

# A Study of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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## ABSTRACT

The theatre of the Absurd includes plays wherein humans are mere puppets full of irrational and illogical thoughts. From Aeschylus to Ibsen, the artists aimed at constructing meaning out of chaos and at gaining a momentary stay at confusion. So drama was then a temporary escape from the utter meaninglessness of life, a brief period when the audiences could dismiss their tensions and enter into a fictional world based on the assumption that man was a rational animal. But, 'The Theatre of the Absurd' ruthlessly shattered these notions, advocating instead their view of human being as an isolated existence and to represent life as it moves from nothingness whence it came to nothingness where it must go. The same notion is very much significant in Shakespeare's line:

"Life is a tale told by an idiot  
Full of sound and fury signifying nothing." (Act V, Scene 5, Macbeth)

Martin Esslin provided justification for the emergence of this new wave in the theatre, in his book: "The Theatre of the Absurd" which attempts to make man face up the world in which he lives and human conditions as they really are. As it was believed that the real dignity of man lies in his ability to face the reality in its senselessness, to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions and to laugh at it. This term is applied to a group of dramatists in the 1950s who shared the same predicament of man in the universe. Incidentally, the word 'absurd' is used in music which denotes a 'jarring note' or 'discord'.

This research paper is an attempt to study Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," a tragicomedy in two acts, published in 1952, originally in French as *En attendant Godot* and first produced in 1953. It is a true innovation in drama that successfully depicts the search for meaning in a world of chaos.

**Keywords** – Absurd, Discord, Uncertainty, Illusions, Ambiguity, Escape, Meaninglessness, Assumptions, Futility Of Human Existence

The 'Theatre of the Absurd' includes plays wherein humans are mere puppets full of irrational and illogical thoughts; a dramatic style popular during the mid-twentieth century, predominantly in Europe and America. It highlights the philosophical viewpoint called the absurd, which enquires about the relationship between human beings, the world, thereby, trying to find the meaning of life. This type of dramatic ensemble tries to capture and combine the elements of tragicomedy and farce to show the absurd circumstances that people experience in their lives. From Aeschylus to Ibsen, the artists aimed at constructing meaning out of chaos and at gaining a momentary stay at confusion. So drama was then a temporary escape from the utter meaninglessness of life, a brief period when the audiences could dismiss

their tensions and enter into a fictional world based on the assumption that man was a rational animal. But, 'The Theatre of the Absurd' ruthlessly shattered these notions, advocating instead their view of human being as an isolated existence and to represent life as it moves from nothingness whence it came to nothingness where it must go. The same notion is very much significant in Shakespeare's line:

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Albert Camus first realised the absurdity of existence during the second world war and gave a vociferous expression in his novels and drama about this meaninglessness of life. In 'The myth of Sisyphus,' Camus identifies the protagonist Sisyphus as the archetypal absurd hero, for both his behaviour on earth and for his punishment in the underworld. He defined the term 'absurd' as the tension that emerges between man's determination to find purpose and order in a world that refuses to evidence either. Thus, divorce between man and his quest to find meaning in life truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity. With this respect, Shakespeare says:

"As flies to wanton boys are we to Gods,  
They kill us for their sport" (Act 4, King Lear)

The above quote thus explains us the view of absurdist playwrights that our very existence is absurd, we are born without asking to be born, we die without seeking death, we live between life and death trapped within our body in which we will be finding 'nothingness' very much like the concept of infinity; something that we perceive but cannot experience. The absurdist writers believed that, we create in order to identify ourselves but our creations become autonomous facts. Therefore, the more we strive for definition and permanence the more absurd we are. If in despair, we turn to religion and illusion we betray and deny our only means of perception that is our reasoning. This is the condition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century man termed as 'absurd.' It is the same state that Aristotle labelled as 'ignorance.' The absurdist of today determinedly resist the traditional separation of farce and tragedy. Thus, they make us laugh at that which hurts more and make us weep at that which is foolish in our nature. They want drama 'which is not life but about life.' In the whole context, they all suit in the best sense of the word ironists. According to John Russel Taylor, 'Human beings fail to make meaningful actions in real life, their characters in the absurd play become mere performers, being string pulled by unknown forces.' This then becomes the foremost

characteristic in the absurd play. Edward Albee, an American absurdist considers the ‘Theatre of Absurd’ as a protest against growing conformity, a retreat from individuality, and moral responsibility. He opines: ‘Language is both, the disguise and the nakedness, the written and spoken language. There is also a body language that is not said – but we communicate and fail to communicate by language.’ He further observes: ‘Art must not be too afraid of incompleteness. It too lives in a region where all human endeavour is failure.’ Some critics consider the ‘Theatre of Absurd’ as a reaction to the atrocities and nuclear bombs of the war life. For them, life is not only meaningless in the universe but also with man-made destructive weapons.

In Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting For Godot,” there is no distinct stage setting. This adds an element of uncertainty and ambiguity and lends a symbolic depth to the play, enabling the audience to instantly relate to it. This absurd play is thus, an anti-play denying any plot, structure, unity, purpose, action, dialogue, logic, in the conventional sense. The entire plot constitutes nothing but endless waiting and it absolutely refuses to take the action forward. Initially the sequence of events seems illogical but it is only later when we realize that the author is symbolically trying to present his views through passive and male heroes. Further we have nothing but continuous cross talks as dialogues; without any attempts to delve into the roots of social relationships. In this play, Beckett portrays the agony of waiting and the boredom of living; through the conversation between these two characters namely, Vladimir and Estragon where they say,

“Nothing happens Nobody comes, nobody goes It’s awful.” (Act – I, Waiting For Godot)

Moreover, ‘Waiting For Godot’ has a religious meaning. While ‘Godot’ is a symbolical representation of God, ‘Waiting For Godot’ is important as it leads us on the path of salvation. The play depicts the human absurdity and their dependence on illusions, through which the author conveys the message to stay focussed on the truth. This is evident from some religious quotes from the play,

“Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings... Like ashes

Estragon: Like leaves.”

Long silence (Act II, Waiting For Godot)

What does this ‘Long silence’ signify? It is probably the emptiness and nothingness that their continuous talk is meant to disguise. This silence is awful because it makes us experience a state of vacuum.

Later they are heard interacting as, “Let us not then speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its predecessors. Let us not speak well of it either. Let us not speak of it at all. It is true the population has increased.” (Act I, Waiting For Godot)

Here, the cast of the play finds that the more they speak, more ambiguous it becomes. Thus, what starts off as an assurance and fact quickly degenerates into guesswork and even more questions. The futility of human existence is also evident when Vladimir says, “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?” (Act II, Waiting For Godot) It reinforces the state of mind of human consciousness where uncertainty empowers the thought process.

Thus, Beckett sums up the essence of life as ‘Art is an expression that there is nothing to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express combined with an obligation to express.’ So it is understood that life in Beckett’s plays is like an intolerable imprisonment spent between the compulsion of birth and the worst compulsion of death. Jean Sartre was another forerunner of this movement. He stated that there is void at the centre of all things and believed that man must choose his own values and live up to them regardless of the prevailing ideas.

Absurd plays are thus devoid of any plot or characterization. Their characters lack motivation that emphasize their purposelessness. The absence of the plot serves to reinforce the monotony and repetitiveness of time in human affairs. Instead of a logical construction, the irrationality of experience is transferred to the stage. In this relation, Beckett in this play attempted to create chaos out of genuine chaos; where human existence is depicted in a series of reflections in mirrors; each image mistaken for reality but it always proves to be an illusion.

## References

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