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Waiting for What?

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a thought provoking play, to say the least. While many who read it insist that nothing happens, the opposite could not be truer. It can be viewed through an existentialist lens as a quest for the meaning of life. Estragon and Vladimir seem to be stuck at an extremely stagnant, low point in life, both homeless and without motivation other than to wait for a mysterious character, Godot. While the overall message of the play is rather dreary, Beckett wrote the play as a tragicomedy, a play that has solemn action with a happy ending. Having read the play in Existentialism in Literature class, I was excited to see it on stage. I knew that I would get much more out of it after having both read it and watched it. Starring Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellan as the lead characters intrigued me because I'm familiar with their acting history. Similar to when I saw *First Date*, starring Zachary Levi who is also known for his film acting, I was interested to see how they would perform on a stage rather than in front of a camera.

An interesting observation that I learned in Existentialism in Literature class with Dr. Good and Dr. Neelakanta is that when the play was first performed, the audiences felt cheated out of their money; they were extremely disappointed and thought the play to be a waste of time. But, when prisoners saw the play performed, they seemed to love it. I found this to be a compelling observation and I thought a great deal about why that may

be. From an existential point of view, *Waiting for Godot* is a play in which one must derive the meaning of life when one has no drive or thing to live for. It seems that Gogo and Didi, have only each other to live for. Perhaps, however, that is the very message of the play. Perhaps it is not important to find some *thing* to live for, but rather some *one*.

Casting Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellan as Vladimir and Estragon, respectively, was an excellent choice. The chemistry they have together in real life shines through in their stage performance. Perhaps my favorite moment in the play is when Didi sings Gogo to sleep, taking Gogo's hand in his and stroking it softly as Gogo slept on Didi's shoulder. That moment seemed so genuine and it was then that it became obvious to the audience just how much these two characters needed each other. Their previous moments of Didi wanting to embrace Gogo and Gogo being reluctant as well as any other tension between the two vanished in that instant. Despite these instances, it is clear that Gogo and Didi are very dependent upon each other. Without each other, they would both be lost. Didi provides sustenance for Gogo and Gogo provides company for Didi. While they both usually part ways at night, they always reconvene in the morning. Without each other, they have no purpose in life.

The purpose of the two supporting characters, Pozzo and Lucky, comes into question. Pozzo, a landowner, seems to be obsessed with possessions. He carries, or rather has Lucky carry, all his possessions with him at all times. He even owns Lucky, whom he insists he is taking to be sold. His obsession with material goods never ceases, even after he is blinded. Although now completely dependent on Lucky, he still forces Lucky to carry a bag full of sand. It can be argued, then, that Lucky defines Pozzo. Without Lucky, Pozzo would be helpless. Lucky has a purpose in life, and that is to carry

Pozzo's things and to guide him once Pozzo is blinded. Lucky could not be more different from Gogo and Didi. He has a purpose in life and it is clear from his speech that he is well educated. Although it appears that he is treated poorly by Pozzo, he has consistency in life, he knows why he is on earth, and he has a place to live. Lucky's performance was interesting to me. The way the director chose to portray him was with a really rugged and rundown appearance. When reading the play, I'd imagined him to look more normal, but I think the director was trying to show how animalistic Lucky is. Pozzo has him leashed as he would an animal and treats him as such, even calling him "Pig" quite frequently. I think the way the director portrayed Lucky was effective.

One of the biggest differences I noticed from reading the play to seeing it performed was in Lucky's speech. In the play, Gogo, Didi, and Pozzo jump on Lucky to try to stop his speech. In this version, Lucky seemed to be chasing the others around the stage in an almost frantic and scary way and the others never jump on him to stop him. They merely take his hat off and he falls to the ground, seemingly unconscious. I tried to read into the significance of the director's choice to play out the scene this particular way. Perhaps he wanted to portray that life is easier when one thinks less; too much knowledge can begin to drive one mad. The more one studies, the less one knows.

When Didi finally figures out that Godot is not going to ever arrive, he has to come to grips with the fact that he has no other motivation in life. It is implied that he will return each day to wait for Godot, knowing full well that at the end of each day, a little boy will arrive to say that Godot will not be coming today, but he definitely will the next day. It is at this point that he becomes completely dependent upon Gogo and he

realizes it. I feel as though he finds some complacency in waiting day in and day out with Gogo because they are such good friends.

The play has many funny lines and interactions, though, so its serious undertone is cushioned. The tragicomedy aspect of the play is relevant in the funny dialogue, but solemn themes and motifs. The audience laughs at many interactions between Gogo and Didi, especially at all the repetitions of the line, “We’re waiting for Godot!” when Gogo seems to constantly forget why the two cannot just leave the spot they occupy. Many of the interactions between the two characters are lighthearted and entertaining. A key difference between the two characters, however, is that Gogo seems only to remember physical events, whereas Didi fixates on concepts. Gogo does not remember Pozzo and Lucky, but rather he remembers getting kicked in the shin. Likewise, he never remembers who beats him at night, just that he was beaten. The biggest example of this difference is when the two discuss hanging themselves from the tree. Gogo fixates on the fact that they could get an erection from hanging themselves, whereas Didi has more of an understanding that the act would terminate their lives. Regardless, though, neither of them is willing to be the first one to actually hang himself.

Throughout both reading the play as well as seeing it, I kept comparing it to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Stoppard. In both plays, the characters seem to be stuck waiting on something and have no control over their own lives. They both struggle with finding the meaning of life and center on forgetfulness. The concept of time passing is a focus of both plays, too. In *Waiting for Godot*, time is cyclical, as each day seems to be a copy of the last with minor changes, whereas time is very linear in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Neither of them can seem to remember much

of the past, other than they were both assigned a task, to wait for Godot or to accompany Hamlet on his journey. The characters in both plays seem to lack imagination, which we as people have. They are unable to think forward to the future or formulate alternative situations. For example, it never crosses Didi's mind to perhaps follow the little boy back to the supposed place where Godot lives.

Perhaps Beckett's overall message from *Waiting for Godot* is that life does not necessarily get better, it just gets different. As people, we are relatively stagnant in our lives. There are going to be times when one hits low points and it seems as though it might not get better. And for some, it may not get better. While this thought may not be the most optimistic note to end a play on, it has some credibility. The audience knows that because Gogo and Didi have each other, they are going to be okay. Delicately performed by both Ian McKellan and Partick Stewart, *Waiting for Godot*, having seen it performed on stage, left me with a feeling of contentment despite life's imperfections.