Tikrit University

College of Education for Humanities

English Department

Fourth Grade

Waiting for Godot

Themes Analysis

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1 - Humor and the Absurd:

Waiting for Godot is a prime example of what has come to be known as the theater of the absurd. The play is filled with nonsensical lines, wordplay, meaningless dialogue, and characters who abruptly shift emotions and forget everything, ranging from their own identities to what happened yesterday. All of this contributes to an absurdist humor throughout the play. However, this humor is often uncomfortably mixed together with tragic or serious content to make a darker kind of comedy. Estragon refers to "billions of others," who have been killed, and describes being beaten by an anonymous "they." Lucky (whose ill-fitting name is itself darkly comic) is treated horribly and physically abused on-stage. And Vladimir and Estragon talk nonchalantly and pleasantly about suicide. All this has a discomforting effect on the audience, who is not sure how to react to this absurd mixture of comedy and tragedy, seriousness and playfulness. In act one, Vladimir says, "one daren't even laugh any more," and his comment could apply well to the audience of Beckett's play, who don't know whether to laugh or to cringe at the events on-stage. The absurdity caused by the seeming mismatch between characters' tones and the content of their speech can be seen as a reaction to a world emptied of meaning and significance. If the world is meaningless, it makes no sense to see it as comic or tragic, good or bad. Beckett thus presents an eerie play that sits uneasily on the border between tragedy and comedy, in territory one can only call the absurd.

2- Waiting, Boredom, and Nihilism:

As Beckett's title indicates, the central act of the play is waiting, and one of the most salient aspects of the play is that nothing really seems to happen. Vladimir and Estragon spend the entire play waiting for Godot, who never comes. Estragon repeatedly wants to leave, but Vladimir insists that they stay, in case Godot actually shows up. As a result of this endless waiting, both Vladimir and Estragon are "bored to death," as Vladimir himself puts it. Both Vladimir and Estragon repeat throughout the play that there is "nothing to be done" and "nothing to do." They struggle to find ways to pass the time, so they end up conversing back and forth about nothing at all—including talking about how they don't know what to talk about—simply to occupy themselves while waiting. The boredom of the characters on-stage mirrors the boredom of the audience. Beckett has deliberately constructed a play where not only his characters, but also his audience wait for something that never happens. Just like Estragon and Vladimir, the audience waits during the play for some major event or climax that never occurs. Audience members might at times feel uncomfortable and want, like Estragon, to leave, but are bound to stay, in case Godot should actually arrive later in the play.

All of this waiting for nothing, talking about nothing, and doing nothing contributes to a pervasive atmosphere of nihilism in the play. Broadly defined, nihilism is a denial of any significance or meaning in the world. Deriving from the Latin word for "nothing" (nihil), it is a worldview centered around negation, claiming that there is no truth, morality, value, or—in an extreme form—even reality. This seems to describe the world of the play, largely emptied out of meaning, emotion, and substance, leading to characters who blather on endlessly in insignificant conversation. Given the play's deep exploration of the absurd humor and feelings of alienation that arise from this nihilistic understanding of the world, one could say that Waiting for Godot is, at its core, about nothing.

3- Modernism and Postmodernism:

Written in 1953, Waiting for Godot was a somewhat late successor to the vibrant experimentation in art and literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries known as Modernism. Modernist writers saw themselves as dramatically breaking

with the past and innovating in all aspects of art, literature, and culture. Beckett's play shares with Modernist works a fascination with pushing the boundaries of literary genre, representation, and etiquette, as well as an interest in language and thought prioritized above action and plot. However, the play can also be seen as somewhat Postmodern, belonging to the literary and artistic period following Modernism. Both Modernism and Postmodernism are rather vague terms, often used differently by different critics. Moreover, it is also debated whether Postmodernism continues the aspirations of Modernism, or is a more radical break with it. In any case, Beckett's play sits on the fence between these two movements. While Postmodernism is difficult to define exactly, Waiting for Godot displays a number of the defining features of a Postmodern conception of the world. One of these is an alienation from tradition and a questioning of the grand narratives that were previously seen to have some kind of authority. This includes grand narratives of historical progress—that history is the story of human life continually getting better—as well as religious narratives like the Bible. There are some biblical and classical references in the play, but they are only used ironically. Estragon compares himself to Christ in act one, for example, but the comparison is rather ridiculous. And Pozzo invokes "Atlas, son of Jupiter!" but doesn't actually believe in the force of this classical reference (what's more, he gets his mythological family tree wrong). The religious and cultural traditions of the past have lost their authority and centrality in the world of the play. Another Postmodern feature of the play is a pervasive sense of entrapment or enslavement, but a lack of any central authority. Characters are often unable to move or get up from the ground for no apparent reason. Vladimir and Estragon are, in a sense, trapped in their place of waiting, even though no one is forcing them to stay. Pozzo is Lucky's master, but he is far from free or powerful. Everyone in the play seems to be trapped or enslaved in some way, but no one seems to be the master. The characters of Waiting for Godot are also profoundly disoriented: they don't know where, or when, they are. At times, the characters don't even know who they are, as Estragon cannot remember his own past, for example. Finally, some of Beckett's characters feel a separation from reality. Both Vladimir and Pozzo question, in act two, whether they are actually awake or are simply dreaming. This confusion of reality with a dream or a false representation is a central, common feature of Postmodernism.

Seeing Beckett's play as Postmodernist is more than just labeling it as part of a particular literary movement; it gets to the heart of the world Beckett represents, one defined by alienation, entrapment, disorientation, and a questioning of reality. With the play's lack of specifics regarding its place or time, the circumstances of its events, or the particular back stories of its characters, Waiting for Godot can even be seen as a kind of allegory for the Postmodern condition. Beckett wrote his play before Postmodernism really coalesced or was written about as a distinct period or movement. Nonetheless, while in some ways still belonging to Modernism, the play presciently depicts many of the defining aspects of a Postmodern world. In representing these negative features, the play can be seen as either a pessimistic indictment of the present or as a chilling warning of what the future might look like: as how Beckett saw the world to be or as he feared it might become.

4- **Time:**

Closely related to the Modernist and Postmodernist aspects of Beckett's play is its conception of time, an issue of fascination to Modernists and Postmodernists alike. Perhaps the most important thing about time in the play is that it is uncertain. All of the characters (and thus the audience, as well) are unsure of exactly when the play is taking place. The time period of the play is unclear, as is the relative chronology of the play's events. Vladimir is rather sure that act two is one day after act one, but all the other characters disagree. Moreover, everyone except for Vladimir seems to have forgotten the events of act one by the time act two begins. In act two, Vladimir and Estragon even disagree over what time of day it is.

Amid all this uncertainty, the one thing that seems certain is that time is recursive in Waiting for Godot. That is, the same events occur again and again, while characters also repeat themselves. As Pozzo and Estragon forget their immediate past, they end up repeating much of act one in act two. Vladimir and Estragon wait in the same place, where the same two people (Lucky and Pozzo) encounter them, and where a boy delivers the same message from Godot. Vladimir himself wonders to what degree the events of act two are an exact repetition of those in act one, as he asks whether Lucky and Pozzo are the same characters from the previous day, and whether it is the same young boy, or a different one. The boy claims to be a different boy from that of act one, and Pozzo does not remember Vladimir or

Estragon, but given all of the forgetfulness in the play, Vladimir's questions remain unanswered.

With this strangely repetitive temporal structure, the characters of Waiting for Godot are trapped within an infinite present time. "Time has stopped," says Vladimir in act one. Indeed, the ending of the play seems somewhat arbitrary. It could have continued on for however many acts, endlessly repeating, as Vladimir and Estragon endlessly await the arrival of the mysterious Mr. Godot. Moreover, it is not clear that the beginning of the play was really the beginning of this story. How many days did Estragon and Vladimir come to the same part of the road and have essentially the same conversation before the day of act one?

5- Humanity, Companionship, Suffering, and Dignity:

Beckett's play is filled with a great deal of physical, mental, and emotional suffering. Vladimir and Estragon (especially Estragon) are starved for food, in physical pain, and "bored to death." Both fear an anonymous "they" who threaten to beat them at night, and are frequently unable to move of their own accord. Estragon mentions "billions of others," who have been killed, but does not elaborate. Lucky, meanwhile, is treated horribly, pulled about by a rope tied around his neck, beaten by Pozzo, and kicked repeatedly by Estragon. All of this suffering has a dehumanizing effect, and robs characters of their dignity. Lucky, for example, is addressed by Pozzo as "pig," and treated like a pack animal. Estragon is reduced to sucking on Pozzo's leftover chicken bones pathetically. And even Pozzo, who imposes suffering on Lucky, is unable to get up from the ground when he falls in act two.

Amid all this, Vladimir and Estragon desperately seek two things throughout the play: some recognition of their humanity, and companionship. When the boy asks Vladimir what message he would like to send to Godot, he simply asks the boy to tell Godot that he saw Vladimir. In other words, Vladimir wants to be acknowledged as a person. This is particularly important to him because the other characters in the play forget and mix up their identities. Pozzo and Lucky don't

recognize Estragon and Vladimir in act two, whereas Estragon forgets about Lucky and Pozzo. In this environment where people are so easily forgotten, Vladimir wants some confirmation of his own identity and humanity. Beyond this, Vladimir and Estragon also desire companionship. Although Estragon repeatedly suggests that they go their separate ways, the two stay together out of a mutual fear of loneliness. When Estragon momentarily leaves the stage, Vladimir panics and becomes immediately lonely. And Estragon needs Vladimir as well—whether to have someone to talk to and ask questions of, or to help him put on his boots.

Nonetheless, even as Vladimir and Estragon seek some kind of dignity and companionship in the face of suffering, they are remarkably indifferent to the suffering of others. Vladimir is at first outraged at Pozzo's treatment of Lucky, but soon gets used to it and even encourages Estragon to kick him. Vladimir and Estragon converse nonchalantly while Pozzo is stuck on the ground and crying for help in act two, and they first scheme how they might take advantage of him rather than help him. Vladimir and Estragon value their own relationship, but generally fail to sympathize with Pozzo and Lucky as other potential companions. Beckett suggests that this kind of indifference to the pain of others is what allows the vicious cycle of suffering to continue on indefinitely, as it does in the play.