

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Waiting for Godot**

by Samuel Beckett

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ISBN 978-1-60389-966-6  
Reorder No. 201461

# Waiting for Godot

## Background Lecture

Samuel Beckett, born 1906 in Dublin, Ireland, was a novelist and playwright who spent much of his life in the cultural center of Paris. Beckett was drawn to this intellectual atmosphere after completing his M.A. at Trinity College, Ireland. Except for excursions in Europe, he spent most of his life in Paris, writing in French from the 1940's on. Like his close friend James Joyce, Beckett, was a scholar of language. In 1969, Beckett was given the Nobel Prize for his work. *Waiting for Godot* is considered a representative play of Theater of the Absurd.

### Theatre of the Absurd:

- was a trend in theatre during the 1950's & 1960's.
- originated with the Surrealist movement of the 1930's.
- was the culmination of the pessimistic, disillusioned attitude that existed between the 1920's & 1950's.
- showed that man's only protection is to laugh at the absurdity of his situation since human life and efforts are illogical, and language is inadequate as a means of communication.
- saw existence as ridiculous because human action is meaningless. As a result, there are no moral decisions or conflicts between forces that are meaningful.

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. identify *Waiting For Godot* as Theatre of the Absurd, pointing out the following characteristics:
  - A. There is the attitude that life is ridiculous.
  - B. It uses non-conventional techniques of plot and character development.
  - C. It explores the inner world of humans, not the external reality.
  - D. The style is fragmented thought.
  - E. Metaphors, images, and symbols are presented.
  - F. The atmosphere is one of despair.
2. creatively write a description of what some people do while they are waiting.
3. explain the elements of tragi-comedy in the play: the comedy of absurdity, the tragedy of the characters' miserable plight.
4. explain how the setting, "the world of the play," contributes to the mood, atmosphere, and theme.
5. write an essay that explains one aspect of the play that affects the audience.
6. discuss the following themes:
  - A. People exist in a cycle of meaningless suffering, waiting for some relief.
  - B. In human existence, hoping, attempting to communicate, and searching for meaning are futile. Man is powerless, bored, and frustrated.
  - C. In spite of the suffering and futility of life, humans are noble in their efforts to survive, their ability to hope, and their capacity to show compassion to each other.
  - D. The two main characters, Gogo and Didi, are like clowns; throughout their grotesque interactions, they are unable to understand each other.
  - E. Humans are alienated. Each individual feels "apart" from society as a whole and feels frustrated as he tries to communicate and cries out for help.
  - F. As people struggle to combat boredom in their lives, life itself becomes meaningless.
  - G. The catharsis of the play is the "nothing happens" aspect of our daily lives; paradoxically, we are thrown out of our boredom by the suspense resulting from the "nothing happens" of life.

# Waiting for Godot

## Act I

### VOCABULARY

**pubis**—the forward portion of the hip bone  
**privation**—lack of the basic necessities of life  
**insidious**—intended to entrap  
**wheedling**—persuading by flattery  
**voluptuously**—suggesting unrestrained pleasure  
**pugilist**—one who fights with his fists  
**mandrakes**—plants believed to have magical powers  
**prerogatives**—exclusive rights held by a person  
**vacuously**—stupidly  
**proffers**—offers  
**peremptory**—commanding  
**magnanimous**—generous in forgiving  
**voraciously**—greedy in eating  
**effeminate**—feminine  
**cretin**—one who is mentally and physically challenged  
**goiter**—a swelling of the neck  
**impertinent**—inattentive  
**affectation**—a false display  
**vehemently**—in a forceful manner  
**ostentatiously**—the act of making a showy display  
**grampus**—a whale  
**mollify**—to placate or calm  
**knook**—a knucklehead  
**dudeen**—a short stemmed clay pipe  
**Kapp and Peterson**—a brand of pipe  
**effulgence**—brilliant radiance  
**tray bong**—slang for French phrase “tres bien” meaning very good  
**indignantly**—angrily  
**aesthete**—an admirer of beauty  
**consternation**—surprise; panic  
**fob**—a small pocket in the front of a vest, used especially to hold a watch

**Act II**

## VOCABULARY

**splayed**—spread apart  
**sententious**—full of meaning  
**charnel**—house—a vault where corpses are kept  
**que voulez-vous**—French phrase meaning “what do you want”  
**coquettishly**—teasingly  
**gonococcus**—bacteria found in venereal diseases  
**spirochete**—bacteria found in venereal diseases  
**punctilious**—attentive to details  
**morpion**—a louse  
**aphoristic**—in the form of a brief statement  
**caryatids**—columns sculptured in the form of women  
**memoria praeteritorum bonorum**—Latin phrase meaning “the past is always recalled to be good”

1. What is different about the setting?

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2. What ideas of life does Vladimir’s song suggest? Describe Estragon’s condition when he enters.

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3. What idea about friendship is suggested when Estragon and Vladimir are re-united?

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4. What part do things such as sharing memories, trying to remember, and having to be reminded have in life?

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