

ABSURDITY AND EXISTENTIALISM IN “WAITING FOR GODOT”

Dr. Rajula Albert
Assistant Professor English
Govt. Degree College, Hatta
Damoh, (M.P.)

Absurdism, one of the most exciting and creative movements in the modern theater, is a term applied to a particular type of realistic drama which has absorbed theater audiences and critics for the past three decades. One specific area, appropriately labeled "Theatre of the Absurd" by the American critic Martin Esslin in the 1960's, offers its audience an existentialist point of view of the outside world and forces them to consider the meaning of their existence in a world where there appears to be no true order or meaning. Inching ever closer to a realistic representation of life, the evolution of absurdist drama from Samuel Beckett to Tom Stoppard brings a new focus to absurdism and expands the role of philosophy and metaphor in theatrical drama.

Therefore, the goal of absurdist drama is not solely to depress audiences with negativity, but an attempt to bring them closer to reality and help them understand their own "meaning" in life, whatever that may be. Samuel Beckett's understanding of this philosophy best characterizes how we should perceive our existence as he says, "Nothing is more real than nothing." Beckett's most popular absurdist play, *Waiting For Godot*, is one of the first examples critics point to when talking about the Theatre of the Absurd. Written and first performed in French in 1954, *Godot* had an enormous impact on theatergoers due to its strange and new conventions. Consisting of an essentially barren set, with the exception of a virtually leafless tree in the background, clown-like tramps, and highly symbolic language, *Godot* challenges its audience to question all of the old rules and to try to make sense of a world that is incomprehensible. At the heart of the play is the theme of "coping" and "getting through the day" so that when tomorrow comes we can have the strength to continue.

Structurally, *Godot* is a two-act play which is primarily cyclical. It begins with two lonely tramps on a roadside who are awaiting the arrival of a figure referred to as Godot and ends with the same premise. Many critics have concluded that Act Two is simply a repeat of Act One. In other words, Vladimir and Estragon may forever be "waiting for Godot." We are never given an answer to their predicament. As an audience, we can only watch them do the same things, listen to them say the same things, and accept the fact that Godot may or may not come. Much like them, we are stuck in a world where our actions dictate our survival. We may search for an answer or a meaning to our existence, but we most likely will never find it. Anthony Jenkins writes, "there can be no answers; Godot may or may not exist and may or may not arrive; we know no more about him than do Vladimir and Estragon"(40). Thus, this play is structurally arranged in such a way as to make us believe that Godot will probably never come, and that we must accept the uncertainty of life.

The two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, spend their days reliving their past trying to make sense of their existence, and even contemplate suicide as a form of escape. As characters, however, they are the prototypical absurdist figures who remain detached from the audience. They essentially lack identities and their vaudeville mannerisms, particularly when it comes to contemplating their suicides, has a more comic effect on the audience than a tragic one. This is perhaps best observed in the beginning scene of the play when they contemplate hanging themselves:

VLADIMIR: What do we do now?

ESTRAGON: Wait.

VLADIMIR: Yes, but while waiting.

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR: Hmm. It'd give us an erection.

ESTRAGON: (highly excited). An erection! (12)

What follows is a discussion of who should hang themselves first. Vladimir suggests Estragon go first since he is lighter and therefore won't break the bough and leave the other one alone and alive. The conversation continues:

ESTRAGON: (with effort). Gogo light- bough not break- Gogo dead. Didi heavy- bough break- Didi alone. Whereas-

VLADIMIR: I hadn't thought of that.

ESTRAGON: If it hangs you it'll hang anything.

VLADIMIR: But am I heavier than you?

ESTRAGON: So you tell me. I don't know. There's an even chance. Or nearly.

VLADIMIR: Well? What do we do?

ESTRAGON: Don't let's do anything. It's safer.

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

ESTRAGON: Who?

VLADIMIR: Godot.

ESTRAGON: Good idea. (13)

This comical scene, replete with the image of death, ends up making the audience laugh rather than take the two tramps seriously. And, the fact that Estragon and Vladimir choose to not hang themselves suggests a much more existentialist, absurdist view of death and a less tragic one.

What remains archetypal in *Godot* concerning the absurdist metaphor is the way in which each character relies on the other for comfort, support, and most of all, meaning. Vladimir and Estragon desperately need one another in order to avoid living a lonely and meaningless life. The two together functions as a metaphor for survival. Like the characters who proceed and follow them, they feel compelled to leave one another, but at the same time compelled to stay together.

At the end of Act One, Vladimir and Estragon discuss their partnership, saying:

ESTRAGON: Wait! (He moves away from Vladimir.) I sometimes wonder if we wouldn't have been better off alone, each one for himself. (He crosses the stage and sits down on the mound.) We weren't made for the same road.

VLADIMIR: (without anger). It's not certain.

ESTRAGON: No, nothing is certain.

Vladimir slowly crosses the stage and sits down beside Estragon.

VLADIMIR: We can still part if you think it would be better.

Silence.

ESTRAGON: No, it's not worth while now.
Silence. (35-36)

The same conversation takes place again at the end of Act Two:

ESTRAGON: Didi.

VLADIMIR: Yes.

ESTRAGON: I can't go on like this.

VLADIMIR: That's what you think.

ESTRAGON: If we parted that might be better for us.

VLADIMIR: We'll hang ourselves to-morrow. (Pause). Unless Godot comes.

ESTRAGON: And if he comes?

VLADIMIR: We'll be saved. (61)

The play opens with the character Estragon battling to take off his boot, who inevitably surrenders, murmuring, "nothing to be done"². His companion Vladimir consumes the thought and muses on it, the suggestion being that 'nothing is a thing that must be done' and this pair is set to use whatever is left of the day doing it. The point when Estragon at long last succeeds in uprooting his boot, he looks and feels inside yet finds nothing, only preceding this, Vladimir checks his hat and this theme repeats all through the play. (Beckett 207).

In Existential writing, characters are constrained to answer the existential inquiries by being compelled into utterly futile scenarios. The supposed "Existential Hero" is he or she who can will, or make, his or her importance in these foolish, bound scenarios, then after that still enactment in understanding to an interior ethics. The Existential Failure or screw-up, or failure, conversely, is he or she who is incapacitated by the scenario or his or her own particular keenness and unable to ascent above triviality.

Likewise, in Beckett's "Waiting For Godot" the characters are gotten in silly theoretical scenarios where they are continually sitting tight for intending to touch base (fit as a fiddle of Godot = God) or they squander their opportunity attempting to reply to the inquiry "what does everything mean?" (Existential literature and film).

Samuel Beckett's works have been recognized as a representation of individuals' state of mind and the good for nothing ridiculousness of the human condition. The hopeless state of life in the present, the steady deliberation to make it productive and the flop to succeed in this is depicted in Waiting for Godot.

The play has been named as one of the major samples in post-innovator symbolization which demonstrates the 'collapsing of reality', the starting focuses for the 'theatre of the absurd'. The understandings of the play are shifted, and they all rely on upon the single gathering of people's perspective. The play gives profound knowledge into the human condition, and reflects a mirror to the crowd which makes them ask, is this me and my existence circumstances.

After the Second World War, a profound emergency of thoughts in Europe forced individuals to re-examine accepted planet sees and general qualities. The French post-war existentialism and the expositive expression of the silly are two of the most huge results of the European philosophical and artistic patterns of that time, and Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot" (1949) was the first to carry the existential plan and style to the theatre scene. This study prescribes an investigation of this play as conveying the existential skeptical thought that includes the thought of God's nonexistence. The play likewise passes on an additional existential thought that the issue of God's being all things considered is of a minor essentialness for a mere mortal. The examination is a nearby perusing of the content of Beckett's play in the perspective

of some crucial principals of the existential philosophical idea figured by Jean-Paul Sartre in his established function "Existentialism Is a Humanism" (1946).

No doubt, *Waiting for Godot* deals with the theme of despair. It deals with man who continues existing because he happens to exist. The tramps go on waiting for something, they go on waiting for death. But the play is not a traditionally existential play. In spite of their inaction and the pointlessness of their existence, the two tramps still want to go on. Ultimately they go on living, because they happen to exist and because existence does not know of any other alternative but to exist. The two heroes, however, are of the view that life must have a meaning even in an evidently meaningless situation. The whole background reminds of man's loneliness and alienation. There is suffering, agony, anxious wait, futility and all sorts of absurdity. Man is baffled at his existence, at his transitoriness and that his existence therefore is futile, man must end as soon as possible. These existential overtures too make the play an absurdist drama. So from the point of view of structure, theme, motif, characters, atmosphere, setting and language we find the play an absurdist one.

Works Cited

- "From Beckett to Stoppard: Existentialism, Death and Absurdity". home.sprintmail.com/./beckstop.html
- "Authentically Absurd: The Stranger vs Waiting for Godot." *Mega-essays*. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 June 2013. <<http://www.megaessays.com/viewpaper/97092.html>>.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010 (1956). 10. Print.
- Bloom, Harold. *Albert Camus's The Stranger Bloom's Guides Comprehensive Research and Study Guides*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008. Pdf.
- Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: The Stranger*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2001. Pdf.
- Bradshaw, David, and Kevin J. H. Dettmar. *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*. Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. Pdf.
- Cline, Austin. "Literary Existentialism: Existentialist Thought in Literature and Art." About.com. N.p., n.d. Web. 2013.
- Duignan, Duignan. *Modern Philosophy: From 1500 Ce to the Present (The History of Philosophy)*. New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2011. Pdf.
- Esslin, Martin. *The theatre of the absurd*. London: Methuen Publishing Limited, 1961. Pdf
- "Existentialism." *Existentialism*. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 June 2013.
- Graver, Lawrence. *Beckett: Waiting for Godot (Landmarks of World Literature)*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pdf.
- "Is Samuel Beckett's Work 'Waiting for Godot' Existential?" *Existentialabsurdist.blogspot*. N.p., 30 Jan. 2010. Web. 2013. <<http://enexisttialabsurdist.blogspot.com/>>
- Kelsch, L., Amanda. *Reading Waiting for Godot through the Lens of Christian Existentialism*. Eastern Michigan University, 2007. Pdf
- K.M, Newton. *Modern Literature and the Tragic*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2008. Pdf.
- Lyons, John .D. *French Literature A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2010. Pdf.
- Morrison, Matthew. "Existentialism of Samuel Beckett." *Studymode.com*. N.p., 05 Dec. 2008. Web. 2013.

- Panza, Christopher, and Gregory Gale. *Existentialism for Dummies*. Indianapolis, Indiana: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2008. Pdf.
- Priest, Stephen. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*. London: Routledge, 2001. Pdf.
- Rahn, Josh. "Existentialism." LiteratureNetwork.N.p., 2011. Web. 2013. <<http://www.online-literature.com/periods/existentialism.php>>.
- "The Meaninglessness of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*." 123helpme.com. N.p., 25 Mar. 2013. Web. 2013. <<http://www.123helpme.com/view.asp?id=2713>>.
- "The Stranger – Albert Camus." Martita's Place – Literature in English and Spanish.N.p., 2006. Web. 2013. <<http://mhgaray.wordpress.com/2006/01/23/the-stranger-albert-camus/>>.
- Warsh, Lewis .D. *Albert Camus's The Stranger*. New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1993. Pdf.
- Weiss, Daniel. *Spark Notes 101: Literature.150 Novels and Plays.one Book*. New York: SparkPublishing, 2004. Pdf.

Waiting for Godot is one of the masterpieces of Absurdist literature. Although, the fact is that they are conscious of this absurdity, yet it seems to imply that the rest of the world is waiting for the things, which are more absurd and also uncertain. "Waiting for Godot" is an absurd play for there is no female character. Characters are there but they are devoid of identity. "Waiting for Godot" is an existentialist play as it has clear tints of existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophical doctrine emphasizing the existence with its concrete experience. Moreover, it focalizes individual existence, freedom and choice. "Waiting for Godot" is an absurd drama and it shows the absurdity of human beings. In this play, nothing happens and no development of plot is found and there is. Sartre in his plays "No Exit" discusses the philosophy of existentialism. Existentialism is a root of absurdism and it deals with the freedom, existence, position, responsibility of human beings and similarly absurdism also deals with the meaningless life of a modern man. Though Godot is a vague figure and would never live up to the protagonists' expectations if he made an appearance, he offers Vladimir and Estragon the illusion of meaning within their lives. Vladimir and Estragon (or Didi and Gogo, respectively) exhaust every extent possible to maintain this pattern of waiting, which, as Aristotle stated, gives them the impression that their lives do not have an "absence of meaning" that despite being poor and homeless (deplorable traits in society) they are existential successes (Webb 55). Here, absurdity and existentialism share the idea that man's search for meaning is an exercise in futility because life is inherently meaningless and truth is only subjective. When Friedrich Nietzsche pronounced, "God is Dead," he meant "the time has come to overcome man" (Appignanesi 146). "Waiting for Godot" continues to be relevant in the Post-Modern age. Martin Esslin, a theater critic wrote at the time of the production of "Waiting for Godot": Today when death and old age are increasingly concealed behind euphemisms and comforting baby talk and life is threatened with being smothered in the mass consumption of hypnotic mechanized vulgarity, the need to confront man with the reality of his situation is greater than ever. This paper intends to illustrate that "Waiting for Godot" being an absurdist drama is isolated from the classic drama and its conventions and deals with the structural elements Beckett used to convey the absurdity and illogicality that the play is based on. After explaining the term absurd and outlining the formation of the Theater of the Absurd the paper focusses on structural elements of the absurdist drama in general. A short summary of "Waiting for Godot" is followed by the analysis of the play, concentrating on the connection of form and content especially by discussing characters and their actions, the time and place and the dialogues and language. Existentialism in "Waiting for G Is Samuel Beckett's "Waiting Samuel Beckett und das Theater des Ab...