

Who is Godot

In the 1950s, perhaps the most sensational question in literary world was about Godot's identity, the absent character in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In this play, a pair of tramps named Vladimir and Estragon wait for someone called Godot, whom they even do not know and who has even not promised to come. Meanwhile, Pozzo arrives and occupies the stage for sometime with his slave Lucky. The tramps initially take him to be Godot, though he repeatedly introduces himself as Pozzo.

When Colin Duckworth asked the author point-blank whether Pozzo was Godot, he replied: "*No. It is just implied in the text, but it's not true.*" Most of the early recipients took Godot for God, presented as a rather familiar figure by adding the suffix '-ot', just as Charlie Chaplin was mostly known as Charlot in France. In an interview in 1994, Beckett regretted calling the absent character 'Godot', because of all the theories involving God to which this had given rise. He told Ralph Richardson that if by Godot he had meant God, he would have written God and not Godot. This was little disappointing for Richardson, and also for a number of scholars who emphasized the Christian interpretation. We must keep in mind that the play was originally written in French as *En attendant Godot*; if Beckett wanted to relate it to religion he could have rather use '*dieu*', the French word for God, or a close sounding one. (The bilingual nature of Beckett's works should be kept in mind for a total comprehension of his worldview.)

There was a French play called *Attente de Dieu* by Simone Weil. In Beckett's play Godot is not defined as God, which makes the text even more complex. In Balzac's *Mercadet* (1851), an off-stage character called Godeau results in the protagonist's misfortune right through. Roger Blin, the director of the first production in Théâtre de Babylone in 1953, once asked the writer who or what Godot stood for. Beckett's reply was as problematic as his text, that he had derived the term Godot from the slang for boot in French, '*godillot*' or '*godasse*', because feet had such an important function in the play. This was his explanation often in future, too. Jokingly though, he once remarked that one of Estragon's feet was saved, just as one thief was saved during Crucifixion and one boy was spared from beating by Godot. There are more than ten words in French that sound similar to Godot. Chinmoy Guha suggests that god is also the French slang for the dildo used by lesbian women. A shocking example of the Anglo-French cultural conflict, it certainly problematizes any simplistic interpretation of the Beckettian text.

Unlike elsewhere in Beckett's work, no bicycle appears in this play. Nevertheless, Hugh Kenner reports in his essay "The Cartesian Centaur" that Beckett, when asked about the meaning of Godot, once mentioned "*a veteran racing cyclist ... Christian name elusive, surname Godeau, pronounced, of course, no differently from Godot.*" Beckett himself did wait for Godeau, outside the velodrome in Roubaix, though it is difficult to find a relation between track cycling and *Waiting for Godot*.

Critics like Vaclav Havel often attempted to relate Godot with politics. For some, Godot was communism. On the other hand, after the success of the Velvet Revolution and the overthrow of the Czechoslovak communist regime in 1989, the crowd shouted that Godot had arrived. Also, during the period of marital law in the early 1980s in Poland, waiting for Godot became a declaration of subversion against the establishment.

Whatever or whosoever Godot is, his function in the play is equally ambiguous. Borrowing the title of a novel by Beckett, we may call him 'L'Innommable' or 'The Unnamable'. In a word, Godot seems to be the transcendent Other for Vladimir and Estragon. He never appears on the stage, yet all the emotions of the two tramps – joy and sadness, hope and despair, cheer and fear – centre around him. He provides them with something to live for. It is the faith that Godot will come – tomorrow if not today – sustains them in an otherwise meaningless life and a futile universe where "*Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes.*" Estragon once remarks: "*We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression that we exist.*" In brief, their identity is utterly dependent on their waiting for Godot; whether he would come or not is relatively insignificant.

The ambiguity in Godot's identity and function invites endless interpretations, and that was what Beckett had actually intended. One of the last lines of his last play, *What Where*, is "*Make sense, who may.*" Precisely, that is the challenge for Beckettian criticism. On the other hand, the author spoke so little that the recipient always has the freedom to make his or her own interpretation. That is why *Waiting for Godot* could have become everyone's play, running with equal success in theatre halls and prison yards.