Samuel Beckett and *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract
This essay focuses on the criticism of Samuel Beckett and how anti-plot is effectively expressed in the absurdist and existentialist vision that life is inherently without meaning or purpose in *Waiting for Godot*.

Key words: Samuel Beckett; Anti-plot; Absurdity; Waiting for Godot

INTRODUCTION
Samuel Beckett, an Irish writer who lies in self-imposed exile, writes in French, and then translates his own works back into his mother tongue, English, with an Irish flavor, shows an extreme of pessimism and existentialist despair in his works. His plays and fiction are written in an unrealistic, abstract style that probes into difficult philosophical questions about human existence. His works have had such a wide influence on English and European thought that he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. One of the most significant developments in post-war drama has been a movement called “Theatre of the Absurd”, of which Becket is a pillar.

1. HIS POINT OF VIEW
Samuel Beckett’s point view in the early period is strongly influenced by Joyce. The first published essay *Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce* is to defend his acquaintance Joyce’s work and method, chiefly from allegations of wanton obscurity and dimness. However, after the WWII, realizing he could never excel the achievement of Joyce, Beckett changed his idea.

I realized that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realized that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding. This revelation changed his literary direction and interests and turned definitively to write four major plays using French as a vehicle, among which *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) is generally considered as the representative for the concept of “the absurd”.

The criticisms on Beckett was traditionally divided according to his two career periods: The fundamental criticism towards Beckett originated from the “perspective” (1959), highlighting that the works of Beckett has penetrated the philosophical thoughts and principles, which sets down a convention on criticism towards Beckett English works, also a basic tone for potential critic practice: the existentialist perspective. Hugh Kenner (1961), in his *Samuel Becket* claimed that “the mind-body split was at the heart of Beckett’s work”. Martin Esslin’s argument strengthened his position as an existentialist. Ken especially pointed that the drama of Becket intends to clash the boundary of drama.

Since 1980s, study on Beckett started to convert into a structuralist perspective. Lalita Ramakrishna talked about time, mind and body appeared in Beckett’s drama. Other critics regard Beckett’s work as radical problem collection of meaning, identity and subject-hood. The instead of embodying negativity humanism, Beckett dramatizes the limits where representation turns into nothing.

2. THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD
The Theatre of the Absurd, which came into being in
the fifties of the last century, totally subverts the ideas of traditional drama. The Absurd in these plays takes the form of man’s reaction to a world apparently without meaning and man as a puppet controlled or menaced by invisible outside forces. The characters in Absurdist drama are lost and floating in an incomprehensible universe and they abandon rational devices and discursive thought because these approaches are inadequate. Languages appear to have lost their denotative function, thus creating misunderstanding among the characters. Plots consist of the absurd repetition of cliché and routine and cyclical. The leading features of absurd fiction that have become very widespread in the twentieth century lie in the following:

• Rebel against Romanticism;
• Focus on the practical issues of human life;
• Absurd writing skills behind which the seriousness and clarity of the theme is clearly presented;
• Strict corresponding between symbolic context and story situations;
• Movements.

Elements of all these kinds are now mixed into a literary form especially suited to the present age and worthy of serious critical attention. He has won fame for both his novels and drama.

_Waiting for Godot_ is the masterpiece of the theatre of absurd. It cannot be initially accepted by the audiences. With the time going by, it is in the world classic modern art hall. More and more people pay attention and even think it over . . . " (p. 18) but Vladimir and Estragon live.

Different from those of the conventional theatre, the dramatists of the new age use anti-drama ways to express their view about the world, anti-drama include anti-plot, anti-hero, anti-language, anti-techniques. They use illogical situations, unconventional dialogues and minimal plots to express the apparent absurdity of human existence. No intense dramatic conflict or meaningful plot is involved in the plays, therefore anti-drama always considered as conflictless and plotless. Logic is almost subverted, with the unexpected and the logically impossible being favored in the plays. In almost all the anti-drama works, the dramatists explore man’s life by depriving the lovable surface, by taking away the illusory charms, by stripping the man to the absolute mass, and by reducing him to the essential base. The characters are often reductions of mankind. They are misfits, or poverty, sick people. Structure is circular, meaning that the plays end where they started with nothing really changed or accomplished. And last but not the least, language as a means of communication is absolutely distrusted and devalued. The dialogues in the plays often seem to make no sense and only bring out the inadequacies of verbal communication.

_Waiting for Godot_ is usually labeled as “Anti-Theater”, “New Theater”, or more exactly, “Theater of the Absurd”. Influenced by the painful experience of the horrors of World War II, it gives artistic expression on creating a style of theatre which presents the pointless life, the powerless people and the meaningless world. Everything is, in a word, “absurd”! These dramatists all seem to have a pessimistic view of people struggling vainly to find a purpose in life. They define the human condition as basically meaningless and absurd. The dramatists of the absurd use illogical situations, unconventional dialogues and minimal plots to express the apparent absurdity of human existence. No intense dramatic conflict or sense plot is involved in the plays, therefore the absurd theatre is always considered as conflictless and plotless. Logic is almost subverted, with the unexpected and the logically impossible being favored in the plays. Structure is circular, meaning that the plays end where they started with nothing really changed or accomplished.

4. ANTI- PLOT FEATURES IN WAITING FOR GODOT

Beckett’s masterpiece _“Waiting for Godot”_ might be the most famous and controversial absurdist play in the western world.

Waiting for Godot presents two poor vagabonds who are frozen to their place and keep waiting for the coming of Godot who will “surely come Tomorrow” and offer them safety and warmth. It was “nothing very definite . . . a kind of prayer . . . a vague supplication”. And what had Godot promised them? That he’s see . . . that he would think it over . . . ” (p. 18) but Vladimir and Estragon live.
in hope: “Tonight perhaps we shall sleep in his place, in
the warmth, dry, our bellies full, on the straw. It is worth
waiting for that, is it not?” (p. 30) When Beckett is asked
about the theme of Waiting for Godot, he sometimes
refers to a passage in Waiting for Godot attributed to St.
Augustine: “There’s a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I
wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin
than in English. ‘Don’t despair: one of the thieves was
dead. Do not presume, one of the thieves were damned.’ ” (Esslin, p. 53). Perhaps the most famous production of
Waiting for Godot, took place in 1957 when a company of
actors from the San Francisco Actors’ workshop presented
the play at the San Quentin penitentiary for an audience
of over fourteen hundred convicts. Surprisingly, the
production was a great success. The prisoners understood
as well as Vladimir and Estragon that life means waiting,
killing time and clinging to the hope that the relief he
prays would be just around the corner. As a teacher at the
prison remarked, “They know what is meant by waiting . . .
and they know if Godot finally came, he would only be a
disappointment” (Blau, p. 264). To sum up, the playwright
“stare at man’s existence unblinkingly” (O’Neill, p 106).
They “Present existence itself utterly naked, insignificant,
sad, and they know if Godot finally came, he would only be a
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They “Present existence itself utterly naked, insignificant,
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He conveys an anguished need to get it said, all of it.
Interruption is Beckett’s most constant stylistic tool. In
the opening, Estragon is struggling to remove a boot. He
battles his boots throughout the play; the boots may or
may not preserve their identity, as they may or may not
have been replaced by another pair between the two acts,
an indeterminacy attributed to both internal and external
reality in the play. The first line spoken is Estragon’s
“nothing to be done”. We have just seen him struggling
for too long to do something ordinarily no great challenge,
remove a boot. We understand the line as expressing a kind
of futility usually associated with broad comedy—Laurel
and Hardy managing a ladder, or Dogberry an inquiry.

Vladimir’s response: “I’m beginning to come round to that
opinion. All my life I’ve tried to put it from me, saying,
Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven’t yet tried everything. And
I resumed the struggle. (He broods, musing on the struggle.
Turning to Estragon.) So there you are again.”

Estragon: “Am I?”

Vladimir leads us to interrupt our understanding of
what Estragon has said, and Estragon’s “Am I?” returns
the favor for Vladimir’s speech. The horizon of broad
comedy created by “Nothing to be done” is replaced by a
horizon of lugubrious reflection. Vladimir’s misprision of
Estragon’s remark sounds intentional, the kind of willful
mistake often practiced on children by careless or uncaring
adults, a turning of the phrase that leaves the child outside
the communication. But how do we understand Estragon’s
“Am I?” does he truly not know whether he is there or
not? Has he undertaken some sort of misprision on his
own so private that we cannot detect its horizon? Is it a
serious comment on the diaphanous nature of identity, and
if so an authorial intrusion in Estragon’s voice? Perhaps
it is best to observe that the remark constitutes for me a
horizonless interruption.

As has been mentioned, the plays classified as the
“Theatre of the Absurd” are thought to nearly have no plot.
It is the case in “Waiting for Godot”, is a kind of anti-drama,
there is no plot, no story, not any the traditional patterns of
order to illustrate the ideas; neither is there the usual five
parts of the play such as introduction, explosion, climax,
conclusion, dénouement. And its structure is not a linear
one; it is a circular structure of repetition without beginning
and ending. In Waiting for Godot we could not find out the
division of which is the conflict, which is the dénouement.

All plots of this play is plain, the characters that
appeared in that play is also flat, too. They are not
complicated and don’t change throughout the course of
the play. This does not tell a story but only explores a
static situation. Anyway, no matter how “plotless” the play
is, the term “plot” is still applied here. The plot of “Waiting
for Godot” is not complicated at all and can be related
in the following: In Act I, two old tramps Vladimir and
Estragon are waiting by a solitary tree for someone named
Godot. They kill time through nonsensical conversation,
barren argument and ludicrous acts. They are interrupted
by the arrival of two other characters, a master called
Pozzo and his slave Lucky. A young boy arrives with a
message from Godot saying that he will not come this
evening but surely tomorrow. Vladimir and Estragon
decide to leave and finally do nothing but stand still when
the curtain falls. Act II seems to be a repetition of Act I,
the only difference is the tree’s leaves all fell. since on
the second day nothing has been changed except that Pozzo
has gone blind, Lucky has gone dumb and small
variations occur in the arrangement of the characters’
talks. In the end, we are not surprised to find that the two
tramps are still waiting in the same place at the same time
for a certain Godot who may never come.

Estragon: Well, shall we go?
Vladimir: Yes, let’s go.
(They do not move.) (Curtain)

The above scene in the end of Act II is completely
the same as that in the end of Act I. The play seems to
end in precisely the same condition it began, with no
real change having occurred. Just as some critic puts it:
“nothing happens, nobody comes nobody goes . . . ” There
is no dramatic conflict in “Waiting for Godot”, which
may also account for its “plotlessness”. It gives us the
impression that no matter how long the character perform,
we can’t see anything in progress at all, only left with the
impression that nothing will really happen except for the
endless wait.

Beckett always advocates the “pure” literature creation
should have “no plot, no action”; Waiting for Godot is
the practice of this principle. It is from the beginning to
the ending, no concrete plot, in the end just the repetition
of the beginning. Throughout the play, there is only meaningless dialogue and strange interlude. None of the five characters in the play have normal thinking ability, the time arrangement is separated from the regular pattern, and there is no rule to follow. But this is the theme which Beckett elaborately devised—everything is blank, the comic style’s language, expressions and action—absurdity. As in the reality, everywhere is full of this kind or that kind of absurd: neither all the things happen with reason nor ending; whether the contact would have between human beings; time and space under some circumstances would occur chaos; what people pursue for maybe just meaningless . . . all of them follow and reflect the theatre of absurd’s principles and nature: the world itself is absurd, the life is meaningless and hopeless.

CONCLUSION

Under the nothingness or desperation converged in the drama we could interpret this play from an optimistic perspective because the author inadvertently infused the play with a touch of hope.

All the characters in the play live in a miserable condition judging from the physical appearance and by further reading we know they also suffer more than poverty and indecency. They are social outcasts who had experienced various failures in Society, owning barely nothing but illusions that “tomorrow everything will be better” (p. 51) Waiting is the prevailing action in the play. The vagabonds are waiting throughout the two acts, longing for the appearance of the unknown figure who might save them from misery, offering them food and shelter. but waiting, a kind of action less action, cannot be viewed as the theme of the play, for behind the action itself: hope, or rather to put it exactly, illusion which keeps them frozen to the stagnation. the characters in the play are not just waiting for the show-up of the great savior or the realization of dreams. rather by doing so they can go on with living with hope, though the hope is a hopeless one. In Godot’s view, the central statement “nothing to be done” reflects frustration and impotence. In the play, impotence remains the condition of man. the idea of failure is ubiquitous throughout Waiting for Godot such as Godot’s failure to turn up, the two protagonists’ failure to wait for him at the right place, and their inability to figure out when Godot will come and the impotence of escaping from the stagnation (“let’s go. [they do not move]”). Becket originally thought of calling his play En attendant (without Godot). the protagonists are keeping waiting an appointment and waiting for the arrival of someone they don’t know and can’t describe, and they are uncertain what the arrival will mean. Vladimir and estragon wait for Godot to do for them. This passage omitted in the English version, clearly suggests the peace, the rest from waiting. they will no longer be tramps, homeless wanderers, but will have arrived home, a haven represented by Godot.

REFERENCES