

Waiting for Godot as a tragicomedy

Tragicomedy is a play which claims a plot apt for tragedy but which ends happily like a comedy. The action is sometimes serious in theme, subject matter and tone but it seems to be a tragic catastrophe until an unexpected turn in events brings out the happy ending. The characters of a tragicomedy are noble but they are involved in improbabilities. In such a play tragic and comic elements are mixed up together. Fletcher, in his "Preface to the Faithful Shepherdess", defines a tragicomedy as: "A tragicomedy is not so called in respect to mirth and killing, but in respect it wants death which is enough to make it no tragedy. Shakespeare's 'Cymbeline' and 'The Winter's Tale' may also be categorized as tragicomedy."

The English edition of "Waiting for Godot", published in 1956 describes the play as a "tragicomedy" in two acts. There are many dialogues, gestures, situations and actions that are stuff of pure comedy. All musical devices are employed to create laughter in such a tragic situation of waiting. The total atmosphere of the play is very akin to dark-comedy. For example, Vladimir is determined not to hear Estragon's nightmare. The latter pleads with him in vain to hear him, saying that there is nobody else to whom he may communicate his private nightmares.

The audience burst out in laughter when they see Estragon putting off and on his boots. Vladimir's game with his hat appears as if this is happening in a circus. Vladimir is suffering from prostate problem. Vladimir's way of walking with stiff and short strides is as funny as Estragon's limping on the stage. Estragon's gestures of encouraging Vladimir to urinate off-stage are farcical. The comedy in this play at certain times gives the impression of Vaudeville. There are many dialogues which occur like a comic paradigm in the play. To cite an example the following conversation may be quoted:

Estragon: Let's go.

Vladimir: We can not.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We are waiting for Godot.

(They do not move.)

Again, Estragon and Vladimir put on and take off each other's hat as well as that of Lucky again and again. It shows that in the world of tramps, there is no place of significant actions. The most farcical situation in the play is the one where the tramps are testing the strength of the cord with which they wish to hang themselves. The cord breaks under the strain. One cannot have an uninhabited laugh at the situation for there is also something deeply uncomfortable.

"Waiting for Godot" has several moments of anguish and despair. We are told that someone beats Estragon daily. Estragon's feet and Vladimir's kidneys are also taken to be granted. The tramps resent that they should be asked whether it still hurts. It goes without saying that it hurts all the time. When Vladimir asks Estragon whether his boots are hurting him, he responds:

Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!

A little later Estragon asks Vladimir about his kidney trouble and the latter replies in the same words:

Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!

In fact his trouble is so bad that it does not even permit him to laugh. Life lies all bleak and barren before them and that only valid comment on it is the one with which the play opens, "Nothing to be done". There is a world of negation in which inactivity is the safest course; as Estragon says:

Do not let us do anything, it's safer.

The tramps are living at the barest level of existence. Carrot, turnips and radishes are all they have to eat. Estragon's remarks show tragedy and helplessness:

Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.

Contextually, the situation of Lucky too is quite pathetic, especially in view of his glorious past, as Pozzo describes it. His speech tells us that Lucky must have brooded deeply over the anguish of the human situation. The anguish breaks in his incoherent harangue:

"... the flames, the tears the stones so blue so calm alas alas on on the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the labours abandoned left unfinished graver still abode of stones in a word I resume alas alas abandoned unfinished the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the skull alas the stones Cunard (melee, final vociferations) tennis ... the stones ... so calm ...Cunard ... unfinished ..."

The comedy in "Waiting for Godot" at once turns into tragedy when the audience thinks about the helplessness of tramps. Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for someone who never comes. In order to pass time they indulge in irrelevant, meaningless activity. The element of force fades away and miserable condition of man looms large in our imagination. Their life can be compared with that of a prisoner for whom there is no escape, even suicide is impossible. Every activity is a mockery of human existence.

The changing of farce into absurdity brings a lot of tragic sentiment in the play. Estragon's nakedness is a picture of 'man's miserable condition'. The absurd living is a major source of tragedy. The source is the situation of pointless waiting of Estragon and Vladimir. They do not know who Godot is. They are sure neither about the time nor about the place of their appointment. They even do not know what will happen if they stop waiting. Lack of essential knowledge makes them totally impotent and powerless. They are glued to a situation. Nothing is certain and all they can say is "Nothing to be done".

The total effect of the play is therefore the co-mingling of tragic and comic elements, which in turn suggests that Samuel Beckett was a realistic dramatist who looked at life from a position of a pessimist and an optimist. The form of tragicomedy is highly suitable to this vision of life. The climax of Beckett's tragicomedy is the role of Lucky. He is wearing servant's vest while holding his master's overcoat, a basket and a stool. His neck is tied with one end of the rope. His appearance is not only fantastic but grotesque too. The moment we realize that he is a half-wit; he becomes an image of man's misery. We are all the more sorry for Lucky when it is revealed that Pozzo has learnt all the beautiful things of life from lucky. But now Pozzo is taking the same person to sell in a fair. The relationship of a ringmaster and his trained animal, changes into a relationship of an owner and a slave. It is an exploitation of a man by a man who stops the audience from bursting out into laughter. Comedy has been checked by tragic element or sentiments, while the effect of tragedy has been mitigated by farce created through characters, dialogues, gestures and actions. We can sum up with the remarks of Sean O' Casey, ***"Beckett is a clever writer, for within him there is no hazard of hope; no desire for it; nothing in it but a lust for despair and a crying of woe, not in a wilderness, but in a garden."***