



A Critical Study of Characters in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* with Special Focus on The Theatre of Absurd

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Abstract

Aim: *The paper explores the aimless existence of individuals post World War II. The Second World War shattered the religious faith of mankind, and this became the staple theme of writers. The twin bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki left an indelible scar in the minds of people all over the world. Though the third-world countries gained independence, the world was moving from one crisis to another. The unemployment problem was at an all-time high, and people started losing their religious faith leading to questioning their very own existence. Existentialism became popular in the twentieth century due to the contribution of 20th-century existentialists like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Camus, and others. In these circumstances, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was published in Paris*

in 1952. This paper makes a critical study of characters in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot with a special focus on the Theatre of Absurd.

Methodology and Approach: *The Study is based on the play Waiting for Godot (1952) written by Samuel Beckett. The study has employed a text-based approach to understanding the subtle nuances of the text. Outcome: -The play highlights the problems faced by modern man as he comes to grips with the Post World War Scenario. The play also satirizes the difficulties of man due to problems created by himself in the name of ambition, greed, avarice so on and so forth.*

Conclusion and suggestion: *The characters Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot from beginning to end but still, Godot never arrives. Despite the non-arrival of Godot, the wait continues. Unless the mindset of modern man changes, it's very difficult for him to accept the changes in the Post World War Scenario.*

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, Theatre of Absurd, Waiting for Godot, World War II, The Myth of Sisyphus

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The term 'Theatre of Absurd' was coined by Martin Esslin around the 1960s. Martin Esslin is of the firm opinion that Theatre of Absurd attacks religious and political beliefs. The main aim of the Theatre of Absurd is to wake the audience from slumber. It also aims at bringing the harsh realities of life to the attention of readers. The theatre of the Absurd appeared as a response to the disappearing

religious structure in contemporary life. When people lost their faith in God, absurdism gained prominence. Martin Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* uses the quote from Eugene Ionesco to explain the term absurd:

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. (6)

This quote can be easily applied to the characters in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The characters Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky, and Pozzo act in a senseless manner. The readers understand that the actions of the characters are useless. Further, it can be added that the characters are not God-fearing and rootless. Based on these grounds, one can categorize the play *Waiting for Godot* as an absurd play. In other words, all the elements of absurd drama are there in the play.

Theatre of Absurd focuses on recurring topics like disillusionment, disappointment, and pent-up emotions post World War II that occupied a prominent place in the 1960s. The term Theatre of Absurd is derived originally from a statement given by the famous French Scholar Albert Camus. The futility of human existence is captured by Albert Camus in his legend of Sisyphus. Albert Camus sympathizes with the modern man who finds it difficult to get answers for topics like a reason for survival, death, and shame.

Some of the well-known absurdist writers apart from Samuel Beckett are Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet who made a conscious attempt to explicate the irrelevance of human life. The absurd plays are characterized by totally unreal plots, lack of a proper setting, and coherent dialogues. Though there are a few comic exchanges between characters, the readers are always getting cynical about the basic human condition. As a man gets cut off from religion, supernatural

roots, etc. he is lost. This idea is echoed by Martin Esslin who draws inspiration from Eugene Ionesco.

According to the famous existential philosopher Nietzsche, “God is dead” (17). The two world wars had shaken the faith of the man and this led to the existential philosophy questioning the very existence of God. After the twin bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the year 1945 man has been living under constant threat of atomic destruction

The absurd theatre once again made man aware of the importance of myths and rituals in the twentieth century. The theatre of the absurd successfully arouses the inquisitive nature inherent in man. It focuses on the basic flaw of losing hope quickly and thereby stimulating the need to go in search of new meanings. The main objective of absurd plays is to startle the viewers by using a highly unusual form and thereby shake man out of his comfort zone. During the Post World War era, people started losing faith in traditional art forms and this led to the arrival of the Theatre of Absurd. Samuel Beckett broke the tradition of conventional drama and brought some daring changes on the stage by giving no elaborate sets, or arrangements. This is clear in the play *Waiting for Godot*.

Since the theatre of the Absurd was highly incomprehensible it was outrightly rejected. The Theatre of Absurd launched a scathing attack on the traditional use of language as the playwrights felt that words do not convey the essence of human experience. In other words, the exponents of the absurd drama felt that words convey meanings only at a superficial level. Absurd drama makes an earnest attempt to distort parody and break down the conventional use of clichés, slogans, and technical jargon.

Objects are more important than language. The language of absurd drama tries to go beyond the literal meaning of words. In absurd drama, objects have more significance than language. Logic is not given any iota of significance in

absurd drama. As Sigmund Freud emphasizes the need for freedom by throwing logic out of the window, the dramatists of the absurd theatre stopped focusing on logic. Unlike logic which restricts the freedom of human beings, nonsense leads to a world of infinity. In other words, it gives unrestricted freedom and thereby makes life a beautiful comedy.

Dramatic conflict is altogether absent in an absurd drama because such conflicts are pointless in a condition where reality is meaningless. Just like music, the absurd drama also merely communicates an atmosphere or a certain condition. In conventional theatre, language holds a lot of prominences but in the case of absurd theatre, language is nothing more than just a component of the play, i.e., dialogues in such plays do not have profundity but the thought is profound. Unlike conventional theatre, absurd theatre is devoid of sequential circumstances but rather it is more of a situational drama. This theatre takes much of its ingenuity from silent movies and comedies.

The book 'The myth of Sisyphus' written by Albert Camus presents before the audience an absurd hero, Sisyphus. Sisyphus in Greek Mythology is known for belittling the importance of Gods. His main aim was to make himself immortal and because of committing such a heinous act, he is trapped for eternity as a punishment. His punishment is to push a boulder up the hill only to see it come crashing down repeatedly.

The situation of Sisyphus reflects human toil, specifically the struggle of the modern man who struggles endlessly daily without any sense of hope soon. Camus aims at achieving immortality in a World full of mortals. This myth of Sisyphus forms the crux of the absurd theatre and this inspires the dramatists who are placed under the genre of the absurd. The play 'Waiting for Godot' deals with the same situation as that of Sisyphus. The characters are seen constantly waiting for a mysterious individual. This character is incomprehensible to them but they

still while away their time in worthless conversation and look forward to his arrival. Silence in this play makes the characters uncomfortable and that is exactly what makes them engage themselves in unreasonable conversation. Repetition is a prominent characteristic of the play and its purpose is to show the continuous monotony in the circularity of human existence. The following exchange of dialogues between Vladimir and Estragon in the play reveals the repetition and monotony of human existence.

Vladimir: - ...That we have come to the wrong place

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.

Vladimir: - Possibly.

Estragon: - And so on. (Beckett6)

Few characters are also keen to make a mark in their lives, but it is others who hinder their progress. For example, let us critically examine the following conversation between Vladimir and Estragon:

Estragon: It might be better to strike the iron before it freezes.

Vladimir: Let's wait and see what Godot has to say. (6)

Here Vladimir relies on Godot to tell him what they need to do but Estragon is yearning to act instead of idly wasting time. In the play, existential philosophy is advocated as a more favorable manner of living.

Absurd plays are known to depict 'Dark Comedies.' They make the viewers laugh but after a certain point, the readers are snapped back to reality when they realize the futility of their actions. We keep on running all our lives in our mission to accomplish the goals that we have set but all we attain at the far

end of our life is a sense of futility. As the author writes in *Waiting for Godot*, “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful” (Beckett 14). Camus in one of his absurd plays ‘The Plague’ asserts, “We have been swept out against our will” (15). Absurd though an offshoot of existentialism is different from it in the sense that existentialism still entails some hope but absurd is utterly negative.

The main difference between Vladimir and Estragon is brought about by Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir takes off his hat while Estragon takes off his boot. This is done on more than one occasion by the concerned characters. Vladimir gets angry when Estragon tears at his boot. He asks angrily, “What are you doing” (Beckett 2). The symbolic meaning here is that both physical and mental impurities should be cleaned to get fresh and new thoughts. This is what both the characters lack in the play as they are trapped in mundane things. Vladimir even goes to the extent of saying, “Never neglect the little things of life”(2).

The casual attitude towards religion is effectively brought out through the casual remarks of Estragon. This is the main reason for frustration creeping in now and then. When a serious topic like Bible is touched upon Estragon talks nonchalantly, “... I used to say, that’s where we will go for our Honeymoon. We’ll swim. We’ll be happy” (Beckett 4). A serious subject like Bible is treated with total impunity by the tramp Estragon in the company of Vladimir. When the characters talk about the crucifixion of Christ, more attention is paid to the thieves than the Saviour himself. All these things clearly show that modern man has become rotten to the core.

For the first time in the play, the word Godot is used by Vladimir. Still, there is hope left for Vladimir and Estragon, as they are prepared to undergo the tortuous process of waiting. Just as it appears that there is a semblance of hope, once again hope paves the way for despair. The tree appears as “a bush” for

Estragon and “a shrub” for Vladimir. They even start quarreling with each other during their discussion about a mundane thing like a tree. The playwright wishes to tell the readers that there is no proper setting in the theatre of the absurd. The process of waiting followed by the arrival of Christ is a mystery. It is not even clear to the readers the real meaning of Godot. For instance, let us pay attention to the conversation between Vladimir and Estragon regarding the arrival of Godot:

Estragon:- He should be here.

Vladimir:- Possibly. (6)

The characters wait for Godot throughout the play. Unfortunately, the wait continues for characters throughout. This process of waiting is explicated in the conversation between Vladimir and Estragon. The names of Vladimir and Estragon are Didi and Gogo respectively. The point to be noted is that these names are used as nicknames for Vladimir and Estragon respectively. These names are used only by the two tramps but not Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo and Lucky form a different pair when compared to that Vladimir and Estragon.

There is no love or affection between the two tramps. When Estragon is sleeping, Vladimir does not have the courtesy to wait. He even rudely wakes up his companion by uttering the name Gogo three times. Some critics remarked that the two tramps share an unnatural relationship after the war of words between the two. Vladimir even wants to go away permanently from Estragon. At this juncture, it is Vladimir who calms Estragon. When Estragon recovers quickly, he admonishes the Englishmen for their hostility towards the French. He remarks, “An Englishman having drunk a little more than usual goes to the brothel” (Beckett 8). Topics unthinkable during Victorian times become the norm in the 20th century. For instance, taboo topics like homosexuality, Oedipus Complex, etc. have been dealt with by modern writers like Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, and others. Samuel Beckett also deals with the theme of homosexuality explicitly

in his play *Waiting for Godot* through the two characters Vladimir and Estragon. Let us pay attention to the description during the dialogue uttered by Estragon to Vladimir, “Estragon:- (step forward) You are angry ... You stink of garlic” (9).

Guilt conscience after a criminal act is inevitable. The two characters talk about death, but none wants to die. Courage deserts both Vladimir and Estragon as they contemplate death. Both the characters encourage each other to die but never think about death themselves. Let us look at the exchanges between Estragon and Vladimir:

Estragon:- We can always try.

Vladimir:- ... No, no you first. (Beckett9)

Now and then Beckett gives the readers some semblance of hope through one or the other character. It is Estragon who is more proactive than Vladimir. Vladimir is prepared to wait for Godot till eternity but on the contrary, Estragon is willing to act instantly. He says, “It might be better to strike the iron before it freezes”(Beckett 10). Both characters are very sarcastic about God. This is obvious in the following exchange:

Estragon:- What did he reply?

Vladimir: - That he'd see. (11)

The characters are not only sarcastic about God but also very condescending towards the attitude of modern man. To put it mildly, the modern man consults everyone for a long time but never takes a decision. The indecisive nature of modern man is effectively portrayed by Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*. One of the chief characteristics of absurd drama is despair. The inability to decide and do something concrete is another quality of modern man. The two characters Vladimir and Estragon accept defeat without putting any sort of resistance. The second incident of homosexuality finds a mention in the play. Even when listening to some strange sound, Estragon and Vladimir stay huddled

together. The turnip crisis that took place due to the lack of vegetables and food during World War I is also hinted at by the author in the play. The unpredictable nature of human beings is brought out when Vladimir changes his preference for turnip to carrot frequently. Both characters exchange vegetables to appease their hunger.

Two new characters Pozzo and Lucky are introduced by Samuel Beckett on the stage after a long time. Though the character's name is Lucky, he is extremely unlucky. It is Pozzo who is the dominant partner. A rope is tied around Lucky's neck by Pozzo and he is kept on a tight leash. The description given by Beckett brings to light the dominant attitude of Pozzo towards Lucky. The description is as follows: [Crack of whip ... jerks it violently]. (Beckett14)

The long wait for Godot never comes to an end. At times the readers think that both Estragon and Vladimir almost reach the point of insanity. Even when Pozzo introduces himself both Vladimir and Estragon assume Pozzo to be Godot. Pozzo treats his sidekick Lucky like a slave. He even uses the whip to keep Lucky on a tight leash. He goes to the extreme by inflicting lots of cruelty on the hapless, Lucky. Lucky is made to carry a basket throughout. As a result, Lucky feels burdened. Lucky is repeatedly asked by the other characters to keep the bag down. Modern man is trying to do so many things at the same time and as a result, falls in the process. Lucky's excessive baggage makes him fall so many times in the play. Lucky is symbolic of a modern man who is under the control of the capitalist most of the time. The master is dependent on the slave for profit and the slave is dependent on the master for capital. Both the master and the slave are inextricably connected. This relationship between master and slave is effectively captured by Samuel Beckett in the play. Both the tramps Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot but Pozzo arrives. The arrival of Pozzo takes both the tramps by surprise. Pozzo is not able to accept Vladimir and Estragon as human beings at

all. Pozzo considers Vladimir and Estragon as less than human beings. According to the Bible, the man was made in God's image but Pozzo thinks both the vagabonds are hardly human beings. Only when he puts on his glasses, he recognizes both as human beings. This makes Pozzo burst into laughter. He says, "You are human beings nonetheless...made in God's image" (Beckett 15).

As Funtan O.Joole writes, "Waiting for Godot is essentially a joke on the whole theatrical experience, an extended invitation on the audience to get up and leave. Nothing is going to happen, the play keeps telling us. It's going to get boring... why do you insist on hanging around with futile expectations? Like Didi and Gogo, our decision to stay is the triumph of hope over experience" (n.a.).

In act 2, we find the tree with some leaves. This is a symbol of hope. The same things are performed by Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly. Pozzo and Lucky make an appearance on the stage slightly later. Now Pozzo is blind and Lucky dumb. This indicates that considerable time has elapsed. According to the author, only one day has passed between Act 1 and Act 2. He writes, "You are human beings nonetheless. [He puts on his glasses.] As far as one can see. [He takes off his glasses.] of the same species as myself"(Beckett 15).

Modern man's understanding of Godot is very negligible. When Pozzo comes, both Vladimir and Estragon are unable to recognize him. They even go to the extent of mistaking Pozzo for Godot. On the contrary, Pozzo considers both the tramps as less than human beings. Capitalism has spread its tentacles all over the world that people want to become voluntary slaves. Though Lucky is treated worse than a dog, he continues to toil to save his master. The voluntary slavery of Lucky makes Pozzo exercise his authority over the other tramps also. It is Lucky who carries the basket throughout the play but Pozzo is the one who finishes off the contents of the basket. Pozzo eats the piece of chicken and drinks wine greedily. He does not even have the courtesy to share some portion of his meal

with either Lucky or the two tramps. The condition of employees is so bad that they wait patiently for the employer to throw away the crumbs. In the play, Vladimir and Estragon wait calmly for Pozzo to throw away the bones of the chicken. Pozzo does not have the magnanimity to even offer bones to the two tramps. The pathetic condition of tramps is brought out in the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. Only when Estragon requests Pozzo to part with the bones of the chicken, Pozzo agrees after offering the bones first to his slave Lucky. Estragon's hunger is insatiable that he even puts the bones in his pocket.

The convincing nature of the master is brought out through the character of Pozzo. In the play, the readers notice that Pozzo is keen to dispose of his slave, Lucky but Pozzo is not willing to give the actual reason for his inclination to dispose of his slave. Further Pozzo also sows the seeds of discord between the two tramps and Lucky. Pozzo is the main reason for the trouble brewing between Estragon and Lucky. Lucky hits Estragon on his shins. Estragon retaliates by spitting on Lucky. The concept of time is different for the two tramps and Pozzo. Pozzo wants to lead his life based on normal times. So, Pozzo looks at the watch now and then. On the contrary, the two tramps consider every day as the same. For Vladimir and Estragon, there is no concept of yesterday and tomorrow. The following conversation between Vladimir and Pozzo reveals their different views about time:

Vladimir:- Time has stopped.

Pozzo:- (cuddling his watch to his ear.) Don't you believe it, sir,
Don't you believe it. (he puts his watch back in his pocket.)

Whatever you like, but not that. (Beckett29)

For Vladimir, the time has no significance. In other words, the time has no meaning for Vladimir but for Pozzo time is everything. The characters created by Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* reflect the changing human nature post

world war II. The features of Theatre of Absurd can be traced in *Waiting for Godot* through the characters created by Samuel Beckett.

To conclude, one can say that the post-modern age in Literature starts post World War II. The events that shaped the world post world war II get explicated in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The greatest victory for the playwright is that the readers get hooked on the text despite the play lacking action, plot, and a proper storyline.

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