Waiting for Nothing: Study of Absurdity in “Waiting for Godot” By Samuel Beckett

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ABSTRACT

The essay ponders over the major themes and techniques used to portray absurdity. The depiction of characters reflects the common behaviour in the conditions that humans go through. The play provides deep insight of the human circumstances and condition. The interpretation of the play carries multiplicity and the final perception remains with the audience. The play is one of the strongest of those to be added as the masterpiece of Samuel Beckett in the “Theatre of Absurd”.

Keywords:
Samuel Beckett, Existentialism, Absurdity

Introduction:

The play “Waiting for Godot” is considered as one of the quintessential plays showing its harmony with the philosophy of existentialism. By and large, the play batters the idea of “creating purpose out of life and making it more meaningful” by portraying the life of its characters in the spiral of nothingness. The name “Godot” was first introduced by Samuel Beckett in his famous play “Waiting for Godot”, first published in French text in Paris at the Theatre de Babylone in 1953 and then was translated into English in 1954. There are many references given to Godot by many critics. It is interpreted variously as God, Saviour, happiness, love, hope, death, future, fulfilment, eternal life, a Paris street notorious for its prostitutes, a famous French cyclist, etc. Some critics also suggest that Beckett might have derived the name from Balzac’s Le Fasteur in which the characters wait for one Monsier Godeau thinking that he would save them from bankruptcy and ruin. But the absurdity lies in the very fact that no any interpretation of it has proved to be the exact one. He somehow deliberately tries to create the absurdity. Martin Esslin, in his “The Theatre of the Absurd” (1960) points out that “Waiting for Godot” was part of a large literary movement called “Theatre of the Absurd”, a philosophy movement pioneered by Albert Camus. In fact, Beckett has himself denied all the interpretations to keep it absurd. In 1955, he remarked that, “Why people have to complicate a thing so simple I can’t make out. As the whole theme of “waiting for Godot” relies on absurdity to depict lack of intrinsic purpose, Beckett tries to keep even the identity of Godot very much absurd.
Samuel Beckett and Absurdity:

Samuel Beckett is an Irish writer, born on April 13, 1906 in Dublin, Ireland to a father who is said to be the contractor and a moth who was a nurse. He got his bachelor’s degree in Modern Languages from Trinity college, Dublin after completing high school education from a boarding school. Thereafter, he served as a lecturer, taught French at Campbell college, Belfast. It was after meeting James Joyce that he started presenting his pieces of writing on criticism and poetry. Then, he visited different places around the world and met many people from whom he got inspired to draw most his famous characters. He was well versed with both French and English and has written in both the languages. He almost touched all the genres of literature like critical essays, plays, novels, short stories and poetry as well. His major works include: Murphy, Watt, Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Happy Days and many more. He has been awarded for Croix de Guerre (1945) for bravery during his time in the French résistance and Noble Prize in Literature (1969). He has translated all of his works into English, except “Molloy”. He is seen as a last modernist writer who as per Martin Esslin presented tremendous pieces of work in the “Theatre of Absurd” and became its key figure. Due to his immense contribution, he is known as the father of “Theatre of Absurd”. The setting in is plays is such that the external world seems devour and queer, characters are trapped in basic disorientation and communication seems complete failure. Most of Beckett’s works including “Waiting for Godot”, showcase that he comes in the category of atheist existentialism. His works are majorly concerned with atheist existentialist philosophies and absurdity.

Existentialism and Absurdity:

Existentialism is a philosophical movement formed its roots in 19th century questioning the very existence of humans. The foundation to the philosophy was framed by Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) which was further carried by profound works of Karl Jaspers (1899 – 1976), Martin Heidegger (1899 – 1976), Albert Camus (1917 – 1960) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980). The theory has expounding focus on absurdity of life which is full of nothingness or so to say nihilism. Broadly, the philosophy sheds light on existentialist life by asserting discovery of life through individual experience repudiating the age old religious philosophy and spiritual beliefs. It suggests that there is no as such predefined set goal or duty assigned by the supreme for the fulfilment of which man exists. Contrary to this, goal of existence is defined and structured by man himself. Thus, the philosophy of existentialism believes in the freedom of human but simultaneously this freedom also leads to the onus. This onus is regarding the thoughts that takes place in the conscious mind of human which further leads to the decisions he take, further proceed by the execution of ideas through actions and ultimately results into what a man becomes.

Absurdity is a basic attribute of existentialism. It is a condition when one becomes anxious and senseless but gets “conscious realization that there is no final resolution—no final synthesis—but only a kind of social game whose purpose it is to create thesis that will eventually destroy themselves (Goodwin, 1971, P,45). Certain elements consisting of senselessness, ambiguity, anxiety, loss, chaos, disorientation, vagueness, detachment, irrationality of life makes death acceptable which is the bitter truth of existence, so that the absurdity of life can be escaped. Not just absurdity celebrated and to certain extent glorifies death but also marks disparity between life and action. On one hand man tries to seek solution or incessantly tries to give meaning to life and contrarily death seems the ultimate solution to evade the absurdity of life.

Who is Godot?

The situation in the play is very much similar to the situation people face in real life. In the play, Godot is not just an unknown figure for Vladimir and Estragon but they are also uncertain about his arrival. This unknown figure and its uncertainty is also there in every person’s life which Beckett directly or indirectly tries to convey. Though there have been many interpretations done for the identity of Godot but what more suits to its identity in close association to the play is that Godot is what one wishes and waits for through all his or her life till the last breath. The prime focus of the whole play is on ‘waiting’ than on ‘Godot’. Till the last breath this wait is never ending. Just like Vladimir and Estragon who are puppets in the hands of some unknown figure, people in the real world are playing in the hands of their Godot. This wait is a hope which enables human beings to carry on their life. If we really compare the situation of the play to the real life, we find that Godot is not something that we achieve but it is
something we always wish to achieve. There may be many achievements in one’s life and when something is achieved there has to be some other wish which could give life some motive to live. Godot can be interpreted as the eternal satisfaction that one gets and the feel of that this is the end of all, this is all. But this eternal satisfaction either never comes and we keep on waiting or it is short lived. This hope and temporariness is necessary because this is how one is able to live in this world. And the end of all or the achievement of Godot is the end of life. The tool that keeps this hope stable is religion or the spiritual world. But when religion itself is questioned it creates horror in the minds of the people. In the play the deprivation of the religion is very much there when we see the characters talking about religion vaguely, showing that they dimly remember Bible and when they compare themselves to the God shows the religious laxity. Wherever some instincts of Bible or religion are shown in the play, we see a kind of absurdity and unfamiliarity of the characters with it. This is very much similar to the vanishing faith of people on the religion after scientific developments especially after the Darwinism theory of evolution which gained general scientific acceptance after Darwin published ‘On the origin of species’ in 1859. From this time the questioning on religion started increasing and the faith on religion started decreasing and till the time of Beckett this questioning reached to the higher level and the faith was more or less became vague. People became more rational. Scientific development not just led to the declining of religion but also led to the wars. After the two world wars people felt that life is so insecure and there is no guarantee of it. People felt that there is nothing in this life. We are born one day and one day we have to die. But in spite of knowing the nothingness of life the decisions like committing suicide and bringing end to this nothingness are not very easy. Estragon and Vladimir plans to die but could not attempt it because for humans even after knowing the absurdity of life it is not easy to bring end to that absurdity. Just like Sisyphus in “The myth of Sisyphus” we keep on doing one or the other thing, no matter what the results are. We keep on weaving our Godot so that this life becomes easy with some purpose and sitting idle here is equal to death. Vladimir and Estragon tries to pass their time by doing some useless activities which shows that how vainly people are struggling to survive, to find purpose by doing some useless activity and Godot is that hope and wish that led people to survive. In short who is Godot? and what is Godot? may not be very clear but it is something we are waiting and shall keep on waiting.

Conclusion:

The play winds up the whole reality in just one sentence when Estragon says “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, It’s awful!” (27). It can be concluded that Samuel Beckett, through all his portrayal, be it strangeness of the setting or aridity of the characters, he has not left any stone untouched to uncover the dilemmas of existentialism and absurdity. This play dramatically presents the vague human conditions and also mirrors the chaos and ambiguity in contemporary society as well as highlights the lack of orientation in the life. The theme of uncertainty is certainly projected as the beast in his play.

References:


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