

Ratul Nandi

Assistant Professor of English

Vivekananda College

Alipurduar, West Bengal, India

ratul4321@gmail.com

Existential Reverberations in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

Abstract

The paper seeks to read Samuel Beckett's famous tragi-comic play *Waiting for Godot* in its broad socio-historical and philosophical background of its time and argues it to be a perfect specimen of an existentialist play projecting the angst, disorientations and boredom of the time. The play, through a nuanced portrayal two tramps, acutely shows how the theme of waiting is not only negative, the bleak aspects of life, but also brings about a range of human emotions that actually make life bearable. While the negative interpretation of the tramps situation fall in line with usual reception of Beckett as a pessimist, a positive reading of the play shows how it is inflected with deep philosophical and metaphysical questions that have remained the basis of human of existence since the beginning of human civilization.

Keywords: Existential, Boredom, Absurd.

As a literary and philosophical movement in the twentieth century that centres on the individual and his or her relationship to the universe or God. One of the leading exponents of existentialist thought was a French novelist and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre's famous pronouncement is "existence precedes and rules essence," which broadly claims that there is no pre-defined essence to humanity except that which we make for ourselves with this freedom to choose, there is the liability for the consequences of one's choices. And this liability leads the individual to a state of deep anguish. Existentialism seeks to liberate the individual from the state of illusory existence to which he/she is essentially born. The craving for logic and immortality are empty, we are forever doomed to create our own meanings, even though they might be temporary. The existentialist label has been applied to writers, philosophers, visual artists, and filmmakers; the movement flourished in mid-20th century Europe. Nineteenth-century precursors to this school of thought include some notable 19th-century precursors including Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Samuel Beckett is commonly acknowledged as a dramatist of the Absurd. The plays of Beckett which come under this absurd category do not conform to the convention of drama

in that they do not satisfy the expectation of the audiences, because they uphold the basic 'meaninglessness of the universe as mentioned above. This sense of the metaphysical absurdity of the human situation is, broadly speaking, the theme of Beckett's plays, a certain emptiness that is both formal and semantic. *Waiting For Godot* is about two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, waiting for a mysterious figure called Mr. Godot, of whom they have little information. Estragon makes it very clear when he says, "Personally I wouldn't know him if I ever saw him." (p.23). He also remarks, "... we hardly know him." (p.23), which shows that Godot is an absent figure, that the question his identity is practically unnecessary. Instead, what is more important is that he represents an ever-promised but never fulfilled point of the play, around which it is organized. It is for Beckett, a question of the empty centre of life. It is possible to stress the idea of waiting for us to see the purpose of action in two men with a mission, not to be deflected from their compulsive task.

Estragon: ... Let's go.

Vladimir: We can't.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot." (p.14).

The existential philosophy asserts that human beings are cursed to make their choices in life. It comes to view individuals less as puppets controlled and monitored by an omnipotent God and more as beings who from the very beginning have their own choices to make. It is the choices that make individuals what they are. As Vladimir reflects:

, "He didn't say for sure he'd come" (p.14), but decides to "wait till we know exactly how we stand" (p.18).

Albert Camus in many of his works attempted to show how an ordinary and inane act of waiting can be seen as something that can potentially disrupt human habit, forcing humans to recognize its significance. Camus goes on to demonstrate his belief in his play *The Plague*. This is also similar to the idea of meditation, an almost motionless activity, that allows the individual to think with clarity. The attempts, as Camus has suggested time and again, to find answers to these perplexing questions can easily propel anyone to lose his/her mind. They constantly resort to this or that means to give themselves the sense that they truly exist: " We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression that we exist?" (p.69).

The theme of waiting takes on a broader significance in the play. It is elevated into a principle of human strategy that makes existence bearable for humankind. Beckett wants his audience to understand the profoundness of the human activity of waiting and consider it as not just any ordinary human preoccupation. The play gives rise to a series of unanswered

questions: Where are Gogo and Didi? Who beats Gogo? All of these unanswered questions represent the rhetorical questions that individuals ask but never get answers to within their lifetime. Vis a Vis is there a God? Where do we come from? Who is responsible for our suffering? The tramp's repetitive inspection of their empty hats perhaps symbolizes mankind's vain search for answers within the vacuum of a universe. They continually subside into the futility of their situation, reiterating the phrase "Nothing to be done." Vladimir also resolves with the notion that life is futile, or nothing is to be done at the beginning, replying, "All my life I've tried to put it from me... And I resumed the struggle." (p.9).

"Estragon: (anxious). And we? ... Where do we come in?" (p.19).

Estragon's question is left unanswered by Vladimir. For Beckett, the unanswerable questions spring forth from the depth of human existence and bring innate suffering to humans. This brings them closer to anxiety which is built into human existence. As human beings are surrounded by infinite choices and possibilities, the difficulty is choosing any one out of a multitude of possibilities. This may lead to boredom or inactivity as we encounter in Vladimir and Estragon. They are both acutely aware of the choices but fail to do so leading to an ultimate Hamletian "to be or not to be".

"Estragon: Well, shall we go?

Vladimir: Yes, let's go.

[They do not move.] (p.54).

Beckett takes his dig against the habit as he feels it draws a protective layer around us that pulls us away from experiencing the unpredictable facet of life. As he says: "Habit is a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence. Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is a habit. Life is a habit."

Estragon and Vladimir constantly 'pass the time' throughout the entire play to escape the pain of waiting and possibly to stop themselves from thinking or contemplating too deeply. They are entirely preoccupied with an obsession to pass their time:

" Vladimir: That passed the time.

Estragon: It would have passed in any case.

Vladimir: Yes, but not so rapidly." (p.48).

The rituals by which Estragon and Vladimir combat silence and emptiness are elaborate, and original, and display Beckett's skill as a writer. In the play, Beckett echoes patterns of the question, answer, and repetition which is his alternative to all the flaccid chat

and triviality of the conventionally 'well-structured play'. Since his subject is habit and boredom, he has dispensed with the plot; since his characters are without much history. Beckett deliberately employs the repetition of themes, speech, and action to highlight the futility and habit of life. Gogo and Didi frequently repeat phrases, such as, "Nothing to be done". Their actions consist of ritually inspecting their hats. The absolute stupidity of actions only deepens the nothingness of their existence which they are trying to combat:

" Estragon: ... we are incapable of keeping silent.

Vladimir: You're right we're inexhaustible.

Estragon: It's so we won't think." (p.62).

Estragon and Vladimir symbolize the human condition as a period of waiting. Most of society spend their lives searching for goals, such as exams or jobs, in the hope of attaining a higher level or advancing. Beckett subtly hints at the suggestion that suggests that the idea of linear progression through time is an illusion. Vladimir states this, "One is what one is. ... The essential doesn't change.", (p.21). This may be a mockery of all human endeavours, as it implies that mankind achieves nothing, and is ironically contradictory to Beckett's own endeavour. The tragicomedy of the play illustrates this, as two men are waiting for a man whom they know little about. The overwhelming climax of their story represents the ultimate disappointment of life. The Kierkegaardian nothingness wraps the entire play in its bleakness, stating that there is only nothingness that surrounds human existence however it may brag about its 'sound and fury'.

Estragon and Vladimir throughout the play end as they begin and have made no progression: waiting for Godot. The few leaves that have grown on the tree by the second act may symbolize hope but more feasibly represent the elusive passage of time. The process of dying seems to take place within all four characters, mentally and physically. Estragon's poetic eloquence ultimately finds consolation in quoting the biblical line "Hope deferred maketh the something sick". While Vladimir loses his power of reasoning in the face of mad questions put to him by Estragon about their whereabouts the day before Time also erodes Estragon's memory, as shown here:

" Vladimir: What was it you wanted to know?

Estragon: I've forgotten. (Chews.) That's what annoys me." (p.20).

The play completely does not at all progress through a linear time. The commonplace idea of time progressing from a past into a present which, in turn, will flow into a future barely applies to the play. The oblivion of their temporal memory goes to demonstrate the utter triviality of the 'past' in the play. Similarly, the play equally downplays the futuristic

dimension of life as being clearly foreseeable and easily calculable. *Waiting For Godot* eschews all past and future and focuses only on the here-and-now of the tramp's existence. They are caught in the vicious loop of time which lives in the eternal presence without any past or future.

The play consists of two acts that represent two cycles of time or two mirrors reflecting endlessly. The pattern of time appears to be circular or cyclic, as critical linear. Linear time seems to have weakened, as events don't develop with inevitable climaxes historically. The boy returns with the identical message, Godot never comes and tomorrow never seems to arrive

Estragon and Vladimir are moving unrelentingly towards a presumptively untouchable event, (the returning of Godot), at intervals of their finite existence, with a frequently receding finish. It's going to be delineated as a result of the curve on a graph that mathematicians would describe asymptotic: all the time drawing nearer to a price, whereas ne'er reaching it. Estragon brings into prominence the terror of repetitive an existence:

"Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" (p.41).

The lack of information about the tramps' culture and past symbolizes the breakdown of culture and tradition within the twentieth century. Having withstood the two great World Wars, the tradition of the West has been shattered and culture has been greatly modified. The Holocaust showed the atrocities of war and destroyed peoples' beliefs concerning basic human nature. The consequences of political reforms, like communism, Marxism, and science have destroyed society's belief in the church. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche declared the "death of God", as he felt that religion could not offer an appropriate framework for living. Estragon and Vladimir's uncertainty symbolizes the uncertainty of living in the twentieth century and additionally typically the uncertainty of existence. Estragon is unsure concerning their location and temporal order inquiring, "You're certain it absolutely was here? ... you are certain it absolutely was this evening?" (p.15).

Beckett displays the sheer randomness of life through the events of the play. Life is portrayed as unfair, risky, and arbitrary. Proust believed that a person wakes as a literally new person with their past memories intact to assist them to govern their actions within the present. Beckett raises questions on the past or memory governing the individual's identity. The character's identities are uncertain because the past and their memories are uncertain. Vladimir tries to come back to terms together with his existence and also the human condition: "It's an excessive amount of for one man. ... On the opposite hand what is the point of losing heart now" (p.10).

Bishop Berkeley proposed the philosophical hypothesis that being perceived was being or existing. Vladimir desperately asks the boy, "You did see us, didn't you?" (p.52), and Estragon later questions, "Do you think God sees me?" (p.76), because they are uncertain about their own senses, reality and existence. Beckett poses the theory that reality is based on human perception. Schopenhauer devised the vision, akin to Buddhism, that the desiring self does not exist in any 'real' sense, except through the painful consequences of wilful self-assertion.

Estragon asks, "We've lost our rights?" while Vladimir replies, "We got rid of them." (p.19). Perhaps they are pondering the idea that they have no choice in their future and think their fate is preordained, although this would contradict the existentialist notion of free will. The tramps cannot perceive the future and therefore would be unable to know if their future is preordained. Equally, the tramps could have 'no rights because they are devoted to the task of waiting. Heidegger said that instead of trying to comprehend one's existence each individual must choose a goal and follow it with passionate conviction.

Beckett distrusted language because it falsified, he believed in the deepest self. His bleak vision of human ignorance, impotence, and loneliness made communication an absurd endeavor. James Joyce strongly influenced Beckett and Joyce wrote *Finnegan's wake*, in which he practically composed his own language to add truthful meaning to his expression. Beckett is simultaneously torn between the inability to express and his need to express. Estragon and Vladimir talk to each other and share ideas, but it is clear that both characters are self-absorbed and incapable of truly comprehending each other. Estragon and Vladimir regularly interrupt one another with their own thoughts, showing their individual self-absorption. Estragon admits, "I can't have been listening." (p.18), and Vladimir says, "I don't understand." (p.17), displaying the failure of language as a means of communication.

Kierkegaard ultimately advocated a 'leap of faith' into a Christian way of life, which, although incomprehensible, was the sole commitment he believed, could save the individual from despair. Beckett seems to portray the incomprehensibility and irrationality of religion or hope and maybe feels advocating 'a leap of faith' limits the individual's choice. Despite Beckett's denial of Godot's symbolism to God, Godot does have a robust reference to a god of some kind. Godot may well be a hero, a spiritual symbol, a job model but most significantly an emblem of hope. Gogo replies more realistically, "Pah! The wind within the reeds." Camus talked of the Absurd within the myth of Sisyphus, meaning a life lived solely for its own sake during a universe that now not made sense because there was no God to resolve the contradictions. Absurdity within the play could be a by-product of their metaphysically

absurd condition; it's the most effective they'll hope for, the worst they always expect.

Beckett perhaps feels that to scale back the individual's suffering one must detach oneself from one's emotions. The tramps perhaps want to distance themselves from emotion to numb the pain of living. The earliest Greek philosophers were firm believers in the principal self-abnegation, i.e., the self-fashioned distinction from worldly worries and concerns. However, Beckett makes it sound like the noblest human condition is to be emotionally robotic - conditioned out of human feeling by boredom.

A sense of balance within the universe is illustrated in the play, because the silences counteract the conversation, the actions counteract the inactivity. Estragon represents a person of the body and Vladimir represents a person of the mind. Together they represent the divide of self: the mind and body, in Freudian terms - the id and also the ego. Pascal thought it important to acknowledge that the self consists of the mind and body. Note the physical troubles of Estragon, concerning his boots, and therefore the philosophical problems, like time and existence, facing Vladimir:

“Vladimir: (gloomily). It's an excessive amount of for one man. (Pause. Cheerfully.) On the opposite hand, what is the good of losing heart now, that is what I say? we must always have thought of it 1,000,000 years ago, within the nineties.” (p.10).

Estragon: Ah stop blathering and help me off with this bloody thing.” (p.10).

So it is safe to say that anticipating *Godot* as a display of Beckett's bleak view of life would be a simplistic presumption, as Estragon and Vladimir epitomize all of mankind (as Estragon refers to himself as "Adam", p.37), showing the complete range of human emotions. Vladimir and Estragon are excited by Pozzo's arrival and Estragon is "highly excited" about the prospect of an erection. Gogo and Didi are the affectionate names Estragon and Vladimir call one another. Although Gogo and Didi fear being 'tied' or addicted to one another. This has both positive and negative inflections for us. The pessimistic view is that they cannot escape looking ahead to Godot, from one another or from their situation generally. The optimistic view of the play shows a spread of human emotion and therefore they have to share experiences alongside the suffering of finite existence; governed by the past, acting within the present, and unsure of the long run.

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