

Term Paper

Existentialism and Happiness in Samuel Becket's "Waiting for Godot"

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June 16, 2014

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Samuel Becket's "Waiting for Godot" is known to be as the greatest absurd play of the twentieth century depicting man's psychological condition in post WWII Europe. The play's main, tragicomic characters depict humanity's main existential problems considering the strongly conveyed theme of futility leading towards the temptation of suicide. The play's vast capacity for interpretations has engendered countless studies to be made analyzing religious, philosophical, classical, psychoanalytical and biographical themes. This study concentrates mainly on the theoretical grounds of Camus's existentialism and focuses on his thoughts on the absurd together with the analysis of the myth of Sisyphus showing that having a purpose gives meaning to one's life. Also, parallels to Dante's the "Divine Comedy" are indicated, revealing equivalents between Becket's play's protagonists and Dante's "neutrals" who significantly explain Estragon's and Vladimir's attitude towards their absurd and meaningless commitment to waiting for Godot. Nevertheless, it is argued that although Estragon's and Vladimir's meaningless dedication has led them to contemplate the possibility of suicide, the fact that it was not committed shows their resolve not to submit into the absurd. This coincides with the theme of happiness, which is explained through themes of friendship, having a goal, and Lucky's sacrifice of freedom.

The opening words of the play set the stage for nothing else than the absurd: "Nothing to be done." With these words Estragon verbalizes the complete absence of creative activity and sets a certain feeling of futility, which continues to be the main problem of the play, therefore all further actions become like arduous performances by reluctant players: "People come and go, night comes and goes in a ceaseless succession of unaccomplishment and futile attempts to do something. Though the reader thus begins to feel that they have never done anything significant, there" (Sobosan 1976: 183). Futility and meaninglessness of the characters are parallel to the "Neutrals" in Dante's "The Divine Comedy". In Canto III the "waiting room" of the Inferno Dante encounters the "Neutrals" "the unhappy people, who never were alive-never awakened to take any part either in good or evil, to care for anything but themselves" (Cuddy 1982: 60). As Lois A. Cuddy explains in his study:

Like Dante's Neutrals, Gogo and Didi "follow still, as they have always done, a meaningless, shifting banner that never stands for anything..., a cause which is no cause but the changing magnet of the day". For this reason, Gogo and Didi will wait forever for Godot (or any substitute) whom they do not know and have never seen because they believe they should. They might be waiting for anything, but here and now their focus is Godot, their present "meaningless banner," that thing to which they passively attach themselves because they can't make up their minds to do anything else. Godot, then, functions not as a man or a figure of authority-or even as God-but as an illusion of certitude, a construct created by these souls as a crutch which reflects the passive pretenses and waiting of their lives on earth (Cuddy 1982: 48).

This allows us to view Estragon and Vladimir as aimless wonderers trapped in hell, waiting for salvation (Godot), which never comes, for it is just an illusion. Therefore Godot becomes as a manifestation of the absurd suggesting that the salvation never comes.

Moreover, the feeling of futility coincides with the theme of suicide in the play. In his essays Camus contemplates that the only thing waiting for us in the future is death, and raises a question if it is worth living at all. Furthermore, Camus reasons that if one realizes the absurdity in everyday life and sees it as suffering, one may consider suicide (Camus 1955). These ideas on existentialism reflect upon the main characters and their situation when the act of suicide, especially hanging themselves, is suggested by Estragon a number of times throughout the play, which can be interpreted as an act of trying to achieve salvation in a quicker and easier way, and at the same time put an end to their absurd situation:

ESTRAGON:

What about hanging ourselves?

ESTRAGON:

Let's hang ourselves immediately!

ESTRAGON:

If it hangs you it'll hang anything. (Waiting for Godot. Act 1).

ESTRAGON:

The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.

ESTRAGON:

Why don't we hang ourselves? (Waiting for Godot. Act 2).

Estragon's temptation of suicide can be seen as an act of trying to experience death, as Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* argues that Sisyphus' boulder is his greatest value and this burden makes him immortal in his punishment (Camus 1955). We are all immortal until the moment of death occurs because death has never been experienced.

Significantly, a parallel can be drawn between Sisyphus and the play's main characters regarding their absurd situation.

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was the king of Corinth, who was avaricious and deceitful. When Sisyphus betrayed Zeus by telling the river God Asopus of the whereabouts of his daughter Aegina, Zeus then ordered Thanatos, the God of death to chain Sisyphus down below in Tartarus.

Nevertheless, Sisyphus by tricking Thanatos chained him instead, that caused an uproar since no human could die with Thanatos disabled. Eventually Ares intervened and freed Thanatos, and turned Sisyphus over to him. The second time Sisyphus deceived the Gods by telling his wife neither to bury him after death nor to make sacrifices to the Gods. Then he approached Hades and asked to be allowed to leave the underworld to tell his wife to start sacrificing to the Gods, when allowed he tricked Hades and never came back. As a punishment for his trickery, King Sisyphus was made to roll a huge boulder up a steep hill. Before he could reach the top, the massive stone would always roll back down, forcing him to begin again. The maddening nature of the punishment was reserved for King Sisyphus due to his arrogant belief that his cleverness surpassed that of Zeus himself. Zeus accordingly displayed his own cleverness by enchanting the boulder into rolling away from King Sisyphus before he reached the top which ended up consigning Sisyphus to an eternity of useless efforts and unending frustration.

Similarly, the burden of waiting for Godot, like the burden of Sisyphus, makes Estragon and Vladimir immortal in their punishment, therefore the temptation of suicide can be interpreted as Estragon's realization of the absurd and a failure to cope with it, which leads him to look for a quicker and easier way to reach salvation and put an end to his misery.

This raises the question: Does the realization of the absurd requires suicide? As Camus answers: "No. It requires revolt" (Camus 1955). The fact that Estragon never commits suicide is because of Vladimir who keeps him company and shares the burden with him making it easier for them both. Estragon realizes that, and does not want to leave Vladimir alone. The way in which the characters are positioned in the play corresponds with this interpretation because all the characters are paired: Vladimir with Estragon, Pozzo with Lucky, a boy with his brother (which is ambiguous because it is not clear whether it is another boy). Therefore Beckett challenges the absurd by establishing the characters in pairs, and shows that the best revolt against the absurd is friendship. The dominating idea between each pair is that they cannot be without each other, because if one is alone, one cannot know unquestionably if one still exists.

As Camus at the end of his essay suggest that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 1955: 3), the same applies to Estragon and Vladimir. They, like Sisyphus have been punished to "roll" their burden and wait for Godot to come, which can be seen as absurd and meaningless, but no matter how absurd, it is still a purpose. They have chosen to wait for Godot and thus have given a purpose to their lives, which has made their lives meaningful. They are as happy as a man can be in this world of reality, because, according to Camus, happiness is achieved in having a goal (Camus 1955).

ESTRAGON:

I am happy.

VLADIMIR:

So am I.

ESTRAGON:

So am I.

VLADIMIR:

We are happy.

ESTRAGON:

We are happy. (Silence.) What do we do now, now that we are happy?

VLADIMIR:

Wait for Godot. (Estragon groans. Silence.) Things have changed here since yesterday (Waiting for Godot. Act 2).

VLADIMIR:

Wait . . . we embraced . . . we were happy . . . happy . . . what do we do now that we're happy . . . go on waiting . . . waiting . . . let me think . . . it's coming . . . go on waiting . . . now that we're happy . . . let me see . . . ah! The tree! (Waiting for Godot. Act 2).

Another reason for their happiness is friendship, for Estragon and Vladimir have nothing else in their lives except each other and their goal:

VLADIMIR:

You must be happy too, deep down, if you only knew it.

ESTRAGON:

Happy about what?

VLADIMIR:

To be back with me again. (Waiting for Godot. Act 2).

Especially, their strong bond of friendship can be seen in scenes, where they embrace each other:

VLADIMIR:

Together again at last! We'll have to celebrate this. But how? (He reflects.) Get up till I embrace you. (Waiting for Godot. Act 1).

ESTRAGON:

(step forward). You're angry? (Silence. Step forward). Forgive me. (Silence. Step forward. Estragon lays his hand on Vladimir's shoulder.) Come, Didi. (Silence.) Give me your hand. (Vladimir half turns.) Embrace me! (Vladimir stiffens.) Don't be stubborn! (Vladimir softens. They embrace. (Waiting for Godot. Act 1).

VLADIMIR:

Look at me. (Estragon does not raise his head. Violently.) Will you look at me!

Estragon raises his head. They look long at each other, then suddenly embrace, clapping each other on the back. End of the embrace. Estragon, no longer supported, almost falls. (Waiting for Godot. Act 2).

ESTRAGON:

Off we go!

They embrace (Waiting for Godot. Act 2).

Their strong friendship can be understood to rise from the same purpose they share, which bounds them together and helps to share the burden, and overcome the absurd.

Moreover, another interesting character – Lucky, a servant, may appear miserable because of the way he is being treated by his master Pozzo, who tells him when to stand, sit, dance, speak, and even think. Nevertheless, Lucky can also be seen as a happy character because he has declined his right of freedom, and refused his will to decide, therefore being freed from the responsibility (Melnikova 2014). Lucky in his long monologue makes comments on the arbitrary nature of God, man's tendency to pine and fade away, and towards the end, the decaying state of the earth. "His ramblings may be loosely based around the theories of the Irish philosopher Bishop Berkeley" (Barker), who is known for his philosophy of subjective idealism. According to Encyclopedia Britannica "subjective idealism is a philosophy based on the premise that nothing exists except

minds and spirits and their perceptions or ideas. A person experiences material things, but their existence is not independent of the perceiving mind; material things are thus mere perceptions". This shows that Lucky rejects the idea of possession, even the possession of freedom, and thus is free of expectations. By sacrificing his freedom, Lucky rejects the absurd found in acts created by free will (like waiting for Godot), and by being absolutely determined by his master Pozzo, is free of being affected by the absurd, therefore being happy.

In conclusion, although Estragon's and Vladimir's situation can be seen as futile and vain by the parallel drawn between the "Neutrals" in Dante's "The Divine Comedy" and the play's main characters, their dedication has a deeper meaning to them. Camus's approach towards Sisyphus as having a possibility of being happy made it possible to interpret the play's characters through a different, more positive point of view. According to Camus's approach on existentialism, having a purpose gives meaning to one's life, which means that even an absurd purpose, such as waiting for something to happen even if it is pointless, is actually meaningful. This theory allows to reinterpret the myth of Sisyphus that depicts a constant struggle, an eternity of useless efforts and unending frustration, by viewing Sisyphus's goal as giving a purpose to his life, and like in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, as Camus suggests, to imagine Sisyphus happy. Similarly, this significantly corresponds to the constant struggle of Estragon and Vladimir, who dedicated their lives for a goal of waiting, but nevertheless by resisting the temptation of committing a suicide and submitting to the absurd, have found happiness in friendship and have given a purpose to their lives by having a goal. Moreover, Lucky's ideas in his speech contemplating the philosophy of subjective idealism, has led to the conclusion that he, having sacrificed his freedom, achieved happiness. This approach towards considering the play's main characters as being less tragic and more positive in regard of being happy, will hopefully allow other studies to be made analyzing other characters and other themes through a different, more positive perceptive.

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