

Futility, Hopelessness and Meaninglessness: Central Forces leading towards Absurdity in
Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), a Nobel Prize winner playwright of the 20th century illustrates in his play Waiting for Godot, the poignancy, oppression, corruption, and bewilderment of human experience through which the mankind has been sliding uninterestingly. The play conspicuously examines the elementary questions such as death, meaning and the place of God in the life of an individual. The formlessness of the play as against its traditional structure depicts the dwindling interpersonal relationship that questions the vital function of society of disseminating the feelings of oneness, brotherhood and empathy in the fellow beings. Beckett emphasizes his agnostic view that even the presence of God Himself would also not be able to bring about any change in this lonely, enslaved, cold, silent and indifferent universe where people have become self centred, mercenary and self-regarding.

The present paper concentrates on the alarming situation of the postmodern world, in which the man has lost his inherent values of compassion, benevolence and tenderness which in turn is pushing him towards a pointless, mechanical and pessimistic life. The futile, hopeless and

meaningless existence is rendering him unreasonable, senseless and ridiculous, steering him towards absurdity and incongruity.

Keywords: *absurdity, agnostic, incongruity, bewilderment, pointlessness, elevations, elongations and devitalization.*

Introduction

Samuel Beckett, an eminent Irish writer was closely linked with a consciously conceived movement known as “Theatre of the Absurd” that focussed on the abandonment of conventional dramatic form to portray the futility of human struggle in a meaningless world. From the beginning, he was fascinated by such innovative formal design employed in the drama. In a seemingly strange play *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett has depicted the external world as menacing, devouring and unknown. Also he has painted the world that is incoherent, queer and frightening. Through the play, Beckett has established the idea that if the world is devoid of logic and reason, then man’s inhabitation in such a world becomes purposeless. The fundamental convention on which the play is based is that the spectators are treated as virtually absent in order that they communicate and sustain the illusion that the dramatized world that consisted of characters, situations, problems, physical environment was ‘real’. The purpose was to let the spectators identify themselves uncritically with the dramatized experience and view the play not from *within* but from *outside* as advocated by Bertolt Brecht in his concept of ‘epic’ theatre.

The keynote to the play *Waiting for Godot* appears in the memorable words uttered by Estragon with regard to his own life and that of his friend Vladimir, “*Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful!*” (71) The play presents anxiety, despair and sense of loss at the disappearance of solutions, lack of commitment and dearth of perseverance on the part of human

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beings who are in turn left bewildered, troubled and threatened by powerful forces prevalent in the society.

Plot of the Play *Waiting for Godot*

The plot of the play *Waiting for Godot* revolves around two tramps Estragon (Gogo) and Vladimir (Didi) waiting for the arrival of unknown Godot. As the play begins, both the tramps are shown sitting on a low mound near a tree on a country road waiting impatiently for Godot. They try to kill time in several ways. When in spite of waiting for long hours, Godot does not come, Estragon suggests that they should go away from the spot, but Vladimir objects to it and refuses to go since Godot has not arrived yet. They indulge in nostalgic retreat and compare their past experience with the current state of affairs. Vladimir exclaims:

“Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower among the first. We were presentable in those days. Now it is too late. They wouldn't even let us up” (40)

Vladimir is curious to know what Godot has to offer to them because only then, they would be able to understand whether they should accept the offer or refuse it. They are hopeful that this mysterious character Godot will in some way change their lives for the better. But irony is that they neither know the time nor place of their appointment with Godot. Also they do not know how exactly Godot looks like. Estragon and Vladimir believe that Godot will give their lives a purpose and a meaning. Through the characters of two tramps, Beckett suggests the mental state of human beings who continue to live in a cherished dream hoping for its fulfillment at some time in future. But when their dreams are shattered, they concoct another dream and the process continues. The person keeps on waiting for the ‘right’ time which does not come and he is entangled in a web of illusion. The following conversation between Estragon and Vladimir holds the contention:

“Estragon: He should be here.

Vladimir: He didn't say for sure he'd come.

Estragon: And if he doesn't come?

Vladimir: We'll come back tomorrow.

Estragon: And then the day after tomorrow." (44)

The truth that "*The essential doesn't change*" (51) and therefore "*Nothing to be done*" (51) hovers throughout the play. Vladimir asks Estragon to become alert since he predicts from the sounds of shouting that Godot has come, but to their disappointment, Godot is not seen anywhere. The sound was in fact that of the wind blowing through the reeds. After a while, two other characters Pozzo and Lucky make their appearance at the place. Pozzo drives Lucky by means of a rope tied around his neck. Lucky is carrying a number of articles of his master. Pozzo holds a whip in his hand to control Lucky. He behaves violently with his slave Lucky and jerks the rope so brutally that Lucky falls down with all the baggage in his hands. When Estragon and Vladimir show their willingness to give a helping hand to Lucky, they are warned by Pozzo that Lucky is wicked in his behavior with strangers. Through Pozzo, Beckett has targeted the elite class of people of society who exploit the lower class people ruthlessly and mercilessly. The excruciating pain through which Lucky undergoes reminds the reader of the callous and sadistic people who derive delight in torturing others by making their lives miserable.

The pitiable condition of Lucky impel Vladimir to retort, "*To treat a man...(gesture towards Lucky)...like that...I think that...no...a human being...no...it's a scandal!*" (57) When Vladimir asks Pozzo whether he wants to get rid of Lucky, Pozzo arrogantly remarks, "*The truth is that you can't drive such creatures away. The best thing would be to kill them.*" (62) He further comments, "*The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops*". (63) Beckett has revealed the gruesome and frightening aspect of rich people through the character of Pozzo who treats a person not as a human being but as a dumb animal fated to suffer silently. When asked by Vladimir,

"And now you turn him (Lucky) away? Such an old and faithful servant...After having sucked all the good out of him you chuck him away like a ...like a banana skin. Really..."(63), Pozzo groaningly utters, "I can't bear it...any longer...the way he goes on...you've no idea...it's terrible...he must go...(he waves his arms)...I'm going mad...(he collapses, his head in his hands)...I can't bear it...any longer..." (64)

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The bitter aspect of life towards which Beckett has drawn our attention is that a person is valued till he works efficiently and proves his efficacy, but once his energies diminish, he is abandoned like a scrap. His lifelong dedication and allegiance is soon forgotten as his place is filled by another suitable alternative. The conversation between the tramps and Pozzo justifies the argument:

“Vladimir: But will he be able to walk?

Pozzo: Walk or crawl! (He kicks Lucky) Up pig!

Estragon: Perhaps he's dead.

Vladimir: How?

Pozzo: Raise him up!” (75)

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Pozzo: Up! Pig! (Noise of Lucky getting up.) On! (Exit Pozzo) Faster! On! Adieu! Pig! Yip! Adieu!” (76)

When Pozzo and Lucky depart, Vladimir remarks that the visit of these two men had enabled them to pass the time. Estragon says that time would have passed in any case. Vladimir says that time would certainly have passed but not so rapidly. Estragon asks Vladimir what they should do now; Vladimir replies that he does not know. Reacting to the suggestion proffered by Estragon to go away from the spot, Vladimir vehemently objects, “We're waiting for Godot” (78)

A boy now appears on the scene. The boy timorously approaches Vladimir and asks him if he is Mister Albert. Vladimir answers in the affirmative. Estragon asks the boy harshly why he is so late in coming. The boy says that he was afraid of facing the situation. Vladimir tells Estragon that the boy was afraid of “*the whip*” and “*the roars*” and “*the two big men*”. Estragon refuses to believe the boy and shaking him by the arm, asks him to come out with the truth. But the boy, trembling with fear, says that what he has said is true. At Vladimir's intervention,

Estragon releases the boy and moves away. Vladimir asks the boy if he recognizes him, but the boy refuses. Vladimir asks him if he had come to the same spot yesterday, the boy once again refuses. The boy then says that Mr. Godot had asked him to tell him (Vladimir or Mr. Albert) that Mr. Godot will not come this evening but “*surely tomorrow*”. In reply to other questions, the boy answers that he works for Mr. Godot, looks after his goats, while his brother looks after Mr. Godot’s sheep. He also tells that Mr. Godot beats the boy’s brother though not the boy. Moreover Mr. Godot feeds the boy fairly well as against his brother whom he mistreats. When Vladimir asks the boy whether he is happy, the boy replies that he does not know. After a while Vladimir asks the boy to go to Mr. Godot and “*Tell him you saw us*” (82) The boy leaves the place.

Once again the problem of passing time evolves. Vladimir tells Estragon that they have nothing more to do here. Estragon replies that they have nothing more to do anywhere. Vladimir consoles his friend and advises him not to talk like that because tomorrow things will change and the ‘*situation will become better*’. Vladimir reminds Estragon of boy’s message that Godot is sure to come tomorrow. As they wait, Vladimir also acquiesces with Estragon that they should go from there. Both decide to go but do not move from the place. The first Act of the play ends here. The incident emphasizes the seamier side of life when human beings become restless; give up hope and throw their arms against the cruel forces of Time. But Time once again intercepts and does not let them act as per their wishes. Hope keeps their lives moving and they again prepare themselves to face the situation.

The second Act resembles the first Act with the only difference that the tree under which they were resting and passing their time had put forth a few leaves. It is indicative of new hope that transpires in the hearts of two tramps that had been eagerly waiting for Godot. The flash of hope is evident in the following conversation:

“Vladimir: Say, I am happy.

Estragon: I am happy.

Vladimir: So am I.

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Estragon: So am I.

Vladimir: We are happy.

Estragon: We are happy. (Silence) What do we do now, now that we are happy?

Vladimir: Wait for Godot. Things have changed since yesterday.”(90)

Estragon asks Vladimir to tell him what he should do. Vladimir replies, “*There is nothing to do*”. (104). Vladimir suggests that they can do certain physical exercises to kill time. Estragon uses the words “movements” and “relaxations” whereas Vladimir uses the terms “elevations” and “elongations” (106) for workouts. As they get tired, they stop their exercises and relax. Pozzo and Lucky now reappear. Pozzo has turned blind while Lucky is carrying the same burden as before. Both the tramps mistake Pozzo and Lucky for Godot. Vladimir expresses his pleasure saying:

“We are no longer alone, waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for ...waiting. All evening we have struggled, unassisted. Now it's over. It's already tomorrow.” (107)

A strong hope ushers in Vladimir and Estragon that their restless days are over and they will be able to see the bright morning again. But their hope crashes as they find that it is not Godot but Pozzo and Lucky who left yesterday and have come back again. Since Pozzo has become blind, he shouts for help, and keeps on shouting at brief intervals whereas Estragon and Vladimir do not pay any heed to him and remain engaged in their conversation. Hearing Pozzo's incessant cry for help, Estragon demands a price for the help to be extended. The two tramps help Pozzo to his feet but when they release him, he falls down again. Vladimir remarks that Pozzo used to have good eyesight in the past. To that Pozzo replies that it is true but one fine day when he woke up, he found himself blind as Fortune. Vladimir reminds him that till yesterday, he had good eyesight. Pozzo retorts, “*Don't question me! The blind have no notion of time*”(116)Pozzo asks Estragon regarding his slave Lucky. Vladimir informs him that he and his slave had slipped and fallen down. When asked by Pozzo about their state of affairs, Estragon answers that they are waiting for Godot. Pozzo then asks Estragon to go and kick his slave Lucky

“*in the face and the privates*” (117) in order to rouse him to action. It shows Pozzo’s cruelty even in the event of extremity when he has turned blind and has to depend upon Lucky. When Vladimir asks Pozzo if he remembers having met anybody on the previous day, Pozzo declines and says that he does not remember yesterday’s events. A little later Pozzo jerks the rope entwined round Lucky’s neck and orders the dumb slave to move on. Pozzo and Lucky leave the place. After their departure, Vladimir shakes Estragon to wake him up as he had fallen asleep and he (Vladimir) was feeling lonely.

At this time, a messenger boy arrives and addresses Vladimir as Mr. Albert. The boy gives no indication that he recognizes Vladimir. In fact, the boy says that he has come for the first time. The boy informs Vladimir that Godot will not come this evening but that he will come on the following day. On being asked what Godot does, the boy replies, “*He does nothing, sir*” (121) Vladimir asks if it was the boy’s brother who came yesterday, the boy says that he does not know. On learning that Godot has a beard, a white one, Vladimir emphatically utters, “Christ have mercy on us!” (122) Vladimir asks the boy to tell Godot that he (the boy) had seen him (Vladimir). Seeing Vladimir rushing towards him annoyingly, the boy runs away from there.

Once again the night falls and Estragon suggests that they should go far away from there. But Vladimir replies that they cannot go away as they have to be at this very place on the following day in order to wait for Godot. Estragon asks what would happen if they do not wait for Godot, then Vladimir replies that Godot will in that case punish them. Vladimir now asks Estragon if they should go, Estragon immediately gives his consent. But they do not move and remain there only. The play ends at a note when Estragon and Vladimir are still waiting for Godot who never comes.

Pozzo – Lucky Relationship

Pozzo-Lucky relationship depicted by Beckett is suggestive of incarnate Time’s twin qualities of change and changelessness. Pozzo and Lucky are the only characters in the play who undergo a change. Pozzo changes from his ‘*wonderful sight*’ to complete blindness and Lucky from a teacher of ‘*beautiful things*’ (63) to an incoherent babbling; from a speaking animal to a dumb automation who cannot even groan. These changes signify Time that moves unceasingly

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and inexorably towards loss, devitalization and death. The ironic aspect is that life itself is devalued as a brief flash of light that '*gleams an instant*' between birth and death. On the level of collective existence and experience too, human time is perceived as a devitalizing process in which man continues to '*waste and pine*'. The changelessness of Time in cyclic fashion is signified by Pozzo and Lucky's perpetual wanderings. Travelling has become a deadening habit with them. They give an impression that they are going somewhere, but actually they are going round and round in a circle. They are in fact ambushed in this circular time of the universe.

Pozzo represents the physical aspect of the human personality and Lucky the spiritual, which in the course of time is desensitized by the harsh treatment he receives by his master Pozzo. Lucky is reduced to inarticulateness; his sudden outburst is observed when his "*thinking hat*" is put on his head. Pozzo in the course of time turns blind indicating the transience of human power and domination. In the play, Beckett also incorporates minor themes such as the inadequacy of human language as a means of communication along with the illusionary concepts of past and future. He has emphasized the fact that the waiting of two tramps is mechanical; in other words, it is a compulsion. They have to wait there even though they resent from doing so and would earnestly like to leave. It is possibly the moral obligation that they are forced to act in a manner contrary to their wish since it involves the possibilities of punishment and reward. If Godot comes, a new chapter would be added into their existence whereas if they leave, they will certainly miss him. Their waiting contains an element of hope, no matter how skeptical they may be about it. They are the champions of the view that life must be meaningful in spite of evidently meaningless situation. The pitiful struggle which the two tramps engage in mirrors our own fate, the fate of multitudes of modern men.

Plight of Modern Worker in Post Modern Era

Through the mechanization of labour, the worker of the postmodern era is deprived of the opportunity of recognition of his work which has resulted in the reduction of his work to a sheer mock activity. The modern European literature, especially since the First World War, respond to a world that appears to be splitting apart and becoming increasingly meaningless in the wake of the brutal advance of capitalism, rampant individualism and the consequent loss of community,

large scale destruction due to the world wars, threat of a nuclear holocaust and the disappearance of the liberal traditions of hope and faith in man's innate goodness, progress and rationality.

The modern worker has become so exhausted due to the laborious mechanical activity that he now feels a strong urge to restore his equilibrium during his leisure time by engaging himself in substitute activities and hobbies. The modern worker has become deprived of his ability to shape his leisure hours by doing some obsolete forms of production like maintaining terrace garden, preparing some decorative craft or indulging in painting and singing or engaging self in some do-it-yourself carpentering. The situations have so changed that a modern worker finds great affinity between his working time and leisure time as both occur simultaneously. For instance, in millions of homes and factories, the flow of work and the flow of the radio transmission are becoming one single stream. In the Postmodern era, the 21st century worker experiences that the working time and leisure time, activity and indolence, real life and playing have become so closely inter-twined that they have become virtually inseparable. A large number of people increasingly feel that they live in a world in which they do not act but are acted upon. In spite of their inaction and pointlessness of their existence, they do not give up and strive to lead the life with a hope of a better future.

Conclusion

The play *Waiting for Godot* presents an essential characteristic of the human condition which emphasizes the fact that most often people wait for something which does not materialize just as Godot does not arrive. A man may vainly wait for a job, or promotion or long awaited transfer, or message from a dear friend, or a love letter or a reunion with a divorced wife, and so on. Vladimir and Estragon by their indefinitely waiting without any concrete result symbolize the psyche of millions of human beings who wait for some thing or the other without attaining it. People in the Post Modern era have become victims of the dominance of their superiors who exploit them for gaining personal benefit. This has resulted in depression, frustration and psychological ailments in the modern man. In spite of mechanical and pessimistic life that they are compelled to lead, they move on with a hope that God (Godot) will come to their rescue and transform their lives. The play in this sense gathers universal validity as it touches the chord of every heart of modern man.

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