

CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE: BECKETT'S WEEPING INNOCENTS AND THE PAIN OF EXISTENCE

Eugene Ngezem,
Associate Professor
Department of English
Clayton State University
2000 Clayton State BLVD
Morrow, GA 30260

Abstract

Placed on a dusty road to nowhere and on a barren landscape, Samuel Beckett's disorientate characters are caught in the crossfire of anguish, and their wailings and attempts to escape only plunge down into the abyss of more excruciating pain and loss. Via characters, who are essentially shadows of walking corpses, Beckett, as evident in both matter and content, seems to hold modern humanity responsible for the dysfunctional modern world, which victimizes his helpless and despondent characters. Beckett's characters or say tramps undergo both physical and psychological collapse as they confront agonizing conditions of existence in their hostile, arduous world of empty or diminishing possibilities.

Fenced on all sides by strong hurdles beyond their control, Samuel Beckett's characters in *Waiting for Godot* find themselves in a whirlpool of absurdity as they strive to escape into and from crumbling modern values. Through characters, who are basically walking corpses, Beckett seems to hold modern humanity responsible for the problem-ridden modern world which victimizes his characters. Beckett's characters, tramps, undergo both physical and psychological breakdown as they confront excruciating conditions of existence, or say, existentialism.

Existentialism, a philosophical school which rests on the insistence that existence precedes essence, gained global eminence in the aftermath of the Second World War, especially in Europe. Its founder, Jean-Paul Sartre, insists: "man makes himself" (Murfin 115). Existentialists are concerned with humanity's very being with its perpetual struggle to exist in a world hanging on the string of collapse. They presume that individuals have free will, and are entirely responsible for their thoughts and actions. Existentialists claim that individuals are free to construct and use (or choose not to use) their own value systems, therefore, forming their own sense of being and creating meaning in the process. To Christian existentialists such as Paul Tillich and Gabriel Marcel, the true freedom, including freedom from despair and conflict can be found in God, who bridges the gap between the finite and the infinite. But to Atheist existentialists, who include Martin Heidegger there is an atheistic universe in which individuals

can “make themselves” through exercising their free will in a world, which necessitates an engagement in both the social and the political spheres (Murfin 115).

Existentialism gave birth to theater of the absurd, a literary genre that developed in France from the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in the 1940s. The phrase, “theater of the absurd” refers to any twentieth-century work that has an existentialist outlook, and often depicts the absurdity of modern human condition, with reference to humanity’s lack or loss of religious, philosophical or cultural roots (Murfin 2). While existentialism and absurdist are two sides of the same coin, writers of absurdity such as Beckett believe that literary style must be bizarre in order to reflect an existentialist outlook. Beckett seems to incorporate the views of both existentialist camps in his works, especially in his masterpiece, *Waiting for Godot*. In this play, man lacks a foundation to depend on. From the perspectives of both the Atheist existentialists and Christian existentialists, humans lack value systems as they fail to use their free will to fight despair, despondency, and conflict. Characters end up as victims in a bizarre world in which they have no control or understanding.

Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is set at the backdrop of the carnage of the First and the Second World Wars, wars that depicted modern humanity as irrational, violent and amoral. Beckett, in *Godot*, holds humanity responsible for the predicament in his shrinking world. In *Waiting for Godot*, there is disintegration in all spheres, as Modern humanity has failed to “make himself” in either the atheistic universe or the Deity oriented universe.

The physical conditions of Beckett’s prominent characters, Vladimir and Estragon, suggest the general atmosphere of disintegration as humanity fails to use its free will to create genuine values and to cope in a dysfunctional world it is trapped in. From the perspective of atheist existentialists, Beckett presents two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, whose lives represent the meaninglessness of existence as they strive, to no avail, to give purpose to their battered lives:

ESTRAGON. (giving up again). Nothing to be done.

VLADIMIR ... There you are again. When I think of it ... all these years
... but for me ... where would you be... (Decisively.) You would
be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute,
no doubt about it.

ESTRAGON. And what of it?

VLADIMIR. It is too much for one man... There is no need losing heart
now, that is what I say. We should have thought of it a million
years ago, in the nineties. Estragon: Ah stop blathering and help
me up with this bloody thing.

VLADIMIR. Hand in hand from the top of Eiffel Tower, among the first.
We were respectable in those days. Now it is too late. (2-3)

Beckett, the most eminent and influential writer of theatre of the absurd, through the above quote, presents the helpless, and the irrational human existence as Estragon and Vladimir reminisce the beautiful past, a past that was promising but would never ever be experienced. In consonance with the concept of existentialism, the tramps’ attention is focused on death, for their lives have been reduced to a frightening tragic anguish, especially as they have fallen from economic power and are social misfits as they walk their dusty roads and perambulate their barren landscape. It is strange that they have nothing to do, and live in extremely denigrating conditions. They have lost their “job” of picking grapes for a certain fickle figure, and it is impossible to have the so-called employment anywhere. They do not have any money to buy; neither do they have anything to sell. They suffer from starvation, and wear rags of poverty, and

expect to be nothing more than a little pile of bones. That is, they are prone to imminent death as there is no recourse for their tragic existence.

Estragon becomes hungry, and all the “food” Vladimir can provide for him is a carrot and a turnip that have been in his pocket for long. Estragon and Lucky also eat bones of chicken from which Pozzo has carefully sucked out every ounce of marrow. Having a job may not lead to much, for Lucky, who is Pozzo’s servant feeds on bones just like the unemployed Estragon and Vladimir. By making his characters, metaphors for modern humanity, rely on bones, Beckett points to the diminished status of humanity in the modern world, a world where exploitation is done with impunity and anguish is everywhere evident. To Atheist existentialists, humans have failed to establish laws that can protect the weak from exploitation in the world.

Pozzo exploits the aged man, Lucky, without compassion. Vladimir tells Pozzo: “After having sucked all the good out of him you chuck him away like a ...like a banana skin” (*Godot*33). Pozzo also chains lucky like a dog and makes him carry a load, including sand that is apparently beyond Lucky’s ability, as he stumbles and falls constantly. Pozzo seems to enjoy torturing and commanding. He commands Lucky to do meaningless activities mostly to deprive him of rest. He is unable to give precise reasons for which Lucky constantly carries a load without recess or why he persistently beats him.

Upon all this exploitation, Pozzo shows dissatisfaction about Lucky’s service to him:

...instead of driving him away as I might have done, I mean instead of simply kicking him out on his arse, in the goodness of my heart
 I am bringing him to the fair where I hope to get a good price for him. The truth is you can’t drive such creatures away. The best thing would be to sell them. (*Godot*30)

Surprisingly, selling Lucky after wearing him out is the “best” reward Pozzo can offer him “in the goodness of his heart.” Only someone that lacks a moral and spiritual foundation can treat another human being in the way that Pozzo treats Lucky. His behavior is inexplicable, bizarre. Lucky’s name is an irony. He should rather be called “unlucky.” Still, Lucky does not want to part with Pozzo just as Estragon and Vladimir live in constant strife, but stick together even as they occasionally threaten to abandon each other. Their suffering reflects the bareness of the material world around them. It reflects the general economic hardship that existed after the devastating wars that erased all that took centuries to be built. Humanity has failed to respect those laws that preserve economic values, that is, to make itself, in atheist existentialist terms.

The idea of homelessness also features, as Vladimir and Estragon spend their time on the road, beside a small tree. Estragon, at times, spends nights in a ditch:

VLADIMIR. (hurt, coldly) May one enquire where His Highness spent the night?

ESTRAGON. In a ditch.

VLADIMIR. (Admiringly) A ditch! Where?

ESTRAGON. (Without gesture) Over there.

VLADIMIR. And they didn’t beat you?

ESTRAGON. Beat me? Certainly they beat me.

VLADIMIR. The same lot as usual? (*Godot*2-3)

While the characters in question are victims of joblessness, homelessness, and frustration, they are also victims of random violence. They are almost always beaten without a fault of theirs. They barely exist in a brutal world, a universe without a lucid sense of purpose. The only voices they hear in their isolation are the echoes of their own wailing. The tramps decide to wait for Mr. Godot, who, in their confusing perspective, is both a rescuer and punisher. They are not even

certain about the date, the time, and why he is coming. In case Godot, perceived as God by some, comes, none of them may be saved as they question the validity of the Bible, mock at what they consider the weakness of Christ on the cross, and insist to lead a life without repentance. They, as if to heed to Albert Camus, who argued, in 1942, that “since life had lost all meaning, man should seek escape in suicide” (Esslin 5), instead attempt suicide, and even commit blasphemy in several instances. To Estragon, those who believe in the biblical story of the crucifixion are “bloody ignorant apes” (*Godot*7). To further eliminate themselves from the possibility of salvation, Vladimir and Estragon wonder whether Christ, who could not save himself from death can save anybody. Their argument and resistance to the idea of salvation demonstrate their disintegrated faith, and like Atheist existentialists, they question God’s role in human life. The discussed relationship between Pozzo and Lucky, and the rejection of God by Estragon and Vladimir show that humanity has failed to use its free will and responsibility wisely as expected existentialists.

Beckett’s characters, especially in view of their perception that God is absent or does not exist, show that humanity, as both Christian and atheist existentialists hold, has failed to “make himself” in the stoic universe and the atheistic universe. Estragon, for instance, refuses to listen to the biblical story as he insinuates that he has no time to waste on fiction:

VLADIMIR. Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story?

ESTRAGON. No

VLADIMIR. Shall I tell it to you?

ESTRAGON. NO (*Godot*9)

In addition, Estragon seems irritated when Vladimir calls Jesus Christ “Our Saviour” (*Godot*9). His question, “our what?” (*Godot*9) and his conclusion that believers of divine existence are “ignorant apes,” demonstrate his doubt on Christ’s capacity to save anybody from the pain they experience. Live becomes an inescapable tragic, gnawing exercise to Estragon and Vladimir.

In reference to the tramps’ lack of spiritual and moral foundation that give meaning to life, and their acute physical pain, Albert Camus asks whether humans should choose either to take their lives or, at whatever meager level, to affirm existence (and probably make a plan and justification for that existence) by deciding to live (Homan 12). Camus sees no need for such existence while Beckett creates a painful existence as his characters “spend the night apart and are certain only of intervening beatings, since life is an endless rain of blows” (Grossvogel 89-90). However, Beckett, as the following paragraphs shows, lays blames on modern humanity for its traumas.

Beckett’s suggestion that humanity is responsible for this stretched-out pain is further evident in the way that his characters seem to love vice more than virtue. They are violent towards each other rather than being supportive. Vladimir “shoulders Estragon out of his way, kicks over the tool” (*Godot*24). Similarly, Lucky furiously kicks Estragon in the shins when Estragon tries to comfort him as he wails in stress. Vladimir also advises Estragon to kick Lucky: “You see, you’ve nothing to be afraid of. It’s even an opportunity to revenge on yourself... let him have it” (*Godot*56). Pozzo, on his part, frequently weeps his own aged servant, Lucky, and cautions Estragon to “give him [Lucky] a taste of his boots to the face and the privates as far as possible” (*Godot*56). Coupled with Pozzo’s exploitative and greedy attitude, his violent nature symbolizes humanity’s contribution to the disintegration of modern society or the existentialist conditions under which mankind lives.

It is worth noting that, in *Waiting for Godot*, the disintegration caused by humanity's total failure to use its free will to establish happy conditions in both the physical and the spiritual universe, as seen in the conflicting relationships between characters and the extent to which they defy God, is also evident in Beckett's absurd style. Writers of absurdity believe that the foregoing loss of religious or philosophical roots (existentialist outlook) needs to be presented in a bizarre style that will reflect the bleak subject matter. *Waiting for Godot*, in a compelling way, reflects the disharmony and irrationality of modern humanity. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett as shown below, and likemost absurdist, achieves a bizarre style by violating most of the conventions that governed traditional drama such as plot, characterization, setting, themes, and language.

As a metaphor for the twists and turns in the lives of Beckett's characters, *Waiting for Godot* does not have the kind of chronological plot with causality that is characteristic of traditional drama. The beginning and the end are the same rather than having a beginning, middle and an end. There is no denouement because it appears to have very few actions that attend an apogee. In its first performance, critics called *Waiting for Godot* a "little play in which nothing happens" (Webb 5). Vladimir and Estragon whirl away time in purposeless activities such as fiddling with their hats and boots, as they wait for Godot, who never comes and whose coming would not guarantee happiness.

Characterization further reflects the spirit of disintegration. Instead of kings, queens, princes, princesses, and generals that are the main characters in traditional plays such as Shakespeare's *Othello*, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Sophocles *Oedipus Rex*, Beckett's main characters are tramps. Beckett's use of tramps, or characters, who seem drawn from the lowest of the low, is consistent with the subject of pain and alienation in his work.

Following on the heels of disintegration, the setting of *Waiting for Godot* also descends from the castles and the palaces of traditional literature to a narrow and dusty road with a sterile environment as its backdrop. Such barren environment or setting points to the worsen conditions of existence upheld by both existentialists and writers of absurd literature. Beckett creates a physical landscape, which further suggests mental disintegration of characters caught in the cross-fire of twentieth-century anguish. Apart from the foregoing aspects, dominant themes in modern drama, as demonstrations from *Waiting for Godot*, in the subsequent paragraphs show, become those that express stretched-out pain, acute alienation, haunting loneliness, gnawing despair, and dissolution, which all symbolize the traumas and collapse of modern humanity, a collapse, which is more evident in language.

While language, which is, of course, the vehicle of communication is expressed in patterned, poetic and rhetorical speeches in drama of the past, Beckett's characters reduce it in their fragmented speeches, awkward pauses, and illogical silences, and monotonous repetitions. Such communicative breakdown symbolizes the fundamental incompleteness and dysfunction in the individual and in the modern world (Kane). Communicative issues such as ellipsis, and overlapping dialogue in *Waiting for Godot*, further confirm the memory defectiveness of the characters, as they are victims caught in their own dementedness. Vladimir and Estragon talk at cross-purposes and Pozzo stammers in his speech, a replete of ellipses and illogical pauses:

VLADIMIR. Boots must be taken off every day. I'm tired telling

You that. Why don't you listen to me?

ESTRAGON. (feebly) Help me?

VLADIMIR. It hurts?

Pozzo: I can't bare it...any longer...the way he[Lucy] goes on...you've no idea...It's terrible...he must go...(he waves his hand...I'm going mad...(he collapses, head in the hands)...I can't bear it anylonger...

Silence.All look at Pozzo. (33-34)

Estragon and Vladimir do not listen to each other and Pozzo stammers and omits words as he tries to explain why he has exploited Lucky for about sixty years. There is a lot of monotonous repetition in his speech: "Is everybody ready...Is everybody looking at me?...I am ready. Is everybody listening? Is everybody ready? (29) The word "everybody" is belabored. There is also code mixture in *Waiting for Godot* as characters vacillate, in a moment notice, between broken English, French, and Latin during dialogue, suggesting the unstable, erratic lives of characters. To show the fused and confused nature of modern life, Beckett's Estragon abruptly switches from English to broken French language in the play. Such brokenness is a reflection of the shattered modern life. In agreement with the concept of absurdity, which expects works of absurdity to show the purposelessness and fruitlessness of life in both subject and style, Beckett uses broken or confused communication patterns to depict the disintegrated life of his characters, who are, to Vladimir, "all mankind...whether we like it or not" (90).

In a statement that ties in with the preceding discussion on absurdity, and violation of conventional theatre, Martin Esslin, while talking about *Waiting for Godot*, and other plays of absurdity argues, in a forthright manner that:

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings. (Esslin 3-4)

While the above quote deals with a radical departure from the aesthetics and cultural sensibilities of literature of the past, it also demonstrates the sense of collapse of meaningful existence (existentialism), and the ridiculous nature of life (absurdity).

Published at the time that there was still a strong feeling of post-war disillusionment, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* reflects the existentialist and absurdist views that many playwrights of this era sought to portray after the devastation of two world wars. The world of Beckett is an unfulfilling one to characters, who are metaphors for humanity, and, to use the words of Esslin, "a most genuinely representative of our own time" (4). Beckett's portrayal of modern humanity as victims of their own actions as they experience alienation, isolation, frustration, hopelessness, faithlessness, and helplessness in a violent and unfulfilling world of barrenness is consistent with what discredited values, broken hierarchies and collapse institutions of traditional culture that defined the post-war spirit, which Robert Brustein alludes in his book, *Theatre of Revolt*. The world in Beckett's play is a prison in which helpless characters are caught in a cross-fire of anguish. He weaves both matter (subject) and manner (style) as he demonstrates a strong sense of collapse, which, without doubt, highlights the acute physical and psychological pain Beckett's weeping characters are trapped in, even as their anguish may be an attendant consequence of own malaise and circumstances that befall them.

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