

Samuel Beckett

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Samuel Beckett — Waiting for Godot (ENH 403: Modern Drama)

Overview — the story in simple English

Waiting for Godot is a play by Samuel Beckett, an Irish writer who lived in France and first wrote the play in French as *En attendant Godot*. The story is very simple, and that is the point. Two old tramps (ভবঘুরে), Vladimir (also called Didi) and Estragon (also called Gogo), stand on a country road beside one bare tree. They are waiting for a man named Godot, who has promised — or they think he has promised — to come and meet them. While they wait, they talk, quarrel (ঝগড়া করা), joke, eat a carrot, take off boots, and even think about hanging themselves, just to pass the time. Two strangers arrive: Pozzo, a cruel master, and Lucky, his slave, who is tied by a rope around his neck. At the end of Act One, a Boy comes with a message: Mr Godot will not come today, but surely tomorrow. Act Two repeats almost the same day: the tree now has a few leaves, Pozzo returns blind (অন্ধ) and Lucky dumb (বোবা), and the Boy again says Godot will not come. Both acts end the same way — the tramps say "let us go," but the stage direction tells us they do not move. Godot never comes, and we never learn who he is. The play shows human life as endless waiting for a meaning, a help, or a saviour (ত্রাণকর্তা) that never arrives — yet the two friends keep waiting together, with humour and small acts of kindness.

 **One-line meaning: Life is an endless, uncertain wait for a meaning or saviour that never comes, and human beings fill that wait with habit, talk, and companionship.**

Quick Facts	
Published / First performed	Written in French in the late 1940s; premiered in Paris, January 1953; Beckett's own English version followed (mid-1950s)
Genre	Tragicomedy; the key example of the Theatre of the Absurd
Setting	A country road, a single tree, evening — place and time deliberately vague (অস্পষ্ট)
Form	Two-act play; circular (চক্রাকার) plot — Act Two repeats Act One with small changes
Famous remark	Beckett subtitled the English text "a tragicomedy in two acts"

Themes & Technique

- Waiting and the absence of meaning.** The whole action of the play is waiting itself. Godot never arrives, so the waiting has no result and no clear purpose — this pictures the absurd (অর্থহীন) condition of modern man, who waits for a meaning that life never supplies. In the exam, always connect waiting to the Absurd: the waiting continues even after hope is repeatedly broken.

2. **Uncertainty of religion and salvation (মুক্তি / পরিত্রাণ).** The play is full of half-religious hints: the two thieves crucified with Christ, the tree that suggests the Cross, and Godot himself, whose name echoes "God." Vladimir worries whether he will be saved like one of the thieves. Beckett neither confirms nor denies God — he dramatizes doubt, which is exactly what the "religious significance" question wants you to discuss.
3. **Time, memory, and repetition.** Time in the play does not move forward; it circles. The characters cannot remember yesterday clearly, Pozzo loses his watch and later his sight, and Act Two mirrors Act One. Time becomes a burden (বোঝা) to be "passed," not a road leading to progress.
4. **Habit as a shield against suffering.** Vladimir observes that habit is a great deadener — routine games with hats, boots, and talk protect the tramps from facing the emptiness of existence. Habit keeps them alive but also keeps them trapped in the same day forever.
5. **Companionship and interdependence (পরস্পর নির্ভরতা).** Didi and Gogo constantly threaten to part but never do; Pozzo and Lucky are tied by a literal rope. Human beings, Beckett suggests, cannot bear existence alone — even a painful bond is better than solitude (একাকীত্ব).
6. **Master and slave; cruelty and power.** Pozzo and Lucky show power relations in their rawest form: the master owns, drives, and displays the slave. In Act Two their position collapses — Pozzo is blind and helpless, Lucky dumb — showing how fragile (ভঙ্গুর) all human power is under time.
7. **Tragicomedy: laughter on the edge of despair.** The play mixes music-hall comedy — bowler hats, falling trousers, quick cross-talk (দ্রুত হাস্যকর সংলাপ) — with despair and talk of suicide. The comedy does not cancel the pain; it makes the pain bearable and visible at the same time.

Narrative technique (dramatic technique)

- **Theatre of the Absurd:** no logical plot, no character development, no resolution; the form itself expresses meaninglessness (Martin Esslin's term).
- **Circular / static plot structure:** Act Two repeats Act One with variations; the play ends where it began — nothing "happens."
- **Minimalist setting (নূন্যতম মঞ্চসজ্জা):** one road, one tree, evening — a bare, universal stage for all humanity.
- **Symbolism:** the tree, the road, the rope, boots, hats, night and moon carry the meaning instead of plot.
- **Repetition and cross-talk dialogue:** short, echoing exchanges like music-hall or circus-clown routines; language often fails to communicate.
- **Tragicomedy:** comic business set against despair; Beckett's own subtitle for the play.
- **Silence and pause:** Beckett's repeated stage direction (*Silence.*) makes emptiness itself part of the dialogue.
- **Anti-play with anti-heroes:** tramps replace heroes; waiting replaces action.

Key Quotations — memorize

- "Nothing to be done." — Estragon, opening line of Act I (later repeated; the keynote of the whole play).
- "Let's go." / "We can't." / "Why not?" / "We're waiting for Godot." — Vladimir and Estragon; this exchange returns again and again like a refrain (ধূম্রা).
- "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" — Estragon, Act I; the best one-line summary of the absurd plot.
- "One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage." — Vladimir, Act I; the key religious reference to the two thieves crucified with Christ.
- "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." — Pozzo, Act II; life as a brief flash between birth and death.

- "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" — Estragon, Act II; existential self-awareness.
- "Habit is a great deadener." — Vladimir, Act II; habit numbing the pain of existence.
- "Yes, let's go." (*They do not move.*) — the closing words and stage direction; speech and action contradict each other.
- The Boy's message in both acts is that Mr Godot will not come this evening but surely tomorrow (learn the idea; do not present it as an exact quotation).

Critics' Views (safe to cite)

Critic	View	Use for
Martin Esslin	Coined the term "Theatre of the Absurd" (1961) and placed Beckett at its centre: the play does not tell a story but presents a human condition of uncertainty.	Absurd drama essay; technique questions
Vivian Mercier	Famously described <i>Waiting for Godot</i> as a play in which nothing happens, twice.	Structure, use of time, absurd drama
Jean Anouilh (French dramatist)	Reviewing the 1953 Paris premiere, compared the play to Pascal's <i>Pensées</i> performed as a music-hall sketch by clowns.	Tragicomedy; philosophy mixed with farce
Albert Camus (background philosopher)	In <i>The Myth of Sisyphus</i> (1942) defined the Absurd as the clash between man's demand for meaning and the silent universe — the idea Esslin later applied to Beckett.	Defining "absurd"; existentialism note
Harold Hobson and Kenneth Tynan (London reviewers, 1955)	Defended the play when most early reviewers mocked it, arguing it forced English theatre to rethink what drama could be.	Reception; why the play is revolutionary
G. S. Fraser	Read the play as a modern morality play centred on Christian hope — the waiting itself becomes a kind of faith.	Religious significance essay

Safe general sentence: many critics identify Godot with God, but Beckett refused to explain, reportedly saying that if he had known who Godot was, he would have said so in the play. Cite this as a reported position, not a word-for-word quotation.

Exam Q&A Bank

Part A — Reference to Context (5 marks)

1. "Nothing to be done." — Very likely passage (the keynote line; feeds the symbol, time, and absurd-drama questions that appear in both the 2019 and 2020 lists)

These words open Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), the central play of the Theatre of the Absurd. Estragon speaks the line at the beginning of Act One while struggling to pull off his painful boot, and Vladimir at once repeats it in a wider, philosophical sense. The context is trivial — a tramp fighting a boot — but the meaning expands to cover the whole play: nothing can be done about the human condition. The sentence becomes a refrain, returning whenever the tramps face their helplessness while waiting for Godot, who never comes. Its significance is great: it announces the theme of inaction and futility (নিষ্ফলতা), it establishes the tragicomic method of joining a comic physical act to a despairing thought, and it prepares the circular structure in which, as Vivian Mercier said, nothing happens, twice. It is the keynote of Beckett's absurd vision of life.

2. "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." — 🔥 Very likely passage (supports the time, symbol, and absurd-drama questions repeated in both years)

This line occurs in Act Two of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The speaker is Pozzo, who has returned to the road blind and helpless — a broken version of the proud master of Act One. When Vladimir asks him when he became blind, Pozzo bursts out in anger against all questions about time and delivers this terrible image: women give birth while standing over a grave (কবর); human life is only a brief gleam of light between birth and death. The explanation is clear — clock time is meaningless; one day is like every other day, and the whole of life is a single dying instant. Its significance is threefold: it states the play's philosophy of time in one image; it marks Pozzo's fall, showing how time destroys every human authority; and Vladimir soon echoes the same image in his own speech, showing that the thought has infected him too. It is the darkest and most quoted sentence in the play.

Part B — Short Notes (5 marks)

1. Who is Godot? What purpose does he serve in Beckett's play? — 🔥 Very likely (appears in both the 2019 and 2020 lists)

Godot is the unseen character for whom Vladimir and Estragon wait through both acts of *Waiting for Godot*. He never appears; we know him only through the tramps' uncertain talk and the Boy's twice-repeated message that Mr Godot will not come this evening but surely tomorrow. From the Boy we gather small details — Godot keeps sheep and goats and beats one boy but not the other — details that faintly recall the God of the Bible, who separates sheep from goats and grants grace (অনুগ্রহ) without explanation. His name echoes "God," so many readers take him as God or divine salvation; others see him as hope, meaning, death, or simply "whatever we wait for." Beckett refused to define him, reportedly saying that if he had known who Godot was, he would have said so in the play. Godot's purpose is both structural and thematic: his promised coming gives the tramps their only reason to stay, and gives the play its only "action" — waiting. Because he never comes, he becomes the perfect symbol of the absent meaning at the centre of modern life: the whole play is built around an empty centre.

2. Comment on the use of symbols in *Waiting for Godot*. — 🔥 Very likely (appears in both the 2019 and 2020 lists)

Because *Waiting for Godot* has almost no plot, Beckett makes symbols carry the meaning. The **tree**, the only object on the bare stage, is the richest symbol: it recalls the Cross of Christ, it is the appointed meeting place with Godot, the tramps consider hanging themselves from it, and its few new leaves in Act Two hint — very uncertainly — at hope, renewal, or merely passing time. The **country road** suggests the journey of life, yet nobody travels anywhere on it. **Godot** himself is the grand symbol of God, salvation, or absent meaning. The **rope** binding Lucky to Pozzo symbolizes slavery and every human bond of dependence; in Act Two the rope is shorter, because the blind master must be led. Estragon's painful **boots** stand for the suffering body, and the **bowler hats** for the mind's routines — Lucky cannot "think" at all without his hat. **Night and the rising moon** end each act, symbolizing the death that closes each identical day. Even the **evening twilight** (গোধূলি) of the setting suggests a world at the fag-end of its faith. Together these symbols turn a bare stage into a picture of the whole human condition.

Part C — Essays (15 marks)

"Discuss 'Waiting for Godot' as an absurd drama." — 🔥 Very likely (appears in both the 2019 and 2020 Part C lists)

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is universally treated as the model play of the Theatre of the Absurd, the term Martin Esslin coined in 1961 for the post-war drama of Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov and Genet. The word "absurd" here carries the sense Albert Camus gave it in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942): the painful clash between man's hunger for meaning and a universe that stays silent. My thesis is that Beckett's play is absurd in a double way — its subject is the meaninglessness of existence, and its very form, being plotless, circular and clownish, acts out that meaninglessness on the stage.

First, the play is absurd in its action, or rather its lack of action. Two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, wait on a country road for a man named Godot who never comes. Nothing is achieved and nothing is decided. Estragon states the plot himself: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" The opening words, "Nothing to be done," begin as a remark about a boot

and grow into a verdict on human life. Traditional drama moves from conflict to resolution; Beckett removes both. As Vivian Mercier wittily put it, this is a play in which nothing happens, twice. The waiting itself — pointless, endless, yet never abandoned — is the perfect stage image of the absurd condition of man.

Second, the structure is circular, defeating time and progress. Act Two repeats Act One with small, disturbing changes: the tree has leaves, Pozzo is blind, Lucky is dumb, but the day is the same day of waiting, ending with the same Boy and the same broken promise. Memory fails; Estragon cannot recall yesterday; Pozzo rages against questions about time and delivers the play's darkest image: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." Time does not develop character or plot — it merely wears them away (ক্ষয় করা). The circular form is itself an absurdist device: the shape of the play imitates the shapelessness of life.

Third, character and language are treated absurdly. The tramps are anti-heroes without history, home, or purpose; the master-and-slave pair, Pozzo and Lucky, show human relationship reduced to a rope. Dialogue constantly misfires: questions receive no answers, conversations circle back on themselves, and Lucky's famous "think" is a long torrent of broken, learned-sounding nonsense (অসংলগ্ন বকবক) — language collapsing exactly where it tries to discuss God and man. The characters talk mainly to fill the silence, as Estragon admits: "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" Speech here is not communication but a habit of survival.

Fourth, the play wraps its despair in comedy, which is why Beckett subtitled it "a tragicomedy in two acts." The bowler hats, the three-way hat-swapping, Estragon's falling trousers, and the rapid cross-talk all come from the music hall and the circus clown. Jean Anouilh caught this mixture when he compared the premiere to Pascal's *Pensées* performed as a music-hall sketch by clowns. The laughter never cancels the darkness — the funniest business occurs while the tramps discuss hanging themselves — and this fusion of farce with metaphysical (আধিভৌতিক) despair is the signature tone of absurd drama.

Finally, the play refuses meaning at its centre. Godot may be God, hope, or nothing at all; Beckett declined to explain. The ending seals the absurdity: "Yes, let's go," they agree — and the stage direction answers, *They do not move*. Word and act, hope and reality, stand permanently apart.

In conclusion, *Waiting for Godot* shows every mark of absurd drama — meaningless waiting as subject, circular plot, failing language, clownish tragicomedy, and a vacant centre. As Esslin argued, the play does not merely argue that life is absurd; it makes the audience live through that absurdity in the theatre. That is why it remains the defining absurd drama of the modern stage.

"Do you find any religious significance in *Waiting for Godot*? Discuss." — 🔥 Very likely (appears in both years; marked v.v.i. by the compiler in the 2020 list)

At first sight *Waiting for Godot* looks like a godless play: a bare road, two tramps, and a saviour who never arrives. Yet the play is soaked (পরিপূর্ণ) in the Bible, and the question of salvation runs through it from the first scene to the last. My thesis is that the play carries deep religious significance — but of a negative, questioning kind: Beckett dramatizes neither faith nor atheism (নাস্তিকতা), but the agony of waiting for a God who stays silent.

The clearest religious signal is Godot himself. His name echoes "God," and what little we hear of him fits a distant deity: he does nothing today but promises tomorrow, he keeps sheep and goats — recalling the Gospel image of God separating the sheep from the goats at judgment — and he beats one boy and spares the other without any reason, like unexplained grace. The tramps' attitude to him is the attitude of worshippers: they fear displeasing him, they hope to be "saved" if he comes, and they feel bound by their appointment with him. Beckett refused to confirm the equation of Godot with God — reportedly saying that if he had known who Godot was, he would have said so in the play — but the religious colouring is deliberate and unmistakable.

Secondly, the play opens with a theological problem: the two thieves crucified with Christ. Vladimir broods that of the four Evangelists only one says a thief was saved: "One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage." The joke hides terror — salvation appears to be a fifty-fifty gamble resting on a single doubtful report. This uncertainty of salvation is the religious keynote of the whole play, and it echoes in the pairs on stage: two thieves, two tramps, two brothers who mind Godot's flocks (one beaten, one spared), as if each pair silently asks again — which one will be saved, and why?

Thirdly, the stage itself is quietly biblical. The single tree recalls the Cross; fittingly, the tramps discuss hanging themselves from it, and its few leaves in Act Two offer an ambiguous flicker of resurrection — or mere seasonal change. Estragon compares himself to Christ, saying he has done so all his life, and goes barefoot as Christ did. The Boy arrives like an angel-messenger, but his gospel is always the same: not today, surely tomorrow. Waiting thus becomes a kind of prayer. Critics such as G. S. Fraser have accordingly read the play as a modern morality play on Christian hope: the tramps' fidelity (বিশ্বস্ততা) to their appointment is itself a stripped, desperate form of faith — they are, in their own words, the only ones who keep their appointment.

Yet the religion in the play is a religion of absence. God, if Godot is God, never comes; grace is arbitrary; the promise is endlessly postponed (স্থগিত). Pozzo's terrible cry — "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" — empties life of divine care altogether. Martin Esslin therefore warned against reading the play as a simple Christian allegory: for him it stages the anxiety of a modern age that has lost religious certainty but not the religious hunger. Both readings can stand together, because the play uses Christian materials precisely to dramatize the modern loss of Christian assurance.

In conclusion, the religious significance of *Waiting for Godot* is real but deliberately unresolved. The play is built out of scripture — the two thieves, the tree, the sheep and goats, the awaited saviour — yet every religious hope in it hangs between "not today" and "surely tomorrow." Beckett gives us neither belief nor unbelief but the waiting itself; and in that endless, faithful, fruitless waiting lies the play's deepest religious meaning. It is the prayer of an age that can no longer be sure anyone is listening.

⚡ One-Page Revision Sheet

Item	Content
Story in 3 lines	Two tramps, Didi and Gogo, wait by a bare tree for Godot, who never comes. Pozzo and Lucky (master and slave on a rope) pass by in both acts; a Boy twice reports Godot will come tomorrow. Act Two repeats Act One; the tramps say "let's go" but do not move.
2 must-quotes	"Nothing to be done." (Estragon, opening) • "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" (Estragon)
2 backup quotes	"They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." (Pozzo, Act II) • "One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage." (Vladimir, Act I)
2 critics	Martin Esslin — Theatre of the Absurd; the play presents the human condition, not a story • Vivian Mercier — a play in which nothing happens, twice
Technique words	Theatre of the Absurd, tragicomedy, circular/static plot, minimalist setting, symbolism, repetition, cross-talk, silence and pause, anti-hero
Top 3 likely essays	🔥 Waiting for Godot as an absurd drama • 🔥 Religious significance in Waiting for Godot • 🔥 Symbols / use of time in Waiting for Godot (Part B favourites — be ready to expand)

Exam timing tip: in the 4-hour paper give each 15-mark essay about 45–50 minutes — spend the first 5 minutes writing a one-line thesis plus a list of your 2 quotations and 1 critic before you begin the introduction.