

Waiting for the Unknown
A Study in Beckett's
Waiting for Godot

مسرحية " في إنتظار غودو " في إنتظار المجهول

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Abstract :

This paper attempts to study Samuel Beckett's play **Waiting for Godot** and specifically the theme of "Waiting for the Unknown", since the play depends on the emblem "**Nothing to be done**" "**Nothing is certain**" and "**nothing very definite**".

The play is overwhelmed by an atmosphere of obscurity and mystery. Nothing is known about this Godot whom the two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, are waiting for. However, they have no alternative but to wait. In this case, we are in front of a situation of "Waiting for the Unknown".

This absurdity of waiting is based on the concept of futility, which is an essential element in the philosophy of Existentialism and the drama of absurdity.

The paper comes to conclusion that the meaninglessness and purposelessness of man's existence in this universe, that the philosophy of Existentialism tries to convey to humanity, is not logical.

Man's life and existence in this universe is meaningful and purposeful, if man is committed to heavenly religion. Not all the answers of man's meaningful existence could be found in humankind scientific theories and laboratories. There are many questions which are not easy to be approached through our five human senses; but by going back to heavenly religion and through deep contemplation in this universe and its Creator and in the causes behind man's existence on this planet

Key Words:

Absurdity, Existentialism, Futility, Materialism and Spirituality.

مسرحية " في إنتظار غودو " في إنتظار المجهول

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الخلاصة :

تحاول الفلسفة الوجودية إيصالها للإنسانية ليس منطقياً . فحياة الإنسان ووجوده في هذا الكون ذو معنى وهدف عظيمين، إذا كان هذا الإنسان مرتبط بديانة سماوية . قال الله تعالى: (أَفَحَسِبْتُمْ أَنَّمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ عَبَثًا وَأَنَّكُمْ إِلَيْنَا لَا تُرْجَعُونَ) (سورة المؤمنون: 115) إذ ليس كل الإجابات لحياة الإنسان ووجوده في هذا الكون يمكن أن نجدها في النظريات العلمية للبشرية ولا في مختبراتها . هناك قضايا لن نصل إليها وندرکها من خلال الحواس الإنسانية الخمس فقط و لكن من خلال العودة إلى الديانات السماوية، وإلى التفكير في الكون وخالقه وفي أسباب وجود الإنسان على هذا الكوكب .

الكلمات المفتاحية : العبثية، الوجودية، اللاجدوى، المادية والروحانية.

تناول البحث دراسة مسرحية (في إنتظار غودو) للكاتب المسرحي (صامويل بيكيت) ، كواحدة من ألمع التحف الأدبية في مسرح اللامعقول . كما تناول البحث وبشكل أساسي فكرة " في إنتظار المجهول " ، كون المسرحية تعتمد على شعارات " ليس هناك ما يمكن فعله " و " لا شيء مؤكد " و " لا شيء واضح " .

يعم المسرحية جو من الغموض ، لا شيء يعرف عن شخصية (غودو) ، لا أحد يعرف سبب إنتظار (استراغون) و (فلاديمير) لهذا الشخصية الغامضة !! ومع ذلك فلا خيار لهما سوى الإنتظار!!

في هذه الحالة نحن أمام موقف بانتظار المجهول . هذه الحالة العبثية في الإنتظار تعتمد على مفهوم اللاجدوى في الحياة الذي هو الآخر أحد العناصر الأساسية في الفلسفة الوجودية وفي مسرح اللامعقول

يصل البحث إلى نتيجة أن فكرة اللامعنى و فكرة اللاهدف في وجود الإنسان في هذا الكون التي

Preliminary:***"There is nothing so absurd but some philosopher has said it."*****(De Divination) The Roman Orator and Statesman****Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 – 43 B. C.)**

Samuel Beckett's play **Waiting for the Godot** was first performed in Britain on the third of August 1955, at the Arts Theatre in London.

The play is regarded by most, if not all, critics as one of the masterpieces in the Theatre of the Absurd. This theatre is based on the concept of futility of human life and meaninglessness and purposelessness of the whole existence. This concept of futility emerged more obvious in the mid twentieth century, after the publication of Albert Camus's book **The Myth of Sisyphus** in 1942. Futility evolves one of the essential intellectual concepts of the philosophy of Existentialism; which:

takes the view that the universe is an inexplicable, meaningless and dangerous theatre for the individual's existence...that life is finite, and it will finish as it began in nothingness (Martin Gray: 1992/2012 : 112).

The drama of absurdity, thus, came into being in the mid twentieth century to express man's absurd and futile life and existence in this obscure universe; and to disclose "*humanity's plight as a purposelessness in an existence out of harmony with its surroundings*" (J. R. Taylor: 1966:8)

Martin Esslin in his book **The Theatre of the Absurd** (1961) states that the world of the playwright of the absurd drama:

most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the Western world (Esslin: 1961/2001: 22).

This drama of the absurd emerged in the west as a reflection and expression of the cultural and intellectual changes in the twentieth century. The great shift to materialism diminished the spirit of heavenly religious faith, and leads man to suffer the pane of anxiety, confusion and anguish. Esslin affirms this fact saying that:

The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war. (p. 23).

Religious faith gives man's existence its meaning and purpose. It gives man more confidence in himself to understand his life and his existence. The Holly Quran says "*Did ye then think that We had created you in jest, and that ye would not be brought to Us*". (Al-Mo'menoon: 115)

Abdulla Yusuf Ali, the scholar and the translator of the meaning of the Glorious Quran comments on this verse (Ayat) saying that:

God's Creation is not without a high serious purpose. It is not vain, or for mere play or sport. As far as man is concerned, the highest issues for him hang on his behaviour in this life. ... We must therefore earnestly search out God's Truth, encouraged by the fact that God's truth is also, out of His unbounded mercy, searching us out and trying to reach us (1938: 893 – 894).

Life, thus, has its meaning and its purpose; even death has its meaning and its purpose, nothing is obscure in man's life and existence if he adheres to religious faith and its teachings.

Waiting for the Unknown

Waiting for the mysterious Godot is no less and no more than waiting for the unknown. The two tramps Vladimir and Estragon pass their boring and dumpish time, hour after hour and a day after a day, at a country road under a bare tree waiting for whom they call Godot who never comes and seems not to come at all. We know from their fragmental conversation that this is not their first time to come to this place and wait. We do not know the exact time of their waiting in this desolate place for this mysterious Godot; whether it is days, weeks, and months; or may be years. Nothing is certain in such an age and such existence. However, it seems clear that the tramps while waiting in this tedious atmosphere, having nothing serious to do or to discuss; although there are some hints to serious questions, yet it is only to pass time.

From the very outset of the play, we see Estragon tries hardly to take off his boot but he fails (*He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests,*

tries again. As before). (p.9). This behaviour reveals impression of anxiety, exhaustion and depression from the very beginning of the play.

Estragon, after this hard attempt of taking off his boot, comments "*Nothing to be done.*" (p. 9). This is the first sentence to be uttered in the play and will be uttered and repeated from time to time throughout nearly all the play, to suggest the theme of nothingness. It is an essential theme to denote the futility of man's life and existence in the complicated materialistic societies in the west.

Vladimir, on the other hand, responds to Estragon's comment in a very ridiculous and farcical gesture showing himself an intellect debating on a serious intellectual topic "*I'm beginning to come round to that **opinion**. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir be **reasonable** you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle*" (p. 9).

While Estragon is busy to take off his boot, Vladimir, on the other side, has his own trouble with his hat (*He takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, puts it on again*) (p. 10). Again and again (*He knocks on the crown as though to dislodge a foreign body, peers into it again, puts it on again*) (p. 11).

Each of them is busy in his own way; one with his boot and the other with his hat, as if they are trying something serious to solve. The two tramps have nothing serious to do or to discuss, but wasting time waiting for this obscure Godot to drop in.

Waiting in such a way causes boredom and more anguish. Godot always postpones his arrival; a boy working for Mr. Godot comes usually to inform Vladimir and Estragon that Godot is not coming; but sure he is coming next day "*Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow*" (p. 50). This uncertainty of Godot's arrival raises the theme of uncertainty of man's life itself according to absurdism.

The concept of futility of human life and existence is seen clear in the tramps' attempts to wait helplessly for Godot to come. Time is passing slowly and there is only boredom, anxiety and vagueness predominating the situation. Everything is static and uncertain: "*Nothing to be done.*", "*Nothing is certain*", and "*nothing very definite*". This brings to mind that life is futile. It has no meaning or purpose; and to wait means to add more suffering to the already anguish. Waiting for the unknown and for nothing "*...cause pain, anxiety, inactivity and destroy people from within*" as Jack Peak suggests in his *Essays On Waiting for Godot* (2005: 2).

During the course of the play and mainly during the course of waiting, many questions and topics are raised; yet no answers are given. No one knows who Godot is!! No one knows the cause of the tramps waiting!! No one knows why Godot always postpones his arrival!! Even no one knows who those tramps are!!

The arrival of the two characters of Pozzo and Lucky and the way they enter the stage add more obscurity and even more absurdity to the play.

The uncertainty and the obscurity suggest the serious questions raised by the existentialist and the absurdist about the universe and mankind's existence in the universe which is a big elusive riddle to them. Jack Peak argues that to have answers for these questions make the matter more complicated, it " *...could drive someone to the point of insanity. The tramps continually attempt to prove that they exist, in order to keep their sanity*" (2005: 2). This seems obvious through Estragon's speech to Vladimir, though it sounds ironic " *We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?*" (p. 69).

However, Beckett raises the theme of religion and spiritual faith to oppose the concept of futility and absurdity that preoccupies man's materialistic mentality in the west. While waiting for the unknown Godot, the two tramps come to discuss a serious question; it is the religious thought of salvation, condemnation and Jesus Christ Crucifixion. Even this serious matter is taken carelessly. The two tramps attempt to discuss this matter not for any reasonable cause, but simply to pass time; and here we come to realize how life becomes meaningless.

Vlad. *Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story?*

Est. *No.*

Vlad. *Shall I tell it to you?*

Est. *No.*

Vlad. *It'll pass the time. (Pause.) Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour. One ———*

Est. *Our what?*

Vlad. *Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other ... (he searches for the contrary of saved) ...damned.*

Est. *Saved from what?*

Vlad. *Hell.* (p. 12)

Few minutes earlier, the two tramps spoke about '*repentance*' which is one of the essential concepts in heavenly religions, when Vladimir suggests to Estragon to repent "*Suppose we repented*" "*Repented what?*" Exclaims Estragon; then he comments "*Our being born?*" (p. 11).

The tramps, while speaking, come across some sacred matters as the **Bible**, the **Gospels** and the **Holy Land**. (p.12) Then they come to speak about the story of **Abel** and **Cane** (p.83).

It is clear that the two tramps are suffering the pain of waiting, not only for Godot; but also waiting in such obscure, meaningless and purposeless existence.

The suffering of humanity is evoked through the concept of the Original Sin as Pershinova argues "*To be borne is to be a sinner, and thus man is condemned to suffer. The only way to escape the suffering is to repent or to die*" (Sept. 2006).

The absurdist believes that man is thrown into an absurd world only to suffer, ignoring the teachings of the religious faith. Agony according to him is a basic element in man's existence. It is because of the "*sin of being born*" man has to suffer, and when he thinks of repentance, it is only to escape pain and suffering.

Meanwhile, the themes of waiting and hope seem to be inseparable and also complementary to the theme of salvation. Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for hope of salvation embodied in the coming of Godot; though it is not clearly evident. Vladimir seems to be delighted when he thinks that Godot is in his way to them "*It's Godot! At last! Gogo! It's Godot. We're saved! Let's go and meet him.*" (p. 73). To Estragon the arrival of Godot is something disastrous; he expresses this feeling in what he says "*I'm accursed.*" (p. 73). Again he emphasizes his dreadful situation saying "*I'm in hell*" (p. 74). One has to see into the two reactions of Vladimir and Estragon, thus to search for the real identity of Godot!!

In their waiting for Godot, one can feel that they are waiting for the unknown; Vladimir is delighted while Estragon is frightened. This fact moves our feelings of pity towards them. Our pity and sorrow is doubled when we realize that there is no hope in waiting. Jack Peak argues that:

The pessimistic view is that they cannot escape waiting for Godot, from each other or from their situation in general. The optimistic view of the play shows range of human emotion and the need to share experiences alongside

the suffering of finite existence, governed by the past, acting in the present, and uncertain of the future. (2005: 10).

The process of waiting is in itself tedious and boring. If there is no use or no hope in waiting, waiting becomes a waste of time; and to waste time for nothing is boring, tedious and painful. Such a situation compels Vladimir and Estragon to think of killing themselves. When Estragon suggests the idea "*What about hanging ourselves?*" it finds acceptance and readiness from Vladimir "*It'd give us an erection*" (p. 17).

When they fail to commit suicide, they come back to their minds to continue their waiting for Godot. This time they are more concerned with the matter to know what he is going to tell them, however, it seems that Vladimir is more concerned with Godot's arrival than Estragon. "*Let us wait and see what he says*" "*I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it*" (p. 18).

This time the tramps feel that they are tied to Godot and they have no other alternative:

Est. (*chews, swallows*) *I'm asking you if we're tied?*

Vlad. *Tied?*

Est. *Ti – ed.*

Vlad. *How do you mean tied?*

Est. *Down.*

Vlad. *But to whom. By whom?*

Est. *To your man.*

Vlad. *To Godot? Tied to Godot? What an idea! No question of it. (Pause)*

For the moment.

Est. *His name is Godot?*

Vlad. *I think so.* (pp. 20 – 21)

Martin Esslin argues on the tramps' decision to commit suicide and their failure to execute it saying:

Suicide remains their favorite solution, unattainable owing to their own incompetence and their lack of the practical tools to achieve it. It is precisely their disappointment at their failure to succeed in their attempt at

suicide that Vladimir and Estragon rationalize by waiting, or pretending to wait for Godot" (1961/2001: 57).

In an age of cultural and intellectual confusion and haziness Robert Lane in his essay **Beckett's Godot: A Bundle of Broken Mirrors** finds that:

There is no longer delight which bends humans to the universe; there is simply waiting: waiting which fills the reprieve between birth and death, waiting which engages our attention while making the journey from spermatium to crematorium', waiting which is futile offers very little suggestion of heroic endurance. (1996: 2).

In such futile human existence, as the absurdist and the existentialist believe, birth and death seem to be the only tangible facts; between these two facts the whole existence is an empty vacuum, void of any meaningful sense.

However, in such situation of hopeless waiting, Estragon and Vladimir find themselves in need of each other. No one has the desire or even the will to leave the other. They are in need of each other not only to pass time while waiting for Godot to come; but also they feel safe and secure in such an exhausted age and to escape the feeling of loneliness.

If we suppose that these tramps represent humanity as some critics suggest and as Vladimir hints to it "*But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not*" (p. 79); therefore, people cannot choose but to live together. In Beckett's drama, time has no meaning as existence itself has no meaning; it is only an endless waiting for the unknown. Waiting is the bitterness of existence that man has to swallow.

In addition to the two characters of Estragon and Vladimir, Beckett introduces us to two other obscure characters: Pozzo and Lucky and through them to highlight the theme of futility and absurdity, and to add much to the atmosphere of ambiguity and obscurity.

The scene of the arrival of these two characters is described as follows (*Enter Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo drives Lucky by means of a rope passed round his neck....etc*) (p. 21).

The two tramps who are waiting for Godot to drop in at any hour, take Pozzo as Godot, till he tells them that his name is Pozzo. Then he addresses them:

You are human beings none the less. (He puts on his glasses) as far as one can see. (He takes off his glasses) Of the same species as myself. ... Of the same species as Pozzo! Made in God's image (p.23).

In his speech to the two tramps, Pozzo speaks about man's life on this planet: a combination of sorrow and happiness, suffering and enjoyment; yet suffering seems to be more dominant. *"The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh"* (p. 33).

The absurdity also resides in the passing of time. (Next Day. Same Time. Same Place); (p. 55) as the setting of Act Two is described. The absurdity resides in the fact that many things have been changed *"in a single night"* as Vladimir observes. The bare and infertile tree has been covered with leaves just in one night *"But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And now it's covered with leaves"* (p: 66). Pozzo and Lucky also have been completely changed. Pozzo becomes blind and Lucky becomes dumb to the extent that the two tramps fail to realize them. When they fall down helplessly among their scattered baggage, Pozzo calls for help because he is unable to stand by himself.

As far as the question of time is debated, Pozzo comments that *"The blind have no notion of time. The things of time are hidden from them too"* (p. 86).

Time is uncertain, like Godot's coming is uncertain and similar to existence which is uncertain too. Time and waiting are integral in the sense that they denote absurdity and futility of life and existence. Pozzo in his way discusses time as nothingness and meaninglessness. He addresses Vladimir and Estragon furiously:

*Have you not done tormenting me with your **accursed** time! It's **abominable!** When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, one day he went dumb one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were borne, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (Calmer) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (p. 89).*

Time and waiting in this play seem to be inseparable. They are interwoven to be one unique theme in the play. Thus, it is not only Godot who attracts our attention by his obscurity; the process of waiting also has a significant role in this meaningless and purposeless existence.

In his essay *The Search for Self* Martin Esslin comes to conclusion to the effect that:

The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. Throughout our lives we always wait for something, and Godot simply represents the objective of our waiting – an event, a thing, a person, death. Moreover, it is in the act of waiting that we experience the flow of time in its purest, most evident form. If we are active, we tend to forget the passage of time, we pass the time, but if we are merely passively waiting, we are confronted with the action of time itself (2007: 30 – 31).

Conclusion

The play opens with a setting of no specific place or time. The stage direction in Act One describes the scene (A country road. A tree. Evening.) It is the same in Act Two (Next Day. Same Time. Same Place).

The play begins and ends with two tramps passing time idle, waiting for somebody called Godot who is never seen on the stage, never comes to meet the tramps, and will never come at all.

A sense of boredom, because of the useless waiting, prevails the scene, and a sense of obscurity and vagueness also dominates the whole world of the play; because of the obscurity of Godot as well as the sense of uncertainty.

The Theatre of the Absurd usually presents exaggerated images of meaningless and purposeless life in the west. Man in the west searches for answers to his questions concerning this futility and absurdity in this life. However, these answers are not available in societies dominated with materialistic mentality and void of any spiritual or religious faith. Such situation leads man to suffer anxiety and confusion.

The character of Godot is mysterious, so obscure and so elusive as the meaningless and purposeless of human life and existence, according to the existentialist conception of futility.

Some critics argue that it is not Godot's character or his arrival which are significant; the most significant is his meaning. Godot never shows himself on the stage; yet he is always present through Vladimir and Estragon and their process of waiting for him.

Godot may symbolize the unknown matter in the western man's mentality, especially the one whose mind is devoid of religious faith and one who sees the world as a black box. The one who searches for answers through the human scientific theories only will never come to definite answers about the existence of the universe or about the existence of himself.

It is also ridiculous to realize the urgent need of Godot though the tramps do not know him and never see him. If we consider him as a symbol of hope to the two tramps as well as to man in general as the play tries to convey; Godot also could symbolize death in the sense that the existentialist and the absurdist believe that man in this obscure and futile life and existence, finds death as the only solution to his anxiety and suffering. Accordingly man passes his life time waiting for the moment of death!! Birth and death are the only two certain facts in this absurd and futile existence; therefore, death is the essence of salvation in this tedious life.

The play also raises the question of hope and salvation through religious allusions; particularly through Jesus Christ Crucifixion. Jack Peak argues that Godot "*could be a hero, a religious symbol, a role of model but most importantly a symbol of hope*" (2005: 10).

However, nothing is going to recover the contemporary man from his dreadful nightmare but heavenly religious faith. It is this spiritual power that is capable of guiding him to peace in this worldly life and in the hereafter.

Martin Esslin comments on Godot's character saying that it is a matter of foolishness to identify Godot's character through critical analysis asserting the thematic significance of Godot rather than his character. It is not the character of Godot that the play is concerned with but the theme of waiting which is more significant. It is the waiting that constitutes the essential aspect of the human condition (1961/2001: 45).

Finally one may argue whether Samuel Beckett in this play attempts to shock the mind of the intellect in the west by such serious question of life and existence to go deeper and make further searching for clear-cut answers of his anguished existence!!

Contemporary man who is entrapped in a huge industrial and technological steel cage, captive to materialistic mentality, has to find out a way to release himself and to cure and redeem his sick soul. Man has to make a balance between materialistic and spiritual aspects of life.

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