

Theme of waiting

A person of narrower vision and imagination than Beckett might hardly write a play like *En attendant Godot*; nor one artistically less daring than Roger Blin could produce it. It overturned the conventional dramaturgy and completely lacks action in the Aristotelian sense. Neither the characters develop in this play, nor there is any linear plot-movement. All through its two acts, two miserable bums converse and pass idle time, while waiting for someone called Godot who may or may not come. As Estragon sums it up, it seems that "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!"

The original French title of the play, 'En attendant Godot' or 'While Waiting for Godot', is still descriptive and less ambiguous. It implies that the play is about what happens during the period of waiting: about passing of time and the events, or rather non-events, that populate it. While translating it into English, Beckett brought in a significant ambiguity by dropping the initial 'While' from the title. *Waiting for Godot* suggests that the act of waiting should be prioritised, at the same time problematizing what or who is being waited for. And this waiting is an essential condition of mankind, leading to the 'Angst' that the Existentialists like Kierkegaard would like to point out. Vivian Mercier draws our attention to a line omitted in the English translation: "*Ce soir on couchera peut-être chez lui. Au chaud, au sac, le ventre plein, sur la paille.* [Tonight we might perhaps sleep at his place. Warm, dry, a full belly, on straw.]" This is nothing much to aspire for, but even this minimal hope has been removed from the English version.

The significance of waiting in *Waiting for Godot* depends on the point of view from which the recipient is about to judge the play. From a religious perspective, this can signify the endless waiting by the distressed humanity for a messiah to come and redeem them. It reflects the Christian belief that Christ will come again when the time will demand so. Nevertheless, if we accept the religious interpretation of *Waiting for Godot*, we must also admit that this futile waiting problematizes Christianity and also the supreme virtue of Faith. Vladimir and Estragon were initially quite confident about Godot's arrival; but as the play progresses a shadow of despair prevails upon their faith. It also leads them to inaction:

Estragon: Don't let's do anything. It's safer.
Vladimir: Let's wait and see what he says."

From an Existentialist viewpoint, this is precisely what Jean-Paul Sartre has described as "bad faith". Amidst the barren desert, Estragon and Vladimir can do nothing than waiting for Godot. The worse thing of this seemingly endless waiting is it does not convey an assertion of hope. The tramps do not know whether Godot will come or not, or even if Godot comes, he may not be the saviour they are looking for. They can be even more miserable with Godot, perhaps compelled to part, as suggested by one thief being saved and one boy being spared from beating. Still, without this transcendent Other, Godot or whosoever, their lives of meaningless.

To the Existentialist, man makes his own choice since there is no preset or divine will. Estragon and Vladimir have made the choice of waiting, without any external instruction as Vladimir asserts that Godot "*didn't say for sure he'd come.*" Yet they wait, to know "*exactly how*" they stand. Their act of waiting, with all the verbal gobbledygook and silly pastimes, somehow resists them from sinking into the all devouring silence and inaction. It gives them an identity, a sense of being amidst vast nothingness. Estragon remarks: "*We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression that we exist?*"

For Sartre, man needs a rational basis for existence but fails to find one, making his life no better than a wasted passion. The two tramps vainly attempt to put order in their lives by waiting for Godot who never arrives, and reiterate that "*Nothing to be done.*" And this inaction again questions their very entities, and Estragon anxiously doubts: "*Where do we come in?*" Vladimir and Estragon ponder suicide by hanging themselves from the tree, but once again their anxiety stops them, as the latter remarks: "*Don't let's do anything. It's safer.*" Thus they go round and round in an eternal cycle of waiting, which can have innumerable interpretations.

Their endless waiting even stops the natural linear progress of time. The past often becomes shadowy to Estragon and Pozzo. The boy returns with the same message, Godot never comes and tomorrow also never seems to arrive. Vladimir, therefore, is right to say that "*time has stopped.*" In the world of the two tramps, time is cyclic and everything comes reiterating. Most of the phrases become refrains; the two acts are quite alike. Also, they conclude with exactly same words, with only a switching over of the characters.

The bizarre act of waiting thus elevates Beckett's play in an unusual stature, while leading to complexity and incomprehension at the same time. On the other hand, it opens up endless problems and interpretations. That is why *Waiting for Godot* could have become everyone's play, running with equal success in theatre halls and prison yards.