

BECKETT NOTES

Waiting for Godot is an absurdist play written in 1948-49. It presents the philosophy of the absurd, which states briefly that we are on this planet as an accident of evolution and that we have weak bodies, weak minds and weak memories. Our lives are empty and full of suffering and we cannot do anything to change our situation. Only a strong external force can save us. Beckett calls this force Godot, but Godot never comes. We spend our lives waiting for Godot, but it is death that comes in the end. As we go through this life and cling on to it, we are ridiculous, and therefore the characters in the play are all dressed up as clowns. The ideas in the play are presented symbolically and need to be explained in detail.

ACT ONE

P. , ll. 1-12: The two main characters are introduced. The background is vague and can be anywhere. Estragon states the main theme of the play: “Nothing to be done.” That is, humans are fated to live in weak bodies and lead a miserable life, and no matter how hard they struggle they cannot change this basic situation. Estragon’s feet are hurting him because his boots are too tight. The other character, Vladimir, has an enlarged prostate gland.

p. 3, ll. 17-18: Estragon angrily tosses his boots away, but Vladimir comments that the fault is not in the boots but in the weakness of the human body.

pp. 4-5: They discuss the Bible and dismiss it. Estragon is not interested while Vladimir finds contradictions in the text. The philosophy of the absurd is atheistic, since religious belief will destroy its entire argument.

p. 6, ll. 6-10: They are unable to move (symbolically), unable to stop waiting for Godot. These lines are repeated many times in the play, and indicate through the language that a change in the human situation is impossible.

pp. 9-10: They decide to hang themselves, but delay this one more day in the silly hope that Godot will come. They have been doing this for many years—suicide is their only way out—but they always delay it in the “hopeless hope” that their situation may change. They are therefore ridiculous clowns.

p. 12, middle to end: Estragon asks for a carrot and Vladimir gives him one. The carrot is a symbol of the small things in life that continue to give us hope—a high grade, a degree, a hot pizza, a well-paying job, love and marriage, etc.. These things, according to Beckett, trick us into living on and enduring the suffering inflicted upon us by this life. Books have been written, incidentally, on Estragon’s carrot.

p. 14, ll. 1-7: Pure fatalism. There is nothing humans can do to change their terrible fate, so no use trying.

p. 15 following: Pozzo and Lucky are introduced. Pozzo is the capitalist of the play. Lucky is his servant, whom he treats abominably. Vladimir and Estragon are horrified by the way Pozzo treats Lucky. They try to free Lucky, but it turns out that it is Lucky who clings to Pozzo (p. 24). Lucky is lucky because he has a job! The Pozzo-Lucky relationship reflects the employer-employee relationship, according to Beckett. Both are dressed as clowns.

p. 34, ll. 13-24: Beckett makes fun of the human mind. Vladimir reaches a clearly false conclusion but Pozzo admires it and congratulates him!

pp. 35-38: The comic attack on the human mind continues. Pozzo wants to entertain the group, so he asks Lucky to think. Thinking is presented as a circus act. Lucky “thinks” for 2-3 whole pages, spouting philosophical nonsense, until they beat him up to stop him!

pp. 44-47: Pozzo and Lucky leave and a boy appears with a message from Godot. Vladimir is not excited to see the boy, who comes daily with a similar message, which is that Godot is not coming but will come tomorrow. The boy offers “hopeless hope.”

p. 47, bottom: Act One ends with Vladimir and Estragon deciding to go but they do not move. This is symbolic: there is no movement, no development, no hope in human life. Movement implies change but the human situation never changes.

ACT TWO

This act begins the next day, same time, same place—symbolizing lack of change. Vladimir enters, singing an endlessly circular song that is also quite violent and that reflects the significant violence that is part of human life. He finds Estragon, who was mugged and beaten during the night.

pp. 52-53: They both have great difficulty remembering, which shows the weakness of the human memory.

p. 52, bottom 12 lines: Estragon rejects the idea that there is any beauty in Nature, calling it a “muckheap.” Here Beckett replies to literary figures like Wordsworth and Rousseau, who glorified Nature and praised its beauty.

p. 53, 8 lines from the bottom: Estragon observes that the only reason people keep talking is that they are incapable of keeping quiet. In reality, they have nothing to say.

p. 59, top few lines: Beckett replies to Socrates’s famous “I know that I do not know.” Estragon says that he doesn’t know and doesn’t even know why he doesn’t know, reflecting the grim weakness of the human mind.

p. 61, ll. 4-5: Beckett here replies to Descartes's famous statement, "I think, therefore I exist." Beckett's view is that this absurd life we lead cannot be called a real existence.

pp. 65 bottom -top of 66: Vladimir hears some noise and stupidly concludes that Godot has come. He gets very excited while Estragon, who knows it is not Godot, sinks into deep despair.

p. 69: Pozzo and Lucky return. Pozzo is blind, which shows that money cannot protect against the frailty of the human body.

p. 71, bottom-p. 73 bottom: Pozzo and Lucky fall. Pozzo cries for help and Vladimir decides to behave nobly and help him, but stands above him and philosophizes instead. He modifies Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, saying instead, "What we are doing here, *that* is the question." In other words, what are we doing on the face of this planet? Why are we here? Pozzo continues to cry for help but nobody moves until he offers them money. This shows that there is no nobility in human beings, only self-interest. But when they try to help, they too fall and you have all the main characters in the play on the stage floor crying out "Help!" This symbolizes the human condition perfectly. In the end, they get up on their own. In this life, when you fall you either get back up on your own or you die—no one can help you.

p. 82: We discover that Lucky has lost his voice and is now totally dumb—another example of the weakness of the human body. Pozzo sums up the human situation in one line: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more."

p. 84: The boy comes again, with the usual message from Godot. Vladimir hysterically questions him, asking what Godot does. The reply: "He does nothing, sir." In other words, he will never come. The situation is now clearly and totally hopeless.

p.87: Vladimir and Estragon continue to plan their suicide but they also, comically, continue to delay it. Vladimir delivers the most famous line of the play: "We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. (*Pause.*) Unless Godot comes." Thus, they continue ridiculously to cling on to "hopeless hope." The act ends by repeating exactly the same lines as the end of Act One—that is, there is no movement, no development, in human life.