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The influence of Hegel's Philosophy on Beckett's Existentialism

in*Waiting for Godot*

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To my lovely mother, family, grandparents and specially my best friend, who has always been a great inspiration and support.

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“We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?”

- Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*

Abstract

When reading Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, it is possible to unravel the author's apparent Existentialism linguistically and structurally. A method of revealing the possible intention of the author maybe done by uncovering any Hegelian dialectical negation in the text. Philosophical writers, such as Alexandre Kojeve, have attempted to enlighten Hegel’s Existential content. Kojeve examines, as part of his interpretation of Hegel, "autonomous" and "dependent" existences of beings and in particular how they occur in the relationships between mastery and slavery. Hegel's analysis of absolute knowledge breaks down the whole into the parts. A key area for Kojeve's Existentialism is Hegel's portrayal of the negating process of stoicism, skepticism, religion and finally through to actual liberation. For this purposes this paper has tried to unravel the relationship between Beckett's characters, Pozzo and Lucky, in *Waiting for Godot* and has observed the process towards absolute consciousness.

The master and slave relationship is present between Pozzo and Lucky. The interest in this relationship, from a Hegelian standpoint, is the process involved of reaching a consciousness and more importantly the passage to self-consciousness.
Central to the conception of this thesis is a brief remark of Hegel’s idea of “masters and slaves.” What drives the relationships between characters is “power.” Most of the significant relationships depicted in Beckett’s work “involve some sort of power struggle,” for Beckett is at once suspicious of and fascinated by the efforts of individuals to control and influence each other. The reference to “masters and slaves” puts one immediately in mind of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic and suggests that a focus on the dynamics of the self-other relationship may be an effective way of reading *Waiting For Godot*.

Keywords: Sameul Beckett, Waiting for Godot, Hegel, Existentialism, Dialectic, Master and

Slave, Power Relationship

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Chapter I

Introduction

1.1 General Overview

In his chapter on autonomy and dependence in his *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Hegeldescribes self-other relationships as being characterized by fear, desire, violence, domination, and

subjection. According to Hegel, the encounter of two human beings or self-consciousnesses is essentially a battle to the death. The battle is characterized by the struggle for recognition; each self-consciousness tries to force the other to recognize his point of view while withholding reciprocal recognition from the other. This violent struggle ends when one participant chooses submission and life over death, thereby establishing the relationship between master and slave. It is possible to believe that his master-slave dialectic can be brought to bear on the analogies of many destructive personal or group relationships. For instance, from the question of whose definitionof a peace agreement will prevail, or whose understanding of racial superiority will be accepted,to questions of personal identity in love relationships, individual freedom and peer pressure, anddebates about the role of God in human affairs. Hegel appears to claim that all human encountersbrings with them a continual battle of thesis and antithesis, which compete for dominion overeach other.

This study is an attempt to read *Waiting forGodot* in Hegelian terms. In brief, Hegel's ideaof "the struggle for recognition" in self-other relationships will be applied to the relationshipbetween Puzzo and Lucky.

1.2Statement of the Problem

Waiting for Godot begins and ends with "waiting", it generates the appearance of being a phenomenal absolute. Yet waiting is not an isolated phenomenon in the play. The comings and goings of lucky and Pozzo mediated the status of Didi and Gogo and their waiting- just as the constant expectation of Didi and Gogo accentuates the decay of Lucky and Pozzo. Unfulfilled expectation stands in dynamic tension with a deteriorating and aimless movement. The two comprise a single temporal constellation, overlapped in unspoken likeness. Didi and Gogo are temporally related to Lucky and Pozzo because both pairs are

variations of the same dialectics: that of “lordship and bondage”. Waiting can not be an ahistorical condition in the play because as a dialectical paradigm it is the historical precursor to master-slave relationship, which is manifested in Lucky and Pozzo. Hegel’s subsequent version of the master-slave dialectic constitutes a progress in the play. In that Beckett presents both versions of “lordship and bondage”, waiting assumes a peculiar historical status in the play

Waiting for Godot can be seen as one big metaphor for the existential predicament of humankind. We are thrown into the world, we have to decide what to do with our life. There is no ultimate point to existence (Groundlessness) therefore we have to invent a meaning to give it in order to continue the wait between birth and death. In an absurd world, that is a world where there is no ultimate foundation to give meaning to our existence, all we can do is cling to a meaning we have invented for ourselves. In an absurd world every individual must invent their own meaning for existence.

Godot is not clearly defined and that is intentional because he is a placeholder for whatever it is that gives meaning to one’s existence, to what keeps one going on in the face of the struggle for survival, the pain and ultimate diminution of life. It is therefore a pointless question to ask, as so many have, Who is Godot? Godot is simply a placeholder for whatever it is that keeps one going.

But while we wait for our personal Godot (God, hope, success in our endeavours, love, political change, whatever is our ultimate goal and, of course, our ultimate destination, death) what we have to work with is relationships. At the core of *Waiting for Godot*is the relationships between two couples: the tramps Didi and Gogo, and the master and slave relationship of Pozzo and Lucky. These two pairs are best seen as representing couples, like married couples, but one relationship is basically supportive, Gogo and Didi, and the other is

basically exploitative, Lucky and Pozzo. Significantly both sets of couples repeatedly threaten to leave one another but never do. They need one another, even the Pozzo/Lucky combination need one another. Each would be diminished by the absence of the other. Therefore the palliative value of human relationships, complete with bickering and abuse, is the very thing that makes the waiting between birth and death bearable. The human need for recognition and identity is illustrated forcefully at the end of Godot, when the messenger boy from Godot does not recognizeDidi. Didi and Gogo seek distractions to relieve the boredom of waiting/existence and they invent a number of diversions to entertain themselves. But their primary diversion is the appearance of another couple, Pozzo and Lucky, who vividly represent a kind of sado-masochistic relationship of dominance and submission.

The Pozzo and Lucky characters illustrate the nature of human dominance and the mutual dependence of master and slave and how the role of the master is only possible with the complicity of the slave.

1.3 Review of Literature

After nearly a half-century, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* remains one of the most important, respected, and powerful plays in the history of world theatre. Given its radically innovative style and great degree of difficulty, it is no surprise that audiences and critics have generally reacted to it in extremes either of love or hate, admiration or disgust.

Literature often reflects history; many authors incorporate common historical conflicts to create the main struggle in their work of fiction. The same is true for Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. According to James Martin Harding, Beckett's play identifies

the historical 'dialectic', which in this case means a conflict between two opposing ideas, of "lordship and [those in] bondage" (52). This dialectic can be seen in two different sets of characters: Pozzo and his servant Lucky, and Didi and Gogo who wait for Godot.

The first pair of characters who exemplify Harding's point, Pozzo and Lucky, are the most apparent example of slave and master in *Waiting for Godot*. At first, Lucky is obviously the slave. He is attached with a rope to Pozzo, who is mistaken at first for Godot. Like the typical master-slave relationship, Lucky is obviously treated with disrespect. He has many sores on his body, and Pozzo essentially treats Lucky like an animal. Lucky, in turn, blindly follows Pozzo's orders, no matter how cruelly they are issued. This brings to mind the idea of the Elizabethan 'Great Chain of Being', in which every animal or thing had its own rightful placement below those of higher importance. The chain of being is a very notable example of the historical lord and slave dialectic, as it attempts to justify a hierarchy and the inferiority of those that were placed as servants or slaves. According to Harding, this is because "the subjugated perpetuate domination in the reified pursuit of labor" (54). Essentially what Harding posits is that Lucky, the subjugated, brings about his own enslavement. This was a common belief in historical dialectics, when any race considered 'inferior' or different would thus be enslaved. To support this supposition Harding points out Lucky's 'thinking' process:

"Whatever the hypothetical knowledge that Lucky attempts to convey when commanded to think is too specialized for anyone to comphrehend. Its 'profundity' fosters isolation and hostility rather than a shared enlightenment or a reciprocally unfolding self-conscience" (55).

This makes Lucky seem different, which according to Harding, encourages the lord and slave dialectic. Another example of a historical dialectic is Vladmir's reaction to Lucky's enslavement. He berates Pozzo for taking such terrible care of his servant, but quickly revokes his comments and feels guilty for interrupting another person's affairs. This is a

common conflict among people historically, who disagreed with slavery but refused to interfere. Yet even Didi seems to know that Lucky is below them: when Didi and Gogo examine Lucky, they have the following exchange:

"Vladimir: He's not bad looking.

Estragon: Would you say so?

Vladimir: A trifle effeminate.

Estragon: Look at the slobber.

Vladimir: It's inevitable" (Beckett 23).

Vladimir seems to accept that Lucky is beneath, and therefore worthy of the position of servant, even though he doesn't agree with his treatment. When Pozzo and Lucky enter the scene for the second time, Pozzo has lost his original superior attitude, and has become very dependant because of blindness. Harding compares this to the collapse of the historical dialectic of slave and master: "This loss [. . .] suggests that the history of 'humane ideas', like the history of Lucky and Pozzo, follows a path of degeneration" (55). Society's notion of what is humane and what isn't degenerates and regenerates over time, just like the character's and the character's memories in the play.

The second, and more interesting, example of the lord and slave dialectic is Didi, Gogo and Godot. "The relationship Didi and Gogo have to Godot corresponds with the irresolvable subservience which the Jews [. . .] had to their law" (52). Harding uses the widely believed idea that Godot represents God, and supposes that Didi and Gogo, like many religious people, follow their God without discrimination, much like a slave follows its master. Harding "examines the structure of the Jewish version of the same dialectic represented in Didi and Gogo's relation to Godot" (53), and connects the theme of waiting to the historical conflict. Much like followers of the Jewish religion blindly wait for a Savior, Didi and Gogo blindly

wait for Godot. Even when night approaches, and Didi or Gogo propose to leave throughout the act, "they do not move" (Beckett 59). The plot centers on waiting, which "assumes a peculiar historical status throughout the play. It falls further and further into the play as the play progresses without synthesis" (Harding 52). Although "the comings and goings of Didi and Pozzo mediate the status of Gogo and Didi and their waiting" (Harding 53), the lack of movement in the play is obvious. Waiting, as it applies to the historical dialectic of God (as the master) and followers (as the slaves) also connects to the fact that the play's plot really goes nowhere. Gogo himself says that "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" (Beckett 43).

But according to Harding, this intentional "avoidance of meaning, his not meaning anything, is his only home for making 'an uncompromising reprint of a reality'" (Harding 56). Harding insists that Beckett was reflecting the nonsensical behavior of life and people in reality. When Pozzo decides to leave the first time, the three men exchange goodbyes twice, and then 'thank you' and a series of yeses and no's, with Pozzo finally saying he "[doesn't] seen to be able to depart" (Beckett 55). Estragon replies by saying "such is life" (Beckett 55), which Harding interprets as Beckett's hint that life progresses exactly like the play: it is absurd, with worthwhile ever happening. Rather, life is filled with irrational people and occurrences. An example of such irrationality is when Estragon throws out his boots, for no apparent reason, and is questioned by Didi: he simply replies by saying "I must have thrown them away [. . .] I don't know why" (Beckett 74). Like the historical dialectic between lordship and those in bondage, the story progresses with little rationality. Beckett's "abstractions are only as abstract as the real relations among men" (Harding 55); this can be supported by observing the fact that enslaving someone is actually very irrational in itself. Deciding who is inferior, although it may make sense on the surface, generally has little reasoning behind it.

Waiting for Godot is certainly a complex play; but Harding's examination of the historical dialectic of 'those in bondage' struggling against 'lordship' within the play clarifies some of the meaning behind Beckett's characters. The historical dialectic "represented by Lucky and Pozzo and by Didi's and Gogo's relation to Godot" (Harding 61) ix very thoroughly described and explained by Harding in his essay, and the ties to both traditional ideas of 'master-and-slave' and more obscure ideas of followers worshiping God are extensively demonstrated.

The first review of the Paris production, by Sylvain Zegel, was representative.He predicted that the play would be discussed for a long time. Zegel described the play as "an inexplicable miracle" and heralded Beckett as "one of today's best playwrights." Zegel sensed that the two tramps in the play represented all ofhumanity and that audience members had been confronted with a deep image oftheir own emptiness. Many reviewers after Zegel amplified on the manner in which*Waiting for Godot* contains universal existential dilemmas, surreal communications, and a consciousness-raising confrontation of the audience's own self-deception.

John Fletcher in his second book on Beckett (*Samuel Beckett's Art*, 1967) has a definitive chapter on "Beckett and the Philosophers", which considers the philosophers who have influenced him in chronological order from the Pre-Socratics to Leibniz and Hume.(Fletcher, 1.122) In every case Fletcher takes his cue from something in Beckett's own text; this is a job that had to be done and Katharine Worth is quite right-to-maintain that, Fletcher having done it and done it well, there is no, need for us to keep on doing It.

Eugene Webb, in *Samuel Beckett, A Study of His Novels* (1970) has one excellentparagraph which associates Beckett with Existentialism. He argues that Beckett's heroes inhabited a godless universe, where there was no evidence of an overall design to existence. Beckett saw that human being not as dual creature, composed of mind and body, but as a completely fragmented being, unable to establish any secure connection with the world or with the idea of a rational mind.

Ruby Cohn, in her article *Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett* (in Criticism, Winter, 1964) goes again over-the ground covered by Fletcher-and-adds three-pages on Logical Positivism and Existentialism, which gets a bit further and show clearly how valuable these philosophies can be in interpreting Beckett.

The Existentialist side was developed, by Milton Rickels in an article entitled *Existential Themes in BeckettIIs's Unnamable!.* This is the most promising work we have so far mentioned. It takes a late, difficult work from the Beckett canon and scans it for Existentialist elements in a way that is quite different from digging Descartes, or even Wittgenstein, out of Watt. But it is a brief article and alludes to philosophers rather than examining them in any detail.

In the opening chapter of Olga Bernal's *Langageet'fictiondans le roman de Samuel Beckett* (1969), she points to the basic problem of both Language Philosophy and Existentialism, namely, language. This critic, who quotes Heidegger and Sartre quite freely, is clearly at home among her philosophers and she puts the ideas she applies to Beckett into their philosophic historical perspective. Kant is sited between Descartes and Hegel in a summary that gives a certain amount of the background to both Existentialist and Beckettian thought.

DavidHesla provides-a more substantial offering. The first sentence of the Preface to *The Shape of Chaos* runs so. This book is an interpretation of the art of Samuel Beckett mainly from the perspective offered by the history of ideas. (Hesla, 1, v).Heslaeschews the task of relating Beckett to a literary tradition instead, moving with enviable freedom among them, he employs a mass of thinkers, from the Presocratics to Sartre, to illuminate Beckett where they can. He deals with Beckett's work chronologically up to how it is. The result is one of the most satisfactory books to have appeared in this subject so far.

Hesla discussed Beckett's work in relation to those philosophers already identified by other critics as providing important clues to the meaning of Beckett's art. Once more Hesla saw Beckett's work as an encounter with the absurd

"What is absurd is human existence. Why is it absurd? Because being a human and existing are mutually contradictory. One could be s human being if one did not have to exist, and one could not be a human being, in the same place, at the same time…

In other words, man is not contiguous with the conditions – the only conditions – provided for his existence…" (Hesla 1971: 8)

In this book Hegel appears in several places, at first on account of his centrality in the western philosophical tradition as an Essentialist. Then twice in extensive epigraphs to chapters. Finally there are two sections that discuss Hegel in some detail.

The first of these (pp. 193-205) deals with the famous Master and Slave thesis in the Phenomenology of Mind and relates it to *Godot*and *Endgame*, pointing out that the Marxist view of Godot is not enough and that Marx's reduction of Hegel's thesis, when applied to Beckett, is a reduced interpretation of him too. Hesla follows Hegel through Stoicism and Skepticism to the Unhappy Consciousness. The inherent contradictoriness of Skepticism is

compared to the let's contradict each-other of Vladimir and Estragon and the Unhappy Consciousness is retranslated as "unlucky" consciousness which enables Hesla to propose thatit is the origin of Lucky's name. Certainly a case is made for Lucky's being stuck in the free-floating stage of Skepticism - he is not yet lucky. In this discussion of the dialectical triad arising from the Master-and-Slave phenomenon a lot of weight is given to clear explication of Hegel and rather less weight to Beckett. The interpretations offered seem sound but rather marginal.

So we can say that Hesla uses Hegel first as a proponent of certain sorts of Ideas that have been important in the intellectual tradition of which Beckett forms part and second as a direct comparison with Beckett, a comparison that is at first illuminating but that can degenerate into the merely interesting, the amusing, and even far-fetched.

Chapter 2

Samuel Beckett

2.1 Samuel Beckett

Beckett was born in Dublin on April 12, 1906 to a middle-class family. As a youth he was more inclined to athletics than academics, not showing interest in literature until his third year at Trinity College, Dublin, as a student of modern languages. Upon receiving his B.A. in 1927, he departed for France and lectured at Ecole Normal Superieure in Paris, where he became acquainted with James Joyce. Beckett worked with Joyce as an assistant and copier during the writing of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and Joyce's modernist style began to shape Beckett's writing. After two years abroad, Beckett returned to Ireland in 1931 and the following year produced his first play, *Le Kid* (1931). Beckett was dissatisfied with life in Ireland and suffered from debilitating bouts of depression; in 1932, he relocated to Paris. In 1935, he attended a lecture by Carl Gustav Jung about the illusion of consciousness and the uncontrolled unconscious—themes that are widely developed and analyzed in Beckett's drama. During World War II, Beckett joined the French Resistance and worked within that organization until his cell was infiltrated and he was forced to leave Paris. After the war ended, Beckett was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille de la Résistance, and he settled again in Paris as a writer. *Waiting for Godot* was written in 1948 and 1949, but the playwright thoroughly reworked the play before it was finally produced in 1953. *Waiting for Godot* is widely considered Beckett's finest play. He continued to write novels and plays, producing his next full-length play, *Fin de partie* (1957; *Endgame*) in the same minimalist, existentialist style of *Waiting for Godot*, furthering his conveyance of ideas through experimental dramatic techniques and unique staging concepts. Although his last full length

play was written in 1961 (*Happy Days*), Beckett wrote many short plays (or dramaticules), screenplays, and television dramas in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1969, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for contributing "a body of work that, in new forms of fiction and the theater, has transformed the destitution of modern man into his exultation." Beckett died on December 22, 1989.

2.1.1 Major Works

Regarded as one of the most controversial and seminal works of twentieth-century drama, *Waiting for Godot* is noted for its minimal approach to dramatic form, powerful imagery, and concise, fragmented, and repetitive dialogue. Traditional plays begin with some action or event that result in dramatic conflict, an imperative element to Aristotelian dramatic theory. *Waiting for Godot* begins with no precipitative movement, only an abstract struggle involving the passage of time. Vladimir and Estragon, two vagabonds, wait on a desolate plain to keep an appointment with someone called M. Godot. Their purgatorial wait has been interpreted by some as religious faith, the hopelessness of the human condition, or as an example of postcolonial discourse. Beckett encouraged unique interpretations of his works and refused to concede that *Waiting for Godot* had a definitive meaning. Likewise, *Endgame* is a play that is also open to many interpretations. In *Endgame*, Beckett again focused on two characters, bedraggled survivors of an apparent holocaust. The two men, Clov and Hamm, are faced with the nothingness of their existence as they attempt to validate their lives, eventually falling back on memories to justify their existence. Beckett further developed his innovative theatrical techniques and metaphysical concerns in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Happy Days*. In *Happy Days*, the protagonist, Winnie, continues her daily rituals while being buried up to her waist in earth. She seems uncaring and almost welcomes this entombment, and by the second act of the play, she is buried up to her neck. Winnie believes that the earth