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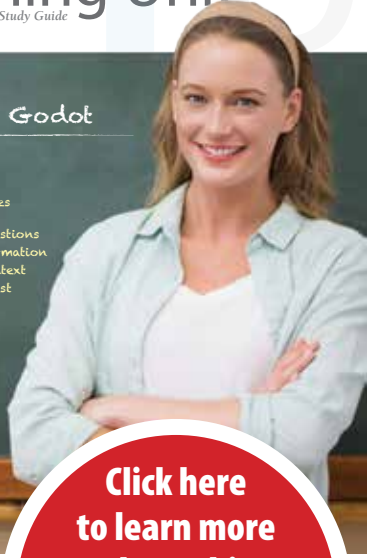
Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Waiting for Godot

by Samuel Beckett

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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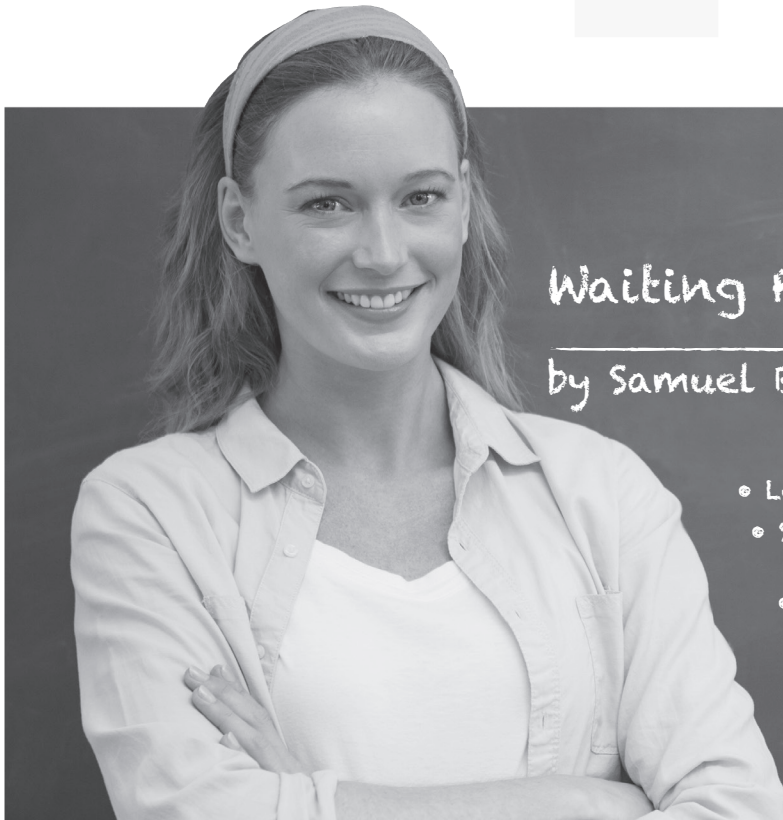
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Waiting for Godot

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.

Questions for Discussion

Act I.

Find three examples of “tragi-comedy” in this act.

Possible answers are as follows:

1. *When Vladimir and Estragon consider suicide (comical argument/human despair).*
2. *When Estragon forgets he and Estragon are waiting.*
3. *Vladimir and Estragon’s comical inspection of the pathetic Lucky.*
4. *Pozzo’s mockery of consideration for Lucky in asking him if he wants the bones before he gives them to Estragon. It is tragic that Pozzo seems to believe that he is a “sensitive” leader.*
5. *Lucky’s hat, dance, and speech.*
6. *Pozzo’s searching for the things he thinks that he has lost.*
7. *The interaction of Lucky with Vladimir and Estragon, i.e. the kicking, etc.*

Act II.

List at least five ways that Act II parallels Act I.

1. *Estragon and Vladimir come together in the morning after being separated during the night.*
2. *Pozzo and Lucky arrive.*
3. *Estragon complains about his feet and leaves his boots.*
4. *The messenger returns.*
5. *Estragon sleeps; Vladimir waits for him to awaken.*
6. *Vladimir and Estragon consider the tree for hanging themselves.*
7. *For another day, Vladimir and Estragon pass the time waiting.*
8. *Vladimir and Estragon consider separating again.*

1. Describe the scenery of the play.

2. Contrast Estragon and Vladimir by considering what each is concerned with, who is more realistic, and who is more idealistic and why.

3. What point does Vladimir make with his story of the two thieves who are crucified at the same time as Christ? What is Estragon's reaction?

4. Considering the juxtaposition of the story of the two thieves and the mention of Godot, what is the significance of Godot?

5. What do Estragon and Vladimir do to pass the time?

6. Estragon says, "There are times when I wonder if it wouldn't be better for us to part." Why do they not part? Give details to prove your points.

7. How are they like a married couple?

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?

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

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

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