



‘Waiting for Godot’: A Modernist Inquiry into the Absurdist Postmodern

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Abstract— There has always been a wide scope for debate about whether the ‘Theatre of Absurd’ is a genre that leans more towards postmodernism or modernism, owing to ample examples from such Absurdist plays which equally portray both. *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett is a critically acclaimed work of Absurdist Literature, and although it was written in the Postmodernist era, it reflects ideas and elements that are at the cusp of modernism and postmodernism. Modernist writing shows a nostalgia for the past, laments the loss of a centre and is in a constant state of Modernist angst- ideas which this research paper aims to join and correlate with the incidents related to the Theatre of Absurd and Existentialism in *Waiting for Godot*. This in turn, facilitates arrival at an analytically fleshed out interpretation about post-war alienation, instability, and unpredictability that writers of such plays aimed to bring out through their literary works.

Keywords— *Absurd, Estragon, Modernism, Vladimir, Waiting for Godot.*



I. INTRODUCTION

In literary circles of discussion, the Absurdist genre or more specifically, the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ as Martin Esslin called it, is one that has opened up new vistas of knowledge and meaning making, by interestingly subverting traditional notions and tenets of drama. Although technically a Postmodern phenomenon, Absurdist literature encapsulates many modernist phenomena like inability to celebrate the loss of structures and a longing to get these ‘centres’ back, unlike Postmodernists who accept these losses with dignity. Samuel Beckett, an Irish playwright who is one of the key figures of the Theatre of Absurd, shows through his minimalistic writing style and use of circularity and repetition of dialogues in ‘Waiting For Godot’ this very intermingling of Absurdism and Modernism - one that gives this seemingly directionless play, an inherently deeper meaning.

Estragon lays down the very essence of the play with his opening statement - “Nothing to be done” (Beckett, 9). Modernist philosophy never gives us a full picture of the happenings in the play, rather providing feelings of anticipation for things that might never occur. Parallel to

this, Estragon’s failed attempts to remove his boots thus, draws attention to its own artifice - it doesn’t try to be accurate or replace representation with reality.

VLADIMIR : “We’re waiting for Godot.”

ESTRAGON : ...“And if he doesn’t come?”

VLADIMIR : “We’ll come back tomorrow.”

ESTRAGON : “And then the day after tomorrow....Until he comes” (Beckett, 14)

II. ANALYSIS

Waiting For Godot can be looked at as a Modernist play because it does not abandon the search for Godot under any circumstance. Godot may stand for the ultimate truth, the voice of god, or even the absence of sense. In this act of waiting, there is a Modernist nostalgia for the peace of mind or answers that were never found after the two world wars. Interestingly, the title of the play is in the present continuous tense. The play then, can also be looked at as not about ‘Godot’, but about ‘Waiting’. Waiting here does not imply passivity, neither does it completely define them. Vladimir and Estragon’s steady acceptance of Godot’s non-arrival

also brings in a Postmodernist element and points out to the audience how this is not a traditional play. Post Modernism glorifies disorder, disharmony and lack of a centre/coherence. Such writing has an attitude of acceptance of chaos and a feeling of skepticism towards structures and order.

On account of its publication in the early 1950s, *Waiting for Godot* is technically classified as a Post Modernist play. However, the profound sense of nostalgia for a truth that is ever elusive places it at the cusp of Modernist thought as well. The dialogues do not begin and end in a structured manner, hence there is a subversion of the notions of beginnings and endings. Ends and beginnings are intertwined in absurdist philosophy. The play is circular and non-structural in nature - It questions the capacity of language as an entity to represent reality. The binary between action and contemplation has been broken down by Beckett in *Waiting For Godot*, as we see how materiality is attributed to thought. Through negating, challenging and subverting all that it states, the play deconstructs the notion of truth and representation itself. The question is whether Godot, as an idea, is constituted by waiting itself. Can we only aspire towards Godot, or can we actually ever reach him? This assemblage of events that the reader weaves into a narrative proves the play to possess elements of both Existentialism and Absurdism, replete with a Modernist outlook of hope amidst hopelessness- that the centre can be eventually brought back.

"Vladimir is always the one who is strong willed in Waiting for Godot. Every time Estragon suggests leaving, Vladimir always restrains him with the same reason: because they have to wait for Godot." (Shanon) .

The quest for the lost ideal and wholesomeness that modernism entails can be juxtaposed with the anxious sense of impending doom that Vladimir and Estragon must endure - they must wait until in despair and at the end of hope. They are doomed to exist in this way. We enter a kind of timelessness and spacelessness in a symbolic realm with the two protagonists and a chaos of signifiers. There is a juxtaposition of the erotic instinct and the death instinct, and this image signifies the essence of absurdist philosophy. The character of the Boy in this play has been portrayed as one who provides no new information, but only confirms or negates the questions that he is asked. The Boy can also be looked at as the voice of their own unconscious or just a nudge which confirms something the protagonists had already been thinking of - an element that lends absurdity. The modernist audience feels that Godot can be a substitute for God, for it is Godot's absence that fills the play as well as the presence of all the other characters, further deepening the void. Godot can be seen as an invention of modernity or a structure that humans believed would add meaning to their

lives, e.g. Religion or Technology.

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre, The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold..." (Yeats *The Second Coming*).

Just like Yeats who has captured beautifully the essence of modernism, in his *The Second Coming*, in *Waiting for Godot* we have moments in the play when the protagonists suppose that they've heard Godot's voice while in reality they haven't. Godot thus stands for a crisis of faith - an illusion of a centre, so to say. He is the centre which eludes the characters in the play and can never be reached, but the play still remains modernist because the characters still believe in Godot as the absolute centre and are bound to the *idea* of Godot. One can argue that Godot is an absent centre and thus the play can be Postmodernist for Godot holds together the play just like an absent centre holds together ideas in Postmodernist theory. However, it is not so since here, Vladimir and Estragon do not take Godot as an 'absent' centre - they firmly believe in his presence and await his arrival.

Godot undermines the idea that enlightenment has to be necessarily a progressive journey from darkness towards light. There is an externalization of internal politics here. The beauty of this play which also rounds up as its absurdity is its portrayal of the fact that every single thing that is otherwise a usual practice in our daily lives, can be enacted on stage in front of an audience, similar to how Vladimir and Estragon enact 'Waiting'. It is a very modernist outlook towards life as well since these seemingly monotonous acts are made out to be active and not passively stagnant. There are many ways to fill nothingness and at every moment of despair, Vladimir and Estragon in the play make an active choice which is centred around their act of waiting for the idea or figure of Godot. On the other hand, the characters Lucky and Pozzo indicate to us readers the ideas of the Hegelian 'master-slave' dialectic, which applies to all other characters in the play as well. Through the outward signs of the rope and whip in Pozzo's hands, Pozzo appears to be the free man and the 'master' to the subservient Lucky, just like Godot appears to be the God-like, tyrannical, modernist idea who somehow still has an equally firm hold over Vladimir and Estragon as Pozzo does on Lucky. The appearance of Pozzo and Lucky on stage and the portrayal of their relationship then, can be seen as an outward manifestation of the very essence of the play that is burdening upon the two characters Vladimir and Estragon in their wait for a mirage - namely, Godot.

"VLADIMIR : '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. ...In an instant, all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness." (Beckett,81)

Existentialist plays deconstruct the metanarrative of life itself and our constant search for a meaning that we could assign to it. Where should we search for meanings if there is no transcendental signified though, as a modernist take suggests? The answer lies in a relentless search for meaning that one must try and derive from life itself. In that moment when there is no hope, or even an illusion of hope, one must not be overwhelmed by knowledge, but understand one's life objectively and look at it as it truly is. It is a moment of consciousness and happiness, not one of hopelessness. Meaninglessness is the essence of life - such is the modernist echo for hope amidst hopelessness which merges with the Existentialist philosophy to be heard loud and clear in *Waiting For Godot*.

"ESTRAGON : 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!'" (Beckett, 41)

The minimalist appearance of the stage as per the stage directions in the play, with little to no props throws light on the bare living conditions of humans during the war period, since the play mirrors a similar environment of bleak desolation and dystopia. To add further to the modernist 'angst' that *Waiting For Godot* focuses upon, we have Lucky's speech as a noteworthy instance in the play. Lucky, who was the muted slave and in a position of seeming subservience to Pozzo, has been seen as the unconscious - for it is when he speaks that the viewers are unable to make sense of his verbal explosion and we come across something that looks more absurd than the incidents that they have been witnessing up till now. Lucky then, can be psychoanalytically viewed as the repressed unconscious of a civilized society, much like Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Lucky's speech has no punctuation marks, and becomes a source of frustration among the audience due to the fact that the only chance given to this character in the play to voice his opinions leads to nothing fruitful but simply comes out as a series of stream-of-consciousness utterances. Now, if we take Lucky's speech to be devoid of sense, the converse must be true - the other characters' speech depicts sense. However, we have seen through the circularity of dialogues and the inherent alienation of language from reality in a Modernist perspective, that this is far from the truth. Hence, if the other characters' speech is not a true marker of sensible speech, then the claim for Lucky's speech to be 'devoid of sense' stands baseless. When the unconscious appears by itself in its truest sense, it questions, subverts and ruptures our hitherto acknowledged ideas of the Self.

With Lucky and Pozzo, the power position changes. Now we see a metatheatrical element with Vladimir and Estragon

becoming the audience. However as Jean-Paul Sartre rightly believes, in life, there can be illusions of absolute bondage but it does not necessarily imply passivity, as we see in the case of Lucky, who 'chooses' to speak. The realist view of language positions it as a medium to communicate and convey an accurate picture of reality. However, modernists view language as alienated from reality. For them, language is inherently unstable and reflects its own fragmented form. The characters in the play do not have the privilege to reflect on their reality and are hence, alienated from it. Acceptance of things as they are, again a very postmodernist aspect can be subverted thus by a modernist outlook on life - by raising one's voice and keeping one's faith and hope alive till the very end, as the characters point out to us in the play.

III. CONCLUSION

To modernists, hope becomes something illusory but still all pervasive - an incessant, continuous play of illusion. The truth in such cases then cannot be outwardly located, rather it becomes the search for truth itself that takes precedence over the actual meaning of life. The characters in the play *Waiting for Godot* embody Albert Camus' notion of *The Myth Of Sisyphus* in every action and dialogue - they find ways to engage in activity, whether or not meaningful, while waiting. Through the use of characters like Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, Beckett truly gives his audience a taste of absurdism, all the while keeping in line with the modernist reverberations that would still continue to be heard in a lot of Postmodernist works of literature in the future.

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