

Reconsidering the Mechanics Creating “Boredom” in *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract

*This study sets to show the univocal consistency in the dramatic representation of the play *Waiting for Godot* through the plot, setting, characters, dialogues, symbols and the thematic content. The theatrical components and the rhetoric of the play reinforce boredom, the essence of the play. The transcendental experience of feeling dislocated, disoriented and absurdity is displayed in the play through tangible crisis of the characters. It is illustrated through the boredom of living and is replaced by their suffering and the meaningless waiting (Nothing to be done! Act I, p 51). Even the tramps who wait for Godot as well as the wayfaring couple whom they encounter have no fixed individual identities barring a few biological, temperamental and situational traits. A feigned attempt to discover the true meaning of existence leads to the perennial inert boredom. This existential play portrays the atypical, unassimilated and unassimilable inner experiences of an individual.*

Keywords: boredom, void, sterility, quest, absurdity

Literature Review

Beckett belongs to the theatre which initiated experimental boldness and intellectual nonconfirmism. He was uncertain about his vocation, and could not confine himself to the traditional forms of fiction, poetry and criticism. He, as it appears in his play, *Waiting for Godot*, had an exaggerated concern with the formal aspects of a play than its content. The incidents in the plot of this play are fragmentary. Due to the post First World War effects, which was then current in Western Literature and art, i.e. the modern works, the play revealed anti-realistic notions. Beckett was influenced by his reading of philosophy and European literature as well as comedies. *Waiting for Godot*, a popular modern absurd play, is well discussed for the modern traits of alienation, dislocation, apathy of existence and the eternal anxiety of disconnectedness. Waiting, silence, hesitation, absence are the various forms of incompleteness, which have been described as the anguishing unknown of “infinity and eternity,” a dramatization of the sublime (Duckworth: 22). The characters in *Waiting for Godot* seem to be in a trance or in a state of illusion where they are persistently struggling with time and life. Their survival remains a continuous lingering for Godot. *Waiting for Godot*, as Erin Koshal in her essay mentions, is an “allegory of the human condition” where the endurance of the hardships of Gogo and Didi are displayed (Koshal: 2). To quote from the text,

“Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not

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better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for one the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say? It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species. The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners without the least reflexion, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets. But that is not the question. What are we doing here, THAT is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in the immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come ...” (Act II; 109)

The play directs towards the understanding of the dilapidated condition of humanity. Gogo and Didi stand for the “is-ness/am-ness” of the whole human race characterizing the transcendental view of hollowness and the sense of belonging to “nowhere”. Peter Hall in *Godotmania*, says *Waiting for Godot* remains a poetic masterpiece transcending all barriers and all nationalities. Life itself bears no meaning or purpose and the unfolding of its incidents are devoid of any essential existential value. Human nature is to encounter the feelings and entertain the fear of existence/ anxiety in this uncaring, chaotic world facing eventual death. Existence in the shadow of death brings meaning and meaninglessness at the same time. While knowing the fact that death limits this objective life, human beings await death and confirm themselves as temporal being. This sense of diminishing awakes in them the urge to extract meaning from life but this quest of learning what, when, why and how of existence is bound to beget depression and hopelessness leading to the ultimate boredom. This seeking culminates to the disintegration of the self and the disorientation. This play beautifully frames the paradox of existence and the numbness of the zeal and excitement of living. In Carolyn Joy Lenske’s “Symbols of Waiting”, holding the faith that our lives have some significance greater than ourselves, Beckett himself finds it impossible to escape the desperate and deeply human hope to define. Beckett presents this crisis with objects and symbols. He reveals to us who we are and how we think. Though a concrete meaning of our existence cannot be clarified, Beckett, it seems, emphasizes the endless “waiting” in human life undergoing joys, fears, anxiety, etc.

The narrative and action of waiting remain frustratingly the same referring to the sameness, stagnancy and static living. The characters state the same and say: “The essential doesn’t change” (Act I; p 51). As in Koshal’s article, “there is no location in space, and no place in Godot’s order of relations/friends/acquaintances where the tramps can find entry to that elusive sphere of Godot’s interest – though they anxiously continue to search for one throughout the play.” Didi and Gogo spend their time in several ways. They sing, they talk, they walk, they play, they quarrel and most importantly they wait. They move around with no goal. Their indifferent steps often lead them nowhere and express their lethargy. They are sometimes gloomily silent and the other times uselessly verbose. They are naïve yet old enough to have seen and experienced the world for a long time.

The incidents of the play are not related by any cause and effect relationship, therefore, the abruptness in their motion and thought follows. The sequence of the actions being disrupted and the discontinuous incidents make it ludicrous. The incongruence in action, speech and interaction thus brings forth the immobility and imbecility as it appears in:

“We wait. We are bored. (He throws up his hand.) No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let's get to work! (He advances towards the heap, stops in his stride.) In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone more, in the midst of nothingness!” (Act II; p 111)

Metaphysical Temporality

Waiting for Godot introduces time as a central metaphorical barrier in the sufferings of life. The painful experience is apparent in Pozzo's speech: “Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! (Act II; p 119). Procrastination, lethargy, forgetfulness, hesitation, confusion, indecisiveness, indetermination, endurance and immobility are the several ways in which time has been delayed and wasted. This stagnancy creates the pivotal recurrent motif of the play. It emphasizes the temporality of human existence, which is the very essence of the play. The fleeting moments in time loses its regular value and meaning as it cannot lead the characters to their goal. “Waiting” in *Waiting for Godot* predominates the play. The characters remain bound in the space devoid of any specific location and dimension of time. The slipperiness of time, for example, in “Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot?” (Act II; p 120), therefore affirms their abrupt actions thus make them revolve in a circular manner.

Structural Components

The structure of *Waiting for Godot* is open and consistently contradictory. The plot of the play is circular and repetitive; it starts and ends with the same abruptness. It leads to nowhere and is inconclusive. The ultimate boredom is evoked from this kind of nihilism. The theme evolves through the structural symmetry and unravels the mystery of existence in life. The dramatic pressure, suspense and the motivation are expressed through the nature of the set through its lack of walls, doors and obstructions through its absolute openness ultimately evoking meaningful senses from the absence. The lack of any panoramic view establishes the central theme of the plot, emphasizing the vagueness of existence. The sequence of the action is such that it circularly repeats through words and gestures of the characters and is closed, producing *ad infinitum*. The actions do not progress and become mechanical and meaningless. In Elizabeth Brodersen's article, she points out that Beckett creates for us characters uniquely adept “at sidestepping despair—singing, joking, dancing, walking, adding, thinking, and above all, talking to forestall the gloom they feel about the conditions of life they cannot control.” The same dullness is imparted and reinforced by the spatio-temporal setting of the play. The absolute barrenness of the stage setting reflects the sterility of their performances in their apathy and inertia of action. There is the potency and terror of insecure situation and meaning in the meaninglessness, waiting for life to come (in the form of Godot) without realizing the ongoing life itself. The ensuing

exhaustion thus puts light on the “the struggle of each individual simply to ‘go on’, despite the inescapable awareness of our own fundamental meaninglessness” (Brodersen, 9). Usually meaning is sought from the organization of the plot, here, in *Waiting for Godot*, the ultimate absurdity, emptiness leads to the very philosophical question of whether or not life is worth living takes us beyond history and society. The plot of the play is linear. There is no climax and Godot never arrives. “They do not move”- the last impression left in the text, the silent immobility that Beckett shows in his play, which according to Duckworth, is ‘the only dignified response to what Lucky calls “divine apathia, divine athambia, divine aphasia”’ (Duckworth:32) where the meanings are discussed in Lensky and Walsh’s (2003) “Waiting for Godot: A Glossary” as (divine) “a pat h i a”: Stoicism, or an inability to feel suffering. (divine) “at h a m b i a”: An inability to feel strong emotions. (divine) “a p h a s i a”: Inability to use or understand language.

Waiting leading to Absurdity

Absurdity, according to Camus, as referred to in Duran’s paper, is the clash of two contradictory phenomena; a rational man and an irrational world. This confusion leads to the attempts to suicide. The characters take suicide as a solution to the inanity of the world as they find no other way to stick around the world. The void of human existence is in the heart of the play. In the words of the play, “There’s no lack of void.” occurs recurrently. The play with the concept of time in *Waiting for Godot* adds to the absurdity it infuses in its meaning hence gives a parallel measure in the structure of the drama itself. Time, as represented in the drama, can be manipulated (as Vladimir and Estragon spend time without being framed in it, or the uncertain yet awaited arrival of Godot), multivalent, chimeric, slippery and subject to strange. The barrenness of the spatial setting stands for the lack of connection of the individuals with each other and existential absurdity which pervades the play.

In the play, Godot never comes. Waiting, here, as if is the relentless ontological quest for meaning of life and the internal time that relates to the mental condition. The tension or dilemma of “abandonment and confinement” creates a sense of stretch in existence, the ultimate indistinctness is what results. Critics invoke themes of imprisonment to describe the tramps’ predicament as an eternal characteristic of human existence shared by all, not as a historical and political situation. (Koshal: 4) In *Waiting for Godot* the two tramps want to pass their time to remain unbothered by it. They, like most of us, fail to connect time with their tangible surrounding and thus feel the absurdity in existence. In the process of passing away their time, the hat-passing game and Lucky’s inability to think without his hat on adds essence to the play without caging it into the conventional form. The absurdity and the diffusion of relevance to practicality produce a kind of metaphysical emptiness that the tramps experience culminating into the ultimate universal void. Gogo and Didi’s capability of discovering and affirming “human values” is wasted because they are aware of the “terror and potency” of their insecure situation of not having any economic possession. Gogo and Didi are suspended in the same place and time. In other words, the paradox of existence is portrayed through the tension of the relentless waiting.

Immobility of the Characters

The characters in their topsy-turvy are in continuous act of diverting their personal despair through the act of contemplation into desolation. In spite of their inaction yet consistent efforts to initiate action nullify the modes of living. Carolyn Joy in his article quotes from Sastre “These men who are bored cast us out of our own boredom”. The characters ironically never agitate over their failure to get any action completed, or to meet the awaited, or to express verbally. The frantic actions of Didi and Gogo and the incoherent speech of Lucky upholds the metaphysical absurdity. Hazy and fragmentary memory and forgetfulness of the characters compliment the other attributes of the play that implies absurdity. They are incapable of taking actions that eventually exposes their lack of seriousness. The expressions in the play also mirror the incoherence and incongruity of the poses, gestures, action and meaning which remain unresolved and therefore anguished parodying the philosophical language. The repetitive and incomplete speech renounces the logicity in word order reestablishing the central concern. There are traits of incompleteness, blabbering, stammering, colloquialism, comic elements and repetition. The following lines have been used more than once and this repetition accentuates the cyclic nature. “Let's go.” “We can't.” “Why not?” “We're waiting for Godot.” (Act II; p114) Their procrastination is prominent in the questions they ask and the incessant quest they are into. The language games and the play (games) constitute their existence and form their social bond <<http://www.utpjournals.press/doi/abs/10.3138/md.31.4.520>>. The intermittent communication of the characters is like the discontinuous sports that they linger with to spend their time. Their immobility, tendency to wait and to proceed and the urge to establish meaning out of the bafflement remains in vain and creates “incredible sense of flux and movement in the characters’ interactions”(Joy: 22)

“Pozzo: I don't seem to be able...(long hesitation) to depart.

Estragon: Such is life.” (Act I; p77)

The following anaphoric lines lay emphasis on the idea of stagnancy.

Estragon: Our movements.

Vladimir: Our elevations.

Estragon: Our relaxations.

Vladimir: Our elongations.

Estragon: Our relaxations. (Act II; p106)

Their apparent naïve actions and statements rise into eloquence at times, when it imparts glimpses of philosophical height. Beckett employs a kind of unmetrical poetic lines which tell more than what they are. It tends to give an impression of tension of dramatic progression and implies nothingness creating bewilderment.

The characters like us are not “able-talkers” and “reasoners” and Henry Beers calls them “scientific prigs”. Their lunatic and frantic behaviours echo their denuded irrationality. The viewers can empathize with the characters’ regular routine unrealized activities. They are “slightly caricatured” (Beers: 756) and weird in terms of their behavior and verbal modulations confirming to the unfamiliar type. The undertone regarding the existence of God(ot) and the triviality in the references to Christ declare their religious hypocrisy too. They are disoriented in social order and therefore, alienated.

“Astride of a grave and a difficult birth.
 Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps.
 We have time to grow old.
 The air is full of our cries.
 But habit is a great deadener.
 At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing.
 Let him sleep on.” (Act II; p 120)

The philosophical quest of the spirit, implied in the lines quoted above, is portrayed through the life of the tramps. Their engagement with the absurd material objects and unresolved queries disclose meaning in the abstract level. In Duran’s words, Beckett’s protagonists see only two options in their lives- “physical suicide or philosophical suicide”. They are therefore condemned to an absurd existence, they lack Sisyphus’s courage to confront their fate honestly and live their lives accordingly (Duran: 991). The symbols in the play are diverse and do not have any linear connection. Contradiction of the symbols leads us to the consistent dilemma of existence leaving no concrete, conclusive meaning. The only element on stage is the tree; its distinctiveness is similar to the aloofness of the characters. Again, the leafless tree in the first act reflects their desolate state. The tree like human being through their tangible existence is as dysfunctional as the single tree on the bare stage. The tree ironically makes the place indefinite because the characters are not sure if they are to wait near that particular one or not. The unspecified location as well as the indeterminate tendency of the tramps gives a tangible portrayal of their blurry condition. The moon in the second act adds to the gloomy and placid atmosphere of their entire presence in the play. Rope is a prominent prop used in the play by Pozzo to tie Lucky. Conventionally it is interpreted to imply exploitation, slavery and domination from a political point of view. They are again literally “tied” together by a rope and it expresses their connection, but the rope is around first Pozzo’s and then Lucky’s neck. The rope metaphorically stands for our confinement in life, the fact that human existence is bound to go on in a cyclic motion. This eternal obligation brings the ultimate depression and sense of meaningless absurdity which the characters also confirm to. The sprouting of four or five leaves in Act II shows the apparent, superficial dynamism or in other words, the inertia of existence in the play. Didi and Gogo are alive, struggling “to do” something. Their endeavor is in vain. The reality is they remain obsolete and motionless.

Conclusion

Waiting for Godot, since its publication, was appreciated a lot for its experimental and innovative form and content. Eventually various literary interpretations and theoretical approaches also created an immense appeal among the critics, authors and audience. From its inception, it has widely been accepted and acclaimed to be a timeless classic upholding the universal human condition as engaged beings. Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* has influenced many contemporary dramas being one of the pioneer realistic plays. This study has not invented anything new out of the play but keeping other related publications in consideration, it has thoroughly researched the persistent meaning(lessness) leading to eternal boredom and the anguished awareness of vacuity

on earth as represented in the play. In the development of this paper, the established meaning outside the text is in accordance with the internal constituents of the play. The boredom being the centre of existential crisis in the play evolves from the plot, setting, dialogues, imageries, actions and characters. It has concentrated on the dramatic tools and elements to extract the essence of the play which reflects on the characters’ inner obligation to express nothing (the absurdity in existence). It has showed through references, quotations and analysis that “boredom” in the play arises from the morbid preoccupation with nothingness. Therefore, in the process of the study we have looked into several textual components, analyzed the rhetoric and sought the congruence of the two. The innate behaviour of the characters establishes the internal vacuity and it recurrently sets the motif of the play. The theme of waiting is intricately woven into the essential immobility in the actions and dialogues of the play. The ultimate meaninglessness of the deeds in daily life, the futility of existence and the overall representations evoke the central passivity in the play.

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