



## Postmodern Aspects in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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**Abstract:** Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard have provided the philosophical framework for postmodernism. The former with his stress on the need to be incredulous towards grand narrative and the latter with the loss of the real to virtual reality created largely by the new information and communication technologies. Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition* has proved to be the major text for debates on postmodernism. Baudrillard's book *Simulations* theorized the 'loss of the real'. At present two literary critics can be considered important chroniclers of postmodernism. The first is Ihab Hassan. His book *Paracriticisms* equates postmodernism with anti-elitism and anti-authoritarianism. He visualizes art as becoming communal, participatory, optional and irony, becoming self-consuming play. The writer he had in mind most of the time was Samuel Beckett. The second critic is Linda Hutcheon, the author of *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, who sees postmodernist fiction as subversive and complicit at the same time.

Postmodernism is the term used to suggest a reaction or response to modernism in the late twentieth century. Postmodernism believes in the premise, "irrational is real, real is irrational". It celebrates fragmentation instead of lamenting over it. Postmodernism is both a reaction against modernist values and a natural progression from them: the quest for meaning is abundant, and the experimentation with new nodes of expression is replaced by a reconfiguring of older modes. This breakdown of the traditional systems of Western thought is typically associated with postmodernism. From the above points and parameters related to postmodernism, we will discuss the postmodern condition in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

The play explores a static situation. In Act One, two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon wait on a country road for an appointment with someone called Godot. He never turns up but the tramps meet Pozzo and Lucky and a messenger boy who informs them that Godot is not going to come on that day, but definitely the next day. Act Two repeats what happened in Act One, with some important differences. But the basics remain the same. Thus, the play explores the postmodern condition of men caught in a certain situation as it can be located in the following dialogue:

Estragon: suppose we repented

Vladimir: repented what?

Estragon: Oh (he reflects) we wouldn't have to go into the details.

Vladimir: Our being born? (p. 13)

In his book *Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin attempts to establish *Waiting for Godot* as a representative play, displaying the anxiety and lack of rational discursivity characteristic of these plays. So according to him, the play enacts the predicament of the modern man caught in a meaningless existence and puts it forward in an equally meaningless way. The plays of the theatre of absurd are primarily intended to convey a poetic image or a complex pattern of poetic passages. That is why a play like *Waiting for Godot* can generate considerable suspense and dramatic tension in spite of being a play in which nothing happens, a play designed to show that nothing can ever happen in human life. It is only when the last lines have been spoken and the curtain has fallen that we are in a position to grasp the total pattern of the complex poetic image we have been confronted with.

In the process of living a meaningless existence, man creates a number of institutions with which to cover up the meaningless society (represented by Pozzo and Lucky), knowledge (represented by Lucky's speech), friendship, art, religion and a number of similar institutions are shown to be the constructs and thus fundamentally meaningless. For the common man, they serve to cover the fundamental meaninglessness of life. All through his life man keeps hankering for some kind of absolute meaning or significance, while life slips by. As Gogo says pertinently "we always find something, eh Didi, to let us think we exist?" (p. 14)

Everything conventionally used in the play is to generate meaning, that is its story, character, time and dialogue is carefully rinsed off any potential to signify. This lack of conventional meaning, generating elements, is carefully engineered to suggest the lack of any fundamental meaning, in human life. So the meaninglessness of the play is supposed to suggest the meaninglessness of life.

The label of meaninglessness was actually inspired by the absurdist vision. As is argued by Ionesco, man finds his existence meaningless, being cut off from his metaphysical, transcendental and religious roots. Such is the predicament of the postmodern man. The Western man believed in some absolute meaning and significance to life controlled by the infallible powers of Reason, God and Progress. But then the severance was caused due to the bloody revolutions, ceaseless exploitations, de-humanization and

other problems associated with industrialization in Europe, including the two devastating wars. By the end of the modern era, it was clear that life was the product of a number of social, cultural and political forces, which far from being ideal and infallible had such terrible implications. It is only when we understand these roots and their severance that we get the framework within which the concept of meaninglessness makes sense.

The characters in the play depict the meaninglessness of everyday life activities. They are carefree, gullible and ironically hopeful and patient. These characteristics of both the personalities, namely Gogo and Didi, primarily show the real characteristics of people in reality. The play illustrates that in everyday life people are meant to show and emphasize a perspective that tells that there is no future meaning that can put meaning to any action done in the present. Beckett aims to emphasize the nothingness, pointlessness and meaninglessness of living for the future. Gogo and Didi make use of their waiting time by entertaining themselves and thereby letting time pass without their knowing about it. The meaninglessness or absurdity in the play is absolutely tangible when Pozzo utters out these meaningful words: "Pozzo: (suddenly furious) have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! Its abominable!" (p. 37) It is not only trying to unravel the notion of absurdity of his life that everything like becoming deaf and dumb affected them easily, but also it is trying to mention the absurdity of everyone's life when mundane matters are put at the central part of their lives.

The meaning of the play emerges only when the audience recognizes that the second act has the identical structure as the first. The structure itself acts as a signifier to tell the audience what the play has been saying, namely, that it is a metaphor for the unchanging sameness of the human existence, an image of its underlying pattern; the passing of time experienced as 'waiting', the dependence of human beings on each other, the rhythm of meetings and parties. The suspense of a play in which 'nothing happens' grows from the gradual unfolding of this image.

*Waiting for Godot* deconstructs many important oppositions of conventional Western thoughts. The character of Godot is a specially problematic site in the play where some important conventional oppositions are questioned in a deconstructive manner. The play also celebrates the concept of fragmentation in all dimensions. The play with its desired characteristic turns irrationality into rationality, the unreality into reality. There is no plot or action in the play. So, nothing apparently happens in the play and so Estragon rightly says in the beginning of the play: "nothing to be done". (p. 1)

There is absence of order in postmodernism and it is reflected in this play. Postmodernism believes in the view that there is no absolute truth and rather truth is relative. It asserts that truth is not mirrored in human understanding of it, but is rather constructed as the mind tries to understand its own personal reality. The play successfully highlights the predicament of modern man caught in the clutches of helplessness. The two tramps are symbolic of the wretchedness of existence which is rooted in utter confusion. They do not know what day is it, what time, what are they supposed to do, who is Godot, whether he will come or not. Life is itself full of such uncertainties but surprisingly they are certain of one thing, that Godot is their Messiah and he will come and relieve them from their sufferings. That is the only note of hope in the play and supposedly in the postmodern life, the hope which probably helps man to sustain himself in this flux.

The play features the helplessness of the human condition who are rooted in a particular situation. The hope against hope and this phenomena is sustained by the fact that the messenger boy comes and tells them that Godot will come the next day. Despite what can be viewed as a postmodernist approach to representations of time in that it is shown to be inconsistent and immeasurable, the idea of time as an oppressive force and the cause of great agony for the characters, it follows the postmodern tradition.

Within the wider framework of the play, the instability of language has greater repercussions. Didi and Gogo use word games and play with language as a way of passing the time. This element of playfulness has been identified as another link to postmodernism within the play. However, the inability to sustain a concept of reality is what makes their comic interchanges simultaneously tragic:

Vladimir: say you are, even if it's not true.

Estragon: what am I to say?

Vladimir: say, I am happy.

Estragon: I am happy.

Vladimir: so am I

Estragon: so am I

Vladimir: we are happy.

Estragon: we are happy. (silence) what are we to do now that we are happy? (p. 39)

Estragon's mimicry reveals the pointlessness of this endeavour and crucially, his awareness of that pointlessness. Beckett's characters are tied together by a fear of being left entirely alone, and they therefore cling to one last hope of establishing some kind of communication. The two derelicts in this play are seen conversing in a repetitive, strangely fragmented dialogue that possesses an illusory, haunting effect. Their fumbling ineffectuality in their attempts at conversations seems to represent the ineptness of all mankind in its attempted communication.

The play thus presents an existential and absurdist view of the human condition in the postmodern era. Didi and Gogo, Lucky and Pozzo are psychically isolated from one another; they try at best but fail to communicate meaningfully. This is best expressed in Lucky's speech. They are in despair and feel helpless in the face of destiny. However, Didi and Gogo hope and it is this hope that sustains them through their immobile and monotonous existence. So, they wait for Godot with the complete hope that he will bring them relief and may be will alter their destinies. But maintaining this hope they avoid facing the logic of existential philosophy. Life is occupied by waiting and Beckett presents the suffering of the human beings related to this in the play. The two tramps exemplify this condition of suffering through the juxtaposition of inaction and complaints. Beckett's outlook of postmodern life can be viewed as somewhat bleak, helpless, hopeless and ironic where language does not have particular meaning. The play illustrates the desire to prove one's existence and makes sense of this world.

It is poignant play about ceaseless waiting, about repetition, the meaninglessness, the absurdity of waiting and a feeling suspended in time. It is a postmodern critic of language, of existential despair and nihilistic meaninglessness. Finally, one way of understanding the play is to see it as an abstract play about waiting, waiting for a better future. Our postmodern world seems very likely to become one of spiritual emptiness and cultural superficiality in which social practices are endlessly parodied, a fragmented world of alienated beings which the play strives to present.

Through the barren setting and meaningless waiting, the play actually symbolizes the psychological barrenness of modern people that aroused after two World Wars. Modern people fall in the trap of waiting that has no solution except keeping on waiting. The play describes a mood, a tone towards life, where man's existence is a dilemma of purposeless, meaningless and pointless activity. Through the portrayal of characters and their situation, Beckett asserts that at the root of our being there is nothingness. Through the play, he represents the reality, that happens to most people in the real world. Technically, the postmodernist theory deals with the turn of external reality into an inner state of consciousness. This means that these characters unconsciously show and manifest their inner consciousness through the things they do. The play illustrates that the everyday activities of people are meant to show and emphasize a perspective that tells that there is no future meaning that can actually be meaningful in the present. The play suggests that people should make their present worthwhile. Gogo and Didi make use of their waiting time by entertaining themselves and by letting themselves be entertained by the people who pass by and thereby avoid their boredom. Beckett has deliberately constructed a play when not only his characters, but also his audience wait for something that never happens.

**Conclusion:** Seeing and judging the play as a postmodernist text is more than just labelling it as part of a particular literary movement. Beckett represents a world over here which is defined by alienation, entrapment, disorientation and a questioning of reality. Thus, we can say that the play *Waiting for Godot* is an interesting play for study from the postmodernist perspective. The characters, setting, language and most importantly the style of representation used in the play suits the literary movement of postmodernism. Nullification of linear historical time, imprisonment within an historical prospect, predisposition toward the perception of uncertainty, evincing numerous signs of binary opposition and most important of all, displaying absolute absurdism in all parts of the play, have paved the path to give it a postmodern scrutiny.

#### REFERENCES

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