



## Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: An Absurd Play

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### Abstract

This research article aims to evaluate Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as an Absurd Play. *Waiting for Godot* is an absurd play, first because it goes without any traditional plot or coherent story; secondly, because whatever characters there are in the play are strange or extraordinary ones, utterly unlike those we come across in other regular plays; thirdly, because there is nothing of conflict and action in the play; fourthly, because the atmosphere prevailing in the play is neither one of comedy nor one of tragedy, but that of strange futility of endless or hopeless wait; and lastly, because the speeches or dialogues of the play have been rendered in a highly repetitive, unconventional and broken form.

**Keywords:** Absurdity, existentialism, nihilism, uncertainty, meaninglessness.

### Introduction:

The English Edition of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, published in 1956, introduced the play as a 'tragic comedy in Two Acts'. However, the term 'tragic comedy' is not quite adequate for *Waiting for Godot*, because in its own right, it is a highly complex play, full of wit and humor, irony and satiric feelings, farce and pathos, trivial statements and serious suggestions, anguish and mystery, misery and expectations, nothingness and substance. *Waiting for Godot* is an absurd play, and it is rightly acclaimed as one of the major contributions to the Theater of the Absurd.

### Salient Features of the Theatre of the Absurd:

The Theatre of the Absurd is not a regular movement in drama, and in this respect it is basically different from verse plays, expressionist plays, or even problem plays and prose. The phrase, The Theatre of the Absurd may be traced to Albert Comus' essay entitled 'The Myth of Sisyphus', published in 1942, and it gained wide currency with the publication of Martin Esslin's book '*The Theatre of the Absurd*' in 1961. Some traits were found common to the works of a large number of dramatists, and it was only proper to adopt this term in relation to their writings. The dramatist who figure in this connection, at least the major ones, are Albert Comus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov and Eugene Ionesco.

Albert Comus defines the term 'absurd' as the tension that emerges from man's determination to discover order and purpose in a world which persistently refuses to have any such things in its fold. An absurd or absurdist dramatist sees life as a futile play acting; he portrays life as something farcical, comic, tragic, as something odd or chaotic where nothing logical or predetermined can take place, and he breaks all established rules and conventions. He gives no story or plot worth the name in his plays; his stories or plots, whatever they are, do not seem to have any beginning, middle or end; his plays do not register any subtlety of characterization or motivation; he offers no stable picture of the society he lives in, but only the dreams and nightmares of the society; and the speeches or dialogues that we get in his plays are not coherent statements but only incoherent babblings. He takes pains to demonstrate the absurdity of men's existence, his helplessness, his suffering, his loneliness, and his sameness despite so much of material progress; he lays bare soul's agony and the meaninglessness of life through dreams and fantasies, symbols and allegories, he tries to face the universe that has lost faith in god, and he seeks to present a picture of the human situation, of the human condition rather intuitively.

An absurd drama does not and cannot claim to offer solutions to man's problems, though it satirizes society that is petty and dishonest, and it is indeed difficult to affirm whether an absurd or absurdist dramatist thinks rationally, romantically or mysteriously, nevertheless, we have to accept that an absurd or absurdist dramatist is a serious thinker who tries to go deeper and still deeper into the layers of human psyche. Obscurity is indeed there in his plays, but it seems he does not care for the audience.

Samuel Beckett wrote several plays, besides novels, and his plays are *Waiting for Godot*, *Cardgame*, *Krappes Last Tape*, *Happy Days*, *Play Breath* and *Not I*. He did also write a number

of plays for radio, television and cinema, plays such as *All That Fall*, *Embers*, *Eh, Joe*, *Film*, *Words And Music*, *Cascando*, *Come and Go* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*. However, it is *Waiting for Godot* that is the most important of his plays, and it is, more or less on this very play that his name as a playwright does chiefly rest. As a dramatist and thinker Beckett was greatly influenced by the French existentialist, and it is quite in consonance with the spirit of the influence that *Waiting for Godot* undertakes the study of the human situation, of man's existential problems of choice, of life and death, of sin and salvation, of suffering and loneliness, of the loss of purpose in life and loss of faith in God.

#### **Waiting for Godot is an Absurd Play:**

*Waiting for Godot* is an absurd play, first because it goes without any traditional plot or coherent story; secondly because whatever characters there are in the play, are strange or extraordinary ones, utterly unlike those we come across in other regular plays; thirdly, because there is nothing of conflict and action in the play; fourthly, because the atmosphere prevailing in the play is neither one of comedy nor one of tragedy, but that of strange futility of endless or hopeless wait; and lastly, because the speeches or dialogues of the play have been rendered in a highly repetitive, unconventional and broken form.

*Waiting for Godot* has only two Acts, and it is the same scene in both the Acts, with the difference that while in Act I, the tree is bare, in Act II, it has acquired some leaves. It is difficult, if not impossible, to explain this difference logically for the reason that these two Acts or Scenes stand separated only by the margin of one night. The first two characters we encounter in the play are Estragon and Vladimir who are tramps, rootless, homeless wanderers and who keep on waiting for Godot. The dramatist does not give the physical descriptions of Estragon and Vladimir. Vladimir keeps standing in most part of the play, while Estragon sits down many

times and even dozes off. Estragon is inactive and Vladimir is restless. Vladimir looks at the sky and broods over spiritual or religious things. Estragon belongs to the stone; he is very much interested in worldly things. He always thinks over his breakfast, lunch and dinner. He is interested in removing his troubles and anxieties. He is straightforward and thoughtful. He forgets things continually and Vladimir reminds him continually. Estragon and Vladimir have been living together for fifty years. When Pozzo wants to know of their age, they do not tell him about their real age. Vladimir has his own tribulations, his own discomforts, but he is more tolerant, more patient than Estragon. He has his own mental troubles and he bothers for another person's thoughts. He proves it when he is ready to exchange his hat for Lucky. Vladimir stands for mental state and Estragon stands for physical things or the body. The dramatist shows it when Vladimir pays continuous attention to his hat and Estragon pays continuous attention to his boots. Vladimir and Estragon are diametrically opposite in temperament, they respond to a situation differently, but they both are essential in the play. Vladimir's spiritual temperament is balanced by Estragon's physical demands. Vladimir is happy to see Estragon and he is concerned about Estragon's welfare. As they talk and tease each other, Estragon wants to leave, but Vladimir reminds him that they are waiting for Godot, whom they seem to hardly know. They keep waiting for Godot and then become confused, bored and frustrated. They have a feeling of utter despair, so they consider hanging themselves from the tree, but soon they leave the idea and decide to keep waiting. Vladimir and Estragon are such human beings who do not know why they were born on earth, they make the uncertain assumption that there must be some point to their existence, and they look to Godot for enlightenment. Because they have a profound feeling or some intense hope that someday they will get some meaning and direction in life, they acquire a kind of nobility or dignity that enables them to rise above their

futile existence. In all likelihood, Godot has promised to see them at the place they have been waiting for him. We do not know, perhaps we cannot know, who this Godot is, and we do not find ourselves in a position to see whether he is Godot, Godin, God, Jesus, or anyone else. And even though a boy, in either of these scenes, brings a message to the tramp from Godot, he remains invisible to us. In any case, Godot is a mysterious and baffling character. The other two characters in the play are Pozzo and Lucky, the former being the master and later his slave. Pozzo and Lucky have been living together for sixty years. Pozzo exploits Lucky ruthlessly in all possible ways; he is terribly cruel to Lucky, he controls Lucky by means of an extremely long rope, which he jerks and tugs if Lucky is the least bit slow or inactive. He is on his way to the fair to sell his slave, Lucky. Lucky carries out every task that Pozzo orders him to do without any question. Afterwards Pozzo realizes that Lucky is a man of culture and refinement and has ability to reason and that he credits Lucky with having given him all his qualities. In Act I there is no physical deformity in them, in Act II intriguingly enough, Pozzo becomes blind and Lucky dumb. These two characters too do not seem to be the normal persons; in fact, they are not at all normal, and they live in strange conditions for their strange destination. At the close of the play we find Estragon and Vladimir still waiting for Godot at that very place. Throughout the play we find them talking of their boots, of the tower from the top of which they once thought of jumping down to death, of the pit and of the tree from which they want to hang themselves.

Although Waiting for Godot appears to be depressing, still in different parts of the play the four characters produce different movements of humor in their mannerism and behavior. In other words, tragic and comic aspects of the play are mingled simultaneously. Most of the time, we can feel this helpless absurdity throughout the play.

Estragon: why don't we hang ourselves?

Vladimir: with what?

Estragon: you haven't got a bit of rope?

Vladimir: no

Estragon: then we can't

Vladimir: let's go

Estragon: oh, wait, there is my belt

Vladimir: it's too short

Estragon: you could hang on to my legs

Vladimir: and who would hang onto mine?

Estragon: true

Or even when Estragon's pants are fallen off his feet, he does not pay attention to that, and Vladimir makes him conscious of that. The expression "nothing to be done" is repeated in most of their dialogues; it expresses the notion of absurdity in people's life. In other words, they start a new conversation or terminate one with this tangible feeling. The meaninglessness or absurdity in the play is absolutely tangible when Pozzo speaks these meaningful words:

Pozzo: (suddenly furious.) Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When!

When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, 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 is night once more. (He jerks the rope.) On!

Pozzo tries to unravel the notion of absurdity of his life, and refers to becoming deaf and dumb easily, he also tries to mention the absurdity of everyone's life when worldly matters are placed at the central part of their lives. He is uttering these strange expressions so downheartedly due to the fact that, he has realized the true nature of life and the eternal life.

#### Conclusion:

Although works of the Theater of the Absurd, particularly Beckett's, are often comical, their underlying premises are wholly serious. Uncertainty looms large in the whole play. It shows an uncertainty when we see that no one tries to make any movements in the play. Estragon: "don't let's do anything. It's safer" or "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful. Due to their uncertainty, they are somehow afraid of making any movements, so they remain still, or when Vladimir says, "Nothing is certain when we are about".

Even the most fundamental things are not certain, in other words, nothing is certain, not even sickness and death:

Estragon: Wait! (He moves away from Vladimir.) I sometimes wonder if we wouldn't have been better off alone, each one for himself. (He crosses the stage and sits down on the mound.) We weren't made for the same road.

Vladimir: (Without anger) It's not certain.

Estragon: No, nothing is certain.

Another symbol of uncertainty is the lightening. The only lightening effect is when days turn rapidly to night and the moon rises. The surrealistic effect of this heightened change from day to night amplifies the theme of uncertainty. It should also be mentioned that, this play was written after the Second World War, when the insecurity about the Soviet Union was the order of the day as the arms race gave rise to the possibility of nuclear war.

Something which was never mentioned in the play and can be taken into consideration is the characters' age. The humorous part is that, though it is not present as any dialogue, but it can be regarded as one of the points of uncertainty. Even when Pozzo asks Vladimir about his age he does not respond, because he is not sure. "Pozzo, You are severe. (To Vladimir.) What age are you, if it's not a rude question?"

(Silence.) Sixty? Seventy? (To Estragon.) What age would you say he was? Estragon: Eleven."

But apart from all these points of uncertainty, even there is no sense of certainty in Godot's entry time. In act one, when Estragon and Vladimir are talking about the Godot's time of arrival, they do not even have the slightest certainty of when he appears:

Vladimir: He said Saturday. (Pause.) I think.

Estragon: You think.

Vladimir: I must have made a note of it. (He fumbles in his pockets, bursting with miscellaneous rubbish.)

Estragon: (very insidious). But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (Pause.) Or Monday?

(Pause.) Or Friday?

Vladimir: (looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape). It's not possible!

Estragon: Or Thursday?

The most helplessly humorous part of this uncertainty is that they do not even know whether the person they are waiting for is named Godot or not as Vladimir says: Vladimir: To Godot? Tied to Godot! What an idea! No question of it. (Pause.) For the moment. Estragon: His name is Godot? Vladimir: I think so.

But other than this, Who Is Godot? When does he come? Where does he show up? Why does he have to come? Or even the most fundamental question: Why do they have to wait for Godot?

It is not only about Estragon and Vladimir, but also about humankind who helplessly in each segment of life waits for a new Godot. We are searching for the meaning of life too repetitiously and without purpose, always trying to find somebody or something that can take the lead of our lives. This postmodern

world comes into being when salvation is expected from an external entity.

Waiting For Godot is a play without action. It is something extremely remarkable to note that no character of the play has any identity of his own. There is absolutely nothing of conflict in the play, and the atmosphere prevailing in it is one of boredom and listlessness. Moreover, the play has been rendered in a kind of language that is marked by fragmentariness. The play maybe interpreted morally, philosophically, religiously, psychologically or symbolically, for it contains a few symbols that do have their own suggestiveness. Samuel Beckett may be looked upon as a prophet of doom, and play may appear to be nihilistic in character or an exercise in perversion. However, Waiting for Godot is an absurd or absurdist play because it does bring out the absurdity, futility and meaninglessness of human existence.

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