

Samuel Beckett Biography

Directions:

1. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark up the text with questions/comments
2. Answer the questions at the end of the text.

Samuel Barclay Beckett (possibly April 13, 1906 - December 22, 1989) was an absurdist Irish playwright, novelist and poet. Although Beckett insisted he was born on Good Friday, April 13 1906, his birth certificate puts the date a month later.

He studied French, Italian and English at Trinity College, Dublin from 1923 to 1927, and shortly thereafter took a teaching post in Paris. There he met James Joyce, who was to have a massive influence on him. In 1929 he published his first work, a critical essay defending Joyce's work. His first short story, "Assumption", was published the same year in the periodical *transition*, and in 1930 he won a small literary prize with his poem "Whoroscope", which largely concerns René Descartes, another major influence.

In 1930, he returned to Trinity College as a lecturer, but left after less than two years, and began to travel throughout Europe. He also spent time in London, publishing his critical study of Proust there in 1931. In 1936 he departed for extensive travels around Germany, during which time he filled several notebooks with lists of noteworthy artwork that he had seen, and also noted his distaste for the Nazi savagery which was then taking over the country. In 1937, he returned to Ireland briefly, but after a falling-out with his mother he decided to settle permanently in Paris. In December, when refusing the solicitations of a pimp, he was stabbed and nearly killed, and while recovering he met the woman who would be his lifelong companion, Suzanne Descheveaux-Dumesnil. In 1938 he published "Murphy" and the next year translated it into French.

He remained in France at the outbreak of World War II and following the 1940 occupation by Germany, Beckett joined the French Resistance, working as a courier. During the next two years, on several occasions he was almost caught by the Gestapo but in August of 1942 his unit was betrayed by a former Catholic priest and he and Suzanne fled south on foot to the safety of the small village of Roussillon, in the Vaucluse département on the Provence Alpes Cote d'Azur region.

Although Samuel Beckett rarely spoke about his war time activities, during the two years he stayed in Roussillon, he helped the Maquis sabotage the German army in the Vaucluse mountains. While in hiding, he began work on the novel *Watt* which he would complete in 1945.

Theatre of the Absurd is a designation for particular plays of absurdist fiction written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1950s, as well as one for the style of theatre which has evolved from their work. Their work expressed the belief that human existence has no meaning or purpose and therefore all communication breaks down. Logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and to its ultimate conclusion, silence.

Critic Martin Esslin coined the term in his 1960 essay "Theatre of the Absurd." The Absurd in these plays takes the form of man's reaction to a world apparently without meaning, and/or man as a puppet controlled or menaced by invisible outside forces. Though the term is applied to a wide range of plays, some characteristics coincide in many of the plays: broad comedy, mixed with horrific or tragic images; characters caught in hopeless situations forced to do repetitive or meaningless actions; dialogue full of clichés, wordplay, and nonsense; plots that are cyclical or absurdly expansive; either a parody or dismissal of realism and the concept of the "well-made play".

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1. How does information about Samuel Beckett's life relate to what you observed in *Waiting for Godot*? In other words, how did his life influence his work (minimum 8 sentences)?

