

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

**August 2013 Vol. 4 Issue IV**

**Editor-in-Chief**

**Dr. Vishwanath Bite**

**Managing Editor**

**Madhuri Bite**

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## **The Meaninglessness of Life in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Harold Pinter's *the Birthday Party***

**Mehmet Akif Balkaya**

Research Assistant

Department of English Language and Literature

Faculty of Science and Letters

Aksaray University

Aksaray, Turkey

This paper studies Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* in terms of their rejection of the characteristics of the traditional drama, and analyzes in what ways these plays are absurd. The movement of absurd drama rose in Paris, France now that it was seen as the center of art of the world at that time. Absurd drama resists the traditional forms of conventional drama which has a tradition based on strong roots, and in it the inharmoniousness between the human being and the world is portrayed. The absurd drama minimizes all the visual and sensitive elements on stage. The most known dramatists are Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco and Arthur Adamov, who criticize the conventional drama and its elements in their works in a direct or indirect way and make them problematic while trying to expose their own theatre conception.

### **Introduction**

The absurd drama rejects the classic plot. In his article, Worton mentions that "instead of following the tradition which demands that a play have an exposition, a climax and a denouement, Beckett's plays have a cyclical structure which might indeed be better described as a diminishing spiral" (69). It gives a chance to the audience to dream the end of the story.

The absurd theatre developed against the forms and rules of the classical drama in the twentieth century. As acknowledged by dramatists and critics, the state of human being is nonsense and without any aim basically.

The ideas of absurd drama playwrights affect the form and structure of their plays and they do not use the logical structure of the classical drama. There are few common dramatic actions in their works. For instance, there is no plot in *Waiting for Godot* of Samuel Beckett. The play develops around two aimless characters spending their time while waiting but not knowing for whom or what in an atemporal and circular atmosphere. The language applied in the absurd theatre is corrupted and full of puns, repetitions and irrelevant speeches, that is to say, the characters in these works use informal language just as the useless dialogues between Vladimir and Estragon and Meg and Petey.

### **Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot***

We can regard Vladimir and Estragon as two punks, who seem to have no aim in life, which is actually one of the features of the absurd drama: having no aim. As the title of the play suggests, the play portrays the audience/reader the aimless behaviors of the two characters for spending time while "*Waiting for Godot*. In Act I the dialogue between Estragon and Vladimir is like a summary of the play:

Vladimir: What do we do now?

Estragon: Wait.

Vladimir: Yes, but while waiting.

Estragon: What about hanging ourselves. (Beckett 13)

Furthermore, the only things they do are to put on their shoes, eat turnip, thinking of committing suicide by hanging themselves and pee, and as a result of this dull waiting absurd

dialogues take place. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, language is not a means of communication but a means of killing time. At the beginning of Act I of *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon says "Nothing to be done" (Beckett 5). With this Beckett displays his nihilistic ideas. And following a few pages, the same character says "there's nothing to show" (7). It seems that, according to the writer, the human life is absurd, and thus the works of it need to have absurd style. The place is where nothing to be done and seen, and shown. *Waiting for Godot* means hope for the two aimless characters. Beckett presents the meaninglessness of existence to the audience by using ridiculous characters.

Both *Waiting for Godot* and *The Birthday Party* –like many absurd dramas – express the meaninglessness of human state and logical approach to this state. The human is alone in this world and s/he is the loser who is forced to live there. The human is not in harmony with the world. One of the principles of the absurd drama is to reflect the disharmony by creating disharmony on the stage. Neither of the plays proposes alternative solutions for better living conditions. On the contrary, it is emphasized that the human is forced to live in bad conditions, therefore, it can be said that both plays try to reflect the relationship between absurd requests of human and absurdness of the world.

As Lumley states: "language becomes a means to try and make sense, but it is no use. The characters are no longer human, they are like puppets" (200). As mentioned, the characters of *Godot* look like puppets; in the play after the characters say "Let's Go" "They do not move" (51, 91). In other words, a linguistic sign contrasts with non-linguistic sign.

The two characters of the play find themselves in a complex and centerless world. They look like two rovers – belonging to nowhere and penniless and homeless – who lose their self-esteem. They are not part of any social order. Actually this situation is true not only for Vladimir and Estragon but also for Stanley in *The Birthday Party* because we do not know who actually he is, where he lives, who his family is, if he has any. So it can be said that the characters in both plays seem similar in these senses.

The space and time lose integrity. At the beginning of the play the dialogue between the two characters shows us how completely homeless and timeless they are. They are like vagabonds.

Estragon: You're sure it was this evening?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: that we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said Saturday. (Pause) I think.

...

Estragon: ... But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (Pause.) Or Monday? (Pause.) Or Friday?

...

Vladimir: What'll we do?

Estragon: If he came yesterday and we weren't here you may be sure he won't come again today...I may be mistaken... (11)

The cause and effect relationship is also broken in their lives. The reasons are disconnected with the result. The dialogue between the two reveals that they do not have cause and effect relationship.

Vladimir: ...I wouldn't have let them beat you.

Estragon: You couldn't have stopped them.

...

Vladimir: No, I mean before they beat you. I would have stopped you from doing whatever it was you were doing.

Estragon: I wasn't doing anything.

Vladimir: Then why did they beat you?

Estragon: I don't know. (Act II 55)

While Vladimir represents reason and intellectual competence, Estragon represents instincts and feelings. Vladimir is obsessed with his hat while Estragon is obsessed with his boots. The life is very boring without the other as they feel incomplete. It can be seen that Estragon contradicts himself.

Estragon: Don't touch me!

Vladimir: Do you want me to go away? Gogo!...

Estragon: Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me! (53)

In the play, Pozzo is the only one who lives in the linear time because he is the only one that has a watch. Being the master of Lucky, Pozzo behaves brutally to him but as Worton states "... Lucky is stronger than Pozzo because his apparent servility and inadequacy provide the crutch on which Pozzo constantly leans in order to create or, rather, to proclaim, a sense of his authority" (71). In Act II Pozzo is blind and he is alienated from the linear time.

Vladimir: I'm asking you if it came on you all of a sudden.

Pozzo: I woke up one fine day as blind as Fortune.

...

Pozzo: Don't question me! The blind have no notion of time. The things of time are hidden from them too. (83)

And Vladimir ironically replies: "...I could have sworn it was just the opposite"(83). The language becomes meaningless; no one seems to be expressing himself, and as a result, they are not able to do anything apart from having meaningless dialogues which are composed of repetition, there seems to be no relationship between the answers and questions. In his article Worton mentions that "the central problem they pose is what language can and cannot do. Language is no longer presented as a vehicle for direct communication or as a screen through which one can see darkly the psychic movements of a character" (68). In this atmosphere, the silence is effective and meaningful like the words.

At the end of the play, when Estragon asks "Let's go", Vladimir says "Yes, let's go" but "they don't move" (91). Moving means taking risk and they cannot take risk. They do not move but act as if they would. Their only purpose is waiting for Godot. They are aware of the fact that they live in a confusing world. Godot does not come but they can spend time while waiting for Godot. It seems that if Godot arrives they will have no other aim in life.

The reader does not know anything about their family or social background. The play has an open-ending end. Their world has no cause and effect relation and consists of repetitive actions and expressions because it is seen that the second act is the almost the same of the first act. They wait for Godot again, Lucky and Pozzo arrive again and Estragon gets a beating again. At the end of both acts, similar dialogues between the boy and Vladimir show the meaningless and inconclusive cyclical part of life:

Boy: Mr Godot –

Vladimir: I've seen you before, haven't I?

Boy: I don't know, Sir.

Vladimir: You don't know me?

Boy: No, Sir.

Vladimir: This is your first time?

Boy: Yes, Sir. (Act I 48)

...

Boy: Mister...(Vladimir turns) Mr. Albert....

Vladimir: Off we go again. (Pause) Do you not recognize me?

Boy: No, Sir.

Vladimir: This is your first time.

Boy: Yes, Sir. (Act II 88)

### Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

As mentioned before Harold Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* is similar in many ways to *Waiting for Godot*. In his plays, Pinter mostly deals with human experiences, and describes the human experience as grief. The human is portrayed as alone in Pinter's plays as he can communicate neither with himself nor others. In the play Stanley is such a person, he does not talk about himself or let anybody get to his world as he is not able to hide himself. He always wears a mask. Pinter regards the human in a war. Stanley is a closed book; he does not reveal his inner world to the others. Moreover, he tries not to give his room or house which is a sign of his existence and identity. He is motionless in his room and secure. The struggle between the outsiders and insiders is portrayed with the struggle between Stanley and Goldberg and McCann. The danger outside represents the human's past and his repressed unconscious. Although there is a loser and winner at the end of this struggle, there is not always a certain border between the loser and the winner as this struggle lasts forever and the loser and the winner always replace.

In Pinter's *the Birthday Party*, Stanley is portrayed to be frightened. He lives in fear and waits for the day when somebody will take him, and then Goldberg and McCann arrive. Everything is portrayed upside down. "Culturally sanctioned identities are capable of frightening reversals, as Pinter famously shows ... oppressed groups – McCann and Goldberg in *The Birthday Party* – become, seemingly, the oppressors themselves" (Stokes 40). Meg prepares a birthday party for Stanley. She presents a drum to Stanley. Goldberg, McCann, Meg and the neighbor Lulu join the party. He is the loser against Meg and Lulu. He is angry with Meg as she cannot defend him against Goldberg and McCann. It seems that the sexuality of Lulu makes him frightened. Meg cannot prevent Goldberg's and McCann's taking Stanley. She is not even aware what is going around. She is not aware that Stanley is taken to be killed. As Lumley states

The Birthday party is a good example of Pinter's work generally, since he cannot be said to have advanced since then, for he does not have any particular goal. As in all his work we have the feeling that he improvises the situations as he goes along, invents confusions and misunderstandings, intruder arrives normally and makes the menace of his presence felt; somehow in the end the characters muddle through as in life. (268)

The dialogues are similar to those of *Waiting for Godot*; aimless and killing-time dialogues are present in the play.

Meg: Is that you Petey?

Pause

Petey, is that you?

Pause.

Petey?

Petey: What? (9)

Similar to *Waiting for Godot*, pauses and silence take place while talking, and as mentioned the language seems to be just for killing the time; it seems useless. Communication does not seem to be the main target of the characters while talking.

Petey: Someone's just had a baby.

Meg: Oh, they haven't! Who?

Petey: Some girl.

Meg: Who Petey, who?

Petey: I don't think you would know her.

Meg: what is her name?



Petey: Lady Mary Splatt.  
Meg: I don't know her.  
Petey: No. (11)

Another similar and common feature of the absurd drama is timelessness. This can be witnessed between the husband and wife's dialogue.

Meg: What time did you go out this morning, Petey?  
Petey: Same time as usual.  
Meg: Was it dark?  
Petey: No, it was light.  
Meg: But sometimes you go out in the morning and it's dark.  
Petey: That's in the winter.  
Meg: Oh, in winter.  
Petey: Yes, it gets light later in winter. (10-11)

Although they are wife and husband, it seems that lack of communication or monotonous dialogues make them alienated to themselves. "But Pinter's plays are not solely about unexpected moments of isolation; they are equally about unexpected moments of alliance (Copa 50)".

We do not know much about the isolated Meg and Petey, and almost nothing is known about Stanley: who he is, where he belongs to, whether he has a family, why two men are after him, therefore nothing seems to be certain in the play. The coming of Goldberg and McCann suggests that "we are surrounded by the unknown" (Esslin 242). In his book, Esslin states that the play

speaks plainly of the individual's pathetic search for security; of secret dreads and anxious the terrorism of our world, so often embodied in false bonhomie and bigoted brutality; of the tragedy that arises from lack of understanding between people on different levels of awareness. (241)

## Conclusion

All in all, in absurd drama the inharmoniousness between the human being and the world is portrayed through the use of language and behaviors of the characters but dissimilarly the language and the actions seem to be absurd which imply that life itself is absurd, and this situation is portrayed in Pinter's and Beckett's works.

## Works Cited:

- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2010. Print.
- Copa, Francesca. "The sacred joke: comedy and politics in Pinter's early plays." *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*. Raby, Peter. Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 43-55. Print.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004. Print.
- Lumley, Frederick. *New Trends in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Drama: A Survey since Ibsen and Shaw*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967. Print.
- Pinter, Harold. *The Birthday Party and Other Plays*. London: and Co Ltd., 1964. Print.
- Stokes, John. "Pinter and the 1950s." *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*. Raby, Peter. Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 27-42. Print.
- Worton, Michael. "Waiting for Godot and Endgame: theatre as text." *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*. John Pilling. Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 67-87. Print.