

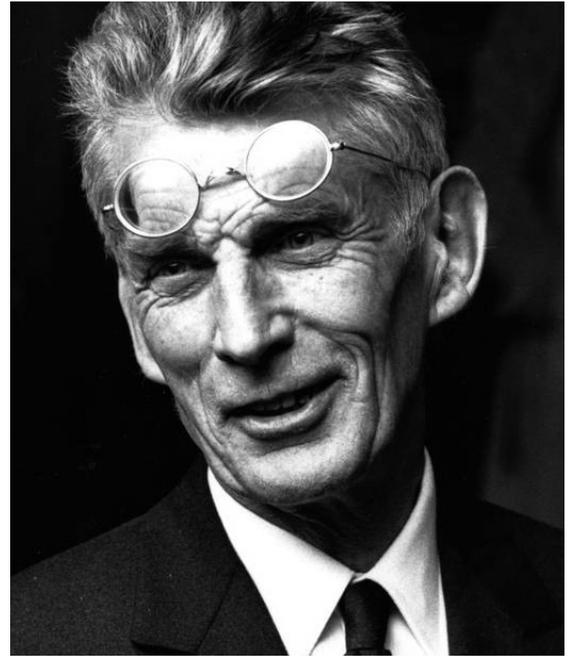
## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) is one of the giants of twentieth century literature. His plays, *Waiting for Godot* (1948), *Endgame* (1955), *Happy Days* (1961), and *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), reinvented theatre by pushing the limits of the medium. His drama lacks precise setting, has a minimal plot, and is inhabited by broken characters. The dialogue is often monosyllabic and terse. His plays don't tell a story as much as they are poetic and symbolic attempts to stage memory, time, life and death. His dramas are both disliked and worshipped, but they have entered the canon as modern masterpieces. And they are not without their humor, often slapstick and silly.<sup>1</sup>

A resident of Paris for most of his adult life, Beckett wrote in both English and French. Although painfully shy, he became an anti-Nazi activist while living in France. Like his mentor James Joyce, Beckett had profound ties with the Jewish people. Some sources suggest that as Irish writers in self-imposed exile, they both identified intellectually with Jews as people of the diaspora. Moreover the idea of "otherness" – a sense of apartness – was a motivating force in their work. In 1938, after Joyce's Jewish friend, Paul Leon was arrested in Paris and later murdered in Auschwitz, Beckett joined the French Resistance as a translator. He was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* and the *Médaille de la Résistance* by the French government for his efforts in fighting the German occupation during World War II.

The destruction and anxieties of the war had a significant influence on Beckett's work.

His name, like Kafka's, has entered everyday language as a term used to express a certain outlook of life. *Beckettian* refers to a world that appears to consist of pointless or misunderstood communication, that seems to lack purpose and direction, and yet, in the midst of despair, we survive, find inner strength, and continue to look for hope, albeit a form of salvation in which the awareness of the scale of the problem is already deeply embedded. There cannot be an easy fix to the horrors of the twentieth century. A *Beckettian* world is dark, but not unforgiving. And we see evidence of his writings in many aspects of popular culture, from *Seinfeld*, a show,



like *Waiting for Godot*, about nothing, to the often-cited last lines of *The Unnamable* (1949), "I can't go on. I'll go on." Part of the attraction of Beckett for readers lies in his use of minimalist language and forms. His works are symbolic, and because little action happens on stage or in text, everything becomes potentially significant. There is a great freedom of interpretation in Beckett. He never argues about why the world is the way it is, and he himself never attempted to explain the meaning of his works (...) Beckett did not, then, seek to provide definitive answers. Rather his works challenge our expectations: what do we do with a text that is open, free to us to read how we will, a work that is difficult both in its 'obscurity,' but also in its simplicity?<sup>2</sup>

Beckett is considered one of the last modernist writers, along with James Joyce, and also one of the key figures in the *Theatre of the Absurd*. The term was coined by the critic Martin Esslin to group Samuel Beckett together with Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter, whose writings responded to the challenges of living in the 20th century – in a world oftentimes filled with nonsense and devoid of meaning.

Beckett was awarded the 1969 Nobel Prize in Literature. He quickly gave the 30,000 pounds award away to the library of Trinity College Dublin, his alma mater.

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<sup>1</sup> and <sup>2</sup>: Kincaid, Andrew. Associate Professor of English, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.