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Dramatization of ‘To Be, or Not to Be’ at the Stage of *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract:

Hamlet: “To be or not to be, that is the question.”----Hamlet.

Vladimir: “But that is not the question. What are we doing here, that is the question.”---Waiting for Godot.

To be or not to be (is it better to live or to die?) is probably the best-known line from all Shakespearian drama. No doubt, if anyone is asked to quote a line of Shakespeare this is the one that first comes to mind for most people. The present study brings two great literary works Hamlet and *Waiting for Godot* on the common ground: ‘To be or not to be’ to dramatize first on the plot of the second. As we know that Hamlet continues to assert its prominence and its relevance in the present century because it reflects on the basic problems of humanity: “Is it better to live or to die?” Samuel Beckett’s ‘*Waiting for Godot*’ also portrays a similar crisis in the dramatization of waiting for unapproachable Godot to this planet. Here, Hamlet, Vladimir and Estragon are utterly struck by the mournful thought of ‘to be or not to be’ which sink them to the abyss of despair until they are rejuvenated by the philosophical elixir. In this soliloquy, Hamlet reasons himself out of committing suicide. He first acknowledges the attractiveness of death to someone who has many problems in life then he realizes why most people choose lives over death: they are afraid of the unknown. For those who kill themselves, life after death might be far worse than life on earth. It is this possibility that dissuades Hamlet from committing suicide. Thus the present study dramatizes the Shakespearean melancholy of suicide portrayed in Hamlet at the existential stage of *Waiting for Godot*. It is an effort to provide remedies not for the survival of the fittest but for those who are gloomy and dejected from their self.

Keywords: To be or not to be, Hamlet, *Waiting for Godot*, Suicide.

INTRODUCTION:

How can we know what Shakespeare intended the meaning of the soliloquy ‘to be or not to be’ when he left us not any private notes to tell us. So, here we are left to make our own interpretations of this. One of the reasons why this soliloquy is so famous is because it speaks to all of us in different ways. It is something that we can all relate to in our own way based on our own experiences. Samuel Beckett’s play ‘*Waiting for Godot*’ is commonly interpreted within the context of the Theater of the Absurd, existential literature, or Christian allegory. By investigating

the play within the context of Shakespearean dilemma, new insights are uncovered by the scholar as to what the play may be saying about the Hamlet's soliloquy "to be or not to be". By applying this approach to various aspects of *Waiting for Godot*, we can see how the play dramatizes Hamlet's soliloquy on its plot. No doubt, Martin Esslin categorizes it as the 'theatre of absurd', Peter Barry categorizes it as post-modernism in his book *Beginning Theory*, the present study will try to dramatize Hamlet's soliloquy in it in the form of unapproachable traits of other world to this world. That is it dramatizes the Hamlet's rejection of the idea of suicide, though as bad as life may get, because we fear what comes after could be even worse.

TO BE, OR NOT TO BE: THAT IS THE QUESTION:

Soliloquy is a literary device according to which a character brings out the inner complex feelings by speaking himself / herself. The audience is supposed to hear it but not the other characters. There are eleven soliloquies uttered in the play by Hamlet, Claudius and Ophelia out of which, seven soliloquies are uttered by Hamlet. These soliloquies show the feelings, the tendencies and psychological aspects of Hamlet. 'To be or not to be' is the central soliloquy that prevents Hamlet to take revenge, though the play is about revenge. There are several opportunities to kill Claudius but Hamlet does not make use of them. He is hesitant to take revenge because he is intended to make an experiment if his uncle is the murderer of his father or not.

This is one of the most remarkable soliloquies that serves to highlight the state of indecision in which he finds himself. He asks which of the two alternatives is nobler whether silently to suffer the cruelties of fate or to put up a fight against the misfortunes of life. What prevents a man from committing suicide is that he does not know what the result for him, after death. It is the fear of what may happen to us after death that makes us endure the ills and injustices of life. This soliloquy reveal the speculative temperament of Hamlet, irresolute and wavering mind and his incapacity for any pre-mediated action of a momentous nature. It also has a universal appeal because Hamlet is speaking for all human beings. There are occasions in every man's life when he feels a strong desire to put an end to his life, but he is prevented from doing so by several considerations including those specifically mentioned by Hamlet. Further, a man is no better than a beast if he is satisfied only with sleeping and feeding himself. God gives reason to human beings so that they may make use of it. "Oh, from this time forth, /My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!"(Act 4, 3)

In it Hamlet weighs the relative benefits of life ("to be") and death ("not to be"). To live involves constant struggle against the travails that life throws at him ("the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"), and he thinks momentarily that death, even through suicide, might bring a welcome sleep. But if death is truly like sleep, then it is possible that we might dream, which is, to Hamlet "the rub". This is what keeps people from choosing suicide, for life is so unbearable that we would choose to end it if we were not afraid of what come after. This compels us rather

continue to live, as bad as life may get, rather than risk the possibility that what comes after could be even worse, or more of the same.

The significance of the present soliloquy is that Hamlet proves to be a thinker, not just one who acts and reacts. It is in this soliloquy that Hamlet is seen as a true philosopher. This allows us to recognize that his actions are not simply reactions to what is going on around him. Instead, he deeply considers things. Here, he is shown on the horn of dilemma and thinks whether he should tolerate it or fight against the tyranny of life. His acute pain, caused by obsession, pushes him to commit suicide. He prefers escaping from reality. But such dejections are interim. When he comes to round, he condemns it cowardice and uplifts himself to the spell of suicide. So, he hesitates to commit suicide because it is not way of getting rid of the trouble of life, but implicating or trapping himself into more torturous troubles. If it had not been, it would have been the best remedy for all troubles given by life in the world. In this way, the present soliloquy chances the person to think about something repeatedly and gives birth to what is right.

DRAMATIZATION OF ‘TO BE, OR NOT TO BE’ AT THE STAGE OF ‘WAITING FOR GODOT’:

The present play has been identified as a representation of human attitude and the meaningless absurdity of the human condition. The interpretations of the play are varied, and they all depend on the individual audience’s point of view. The play gives us deep insight into the human condition, and reflects a mirror to the audience which makes them ask, is this me and my life circumstances. So, the present analysis will focus on the miserable condition of life in the present, the constant effort to make it fruitful and not to commit suicide in the light of ‘to be or not to be’ as portrayed in Hamlet. The entire plot of the play centers on two protagonists and their waiting for the mysterious character named Godot and their failure to approach him. Here, Beckett’s intention in creating these characters may have been to make them aware that we should live in the present circumstances with what we have, instead of waiting for better lives beyond the present. To achieve the goal the present study is divided into three subheads.

1‘TO BE, OR NOT TO BE’: DELAY IN ACTION

In this soliloquy, it is obvious that Hamlet is over thinking and wavering between two different extreme: life or death. Here, Hamlet wonders whether he should live and suffer the hardships that his life has to offer him or die in order to end the suffering.

“Whether t’is nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them” (3, 1, 56- 60).

Likewise in 'Waiting for Godot', it is obvious that Estragon and Vladimir are also over thinking and wavering between two different extreme: leave or wait. Here, they wonder whether they should wait for hope and hardship of life or leave the world in order to end the suffering. The very title of the play suggests its central theme as Martin Esslin has pointed out:

“The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of human condition”.

The dramatization of the theme of waiting in the play reminds us the theme of delay in action occurs in Hamlet. Here, the object of waiting may be an event, a person, or death. As we proceed along with the play we see that throughout the play Vladimir keeps on repeating that they are “waiting for Godot”. Actually, Vladimir repeats it for eight times and ninth is by Estragon. They used the phrase “passed the time” or “will pass the time” five times in the play. The slogan of “Nothing to be done” is repeated four times in the play, two times by Estragon and two times by Vladimir. The theme of “waiting” as the theme of “delay in action” portrayed in Hamlet, are scattered everywhere in the play. For examples:

- “Estragon: Let’s go. Vladimir: We can’t. Estragon: Why not? Vladimir: We’re waiting for Godot” (1, 8).
- “Vladimir: Let’s wait and see what he says. Estragon: Who? Vladimir: Godot” (1, 13).
- “Estragon: Simply wait. Vladimir: We’re used to it” (1, 39).
- “Estragon: Let’s go. Vladimir: We can’t. Estragon: Why not? Vladimir: We’re waiting for Godot” (1, 76).
- “Estragon: What do we do now? Vladimir: While waiting. Estragon: While waiting” (1, 86).
- “Estragon: Let’s go. Vladimir: We can’t. Estragon: Why not? Vladimir: We’re waiting for Godot” (1, 88).
- “Vladimir: Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come” (1, 91).
- “Estragon: Let’s go. Vladimir: We can’t. Estragon: Why not? Vladimir: We’re waiting for Godot” (1, 96).
- “Pozzo: What is he waiting for? Vladimir: What are you waiting for? Estragon: I’m waiting for Godot” (1, 100).

Here, what they are waiting for may be God, salvation, death, an escape in suicide, or an escape from suicide. During the reading of the play what becomes evident to me is that both of them are ‘tied’ to Godot, they cannot do anything except to wait for him endlessly. So, waiting for something fruitful and reasoning for right and wrong in life are the hopes for survival. Waiting for something fruitful i.e, Godot is the one that controls their lives in this absurd universe. They can only be saved by Godot and therefore waiting until his arrival is their fate and destiny.

The significance of the theme of ‘waiting’ in the play is that both Estragon and Vladimir prove to be a thinker like Hamlet and not just one who only acts and reacts one’s surroundings. It is in this theme of waiting that they are seen as a true philosopher like Hamlet. This allows us to understand that their actions are not simply reactions to what are going on around them. Instead, they deeply consider things. Here, they are shown on the horn of dilemma and think whether they should leave the world or wait for something fruitful in life. Thus, by utilizing the theme of ‘waiting’ like the theme of ‘delay in action’, they demonstrate which of the two alternatives is nobler whether to leave the world silently or to wait for something fruitful in their life.

2 ‘NOT TO BE’: THE ESCAPE IN SUICIDE

In the soliloquy, it stands for suicide, death, or non- existence. Here, Hamlet wonders if living is worth enduring these numerous pains or he should choose to kill himself, all of his heartaches would be put to rest.

“To die, to sleep- no more;

and by a sleep to say we end

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks...

To sleep, perchance to dream”(3, 1, 61-64).

In the same way, suffering is a permanent and constant part of human existence in ‘Waiting for Godot’ as portrayed in ‘Hamlet’. Every character suffers and suffers always, with no seeming resolution in life. Here, the hardships in life range from the physical to the mental, the minor to the extreme like the theme of ‘Not to be’ in Hamlet. In the present play, Vladimir and Estragon suffer not for lack of happiness in life, but for lack of certainty in this universe. None of the characters in the play shy away from the fact that death is inevitable. Actually, death and suicide become a solution for the inanity of daily life as depicted in the theme of ‘Not to be’ in Hamlet. Here, the main characters contemplate suicide as though it were as harmless as a walk to the cinema hall, probably because there is nothing in their lives worth sticking around for anyway.

Likewise the concept of suicide depicted in Hamlet, they also do not commit suicide because they are uncertain of the result of their attempt. Also, they do not commit suicide because they are not be sure of what their action will bring to them and so they decide on no action at all but wait. Thus, Estragon and Vladimir dramatize the theme of ‘Not to be’ as portrayed in Hamlet because they put the label of ‘Waiting for Godot’ on what is really just a systematic waiting for death i.e, an escape in suicide. For examples:

- “Estragon: What’s all this about? Abused who? Vladimir: The savior. Estragon: Why? Vladimir: Because he wouldn’t save them. Estragon: From hell. Vladimir: Imbecile! From death. Estragon: I thought you said hell. Vladimir: From death, from death” (1, 73-80).
- “Estragon: What about hanging ourselves? Vladimir: Hmm. It’d give us an erection. Estragon: (highly excited) an erection! [...] Estragon: Let’s hang ourselves immediately! ” (1, 17).

[Here, the appeal of hanging is not that it would bring death, but rather that it is something to do during the eternal wait. As yet another way to pass the time, Vladimir and Estragon consider suicide, by hanging with a rope. Here, the topic of suicide arises in a fit of boredom, as the two friends search for ways to speed up the passage of time while they wait for Godot. The erection, the ejaculation, and even the suicide itself would be something at variance the monotony of their everyday waiting and would therefore help speed up the passage of time. But never do Vladimir and Estragon contemplate suicide in a realistic context, where they can see it as an act that would inevitably prevent them from meeting Godot].

- “Pozzo: I do. But 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 kill them. Lucky weeps” (1. 45).
- “Estragon: Do you remember the day I threw myself into the Rhone? [...] Vladimir: There’s no good harking back on that. Come on. He draws him after him. As before.” (1, 54).
- “Estragon: It’d be better if we parted. Vladimir: You always say that and you always come crawling back. Estragon: The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.”(2, 85-87).

[Here, both characters seem to see death as some sort of relief or end of suffering in life like Hamlet].

- “Estragon: They talk about their lives. Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them. Estragon: They have to talk about it. Vladimir: To be dead is not enough for them. Estragon: It is not sufficient. Silence.” (2, 113-118).
- “Vladimir: Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps we have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (He listens.) But habit is a great deadener. (He looks again at Estragon.) At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying. He is sleeping he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (Pause). I can’t go on! (Pause). What have I said?”(2, 795).

[This is Vladimir’s response to Pozzo’s statement that life is fleeting and therefore without meaning. Though Pozzo focuses on the inevitability of death, Vladimir focuses on the banality of life. Life is not meaningless because we die life is meaningless because we “deaden” it with purposeless habits].

Thus, we can see that there are many occasions in Estragon and Vladimir’s life when they feel a strong desire to put an end to their life and escape in suicide. How would escape

in suicide for them be at all unsafe? If they are living a virtual death, dying will be nothing but more of the same. On the other hand, if they are merely living an extraordinarily mundane and pathetic life, death will be the exclamation point that relieves them of their boredom with life. Here, it seems that Estragon gives credence to the former when he says “everything’s dead but the tree”, but, regardless, it makes no difference; for neither possibility can be any more unpleasant than life and one is far preferable to life’s incessant boredom, it follows that the rope should be used, suicide should be attempted as the logical conclusion.

3 ‘TO BE’: THE ESCAPE FROM SUICIDE

In the soliloquy, it stands for survival, life, and existence. When Hamlet comes to round, he condemns suicide and tries to escape from it. This is what escapes humanity from choosing suicide, for life is so unbearable that we would choose to end it if we were not afraid of what come after.

“But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover’d country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of ?” (3, 1, 76- 80)

In the same way, Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is an image of human condition and it is centered at the theme of escape from suicide. Here, the playwright wants to communicate the problematic nature of man’s situation in the world. The present play is not pessimistic even though it deals with the disillusionment and despair of the modern world. What Beckett tries to communicate here is not the theme of disillusionment and despair but the theme of Hamlet’s “to be” to face the human condition as it is, with all its mystery. That is, in the light of Hamlet’s theme of “to be” man should face the realities of life and he need not feel disheartened at his suffering and misery.

On numerous occasions we can see that the characters say “Let’s go”, but they end up doing nothing. This is also related to their rejection to escape in suicide: nothing is being achieved. In the beginning the characters are waiting for Godot to arrive, and at the end of the play nothing has changed. We can also see this rejection of suicide in *Lucky* in the second half; he is the slave of a man who is incapable of punishing him. Lucky is perfectly able to run away but he never does, and so he rejects the theme of escape in suicide. Thus, the play focuses on the miserable condition of the present life, the constant efforts to make it fruitful and not to commit suicide in the light of “to be, or not to be” as portrayed in *Hamlet*. For examples:

- “Estragon: I’m going. He does not move.” (1,67).
- “Estragon: Let’s go. Vladimir: We can’t. Estragon: Why not? Vladimir: We’re waiting for Godot.” (1, 91-94).
- “Vladimir: Well! What do we do? Estragon: Don’t let’s do anything. It’s safer.” (1, 194-5).
[This is the fundamental problem in the present play. If we see the play as an allegory, fear and uncertainty after death results in an escape from suicide.]
- “Vladimir: But that is not the question. What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come.” (2, 526).
[According to Vladimir escape in suicide is not the question of our present life. What is important to our life is to escape from suicide and wait for something fruitful in our life.]
- “Estragon: It’d be better if we parted. Vladimir: You always say that and you always come crawling back” (2, 85-86).
[Here, Estragon always proposes that we should leave this absurd world immediately but like Hamlet he always escape from suicide.]
- “Estragon draws Vladimir towards the tree. They stand motionless before it. Silence. Estragon: Why don’t we hang ourselves? Vladimir: With what? Estragon: You haven’t got a bit of rope. Vladimir: No. Estragon: Then we can’t. Silence.” (2, 853-8).
[Here, in his first attempt Estragon thinks about suicide but later in the influence of Vladimir he rejects the plan of suicide and concludes to wait for something fruitful in his life.]

Thus, Beckett asks a crucial question and answers it in this play. If we accept that life has no meaning and therefore, no value, should we kill ourselves? He boldly argues that all attempts to commit suicide, physically or mentally, cannot be the solution for escaping from the absurdity of life. So, he claims that his characters choose to escape from suicide with the theme of waiting for Godot and hope of getting something fruitful in their life like Hamlet. In their first attempt they show the pointlessness of daily life and its monotonous routine, the realization of death; escape in suicide and time, indifference of nature to human life. But in their counter attempt like Hamlet, they choose to escape from theme of suicide and wait for something fruitful in their life. Due to un-approachability of Godot to this world, they realize that they are condemned to live their present life despite of its whole absurdity.

Here, Beckett represents the voice of modern men, who have witnessed the worst human tragedies, like world wars, concentration camps, and unbearable solitude. Millions of people have experienced the loss of their families, homes, lives, relatives, and may be the most important thing, their belief in reason. So, they could not maintain any rational basis for living and life, because of this, becomes saturated with dread. For Beckett, this awakening requires two possible alternatives to choose from either escape in suicide from our own existence or escape from suicide and wait for something fruitful in life. Here,

Vladimir and Estragon choose the second alternative and decide to wait for Godot. Thus, like Hamlet they conclusively dismiss the viability of suicide as an option.

Conclusion:

Thus, the present analysis concludes that the Shakespearian melancholy of life “Is it better to live or to die?” is perfectly dramatized at the existential stage of Waiting for Godot. The theme of waiting as portrayed in Waiting for Godot like Hamlet’s delay in action, demonstrates that Estragon and Vladimir choose to escape from suicide and decide to wait for something fruitful in their present life. Finally, in the light of the present analysis we can say that Waiting for Godot is an effort to provide remedies not for the survival of the fittest but for those who are gloomy and dejected from self and society.

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