

Existentialism and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a play that presents conflict between living by religious and spiritual beliefs, and living by an existential philosophy, which asserts that it is up to the individual to discover the meaning of life through personal experience in the earthly world. Support for this assertion regarding the nature of the play is based on first hand interpretation of the dialogue and action within the play itself as well as interpretation of quotes and ideas from Samuel Beckett and his critics.

Günther Ander clearly points out the notion that the protagonists in Beckett's plays, including Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, reflect humanity in general. He states that "the *fabulae personae* whom Beckett selects as representative of today's mankind can only be *clochards*, creatures excluded from the scheme of the world who have nothing to do any longer, because they do not have anything to do with it" (142). While the argument here holds with the notion of Vladimir and Estragon representing humanity, it is necessary to note that Günther's statement conflicts with this discussion in that Vladimir and Estragon have everything to do with the world, merely lacking proper perception of it.

Being more specific, it can be shown that Vladimir represents the portion of humanity who trusts in religion and spiritual beliefs to guide them, and that Estragon represents the more ideal existentialist portion of humanity who chooses to stop waiting and construct the meaning of life based on experience in the tangible and physical world around them. The following is an example of dialogue which supports this concept:

Vladimir: Let's wait and see what he says.

Estragon: Who?

Vladimir: Godot.

Estragon: Good idea.

Vladimir: Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.

Estragon: On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes

Here we see that Vladimir is depending on Godot to tell him what he needs to know regarding his existence, while Estragon asserts that they do not have the time to wait and that they should take action on their own before it is too late. The metaphor of the cooling iron suggests that humanity does not have enough time to wait for their spiritual ponderings to offer them enlightenment, that the chance will pass, and their efforts will not take effect once it does. Therefore, it can be concluded from this that Estragon's suggestion that he and Vladimir make their own way now, before it is too late, is the more ideal course of action advocated by the play. It is Estragon who follows the notion of no longer waiting on religion for answers and going to the philosophy of existentialism. There is another instance in the dialogue between Estragon and Vladimir that plays on the idea of Vladimir as faithfully religious and Estragon as progressively humanistic: Estragon: Charming spot. (*He turns, advances to front, halts, facing auditorium.*) Inspiring prospects. (*He turns to Vladimir.*) Let's go:

Vladimir: We can't.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot.

Estragon: (*despairingly*). Ah! (8)

Once again, the existential philosophy of human experience in the physical world is what Estragon seeks in his desire to leave for "inspiring prospects," and the common human tendency to wait on religion to offer

answers is inherent in Vladimir's suggestion that they should stay and wait so that they can be enlightened by Godot.

Keywords : Existentialism, Waiting for Godot, Samuel Beckett.

Full Paper

The play, *Waiting For Godot*, is centred around two men, Estragon and Vladimir, who are waiting for a Mr. Godot, of whom they know little. Estragon admits himself that he may never recognize Mr. Godot, "Personally I wouldn't know him if I ever saw him." (Estragon also remarks, "... we hardly know him." which illustrates to an audience that the identity of Mr. Godot is irrelevant, as little information is ever given throughout the play about this indefinable Mr. X. What is an important element of the play is the act of waiting for someone or something that never arrives. Western readers may find it natural to speculate on the identity of Godot because of their inordinate need to find answers to questions. Beckett however suggests that the identity of Godot is in itself a rhetorical question. It is possible to stress the for in the waiting for ...: 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."

The essence of existentialism concentrates on the concept of the individual's freedom of choice, as opposed to the belief that humans are controlled by a pre-existing omnipotent being, such as God. Estragon and Vladimir have made the choice of waiting, without instruction or guidance, as Vladimir says, "He didn't say for sure he'd come" but decides to "wait till we know exactly how we stand" Albert Camus, an existentialist writer, believed that boredom or waiting, which is essentially the breakdown of routine or habit, caused people to think seriously about their identity or from their situation in general. The optimistic view of the play shows a range of human emotion and the need to share experiences alongside the suffering of finite existence; governed by the past, acting in the present and uncertain of the future. "Waiting for Godot" is an existentialist play because it has clear tints of existentialism in it. If we study the term existentialism we would come to know that it is a philosophical doctrine which lays stress on the existence with his concrete experience and solidities. However, "Waiting for Godot" is an existentialist play for it embodies Christian existentialism. Christian existentialism stress the idea that:

I God only, man may find freedom for tension.

For Christian, existentialism religious leads to God, whereas according to the Atheistic Existentialism, it is based on the idea of Jean Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger who state that:

Man is alone in a godless universe.

The comparative study of both philosophies helps us to prove "Waiting for Godot" as a Christian existentialistic play. We know that man is confronting the problem of his existence as a being. He is striving for his survival and to control the bridle of the pacing time. He is struggling to save his "individuality" and this very idea leads to the philosophy of existentialism. The word "Existentialism" stands for one's "awareness" of one's "beingness". It stands for a vital principal of life. "Waiting for Godot" resembles the existentialist literature because it deals not only with existence or identity but also with the momentary and the internal time. The time mentioned in "Waiting for Godot" is related to man's mental condition. For instance, the major problem for the tramps is to make time pass in such a way that they are least bothered by it. Vladimir and Estragon constantly complain of the slowness of time passing and do their best to hurry it with their futile diversions. Estragon says:

Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.

But we know that outside the natural time, its consequences flow on. For example, the tree has grown five or six leaves. Pozzo has grown blind and Lucky dumb. Here Estragon remarks:

They all change, only we not.

It should be noted that waiting the natural course of time, they think they would believe themselves from all of their problems without doing any effort. They might die naturally and save the effort of hanging themselves. There is a distinction between the momentary and eternal time for it deals with the question of existence and identity. This difference can also be seen in this play. In “Waiting for Godot” physical time is sometimes taken seriously and sometimes it is ridiculed or condemned. Estragon once succeeds in confusing Vladimir about the passage of time as well as about the day of week. In the same sentence the tramps speak of a million years ago and in the nineties. We have no reason to be certain that the second description is anyone factual than the first. Doubts about time make the tramps doubtful about their existence and identity. One tramp claims to be of the part, it is doubted by the other. Their own identity and existence in time is also questionable. One day seems to have elapsed between the first act and the second, yet it becomes extremely difficult to differentiate this day with the previous by any important physical evidence.

The play “Waiting for Godot” has all the traits of existentialism both Vladimir and Estragon represent the man in general who is facing the problems of his existence in this world. They are interdependent like all other man. Hope for salvation is the subject of play and is the problem faced by the whole human race. Representing the man in general, the two tramps realize the futility of their exercise and we note that they are merely filling up the hours with the pointless activity. Hence their ‘waiting’ is mechanical and deals with problem of existentialism.

Samuel Beckett never gave much information about his *Waiting for Godot*, which premiered on January 5th, 1953 in Paris. This left many people wondering what the play meant, exactly. It has been labeled as “communist”, “avant-garde”, “existential” or just “boring.” Beckett himself said “My work is a matter of fundamental sounds made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them.” I will argue that the play is existential above anything else. Some say that Beckett’s play cannot be existential because Beckett never identified himself as such. They may also point to the fact that Beckett did not even associate himself with philosophy at all: “I never read the philosophers; I don’t understand what they write.” This is a good point. How can you give a work a label that the author himself has dismissed? Isn’t that a little egotistic? But by focusing on what Beckett has said, rather than on the work itself, they overlook the overall tone and message that is conveyed in *Waiting for Godot*. They also ignore the nature of existentialism. Existentialism emphasizes freedom of choice. If Beckett was in fact an existentialist, he may have said the opposite so that readers could choose for themselves what the play meant, instead of being told what to think. The overall feeling of isolation in *Waiting for Godot* is existential. The fact that Vladimir and Estragon do nothing except *be* and *exist*, highlight existential themes. The two wait for Godot, instead of searching him out, and, though they want to leave, they never do. By the end of the play, one gets the feeling that the two will remain in that strange place forever, waiting for a man who will never come: “Vladimir: ‘Well? Shall we go?’ Estragon: ‘Yes, let’s go.’ *They do not move.*” Another major theme in the play is that of loss of identity. Estragon and Vladimir are called only by their nicknames, Gogo and Didi, and Vladimir is also called “Mister Albert” by the boy messenger. Estragon and Vladimir do not seem to know who they are, and their pasts are distant memories that are somehow disconnected from them. According to existential thought, it is the loss of identity that causes mankind’s helplessness. This is why existentialists emphasized giving one’s life a purpose. They would argue that God has not given your life a purpose, and therefore it can mean nothing, unless you give it meaning yourself. Beckett’s play serves as a warning to its readers: do not do as Vladimir and Estragon do. Beckett warns against wasting one’s life by “waiting” instead of “doing.” Pozzo also demonstrates this warning. Imagine the audience’s reaction when, watching *Waiting for Godot* for the first time, sees Pozzo come on stage with Lucky on a leash, treating him like an animal or a slave. This must have had a big impact, and I would imagine that Beckett wanted it this way. Lucky is all of us, he allows himself to be tied up and controlled and only “thinks” when he is told to: “Pozzo: ‘Stop!’ (*Lucky stops.*) ‘Back!’ (*Lucky moves back.*) ‘Stop!’ (*Lucky stops.*) ‘Turn!’ (*Lucky turns towards auditorium.*) ‘Think!’...Lucky: ‘Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqu...’Lucky’s “thinking” goes on for another three pages and consists of nothing but jumbled thoughts that seem to be recycled from other places and are not Lucky’s own thoughts or opinions. Everyone is in danger of becoming Lucky. Many of us allow ourselves to be controlled by other

people, social institutions, religion, etc and many seem content in only recycling others' ideas and thoughts instead of creating their own. *Waiting for Godot* still has much significance today, in that Beckett wanted to wake up his audience, to show how one can live one's life without meaning or purpose, and to make people contemplate and think about this, and maybe realize how they too are Estragon and Vladimir or Lucky, living one's existence waiting or allowing one's life to be controlled by another.

Conclusion

To conclude we say that the whole picture shows a pretty hopelessness. Neither time nor existence, neither reality nor memory or the past have any meaning or significance. Acts are meaningless, time does not flow consecutively, memory seems deceptive, existence is an impression or perhaps a dream and happiness is extremely and affliction is crystal clear through the situation of two tramps. They are on the point of becoming hollow philosophies of existence but demand no other equipment in an audience than the bond of common perception.

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