



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Waiting for Nothing; an Analysis of “Waiting for Godot”

By Samuel Beckett

B. A Thesis

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Abstract

This essay examines the themes in *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. It will analyse Beckett's style and the writing technique that he used in his play. It will provide an interpretation of the play, mainly focusing on the habit and routine of the main characters, Estragon and Vladimir. The essence of their behaviour reflects the common situation in the human condition, and men's despair at being unable to find a meaning for his existence. Martin Esslin's exploration of the play under the group 'the theatre of the absurd' will help to find the tone for the themes that will be discussed in the essay.

Samuel Beckett's works have been identified as a representation of people's attitude and the meaningless absurdity of the human condition. The miserable condition of life in the present, the constant effort to make it fruitful and the failure to succeed in this is portrayed in *Waiting for Godot*. The play has been labelled as one of the major examples in post-modernist art which explains the 'collapsing of reality', the beginning points for the 'theatre of the absurd'. The interpretations of the play are varied, and they all depend on the individual audience's point of view. During the essay, the varied critics and different interpretations will be used to analyse the play in order to highlight its essence. The play gives deep insight into the human condition, and reflects a mirror to the audience which makes them ask, is this me and my life circumstances.

Introduction

Waiting for Godot (1952) is an unusual and notable play written by Irish Nobel Prize-winner (1969) Samuel Beckett. The purpose of this essay is to analyse how Beckett constructs his world of the absurd in the play. The play was an exploration of a new form of drama which was categorized as the 'theatre of the absurd' by Martin Esslin. In his *The Theatre of the Absurd* he explains the distinction between conventional plays and modern dramas by selected playwrights. He insists, "The Theatre of the Absurd, however, can be seen as the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our own time" (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 22-23). Under the title *The Search for the Self*, Esslin discusses intriguing absurdist elements in various plays, including Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

The term abstract is used in Esslin's study and was discovered in the early fifties during a period that saw the rise of modernism in Europe. Peter Barry categorized it as post-modernism in his book *Beginning Theory*. The psychoanalytic perspective in the same book (with its roots in the theories of Sigmund Freud), also applies to the protagonist's desire to meet Godot. Although sometimes the tramps, especially Estragon, forgets their intention as Estragon often says "Let's go", Vladimir reminds him "We can't", Estragon asking "Why not", Vladimir replies "We're waiting for Godot" (*Waiting for Godot*, 10), they always return to the same subject, or in Freud's words "There is always a return of the repressed" (*Beginning Theory*, 100).

Throughout the play the role of time plays a major part and therefore the question of whether time controls the protagonists or the protagonists control time will be explored. Angela Hotaling points out, "The waiting is the hardest part", for the tramps "Not only is the waiting difficult, but figuring out what to do while waiting is difficult" (3-4).

The essay will analyse how Beckett uses absurdity to play around with the concepts of time, space, the unknown and uncertainty. The essay will also explore the themes of words, memory, waiting and hope. The entire plot centres on two protagonists and their waiting for the mysterious character named Godot. Why is he an important figure for the

protagonists, why does he not appear, and why are they waiting; all these questions are unknown and uncertain. The men's future, the travellers, the messenger, and the play's setting, plot, theme and background history is not revealed. Therefore, the play opens without any details for the audience, and it continues with a lack of information, without reaching any climax, ending at the same point it starts (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 21-23).

Chapter One: The Use of Time in *Waiting for Godot*

The dictionary definition of ‘absurd’ is ‘something that is completely stupid and unreasonable’. In a musical context it means “out of harmony” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 23). However, the definition ‘absurd’ derives into the literature from the mid-twentieth-century-essay *Myth of Sisyphus* by the French author and philosopher Albert Camus. In 1962 Martin Esslin wrote his book on the topic, entitled simply *The Theatre of the Absurd*. In this book Esslin mentions, the Romanian and French playwrights Eugène Ionesco’s definition for the ‘absurd’:

Absurd 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 (23).

Waiting for Godot is a story of ‘time’ written in the form of ‘absurd’, set during two consecutive days. The two main characters are tramps awaiting Godot’s arrival. Nevertheless, Godot’s continual absence wastes time in the lives of the tramps by making them living puppets in the world of the absurd, therefore they simply “Let it go to waste” (52), instead of finding an appropriate way to spend it. Beckett’s intention in creating these characters may have been to make them the victims of time, pointing out that we cannot stop time, suggesting that we live in the present moment with what we have, instead of waiting for better lives or for what we do not have. Anthony Chadwick refers to this in his article “Waiting for Godot”:

We seem to have a choice between waiting for one “better” thing after another or simply living with what we have. Both past and future are illusions, and seen under this aspect, we begin to taste the notion of eternity.

He says that the concept of a past and future is an illusion, and yet the play seems to be only set in the “present”. However, the present does not seem to have a fixed beginning or end and the play seems to hold its audience in a kind of limbo. It would seem that we cannot control time, and the senselessness of time suggests that it is pointless to attempt to stop its passage. Time passes, we age, become sick, and one day we eventually die; the truth is that time stops us. Therefore, no matter how hard we try to succeed in our lives, all our achievements are buried with us as time survives unchanged “In an instant all will vanish and we’ll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness” (52). A possible solution to this would be the path to eternity; which could be represented by Godot. This idea of “eternity”, an escape from death, is commented on by Anthony Chadwick who says “Death as a final ending, as a final silence, is absent from the play”. Furthermore, this suggests that if the tramps intention is to find the way to eternity through Godot, and if they are certain that Godot is able to guide them, it would be advisable to invest their time in that hope. In reality, it proves to be the most absurd investment; a whole life spent waiting for someone mysterious to come and rescue them.

The above argument proves that the tramps do not live in the present moment, and instead of enjoying the present time, they are waiting. They are excited that Godot will come along after some time and “Will miraculously save the situation” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 50). As Vladimir says “To-morrow everything will be better” (34), because the boy said to them “Godot was sure to come to-morrow” (34). Time could be identified as another major character in the play, since the tramps have nothing else to do in their lives but wait for Godot. In fact, the idea behind the waiting is that letting time pass on its own, instead of using it, is harmless. Indeed, if we do not like the present moment, the only thing we have to do is wait. For example if we do not like the winter time then we only have to wait for summer, and as we are waiting, we can look forward to it by fantasizing what a wonderful summer it will be.

The tramps’ excitement to meet the mysterious Godot may be a representation of man’s desire to fill the time between birth and death with something meaningful. This period of time often could be a continuation of endless hope which connects the beginning,

birth, to the end, death. In *Waiting for Godot* it seems that the tramps' hope is Godot; they continue their lives with that hope of meeting Godot, because they believe that they "Will be saved" (60). However, if they did not have the hope of meeting Godot they may already have taken the action of suicide as Angela Hotaling points out "The only options that seems available to the men are waiting or suicide" (4). Meanwhile, as the tramps are waiting for Godot, they try to find something to do in order to pass the time. The suggestion of suicide is tragic and yet the audience receives it as a comic one:

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!

Estragon: (*highly excited*). An erection! (12).

On one hand, in his play, Beckett may use humour as a vehicle to explain and capture the attention of audience, helping man understand the importance of time in his own existence. On the other hand, Gylfi Kristinsson pointed out in his thesis that it could be Beckett's way of sugaring the pill for a subject which is rather boring, harsh and bitter (*Waiting for the Absurd: An Analysis of the Absurd in Two Works by Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard*,12). On the one hand, this is a clever way to bring humour into the play through outright absurdity. On the other hand, it is meaningless, nonsensical and absurd to hang oneself in order to pass the time. However, the tramps do not hang themselves and they continue their journey, coming again the next day with the same hope despite nothing significant happening. The escape from suicide is mentioned by Albert Camus "Since life had lost all meaning, man should not seek escape in suicide" (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 23). The same concept is discussed by Angela Hotaling, she mentions in her essay that

suicide could be thought of as the ultimate conclusion to a meaningless life; when man cannot find meaning for his existence then his life becomes absurd, and that state of absurd is what Camus calls “philosophical suicide”. As she insists;

Camus’ concept of philosophical suicide is when by claiming that life is meaningless, one attempts to find meaning amidst the meaninglessness. After finding life meaningless, one attempt to escape it, however, Camus claims that to escape the absurdity of existence is philosophical suicide. (4-5).

The tramps hope that Godot will be the saviour to bring comfort into their lives. Estragon asks “If he comes?” Vladimir replies “We’ll be saved” (60). However, after deciding against the idea of suicide they select the act of waiting. In the very first sentence of the play, Estragon states “Nothing to be done” (7), concluding with the idea that the tramps may want to spend their time doing nothing. This becomes certain when Vladimir insists “I’m beginning to come round to that opinion” (7), and throughout the play they come back to the same conclusion, “Nothing to be done”. During the second act, when they try to remember how they spent yesterday, Estragon’s memories for yesterday and the last fifty years of their lives awaken:

Oh...this and that I suppose, nothing in particular. (*With assurance.*) Yes, now I remember, yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That’s been going on now for half a century (42).

It comes to light that they have wasted “half a century” (42) by repeating the action of waiting, and it seems that there is nothing much left to try as Vladimir says “We’ve nothing more to do here” with Estragon insisting “Nor anywhere else” (34), except waiting for Godot’s arrival. Estragon insists, “In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent” (40), to distract the silence, and break the discomfort of

silence between two people by feeling their existence; they tell stories, think, sing, dance, eat, fall asleep, converse, and exercise, because “It’ll pass time” (9).

It seems that the tramps’ idea of wasting their time on these ceaseless activities is utterly irresponsible compared to what we are supposed to do in reality. Therefore, the audience doubts whether the tramps are aware of their time, and the way they spend it. Vladimir’s consciousness comes to light in his dialogues, “We wait. We are bored. No, don’t protest, we are bored to death” (52). That is why they choose to wait for Godot, because it wastes their time, more coherently, “A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste” (52). This suggests an awareness for their time and meaningless routine as Beckett concluded in his study of Marcel Proust “Habit and routine were the cancer of time” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 33).

Time has an important role in the play because it seems to highlight the idea that the present moment has already become part of history: that time does not regenerate. When Estragon complains “Nothing to be done” (7), Vladimir insists “Be reasonable, you haven’t yet tried everything” (7), and he is disappointed by Estragon’s forgetful memory: Estragon does not have memory for the past events, he explains himself “That’s the way I am. Either I forget immediately or I never forget” (39). Vladimir insisting:

You’d be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it...it’s too much for one man. We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties (7).

Undoubtedly, it proves that the tramps have no sense of time or they may not be as concerned with time as we are. They talk about the nineties as being a million years ago as mentioned above from the words by Vladimir “We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties” (7). Similarly the play itself has no time setting, because the play has been written in the fifties, but they talk about the nineties. So the question of who is right,

either the characters or the setting, certainly has no answer because none can be proven right. Similarly, the tramps are uncertain of the day that they were to wait for Godot:

Estragon: You're sure it was this evening?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: That we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said Saturday. (*Pause*) I think.

Estragon: You think...But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? It is not rather Saturday? Or Monday? Or Friday? ...Or Thursday? (10-11).

Angela Hotaling points out "Not only is the waiting difficult, but figuring out what to do while waiting is difficult" (4). The tramps do not seem to consider their use of time and doing something that will make a significant change in their lives. At the end of the second act, somehow the tramps are capable of spending time without the expected outcome of Godot's arrival. So, twice in the play, two days in a row, nothing significant happens. It seems to suggest that the circle of coming and going is the only choice in the tramps' time, and "waiting" is an inevitable product of this circle.

The play suggests that "waiting" is the only choice the tramps have if they want to continue their lives "The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting". Esslin points out "Waiting is an essential characteristic of the human condition". All our lifetime is an endless wait for something, and Godot simply seems to represent that object of our waiting. We wait for "an event, a thing, a person, death". If we are active, we hardly remember the passage of time, then the time flies but if we are inactive, perhaps waiting, "We are confronted with the action of time itself" (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 50). Beckett points out in his *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*:

There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us...Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us heavy and dangerous... The flow of

time confronts us with the basic problem of being-the problem of the nature of the self, which, being subject to constant change in time, is in constant flux and therefore ever outside our grasp (2-3).

Similarly, in *Waiting for Godot* the tramps are merely passively waiting. They are confronted with the action of time itself; therefore, all the ceaseless activities, perhaps absurdist activities, they engage in is to waste time, which is an essential characteristic of the human condition as Esslin points out:

Waiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is in itself an illusion. The ceaseless activity of time is self-defeating, purposeless, and therefore null and void (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 52).

The theme of “Waiting as an essential characteristic of the human condition” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 50), is a statement that becomes clearer among the confusion and disappointment of the play; the tramps are waiting for Godot, just as Vladimir says, “In this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come” (51). Their waiting functions as an absurd parallel to our real lives, as we wait our whole lives to be happy for something we do not have instead of being happy with what we have. Sometimes we wonder if waiting is a habit because waiting is tied with hope, and there is no human existence without hope. Indeed in our lives we have rational and practical hopes which may be fulfilled one day, unlike the tramps, who seem to have irrational hopes waiting for the mysterious Godot to come and to be “saved” (60). Their hope reflects irresponsibility for themselves as Vladimir says, “No further need to worry” then Estragon says “Simply wait”, and Vladimir replies “We’re used to it” (25). It seems the tramps are fully confident of their meeting with Godot, although we do not see any hope for his arrival. Most probably the tramps are not waiting to meet Godot, but waiting to wait for him. So the “waiting” represents a common theme both in absurdity as well as in reality, as we continue waiting until we are satisfied, even though in reality what we are looking for may never happen. Hence, it seems life is waiting, and all these activities happen while we are waiting. Godot seems to be the only hope in the lives of the tramps, who have no existence without the hope for Godot, therefore their future depends on that hope because the tramps truly believe

that Godot can rescue them from their hardship and discomfort. Angela Hotaling's brings the same idea of the tramps hope on Godot, goes on to explain it as such:

The characters Vladimir and Estragon anxiously wait for Godot to come. Their lives are spent waiting. They think that when Godot finally comes, they will be fulfilled or something. By, what? Godot will bring purpose and meaning to Estragon and Vladimir's life, and nothing else seems to have the ability to do this (11-12).

Although Godot does not appear in the play, they make the uncertain assumption that there might be some hope in their existence, which is why they do not give up waiting for him. This means that the rest of their lives will probably not have any significant events happening, except waiting for him:

Estragon: And If he doesn't come?

Vladimir: We'll come back to-morrow.

Estragon: And the day after to-morrow.

Vladimir: Possibly.

Estragon: And so on.

Vladimir: The point is.

Estragon: Until he comes (10).

The tramps hope to meet Godot continues their desire to fight for their lives as Vladimir says, "Let's wait and see what he (Godot) says...I'm curious to hear what he has to offer" (12).

Chapter Two: The Use of Space in *Waiting for Godot*

It is sufficient to start with a short introduction to Beckett's scenery, since almost all his works are completely different from what we use in the theatre as well as in reality. Most of his plays show no objects at all such as *Footfalls*, *Come and Go* and *Play*, and some have only a tree, a chair or few objects including *Act Without Words I*, *Act Without Words II*, *Rockaby*, *Krap's Last Tape*. According to Martin Esslin, Beckett may have used simple, unusual and uncommon scenery in his works to emphasize the difference between his plays and conventional ones, which is another reason that his works are categorized in the genre of the absurd (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 21-22). His stage manifests with the characterization of strangeness, unusualness, emptiness and untidiness, with characters who are "tramps, wanderers, and that all are lonely" (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 33). Instead of using the materialized, sophisticated environment he uses a dark, gloomy, small and empty stage in most of his plays including *Footfalls*, *Rockaby*, *Come and Go*, *Play*, *Act Without Words I* and *II*. From Esslin's citation it can be understood that the stage often gives the audience information about the characters, such as their personality and their background history. This might be the reason that Beckett used simple and desolate scenery in his stage background. Angela Hotaling also insists in her essay on *Waiting for Godot* "The exact location is unknown and it appears that the characters are placed in some 'distant region' that could be anywhere" (1).

In *Waiting for Godot* a space without identification of its background, either materially or culturally, is created or applies to the world in general. This allows the audience to focus on the dialogue itself rather than the scenery. The audience is presented with a desolate, unfamiliar and strange space where almost nothing exists. Nothing noticeably changes in the appearance of the stage, except for few leaves growing on the tree in the second day of the second act.

The tree is the only object that exists in the middle of emptiness. Interestingly, the first astonishing absurdist element, the tree, seems struggling to survive with the tramps,

and functions as everything that the tramps have except the clothing that they are wearing. Yet it seems the tree means nothing for them since they take nothing from it to affect their current circumstances. The tramps' attention to the tree is repeated in the play:

Estragon: What is it?

Vladimir: I don't know. A willow.

Estragon: Where are the leaves?

Vladimir: It must be dead (10).

At the end of the second act, they mention the tree for the last time:

Vladimir: Everything's dead but the tree.

Estragon: (*looking at the tree*). What is it?

Vladimir: It's the tree (59).

Keeping only a tree without any other objects seems to be Beckett's attempt to highlight characters and ongoing events on the stage, because multiple objects on the stage distract the action and the intended message. The tree may symbolise many possibilities, such as death, survival, change, and life. The tree which has no leaves or fruit could be a representation of lifelessness and death, although it is surviving throughout the harsh circumstances; likewise the tree in the winter time looks pale and dead. Eventually that tree slowly begins to change, growing leaves, and perhaps regaining life. Symbolictionary. net, one of symbolic meaning of the tree is "The appearance of death in the winter- losing their leaves, only to sprout new growth with the return of spring. This aspect makes the tree a symbol of resurrection".

Symbolictionary. net also suggests that the tree could symbolise the connection between life and death, "Egyptian's Holy Sycamore stood on the threshold of life and

death, connecting the worlds”. In the play this idea reflects the tramps who struggle between waiting and suicide, often considering the idea of suicide, but they come back to the same point to wait.

Although, there is no change in the plot on the second act, the space changes by growing few leaves. The tree’s awakening at the second day with few leaves may symbolise hope for tomorrow, which in the tramps’ case is Godot. However, empty space may represent the empty souls of the tramps waiting to be filled by Godot.

Although the tramps talk about the tree, they seem uninterested in their location, perhaps because they think that the place does not make any difference when the situation is still the same for them. Although the impression we receive is that they have been waiting in the place for Godot’s arrival for “Fifty years maybe” (35), they are unfamiliar with the place that they were the day before, as they converse in act one:

Estragon: In my opinion we were here.

Vladimir: (*looking round*). You recognize the place?

Estragon: I didn’t say that.

Vladimir: Well?

Estragon: That makes no difference (10).

Similarly, in act two in the same circumstance, they doubt about the place they were the day before:

Estragon: And here where we are now?

Vladimir: Where else do you think? Do you not recognize the place?

Estragon: (*suddenly furious*). Recognize! What is there to recognize? (39).

Vladimir is aware of the place and its atmosphere, because he represents the leader among the two of them, constantly insisting that they fulfil their intention to successfully meet Godot by staying in the same place. He also “remembers past events” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 48), although he often doubts his memory. His friend Estragon represents the weaker among the two of them because he has no memory at all and therefore he has to depend on Vladimir. Estragon “tends to forget”, past events “as soon as they have happened” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 48), almost everything including where he spent yesterday evening with Vladimir. Therefore, although it seems logical to say he forgot the place, he is frustrated by Vladimir’s question, “Do you not recognize the place?” (39). His answer makes the miserable circumstances of his life and its living condition clearer:

(Suddenly furious). Recognize! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I’ve crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery! *(Looking wildly about him)* Look at this muckheap! I’ve never stirred from it! (39).

In such a situation scenery does not help him. He is concerned about his basic living condition, which is also the reason that he waits for Godot: to live comfortably. Hence, he pays no attention to scenery, when he has nothing to eat, no place to sleep, and no suitable shoes for feet, it is pointless to talk to him about scenery.

The space in the play can also be seen as eternity. According to Anthony Chadwick’s religious point of view “Both past and future are illusions, and seen under this aspect, we begin to taste the notion of eternity”. The distance between the world the tramps are trapped in and the distance from the tramps to Godot or the place where they can enjoy comfortable lives could be eternity. They are certainly not happy about the present condition of their lives; still, they are not capable of changing their current circumstances for better ones instead of wasting time for Godot. They hope that perhaps he will bring the happiness and prosperity into their lives, as Angela Hotaling insists “Godot will bring purpose and meaning to Estagon’s and Vladimir’s life” (12). It seems like they are tired of

trying on the earth as Estragon complains “I’ve tried everything” (44), and that they have given up on fighting for life; hence, the play suggests, that they are waiting to end their hardship on the earth and start it in a heavenly place to succeed in their lives with the guidance of Godot; a place to accomplish everything they failed on the earth and find another space where everything exists. This idea is provided when Vladimir asks Estragon if he has ever read the Bible and his past memory reappears:

I remember the maps of the holy land. Coloured they were. Very pretty.
The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. **That’s where we’ll go, I used to say, that’s where we’ll go for our honeymoon. We’ll swim. We’ll be happy** (8).

The space in the play could be interpreted in a number of ways. It could be hell; a reflection of the miserable situation the tramps are in. It could be limbo; waiting for Godot or it could be heaven; where they expect to live fully and happily ever after the meeting with Godot. Whatever the space happens to be, whether it is either visible or invisible, seems absurd in both aspects. We are to assume that the visible space is not the one we are used to seeing in conventional plays or in reality; the space in the play rather gives the impression of hollowness and emptiness.

Chapter Three: The Unknown and Uncertainty in *Waiting for Godot*

Waiting for Godot directs us to consider “What they mean” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 44), and its reflection to the world we live in. The tramps lack of knowledge about everything seems to be a metaphor for mankind’s lack of basic understanding of the universe and life itself. The creation of the entire universe is a big question mark, especially for those who do not want to believe Christianity’s religious theory that God created the world in seven days. Modern science fills the role of religion by trying to find reasonable answers for these questions, but the truth is that we know neither our creation nor end. We are born, live, educate ourselves, get married, become old, get sick and finally we die. The path of life cannot be accurately speculated and is completely unknown. Throughout the play we come across hundreds of questions that have no answers, consequently paralleling our lives because we never understand what, where and how life has brought us to the present moment. When Beckett was asked, he did not have any answers, but chose to leave the interpretation to the audience. As Esslin writes, “It was an expression, symbolic in order to avoid all personal error, by an author who expected each member of his audience to draw his own conclusions, make his own errors” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 20).

Another important issue in the play is the characters’ names. A person’s name is an important signifier of his existence, but the audience’s perception of the tramps is confused since they go by many names given to them by different people. The tramps go by names including Vladimir, Didi, Albert, Estragon, Gogo and Adam. There are no two people who call them the same name, as Estragon calls Vladimir, Didi, the boy calls him “Mr. Albert” (32), and Vladimir calls Estragon Gogo, but Estragon introduces himself to Pozzo as “Adam” (25). So who are they, and what are their identities? The audience is left in darkness about the identity of the protagonists whereupon the unknown becomes the most significant issue, as is typical in the genre of the absurd.

Among the little information given about everything we are supposed to assume that the tramps are waiting for Godot to come as Vladimir says “In this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come” (51). Nevertheless, the audience is

in a complete fog when it comes to Godot's identity. After such a long time waiting they still doubt the name of the person they have been expecting; Estragon asks "His name is Godot? Vladimir "I think so" (14). He does not reply "yes", but that he "thinks so", and that the person they have been waiting for such a long time might be "Godot" or someone else. Although the play manipulates the memory of its characters it seems that they certainly have not met Godot before:

Vladimir: Oh he's a ...he's a kind of acquaintance.

Estragon: Nothing of the kind, we hardly know him.

Vladimir: True...we don't know him very well...but all the same...

Estragon: Personally I wouldn't even know him if I saw him (16).

The entire plot flows with the hope of this mysterious character's arrival. Esslin says, when Beckett was asked by Alan Schneider (who was to direct the first American production of the play) who or what does it mean by Godot, the answer was "If I knew, I would have said so in the play" (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 44). Over the last sixty years critics have suggested that Godot is happiness, eternal life, love, death, silence, hope, time, God and many other things. Indeed, it seems Godot is everything, at the same time he is nothing. The identity of Godot is like listening to a blind man who is asked to describe an object or person. Esslin says that "It has been suggested that Godot is a weakened form of the word God" (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 49). However, the possibility that Godot might represent "God" is more often acknowledged than any other suggestion, according to what little description of Godot is given in the text and the two protagonists' excitement to meet him. They hope that "Godot will bring purpose and meaning" (Angela Hotaling, 12), into their lives. The impression we have of Godot may well be of God or of some sort of a prophet; he certainly seems a rather patriarchal figure, just as God is commonly conceived. The tramps are frightened about Godot's arrival as Esslin's observes in *The Theatre of the Absurd*:

(Godot's) coming is not a source of pure joy; it can also mean damnation. When Estragon, in the second act, believes Godot to be approaching, his first thought is, 'I'm accused'. And as Vladimir triumphantly exclaims, 'It's Godot! At last! Let's go and meet him', Estragon runs away shouting, 'I'm in hell!' (55).

Their fear manifested when Pozzo and Lucky approach the stage. They think one of the pair is Godot, suggesting religious awe because they are frightened and panic. Beckett's description for the event:

Estragon drops the carrot. They remain motionless, then together make a sudden rush towards the wings. Estragon stop halfway, runs back, picks up the carrot, stuffs in his pocket, runs to rejoin Vladimir. Huddled together, shoulders hunched, cringing away from the menace, they wait (15).

Similarly, the characteristics of Godot, based on what we hear from the boy who works for him, is only that Godot does "nothing", and that he has a "white beard" (59), demonstrates the image we have for God. However, Godot's mysteriousness makes the audience more and more curious and confused when attempting to predict who Godot is. Indeed, whoever Godot is seems to be an important part of the tramps' lives, perhaps the only hope of their lives. This is the reason that they waited so long and, according to Pozzo who claims that Godot has a vital power over the tramps. Pozzo asks when the tramps are going to leave:

What happens in this case to your appointment...with this Godet...Godot...Godin... anyhow you see who I mean, who has your future in his hands (19).

The possibility that Godot might represent "tomorrow" also could be reasonable way of interpreting who he is. It is obvious that the tramps in *Waiting for Godot* have been

waiting for Godot for a long time, even though the person “didn’t say for sure he’d come” (10). During the play, the audience witnesses neither any accomplishment, nor any loss within these two days, and we come to realize that somehow the tramps’ intention is to meet Godot, and waiting is the action they choose to accomplish their desire. They are hoping that if Godot does not come “today” then he may come “tomorrow”, but when tomorrow arrives it is the same hope once again, and it is again “tomorrow” which will never arrive. Therefore, the illusion of “tomorrow” reflects Godot, although the tramps may not be ready accept the fact that Godot is an illusion, and that he may only be a fictional figure in the mind of Vladimir. Angela Hotaling’s ideas on this are described in her article, “Godot will never come and the clarity that Godot might offer will never be reached” (11). However, this cannot be certain, as the tramps are going to be waiting tomorrow for Godot, he may appear tomorrow denying all our arguments.

However, since the audience is in the darkness about who Godot really is, the audience has many choices in interpreting him. The fact that there are so few details of one of the main characters makes it difficult for the audience to figure out what sort of character they are waiting for, and therefore they can apply their own hopes and expectations to Godot’s identity. These ideas can be seen Anthony Chadwick’s opinion for the possibilities that Godot might represent is:

He (Godot) is simultaneously whatever we think he is and not what we think he is: he is an absence, who can be interpreted at moments as God, death, the lord of the manor, a benefactor, even Pozzo. But Godot has a function rather than a meaning. He stands for what keeps us chained – to and in – existence. He is the unknowable that represents hope in an age when there is no hope, he is whatever fiction we want him to be – as long as he justifies our life-as-waiting.

Since the tramps have been waiting “Fifty years maybe” (35), it is understandable for the tramps to be frustrated after they have been manipulated for so many years. Throughout the play, although Vladimir persuades Estragon not to give up hope on Godot,

Godot's absence makes Vladimir frustrated, disappointed as well depressed when they do not attain what they are waiting for, he goes on:

Or for night to fall. (*Pause.*) We have kept our appointment and that's an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much? (51).

When their only hope fades away, they become hopeless and that may be the reason they came up with the idea of hanging themselves. Angela Hotaling brings the same idea that "Vladimir and Estragon, frustrated and discouraged contemplate not showing up and decide that when they arrive tomorrow they will bring a rope to hang themselves" (3).

The play seems to suggest that not waiting for Godot could result in some sort of punishment. When they do not see a shadow of Godot by the time night falls, they think of giving up on him, but they are afraid to disobey or disrespect Godot by not coming tomorrow. At the end of the second act Estragon asks, "If we dropped him? (*pause.*) If we dropped him?" Vladimir reply is "He'd punish us" (59). Therefore, they come tomorrow to wait for Godot as Estragon asks "You say we have to come back to-morrow? Vladimir "Yes" (60), is it because they "have" to, not because they "want" to? Angela Hotaling insists "Without Godot, the men have lost the meaning to their days. What is the "punishment" for dropping Godot? It is essentially the loss of meaning" (4).

Beckett has created the entire plot of the play based on the themes of unknown and uncertainty. Since the uncertainty takes part in unknown, the rest of the chapter is reserved for discussing the uncertainty in *Waiting for Godot*. Esslin sees the play as a production which produces the feelings of uncertainty:

In *Waiting for Godot*, the feeling of uncertainty it produces, the ebb and flow of this uncertainty-from the hope of discovering the identity of Godot to its repeated disappointment - are themselves the essence of the play. (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 45).

The play provides the idea that whatever is certain in this moment may turn out to be uncertain in the next moment, and as Estragon insists “No, nothing is certain” (35). In act one Pozzo and Lucky were healthy, but in act two, the following day, Pozzo has become blind and Lucky dumb. Pozzo, the master, was “rich, powerful, and certain of himself” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 48), the day before, but the following day he is as deflated as a balloon without air. In only one day both of their lives have changed. Pozzo’s dialogue in the second act is an excellent illustration of the uncertainty of life, which is, ironically, one of the few certainties in life:

Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time!...One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were bone, 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. (*He jerks the rope.*) On! (57).

The tramps idea of uncertainty in life proves the argument mentioned in chapter one, the tramps intention is to spend their time doing nothing. Unfortunately, the tramps do not try to use the time but “Let it to go to waste” (52), for unknown Godot, and it seems that they have come to the conclusion “Nothing to be done” (7,8,14), a phrase which is constantly repeated throughout the play. They are certain that whatever they achieve will last only for a short time, that in one second they will lose everything, and end up attaining nothing, stuck in the same place where they began. Hence, they simply do not try to change the present situation, because what is certain in this moment may turns out to be uncertain in the next as Vladimir says “Nothing is certain when you’re about” (10). So they may think that there is no reason to work, if the only certainty in life is uncertainty as Vladimir insists:

We wait. We are bored. No, don’t protest, we are bored to death, there’s no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to

waste. Come, let's get to work! In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness (52).

If we put this idea "In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness" (52), on a large scale then the events of the play remain the same and go round and round, like a circle as Vladimir says "Sometimes I feel it coming all the same" (8). The tramps disconsolate situation parallels our lives' circle of birth, survival, death and rebirth.

Angela Hotaling points out "Death seems so attractive" to the tramps "because it seems to end the confusion of existence" (7). The realist reflection throughout the absurdity in the play is Vladimir's philosophy for death, which is also the only certainty in our lives. We have no doubt that one day we will die, but what we do not know is when we will die, even though we know that it could be today or tomorrow. The play seems to raise the question of whether they are waiting for death, because he says "We are bored to death" (52), certainly they are not prepared for death. If someone is bored to death, he wants to continue living, which is what the tramps seem intent on doing. Although Angela Hotaling argues that death seems to attract the tramps, Anthony Chadwick points out Beckett's characters are not born for death, but they are born sinful, he explains it as such:

There is the abiding concern with death and dying, but death as an event is presented as desired but ultimately impossible, whereas dying as a process is shown to be our only sure reality. Beckett's characters are haunted by 'the sin of having been born', a sin which they can never expiate.

The two men's decision is quite different from the reality of the method that they choose for continuing to live when they are bored to death. They spend their time waiting for Godot, which does not make them happy and satisfied, but rather only makes them miserable and disconsolate. Nevertheless, they strongly believe in the uncertainty of life,

therefore, they do not attempt to make any changes, because everything they have done will vanish in an instant, resulting in no reward for their time and hard work.

The play challenges our conciseness, when uncertainty plays games with the memory of the characters throughout the play, making them doubt the little details they are given, including the tramps meeting with the travellers and the messenger, the place, the time and simply everything. In the second act, when Vladimir reminds Pozzo of their meeting yesterday, Pozzo denies it by having no memory of meeting anyone on the previous day:

Vladimir: And you are Pozzo?

Pozzo : Certainly I am Pozzo.

Vladimir: The same as yesterday?

Pozzo : yesterday?

Vladimir: We met yesterday. (*Silence*) Do you not remember?

Pozzo : I don't remember having met anyone yesterday. But to-morrow I won't remember having met anyone to-day. So don't count on me to enlighten you. (56-57).

Pozzo's claim, for he has no absolute memory regarding the meeting with the tramps yesterday, makes Vladimir question himself "would that be possible". He is disappointed for the world as it is "The air is full of our crisis" (58), when no one is certain of their memory, tomorrow and life itself. In this manner, everything is uncertain and you cannot believe your own eyes and ears. Vladimir questions himself about his own beliefs because he cannot believe Pozzo's claim for their meeting "That pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? probably. But in all that what truth will there be?" (58).

Estragon is uncertain about almost everything and he also has no memory of their meeting with the travellers the day before. When Vladimir tries to remind him, his only comment is “I don’t know” (43). Although, he remembers the bones and the kick, he cannot remember the people who gave them to him. Estragon’s forgetful mind may represent an easy method to escape from the consciousness of absurdity that life eventually becomes with Godot’s constant absence. Estragon’s unconsciousness regarding everything could draw into Peter Barry’s explanation about mind as he insists we try to push our difficulties into unconscious mind:

The underline assumption is that when some wish, fear, memory, or desire is difficult to face we may try to cope with it by repressing it, that is, elimination it from the conscious mind (*Beginning Theory*, 100).

Similarly, the boy also denies his meeting with the tramps. In act one Vladimir questions him, “I’ve seen you before, haven’t I?”, the boy replies, “I don’t know, Sir”, then Vladimir questions him again, “You don’t know me?”, the boy replies, “No Sir”, and Vladimir asks once more, “It wasn’t you came yesterday?”, the boy replies again, “No sir” (33), and the “yesterday” that they refer to is possibly the day before the play starts. However, it is uncertain whether the same boy or someone else has been delivering the message from Godot on all three days.

Vladimir is frustrated with memory manipulation by all these people that he meets. Therefore, at the end of the second act he “*violently*” tells the boy “You are sure you saw me, you won’t come and tell me to-morrow that you never saw me” (59). Although Vladimir remembers all these incidents, he may be uncertain of his consciousness, and doubt his own memory as he insists, “Extraordinary the tricks that memory plays!” (33), because everyone else denies his perception.

Throughout the uncertainty, Beckett presents a notion of the unconsciousness which acts as a prominent role upon our behaviour. Peter Barry insists we try to forget our difficulties by pressing them into our unconscious mind (*Beginning Theory*, 100). Similarly, the tramps also constantly forget Godot, possibly because they are frustrated with

him as Vladimir says “We have kept our appointment and that’s an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?” (51). Nevertheless, the tramps, especially Vladimir, constantly reminds him as Peter Barry says, although we pressed down our difficulties into the unconscious mind that memories are not completely erased there:

It remains alive in the unconscious, like radioactive matter buried beneath the ocean, and constantly seeks a way back into the conscious mind, always succeeding eventually”, as Freud said “there is always a return of the repressed (*Beginning Theory*, 100).

Vladimir’s “repression”¹ about Godot and the events including Pozzo and the boy who he met the day before, recalls his unconsciousness although he has no courage to accept this. He is unable to identify the distinction between his own conscious and unconscious mind, because his “conscious awareness” is forced out by the people (Estragon, Pozzo and the boy) who he has been surrounded (*Beginning Theory*, 96-97). However, all their memories are uncertain, including Vladimir’s because “The play itself remains the clearest and most concise statement of its meaning and message, precisely because its uncertainties and irreducible ambiguities are an essential element of its total impact” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 44-45)

¹ Repression is Sigmund Freud’s idea for forgetting or ignoring of unresolved conflicts.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have looked at some material particularly relevant to the themes of time, space, unknown and uncertainty in *Waiting for Godot*. The common opinion about the play is that the themes are highly appreciated. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett made use of the universal theme of “human condition, and man’s despair at being unable to find a meaning in existence” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 45), when confronting men’s desire to understand the meaning of life. Generally, men try to find the meaning of life by creating their own pattern based on their daily routine. If a man is not able to find his own pattern, then he will get lost in the world of confusion making it very difficult to find his way, while simultaneously fantasizing about the meaningful life that he has been expecting. *Waiting for Godot* is the story of two homeless men desperately seeking some meaning for their existence, and constantly hoping to meet someone called Godot who might be able to help them out of their current circumstances. In order to fulfil this hope, waiting is the pattern they create to represent the meaning of their lives, because they strongly believe that their lives will be fulfilled if they meet Godot. However, they would be hopelessly disappointed if they encounter a negative aspect from Godot. It seems that Godot is probably an ideal illusionary figure in the mind of Vladimir that could never ever exist in reality. Yet, the tramps make themselves believe that someday Godot will appear, and help their lives to be fruitful. Their situation may symbolize man’s desire to meet some unseen super-natural beings, such as Godot or some sort of prophet, with the hope of relieving their present difficulties. In their desire, their hopes and their lives become absurd, not only in the absence, but also in the presence of Godot. Thus the meaning of life generally, and specifically in *Waiting for Godot* can be interpreted as unknown, uncertain, mysterious and tragic.

However, the play sometime confuses us and causes us to wonder if the play really has any meaning, or if the pair Vladimir and Estragon were just playing games with useless words. In a postmodernism study, Peter Barry discusses Nealon’s literary analysis of the play, claiming that “Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett’s play, engage in ‘language games’ of this type (the type of the language which is ‘disappearance from the real’), but without

realizing their full significance”. So the postmodernists agree there is no “transcendent reality” behind those words and that, “They are actually self-validating, and provide us with the social identity we seek” Furthermore, Nealon says it is a play of the tramps’ words, there is no significant meaning in it “Waiting for legitimation of their society”, and Godot is from the beginning unnecessary (*Beginning Theory*, 92). Maybe he is correct maybe he is not, but the most important thing is to find out that Vladimir and Estragon represent us as Vladimir says “At this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not” (51).

The “tomorrow” which never arrives in reality keeps the tramps alive with the hope of meeting Godot. Nevertheless, we come to the conclusion that Godot is an illusion; he cannot exist in reality, but only in the mind of the tramps. Therefore, the truth is that they are “waiting for nothing” significantly similar to the title “*Waiting for Godot*”, thus time has no meaning in their lives because from their point of view time only brings difficulties into their lives. They do not see the opposite side, which is the beauty that life offers in the form of options, which come with time. These are often chosen at random and without our knowledge and can make us happy or sad. Hence, they may be frightened to take advantage of time, but this logic leads time to take advantage of them by controlling their lives. So the time in *Waiting for Godot* has been occupied absurdly throughout the last fifty years by bringing bizarre tragedies into the tramps lives.

Although the tree appears to be nothing but an absurdity because its appearance and lack of relation to the event, a few leaves shows the reincarnation of life on the second day in act two. The tree and its resurrection seem to be a symbol for the tramps, who circle around the concept of time.

The unknown seems an obvious theme not only *Waiting for Godot*, but also in Beckett’s other works, leading the audience into darkness since there are no answers for all the questions he brings up. The last part of his trilogy *The Unnamable* starts “Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving”. The word “I” is myself and who I am, and here he says I, am not a believer of myself and have no basic knowledge for

concept of living, consequently, “What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed?” (*Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 293), desperately seeks answers. Nevertheless, the fact is, “Where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know” (*Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 418). There, as Beckett seems to point out throughout his works, life is absurd and in such, the reality of living challenges the person differently according to his ability of viewing his pattern of routing; hence, life has no other option than continuing as he says “You must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (*Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, 418).

Beckett has created his play using the theme of uncertainty to point fingers toward us, and wakes us up from the dreams we have been dreaming for decades to ask us what is certain in our lives? The unknowable in the play consequently progress into the next level of uncertainty, proving the fact that everything changes in the world but change itself. Nevertheless, the tramps hold onto their lives, not allowing for significant changes because there will be no consequences since everything is connected to uncertainty; “Nothing is certain when you’re about” (10). All the progress of their hard work would vanish in a second and they would end up at the same point where they started, at the middle of nothingness; and this process, which is like an endless circle, manifests reincarnation. Perhaps, that may be the reason that the tramps, who do not want to struggle in life “No use struggling” (14), except wait for Godot, because they believe that they will be “saved” (60). This probably means that they will be able to live fully and happily ever after, when they meet Godot. So, the place where they want to be cannot be the earth because on earth there cannot be a life without suffering. Therefore, they may hope that they would be able to attain eternity with the guidance of Godot, which links to the Christian mindset on escaping reincarnation.

If Godot is an illusory figure in the mind of Vladimir and they are “waiting for nothing”, then the truth is that the entire plot is only waiting without anything significant happening, neither loss nor accomplishment. So the audience may wonder what would have happened if Beckett had titled the play as its true representation “Waiting for Nothing”. The play might not have been recognized as such remarkable work, either in the genre of absurd

because the title simply covers the entire plot in advance, or we would be expecting nothing to happen and therefore eliminate the hope of something happening, which motives both the main characters and all of humanity. The argument leads us to conclude that the entire plot is captured in one sentence, as Estragon says “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, It’s awful!” (27).

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