

## BECKETT, SAMUEL (1906-1989)

**Samuel Beckett: the imprint on his world.** Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) was an Irish novelist, poet, theater director, and commentator on the meaning of life, who left a deep mark on writing and thinking in English. He has been considered the last great master of Modernism, the greatest proponent of the so called Theater of the Absurd, and even one of the first of the Postmoderns. In other words a major literary figure at the crossroads of many of the artistic frontiers of his and our time.

**Samuel Beckett, school and study.** Samuel Beckett was born on Good Friday into a comfortable Dublin suburb. (His parents were devout members of the Anglican Church of Ireland.) His house, with its grounds and tennis court, gave the young Samuel a congenial venue for long walks with his father, as did the surrounding parks and roadways, which were green and inviting. His father was a surveyor, and in good relation with his son; there is little, in Beckett's childhood, to suggest the formation of a world class cynic and gallows humorist. He was educated first at a local playschool, then at Portora Royal School—where Oscar Wilde had also matriculated—and where Samuel began his serious career as an amateur cricketer. He was to become an outstanding player when he went up to Trinity College, Dublin, where he was a student from 1923-1927, and where he acquired the formal underpinnings of his linguistic genius. At Trinity he studied French, Italian, and English literatures and language, working under such luminaries as A.B. Luce the distinguished student of Bishop Berkeley's philosophy.

**Maturity and mature works.** Upon graduation from Trinity, Dublin, Beckett was invited to work as a teacher of English at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. He was to remain in that city for much of his life, with occasional forays around the continent and home to Ireland. One important factor in his prolonged French residence was his early acquaintance, in Paris, with James Joyce, another transplanted Irishman. Upon arrival in Paris, Beckett had met the older man, and become his private secretary, doing research for *Finnegans Wake*. From the start this relation had been the great literary inspiration of Beckett's life, although he was later to discover that his own genius lay in a direction opposite to Joyce's, in the direction of contraction and simplification of language, rather than of exuberant and erudite growth. Language play and daring joined the two men, as they constructed very different kinds of verbal universe. (Their bond was threatened when Joyce's daughter, who was passing into schizophrenia, made advances to Beckett; the latter withdrew, bruising many feelings.) Beckett, meanwhile, was embedding himself in French culture, starting to write and publish actively in French—which was to remain his first language for writing, throughout his life—and participating actively in the French Resistance against German occupation. (Beckett fought throughout the war, served the French with high honors, and was rewarded at war's end with the French Croix de Guerre.) By this stage, Beckett was coming into mastery of his own minimalist, gallows humor drama. Starting with *En Attendant Godot* (1953), *Waiting for Godot*, he wrote a series of dark dramas which attained immediate success both in Europe and the United States. *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Fin de Partie* (1957), (*Endgame*), deserve mention, among others. These plays faced human beings with the bleakness of themselves, of their histories and prospects, and with the looming meaningless of the universe. Human beings flocked to the theater, to hear this about themselves.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

*Waiting for Godot*, tr. Beckett, 2011.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Esslin, M., *The Theater of the Absurd*, 1969.

### **Further reading**

Ricks, Christopher, *Beckett's Dying Words*, 1995.

### **Original language reading**

Kamyabi Mask, A., *Les temps de l'attente*, 1999.

### **Suggested paper topics**

What seems to you, upon looking into it, to have been the major influence of James Joyce on Beckett? Did Beckett not write as a minimalist, while Joyce expanded his text to the limits of the world? Was the bond between the two men their common sense of language, or was it their view of the world?

Does Samuel Beckett belong in our French writers' syllabus? He did, after all, write a lot in English, and translate some of his own French work into English. Is his inclusion here owing to the special value of the work he did in his writing in French? Or, amazing possibility, did he come to write French better than English?

### **Excerpt**

[www.english-literature.uni-bayreuth.de/en/teaching/.../Sur-20c-read.do](http://www.english-literature.uni-bayreuth.de/en/teaching/.../Sur-20c-read.do)

*A country road. A tree. Evening.*

*Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again.*

*As before. Enter Vladimir.*

**ESTRAGON:**

*(giving up again).* Nothing to be done.

**VLADIMIR:**

*(advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart).* I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. *(He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon.)* So there you are again.

**ESTRAGON:**

Am I?

**VLADIMIR:**

I'm glad to see you back. I thought you were gone forever.

**ESTRAGON:**

Me too.

**VLADIMIR:**

Together again at last! We'll have to celebrate this. But how? *(He reflects.)* Get up till I embrace you.

**ESTRAGON:**

*(irritably).* Not now, not now.

**VLADIMIR:**

*(hurt, coldly).* May one inquire where His Highness spent the night?

**ESTRAGON:**

In a ditch.

**VLADIMIR:**

*(admiringly).* A ditch! Where?

**ESTRAGON:**

*(without gesture).* Over there.

**VLADIMIR:**

And they didn't beat you?

**ESTRAGON:**

Beat me? Certainly they beat me.

**VLADIMIR:**

The same lot as usual?

**ESTRAGON:**

The same? I don't know.

**VLADIMIR:**

When I think of it . . . all these years . . . but for me . . . where would you be . . . (*Decisively.*) You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it.

**ESTRAGON:**

And what of it?

**VLADIMIR:**

(*gloomily*). It's too much for one man. (*Pause. Cheerfully.*) On the other hand what's the good of losing heart now, that's what I say. We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties.

**ESTRAGON:**

Ah stop blathering and help me off with this bloody thing.