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Lois Gordon. *Reading Godot*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.  
214p.

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A great work of art frequently lends itself to multiple interpretations and can be analyzed from a variety of perspectives. It seems to stand the test of time when it can be dissected and examined by contemporary and subsequent generations, and still yield something new. In such a work, there is often an underlying structure that includes relationships that are balanced and orderly, regardless of what appears on the surface. A masterpiece is also often successful in penetrating the soul of the observer in such a way that some type of transformation takes place, even if it is small. A person who experiences such art is often changed and/or illuminated in a positive way as a result of the encounter. Many would concur that Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, now about a half century old, is in this class of art.

Lois Gordon's *Reading Godot* provides further evidence that there is more to find in the play despite the fact that it has received critical attention from a variety of vantage points. She explains in the introduction that there "has been immeasurable assistance in explaining the work," but that there has not been enough analysis of "the psychological depths" (12) of Beckett's characters. She cites Beckett who writes of "the mess" that "invades our experience," and how "the task of the artist" is "to find a form that accommodates the mess" (12-13). Gordon says she seeks to unveil "this new form" and to show how Beckett works with "the mess in its internal and external manifestations" (13).

The book is divided into eight chapters, with an introduction, endnotes, a selected bibliography, and an index. There are also three pages of Beckett's diagrams and notes from the *Regiebuch* notebook, used in connection with the 1975 production he directed in Berlin. The first chapter covers the first forty years of Beckett's life. It delves into some of the issues and influences of the times, such as world wars, civil wars, economic depressions, Surrealism, and Freudianism, which played a role in shaping his artistic development and perspective. In the second chapter, Gordon argues that "the existential condition ... establishes the philosophical backdrop" (59) of *Godot*. She discusses how Beckett depicts existentialism on stage without formally addressing it in a theoretical manner. She suggests in the third chapter that analyzing Beckett's creative work from a Freudian point of view, one that takes into consideration both conscious and unconscious thinking processes, provides new insights. Gordon incorporates Freud's term *conglomeration*, which involves piecing together various parts of a dream in order to arrive

at a “compressed dream image” (75). She associates the “conglomerative effect” with “the dominant theme of the play,” and connects it with “thesis and antithesis, affirmation and negation” (75). In the fourth chapter, she expounds on the “conglomerative voice” (86) in relation to Cain and Abel, asserts that they represent the “primal archetypes of innocence and brutality” (87), and compares the biblical brothers with some of the characters in *Godot*.

The fifth chapter focuses on Freud’s ideas about dreams and the conglomerative effect. In the sixth chapter, Gordon presents an additional vantage point from which to read *Godot* that concerns visual art, and elaborates on artists such as Cézanne and Monet. She states that some painters were particularly interested in “fluid psychological, optical, and intellectual mechanisms” (116) and “the phenomenological instability of the external world” (116), and that such concerns are also found in *Godot*. In the seventh chapter, “Staging the Conglomerative Effect,” Gordon explores some of the choreography and movement involved in staging the play, which she relates to ballet and dance. She provides hand-drawn, geometric-like diagrams Beckett created to visually depict and outline the conglomerative effect as it was to be performed. Finally, in the last chapter, Gordon elaborates on Beckett’s successful manner of portraying “the rational and emotional components of human behavior” (144) in *Godot*. She illustrates how complex relationships, involving both the conscious and unconscious, take place while the characters carry on with life “in the act of waiting” (144).

Gordon interweaves a variety of subjects into her text, some of which include philosophy, psychoanalysis, religion, history, mathematics, visual art, dance, drama, and literature. One of her major foci, and one of her most significant contributions, is to shed light on *Godot* from a Freudian point of view, and to provide a psychoanalytic interpretation. She demonstrates how Beckett portrays pieces and fragments of human consciousness and unconsciousness through the words, actions, and interactions of his characters. In so doing, she explains how the snippets of dialogue, the sparse stage, the limited use of props, and the movement of the actors all work together to create a unified whole. She explains “the bizarre, illogical fragments and dialogue exchanges” using some of Freud’s theories of “displacement, condensation, plastic pictorialization, and multiple manifestations of paralogic” (98).

I would like to offer a few suggestions on how the insightful and well-written book could be improved. First, in discussing how music was one of the art forms in the twentieth century that experienced the “breakdown of traditional form” (5), Gordon writes: “In music, initial assaults on form, *dissonance*, and diatonic music progressed to electronic cacophony and the randomness of the aleatory” (5, my

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emphasis). It was during this century that Arnold Schoenberg, whom she mentions later in the text as “avant garde” (24), emancipated dissonance and gave it greater importance. So the assault was actually on consonance.

Furthermore, Gordon seems to associate Albert Camus with existentialism in the following statement: “In the 1940s and early 1950s, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams pursued traditional drama, and Sartre and Camus focused on existential matters” (7). Some Camus scholars deny vehemently that the Nobel laureate was an existentialist. For example, in the January 2000 edition of the bulletin for the *Société des Etudes Camusiennes*, Camus is quoted to have said the following in an interview with *Nouvelles Littéraires* (15 Nov. 1945): “Sartre et moi nous nous étonnons toujours de voir nos deux noms associés.... Sartre est existentialiste, et le seul livre d'idées que j'ai publié: *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, était dirigé contre les philosophes existentialistes” [“Sartre and I are always astonished when our two names are associated.... Sartre is an existentialist, and the only book of ideas that I have published, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was directed against existentialist philosophers”](12, my translation).

Gordon's general insights, valuable though they are, represent only a few of many possible ways in which to read *Godot*. It is desirable and important that further analyses and viewpoints come forth in relation to the play. So, while Gordon has made a substantial contribution to the criticism on *Godot*, there is still room for further examination. As trends of thought shift, alter, and change, and as new theories are introduced to the academic world, analyses of the play will continue to be written, happily. In the meantime, sit back, relax, and enjoy *Reading Godot* for an academic as well as an aesthetic journey. ✨