

Beckett's Atheism in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*: a Proof for Absurdism

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Abstract

This paper is about the Beckett's two masterpieces in the world of literature which are the best samples of Beckettian absurdism, as well. In both Waiting for Godot and Endgame Beckett intends to represent the absurdity of his situation through the indeterminacy of religion. To do this, Beckett shakes the pillars of religious beliefs and certainties through using both logical argumentation and mocking them, as well. Whether he logically questions the reliability of the religion or mocks it as a comic relief, his intention is to draw the audiences' attention to think about the indeterminacy of religion once more to arrive at the recognition that religious certainties are absurd, similar to our existence which is absurd.

1. Introduction

Humans in the nineteenth century believed in his ability to construct a real utopia. It was a time in which they dreamt of the possibility of all humans being able to love together in a world united in a state of peace. Yet the historical events of the twentieth century undermined that belief. Both cold and hot wars have followed each other in quick succession; revolutions, civil wars and new totalitarian ideologies for governing the world, such as Fascism and Nazism, introduced such evil leaders as Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin, and clouded the orderly progress of mankind towards some better future. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2007) wrote about the era in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

The fallen nature of modern man cannot be separated from social progress. On the one hand the growth of economic productivity furnishes the conditions for a world of greater justice; on the other hand it allows the technical apparatus and the social groups which administer it a disproportionate superiority to the rest of the population. (xi)

Living in a dark and brutalizing century had a profound influence on the intellectuals of the time and particularly on Samuel Beckett, who was one of the towering playwrights in representing the absurdity of the situation in his own time. There is a remarkable pessimism and human suffering in Beckett's work. The time that the plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* were written by him was the era when the whole of Europe was overwhelmed by the fear of nuclear attack. Hundred of thousands were killed when Hiroshima and Nagasaki were attacked with atomic bombs in 1945 by the U.S Air Force near the end of World War II. People around the world, especially Europeans, shared the horror of experiencing what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There were some TV programmes in England and a few other European countries to train their peoples in what they should do if they were attacked by atomic bombs. European were trained to live in dim and damp air-raid shelters during World War II, and were prepared to have fallout shelters to live in for a longer time if another World War were to break out. This fear was an influential factor especially when Beckett wrote the play, *Endgame*, and when it was performed, in 1957. The scene of the play can also be viewed as a fallout shelter, since much of the outer world has been destroyed by a nuclear attack. The characters in *Endgame* are aware that the outer world has been destroyed, and that they are safe, temporarily, in their gloomy shelter, yet soon their lives are going to end:

CLOV: [He gets up on ladder, turns the telescope on the without.] Let's see. [He looks, moving the telescope.] Zero...[he looks]...Zero...[he looks]...and zero.

HAMM: Nothing stirs. All is –

CLOV: Zero –

HAMM: [Violently.] Wait till you're spoken to! [Normal voice.] All is... all is ...all is what? [Violently.] All is what?

CLOV: What all is? In a word? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment. [He turns the telescope on the without, looks, lowers the telescope, turns toward HAMM.] Corpsed. [Pause.] Well? Content? (*Endgame*, 106)

The horror of the World Wars, especially the systematic displacement and killing of vast numbers of persons, created a crisis of conscience among many of the world's intellectuals. Post-war Europeans found themselves in a grim and featureless landscape without any signs to guide them, without any hope that they could go on and, by their efforts, bring about a better world; they found themselves with an existence and a responsibility foisted upon them which they had not chosen and did not particularly want. Traditional values seemed incapable of coping with such dilemmas and, more significantly, to rest on no solid foundation. World war had threatened people's lives, so they lost their human qualities. When they faced such destruction and annihilation, their faith in God, as a superpower, was crushed. In this context, life was meaningless, and there was a belief that either God did not care about people, or that He did not exist at all. This aspect of ruin must also be recognized as forming an integral part of much of the literature of the late 1940s and early 1950s. It was a landscape which provided a metaphor for broken lives and spirits.

The influence of the gloomy atmosphere of the time reveals itself in Beckett's idea of absurdity. Yet, Beckett never explained his work to readers and spectators for the sake of clarification. He believed that his work means what it says, and did not need his interpretation. Concerning how Beckett's literary works should be read, Ronan McDonald (2006) commented:

To engage fruitfully with Beckett's plays and novels does not necessarily mean to 'decode' them or to figure out what they really mean underneath the obscurity ... Readers or spectators are often drawn to Beckett, not because of some perceived idea or vision of life, but because of the compelling and utterly unique voice he has on stage and page. Beckett always put much emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of his works [rather] than the meaning that could be extracted from them, on the shape rather than the sense. (3)

In both *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, Beckett's atheism purports absurdism through the indeterminacy of religion. The purpose of looking at religion being in doubt, in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* was in consequence of the extreme suffering of World War II, and human fear of an even more horrific war to come. Beckett revealed the human being's absurd situation, in unstable conditions, by pointing to the unreliability of religion, to Christianity with the most followers in the world. Beckett's usage of biblical tenets both in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* is remarkable. These biblical allusions are not used to supporting religion, but are used to mock and question the validity of biblical tenets. Beckett's usage of biblical allusions in his works, in fact, is a proof of absurdity of the humankind's beliefs in religion through the course of history on the one hand, which support the absurdity of existence on the other hand. In doing so, the spectators and readers of his plays are encouraged to think about the truthfulness of religion once more.

In the following sections, the indeterminacy of religion in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* is being discussed separately to see that how it helps Beckett to represent the absurdism.

2. Indeterminacy of religion in *Waiting for Godot*

Waiting for Godot begins with the physical suffering of its characters, which reflects the consequences of the extreme suffering of the World War II. Estragon hurts, he has sore feet, and Vladimir's urinary infection troubles him. Yet, suddenly Vladimir moves from his physical suffering to the biblical concept of "Hope deferred maketh the something sick..." (*Waiting for Godot* 8). The complete proverb is this: "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life" (*Proverbs* 13:12). The proverb foreshadows the two tramps' hope for Godot's arrival, which is deferred until the end of the story. Their suffering and being unsure about Godot's arrival draws Vladimir thoughts to the story of the two thieves in the Bible. At the beginning of the first act, there is a discussion between Vladimir and Estragon about the story of the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus, as quoted in the Bible. According to Dan O. Via Jr., The story of the thieves has no meaning for Vladimir and Estragon's current situation. They know all about what happened to the thieves and Jesus's crucifixion. The main purpose of reminding themselves of biblical stories is only to pass the time. *Waiting* in itself is a torture for them; therefore, they look for ways to kill the time (*Reading on Waiting for Godot*, 2001: 85).

But unlike Dan O. Via Jr. I think that even if Vladimir tells the story of the two thieves in the Bible to pass the time, it leads to a serious conclusion about the unreliability of religion. The biblical tenet "Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned" (qtd. In Esslin, 1968: 32) was Beckett's favourite verse, and was used by him again when he was asked about the theme of *Waiting for Godot*.

Vladimir tells Estragon that, according to one of the four evangelists, only one of the two thieves who were supposed to be crucified with Jesus was saved. Two of the evangelists did not give the same account, and the fourth one reported that both thieves were damned. Vladimir asks Estragon “how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of [one] thief being saved ... why believe him [the one who reported only one of the thieves was saved] rather than the others?” When Estragon asks him a question, “Who believes him?”, Vladimir answers: “Everybody”, and then Estragon says, “People are bloody ignorant apes” (*Waiting for Godot*, 14-15). The story of the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus truly leads one to be disappointed in God’s judgment, and hence it multiplies one’s stress and suffering. Although the thieves were guilty of the same crime, one was saved but the other was damned. The basis of their salvation and damnation is unclear, and it leaves the audience uncertainty of their own situation. Martin Esslin believes that the atmosphere of the uncertainty of the hope of salvation is one of the main themes in the whole play (1968: 32).

Furthermore, there is the same illogicality and irrationality in terms of salvation and damnation in Godot’s treatment of the boy and his brother. The boy minds the goats and is treated kindly by Godot, whereas his brother minds the sheep and is beaten. This story is further evidence of the incomprehensibility of the term grace:

Vladimir: You work for Mr. Godot?

Boy: Yes Sir.

Vladimir: What do you do?

Boy: I mind the goats, Sir.

Vladimir: Is he good to you?

Boy: Yes Sir.

Vladimir: He doesn’t beat you?

Boy: No Sir, not me.

Vladimir: Whom does he beat?

Boy: He beats my brother.

Vladimir: Ah, you have a brother?

Boy: Yes Sir.

Vladimir: What does he do?

Boy: He minds the sheep, Sir.

Vladimir: And why doesn’t he beat you?

Boy: I don’t know, Sir.

Vladimir: He must be fond of you.

Boy: I don’t know, Sir.

Silence (49-50)

The parable of the sheep and goats, which is about salvation and damnation, is mentioned in the Bible:

When the son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the king say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world ... Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matthew 25: 31-46)

These biblical parables support the irrationality of God’s judgment which prefers to curse rather than to save. Therefore Godot, whose role as a saviour must appear to offer hope and comfort to Vladimir and Estragon, damns them unreasonably. That is why, at the end of the play, when the two tramps think that Godot is approaching, Estragon becomes scared, runs away and shouts “I’m in hell”. The two tramps wait for an irrational and unreliable Godot who never appears in the play. Therefore, there is futility and absurdity in their hoping and waiting. Gatsinzi Basaninyenzi draws a conclusion about the falsity of religion in this way:

Beckett’s Godot (God) is a capricious being: he promises but never fulfils; he beats the boy who takes care of his sheep for no reason whatsoever and treats well the boy who takes care of his goats. The biblical symbolism of sheep and goats is only too obvious. For Beckett, God is arbitrary in his dealings with man, and the biblical image of a just and loving father is a false one. (1993: 70)

Despite this, Esslin finds superiority in their waiting. He states that Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting for a saviour, Godot, are superior to Pozzo and Lucky, who are not waiting for him. Pozzo and Lucky have no objective and no appointment with a saviour; they “are wholly egocentric, wholly wrapped up in their sadomasochistic relationship. Is it not their faith that puts the two tramps on to a higher plane?” (1968: 37). It seems that, for Esslin, only the matter of faith is crucial, though the essence of their faith is not necessary. Esslin’s commentary raises some questions in one’s mind, such as how does faith in their illusory saviour make them superior? Then, one immediately thinks that they do not even know who Godot is. They have not had any previous experience of Godot. Other questions may come into one’s mind, such as: Is Godot supposed to undertake to give the two tramps salvation, or blow meaning and direction into their meaningless lives?

Esslin believes that the two tramps’ superiority over Pozzo and Lucky is not merely limited to their faith in Godot. Vladimir and Estragon are not so naive as Pozzo and Lucky to believe in illusions such as wealth, action and reason. They are aware of the absurdity of the things that Pozzo and Lucky are dependent on (ibid. 37). Despite Esslin’s claims, at the end of the play, when the boy arrives to remind them that what they are waiting for is just an illusion, and Godot’s arrival may not be a source of salvation, they are overwhelmed by deep frustration. I think that what can be truly concluded from the story is that Vladimir and Estragon’s illusory faith fools them into waiting passively and doing nothing for a change. Therefore, their false hope leads them into deep frustration in the end, and the absurdity of their faith pervades the whole play.

The story of the thieves at the beginning of the Act I, and the revelation of Godot’s unkindness in his treatment of the boy’s brother in the Act II, foreshadows the falsity of their hope and salvation. The play’s purport is that religious problems may lead only to confusion, and religion as the “ultimate truth”, with a great number of people’s lives being based on its principles, could be unreliable and confusing, “...for Vladimir, the Bible is just like any other text whose ‘truth’ must be tested by logic. In this case, Vladimir has found the ‘truth’ of the Bible to be fallible, hence the anti-Christian stance of the play” (Basaninyenzi, 1993: 65). In this regard, Eugene Webb points out that:

As long as thought can find at least an illusion of meaning it is a source of some comfort, but the trouble is that it continually runs up against such ultimate mysteries as that represented by the story of the thieves. When this happens, the effect is not only disorienting but painful, sometimes excruciating. (*Readings on Waiting for Godot*, 2001: 57)

Therefore, via the illusory knowledge of religion, the world and its people are unattainable for human beings. Nevertheless, believers claim that only religion can and define the origin of the world and the existence of human beings.

Dan O. Via Jr. believes that Beckett’s use of biblical imagery in *Waiting for Godot* makes it too pessimistic when compared to normal nihilistic plays without allusions. The Biblical parables and images of salvation which are used in the play allude to the inability of God in sending His saviour to redeem man. However, he believes that the extreme atmosphere of pessimism and hopelessness in the play does not prove that hope is lost. In fact, “Hope is not dead, but there is little reason to suppose that hope will be more fulfilled in the future than it has been in the past” (*Readings on Waiting for Godot*, 2001: 95).

The tree that served as barren gallows in the first act, springs forth and has a few leaves, which probably represents the passage of time as the birth of nature breeds a sign of new hope. The play, for Eugene Webb, reveals the illusory pattern that Vladimir and Estragon have made for themselves. In the case of one’s enthusiasm in making a pattern in one’s life, Webb uses Aristotle’s words:

Being a creature that desires to know, man cannot endure for long the absence of meaning. And meaning, in its most basic sense, is pattern. If man cannot find pattern in his world, he will try by any means at his disposal to create it, or at least imagine it. If a jar is not available, then a stump or a tin can will do. (*Readings on Waiting for Godot*, 2001: 55)

Regarding what Aristotle said about the significance of patterns in human life, one may recognize that Godot’s arrival as a saviour can bring a pattern into Vladimir and Estragon’s lives. However, such an illusory pattern is easily demolished for them, after the arrival of the boy at the end of the play.

Webb notes that Vladimir realizes “the painful truth that the Godot he has made with his imagination into a kind of God, into a figure, that is representing absolute power and ultimate meaning, is as empty a God as the traditional one ‘with a white beard...’” (*Readings on Waiting for Godot*, 2001: 64). Vladimir realizes that Godot can do nothing for them, as God can do nothing for human beings. Godot is arbitrary, like God. Godot plays a passive role in their life as God plays a passive role in human lives. Therefore, to be hopeful of his intervention in their affairs is just absurd.

Furthermore, Webb argues, “And Godot, who is kind to one boy but beats the other, is as arbitrary as God was to the thieves or to Cain and Abel” (*ibid.*, 57). He realizes that they are waiting in vain and, all this time, they hope for something that never gets fulfilled. What they were waiting all the time for just helps them to comfort themselves, and to alleviate the futility of their existence. They hope that the purpose of living will be given to them by Godot’s arrival. Therefore, the effect of Godot’s non-arrival multiplies the uncertainty of their lack of identity. As a result, they turn to the idea of death, and are overwhelmed by desperation and their contemplation of committing suicide.

VLADIMIR: We'll hang ourselves to-morrow. [*Pause.*] Unless Godot comes.

ESTRAGON: And if he comes?

VLADIMIR: Then we'll be saved. (*Waiting for Godot*, 88)

3. Indeterminacy of religion in *Endgame*

Beckett’s use of biblical tenets in *Endgame* is remarkable, as well. However, in *Endgame*, Beckett does not enter into the issue of religion and its tenets as critically as he does in *Waiting for Godot*. In *Endgame*, biblical tenets are used to mocking mostly; nevertheless, similar to the biblical tenets which are used in *Waiting for Godot*, they trigger spectators to think about the truthfulness and the validity of religion more deeply. For example, there is comic relief in the play when Nagg and Nell narrate the story of an old Jewish tailor who could not make a pair of trousers after three months for his customer. Finally, the customer says to the tailor angrily:

God made the world. Yes Sir, no less Sir, The WORLD! And you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months! [*Tailor’s voice, scandalized.*] ‘But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look—[pause]—and look [*loving gesture, Proudly*]—at my TROUSERS!’ (*Endgame*, 103)

Helen H. Popovich deduces from the statement that Nagg “implies that God was an inept creator, and he creates a god who exhibits this same ineptness” (1972: 37). Another scene is when Hamm orders Clov and Nagg to concentrate and pray to God. Since he realises that their praying is pointless, and nothing will be changed by it, he cries angrily, “The bastard! He doesn’t exist!” (*Endgame*, 119).

In fact, Beckett questions the significance of God’s existence by posing universal and timeless questions such as: Does God truly exist? Do we matter to Him? Beckett poses these questions without providing answers. Even in some of his interviews, when he was asked about his intention of putting such a crux in his plays, Beckett answered as if he did not know more than the audiences about the questions. In this regard, Harold Hobson states:

Mr. Beckett is a poet; and the business of a poet is not to clarify, but to suggest, to imply, to employ words with auras of association, with a reaching out towards a vision, a probing down into an emotion, beyond the compass of explicit definition. And this is exactly what the so dangerously simple dialogue of ‘Fin de Partie’ [*Endgame*] does. (*Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, 1979: 162)

Beckett wanted to persuade audiences to think deeply by asking whether God does exist, or if believing in God is just a consolation for mankind. If audiences think profoundly, as Beckett wished, they may decide that God might have been created by humans, like a myth, to put humans at ease by being reminded of Him, and so reduce their fear of death. Beckett uses the name of God negatively. It is used for the sake of cursing: “What in God’s name could there be on the horizon? (*Endgame*, 118); “Catch him [a flea] for the love of God” (*ibid.*, 108).

Alice and Kenneth Hamilton argue that Beckett’s use of biblical tenets, as an allusion, proves that he was a non-believer, “Beckett does not use Christian ‘mythology’ just because he knows it, but, more particularly, he is certain it is not true” (*Condemn to Life: The World of Samuel Beckett*, 1976: 35-6). When the truthfulness of Christianity, biblical lessons and, consequently, the existence of God are being questioned like this, the audience member is overwhelmed by the most obvious truth, death. He is aware that, sooner or later, he dies, and when there is no God, then he shifts to nothingness.

Therefore, this is absurd, if all one's struggling in the world, all one's ups and downs and hopes for the future end in the nothingness which death brings for him. It is possible to say that Beckett's absurdism somehow comes from direct blasphemy, which can be clearly seen in Hamm's words, "The bastard! He doesn't exist!"

4. Conclusion

At the end of the both plays, Beckett leaves the audience in indeterminacy. In *Waiting for Godot*, for example, perhaps, Godot finally arrives or perhaps he does not. Yet the point is that Godot's arrival seems to be left purely to chance. This is a reflection of the absurdist value that the world is a random and purposeless place. Vladimir hopes to be saved by Godot, but contemplates the fact that Godot might punish them as he punished the boy unreasonably. This exposes the ambiguity of Godot's role. He could be good but, then again, he might not be. Beckett manages to convey the absurdist ideals of a random universe and dislocation, depicting life as purposeless and human beings as inexplicable.

Both plays end with no conclusion, as well. There is a sense of uncertainty in Beckett's plays, which creates doubts in the minds of spectators and readers. At the end of *Endgame*, Clov decides to leave Hamm. He gets dressed and stands next to Hamm with his suitcase, umbrella and overcoat. He does not respond when he is called by Hamm. He just stands next to Hamm, impassive and motionless. We will never know whether he succeeds in leaving or not. What we see, in the end, is that he has not done it yet. There are also some indications in the play that make it difficult for Clov to leave: "CLOV: I say to myself – sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than if you want them to let you go – one day. But I feel too old, and too far, to form new habits. Good it'll never end, I'll never go" (*Endgame*, 132). Regarding Clov's statement, Jane Alison Hale posits, "What prevents Clov from going is the indeterminacy of space: there is nowhere else than the endless, formless, inescapable space he has always inhabited because a 'there' can exist only by contrast with a well-defined 'here'" (*Waiting for Godot and Endgame*, 1992: 80). This kind of "indeterminacy" is also seen in *Waiting for Godot*, when the two tramps decide to leave, but they do not. "VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go? ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go. [*They do not move.*]" (*Waiting for Godot*, 88).

In both cases, it is obvious that there is a contradiction between the characters' words and actions. They want to stand on their own, but they are dependent on each other, as if they have been cursed to live with each other. At the end, nothing might have been concluded clearly; however, there are some feelings that one may share with the characters on the scene, such as uncertainty, doubt, frustration and an awareness of one's inability to change one's life, which all meanwhile support the notion of absurdity.

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