

The Politics of Waiting: A polysemic reading of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract

Since its publication and stage play, *Waiting for Godot* has aroused a strenuous debate among scholars, theatergoers, and critics as to its very nature and significance. Many consider it to be tedious and uneventful while others consider it as a masterpiece and an enigma. A lot of attention has been paid to the play in general and Godot in particular. A set of questions revolving around the identity of Godot has to a great degree baffled research scholars and critics. So much of attention has been paid to Godot that the identity and existence of Godot has also questioned human existence and the purpose of human life in general. The difficulty of living, denying, and defining Godot has to a great degree absorbed most of the research attention. This paper, however, focuses on the 'waiting' aspect in Beckett's masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*. Waiting as a sublime, self-fulfilling, and characteristic aspect of human life is dealt with via political, social, and psychoanalytical approaches.

Keywords: Godot, Waiting, Politics, Polysemy, Zone occupée, Zone libre, Nazis.

Introduction

Waiting for Godot, a classic and magnum opus in the literary spheres is the favorite and focal point of attraction for research scholars, and critics. Even after decades of its theatrical debut, it still entertains the attention of audience as well as literary critics. It offers an enormous scope for diverse interpretations, and the literary critique has produced "a confusing mass of commentary which significantly outweighs Beckett's total writings." (Innes 430) It has also roused a great number of controversial debates and discussions since its publication and stage play among the literary circles as well as the common masses as to its very nature and implications. What makes the play even more ambiguous is Beckett's silence; he himself hasn't clarified his intent and motive while writing the play. Consequently, there is an inherent polysemy in the text which baffles research scholars and critics with its conflicting and contradictory meanings.

Beckett through his work, *Waiting for Godot* reintroduces the metaphoric into the theatre, whereby he reduces everything to the bare minimum. His characters, especially the two

tramps are without age, or profession, they have no home to go to, have nothing substantial to say to each other. Yet they are still able to keep the audience glued to their seats till the very end, which in itself is quite implausible. Thus it is not the absence of action or meanings, but a possibility of many different interpretations which baffles the critics and researchers; there is in fact, something in the play for almost everybody.

Analysis

“Nothing happens twice”, Vivian Mercier’s widely noted comment seems to contradict itself in the very first note when he describes:

“[Beckett] has achieved a theoretical impossibility—a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What’s more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice.” (Boxall 13)

If nothing happens, then how could in the very first instance, the audience be glued to their seats. Further if one looks into the text itself, there is in fact, a tremendous amount of action. There is not a single moment where the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon quite literally do nothing. They walk; they talk, argue, eat turnips and carrots, play with boots and hats, and even amuse the audience with their nonsensical stuff. Even more, they also seem to perform a lot of thinking actions and in a way grab the audience’s attention and force them to think along with them.

The play opens, in a deserted country road near a stunted, sickly tree, whereby two men, half-tramp, half-clown are waiting for someone named Godot. On a superficial note, it seems that the play mostly revolves around two tramps waiting for a third one with the hope that he might bring a significant change to their life. However if one digs deeper within the text, only layers and layers of meaning come up just like an onion.

Now considering the historical aspect, Becket wrote the play “*En attendant Godot*”, the original French version somewhere between 1948-1949 in France (a foreign country), using a foreign language to portray his ideas, which in itself is quite ambiguous. Moreover, the fact that the impressions of the Second World War were still afresh in his mind cannot be denied at the same time. Further his journey through Nazi Germany (1936-1937) and his stay in France during the Nazi occupation raises certain questions as to his intentions, motives, and interests while writing the play. Although Becket adroitly tries to avoid all political discussions and attempts to eliminate or suppress all social references from his work, traces of war-torn Europe and the political climate of the era seem to stress their presence throughout the text.

In the opening passages of Act 1 itself one may find traces and references to trench warfare and a glimpse of occupied France:

VLADIMIR: [Hurt, coldly.] May one enquire where His Highness spent the night?

ESTRAGON: In a ditch.

VLADIMIR: [Admiringly.] A ditch! Where?

ESTRAGON: [Without gesture.] Over there.

VLADIMIR: And they didn't beat you?

ESTRAGON: Beat me? Certainly they beat me. (Beckett 9)

The references here made to the “ditches” certainly traces the presence of numerous trenches in and around the place. Besides people usually don't squander away their time in ditches or trenches for that matter unless and until there is some sort of armed conflict. Vladimir's remarks to Estragon on the Eiffel Tower also somewhat hints towards the occupation of France by a foreign power; the Nazis of course.

VLADIMIR: Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were presentable in those days. Now it's too late. They wouldn't even let us up. (Beckett 10)

Now who are “they” here, and why would they not allow others up? These remarks by Vladimir raises a tone of ambiguity and perplexity as to the identity of “they” at the same time it also hints at the Nazi occupation of France, considering the time period and the inkling references made to places like The Eiffel Tower and Macon country.

VLADIMIR: All the same, you can't tell me that this [*Gesture*] bears any resemblance to... [He hesitates]... to the Macon Country, for example. You can't deny there's a big difference.

ESTRAGON: The Macon country! Who's talking to you about the Macon country?

VLADIMIR: But you were there yourself, in the Macon country. (Beckett 61)

Now during *The Second World War*, Macon was the first town in the unoccupied *zone libre* between Paris and Lyon. The *zone libre* was essentially the unoccupied zone, which constituted a land area of 246,618 square kilometres, approximately 45% of France. The other half, called *zone occupée* was under German occupation. Now the reference made by Vladimir in the context of the Eiffel Tower somewhat suggests, it being occupied by some foreign power, further if the geographical positioning of Eiffel Tower is taken into account, it falls under the occupied zone, Paris being a part of the *zone occupée*. Is Beckett in some way trying to manifest the plight of the people living in the occupied zone, waiting for a messiah to liberate them from their miserable state? Or is he trying to paint the fear of the masses in the unoccupied zone, waiting for the Nazi incursion through his ambiguous references:

ESTRAGON: They're coming!
 VLADIMIR: Who?
 ESTRAGON: I don't know.
 VLADIMIR: How many?
 ESTRAGON: I don't know. (Beckett 73)

Again who are "they" here, Vladimir and Estragon no nothing more about them than they know about Godot? Yet these mysterious creatures "they", seem to appear throughout the play just like Godot but never materialize. Even at specific instances, one may find parallelity between the two tramps waiting for Godot and the British Expeditionary Forces (BEF) and French troops stationed at Dunkirk waiting for the Germans:

ESTRAGON: I'm in hell!
 VLADIMIR: Where were you?
 ESTRAGON: They're coming here too!
 VLADIMIR: We're surrounded! [ESTRAGON makes a rush towards back.]
 Imbecile! There's no way out there. [*He takes ESTRAGON by the arm and drags him towards front. Gesture towards front*] There not a soul in sight! Off you go. Quick! [*He pushes ESTRAGON towards auditorium. ESTRAGON recoils in horror.*] You won't? Well, I can understand that. Wait till I see. [*He reflects.*] Your only hope left is to disappear. (Beckett 74)

Vladimir and Estragon, frequently using sentences like "They are coming", and the specific utterances like "We are surrounded" along with the stage directions frequently forcing the characters' to the "Front" might be a symbolic reference to the "Battle of Dunkirk". Whereby British and French troops stationed at the Western Front were waiting for the Germans to close in, they were also not sure, about the exact number of Wehrmacht divisions as Vladimir and Estragon are unsure about the exact number of the mysterious "they", whom they fear throughout the text.

Yet at another level, one of the more bizarre accounts of political interpretations of the play is an early one of Margaret D' Arcy who in fact alleged that the play must be seen as an allegory of nations; whereby 'Godot' is the United States for whom the free nations wait, with a hope that it might solve all their problems, as Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot:

The tramps are Great Britain and France – they are free but have little else but freedom. 'Pozzo' is Russia, driving the slave peoples who can only repeat what is now a meaningless stream of totalitarian clichés. 'Godot' is the United States for whom the free nations wait, expecting 'him' to solve all their problems. As the small boy in the play says: 'Surely he will come tomorrow.' (Prasad 149)

“The one thing that seems to support this argument is that Pozzo and Lucky are called ‘les comiques staliniens’ (the Stalinesque comedians) in the first (French) edition of *Waiting for Godot*.” (Prasad 149) On a broader sense, it could also be the common masses waiting for a true leader, or a messiah (not the fuhrer), who could save Europe from the socio-economic crisis of war trodden Europe, and give them the much needed political stability.

On a more universal note, it might be the ‘waiting’ of the entire mankind to attain salvation through god. This explanation in some way roused the feelings of the audience, as the French pronunciation of ‘Godot’ in some way sounds similar to ‘God’.

Thus there is inherent polysemy as to the nature of wait, the participants, and dimensions involved. Beckett has knowingly induced this ambiguity in order to throw light on the broader and truer aspect of human existence “*Waiting*”. It is not ‘Godot’ or the two tramps or anything else which he pays much attention to than the phenomenon of “*Waiting*” itself.

The play in fact begins with “*Waiting*” and so also ends with it. Thus who is waiting? And for what they are waiting, be it the Germans, Godot or even God for that matter is only of secondary importance. The subject matter of the entire play revolves around the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. Throughout our life, we all wait for something, and Godot simply manifests the objective of our *waiting*. Waiting is the essential and phenomenal aspect of our very existence. In the two-dimensional prison of time, where only forward motion is possible, waiting gives us a sense of purpose and hope to move on.

Conclusion

In an effort to look for the signification of the complex and contradictory meanings within the text, this paper concludes that while Beckett’s writing reflects and mirrors the politics of the time. Beckett knowingly or unknowingly has tried to cover it up, which in itself is quite vacillating and ambiguous. However, in the analysis section of the paper, it is quite evident that he fails miserably in his attempts to completely obliterate the politics of the time, from his work. Yet, he succeeds in another aspect; he quite adeptly and successfully deals with the broader and truer aspect of *waiting*. The politics and power of *waiting* is more important to him. Thus his characters wait patiently, to bring about a change in their life, which is in fact, the true implication of politics; i.e. to uplift the common masses from their miserable state, and in Vladimir and Estragon’s case their *waiting* emancipates them from their wretched state and gives them a purpose as well as a hope for a better future.

Still, owing to its very polysemic nature, there are many other untapped and unexplored areas of the play. The present study may prove useful and helpful to suggest clues to the uncultivated and untapped areas of the play for future research.

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