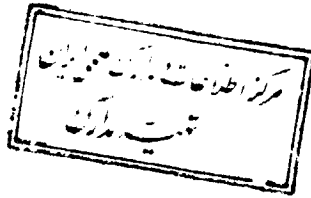


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*The Search For The Self In Beckett's Theatre:*

*Waiting For Godot &*  
*Endgame*

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*Portrait of Samuel Beckett, by  
Avigdor Arikha, chalk, 1965.*

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## *Preface*

*This thesis is based upon the works of Samuel Beckett, one of the greatest writers of contemporary literature. Here, I have tried to focus on one of the main themes in Beckett's works: the search for the real "Me" or the real self, which is not only a problem to be solved for Beckett man but also for each of us. I have tried to show Beckett's techniques in approaching this unattainable goal, based on two of his plays: Waiting For Godot and Endgame.*

*I believe this study as well as any other work on Beckett is not only the story of the characters involved but our own and we ourselves are the real centre of the book and if I have been successful in conveying just a small part of this feeling, I shall be grateful.)*

*My specific debts are to my professor Dr. Arbab Shirani who took great trouble reading and re-reading my work and gave me the right clues. I am also indebted to Dr. Naficy who through the years of my studies gave me the chance to look at every thing differently. I shall also acknowledge how much my thinking has been influenced and shaped by the books and articles I have studied. I hope all these efforts are not in vain and have made this study worth reading.*

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## Introduction

"I'd be quite incapable of writing a critical introduction to my own works."<sup>1</sup>

-Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett is one of the most important writers of the twentieth century, in fact he is one of the giants not only of contemporary literature but of all literature. Much has been written and said about the ambiguity of his works and most of the times the common reaction to his plays is that of utter dismay, because on "traditional sense, they seem to be 'about nothing'"<sup>2</sup>, but as Frederick Hoffman says in his book; The Language Of Self, "it is the most significant 'nothing' in the twentieth century literature .Beckett's works are not empty intellectual exercises, but profound explorations of human intellectual dislocation."<sup>3</sup> They are about the need for man's suffering, the failure of love and friendship and furthermore they are concerned with man's need to search for the real self within which is also one of the important themes in Beckett's writings. Man who is concerned with questions such as who am I? where am I? and why am I? does not know himself and cannot tell who he is so he tries to talk about it. He not only does not find himself but also enlarges his own darkness in which he has to remain and is incapable of finding himself. But what is this self and how can one attain it? These are the questions which provide the basis of Beckett's works and in the following chapters I have tried to focus on Beckett's techniques and ways of approaching this real self within. Eventhough at the end we shall see that reaching this reality is an impossibility. I have tried to apply Beckett's techniques to two of his famous plays; Waiting For Godot and Endgame. Each

1. Samuel Beckett, as quoted in J.D.O'Hara, Twentieth century Interpretations Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable (Engle Wood Cliffs, NJ. Prentice Hall'Inc., 1970), P.1

2. Frederick Hoffman, Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self (New York: E.P.Dutton and co., Inc, 1964) P.12

3. Ibid P.12

*chapter tries to focus on one or two of these techniques and in each chapter after a brief discussion about the way these techniques are helpful in Beckett's search for the real " Me" , I shall try to find instances of the use of this technique in the mentioned plays. I have tried to provide an example out of the plays for each subject which has been discussed. There are many allusions to Bible either in the text of the plays or in the use of characters which has been fully discussed in the part about suffering and I have tried to provide the Biblical original text for them. In chapter I we shall examine the concept of time and apply it to the two plays. Part of this chapter will consider the concept of waiting and stagnation in relation to time and as another technique of Beckett in his search for the self. Chapter II deals with suffering as one of the ways which can bring Beckett's characters closer to their reality, this concept is also based on the two plays. A part of this chapter considers the language of the plays. In chapter III we shall see the role of pseudo couples in Beckett's theatre and the last chapter tries to draw a conclusion about Beckett's point in writing.*

*The point to remember during reading this thesis as well as any other work on Beckett is that these are only interpretations and analysis based on the images and clues in the plays and the ideas of some of the writers and are not completely without fault. Beckett's works demand the attention and intelligence of each reader and gives him the chance to interpret the work on his own terms.*

*Chapter I*

*Being Without Time - Stagnation and  
the Concept of Waiting.*

*But thoughts, the slaves of life,  
and life, time's fool, And time,  
that takes survey of all the  
world, Must have a stop.*

*(Henry IV, Part I. Act 5. Scene 4)*



## *Being Without Time*

" There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday."<sup>1</sup>

Beckett's essay on Proust summerizes the concept of artistic thinking in which one must place Samuel Beckett's experience of time which is the subject of this chapter. Here we shall examine timelessness as a technique of getting closer to the self in Beckett's theatre. Basically, the ideas of Proust to rescue and preserve the self from time was Beckett's cue. "For him as for Proust, the self fought steadily to avoid immersion in nonentity, to assert identity."<sup>2</sup> Whereas Proust's experience was based largely on memory; "present sensation may release a flow of past sensations which will secure the self"<sup>3</sup>, Beckett seeks other solutions to approach the self. " The self must be attained as a non-dimensional place, outside time and space, because the self in Beckett is that something which is undefinable in space, something dimensionless, and something which, because it is dimensionless exists outside the world of time and space and is by definition unattainable within that world."<sup>4</sup> So to approach the self is to begin an infinite process. " The flow of time confronts us with the basic problem of being - the problem of the nature of the self, which, being subject to constant change in time, is in constant flux and therefore ever outside our grasp."<sup>5</sup> What Beckett does to

1. Samuel Beckett, "Proust" (New York: Grove Press, no date) PP.2-3, as quoted in Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (London: Penguin Books, 1967) P.49

2. Hoffman, Language of Self, P.82

3. Ibid P.84

4. Ross Chambers, "Beckett's Brinkmanship". Journal of the Australian Language and Literature Psychology. No.19 (1963) PP.153-4

5. Martin Esslin, The Theatre of Absurd (London: Penguin Books, 1967) P.50

escape this flux of time is dragging past and future to the present time. This timelessness is one of the techniques he uses to approach the self,

" that infintely receding something which resists definition and is inseparable from what surrounds it and has the characteristic of nothing. That inner life which we may call it what we will: essence, self, personality and soul or even nothing - for whose existence there is no shred of evidence beyond our belief in it, while at the same time establishing life as endless exile from it and also pursuit of this infinite unattainable self. " <sup>1</sup>

Being in present is the only reality the self may know. In Beckett's works, " all time, past, present, and future, has resolved itself into an instantaneous present, because past, present and future are cyclical, and every series of acts repeats itself to infinity. " <sup>2</sup>

So in all of his plays, Beckett is concerned with the passage of time or the refusal of time to pass. The three constant contradictory aspects of time in his works are that time does not pass at all, that it passes too slowly, and that too much of it passes. It is because so much of it has passed for them that many of his characters have become so weak and have sunk so low and lost so many faculties.

His famous play, Waiting For Godot is no exception. It also deals with problem of time. This preoccupation with time is constant. It would be hard to count the number of times that the word "time" is mentioned in the play.

When the curtain rises, the set conveys nothing, or practically nothing. Two men, part clown, part tramp, of indeterminate age are on the stage. "Space and time finds them, though the space is empty, save for a mound and a tree; and time is no longer the measure of motion but an arbitrary imposition through which men crawl to a death they can never know. " <sup>3</sup> They talk about their lives and their appointment with someone named Godot, who is essential

1. Chambers, "Beckett's Brinkmanship", P.154

2. Richard N. Coe, Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1964) P.83

3. Francis Doherty, Samuel Beckett (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1971) P.87

for them, because they expect him to tell them the meaning of their existence.

Meanwhile they have to occupy their time with conversation and trivial actions. While they pass the time in waiting, two strangers appear, a domineering land owner called Pozzo and at the end of a rope his servant Lucky. After a bizzare, mystifying conversation, the master and his slave move on. A boy appears to announce that Mr. Godot will not come this evening but "surely tomorrow", when the night falls Vladimir and Estragon contemplate suicide, decide to leave, but cannot. In Act II, the action is basically the same. It is the next day. But is it really the next day? or after? or before? At any rate the decore is the same except for the tree which has now four or five leaves. The same things happen, again Pozzo and Lucky arrive but now they are blind and dumb, again the boy messenger arrives with the same message and the play ends with the decision to go but not being able to.

To describe Waiting For Godot this way is to say nothing about its originality and the way it is felt when played on the stage. Beckett himself says that "Waiting For Godot is designed to give artistic expression to 'the irrational state of unknowingness wherein we exist, this mental weightlessness which is beyond reason.'" <sup>1</sup> So it is better to talk about the play as the dramatization of what it is like and what it means to exist in such a state and how can one approach his true self within this state. Approached in this way, the dialogue of the characters, their situation and their gestures, their moment by moment responses become important. Beckett dramatizes this doubt and unknowingness in different ways. When the play begins the audience comes up with many questions such as: where are these people? and who are they? what are they doing and why? why do they call each other names which are different from those mentioned in the cast list? who has been beating Estragon and why? why do their moods change so quickly from anger to cheerfulness, irritation, sadness, etc. The repetition of the acts is also very strange.

The play is basically circular. The setting and the time is the same in both acts and instead of a temporal progression, we have a repetition in the second act of the same things that we saw and heard in the first act. Beckett

1. Lawrence Graver, Beckett: Waiting For Godot (Cambridge University Press, 1989) P. 23

himself believes that,

"The essential aim in Waiting For Godot is to give confusion a shape. ... through the visual repetition of the themes. Not only y themes in the dialogue, but also visual themes of the body.' To illustrate this point he chose the initial tableau of Estagon asleep on the stone which indicates a 'waiting point' or 'a fixed moment of stillness' where everything stands completely still and silence threatens to swallow everything up. Then the action starts again."<sup>1</sup>

But there is no continuous developement either of observable action or a line of thought, and at the end of the play the tramps were just as they were at the beginning. The opening words " Nothing to be done" spoken by Estragon while struggling with his boots summerizes the whole situation in which time is circular. Nothing ever finishes, and everything begins again. Vladimir's song at the beginning of Act II is the best example of this timeless situation. Here the linear time is made in the form of a circle. Nothing ends in the play: neither the song, nor the "story of the English man in a brothel."<sup>2</sup>

"What we call 'time' springs from man's needs and from his attempts to satisfy them, that life is temporal only because needs are either not yet satisfied, or goals have already been reached, or objectives reached are still at one's disposal. In Estragon and Vladimir's lives, objectives no longer exist. For this reason in the play time does not exist either, and it is for this reason, that events and conversations are going in circles, before and after become like left and right, they lose their time character; after a while this circular movement gives the impression of

1. Graver, P.36

2. Samuel Beckett, The Complete Dramatic Works: Waiting For Godot (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1986) P.18 All further references to this work appear in the text.

being stationary and time appears to be standing still." <sup>1</sup>  
So all that matters is the present. In Act I Estragon asks Pozzo a question:

" Estragon: Why doesn't he put down his bags? "

(Waiting For Godot P.30)

He is referring to Lucky. This is, as a matter of fact, the question which has been asked some moments before, but at the interval the servant has put down the bags. So Didi convinces everyone:

"Vladimir: Since he has put down his bags it is impossible we should have asked why he does not do so."

(Waiting For Godot P.40)

Which is logical in itself. The bags are down and that is important.

Act I begins in the evening. It is always evening in Beckett, and always an interminable one; "always purgatory, always the indecisive threshold between day and night." <sup>2</sup> And in terms of our discussion between time and timelessness.

" Evening is the time of the day when time itself is exhausted; at evening time that ever devours but does not devour the self is running down. Evening thus gives promise of a night to come, when time itself will stop, and the self, undevoured, will be free to enjoy the darkness of timelessness. But although at evening time is no longer the ordinary time of daylight and is on its way towards stopping, the dark of stopped time is itself always in the future and it is always evening. In Godot, ofcourse, night does actually fall, but it brings only contemporary release as opposed to the final permanent release Godot himself will one day bring. Always the release lies somewhere ahead and meanwhile

1. Gunther Anders, "On Beckett's Play Waiting For Godot" in Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Martin Esslin (Engle Wood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice Hall Inc., 1965) P.146

2. Chambers, "Beckett's Brinkmanship", P.158

one can only wait, part of the way 'there' but never actually 'there'".<sup>1</sup>

Beckett presents us a pair who are part clown and part tramp. At the beginning of Act I the stage direction explains the way Vladimir walks :

"[ Advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart.]"

(Waiting For Godot P.11)

He has a comic walk which is the result of a comic disability that makes him rush off to pee in the wings every time he is made to laugh. Estragon's boots and the way he talks and acts makes him a clown as well. They also wear bowler hats and ill-fitting clothes. They bring Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy to our minds. So we are prepared for many of the comic routines that Vladimir and Estragon perform. From the beginning we understand that they are waiting for someone called Godot.

"Godot is the name for waiting, and that waiting unfolds in immutable space, except for five leaves in the second act that designates the bare place where the characters remain. Thus space becomes a metaphore for repetitive time. Estragon and Vladimir refer to the environment in which they live their difficult present, only by that signal which punctuates the void of their time; it is no accident that the signal takes the form of a refrain: 'we are waiting for Godot', driving the flow of time into repetitive periods of waiting."<sup>2</sup>

By Godot's coming, the tramps "hope to be saved from the evanescence and instability of the illusion of time, and to find peace and permanence outside it."<sup>3</sup> But they are not sure about Godot, the place and the time. They are not sure they are in the right place; they are not sure they are here on the correct day; they are not sure what day of the week it is (maybe it is yesterday); they think they were to meet Godot by a tree on Saturday, but if

1. Chambers, "Beckett's Brinkmanship", P. 158

2. Ludvic Janvier, "Cyclical Dramaturgy" in Casebook on Waiting For Godot ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1967) PP.166-167

3. Esslin, Theatre of Absurd, P.52

today is Saturday, is it the right Saturday? And if it is the right Saturday is it the right tree? So we do not have a definite calendar date or a definite locality.

" Estragon: [Despairingly.] Ah! [pause.] You're sure it was here?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: That we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said by the tree [They look at the tree.] Do you see any others?

Estragon: What is it?

Vladimir: I don't know. A willow.

Estragon: Where are the leaves?

Vladimir: It must be dead.

Estragon: No more weeping.

Vladimir: Or perhaps it's not the season.

Estragon: Looks to me like a bush.

Vladimir: A shrub.

Estragon: A bush.

Vladimir: A - what are you insinuating? that we've come to the wrong place?"

(Waiting For Godot PP.15- 16)

The tree may be a willow. Willows because of their drooping leaves are often associated with grief which can imply the tramp's mood. Vladimir is not certain about the kind of tree and season, but if the tree is dead then there will be no more weeping so here weeping is associated with life and this concept conveys one of Beckett's important themes; the need for suffering which will be discussed in the next chapter. The tree is only alive if it is weeping but again nothing is certain. The only thing the tramps are certain about is waiting. These frequent memory failures of the characters, for example here their failure to remember the appointed place and time break the continuity of linear time and so one gets the impression that there is no relationship, nor any difference between past and present, which therefore tend to merge into each other as mentioned before and so create a timeless atmosphere which is Beckett's aim.