Postmodernism in Contemporary Theater: Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*

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The recent developments in postmodern studies have centered on areas of popular culture such as film genres, television, rock’n’ roll, advertising, and cartoons, which have previously been denigrated as low-brow. Drawing critical attention from academicians, mass culture has emerged as a new breed of cultural hegemony, overpowering traditional literary genres such as drama, poetry, and the novel which are seen to be unfit to engage in postmodern debates. The strongest postmodern discontent is found within dramatic arts. The venerable Matei Calinescu, for example, deliberately offers no account of postmodernism in contemporary American and European theater in his revision of *Five Faces of Modernity* (1987). He instead makes a long list of poets and novelists whom he believes to have made important contributions to making of the literary postmodernism:

In poetry the corpus of American postmodernist writing would include the Black Mountain poets (Charles Olson, Robert Duncan,
Robert Creeley), the Beats (Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Laurence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso), and the representatives of the San Francisco Renaissance (Gary Snyder) or those of the New York School (John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch); in fiction the names most often quoted are John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, Robert Coover, John Hawkes, Donald Barthelme, and the surfictionists' Raymond Federman and Ronald Sukenick. (297)

The exclusion of postmodern theater by a prominent scholar like Calinescu explains the popular wholesale criticism that theater is too rigid a form of art to depart from the privileges and traditions of the high culture of modernism. It has been argued that the devices employed in theater, however postmodern, do not equal in terms of velocity and diversity those employed to create the spontaneous, instantaneous, and chimera-like mass culture. The notions of the ephemeral and mutations, so prominent in the postmodern arts, are considered lacking in theater, for it allegedly strives to honor the heritage of the past. In spite of the little attention it has attracted, there is a postmodern theater. Considering that the postmodern perspective is indeed another way of defining a locale where critical pluralism takes shape, as Ihab Hassan asserts, contemporary theater presents itself as a deserving cultural genre for any postmodern scrutiny.

Historically, the modernists' task was to restore artistic purity to guard against the infiltration of commercialism and fanaticism. Modernism was designed to exorcise bad taste from the high art and to subvert false bourgeois values. The beginning of modernism was marked by a radical departure from the traditions of its predecessor. In theater, the era of modernism began with Ibsen, and at its forefront was standing Realism as the crown creed. The revolution which was born with Doll's House