An Introduction to Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot

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Abstract: In the present paper a research has been done on the drama ‘Waiting for Godot’ by Samuel Beckett. The theme of the play has been explained in a simpler language for a better understanding. Also the critical analysis has been done from different sources which are helpful for the students from the examination point of view. The paper has been divided into three different parts with an introduction and also the conclusion. The references have been mentioned that depict the sources of criticism.

Keywords: Theatre of the Absurd, Characters, Existentialism, Tragicomedy

‘Waiting for Godot’ is a play by a twentieth century Irish literary scholar Samuel Beckett who has also received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. Beckett is widely known for his play ‘Waiting for Godot’ which was first written in French under the name En attendant Godot. The play has been divided into two acts and there are four main characters- Estragon, Vladimir, Lucky and Pozzo. The play is one of the finest examples of the twentieth century under the theme of existentialism and became quite popular in English literature for its unique characteristics.

The play stands unique for its distinct features. It does not consist of the standard dramatic conflicts and there is hardly any notable action taking place in the play. Also, it does not have the regular structure of a drama. There is no beginning, no development and no ending in the play. However, the development of the action takes place in an illogical setting where there is nothing around only a tree and the two main characters - Vladimir and Estragon who are simply waiting for Godot about whom they have only a vague idea. Two characters, a half crazy slave Lucky and his cruel master called Pozzo arrive on the scene and eventually a boy arrives. The two homeless persons Vladimir and Estrogen have taken the decision to return despite that they never proceed.

The second act is the reduplication of the first one except that Pozzo has turns blind and become totally dependent on Lucky. That is why it is called as a drama in which nothing happens “twice”. Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait in despair. This gloominess that engulfed people across the globe post the Second civil war and their condition is depicted in the “Theatre of Absurd”.

“Nothing happens. Nobody comes, nobody goes. It’s awful.”

Beckett makes conscious attempts to use symbolism in his play. Estragon and Vladimir are made to face the basic condition of their existence. The empty setting is also an indicator of their lives which are vacant. The continuous dilemma and purposelessness puts Vladimir and Estragon in a helpless situation. There is little resistance from their side. Time and again, they get tired of waiting and express the wish to go back but they are bounded by the unending wait.

The play is a striking example of the Theatre of the Absurd. The term “Theatre of the Absurd” depicts the vision of an exhausted civilization and the chaos set in the world by presenting their life after the Second World War. This name was given to the avant-garde plays which expressed the purposelessness, lack of harmony and sense of futility that that characterized the post-world war II existentialism. Beckett’s play is based on this philosophical belief.
The Theatre of Absurd deals with a profound level of absurdism which questions the reason and the purpose of human existence in a society where there is a significant decline in the ethics and belief system. In such a condition, man cannot help and finds himself in the pool of indecisiveness. It is because of these characteristics that the play has been well accepted by the contemporary readers. It displays a true depiction of the societal exhaustion. Waiting for Godot represents the Theatre of Absurd because of the absurdity in its characters, in its plot, its dialogues and also its theme.

Beckett’s play “Waiting for Godot” is also seen in the light of Tragicomedy. Tragicomedy is a literary genre which has the elements of both tragedy and comedy. The absurdist plays belong the tradition of the Theatre of Absurd basically expressed that human existence had no meaning or purpose and logical constructions paved the way for illogical or irrational speech.

It is seen primarily in the light of existentialism for the ideas presented on life. The minute details like the lack of historical background of the two characters demonstrate their struggle with their self-identity. There is thus a constant question mark on their existence that its characters are dealing with. The character of Godot, who never appears the scene, is also unidentified as a character. Nobody knows about who is he and where he belongs to.

Belonging to category of the Theatre of Absurd, the play lacks the standardized concepts of drama like a systematic plot, specific dialogues and proper setting. There is also a gap between the structure of the play and its deeper meaning. On the surface level, it looks like a nonsensical piece of writing in which nothing substantial takes place whereas its holds some intense and noteworthy questions on the core of the human survival. The play can be analyzed on various grounds and at each ground it provides a different interpretation.

Thus, Waiting for Godot is a play which is known for its unconventional features and the theme of existentialism. This play has set the path for the other authors to experiment with the structure and the plot. The readers identify the character of Godot to their unfulfilled dreams and aspirations which they are waiting to fulfill. Some even compare it to God. Godot never arrives on the stage and the wait continues.

Beckett has also written various other plays however he became well renowned for his contribution to the literary world through this play. Due to its simplicity and its distinguished features it is commonly read by the students of English literature and outside. It has beautifully captured the psychological chaos and feebleness of human mind. The heart wrenching account of impotence of human beings in the hands of nature is noteworthy. It is creative representation of the human mortality.