

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****The Absurdity of Existence: Waiting for Godot and an Analysis of the Human Condition in the Tradition of The Theatre of the Absurd**

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**Abstract:**

The research paper thoroughly examines Samuel Beckett's renowned play, "Waiting for Godot" within the context of the "Theatre of the Absurd." The absurdity of existence and the failure to derive meaning in an absurd world contribute to the existential angst of the characters in the play. "The Theatre of the Absurd" emphasizes the resurgence of despair and irrationality while also striving to offer a perspective that transcends absurdity, enabling characters to confront the stark reality of their existence in a meaningless world and thereby reveal their true strength. This paper highlights the in-depth exploration of the human condition depicted in 'Waiting for Godot' and underscores its enduring importance within the "theatre of the absurd."

**Keywords:** Existential Angst, Fragmentation, Alienation, Existentialism, Minimalism**Introduction**

Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot" is regarded as a classic of the post-war theatre. It focuses on the abiding concerns and anxieties of human existence. It is mainly a story of two tramps Vladimir and Estragon, whose entire life is spent waiting for a miracle to take place, though they knew that it was a mistaken belief. But the illusion of Godot's coming tempts them to come to the same place at infinitum. The moment they appear on the stage in a repeat performance, we know that their belief in Godot's coming is futile, because the more they press it, the more it turns out to be fiction.

The play is a tragicomedy where we find a perfect blend of the comic and the tragic elements, of course, not in their pure forms but so close together as to make the drama quite Janus faced. The stumbling and falling of the clowns are at the level of physical comedy. We have linguistic comedy in the shape of repetitive dialogues, puns and wordplay. Despite all these comic features the play is charged with potentially tragic meaning. The laughter is choked and the comic catharsis is arrested.

**The Absurdity of Man's Existence**

Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot" is groundbreaking in the theatre of the absurd tradition as it highlights, the absurdity of man's existence in the absence of the transcendental and metaphysical factors to sustain life. Ionesco defined the term "absurd" as follows: "Absurd is that

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which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd and useless.” (Esslin 23) Beckett accepts the absurdity of the human condition as inevitable. His plays project strong irrational incidents and characters. These irrationalities are the symbols of the utter pointlessness of human survival. The plays of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ are quite different from those of the conventional plays, and therefore can be judged only by the standards of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd.’

Describing the difference, between the conventional play and the plays of the theatre of the absurd, Martin Esslin has observed. “If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of, if a good play is judged by the subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings.” (Esslin 21)

The setting of the play is equally absurd. It is the evening time in Act I when the two tramps are found waiting for ‘Godot’ on a country road near a barren tree. But they fail to reason the coming of a few leaves on the tree the next day. They forget that it is possible for leaves to sprout overnight. These two happenings appear illogical to them because they are in the rational view of things.

Beckett, like Kierkegaard, believes that the absurdity emerges from man's attempt to understand each and everything on the rational ground; and from man's attempt to interpret religion in terms of reason. Beckett seems to say that the God-man relationship is enigmatic because it is essentially ridden with the insoluble paradox. Therefore, it cannot be made comprehensible in terms of reason only. Albert Camus suggests, “At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 28).

It is through subjectivity that an individual can grasp the eternal truth and blessedness and help in suspending doubts and questioning, resulting from the application of reason. Beckett has shown the failure of the application of reason to comprehend the ethical and the religious. Hence despair is inescapable. Vladimir and Estragon cannot hope to escape despair amply manifests in their anger, suffering and wretchedness. They will continue to suffer as long as they try to resolve the paradox through reason alone. As Martin Esslin states, "The theatre of the absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought." (Esslin 24)

‘Waiting for Godot’ lacks action to such an extent that it has been called an anti-play. No hero moves here from good to bad fortune, nor can we talk of a beginning, a middle and an end. The drama revolves around the solitary act of waiting which does not progress. The play lacks the elements that would classify it in the genre of classical tragedy and yet it is a great classic in that

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tradition. We identify ourselves with the entire situation rather than with any character. Tragically we experience a deep anguish because the play voices the deepest concerns of the twentieth century, but it stops short there. It gives us no lie about the nature of man and his destiny as in a tragedy, man reached the limits of his understanding and life being stripped of all values that falsify, we are constantly on the brink of disaster.

A closer study of the plot of "Waiting for Godot" reveals a steadily darkening world in which hope becomes more and more difficult to sustain. The way they pass time is as important as the identity of Godot. The two acts repeat themselves, as in both, the tramps wait and the Godot does not arrive. But in many ways, they are not identical. In the second act, as hope recedes, the games become more frenzied, the silences longer, and the references to Godot more frequent. "Nothing to be done." (Beckett 1) Vladimir here takes up the word "nothing" in a much more serious tone and suddenly the meaning spirals out to embrace a metaphysical paradox. This is what gives the play its tragic quality. Vladimir's words signify his awareness of the absurdity of man's fate:

"Estragon: Let's go

Vladimir: We can't

Vladimir: We are waiting for Godot." (Beckett 41)

The opening line "Nothing to be done" sets the tone of the play. There are ditches where they spend their night and where Estragon is beaten. It is only because of Vladimir that Estragon has lived all these years, but then since his life has not been worth anything it would have been better had he been allowed to become 'a heap of bones.' Meanwhile, the time has been extended from an evening to a million years. Mankind might have found it worthwhile to despair all those years ago, but now nothing, not even despair all the time, it is Vladimir who in an absurd world, does his best to sustain hope, trying to give himself and his friend the feeling that they exist and life is, despite everything, worthwhile. Peering into his hat, he is both relieved and appalled. The growing sense of chaos makes him exclaim " This is getting alarming" But he consoles himself by recalling the story of the thieves in the gospel. One of the two was saved which he thinks is " a reasonable percentage." As Estragon affirms, "Do not despair: One of the thieves was saved. (Pause) It's a reasonable percentage. (Pause) Gogo." (Beckett 3)

Hope and endurance are eroded at every step leading the tramps back to the meaningless from where they started. Before any belief can take shape, they realize the illusory nature of all such consolations. Soon after this speculation on the thieves and the Savior, Vladimir for the first time announces that they are waiting for Godot. Indeed, the coming of Godot is as uncertain as the fact of the thief being saved. They cannot be sure that this is the right time and the right place.

"Estragon: You're sure it was this evening?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: That we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said Sunday (Pause) I think.

Estragon: You think

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Vladimir: I must have made a note of it.” (Beckett 7)

**Master- Slave Relationship**

The degenerate master-slave relationship between Lucky and Pozzo is the degenerate counterpart of the astonishment, Vladimir and Estragon feel towards Godot. However, under Pozzo there is a sense of direction. No wonder, Lucky does not want to leave Pozzo. But even in this absolute surrender, there is no promise of salvation. Pozzo is going to sell him at a fair. As he says, ‘I am bringing him to the fair, where I hope to get a good prize for him.’ (Beckett 24)

Pozzo is a grotesque figure and the image of Godot suffers by comparison, as such he brings about a tragic awareness in Vladimir and Estragon, but he too is human like them and capable of tragic utterances. He would make an attempt to pressure his dignity at any cost. Seeing Lucky crying he says, "Old dogs have more dignity." (Beckett 25)

However, Lucky's tears make Pozzo utter a profoundly philosophical observation that is tragic to the core. As Beckett wrote, "The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stop" (Beckett 25).

Ironically enough, it was Lucky who taught him all the beautiful things he knows, all his glory has been because of him. Pozzo offers to teach them about the twilight with which they are not familiar. Indeed, Pozzo does not have the stoicism required to sustain the tragic burden. The tramps console Pozzo just as he encourages them to wait, but their mutual efforts come to an end with Lucky's "think." He knocks the bottom off their meagre attempts at sustaining life. His monologues are a reflection of all civilization and culture. A personal God loves man and yet he allows him to suffer but without a god, man must suffer the void, compared to which belief in a personal god is a heaven; Man is seen to "waste and pine." (Beckett 36)

Despite the physical culture he continues to "shrink and dwindle." Everything is left incomplete and unfinished. In the end, it is the stones, the skull and the calm that replace the unfinished man, who despite his efforts remains incomplete. As Ruby Cohn rightly points out: “Lucky's monologue displays western civilization as shards of religion, philosophy, science, art, sports and modern industry. Lucky utters the "unfinished" seven times, his sentences do not finish and his monologue is not permitted to finish. Named with devastating irony, Lucky is a modern man with his contradictory unfinished fragments” (Cohn 127)

Lucky's "think" corresponds to the moment of vision in tragedy. This is what Vladimir and Estragon have been trying to do all along. They have been trying to pass the time playing games while waiting for Godot, the personal god. The God presented in Lucky's speech is a personal God “who does not communicate with us, cannot feel for us and condemns us for reasons unknown.” (Esslin 56).

They suffer, till dejected. Pozzo is even more pained, because Lucky's ideas which have made him what he is, have the power to destroy his majesty. The subversion of the master-slave relationship is projected poignantly by the playwright. In Act 1 Pozzo carries Lucky by a rope

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around his neck and Lucky does whatever Pozzo wants him to do. Pozzo wants to get rid of Lucky by selling him at the fair because he is not in a position to bear him anymore. But in Act II, Pozzo is seen at the mercy of Lucky because he has suddenly gone blind and is guided by Lucky who he earlier guided.

Lucky's monologue sums up the efforts of man from generation to generation. At all times man has been doomed to failure. As Esslin suggests, "Lucky's speech in *Waiting for Godot* is a parody of philosophical jargon and scientific double-talk." (Esslin 69)

**The Futility of Applying Logic and Reason**

The futility of applying reason and logic to comprehend the irrational world is the essence of his monologue. At the end of Lucky's monologue, we find that Pozzo has lost what is most precious to him, his watch, the temporal time sense, inherited from his grandfather, which has been his way of keeping control over the sense of chaos that threatens him. With Lucky everything comes to a standstill, but even from this hopeless situation something is salvaged. Lucky is raised to his feet, the voices come back and the difficulty in breaking the silence shows how difficult are the efforts that have to be made to illumine the darkness and win words out of the salience.

Vladimir's encounter with the messenger is another dramatization of man in an absurd world. There is no reason for believing in one thing more than in another, the messenger boy talks about Mr. Godot that he minds the goats while his brother minds the sheep, Mr. Godot beats the one who minds the goats, in this he is like Christ who saved one thief and not the other. Between hope and despair, there is this perpetual oscillation, Vladimir and Estragon being new each time and each time they are returned to zero, it is the measure of their heroism in an absurd universe that they begin again every time they are defeated and this way the wait is perpetuated, with every step there is a growing-realization that Godot will never come and even if he does come his coming will not be worthwhile for them.

"Somewhat less heroic than Camus's absurd hero, however, who rejects death as an escape, Didi and Gogo reject suicide partly because death is as uncertain to them as life. Unsure of their weight—they don't know which one is heavier—they fear that whichever one is heavier will not succeed in hanging himself without breaking the bough." (Bloom 42)

**Conclusion:**

Thus, we can say that "*Waiting for Godot*" is a perfect example of the play of "The Theatre of the Absurd." Beckett here deals with a serious matter i.e., the human condition in this universe, but he has treated this serious theme in a light-hearted manner. Its comedy is borrowed from the most direct of all forms of humour, the circus, pantomime, and music hall comedy. These devices, ironically, do not produce a comic laughter but a grotesque one. Laughter is choked in the throat thereby arresting the comic catharsis.

The futility of applying reason and logic in an irrational world as projected in the play can be seen as an attempt to subvert traditional notions of meaning and purpose. The courage to laugh

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at the futility of one's existence and embrace it wholeheartedly is shown in the play as a solution to escape all the fear of an uncertain world. As Vivian Mercier rightly asserts, "Beckett cannot create a genuine tragic hero- powerful, proud, yet essentially good save for the tragic flaw. Beckett's anti-heroes do not aspire, so they can never fall- even their minimal expectations are frustrated. (Mercier 12-13)

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