

(Post-War drama)

The Theatre of the Absurd

SAMUEL BECKETT (1906-1989)

Waiting for Godot

1953/1955



Historical background



The nuclear bombing of Hiroshima, 1945

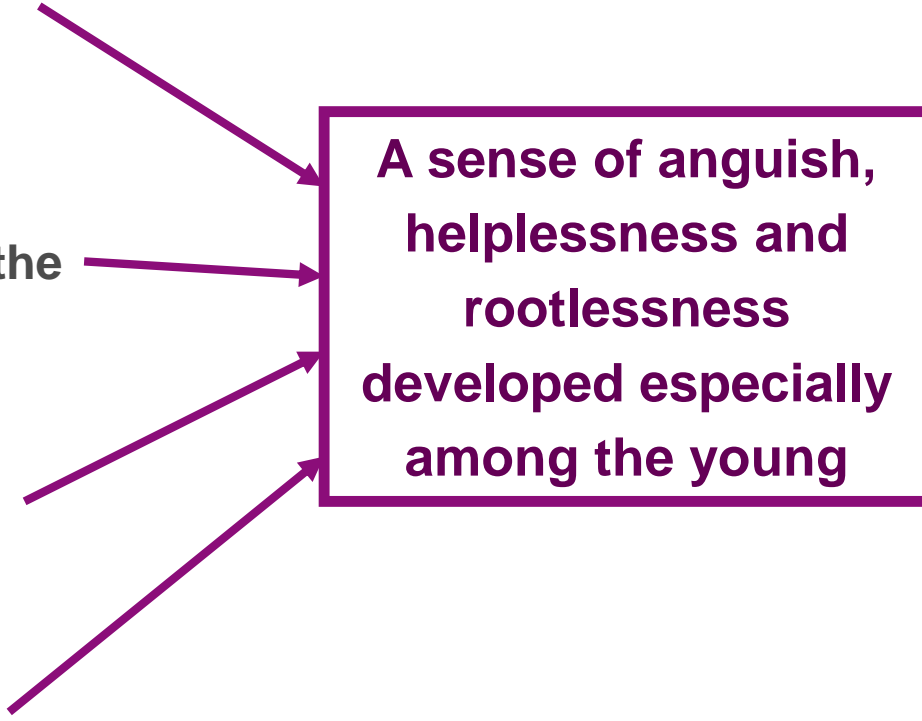


The infamous entrance to Auschwitz.

- The aftermath of World War II increased by the **Cold War**.
- The **atrocities** of the Nazi concentration camps.
- The Allies' **atomic bomb**.
- Disillusionment coming from the realization that Britain had been reduced to a **second-class power**.

New meaning of existence

- Awareness of **man's propensity to evil** and conscience of the **destructive power of scientific knowledge**.
- The lack of moral assurance and the **decline of religious faith**.
- The **disillusionment** with both the liberal and social theories about economic and social **progress**.
- **Mistrust** in the power of **reason**.



A sense of anguish,
helplessness and
rootlessness
developed especially
among the young

French existentialism

- **Existentialism** saw man trapped in a hostile world.
- Human life was **meaningless** and this created a sense of **confusion**, **despair** and **emptiness**.
- **The universe was not rational** and defied any explanation = **ABSURD**
- The main exponent of this philosophical current was the French **Jean Paul Sartre**.



Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

POST-WAR DRAMA: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

- During the 1950's= **REVIVAL** of **DRAMA** in **Britain**

showing → **REJECTION of TRADITIONAL
VALUES**

- **TWO MAIN TRENDS** in new post-war drama:

ANGER and **ABSURD**

“ANGRY YOUNG MEN”

EDUCATED middle class or working class
playwrights (left-wing ideas)

Also called the **KITCHEN-SINK DRAMA** (squalid setting)

- Formally NOT innovative plays ⇒ **REALISTIC PLAYS**
- but **INNOVATIVE CONTENT** ⇒ **STRONG CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS**
- **Frustration of the younger generation** who rejected their parents' middle class values and wanted to expose their unfair situation
- **Direct/real language** of the working class
- **Attacks against the establishment** (the ruling classes and their values)

main exponent = John Osborne – *Look back in Anger* (1956)

The theatre of the Absurd

Influence of **Camus** and **Sartre (existentialism)**



**pessimistic view of man's existence=
no purpose at all in man's life, totally absurd**

=

After 2 world wars, in a world with no religion, with no
belief → **Man is lost**

?

A **BIG** existential question

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE?

NO MEANING AT ALL

A tragic situation

Beckett's plays want to represent just this

**The absurdity and Irrationality of
Human Existence**

To represent this ...

...he **could not follow a realistic form** of drama

→ INNOVATIVE FORM

Main THEMES of Beckett's plays

(influenced by existentialism)

- **The sense of man's alienation.**
- **The cruelty of human life.**
- **The absence or the futility of objectives.**
- **The meaninglessness of man's struggle**

The theatre of the Absurd

- Term applied to a group of dramatists:
 - Rumanian Ionesco, Russian Adamov
(Beckett met them in Paris) Beckett (the most representative)
- but not a “school” (each worked on his own)

WAITING FOR GODOT

- First written in **French** and performed in Paris
→ *En Attendant Godot* (1953) (written in a foreign language to maintain the language as simple and detached as possible)
- Then **translated** (by Beckett himself) **into English** (1954) and performed in London
→ *Waiting for Godot* (1955)

General situation of B's plays

All of his characters ARE TRAPPED by a situation from which they can not escape (buried in earth, in dustbins)

Main features: plot

TRADITIONAL DRAMA

- There is a **story developing in time**
- Portrait of society through **realistic characters** who move in a **definite period of time**
- the **audience can identify themselves** with the characters

WAITING FOR GODOT

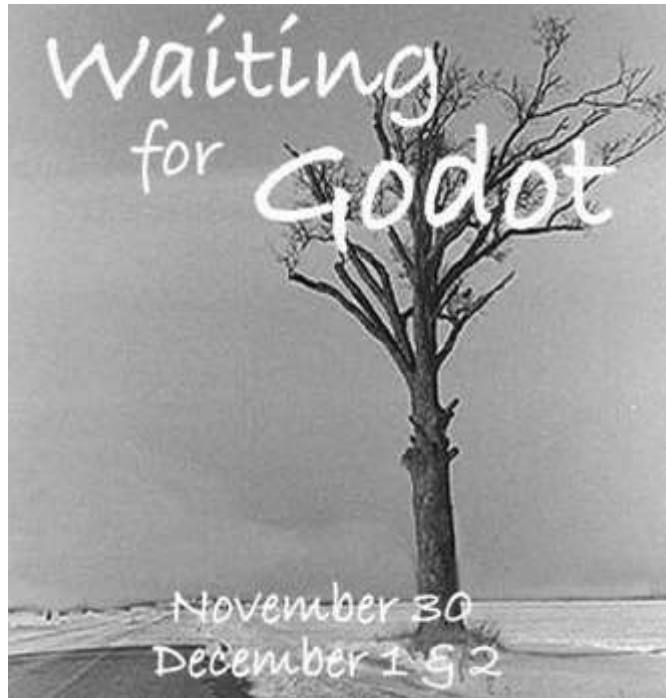
- **NO STORY, NO PLOT (static work)** nothing happens
- The characters interact to **fill up their time**, pauses and silences are as important as words
- They quarrel, they put on or off boots (estrason) or hat (vladimir)
- **they speak but not to communicate** something – **they just fill up the time** to avoid silence
- **Emphasis on INNER REALITY**
(A DRAMA OF THE MIND)

Main features: time

- TRADITIONAL DRAMA
 - Events narrated in a chronological way, there is a development, a climax, a conclusion
- WAITING FOR GODOT
 - No development in time
 - **No past, no future** = the characters **do not remember** their past or figure out their future
 - **one day similar to the following**
 - Not a beginning not an end (sort of nightmare)
 - **First act** almost identical to the **second**

Main features: setting

- TRADITIONAL DRAMA
= Realistic setting
and scenery
- WAITING FOR GODOT
• A country road, a
bare tree (everywhere)



Symbolical setting
(expressionism= the
representation of the
mind and its existential
desolation and despair)

Main features: CHARACTERS

- Two tramps ESTRAGON (gogo) and VLADIMIR (didi)
- Other two tramps POZZO (the boss) and LUCKY (the slave)
- The boy announcing the arrival of GODOT (that never comes)

Who is godot?

It may recall the idea of God (In French= **Little God**)

Go + . (dot) (they want to go but they do not move)

N.B.: Beckett never said it was God

This is what the characters do:

just **WAITING FOR GODOT (main theme)**

Godot = something/someone that could relieve man from an unbearable situation

But..... **GODOT NEVER COMES**

Main features: characters

TRADITIONAL DRAMA

- Realistic characters
- with their personalities
- Belonging to a specific social class

- WAITING FOR GODOT

- Tramps - No defined personality or social class – (symbolical of an existential situation)

COMPLEMENTARY

(two different aspects of the same personality = body (gogo) and mind (didi))

they need each other

Vladimir (didi ⇒ *dît dît* – he speaks) ⇒ more intellectual, he plays with his hat

Estragon (gogo ⇒ *go,go* – problems with his boots) – he has to do with corporal activities (he is angry, sleepy, he always complains he is beaten by someone during the night,)

+

Pozzo (the oppressor/ the power of the body)

Lucky (the slave / the power of the mind, he can speak-when he has his hat on)

COMPLEMENTARY, too = Linked to each other by a rope, kept by Pozzo (but in the second act the role is the opposite – Pozzo is blind and needs Lucky who has become dumb)

GODOT The “saviour” or the “saving event” that never comes

Main features: language

TRADITIONAL DRAMA

- Realistic,
- Characters speak to communicate

WAITING FOR GODOT

- Incoherent babbling, puns, gags (language loses its meaning too)
- Many **PAUSES, MIMING, SILENCES**
- What happens on the stage is often contradicted by the words spoken by the protagonists

Vladimir “Well, Shall we go?”
Estragon “ Yes, let’s go”
[*they do not move*]

Main features: Style

- It is pervaded by a **grotesque humour** (irony about everything because everything is equally meaningless)
- It may be considered a **Tragi-comedy**
- **Tragedy**= they would like to commit suicide to put an end to their absurd, desperate situation
- **Comedy**= There is no tragic end, they fail, they cannot escape their existential situation
- **Its tone is tragic and desperate.**

Life (1906 -1989)

- **IRISH** - Born in Dublin (Anglo-Irish parents)
- Graduated in **Modern Languages** (French, Italian) at Trinity College, Dublin
- 1928 **Paris** (lecturer at Ecole Normale)
- Influenced by **EXISTENTIALISM** (Camus, Sartre)
- Met Ionesco and Adamov in Paris
- Back to Ireland: Teacher at Trinity College Dublin
- 1931 (25 years old) ➤ **vagabond years** across Europe ➤ finally Paris (1936)

...life

- World War II ⇒ fought in the **Resistance Movement**
- **1945** definitely in Paris (met Joyce)
- Wrote in French and English, indifferently
- **En Attendant Godot** = Instant success
- He wrote other plays (*Endgame*, *Happy days*), critical essays, radio plays.
- **1969 NOBEL PRIZE** for LITERATURE

t205 “We’ll come back tomorrow” (from about minute 6 of the video)

FILM (English)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDjgThErfIM>

THEATRE (English)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7_g52JrshE

t206 “Waiting” (from about minute 1:35 of the video)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YELhHkDvwZM&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL

Miscellaneous scenes from Waiting for Godot

THEATRE (Italian)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBfJaHDDZI8&feature=related>



HAPPY DAYS <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f9wM-6OLl8&feature=related>