



Religious Imagery in Samuel Beckett's "Waiting For Godot"

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ABSTRACT

Beckett is an iconoclast and an image breaker. He has pioneered a new kind of drama. Beckett's plays do not have an ordinary plot, setting and theme. He leaves several things untold or leaves for the audience to think on it and no conventional conclusion can be found in his plays. In his play "Waiting for Godot", he brings out many religious imageries. Many Christ-like images accompany the religious symbols and references in the play. Beckett's characters are timeless creations. Existentialism highlights man's responsibility for finding his own nature and decisions. Man is completely responsible for himself. In this play, faith and science actually detract from each other.

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Barclay Beckett (1906-1989) was born in Foxrock, near Dublin, Ireland in a respectable Protestant family. Samuel Beckett is commonly referred to as an 'absurd' dramatist- 'The Theatre of the Absurd' is a phrase taken from Albert Camus' essay, 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (1942) in which Camus defined the absurd as the tension which emerges from man's determination to discover purpose and order in a world which steadfastly refuses to evidence either. The writers in the Theatre of the Absurd diagnosed humanity's plight as purposelessness in an existence cut of harmony with its surroundings. Awareness of this lack of purpose in all produces a state of metaphysical anguish which is the central theme of their absurdism. Thus Absurd drama is the drama that deals with the absurdities and inescapable ills of life.

Samuel Beckett, an Irish dramatist and novelist who lived long in Paris and has written in French and English with ease and facility. He deliberately uses a formless language to present the meaningless void of experience encountered by his characters. His masterpiece drama is *Waiting for Godot*, (1953) in French and translated into English in 1956. His other dramas are *Quad* (1981), *Endgame* (1957-58) and *Krapp's Last Tape* (1959).

His drama is above categories of tragedy and comedy. In the five decades since *Waiting for Godot's* publication, many of the countless attempts to explain the play have relied on some variation of this religious motif proposed by William Mueller. Though Beckett's open text invites the reader to hunt for an interpretation, statements as decisive as this one overstep the search and leave little room for any other possibility. His idea has a compelling textual basis, but its finality violates the spirit of the play. Kenneth Tynan suggests that "Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a dramatic vacuum..It has no plot, no climax, no beginning, no middle, and no end." Such an idea forces any analyst of this enigmatic masterpiece to tread lightly and makes definite criticism nearly impossible. Before examining an explanation as

conclusive as Mueller's we must acknowledge that we cannot hope to determine "the meaning" of this play.

LITERATURE SURVEY

Considering that the work becomes nearly incomprehensible at times, one finds the religious explanation too simple. If Beckett provides such clear references to religion, it seems he would simply call his title character God. Furthermore, Beckett, himself, has denied the existence of a key or myth to the play. The playwright did not produce religious ambiguities because Godot represents God; the ambiguities themselves hold the true significance. The word Godot is meaningless in itself, and those who associate the word with religious themes are fooled by Beckett's language. The play leads some long and tedious path of interpretation; ultimately, the path hits a dead-end.

Language is not synonymous with truth, and the interpreter emerges with nothing. The meaninglessness of Godot is further explained through its connection to Goddillot or Estragon's boots.

RELIGIOUS IMAGERY

The opening conversation between Vladimir and Estragon provides the reader with initial proof that the "Godot = God" hypothesis can be an accurate one. Beckett later will tempt the reader to make such an assumption with the unmistakable correlation between Lucky's conception of God as "with white beard" (p.23) and the child messenger's identical description of Godot. In the first few pages Vladimir immediately steers the conversation towards religion, ambiguously reminding Estragon, "One of the thieves was saved" (p.12). As he attempts to enlighten his friend on the message of the Bible, Vladimir provides initial evidence of Beckett's views on religion. He explains that only one of the four Gospels portrays the thief as being saved, and yet "everybody" (p.23) believes this version. Could this be the author's subtle exposition of the religious logic gap? Estragon explicitly states the thought when he says, "People are bloody ignorant apes" (p.24). Though we must make our judgements carefully, the early pages of the text suggest a cynicism that seems to parallel the religious metaphor throughout the rest of the work.

Several Christ-like images accompany the religious symbols and references scattered throughout the play. When Estragon and Vladimir must lift Lucky, one on each side, we see an image much like that of Christ in his dying moments. The same representation appears again when Pozzo suffers in blindness and must be supported by Vladimir and Estragon. Unbelievably enough, Estragon himself makes appearances that seem to mirror Christ's final earthly days. He talks of spending the night in a ditch, an analogy to the cave that housed the Lord after his death (Perhaps, this thought makes Vladimir's song and its five references to the word "tomb" more significant than it otherwise seems). After discussing the ditch and learning that Estragon has been beaten, Vladimir takes the persona of Veronica and tenderly reaches out to embrace him. He then plays the unrepentant Peter and claims to have never left his side. In a moment of tenuous friendship, Estragon shortly suggests that "the best thing would be to kill me, like the other" (p.40)-the name of this "other" should by now rest firmly in our minds. The final expression of the image comes when Estragon rises from sleep and Pozzo examines the cut on his leg, thus recalling the Apostle's examination of Christ's wounds after his rising.

Despite Beckett's apparent wariness of religion (or perhaps because he wishes to make folly of it), the question of faith appears frequently in *Waiting for Godot*. Most obviously, the metaphor stems from the eternal waiting that the Christian faces in their belief that Christ will return but at an unknown time. The play first addresses this central tenet of faith in a dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon:

Estragon : And if he doesn't come?
 Vladimir : Well come back to-morrow.
 Estragon : And then the day after that.(p.10)

If we read this drama with the intention of fitting Mueller's theory to the play (or perhaps the play to his theory), a vast number of previously unnoticed interpretive opportunities arise. Though the nondescript tree can be universal symbols, when viewed from a religious standpoint it conjures an image of Christ's cross. The setting places this tree alongside an unspecified country road of which time, location and destination all are irrelevant. Metaphorically, the undefined beginning could easily be Christ's crucifixion and the end his resurrection, but the road also could represent the journey from his birth to his death or from the beginning of the human struggle to his salvation.

Before the first word is spoken, a key paradox explodes open : crucifixion, a seemingly fatal end, instead marks the beginning of Christian faith and possibly the metaphysical beginning of this play. Of course these suppositions may border on the absurd, but still they show just how easily this play can take on a life of its own.

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The author does not portray the act of waiting as ludicrous in itself but draws attention to the endless irritation and talks of suicide that fill Vladimir's and Estragon's waiting. We see the author's comment on such frustrations in Pozzo's aphorism, "The tears of the world are a constant quantity" (p.22). Estragon speaks the pain of such interminable waiting in describing, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" (p.41). Beckett then makes clear note of their aimlessness with comments like, "This is becoming really insignificant" (p.44) and "We always find something Didi, to give us the impression that we exist?" (p.44).

As the true existentialist would agree, Beckett portrays Estragon and Vladimir as passing their time with useless trifles and senseless hope. He comments on the despair caused by such empty longing in the exchange begun by Vladimir, "He's thinking of the days when he was happy" (p.55) and ended by Estragon, "We wouldn't know" (p.55): Beckett offers endless opinion on this existence, allowing Vladimir to describe it as "indescribable. It's like nothing. There's nothing" (p.55).

With a religious framework conceived, we must examine the cynicism with which Beckett paints such a picture. If Mueller's likening of this book to the interim between crucifixion and resurrection really is accurately, perhaps Beckett's most biting statement is that Sunday closes without any coming. Vladimir probably offers the best summary of the author's views when he utters, "Hope deferred makes something sick" (p.8).

The importance of messengers does not simply end with Pozzo and Lucky. Godot sends the Boy much as Christ arrives as his father's messenger, and both meet similar mistreatment at the hands of the people they come to address.

Each allusion is an allusion to evidence, which makes the final words of the quote even more significant: "labors abandoned left unfinished". Despite all of the witnesses, writer has denied that Godot represents a specific thing, despite a certain ambiguity in the name. Upon study, however, one realizes that this ambiguity in meaning is the exact meaning of Godot. Though he seems to create greater symbolism and significance in the name Godot. Beckett actually rejects the notion of truth in language through the insignificance of the title character's name. By creating a false impression of religious symbolism in the name Godot Beckett leads the interpreter to a dead end.

For one to make an association between God and the title character name is completely logical. In fact, in producing the completely obvious allusion, Beckett beckons the interpreter to follow a path of religious symbolism. Throughout the play, references to Christianity are so often mentioned that one can scarcely identify a religious undercurrent: the presence of religion is not really below the surface. In the opening moments of the play, Vladimir asks "Hope deferred make something sick. who said that?". The real quotation. "Hope deferred make the heart sick," comes from Proverbs 13:12 of the Bible.

Shortly after Vladimir asks if Estragon has ever read the Bible and continues on a discussion of the Gospels, the "Saviour," and the two thieves surrounding Christ during the crucifixion. By inserting religious discussions in the first few moments in the play, the playwright encourages the interpreter to assume the play's themes are greatly connected with religion. Then when the discussion turns to Godot, Estragon associates their request from Godot with "A kind of prayer".

The connection between God and Godot is seemingly firmly established, leaving room for a variety of interpretations. Vladimir and Estragon are the faithful adherents to God, and wait for Him, or a messianic figure, to come. Perhaps Vladimir and Estragon are representatives of hope by demonstrating unwavering faith to a God who does not present himself or, on the other hand, are showing the folly of blind faith.

Samuel Beckett is commonly referred to as an 'absurd' dramatist- 'The Theatre of the Absurd' is a phrase taken from Albert Camus' essay, 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (1942), in which Camus defined the absurd as the tension which emerges from man's determination to discover purpose and order in a world which steadfastly refuses to evidence either. The writers in the Theatre of the Absurd diagnosed humanities plight as purposelessness in an existence cut of harmony with its surroundings. Awareness of this lack of purpose in all produces a state of metaphysical anguish which is the central theme of these absurdist. Thus Absurd drama is the drama that deals with the absurdities and inescapable ills of life.

In the play, the tirade ends when Pozzo, Estragon and Vladimir triumphantly tackle Lucky, like the mob which turns upon Jesus, silencing him, shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!". Lucky serves Pozzo well insisting on carrying his burden. But his burden is a symbol; bags filled with sand. In the same way, Christ, by his example, taught humanity to shoulder burden, but, according to Wailing for Godot, the burden is not worth carrying. Christ was both the beginning and the end of Christianity, just as Lucky began his service with high intentions. but ends as a slave who speaks only gibberish, on his way to the auction block. In the end, they both destroy what they hoped to create.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett produces a truly cryptic work. On first analyzing of the play, one is not sure of what, if anything, happens or of the title character's significance. In attempting to unravel the themes of the play, interpreters have extracted a wide variety of symbolism from the Godot's name. Some, taking an obvious hint, have proposed that Godot represents God and that the play is centered on religious symbolism. Through all these efforts, there is still no definitive answer as to whom or what Godot represents and the meaning of Godot is non-existent, and the effort to find one is futile and exhausting. No matter how many times one searches, one will not find significance in the word.

Alongside the theme of waiting, other religious institutions enter the debate, as when Estragon describes his supplication to Godot as "a kind of prayer" (p.18), Vladimir asks, "And what did he reply?" (p.18), to which Estragon must answer, "That he'd see." (p.18).

Throughout the play Beckett gives a glimpse of the interminable waiting that faith demands, shaded by the view that it is unnatural and unwise. He also makes clear notice of the unnatural significances shown to religion. Perhaps this examination itself demonstrates the extremes to which people will go to extract religious significance. Very early in the play, Vladimir first introduces the notion of religion as he asks, "Did you ever read the Bible?" (p.12). Estragon, with all possible profanation responds, "the Bible. I must have taken a look at it. I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty" (p.12):

In the end, is there sufficient evidence to draw so heavily on a religious motif in this play? Though Beckett surely intended some degree of meaning to the religious undertones in making our case we have fallen into one of Beckett's most wily traps. In a play to which there can simultaneously be assigned no meaning and infinite meaning, we have obstinately found an explanation. As Kenneth Tynan suggests, "*Waiting for Godot* frankly jettisons everything by which we recognize theater." We have tried to apply our methods of dealing with all other drama and in doing so have violated this masterpiece.

Tynan continues, "A play, it asserts and proves is basically a means of spending two hours in the dark without getting bored". Dark in this case is much more than a physical condition. Though we can tell ourselves that this explanation is correct, we still wander through this text as blindly as ever, probably having provided the soul of Samuel Beckett with a hearty laugh for even attempting to define the undefinable. Though in this analysis we see the majority of literary interpretations, we dare not consider ourselves fulfilled—most of this play's vast psychological landscape has yet to be traversed. We must not assume ourselves masters of this work, for in the game of insults played between Vladimir and Estragon, examples of the play's mockeries of religion abound, but some of the less satirical religious allusions also deserve notice. The scene in which Vladimir feeds Estragon on only scraps of food and tells him, "Make it last, that's the end of them" (p.13) is strikingly reminiscent of the moment in each of the four Gospels when Jesus feeds a crowd of five thousand on just five loaves and two fishes. In the debate over the appearance of the tree, Estragon insists, "Looks to me more like a bush" (p.14), thus invoking Exodus' picture of Moses on Mount Sinai. Several religious references also appear during the first encounter with Pozzo, including the words "crucify" (p.34), "angel" (p.34) and "Adam" (p.34).

Beckett conceived a totally new kind of play. In doing this, he greatly enlarged the scope of the theatre. Beckett's plays were deliberately designed to be performed by actors for an audience sitting in a theatre or beside a radio or television. In fact, Beckett's plays cry out to be acted on the stage. They produce in an audience an effect peculiar to the theatre, an immediacy of something experienced directly as opposed to something described. To achieve this effect Beckett employs words, movements, costumes, scenery, sound

and light effects. An artistic blending of these several elements make his plays a new experience and his theatre a "total theatre". Beckett's plays do not have what we call a conventional plot. We do not find any subtly of characterization and motivation. We find only mechanical puppets. We do not find the theme of Beckett's plays explicitly stated. Beckett leaves several things about his plays unsaid and leaves it to the audience to draw its own conclusion. Beckett's plays can be interpreted on many levels.

Beckett does not present the grim picture of humanity at odds with an alien universe as a tragic vision. He presents this horrible picture of characters torn out of life with an admix-ture of comedy. The comic elements serves to tone down thy,. menace element of the tragedy on the one hand. And on the other hand, it serves to heighten the tragic irony. Beckett's plays are the monumental examples of dramatic nightmare. His saddestplays are also the funniest as in the case of *Waiting for Godot*.

Martin Esslin wrote a book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) to popularize the absurdist drama. Martin Esslin rightly remarks that the term 'Absurd Drama' is useful as "a device to make certain fundamental traits which seem to be present in the works of a number of dramatists, accessible to discussion by tracing features they have in common". The major dramatists of this group are Samuel Beckett, Engene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet., and Harold Pinter. The lesser figures in the Theatre of the Absurd are Robert Pignet, N.F. Simpson. Edward Albee, Fernando Arrabal and Funter Grass.



CONCLUSION

All of Samuel Beckett's works are highly symbolic. And to a major extent the symbolic in Beckett's work means the religiously symbolic. Often the symbols are explicit. Even the most casual reader cannot help but be aware that Beckett's writings are packed with direct Biblical quotations and theological terms. But just as often they are implicit, gaining in weight of religious reference by means of context and juxtaposition, echo and reverberation. Beckett constantly alludes to the death of Christ generally and crucifixion specifically. It is precisely in its skillfully woven pattern of implicit religious imagery that so much of the textural richness of Beckett's resides. And it is particularly in his plays, that this underlying pattern becomes most apparent. It is a pattern embodying at the basic metaphysical and theological issues at the heart all of Beckett's work: Suffering, death, guilt, judgment and salvation.

The suffering that characterises earthly existence and the theological context of that suffering are recurrent leit-motives in Beckett's drama. The causal relationship between divine cruelty and human suffering is perhaps most effectively dramatized in Beckett's portrayal of many of his characters as emblematic Biblical sufferers. In this way, Beckett implies that, like the Biblical figures with whom they are consistently assimilated, his characters suffer as a consequent of divine punishment. And the Biblical sufferer with whom Beckett's characters are most frequently identified is Christ. The death of Christ on the cross is for Beckett, a paradigm of divine rejection. Occasionally, the comparison is explicit; thus in *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon admits, "All my life I've compared myself to (Christ)". More often, it is implicit. In order to grasp the underlying religious connotation, one must first pay careful attention to all elements of Beckett's dramaturgy, verbal and non-verbal alike.

Godot, a meaningless word or mere sound, reveals the insignificance of all Beckett's language. While the play contains obvious ambiguities into the word's meaning, they are all for show. There is no real meaning. The interpretation of Godot's religious significance, while this significance is clearly alluded to, leads to interpreter into a long, blind alley of meaninglessness. Just as Estragon's boots contain nothing inside them, there is no central meaning to the word Godot. Furthermore, this meaninglessness can be expanded to all of Beckett's language; full of hints of a greater significance, language hides the triviality of all things described. Only after this revelation can one finally get towards the central meaning of Beckett's play; there is no meaning. His characters engage in ridiculous language to pass the time and to "give [them] the impression [they] exist". Illusions of significance continue throughout the play, but, in truth, the play comes from nothing and ultimately ends in nothing. Beckett exposes the pitfalls of a language that attempts to create meaning when none exists. *Waiting for Godot* is not a commentary on religion or really anything for that matter is that meaning comes in its meaninglessness. That is the play's greater truth.

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