

**Samuel Beckett**  
**Waiting For Godot**

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École Normale Supérieure

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# Preamble

## Objectives

"In fact, people do not read; or, if they do read, then they do not understand; or, if they do understand, then they forget.' This remarkably sums up the situation, don't you think<sup>1</sup>?"

Before beginning to write anything, and even before beginning to read the book, I would like to be precise about my purpose in writing this short essay.

There is no doubt that many books have already been published about SAMUEL BECKETT's *Waiting for Godot*, in various languages. I obviously do not intend to be as complete or precise as they are, and I may even not read them – except for biographical information – since my main purpose is to try to have a personal reading of the book, and not to do a synthesis of what has already been written.

I tend to believe that 'research' in literature consists more in trying to bring original ideas (when possible) than in starting at the point where the previous research ended (as in science).

My ideas might thus not be so scholarly, or not so new, or not so fascinating, but at least they will be mine.

## Calendar

Since the final project is to be presented orally in the end, it seems useless to make a small oral presentation about each of its parts. Maybe we could, after checking together that everything is going well about the contents, discuss more about the grammar, vocabulary, or spelling mistakes that I will certainly have done.

5th February 2003	Project agreement and calendar presentation.
12th February 2003	Short interview about the project plan (contents, parts, etc.).
19th February 2003	First paper (First part : 'A dark vision of the human condition...').
12th March 2003	Second paper about Samuel Beckett (biography).
26th March 2003	Third paper (Second part : '... and only friendship makes it bearable').
9th April 2003	Global overview (introduction, conclusion) and correction of the last few mistakes.
16 April 2003	Presentation of the final project.

<sup>1</sup>Amélie NOTHOMB, *Hygiène de l'assassin*, Albin Michel, 1992 (my translation).

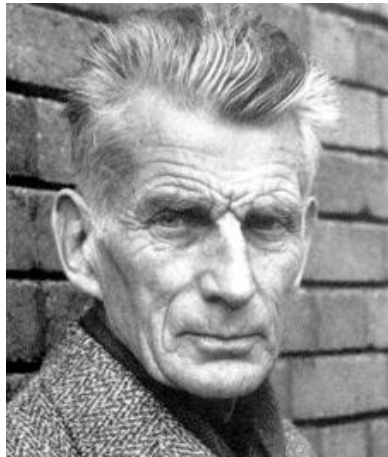
*Nota bene :*

- The final project could be published on a website as well, if it is suitable for that.
- The final project may, eventually, be longer than five pages...

## References

All references and page numbers are taken from Faber and Faber's paperback edition. Each quotation will be followed by a footnote specifying the number of the page it was taken from.

# Samuel Beckett (1906 – 1989)



A lot of ideas about Samuel Beckett have changed since James Knowlson (one of Beckett's friends) published his biography<sup>2</sup>. While Beckett was believed to be quite an ascetic writer, isolating himself from the outer world like a philosopher, it appears that his work is very much linked to his Irish childhood.

People may not realize how immediately autobiographical Samuel Beckett's works are.

## I Irish Childhood (1906 – 1927)

Samuel Barclay Beckett was born in Dublin on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1906, in a fairly rich Protestant family. His father, Bill Beckett, was a real estate adviser. Samuel didn't feel so much love towards his mother (who was very depressive), and this might partly explain why, later, he was more attracted to French than to his mother language.

During his studies in Trinity College he had a very good relationship with a French teacher, Thomas Brown, and there began a real love for French. Samuel thus used to spend all his summer holidays in France.

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<sup>2</sup>See bibliography.



## II First journey to France (1928 – 1933))

Samuel, as a brilliant student, became "lecteur" at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, in 1928, and wrote his first poems (*Whoroscope*).

When he went back to Dublin in 1930 as a teacher in Trinity College, Samuel had to bear a suffocating atmosphere and he strongly argued with his mother about the women he was used to seeing. He quit his job, and went back to the continent, living of odd jobs in France and in Germany.

When his few odd jobs eventually finished, Samuel went back home, in Ireland.

## III From his father's death to exile (1933 – 1938)

In 1933 when Hitler took power, Beckett was in Dublin. This was the beginning of a very hard period with Beckett's mental breakdown. His great love Peggy died from tuberculosis that year, and soon Beckett's father had a massive heart attack (in 1937), which totally overwhelmed him.

His mother sent him to London for a psychoanalysis, during which he wrote his first novel *More Pricks than Kicks*. Some think that part of Beckett's style appeared at that time : a lot of his plays contain soliloquies, the narrator of which is lying down in the dark, helplessly searching for his own personality.

1936 : Beckett travelled through Europe, and in Germany in particular. He learned German, visited museums, and was astonished by the atmosphere imposed by Hitler's mode.

Samuel went back Paris and settled on the "rive gauche", meeting a lot of artists, including Giacometti who was going to sculpt for him a tree for *Waiting for Godot*. His next novel, *Murphy*, was written in English but translated in French by himself.

Beckett set permanently in Paris with Suzanne Deschevaux-Dusmesnil, who became his life companion (and wife, though not until 1961). Beckett would say "we are a couple of single people"<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>My translation.

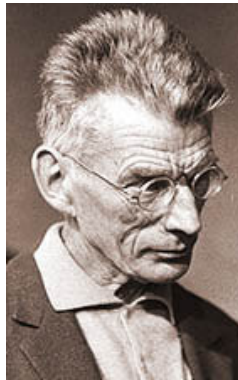
## IV War and resistance (1939 – 1945)

Temporarily in Ireland in summer 1939, Beckett went back to France saying : "I prefer war in France than peace in Ireland<sup>4</sup>", and joined the resistance with Suzanne. Later they were forced to flee when their cell was betrayed and took refuge in Roussillon, in the south of France (Vaucluse), where Beckett worked on a farm in exchange for room and board. However, he immediately went back to Paris in 1945.

## V From the Liberation to *Godot*

Samuel Beckett then wrote half a dozen of books between 1946 and 1949, in French (*Mercier and Camier*, *First Love*, *Molloy*, *Malone dies*, *The Unnamable* and *Eleutheria*, his first play, which he would not allow to be published during his lifetime).

In 1948–49, he also wrote *Waiting for Godot*. Its production in Paris in January 1953, by the director and actor Roger Blin (with whom Beckett would develop a lifelong friendship), brought the artist his first real public success both in and outside France. Others were to come...



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<sup>4</sup>My translation.

# Waiting for Godot

# Introduction

Samuel Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* without, obviously, hoping anybody to interpret it fully. He even pretended not to understand it himself, as he says in one of his letters to Michel Polac :

I don't have any ideas about theater. I don't know anything about it. I don't go and see plays. It is allowable.

What is not so allowable is, first, in these condtions, to write a play, and then, having done that, not to have any ideas about it either.

Unfortunately, it is my case<sup>1</sup>.

He thus left a lot of what we could call "deceptive tracks" here and there. Among these are, we believe, the characters' names (including "Godot" or "Lucky"), or all the absurd dialogues that are probably here to prevent us from realizing what is really going on.

My purpose is not to study Samuel Beckett's style, proper to all his work. It is not either to try to give a concrete meaning to what hasn't : stylistic figures, meaningless (at least apparently) and nonsensical dialogues, mysterious names, that I believe were introduced by Beckett (consciously or not) to hide everything that lies behind. The purpose is indeed to try not to follow these deceptive tracks, but to find the ones (if there are any) that lead to concrete things, dates, places, ideas. If such tracks exist, then we might be able to begin discussing about the real problems this play rises.

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel BECKETT, Lettre à Michel Polac, January 1952 (my translation).

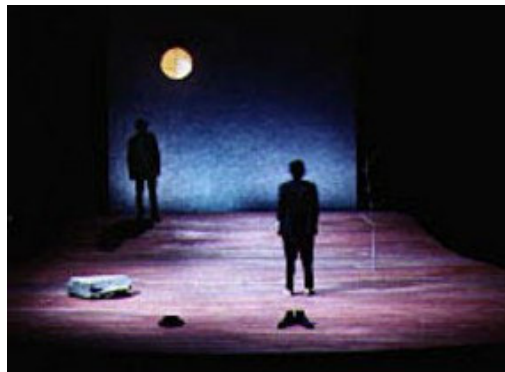
# Chapter 1

## A dark vision of the human condition...

### I Background : Not so much abstraction

Alain Satgé (see Bibliography), along with many other authors, believes *Waiting for Godot* to take place in an undetermined world. This road in the countryside is supposed to be a kind of anonymous place ; anywhere, nowhere.

Even if the environment of the play indeed appears quite abstract the first time, is it really so intemporal ?



#### I.1 A dated and localized play

There are, in fact, several clues in the play that can let us guess its time and place (with quite a good precision indeed). At the very beginning, Vladimir recalls :

**Vladimir**

We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Page 2.

which indicates that the play takes place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the "million years ago" is obviously not to be taken seriously since Vladimir doesn't need to say what century he is talking about).

In our quest for time and space, Vladimir not only helps us about time :

**Vladimir**

Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first<sup>2</sup>.

which seems to indicate that the two characters are somewhere in France. As if it was not enough, Vladimir tells Estragon :

**Vladimir**

But you were there yourself, in the Macon country<sup>3</sup>.

and refers to Roussillon, a small town in "Vaucluse". Things are getting more and more precise, since Beckett himself was a farm hand in Vaucluse when he found shelter there in 1942. Beckett thus mentions (intentionally or not) a very precise period of history : the French occupation. Another clue is given by Estragon :

**Estragon**

We'll go to the Pyrénées<sup>4</sup>.

letting us recall that "Ariège" was another place where Beckett went to when he was escaping from Nazism. These indications allow us to determine the possible background of the play: the south of France in World War II.

At that time, during the German occupation, French people lived in poverty. In particular, it was very hard to get enough food for everybody (food tickets were given according to social level). This appears as well in the play when Vladimir stingily gives carrots and turnips to Estragon :

**Vladimir**

Make this carrot last, that's the end of them<sup>5</sup>.



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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>Page 53.

<sup>4</sup>Page 74.

<sup>5</sup>Page 12.

The lack of food is even more visible when Estragon timidly asks Pozzo whether he can have his chicken's bones :

**Estragon**

Er... you've finished with the... er... you don't need the... er... bones, Sir<sup>6</sup> ?

Further on, Lucky gives us a long speech without any punctuation<sup>7</sup> about people's health and weight. A. Satgé considers it as scientific untruth, but this indeed corresponds to the physical condition of the concentration camps' survivors. At that time, people were actually getting thinner.

## I.2 An allusion to the holocaust or the class struggle ?

### Class struggle ?

One could see many of the situations in the play as a reference to the class struggle. Seen from this point of view, the characters easily become symbols : Pozzo would be an owner, Vladimir and Estragon would be proletarians and Lucky an intellectual.



Vladimir dreams about Godot in a passage that, strangely, doesn't appear in the English version of the play :

**Vladimir**

Tonight, we might sleep on straw in his home, warm, dry and full<sup>8</sup>.

Vladimir's dream is to be comfortable : they don't even have straw to sleep on.

Although we know very little about Godot himself, he does seem to have a high social situation : the boy who works for him as a goatherd confesses that Godot maltreats his brother :

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<sup>6</sup>Page 19.

<sup>7</sup>Pages 36–38.

<sup>8</sup>My translation.

**Vladimir**

He doesn't beat you ?

**Boy**

No Sir, not me.

**Vladimir**

Whom does he beat ?

**Boy**

He beats my brother, Sir<sup>9</sup>.

Pozzo beats Lucky exactly the way the boy's brother is beaten by Godot (Vladimir and Estragon even believe, at first sight, that Pozzo is the Godot they have been waiting for<sup>10</sup>). The relationship between them is the same as between a slave and his master : Pozzo uses a whip and gives Lucky orders such as "Back !", "Stop !" or even "Up, pig<sup>11</sup> !". Lucky obeys like a dog, and also takes the whip between his teeth.

**Pozzo**

I am bringing him to the fair, where I hope to get a good price for him. The truth is you can't drive such creatures away. The best thing would be to kill them.  
*Lucky weeps*<sup>12</sup>.

This even suggests that there were markets where to buy slaves, in France, at that time (the French version of the play mentions a name for this market "Saint-Sauveur").



**Pozzo**

Let us not speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its predecessors.  
(*Pause.*) Let us not speak well of it either. (*Pause.*) Let us not speak of it at all<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>Page 44.

<sup>10</sup>Page 15.

<sup>12</sup>Pages 24–25.

<sup>13</sup>Pages 25–26.

Isn't it logical to hear this from somebody who can eat his fill ?

According to this kind of interpretation, the characters would thus be the reflection of a communist ideology, *to which Samuel Beckett never adhered*. That is why one would rather see in the play an allusion to the holocaust.

## Holocaust

Between the two acts, Estragon gets beaten by a group of people :

**Estragon**

You couldn't have stopped them.

**Vladimir**

Why not ?

**Estragon**

There was ten of them<sup>14</sup>.

This – possible – allusion to a pogrom is only the first of a long list of clues about war. Later in the second act, when Estragon remembers talking about boots (another interesting difference between the French and the English version is that Beckett removed this idea of boots to replace it with "nothing in particular") :

**Estragon**

That's been going on now for half a century<sup>15</sup>.

and, indeed, wars had followed one after the other for half a century, in Europe.



**Estragon**

The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.

**Vladimir**

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<sup>14</sup>Page 50.

<sup>15</sup>Page 58.

What other ? (*Pause.*) What other ?

**Estragon**

Like billions of others<sup>16</sup>.

Is this, again, once again, an allusion to extermination camps ? Moreover, Vladimir and Estragon speak about "dead voices" who "all speak at once" : "They talk about their lives<sup>17</sup>".

**Vladimir**

Where are all these corpses from ?

**Estragon**

These skeletons.

**Vladimir**

Tell me that.

**Estragon**

True.

**Vladimir**

We must have thought a little.

**Estragon**

At the very beginning.

**Vladimir**

A charnel-house ! A charnel-house !

**Estragon**

You don't have to look<sup>18</sup>.

Isn't it precisely what most people did, at that time : not to look ?

## Conclusion

This historical and political reading of the play matches Beckett's friends' testimonies. James Knowlson recalls : "I know how much war had struck him, his friends' disappearing, camps. Without this war, he would never have written Molloy, *Godot*...".

*Waiting for Godot* is thus not as intemporal as lots of authors think : it takes place at the end of World War II, in the south of France.

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<sup>16</sup>Page 53.

<sup>17</sup>Page 54.

<sup>18</sup>Pages 55–56.

## II Human condition after the Shoah

The second act begins with Vladimir's song about a dog : after stealing a crust of bread, it is beaten up until it dies, and the other dogs make a tomb for it with its story carved on it. Maybe we could take this little song as an image for the harshness of existence and men's wickedness ?

### II.1 Existence of torturers

#### If Pozzo is not an owner, he is a torturer

When Pozzo first appears, the stage directions specify "Pozzo advances threateningly", and Pozzo goes on :

**Pozzo**

You are human beings none the less. (*He puts on his glasses.*) As far as one can see. (*He takes off his glasses.*) Of the same species as myself. (*He bursts into an enormous laugh.*) Of the same species as Pozzo ! Made in God's image<sup>1</sup> !

This is a very clear example of Pozzo's vanity : he believes himself to be a very special being, a kind of superman to whom the Earth belongs, and who regrets that "The road is free to all."

**Pozzo**

Good. Is everybody ready ? Is everybody looking at me ? (*He looks at Lucky, jerks the rope. Lucky raises his head.*) Will you look at me, pig ! (*Lucky looks at him.*) Good<sup>2</sup>.

He wants to be the center of the world, just like a king. But he is a cruel king :

**Pozzo**

A moment ago you were calling me Sir, in fear and trembling. Now you're asking me questions. No good will come of this<sup>3</sup> !

He begins to be threatening when he feels that people doubt about his supremacy. He is a cynical superman, and also monstrous : he even complains and cries because his slave is not as docile as he used to be :

**Pozzo**

(*sobbing*) He used to be so kind<sup>4</sup>...

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<sup>1</sup>Page 15.

<sup>2</sup>Page 23.

<sup>3</sup>Page 22.

<sup>4</sup>Page 27.

### Lucky is the slave

Pozzo first introduces Lucky in quite a laudatory way : "Guess who taught me all these beautiful things<sup>5</sup>", but describes him as a "knook". What would that be ? The clown ? The slave ?... The intellectual ? The latter would be the only one capable of letting somebody open to thought and beauty. But Pozzo only uses Lucky to make him do circus tricks that could make Vladimir and Estragon laugh.

The intellectual's only role would then be to play the buffoon. Is Beckett thinking over his own situation or is it clear-mindedness towards the society in which he was living ?



Then comes Lucky's very long speech, the parody of an academic and scientific seminar. Lucky uses words of quite a sophisticated level of language, gives references to a lot of scholars. But he loses all chances to make his speech look serious by repeating syllables and his soliloquy becomes completely ridiculous, letting the audience believe he has grown senile. The final *mêlée* finishes a scene that ridicules scientific thoughts.

In the second act, Pozzo has become blind. Everything should then have changed, but Lucky keeps serving his master, like a good dog, while he could very well be free. Is it attraction to servitude ? Spinelessness ? It doesn't give, anyway, such a good image of the intellectual.

**Pozzo**

But he is dumb.

**Vladimir**

Dumb !

**Pozzo**

Dumb. He can't even groan<sup>6</sup>.

Doesn't the intellectual have anything to say ?...

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<sup>5</sup>Page 26.

<sup>6</sup>Page 82.

## II.2 Social disease ; metaphysical disease

Vladimir replies to Estragon with pessimism :

**Estragon**

What'll we do ! What'll we do !

**Vladimir**

There's nothing we can do<sup>7</sup>.

and Estragon does seem to agree :

**Vladimir**

What about trying them.

**Estragon**

I've tried everything<sup>8</sup>.

For these two characters, life doesn't have any purpose other than to wait. Waiting for something, waiting for somebody who never comes and who happens to be called "Godot". "We're waiting for Godot", they say this sentence many times in the play, as a reason not to go. Only waiting can give sense to existence ; but the only thing that one waits for, and that will come undoubtedly, is death.

The waiting is not necessarily sad (Beckett had a Protestant education), but his characters are held by some kind of curse. Pozzo says "this bitch of an earth" and Estragon : "my lousy life" or "muckheap". At the end of the first act, Vladimir and Estragon are arguing about knowing or not Pozzo and Lucky : on "this bitch of an earth"<sup>9</sup>, people pretend not to know each other. It is the image of the hate that people have towards each other in this existence that is only a "muckheap".

In the passage with one of the boys, the word "timidly" appears three times on a single page<sup>10</sup>: in this world, everybody is afraid of everybody.



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<sup>7</sup>Page 60.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>Page 31.

<sup>10</sup>Page 42.

Even when when Pozzo depends on Vladimir and Estragon because of his blindness ("Pity ! Pity !"), he doesn't get any better than the day before : his blindness prevents him from beating Lucky, but he tells Estragon and Vladimir how to do it in his place. Misfortune only made him weaker, but didn't make him any nicer.

However, when Estragon finally insults Pozzo, the master becomes very timid. It is easy to become the slave after having been the master, and the more one was used to giving orders, the more easily one will obey<sup>11</sup>. Victims easily become torturers and *vice versa*.

**Vladimir**

You mean we have him at our mercy ?

**Estragon**

Yes.

**Vladimir**

And that we should subordinate our good offices to certain conditions<sup>12</sup> ?

Life would thus only be a set of relationships where strength predominates, where the weak are ready to take their revenge as soon as the strong decline. The wheel turns, but things don't change.

**Vladimir**

Let us make the most of it, before it is too late<sup>13</sup> !

Vladimir is as cynical as Pozzo is. Vladimir and Estragon even participate when Pozzo hits Lucky. They claim to be men. But are those men any better than beasts ?

## Conclusion

**Pozzo**

They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more<sup>14</sup>.

Vladimir gives an echo to Pozzo's words two pages further ; all of them have the same pessimistic vision of life : couples give birth to beings condemned to die. We could believe this is taken from one of the most pessimistic philosophies ever<sup>15</sup>...

**Vladimir**

I can't go on<sup>16</sup> !

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<sup>11</sup> André Malraux used to wonder how to fight against fascism without oneself becoming fascist...

<sup>12</sup> Pages 70–71.

<sup>13</sup> Page 72.

<sup>14</sup> Page 82.

<sup>15</sup> Chateaubriand, for instance ("From the cradle to the grave...").

<sup>16</sup> Page 83.

which is the very expression of living despair. Are they all totally desperate ?

However, when reading Pozzo's long speech about night and day<sup>17</sup>, can't we feel the characters do love living, after all, no matter how horrible this life is ?



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<sup>17</sup>Page 30–31.

## Chapter 2

# ... and only friendship makes it bearable

In the middle of the first act, Pozzo is smoking and talking with Vladimir and Estragon:

**Pozzo**

He speaks to me again ! If this goes on much longer we'll soon be old friends. [...] The more people I meet the happier I become<sup>1</sup>.

It seems than even the torturers need company and have a heart. Man is a loving being despite his potential atrocities. However, wouldn't this very need for company be even more atrocity and selfishness ?

**Pozzo**

From the meanest creature one departs wiser, richer, more conscious of one's blessings<sup>2</sup>.

Is it only to better enjoy his own happiness ? The relationship between Pozzo (the master) and Lucky (the slave) is, again, very interesting. The master-slave relationship according to Aristotle (a part of slave in the master and *vice versa*) makes the master prisoner of the slavery he creates, and therefore makes him depend on the slave.

## I Vladimir and Estragon : love or friendship ?

At the beginning of the second act, there is a kind of domestic fight between Vladimir and Estragon :

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<sup>1</sup>Page 22.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

**Vladimir**

Come here till I embrace you.

**Estragon**

Don't touch me !

**Vladimir**

Do you want me to go away<sup>3</sup> ?

where Vladimir shows his affection ("Come here till I embrace you."), his concern ("Did they beat you ?") and jealousy ("Where did you spend the night ?"), whereas Estragon's behavior is ambiguous and contradictory ("Don't touch me ! Don't question me ! Don't speak to me ! Stay with me !"<sup>4</sup>). Aren't they really like an old couple ? The problem of the nature of their relationship is thus risen : is it homosexual love or simply friendship ? Both of these feelings can be felt in a stage direction appearing on the same page : "*They suddenly embrace [love], clapping each other on the back [friendship]*".

**Estragon**

I heard you singing.

**Vladimir**

That's right, I remember.

**Estragon**

That finished me. I said to myself, he's all alone, he thinks I'm gone forever, and he sings<sup>5</sup>.

Estragon is hurt, but he was the one who had decided to go away. When Vladimir says "I don't count<sup>6</sup>." and Estragon : "That's where we'll go for our honeymoon<sup>7</sup>.", isn't there a feeling that, in their relationship, "hand in hand<sup>8</sup>", there is more love than friendship ?

## I.1 The "neither-nor" theme

**Vladimir**

I missed you... and at the same time I was happy. Isn't that a queer thing<sup>9</sup> ?

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<sup>3</sup>Page 49.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Page 50.

<sup>6</sup>Page 2.

<sup>7</sup>Page 4.

<sup>8</sup>Page 2.

<sup>9</sup>Page 50.

At the beginning of the first act<sup>10</sup>, one can begin to feel the kind of relationship that exists between Estragon and Vladimir, and a theme that we could call "Neither with you, nor without you"<sup>11</sup>.

Until that point when Vladimir goes out then comes back, Estragon was the one making reproaches, but then it is Vladimir who becomes sulky, and Estragon has to beg him to be friendly again : this is a kind of sadomasochistic relationship where the two characters exchange their roles periodically, until the reconciliation :

**Estragon**

Give me your hand. (*Vladimir half turns*) Embrace me !

and then :

**Estragon**

What about hanging ourselves ?

**Vladimir**

Hmm. It'd give us an erection !

**Estragon** (*Highly excited.*)

An erection<sup>12</sup> !

Later on, one of Vladimir's cues, more brutal than usually ("Let him alone."), is followed by :

**Vladimir**

What's the matter with you ?

**Estragon**

I'm unhappy<sup>13</sup>.

which shows Estragon's over-sensitiveness : any of Vladimir's word or action has major consequences on Estragon.



<sup>10</sup>Pages 8–9, for example.

<sup>11</sup>About the "neither-nor" theme, an interesting movie is *La Femme d'à côté* by François TRUFFAUT.

<sup>12</sup>Page 9.

<sup>13</sup>Page 43.

Their friendship (or love) is absolutely necessary, even though encumbering :

**Estragon**

You see, you feel worse when I'm with you. I feel better alone too.

**Vladimir** (*Vexed.*)

Then why do you always come crawling back ?

**Estragon**

I don't know.

**Vladimir**

No, but I do. It's because you don't know how to defend yourself<sup>14</sup>.

Then, a few pages later, everything is repeated, but the only and terrible solution begins to appear :

**Estragon**

It'd be better if we parted.

**Vladimir**

You always say that, and you always come crawling back.

**Estragon**

The best thing would be to kill me, like the other<sup>15</sup>.

Away from each other, they are too vulnerable ; together, their living despair remains. As Estragon says, only death could be a solution to their dilemma.

## I.2 The role of Vladimir and the problem of solicitude

We have so far considered the two characters' relationship as mainly symmetric. However, Vladimir and Estragon are far from being interchangeable. Indeed, various situations in the play let Vladimir's nearly maternal solicitude appear. Thus, after Lucky has just kicked Estragon :

**Vladimir** (*To Estragon.*)

Show. (*Estragon shows his leg. To Pozzo, angrily.*) He's bleeding ! [...]

**Estragon** (*On one leg.*)

I'll never walk again !

**Vladimir** (*Tenderly.*)

I'll carry you<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup>Page 50.

<sup>15</sup>Page 53.

<sup>16</sup>Page 25.



Vladimir even sings a song to lull Estragon asleep ("Bye bye bye...") and the long stage directions describe how Vladimir takes off his coat (while it's very cold) and lays it on Estragon, who finally wakes up :

*(Vladimir runs to him, puts his arms around him.)*

**Vladimir**

There... there... Didi is there... don't be afraid...

**Estragon**

Ah !

**Vladimir**

There... there... it's all over<sup>17</sup>.

The roles in this couple are clearly defined : Estragon is the passive element, while Vladimir is the active one, like a father or an elder brother, or even a husband.

It is also interesting to notice that Estragon is the one who usually questions things (Vladimir : "Nothing is certain when you're about<sup>18</sup>." ) while Vladimir tries to let the couple live on stable basics. Estragon is like an adolescent, questioning everything.

Nevertheless, at the end of the first act, when they talk about leaving each other :

**Vladimir**

We can still part, if you think it would be better.

**Estragon**

No, it's not worth while now<sup>19</sup>.

Estragon, the feminine element of the couple, is the one who speaks last.

Finally :

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<sup>17</sup>Page 62.

<sup>18</sup>Page 7.

<sup>19</sup>Page 47.

**Vladimir**

Say, I am happy.

**Estragon**

I am happy.

**Vladimir**

So am I.

**Estragon**

So am I.

**Vladimir**

We are happy.

**Estragon**

We are happy. (*Silence.*) What do we do now, now that we are happy<sup>20</sup> ?

This passage, among others, could let us understand why Beckett called his play a "tragi-comedy", although the "comedy" part – as well as a kind of comic relief – probably only exists for the audience (since the characters themselves don't laugh so much !) because of distanciation ; here, isn't Estragon expressing a kind of pity towards Vladimir, who needs to feel himself indispensable ? Thus, maybe it is pity and compassion, more than solicitude, that link the two men. Estragon himself has pity of the very pity Vladimir feels for him. This reciprocity of feelings goes even beyond parental love, brotherly love, or homosexual love : like diamond, this relationship between two beings is certainly lasting, but it is fragile.

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<sup>20</sup>Page 51.

## II Meaning and function of the emotional relation

### II.1 Friendship as a protection

A first and obvious example can be found in the stage directions just before Pozzo arrives : "*Huddled together, shoulders hunched, cringing away from the menace, they wait*<sup>1</sup>.", and then again, ten pages later : "*Motionless, side by side, they wait*<sup>2</sup>."



While they are playing their little comedy in the middle of the second act (Vladimir plays Lucky, Estragon plays Pozzo), an imaginary danger approaches :

**Estragon**

They're coming there too !

**Vladimir**

We're surrounded ! [...] (*He takes Estragon by the arm and drags him towards the front*<sup>3</sup>.)

the couple is re-soldered to face danger ; Estragon asks Vladimir to forgive him and takes back his impulse for independence :

**Estragon**

I lost my head. Forgive me. It won't happen again. Tell me what to do<sup>4</sup>.

A couple mustn't split when facing danger. Then again :

**Vladimir**

Back to back like in the good old days ! (*They continue to look at each other for a moment, then resume their watch. Long silence.*) Do you see anything coming<sup>5</sup> ?

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<sup>1</sup>Page 14.

<sup>2</sup>Page 23.

<sup>3</sup>Page 66.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

Their friendship is always a union against adversity.  
Even Pozzo seems to agree :

**Pozzo**

I used to have wonderful sight – but are you friends ?

**Estragon** (*Laughing noisily.*)

He wants to know if we are friends !

**Vladimir**

No, he means friends of his<sup>6</sup>.

while he just became blind : friendship is the only thing that can help someone stop feeling lonely ; even Pozzo searches for friends.

## II.2 Protection against oneself

Friendship (or, at least, company) is a fence against suicide, and this appears at the end of each act (in fact, at the end of each day).

**Estragon** (*Looking at the tree.*)

Pity we haven't got a bit of rope<sup>7</sup>.

to which Vladimir answers :

**Vladimir**

How long have we been together all the time now<sup>8</sup> ?

Only the presence, the solicitude and the friendship of Vladimir still keep Estragon alive. And again, at the end of the second act :

**Estragon**

Why don't we hang ourselves<sup>9</sup> ?

Maybe Estragon gives up his idea of suicide only because he knows that Vladimir couldn't follow him.

**Estragon**

If we parted ? That might be better for us.

**Vladimir**

We'll hang ourselves tomorrow<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>Page 77.

<sup>7</sup>Page 46.

<sup>8</sup>Page 47.

<sup>9</sup>Page 86.

<sup>10</sup>Page 87.

Tomorrow, he will probably be saying the same thing. And friendship is the reason why their suicide is postponed again and again.

After all, doesn't their whole existence consist in postponing their suicide ? All through the play, they do nothing but search entertainment, nothing but fill the void. They find a lot of ways to fill the void, they speak a lot. But *what* they say is not as important as the *mere action of speaking*.

**Estragon**

There's no lack of void<sup>11</sup>.



They can't find anything better to do than to insult each other :

**Estragon**

That's the idea, let's abuse each other. [...] Now let's make it up<sup>12</sup>.

(another funny detail is that Beckett wrote real insults in the English version when he only writes "*They insult each other. Silence*"<sup>13</sup>. in the French one).

**Vladimir**

How time flies when one has fun<sup>14</sup> !

This game is not futile, it is tragic and desperate.

**Vladimir**

God have pity on me<sup>15</sup> !

This is common in Pascal's writings : futility meets tragedy, and futility is meant to be a relief for tragedy. However, when "divertissement" indeed means entertainment for the audience, it is merely waiting for the time to pass by filling the void for the two characters.

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<sup>11</sup>Page 57.

<sup>12</sup>Page 67.

<sup>13</sup>My translation.

<sup>14</sup>Page 68.

<sup>15</sup>Page 69.

## **Conclusion**

In this play, friendship is the help one gives to someone else. But it is also the best way to fight against the temptation of committing suicide. Man is an emotional being, and without this emotion, he is nothing.

# Conclusion

In the dialogue about the Shoah<sup>16</sup>, Vladimir speaks about dead voices. Estragon and Vladimir's cues are very short, which would be a way to mute the noise coming from all these dead voices.

**Vladimir**

Wer'e inexhaustible.

**Estragon**

It's so we won't think<sup>17</sup>.

It is so they can mute their fear. They are trying to forget, together, what they have seen, what they have lived. They want to act like ostriches, using their inexhaustible speech to hide what they cannot bear from themselves. How can one still live after all these horrors when one has been a witness, or maybe an actor? Friendship is the only thing they have left in a world where human rights don't exist any more. After the war, only friendship can give back a human appearance to the ghosts that have survived.

In another play by Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, the characters Hamm and Clov show us that when there is only solitude left, one has nothing to do but to die.

My reading of Samuel Beckett's play, even if it tries to draw some light upon several dark parts of the characters' personality, is somehow limited (since the time given to write it was quite short) and obviously doesn't explain everything. It doesn't rise any question about the place of *Waiting for Godot* in the theater of the absurd, about the comical situations in the play (movements, for instance), or about Beckett's style, which are probably part of the reasons why this play has been a great success over the years, and will probably remain so.

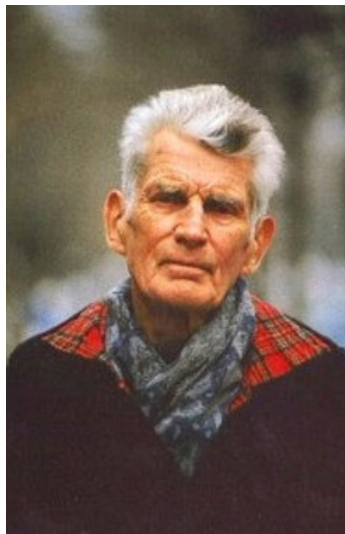
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<sup>16</sup>Pages 53–54.

<sup>17</sup>Page 53.



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