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## UNIT 5 THEMES AND ISSUES-II

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### 5.0. OBJECTIVES

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Continuing our discussion from Unit 4 we will be focussing on more technical aspects of the play. We will also touch up *Godot's* contribution to modern theatre.

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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You are by now familiar with the new ground *Waiting for Godot* broke in the history of theatre and the reasons why it is rightly called an *avant garde* play. We shall further continue our discussion on *Godot* by taking up aspects such as:

1. *Godot* and the Theme of Time
2. *Godot* as a Christian Play
3. *Godot* and the Use of Language
4. Language and Theatricality
5. *Godot* and Theatricality and
6. Contribution of *Godot* to Theatre and Drama

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### 5.2 GODOT AND THE THEME OF TIME

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Relating the theme of 'waiting' to time in *Godot*, Eric Bentley states:

The subject of the play is not *Godot* but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. Throughout our

lives we always wait for something, and *Godot* simply represents the objective of our waiting--an event, a thing, a person, death. Moreover, it is the act of waiting that we experience the flow of *time* in its purest, most evident form. If we are active, we tend to forget the passage of time, we *pass* the time, but if we are merely passively waiting, we are confronted with the action of time itself . . . The flow of time confronts us with the basic problem of being--the problem of the nature of self, which being subject to constant change in time, is in constant flux and therefore ever outside our grasp . . .

Being subject to this process of time flowing through us and changing us in doing so, we are, at no single moment in our lives, identical with ourselves. . . . It is significant that the Boy who acts as go-between in *Godot* fails to recognize the pair from day to day.

Similarly, when Pozzo and Lucky first appear, neither Vladimir nor Estragon seems to recognize them; Estragon even takes Pozzo for *Godot*. But after they have gone, Vladimir comments that they have changed since their last appearance. In the second Act, Pozzo and Lucky are cruelly deformed by the action of time. Waiting is thus to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is in itself an illusion. The ceaseless activity of time is self-defeating, purposeless, and therefore null and void. The more things change, the more they are the same. That is a terrible stability of the world. One day is like another, and when we die we might never have existed. As Pozzo exclaims in his great outburst:

Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time? . . . One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day: one day he went dumb. . . one day we are born, one day we'll die, the same day, the same second. . . .

Still Vladimir and Estragon live in hope: they wait for *Godot*, whose coming will bring the flow of time to a stop. In the French version Beckett wrote: "Tonight perhaps we shall sleep in his place, in the warmth, dry, our bellies full, on the straw. It is worth waiting for that, is it not?" This passage, omitted in the English version, clearly suggests the peace, the rest from waiting, the sense of having arrived in a haven, that *Godot* represents to the two tramps.

Alvarez relates time to memory and functioning of the memory. Frequent forgetfulness brings about the invalidity of time--as is borne out by Vladimir and Estragon's uncertainty about the time, place and human beings. Boredom hangs over every word and Estragon's constant forgetfulness is answered by Vladimir's "Try and remember." One goes through life, its boredom and pain by force of habit - "the great deadener," - absurdly and hoping for an elusive rescue.

Ruby Cohn compares the effect of time on the two pairs, Vladimir-Estragon and Pozzo-Lucky, who represent antithetical attitudes to infinity--wait and wander respectively. *Waiting for Godot*, or nothingness or infinity, Vladimir and Estragon are ageless with only the haziest past and a hazier future, tied to *Godot*. Ignorant of *Godot*, Pozzo and Lucky live in time. Pozzo's watch tells hours and years, but Pozzo loses his watch, and considers his heart a poor substitute, changed and changeless, each couple lives by its own compulsions.

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### 5.3 *GODOT AS A CHRISTIAN PLAY*

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Many commentators have interpreted *Godot* as a religious parable, although Beckett himself disclaimed it saying, "If by *Godot* I had meant God, I would have said God, not *Godot*." As for the presence of Christian elements in his works he maintains, "Christianity is a mythology with which I am familiar, so I naturally use it." Beckett

is interested in mythologies for their own sake, without any commitment to them whatsoever. Speaking in a characteristic Beckettian manner, he stated: "I'm not interested in any system. I can't see any trace of any system anywhere."

Beckett, according to Fletchers, is the complete agnostic. He is simply not interested in whether the Christian Church is telling fairy stories or not. Beckett is essentially interested in probing into the state of man in this Universe. Even were God to exist he would make no difference, maintained Beckett. He (God himself) would be as lonely, and as enslaved and isolated and ridiculous as man is, in a cold, silent, indifferent universe.

But, "trust the tale and not the teller" goes the saying. Critics would like to judge the play on its own merits, rather than on the basis of what its author says about it. Those commentators who have viewed *Godot* as Beckett's reaction to his Roman Catholic background consider Vladimir and Estragon as representatives of the fallen state of humanity faithfully awaiting the arrival of an elusive God who promises salvation but never arrives. Despite their inability to thoroughly explain *Godot*, most critics agree that the play's religious associations enliven and enrich its sense of fluidity and ambiguity.

As Beckett himself has admitted the fundamental imagery of *Godot* is drawn from Christian mythology. There are numerous references to the Bible, Christ/God, to the "two thieves" and the four Evangelists (pp.11, 13), as also to certain Christian beliefs, as you will see from the list.

1. Suppose we repented "Our being born" (p.4)
2. I must have taken a look at it [The Bible] (p.12).
3. Estragon has all his life compared himself to Christ" (p.12).
4. Pozzo is "made" in "God's image" (p. 23).
- 5: References to Adam, Abel and Cain, p.83, etc.

The protagonists have come from nowhere in particular and have nowhere in particular to go. Their life is a state of apparently fruitless expectation. Their attitude towards *Godot* is one partly of hope, partly of fear. The orthodoxy of this symbolism, from a Christian point of view, is obvious. The tramps with their rags and their misery as already stated, represent the fallen state of man. The squalor of their surroundings, their lack of a "stake in the world," represent the idea that here in this world we can build no abiding city. The ambiguity of their attitude towards *Godot*, their mingled hope and fear, the doubtful tone of the boy's messages, represents the state of tension and uncertainty in which the average Christian must live in this world, avoiding presumption, and also avoiding despair.

Finally, the tree, as has already been explained in some detail in Unit 3, can variously symbolize death, the crucifixion, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and when it puts on green leaves, the Tree of Life.

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## 5.4 GODOT AND USE OF LANGUAGE

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You would recall that in Unit 1 we pointed out the inability of language to be an effective means of communication in modern times. Besides, we also brought into focus how this "breakdown of language" successfully conforms to the "absurdity of life" as is portrayed in *Godot*. Ironically, the writer must use language itself to be able to show its inadequacy as a medium of communication. That is why we said that Lucky's speech which on surface is a mere barrage of words and appears illogical does have a logic of its own.

During the course of the play you have noticed that the tramps lapse into silences, or into monologues; besides, there are often pauses, too. All these further reinforce the idea of the inability of language to communicate effectively. If 'silences' connote difficulty in expressing one's thoughts, leading to withdrawing within oneself, the monologues signify their inability to understand each other. That language fails both at the encoding and decoding levels, is to be further seen in the great deal of 'verbal repetition' and 'echoing' in the play. These theatrical devices, used by Beckett, also serve the dramatic purpose of emphasizing the existentialist situation of the two tramps, in which they are essentially lonely and cannot communicate with each other.

We have earlier also referred to the heightened use of language to communicate the emotional intensity in plays by Marlowe, Shakespeare, Webster, etc., and attempted in the present times by T.S. Eliot in his poetic drama. Beckett, however, inverts the conventional use of language. There is little imagery or figurative language in the speeches of the characters. You will find that much of the dialogue consists of studied banality and clichés interspersed with silences. Some of the examples of such usage have been pointed out in the annotations to the play and in the first Unit.

Also, there is a spectrum of usage ranging from the highly colloquial, including Irishisms, to the self-portraying formality (e.g. "All my life I've tried to put it from me), and "And I resumed the struggle," respectively, and again to mock-heroic formality "May one enquire where His Highness spent the night?" and "Your Worship wishes to assert his prerogatives?" (p.19).

With all this the dialogue comes to span the earthy and realistic at one end and the mysterious and disturbing at the other.

Esslin rightly observes that the disintegration of language is central in Beckett's drama, and there is a steady progression until in the later plays the audience is fortunate to be able to make anything out of what is said on stage. Niklaus Gessner points out ten different modes of disintegration of language in the play. They are misunderstandings, double entendre, monologues, dialogues, clichés, repetition, inability to find the right word, telegraphic style (loss of grammatical structure, communication by shortened commands, etc.) culminating in Lucky's speech. In his speech there is a complete breakdown of syntax. This reflects Beckett's inability to see "any trace of any system anywhere" ("I am not interested in any system. I can't see any trace of any system anywhere.") Such a lack of coherence, system, and 'structure' in language in the play, implicitly becomes a fitting vehicle to convey the playwright's sense of uncertainty, meaninglessness and absurdity in the universe surrounding us. As Eliopolus observes, "the essential purpose in relating the general breakdown of language is to demonstrate its relationship to one of the main themes in Beckett's plays - "where there is no certainty there can be no definite meanings."

#### 5.4.1 Language and Theatricality

Underscoring the complementarity between language and theatricality, Morris Freedman suggests that "language is far too straightforward an instrument to express the multiple complex and multi-dimensional aspects of reality. Reality can only be conveyed by being acted out in all its complexity. Hence it is the theatre which is the only instrument to express the bewildering complexity of the human condition."

What language, thus, fails to convey is sought to be communicated by effective use of techniques borrowed from various performing arts such as music, circus, music hall cross talk, vaudeville, stylized movements and gestures etc. Together they take on the role which language does not or cannot. Where one language has broken down, a new one has been devised to take its place.

Ostensibly, language may have lost its conventional role and communicability--as has been brought out by the foregoing discussion, yet, paradoxically the play makes its profoundest statements in truly evocative language - which exploits the traditional

stylistic devices like, metaphors, images, connotations, etc. "From the play of contradictory hypotheses down to the most gritty, concrete images of human functions, the words swirl about embracing all the nuances of existences." When Vladimir says, "one of the thieves was saved" or gives his name as "Adam," Beckett has, in one sweep, historicized and compressed millenia of human existence, something which language alone could have achieved.

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## 5.5 GODOT AND THEATRICALITY

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We have in Unit 1 hinted at the uncharacteristically bare stage in *Godot*, and how it forms the fitting backdrop to the meaningless existence of the protagonists. The empty stage is, thus, a device to magnify theatricality. The stage itself becomes a character undergoing a change as the play progresses. One can go to the extent of saying that the two protagonists (Estragon and Vladimir) do not undergo so much transformation as does the stage during the course of the play.

The emptiness of the stage, highlighted and filled by a mound and a bare tree, is further filled with words, actions, and images, such as the moon rising at the end of Act I; interestingly, the words themselves match the stage-setting in "emptiness."

During the course of the play the stage becomes an extension of the auditorium as does the auditorium become an extension of the stage. Besides, the tramps assume the role of audience vis-a-vis Pozzo-Lucky. What Beckett is doing is to consciously construct a "play within a play" in the form of Pozzo-Lucky episodes. The protagonists are 'entertained by the master slave pair and they find that they are having "charming evening." They thus assume the role of an audience, as also of critics.

In the middle of the first Act Pozzo-Lucky episode when Pozzo is speaking in his most histrionic manner, the two of them are aware of the spectacle they are enjoying:

Vladimir.	Charming evening we are having.
Estragon.	Unforgettable
Vladimir.	And it's not over
Estragon.	Apparently not
...	
Estragon.	It's awful.
Vladimir.	Worse than mime.
Estragon.	The circus.

Their remarks do not confine themselves to the Pozzo-Lucky performance but are also a pointed reference to the play itself which has incorporated elements from these performing arts.

The two protagonists thus, during the performance of Pozzo-Lucky, identify themselves with the audience, and alternate their roles as audience and characters. Beckett, according to June Schlueter, endows his tramps with a duality of which the audience is constantly aware - they are not only characters but also participants in theatre. The tramps' running commentary on the progress of the play reflects their awareness of the presence of an audience. Some of their comments reflect their consciousness of themselves in relation to the audience: upon Pozzo's and Lucky's second entrance, for example, Vladimir assures anyone who feels the play is dragging, "We were beginning to weaken. Now we're sure to see the evening out." And as we approach the end of the play, we are again comforted by Vladimir, who assures us. "It is very near the end of its repertory."

In the Second Act, the stage, more specially, becomes a microcosm of the Universe in which the two tramps are trapped. Such inward-pointing theatre metaphors are intensified when the two find themselves surrounded and realize there are no exits: "We are surrounded--There's no way out there. There! Not a soul in sight." The latter reference to the audience in the auditorium brings to mind the earlier references to the auditorium as a "Charnel house!" and "a bog" and the audience as "corposes" and "skeletons." So Beckett uses clown's jests for effect. Thus, throughout the performance of *Godot*, the spectator watches "from without": he finds no opportunity of identifying himself with the characters or projecting his own personality on to the play or living through their tragedy as if it were his own. And it is this very detachment which produces a catharsis in the audience. Since the spectator doesn't get emotionally involved in the play, he can enjoy the acting jests and admire the literary and artistic skill of the play very objectively.

You will observe that in *Waiting for Godot* the audience is never allowed to settle down. There is always "uncertainty" and questioning - be it "the tree," the 'shoe' or Pozzo himself. Their understanding is being questioned at every step. In all this questioning the tramps are compelling the audience to question the reality--to which they and the audience have together been a witness to. By extension, they question the very nature of existence--hence they are not sure whether they were here yesterday or day before. Particularly the shoe which earlier was very tight in the beginning of Act I, on Estragon's feet, is now too big for him. Has Estragon "dwindled" or the 'shoe' grown in size? Either way the reality is at stake: Pozzo doubling up to search for his watch in his fob, Estragon's trousers slipping down, Estragon going through the motion of civility giving precedence to Vladimir to commit suicide, are all farcical gestures which by their theatricality underline the absurdity of human life.

## 5.6 CONTRIBUTION OF *GODOT* TO THEATRE & DRAMA

Ruby Cohn in "Growing up? with *Godot*," maintains that *Waiting for Godot* is Beckett's most resonant play. After *Godot* it was theatrically viable to perform a deeply serious and playful play. After *Godot* plots could be minimal; expositions, expendable; characters, contradictory, settings, unlocalized; and dialogue, unpredictable. Blatant farce could jostle tragedy; obscenity could pun on the sacred. One actor could recite a ten-minute monologue, and other be mute, or the same actor could be both monologist and mute. Delicate verse lines could mourn the humanist tradition-like leaves, like ashes - while the stage showed the cruelty of that tradition - a charnel house! (p.23).

Beckett's unique contribution also lies in giving a new idea of drama which focussed on situation rather than on story and also on direct experience than indirect description. He is an innovative dramatist who does imaginative things with old ideas. Besides, Beckett while rejecting didacticism, strikes a universal note with his concept of impotence and its subsequent implications for morality, society, and communication. And finally, Beckett imaginatively creates situations which demonstrate rather than rhetoric which describe.

### 5.6.1 *Godot's* Appeal to Modern Times

Writing a bout the contemporaneous appeal of *Waiting for Godot* Enoch Brater writes:

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett succeeded in writing a lyrical play for an age that had almost nothing poetic to say for itself. The scene in which 'nothing happens, twice' was somehow not merely diagnostic, but prophetic: it was

suddenly mankind, not just any poor player, who was waiting for something to arrive which never comes. The lines echoed recent European history, but they also had at their core the substance of myth. Beckett was with the empyrean. *Godot*, in Alan Schneider's words was something more than a play. It had become, he wrote, 'a condition of life.'

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## 5.7 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit besides discussing the themes of time, *Godot* as a Christian play and Beckett's use of language, we have deliberated on *Godot* and theatricality to ascertain *Godot's* contribution to modern drama.

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## 5.8 SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY WITH CRITICAL COMMENTS

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Duckworth, Colin. *Angels of Darkness: Dramatic Effect in Samuel Beckett with Special Reference to Eugene Ionesco*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 153 pp. (1972).

Studies Beckett's plays and attempts to explain their effectiveness. Duckworth compares Beckett's plays to those of Ionesco because they frequently elicit similar kinds of response from empathic spectators. The author tries to discover and describe the function and effect of dramatic structures of these two dramatists as a form of inner exploration leading to deeper self-knowledge. The problems of dramatic impact and intensity are examined to find out how and why people react to performances, and to account for the degree and kind of tension created by plays written with a minimum of conscious control. Duckworth illustrates his theory through the results of a survey of audience reaction to performances of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* that he compiled in 1971.

Cohn, Ruby. *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1962.

Connects Beckett's use of the term tragicomedy with Sir Philip Sidney's mungrell "Tragy-Comedie" of his *Defense of Poesie*.

Duckworth, Colin. Ed. *Samuel Beckett: En attendant Godot Piece en deux actes*. Nelson, 1966.

A detailed analysis of the play dealing with its genesis, composition, structure and style, symbolism, characterization etc. Interestingly Duckworth views the structure of the play assimilating the conventional and the unorthodox elements. Duckworth makes a detailed study of the structure and attempts to show how the play achieves a rare quality of being both static and dynamic.

Eliopoulos, James. *Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Language*. The Hague and Paris: Mouton, pp. 131, (1975).

This concise description of Beckett's dramatic style is developed through three phases: (1) an examination of the rhetorical poetic elements (author, purpose, audience and occasion, method, medium, and subject matter); (2) a portrait of Beckett's literary development followed by an interpretation of the modern theatre movement; and (3) an analysis of Beckett's dramatic language from a structural

approach. In conclusion these stylistic qualities are assessed as they impose upon dramatic situation, ideas, and characters.

McCary, Judith D. and Ronald G. McCary. "Why Wait for *Godot*?" *Southern Quarterly* 14, no.2 (Jan): 109-15. (1976).

Studying the audience reaction to *Waiting for Godot*, demonstrates how Beckett forces the spectator to become an integral part of the play: "Beckett supplied the theme, waiting, and each spectator must wait, in his own way and on his own terms." The study analyzes various reactions to the play's premier performance and illustrates the effectiveness of the play in its lack of conventional dramatic structure by the play's performance at San Quentin Penitentiary in 1957.

Bair, Deirdre. *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*. London: Cape, 1978.

Exhaustive life history of Beckett, which received a controversial reception. While some thought it authoritative, others did not think so.

Esslin, Martin. *Theatre of the Absurd*. Re. & enlarged edition. 1961; Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1968.

Attempts to link Albert Camus' term "absurd" to the theatre of Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, Genet etc. Esslin accepts the philosophies of Sartre and Camus as the basis of *Godot*, but he is careful to indicate that the plays of these two dramatists are markedly different from Beckett's plays; the difference is in the form. The texture of *Waiting for Godot*, with all its dramatic irregularities mirrors its metaphysical basis. While the theatre of Sartre and Camus remains formally traditional.