

**Defer, Deferred, Deferred: A Derridean Study of *Différance* in
Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot***

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Abstract

Samuel Beckett has been traditionally viewed as a Modernist playwright and therefore, his iconic play *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) has continued to be confined to an Existentialist reading. Similarly, it has also been staged on numerous occasions along these lines; however, a text cannot be bracketed into a particular type and one can undertake any kind of reading. The work of literature not only goes beyond any compartmentalisation but can stand on its own as a text. Apropos this, the play too can be read along umpteen other ways. This suggests that different attempts to read a text tend to liberate it from a particular established and authoritative way of reading by relegating the predominant one to peripheral importance. It then appears to democratise the reading experience which further enriches the text by providing new unmapped dimensions of interpreting a text.

The inimitable use of language and the structure of the play *Waiting for Godot* makes it a unique play. This paper, therefore, attempts to undertake a deconstructive study of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Deferral, Différance, Supplement, Derrida, Author, Substitution, Approximation Words, Absurd, Drama, Existentialism.

The title of the Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, is inextricably linked to the Derridean term *difference* which is a portmanteau term for 'difference' and 'deferral.' The title of the play contains two significant words: one being 'Waiting' and the other 'Godot.' The word 'wait', according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, means "to stay where you are or *delay* doing sth until sb/sth comes or sth happens." (*my italics*). The word 'delay' directly teleports us to the 'deferral' aspect of *difference*.

The deferral, in the play, takes place at different levels: verbal, conceptual, responsive, and even storytelling. At the verbal level, meaning is always deferred to the point of an endless substitution by other words which Derrida describes as a "supplement."

Vladimir: Consult his family.

Estragon: His friends.

Vladimir: His agents.

Estragon: His correspondents.

Vladimir: His books.

Estragon: His bank account." (11)

It is, therefore, that the matter of consultation with Godot achieves completion through substituting words such as friends, agents, correspondents, books and bank accounts. The term *supplement* is derived from Latin *supplementum* which is further derived from the verb *supplere* 'fill up, complete.' It is in this etymological sense that the meaning of the term should be understood. Derrida further adds:

"But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or sinuates itself in-the-place-of, if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of presence. Compensatory [*suppléant*] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct a subaltern instance which *takes-(the)-place* [*tient-lieu*]. As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. Somewhere, something can be filled up of itself, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy. The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself." (*Literary Criticism and Theory* 76)

Also in another instance, Vladimir and Estragon seem to play the audience to the entertainment provided by Pozzo and Lucky. They discuss how wonderful the evening was and the performance of Pozzo and Lucky is seen worse than the pantomime, which is succeeded by other ‘approximation words’ such as the circus, music-hall and the circus.

Similarly, later in the play, the distinction between a carrot and a radish is also blurred. A carrot is seen as a ‘supplement’ for turnip and a turnip for carrot as both are root vegetables.

“Vladimir: I might have some turnips.

Estragon: Give me a carrot. [*Vladimir rummages in his pockets, takes out a turnip and gives it to Estragon who takes a bite out of it. Angrily*] It’s a turnip!” (12)

The name “Pozzo” is ‘supplemented’ by other names such as “Bozzo” and “Gozzo.”

“Estragon: Bozzo . . . Bozzo . . .

Vladimir: Pozzo . . . Pozzo . . .

Estragon: PPPOZZZO!

Vladimir: Is it Pozzo or Bozzo?

Estragon: Pozzo . . . no . . . I’m afraid I . . . no . . . I don’t seem to . . .

[*Pozzo advances threateningly*]

Vladimir: [*Conciliating*] I once knew a family named Gozzo.” (15)

Linguistically, the bilabial plosive /p/ is replaced by another bilabial plosive /b/ and velar plosive /g/. “Clang associations,” as Lois Gordon opines, are typical of what he calls “asyndetic poetic dialogue,” wherein the words are united on the basis of their common vowel or consonantal sounds. (Gordon quoted in Bloom, 81). Apropos the argument, Pozzo, who has difficulty breathing, says, “I can’t find my pulverizer” (33) when he means vaporizer. While quoting from Jacques *Derrida: Acts of Literature* by Derek Attridge, Sarah Gendron observes:

“In his interview with Attridge, Derrida states that what he finds intriguing about Beckett’s writing, and what constitutes his very “signature,” is not his treatment of character or plot—not the quintessential “monuments” of traditional narrative. Instead, it is the “ruins” of such monuments—the “remainder which remains” only after their destruction—that, for Derrida,

characterize Beckett's texts. In his own words, what is interesting to him in Beckett's work is what remains once the thematics are "exhausted". (27)

Deferral occurs not only at the level of words but also at other levels too: conceptual and responsive. At the conceptual level, hope is deferred as Vladimir says "Hope deferred maketh the something sick," (2) which is a rewording of Proverbs 13:12, "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life." The element of finality in desiring to hope again with fruition, which is reinvigorating to the human being, is nullified through its conspicuous absence. At the responsive level, the deferral extends to the process of eliciting an answer to a question. The question 'You want to get rid of him?' is asked four times by Vladimir to Pozzo and the answer is deferred each time. Similarly, Vladimir and Estragon jointly ask another question 'Why doesn't he put down his bags?' five times from Pozzo and this too is deferred again and again. "The play," Lois Gordon feels, "as a whole becomes a working out of hope deferred versus hope retained, the wavering resolve to await Godot and the heartsickness that that brings." (Gordon quoted in Bloom 80)

While waiting for a Godot, Vladimir and Estragon decide to while away time, they decide to do exercises which is further replaced by its 'approximation words' including 'movements,' 'elevations,' 'relaxations.' The Macon country is a supplement for the Cackon country. The voices of dead, these have been compared to noise like wings, ashes, leaves, and sand. Further, their conversation is referred to as whisper, rustle and murmur.

There are also occasions where the end word of a sentence is repeated by its synonym as in the following conversation between Estragon and Vladimir:

"Vladimir; It'd pass the time. [Estragon *hesitates*.] I assure you, it'd be an occupation.

Estragon: A relaxation.

Vladimir: A recreation.

Estragon: A relaxation." (60)

In this example, the occupation is replaced by other 'approximation words,' such as 'relaxation' and 'recreation.'

The wait for Godot does not reach fruition till the end of the play. However, the much-awaited anticipation wait for Godot culminates in the appearance of Pozzo on the scene

not just once but twice — once in Act One and once in Act Two. There is a covert suggestion that Pozzo is Godot at least phonologically.

Paradoxically, uncertainty is the only certain element of the play and so is true of the identity of the tree which is also scrutinised and examined. When Estragon asks about the kind of the tree, Vladimir replies: “I don’t know. A willow.” (6) It is even palpably evident in the response of Estragon who though does give the answer but not without perennial uncertainty—which is the only certain element in the play and it, thereby, lends a unique characteristic to the play—by prefixing the phrase denoting indeterminacy “I don’t know.” The identity of the tree is also examined at different occasions in the play. It is sometimes seen as a willow tree, a shrub or a bush.

“Estragon: Looks to me more like a bush.

Vladimir: A shrub.

Estragon: A bush.” (6)

The absence also extends to insidiously through absence of an answer and is veiled through the phrase ‘I don’t know.’ In a sparsely worded play, there are 30 instances when the phrase ‘I don’t know’ appears in *Waiting for Godot*. The phrase is an expression of exasperation that not merely seemingly proclaims non-cognisance and suggestive of linguistic indeterminacy on the part of the speaker but essentially works as a subtle ploy of feigning ignorance. It, thereby, belies the motive of asking questions by deftly working through eliding an answer.

Vladimir: [*Vexed*] Then why do you always come crawling back?

Estragon: I don’t know.

...

Vladimir: Then why did they beat you?

Estragon: I don’t know.” (50-51)

When Vladimir asks Estragon about his boots, the latter mentions that he might have thrown those away. And when Vladimir persistently pesters him for an answer and interrogates him on the same, Estragon brusquely voices his exasperation: ‘I don’t know why I don’t know.’ (59)

The interrogation of the Boy, who is purportedly shown as the messenger of Godot in Act One, also reflects a conflicting response of his state of happiness which is indicative of his internal psychomachia or an omission of some kind.

Vladimir: You're not unhappy? (*The Boy hesitates.*) Do you hear me?

Boy: Yes, sir.

Vladimir: Well?

Boy: I don't know, sir.

Vladimir: You don't know if you're unhappy or not?

Boy: No, sir. (45)

This conflict of knowing and not-knowing stems from a tantalising state, in its etymological sense, of “in-betweenness” which surfaces recurrently in the play. It is this “in-betweenness” which Sarah Gendron sees as the common strain between Derrida and Beckett as she argues too:

“Derrida and Beckett seem to share is a mutual appreciation of the *in between* — the between space of literature and philosophy, writing and speech, subject and object, beginnings and ends. It is by examining this inter-space that one learns that the real signification of a word cannot simply be found in what it claims to mean but also in what it denies. There can be no life that is not tainted by death, and no death that is not implicated already in life. The truth of all existence, if there is indeed a “truth” of which to speak, lies somewhere in between.” (26)

In another of Vladimir's utterance, he says:

“But we were there together, I could swear to it! Picking grapes for a man called ... [He snaps his fingers] ... can't think of the name of the man, at a place called ... [Snaps his fingers]... can't think of the name of the place, do you not remember?” (53)

The key words in the utterance above are missing such as the name of the person for whom Estragon and Vladimir picked up the grapes and the name of the place where they did. The omission of key words in the sentence renders it as inadequate thereby suggesting that it is not always about the sentence and the meaning can yet be obfuscated.

The play also shows how the deferral also takes at the level of the deferral of storytelling. The story of the Englishman's visit to brothel ends abruptly. The conversation leaps onto the discussion of the English, the Englishman and finally to the incomplete story of an Englishman's visit to a brothel as Estragon says: "An Englishman having drunk a little more than usual proceeds to a brothel. The bawd asks him if he wants a fair one, a dark one or a red-haired one. Go on." (8) Completion, if at all it exists, is impossible to achieve for a Derridean critic and the omission of an end to the story is a case in point. Even the dialogues in the conversation do not flow into one another but are violently coerced in an instance of textual violence.

The deferral has a function which is show that the life of the two tramps in the play *Waiting in Godot* is a labyrinthine circuitous where one day is like any other day. The progression of life is marked by mere repetitions. Act One can broadly be divided as Vladimir and Estragon on the stage, arrival of Pozzo and Lucky, departure of Pozzo and Lucky with Vladimir and Estragon left on the stage, the arrival of the messenger boy and then finally the departure of the messenger boy with Vladimir and Estragon on the stage. Similarly Act Two can be broadly divided as Vladimir and Estragon on the stage, arrival of Pozzo and Lucky, departure of Pozzo and Lucky with Vladimir and Estragon left on the stage, the arrival of the messenger boy and then finally the departure of the messenger boy with Vladimir and Estragon on the stage. Hence, the readers can well imagine other acts in the play such as Act Three, Act Four, Act Five, and so on — in a never-ending exercise where 'nothing happens' as Estragon expresses this too: "Yes, now I remember, yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That's been going on now for half a century." (58) It suggests a finality in anything cannot be achieved whether it be meeting or an end to the play rather what can be achieved in only deferral.

Similarly, the answer to the most frequently asked question on "Who is Godot?" has no definite meaning. As a reader, the word 'Godot' too can be pinned to numerous and endless possibilities such as those added by Pozzo, 'Godet' and 'Godin' in the play. It is because of this that Samuel Beckett eschews answering the question himself and to Alan Schneider's question 'Who or what does Godot mean?', he replied, 'If I knew, I would have said so in the play.' (Schneider, 38)

We realise that the wait for Godot is endless and eternal. The meeting with him is perennially deferred with perpetual uncertainty from one day to another. Michael Worton explicates on Godot being emblematic of deferral of hope:

“... he is simultaneously whatever we think he is and not what we think he is: he is an absence, who can be interpreted at moments as God, death, the lord of the manor, a benefactor, even Pozzo, but Godot has a function rather than a meaning. He stands for what keeps us chained to and in existence, he is the unknowable that represents hope in an age when there is no hope, he is whatever fiction we want him to be — as long as he justifies our life-as-waiting. Beckett originally thought of calling his play *En attendant* (without Godot) in order to deflect the attention of readers and spectators away from this ‘non-character’ onto the act of waiting.” (Worton quoted in Bloom 75)

Godot, hence, can be seen to stand for the struggling and the hopeful who live lives with a teleological aim of some prospective attainment even though the word ‘Godot’ has been widely viewed as a slight variation of the word ‘God.’ It is human nature to pine hopes on a constant factor, which might be perennially suspended to a state of prospective yearning (low- or high-level), and fix it onto that. In *Waiting for Godot*, it is this hope of meeting the ‘unknown’ which keeps the two protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, dangling to the edge in the liminal space of hope and despair. These sentiments are expressed by Vladimir in Act Two as he says:

“But that is not the question. What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this that we happen to know the answer. Yes in this immense confusion one thing is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come” (72)

It is this hope that keeps them inspired to come tomorrow and then day after tomorrow. However, this is an unending process and if one hope is achieved or desire fulfilled, the desire is not satiated and it moves on to some other object. Hence, it is not the person named Godot who is of significance; it is the act of waiting which is of primary importance over anything else.

An Existentialist reading of the play views ‘Godot’ as a supplement for ‘God’ and similarly traditional critics have invariably positioned Beckett neatly within the confines of

Modernist domain as an Absurd playwright; however, it is a heresy to staunchly associate the play to one metaphor — in this case, the religious one. It not only restrains the ‘many voices’ in a text but also divests the text of its suggestive power as it goes beyond the dermal level of the text. As Beckett puts it in *Proust*, “We are disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment. But what is attainment? The identification of the subject with the object of his desire? The subject has died — and perhaps many times — on the way.” (13-14). Like other texts, Beckett’s text is a text full of suggestions and inferences, one cannot and should not reduce it to one rigid frame and must abstain from a sedulous one-to-one allegorical mapping. He himself described it as “striving all the time to avoid definition”. (Beckett cited in Graver and Federman 10.)

Suggesting no determinate fixation with the inferences on one set of meanings, Rónán McDonald expresses:

“The play will not be pinned down or located, a clear meaning will not arrive for us, just as Godot does not arrive for Vladimir and Estragon. They can be confused and uncertain about where they are, where they were and where they will be, and the audience, by extension, can feel bewildered by the elusive themes of a play which, while orbiting around philosophical and religious issues, tends to keep them at a distance, to keep us in a state of interpretative suspension.” (30)

The play moves, even though in a cyclical manner, by navigating through silences and omissions. Silences are presented to the readers primarily through the clichéd phrase “I don’t know” and punctuations. Ellipsis is one such most potent type of punctuation which entails leaving out a word or words. It is noteworthy that there are as many as 185 instances when an ellipsis appears in the play. It is not without purpose that Beckett has added so many ellipses in the play. Ellipses are not merely sets of three dots suggesting that a word or words have been left out; it is a deliberate attempt of leaving a word or words from a sentence based on assumption. It is a red herring that might lead to a literary predisposition to interpretation and misinterpretation. Commenting on punctuation in Beckett’s plays, Steven Connor observes: “The adversary in Beckett’s work up to the end of the 1950s is the ‘mask’ or ‘veil’ of

‘grammar and style’, and punctuation is a principal means of drilling through or decomposing that ‘imperturbability’.” (Connor cited in Gontarski 279)

Beckett’s deft use of words and his refusal to divulge what he meant has led to a wide interpretation of his texts. It has helped enrich the text and taken it into that realm of mental faculty which is unfathomable to a novice reader. It could be through the use of words with same meaning etymologically or otherwise such as dying (which etymologically means “something given or played”) and amusing and through the use of phrases in different contexts such as ‘Ah! That’s better’ which produces two meanings in contradistinction to each other when used in different contexts.

Hence, Sarah Gendron observes Beckett as occupying a liminal space between modernism and postmodernism:

“In questioning the authority of the author/narrator, in confronting the limits of beginnings and endings and the boundaries of meaning, Beckett’s words and works exemplified the writer and the writerly during a critical time when modernism was unfolding into postmodernism. His work was emblematic of crossing over; of change, as Foucault suggests, as it was in the process of changing.” (xix)

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