

## Irish Masterpiece



Samuel Beckett  
1906–1989



**READING 4** Evaluate how the structure and elements of drama change in the works of British dramatists across literary periods.

# from *Waiting for Godot*

Drama by Samuel Beckett

**BACKGROUND** Samuel Beckett led a rather unusual life. Irish by birth, Beckett settled in Paris. During World War II, he joined the French Resistance against the Nazis, who overran Paris. Eventually hiding out in the French countryside, he transmitted valuable information to the Allies and received two French medals for bravery when the war ended. Fame as a writer also came after the war, with plays like *Waiting for Godot*. In 1969, Beckett won the Nobel Prize in literature.

*Waiting for Godot* was inspired by Beckett's conversations with his wife while the two hid out during the long wait for World War II to end. The entire play takes place on a country road on which the only features are a low mound and a small tree. There, two somewhat clownish characters named Estragon and Vladimir wait on two consecutive evenings for the appearance of someone named Godot. Sometimes the two seem witty, sometimes witless; sometimes they talk philosophy, sometimes nonsense; and often they seem to forget why they are there and for whom they are waiting

**LITERARY ANALYSIS** *Waiting for Godot* was a landmark work in a postwar movement called **theater of the absurd**, drama that suggests the absurdity of the human condition by abandoning realism. In the following passage, you'll notice that traditional elements of drama are missing. The plot, for example, seems stagnant. Estragon and Vladimir are waiting and waiting and waiting; no other action takes place. Also, the dialogue between them is unconventional.

**DISCUSS** Notice Beckett's use of **repetition** in this scene: words, phrases, and entire lines are repeated. Also, note the use of **wordplay**, or verbal ambiguity, where Beckett plays with the various meanings of words. With a partner, discuss how Beckett's use of these two literary elements creates an overall feeling of absurdity and irrationality. What can you infer about Beckett's view of human existence?

### FROM ACT ONE

**Estragon.** Let's go.

**Vladimir.** We can't.

**Estragon.** Why not?

**Vladimir.** We're waiting for Godot.



**Estragon** (*despairingly*). Ah! (*pause*) You're sure it was here?

**Vladimir**. What?

**Estragon**. That we were to wait.

**Vladimir**. He said by the tree. (*They look at the tree.*) Do you see any others.

**Estragon**. What is it?

10 **Vladimir**. I don't know. A willow.

**Estragon**. Where are the leaves?

**Vladimir**. It must be dead.

**Estragon**. No more weeping.

**Vladimir**. Or perhaps it's not the season.

**Estragon**. Looks to me more like a bush.

**Vladimir**. A shrub.

**Estragon**. A bush.

**Vladimir**. A—. What are you insinuating? That we've come to the wrong place?

**Estragon**. He should be here.

20 **Vladimir**. He didn't say for sure he'd come.

**Estragon**. And if he doesn't come?

**Vladimir**. We'll come back tomorrow.

**Estragon**. And then the day after tomorrow.

**Vladimir**. Possibly.

**Estragon**. And so on.

**Vladimir**. The point is—

**Estragon**. Until he comes.

**Vladimir**. You're merciless.

**Estragon**. We came here yesterday.

30 **Vladimir**. Ah no, there you're mistaken.

**Estragon**. What did we do yesterday?

**Vladimir**. What did we do yesterday?

**Estragon**. Yes.

**Vladimir**. Why . . . (*angrily*) Nothing is certain when you're about.

**Estragon**. In my opinion we were here.