CAPITOLO

11

After the Bomb: Postwar Britain and the Theatre of the Absurd

"Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea." — Dylan Thomas, "Fern Hill" (1945)

OBIETTIVI

1. I can describe how Britain changed between 1945 and 1970: the welfare state and the NHS, austerity, Suez and the Bomb, the 1960s.
2. I can explain the Theatre of the Absurd, the Angry Young Men, kitchen-sink drama and the comedy of menace, and say whose labels they are.
3. I can analyse a villanelle and summarise *Waiting for Godot* and *Lord of the Flies* from a reading guide, comparing them in a paragraph.
4. I can recognise implicature, make indirect requests and polite refusals, and use softeners, hedges and pauses appropriately.
5. I can improvise a dialogue, write a dramatic scene with stage directions, and stay fluent in the colloquio by paraphrasing and buying time.
6. I can compare Beckett with Buzzati and Pirandello, and read Homer's Sisyphus as an image of the absurd.

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On the evening of 5 January 1953, in a small theatre on the Left Bank in Paris, two shabby men waited on a country road for someone called Godot. He did not come. Two and a half years later the same play opened in London, in English; some of the audience walked out, and within weeks it was one of the most discussed plays in the country. The people who argued about it had lived through a world war and had seen it end with two atomic bombs. They were building a new, fairer country at home while their empire shrank and a colder war began.

This chapter follows Britain from 1945 to 1970: the welfare state, austerity and the first television age, Suez and the Bomb, the 1960s. It then looks at the theatre that grew out of those years — Beckett's waiting, Osborne's anger, Pinter's menace — at a Welsh poet who told his father to fight death, and at a novel about boys on an island who invent a government and destroy it.

11.1 History and Society: Rebuilding Britain in the Nuclear Age, 1945–1970

The Second World War in Europe ended on 8 May 1945 (chapter 10). Two months later, on 5 July, Britain held its first general election for ten years; because the votes of soldiers overseas had to be collected, the result was announced only on 26 July. It was a landslide for the Labour Party. Winston Churchill, the war leader, was replaced as prime minister by **Clement Attlee**, a quiet, methodical politician who had been his deputy in the wartime coalition. Voters were not ungrateful to Churchill: they were afraid of returning to the unemployment and poverty of the 1930s, and Labour promised that the peace would be different. Figura 11.1 sets the events of this section beside the plays, poems and discoveries of the same years.

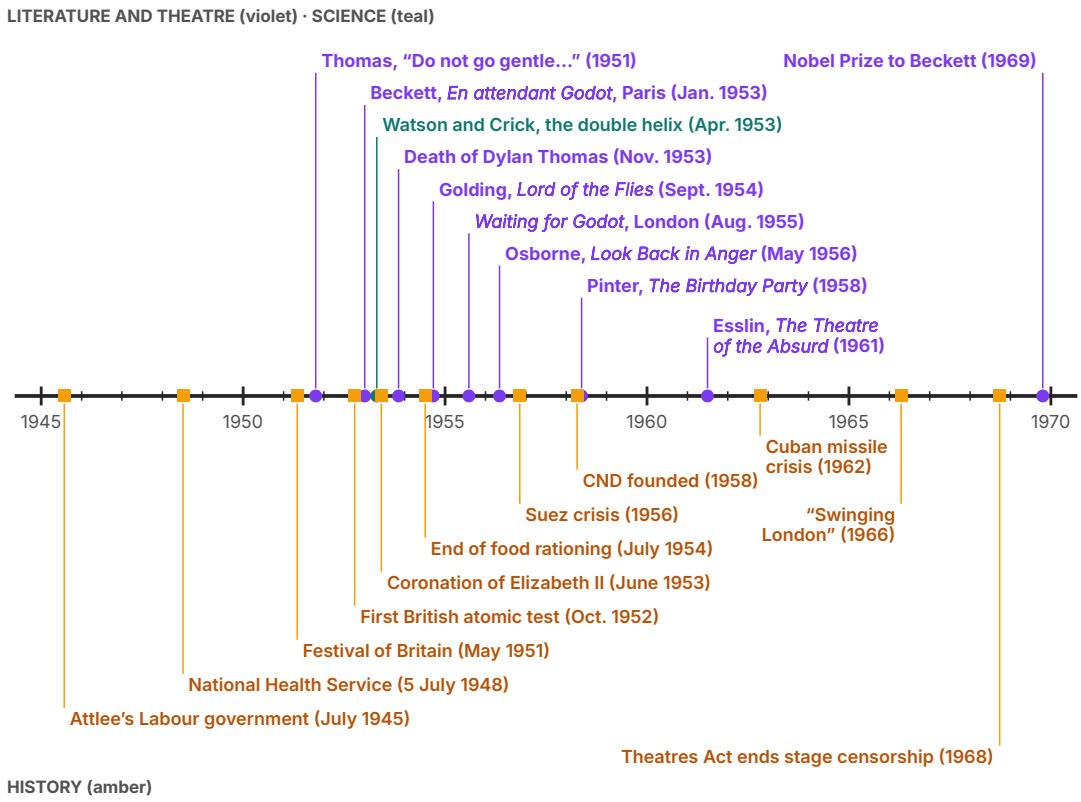


Figura 11.1 Britain, its theatre and its science, 1945–1970, on a proportional axis (ticks every year, labels every 5): literature and theatre above the axis (violet), science (teal), history below (amber). The Beveridge Report (1942) falls before the left edge.

11.1.1 The welfare state

Labour's programme came from a document written in the middle of the war. In November 1942 the economist William Beveridge published a government report, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, which named "five giants" standing in the way of reconstruction: Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness — poverty, illness, lack of education, bad housing and unemployment. The report was an unexpected best-seller. It proposed a single system of national insurance: every worker would pay a weekly contribution, and in return the state would support everyone "from the cradle to the grave", a phrase often used to sum it up.

Between 1945 and 1951 Attlee's government built what came to be called the **welfare state** (*stato sociale*): a state that takes responsibility for its citizens' basic security — health, education, pensions, housing and support in unemployment. The Education Act of 1944, passed by the coalition, had already made secondary education free for all. The National Insurance Act (1946) created pensions and benefits for sickness and unemployment. The **National Health Service**

(NHS) began on **5 July 1948**: for the first time, doctors, hospital treatment, medicines, glasses and dentists were free at the point of use for the whole population, paid for by taxation. Aneurin Bevan, the Welsh minister of health and a former miner, opened it symbolically at a hospital near Manchester. New towns, such as Stevenage, were planned to replace the bombed and overcrowded slums of the cities.

The government also carried out **nationalisation** (*nazionalizzazione*): the transfer of private industries to public ownership. The Bank of England (1946), the coal mines (1947), the railways and electricity (1948) and gas (1949) became state concerns. When the Conservatives returned to power in 1951, with Churchill once again prime minister, they kept almost all of this. Historians call the broad agreement between the two parties that lasted until the 1970s the *post-war consensus* — a later label, not a word used at the time.

11.1.2 Austerity and celebration

Victory did not bring plenty. Britain had spent its savings on the war and owed huge sums, above all to the United States. **Rationing** (*razionamento*) — a fixed weekly amount of basic goods per person, bought with coupons from a ration book — had begun in 1940 and went on long after the war: bread, which had never been rationed during the fighting, was rationed from 1946 to 1948. Food rationing ended only on 4 July 1954, when meat came off the ration. The word for these grey years of queues, coupons and making do is *austerity*.

Two events offered a brighter picture. The **Festival of Britain** opened in May 1951, a hundred years after the Great Exhibition (chapter 1), with exhibitions on London's South Bank about British science, design and history; its concert hall, the Royal Festival Hall, still stands. And on 2 June 1953 the young **Elizabeth II** was crowned in Westminster Abbey. The ceremony was broadcast on television, and millions of people watched it, many on sets bought, rented or borrowed for the day. On the same morning the newspapers announced that a British expedition had made the first ascent of Everest. Some commentators spoke of a "new Elizabethan age"; the reality was a country that was still poorer than it felt.

ERRORE FREQUENTE

✗ «Il welfare state fu creato da Churchill dopo la guerra.» → ✓ Il **Rapporto Beveridge** (1942) uscì durante la coalizione di guerra, ma lo **stato sociale** fu costruito dal governo laburista di **Attlee** (1945–1951); i conservatori, tornati al potere nel 1951, lo mantennero.

✗ «Con la fine della guerra finì anche il razionamento.» → ✓ In Gran Bretagna il razionamento durò fino al **1954**; il pane fu razionato solo **dopo** la guerra (1946–1948).

✗ «L'NHS è un'assicurazione sanitaria obbligatoria.» → ✓ L'NHS (5 luglio 1948) è un servizio sanitario **pagato dalle tasse** e gratuito al momento dell'uso: un modello che l'Italia adotterà con il Servizio sanitario nazionale nel 1978.

11.1.3 Suez and the Bomb: the end of a great power

In March 1946, in a speech at Fulton, Missouri, Churchill spoke of an "iron curtain" that had fallen across Europe. The wartime alliance with the Soviet Union had turned into the *Cold War* (chapter 10), and Britain chose to remain a nuclear power. Its first atomic bomb was tested on 3 October 1952 in the Monte Bello Islands, off the coast of Western Australia; a hydrogen bomb followed in 1957. The fear of a third, nuclear war became part of everyday life — in civil-defence leaflets, in films, in schoolchildren's drills. In 1958 the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was founded, and at Easter that year the first protest march went from London to the weapons research centre at Aldermaston; from 1959 CND led the march each Easter in the opposite direction, and it became a ritual of the new protest movements. In October 1962 the Cuban missile crisis brought the United States and the Soviet Union closer to nuclear war than ever before.

The empire was ending too: India and Pakistan became independent in 1947, and chapter 12 follows the decolonisation that came after. The moment when Britain discovered the limits of its power came in 1956. On 26 July the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalised the **Suez Canal**, owned mainly by British and French shareholders. Britain and France secretly agreed with Israel on a plan: Israel attacked Egypt, and in November British and French troops landed at the canal, claiming to separate the two sides. The United States, not consulted, refused to support the pound, and within days the operation was stopped. The prime minister, Anthony Eden, resigned on 9 January 1957. After Suez it was clear that Britain could no longer act as a world power without the agreement of the United States.

11.1.4 The 1960s

By the late 1950s rationing was a memory. Wages rose, unemployment was low, and families bought cars, washing machines and televisions on hire purchase. For the first time young people had money of their own, and a *youth culture* grew up around it: coffee bars, fashion, rock and roll and then British pop. The Beatles, four young men from Liverpool, released their first single in October 1962 and within a year were a national obsession, then a global one. London's fashion — the boutiques of Carnaby Street, Mary Quant's miniskirts — made the capital fashionable abroad; in April 1966 the American magazine *Time* put "London: The Swinging City" on its cover, and "Swinging London" became the label for the decade, though it described a small part of one city better than the country as a whole.

The law changed with the mood. The death penalty for murder was suspended in 1965 and abolished in 1969; in 1967 homosexual acts between consenting adult men in private were decriminalised in England and Wales, and the Abortion Act was passed. The **Theatres Act of 1968** ended a censorship that had lasted since 1737: until then every new play had needed a licence from the Lord Chamberlain, an officer of the royal household. In 1968, as students occupied

universities in Paris and demonstrators gathered in London against the war in Vietnam, the post-war world of ration books and coronation parties seemed very far away.

11.2 Literature: Waiting, Anger and Menace

In the first post-war years the most visible literary event in Britain was not a novel but a change in the theatre. The London stage of the early 1950s was dominated by polished comedies set in middle-class drawing rooms and by verse drama. Within ten years three very different kinds of play had transformed it, and with them came a new generation of writers who had grown up with rationing, national service and the Bomb. Poetry, meanwhile, found a large audience through a new medium: the BBC's radio programmes, above all the Third Programme (1946), which commissioned poems and plays for voices.

11.2.1 Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd

Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) was born at Foxrock, near Dublin, and studied French and Italian at Trinity College. In Paris in the late 1920s he became a friend and helper of James Joyce (chapter 8). During the German occupation of France he worked for the French Resistance and was decorated for it. After the war he began to write in French — he said that it allowed him to write more simply — and in 1948–49 he wrote *En attendant Godot*. Published in 1952, it was first performed at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris on 5 January 1953. Beckett translated it himself as *Waiting for Godot*, subtitled "a tragicomedy in two acts"; the English version opened at the Arts Theatre, London, on 3 August 1955. *Endgame* (*Fin de partie*, 1957) and *Happy Days* (1961) followed, and in 1969 he received the Nobel Prize in Literature.

In *Waiting for Godot* two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, wait by a tree for a man who never arrives; they quarrel, joke, eat a carrot, consider hanging themselves, and stay. The play has no plot in the usual sense, and its characters have no past that we can trust. Beckett is not PD in Italy, so this book summarises it (T2). A **tragicomedy** (*tragicommedia*) mixes tragic and comic elements; Beckett's word warns us that the tramps' misery and their music-hall jokes belong together.

In 1961 the critic Martin Esslin gathered Beckett and a group of playwrights who worked mainly in Paris — Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov — under one name. The **Theatre of the Absurd** (*teatro dell'assurdo*) is drama that presents the human condition as without meaning or purpose, and that shows this through its form as well as its content: circular or static action instead of a plot that develops, characters without clear motives or identities, language that breaks down into repetition, clichés and non-sequiturs, and comic routines in the middle of anguish. The word "absurd" came from the philosophy of the time, above all Albert Camus's essay on Sisyphus (1942; see the Connections). It is a critic's label: the playwrights never formed a movement, signed a manifesto or accepted the name together.

ERRORE FREQUENTE

✗ «Godot è Dio: Beckett lo ha spiegato.» → ✓ L'identità di Godot non è mai chiarita. L'interpretazione "Godot = God" è diffusa, ma secondo quanto riportato Beckett la **negò**; in un saggio la si presenta come *una* lettura possibile.

✗ «Il Teatro dell'assurdo è un movimento fondato da Beckett.» → ✓ È un'**etichetta critica** di Martin Esslin (1961), applicata a posteriori ad autori diversi, che non si riconobbero come gruppo.

✗ «*Waiting for Godot* fu scritto in inglese e poi tradotto in francese.» → ✓ Il contrario: *En attendant Godot* (Parigi, 1953); la versione inglese è dello stesso Beckett (Londra, 1955).

11.2.2 The Angry Young Men and kitchen-sink drama

On 8 May 1956 the English Stage Company, a new company at the Royal Court Theatre in London, opened *Look Back in Anger* by **John Osborne**, then twenty-six. Its hero, Jimmy Porter, is a young man with a university degree who runs a sweet stall; he lives in a one-room flat in the Midlands with his wife Alison, the daughter of a retired colonel, and a friend. For three acts he talks — brilliantly, cruelly, and mostly to Alison as she irons — against the comfortable middle class, the Church, the newspapers and the dead certainties of a country that had lost its empire. Most of the first critics disliked it; a few saw in it the voice of a generation, and the play became the sensation of the year.

To publicise the play, the Royal Court's press office described Osborne as an "angry young man", and journalists took up the phrase. The **Angry Young Men** (*"giovani arrabbiati"*) were a group of young British writers of the 1950s, most of them from the working or lower middle class, whose heroes rebel against the class system and the complacency of post-war Britain: besides Osborne, the novelists Kingsley Amis (*Lucky Jim*, 1954), John Braine (*Room at the Top*, 1957) and Alan Sillitoe (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 1958). It is a journalists' label: the writers had little in common, and most of them disliked it.

The plays that followed Osborne's took the stage out of the drawing room. **Kitchen-sink drama** (*teatro "del lavello"*, realismo domestico) is realistic drama about the everyday domestic life of working-class or lower-middle-class people, set in cramped rooms, flats and kitchens. The name was borrowed from painting: in 1954 a critic called a group of young painters of shabby domestic interiors the "kitchen sink" school. Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958), written when she was still a teenager and set in Salford, and Arnold Wesker's *Roots* (1959) are typical examples; the same realism soon reached the cinema and television.

APPROFONDIMENTO

The Lord Chamberlain's blue pencil. From 1737 to 1968 no new play could be performed in public in Great Britain without a licence from the Lord Chamberlain, whose readers sent back scripts with words, lines and whole scenes crossed out — traditionally in blue pencil. Religion, sex, the royal family and politicians were the usual targets. Even *Waiting for Godot* had to lose a few words before it could open in London in 1955, and some writers got round the law by performing in "private clubs". The Theatres Act of 1968 abolished stage censorship; the musical *Hair*, with its nudity, opened in London the day after the act came into force. Italy too censored the stage and the cinema after the war: compare the two systems in a history or law lesson.

11.2.3 Harold Pinter and the comedy of menace

Harold Pinter (1930–2008), the son of a Jewish tailor in Hackney, in East London, worked for years as an actor in touring companies before he wrote his first play, *The Room* (1957). *The Birthday Party* opened in London on 19 May 1958 and closed after a week, condemned by almost all the critics. It is set in a shabby seaside boarding house. Stanley, a lodger who may once have been a pianist, is visited by two strangers, Goldberg and McCann, who interrogate him with a torrent of absurd and terrifying questions, turn the birthday party that the landlady, Meg, has organised for him into a nightmare, and take him away the next morning, while Meg hardly seems to notice. We never learn who they are, whom they work for, or what Stanley has done. *The Caretaker* (1960) was Pinter's first success; *The Homecoming* (1965) confirmed him, and he received the Nobel Prize in 2005.

In 1958 the critic Irving Wardle borrowed a phrase from the subtitle of a play by David Campton to describe this kind of drama. The **comedy of menace** (*commedia della minaccia*) presents ordinary, often funny conversation in a closed room, behind which an unexplained threat slowly grows: someone arrives from outside, and the people inside are afraid without knowing why. The phrase is also a pun on *comedy of manners* (English 4, chapter 4). Pinter's dialogue sounds like real speech — repetitive, banal, full of misunderstandings — but what matters is what is not said. His scripts mark the moments of silence with stage directions, and actors speak of the **Pinter pause** (*la "pausa pinteriana"*): a silence in the dialogue that carries meaning — a threat, an evasion, a struggle for power. The Language section of this chapter studies how this works in everyday English.

11.2.4 Dylan Thomas

Dylan Thomas (1914–1953) was born in Swansea, in South Wales; his father, D. J. Thomas, taught English at the town's grammar school. Thomas was Welsh but wrote only in English, and his poems are famous for their music: dense images, strong rhythms, alliteration and internal rhyme (English 4, chapter 12). After *18 Poems* (1934) and *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), which contains "Fern Hill", he became one of the best-known voices on BBC radio and, from 1950, a cele-

brated reader of his work in the United States. He died in New York on 9 November 1953, aged thirty-nine. His "play for voices", *Under Milk Wood*, about one day in a small Welsh seaside town, was broadcast by the BBC in January 1954, after his death.

"Do not go gentle into that good night" (T1) was first published in 1951 in *Botteghe Oscure*, an international literary review founded in Rome in 1948 by Marguerite Caetani, an American-born princess, and then in his collections of 1952. It is usually connected with the illness of his father, who died in December 1952. It is a **villanelle** (*villanella*): a fixed form of nineteen lines, five **tercets** (three-line stanzas) and a quatrain, built on only two rhymes and two refrains (English 3 terms) — the first and third lines of the poem, which return alternately at the end of each tercet and together at the end of the quatrain. The name comes from the Italian *villanella*, a rustic song; the fixed form goes back to a single French poem by Jean Passerat, published in 1606, and became popular with English poets from the late nineteenth century.

11.2.5 William Golding

William Golding (1911–1993) was a schoolteacher in Salisbury who had served in the Royal Navy during the war and taken part in the D-Day landings. His first novel, *Lord of the Flies* (1954), was rejected by several publishers before Faber accepted it. During an unnamed war, a plane evacuating British schoolboys crashes on a tropical island; there are no adults. The boys try to govern themselves, but fear of a "beast" and the pleasure of hunting destroy their society. The novel answers a Victorian adventure story, R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858), in which shipwrecked British boys bring order and virtue to an island: Golding's boys bring the war with them. Read as an allegory (English 3, chapter 7) of human nature and of the political violence of the century, it became a school classic; Golding received the Nobel Prize in 1983. It is not PD: T3 is a reading guide.

IN SINTESI

Post-war British writing at a glance

- **Theatre of the Absurd** — Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (Paris 1953, London 1955): waiting, repetition, a world without meaning (Esslin's label, 1961).
- **Angry Young Men** — Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (1956); Amis, Braine, Sillitoe: anger against class and complacency (a journalists' label).
- **Kitchen-sink drama** — Delaney, Wesker: realistic working-class domestic life.
- **Comedy of menace** — Pinter, *The Birthday Party* (1958): a closed room, an unexplained threat, pauses (Wardle's phrase, 1958).
- **Poetry** — Dylan Thomas, "Do not go gentle into that good night" (1951): a villanelle; *Under Milk Wood* (radio, 1954).
- **The novel** — Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (1954): an allegory of civilisation and violence.

11.3 Texts: the Dying Light, the Empty Road, the Island

One complete poem and two reading guides. Dylan Thomas died in 1953, so his poem has been in the public domain in Italy since 1 January 2024 and can be printed in full; Beckett and Golding are still protected, so their works are summarised, with no more than two short phrases from each.

11.3.1 T1 · Dylan Thomas, “Do not go gentle into that good night” (1951)

Context. A son speaks to his dying father, and through him to every reader who will die. Instead of offering comfort, he asks his father to resist. The poem is printed complete, nineteen lines, in a strict villanelle (Figura 11.2).

Tabella 11.1 T1 — Dylan Thomas, "Do not go gentle into that good night", complete (19 lines). Text of the Academy of American Poets (poets.org, from *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, New Directions), checked against a second transcription: the two agree word for word. Public domain in Italy since 2024.

Do not go gentle into that good night,	
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;	
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.	
Though wise men at their end know dark is right,	
Because their words had forked no lightning they	5
Do not go gentle into that good night.	
Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright	
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,	
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.	
Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,	10
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,	
Do not go gentle into that good night.	
Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight	
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,	
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.	15
And you, my father, there on the sad height,	
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.	
Do not go gentle into that good night.	
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.	

Glosses. *gentle*: gently, without resisting (an adjective used as an adverb) · *that good night*: death, seen as a peaceful sleep · *rave*: shout wildly · *close of day*: evening; here, the end of life · *forked no lightning*: produced no flash of lightning — changed nothing · *the last wave by*: when the last wave has gone past · *frail*: weak · *bay*: a curve of the coast; also the bay laurel, the leaves of a poet's or a victor's crown · *grieved it*: made the sun sad, or mourned it · *grave*: serious (and, as a noun, a tomb) · *blinding sight*: a vision so intense that it blinds · *gay*: joyful (the older meaning) · *sad height*: a high, lonely place — perhaps the deathbed.

LINE	RHYME	LINE END, OR THE REFRAIN WHERE IT RETURNS	STANZA
1	a	A1 *Do not go gentle into that good night*	tercet 1
2	b	… day	
3	a	A2 *Rage, rage against the dying of the light*	
4	a	… right	tercet 2
5	b	… they	
6	a	A1 *Do not go gentle into that good night*	
7	a	… bright	tercet 3
8	b	… bay	
9	a	A2 *Rage, rage against the dying of the light*	
10	a	… flight	tercet 4
11	b	… way	
12	a	A1 *Do not go gentle into that good night*	
13	a	… sight	tercet 5
14	b	… gay	
15	a	A2 *Rage, rage against the dying of the light*	
16	a	… height	quatrain
17	b	… pray	
18	a	A1 *Do not go gentle into that good night*	
19	a	A2 *Rage, rage against the dying of the light*	

A1 = line 1, repeated as lines 6, 12, 18 · A2 = line 3, repeated as lines 9, 15, 19
Two rhymes only: a (-ight) and b (-ay). In the quatrain the two refrains meet as a final couplet.

Figura 11.2 The villanelle scheme, checked on the text of T1: five tercets (*a b a*) and a quatrain (*a b a a*). The two refrains (A1 violet, A2 amber) return alternately and meet at the end.

Analysis

Form against content. The villanelle is one of the most rigid forms in English: two rhymes for nineteen lines, and two lines that must keep coming back. Thomas uses that rigidity. The refrains sound like a command repeated to someone who is not listening, or like a son repeating the same words at a bedside because there is nothing else to say. The two rhymes are a light, open sound (*-ight*: *night, light, right, bright, flight, sight, height*) and a long, falling one (*-ay*: *day, they, bay, way, gay, pray*). In the final quatrain the two refrains, separated until then, are joined as a couplet: the poem ends with its two commands side by side and no answer.

Four kinds of men. Tercets 2–5 form a list, each beginning with an adjective: *wise*, *good*, *wild*, *grave* men. Each group has a different reason to resist death. Wise men know that death is natural (*dark is right*) but have not yet made their words change the world. Good men see how their small acts might have shone. Wild men, who lived for pleasure and celebrated the sun, learn too late that time was passing. Grave men, near death, see that even blind eyes could still burn. The pun in *Grave men* — serious men, and men close to the grave — is typical of Thomas.

Light and dark. The whole poem is built on one metaphor: life as light and day, death as night. Almost every image develops it: *close of day*, *dying of the light*, *lightning*, *bright*, *the sun in flight*, *blinding sight*, *blaze like meteors*. The verbs are violent: *burn*, *rave*, *rage*, *blaze*, *curse*. Notice the alliteration of *blind*, *blinding*, *blaze*, *be* in lines 13–14, and the oxymoron *blinding sight*.

The father. Only in the last stanza do we discover whom the speaker is addressing: *And you, my father*. The general argument becomes a private one. The son asks to be cursed and blessed at once — any strong feeling is better than a quiet surrender — and the commas in *Curse, bless, me now* slow the line into a plea. The final word of the poem, *light*, is still a word of life.

1. ● What is the speaker asking his father to do? Which two lines carry the request?
2. ●● Find the four kinds of men in tercets 2–5. Explain in your own words why each should "not go gentle".
3. ●● Show how the villanelle form (Figura 11.2) strengthens the speaker's message.
4. ●● List the images of light and of darkness. Which line contains an oxymoron?
5. ●●● Is the poem an elegy (English 3, chapter 3)? Discuss: the father is still alive.

11.3.2 T2 · Reading guide · Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1953; English version 1955)

Context. Two acts, five characters, one country road with a single tree. The play is still protected by copyright, so here is a guide to its structure and its key moments, with two short phrases from the English text.

Act I. Evening. Estragon sits on a low mound trying to pull off his boot. He gives up and says there is "Nothing to be done" (Act I) — the first words of the play. Vladimir takes the phrase as a statement about life in general, and their dialogue moves at once from a sore foot to the meaning of existence. They are waiting for Mr Godot, though they are not sure where, when, or why they arranged to meet him. Two travellers arrive: Pozzo, a self-important landowner, and Lucky, his servant, whom he drives on the end of a rope. Ordered to "think", Lucky delivers a long, unpunctuated speech in which scholarly phrases collapse into nonsense. After they leave, a Boy comes with a message: Mr Godot will not come this evening, but surely tomorrow. Night falls suddenly and the moon rises. Estragon proposes to leave, Vladimir agrees, and the act ends with the stage direction "They do not move."

Act II. The next day, same time, same place. The tree, bare the evening before, has a few leaves. Vladimir and Estragon meet again; Estragon remembers almost nothing of yesterday. Pozzo and Lucky return, but Pozzo is now blind and Lucky dumb, and Pozzo does not remember meeting the tramps; asked when it all happened, he answers furiously that time has no meaning. The Boy returns with the same message — and says that it was not he who came the day before. The act ends with the same exchange as Act I, but the speakers have swapped lines; and again neither moves.

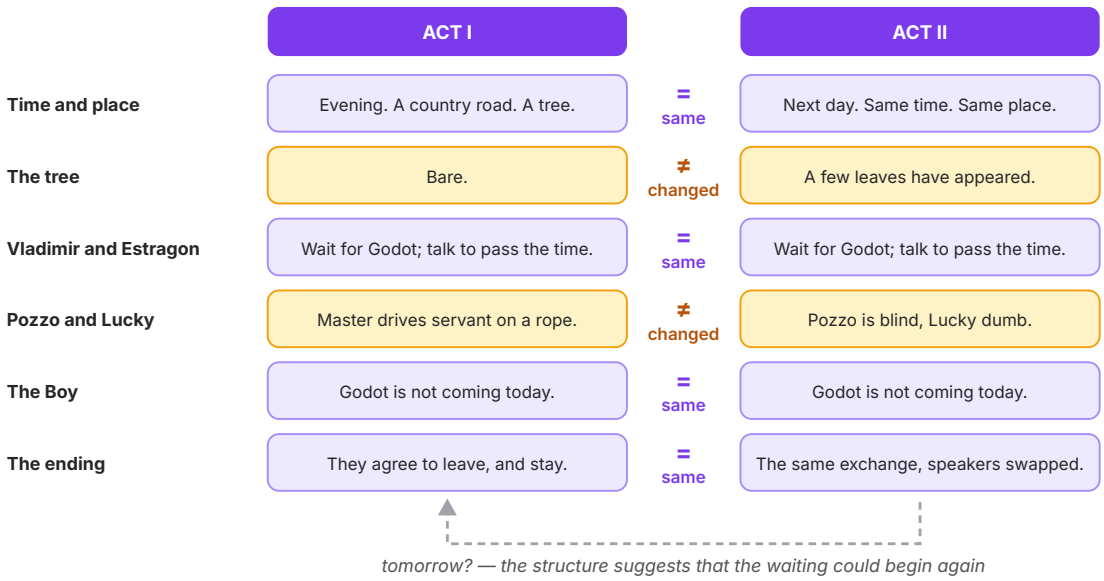


Figura 11.3 The two acts of *Waiting for Godot* (from the English text, summarised): what repeats (violet) and what changes (amber). The repetition suggests a cycle with no end.

Analysis

Structure. As Figura 11.3 shows, Act II repeats Act I with small changes, all for the worse: the tree's leaves are the only sign of time passing, and they bring no hope. A critic once joked that in this play nothing happens, twice. The circular form is the meaning: waiting is not a pause between events, it is the whole of life.

Language and comedy. The tramps talk to fill the silence — they play games, insult each other, swap hats in a routine that comes from the music hall and silent cinema. Their dialogue is a stream of short lines, repetitions and pauses, and the stage directions *Silence* and *Pause* are as important as the words. The comedy does not reduce the despair; it makes it bearable.

1. ● Why do Vladimir and Estragon stay where they are? What reasons does the play give, and what reasons does it leave out?
2. ●● What do Pozzo and Lucky represent in your reading? Consider master and servant, rich and poor, mind and body.
3. ●● Explain the effect of ending both acts with the stage direction quoted in the guide.
4. ●●● "Godot is God." Discuss this interpretation in 80 words, without presenting it as a fact.

11.3.3 T3 · Reading guide · William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (1954), ch. 12

Context. The boys' assembly, called by Ralph with a conch shell, has broken down. Most of them have joined Jack's tribe of painted hunters; Simon has been killed in a frenzied dance, and

in the novel's chapter 11 Piggy, the clumsy, short-sighted boy who stood for reason, is killed by a boulder and the conch is smashed. The novel's symbols are simple and strong: the **conch** stands for order and the right to speak, the **signal fire** for the hope of rescue, **Piggy's glasses**, which make fire, for science and intelligence, and the **Lord of the Flies** — a pig's head on a stick, covered with flies — for the beast inside the boys themselves. The title is a literal translation of Beelzebub, an ancient name for a devil.

The last chapter, "Cry of the Hunters". Ralph is alone. Jack's hunters track him through the forest and set the island on fire to drive him out. Running from the flames and the spears, he falls on the beach at the feet of a naval officer, who has landed because he saw the smoke. The officer, in a white uniform, thinks the boys have been playing a game; he is disappointed that British boys have not behaved better. Ralph begins to cry, and the other boys with him. Golding writes that Ralph wept for "the end of innocence" and for "the darkness of man's heart" (ch. 12). The officer turns away, embarrassed, towards his cruiser waiting offshore.

Analysis

Irony. The rescue is not a happy ending. The fire that saves Ralph was lit to kill him, and the adult who restores order belongs to a navy engaged in a war that the boys' own violence imitates. The shift of point of view in the final pages — we suddenly see the hunters as small, dirty children — makes the reader share the officer's shock, and then measure what he does not understand.

1. ● What do the conch, the fire and Piggy's glasses stand for? What happens to each by the end?
2. ●● Why is the arrival of the naval officer ironic?
3. ●●● Compare T3 with *The Coral Island* as the guide describes it: what does Golding's novel say about "civilised" British boys?

ESEMPIO SVOLTO

Comparing two texts in one paragraph (T1 and T2: two responses to the end).

1. **Find the common ground.** Both texts face death or meaninglessness: Thomas's father is dying; Beckett's tramps wait for a meaning that never comes.
2. **Find the difference.** Thomas commands resistance (*Rage, rage*); Beckett's characters announce action and do not act ("They do not move.").
3. **Link difference to form.** Both use repetition — refrains in T1, a repeated act in T2 — but in Thomas repetition is energy, in Beckett it is paralysis.
4. **Write the paragraph** with a comparative connector (*whereas, while, by contrast*) and the literary present.

Model: *Both texts confront the end of meaning, but they answer it in opposite ways. Thomas's speaker refuses calm acceptance: his refrain "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" turns repetition into a call to fight. Beckett's tramps, by contrast, repeat themselves because they cannot act; each act of* Waiting for Godot *closes as they agree to leave and remain on stage. Whereas the villanelle's returning lines grow louder, the play's returning scene grows emptier — rage against paralysis, the same decade, two forms of the same fear.*

11.4 Language: Pragmatics — What Is Said and What Is Meant

In English 4 (chapter 7) you met pragmatics — how meaning depends on context, tone and intention — through irony and understatement. This section goes further: how English speakers ask, refuse, criticise and avoid answering without saying so directly. It is the everyday version of what Pinter does on stage, and one of the main differences between correct English and natural English.

11.4.1 Implicature

When a speaker means more than the words say, and the listener is expected to work it out, the extra meaning is an **implicature** (*implicatura*). The term comes from the British philosopher Paul Grice, who argued in lectures given in 1967 that conversation rests on a **cooperative principle** (*principio di cooperazione*): we assume that the other person is trying to be relevant, truthful, clear and as informative as necessary. When a reply seems not to be, we look for the meaning that would make it so. Tabella 11.2 gives some everyday examples.

Tabella 11.2 Implicature: what is said, the context, and what is meant (invented examples)

What is said	Context	What is meant
It's cold in here.	a guest near an open window	Please close the window.
Have you seen the time?	a parent to a teenager at midnight	You should be in bed.
Some of the reviews were good.	*The Birthday Party*, 1958	Not all of them were (in 1958, most were not).
Well, the set was beautiful.	after a friend's play	I didn't like the acting (or the play).
I've got an essay due tomorrow.	answer to "Coming to the cinema?"	No, I can't come.
Is that the time?	a host to late guests	It is time for you to go.

An implicature can be cancelled — *Some of the reviews were good; in fact, all of them were* — which is what distinguishes it from what the words actually say. That is also why it is useful: the speaker can always deny having meant it.

11.4.2 Indirect requests and refusals

English speakers rarely use the imperative to ask strangers, colleagues or teachers for something. An **indirect request** (*richiesta indiretta*) is a request made in the form of a question or a statement: *Can you…?* is grammatically a question about ability, but nobody answers it with *Yes* and does nothing. Figura 11.4 arranges six ways of making the same request from the most direct to the most indirect.

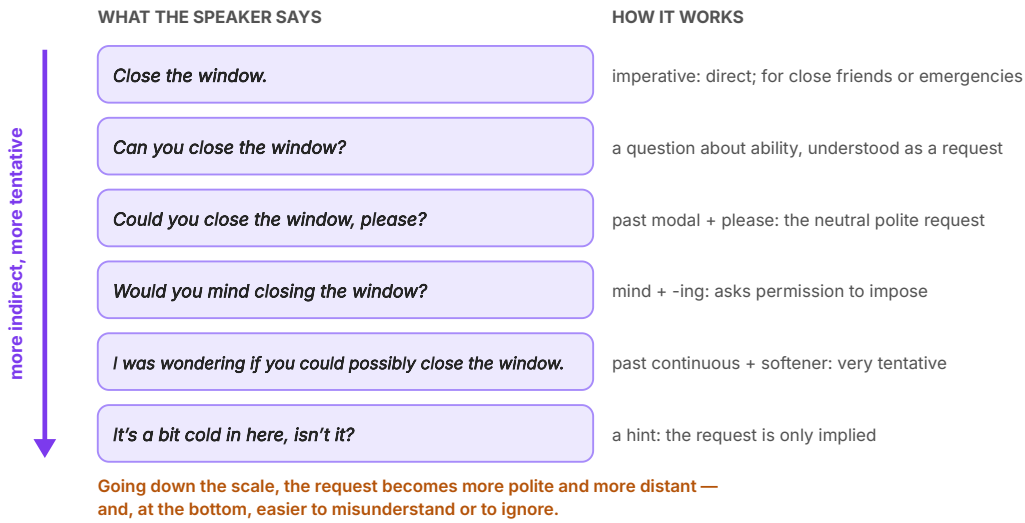


Figura 11.4 From direct to indirect: six ways of asking someone to close a window (invented examples). The choice depends on the relationship, the size of the request and the situation.

Refusals are even more carefully wrapped. A bare *No* to an invitation sounds rude in English; a polite refusal usually has three or four parts: an expression of thanks or regret, the refusal itself (often softened), a reason, and sometimes an alternative.

Tabella 11.3 Refusing politely: the usual moves

Move	Examples
Thanks, regret or appreciation	*That's really kind of you, but… · I'd love to, but… · What a shame —*
The refusal, softened	*I'm afraid I can't. · I don't think I can make it. · I'll have to say no this time.*
A reason	*I've got a rehearsal on Thursday. · I promised my sister I'd help her.*
An alternative	*Could we do it next week instead? · Maybe another time?*
A refusal disguised as a delay	*Let me think about it. · I'll see.* — often understood as *no*.

11.4.3 Politeness strategies

The linguists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1978, revised 1987) proposed a model in which every speaker has a public self-image, or "face", that others are expected to respect. Their model distinguishes two kinds of **politeness strategy** (*strategia di cortesia*). **Positive politeness** stresses closeness and shared ground: first names, compliments, *we*, jokes, interest in the other person (*Great idea — and maybe we could also…*). **Negative politeness** respects the other person's freedom: it avoids imposing, gives options, apologises and keeps distance (*Sorry to bo-*

ther you, but would you mind…?). British English is often described as relying heavily on negative politeness.

The tools are small words. A **softener** (*attenuatore*) is a word or phrase that reduces the force of a request, criticism or refusal: *just* (*Could I just ask…?*), *a bit*, *a little*, *possibly*, *perhaps*, *I think*, *I'm afraid*, *sort of*. Three grammatical strategies do the same job:

- **Past tenses for distance:** *I wanted to ask you…; I was wondering if…; Did you want some tea?* — the past makes the request less immediate, not past.
- **Modal verbs:** *could, would, might* (*You might want to check the second scene* = I think you should).
- **Negative questions for suggestions and criticism:** *Wouldn't it be better to cut the last line? Isn't that a bit long?*
- **Hedges** (English 4, chapter 4): *It seems to me that…, in a way, I may be wrong, but…*

GRAMMAR IN ITALIANO

La pragmatica: quello che si dice e quello che si intende. L'**implicatura** è il significato che l'ascoltatore deve ricavare dal contesto (*It's cold in here* = chiudi la finestra). Le **richieste indirette** usano domande con i modali: *Can / Could you…?*, *Would you mind + -ing?*, *I was wondering if you could…*. Si rifiuta con ringraziamento + rammarico + motivo (*I'd love to, but I'm afraid I can't…*).

Confronto con l'italiano. Anche l'italiano attenua con il **condizionale** (*Mi daresti una mano? Potrebbe chiudere la finestra?*) e con l'imperfetto di cortesia (*Volevo chiederle… = I wanted to ask you…*). Ma in italiano un imperativo con *per favore* o con *pure* (*Si accomodi pure*) è spesso naturale, mentre in inglese *Give me…, please* suona brusco: si preferisce la domanda (*Could I have…?*). E *please* non basta a rendere cortese un ordine. Attenzione anche a *prego*: non è *please*, ma *you're welcome*, *go ahead* o *after you*, secondo il contesto.

11.4.4 Silence, pauses and evasion

Not answering is also a way of answering. In conversation, a pause before a reply often announces a "dispreferred" answer — a refusal, a disagreement, bad news — and the listener reads it before any word is spoken. **Evasion** (*evasività*, risposta elusiva) is the avoidance of a direct answer: changing the subject, answering a question with a question, repeating the question, giving a vague or partial answer. Politicians are famous for it; so are Pinter's characters, whose short, banal exchanges become frightening because nobody says what they want. The dialogue below is invented, in Pinter's manner:

Tabella 11.4 Evasion in dialogue (invented example)

Line	What is happening
A: *Did you sleep well?*	an ordinary question — or a check
B: *Is that tea?*	evasion: a question instead of an answer
A: *You didn't sleep, did you.*	a statement with a falling tag: A knows, and says so
B: *(Pause.) The tea's cold.*	a pause, then a change of subject: B refuses the topic
A: *I can make some more. If you like.*	polite words, but A now controls the scene

ERRORE FREQUENTE

✗ (al cameriere) *I want a coffee.* → ✓ *Could I have a coffee, please?* / *I'd like a coffee, please.* — *I want* in una richiesta suona infantile o maleducato.

✗ *Excuse me, you can close the window?* (calco di «Scusi, può chiudere la finestra?») → ✓ *Excuse me, could you close the window?* — in inglese la domanda richiede l'inversione, non basta l'intonazione.

✗ *Would you mind to close the door?* → ✓ *Would you mind* ***closing*** *the door?* — e la risposta di consenso è *No, not at all* (= non mi dispiace), non *Yes*.

✗ A: *Can you help me with this?* B: *Yes.* (e non fa nulla) → ✓ *Sure, what do you need?* — in questo contesto *Can you…?* è una richiesta, non una domanda sulla capacità.

11.5 Skills: Staging a Scene

11.5.1 Vocabulary: theatre and staging

These words describe a performance from the inside, as a director or an actor would.

Tabella 11.5 Theatre and staging: key words

Word	Meaning	Example
stage directions	the playwright's instructions in the script about movement, setting and tone	*The stage directions say only: "A country road. A tree."*
set	the scenery and furniture that represent the place of the action	*The set was a single room with a window.*
props	objects used by actors on stage (from *properties*)	*A hat, a carrot and a rope are the main props.*
rehearsal / **to rehearse**	a practice performance before the real one	*We rehearse every Thursday.*
cast	all the actors in a play; *to cast*: to choose actors for parts	*She was cast as Estragon.*
playwright	a person who writes plays (*-wright*: a maker)	*Pinter was a playwright and an actor.*
audience	the people watching (a collective noun)	*Half the audience left at the interval.*
pause	a short silence; in a script, a direction	*Hold the pause before you answer.*
absurd	without logic or meaning; ridiculous	*The situation is absurd, but the characters take it seriously.*
menace / **menacing**	a threat; threatening	*There is menace in his politeness.*

Collocations: waiting and time

English has many fixed expressions about waiting — useful for talking about Beckett, and about exams. *Wait in vain* (wait for something that never comes); *keep someone waiting* (make them wait); *wait your turn*; *can't wait to* + verb (be very eager); *wait and see* (be patient before deciding); *hang on* / *hold on* (informal: wait a moment); *while away the hours* (pass time pleasantly or idly); *play for time* (delay deliberately); *bide your time* (wait patiently for the right moment). Note that *wait* takes *for* before its object (*wait for Godot*), while *await* takes none and is formal (*We await your reply*).

11.5.2 Listening: At the Rehearsal

Before you listen. Have you ever acted in a play, or watched a rehearsal? What can go wrong? **Listen (books closed)** while three classmates read the script: Giulia, Marta and Elena at a Thursday rehearsal of the school's English theatre group, run by Prof.ssa Rossi. Elena has written a short scene in the style of Beckett; Giulia is directing it.

Tabella 11.6 Listening script — At the Rehearsal

Speaker	Line
Giulia	Right, from the top of the scene. Marta, you're at the bus stop, Elena comes on from the left. And… go.
Marta	(as A) Is this the stop for the number nothing?
Elena	(as B) It was yesterday.
Marta	(as A) And today?
Elena	(as B) Today it's a lamp post. (Pause.) But the bus stops here anyway.
Marta	(as A) How long have you been waiting?
Elena	(as B) I don't know. I had a watch, but it was waiting too. It stopped.
Giulia	Sorry — can we stop there a second? Marta, that was lovely, but you came in a bit early after Elena's pause.
Marta	Did I? I thought the pause was finished.
Giulia	It's just that the pause is sort of the joke. If we cut it, the line about the watch hasn't got anything to land on.
Elena	I wrote "Pause" in the script, actually. In capitals.
Marta	Elena, I can read. I'm disorganised, I'm not blind.
Giulia	OK, OK. Would you mind counting to three in your head before you answer? Just for now.
Marta	Fine. One, two, three. Is it a bit dark in here, or is it me?
Giulia	(laughs) That's a hint, isn't it? Elena, could you possibly get the light by the door?
Elena	Sure. (Pause.) Better?
Marta	Much. And while we're at it, I was wondering if we could change the hat. This one smells of the cupboard.
Giulia	I'm afraid it's the only hat we've got. Prof.ssa Rossi brought it from home.
Prof.ssa Rossi	(from the back) I heard that! It belonged to my grandfather, and it smells of history.
Marta	It's a wonderful hat, Prof. I'll wear it with pride.
Prof.ssa Rossi	Good. And for what it's worth, the pause works. The audience will wait, if you make them. That's the whole point of Beckett.
Giulia	Right. From "How long have you been waiting", then. And this time, Marta, really wait.

After listening. Answer the Listening questions in the Esercizi (Towards the Exam); the key gives the answers.

11.5.3 Speaking: role-play and improvisation

In an improvisation nobody gives you the next line, so you need language that keeps a conversation going while you think, and ways of dealing with silence — yours or your partner's. The most famous rule of improvised theatre is to accept what your partner offers and add something: *Yes, and…*, never a flat *No*.

Tabella 11.7 Useful language — role-play and improvisation

Function	Expressions
Buying time	*Well… · Let me think. · That's a good question. · How can I put it? · The thing is…*
Fillers (spoken only)	*you know · I mean · sort of · kind of · actually · right*
Accepting and building	*Yes, and… · Exactly — and what's more… · That reminds me…*
Dealing with silence	*So… where were we? · Anyway… · Shall I go on? · What do you think?*
Rescuing your partner	*I think what you mean is… · Didn't you say something about…? · Go on, tell them about…*
Paraphrasing a missing word	*It's a kind of… · the thing you use for… · a person who…*

- **Task 1 (pairs, 3 minutes).** Improvise a scene at a bus stop, a waiting room or a station platform. Student A waits for someone who has not come; Student B arrives and refuses to explain why. Use at least two indirect requests, one polite refusal and one evasive answer. Swap roles.
- **Task 2 (groups of three).** One student is a director, two are actors. Rehearse the first lines of the model scene in the Writing section. The director must give at least four pieces of advice politely (softeners, *Would you mind…?*, negative questions); the actors must accept, ask for clarification or refuse with a reason.

11.5.4 Writing: a dramatic scene

A dramatic scene is a short piece of theatre: two or more characters, one situation, dialogue and stage directions. In a written scene you show, you do not tell: the characters' feelings must come through what they say, what they avoid saying, and what they do. Read the scene Giulia wrote for the theatre group.

Tabella 11.8 Model text — Giulia's scene "The Interview" (242 words, title and cast list excluded)

The Interview
Characters: SMITH, an interviewer; CANDIDATE, nineteen.

An office with no window. A desk, two chairs, a clock without hands. SMITH sits, writing. CANDIDATE enters holding a folder.

CANDIDATE. Good morning. I have an appointment at ten.
SMITH. *(without looking up)* Everyone has an appointment at ten.
CANDIDATE. Should I sit down?
SMITH. Would you like to sit down?
CANDIDATE. If that's all right.
SMITH. It's a chair. *(Pause.)* Sit.
CANDIDATE sits. SMITH goes on writing.
CANDIDATE. I've brought my CV.
SMITH. We know about your CV.
CANDIDATE. Oh. Good. So… would you like to ask me anything?
SMITH. Where were you on Tuesday?
CANDIDATE. Tuesday? At school, I think. Why?
SMITH. You think.
CANDIDATE. I was at school.
SMITH. *(looking up for the first time)* Do you like the room?
CANDIDATE. It's… very quiet.
SMITH. People find it restful. Some stay for years.
CANDIDATE. *(laughing nervously)* I only came about the summer job.
SMITH. Of course. *(He stands, walks to the door and locks it.)* We'll start whenever you're ready.
CANDIDATE. I'm ready now, actually.
SMITH. No. *(Pause.)* Not yet.
He sits again and goes on writing. CANDIDATE looks at the clock without hands. Silence. The lights fade slowly.

Analysis. The opening stage direction sets a strange, closed place in one line (the clock without hands tells us that time has stopped). The dialogue is made of short, ordinary lines, but Smith never answers a question directly: he repeats (*Everyone has an appointment at ten*), answers with a question (*Would you like to sit down?*), picks up a word to make it threatening (*You think.*). The menace grows through polite language, a locked door and pauses, without a single violent word. The scene ends on an image, not an explanation.

Checklist. ✓ a title and a cast list · ✓ an opening stage direction (place, objects, who is on stage) in the present tense and in italics · ✓ a clear situation and a change or tension · ✓ characters who speak differently · ✓ stage directions for important actions and pauses, not for every gesture · ✓ dialogue that shows feelings indirectly · ✓ a strong ending (an action, a line or an image) · ✓ the play's layout: NAME. Line.

Task (250–300 words). Write a dramatic scene for two characters in a single place: a waiting room, a lift that has stopped, the last bus, a shop that never closes. One character wants something the other will not give. Use stage directions, at least one meaningful pause and at least

one evasive answer. **Exchange:** send your scene to Sam in Manchester with a short email (60–80 words) asking him, politely, to suggest one cut and one change.

LEARNING TO LEARN

The oral exam: staying fluent. In the colloquio no one expects you never to hesitate; they expect you to keep going. Fluency is a set of strategies, and you can practise them.

- **Paraphrase when a word is missing.** Do not stop: describe it (*the thing actors carry on stage… props*), use a general word (*a kind of poem*) or an opposite (*not hopeful, rather the opposite*).
- **Buy time honestly.** *That's an interesting question; let me think for a moment* is better than a long silence. One sentence of buying time per answer is plenty.
- **Use your silences.** A short pause before an important point sounds confident, as in Pinter; a pause in the middle of a sentence sounds lost. Finish the sentence, then breathe.
- **Manage nerves.** Prepare the first two minutes of each percorso aloud, so that your voice is already warm when the unexpected questions come; slow down on purpose; look at the examiners, not at your notes.
- **Transfer.** The same strategies work in Italian, and in the Latin and Greek parts of the exam, where you will often have to explain a word you cannot translate exactly.

Colloquio link. *Waiting for Godot* → **philosophy**: the absurd and existentialism (Camus, Sartre); or → **Greek**: Sisyphus in *Odyssey* XI (see the Connections).

11.6 Connections: Waiting in the Desert, Sisyphus in Hades

11.6.1 Italian literature: Buzzati's fortress and Pirandello's stage

Thirteen years before *Godot*, an Italian novel had already made waiting the substance of a life. Dino Buzzati (1906–1972) published *Il deserto dei Tartari* in 1940. It is still protected by copyright, so here is a summary. The young lieutenant Giovanni Drogo is posted to the Fortezza Bastiani, a remote fortress on the edge of a desert from which, it is said, the Tartars might one day attack. He means to leave after a few months, but the routine, the empty landscape and the hope of a glorious battle hold him there; the years pass, his friends leave or die, the city forgets him. When at last the enemy appears on the horizon, Drogo, now old and ill, is sent away to make room for the new officers, and he dies alone in the room of an inn — facing, at least, the one enemy that has really come.

The two works share a situation — people waiting for an arrival that gives their lives meaning — but treat it differently. Buzzati tells a whole life in time, with a realistic setting, a psychology and a moral: Drogo has wasted his life, but finds dignity at the end. Beckett removes time,

setting and psychology; his tramps have no story to waste, and nothing is resolved. In the colloquio you can present Buzzati as a novel of waiting, Beckett as a theatre of waiting.

The theatre that questions theatre has an Italian ancestor. In Luigi Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, first performed at the Teatro Valle in Rome on 9 May 1921 among shouts and protests, a company is rehearsing a play when six characters, abandoned by their author, walk in and ask to have their drama performed:

> *Noi veramente veniamo qua in cerca d'un autore.*
>
> — Luigi Pirandello, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921), the Father's first words (Bemporad first edition, as transcribed on Wikisource; the revised text of 1925 has «Siamo qua in cerca d'un autore»)

"Actually, we have come here in search of an author." Like Beckett's, Pirandello's stage is bare — a theatre during a rehearsal — and the drama is about the impossibility of telling a story completely. Pirandello died in 1936; his work is in the public domain.

11.6.2 Classico: Sisyphus

In the underworld of *Odyssey* XI, which you read in the ginnasio, Odysseus sees the great sinners punished for ever. One of them is Sisyphus, king of Corinth, who in the myth had cheated the gods and even death:

Tabella 11.9 Sisyphus in the underworld: *Odyssey* XI.596–598. Greek text of the Perseus Digital Library (ed. Murray), checked against the transcription on Greek Wikisource. Translation by the editors.

Original	English (translation by the editors)
«λᾶαν ἄνω ὤθεσκε ποτὶ λόφον· ἀλλ' ὅτε μέλλοι ἄκρον ὑπερβαλέειν, τότ' ἀποστρέψασκε κραταιίς· αὖτις ἔπειτα πέδονδε κυλίνδετο λᾶας ἀναιδής.» (*lāan anō ōtheske poti lophon; all' hote melloi / akron hyperbaleein, tot' apostrepsaske krataiis; / autis epeita pedonde kylindeto lāas anaidēs*)	"He kept pushing the stone up towards the crest; but whenever he was about to heave it over the top, then the overpowering weight would turn it back, and down again to the plain rolled the shameless stone."

The verbs in *-σκ-* (*ὤθεσκε*, *ἀποστρέψασκε*) are Homeric iteratives: they describe an action repeated again and again, and the grammar itself makes the punishment endless. The stone is *ἀναιδής*, "shameless", as if it mocked the man. The meaning of *κραταιίς* is uncertain — a noun for "overpowering force", or a name, Krataiis, as some editors print it.

In 1942 Albert Camus made Sisyphus the hero of his essay on the absurd, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Camus is not in the public domain, so in summary: he calls absurd the conflict between the human need for meaning and a world that gives none, and he sees in Sisyphus walking back down to his stone the moment of lucid awareness in which a man accepts his task without hope — and ends by asking us to imagine Sisyphus happy. Beckett's tramps, waiting each day for the same Godot, can be read as Sisyphus without the stone. Some critics have also compa-

red Vladimir and Estragon to a Greek chorus whose tragedy never begins: they watch, comment and endure, but no hero arrives to act. This is an interpretation, not Beckett's declared model.

COLLEGAMENTI

Biology: DNA, 1953. In April 1953, a few months after *Godot* opened in Paris, the journal *Nature* published the structure of DNA, the molecule that carries genetic information. James Watson and Francis Crick, working in Cambridge, proposed a **double helix** (*doppia elica*): two long strands of sugar and phosphate, running in opposite directions and twisted round each other, joined by pairs of bases. Each **base pair** (*coppia di basi*) is held by hydrogen bonds — adenine always with thymine, cytosine always with guanine — so that each strand is the template for the other, which explains how DNA can be copied (Figura 11.5).

The model rested on experimental evidence obtained at King's College London. In May 1952 Raymond Gosling, a PhD student working under **Rosalind Franklin**, took an X-ray diffraction image of DNA, "Photo 51", whose X-shaped pattern pointed clearly to a helix; Franklin's measurements also showed that the phosphate backbones were on the outside. In January 1953 Maurice Wilkins showed the photograph to Watson without Franklin's knowledge. The same issue of *Nature* printed papers by Wilkins's group and by Franklin and Gosling. Watson, Crick and Wilkins received the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1962; Franklin had died in 1958, aged thirty-seven, and the prize is not awarded after death. Her essential contribution is now widely recognised.

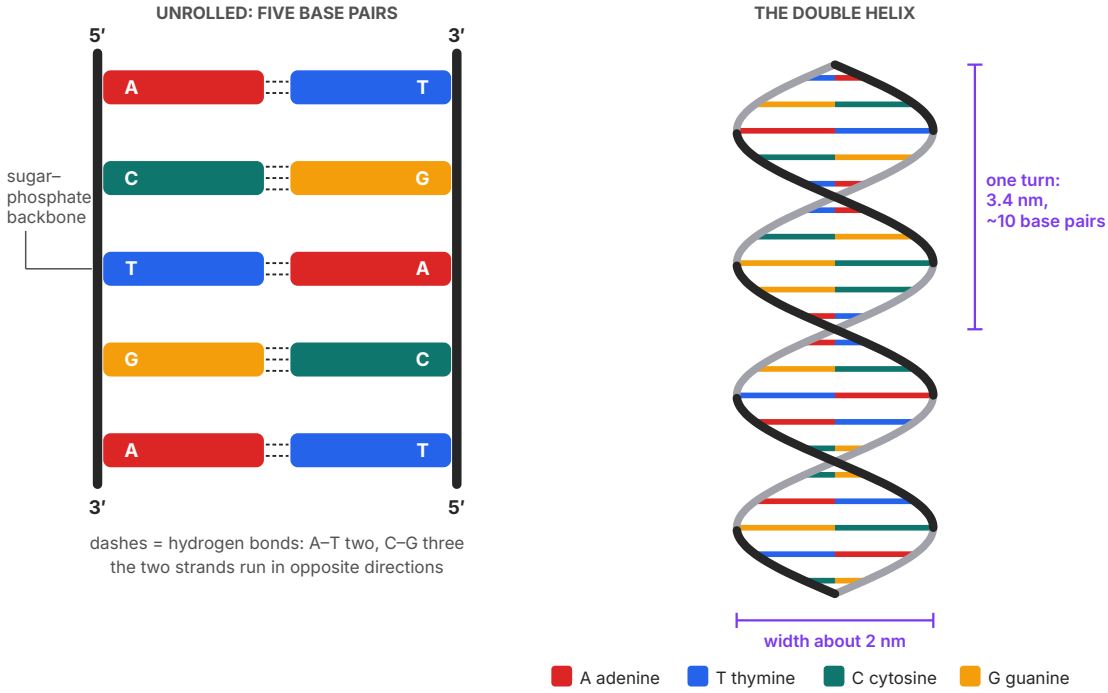


Figura 11.5 The DNA double helix (simplified). Left: a short stretch unrolled, with the two sugar–phosphate backbones running in opposite directions (5′ → 3′ and 3′ → 5′) and the base pairs A–T and C–G. Right: the helix, about 2 nm wide, with one complete turn every 3.4 nm (about 10 base pairs); the real helix has a major and a minor groove, not drawn here.

SINTESI

- Labour won the election of July 1945, and Attlee's government (1945–1951) built the **welfare state** on the Beveridge Report (1942): national insurance, free secondary education and the **NHS** (5 July 1948), with the **nationalisation** of coal, railways and other industries.
- Austerity lasted: **rationing** ended only in July 1954; the Festival of Britain (1951) and the coronation of Elizabeth II (2 June 1953) offered a brighter image of the nation.
- Britain tested its first atomic bomb in 1952; CND was founded in 1958. The **Suez crisis** (1956) showed that Britain could no longer act as a world power without the United States.
- The 1960s brought affluence, youth culture, the Beatles and "Swinging London" (a *Time* label, 1966), and liberal reforms, including the end of stage censorship (Theatres Act, 1968).
- **Samuel Beckett** wrote *En attendant Godot* in French (Paris, 1953) and translated it (London, 1955): a tragicomedy in two acts in which two tramps wait for a Godot who never comes.
- The **Theatre of the Absurd** is Martin Esslin's label (1961) for drama that shows a meaningless human condition through circular action, broken language and comedy; it was never an organised movement.
- Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (Royal Court, 8 May 1956) gave its name to the **Angry Young Men** (a journalists' label); **kitchen-sink drama** brought working-class domestic life to the stage.
- Harold Pinter's **comedy of menace** (Irving Wardle's phrase, 1958) builds threat out of ordinary dialogue, evasions and pauses (*The Birthday Party*, 1958).
- **Dylan Thomas**'s "Do not go gentle into that good night" (1951) is a **villanelle** — nineteen lines, two rhymes, two refrains — in which a son urges his dying father to resist death; Thomas is PD in Italy since 2024.
- Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) is an allegory of civilisation and violence; its ending is ironic, since the rescuer belongs to a world at war.
- **Pragmatics:** an **implicature** is meaning the listener must infer; English prefers indirect requests, softened refusals, softeners and hedges; pauses and evasion also communicate.
- Buzzati's *Il deserto dei Tartari* (1940) is a novel of waiting; Pirandello's *Sei personaggi* (1921) questions the theatre; Sisyphus (*Odyssey* XI) became Camus's image of the absurd; the double helix of DNA (1953) rested on Rosalind Franklin's X-ray evidence.

ESERCIZI

History and Literature

1. ● Which of these was NOT one of Beveridge's "five giants"?
   - **A.** Want
   - **B.** Ignorance
   - **C.** Idleness
   - **D.** Inflation

2. ● When did food rationing end in Britain?
   - **A.** May 1945
   - **B.** July 1948
   - **C.** July 1954
   - **D.** November 1956

3. ● Who invented the label "Theatre of the Absurd"?
   - **A.** Samuel Beckett
   - **B.** Martin Esslin
   - **C.** Albert Camus
   - **D.** Irving Wardle

4. ● Match each work with its author and its date: *Look Back in Anger* · *The Birthday Party* · *Lord of the Flies* · *En attendant Godot* (first performance) · *Under Milk Wood* (first broadcast) — Beckett · Golding · Osborne · Pinter · Thomas — 1953 · 1954 · 1954 · 1956 · 1958.

5. ●● True or false? Correct the false statements. a The NHS began on 5 July 1948. b Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* in English and translated it into French. c The Angry Young Men published a manifesto in 1956. d After Suez, Anthony Eden resigned. e Dylan Thomas wrote in Welsh. f The Theatres Act of 1968 abolished the Lord Chamberlain's censorship of plays.

6. ●● Explain each term in one or two sentences, with an example from the chapter: a welfare state · b kitchen-sink drama · c comedy of menace · d villanelle · e tragicomedy.

7. ●●● Short answer (60–80 words): Why was the Suez crisis a turning point for Britain?

Text Analysis

8. ● In T1, which line is the second refrain (A2)?
   - **A.** Rage, rage against the dying of the light
   - **B.** Do not go gentle into that good night
   - **C.** Old age should burn and rave at close of day
   - **D.** Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray

9. ● T1: Copy the scheme of the first tercet and of the quatrain (rhyme letters and refrains). Which words make up the *a* rhyme of the final stanza?

10. ●● T1: Find and explain: a an oxymoron; b a pun; c a metaphor for death; d an example of alliteration.

11. ●● T2: Complete the comparison of the two acts with three things that stay the same and three that change. Then explain, in 40–60 words, what the circular structure suggests.

12. ●● T3: Explain the irony of the ending of *Lord of the Flies* in 50–70 words. Refer to the fire and to the naval officer.

13. ●●● Write a PEE paragraph (80–100 words) on this point: "In T1 repetition is a source of energy."

14. ●●● Colloquio link (60–80 words): from *Waiting for Godot* to another subject of your choice (philosophy, Greek, Italian or history).

Language

15. ● What is meant? Write the implicature of each utterance in its context. a *Your essay is… interesting.* (a teacher, returning an essay) b *I'm not really a fan of horror films.* (answer to "Shall we see the new horror film?") c *Is anyone else hot?* (in a classroom with closed windows) d *Some of the actors knew their lines.* (after a rehearsal)

16. ● Put these requests in order from the most direct (1) to the most indirect (5): a *I was wondering if you could lend me your notes.* b *Lend me your notes.* c *Could you lend me your notes?* d *Can you lend me your notes?* e *Would you mind lending me your notes?*

17. ●● Make these requests more polite for the situation in brackets. a *Give me the script.* (to a director you have just met) b *Turn the music down.* (to a neighbour) c *Explain this again.* (to a teacher) d *Move your bag.* (to a stranger on a train)

18. ●● Refuse these invitations politely, using at least three of the moves in Tabella 11.3. a *Do you want to come to my party on Saturday?* b *Could you play Lucky in our production?* c *Would you like to join the debate team?*

19. ●● Correct the errors (✗). a *Would you mind to help me with the set?* b *Excuse me, you can tell me where the theatre is?* c *I want a ticket for tonight.* (at the box office) d A: *Would you mind if I opened the window?* B: *Yes, of course, go ahead.*

20. ●● Add a softener or hedge to each sentence: *just, a bit, possibly, I'm afraid, I think, sort of*. a *The second act is long.* b *Could I ask a question?* c *We can't lend you the costumes.* d *Your character is unclear.* e *Could you move?*

21. ●● Rewrite each criticism as a negative question or a suggestion with *might*. a *Cut the last line.* b *The pause is too short.* c *You should speak more slowly.*

22. ●●● Read the dialogue and identify each strategy of evasion (question for question, change of subject, repetition, vague answer). A: *Did you finish the scene?* B: *Which scene?* A: *The one for Thursday.* B: *Thursday… Is it Thursday already?* A: *Did you finish it?* B: *More or less. Have you had lunch?*

23. ●●● Translate into English, using an indirect request or a polite refusal. a *Scusi, potrebbe ripetere la domanda?* b *Mi dispiace, ma sabato non posso: ho le prove. Facciamo la settimana prossima?* c *Volevo chiederle se posso consegnare il saggio lunedì.*

Vocabulary

24. ● Complete with a word from Tabella 11.5: a The ____ were very simple: a hat, a rope and a carrot. b We had our last ____ the night before the first performance. c The ____ describe the place in only five words. d The whole ____ came on stage at the end to bow. e The ____ was so quiet that you could hear the actors breathe.

25. ●● Complete each sentence with a collocation of waiting and time, in the right form: *wait in vain, keep someone waiting, can't wait, hang on, while away the hours, play for time, wait and see*. a Sorry to ____ you ____ — the bus was late. b Vladimir and Estragon ____ for Godot. c The tramps ____ with games and insults. d I ____ to see the show! e "Will the play be a success?" "We'll have to ____." f When she didn't know the answer, she tried to ____. g ____ a minute — I'll get my coat.

26. ●● *Wait* or *await*? Choose and add a preposition where necessary. a The cast nervously ____ the reviews. b We ____ Marta for twenty minutes. c Applicants should ____ an email from the school. d How long have you ____ the bus?

Writing and Speaking

27. ●●● Write a dramatic scene (250–300 words) following the task in the Writing section. Use the checklist.

28. ●●● Speaking. In pairs, improvise for three minutes: Student A is a director who wants to cut half of Student B's favourite scene; Student B is the playwright. Both must stay polite while disagreeing. Then report to the class, in one minute, what you agreed.

Towards the Exam

29. ●● Listening (on the printed script "At the Rehearsal" in the Skills section; books closed while the script is read). a Where are A and B, and what are they waiting for? b Why does Giulia stop the rehearsal? c What does Marta mean by *Is it a bit dark in here, or is it me?* How does Giulia understand it? d Find three softeners or indirect requests in Giulia's lines. e How does Marta repair her rudeness about the hat? f According to Prof.ssa Rossi, why does the pause work?

30. ●● Reading (multiple choice, inspired by INVALSI formats). Read the text and choose A, B, C or D.
When the National Health Service opened on 5 July 1948, many family doctors expected chaos. Some had campaigned against it for months, afraid of becoming civil servants. In the first weeks the waiting rooms were indeed full: people who had lived for years with bad teeth, poor eyesight or untreated pain came at last, because now they did not have to pay. Opticians ran out of glasses; dentists worked late into the evening. Critics said that the cost would ruin the country, and in 1951 the government introduced charges for glasses and false teeth — a decision that led Aneurin Bevan, the minister who had created the service, to resign. Yet the principle survived. For most British people the NHS soon stopped being a political argument and became part of ordinary life, like the post office or the weather forecast.
a Some doctors opposed the NHS because they A thought it was too cheap. B did not want to work for the state. C had too few patients. D wanted more hospitals.
b The full waiting rooms show that A the service was badly organised. B doctors refused to work. C the population had grown. D people had previously gone without treatment because of cost.
c Bevan resigned because A the government started charging for some treatments. B the NHS failed. C doctors attacked him. D he lost the election.
d The last sentence suggests that the NHS A remained controversial. B was replaced by insurance. C became something people took for granted. D was privatised.

31. ●● Open cloze. Write ONE word in each gap. *Beckett wrote* Waiting for Godot *in French and then translated it (a) ____ English himself. The play shows two tramps (b) ____ wait for a man called Godot. (c) ____ the end of each act, a boy arrives to say that Godot will not come today. Although very (d) ____ happens, audiences have found it funny and moving (e) ____ more than seventy years. Beckett is reported to have denied (f) ____ Godot was God.*

32. ●●● Key-word transformations. Complete the second sentence so that it means the same as the first, using the word in capitals (2–5 words). a "Please close the window," she said. MIND — "Would you ____ the window?" she asked. b I'd love to come, but I have a rehearsal. AFRAID — I'd love to come, but ____ because I have a rehearsal. c It's possible that the critics didn't understand the play. MAY — The critics ____ the play. d The tramps wait, but Godot never arrives. VAIN — The tramps ____ for Godot.

33. ●●● Colloquio prompt. The material: the last two lines of Dylan Thomas's poem (T1, lines 18–19) and a short description of a stage — *a country road, a bare tree, evening*. In about two minutes: identify the two works; say what they have in common and how they differ; link them to one other subject (philosophy, Greek, Italian or history). Prepare three key words and one quotation.

PER APPROFONDIRE

- [ESS] M. Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*: the introduction, on the meaning of "absurd", and the chapters on Beckett and on Pinter.
- [NOR] S. Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. F: the introduction to the twentieth century and the post-war poetry and drama.
- [SAN] A. Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*: the chapter on literature after 1945.
- [ABR] M. H. Abrams, G. G. Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*: the entries on the literature of the absurd and on speech-act theory.
- [SWA] M. Swan, *Practical English Usage*: the entries on politeness, distancing and requests.
- The texts of this chapter online: Dylan Thomas at the Academy of American Poets (poets.org); Pirandello, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921), Wikisource; Homer, *Odyssey*, Perseus Digital Library.

Glossario del capitolo

Angry Young Men
"giovani arrabbiati" — a journalists' label (1956) for young British writers of the 1950s, such as Osborne and Amis, whose heroes rebel against class and complacency.

Base pair
coppia di basi — two bases joined by hydrogen bonds across the DNA double helix: adenine with thymine, cytosine with guanine.

Comedy of menace
commedia della minaccia — Irving Wardle's phrase (1958) for plays, like Pinter's, in which ordinary comic dialogue in a closed room hides a growing, unexplained threat.

Cooperative principle
principio di cooperazione — Grice's idea that speakers assume each other to be relevant, truthful, clear and suitably informative, and interpret replies on that basis.

Double helix
doppia elica — the structure of DNA: two strands running in opposite directions and twisted round each other (Watson and Crick, 1953).

Evasion
evasività, risposta elusiva — avoiding a direct answer by changing the subject, repeating the question, answering with a question or staying vague.

Implicature
implicatura — a meaning that is not stated but that the listener is expected to infer from the context (*It's cold in here* = close the window).

Indirect request
richiesta indiretta — a request made as a question or a statement (*Could you…? Would you mind…? It's a bit dark*) rather than with an imperative.

Kitchen-sink drama
teatro "del lavello" — realistic British drama of the late 1950s about the everyday domestic life of working-class people.

Nationalisation
nazionalizzazione — the transfer of a private industry to public ownership (coal 1947, railways 1948 in Britain).

Pinter pause
la "pausa pinteriana" — a silence marked in Pinter's dialogue that carries meaning: threat, evasion, a struggle for power.

Politeness strategy
strategia di cortesia — a way of protecting the listener's "face": positive politeness stresses closeness, negative politeness avoids imposing (Brown and Levinson's model).

Rationing
razionamento — limiting each person to a fixed amount of food or goods, bought with coupons; in Britain it lasted from 1940 to 1954.

Softener
attenuatore — a word or phrase that reduces the force of a request, criticism or refusal: *just, a bit, possibly, I'm afraid*.

Tercet
terzina — a stanza of three lines; a villanelle has five tercets and a quatrain.

Theatre of the Absurd
teatro dell'assurdo — Martin Esslin's label (1961) for drama that presents the human condition as meaningless through circular action, broken language and comedy (Beckett, Ionesco).

Tragicomedy
tragicommedia — a play that mixes tragic and comic elements; Beckett's subtitle for *Waiting for Godot*.

Villanelle
villanella — a fixed form of nineteen lines (five tercets and a quatrain) on two rhymes, with two refrains that alternate and close the poem together.

Welfare state
stato sociale — a state that takes responsibility for its citizens' basic security: health, education, pensions and support in unemployment.

Soluzioni

1. D (the five giants were Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness).

2. C (4 July 1954, when meat rationing ended).

3. B (Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 1961).

4. *Look Back in Anger* — Osborne — 1956; *The Birthday Party* — Pinter — 1958; *Lord of the Flies* — Golding — 1954; *En attendant Godot* — Beckett — 1953; *Under Milk Wood* — Thomas — 1954.

5. a True. b False: he wrote it in French (*En attendant Godot*, 1953) and translated it into English (1955). c False: "Angry Young Men" is a journalists' label for writers who never formed a movement; no manifesto launched them. d True (9 January 1957). e False: he was Welsh but wrote in English. f True.

6. Model answers: a A state that takes responsibility for citizens' basic security — health, education, pensions, unemployment support; e.g. Britain after 1945, with the NHS. b Realistic drama about everyday working-class domestic life in cramped interiors; e.g. Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*. c Drama in which ordinary, funny conversation in a closed room hides a growing, unexplained threat; e.g. Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. d A fixed form of nineteen lines — five tercets and a quatrain — on two rhymes, with two refrains; e.g. Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night". e A play that mixes tragic and comic elements; Beckett's subtitle for *Waiting for Godot*.

7. Model answer: In 1956 Britain and France, secretly agreeing with Israel, invaded Egypt after Nasser nationalised the canal. The United States refused to support them and put pressure on the pound, and the operation was stopped within days; Eden resigned. Suez showed that Britain was no longer an independent world power: it could not act against the wishes of the United States, and the end of empire accelerated.

8. A.

9. First tercet: A1 b A2 (*a b a*). Quatrain: *a b* A1 A2 (*a b a a*) — line 16 (*a*), line 17 (*b*), then the two refrains. The *a* rhymes of the final stanza are *height*, *night*, *light*.

10. a *blinding sight* (line 13): sight that blinds. b *Grave men* (line 13): serious men and men near the grave. c *that good night* or *the dying of the light*: death as night or as light going out. d *Blind eyes could blaze* (line 14), or *sang the sun* (line 10).

11. Same: the place and time of day; Vladimir and Estragon waiting; the Boy's message; the ending in which they agree to leave and do not move. Changed: the tree has leaves; Pozzo is blind and Lucky dumb; Estragon (and Pozzo) remember little of the day before; the speakers of the final exchange are swapped. Model: the circular structure suggests that the waiting has no end — there could be a third act exactly like the second, and life itself is this repetition without progress.

12. Model answer: The ending looks like a rescue, but it is ironic. The officer has come because of the smoke of the fire that Jack's tribe lit to kill Ralph, so violence, not the signal fire, brings help. The officer is shocked by the boys' savagery, yet he is himself part of an adult war, and he returns to a warship: the adult world is the boys' world on a larger scale.

13. Model PEE: *In T1 repetition does not slow the poem down but drives it forward. The refrain "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" appears four times, and its own first word is repeated, so that the command grows louder at each return. By contrast with the slow, falling -ay rhyme, the refrains insist on action; when they are joined in the final couplet, the son's appeal reaches its greatest intensity. Repetition here is the voice of someone who refuses to accept silence.*

14. Guidance: e.g. → philosophy: the absurd as the gap between our need for meaning and a silent world (Camus); waiting as the human condition;

existentialism (we exist first, and must give ourselves meaning). Or → Greek: Sisyphus and his endless task in *Odyssey* XI.593–600, the iterative verbs. Or → Italian: Buzzati's Drogo; Pirandello's characters in search of an author. Or → history: post-war uncertainty and the nuclear age, presented as context and not as the play's "message".

15. a The essay is not good (but I don't want to say so). b No, I don't want to see it. c Please open a window. d Not all the actors knew their lines (probably many did not).

16. b (1) – d (2) – c (3) – e (4) – a (5).

17. Possible answers: a *Could I have a look at the script, please?* b *Sorry to bother you, but would you mind turning the music down a bit?* c *I'm sorry, I didn't quite follow — could you possibly explain that again?* d *Excuse me, would you mind moving your bag so I can sit down?*

18. Possible answers: a *Thanks so much for inviting me. I'd love to, but I'm afraid I can't — I'm going to my grandparents' this weekend. Could we meet next week instead?* b *That's really kind of you to ask, but I don't think I can: I've got too much on before the exam. Maybe next year?* c *What a shame — I'd really like to, but I already have rehearsals on those afternoons. Let me know if there's a one-off event, though.*

19. a *Would you mind* ***helping*** *me…* b *Excuse me,* ***could you tell me*** *where the theatre is?* c *Could I have / I'd like a ticket for tonight, please.* d B: ***No, not at all*** *— go ahead.* (*Would you mind…?* asks whether you object; *Yes* means you object.)

20. Possible answers: a *I think the second act is a bit long.* b *Could I just ask a question?* c *I'm afraid we can't lend you the costumes.* d *Your character is sort of unclear. / I think your character is a bit unclear.* e *Could you possibly move?*

21. Possible answers: a *Wouldn't it be better to cut the last line? / You might want to cut the last line.* b *Isn't the pause a bit short? / You might want to make the pause longer.* c *Wouldn't it help to speak more slowly? / You might want to speak a little more slowly.*

22. *Which scene?* — a question for a question; *Thursday… Is it Thursday already?* — repetition and a question that changes the topic; *More or less* — a vague answer; *Have you had lunch?* — a change of subject. B never says whether the scene is finished: probably it is not.

23. a *Excuse me, could you repeat the question, please?* b *I'm sorry, but I can't make it on Saturday: I've got a rehearsal. Shall we make it next week?* c *I was wondering if I could hand in the essay on Monday.*

24. a props b rehearsal c stage directions d cast e audience.

25. a keep you waiting b wait in vain (waited in vain) c while away the hours d can't wait e wait and see f play for time g Hang on.

26. a awaited (*waited for* is also correct) b waited for c await (formal, as in an official notice; *wait for* is also correct) d been waiting for.

27. Assessment: layout of a script (title, cast list, NAME. line); an opening stage direction in the present; one situation with tension; at least one meaningful pause and one evasive answer; dialogue that shows feelings indirectly; an ending on an action, a line or an image; 250–300 words.

28. Model (playwright): *I see what you mean, and I'm grateful you've read it so carefully. But wouldn't we lose the joke if we cut the pause? Could we perhaps cut the first half of the speech instead and keep the ending?* Report: *In the end we agreed to keep the ending and shorten the opening by about half.*

29. a At a bus stop that has become a lamp post; they are waiting for "the number nothing", a bus with no number. b Because Marta came in too early after Elena's pause. c She wants more light; Giulia understands it as a hint and asks Elena to turn on the light by the door. d *Sorry — can we stop there a second?*, *a bit*, *just*, *sort of*, *Would you mind…?*, *could you possibly…?*, *I'm afraid* (any three). e She praises the hat: *It's a wonderful hat… I'll wear it with pride.* f Because the audience will wait if the actors make them wait: waiting is the point of Beckett.

30. a B b D c A d C.

31. a into b who / that c At (also *Towards* or *Near*) d little e for f that.

32. a *"Would you* **mind closing** *the window?" she asked.* b *I'd love to come, but* **I'm afraid I can't** *because I have a rehearsal.* c *The critics* **may not have understood** *the play.* d *The tramps* **wait in vain** *for Godot.*

33. Model answer: *The first material comes from Dylan Thomas's villanelle "Do not go gentle into that good night" (1951), the second describes the stage of Beckett's* Waiting for Godot *(1953). Both were written in the same post-war years, and both face the end — of a life, or of meaning. But they answer it in opposite ways: Thomas commands resistance, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light", while Beckett's tramps wait and do not move. Both use repetition, a refrain and a repeated act. I would link them to philosophy, with Camus's idea of the absurd, or to Greek, with Sisyphus in* Odyssey *XI, whose stone always rolls back.* Key words: absurd, resistance, repetition.