

Hope and Anxiety in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot

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Abstract

This paper examines the two ideas of hope and anxiety in Samuel Beckett's play Waiting for Godot. The hopeless and anxious characters in the play feel that their existence has not been acknowledged by society and decide to pass time through idle gossip waiting for an external power to save them from their current condition. The absence of Godot in the two acts of the play implies that he will never arrive and this leads the two tramps to contemplate suicide because they are completely dependent upon Godot. Beckett suggests throughout the play that people should overcome their existential worries through solving the problems of life rather than belief in illusions that leads to nothing but despair and loneliness.

Keywords: hope, anxiety, modern, meaningless, savior

Samuel Beckett's play Waiting for Godot was originally written in French after the Second World War in 1948-49, and translated into English by Beckett himself in 1953-54. The play has been widely studied by scholars as a paradoxical and ambiguous existential text that asserts the important role of the individual to discover the meaning of life through personal experience. While critics like Eric Levy (2002: 235) read the play as a tragi-comedy that describes the absurdity of the universe, "Waiting for Godot dramatizes the Absurdity of the 'human' condition", others like Antje Diedrich(2005: 150) claim that "the dialogue of Waiting for Godot was not absurd but realistic". Deirdre Bair (1980: 262) examines the play as a metaphor that describes the flight of Beckett and his wife, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, to Roussillon, a village in the Vaucluse in Southeast France, during World War II. George Tabori and Wend Kassens (1989: 46) agree with Bair that the works of Beckett are personal accounts, "Beckett's oeuvre is autobiographical and based on personal experience". Spyridoula Athanasopoulou-Kypriou (2000: 39) argues that Beckett aims at reducing the importance of established systems in the life of humans, "he [Beckett] ridicules and opposes any culturally established authority, be it religious or secular, that tries to interpret the universal chaos and the human tragic condition". This paper examines Beckett's play with special emphasis on the anxiety and hopeless condition of the modern individual in a meaningless universe that seems to be designed to destroy him.

The play opens with the anxious and exhausted Estragon "sitting on a low mound" (5) near a bare tree and declares his dejection: "Nothing to be done" (5). Ruby Cohn (2001: 177) refers to this line as "the most celebrated opening line in modern drama" because it describes the silence and idleness of the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, and the fact that there would be nothing expected to happen. The bare tree may stand for death as well as the lack of hope in the life of the modern individual who seems to be lost in a meaningless world. It would be important to note here that the play implies a universal meaning that applies to all humanity. The character Vladimir refers to the fallen state of Pozzo as "all humanity" (79), he also identifies his condition with Estragon as the condition of everyman: "But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not" (75). Eric Levy (2002: 229) comments, "in psychological and moral terms, the primacy of nothingness means that life is reduced to awareness of triviality". This implies that the life of man has become insignificant and it seems to be futile to give meaning to absurd life. Athanasopoulou-Kypriou (2000: 40) states, "life must be faced in its ultimate, stark reality, in the reality of nothingness". Therefore, the play focuses on the suffering of the two tramps and the feeling that their existence has not been acknowledged by society.

Beckett emphasizes throughout the play the need for hope and salvation in the life of humans. The two tramps emphasize the necessity of waiting for an external power by the name of Godot to save them from their current condition:

ESTRAGON: What do we do now?

VLADIMIR: I don't know.

ESTRAGON: Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot. (44)

However, the identity of Godot, the awaited and redeemer, is never clarified in the play. The only thing that we know about the absent Godot is what the two tramps tell us, and who seem to be uncertain about his existence, as they have never met him before. In other words, the only certainty Vladimir and Estragon know is the necessity of waiting for their savior: "Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come" (76). Athanasopoulou-Kypriou (2000: 39-40) notes, "Beckett presents a picture of a disintegrating world that has lost its certainties, traditional values and revelations of divine purpose". Despite the trivial existence that Vladimir and Estragon are leading and the fact that they are suspicious of the existence of organized system in the universe as they decide, "nothing is certain" (49), the act of waiting for Godot gives them little hope and temporal satisfaction. The two tramps seem to be helpless without Godot whose arrival gives meaning to their life.

The presence of the character Godot is not confirmed in the play through physical existence and this leads to speculations about the identity of the absent Godot. Athanasopoulou-Kypriou (2000: 47) misinterprets the identity of Godot by suggesting that it refers to the divine or God: "Godot stands as the 'shadow of God', for Godot is a weakened form of God and can thus refer to both the divine and to whatever might substitute the traditional concept of God". She adds: "He [Beckett] uses Biblical and religious allusions, with which he is familiar, and on the other he reduces God, the divine, and religion in general to the level of the ludicrous" (ibid. 34). There is no doubt that Beckett suspects the authority of the Bible as a source of truth:

Vladimir: Did you ever read the Bible?

Estragon: The Bible... {He reflects.} I must have taken a look at it.

VLADIMIR: Do you remember the Gospels?

ESTRAGON: I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. (8)

The two tramps read the Bible as any other book that has no veracity and this can be seen when they express their surprise at the fact that only one of the gospels speaks of the thief who was saved at the time of crucifixion. Vladimir wonders, "And yet . . . (pause) . . . how is it – this is not boring you I hope – how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there – or thereabouts – and only one speaks of a thief being saved" (8). Maryam Beyad and Amir Maniee (2011: 324) comment on Beckett's reading of the Bible, "Beckett's use of the Bible as a grand narrative whose authority is suspect could represent the very idea of decentralization of any text as a truth to hold on to". This implies that religion, according to Beyad and Maniee can not be a source of hope, but rather a source of anxiety that reveals "the full horror of the human condition" (Esslin, 1961: 37-38). Despite the fact that Beckett was an atheist and his intention was not to propagate any religious denomination, he refuses to identify Godot with God. Beckett once declared: "I produce an object. What people make of it is not my concern ... I'd be quite incapable of writing a critical introduction to my own works" (qtd. in Worton, 1994: 67). Furthermore, in response to the question of the director Alan Schneider "Who or what does Godot mean?" Beckett replied, "If I knew, I would have said so in the play" (ibid). Therefore, the main concern of Beckett seems to present the tragic condition of humans who seem to live in a purposeless world rather than critiquing theology.

The idle life that the two tramps are leading reflects the existential anxieties of the modern man. The illusion that Godot exists sustains the idea of hope in the minds of Vladimir and Estragon and this hinders the characters from determining their life independently. Just as the existence of Godot becomes an illusion, the life of the two tramps turns to be an illusion that can not be taken seriously. Estragon says: "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" (65). The main characters engage in an endlessly indecisive dialogue that "frees [them] from actually discussing the desperateness of their situation" (Yates, 2004: 441). The insecurity of the two tramps makes them search desperately for an external power to depend on and this makes them psychologically tied to the absent Godot. When Estragon asks, "I'm asking you if we're tied" (16) Vladimir responds, "To Godot? Tied to Godot! What an idea! No question of it" (17). Athanasopoulou-Kypriou (2000: 41) comments, "In Beckett's works, people seem to be like 'strangers' in an absurd world and seek their lost 'homeland', the place or rather the situation where everything is familiar to them". Therefore, the loss of the two tramps who seem to be trapped by their hope for escape from their situation represents the loss of the modern individual who lives a meaningless life in an industrial society.

The hopes of Vladimir and Estragon get shattered when they realize that the savior Godot will never come to deliver them from their desperate condition. The two tramps feel lost without Godot and their life turns to be a

terrible dream. Through their idle dialogue, they attempt to kill the time and imply that the greatest sin of man is to be born.

When Vladimir asks, “now what did we do yesterday evening?” (62) Estragon responds, “oh . . . this and that I suppose, nothing in particular. (With assurance.) Yes, now I remember, yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That’s been going on now for half a century” (62). Nothing seems to be new in the life of the two tramps and this implies that the only thing they can do is waiting. Beckett allows the audience to access the subconscious of his characters to live the experience and understand their existential worries. The lonely life that the two tramps are leading may stand for the loneliness of the modern individual and his attempts to overcome the impediments of life. Eric Levy (2002: 222) states, “[the play] concerns the universal plight of man, unprotected by earlier cultural assurances or belief systems”. This suggests the absurdity of the life of man who is waiting for salvation when nothing good happens.

The confusion and frustration of the two main characters in the play reflect the bleak outlook of Beckett on life. Athanasopoulou-Kypriou (2000: 40) states that “for the Irish writer [Beckett] . . . a coffin is laying next to every cradle”; therefore, life, according to Beckett, can be seen as a short journey from the womb to the tomb. Normand Berlin (1999: 421) speaks of his visit to the gravesite of Beckett in Paris, “I felt no emotion at the gravesite, perhaps because Beckett, in his thoughts (as reflected in personal statements and in his work), was always cemetery-bound, waiting for the rest that is silence”. The fact that Godot, the savior, remains absent and never appears implies that the belief in futility leads people to live in despair and loneliness till the end of their life. The emissary of Godot, the boy, enters near the end of each act with the message, “Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won’t come this evening but surely tomorrow” (46). Beckett suggests that Godot will never show up by emphasizing the idea that he does not appear in the two acts.

Beckett describes throughout his play the outcome of the atrocities and cruelties of World War II that left people helpless and searching for any sign of hope in life. Normand Berlin(1999: 428) comments, “In Godot, with its silences and emptiness and balances, Beckett has brilliantly caught the temper of the times. A radical uncertainty informs the 20th century, a sense that we have lost our moorings, that we are centerless, purposeless . . .”. Berlin adds, “it [Godot] hauntingly reveals the darkest shadows of our frightening age, the grossest example in our time of man’s pitiful vulnerability and unexplainable cruelty” (ibid). Therefore, what can be seen in the play is the image of individuals who feel exiled from their homeland waiting for something that never arrives. In other words, the two tramps live an empty life with no purpose and seem to be terrified of their current condition because they do not want to face the problems of life.

The absence of Godot represents a source of anxiety and hopelessness to Vladimir and Estragon because their life seems to be attached to him. In fact, the two tramps contemplate committing suicide two times throughout the play and suggest that if Godot never arrives they will hang themselves. The dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon about death goes as follows:

Vladimir: We’ll hang ourselves tomorrow. (Pause.) Unless Godot comes.

Estragon: And if he comes?

Vladimir: We’ll be saved.

However, the absence of Godot in the two acts implies that he will never arrive and this foreshadows the death of the two tramps. Athanasopoulou-Kypriou(2000: 40) comments, “Beckett’s heroes seem to be haunted by the consciousness that their life is tied up with death”. Therefore, Godot in Beckett’s play may stand for death when we see the main characters pass the time waiting for endless rest. Beckett seems to suggest that the belief of the modern individual in illusions leads to nothing but hopelessness and death. Athanasopoulou-Kypriou explains, “the dignity of human beings lies in their ability to face reality in all its senselessness, to accept it freely, without fear, without clinging to illusions, without waiting for anything, to laugh at it and go on” (ibid. 46). This implies that the heroes of Beckett lose their dignity because of their refusal to accept reality and that people should overcome their anxiety without expecting anything to happen.

In conclusion, Beckett’s play reflects the anxious and hopeless condition of the modern individual who seems to live with no purpose in a meaningless world. Beckett presents his characters as self-victimized because they decide to live an idle existence and wait for something that never arrives. This suggests that people can overcome their existential worries through facing the problems of life rather than live with the idea that a savior will appear. The characters of Beckett decide to pass the time waiting for the savior Godot and they seem to be dependent on his arrival, but the absence of Godot leads them to contemplate suicide and lose their life.

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