

Waiting for Godot *without Existentialism*

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Waiting for Godot is an existentialist play. The renowned New York critic Eric Bentley said so in his review of its first Broadway production in 1956. BBC Radio's head of drama Martin Esslin said so in his influential book *The Theater of the Absurd* in 1961. The inescapable Grove Press edition of *Waiting for Godot*, long a staple of North American college English courses, has said so on the back cover for thirty years. Throughout the eighties and nineties, Grove quoted Bentley's remark that *Waiting for Godot* is "the quintessence of 'existentialism'" on more than fifty printings. Sometime after the 110th printing in 1998, Bentley's claim gave way to the anonymous statement of Grove's current copy: "Beckett's language pioneered an expressionistic minimalism that captured the existentialism of post-World War II Europe."

That's a lot of -isms. My quarrel is with the last: its reputation notwithstanding, *Waiting for Godot* is not really an existentialist play. In 1961, Theodor Adorno said as much about Beckett's work in general in *Noten zur Literatur II*, but he used *Endgame* instead of *Godot* as his example—and worse, he said it in German, so no one in North America even heard him.

Beckett's best-known play is existentialist in the sense that Bentley used the term in his review, before Grove cut him short. Bentley actually wrote that *Waiting for Godot* "is the quintessence of 'existentialism' in the popular, and most relevant, sense of the term." From that, I gather Bentley thought *Waiting for Godot* fit a vague sense of what mattered about existentialism in the 1950s: "a philosophy," as he went on to say,

which underscores the incomprehensibility, and therefore the
meaninglessness, of the universe, the nausea which man feels

upon being confronted with the fact of existence, the praiseworthiness of the acts of defiance man may perform—acts which are taken, on faith, as self-justifying, while rationally speaking, they have no justification because they have no possibility of success.

As a summary of existentialism, that begins well but ends too cynically. It describes Beckett's play, or a reading of Beckett's play, better than it does the philosophy of Sartre, the existentialist philosopher Bentley's language most clearly calls to mind. In short, the quintessence of popular existentialism is not the same thing as the quintessence of existentialism, a difference Grove's abridged quotation hid from generations of students, the only statistically significant readers of Beckett's play.

The "popular sense" is never completely right, but it is also never completely wrong. It was and remains reasonable for audiences to associate *Waiting for Godot* with existentialism, with Bentley's incomprehensible, meaningless, nauseating, hopeless universe. But the difference between that popular sense of existentialism and Sartre's existentialism resides precisely in the popular misunderstanding that it is a hopeless philosophy. *Waiting for Godot* depicts something very close to the existential condition. But it does not advance or share Sartre's answer to that condition, the silver lining that is humanity's radical freedom. For Adorno, it was exactly here that *Endgame* parted company from existentialism: "Even to the concentration camp victims, existentialism had attributed the freedom either inwardly to accept or reject the inflicted martyrdom. *Endgame* destroys such illusions." That difference is not trivial. It is quintessential.



Reports of near riots have, I suspect, been exaggerated by a self-righteous literary history, but some of the first audiences of *Waiting for Godot* were certainly confused, bored, or angered by the play. It became "the talk of theatrical Paris" on its premiere in January 1953 in large part because it upset audiences, including a group of

well-dressed hecklers who one night forced the curtain to come down after Lucky's monologue. At its London premiere two years later, a spectator shouted out, "This is why we lost the colonies!" A prominent reviewer titled his comments with "The Left Bank Can Keep It." When Estragon asked Vladimir if he had a piece of rope with which to hang themselves, someone yelled to give him some. At the opening night of the American premiere in Miami, much of the audience left at the intermission, suggesting that postwar Americans were either less certain of their judgment than European theatergoers, less demonstrative, or perhaps just more concerned about wasting time.

And then there is the other side of the story, the slightly gleeful and so perhaps also exaggerated accounts of the play's immediate popularity with prison audiences. In *Damned to Fame*, Beckett's biographer James Knowlson relates the 1954 incident in which Beckett received letters from the pastor and an inmate of a German prison near Wuppertal telling him the prisoner had translated *Waiting for Godot* into German and performed it for the inmates with prisoners as actors. According to both letters, the four hundred prisoners who had seen the play enjoyed it, understood it, and identified with it. "Your Godot was Our Godot," the prisoner wrote. "We are all waiting for Godot." In *The Theater of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin tells the better known story of the play's ready reception by fourteen hundred convicts at the San Quentin penitentiary in San Francisco in 1957. Again, the inmates reportedly enjoyed, understood, and identified with the play. As Esslin says, "what had bewildered the sophisticated audiences of Paris, London, and New York was immediately grasped by an audience of convicts."

I'll side with the convicts in this story, though after Beckett's Nobel Prize it doesn't take any courage to do so. *Waiting for Godot* is the clearest, most truthful play I know. The question isn't why prisoners understood that, or something like it; the question is why dedicated, sophisticated theater audiences, people who would happily attend a new play at a small theater by a largely unknown writer, did not.

For Esslin, the likely answer *is* their sophistication: unlike prisoners, theatergoers came to *Godot* loaded with educated expectations about what a play should be and do. *Godot* upset those expectations. To the members of an educated audience, the shock of *Godot* isn't that it departs from theatrical convention, but that it throws those conventions in their well-educated faces. For instance, *Waiting for Godot* actually follows the traditional dramatic unities: plausibly connected actions, a concentrated period of time, a single setting. But it follows the rules to flout their spirit, transforming dramatic conventions into what Adorno observed in *Endgame* as "decomposed elements in a post-mortem examination of tragedy." Traditional drama represents actions; *Godot* is about inaction, about waiting for an action that never comes. Time in *Godot* isn't concentrated so much as it is irrelevant, undifferentiated, one moment no different from another. The play takes place in a single setting, but a setting almost completely severed from any real-world referent, a place nowhere and everywhere. So *Waiting for Godot* follows the unity of action in a play without action, the unity of time in a play without time, and the unity of place in a play without place.

But *Waiting for Godot* didn't upset traditional drama, it just picked at its scabs. *Godot* was hardly the first play these educated theatergoers would have seen that subverted the classic unities, broke from the core Aristotelian notion of drama as the representation of action, or used dialogue interrupted by other characters and punctuated by silences (they could have learned all that from Chekhov). As for the prisoners, they even more than educated audiences must have come to the play with preconceived notions about what Esslin called "plot, development, characterization, suspense, or plain common sense"—notions that in the 1950s they could have learned better from mass culture than from high culture, from pulps and movies than from avant-garde Parisian theater.

Since later audiences seem to like Beckett's work well enough, maybe *Godot's* initial furies and flops were simply the fault of poor productions. The avant-garde thrives on angry mobs and stupid critics, so it rarely points the finger at itself—for instance, at the

inexperience of both the Paris director of *Godot* and his consultant, Beckett himself. Or at the London director, Peter Bull, who admitted during rehearsals that he didn't understand the play. But with the possible exception of Miami, where *Godot* disappointed audiences expecting a play advertised as "the laugh sensation of two continents," production problems weren't severe enough to justify the confusion and hostility *Godot* provoked among experienced theatergoers and critics. In this case, it does seem to have been the script itself.



I wouldn't discount more obvious causes such as its vulgarity and repetition, but I think what really confused and angered educated audiences about *Waiting for Godot* was its neglect of long-standing and deeply important hierarchies between dramatic characters and their audiences. Both comedy and tragedy depend on these hierarchies. Comedy relies on its audience's sense of superiority to its characters, or more precisely to those among its characters (or its audience) who are excluded from its resolution. Tragedy schizophrenically demands an audience simultaneously inferior and superior to its protagonist: inferior, because the protagonist is better than us, a ruler or an uncommon commoner; but superior, because we know something he does not, the wincing smirk that is dramatic irony.

A tragicomedy in title and spirit, *Waiting for Godot* refuses to play by the rules of either of its generic parents. If you feel superior to Estragon and Vladimir, you have seriously misunderstood the play, and yourself. Just as obviously, none of the characters—even the possibly high-born Pozzo—come across as superior to us, and certainly not as the best of their kind.

What is most striking about this, and most disturbing, is the play's utter elimination of the basis of the tragic audience's traditional superiority over the characters, so-called dramatic irony. The best, and best-known, definition of dramatic irony is Wayne Booth's, from his 1977 *A Rhetoric of Irony*. As Booth explains it, the hallmarks of dramatic irony are superiority and certainty: author and audience

watch the characters make their mistakes “from above,” secure in their shared knowledge of the truth. In Booth’s example, no Greek could mistake the irony of Oedipus’s opening speech: “I, Oedipus, whom all men call great.” But in *Waiting for Godot*, there is no superiority, and there is certainly no certainty. Its audience is no more enlightened than its characters. We don’t know who Godot is, and neither does the author. As he put it, “If I knew, I would have said so in the play.”

The first theatrical audiences of *Godot* would have been comfortable with the tragic hero remaining in the dark, with, say, Oedipus not knowing he’s scouring his city to find himself. But they had to know that themselves. The audience of a tragedy has to know more than its hero in order to experience the cruel pleasure of dramatic irony, the certain knowledge that you’re doomed and I know it but you don’t. That, more than anything else, is what upset the play’s first, educated audiences: being forced to remain in uncertainty, with no better understanding of life than “That’s how it is on this bitch of an earth.” The convicts at Lüttringhausen and San Quentin were clearly comfortable with that—perhaps because they had daily evidence that Pozzo was right, but perhaps also because they didn’t need to feel they knew more than Beckett’s characters. The increasingly favorable reception of *Godot* after its first productions suggests that theatergoers have since become more comfortable with ignorance, a comfort learned partly from Beckett.



Many people, of course, continue to respond to *Waiting for Godot* as if it allowed for dramatic irony, contentedly watching its characters from above. You will know them by this mark: they are the people who know, and will tell you for a certainty, who Godot is. Others, less certain, have seen in the play a new kind of irony, a rough beast slouching its way toward the postmodern. In 1960, Ward Hooker argued in the *Kenyon Review* that audiences of *Godot* experience an unsettling transformation from ironic, knowing laughter at its characters to a “sickening doubt” that “spreads from the addled

minds of Vladimir and Estragon to engulf the audience," a phenomenon Hooker called "irony in a vacuum." In the next decade, Wayne Booth named the spreading plague "unstable irony." Today, it is probably best known as "blank irony," the name given it by Fredric Jameson in his influential study of postmodernism.

Unstable or blank, this new irony completely hid its author's position, preventing the reader from reconstructing its hidden meaning. The only certainty in unstable irony is that the surface meaning must be rejected, and this accounts for the "sickening doubt" Hooker mentions. For Booth, Beckett was the most extreme example of unstable irony of his time, what Booth calls infinite instability, the sense that the universe is fundamentally meaningless. In irony like Beckett's, says Booth, the only stability is, ironically, an "extremely stable commitment" to instability.

Booth thinks Beckett's stable commitment to instability traps him in an inconsistency. But Beckett is only inconsistent if we assume, as Booth has, that he is being ironic. If there is no irony in *Waiting for Godot*, if Beckett is in fact sharing everything he knows—if he's being sincere—then we don't have to reject the play's surface meaning, and we don't have to choose a new meaning (that there is no meaning) that would be inconsistent with it. Beckett might of course be wrong about the meaninglessness of human experience, which I think is Booth's real complaint, but he is not inconsistent.

The problem with reading irony into *Waiting for Godot*, stable or unstable, is that it assumes the existence of another meaning behind and superior to the surface meaning. Stable irony assumes an accessible truth behind appearances; unstable irony assumes an inaccessible truth behind appearances. Both reject appearances for essences, a religious longing that resurrects the very hierarchies that *Waiting for Godot* rejects. In the many productions of Beckett's plays with which he assisted, he insisted time and time again to actors and directors that what mattered were the words on the page, their sounds and rhythms. Just as insistently, he discouraged questions about what the words meant, the symbolic meaning, of Godot or

anything else. In Beckett's plays, the phenomenon is all there is. To insist on anything else is to install a noumenal world in which neither he nor his plays believed.



Beckett shared that disbelief with the existentialists, and it is one of several compelling reasons for calling *Waiting for Godot* an existentialist play. In Beckett's insistence on the literal meanings of his plays and no more, and in the plays' own insistence on the concrete, the *muck*, we can see existentialism's insistence on the phenomenological. Vladimir and Estragon's repeated exchanges about their physical ailments, Estragon's sore foot and Vladimir's swollen prostrate, suggest Sartre's nausea, the inescapable taste of our facticity. Existentialism's denial of a preexisting narrative that would give meaning to life is thematically evident in Godot's failure to arrive and formally evident in the play's rejection of familiar dramatic hierarchies. Most important, the disturbing absence of dramatic irony offers a clear theatrical equivalent of the primary existential dilemma, the denial of recourse to any external authority. These formal equivalences bear out Martin Esslin's argument that the plays of Beckett and his contemporaries better expressed existentialist philosophy than Sartre's or Camus's own plays, because unlike their *formally* traditional plays, the Theater of the Absurd created a form as well as a content equal to existentialist philosophy.

Beckett was never close with Sartre or Simone de Beauvoir, but he knew them both in prewar Paris. He read and admired *Nausea* in 1938, the year of its publication. And he published his first post-war story, "Suite," in Sartre's journal *Les Temps modernes*. I don't know if Beckett read *Being and Nothingness* before writing *Waiting for Godot*, but it is certainly possible, even likely: he read a great deal of philosophy, and took detailed notes when he did (the pre-Socratics, Descartes, Kant, and especially Schopenhauer, a lifelong favorite). To my knowledge, the only explicit comment Beckett made on existentialism was in conversation with his official biographer, James Knowlson, in the last decade of his life. Reportedly, Beckett

told Knowlson that "he found the actual limitations on man's freedom of action (his genes, his upbringing, his social circumstances) far more compelling than the theoretical freedom on which Sartre had laid so much stress." Beckett is apparently talking about the Sartre of the 1950s, not the later, more Marxist Sartre of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, with whom he might have had more in common. But in any case, in Beckett's mind he and Sartre diverged on the crucial question of freedom.

In many ways *Waiting for Godot* does depict the existentialist condition, though it is probably more accurate to say that it depicts the conditions that gave rise to the existentialist condition: hardly surprising, since both grew in the soil of the Occupation. Most fundamentally, it is an existentialist play in the sense that it depicts humanity as stripped of all *a priori* explanations of being, and therefore suffering from angst and despair. In this post-World War II wasteland, Godot never speaks, never offers even the enigmatic answer of Eliot's divinely obscure "DA." Godot never even comes. But although *Waiting for Godot* shares the existential dilemma, it is not existentialist, because it doesn't share the hope that Sartre found in the wreckage, the freedom of humans to find their own explanations and create their own identities.

Early in act 1, Vladimir tells Estragon the dimly remembered story of the two thieves crucified alongside Christ, one saved and the other damned. For St. Augustine, Luke's story is about the wonder and the uncertainty of God's grace: "Do not despair," says Augustine, "one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of them was damned." To an existentialist like Sartre, that's nonsense: the thief chose to be a thief, and that is why he is hanging on a cross. Just as important, there is no mysterious force like grace deciding in advance that some are saved and some are damned.

But what does the story mean to Vladimir and Estragon? Not much. It is just another story to pass the time. Estragon barely cares enough to listen, and Vladimir is more interested in why only one of the evangelists tells the story than in why one thief was saved and the other damned. Characteristically, what appealed to Beckett about

Augustine's famous explanation was its style, the shape of Augustine's sentence. "I take no sides," he said of it. "I am interested in the shape of ideas." The story itself has no ethical relevance to the lives of his characters. Vladimir and Estragon don't have Augustine's faith that there is meaning behind the apparently random events of life, but they also don't share Sartre's conviction that they can themselves decide that meaning. So all they do is suffer, and play games to fill the void.

Waiting for Godot doesn't show humans controlling time, freely shaping their own destiny. It shows humans enduring time—what we're like when we've got nothing left *but* time. Which is to say, all the time. "I can't go on like this," says Estragon in the play's last few minutes. "That's what you think," says Vladimir. For Sartre, existence precedes essence. For Beckett, "The essential doesn't change." And there is, as Vladimir says, "Nothing you can do about it."

Beginning with Martin Esslin, a long line of critics and teachers have attempted to defuse Vladimir's bombshell by suggesting that *Godot* is an existentialist critique: that he and Estragon are, like Sartre's café waiter, behaving in bad faith, avoiding both the possibility and the responsibility of their freedom. But the problem with reading *Waiting for Godot* as a critique or satire of its characters, existentialist or otherwise, is that it makes the audience once again superior to the characters. It makes the play depend on what it doggedly rejects: dramatic irony. Ironically, if *Waiting for Godot* did endorse an existentialist ethics, that would give its audience recourse to a preexisting narrative: exactly what both the play and existentialist philosophy reject.



In both France and America, *Waiting for Godot* became associated early in its life with existentialism, a relationship long entrenched by the cover copy of the play's only American edition. It is a legitimate match if we remember what Grove Press has helped us forget, Eric Bentley's caveat that *Godot* is existentialist "in the popular, and most relevant, sense of the term." But the absence of

existentialist freedom in the play is a serious and ultimately definitive difference. *Godot* is existentialism without a way out, which is to say that it is not existentialist at all, as nonexistentialist as it is non- every other -ism. Hugh Kenner said it briefest and best: "After years of familiarity with his work, I find no sign that it has ambitions to enunciate a philosophy of life."

Why, then, have we insisted on calling *Godot* an existentialist play? In a recent essay, Marjorie Perloff provides an excellent general answer in her discussion of the tendency to ascribe universal themes to *Waiting for Godot*. According to Perloff, postwar French critics read Beckett's work as being about the "human condition" to avoid its painful, embarrassingly particular roots in collaborationist France. Anglo-American critics like Bentley and Esslin readily absorbed this reading, which came with the bonus of giving a decidedly foreign play a theme to which everyone—that is, other Anglo-Americans—could relate.

The desire to universalize Beckett could explain why his first French critics associated his work with a philosophy of existence. But I doubt that Anglo-American criticism could have absorbed the French critics Perloff cites in time to explain Bentley's 1956 review, or that calling a French play existentialist would make it seem any less French to Americans. In North America, *Waiting for Godot* became an existentialist play partly because it displayed obvious similarities with the popular understanding of existentialism, and partly because in the 1950s calling a play existentialist made it, its reviewer, and its audience feel smart and sexy, much like calling a play post-modern in the 1980s made all concerned feel smart and sexy. Mostly, though, *Godot* became the existentialist *Godot* because existentialism lent authority to its despair, a kind of scholarly footnote to "That's how it is on this bitch of an earth." For more informed audiences, invoking existentialism carried the additional benefit of alleviating the play's despair by suggesting what *Waiting for Godot* itself does not: that there's anything we can do about it.

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