

Meaninglessness and Futility in Samuel Beckett's

Waiting for Godot

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Abstract

The research paper deals with the theme of meaninglessness and futility of life that lead to the loss of dignity and the spread of depression of the European peoples due to the frightening World War II (1939-45) as reflected in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. A war that brought nothing but destruction, sadness and misery and had forced humanity at that time to suffer the trauma of losing all sense of reason as they no longer had personal quality, dignity, attitude and belief in addition to the loss of relatives and friends, as well as facing all forms of destruction, not to mention the social disintegration and physical and psychological problems and the other social diseases, like killing, robbery, prostitution and all sorts of criminal actions.

The research also deals with the absurdity of life in which a particular and distinctive type of literature (Theatre of the Absurd) emerged in the fifties of the last century as a natural result of the depressed environment surrounding people as well as Beckett's full treatment of the war's destructive impacts on mankind as he tries to give a universal setting and atmosphere in his play *Waiting for Godot* (1953) as if he had addressed all people worldwide and

warned them of war risks in general. Beckett's presentation of the terrible physical and psychological sufferings, dreams, and hopes in his drama may stem from his moral responsibility as a dramatist conscious of the main ingredients of life conducive to dignity, faith, peace and freedom.

المستخلص

يعني هذا البحث بعثت والا معنى للحياة التي تقود الى فقدان الكرامة وتفشي التعاسة للشعوب الاوروبية نتيجة للحرب العالمية الثانية المروعة (1939-45)، كما يظهر في مسرحية صموئيل بيكت انتظار كودو. الحرب الطاحنة التي لم تجلب شيء سوى الدمار، الحزن، والبؤس والتي اجبرت البشرية في ذلك الوقت ليعانوا من صدمة فقدان كل مشاعرهم الحسية ، حيث لم يعدوا يمتلكون جودة شخصياتهم الانسانية، ميزتها، موقفهم السلوكى في الحياة، ثقفهم بأنفسهم، وحتى كرامتهم بالإضافة الى فقدان أقاربهم وأصدقائهم، وكذلك صدمة مواجهة كل انواع الدمار، ناهيك عن الذكر التفكك الاجتماعي والمشاكل النفسية والجسدية والامراض الاجتماعية الأخرى مثل القتل، السرقة، المتاجرة بالشرف، وكل أنواع الاعمال الإجرامية.

يختص البحث ايضا بثقافة الحياة حيث نشأ نوع من انواع الادب خاص ومميز الا وهو (مسرح العبث) في خمسينيات القرن الماضي كنتيجة طبيعية للبيئة الكئيبة التي احاطت بالناس والمعالجة الكاملة لصموئيل بيكت للتأثيرات التدميرية للحرب على البشرية حيث يحاول الكاتب أن يعطي جو ومكان كونيان في مسرحيته انتظار كودو (1953) كأنه خاطب كل شعوب العالم وحذره من مخاطر الحروب بصورة عامة. أن عرض بيكت لمعاناة الإنسان الجسدية والنفسية المروعة، احلامه واماله في مسرحيته ربما ينبع من مسؤوليته الأخلاقية ككاتب مسرحي مدرك للمكونات الرئيسية المحفزة للكرامة، الأيمان، المجد، السلام والحرية.

Waiting for Godot written by the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) is one of the big landmarks in the modern history of English drama. The play appeared at a time when European society was not quite sure which direction it wanted to assume. Europe had just emerged from the Second World War (1939-45), a war which had traumatized the continent and its society. Many felt the world was chaotic and inhumane. A sense of disillusionment and cynicism became pronounced and nihilism¹ grew in popularity.

Waiting for Godot (pronounced godo) is Samuel Beckett's translation of his own original French version, *En attendant Godot* and it is classified as a "tragicomedy in two acts"². The original French text was composed between "Oct. 9, 1948 and Jan. 29, 1949,"³ and it was acted at the Theatre de Babylone in Paris on Jan. 5, 1953. Beckett in his play has given his characters a wider identity to represent the European human race when he varies their names: Vladimir is Russian; Estragon is French; Pozzo is Italian; and Lucky is English. In a broader sense, Beckett's characters are representatives of European young men at that time and of their responses. The play is so significant that it is translated into about twenty languages and acted about four hundred performances at the Theatre de Babylone in Paris before it moved to another theater in the French capital. The English version, translated by the playwright himself, was first acted successfully in London in 1955 and then it was acted in 1957 at U.S.A. San Quentin Prison where hundreds of prisoners attended there. It is important to mention that the play was acted in front of a huge number of male prisoners might be because the play has no female characters. Asked about the absence of female actresses, Beckett pointed out "Women don't have prostates"⁴ in a reference to the fact that Vladimir, one of the characters in the play, suffers from a difficulty in passing water.

Beckett is the most famous modern absurdist dramatist for his masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*. He is also well-known for his plays such as *Endgame* (1957), *Act Without Words I* (1957), *Kapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Act Without Words II* (1960). The two other well-known absurd dramatists are the French Jean Genet (1910-1989) in his plays *The Balcony*, *The Blacks*, *The Maids*, and *The Screens* and the Romanian Eugene Ionesco in his plays; *The chairs*, *The Lesson*, and *The Killer*. However, Beckett along with a group of dramatists such as Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco, Edward Albee, Arthur Adamov, and Harold Pinter are considered absurdist playwrights as their attitude in their writings is based upon the belief that

the condition of man in this world is meaningless which is in fact the principle of The Theatre of the Absurd which is a term coined by the Hungarian critic Martin Esslin (1912-2002) in his study of contemporary playwrights, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1962). In their plays, Beckett and the other absurdist playwrights tried to show that the life of the modern man in the aftermath of the horrible Second World War changed to be futile and meaningless because of the increasing sense of despair, and the atmosphere of chaos and disorder. He cannot recognize what is going on around him. Everything lacks cohesion and logicality. So life becomes meaningless and there is no faith in the existence of rational and well-ordered universe. Therefore, all Beckett's plays in particular express a sense of shock at the absence and the loss of any clear and well-defined system of beliefs or values.

In Waiting for Godot, Beckett successfully explains the meaninglessness and futility of life as he gives a real sample of the European young men after the recent horrifying and destructive war represented by the protagonists Vladimir and Estragon when he makes them isolated from other human beings, engaging in circular, meaningless conversations while waiting endlessly for someone they do not know and have no appointment with him to come and save them as they thought from their miserable life which seems absurd, without purpose, sad to the point of anguish and at the same time funny. Thus, the genre of most absurdist plays is "tragicomedy"⁵. One of Beckett's quotes in his play *Endgame* premiered in 1957 confirms this idea by saying: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness ... it's the most comical thing in the world"⁶. Moreover, the English literature of the absurd is pessimistic and comic having satire and parody as Jean E. Kennard describes as it "is often pessimistic in vision, comic in tone, and contains strong elements of satire or parody".⁷ Furthermore, unresolved mysterious, absence, emptiness, and nothingness are central characteristics in many absurdist plays⁵, for example, the action of the alleged character Godot in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is centered on

the absence of a man named Godot, for whom Vladimir and Estragon continually wait with no avail since he would never come. Similarly, in the Romanian Eugene Ionesco's *The chairs*, an old couple welcomes a large number of guests to their home, but these guests are invisible so all we see is empty chairs, as a sign of their absence.

Moreover, Beckett's play expresses a nihilistic view of human meaningless existence and it is considered by some critics to be one of the most well-known works of the Theatre of the Absurd because it has much ridiculous and nonsense actions and it lacks of a plot. The absence of the plot emphasizes the meaninglessness and futility of human existence as the two tramps (Vladimir and Estragon) have neither motivation nor resolution necessary to achieve a genuine stature but exerting efforts of only waiting for a mysterious man who never arrives. It seems that Godot is an imaginary image that exists only in the mind of the two tramps and not in real life as they claim hesitantly that he is one of their associates "Oh, he's a ...he's a kind of acquaintance ... Nothing of the kind, we hardly know him"⁸(Waiting for Godot.p.23). Psychologically speaking when someone feels frustrated and worried he or she tries intensely to cling to someone or something as a hope of salvation or to end his or her life in order to get relief just in the case of the tramps who in the early beginning of the play decide to end their miserable life by hanging themselves on the tree but even death for them is unattainable since they have no rope and the nearby tree is weak as it is bare and dry that's why they decide to go and come back the next day "Then we can bring a good bit of rope" (p 94).

In his play, Beckett portrays the squalid human conditions in the aftermath of the brutal war that made each character in his play suffer not only from his harsh surrounding but also from his mental or physical problems. Agony, desolation and

despair which are the main characteristics of the play motivate the tramps not only to attempt to get rid of their thinking so that "We're in no danger of ever thinking anymore," (p.64) but also wish eagerly to put an end to their lives as the world, in itself, is objectively meaningless and they lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for. However, the tramps can neither commit a suicide nor achieve their dream of meeting Godot. Thus they busy themselves from the early beginning of the play in trivial things when Estragon for example is sitting on a low mound, struggling to remove his boots from his foot and muttering the first words of the play "Nothing to be done"(p.9). Besides, he protests at his companion Vladimir to "stop blathering and help me off with this bloody thing"(p.10). Moreover, he frequently complains bitterly that he is beaten by unknown people who "certainly ... beat me"(ibid) for reasons he knows nothing about while Vladimir is plagued by difficulties with urination as he tells Estragon angrily that "No one ever suffers but you. I don't count. I'd like to hear what you'd say if you had what I have,"(Ibid). Pozzo and Lucky, two other characters in the play, who interrupted the tramps' waiting by their coming in Act 1 also suffer, especially Lucky who suffers from the early beginning of his appearance on the stage as he is driven by his master Pozzo, carrying a heavy load and threatened by his whip:

Enter Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo drives Lucky by Means of a rope passed round his neck, so that Lucky is the first to appear (on the stage)...before Pozzo appears. Lucky carries a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket and a greatcoat. Pozzo a whip. (P.21).

Eventually, Lucky becomes dumb while Pozzo, the self-centered figure in the play, imagines proudly that he will never suffer, thinking that he is strong and immune to diseases and handicaps, asking: "Do I look like a man that can be made to suffer?" (p.34). He suffers a lot when he goes blind in Act II.

In fact the tramps are so confused that they do not know what to do or where to go and how to solve a simple problem as is the case with Estragon who no

longer has the competence even to take off his boots. Therefore, Vladimir and Estragon are not blamed for their weakness and incompetence to survive their miserable situation, that's why they are in a bad need for help and their future seems uncertain as they feel they could do no change for the better unless the existence of someone like Godot as they thought come and assist them. Thus, they impatiently wait for him whose identity and arrival are not sure that he will ever come in a deserted place, where we find nothing more inspiring than a road and a single bare tree. Moreover, the process of waiting by itself for someone who never comes is to some extent boring and almost unbearable. Apparently, the two tramps force themselves to keep waiting since they have no other choice left for them due to their cruel circumstances yet "the act of waiting is itself a contradictory combination of doing nothing and doing something".⁹ However, their toil of waiting for someone would never come in such circumstances is unpleasant and physically tiring, leading to no avail and it is not only suffering but also tedious and irritating, reflecting the absurdity, nothingness and emptiness of life.

Vladimir and Estragon can be considered solitary figures because they have been held by Beckett in confused solitary confinement though faint hope which is mixed with uncertainty future that still flickers in their breasts, wishing to be released by an exterior force outside the self which is represented by the alleged Godot. Beckett makes them adhere not only to a desolate place where they lament the fact that "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful," (p.15) but also to themselves because they are alone and "it wouldn't be better for us to part," p.16 as they are attached to isolated spot in a closed world; the road where the tramps settled seems unrelated to any other spot and definitely they stick to that forsaken place as if they are shackled by the process of staying and stagnation since all of their frequent decisions to go away end in inaction, hearing with Wordsworth "The still, sad music of humanity"¹⁰. In Fact they seem that they want

to move so that they may find a meaning for themselves to live for but they have not the determination to do so as they frequently ask each other to leave but "They do not move" (p. 94).

In fact the life of the two tramps in this arid area is so gloomy that even the nearby naked tree is bare and fruitless in Act I, suggesting death and despair. Moreover, the shape of the tree also represents death as it resembles the cross which is the most important Christian symbol on which Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) was crucified. Besides, the tree represents the collapse of the European economy in the aftermath of the war as it is bare and dry. Therefore, the existence of the tree in Act I is significant to show the weariness and boredom of life that makes the tramps feel bored and unhappy. Thus Estragon describes angrily the whole landscape as a "muckheap"(p.61) which means a heap of dung or refuse¹⁰. But all of a sudden the tree in Act II is covered with some new green leaves signifying a new life and hope and making Vladimir amazed because it happened only in a "single night" (p.66), and pushing him to wonder "But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And now it's covered with leaves"(ibid).

Furthermore, time for the tramps is so long and boring that forces Vladimir to think that "time has stopped" (p.36). Time is long simply because the life of the tramps is meaningless, depressed and pointless since they have nothing to do but only trying to pass it to ease their boredom caused by their ceaseless waiting. Apparently, they are fully aware of "the hours are long, under these conditions"(p.80). Yet, time passes quickly when someone for example enjoys happy times and this thing has been emphasized by Vladimir when he says "How time flies when one has fun!", (p.76) just after he and his partner spent a good time by exchanging obscenities and had some fun. Apparently, the tramps' future seems uncertain and unpredictable and therefore any attempt carried out by them to avoid

time by changing place they soon face the same problem. Thus, any "effort to escape time by changing place...is a foolish and impossible idea"¹¹.

Not only is time detestable for the two tramps but also repulsive as considered by Pozzo as saying "Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable!"(p.89). In fact, Pozzo has a similar pessimistic view on Time, regarding it as just a routine, agony and death and its events are the same, saying:

"...one day like any other day, one day he went dumb,

One day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one

Day we were born, one day we shall die, the same

Day, the same second..." (ibid).

In general, time is so important throughout human practical and scientific life because life itself is very short. When someone for example has a job to do, he certainly needs enough time to finish it and sometimes because of man's many obligations for example he does not find more time to finish all his duties throughout his life, thus we can see easily the process of finishing work for such busy man is a race against time. As long as Pozzo's view on time is concerned, the passage of time in which events are the same leads to disillusionment and frustration, because it would represent only routine and life would be boring and unpleasant as man is born to die as he sooner or later goes to his grave. Birth itself is also similar to death as light comes out of a grave-like dark womb as Pozzo explains "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (ibid). Moreover, the idea of death resembling birth is also confirmed by Vladimir as both womb and birth are likened to the grave by Vladimir who says:" 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."

(pp.90-91). Hence, time is no more than an interval of life between birth and death and it does nothing but speed up our death.

In his play, Beckett is right in distorting the image of the modern Man, making it a gloomy and creating tortured protagonists according to the spirit of the age as his characters suffer a lot from the war and its terrible consequences as well as the difficulties of the cruel modern life. In Sophocles' dramatic works such as *Oedipus Rex*, the reader can easily perceive that even though the protagonist is strong and powerful, he is still weak and feeble in front of a domineering power of "Fate." Man is pictured, in Sophocles' drama as having no free-will; he is described as a puppet in the hand of Fate. On the contrary, the Renaissance philosophers and authors have freed Man from the shackles of Fate and supernatural powers, giving him an entire free-will as they believe in the power of Man who can make a change to improve his situation. The writers of that time like Sidney, Spencer, Marlowe, Shakespeare and others have praised and glorified Man. Instead of regarding man as a fallen and sinful creature they asserted his dignity and importance in the world. This glorious image is strongly expressed in Shakespeare's famous speech that is delivered on the tongue of prince Hamlet in *Hamlet*: "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a god! The beauty of the world...." (*Hamlet*, Act II, scene 2). This shows that Man is a great creature. He is superior to other creatures. He is noble, intellectual, and has unlimited ability. Hamlet's speech might be considered the typical opinion of the Renaissance age towards Man.

However, Beckett tried to show the decline of this holy image of Man as he deprived the individual in his play from his holiness and humanity. In fact Beckett has dehumanized and decentralized what the Renaissance pioneers had strongly

centralized. Beckett has an extraordinary ability to show the current problems of his people in their society. He is interested, for instance, in the problems of people represented by the two tramps as they live in a complete disorder and confusion. When reading the play carefully, the reader can conclude that Beckett shows indirectly the relationship between the individual represented by Vladimir and Estragon and the state represented by Pozzo who owns everything including the land where the tramps are waiting for Godot, and the state responsibility towards its citizens in providing them support and aid to make their life better and in the way in which certain pressures tend to reduce the individual to a slave such as Lucky, the absolutely submissive slave of Pozzo, or at least to someone without dignity just like Estragon who could not prevent himself from asking Pozzo humiliatingly for the chicken bones after being sucked by him, "Er...you've finished with the ...er...you don't need the...bones, sir?(p.26). Pozzo explains to Estragon that the bones "go to the carrier" (Lucky) (ibid), who has been asked by Pozzo whether he wants the bones or not but the latter does not answer and remains silent, thus Pozzo gives them to Estragon who shamelessly picks them up and begins to gnaw them. Vladimir observed the disgusting situation had begun to agitate for better treatment, daring to protest hesitantly against Pozzo "To treat a man... like that...I think that...no...a human being...no...it's a scandal!" (ibid).

The strong attachment of the two hopeless tramps to Godot indicates not only despair but doubts which are parts of human sufferings since even if the imaginary Godot comes, they are absolutely not sure whether he will help or punish them especially after Vladimir asks the Boy, a superficial character in the play, who claims that he works for "Mr. Godot" (p.51) as a shepherd of the latter's goats. Although the Boy acknowledges that Godot is good with him he accuses Godot of beating his brother who minds the sheep and therefore he is confused whether he is happy or not, prompting Vladimir to liken The Boy to himself as saying "You're

as bad as myself" (ibid). Thus, the salvation of the tramps at Godot's hands now is shaky and doubtful because Godot himself seems biased in his treatment of the two brothers. Hence, the long-awaited Godot might bring damnation to the tramps as Vladimir prays for peace when he says "Christ have mercy on us,!"(p.92) confirming to Estragon that Godot would punish them if they "dropped him" (p.93).

It is clear that the two tramps have no choice but waiting for Godot who would never appear. Besides, they have an excessively pessimistic view of life as Vladimir who is dejected and desperate according to his painful experiment in life telling us that the condition of man in life is like crucifixion "To every man his little cross.... Till he dies.... And is forgotten" (p.62), so life for the tramps means nothing but torture and death and that is why they are very disillusioned with their situation. Thus, they frequently desire to hasten their death to get relief as Vladimir suggests to celebrate their death by throwing themselves from Eiffel tower, saying "hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower" (p.10). Apparently, even committing suicide is unattainable for the tramps because they are not allowed to mount the French high tower as Vladimir explains "They wouldn't even let us up" (ibid).

Beckett's play demonstrates the power that affects negatively the tramps' life as we see in the play in which particular harsh surroundings wrap their life and make it unbearable . Besides, the play attempts to show the power of imagination which allows the tramps to form the picture or the idea of things such as Godot that do not necessarily exist in real life. For the tramps, Godot represents the only hope whom they want it to be true or to happen, and they usually believe that it is possible or likely that Godot will come one day to drag them out of their miserable situation. Hence. the idea of waiting for Godot captured the imagination of the

tramps whose efforts to meet Godot were of no avail since he does not show up. As a result, they were unconsciously compelled to be frustrated and to feel the slowness of time that conducive to disillusionment. Besides, the tramps' life is full of horror and remorse as they frequently remember the cries of the dead people who were in a bad need for help "those cries for help still ringing in our ears!" (p.79). Furthermore, Beckett has successfully implied comic and tragic elements in his play by creating the sense of incongruity which appears in dynamic fusion, making spectators or readers laugh at the tramps when they distract themselves either by exchanging hats or shouting obscenities on each other or to sympathize with them since their apathetic behaviour occurs within a context of despair.

Conclusion

As a matter of fact, literature is the mirror of society that reflects the realism of the factual daily life at any epoch, pushing Beckett as a dramatist aware of the blights of the recent war and its terrible consequences to present his masterpiece *Waiting For Godot* in the mid-twentieth century to show the nature of European human miserable life and to raise his idea of human dignity after a devastating war that caused much suffering, particularly to the European people, leaving them tortured, humiliated, incoherent, and lost in their war-torn countries. Apparently, Beckett's message to the humanity that man mustn't take an entirely pessimistic view of life if he falls into despair just like the situation of the two tramps who are indirectly obliged to submit themselves to fears and hesitations, hoping ironically there will be an exterior power would come and pick them up from their misery. It is a matter of fact that real power gushes out from inside man not from outside, thus, man must have a great deal of faith in himself to feel confident about his ability to achieve his goal in life. Moreover, man should appreciate his current situation and try to enjoy each moment of his

life as much as possible because life is short and time is passing whether he accepts or not. Besides, man must make use of his resolution, persistence, and patience to achieve his goals in life despite the difficulties which he may face. This is what Beckett wants to convey to his audiences.

Notes

- 1- Nihilism: (from the Latin nihil, nothing) a philosophical position which argues that the world, especially past and current human existence, is without meaning.
- 2- Ackerley, C. J. and Gontarski, S. E., (Eds.) *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 620.
- 3- *Ibid.* p. 172.
- 4- This is taken from a meeting with Linda Ben-Zvi, December 1987. Quoted in "Introduction" to Ben-Zvi, L., (ed.) *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. x.
- 5- Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961). pp.323-324.
- 6- Samuel Beckett. *Endgame: A Play in One Act, Followed by Act without Words, a Mime for One Player*. Grove Press, 1958. p. 18-19.
- 7- Jean E. Kennard, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Harper& Row, Publishers, Inc., 1975). p.1.
- 8- Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber limited, 1978), p.10. All subsequent textual quotations and references are based on this reference book.
- 9- Ronald Hayman, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Heinemann, 1980), p.4.
- 10- <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/muckheap>.
- 11- David H. Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1973), p.133.

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