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Abstract

Waiting for Godot is a wonderfully suggestive and subtle play where Samuel Beckett, with his creative genius, projects the stark reality of life. His portrayal of life, in all its varied colours and perspectives, helps in knowing the complex and intertwined essence of life. With his artistic vision, he has charted the 'very plight of the human condition'. Beckett has shown the predicament of human beings who search for certainty within a world of uncertainty, doubt, insecurity, and chance. This paper explores how Beckett constructs a world plagued by uncertainty and how this metaphorically conveys the human condition capturing the infamous post-war existential crisis. Beckett's delineation of the dilemma of worldly life where 'man flounders about in a purposeless void' shall also be examined.

Keywords: *Uncertainty, existence, faith, absurdity, perspective, external, normal.*

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Samuel Beckett added an insightful dimension to the idea that life is an ambiguous, uncertain, futile cycle of time within which humans cling hopelessly to the slightest flicker of hope. He propounded this perspective through his celebrated play *Waiting for Godot* originally published in French in 1952. This play explored a static situation instead of telling a story about the characters- the two old tramps Vladimir and Estragon. In the opening act, they can be seen standing under a bare tree, waiting for Godot- who never arrives. Godot, perhaps, stands for some external agency that every common man looks up to for establishing himself in the world full of misery, chance, doubt, uncertainty and insecurity. Vladimir and Estragon, as common men, escape from the uncertainty of life by living in a make- believe world of their own in which they recoil from the hostile outside world. They oscillate between depression and elation, certainty and uncertainty, ambiguity and clarity. When obsessed, they talk of abandoning the vigil and leave the scene. Next moment, they resume waiting for Godot with renewed enthusiasm. But it is in the act of waiting that they experience the flow of time. Beckett seems to suggest that one's salvation lies in giving up expectation, remaining content and facing the reality. The anxiety of uncertainty will vanish if we come out of the web of our illusions. Only then can we lead an authentic existence.

The production of *Waiting for Godot* was regarded by some critics as a great landmark in the history of English theatre, although others looked at it as one more example of literary anarchy of the twentieth century. It is an unconventional play since there is no narrative sequence but it is wonderfully suggestive and subtle. Beckett has been praised for his artistic vision with which he has charted the "very plight of the human condition". Martin Esslin says that it is the peculiar richness of the play *Waiting for Godot* that it opens vistas on so many different perspectives. It is open to philosophical, religious and psychological interpretations, yet above all, Esslin considers it as "a poem on time, evanescence and the mysteriousness of existence, the paradox of change and stability, necessity and absurdity" (TA 61-62). It is ironical, Beckett shows that human beings are searching for certainty in an uncertain world and hoping against hope; expecting against the unexpected. Long back in the history of thoughts, skeptics had declared that there was nothing certain, fixed and permanent. All that a man can hope for by way of certainty is probability. Things might happen the way they happened but even in the laws of physical science, it is not certain that the sun would rise tomorrow. Beckett, in the concerned play, shows this absurdity of the world at large through the central characters' endless waiting for Godot even when they are not sure about his identity. The play explores a static situation:

Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful (WFG 41).

In the opening situation at the beginning of Act I, two old tramps Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for Godot on a country road by a bare tree. At the end of the same act, they are informed that Godot, with whom they had an appointment, would not come, but that he would surely come the following day. Act II repeats precisely the same pattern. The same boy arrives and delivers the same message at the end of the Act. Thus the play adds on the note of uncertainty:-

Estragon : Shall we go?
Vladimir : Yes, let's go?
 (They do not move)

Act II ends with the same dialogue, but spoken by the same characters in reversed order. This shows the only significant change, complete with the change in the tree. The sequence of events and the dialogue in each act are different. Each time the two tramps encounter another pair of characters, Pozzo and Lucky, master and slave, under different circumstances; in each act Vladimir and Estragon attempt suicide and fail, for different reasons, but these variations merely serve to emphasize the sameness of the uncertain, purposeless situation. These two characters want to seek salvation through Godot whose identity is uncertain, as is his promise and even his means of helping them. They have been coming to the place so often but they are not sure whether they are standing at the right place or not. Vladimir is more practical than Estragon while Estragon is more confused than Vladimir. He asks Vladimir "You're sure it was here?" (WFG 64). They go on discussing about the place and Godot and Estragon's confused bubbling make Vladimir angry and he says, "Nothing is certain when you're about" (WFG 69). He has to remind Estragon again and again that they are waiting for Godot. Vladimir, as Eugene Webb says, "... is a name that suggests the aspirations of intellect to master the universe by reducing it to knowledge" (PSB 3).

Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot but they are not sure about the identity of Godot and their appointment with him is by no means certain. Vladimir himself is not quite sure what they asked Godot to do for them. "It was nothing very definite... kind of prayer a vague supplication and what had Godot promised them? ... that he would see...that he would think it over ..." (WFG 20). Michael Robinson suggests "Godot's existence is the result of man's profound need for meaning. When man is shown to be incapable of accepting his own significance in a slowly dying world, and of realizing that his suffering is meaningless, Godot is the necessary unknown at the end of the series who is introduced to justify existence by the rational lead into the dark" (LSD 34). It has been suggested that Godot is a weakened form

of the word “God” a diminutive formed on the analogy of *Piere-Pierrot*, *Charles-Charlot*.

Godot here stands for some external agency man is looking for establishing him in the world of misery, chance, doubt, uncertainty and insecurity. He may be a mythical or supernatural invention. Throughout our lives, one waits for something and Godot simply represents the object of waiting-an event, a thing, a person, death. For A. Alvarez Godot is “...just another diminutive God like all the other little Gods- some divine, some political, some intellectual, some personal for whom men wait, hopefully and in fact, to solve their problems and bring point to their pointless lives” (SB 38). The play shows the characters hovering between the fixed and unfixed. They respond under mistaken identities. Pozzo responds to Estragan’s call: ‘Abel! Abel! Vladimir is called Mr. Abert and he responds. Pozzo asks Estragan’s name he replies ‘Adam’. The ambiguity and doubt pervade the whole play. I.K. Masih suggests that Vladimir and Estragan in waiting and while employing themselves in various types of word-games, have schizophrenic traits. They live in a make-believe world of their own and recoil from the normal outside world. When obsessed, Vladimir and Estragan talk of abandoning the vigil and leave the scene. Next moment, they resume waiting for Godot with renewed enthusiasm. But it is in the act of waiting that they experience the flow of time.

Beckett points out in the analysis of Proust that every day, every hour the flow of time changes man’s self which is in constant flux and outside his grip. Martin Esslin says in this connection that being subjected to this process of time flowing through us and changing us in doing so, we are at no single moment in our lives identical with our selves. Beckett’s play seems to suggest that search for certainty, support, stability and hoping for these things is futile. It’s an illusion. Man’s changing self makes us disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment. We identify attainment as the identification of the subject with the object of desire. If Godot is the object of Vladimir and Estragan’s hope, he seems naturally beyond their reach. It is significant that the boy who acts as the ‘go-between’ fails to recognise them from day to day. Though the boy who appears in the second act is the same boy as the one in the first act, yet the boy denies that he has ever seen the tramps before and insists that it is the first time he has acted as Godot’s messenger. As the boy leaves, Vladimir tries to impress it upon him: “You’re sure you saw me, eh, you won’t come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me before” (WFG 84). The boy, however, does not reply. Can we ever be sure and certain that the human beings we meet are the same today as they were yesterday? When Pozzo and Lucky first appear, neither Vladimir nor Estragan seems to recognise them; Estragan

even takes Pozzo for 'Godot'. But after they have gone, Vladimir comments that they've changed since their last appearance. Estragan insists that he didn't know them. Thus man is deceived by everyday appearances and hence is burdened by uncertainty.

Vladimir and Estragan want to seek salvation but it is uncertain whether their hope for salvation will be fulfilled or not, a grace will be fortuitously bestowed upon them or not. Vladimir states this theme right at the beginning: "One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage" (WFG 5). Later he enlarges on the subject "Two thieves, one is supposed to have been saved and the other damned. And yet how is it that of the four evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved? The four of them were there or thereabout and only one speaks of a thief being saved of the other three two don't mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him" (WFG 11). There is a fifty-fifty chance, but as only one out of four witnesses reports it, the odds are considerably reduced. But as Vladimir points out, it is a curious fact that everybody seems to believe that one witness. "It's the only version they know" (WFG 12). Estragan, whose attitude has been one of skepticism throughout, merely comments, 'people are bloody ignorant apes'. Thus Estragan and Vladimir are taking chances. One out of the two thieves made hostile remarks; he was damned. One happened to contradict that hostile remark; he was saved. How easily could the roles have been reversed! These were chance exclamations uttered at a moment of supreme suffering and stress. As Pozzo says about Lucky's remark, "I might easily have been in his shoes and he in mine. If chance had not willed it otherwise. And then our shoes might fit us one day and not the next" (WFG 31). Godot himself is unpredictable in bestowing kindness and punishment. The boy who is his messenger, minds the goats and Godot treats him well. But the boy's brother, who minds the sheep, is beaten by Godot. "And why doesn't he beat you?" asks Vladimir. "I don't know, sir" (WFG 54). There is no rationale behind why Godot beats the minder of the sheep and cherishes the minder of the goats. If Godot's kindness is bestowed fortuitously, it can also mean damnation. Thus chance may lead to any end. One day a man sleeps well and next day he finds himself blind just as Pozzo becomes blind one day and hereby dumb. This incident, mentioned in ACT II, highlights the theme of the unpredictability and abruptness of human suffering and change, a central motif in the play.

Beckett shows the absurdity of human situation when Vladimir and Estragan wait for Godot to come despite the fact that they are being deceived daily in their expectations. Whether he would come, is doubtful. Thus these characters are hoping against hope. They have, to put in the words of Larkin, developed a bad habit of

expectancy. Their act of waiting has been shown as essentially absurd as there is constant stress in the play on the uncertainty of the appointment with Godot. Godot's unreliability and irrationality, and the repeated demonstration of the futility of the hopes are pinned on him. The hope that Godot might come is an illusion that saves Vladimir and Estragan from facing the harsh human condition of fully conscious awareness. When at the end of the play, Vladimir is about to realize that he has been dreaming and must wake up and face the world as it is, Godot's messenger arrives and rekindles his hopes plunging him back into the passivity of illusion. Beckett seems to suggest that one's salvation lies in stopping to expect, to hope, to wish things to happen; in remaining content in uncertainty, insecurities and to face the reality. The anxiety of uncertainty will vanish if we come out of the web of our illusions in order to lead an authentic existence.

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