

Conference Paper

Social Condition Reflected in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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ORCID:Fita Chyntia: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5301-9253>**Abstract**

This paper discusses the absurd character types that exist in Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky are the four contradictory yet dependent characters in the play. The absurd characters reflect the social condition of the time, post – World War II. The characters are pictured waiting for the completion of the war in the hope that it will come. Their fate can be changed instantly, the same as the state of war. Besides discussing the characters in the drama, this paper also discusses the characteristics of the language used by the characters. The language used is unreasonable, not in accordance with what is said or how they act; it is called “verbal nonsense”. The interpretations of the dialogue among the characters in the play will give a better picture of each character and how they can be related to societal conditions.

Keywords: Theater of Absurd, Character Types, Post-War, Social Condition.

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1. Introduction

Literature is an honest mirror of the world because it comes from people who live in the period and is the expression of their mind and emotion, conscious or unconscious. Literature is identical with the words: the expression of human feeling, imaginative process and creativity. People may express their mind and emotion through many ways and literature expresses them through words. According to Wellek and Warren “literature is said to be creative, an art, what an author has produced.” (Wellek, 1971: What makes a literary works an art is the creativity in the author and where an art needs interpretation. Meanwhile, Taylor in his book *Understanding the Element of Literature* (1981:13) states that “Literature is often said to be school of life in that authors tend to comment on the conduct of the society and of individuals in society.” This definition seemingly tends to view literature from its nature in case of the relationship between individual and society. Individual and society, doubtlessly, are material which has two sides, so they cannot be separated. Individual learns from society and society itself is established by individuals.

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According to Taylor's definition above, literature can be said as the medium to comment about the conduct of society and also the conduct of individuals in society.

Drama has several movements; one of the movements is theater of absurd. Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961: xviii) states that "Absurd originally means 'out of harmony', in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: "out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical". This statement indicates that 'absurd' deals with something out of harmony, out of context and beyond the limit. Absurd serves unconventional perspectives which can lead to nowhere and meaningless. Every single thing in 'absurd' is illogical and yet unreasonable, so it will remain big question mark and have many interpretations all the time. The characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd by Martin Esslin are those characteristics encompassing plotless, no recognizable characters and the theme is never fully explained or resolved, reflects dreams and nightmares and also serves incoherent and incomprehension dialogue (Esslin, 1961: XVII).

These absurd phenomena are reflected in the play and are pictured in the absurdity of the characters. Plays falling into the theater of the Absurd category expresses the ideas articulated by Camus and others like him. In one way or another they convey a sense of alienation and of people having lost their bearings in an illogical, unjust, and ridiculous world. This is intriguing because dramatic characters are symbols of people. Absurd characters are symbols of absurd society. Besides the absurdity of the character's types, the language is also absurd. These both; characters and dialogue cannot be separated. In the absurd play, we could find verbal nonsense; where sentences do not follow in sequence and words do not mean what we expect them to mean. One example of the reflection in the language (dialogue) is when one character in *Waiting For Godot* tells the other "Shall we go?" and the other says "Let's go". However, nobody is moving from where they are. This absurd dialogue is reflected in society as example: some teachers who tell the student "Don't litter" but what they do outside is littering. The phenomenon above moves the writers to analyze the absurdity of the characters' types as well as the verbal nonsense in the play *Waiting For Godot*.

Waiting for Godot is an absurdist play by Samuel Beckett, in which two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait endlessly and in vain for the arrival of someone named Godot. Godot's absence, as well as numerous other aspects of the play, have led to many different interpretations since the play's premiere. *Waiting for Godot* is Beckett's translation of his own original French version, *En attendant Godot*, and is subtitled (in English only) "a tragicomedy in two acts".

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* presents many personalities and types of people in the play which has only 4 characters. *Waiting for Godot* is a play where you could see the absurdity of the conversation between the characters, their acts, the repetition, and the personalities.

Waiting for Godot is an absurd play, in Martin Esslin's book *The Theater of the Absurd (1961)*, in which he maintains that these dramatists write from a sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of human condition. So, it is a quite clear that, this play is a representative of human condition. In this case, Beckett shows the human condition in a very hopeless one and he shows characteristics polarities as sight versus blindness, life – death, present – past, waiting – not waiting, going – not going, etc.

The characters in Beckett's works are tied together, fear of being left alone and therefore they make some kind of communication to pass the time. In *Waiting for Godot*, they are waiting for Godot, an unclear, never-defined being who will bring them something, nobody knows what actually it is, something like hope, way of life, homeland or maybe identity.

Problems of communication among characters and lack of individualism in the play may criticize the society. Many people nowadays have no direction, aim, or ambition, however these people exist and drive to live and wait for an unknown "hope". Characters, especially in plays guide readers through their stories, helping them to understand plots and ponder themes. The study of a character requires an analysis of its relations with all of the other characters in the work.

2. Literature Review

Throughout *Waiting for Godot*, the reader or viewer may encounter religious, philosophical, classical, psychoanalytical and biographical – especially wartime – references. There are ritualistic aspects and elements and there is a danger in making more of these than what they are: that is, merely structural conveniences, avatars into which the writer places his fictional characters. The play exploits several archetypal forms and situations, all of which lend themselves to both comedy and pathos.

Because *Waiting For Godot* is so stripped down, so elemental, it invites all kinds of social and political and religious interpretation, with Beckett himself placed in different schools of thought, different movements and 'ism's. The attempts to pin him down have not been successful, but the desire to do so is natural when we encounter a writer whose minimalist art reaches for bedrock reality. 'Less' forces us to look for 'more,' and

the need to talk about *Godot* and about Beckett has resulted in a steady outpouring of books and articles.

Beckett tired quickly of “the endless misunderstanding”. As far back as 1955, he remarked, “Why people have to complicate a thing so simple I can’t make out.” He was not forthcoming with anything more than cryptic clues, however: “Peter Woodthorpe [who played Estragon] remembered asking him one day in a taxi what the play was really about: ‘It’s all symbiosis, Peter; it’s symbiosis,’ answered Beckett.

It is a game, everything is a game. When all four of them are lying on the ground, that cannot be handled naturalistically. That has got to be done artificially, balletically. Otherwise everything becomes an imitation, an imitation of reality. It should become clear and transparent, not dry. It is a game in order to survive.” (Wilson, 1976)

Beckett (1956) gives a political interpretation of the play. It is seen as an allegory of the cold war of French resistance to the Germans. “The intrusion of Pozzo and Lucky seems like nothing more than a metaphor for Ireland’s view of mainland Britain, where society has ever been blighted by a greedy ruling élite keeping the working classes passive and ignorant by whatever means.”

The pair is often played with Irish accents, as in film project. This, some feel, is an inevitable consequence of Beckett’s rhythms and phraseology, but it is not stipulated in the text. At any rate, they are not of English stock: at one point early in the play, Estragon mocks the English pronunciation of “calm” and has fun with “the story of the Englishman in the brothel”.

There is also another psychological interpretation by the Jungian. “The four archetypal personalities or the four aspects of the soul are grouped in two pairs: the ego and the shadow, the persona and the soul’s image (animus or anima). The shadow is the container of all our despised emotions repressed by the ego. Lucky, the shadow, serves as the polar opposite of the egocentric Pozzo, prototype of prosperous mediocrity, who incessantly controls and persecutes his subordinate, thus symbolizing the oppression of the unconscious shadow by the despotic ego. Lucky’s monologue in Act I appears as a manifestation of a stream of repressed unconsciousness, as he is allowed to “think” for his master. Estragon’s name has another connotation, besides that of the aromatic herb, tarragon: “estragon” is a cognate of estrogen, the female hormone. This prompts us to identify him with the anima, the feminine image of Vladimir’s soul. It explains Estragon’s propensity for poetry, his sensitivity and dreams, his irrational

moods. Vladimir appears as the complementary masculine principle, or perhaps the rational persona of the contemplative type.”

Philosophical interpretation comes from the existentialists. Broadly speaking, existentialists hold that there are certain fundamental questions that every human being must come to terms with if they are to take their subjective existences seriously and with intrinsic value. Questions such as death, the meaning of human existence and the place of (or lack of) God in that existence are among them. By and large, the theories of existentialism assert that conscious reality is very complex and without an “objective” or universally known value: the individual must create value by affirming it and living it, not by simply talking about it or philosophizing it in the mind. The play may be seen to touch on all of these issues.

Fisher (1980) gives another view of the play. The play calls on only male actors, with scarcely a reference to women, has caused some to look upon Vladimir and Estragon’s relationship as quasi-marital: “they bicker, they embrace each other, they depend upon each other. They might be thought of as a married couple.” In Act One, Estragon speaks gently to his friend, approaching him slowly and laying a hand on his shoulder. After asking for his hand in turn and telling him not to be stubborn, he suddenly embraces him but backs off just as quickly, complaining, “You stink of garlic!” When Estragon reminisces about his occasional glances at the Bible and remembers how prettily coloured were the maps of the Dead Sea, he remarks, “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.” Furthermore, the temptation to achieve post-mortem erections arises in the context of a world without females. Estragon in particular is “highly excited”, in contrast with Vladimir, who chooses this moment to talk about shrieking mandrakes. His apparent indifference to his friend’s arousal may be viewed as a sort of playful teasing. Another possible instance of homoeroticism has been discerned in the segment in which Estragon “sucks the end of it [his carrot]”, although Beckett describes this as a meditative action.

3. Research Method

The research done through *Waiting for Godot* play is a descriptive qualitative research, focusing on refuting or supporting theories that explain how certain things can occur. There are seven steps in the doing this process of research (Neuman, 2006:9):

- Selecting Topic, the topic might be general studies or issues in society, e.g. Fictional Character Study.

- Focus Question, narrowing the topic which is going to be discussed by focusing on the topic through questions and developing possible theories and answers, e.g. Absurd Character, Verbal Nonsense.
- Design Study, deciding method that is going to be used, it can be either quantitative method or qualitative method, e.g. Qualitative Method is used since it is a play which is studied.
- Data Collection, collecting the data based on the method which is used as well as the topic, e.g. Since the Qualitative Method is being used; the data are collected from books, reports, journals, etc.
- Data Interpretation, data are put in order to get the understanding of what or how something happens, e.g. When Lucky is cleverer than the Master, Pozzo. It happens because the essence of absurd is a nonsense itself.
- Data Analysis, analyzing the data which have been gathered based on the theory that is used, e.g. analyzing quotations based on the theory of The Theatre of Absurd by Martin Esslin
- Informing others; reporting the result of the research using writing, e.g. writing the finding of the analysis as an article.

Therefore, using the steps which have been explained above, the method which is going to be used in analyzing *Waiting for Godot* is qualitative method. This method is being used in order to understand how something happens, not only what, when, or where something occurs. Moreover, library research and internet research are also being applied to support and to widen the ideas of the researchers as well as to get materials and insights that are needed. Those ideas and concepts are then going to be selected and interpreted before being analyzed so as to get the conclusion of the studying.

Descriptive qualitative research provides an answer to the questions of how something happens and who is involved, but not why something happens or why someone is involved (explanatory research). Descriptive research provides a detailed profile of an event, condition or situation using either quantitative, qualitative or a combination of methods. Data gathering techniques such as field research and case studies are for qualitative descriptive research.

In this case, the researchers are using case studies which will study the cases (read: dialogues) in the play, *Waiting for Godot*.

Primarily, the researchers choose a literary work which is going to be analyzed. Among poetry, play, and novel, the play *Waiting for Godot* written by Samuel Beckett

(1956) is selected. First, the play is read and watched for several times to find out problems which are faced by the characters at that time. There are several topics which are found and are interesting to be discussed, such as absurd characters and verbal nonsense. Since absurd characters and verbal nonsense are the topic which are going to be discussed, next thing that needs to do is to find and to know what kind of approaches and principles that are suitable to be used. As the topic is dealing with the Theatre of Absurd, the theory itself is a suitable approach as well as textual approaches are going to be applied in the analysis. By using the textual approach and the theory of The Theatre of Absurd, the data which consist of quotations will be selected before being interpreted and analyzed. By doing that, the conclusion of the data will be made to support the ideas of the researcher.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Vladimir's Character

Vladimir is one of the two main characters who is waiting for someone called Godot that never comes. He waits with his friend, Estragon and meets other two men in the middle of each act. He is always disappointed in the end of the two acts because Godot is not coming, but he still waits. So, throughout the drama, he makes any kind of occupation to pass the time.

On one story line, we can see that he is disappointed of his expectation but oddly he still waits for the uncertainty. The incongruence of this character shows us the absurdity and then during the waiting he makes any kind of occupations for nothing, without meaning. They are all done just to pass the time; this shows that the no-purpose occupations are absurd.

Vladimir is somebody who claims that nothing can be done in giving up on hope. Vladimir is found hopeless in the very beginning of the drama. Besides, he is also found lost, abandoned when he talks about his life in the past. He is also described exiled and lonely throughout the drama, he needs to be felt needed and kept accompanied by Estragon. He is hopeless as well when he has the idea of repentance of being born because he has problems with his part of body where he has to urinate every time he laughs.

Throughout the drama, Vladimir is known to have a good memory and wiser than Estragon. However, he can also be seen doubtful denying what he knows or remembers

simply because nobody else remembers. It tortures him, it makes him desperate and hopeless. But, he continues waiting.

4.2. Estragon's Character

Estragon is the other main character in the drama; he is so attached to Vladimir, one of the reasons is because Estragon cannot remember anything, and he needs Vladimir to tell him his history. It is as if Vladimir is establishing Estragon's identity by remembering for him. Estragon also sometimes serves as a reminder for Vladimir of all the things they have done together. Thus both men serve to remind each other for their very existence. This is necessary since no one else in the drama ever remembers them.

Identity is to be known and recognized by people. If no one remembers you then your existence and identity are nothing. Estragon seems to be a man who is lost and lives without purpose or at least forgets the purpose. He often has no idea of what to do and always asks it from Vladimir. He seems to depend on Vladimir much. Estragon is much simpler than Vladimir in utterances. His problems are basic problems such as eating and sleeping. He is also having the idea of hanging himself, but he does not do it.

Suicide is a desperate action, when one feels want to die, he has no use living anymore. Estragon is suggesting to hang himself; it is quite clear that he has no spirit to live any more and always gives up and says that nothing is to be done and this shows that he is hopeless.

Besides having no purpose in life, Estragon also has no proper home to sleep in. It is no wonder he hardly exists. Proper house is one of the main needs for humans before that person thinks of something else and pursues the ambition.

4.3. Pozzo's Character

Pozzo is a character from another pair in the drama. He is in one pair with Lucky who is known as his slave. They are found traveling somewhere together and they meet Vladimir and Estragon in the middle of the play. Pozzo changes in the first act and the second. The change is his ability to give big effect in his own character. In the first act, he is vain, proud and cruel; he also has the idea of abandoning Lucky. However, in the second act when he is blind, he is desperate and depends on Lucky to go on the journey.

Pozzo is also a forgetful character like Estragon. He has a problem with his temper as well. He can be assumed to be lonely and in need of an accompaniment as he decides to stay with Gogo and Didi for some time in the play. It is odd how a person can know of what happens tomorrow, even though he is a forgetful person. In the quotation above, it seems that he purposely tries not to remember anybody he meets. It is absurd how a person chooses to forget.

He is vain, very rude to Lucky and looking down on Vladimir and Estragon. However oddly, he wants to stay with them to take a rest. This is absurd, when one does not like or look down on others, they will not stay with them anymore. By this absurdity, we may also conclude that he feels lonely during the journey.

Besides his vanity, he is also a character who looks for sympathy. He wants to be asked to sit down and he does not want to look bad in Vladimir's eyes because of his behaviors towards Lucky. He pretends to get the attention from both Vladimir and Lucky.

When one needs an attention, he will blame anybody to be the victim. This is what happens to Pozzo. He tries to make Lucky look bad so that Gogo and Didi have pity on Pozzo and despise Lucky.

Pozzo as well like Estragon has no purpose or destination in life. He speaks with long sentences and phrases but in the end he will forget. He is on a journey with Lucky, however he has no destination. He has no idea where the journey is leading him.

In both of the acts when Pozzo and Lucky are moving on with their journey, it is absurd that they do not know where they are going. Vladimir is the one who remembers to tell the readers something about it. When one decides to go on a journey then there will be a destination to go to, so it is funny that Pozzo does not know where he is going. This shows that he has no purpose in life.

Pozzo appears to be blind in the second act of the play and by this physical disability he also seems to be helpless and desperate. He could not even get up when he falls down. He is however very dependent on Lucky now because he is blind and Lucky is the one who leads his way. Nevertheless, his temper remains the same as the first act, he is easily angry.

4.4. Lucky's Character

Lucky is Pozzo's slave in the drama. He carries his master's coat, heavy bag, stool and a basket. He carries all the stuffs with a long rope attached round his neck. He obeys whatever his master tells him to do. He does not speak throughout the drama, only

once when he is asked to “think” by his master. His only long speech however is also nonsense. He sleeps when he stops. He is also rude to a stranger; Gogo is kicked when trying to wipe Lucky’s tears. He is older than his master.

It does not make sense how a person does not speak at all in his social relationships. Lucky’s character is all told by Pozzo. He is so loyal and obedient to what Pozzo tells him to do while Pozzo treats him badly. It is just absurd that there is a person who wants to follow a person who is cruel to him.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Absurd Character Interpretation

Through the analysis of Absurd Characters which have been conducted on the drama *Waiting for Godot*, it can be concluded that:

- Vladimir’s character type is floating with doubts. He is lonely when he remembers everything but no one else does so he contradicts himself with what he believes.
- Estragon’s character type is to have no purpose in life, lost and exiled. He is lonely and in need of an accompaniment who can tell him what he is going to do with his life.
- Pozzo’s character types is inconsistent, illogical and changeable. He changes from vain to helplessness, from the first to the second act. He is inconsistent with most of his speeches and illogical at the same time.
- Lucky’s character type is irrational and nonsense. His only speech in the play is nonsense as well as his dance. It is quite irrational for someone to follow someone else like an animal as what he does in the play.
- The two pairs of characters in this drama are found contradicting one another. However, they are always in one pair because they are in need of each other because of each other’s weaknesses.
- Absurd characters are socially lost and exiled, floating with doubts, having no purpose in life, talking of nonsense, acting of nonsense, very changeable, inconsistent, illogical, and irrational.

5.2. Social Condition Reflected in the Characters

Beckett is believed to have said that the name Godot comes from the French “godillot” meaning a military boot. Beckett fights in the war and so spending long periods of time waiting for messages to arrive. The more common interpretation is the name might mean “God” but again this must also be wrong.

The concept of the passage of time leads to a general irony. Each minute spent waiting brings death to the characters and makes the arrival of Godot uncertain. The passage of time is evidenced by the tree which has grown leaves, possibly indicating a change of seasons. Pozzo and Lucky are also transformed by time since Pozzo goes blind and Lucky mute.

Therefore, Beckett tries to make a reflection of the society during the era of second world war. The conditions are chaotic and everyone is waiting, waiting for something uncertain. Peace is much hoped but the existence is unknown. Waiting finally becomes an obligation for everyone involved in that era. They are accustomed to waiting, though they do not know what they are waiting for.

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