

Waiting for Godot A Brief Overview

Samuel Beckett – Irish – b. 1906 Waiting for Godot – 1947 - 1949

Beckett was obsessed with man-as-machine and man-as-a-user-of-machines. (Descartes idea). If man is a machine created by a perfect Being, why is that machine so defective? If man can himself create machines, does he in some way resemble the Creator of man-as-machine? What are the responsibilities of a creator toward his defective creature, and vice versa, and of one creature toward another? (Frankenstein)

Most of Beckett's characters suffer either from failure to face themselves, or from the pain that results from only half-trying. In Waiting for Godot, Didi (Vladimir) hovers on the verge of self-discovery but he is too terrified and so lapses into unfulfillment.

Kierkegaard – “Man is paralyzed by dread. Of what? Why? Because if he breaks out of his mind-limited, objectivist way of life, the possibilities are infinite, and nothing is certain. In all crises man must act decisively. The most tremendous thing which has been granted to man is the choice...” (Genesis)

Sartre says that whether God exists or not is irrelevant; man to be manly must act as if there is no god. He must not look outside himself for excuses, justification, guidance, salvation: “We are alone.”

The main characters in Waiting for Godot yearn vaguely for existence, yet they insist on looking outside themselves for salvation. Up against the need to choose, they choose by failing to choose.

What actually happens in Godot?

Near a roadside tree, two tramps meet as they meet daily: to wait for Godot. Estragon (Gogo) fusses with his boots. Vladimir (Didi) fusses with his hat. They discuss separation, but make up. Suicide, vegetables, religion, urinary troubles and Godot. Passing by are Pozzo (with a whip) and his slave Lucky (on a leash.) Pozzo, who owns everything around, talks of many things. Lucky cries, dances and thinks on command. Master and slave leave. A goat-boy brings a message: Godot will come tomorrow. Didi questions him about his brother, a shepherd. Night falls. Agreeing to leave, the tramps stand still.

Next day, the tramps resume waiting with games and talk. Pozzo (now blind) and Lucky (now mute) return and collapse. Pozzo and Lucky leave. Didi soliloquizes. The goat-boy comes and says Godot will come tomorrow. Night falls. Agreeing to leave, they stand still. The End.

Meanings of:

Setting – road archetype of journey, travel. Tree – archetype of life, promise. Religious symbolism?

Props – leash symbolizes bondage. Boots = earth, body, roots. Hat = mind, rational side of life.

Plot – Act I. The passive ones pass the time waiting
The active ones pass through
The passive ones get a message
The passive ones decide to go on waiting.

- Act II – exactly the same four events

Act I describes circular events. Act II describes circular events. This play could go on forever!!

Note – we know the causes of nothing!

Who is Godot that anyone should spend time waiting for him?

Characters

Estragon (GoGo) – the earthy one. Practical and physical. Rather cultured, good vocabulary. Overly dependent on Didi for security, leadership and rational direction. Name in French means tarragon, a pungent herb used to make pickles and vinegar.

Vladimi – Rational side of humanity. Verbal. Eager to present a good social image. Believe in the world of the mind and accepts a higher reality outside himself. Acts as though loyalty to Godot will bring guidance, security, redemption, salvation. Believes these things can be granted from outside one's self. He will go on waiting for Godot to come...in French, name has connotations with word dis-dis, speak-speak.

Didi and Gogo are a pair which complement each other, i.e. Batman and Robin. A pair who need each other, yet stifle each other's growth. Note – Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf parallels this idea. They are miserable much of the time together, yet neither seems big enough to part from the other. They are possibly parts of a divided self (Crime and Punishment). Gogo as the unconscious mind, Didi as the conscious mind. They can not separate once and for all.

Pozzo – personification of Raw Power. Owns all, has a slave, a whip to symbolize power. Since the slave seems cultured and educated, why is the slave on Pozzo's leash? Pozzo believes: "You don't need an education and a brain, all you need is the cunning to get people with brains on a leash." (Romans with the Greeks) Materialistic. In Italian, Pozzo means "well", as in gushing oil well.

Lucky – symbol of man-as-a-machine. Name is ironic, of course, and yet he is well fed, cared for, etc – a secure man/pet.

Pozzo and Lucky are a pair which complement each other. Pozzo symbolizes the sadist; Lucky the masochist. Perhaps all slaves must become masochistic or else die in rebellion. Parts of a divided self. Materialistic man rejecting and suppressing his spiritual and cultural side. Pozzo needs Lucky, and even so, he is dying and withering.

The Messenger – in Greek drama, symbolizes resolution. Irony here – he symbolizes continuation... He is a goat-boy – Judeo-Christian concepts of sheep and goats. Only contact between the tramps and Godot...a priest figure...yet he works with the goats, not the sheep!

Godot – who is Godot? You have the interesting problem of creating a character here in your own image...the name obviously contains the idea of God...will Godot ever come to save the tramps from their living nothingness?

"They also serve who only stand and wait."

John Milton

"Go you into all the world..."

Jesus of Nazareth

