

## **The ‘Search’ Continues: A Study of Universal ‘Nothingness’ in Waiting for Godot**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Known as the epitome of Absurd drama, Samuel Beckett’s ‘Waiting for Godot’ presents before us a gloomy and dark background of post 2<sup>nd</sup> World War days. The ultimate uncertainty prevailing in and around societal life and the ever hanging question mark about human future dominates the overall mood of the characters.

Any search for meaning or significance is mostly insignificant in this drama. ‘Nothingness’ is presented as the omniscient and omnipotent power behind day to day living; if that kind of existence can at all be termed ‘living’. Beckett is at his best in this drama to portray the genre of absurdity in its true meaning. It seems that the appeal it holds for the readers is perpetual. Good many methods used by Beckett in the drama are not only unique but also used in an absurd way. Inter couple contrast, repetition, skepticism, language, sequence – all these features enhance the effect of absurdity and nothingness in the drama. Situated poles apart from an orderly, harmonious life circle; the drama reveals before us the uncertain future, momentary and impulsive life. It also presents human characters as eccentric and indecisive. The trench life of soldiers, impending danger in the form of sudden bombing add to the nihilistic approach of people towards life.

Needless to say that the drama has become a Bible of absurdity for people interested in this specific genre of literature.

**Keywords:** absurdity, skepticism, Waiting for Godot.

Written in 1948, first staged in 1953 and translated into many languages, ‘Waiting for Godot’ is not merely a contemporary classic, it is also a successful outcome of Samuel Beckett’s relentless quest for a form which would incarnate the experience that he wished to express. It is a “powerful play whose power derives precisely from its skillful blending of form and meaning, dramatic structure and cognitive experience.”

The play projects a dark vision of human life. Privation and uncertainty are the major motifs of the play. But, despite the elements of unhappiness and misery, the play cannot arouse the tragic intensity. This is because of the new approach of the dramatist. Divested of his supreme position, man becomes a pitiful creature being devoid of nobility, dignity and seriousness. The spectacle of his suffering, therefore, does not rise to the tragic heights. By making fun of his suffering the dramatist denies minimum dignity to him. So, what we have in the play are not heroes but anti – heroes. Vladimir and Estragon with all their aloofness symbolize the essential rootlessness of the post – war generation.

The play ends with no hope of a better future. It presents a vision darker than that of tragedy. We can never ignore this aspect of the play even when we come across comic situations and dialogues in the play. Estragon's story about his boots rouses our laughter despite his real physical pain. Lucky's long speech too provokes laughter. But this type of laughter is in, the words of Beckett himself "mirthless laughter". So the play is neither a tragedy nor a comedy as tradition demands.

The speeches in a traditional drama were related to action. That is not so in the present play which has the gap of communication as one of its main themes. Beckett felt that language could not express reality and failed as a medium of expression. So he used 'mime' at the stage. Gesture proves more effective than words. So mime is used at the point of the entrance of Pozzo and Lucky. The dialogue at the beginning of the play is a cross talk which is a source of comedy. The conversation in the play is simply meant 'to pass the time', words and action are so separated that several times the characters say 'I am going' but they do not move.

'Waiting for Godot' is lacking in everything generally accepted as essential for box – office success. There is no spectacle, no sex, no violence, hardly any action. There are no fine speeches or brilliant epigrams, only inconsequential exchanges that usually slump into a hopeless silence. As Vivian Mercier penetratingly observed, it is a play where 'nothing' happens twice. A traditional play would have at least five acts corresponding to the five stages of the development of plot but this play has only two. Beckett once said that he wrote the play in two acts because one act would have been too little and three acts too many. It is time that if the situation and sequence were dramatized only once it would not have had the same effect as its redramatisation in the second act.

The play has a certain emptiness precisely at those places – such as plot, character, dramatic speech, setting, etc. where one would conventionally look for meaning. Yet the play has proved a powerful one, not a failure. The secret lies in a number of innovations.

The play has a symmetrical structure like a mathematical formula in which one part balances the other. This symmetry is evident, first of all in what may be called the device of coupling, of conceiving things in pairs. The play seems to have been constructed on sets of binaries. It has two acts which purport to dramatise two consecutive evenings in the life of its central characters. It employs two sets of characters and each set is a pair. Interestingly, even the messenger boy has a brother.

The relationship between and within these pairs is not always of identity and harmony but also one of contradiction and tension. Each of the two central couples in the play is conceived so indivisibly that it functions as a single agential unit. Thus we find not four characters but two agential units in the play. Pozzo and Lucky are physically tied to each other. Similarly, despite their frequently expressed wish, Vladimir and Estragon cannot part company. The units present a pattern of binary oppositions. Sharply in contrast to each other, each unit epitomizes a mode of being which is counterposed to the other. The tramps are compelled to a futile and perpetual waiting and are imprisoned as it were, in space. Pozzo and Lucky, on the other hand, are committed to an equally futile and perpetual wandering, and are confined within a temporal prison. Mutual love and care between the tramps is also in contrast to the exploitative relationship that the wayfarers symbolize.

This simple pattern of inter – couple contrast is complicated by the further contrast and tension within each agential unit. Estragon's easy defeatism and despair (he seems to be waiting primarily for death) and his preoccupations with immediate physical needs (hunger, sleep) are contrasted to Vladimir's almost obstinate optimism and intellectual preoccupation with philosophical questions. This contrast makes them mutually complementary, but it also adds a contrapuntal dimension to their relationship. The contrast within the other major couple is mainly situational. While Pozzo is domineering, bullying master, Lucky is a treacherous but abjectly obedient slave. A similar situational contrast is offered between the Boy who looks after the sheep and is often beaten.

This contrapuntal arrangement of emphasis so pervades the play that the text itself alternates throughout between the opposite poles of the farcical and tragic, routinized speech and ponderous silence, change and permanence, and theatrical vitality and contemplative stasis. The binary opposition between hope and despair underlies the play and organizes all the other oppositions into a unified experience of absolute ambivalence.

As Ruby Cohn rightly observes the play is 'woven with repetition'. Act Two is a repetition of Act One. In each act we are offered basically the same sequence: the tramps reunite, wait, contrive way of passing time, encounter Pozzo and Lucky, receive Godot's disappointing message, contemplate suicide, decide to leave and do not move. Some variations, particularly in regard to the tree and the physical condition of the wayfaring couple, do occur, but they do not detract from our perception of the essential sameness of the situation. Even the routines with boots and hats, certain standard gestures like brooding, pacing and falling, and arguments about the correctness of space and time, identity of Pozzo and Lucky, events of the previous evening etc. occur in both Acts, as do Estragon's need for food and sleep and references to Vladimir's bladder problem. Verbal repetitions like 'Nothing to be done' and 'We're waiting for Godot/ Aw!' recur throughout the play and function as refrains.

Skepticism is one of the key notes of the play. Proceeding with the common theme of waiting for someone who never comes, the play comes to represent the helplessness of the mankind and uncertainty of its future. Vladimir and Estragon, the main characters of the play, wait for Godot who never comes. His identity – indeed, the very reality of his existence is in serious doubt. In the course of the play, he is perceived in various ways - savior, god, a vindictive tyrant, a rich employer, somebody who has the tramps' 'future in his hand ..... at least (their) immediate future'. In their attempts to solve this mystery, critics have searched Beckett's own life, history and etymology without being able to establish definitively who or what 'Godot' might mean. Actually, 'Godot' cannot be made to represent any one idea, ideal or person, precisely because he represents an absence. We may call it as the absence of faith. The same skepticism is seen at the very beginning of the play where Vladimir applies his thinking to the matter of the Biblical thieves. The thought that one of the thieves was saved is found reassuring. But soon as he finds that out of the floor Evangelists present on the scene, 'only one speaks of a thief being saved', another implies the damnation of both, while the remaining two do not mention any thieves at all. This shortness of the odds destabilizes his hope, shakily propped up as it was on a mere fifty percent chance. There is no positive alternative for Didi and Gogo in the play. They perpetually alternate between assurance and doubt imprisoned within a closed situation. Are they at the right place? On the right day? Is the tree really a willow? Are the boots in the second Act Estragon's? Is Pozzo Godot? Is Vladimir's name Mr. Albert? Almost everything in the play is in doubt and nothing is conclusively resolved. This indecision, doubt and uncertainty is quite in the tune with the spirit of the age and appeals to modern man.

Pessimism is the other keynote of the play that appeals modern man. It appeals because the sense of failure and despair is not unusual in the present day world. Pessimism consists of alienation, boredom and despair and we find the elements of all these in this play in abundance.

The four main characters of the play are perceived 'at this place, at this moment of time', not as distinct personalities but as radically truncated and grossly generalized images of mankind which in Lucky's phrase 'is seen to waste and pine, waste and pine'. Incapable of any significant action or initiative, they imply an utterly pessimistic view of man as a helpless victim of his ontological fate. The tramps are compelled to a futile and perpetual waiting and are imprisoned, as it were, in a space. Pozzo and Lucky, on the other hand, are committed to an equally futile and perpetual wandering and are confined within a temporal prison. Perpetual waiting bores the tramps who devise means to pass time, while perpetual wandering bores the wayfarers who find some change in the company of the tramps.

A sense of closure and nullity pervades the play which is reinforced by the repetitive rhythm. Act Two is a repetition of Act One. Each act basically has the same sequence: the tramps reunite, wait, contrive ways of passing time, encounter Pozzo and Lucky, receive Godot's disappointing message, contemplate suicide, decide to leave and do not move. Some variations, particularly in regard to the tree and the physical condition of the wayfaring couple, do occur but they do not detract from our perception of the oneness of the situation. Even the routines with the boots and hats, certain gestures like brooding, pacing and falling, and arguments about the correctness of time and place, identity of Pozzo and Lucky, events of the previous evening and other times occur in both Acts, as do Estragon's need for food and sleep and references to Vladimir's bladder problem. The play also contains a variety of verbal repetitions like 'Nothing to be done' and 'We're waiting for Godot/ Ah'. Thus a process that is endless and unchanging is implied. It appears that there is no possibility of progress or break from this closed, everlasting circularity.

There are other things in the play which are appealing to people in general. The language of the play, despite its philosophical content or implication is very simple. All the characters of the play converse in short, simple sentences (Lucky's "thinking" is the only exception) which are coherent to all. Things which they discuss are itself commonplace. At the same time, they are related to the destiny of mankind. The play exhibits two sorts of relationship between human beings. Mutual care and love form the basis of the relationship of the tramps while Pozzo and Lucky symbolize the exploitative relationship. People caring and loving each other ameliorate the conditions of their own uncertain lives and prove helpful to others, while the exploitative relationship leads to the blindness of the one and the dumbness of the other. The remark that the blind Pozzo can see into the future is ironical. It makes fun of not only the ordinary soothsayers, but it strikes at the oppressive regimes of the world too who think they know the future but remain unaware of the reality at hand. With the backdrop of the Nazi atrocities against the Gypsies, the play also seems to suggest disorderly people with mutual love and care are far superior to the pillars of law and order.

The play 'Waiting for Godot' still holds a strong universal appeal as an absurd drama. This drama is a special one from Samuel Beckett as it is both a trendsetter and an important piece of art. Darkness and nothingness prevails all through this different kind of artistic creation. In the traditional sense of the term, this drama does not show any progress and lack all parameters to qualify as a drama. But, in a time when uncertainty and skepticism reign supreme, the drama successfully portrays the 'hollowmen' in the truest sense of the term.

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