatrical language for centuries; it is a way of creating tension, to emphasise a point or to indicate a breakdown in communication, but Beckett also uses it extensively to emphasise that there is no answer or response possible. In a 1964 production which Beckett supervised, all the characters 'froze' during these silences:



there appeared to be no way forward.

**The Staging and Setting of the Play-** For the setting, the stage direction is simple, '*A Country Road. A tree. Evening*'. The road itself is not marked on the stage and from all other comments during the play it is clear that this is a very open area, free for all to access and familiar to both Vladimir and Estragon. The danger often lurks off stage but this is a far more open environment than in Beckett's other works. The tree is of huge significance. It is the place for Estragon and Vladimir to potentially hang themselves and the fact that it appears to have acquired four or five leaves by Act Two suggests growth and renewal. This deliberately minimalist stage prop is there for a reason: to evoke a universe that offers little to work with but which provides the possibility for the characters to make choices. Lighting is dim as the play occurs between twilight and nightfall, symbolising the characters' stage of life. In terms of costume, Beckett was critical of productions where the characters were dressed as clowns as he believed that the characters should be unaware of their 'clown status'. He encouraged costumes based on tramps' clothing or cast-off formal clothes. Hats and the wearing of them (or not) is also significant in the play and offers examples of how Beckett employs the comedy of repetitive gestures. Although the set is minimal, it is a very visual play with extensive physical action and reaction, and the high level of stage directions in the play is significant. What is lacking in terms of what is on the stage, is made up for by the very physical nature of the play. The fact that the characters keep falling down in a variety of ways is one of the most interesting aspects of the play, suggesting that none of the characters can stand on his own two feet.

**The Structure of the Play and Changed Conventions in Drama** - Beckett's work clearly subverts conventional ways of organising and planning a drama. There is no clear plot in terms of a narrative with a beginning or end, nor is there an exposition; there is simply a situation. There is no structure with a clear cutting up into acts or scenes with a logical sequence, but a string of incidents. The dialogue leads nowhere and the stage set gives little away. In this drama there is a completely new way of seeing things which the audience must consider. The structure is based on the principle of a double pattern - chain and circle operating simultaneously. Activity develops and grows before coming to a close and then moving on to the next link in the chain. The circle image is an appropriate one because it suggests the repetitive nature of the action, leading back to where we started. This can be seen most clearly in the echoing of the two similar acts of the play. Although different dimensions are introduced in the second act, there appears to be less of everything (food, vision, hope and time). The idea of the 'double run' is prominent and can be seen in the text, the gestures the characters make, the events and the endings. The action of the play is 'cyclical', in that events of the second act echo those of the first, emphasising the monotonous and repetitive nature of the play. Within this, there are the clear contrasts, oppositions and contradictions. By doing this Beckett is following the works of Proust, whom he admired for his use of contradictory parts. Overall the play is very carefully structured, but not in the traditional way. The bi-partite structure of the play can frustrate an audience, but equally it can amuse them. This comic practice is totally in line with the form of Absurdist Drama from which this play comes and is a typical Post-Modernist composition.

**The Audience** - In the early days of the production of this play audiences were often confused and struggled to understand this unconventional play. This struggle in itself was part of the play. The playwright requires active participation in response to his unconventional plot, and audiences are subjected to a gruelling dramatic experience.



However this was one of the reasons for the play's popularity. In this respect Beckett had fulfilled the principles of avant-garde theatre of making the audience 'work' during a performance.



## A03: Contexts

*In this examination, the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which a play is written and received by drawing on appropriate information from outside the play.*

*No particular type of context will be stipulated in the question. However, contextual information which is made relevant to the key terms of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.*

This information is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students. It reflects some of the contextual areas which might be found useful. Remember the remarks above about balancing text and context in a response.

### **The playwright.**

*'I am only interested in failure'* (Beckett- 1945)

There is a danger of including too much biographical detail in an exam response, so candidates should use this section with care and as useful background information.

- Beckett was born in 1906 in Dublin, to middle-class Protestant parents. He remembered the events of the Easter Rising in 1916, and this event clearly had an impact on him and his later works, as did the political events that followed leading to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922.
- Educated at Trinity College, Dublin, he read Modern Foreign Languages and soon became part of an intellectual circle enjoying French poetry and drama. He found Irish society restrictive and for that reason moved to Paris in 1928 as a university lecturer, rarely returning home. He described Paris as 'a good place for a young man to be'.<sup>7</sup> Here he came into contact with a range of French avant-garde and Modernist academics, and with fellow-Irishman James Joyce.
- In his early years he was a poet and novelist but he had little success up to the end of the 1930s. During World War Two he fought bravely against Nazi oppression in the French Resistance. Once again his experiences here fighting tyranny were to feature in many of his future works. It is often suggested that *Waiting for Godot* is linked to the hours Beckett spent hiding from Nazi troops in the South of France fearing arrest.
- In 1946 he took up permanent residence in Paris and continued writing novels. His next two novels, *Watt* and *Mercier and Camier*, foreshadowed his later works. Both looked at the pursuit of meaning, studied the human condition and included characters journeying to find their goal. Other novels on similar themes followed, such as *Molloy*, but few were published as no publisher could see a market for them.
- From 1946 he turned to writing in French and this bilingualism sharpened his use



of language as can be seen in his later works. Significantly, Beckett was able to translate *Waiting for Godot* relatively easily into English from its French origin.

- Beckett began writing *Godot* in 1948; this was one of his first plays. He enjoyed writing plays as he found them far more relaxing to write than novels, although he considered himself a 'novelist in a cul-de-sac' at this stage of his career. He was a great supporter of the theatre and in his earlier years he had enjoyed the works of the Irish playwrights Yeats, Synge and O'Casey.
- He was successful in having *Godot* staged in Paris, mainly because of 'the low costs of production - minimal costumes, a few actors, a spotlight and a bare tree were all that was required' as Roger Blin, the director commented.
- The opening night in 1953 was a success and a European tour followed with the first production being staged in the UK in 1955 after some censorship. Other productions followed in circus rings, prisons and one directed by Beckett in 1975.
- Beckett's next stage play, *Endgame*, followed in 1957 and this was a bleaker version of *Godot* with a blind man in a wheelchair within four grey walls, possessing the only key to a food cupboard. Other plays followed, some for radio and others for television, many of which were monologues.
- In 1969 he accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature although he did not turn up to receive it. He was a shy man, who rarely gave interviews and generally shunned publicity. He died in 1989.

In terms of the literary context the following ideas should be considered:

### **Absurdist Drama**

- Usually tragi-comedy
- Influenced by the slap-stick and early twentieth-century comedians such as Laurel and Hardy (Vladimir and Estragon?), Abbot and Costello, Chaplin, the Keystone Cops and Buster Keaton
- Events drained of significance
- Use of banality, cliché and repetition of dialogue
- Presents the hopelessness of the human situation
- Presents the breakdown of communication
- The social condition at the time of the appearance of Absurdist Drama is significant. The 1950's were overshadowed by the dangers of nuclear conflict.

### **Tragi-comedy**

- A classical term which denoted a drama with serious action and a happy ending
- A mixed form of drama which allowed many disparate elements ignoring the traditions of classical drama
- A prevalent mode in twentieth-century drama which allowed a mix of existential seriousness and dark humour
- Samuel Becket refers to the play as 'a tragi-comedy in two acts' in his titling of the play.



**Twentieth-century literary and philosophical ideas which influenced Beckett.**

As has been suggested in earlier sections, Beckett was influenced by a series of literary movements around him when he was writing. The literary era of Modernism and Post-Modernism dominated the first half of the twentieth century. Modernism was a form of experimental writing which was a response to the modern world and included in drama the breaking of old forms and conventions through abstractions of reality. Post-Modernism takes this to a more extreme form with simple structures and simple ideas.

Beckett was influenced by his interest in such writers as Marcel Proust and James Joyce, and his views concerning the effectiveness of words and the limitations of man's perceptions can be taken from these influences. Yet it is important to note that *Waiting for Godot* in its duration, action, form and structure, and number of characters takes Modernism to a new level.

See also the section on *Critics' Reception of Beckett's play* under A05.



## A05: Argument and Interpretation

*In this examination, the candidate should offer opinion or judgment in response to the given reading of the text, taking account of the key terms as the basis of the argument. This AO (Argument) is the driver of Unit AS 1: Section B and is of primary importance. A05 can be satisfied in full by the candidate developing his/her own reading in response to the given reading. If, however, critics are used, they must be:*

- *used with understanding;*
- *incorporated into the argument to reinforce or be seen as an alternative to the student's opinion;*
- *not used as a substitute for the development of the student's own opinion; and*
- *properly acknowledged.*

Coherence and relevance of argument will be rewarded. Students should be aware of the importance of planning in the sequencing, development and illustration of the reading they wish to put forward. They should also beware of the danger of replacing the key terms of the question with others of their own choosing which they assume mean much the same thing.

Two questions are set and candidates answer either (a) or (b). In the Specimen Assessment Materials the two questions were:

**(a) The words and actions of Vladimir and Estragon are without meaning.**

With reference to the dramatic methods used in the play, and relevant contextual information, **show to what extent** you agree with this statement.

**(b) Waiting for Godot is a tragi-comedy**

With reference to the dramatic methods used in the play, and relevant contextual information, **show to what extent** you agree with this statement.

In order to construct a meaningful and cogent argument (and to move beyond making simple assertions and offering unsupported opinions) students should use A02 and A03 elements to support and enhance their point of view. Convincing arguments will be based on a secure understanding of *how* Beckett has used dramatic methods (A02) to convey his message. Students will also encounter difficulties in presenting an argument which is focused on the stimulus statement without knowledge of the context(s) in which the play is set (A03).

It is not necessary for a candidate to fully agree or disagree with the stimulus statement. Indeed, it is likely that a sophisticated argument will negotiate a response to the key terms of the question in a more considered and tempered fashion than is suggested by the stimulus statement.

**Other questions worth considering apart from those above:**

- Is *Waiting for Godot* theatre?
- Is *Waiting for Godot* a pessimistic or optimistic play?
- Is *Waiting for Godot* a comedy or a tragedy?
- What is the significance of the ending of the play? Is it cathartic or ambiguous?



- A Pantomime? A Circus? A Scream?
- Does life get better or worse in the play?
- What forces dominate the play?
- Is anything certain in the play?
- How universal is the play?
- How important is the structure of the play?
- How important is the language used in the play?
- Does the play suggest 'there is nothing to be done'?
- How important are Pozzo and Lucky to the play?

### **Critics' reception to Beckett's play and his comments on these critics.**

When Beckett's work first appeared a range of diverse, even contradictory positions were taken. Many of the issues raised dealt with the questions raised above. Beckett himself considered the play to be 'a bad play', considering his novels to be his most significant works. However, the play's open-endedness is one of its achievements. As Beckett commented on the play, 'It is striving all the time to avoid definition'. He also valued its simplicity, asking, 'Why do people have to complicate a thing so simple!'

**William Empson** commented, 'I would hate to suggest a moral censorship against the play, it is so well done that it is an enlarging experience, very different for different members of the audience.'

**G.S Fraser** referred to the Christian dimension of the play and commented that 'far from offering the hope of religious consolation, Beckett's drama is full of suffering and despair.'

**Gabriel Marcel** writing about the play suggested that 'there is almost nothing in it that resembles what we usually call theatre.'

**Vivien Mercier** suggests that 'It is a play in which nothing happens, twice.'

**Roger Blin** suggested in 1978 that, 'the play's vision could be seen as a mixture of optimism and pessimism: the kind of mixture that Vladimir contemplates when reflecting on the two thieves crucified with Christ.'

**Sir Peter Hall**, the director of the first English production of the play commented that 'Godot revolutionised the whole Western world in making us rethink what drama is. Sam moved theatre out of wooden naturalism and opened people's minds to theatre's imaginative possibilities.'

### **Other comments have been less favourable:**

**Sourkov** commented that, 'It would be ridiculous to think that people engaged in the real constructing of their own destinies... should want to go to the theatre...to meet up with Beckett's characters.'

**Hobson** referring to language said, 'The dialogue is studded with words that have no meaning for normal ears', but Vannier retaliated by suggesting, 'A stage where nothing happened transformed into the fascinating place where the loneliness of language was revealed.'



**Beckett** was unsympathetic to the critics, believing there was a tendency to over-analyse his work. Writing in 1959 he said, 'If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin.'



## A Glossary of Terms

Some terms are listed below which are useful in the study of the play. More detailed analysis of these terms can be found within the detail above:

1. **Absurdist Drama** - A movement which flourished in the 1950s which put forward the ideas that life was purposeless and meaningless, and that communication between human beings was impossible.
2. **Avant-garde** - commonly used to describe modern artists whose works are deliberately and self-consciously experimental and who set out to discover new forms, techniques and subject matter.
3. **Classical Drama** - from the classical periods, normally denoting works which are excellent or most typical, and traditionally regarded as balanced and ordered.
4. **Dramatic convention** - a set of rules which all parties in a dramatic performance accept (including, importantly the audience), e.g. the 'Three Unities' in classical Greek drama, the Shakespearean soliloquy, the missing fourth wall of a traditional nineteenth-century stage set.
5. **Existentialism** - A philosophical trend popular in the mid-twentieth century which stresses the importance of existence and the view that the universe is inexplicable, meaningless and a dangerous place. Individuals may make choices within this existence.
6. **Minimalism** - In terms of literature, works which are reduced to their most simple and bare elemental forms and in terms of drama are also simple in terms of staging, costume and lighting.
7. **Modernism** - Experimental works of the early twentieth century for which World War One was thought to be a catalyst, which responds to living in the modern world, breaking all conventions in terms of form and structure.
8. **Naturalism** - A post-Darwinian view where man is seen as no more than a specialised animal subject to natural forces and the environment. Life is seen as a squalid and meaningless tragedy in which we are imprisoned.
9. **Post-Modernism** - Following on from Modernism, Post-Modernism is a highly disputed term but it is seen as a reaction to Modernism in drama and concentrates on asking questions on what appears to be the definite truth.
10. **Tragi-Comedy** - A mixture of tragedy and comedy, first used as a term in the early seventeenth century. In terms of modern drama, the two are blended throughout the play rather than existing as separable strands.



## Links to other resources/Suggestions for further reading:

The following resources and works could be useful for further study:

Deidre Bair - *Samuel Beckett* Cape (1978)

Martin Esslin - *The Theatre of the Absurd* Harmondsworth (1983)

Richard Coe - *Beckett* Oliver and Boyd (1964)

Ruby Cohn - *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Criticism* McGraw-Hill (1975)

The full play can be viewed on You Tube with a variety of productions available.  
Ian McKellen discusses the play on a StagingShakespeare You Tube extract.

There is also a DVD- *Theatreland – Behind the scenes at London's Theatre Royal Haymarket*, where the 2009 production of the play is worked on by the director and his actors including McKellen, Patrick Stewart, Ronald Pickup and Simon Callow.