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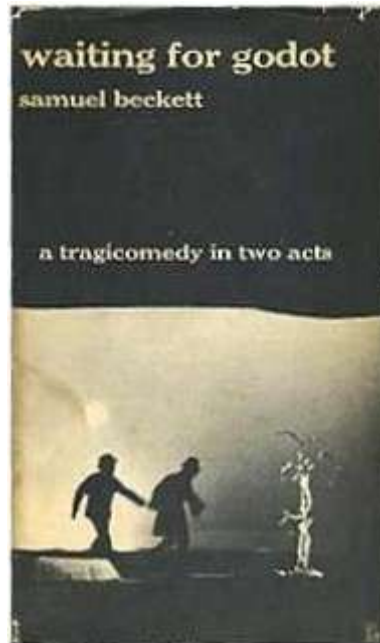
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Understanding Beckett: *Absurdism*

Samuel Beckett as a playwright is not easy to describe and not easy to understand as well. No two opinions on that indeed! Beckett belongs to the category of those writers, who are considered the members of the “Theatre of the Absurd”. His characters are the complete product of the philosophy of *Absurdism*. “The Absurd” refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any, that is, in this meaningless universe, human existence is meaningless altogether”. In this context, *Absurd* does not mean “logically impossible” but rather, “humanly impossible”. All the efforts by human beings to find the meaning of life have dashed to the ground. This is exactly what Beckett’s characters have been doing and trying to convey throughout their lives. Agony of existence is the core problem of all Beckett’s characters and the ruthless life compels them to bear this agony and to admit this fact that there is no option for them.

Beckett’s Unparalleled Breadth of Influence

Human life and its agonies are merciless and Beckett reveals this fact through his characters without any mawkishness. No other dramatist has the capacity to represent this naked truth with such a perfect rectitude. From the very threshold of his career, he presented the art which was common neither for the readers nor for the audience. In his plays, he does not give an account of the stark and harsh realities of life, instead of it, he tells that life itself is a stark and harsh reality in this universe. Here his art makes him conspicuous among his contemporaries and predecessors.

Beckett has an unparalleled breadth of influence on his entire era. His bleak outlook of human life generates many questions in the minds of his readers, the most important one, why we exist? Though none of his plays answers this question, his characters themselves try to find the answer and this is what his readers/audience do afterwards. This is Beckett’s style which is peculiar to him and this is what we find in his *Waiting for Godot*

The First Play of Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*

Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is a magnum opus of his art and is one of the most important dramatic works of the 20th century. However, it is not everybody’s cup of tea. There is much in this play to puzzle, bewilder, intrigue and even irritate the reader. Its entertainment value is almost negligible. Its importance as a work of art lies in the multiplicity of meanings which critics have discovered in it and the many interpretations of it they have offered.

Originally written in French under the title *En attendant Godot*, it was Beckett’s first play to be performed in Paris (in 1952) and it was hailed by critics as the most important dramatic production to be staged in France since World War 2nd. Shortly afterwards, the

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English version achieved parallel successes in New York, London and Dublin.

Beckett and His Vision of Desolation

Waiting for Godot is Beckett's vision of desolation. The play starts bleakly enough. From the very outset, the tone of the play is explicitly clear that there is something unusual in the play, which has the full capacity to startle both the readers and the audience and the play did so. Notwithstanding the fact, this is a play in which according to one critic, "nothing happens twice." The conspicuous success it has achieved on the stage in a large number of countries is really surprising in view of the fact that it is devoid of the conventional elements which make up a play. It has no romantic interest, not even a female character in the cast, and it has very little action. Its "meaning" too is not very clear, the very personality of *Godot* being one of the riddles of the play.

Two Tramps and Their Waiting

There is no adventure, no chaos, no catastrophe, no social or political upheaval in the play. Two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir on a deserted country road are waiting for someone, named *Godot*. Both are the true portrait of every human being on the earth, who bear the agonies of existence. They are constrained to bear the agonies because they have born and they have to pay for it at any cost. They are waiting for *Godot*, who they think will be the source of their salvation, but he never comes. While waiting for him, how they pass their time, the play deals with it, so waiting is a recurring motif of the play.

We All Wait!

Every one of us experiences 'waiting' in his/her life somehow and somewhere, at the airport, at the railway station, in a bank, etc. We are familiar with the pangs of waiting and we do different things to pass our time. These two tramps do the same. They talk, they walk, they play different games, they abuse and rebuke each other, even they try to attempt suicide to free themselves from the agonies of life but this remains just an abortive attempt. Beckett is at his best to show the utter helplessness of human beings that even they can't die according to their wish.

The Concept of Nihilism in Beckett's Plays

The concept of Nihilism is all pervading and all pervasive in his plays. *Waiting for Godot* has no exception. Nihilism refers to the rejection of all religious and moral principles, often in the belief that life is meaningless. We find Beckett's characters moving gradually towards deterioration and decline. Once his people were hopeful, *Waiting for Godot*, later they crouched in garbage cans in *Endgame*. Krapp was moribund in *Krapp's Last Tape*, while listening to his last tape, then in *Happy Days*, the female lead kept sinking deeper and deeper into a mound. Now Beckett's characters have gone all the way to hell in a

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play called *Play*. Only the heads of the three characters could be seen. Their bodies were inside giant clay urns. Spotlights kept picking out the appropriate urns as the dialogue developed. The second half of the play is a verbatim recapitulation of the first half. Such would be the reaction of the large majority of theatre-goers also. Unlike Beckett's dramatic methods and purposes are clearly understood, unlike an audience makes the necessary mental adjustment to see his plays performed on the stage or even to read his plays, the audience is likely to experience bewilderment, incredulity, anger or contempt.

Gradual Dilapidation of Characters – At the Mercy of Circumstances

In *Waiting for Godot*, the gradual dilapidation of every character can be felt through different forms of depravity, for depravity exists in all its form - mental, physical, spiritual. Estragon and Vladimir deprived of any physical grace and dignity, mentally disturbed are unable to recognize Pozzo and Lucky, when they appear again in the play. Now Pozzo is blind, the rope connects the two as before but the rope is much shorter now, enables Pozzo to follow Lucky more easily. Pozzo and Lucky physically disgusted are the symbol of master and slave.

Here Beckett presents slavery in its worst form. Despite being in a worst form, Lucky the servant is still with his cruel master Pozzo. Every character is at the mercy of circumstances and is compelled to be alive. In other words, existence must be endured and in this process Beckett's characters reveal unexpected virtues: charity, compassion, love and a firm resolve to endure.

Beckett's Pessimism and *Waiting for Godot*

Beckett has been attacked generally on two grounds. The first, he is a perverse messenger of gloom and melancholy and the second, he writes only of the extra-ordinary in terms of unnecessary complexity, but his art, according to Beckett, has nothing to do with clarity. The purpose of his art is not to explain but to contemplate. Therefore Beckett confines himself deliberately to those scenarios in terms of writing, where there is no happiness, no joy, no merry-making, only his innermost melancholic approach towards life reflects in his writings but even in this limited canvas, he has a great capacity to portray his characters with different idiosyncrasies combined with his kaleidoscopic view of human life.

Beckett was gifted to expatiate upon a single theme. There is no wonder, if most of the times, he has been at his best while doing so. In spite of the complexity of his themes, Beckett's plays have been successful to keep the audience on the edge of their seats in theatres. His plays have been written in the backdrop of World War II. In *Waiting for Godot* also, he does not describe hydrogen bomb directly but he portrays with unique truthfulness, the cruelty, the sufferings, the helplessness, the destructive forces, which together compel man to bear the sufferings of being.

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Beckett's Realism in *Waiting for Godot*

The one fundamental behind this play is Beckett's ancient knowledge of man's solitude, imprisonment and pain in an intolerable universe. Beckett as a stalwart representative of pessimism including with his utmost realism writes what he considers to be true and not what he knows is diverting.

Themes of habit, the suffering of being and how to get through life are issues, have been presented in *Waiting for Godot* with all the paraphernalia of futile revolt against existence - the abject necessity of being born, the hard necessity of living and the sharp of necessity of dying, which is constant throughout Beckett's other works also. Beckett's genius is like a laser beam, narrow and intense; continually probing deeper and deeper into the same dark area. With the very intensity, he presents sordid realities of life without any complacency.

Beckett's characters suffer from sufferings of being to its fullest, with the pangs of emotional, physical and mental depravity. Estragon and Vladimir, Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* exist with a clear-cut object, that is crystal clear, that doesn't let them hallucinate, that doesn't let them romanticize human life in any way. They have profound knowledge of how much their life is wretched and ugly. Despite this fact, they keep on leading their lives. This is Beckett's realism, dismal and inauspicious, without any effort to glorify human life.

Anything that can make human life glorious and worth-living is carefully avoided in his plays altogether. In *Waiting for Godot*, ignorance and impotence of his characters remain unassailable, only the time has passed imperceptibly. Now all they can do is nothing but to continue: "We are not saints but we have kept our appointment", one of the characters utters towards the end of the play. How many people can boast as much? And how many dramatists have stated such a simple truth so powerfully and so wittily.

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