

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as an absurd play

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was premiered in 1953 at the Theatre de Babylone in Paris. The play is thought to initiate a theatrical tradition called absurd drama. But the theatre of the absurd cannot be reduced to a single bottom line. It cannot be defined in a single word or by a particular theory. In order to understand the rise, characteristics and popularity of the absurd drama we must look back to the events that took place during the first half of the 20th century in the worlds of politics, literature, philosophy and religion.

The early 20th century witnessed two World Wars .In literature it gave birth to two recognizable literary styles: modernism and post-modernism. In philosophy the rise of existentialism was the most important event and the world also saw the decline of men's faith in religion. All these happenings paved the way for the theatrical tradition the absurd drama which in fact was a reflection the age. The term was coined by the critic Martin Esslin, who made it the title of a 1962 book on the subject. Esslin saw the work of these playwrights as giving artistic articulation to Albert Camus' philosophy that life is inherently without meaning, as illustrated in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

The group of the playwrights whose works came to be known as the absurd plays includes Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Edward Albee and Harold Pinter. These writers flout all the standards by which drama has been judged for many centuries. As playwrights they share some theatrical techniques and philosophic ideas. In their plays there is no particular attention spent on developing a recognizable plot, no detailed characterization, and no readily definable theme. This bizarre rejection of any recognizable pattern or development gave birth to the term "Literature of the Absurd". Philosophically almost all of them share the existentialist philosophy of absurdity and nothingness.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* largely deals with the absurd tradition. The play is without any plot, character, dialogue and setting in the traditional sense. The setting of the play creates the absurdist mood. A desolate country road, a ditch, and a leafless tree make up the barren, otherworldly landscape whose only occupants are two homeless men who bumble and shuffle in a vaudevillian manner. They are in rags, bowler hats, and apparently oversized boots- a very comic introduction to a very bizarre play. There is a surplus of symbolism and thematic suggestion in this setting. The landscape is a symbol of a barren and fruitless civilization or life. There is nothing to be done and there appears to be no place better to depart. The tree, usually a symbol of life with its blossoms and fruit or its suggestion of spring, is apparently dead and lifeless. But it is also the place to which they believe this Godot has asked them to come. This could mean Godot wants the men to feel the infertility of their life. At the same time, it could simply mean they have found the wrong tree.

The setting of the play reminds us the post-war condition of the world which brought about uncertainties, despair, and new challenges to the all of mankind. A pessimistic outlook laced with sadism and tangible

violence, as a rich dividend of the aftermath of wars. It is as if the poignancy and calamities of the wars found sharp reflections in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Next comes the plot. In the traditional sense a plot should concentrate on a single motivated action and is also expected to have a beginning, a middle and a neatly tied-up ending. But it's almost impossible to provide a conventional plot summary of *Waiting for Godot*, which has often been described as a play in which nothing happens. It is formless and not constructed on any structural principles. It has no Aristotelian beginning, middle and end. It starts at an arbitrary point and seem to end just as arbitrarily. Beckett, like other dramatists working in this mode, is not trying to "tell a story." He's not offering any easily identifiable solutions to carefully observed problems. There is little moralizing and no obvious "message." The pattern of the play might best be described as circular. The circularity of *Waiting for Godot* is highly unconventional.

As per as the portrayal of characters is concerned the play also fits into the absurd tradition. A well-made play is expected to present characters that are well-observed and convincingly motivated. But in the play we meet five characters who are not very recognizable human beings and don't engage themselves in a motivated action. Two tramps, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), are waiting by a tree on a country road for Godot, whom they have never met and who may not even exist. They argue, make up, contemplate suicide, discuss passages from the Bible, and encounter Pozzo and Lucky, a master and slave. Near the end of the first act, a young boy comes with a message from Mr. Godot that he will not come today but will come the next day. In the second act, the action of the first act is essentially repeated, with a few changes: the tree now has leaves, Pozzo is blind and has Lucky on a shorter leash. Once again the boy comes and tells them Mr. Godot will not come on that day and he also insists he has never met the tramps before. The play concludes with a famous exchange:

Vladimir: Well, shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go.

They do not move.

Again the traditional play is expected to entertain the audience with logically built, witty dialogue. But in this play, like any other absurd play, the dialogue seems to have degenerated into meaningless babble. The dialogues the characters exchange are meaningless banalities. They use language to feel the emptiness between them, i.e. to conceal the fact that they have no desire to talk to each other regarding anything at all.

The absurd plays deal with the themes of existentialism, especially the existentialist theme of absurdity. In other words the absurd playwrights tried to translate the contemporary existentialist philosophy into drama. They also tried to portray the distressful condition of the humans. In *Waiting for Godot* the human condition is shown as dismal and distressful. The derelict man struggles to live or rather exist, in a hostile and uncaring world. A sense of stagnancy and bareness captivates man, and whenever he tries to assert himself, he is curbed. In Beckett's words, human life is the endurance and tolerance to "the boredom of living" "replaced by the suffering of

being." These phrases speak volumes of a philosophy born out of the harsh human realities. Vladimir and Estragon are blissfully and painfully oblivious to their own condition. They go about repeating their actions every day unmindful of the monotony and captivity. They also do not activate their mind to question or brood over their own actions and the motives underlying their actions. The "compressed vacuum" in their lives is constantly disregarded. The idea that God or fate or some Supreme Being with control, toys with the lives of men is startlingly clear. Every moment of every day, mankind waits for some sign from God and hope that his suffering will end. And every day, God does not arrive.

So many times in the play, a possibility is suggested and then immediately undercut by its unhappy opposite. This technique is used by Beckett to relay his theme that life is uncertain and unpredictable at its best, unfortunate and unending at its worst. To further state this theme, Estragon asserts that "There's no lack of void" in life. It is actually of little importance where they were the previous day, as everywhere everyday the same empty vacuum envelops them. Absence, emptiness, nothingness, and unresolved mysteries are central features in the play.

Thus the play *Waiting for Godot* contains almost all the elements of an absurd play. The play depicts the irrationalism of life in a grotesquely comic and non-consequential fashion with the element of "metaphysical alienation and tragic anguish." It was first written in French and called *En attendant Godot*. The author himself translated the play into English in 1954. The uniqueness of the play compelled the audiences to flock to the theaters for a spectacularly continuous four hundred performances. At the time, there were two distinct opinions about the play; some called it a hoax and others called it a masterpiece. Nevertheless, *Waiting for Godot* has claimed its place in literary history as a masterpiece that changed the face of twentieth century drama.