



Political Unconscious in Samuel Beckett's *waiting for Godot*

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Abstract

Political emptiness in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* reveals a profound political unconsciousness that captures the fears and disappointments of people after the world war. Systems of authority, helplessness, and postponed agency are obscured but subtly critiqued by the play's repetitive pattern and austere environment. Estragon and Vladimir's never-ending patience can be interpreted as an analogy for the ineffectiveness of philosophical pledges and the breakdown of political resolve. Despite its lack of resolution, movement and advancement, the drama reflects the plight of those who are ensnared in repressive, imperceptible sociopolitical systems. The incoherent conversations of the individuals and existential gloom allude to the breakdown of political purpose and the loss of social narratives. Samuel Beckett destroys the potential for radical transformation and substitute ridiculous monotony for it. By doing this, the drama captures the unseen effects of administrative authority and dictatorial regimes. Therefore, the play's unconscious aspects are an essential subject of analysis because they encapsulate a concealed political criticism.

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Introduction

Literature has always been an active tool for analyzing the effects of war and the societal changes that follow. Many authors have reflected the horrible influences of war through their works; they portray the suffering of men in the battlefield as well as the transformations of social fabric that follow the war. Barter in his study *entitled Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theater* (1987), holds that war effects societies on different axes, it reshaping family fabric, economies and cultural values, writers convey this effects through narrative that present a communal and individual perspective on resiliency, loss and survival. (77) Samuel Beckett is one of the most significant authors who symbolically refer to war and its effect of human lives in his plays. His works explore the absurdity and futility of human life in a universe that seems to have no purpose, delving extensively into existentialist concepts. Through *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett portrays gloomy atmosphere as a result of the Second World War. He tries to expose people's sufferings and their sense of alienation in an unstable world. The selected novel reflects the economic crisis of the post-war world, which forces man to live in unstable psychological status due to self-doubt and hallucinations. This study will try to answer the question that how war as a symbol of capitalism deconstruct social fabric and leads to suffering and alienation? The article aims to explore the effect of war on individual's lives. The problem of the research is an endeavor to bridge the gap of the former studies and deals with how unconsciousness has crucial necessity to invoke proletariat to protest for their rights to acquire delight and prosperity.

Chyntia, Siregar, and Ramadhan, in their paper entitled "Social Condition Reflected in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*" (2021) analyzed the characters of *Waiting for Godot*, they argued that the characters of the play echo the social condition of the period that follow the Second World War.

According to them, the characters portrayed waiting for a salvation and their fate directly related to the war, it can be developed according to the development of the war. In this paper, they also analyzed the language of the characters, they stated that the language of the characters is unreasonable; and "verbal nonsense" it didn't correspond with how they act. The analysis of the characters' dialogues reflects their relation to social condition. In the end of the paper, they concluded that the writer tries to expose the condition of the society after the Second World War. People are waiting for something abstract or uncertain. People became unsure of what they are anticipating, but they accustomed to do so.

Önder Çakırtaş in his paper entitled "Politics of Existence in Beckett's *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*: "Yesterday" as the Only Timeframe, and Egocentric Characters" (2016) analysis Beckett's two plays *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, he argues that Beckett divided time into three zones, "yesterday, today and tomorrow" In each of these categories, people are physiologically invoked in an effort to ensure that their physical presence is acknowledged. In light of these viewpoints, this essay aims to highlight men's desire for life by exposing Beckett's depiction of "yesterday" as a reminder of long-awaited previous experiences of the main characters of the two plays Nagg and Nell, Clov and Hamm, Vladimir and Estragon, and their egotistical affairs. The study attempts to examine the cruel and deceptive elixir of time and its influence on the bodily putrefaction of human through their entire lives. In the context of yesterday, when time is shown to have no circulation, the writer of this article illustrates Beckett's archetypal characters in terms of how they depict spiritual loss and bodily putrefaction.

On the other hand, Ayanne Larissa Ameida de Souza, in her study entitled "The tragic circularity in *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett" (2020) analyzes Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* to examine the understanding of the tragic according to Raymond Williams' structure of feeling. In this paper, she argues that *Waiting for Godot* can also be interpreted as a figurative formula that communicates the disastrous sense of that time. She also argues that Williams' structure of feeling offers Beckett a contemporary philosopher such as Albert Camus, a theoretical contribution about existential absurdity. However, many writers try to analyze and understand *Waiting for Godot* from different point of views, but none of them analyze it through Jameson's lens of Political Unconscious.

Therefore, this study adopts Jameson's notion of "Political Unconscious". He develops it to clarify the implicit political dimension of literary works and as a resistance to the capitalist dominance. "Political Unconscious" widely explained in his books *the political Unconscious*, *Postmodernism*, *Allegory and Ideology* and *Marxism and Form*. The political unconscious adopts Freud and Lev-Strauss's notions wish-fulfillment and the savage mind, respectively, to construct the postulate that literary works may be considered as figurative explanations to factual but intuitively felt cultural and social issues.

Therefore, the cultural critic mission is to find out the means of reconstructing the original problem for which the literary work represents a symbolic act is a solution. The textual criticism does not focus only on the meaning of a particular text; it gives more attention to why the text exists. Thus, in this analysis of the selected play, the researcher would also adopt an interpretation in which war represents as the main

code to be a political symbol that intuitively tries to challenge or destroy the pyramid power. The researcher would utilize a dialectical approach to achieve this aim. The analysis of the selected play depends mainly on Jameson's explanatory device. In his book *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson theorized that "all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community" (56). According to him, the symbolic meditation occurs on three different perspectives, the political or the textual horizon, the social and the historical horizon.

The first horizon [the political] addresses the literary text as a figurative action, the individual portrayal considered as the typical resolution of contradictions of material-life, later on, such a contradictions obviously appear in the social horizon. In the second horizon [the social horizon] Jameson creates the concept 'ideologeme' according to him, "the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourse of the social classes" (61). While historical horizon [The third horizon] as Jameson proposed, concerns regarding the existence of dominant, emergent, and residual modes of production.

Ideology of form is the object of historical horizon "the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of mode of production" (Jameson, 62). In this study the researcher will adopt the second horizon [the social]. According to Jameson's second horizon *Waiting for Godot's* ideologemes raise a conflict between the dominant and the working class. Such ideologemes obviously appear in the struggles among the workers in the play and the rulers who dominate them.

War and Social Fragmentation in *Waiting for Godot*

Samuel Beckett tackles the effects of war in a nuanced yet impactful manner in *Waiting for Godot*, one of his best-known plays. The events of the play took place in empty area which shows a mysterious environment that reflects a world deformed by a war. Estragon and Vladimir (the main two characters in the play) who represents sort of immobility and aimlessness that reflects the existential misery and disorientation that can follow societal upheaval; they are caught in a never-ending cycle of waiting.

It is possible to see Estragon and Vladimir as members of proletariat or marginalized working class who have been evicted from productive labor. Their miserable circumstances and futile condition symbolize the economic status of poor people in capitalist world after the Second World War. This period was characterized by mass unemployment, economic instability, and the breakdown of established social systems. They are waiting for an abstract Godot, an elusive authoritative who might provide them with meaning, work, or salvation. They are waiting for a system that never fully fulfills their expectations, which might be interpreted as ideological interpellation. The immobility of the proletariat trapped in a system that neither liberates nor nourishes them is reflected in their incapacity to act or get out of their miserable situation. According to Jameson "ideology is not false consciousness; it is the expression of social relationships" (Jameson, 1981, p. 38).

Using such an odd location and recurring conversations, Beckett depicts the sense of meaninglessness and disarray that individuals feel following significant societal upheavals, caused by war. Esslin, in his work entitled *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), opens that in *Waiting for Godot*, the

ambiguity and lack of advancement represent the sense of helplessness and paralysis that frequently influence both people and societies in the period that follow the war.(5)

Another important state of Beckett's reaction to war and its influences is his representation of shattered identity and human relationships, which appears clearly in his works such as *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Rang*. In his play *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett's characters were confined to a single dark space that is clearly present in a postal disaster. The correlation between Nagg, Hamm, Nell and Clov mirror the dynamics of incompatible dysfunction that echo with the broken social connections left behind after horrendous war. The control of Hamm over Clove, with the tense and almost tragic interactions between individuals also shows the breakdown of traditional human bonds and alienation felt by most people in post-war society. Butler in his work entitled *Samuel Beckett and Trauma* (2018) opens that the states of confinement and disillusionment represents the metaphor for the psychological stress forced on people in the period that follow the destruction war. (91)

Beckett's simple style represents obvious observation on the effects of war, as he breaks down the irrelevant details to expose the essential human dilemma. Beckett's style reflects the collapse of social cohesion and the decline in life to its essential necessities that imposed on people during war period and postwar period. The melancholy of Beckett's plays which characterized with limited dialogues and actions assures the notion that war deforms life and reduces it to mere survival. For example, in his play *In Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), Krapp's listening to his memories, his thinking was about the past moments that are now far away and dented. Knowlson, in his work entitled, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, argues that the theme of memory and time passage states how human identities were fractured and deformed by wars which led to trauma, isolation, dislocation and sense of loss. (74)

Essentially, Beckett's work cups an existential, social vacuum that leaves it rather than explicitly focusing on war as a subject. The individuals in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* fight with purpose, their memories and connections with a deep sense of uncertainty that permeates postwar people; it paves the way for profound consideration on social instabilities that permeated post-war societies.

In his study entitled *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett* (2006), McDonald argues that Beckett uses abstraction and simple style representation to highlight certain historical conflicts, he uses individual's dark landscapes and frequent conducts to expose or highlights human situation in the face of crushing loss and uncertainty.(10)

However, with a portrayal of social devastation and fluctuation, Beckett's works expose a valuable commentary on human dilemma and suffering, his characters harshly try to mingle with their horrendous circumstances left by wars. Ackerley, in his study entitled *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Works, Life, and Thought*. (2004) states that war literature becomes a crucial study of human suffering, it provides readers of such literature with a notion that it is hard to erase the scars of war and societies that have experienced war, should seriously strive to redefine and rebuild themselves (100).

Despair, Alienation and Disillusionment in *Waiting for Godot*

Waiting for Godot is a valuable masterpiece written Samuel by Beckett. It deals with themes such as human despair, social disillusionment and existentialism, the play exposes the barrenness of the world after World War II. It reflects the societal horrendous circumstances and fragmentation resulted after the war. Through the events of the play Beckett provides his two main characters Estragon and Vladimir with a unique conducts and dialogues to expose the social consequences of war and how war leads to absurdity of human existence and the psychological instability.

The simple structure of the play, recurrent conducts of its characters, and their odd dialogues assures absurdity of life in a world ruined by wars. Tyndall in his study *Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot: A Reader's Guide*. (2004), acknowledges that The sense of waiting, without clear solutions, reflects the uncertainty that overwhelming the majority of individuals after the war, in such societies social structures no longer dependable, people became a victims of hopelessness and despair.(55) The following extract proves the argument.

"The tree is always there. It's the only thing that is

Vladimir: Let's go

Estragon: We can't"

Vladimir: Why not?"

Estragon: We are waiting for Godot"

Vladimir: The tree is always there. It's the only thing that is" (Beckett, Act I, P. 79)

The war's impact is obvious theme in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett forms characters stuck in a timeless waiting, there are no progress in their existence, and such perpetual state represent the disability due to trauma and alienation. According to Ackerley (2004), the consonant state of the characters in the play (*Waiting for Godot*) results from the psychological state left by war, a situation in which people become immobilized as they pass through bad experiences. (101)

The portrayal of deformed or meaningless world in the play embodies the existential despair felt by the majority of people in the post-war period. The sense of frustration among the characters is compounded by absence of higher power or guiding figure. Pilling in study *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett* (1991) opens that Godot in the play, who never shows up, symbolizes the absence of God or justice and salvation which left people in a sense of hopelessness and despair (72) For example, the following dialogue between Estragon and Vladimir assures the argument.

"We are all born mad. Some remain so"

Estragon: I was born in a hurry. I was born in a hurry.

Vladimir: We are all born mad. Some remain so" (Beckett, Act I, P. 7)

The former dialogue exposes the absurdity of existence in play as the characters reflect on the confusion and futility of their world. They suffer much to cope with their dismal situations and their horrendous world. Social fragmentation is another feature of *Waiting for Godot*. According to Ackerley (2004) As a result of war, the misunderstanding between the characters in the play, represent the breakdown of traditional social structures. (164)

The communication between the character in the play marked by lack of understanding which reflects the alienation and isolation that individuals felt post war. Bloom, in his study,

Themes in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot (2001), opens that in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the social alienation, in which individuals are stuck in existential isolation, mirror the bitterness and dilemmas that many people felt after the war world (45)

Furthermore, the play shows the absurdity of life due to its lack of development and repeated circularity. For instance, the characters in the play involve in repeated conducts, in one of the play's scenes, they portrayed taking off and put on their shoes repeatedly, such actions symbolize the absurdity of war; it shows the repetition of destruction and violence in social fabric after war. The repetitive and futile of lives depicted by Beckett reflect the aimlessness of war which leads people to loss and violence.

According to Esslin (1961), in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, lack of narrative development to expose meaninglessness of life, inability to change and social existential dilemma that appear after the world war. (88) The following dialogue will support the argument.

"Let us not waste our time in idle discourse!"

Vladimir: But what can we do?

Estragon: What do you want to do?

Vladimir: Let us not waste our time in idle discourse!" (Beckett, Act III, P. 23).

Although all the scenes of the play portrayed in atmosphere of despair and gloom, still there are hints of permanence hope. Despite that they have no evidence that someone will come to save them, the main two characters in the play, Vladimir and Estragon, never loss hope with salvation. Therefore, Beckett tries to expose the necessity of hope for humanity even in the most miserable circumstances of despair and uncertainty. Absence of Godot might be interpreted as the inability of political, economic, and religious ideologies to bring about salvation. Investing in a prevailing ideology, whether it is capitalism, God, or leadership is the characters' hope in Godot, however, this belief simply serves to perpetuate their misery. According to Jameson, This stands for the delusion or false consciousness and confusion that conceal actual class dynamics. This displacement reveals the political unconscious, what is said absurd waiting, existential paralysis and circular time is structured by what is not said socioeconomic marginalization and criticism of capitalism.

The characters persistence for waiting something perhaps will never show up represent their intense desire for meaningful life and salvation from the horrendous circumstances caused by the devastating war. Tyndall (2004), argues that in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the hope of the characters in a hopeless world, is an evidence of the ability of human spirit to overcome its adversities, but the futility of this hope due to the absence of what they are waiting for, assure the sense of despair that permeates the play (110).

Class distinction and poverty are another important themes in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The writer deliberately created his two main characters i.e. (Vladimir and Estragon) as poor and deprived in a horrible and barren world. The poor condition of the characters, dependence on others, laziness, lack of resources and opportunities reflect the economic inequalities as a result left by the war. The characters' struggle to obtain food, housing, and comfort is depicted in the play in a way that emphasizes the societal injustices appear after war. Swan in his work entitled *Memory and Trauma in the*

Postwar British Novel (2005) acknowledges that Beckett's portrayal of deprivation and poverty highlights the social and economic upheavals that characterized the post-war era, when many people were left to deal with a society that do not care about their plight. (82)

Through its scenes, the play dealt with theme of memory, the individuals recalled their past repetitively, but their past appeared unreliable and fragmented. The inability of balancing their past and the present in a world radically changed by conflict is reflected in this detachment from the past. The psychological effects of conflict, where the past becomes warped and hard to understand, are highlighted by the characters' incapacity to recall or make sense of their prior experiences. Pilling, J. in his study *Beckett Literary Style of Writing* (1991) argues that Beckett's dealing with theme of memory emphasizes how people frequently find it difficult to understand their own pasts due to trauma and psychological suffering. (101)

Furthermore, this play tackles the issue of the pursuit of atonement, even in a society where it appears to be mysterious. The waiting of the characters for Godot reflects people's quest for meaningful life in a world destroyed by the savage war. The long and vague absence of Godot is an indication that salvation may not be at the end of their way. According to Esslin (1961) the unattainable redemption suggests the psychological suffering which overcomes most of society people after the war. The period in which people started doubt religion and all the traditional sources of hope. (115)

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett portrayed the time monotonous and cyclical and the main characters stuck in the same space waiting something to save them. The repetitive and monotonous time in the play reflects the turbulences that overcome the world, specially the period that follow the war. The monotonous actions of the characters and their failure to meet what they were waiting for assure the constant miserable situation of society without any development or enhance. According to Swan (2005) Beckett's portrayal of repetitive time echoes the difficulty to get rid from the influences of the past particularly in a world that ruined by conflict. (90)

The act of "waiting" in the title turns into a metaphor for a state that is dependent on working class. Estragon and Vladimir wait for an abstract savior who never shows up. From Jameson's point of view, this could be interpreted as an indication of ideological interrogation, the proletarians who never acknowledges their own agency while waiting for salvation, whether it be from God, revolution, or capital. According to Jameson (1981) literature exposes history "in negative form" despite its absences and silences (21). Godot's lack of revolution or action is not an apolitical vacuum; rather, it is a derogatory portrayal of a class that has lost its capacity for action. A more obvious class system is introduced through the relationship between Pozzo, who represents the bourgeoisie class, and Lucky, who represent the proletariat or working class. Pozzo is a performative and exploitative bourgeois authority figure who abuses Lucky while simultaneously depending on him to function. Despite being mistreated, Lucky is the knowledge bearer, his monologue is a jumbled philosophical meditation, implying the working class's intellectual capacity, albeit skewed by the conditions of slavery. Through the final decline, Lucky goes silent and Pozzo goes blind, reflects the breakdown of

conventional class relations and perhaps the crisis of dominant class in contemporary capitalism.

Therefore, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a comprehensive investigation of the harsh impact of war on the human mind in particular and on society in general. Through his portrayal of social fragmentation, the absence of hope and existential despair, the writer could succeed in exposing the confusion, alienation, isolation, the search for meaning and disillusionment that characterized the aftermath of war, thus, Beckett delivered his readers a message that the results of war are the wreckage and destruction of society in general and the poor in particular. Pilling (1991) argues that Beckett's work echoes the impact of war on society and individual's lives (134).

Conclusion

To conclude, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* exposes the plight of man, through portrayal of absurdity and meaninglessness of life after the World War which symbolically reflected through its main characters (Vladimir and Estragon). Beckett highlights the human propensity to look for meaning and purpose in a world that provides neither by having them wait endlessly for an abstract Godot. Through the analysis of the play, it can be inferred a deep political unconsciousness hidden under its lines. A subtle indictment of existential alienation and societal paralysis is concealed by the play's vague characters and simple setting. Beckett illustrates a sense of collective helplessness in the face of repressive systems through Estragon and Vladimir's never-ending waiting and back-and-forth conversation.

The passivity and monotonous routine of the characters in the play reflect the state of people who are ensnared in structures that they do not fully comprehend. The themes of the play are universalized due to the lack of overt political allusions, emphasizing how covert and undetectable ideological domination. The individual portrayed in the play, represent post-war's disillusionment and the inability of political ideologies to provide purpose, they are locked in a sequence of hope and depression. Their inaction serves as a metaphor for their lack of political participation and tacit acceptance of their miserable circumstances. Both the failed authority and the delusion of political deliverance are symbolized by the perpetually anticipated but never arrived Godot.

Therefore, the play criticizes both governmental structures and the human propensity to look to abstract powers to save humanity. Thus, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* exposes how routine and hopelessness mask more powerful forces of ideological domination by dramatizing the political unconscious as a terrain of immobility. In the end, Beckett urges his readers to reflect on their own existence; in addition, he stresses the value of tenacity despite existential uncertainty.

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