

Class Discussion: Waiting for Godot

1. Traditional well-made play vs. the experimental theater of the absurd.

Whatever else you say about this play, one thing is indisputable. This is a really weird, unusual play! Seeing it 50 years later, it still seems really uncanny, very other. It creates the kind of lasting impression that defines most great literature. But it also defies all our expectations for what a play is supposed to do, what drama is supposed to do.

| Traditional Drama | Theater of the Absurd |
|---|---|
| <p>A story with a clearly defined beginning, middle and end. Linear progression; Freytag's Pyramid: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beginning: Thebes is suffering and Oedipus is trying to save it. Middle: he searches diligently for the truth that will save it. End: He discovers the truth, and Thebes is saved. Freytag's pyramid describes the unfolding of the action. | <p>Story seems meaningless or absurd. Progression is circular rather than linear.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two characters arrive to stand around waiting for Godot? Godot never comes. They keep waiting. Act II repeats the same action as ACT I. The play ends in the middle; the characters are still waiting. |
| <p>Well defined characters, clear motivations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeing him in action allows us to see that Oedipus is kingly, a man of power and accomplishment. He's kindhearted but rash in his temper, intelligent but irreverent. He's powerful and determined to use his power to save Thebes, regardless of the personal costs. | <p>Character motivation is unclear; actions and dialogue may seem nonsensical or surreal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Didi and Gogo are nobodies, two bums. Why should Godot care about them? Why should we care about them? They're trying to save themselves, but why? They don't do anything "meaningful" while they're waiting except talk. They seem like clowns. Their talk is mostly "blather" that doesn't lead to anything. |
| <p>Plot with causal sequence of events. We can reflect on why things are happening, what the causes and implications are.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plot is usually considered the central focus of dramatic art. It's the most contrived thing about drama. Life is not a plot. But in a traditional play, like Oedipus, there's a clear <i>casual sequence</i> of events, a plot, as in any well-made play. Because "A" happens, "B" happens, which causes "C" to happen... Although you might not see it coming around the bend, the central conflict leads a train of events as inevitable as a railroad track leading straight to a climax and resolution. That's a good plot. | <p>There's no causal sequence to observe. Things happen without clear causes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why are these characters waiting for Godot? Why do they continue to wait? Why don't they learn from their experiences? Who are Pozzo and Lucky and why do they appear? Where are they going? What effect did their encounter have? |
| <p>The message in a bottle. We expect the traditional play to provide us with the key to its meaning, the solution to the problem, the moral of the story.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oedipus: Character determines fate. | <p>Meaning is subjective and ambiguous.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Godot: ? We're left wondering exactly what the writer intended it all to mean. We have to supply the meaning ourselves. |

Why have these artists, Beckett chief among them, turned away from the traditional drama?

- Traditional drama doesn't reflect the world as they see it. Neatly tied-up resolutions are impossible in our modern world. The world as they see it is an incoherent place—they observe it but barely comprehend it and sometimes despair of its apparent meaninglessness. The theater of the absurd is a kind of a nervous breakdown, if you will. There's nothing out there. It's sometimes referred to as nihilistic—it believes in nothing. But if you observe closely, I think you might find Beckett is more existential than nihilist—meaning may not be “out there” but it very definitely is “in here.” The existentialist recognizes the meaninglessness but declares it the responsibility of every human being to make our own meanings—to *create meaning*.
- Traditional drama reflects a world view composed of a rational, well-ordered universe, a comforting system of beliefs (faith in something, someone), a stable scale of values, an ethical system in working condition. These artists have an entirely different world view. Their world is marked by chaos instead of order. The universe is void—nothing to believe in but nothingness, which holds expresses or demands no inherent values, no inherently humane or moral ethical code. There are just people existing, being only for themselves, and sometimes by themselves.

Waiting for Godot, like a lot of theater of the absurd, rejects traditional conventions:

- **Life is not a plot**—that's too contrived, too artificial; life is composed of a series of sometimes connected, sometimes isolated moments, images, exchanges, situations that don't necessarily lead anywhere
- **People aren't heroic**; they're often absurd, which can be tragic and comic (tragicomedy)
- **Carefully crafted dialogue and “meaningful” speeches are too contrived**; language isn't the wonderful tool we think it is: it can be the source of all our most damaging illusions; and most of the time, we either use it carelessly to say nothing at all or we use it to oppress one another in some way. Only rarely does language help us arrive at truth—and at those times, we are usually frightened away. (Near the end of the play, Didi tries to articulate some kind of truth, but in the end he pulls back—“What have I said?”)

Just like poetry can sometimes be dramatic, drama can sometimes be poetic. The art of the theater of the absurd in particular aims for a kind of drama that functions very much like poetry, revealing images rather than telling stories. You will probably remember certain images from this play for a long time:

- Lucky on the rope, with his bags, and Pozzo treating him like a beast.
- Pozzo's absurd pompous arrogance.
- Didi and Gogo's absurd waiting, their clownish behavior, their friendship
- Didi and Gogo saying at the end of each act. “Let's go,” and then not moving anywhere...

It's not that these images aren't meaningful; it's that they're ambiguous, and we have to supply the meaning ourselves, which is really true of all literature, isn't it? It's just more obvious.

So like a lot of good poetry, *Waiting for Godot* is very ambiguous. Because it is so abstract, it invites viewers to find their own meaning, pursue their own interpretations.

It's a kind of abstract expressionism for the theater. Beckett has tried to strip away all outer contexts, everything external that might help you situate the action and the characters, anything that might give the play an obvious, intended "meaning." The meaning of this play is what you choose to make of it. Beckett gives you a shape to work with, that's all.

The shape of a place (set). What is this place? A country road, a tree. It could be anywhere. Does it seem "realistic"? Do you need it to be realistic? Does the setting in the film feel like an imaginary world or the real world? Why? How would the play seem different if the set were designed to evoke a specific setting? Say, a bombed out neighborhood in London after WWII, or a contemporary urban street—a deserted lot next to a row of abandoned houses? What if Gogo and Didi were two old men in a suburban park? How does the "Beckett on Film" set color your understanding of the play? Was it anything like you imagined when you read the play?

Sound. Did you miss hearing a music soundtrack? What's the effect of watching a film with no musical soundtrack?

- Silences stand out more emphatically
- Silence becomes part of the play's theme
- Silence seems to take on a character of its own—an intolerable void, a nothingness the characters desperately try to fill with their chatter.
- Although the characters battle the silence, they sometimes fail, and the audience experiences it again and again, which is Beckett's intention, it seems

Lighting. The one lighting effect—day turns rapidly to night. What's the effect of this rapid change?

- Surreal, dreamlike effect amplifies the theme of uncertain time
- Night seems caused by Godot's absence, his failure to arrive as promised

Plot. Very nontraditional. The movement is circular and symmetrical rather than linear and progressive. The second act parallels the first.

- Is the second act a progression in a subtle way? Is it mere repetition, or is something else revealed?
- The dilemma intensifies in Act II: the characters have a harder time passing the time; Gogo is more desperate to leave; Pozzo is more helpless; things are a little more absurd. There's more absurd rhetoric and more absurd clowning than in the first act.
- There's a kind of climactic crescendo in Pozzo's parting speech and another in Didi's brief speech just before Godot's messenger arrives for the second time. (p.103, 104)

Theme. Interpret the meaning of the play individually.