



Government College

Township Lahore

Subject:

20TH Century British Literature : Poetry & Drama

Title of Assignment:

➤ 'Waiting for Godot

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Q . Philosophy of existentialism in Waiting for Godot.

Ans: "Waiting for Godot" is an existentialist play because it has clear tints of existentialism in it. If we study the term existentialism, we would come to know that it is a philosophical doctrine which lays stress upon the existence of man with his concrete experience and solidities. However, Waiting for Godot is an existentialist play for it embodies Christian existentialism. Christian existentialism was influenced by Kierkegaard and it stresses the idea that.

"In God only, man may find freedom from tension".

For the Christian existentialists, the act of engagement is religious that leads to God, whereas, according to the Atheistic existentialism, it is based on the idea that.

"Reality as existence can be lived, but can never become the object of thoughts."

Atheistic existentialism emphasized by Jean Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger states that:

"Man is alone in a godless universe",

The comparative study of both the philosophies helps us to prove "Waiting for Godot" as a Christian existentialistic play.

We know that man is facing the problem of his existence as being. He is striving for his survival and to control the bridle of the pacing or galloping time. Undoubtedly, he is struggling to save his "individuality" in space and universe. Mind that this very idea is given by the philosophy of existentialism.

Actually the word "Existentialism" stands for one's awareness of one's "beingness". It stands for the vital principles of life. It is the existence of one's entity, of one's essence, of one's quiddity, of one's subsistence, of one's own reality. It is the problem of existence of one's breeding, of one's occurrence, of one's vegetation, of one's objectives, of one's current and spare and of one's prevalent attitude as well as norms. It is the existence of one's recovery, rectification, regeneration, rejuvenation, refitting and above all of one's concrete experience and solidities.

"Waiting for Godot" resembles the existentialist literature because it deals not only with existence or identity but also with the momentary and the internal time. Though it is quite different from that of

Sartre and other early exponents of existentialism, but there is a sufficient resemblance between the standpoint of Beckett and that of the other existentialists. The closest resemblance lies in the fact that both the views give a lot of emphasis to the treatment of time. As a matter of fact, consideration of time must form a part of any view of existence, theories of time derived ultimately from either Bergson or Proust. Proust as well as those who have studied him, differentiates time into two categories, i.e., clock time (chronometric time) and subjective time as experienced. Clock time is a means of measuring natural time and we can escape our natural time only by taking recourse to illusion or the supernatural. Beckett also pays attention to this aspect of life although at that time existentialism was yet to emerge as a well defined concept. The time mentioned in "Waiting for Godot" is related to man's mental condition. For example, for the tramps the major problem is to make time pass in such a way that they are least bothered by it. Vladimir and Estragon constantly complain of the slowness with which time passes and do their best to hurry it on with their futile diversions. Ironically, they have attained, or almost attained, a godlike timelessness, the impossible romantic ideal, but instead of paradise, the halt in endless bliss, it is a limbo or purgatory. Somehow they are stuck into a pocket of misery. Estragon says, "Nothing happens, nobody comes. Nobody goes, it's awful." But we note that outside the natural time, its consequences flow on. For example, the tree has grown five or six leaves. Pozzo has grown blind and Lucky dumb. Here Estragon remarks, "They all change, only we cannot". Moreover, Vladimir's recognizing of the wound on Estragon's leg is a confirmation of a remembered past event and of the fact that nature is taking its course even in them. It should be noted that with the natural course of time, they would relieve themselves from all of their problems without doing any effort. They might die naturally, and save the effort of hanging themselves.

There is distinction between the momentary and eternal time for it deals with the question of existence and identity. This difference can also be seen in this play. In "Waiting for Godot" physical time is sometimes taken seriously and sometimes it is ridiculed or condemned. Estragon once succeeds in confusing Vladimir thoroughly about the passage of time as well as about the day of the week. In the same sentence the tramps speak of a million years ago and in the nineties. We have no reason to be certain that the second description is more factual than the first.

Doubts about time make the tramps doubt the existence and their own identity also. One tramp claims to be of the past, it is doubted by the other. Their own identity and existence in time are also open to question. One day seems to have elapsed between the first act and the second, yet it becomes extremely difficult to connect this day with the previous one by any important physical evidence.

The play *Waiting for Godot* is a full fledged existentialist play as it has all the traits of existentialism. Both Vladimir and Estragon represent the man in general, who is facing the problem of his existence



in this world. They both are bound together, like all the men by the sub-type of love, known as fraternity, comradeship or solidarity. This fraternity has become mechanical in this play. Hope of salvation is a subject of play and is the problem faced by the whole human race. Representing the man in general, the two tramps realize the futility of their exercises and we note that they are merely filling up the hours with a pointless activity. Hence, their 'Waiting' is mechanical and deals with the problem of existentialism.

The conclusion to which all this leads is a pretty hopelessness. Neither time, nor existence, neither reality nor memory or the past have any meaning or significance. Acts are meaningless, time does not flow consecutively, memory seems deceptive, existence is an impression or perhaps a dream, happiness is acutely absent -though removed, the gap it has left still aches. This tooth aching void supplies as good a metaphor as any other for nothing which the tramps feel within and without them. They are on the point of becoming hollow man in a possibly hollow philosophies of existence, but demands no other equipment in an audience than the bond of common perception.

Q. Concept of time and space in Waiting for Godot.

Answer:

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 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.

For every play which deals with the problem of existence, it is impossible to evade the discussion of time. It is Beckett's treatment of time that makes his play, *Waiting for Godot*, existentialist. Beckett's tramps have to bear the whips and scorns of time, be it temporal, eternal or psychological. There is a sharp distinction between the clock time and the subjective time in *Waiting for Godot*. There is distinction also between the momentary and the eternal. Thus, everything relating to time is clouded in doubts which also lead the tramps to doubt their own identity.

The overriding importance of waiting nullifies not only what they are doing but also the time in which they are doing it. Waiting erases the past and diminishes the present but apparently agegrandizes the future in which the waitedfor will appear, or will it? To wait for the future is also to wait for the unknown and thus to put oneself at risk. Even to wait for the dawn is to become a prisoner of solar system. When the waiting seems intolerable, Vladimir utters:

"Will night never come?"

If one yields oneself to the security of present, it is also another kind of imposition. They have kept their appointment and this gives desperation. It means that in a mutable world, appointments, vows, contracts, promises, and so forth are attempts to control time, to give shape to one's life, to escape the uncertainties of an unknowable future.

The fact that the two tramps have kept, their end of the bargain without Godot putting in an appearance implies that in their world time refuses to be shaped. Thus it is rather heroically pathetic that they wait for a future that has always failed them. Ultimately, keeping their appointment suggest merely their having been born along with billions of others into a world where all appointments have the character of one hand clapping. In *Waiting for Godot*, the past is nowhere secure or knowable than the future. When Beckett begins Act II, with the roundabout, the cook and the dog, he implicitly raises the question of how the past is preserved in present. Tombstones are one traditional form of preservation. Nevertheless, the tombstone of the dog preserves that past perfectly. Once the audience is beyond one of Didi's voiced songs, the other so perfectly reproduces its predecessor that past and the present cannot be distinguished.

The circular structure of the play has its basis in the inseparability of present from the past. Vivian Mercier wittily puts it:

"Waiting for Godot is a play in which nothing happens - twice".

The four or five leaves on the tree, in Act II, a song about the dog and the cook, Pozzo and Lucky's second appearance, Didi's notion that things have changed here since yesterday' and Gogo's replies that everything oozes are changes to avoid monotony. Yet it is difficult to say if things have changed or that what they have changed from. Yesterday is Didi's point of departure and during much of Act I, he confuses Yesterday with today yesterday is as uncertain as Gogo's memory, which is sketchy. At best, only the audience remembers clearly, or does it? The only thing of which one can be sure is that last time Godot did not turn up. The same or a different one may appear again. So, things change and remain the same. Their routine affairs may differ but the waiting is timeless and constant.

The doubts and uncertainties seem to suggest that the vamps live almost entirely in the present but present is nothing if separated from past and future. For Gogo and Didi, the present exists merely as an unbearable route to a future in which Godot's arrival will justify their present waiting – if he comes, but he would not. The past is lost to memory, the future is not yet, and is, thus, incomprehensible, and the present is negated.

From one stand point, "time in this timeless play is simultaneously present and absent".

Q . Is this play a modern or post modern ?

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. Vladimir's questioning of reality and confusion of reality with a dream is a common feature of Postmodernism. The constant repetition of time in the play is beginning to wear on Vladimir.

"*Waiting for Godot*" is a modern play in the sense that it defies classic standards.

Modern writers had a new liking for fragmented forms and discontinuous narratives, and "*Waiting for Godot*" is a superb example of fragmented form.

Waiting for Godot displays characteristics of both modernism and postmodernism. The modernist period in literature, which began around the turn of the 20th century, saw writers respond negatively to the Industrial Revolution and the horrors of World War I. Modernism's goal—to create something completely new—sparked much experimentation by merging psychological theory with the creation of many new forms and styles. Characteristics of modernism include the following:

- focus on the inner self or consciousness
- concern with the decline of civilization and the effects of capitalism

- characterization of technology as cold and unfeeling
- alienation and loneliness of the individual
- first-person narrators stream of consciousness style
- deviation from traditional plot structures

Postmodernism, which arose after World War II, turned away from modernism's insistence on entirely new literary forms. Instead, postmodern art, including literature, often reflected numerous traditional styles within one work. Characteristics of postmodernism include the following:

- parody, paradox, or pastiche (imitation of another work)
- fragmentation
- interest in flattened emotions
- focus on an anonymous or collective experience
- self-reference or recursion (the use of repeating elements)
- unreliable narrators

Both modernist and postmodernist works reject traditional values and generally accepted meanings for texts.

The play depicts the concept of postmodernism through its major characters, Estragon and Vladimir. These main characters in the play primarily depicts the concept of having "hope" in a situation which does not seem to give hope. The play is basically about two men, Estragon and Vladimir, waiting for Godot. Throughout their waiting time, the only thing they do is to make the time pass by doing things that would practically entertain them. The title of the play associated with the act of waiting itself.

Technically, the play depicts the idea of waiting for someone who is not coming. Through the entire play, Godot does not arrive. He is never present or never introduced on the stage. He represents the thing or person whom most of us want to meet. Waiting entails hope and patience. This work represents the reality that happens most people in real world. So, from beginning to end, the play explores a static situation. In the play, there is no absolute truth. All things are relative here.

Postmodernism asserts that truth is not mirrored in human understanding of it. It is rather constructed as the mind tries to understand its own personal reality. The universe may be ordered by a God with pity for his creations or the universe might be controlled by chance or a cruel fate. The world may sometimes seem peaceful or it may be conditioned by sudden changes. The characters in Waiting for Godot depicts the meaninglessness of everyday life activities. They are carefree, but hopeful and patient. These characteristics primarily show the real characteristics of people in reality. The play illustrates that the everyday life activities of people is meant to show and emphasize a perspective that tells that there is no future meaning that can put meaning to any action done in the present. The writer, Beckett, aims to emphasize the meaningless, pointlessness and

nothingness of life. The play suggests that people should make what is present worthwhile. The present play appears to be about nothing at all. The play is actually not just a play about nothingness at it projects. Thus we can say that the play is an interesting play for a study from postmodernist view. The character setting, language, and the style of the play go with the later 20th century literary movement called postmodernism.

