

MAN'S QUEST FOR MEANING IN A MEANINGLESS UNIVERSE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S WAITING FOR GODOT

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Abstract

Samuel Beckett's most successful play Waiting for Godot was written in 1952. It constituted a new convention of drama. The trend, for want of a better title, has been vaguely labeled as 'The Theatre of Absurd'. The play received mixed responses in the beginning. The major reason was the absolute nothingness in the action. It ends where it starts, with no plot or character development. The circumstances remain the same. However if one delves deeper into the play, many layers get unfolded. What appears to be a simple two act play on the surface, actually represents a plethora of possibilities and complexities regarding the futility of human existence. It skillfully portrays man's insatiable quest to find meaning in this relatively meaningless universe. It talks volumes about man being a mere puppet in the hands of a superior power and his inability to change his lot and situation. He boisterously maneuvers to change his course but ultimately reaches at the same point where he started.

Key Words: Absurd, Meaningless Universe., Futility of Human Existence, Nothingness.

Waiting for Godot was originally written in French entitled En Attendant Godot. It broke new ground in theatre history as it had certain distinct features of its own. It was regarded by some critics as a great landmark in the history of English theatre. It is an unconventional play with no narrative sequence, steeped in apparently inconsequential dialogues and apparently pointless remarks. As a matter of fact there is no story worth the name. There is no story, no message, no spectacle, no star-part, no sex and in fact no woman in the cast, however its popularity lies in the fact that it has a general universal application everywhere. The general feelings of pointlessness of existence are stressed upon in the light of the derelicts; hence the response to this play has been overwhelming.

The phrase Absurd Drama or The Theatre of the Absurd became popular as a result of Martin Esslin's book The Theatre of the Absurd published in 1961. He makes certain important

suggestions when discussing the significance of the Absurd. According to him, the number of people for whom God is dead has greatly increased in the present century. This is an absurd world. Man is born without his asking for it. He does not know why he is here and where he has to go. The theatre of the Absurd is one of the ways of facing up to a universe that has lost its meaning and purpose. As such it fulfills a double role. Its first and most obvious role is satirical in Absurd plays. Here man is stripped of the accidental circumstances of social position and historical context. He feels the world has no meaning whatsoever. The resulting play ironically produces the effect of alienation. This drama speaks to a deeper level of the audience's mind. It challenges the audience to make sense of nonsense, face the situation consciously rather than feel it vaguely. It asks man to perceive, with laughter the fundamental absurdity of life. The Theatre of Absurd presents anxiety, despair, and a sense of loss at the disappearance of solutions and purposeless. Facing up to this loss means that we are face up to reality itself. Thus absurd drama becomes a kind of modern mystical experience.

. On an empty stage representing country road, bare but for a single sickly tree, two men dressed whether they have this appointment. The two men Vladimir and Estrogen are waiting for a mysterious figure Godot who never turns up. The two tramps keep on waiting and pass their time in endless cross talks. The two men are in some ways complimentary natures. Estrogen is emotional and a poet. Vladimir is more rational and down to earth. They are dependent upon each other, yet they want to get away from each other. Above all they are convinced of the desirability of doing away with themselves. But each time they attempt suicide they fail. In each of the two acts they meet another pair of characters Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo is big, fat and opulent. Lucky is thin, bedraggled and old. He is Pozzo's slave. Pozzo drives lucky with a whip and a halter around his neck. In the second act, Pozzo gets stricken with blindness and Lucky's halter now serves as a blind man's lead. The two pair of characters meet in each act try to communicate, fail and part. Whereas Vladimir and Estragon walk, Pozzo and Lucky resume their wanderings. At the end of each act, a little boy appears and brings a message from Godot, that he won't come today, but he will come tomorrow.

But what does it all mean? is the most frequent statement heard after one has seen or finished reading a play from the Theater of the Absurd movement. Beckett's plays were among the earliest and, therefore, created a great deal of confusion among the early critics. No definite conclusion or resolution can ever be offered to *Waiting for Godot* because the play is essentially circular and repetitive in nature. Once again, turn to the Dramatic Divisions section in these Notes and observe that the structure of each act is exactly alike. A traditional play, in contrast, has an introduction of the characters and the exposition; then, there is a statement of the problem of the play in relationship to its settings and characters. (In *Waiting for Godot*, we never know where the play takes place, except that it is set on "a country road.") Furthermore, in a traditional play, the characters are developed, and gradually we come to see the dramatist's world view; the play then rises to a climax, and there is a

conclusion. This type of development is called a linear development. In the plays of the Theater of the Absurd, the structure is often exactly the opposite. We have, instead, a circular structure, and most aspects of this drama support this circular structure in one way or another. The setting is the same, and the time is the same in both acts. Each act begins early in the morning, just as the tramps are awakening, and both acts close with the moon having risen. The action takes place in exactly the same landscape — a lonely, isolated road with one single tree. (In the second act, there are some leaves on the tree, but from the viewpoint of the audience, the setting is exactly the same.) We are never told where this road is located; all we know is that the action of the play unfolds on this lonely road. Thus, from Act I to Act II, there is no difference in either the setting or in the time and, thus, instead of a progression of time within an identifiable setting, we have a repetition in the second act of the same things that we saw and heard in the first act. More important than the repetition of setting and time, however, is the repetition of the actions. To repeat, in addition to the basic structure of actions indicated earlier — that is Vladimir and Estragon Alone. Arrival of Pozzo and Lucky Vladimir and Estragon Alone Arrival of Boy Messenger Vladimir and Estragon Alone .There are many lesser actions that are repeated in both acts. At the beginning of each act, for example, several identical concerns should be noted. Among these is the emphasis on Estragon's boots. Also, too, Vladimir, when first noticing Estragon, uses virtually the same words: "So there you are again" in Act I and "There you are again" in Act II. At the beginning of both acts, the first discussion concerns a beating that Estragon received just prior to their meeting. At the beginning of both acts, Vladimir and Estragon emphasize repeatedly that they are there to wait for Godot. In the endings of both acts, Vladimir and Estragon discuss the possibility of hanging themselves, and in both endings they decide to bring some good strong rope with them the next day so that they can indeed hang themselves. In addition, both acts end with the same words, voiced differently. With the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky in each act, we notice that even though their physical appearance has theoretically changed, outwardly they seem the same; they are still tied together on an endless journey to an unknown place to rendezvous with a nameless person. Likewise, the Boy Messenger, while theoretically different, brings the exact same message: Mr. Godot will not come today, but he will surely come tomorrow. Vladimir's difficulties with urination and his suffering are discussed in each act as a contrast to the suffering of Estragon because of his boots. In addition, the subject of eating, involving carrots, radishes, and turnips, becomes a central image in each act, and the tramps' involvement with hats, their multiple insults, and their reconciling embraces — these and many more lesser matters are found repeatedly in both acts. Finally, and most important, there are the larger concepts: first, the suffering of the tramps; second, their attempts, however futile, to pass time; third, their attempts to part, and, ultimately, their incessant waiting for Godot — all these make the two acts clearly repetitive, circular in structure, and the fact that these repetitions are so obvious in the play is Beckett's

manner of breaking away from the traditional play and of asserting the uniqueness of his own circular structure (Roberts).

The key words in the title are Godot and Waiting. What Godot stands for is not clear. Perhaps it is a weakened or diminutive form of the word God. It may be considered the intervention of a supernatural agency or a mythical human being which is likely to bring a complete change in the universe. Though he never appears on the stage, yet he is a real character like others whom we see on the stage. However the real issue is not Godot but the act of waiting itself. Godot, however represents the objective of waiting- an event, a person, a thing or even death. The play can be interpreted as the direct presentation of waiting, ignorance, impotence and boredom. At first the play does not seem to have any relation with human predicament. We do not feel interested in the talk of two garrulous tramps that are indifferent to the concerns of a civilized life. The word Godot is used many times and it looks to be some important personality but it never appears, However we do feel that Vladimir and Estrogen are waiting for someone though they have no idea of that personality nor are they sure that they are waiting at the right place or what would happen when Godot comes. Everything seems to be shrouded in mystery. But one thing is certain. Two tramps are waiting – how they kill time when the person whom they are waiting for does not turn up. Moreover they have no watches, no time table, and no one to give them the correct information. Everything is vague and uncertain. They are also in the state of baffled helplessness which we also experience when we are forced to wait for someone. Thus we are forced to remain in a situation which we don't understand and which is beyond our control. These vagabonds please themselves by stories, singing songs, playing verbal games, pretending to be Pozzo and Lucky and doing physical exercise. But all these activities are mere stop-gap arrangements to pass their time, which reflects their monotony and languor. The flow of time confronts the basic problem of life. He is in a state of constant flux. Thus we are no single moment in our lives identical with ourselves.

And the boy speaks truly in his account of Godot :

Boy (in a rush): Mr Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow (Beckett 44).

Our familiar modern world can easily be reconstructed. The clock time plays an important part in this world. Like Pozzo we check our watches and busily organize our activities to make sure that we are in proper temporal compartment. Localization in space is almost as important. We are Italians Russians Englishmen and Frenchmen. The process involves constant movement irrespective of our big cities. Conversation and speech making consumes a good deal of our time. All these occupations leave them with little time to face the dread of suffering, old age and death. The world is reduced to the status of an illusory façade. Pozzo, after losing his watch claims that blind have no sense of time. This change which occurs in the second act of the play embraces Beckett's testament of man in time. Pozzo's

speech constitutes one of the striking instances of collapse of past and future into an eternal present.

Pozzo (suddenly furious): "Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! ... one day I went blind ... one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (Calmer.) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (Beckett 82).

Moreover, our sense of progressive time is destroyed by the introduction of circle. The innumerable repetitions and return to earlier phases, motifs and situations evoke the idea of circularity.

Vladimir's song at the beginning of Act two clearly has a cyclical pattern:

A dog came in the kitchen

And stole a crust of bread.

Then cook up with a ladle

And beat him till he was dead (Beckett 48) .

Within the context of infinity, any activity is meaningless and progress impossible.

Herein lays a clue towards understanding Beckett's intentions. "Nothing to be done", . Beckett's dual concern with stasis and journey forms the key note of *Godot*. Some events like the sprouting of the tree, the change of Estrogen's boots and the reversal of the fortunes of Lucky and Pozzo are meant to show that something is still taking its course in time. The tree changes from winter to spring. It simply reminds us that time proceeds indifferent to man's anguish. The verbal and physical brutality of Pozzo towards Lucky is an ironic comment on our professed respect for others. The myth of progress is deflated when we learn that in spite of vitamins, sanitation, penicillin, and physical education, man is in the process of shrinking. Beckett is out to destroy the surfaces. That is why our sex life leads to venereal diseases, and our laughter is silenced in pain. Dressed in rags like the tramps in the play, we wait for death which constantly eludes us. We are not free but bound to each other and *Godot*. We are not equal. We exist in a series of compartments in the social hierarchy. Even our feelings of charity and fraternity are inspired chiefly by our own selfish needs.

In *Godot*, even the biblical echoes are mocking ones. Christianity seemed to promise so much to man. If *Godot* is to be interpreted as God, Beckett's irony becomes usually heavy.

The following dialog shows it :

Vladimir: What does he do , Mr. *Godot*?

(Silence) Do you hear me?

Boy : Yes, sir.

Vladimir: Well?

Boy : He does nothing, Sir (Beckett 84).

Beckett's characters are all certain that God, as such, does not exist. Like many sensitive members of the civilization they are haunted by his absence or not being. Towards the end of the play, Vladimir realizes that he has been dreaming. He must wake up in order to face the world as it is. Just then Godot's messenger arrives. Consequently, his hopes are rekindled. He is plunged back in the passivity of illusion.

To conclude we can say that in Godot's continued absence man becomes a king of shreds and patches, of blindness and dumbness. He is only fit to play the clown and feed the worms. He is a victim of the world he did not make. He does not know the end. Nor the beginning. He continues to be tied to a dull circular routine. At the end of the day full of labor, he only returns to the point of start again. That is his tragedy. He is only blissfully happy that he is journeying towards a goal. He does not know this goal. This makes this play a tragedy of inaction.

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