

Emil Brandau

Childs

5/13/2014

English HL

What: Absurdism and Metaphysical Artistry in *Waiting for Godot*

With *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett has reached his artistic zenith. Despite, or perhaps because of, the limitations associated with penning a simple play of moderate length, Beckett has managed to communicate such a massively important message, tantamount to the very meaning of life itself. In terms of literature beyond the merely valueless words on the perpetually yellowed and stained pages of writers past, there is a metaphysical value attached to the art. Whether this attachment was developed on purpose, by humans themselves, or is inherent in the art of literature is not irrelevant but trivial; regardless of its origin, the abstract, incalculable and unquantifiable value of literature beyond literature is present, and in this, its influence is carried throughout every text composed, and *Waiting for Godot* exemplifies this broadly, perhaps overreachingly so. In every arc of the communicated and uncommunicated *Godot*, the value of metaphysical, absurd, and abstract technique in literature is bled liberally from the heart of the work's very presence. Through the use of these techniques, chiefly through symbolism, meta-artistry, and general absurdism, Beckett assaults the reader with a veritable mugging – the communication of a much larger comment, concerning the fragility of life and the innately despairing nature of humanity itself.

Waiting for Godot itself is a play, written mostly in 1948. A “tragicomedy in two acts”, it reaches only a moderate length. The structure of the work itself – a play with only five characters, and one (debatably two) scene(s) – presents a good deal of commentary on the human experience and even provides for a thesis on what constitutes “humanity” to begin with. Life is short, absurd, and sparse, in the tradition of *Godot*. Each individual life is an island. The construction of an entire universe (in *Godot*) in which there are only five players is an astounding symbol for the fragile nature of existence. Speaking mathematically, one out of five is of greater importance than one out of fifty; the fact that there are only five characters, only two

acts, only sixty pages, only one consistent setting – this is all representative of the value of every individual portion of the work, and thus of every individual element of life itself. One character out of place, one setting misconstrued, and the entire work falls into disarray. An existentialist's field day, this is, to examine the massive importance of every minute detail therein, along with its inherent lonesomeness – humanity is queer in that it can feel just as alone in a crowd (in this case, a crowd of five) as it can on its own.

“Do you want a carrot,” Vladimir asks Estragon (Beckett 14). A carrot, of course, is not a mere carrot, here. The carrot is a phallic symbol in a work otherwise not explicitly concerned with sex. It is out of place, yet oddly it is thus perfectly in line with the rest of Beckett's absurdist tendencies. Vladimir, however, in the attempt to give Estragon his carrot, confuses the vegetable with a turnip. As the carrot and the turnip are structurally dissimilar, it is quite unexpected for one to confuse the two, even if one's attention is not fully commanded (as in the scene discussed herein). As if the usage of the carrot as a sexual symbol itself was not absurd enough, sex's often vulgar connotations lend themselves to some semblance of absurdism in itself. The closest the text otherwise gets to vulgarity is the use of the word “erection” twice on page 12, but this again has a sexual connotation. The only legitimate use of vulgarity in the text concerns the sexual nature of a few scant symbols and terms – “sex as a motif” and “vulgarity as a motif” are painted synonymously. Traditionally, as stated, sex is a vulgar topic. However, the breeding ground upon which this work was birthed – artistry, existentialism, and modernism – does not take kindly to this view of sex. While it is recognized that sex has a vulgar connotation traditionally, this notion is rejected. Beckett instead sees this supposed vulgarity and uses it as a device in and of itself in order to mock these accusations against sexuality, through the sheer absurdity of their placement in the play. The motif of sex, thus, is both synonymous with vulgarity, and yet also is a direct counter to this implication. In terms of what this says about humanity itself, the implications are immense. Sex, the very sink at which life itself is renewed, is presented as simultaneously vulgar and yet pure. Sex is acceptable and not acceptable – quite a confusing parable for the religious right and the atheistic left alike. Beckett seeks to mock the notion of sex as totally irreverent, through his absurd acts, and yet recognizes that it has been held as traditionally obscene, historically. An inherent contradiction such as this is easily symbolic of humanity's struggle for understanding and knowledge, and the all-too-easily breakable nature of mankind's search for answers.

Suicide and death have been major players on the artistic and literary stage since the concepts themselves were first realized as fully as possible. Man's inability to comprehend the existence of a supposed afterworld, and his postulations that such a concept is truly existent are the chief cause of a full understanding not being possible. Death is the universal "big deal" – as all of us are alive, all of us will die, and such is the nature of things. Death is inescapable and mortality is inevitable for all. And so it is decidedly absurd that Beckett should handle death and suicide in such a brazenly sudden and valueless stroke as he does. On page 12, it is suddenly suggested that the characters should hang themselves. This prompts a discussion between the two of the viability of such a suggestion. The topic is, again, handled lightly. Beckett specifically chooses to handle such a gravely serious matter in a lighthearted, noncommittal manner, for the purposes of promoting this absurd notion of death as a simple affair. Beckett thus mocks man's inability to cope with his own mortality.

Beckett's thesis in *Godot* is as such: "mankind is quite interesting and yet misguided in its inability to deal with the fact that its life shall come to its eventual end. Man has a tendency towards despair over this, which is yet another merely confusing quality of humanity. Another interesting piece of humanity's nature is that which concerns relations – each life is of itself and thus we are all alone throughout life. Life itself is fragile and easy to corrupt, through it is debatable what constitutes 'corruption', truly. Humanity is certainly a unique breed, accepting his fate superficially and not understanding its true implications, and resorting to guttural emotional viscosity when any figment of reality is questioned for him". This thesis is defended by the use of several outwardly confusing, even patently absurd dialogues, meditations, and techniques. The implications this has on an understanding of the work are obvious, but the implications it has on an understanding of the world itself are more difficult to grasp, since they are purely metaphysical in nature. A close approximation can be derived, however, in saying that death's inevitable nature should be respected and mankind should learn to treat its brothers – both human and not – as well as possible, as life itself is a tough, gritty, and fragile experience for all; only in defiance of the natural predisposition to loneliness we face can we truly foster a productive and meaningful life, and it is innately a team effort. Sartre believed that fiction was the best vehicle for promotion of a philosophy, and *Godot* serves as an example of this sentiment's applicability.