

Anna Wostenberg

Drs. Good and Neelakanta

BHP 222: Existentialism in Literature

3 December 2013

### Waiting for the Absurd

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a play that follows two main characters, Estragon, Gogo, and Vladimir, Didi, on their journey as they wait for the mysterious Godot. An existentialist play, Beckett covers many topics that tend to make the audience question their own values such as the meaning of life, time, and the concept of the absurd. Beckett, in *Waiting for Godot*, "deals with the basic problems of human existence on the most down-to-earth level," (Esslin). Both Gogo and Didi question their purpose in life because neither of them seems to have, or can identify, much purpose outside of waiting for Godot.

Estragon: Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: 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. [Beckett, 2]

Even within that relationship, it appears that Didi is the only one that actually feels a need to wait for Godot, and Gogo is merely there to keep him company. Several times in the play, Gogo suggests that they leave and Didi has to remind him that they are indeed still waiting for Godot.

Estragon: Let's go.

Vladimir: We can't.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot. [Beckett 8]

Beckett also leaves unclear where it is that Estragon wants to go. This plays into the aspect that life is absurd. The two apparently do not really have anywhere else to go yet Estragon continually wants to leave where they are waiting. Gogo and Didi seem to need each other and to complement each other's character traits; Gogo focuses more on the physical world while Didi on the conceptual and theoretical. Together they create a more "egalitarian" relationship (Gordon). They need each other to "distract them from boredom, to lift depression, and to fight paralysis" (Gordon). The two have rejected society's means of fighting these roadblocks, including family life, work, and social action. Beckett implies that Estragon was at one point making a career as a poet but either rejected it or was unsuccessful at it. Whatever the case, he has now been living as a homeless man and sleeping in a ditch and sees no alternative.

Vladimir: You should have been a poet.

Estragon: I was. (*Gestures towards his rags.*) Isn't that obvious? [Beckett 6]

The only other characters that are present in the play, Pozzo and Lucky, are also dependent on each other; Pozzo needs Lucky to carry all his possessions, and Lucky needs Pozzo for survival. But the roles become reversed in the second act when Pozzo is blinded and needs Lucky to lead him everywhere. *Waiting for Godot* asserts that life and existence is absurd, that time is measured based on change, and that there is no real meaning behind life.

*Godot* is without a doubt, a play that encourages people to think about their own existence. Martin Esslin concludes that "being able to look at one's self and one's misfortunes and sufferings with a sense of humor is a liberating and cathartic experience" (Esslin). He means to say that *Godot* makes both Estragon and Vladimir, as well as the audience, question their existence in the world, and leaves them all with a sense of understanding and acceptance. Life through the lens of Estragon and Vladimir leads the audience to question their own existence and is a quest for truth. However, in order to fully accept the truth, that life has no meaning, one must objectively observe one's own life. If one can truly separate one's self from one's consciousness, as Beckett tries to do in *Godot*, then one can accept life for what it is. Only then can one feel truly liberated.

Vladimir: One is what one is.

Estragon: No use wriggling.

Vladimir: The essential doesn't change.

Estragon: Nothing to be done. (*He proffers the remains of the carrot to Vladimir*) Like to finish it? [Becket 17]

This is one of the existential moments in the play where Gogo and Did seem to accept their lot in life; it is even trivialized by Gogo's easy subject change to the carrot. Gogo and Didi acknowledge that there is no real value to life, even if they have not yet realized this for themselves. Esslin also argues that Beckett's message is that there is a need for "compassion, pity, and love for our fellow human beings in this mysterious, impenetrable, and inexplicable universe - and to be able to laugh at ourselves, including our misfortunes." Nothing matters in the grand scheme of things. "To live is to think, and to think embraces all the voices of the silence." (Gordon). In Beckett's opinion, the only

time in which silence from one's inner voices may be truly attained is in death (Gordon).

This is truly prevalent in *Godot*.

Vladimir:... What do we do now?

Estragon: Wait.

Vladimir: Yes, but while waiting.

Estragon: What about hanging ourselves?

Vladimir: Hmm. It'd give us an erection. [Beckett 12]

This passage implies that both Gogo and Didi do not have any reason to remain on earth and that they could achieve true silence in killing themselves. Although, neither of them will actually go through with hanging themselves either of the two times it is suggested. Another point Beckett tries to portray is that life does not always get better it just gets different. Things change but do not necessarily improve. This is the kind of lifestyle that Gogo and Didi have. Each night they part ways and wherever Gogo retires to, he gets beaten by a group of people. In the morning they return to each other, in a different mood destined to repeat the essentially same day.

Author Martin Esslin, who had had several conversations with Beckett, argues that *Waiting for Godot* is a play written by Beckett about only his own experiences and thoughts. Beckett believes, according to Esslin, that "the only segment of the world to which we have direct access, which we can KNOW" is one's own consciousness (Esslin). He believes "we can know nothing of the world except through our consciousness" (Esslin). Everything is merely how we perceive it to be, which is completely different from how someone else perceives it.

One of the many theories developed by intellectuals and readers is that *Godot* is a

metaphor for God. While Beckett did not enjoy engaging in discussion about his works, one thing Beckett did reveal about *Godot*, however, relates to Godot's identity. "If by Godot I meant God, I would say God and not Godot" (Betsalel). When further asked about Godot's identity, Beckett followed up with, "If I knew, I wouldn't have written the play!" (Betsalel). These quotes emphasize that Beckett's writing was as much for himself and his own self-discovery as it was for an audience. Even the author does not know of the identity of the mysterious Godot. Intellectuals can debate who Godot really is, but they will never have their theories confirmed by Beckett himself because he wrote the play without the knowledge.

An interesting fact about *Godot* is that, when first performed, many audiences felt cheated; they felt that nothing happened in the play and that they wasted their money. But when performed for the inmates at San Quentin prison in San Francisco, California, the reviews were positive. Perhaps the inmates found the plot relatable; they found themselves in similar situations as Gogo and Didi, questioning the meaning of life as they are at a low point, literally trapped in time. Time is a prevalent theme throughout *Godot*. Neither Vladimir nor Estragon can seem to understand how much time has passed.

Estragon: But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not  
rather Sunday? (*Pause.*) Or Monday? (*Pause.*) Or Friday?

Vladimir: It's not possible!

Estragon: Or Thursday?

Vladimir: What'll we do?

These few lines highlight how incapable Gogo and Didi are of keeping track of passing

time. This is not the only instance in the play that the two characters lose track of time. Between acts one and two, it is supposed that only one day has passed, but Didi cannot seem to understand how the one tree on the stage has suddenly bloomed leaves and also how Lucky and Pozzo have aged.

What is to be explored next, then, is the question, “Is time something on its own, apart from the things that happen in time, or is time dependent on what happens in it?” (Levy). Beckett seems to remain unsure of the answer to this question. Eric P. Levy claims that throughout *Godot* Beckett explores the idea that, “time is not a condition preceding experience, but a conclusion drawn from experience and a means of expressing that experience.” According to Levy, Aristotle insisted that time is defined as “the measure of change” (Levy). It follows, then, that if there is no change, as is the case in *Godot*, then there is no time. This skewed perception of time is what throws Vladimir and Estragon off in their observations.

Vladimir: Look at it. [The tree]

Estragon: I see nothing.

Vladimir: But yesterday evening it was all black and bare.

And now it's covered with leaves.

Estragon: Leaves?

Vladimir: In a single night.

Estragon: It must be the Spring.

Vladimir: But in a single night! [Beckett 73]

Vladimir becomes frustrated with Estragon here because Estragon does not question the sudden appearance of leaves on the tree that was bare just the day before. Didi cannot

seem to understand how this occurred and obsesses over trying to figure out why the tree has magically sprung leaves. Estragon merely accepts that there are now leaves and is satisfied with his theory that it is springtime. Estragon also illustrates how difficult it is to keep track of time when nothing new seems to happen.

Vladimir: ...Now what did we do yesterday evening?

Estragon: Do?

Vladimir: Try and remember.

Estragon: Do...I suppose we blathered.

Vladimir: About what?

Estragon: Oh...this and that I suppose, nothing in particular.

Yes, now I remember, yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That's been going on now for half a century. [Beckett, 73].

When there is a change, such as the leaves or Pozzo's newfound blindness, he has nothing to compare it to because those are the only things that have changed in the play. Vladimir's assertion that "Time has stopped" (Beckett 37) would then seem logical. Pozzo contradicts this notion, however, in his contraction of the span of human life into one second. He cries, "One day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (Beckett 103). He also insists, "The blind have no notion of time. The things of time are hidden from them too," (Beckett 99). These two assertions contradict Vladimir's previous statements regarding time; the latter implying that sight is necessary for time to exist. They are all trapped in a repetitive

routine that would give the illusion that time does not exist based on the definition of time being defined by change. This is supported by Vladimir once again when his mistakes Pozzo for Godot upon Pozzo's return in the second act.

Vladimir: We are no longer alone, waiting for the night,  
waiting for Godot, wait for...waiting. All evening we have  
struggled, unassisted. Now it's over. It's already to-morrow.

Pozzo: Help!

Vladimir: Time flows again already. The sun will set, the  
moon rise, and we away...from here. [Beckett 88]

Here, the simple act of another character entering the stage allows time to flow again because there is a change, and a drastic one at that. Pozzo, who Vladimir thinks is Godot, is blinded and cannot seem to get up once he has fallen.

There is symbolism behind the stage directions at the end of both acts of the play, as well. Both times, the last line is the same, "Yes, let's go" although in the first act Vladimir says it and in the second, Estragon says it, and the stage direction is "They do not move" (Beckett 59, 109). The symbolism of these endings is to highlight just how stuck in time Gogo and Didi are. They cannot leave, really, because they are trapped at this low point in life. The fact that they do not move at the end of each act highlights this and the audience relates. The line uttered is in direct contradiction with the stage direction; it creates a sense of wrongness and discord. This is another element that the inmates of San Quentin probably found relatable. They have free will to an extent, but only within the confines of the world they are trapped in. Their cycle will repeat endlessly.



Another aspect explored is the concept of the absurd. The definition of absurd employed by many existentialist thinkers is "that which is devoid of purpose.... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless." (Esslin) The main difference between existential thinkers and existentialist playwrights is the lucidity of thought. The thinkers express in lucid, logically constructed reasoning, whereas the playwrights such as Beckett strive to express the absurd's "sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought," (Esslin). Beckett attempts to be more real and true to his stream of consciousness in his play writing than other philosophers such as Camus. With Estragon focusing on the more physical aspects of life and Vladimir on the theoretical, they create the two halves to a stream of consciousness. Estragon seems to only remember things that physically happen to him and Vladimir seems to focus more on the concepts.

Vladimir: And Pozzo and Lucky, have you forgotten them too?

Estragon: Pozzo and Lucky?

Vladimir: He's forgotten everything!

Estragon: I remember a lunatic who kicked the shins off me. Then he played the fool. [Beckett 67]

Because Lucky kicking Gogo was a physical act that quite literally left an impression on Gogo, he remembered it, although it took some effort to recollect. But he recalls physical events. Didi remembers conceptual things, like taking notice of the sudden appearance of leaves on the tree.

Beckett did not like to discuss his works or answer questions about them. Perhaps by refusing to talk about his works, Beckett is providing the audience the freedom to interpret the piece however he or she wants. In fact, Beckett is staying true to his philosophical beliefs by refusing to answer questions about the play because he believes that one can truly only understand one's own consciousness. He could explain his own perception or interpretation of the play, but he would have no way to know if others were understanding or perceiving his discussion in the same way that he is. Each person has his or her own inner thought process and no matter how matter-of-fact a text seems to be, no interpretation will be exactly the same. The human brain is simply unique for each individual. Audience members do just that. When the prisoners at San Quentin in San Francisco, California were asked who they thought Godot was, one responded with, "Godot is society" and another said, "He's the outside" (Esslin). They had a different life perspective going into the play that the audience members who were not imprisoned. It follows, then, that they would have a drastically different interpretation of the play, finding it more relatable and relevant.

Many compare *Godot* to Camus' interpretation of "The Myth of Sisyphus". In that story, Sisyphus is condemned to push a large boulder up a mountain and watch it fall back down every day for the rest of his life. But Camus insists that Sisyphus is actually happy and finds some defiance in his punishment by "ignoring the irrationality of his fate and focusing on the blue of the sky and the texture of the rock" (Gordon). The primary difference between the two texts is that Beckett's characters "lack a sense of defiance regarding their lot in life" (Gordon). While both are essentially condemned to a similar fate, Gogo's and Didi's being to wait for Godot endlessly, their perception of their fate is

different. They also have no assurance that their world is not changing, as Sisyphus's is certain to never change. Their only certainty, in fact, is how uncertain the world is and their insistence that one day, their meaning in life will become known. Despite how mundane and boring their lives are, they are convinced that the arrival of Godot will bring their lives some sort of meaning and provide them with a course of action to take next. The clues provided by the young boy, who arrives everyday to say that Godot is not coming that day, imply that Godot is a brutish character because the boy says Godot beats his brothers. It would still be worthwhile for Godot to come even if he abused Gogo and Didi because their "need for direction" is so intense (Gordon).

Vladimir: Well? What do we do?

Estragon: Don't let's do anything. It's safer.

Vladimir: Let's wait and see what he says.

Estragon: Who?

Vladimir: Godot

Estragon: Good idea.

Vladimir: Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.

Gogo and Didi are truly dependent on Godot for any and all further life direction. In this passage they are arguing that it is a smarter idea to wait for Godot's advice than to attempt to make their own decisions.

While "habit is a great deadener" (Beckett 105) of anxiety, "habit continues to demonstrate one's logic in a random and chaotic universe and provides the hope of linear and predictable behavior" (Gordon). That Gogo and Didi continue on the same routine day in and day out shows that they desire consistency and meaning from life. They

believe that if they wait long enough, Godot just may show up. Although, it appears at the end of the play that Didi finally understands that he will not make an appearance as promised. He realizes this when the interaction with the little boy proves to be the same as the day before. Instead of asking the boy questions, Didi makes statements, essentially relaying the message for the boy because Didi already knows what the message will say.

Vladimir: You have a message from Mr. Godot.

Boy: Yes Sir.

Vladimir: He won't come this evening.

Boy: No Sir.

Vladimir: But he'll come to-morrow.

Boy: Yes Sir. [Beckett 105]

Perhaps this is the moment in which Beckett tries to convey to the audience a very existential concept: life does not always get better it just gets different.

Life is absurd. The whole concept, really, is absurd. Beckett tries to get the audience to understand this as he is trying to himself understand it. There is probably a great deal of Beckett within Gogo and Didi because together they seem to form one consciousness - an emotional and a rational part. Humans strive to find a meaning out of life, but there really is none.

Vladimir: Was I sleeping while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? To-morrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of to-day? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to

us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be?

The point here is that there is no one truth, no universality for what is true. Everything is based on perception which is different for each individual person. Humans are simply another part of existence; they are born and then they die. It is the time between those events in which humans learn, thrive, and age. The existentialist position is that there really is no purpose for human existence; there is no superhuman being that created humanity. Humans developed through genetic mutation and evolution and will continue the cycle. Beckett wants his readers to accept this concept. He does not, however, want his readers to be sad about it. He wants his audience to find comfort and solace in this notion. Only once this is accepted can people truly find happiness. The play, after all, is called a “tragicomedy” which is defined as solemn action with a happy ending. Gogo and Didi do indeed find comfort within each other. In their last lines of the play, Didi says, “Well? Shall we go?” and Gogo responds with, “Yes, let’s go,” (Beckett, 109). This is the first time in the play in which the two characters leave together for the night. Previously they have each gone their separate ways at night, but this time they go together. It is clear, now, that Gogo and Didi need each other and are dependent upon each other for happiness. Perhaps this is another moral of Beckett’s. Perhaps he believes people just need to find someone to get through life with because life is so monotonous and is not always good. Perhaps simply knowing that someone is there to embrace us when we need it and to pass the unending time cycles is enough. Perhaps it is even comforting and happy. Gogo and Didi often debate their happiness with each other. But they ultimately conclude that they are happy.

Estragon: I am happy.

Valdimir: So am I.

Estragon: So am I.

Vladimir: We are happy.

Estragon: We are happy. (*Silence.*) What do we do now,  
now that we are happy?

Vladimir: Wait for Godot. [Beckett 66]

With this newfound assertion that they are both happy, and happy being together, they continue on their routine of waiting for Godot. This symbolizes that, although life is monotonous and unchanging, one can still find happiness and enjoyment from life.

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a play of many themes and ideas. Written as much for Beckett's own self-exploration as it was for others, Beckett leaves no stone unturned. The themes of time, the meaning of life, and the absurd come up time and time again. Beckett explores the different ways to define the concept of time and, more specifically, time passing. He, himself, was not sure on what the correct definition of time was so he employed his characters, Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo, and Lucky to explore it for him. In many ways, change is used to define time, which Estragon and Vladimir have a very difficult time doing because so little in their life changes. The play was written to seem like a stream of consciousness, almost in a dream-like state. Through this, Beckett tries to uncover the meaning of life, but in order to do so, one must first accept the absurdity of life. Once accepted, one can begin to find comfort and even happiness in life, though it is not easy to get to that point. A tragicomedy in two acts, *Waiting for Godot* leaves each audience member with a different outlook on life, both from the person next to them as well as from before he or she entered the theater. Finding

happiness in this complicated, busy life is difficult, but with the help of Samuel Beckett, readers and audience members everywhere can begin to do just that.

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