



Theme of Absurdity in Waiting for Godot

Mrs. Neelam Dwivedi
Assistant Professor, IEHE

“Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless”

- Eugène Ionesco

Abstract

This exploration paper features the absurdity that can be seen in Samuel Beckett's work *Waiting for Godot* (1952). Beckett raises various questions in his plays, which are left unanswered. Thus, there is an overall ambiguity in his works. Everything is redundant and going on in a cyclic manner. Life is useless as an air pocket. Presence of individual and God is being referred to and left upon the audience's imagination to draw their own conclusion. In this paper we also explore Beckett's way of bringing uncertainty of identity; self and other and the way his world of the absurd is constructed in the play. All the critics of existentialist way of thinking have proposed that person ought to recognize his own singularity and quit looking towards a saviour or a heavenly ability to handle issues of men's hostility. This research paper will also explore the themes of memory, waiting and hope. It is evident that the 'Theatre of the Absurd' can be seen here as the reflection of what seems to be the attitude representative of modern time. In fact, *Waiting for Godot* is one of the most important play of Samuel Beckett's of .This classic tragicomedy is known for its lack of plot--"Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" Two old tramps beneath a single tree make jokes to pass the time and reflect on the state of human existence while they wait for Godot--who never comes. A classic play of the absurd.

Introduction

The *Theatre of the Absurd* is a term coined by Hungarian-born critic Martin Esslin, who made it the title of his 1962 book on the subject. The term refers to a particular type of play which first became popular during the 1950s and 1960s and which presented on stage the philosophy articulated by French philosopher Albert Camus in his 1942 essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he defines the human condition as basically meaningless. Camus argued that humanity had to resign itself to recognise that a fully satisfying rational explanation of the universe was beyond human reach; in that sense, the world must ultimately be seen as absurd. Esslin regarded the term "Theatre of the Absurd" merely as a "device" by which he meant to bring attention to certain fundamental traits discernible in the works of a wide range of playwrights. The playwrights loosely grouped under the label of the absurd attempt to convey their sense of bewilderment, anxiety, and wonder in the face of an inexplicable universe. According to Esslin, the five defining playwrights of the movement are Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, and Harold Pinter, although these writers were not always comfortable with the label and sometimes preferred to use terms such as "Anti-Theater" or "New Theater". Other playwrights associated with this type of theatre include Tom Stoppard,

Arthur Kopit, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal, Edward Albee, N.F. Simpson, Boris Vian, Peter Weiss, Vaclav Havel, and Jean Tardieu.

Martin Esslin, in his *The Theatre of the Absurd* explains the distinction between conventional plays and modern dramas by selected playwrights. He insists, “The Theatre of the Absurd, however, can be seen as the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our own time” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 22-23).

Under the title *The Search for the Self*, Esslin discusses intriguing absurdist elements in various plays, including Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The term abstract is used in Esslin’s study and was discovered in the early fifties during a period that saw the rise of modernism in Europe. Peter Barry categorized it as post-modernism in his book *Beginning Theory*. The psychoanalytic perspective in the same book (with its roots in the theories of Sigmund Freud), also applies to the protagonist’s desire to meet Godot.

Waiting for Godot was an exploration of a new form of drama which was categorized as the ‘theatre of the absurd’ by Martin Esslin. Humankind in this view is left feeling hopeless, bewildered, and anxious. The ideas that inform the plays also dictate their structure. Absurdist playwrights, therefore, did away with most of the logical structures of traditional theatre. There is little dramatic action as conventionally understood; however frantically the characters perform, their futile predicament of waiting suggest serves to underscore the fact that nothing happens to change their existence.

Waiting for Godot is an unusual and notable play written by Irish Nobel Prize-winner (1969) Samuel Beckett. He is probably the most well-known of the absurdist playwrights because of his work *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's plays seem to focus on the themes of the uselessness of human action, and the failure of the human race to communicate.

He was born on April 13, 1906, which was both Friday the 13th and Good Friday. He had quite a normal upbringing in an upper-middle-class Irish family, and excelled in both school and the sport of cricket. He attended the University of Dublin Ireland where he received his M.A. in modern languages, he then taught for a short time, explored parts of Europe and eventually settled in Paris. It was in Paris that he met writer James Joyce. It was this literary exposure that encouraged Beckett to seek publication. It is interesting to note that many of the conversations between Beckett and Joyce were conducted in silence. In the 1930's and 40's Beckett published many works in the form of essays, short stories, poetry, and novels, but very few people noticed his work. In fact, he only sold ninety-five copies of the French translation of his novel *Murphy*, in four years. His post war era fame only came about in the 1950's when he published three novels and his famous play, *Waiting for Godot*. *Waiting for Godot* is probably the most famous absurd play to date. The characters of the play, are absurd caricatures who of course have problems communicating with one another, and the language they use is often ludicrous. And, following the cyclical pattern, the play seems to end in the same state it began in, with nothing really changed. Although sometimes the tramps, especially Estragon, forgets their intention as Estragon often says “Let’s go”, Vladimir reminds him “We can’t”, Estragon asking “Why not”, Vladimir replies “We’re waiting for Godot” (*Waiting for Godot*, 10), they always return to the same subject, or in Freud’s words “There is always a return of the repressed” (*Beginning Theory*, 100). Throughout the play the role of time plays a major part and therefore the question of whether time controls the protagonists or the protagonists control time will be explored. Here we also analyse how Beckett uses absurdity to play around with the concepts of time, space, the unknown and uncertainty.

The entire plot centres on two protagonists and their waiting for the mysterious character named Godot. Why is he an important figure for the 6 protagonists, why does he not appear, and why are they waiting; all these questions are unknown and uncertain. The men’s future, the travellers, the messenger, and the play’s setting, plot, theme, and background history is not revealed. Therefore, the play opens without any details for the audience, and it continues with a lack of information, without reaching any climax, ending at the same point it starts (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 21-23).

Plot

The 'plot' of *Waiting for Godot* is easy enough to summarise. The setting is a country road, near a leafless tree, where two men, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for the arrival of a Godot. In order to pass the time while they wait for Godot to arrive, the two men talk about a variety of subjects, including how they spent the previous night (Vladimir passed his night in a ditch being beaten up by a variety of people), how the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ is described in the different Gospels, and even whether they should hang themselves from the nearby tree.

A man named Pozzo turns up, leading Lucky, his servant, with a rope around his neck like an animal. Pozzo tells them that he is on his way to the market, where he intends to sell Lucky. Pozzo commands Lucky to put down his stool, and sits down and begins to eat some chicken. Pozzo tells them more about Lucky and how he has learned from him. Vladimir is unhappy with the treatment of Pozzo but does not seem to be doing much regarding it. Lucky later performs from them for their entertainment.

After Lucky has performed a dance for them, he is ordered to think: an instruction which leads him to give a long speech which only ends when he is wrestled to the ground.

Lucky and Pozzo leave, and a Boy arrives with a message announcing that Godot will not be coming today after all, but will come tomorrow. Vladimir and Estragon decide to leave, but then promptly remain exactly where they are.

The second act of the play opens the next day – although, oddly, the tree has grown a few leaves overnight, suggesting that more time than this has passed. Vladimir and Estragon discover Lucky's hat which he had left behind. They then throw insults at each other to pass the time. Lucky and Pozzo return, but they have changed overnight: Lucky can no longer speak, and Pozzo is blind. When Lucky and Pozzo fall to the ground, Vladimir and Estragon try to help them up, but end up falling too. Pozzo has no memory of meeting the two men the day before. He and Lucky leave again, with Vladimir and Estragon left to wait for Godot.

The Boy returns, but he denies being the same one that came to them yesterday. Once again, Godot will not be turning up today, but will come tomorrow, he tells them. The two men decide to hang themselves in their desperation, using Estragon's belt, but all that happens is his trousers fall. They decide to leave, but stay exactly where they are – presumably determined to stay another day and continue 'waiting for Godot'.

Throughout the play the following themes keep recurring in the play.

Uncertainty of Time

The author has made use of time in the play in such a way that *Waiting for Godot* is a story of 'time' written in the form of 'absurd,' set during two consecutive days. It seems to pass normally during the period the characters are on the stage, with predictable milestones, such as the sunset and moonrise, although the characters are sometimes confused about it. But the intervals between the two acts and various events are wildly uncertain. The two main characters are tramps awaiting Godot's arrival. Nevertheless, Godot's continual absence wastes time in the lives of the tramps by making them living puppets in the world of the absurd, therefore they simply "Let it go to waste" (*Waiting for Godot*, 52), instead of finding an appropriate way to spend it. When Vladimir and Estragon return at the beginning of Act 2, the growth of leaves on the tree suggests a longer period has passed than the one-day Vladimir claims it has been. Estragon and Pozzo retain little or no memory of their encounter the "previous" day, and other changes have mysteriously occurred "overnight." The characters seem to be trapped by time, endlessly repeating essentially the same day again and again. The author here denotes the concept of a past and future is an illusion, and yet the play seems to be only set in the "present." However, the present does not seem to have a fixed beginning or end and the play seems to hold its audience in a kind of limbo. We cannot control time, and the senselessness of time suggests that it is pointless to attempt to stop its passage.

Leafless Tree

According to Martin Esslin, Beckett may have used simple, unusual and uncommon scenery in his works to emphasize the difference between his plays and conventional ones, which is another reason that his works are categorized in the genre of the absurd (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 21-22). His stage manifests with the characterization of strangeness, unusualness, emptiness, and untidiness, with characters who are “tramps, wanderers, and that all are lonely” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 33). Instead of using the materialized, sophisticated environment he uses a dark, gloomy, small, and empty stage in most of his plays including *Footfalls*, *Rockaby*, *Come and Go*, *Play*, *Act Without Words I and II*. In *Waiting for Godot*, a space without identification of its background, either materially or culturally, is created or applies to the world in general. This allows the audience to focus on the dialogue itself rather than the scenery. The audience is presented with a desolate, unfamiliar, and strange space where almost nothing exists. Nothing noticeably changes in the appearance of the stage, except for few leaves growing on the tree in the second day of the second act. The tree is the only object that exists in the middle of emptiness. Interestingly, the first astonishing absurdist element, the tree, seems struggling to survive with the tramps, and functions as everything that the tramps have except the clothing that they are wearing. Yet it seems the tree means nothing for them since they take nothing from it to affect their current circumstances.

Keeping only a tree without any other objects seems to be Beckett’s attempt to highlight characters and ongoing events on the stage, because multiple objects on the stage distract the action and the intended message. The tree may symbolise many possibilities, such as death, survival, change, and life. The tree which has no leaves or fruit could be a representation of lifelessness and death, although it is surviving throughout the harsh circumstances; likewise, the tree in the winter time looks pale and dead. Eventually that tree slowly begins to change, growing leaves, and perhaps regaining life. One of symbolic meaning of the tree is “The appearance of death in the winter- losing their leaves, only to sprout new growth with the return of spring.” This aspect makes the tree a symbol of resurrection.

Some critics point out that the cross on which Christ was crucified is sometimes called a tree. Vladimir and Estragon do discuss the tree and hanging themselves in Act 1 shortly after talking about the two thieves crucified along with Christ. This could support the interpretation that hanging from the tree draws a parallel between them and the thieves. Beckett, however, said he was puzzled by people trying to take away "a broader, loftier meaning" from the play, making it unlikely that he intended any broader religious symbolism.

The Unknown and Uncertainty

The tramps lack of knowledge about everything seems to be a metaphor for mankind’s lack of basic understanding of the universe and life itself. The creation of the entire universe is a big question mark, especially for those who do not want to believe Christianity’s religious theory that God created the world in seven days. Modern science fills the role of religion by trying to find reasonable answers for these questions, but the truth is that we know neither our creation nor end. We are born, live, educate ourselves, get married, become old, get sick and finally we die. The path of life cannot be accurately speculated and is completely unknown. Throughout the play we come across hundreds of questions that have no answers, consequently paralleling our lives because we never understand what, where and how life has brought us to the present moment.

Another important issue in the play is the characters’ names. A person’s name is an important signifier of his existence, but the audience’s perception of the tramps is confused since they go by many names given to them by different people. The tramps go by names including “Vladimir”, “Didi”, “Albert”, “Estragon”, “Gogo” and “Adam”. There are no two people who call them the same name, as Estragon calls Vladimir, Didi, the boy calls him “Mr. Albert” (*Waiting for Godot*, 32), and Vladimir calls Estragon “Gogo”, but Estragon introduces himself to Pozzo as “Adam” (*Waiting for Godot*, 25). So, who are they, and what are their identities? The audience is left in darkness about the identity of the protagonists whereupon the unknown becomes the most significant issue, as is typical in the genre of the absurd.

The entire plot flows with the hope of this mysterious character's "Godot's" arrival. The characteristics of Godot, based on what we hear from the boy who works for him, is only that Godot does "nothing", and that he has a "white beard", demonstrates the image we have for God. However, Godot's mysteriousness makes the audience more and more curious and confused when attempting to predict who Godot is.

Freedom and Confinement

Every character in *Waiting for Godot* seems to live in a prison of his own making. Each is confined to a state of passivity and stagnancy by his own inability to act. The one character who is literally the slave of another is no more restricted than those who are technically free; in fact, he may be more free because he is at least aware of his imprisonment

Conclusion

In this way, *Waiting for Godot* is often described as a play in which nothing happens, twice. The 'action' of the second act mirrors and reprises what happens in the first: Vladimir and Estragon passing the time waiting for the elusive Godot, Lucky and Pozzo turning up and then leaving, and the Boy arriving with his message that Godot will not be coming that day. With this structure in mind, it is hardly surprising that the play is often interpreted as a depiction of the pointless, uneventful, and repetitive nature of modern life, which is often lived in anticipation of something which never materialises. It is always just beyond the horizon, in the future, arriving 'tomorrow'. As the title also indicates, the central act of the play is waiting, and one of the most salient aspects of the play is that nothing really seems to happen. All of this waiting for nothing, talking about nothing, and doing nothing contributes to a pervasive atmosphere of nihilism in the play. Broadly defined, nihilism is a denial of any significance or meaning in the world. Deriving from the Latin word for "nothing" (nihil), it is a worldview centred around negation, claiming that there is no truth, morality, value, or—in an extreme form—even reality. This seems to describe the world of the play, largely emptied out of meaning, emotion, and substance, leading to characters who blather on endlessly in insignificant conversation. Given the play's deep exploration of the absurd humour and feelings of alienation that arise from this nihilistic understanding of the world, one could say that *Waiting for Godot* is, at its core, about nothing.

Samuel Beckett ushered the way for other dramatists to contemplate on the vagueness of existence and the uncertainty of man's identity in a world that seems to be controlled by an irrational power and whose only logic evolves from "nothing to be done". In the Theatre of the Absurd, characters are looking for meaning for their existence fruitlessly. Man is left with two choices; killing himself or taking life as it is without trying to interpret its intriguing predicaments since such efforts are in vain. Through his characters showing anxiety, restlessness, Beckett's plays not only reflect the 20th century spirit, but also, they touch on universal and stable conditions of human beings; thus, the play '*Waiting of Godot*' provide a realistic aspect of the life of modern men.

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