

Examine the symbolism in *Waiting for Godot* and how are they related to its theme.

Written by Samuel Beckett originally in French in 1948, the translated English version of *Waiting for Godot* was first enacted on stage in 1953. One of the masterpieces of the absurdist tradition, the play is infused with psychological, political and philosophical symbolism. The plot is outwardly quite simple, involving interactions between two friends Estragon and Vladimir as they both wait for another friend named Godot to arrive. Although Godot does not arrive during the course of the play, his anticipation sets up the context for the musings and conversations of Estragon and Vladimir. Author Samuel Beckett creatively exploits this open ended plot structure to ponder over important questions about the human condition. Given that it was published in the aftermath of the Holocaust, it asks deep and compelling questions of the state of human civilization and the nature of our species.

Such utterances from the two lead characters as “to hold the terrible silence at bay”, “Nothing to be done”, “We are saved!”, etc offer profound interpretive scope for the reflective reader. (Beckett, 1956) The most ostensible symbolisms in the play pertain to the existentialist philosophical framework. The first quote alludes to the acute existential crisis shadowing the period after the Second World War. Written as it was in the aftermath of the most devastating war in history, Beckett’s preoccupations with the purpose of human life and how best to go about fulfilling it are in tune with the concerns and sentiments of the time. In this, the play is full of symbolisms of existence and its opposite state death – a pattern found in the works of other post-war intellectuals such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. *Waiting for Godot* is a product of the author’s affectations during the war and hence contains in it psychological and philosophical questions treated in the existentialist framework. It is for this reason that notions such as ‘death’, ‘nothingness’ and momentary crises of human existence are all symbolically expressed.

The play can also be read with theological symbolisms in mind, especially that of the Christian doctrine. The choice of the name Godot (that contains ‘God’ in it) is perceived by critics to have religious connotations. This claim is vindicated by dialogues in the play that resonate with Christian concepts of salvation, rising from the dead, etc. For example, “We are saved!”, which is frequently uttered by Vladimir or Estragon can be taken as a reference to the notion of salvation. These two characters can also be seen as the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus Christ. Out of their boredom, every now and then Estragon and Vladimir contemplate committing suicide by hanging themselves from the only prominent tree in the setting. This is again a reference to the crucifixion, but albeit in a sense of parody. Vladimir’s casual remark to Estragon in Act I, “Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that?” is again a parody of a Christian proverb of the same rhyme – “Hope deferred makes the heart sick; but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.” (Beckett, 1956) Hence, the religious symbolism is quite strong, but the tone is one of mockery and not reverence. “*Waiting for Godot*” elaborates two biblical symbols in the play, which was pointed out by the playwright Samuel Beckett. The first biblical symbol is the symbolism of Pozzo. The character Pozzo symbolizes the biblical character Jesus Christ. The playwright took the slavery and the scene “way to cross” from the Bible and he included in the play. The second symbol symbolized by the playwright is the symbolism of Pozzo and Lucky. The lucky symbolizes the biblical character Abel and Pozzo symbolizes the character Cain. Here Samuel Beckett took the slavery of Abel and the murder scene of Abel then he compares to the character Pozzo and Lucky.

The tree, near which Estragon and Vladimir meet, is completely bare of leaves at the beginning of the play. It represents the only organic element in the setting, and it is dead or dormant. This tree portrays the world as barren and lifeless, emphasizing the lack of purpose and meaning the characters must contend with. The apparent growth of leaves on the tree in Act 2 does nothing to ease the sense of meaninglessness; it only adds to the characters' uncertainty about the place and the passage of time. The staging is telling in this regard: despite Vladimir's description of the tree as "covered with leaves," the stage directions specify only "four or five" leaves, leaving it mostly barren. Some point out that the cross on which Christ was crucified is sometimes called a tree. Vladimir and Estragon do discuss the tree and hanging themselves in Act 1 shortly after talking about the two thieves crucified along with Christ. This could support the interpretation that hanging from the tree draws a parallel between them and the thieves. Beckett, however, said he was puzzled by people trying to take away "a broader, loftier meaning" from the play, making it unlikely that he intended any broader religious symbolism.

Ontological questions are focused upon in the play, with the author giving special treatment to the concept of time, which links this work to another path-breaking existentialist thesis, namely that of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. For example, the deliberate similarity between the first and second acts in the play and elements of repetition seen in them is symbolic of the rhythmic and periodic nature of human existence, with each passing day a mirror of the day gone by and so forth.

Because the play has so few props, the props that do appear onstage take on an exaggerated significance. As one example, Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky, and Pozzo all wear hats and at times seem oddly preoccupied with them. Lucky, for instance, needs his hat to think, and stops his long monologue once his hat is knocked off. In act two Estragon and Vladimir exchange their hats and Lucky's hat back and forth, trying different ones on. Given the importance of these hats to their individual owners, this scene can be seen as representing the fluidity and instability of individual identities in the play. As Pozzo and Lucky don't remember having already seen Vladimir and Estragon in act two, Vladimir begins to wonder whether the Pozzo and Lucky of act two are the same as those of act one. Estragon, for one, does not recognize them, and calls Pozzo Abel. Estragon can't even remember his own past, and at one point tells Pozzo that his name is Adam. Moreover, it is not clear whether the young boy in each act is one boy or two different ones. The boy also calls Vladimir Mr. Albert, which may or may not actually be Vladimir's name. With all of this ambiguity and instability regarding people's identities, the scene of the hat exchange playfully represents an exchange of identities, as Vladimir and Estragon wear different combinations of hats. They ultimately return to wearing their own hats, but it is uncertain whether they (or other characters) are being themselves throughout the play, or if they even have stable selves they can be.

Many of the names in Beckett's play can be seen as having hidden meanings. The most important example is Godot, whose name evokes similarity to God for many readers. Along this reading, Godot symbolizes the salvation that religion promises, but which never comes (just as Godot never actually comes to Vladimir and Estragon). But the similarity between "Godot" and "God" could also be a game Beckett is playing with his audience and readers, a kind of red herring that actually imparts no important information. This would be in line with other character names: Estragon means "tarragon" in French, for example, while Pozzo is Italian for a water well, but these meanings hold little to no significance for those characters. And Lucky's name is

anything but fitting, as he is the character who unluckily suffers the most onstage. In the end, Beckett's character names suggest the possibility of meaning but fail to deliver on this promise, just as Godot promises to save Vladimir and Estragon but never shows up. As further examples of the nihilist worldview that pervades *Waiting for Godot*, the play's character names may be significant precisely for being insignificant, meaningful in that they mean nothing.

Lucky never puts down the items he carries, except when it is necessary to fulfill one of Pozzo's orders. Then he immediately picks them up again, even when he has not been told to do so and there is no purpose in it. This action echoes the human tendency of enslavement to burdens, holding onto them even when doing so is unnecessary. The baggage Lucky carries seems to consist mostly of items for Pozzo's comfort. In Act 2, however, one of the bags, which is never opened in Act 1, is revealed to contain only sand. Other than his hat, none of what Lucky carries is for himself and may not even be useful. Yet he takes it up again and again—another example of a character "deadened" by habit, fulfilling the task mindlessly and without purpose.

Pozzo's rope is the only rope that physically appears in the play, and it represents the balance of power in the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky. In Act 1, Pozzo dominates Lucky with a rope half the length of the stage: "Pozzo drives Lucky by means of a rope passed around his neck," and Lucky is often the recipient of Pozzo's whip. Yet Lucky accepts this balance of power without question, as if he cannot envision any other state for himself. By Act 2, however, the rope is shortened, and the balance of power in Pozzo and Lucky's relationship is less clear. Pozzo, now blind, depends on Lucky for direction, and Lucky, still slavish, depends psychologically on Pozzo. By extension, there are a number of figurative ropes in the play. Vladimir and Estragon, like Pozzo and Lucky, are similarly tied to each other in a relationship based on domination and submission. The pair is also tied to Godot and the dominating belief that his arrival will provide a meaning for their lives. Vladimir and Estragon also entertain the idea of hanging themselves with a rope. While suicide is never a real option, its discussion provides the pair a diversion from the act of waiting for Godot. The rope here becomes a symbol of submission to an illogical belief.

Beckett famously refused to interpret *Waiting for Godot*, letting his writing speak for itself. "No symbols where none intended"—the last line of Beckett's novel *Watt*—is often read as a warning against assigning symbolic meaning to objects in his writing. This doesn't mean that no symbolism was intended, only that audiences should be careful about assigning meanings not supported by words and actions in the play.