



## The plays of Samuel Beckett

<b>Start date</b>	16 June 2023	<b>End date</b>	18 June 2023
<b>Venue</b>	Madingley Hall Madingley Cambridge CB23 8AQ		
<b>Tutor</b>	Dr Andy Wimbush	<b>Course code</b>	2223NRX037
<b>Director of ISP and LL</b>	Sarah Ormrod		
<b>For further information contact</b>	<a href="mailto:inteng@ice.cam.ac.uk">inteng@ice.cam.ac.uk</a>		

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### Tutor biography

Dr Andy Wimbush holds a BA and a PhD in English from the University of Cambridge. He specialises in the study of twentieth-century and contemporary literature, particularly experimental fiction, the relationship between literature, religion, and philosophy, and also the work of Samuel Beckett. He is the author of *Still: Samuel Beckett's Quietism* (Ibidem, 2020) and has published in *The Journal of Beckett Studies*, *Literature and Theology*, and various academic books. Andy has taught at the University of Cambridge since 2013 and is an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

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## Course programme

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### Friday

Please plan to arrive between 16:30 and 18:30. You can meet other course members in the Terrace Bar which opens at 18:15. Tea and coffee making facilities are available in the study bedrooms.

19:00	Dinner
<b>20:30 – 22:00</b>	<b>An introduction to Samuel Beckett's life and work</b>
22:00	Terrace Bar open for informal discussion

### Saturday

07:30	Breakfast (for residents only)
<b>09:00 – 10:30</b>	<b><i>Waiting for Godot</i>: Influences and origins</b>
10:30	Coffee
<b>11:00 – 12:30</b>	<b><i>Waiting for Godot</i>: What is tragicomedy?</b>
13:00	Lunch
14:00 – 16:00	Free time
16:00	Tea
<b>16:30 – 18:00</b>	<b><i>Endgame</i>: Beckett and the problem of evil</b>
18:00 – 18:30	Free time
18:30	Dinner
<b>20:00 – 21:30</b>	<b>Performance and gender in <i>Happy Days</i></b>
21:30	Terrace Bar open for informal discussion

### Sunday

07:30	Breakfast (for residents only)
<b>09:00 – 10:30</b>	<b>Selfing and unselfing in <i>Krapp's Last Tape</i></b>
10:30	Coffee
<b>11:00 – 12:30</b>	<b><i>Not I</i>, Dante, and 'helpless compassion'</b>
12:45	Lunch

**The course will disperse after lunch**

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## Course syllabus

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### Aims:

The course will allow you to:

- Appreciate the key thematic concerns of Beckett's plays
- Understand how Beckett drew on the work of other writers and philosophers to create his theatrical work
- Understand how these plays can be read with an eye to performance

### Content:

Samuel Beckett (1906 -1989) was a major author of the twentieth century, whose work occupies a central position in modernism, existentialism, and the theatre of the absurd. This accessible course explores how Beckett's strange but often very funny plays can speak to us today about difficult and important topics: love, friendship, meaning, aging, illness, death, and identity.

The first session will introduce students to Beckett's life and career prior to his first theatrical work. We will discuss his upbringing and education in Dublin, his early poetry and fiction, his friendship with James Joyce, and his experience in the French Resistance during World War II. Students will also understand how Beckett's prose writing helped to set the foundation for his transition into writing for the theatre.

On Saturday morning, we will look at *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's first and most famous play. The lectures will discuss the play's tragicomic elements, its debts to musical hall and vaudeville traditions, its treatment of religion and meaning-making, and its meditations on friendship and loneliness. This session also introduces the central Beckettian concept of the 'pseudocouple'.

Saturday afternoon will look at *Endgame*, Beckett's second major work for the stage. We will explore how Beckett's reading of the story of Noah and his experience looking after his dying brother came together to produce *Endgame*, a play about a world in a post-apocalyptic state of decay. The talks will also explore Beckett's meditations on disability and old age.

On Saturday evening, we will look at *Happy Days*: Beckett's first work to place a woman in the central role. This session considers Beckett's wry use of gender stereotypes in the play, drawing on theories about the male gaze in art and cinema. The talks will also explore Beckett's treatment of optimism and hope in the play as well as the many literary references from Shakespeare to Milton to Keats found in Winnie's monologues.

The final sessions of the course, on Sunday morning, look at two of Beckett's shorter plays. The talk on *Krapp's Last Tape* will explore the relationship between personal identity and memory, via references to philosophy and literature, and also tackle the role of technology in the play. The talk on *Not I* considers how Beckett's debts to the Italian poet Dante helped him forge a play about 'helpless compassion'.

### Presentation of the course:

This course will be taught through interactive seminars. There will be portions of each seminar for lecture material – delivered by the tutor, with accompanying hand-outs and slides – and portions for group discussion. Students will be invited to share their thoughts on the five plays we are discussing, both in small groups and the larger group.

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## Reading and resources list

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### Prior reading:

Students are required to read (or watch) the five plays discussed on the course before course starts:

- *Waiting for Godot*
- *Endgame*
- *Happy Days*
- *Krapp's Last Tape*
- *Not I*

These can be found in:

\*Beckett, S 2006, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, Faber and Faber, London.

Please bring a copy of this text to every session of the course.

### Optional further reading:

- Boulter, J 2008, *Beckett: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Bloomsbury, London.
- Knowlson, J 1997 *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, Bloomsbury, London.
- Weiss, K 2012 *The Plays of Samuel Beckett*, Bloomsbury, London.