

Interpreting *Waiting for Godot* from a Schopenhauerian View

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Abstract: This article is an analytical review of Samuel Beckett's supreme representation of the absurd, *Waiting for Godot*, which aims mainly at stressing Schopenhauer's presence in this work from two aspects: the aesthetic idea and pessimism. In Schopenhauerian aesthetics, one way to recognize thing-in-itself is to get rid of time, space, and causality, which is a noticeable characteristic in *Waiting for Godot*, and the suffering of life, the core of Schopenhauer's pessimism, is also an essential element in this play. This paper will attempt to interpret *Waiting for Godot* from these two perspectives, which might help to illuminate how Schopenhauer's ideas have influenced Samuel Beckett in his early works.

Keywords: Arthur Schopenhauer; Samuel Beckett; *Waiting for Godot*; Absurd; Pessimism

1. Introduction

Arthur Schopenhauer was one of the most famous German philosophers in the 19th century, and Samuel Beckett is a towering playwright and novelist in the 20th century. Beckett's writing has often been called "pessimistic", which shows a kind of kinship with Schopenhauer's pessimism. In addition, in Beckett's essay *Proust*, he proclaimed a metaphysical pre-eminence of art over philosophy, which once again employed Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory as a stepping stone. This paper will go into the matter of how these two ideas are demonstrated in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

2. Schopenhauerian Aesthetics--Getting Rid of Time, Space, and Causality

Building on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and Plato's doctrine, Schopenhauer concluded that both philosophers are compelled and inspired by the same world-view: our visible world is merely an appearance, or as Schopenhauer said-representation, and the Idea or in Schopenhauer's terms, the Will, is eternal, original and fundamental forms of all things. Based on this doctrine, Schopenhauer further put forward that, cognition always remains subordinated to the service of the Will, and the representation which arises through cognition also serves the Will. So, merely recognizing the ordinary cognition of particular things is useless, we need to free the cognition from the service of Will, which means to firstly stop considering the Where, When, Why. As he described in his book *The World as Will and Representation*:

The pure subject of cognition and its correlate, the Idea, have left behind all those forms of the principle of sufficient reason: time, place, the cognizing individual and the individual he has cognition of having no meaning for it. Only when a cognizing individual raises himself to the pure subject of cognition in the manner described, and in so doing raises the object observed to an Idea, does the world as representation step forward, purely and in its entirety, completely objectifying the will, since only the Idea is its adequate objecthood. (Schopenhauer 202)

Then, how to achieve the manner he described above? Through Arts, such as historical paintings and sculptures, since they are "the immediate and intuitive presentation of the Idea in which the Will reaches the highest grade of its objectivation." (Schopenhauer 245-246)

As for Beckett, back in his earliest essay *Proust*, he has shown his agreement with Schopenhauer that the aesthetic object's ontological position is outside time, space, and causality. It seems that Beckett, as a playwright, has abandoned the causality and space-time correctness himself in most of his literary works and especially in his dramas, as if trying to substantiate Schopenhauer's idea by capturing the situation and depicting it through the deadening condition of two lost men in a null world.

Waiting for Godot is a great instance among Beckett's writing that provides one possible understanding of Schopenhauer's theory of art.

Firstly, at the beginning of act 2, the author gave the stage direction as follows:

Next day. Same time.

Same place. (Beckett 2)

This direction is only for the actors and audience to know the basic environment of the characters, not for the characters in it, which means that Gogo and Didi do not know exactly where and when they are. These characters live in a world where there is no certainty of time and space. We can find their confusions about "where they are" and "when they are" a lot in the book:

ESTRAGON:

We came here yesterday.

VLADIMIR:

Ah no, there you're mistaken.

ESTRAGON:

What did we do yesterday?

VLADIMIR:

What did we do yesterday?

ESTRAGON:

Yes.

VLADIMIR:

Why . . . (Angrily.) Nothing is certain when you're about.

ESTRAGON:

In my opinion we were here.

VLADIMIR:

(looking round). You recognize the place?

ESTRAGON:

I didn't say that.

VLADIMIR:

Well?

ESTRAGON:

That makes no difference.

VLADIMIR:

All the same . . . that tree . . . (turning towards auditorium) that bog . . .

ESTRAGON:

You're sure it was this evening?

VLADIMIR:

What?

ESTRAGON:

That we were to wait.

VLADIMIR:

He said Saturday. (Pause.) I think.

ESTRAGON:

You think.

VLADIMIR:

I must have made a note of it. (He fumbles in his pockets, bursting with miscellaneous rubbish.)

ESTRAGON:

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

VLADIMIR:

(looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape). It's not possible!

ESTRAGON:

Or Thursday?

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.

VLADIMIR:

But you say we were here yesterday.

ESTRAGON:

I may be mistaken. (Pause.) Let's stop talking for a minute, do you mind? (Beckett 16-18)

Conversations like this reflect Beckett's idea that time and space here do not function anymore. It's not there is no time, but that time has no order. All events cannot be arranged in a reliable order that people normally used to. A case in point would be the depiction of the seasons and the weather in this play: there is a tree in the setting, which in the beginning has no leaves, but in act 2, it suddenly grows leaves, and in the end, it is covered with leaves. The growing of the tree has no transition at all.

ESTRAGON:

Where are the leaves?

VLADIMIR:

It must be dead. (Beckett 14)

The tree has four or five leaves.

ESTRAGON:

The tree?

VLADIMIR:

Do you not remember?

ESTRAGON:

I'm tired.

VLADIMIR:

Look at it.

They look at the tree.

ESTRAGON:

I see nothing.

VLADIMIR:

But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And now it's covered with leaves.

ESTRAGON:

Leaves?

VLADIMIR:

In a single night.

ESTRAGON:

It must be the Spring.

VLADIMIR:

But in a single night!

ESTRAGON: I tell you we weren't here yesterday. Another of your nightmares. (Beckett 128-129)

The most profound part of the drama, where Beckett expressed some of his ideas on time, is what Pozzo says after being asked when he turns blind:

POZZO: (suddenly furious.) Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (Calmer.) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (He jerks the rope.) On! (Beckett 192)

One critic claims that this monologue means Pozzo considers "time as a basic structure of empirical world to be null." (Pothead 193) So Vladimir and Estragon do not succeed in finding out whether they are and where they are last night. Space and time both have no uncertainty due to their memory or cognition failure, and once people cannot arrange and relate events in a reliable time and space sequence, there will be no way to form a causal chain, which is a necessary and logical thing to predicate and act. And that kind of highly unpredictable structure of the world is what we often call "absurd". Living in such a grotesque, meaningless situation, they will lose normal thinking ability and even logic, therefore, they will act absurdly. So we call *Waiting for Godot* "the absurd theatre", which is not because this drama is in chaos, but often because time, space, and causality have all lost their binding force.

That's the first point, where one sees *Waiting for Godot* as Beckett's supreme representation of the absurd, which contains some of the modernized Schopenhauerian aesthetic ideas.

The term "Theatre of Absurd" was coined by Martin Esslin in his essay *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). He mentioned that the absurd dramas project a state that he describes as "metaphysical anguish" (Esslin 19), which is sensed in Beckett's works vividly and profoundly. This pain or pessimism seems to shed some light on Schopenhauer's most well-known idea.

3. Schopenhauer's Pessimism--Suffering of Life

Schopenhauer claimed that the essence or basis of all beings is "need, lack, and thus pain" (368), which comes to the very fore in *Waiting for Godot* and can even be seen as an essential topic. For example, again in act 2 where Pozzo goes suddenly blind and he says: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (He jerks the rope.) On!" (Beckett 192)

What this means is that a person is born near death, happiness may occur occasionally, but suffering is everywhere and lingering all the time. Similar to that, Vladimir's last monologue demonstrates an even

more painful description. He says: “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.” (Beckett 195)

Both of their words are describing human existence, which has so much in common with Schopenhauer, who says, life is essentially “a multifaceted suffering and a thoroughly disastrous condition.”(381)

And when it comes to why, Schopenhauer claimed in the opening of his article, On the Vanity and Suffering of Life: Will’s desires are “unlimited, its claims inexhaustible, and every satisfied desire gives birth to a new one.” (5) First, there is “unquenchable thirst”, thereafter is endless suffering.

In *Waiting for Godot*, we can see the suffering of desire. For example, Estragon is always concerned about eating, and about carrots, they make two conversations. At first, when Vladimir offers him carrots, he shows disappointment, but later he gets the carrot, which is the last one Vladimir has, and he gets bored with the carrots while finishing it.

VLADIMIR:

Do you want a carrot?

ESTRAGON:

Is that all there is?

VLADIMIR:

I might have some turnips.

ESTRAGON:

Give me a carrot. (Vladimir rummages in his pockets, takes out a turnip and gives it to Estragon who takes a bite out of it. Angrily.) It’s a turnip!

VLADIMIR:

Oh pardon! I could have sworn it was a carrot. (He rummages again in his pockets, finds nothing but turnips.) All that’s turnips. (He rummages.) You must have eaten the last. (He rummages.) Wait, I have it. (He brings out a carrot and gives it to Estragon.) There, dear fellow. (Estragon wipes the carrot on his sleeve and begins to eat it.) Make it last, that’s the end of them. ...

ESTRAGON:

Fancy that. (He raises what remains of the carrot by the stub of leaf, twirls it before his eyes.) Funny, the more you eat the worse it gets. (Beckett 31-33)

And in act 2, there being no carrots, Estragon then settles with a radish, but again is disappointed with its color. That’s exactly a course of action that Schopenhauer has expressed, which is when someone asks for something and finally gets it, they will soon suffer from their next want.

VLADIMIR:

Would you like a radish?

ESTRAGON:

Is that all there is?

VLADIMIR:

There are radishes and turnips.

ESTRAGON:

Are there no carrots?

VLADIMIR:

No. Anyway you overdo it with your carrots.

ESTRAGON:

Then give me a radish. (Vladimir fumbles in his pockets, finds nothing but turnips, finally brings out a radish, and hands it to Estragon who examines it, sniffs it.) It’s black!

VLADIMIR:

It's a radish.

ESTRAGON:

I only like the pink ones, you know that!

VLADIMIR:

Then you don't want it?

ESTRAGON: I only like the pink ones! (Beckett 135-136)

Apart from this, one can say that the process of Waiting for Godot is just the most sufficient and objective example of the idea of Schopenhaurian view of life. Godot, no matter what it is, who he may be, is the desire of Gogo and Didi, and while waiting for him, they suffer.

While reading this great tragicomedy, two elements are hard to ignore -- pain and boredom. Pain and boredom are what life is under the rule of the Will, which is Schopenhauer described as the "pendulum between pain and boredom" (338). His idea of life has been endorsed by Beckett in his essay Proust. He developed this idea and further claimed that suffering enables sufferers to recognize the true reality, whereas the boredom of living keeps the person wrapped in the comfortable but untrue world of Habit. Every character has his share of physical pain. Gogo has a constant foot hurt, Didi has been trying to urinate which never fully succeeds, and Lucky has whips and rope. Moreover, the utter boredom is suffocating. One sentence that has been said by them all the time is "Nothing to be done." We can even notice their "swings" between these two. Boredom is what behind need. Feeling bored, Gogo and Didi want to fight boredom. But desire and need create pain, which makes boredom even stronger.

Most of Beckett's works (novels or dramas) like to leave the plot with a single progress, Malone Meurt is about the death progress of one man; Endgame is about the progress of four people waiting to end. And what about Waiting for Godot? Gogo and Didi are there waiting for someone called Godot. During this, they constantly try to leave and go, but somehow they are just not able to escape due to their desire, and as has been mentioned before, desire creates suffering. Therefore, while reading this great tragicomedy, it is easy to find that everything is getting worse, the characters' health, both physically and mentally, their relation with each other, and their relation to the world. And we can speculate that the future will continue to be worse from the image of Boy. Though there is not much research done especially on the Boy in the play, it is generally considered that Boy is to be the hope carrier and messenger. Beckett arranged for the boy to appear in the near despair of the two homeless men, as the green leaves to the withered branches in the second act, which seems to bring some sort of hope to the characters.

Let's take a close look at this Boy:

BOY:

(off). Mister!

Estragon halts. Both look towards the voice.

ESTRAGON:

Off we go again.

VLADIMIR:

Approach, my child.

Enter Boy, timidly. He halts. (Beckett 74)

This is his first debut, timidly, lacking confidence, recoiling. But he proves to be worse for not remembering meeting these two men before and not knowing what Godot looks like. He clearly has an even poorer memory than the forgetful Estragon; he is more ignorant than Vladimir who cannot make up his mind about nearly anything. He cannot even answer the question of whether he is happy or not.

VLADIMIR:

You're not unhappy? (The Boy hesitates.) Do you hear me?

BOY:

Yes Sir.

VLADIMIR:

Well?

BOY:

I don't know, Sir. (Beckett 80-81)

The Boy is more than just ignorant which may due to the young age, but also muddleheaded and obtuse. How one can be supposed to find the future, the hope in this Boy?

So in the Schopenhauerian view of life, once we live under the service of Will, there will be an endless tragedy, which is perfectly showed in *Waiting for Godot*. Just as one critic proclaimed: "it is a tragedy about waiting and disillusion of the mankind, which is the Sisyphus' myth staging on the western modern wasteland once again." (Zhang 180)

4. Conclusions

One critic says that "The theatre of Absurd is concerned with projecting the author's personal world." (Hussain 1479) And this paper is an endeavor to show *Waiting for Godot*, which bears elements of Theatre of Absurd, contains some Schopenhauerian ideas that Beckett has absorbed earlier.

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