

Existentialism, absurdity, and waiting as a core element in samuel beckett's waiting for godot

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Abstract

'Waiting for Godot' written by Samuel Beckett is one of the most spectacular plays in English language and has strong undercurrents of the tenets of Existentialism and Absurdity. It is in this respect that the paper unfolds the mystery of existentialism, absurdity and 'waiting' as a central element of the play. The thematic exploration of waiting as a core element is the prime focus of the study. Alongside it also taps into the instances wherein the play speaks loud of traces of existentialism and absurdity. The paper also studies the playwright's effort to shadow the advance of modernity by exploring a world full of counter narratives, meaninglessness, lack of identity and subversion of morals.

Keywords: waiting for godot, existentialism, waiting, beckett

Introduction

There is something enigmatic in the atmosphere of the *Waiting for Godot*. It is neither tragic nor comic. The situation of the tramps is funny: yet we dare not laugh at it, for there is something fundamentally human in it. We do not know who Godot is, for whom the tramps are waiting. Lucky and Pozzo appear both revolting and fascinating. Lucky's speech is at the same time ludicrous and disturbing. The ways by which the two tramps pass the time seem funny at first sight, yet we feel that all of us, at some time or the other, pass out life in such transparent deceptions. Moreover, Vladimir and Estragon indirectly ridicule modes of civilized life, when they pretend to treat each other with civility. There is a great deal of mystery about Godot. We want to know who he is, why are the tramps waiting for his what will he do for them, how will he influence them. The relationship between Lucky and Pozzo, as well as their personalities, also creates much curiosity, what seems farcical from one point of view appears to be something deadly from the other. For example, the endless wait of the tramps seems to be absurd, yet the fact is that they are conscious of this absurdity, and seem to imply that the rest of the world is waiting for things which are more absurd and also more uncertain than the coming of Godot. Thus, the situation of the tramps is an allegory of the human situation. Human beings from time immemorial have been debating over the concept of existentialism. The play gives us ample instances to substantiate our judgements about the same. The paper delves deep into the different layers of the play in order to exact traces of existentialism, absurdity and 'waiting' as a core element.

Existentialism, Absurdity, and Waiting as a Core Element

Existentialism in European philosophy is distinguished by its emphasis on human existence although it had an important precursor in the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard in the 1840's. Its impact was fully felt only in the mid nineteenth century in France and Germany. The German philosophers Martin Heidegger and Kari Jaspers prepared some of the ground in the 1920's and 1930's for

the more influential work of Jean-Paul Sartre and the other French existentialists including Simon de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In terms of its literary impact, the thought of Sartre has been the most significant, presented in novels such as *La Naus'ée* (Nausea), 1938 and plays including *Les Mouches* (The Flies) 1943 as well as in the major philosophical work being *and Nothingness*.

Sartrean existentialism, as distinct from the Christian existentialism derived from Kierkegaard's an atheist philosophy of human freedom conceived in terms of individual responsibility and authenticity. Its fundamental premise is that we as human beings have no given essence or nature but we must forge our own values and meanings in an inherently meaningless or 'absurd' world of existence.

Obligated to make our own choices, we can either confront the anguish of this responsibility, or evade it by claiming obedience to some determining convention or duty, thus acting in 'bad faith', paradoxically; we are 'condemned to be free'. Similar themes can be found in the novels and essays of Camus. Both authors felt that the absurdity of existence could be redeemed through the individual's decision to become 'engage' (committed) within social and political causes opposing Fascism and imperialism. Some of the concerns of French existentialism are echoed in English in Thom Gunn's early collection of poems. Existentialism is a heterogeneous cluster of philosophical ideas which have the common element that existence precedes essence. This means that there is no overarching meaning in the universal beyond that which we choose to create through our actions. Endowed with consciousness, humans are confronted with the knowledge that the world is basically absurd – it simply exists, with Neither Justification or organized structure which could yield to rational analysis and this knowledge usually produces feelings of alienation, discomfort, fear, loneliness and the like. Necessarily, the exploration of these feeling will be subjective, peculiar to each individual who endeavours to live an authentic existence through acts of self definition. Samuel Beckett or Samuel Barclay Beckett born in 'cooldrinagh' a house in Foxcrock, a village south of Dublin on Good Friday as the second child of William Beckett and May Beckett. One of his famous works is

waiting for Godot which centers on a pair of vagrant men and their efforts to divert themselves while waiting on a vague pretense for the arrival of a man named Godot, whom they know only by reputation. To occupy the time they philosophize, sleep, argue, and sing, exercise, swap hats and consider suicide- anything to hold the terrible silence at bay. Beckett refrained from elaborating on the characters beyond what he had written in the play. When he started writing, he did not have a visual image of Vladimir and Estragon. There are no physical descriptions of either of the two characters; however the text indicates that Vladimir is likely the heaviest of the pair. Vladimir stands through most of the play whereas Estragon sits down numerous times and even dozes off. Estragon is inert and Vladimir restless. Vladimir looks at the sky and muses on religious or philosophical matters. While Estragon is preoccupied with mundane things like what he can get to eat and how to get relief to his physical aches and pains. He is direct, intuitive. He finds it hard to remember but can recall certain things when prompted. Vladimir's life is not without its discomforts too but he is the more resilient of the pair. Another two important characters in the play are Lucky and Pozzo. Little is known of Lucky and Pozzo besides the fact that he is on his way to the fair to sell his slave Lucky. Pozzo is a character who has to overcompensate. That is why he overdoses things. This overcompensation indicates a deep insecurity in him. Lucky is the absolute subservient slave of Pozzo and he unquestioningly does everything his master orders him to do. *Waiting for Godot* is a novel written from an existentialist point of view, often pointing out the absurdity and meaninglessness of existence. Every creature of this world has meaning in their existence. These activities may sometimes lead to the changes in popular conceptions of human nature. In this context, the basic tenets of absurdity and existentialism are examined by people in their quest for meaning in life. Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Strindberg were some of the writers, whose works were noted for absurdism and existentialism. Samuel Beckett's plays are marked by an artist's vision of the world into which his characters are placed. He deals with the position and the situation of man in his surrounding world, as well as in his complete dramatic and prosaic works. Beckett's man is a Sisyphusean type of man waiting for the fulfillment of his fate, which seems to be eternal through his suffering and hoping. He is alienated from the world which is unknown, remote, and indifferent, and from which he is isolated by the walls of his self. The conflict between two different substances – the world and the human subject, leads to the feelings of absurdity and to fundamental existential questions about the meaning of human life in a world where he lives as a stranger. Beckett's characters are creatures grounded in absurdity, there is no meaning in their Being. Their lives involve the mere waiting for death. The waiting is a pure experience of time itself. Time which disintegrates into small and shorter periods, so that their waiting is a never ending fate having no purpose, but the only aim, the end. In Beckett's characters, tragedy consists in their empty waiting which becomes a long period of suffering. It consists in the power of life which still keeps them breathing and going on although they are very close to their aim, the end. The whole greatness of Beckett's absurd man is his intractability with which he continually fills up his precarious fate. His suffering increases as time stops and he does not live without hope and joy life. Earnest Becker in

his work. The denial of death points out that 'man cannot endure his own littleness unless he can translate it into meaninglessness on the largest possible level' (196)

Absurdity and existentialism is a way to find out these meaninglessness of the world. As a part of the modern world meaninglessness is a common thing found in every human being. In that context, this topic is highly relevant. This project helps to substantiate the topic of 'how meaninglessness is presented in human beings' Samuel Beckett, one of the eminent writers of the theatre of the absurd used his plays to foray into new possibilities for expressing his ideas. *Waiting for Godot* is an absurd drama, which deals with 'waiting amid uncertainty. Throughout his works, one can find religious, philosophical classical, psychological and biological references. The play exploits several archetypal forms and situations. All of which lend themselves to them both comedy and pathos. Absurdity consists in the permanent conflict. It is a contradiction and struggle. It appears in the moment when man realizes his situation, in the moments of awareness of his position in the world. On the other hand, existentialism is characterized by a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world. The principle of absurdity and existentialism are applied thoroughly in *Waiting for Godot*, which reveals that the theme as well as the plot shows an uncertain set up of events, however, there is no true beginning, middle, or end, forming a circular pattern which can be found in everyday lives. Through this Beckett tries to establish the fact that human beings are engaged in a quest for finding meaning in life. Based on these analyses, it is found that 'waiting' is a core element of this play. In the vast kingdom of English Literature, 'Waiting' is a theme that has haunted many a writer. Samuel Beckett's 'waiting' in *Waiting for Godot* somewhat represents eternal life, or the unattainable quest of all men. Thus the 'waiting' in *Waiting for Godot* gives a positive outlook, while no development happens in the play. If absurdism may be considered a branch of existentialism, the highlight of absurdity is the human quest for purpose. It is very important that everything must have a purpose, a higher reason for existence. According to the play, a human being's life is totally dependent on chance, and to explain it in detail, time is meaningless, therefore human being's life is meaningless and this notion drives human beings to depend on 'the Unnatural'.

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