

Absurdism in Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot"

Sajad Ahmad Dar.

Research scholar

DAVV. Indore (MP).

Dr. Fayaz Ahmad Bhat

Research scholar at

Bundelkhand university

JHANSI (UP)

Abstract

Absurdism as a philosophy stands on the idea that the whole universe is irrational and meaningless and that the look for order brings the person into conflict with the universe. Waiting for Godot, is one of the best examples of absurd literature where the characters are unrecognizable, isolated setting, and the dialogues are meaningless in the traditional sense. This research paper reflects the conflict between the meaning of life and struggles of the life of the characters by using absurd elements like repetitiveness, desolate setting, puppet-like characters, no well-made plot, fantasy, and dark humor, indefinite time, meaningless dialogue and violation of tradition. Based on these elements, this paper shows the suffering of human beings, the boredom of life, struggles between body and mind that we cannot understand which one is right and which one is wrong.

Key words: Absurdism, conflict, desolate, dark humor, suffering

Introduction

Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin in 1906. His father was a contractor. His mother was a nurse. Beckett got his early education from a boarding high school and it was 1923 that he took admission at Trinity College, Dublin from where he got his bachelors degree. There he learn modern languages and it was the reason he became an English teacher. Then he served as a lecturer and taught French at Campbell College, Belfast. In Paris he met James Joyce and started writing criticism and poetry. After traveling many countries, at last he settled in Paris and joined writing as his profession. In his writing, Beckett covered almost every genre of literature, which ranged from novels to essays, short stories, poetry and criticism. Beckett major work includes three best plays which are Endgame, Happy days and Waiting for Godot.

The phrase 'Absurd Drama' or 'The Theatre of Absurd' gained popularity after Martin Esslin's book 'The Theatre of Absurd'. Esslin marks that there is no such thing as a continuous movement of Absurd dramatists. The term is useful as "A device to make certain fundamental characteristics which seem to be present in the works of a number of dramatists accessible to discussion by tracing the features they have in common." By 'Absurd', Camus meant a life lived solely for its sake in a universe which no longer made sense because there was no God to resolve the contradictions. In other words, what Camus called 'absurd', Kierkegaard called 'Despair'. And it is on this philosophy that Beckett created his famous play 'Waiting for Godot'.

Review

Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' is related to the tradition of the Theatre of Absurd. It is unconventional in not depicting any dramatic conflicts. In the play, practically nothing happens, no development is to be found, there is no beginning and no end. The entire action encounters in an absurd setting of a country side road with two tramps Vladimir and Estragon who simply idle away their time waiting for Godot, about whom they have only vague ideas. They have nothing substantial to tell each other and yet they must spend the time, for they cannot stop waiting. Two other characters, a cruel master called Pozzo and his half-crazy slave called Lucky appear. Eventually a boy arrives with a message that Godot will arrive the next day. The two tramps decide to go away, but they do not move and the curtain falls, eventually nothing happens. The second act is the replica of the first act, but Pozzo is now blind and Lucky is dumb. The wait of Vladimir and Estragon continues but in despair. This monotony characterized the world after the wars and this condition was captured

and depicted in the Theatre of Absurd.

The play “Waiting for Godot” is structured in a way, which presents the idea not only about the uselessness and meaninglessness of time but also of life. The basic structure of the drama where being tired of their lives and waiting but without any help from Godot, the two main characters with non-sensical existence, two times both in Act one and Act two, try to commit suicides. The continuous waiting increases their despair and their lives are disgusted in this way and thus absurd. This is this structure, which shows the absurd nature of the drama.

The theatre of Absurd is a post world war creation. It is a creation and a search for a way of relief after the two terrible wars. This provided a dignified way for the people to confront the universe deprived of what was once its centre and its living purpose---the God and faith. Beckett also unfolded “Waiting for Godot” with similar view. The title itself is suggestive that the play deals with a prolong wait and the waiting of the two tramps is for Godot.

The characters of this drama also got elements of absurdity. In order to prove it, if we consider the main characters of “Waiting for Godot” i.e., Estragon and Vladimir, we can see that they are waiting without knowing the purpose they are waiting for. Furthermore, they are not making sense of the lives and existence and that is why they think about suicide. In the same way, they also indicate the carelessness of Godot towards them. This relationship is represented in the shape of master slave dichotomy named Pozzo, the master and Lucky, the slave, where no importance is given to the slave and is overburdened without any care. This is to make Estragon and Vladimir realize that though you are waiting for Godot but this could be your situation in the end. Another thing which is also associated with the absurdity in the characters of “Waiting for Godot” is their trust on each other for holding up and support. Each of them believes to get some sort of help from the other one and thus tries to put a seal to his chaotic life.

Beckett very tactfully highlighted some religious references to figure out God as whimsical, partial and capricious. The Biblical story of salvation of one thief and damnation of the other is although narrated as babblings by Vladimir to while away the time, actually raises question on God’s partial nature. The messenger who works for Godot, lets Vladimir know that Godot executes physical tortures to his brother, a shepherd, for no reasons. This episode of the play instantaneously draws the readers’ attention to the Biblical story of Cane and Able. And pathetic enough one of the brothers receives the Lord’s grace without any rational explanation.

The theatre of Absurd is concerned with projecting the author’s personal world and so the plays lack objectivity and valid characters. Unlike the communicable social and moral lessons Brecht’s narrative epic theatre, Beckett’s ‘Waiting for Godot’ being an Absurd play, does not intend to narrate a story. Rather, ‘Waiting for Godot’ communicates in a pattern of poetic images. Beckett unfolds the play with a nihilistic approach.

Right with the opening dialogue, Estragon:- Nothing to be done. (Act 1).

Conclusion

Habit, boredom, monotony, ignorance and impotence which enveloped the world after the wars and created an absurd existence, is recreated by Beckett in “Waiting for Godot.” Beckett captured this situation and depicted it through the deadening condition of the two tramps in a null and void state without any real action. The play has often been interpreted as a parable where Godot stands as God, or for a mythical human being or for the meaning of life, death or something eventful.

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