

David Hiestand
Susan Lucyga: Drama Online

Humans:

A Case Study of the Human Animal in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*

If you want to spend some time at the theater looking at a bunch of actors that essentially do nothing but look back at you, you have two options: Be an actor or watch a play by Samuel Beckett. Whichever decision you make, you will be drawn into another world where fantasy and reality intertwine. Many people view Beckett's work as negative or depressing, and some go so far as to call it almost gibberish because of its reliance on symbolism and context rather than plot. Nevertheless, Beckett's work is truly slice of life theatre, depicting common interactions and their true significance in a boundless format which allows the approach of sociological themes; his work is driving (in the sense that it is powerfully focused) enough to make profound philosophical statements and pound those points home, but it is also kaleidoscopic enough to find the flavor (humor, sweetness, melancholy, etc.) and profundity of human moments. He did not come out of nowhere, and his plays were often disappointments to audiences whom expected the typical narrative with an easy moral characteristic of most theatre; "the bewilderment, exasperation, even anger, inherent in [early audience's reception and consequent early exiting] suggests that, despite a rapidly developing audience, some spectators felt they were being duped, conned"(Davies, 2). Beckett's works, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, are prime examples of how Beckett embraces minimalism to clearly define humanity. Beckett generally refused to talk about his plays or attribute any deeper significance to them than that which was already indicated in his plays, so a respectful and appropriate approach to his plays is achievable by examining that which is printed and performed and taking it at face value, and there is much to take. Progressing from human nature to human condition and surroundings, and finally to reality itself, Beckett's characters examine, with humorous results, the human animal in an unnatural environment.

Beckett approaches society with an observant eye but without a finger to point commenting on the societal element of human nature, particularly as it relates to interdependence. He does not judge right or wrong, "Critics have found it famously hard to produce any positive account of ethics in Beckett's fiction", but he does illustrate interactions between people as to their roles and dependence on others (Figlerovicz, 2). Whether it is the specific relationship of specific fictional characters, or something intended to be of greater significance is debatable; however, their dialogue clearly points to interdependence being a major theme. *Waiting for Godot* addresses this theme with both of its pairs of characters. Vladimir and Estragon consider their codependency, pondering what it is that keeps them together. Vladimir seems to be confident on the subject during the first act, claiming that Estragon would not be alive without him, but in the second act, the nature of their codependency is explored. Vladimir considers his happiness with regard to his partner, "VLADIMIR: Now? . . . (Joyous.) There you are again . . . (Indifferent.) There we are again. . . (Gloomy.) There

I am again." Estragon is also at a loss, but the two seem to be unable to separate. They consider separation throughout the play, but always end up together. Marta Firlorowicz provides some insight into this process in terms of the ethical implications as experienced by the character, "These ethical stakes of anxiety are revealed not only after a character unwittingly hurts another, but also when two characters attempt to positively align themselves with each other before harm can be inflicted." (6). As Vladimir's comments reveal, it is not that they are in a better position without each other necessarily, but rather that their union emphasizes their current predicament. Nothing ever changing is the focus of this play, and this is a primary example. Their happiness is dependent on them being apart, but when they are apart they are scared and lonely. This mirrors a common problem in most human interaction, and is a truly unsolvable problem that can be stated as: *you can't live with 'em, you can't live without 'em*. This is one of many implied jokes that Beckett makes throughout the play.

Endgame's Hamm and Clov examines the theme of interdependence in a somewhat more somber tone, but the message portrayed is essentially the same and actually draws more comparisons to *Waiting for Godot's* other pair of Pozzo and Lucky. The two in pairs are so similar to one another that their interaction could be seen as different interpretations of the same basic characters. For one, we have a person who cannot sit in Hamm (as Pozzo cannot sit without assistance), and we have a person who never rests in Clov (Lucky never puts down his bags). Once again we appear to have a servant and his master, but here we have a closer examination of the reliance of the master on the servant. Hamm has no one beside Clov to assist him, and he needs an incredible amount of assistance. Hamm cannot even urinate by himself and needs Clov to assist him with a catheter. By fortune of birth, as is the the common case, Hamm has the resources that Clov needs to survive, so even though Clov appears to be more capable, he is entirely reliant on Hamm in other respects. Pozzo is blind in the second act, as is Hamm for the entirety of the play, and this affords an excellent opportunity for a clever commentary on the favors of fortune, with Pozzo expounding upon his circumstance, "I woke up one fine day as blind as Fortune"(Waiting for Godot). It is some kind of fortune that determines his position, and because of that fortune he winds up where he is and how he is. Pozzo's fortune has him blind and being led by the deaf, whereas Hamm's fortune has him blind and, like Pozzo, indenturing to someone else, while concurrently being indentured to that person. When asked by Hamm why he does not kill him, Clov responds that he doesn't know the combination to the cupboard. Because of their respective fortunes, Hamm takes Clov in and the two become reliant on one another entirely, but as Hamm mentions while reflecting on his inability to stand compared to Clov's inability to sit, "Every man his specialty" (*Endgame*).

This is not to say that codependency only exists in comparing these two plays with this combination of pairs characters. Just as Pozzo considers replacing Lucky with Estragon for a moment, so, for a moment, is Clov considered to be replaced by the unnamed youth that appears outside. The humor of Pozzo and Lucky's codependency is as strange and humorous as that of their counterparts in *endgame*. Whereas Clov sticks around because he has nowhere else to go and must be fed, Pozzo explains that Lucky serves Pozzo constantly so as to impress his master [Pozzo] into keeping him around. This tireless work by the servant and constant attempting to better-deal that servant by each's master is a constant in both plays. The irony is that we have a man

working himself to the bone solely for the purpose of continuing to do so, and this too reflects on the basic day-to-day survival of the common man. It is almost parody because it appears to be so ridiculous, but upon consideration, there is really no difference between this behavior and that of the common employee. Interdependence can be seen as the primary element of these characters' society, and if the characters are an indication, then this interdependence is a primary element of existence.

Existence as a theme applies to characters in Beckett's plays both as it applies to the human condition and in terms of reality itself. Existence in and of itself is a concern of the characters, and it would be hard to argue against Beckett's plays having strong existentialist overtones. The minimalism and pointlessness of props and backdrops bring pointlessness to the characters themselves, because they are characters surrounded by nothing of any significance. This gives them little context outside of their own interactions and allows the plays to proceed by focusing on the characters going about very common and pointless activities. They laugh, cry, fear, complain, and smile, but through it all, nothing changes. Beyond their implicit involvement and representations of existence, various characters address this theme of existence at many times explicitly as well. There is various commentary on the world such as *Endgame's* Nagg's story about the tailor, in which a claim is made that the world is not assembled as well as a pair of functioning pants. Hamm contributes with his comment, "Use your head, can't you, use your head, you're on earth, there's no cure for that!". *Waiting for Godot's* Estragon, commenting on his experience, states "All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery! Look at this muckheap! I've never stirred from it!". As one can tell from these examples "residual local trivia are no sooner evoked than swallowed into the desolate circumstances faced by Beckett's narrators, doomed. . ." (Morin, 9). Existence is generally disdained, and this previous comment also gives consideration to life itself, such as Hamm's attacking his apparent father for his birth, calling him an "accursed fornicator" (*Endgame*). The most interesting comments, though, come in relation to human life.

Hamm struggles with purpose and expresses his misery with lucid clarity. When a flea is found on his servant, he makes it clear that, from his perspective, if humanity could end that it would be for the best (he appears to be referencing evolution), and eventually expresses his preference for an end even without death being an option; although this could also be a stab at the fourth wall. The most obvious and straightforward commentary on existence in *Endgame* is such:

"HAMM:

Clov!

CLOV (impatiently):

What is it?

HAMM:

We're not beginning to... to... mean something?

CLOV:

Mean something! You and I, mean something!

(Brief laugh.)

Ah that's a good one!"

In *Waiting for Godot* we have something very similar in Lucky's tirade, which never completes a statement but expresses incredible knowledge, unresolved thought,

and incredible misery. Pozzo states that it was in fact Lucky who taught him, but in a moment of unclear but apparent truth, he claims that Lucky brings misery upon him with his words which he later partially retracts. Of course, both of these speeches are interspersed with humor due to Lucky's bizarre nature and over-the-top delivery of nonsense, and Pozzo's questionable sincerity. Whether it is true or not, we have a man who does not take anything from life other than misery teaching a man who later states "one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second". This is a powerful statement that Pozzo makes about the living journey; nothing changes to the point that it is as if one never existed when he/she dies. *Endgame's* Nell is able to address the humor in their misery, "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness". Beckett seems to take advantage of this to the fullest.

The characters in both plays find themselves existing as if they'd always existed, and repetition highlights this feature. Both plays end as they began, and *Waiting for Godot* actually achieves this twice! Characters are called by different names and respond to them as well as calling themselves different names. Actions are repeated and events are repeated; the scene also never changes, save for the transition from day to night in *Waiting for Godot*. This constancy implies that the same events could occur over and over again, and the characters will repeat these actions ad infinitum. In reference to their surroundings, Vladimir's claim that, "Things have changed here since yesterday." is not only baseless, but it appears after him repeating "Wait for Godot", which he repeats throughout the play, and itself implies that the act of repetition of waiting! Beckett seems to be making his best effort to create an infinite loop on several levels, and his success at doing so is intimidating by the nature of its implications. *Endgame's* Estragon and Clov continue to state that they will leave but never do, whereas Nell's "so much the better" bears a close resemblance to *Waiting for Godot's* Estragon's "Nothing to be done"; both express unchangeability and surrender to constancy. Referencing the constant repetition and lack of change, Vladimir states the reasoning behind it quite clearly, "There's nothing to do".

As an extension of the unchanging nature of human and experiential existence, there is also no real concept of time, with age being referenced in an arguably taunting way more than once. *Waiting for Godot's* Estragon states that he is eleven whereas Pozzo implies that he may be well over seventy. The passage of time is represented by the changing from day to night and leafage, but there is no change that makes any kind of a real impact. There is greater ambiguity as to time in *Endgame* but this play has an indoor setting, so we rely entirely on the characters, who are likewise untrustworthy. In *Waiting for Godot* we have Vladimir and Pozzo, who are two sides of the coin when it comes to time. Pozzo is tortured by the concept of time but Vladimir claims that time no longer progresses. Pozzo's final comment on time leads to death, "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (*Waiting for Godot*). Pozzo's anger and anxiety regarding time could be seen as a reflection of the common theme of these emotions popping up in Beckett's work, "Anger, in the classical sense and in Fisher's reading, is a reaction to an infringement of one's known personal boundary by a recognizable force. It is thus the basic emotion guiding the actions of a self defined primarily by its personal territory. By contrast, anxiety is the expectation that a yet invisible boundary may be crossed by the subject or by someone else." (Figlerozicz, 4). By this definition, Pozzo would literally *be* being assaulted by time and

Vladimir by way of Vladimir's assertion of time's existence. The three come to a common ground as to death early on though, with Pozzo lamenting the quickness of its approach as Vladimir and Estragon comment on its inevitability, so his final comment is not at odds with the sentiments of the other characters.

Death is a major focus of both plays embracing themes of both human condition and reality as they apply to death. Beckett's characters acknowledge death as akin to an inescapable murderer lurking in the distance, shadowing every step and making those steps precursors to the final inevitable stumble. The connection between death and existence is illuminated by *Endgame's* Hamm who uses a double-meaning to explain that you can tell if a person is living because that person is crying, and also that a person will cry because he/she is living. This same kind of double-meaning occurs in *Waiting for Godot* when Vladimir responds to Estragon, stating that the tree behind them, a willow, has no leaves, seemingly because it is dead; to which Estragon replies: "No more weeping". For Hamm, it is life that brings sadness, and death seems to be the end, but of course death escapes Hamm because, with another repetitious line, Clov dismisses the possibility of his cessation, "there are no more coffins" (*Endgame*). The interesting nature of death is mentioned with another double-edged statement when Vladimir clearly responds that it would be amusing if Pozzo were dying, but later clarifies that he was referring to something else. Humor is discoverable in death because of its interception of life. As a certain interaction between Pozzo and Estragon states, "[when one cannot] seem to be able to depart[,] such is life". Beckett could be considered very cruel for creating an unending purgatory for suicidal characters and denying them not only death, but giving them eternal life in the theatrical realm. Their pseudo-sentience makes them all the more pathetic, yet they are undeniably funny.

Obviously, humor is interspersed throughout the play, and the outlandish interactions and environments create fertile ground for the absurdity which humor is derived from; in this way, Beckett's characters display the absurdity of existence and life. There are moments in the plays that seem to have no significance other than humor, and this highlights the whole point of the plays. These are absurd distractions, and are also entertainment. The characters give themselves entertainment and as such provide it to the audience. Estragon and Vladimir have several interactions involving their genitals, making jokes out of Penis size and excitement. A more common form of the misery-driven humor represented in Beckett's plays is expounded on by characters from *Endgame*. Hamm and Clov muse on how neither of them feel like laughing, and later, Nell is able to explain their silence in relation to the misery that should bring about laughter, "Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more". It is not misery that is funny because of its nature, but the absurdity of unique forms of misery in human contexts. Most miseries are new versions of the same thing, and the varying contexts provide such ludicrous interactions that we laugh until even humor is no longer amusing. Basically, people laugh because it hurts, and then they laugh until it hurts; then the pain goes away, but the joke is still funny. In the audience and the characters' search for entertainment there is a kinship that Beckett exploits.

Reality is considered most uniquely in the interaction surrounding the fourth wall. The connections that can be drawn between the characters and the audience are both

implicit and explicit. Implicitly, the audience is engaging themselves in the interactions of characters on a stage, and by the very nature of thinking are comparing what they see on-stage to their own lives. Implicitly, the audience is aware that they are watching fiction, but are still becoming engaged in fantasy that is based on reality, even if only semi-contextually. An interesting element to Beckett's two plays is the inclusion of, "hairline fractures, chinks in the fourth wall that confuse the boundary between representation and reality", which rides the line between explicit and implicit reference of the audience by the characters (Davies 14). While using a telescope pointed at the audience, *Endgame's* Clov states that he "see[s] a multitude in transports of joy [and that] that's what [he] call[s] a magnifier. The two again reference humor, but as the joke merely references the implicit audience-actor relationship with swift execution, neither the characters nor the audience generally laugh at this point, which is also mentioned by the characters. This assault of the fourth wall is too implicit to allow for a comfortable audience reaction. At another point, the third wall, which is a prop wall, is referenced as being hollow by Hamm, which mocks the fantasy but has the same issue as the previous event.

These attacks on the fourth wall are not exclusively lighthearted in nature, and though "Often comic, these schisms are also accusatory, discomfiting" (Davies 14). Estragon attacks the fourth wall when he considers entering the wasteland (the audience), and also when he insults Vladimir by calling him a Critic. Some of Estragon and Vladimir's interactions also mimic potential audience conversation, such as when they talk about the night they're having and how awful it is. The fourth wall's reality is, however, completely shattered by Vladimir in this monologue:

"Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? [. . .] At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. I can't go on! What have I said?"

In this monologue, the audience is referenced implicitly, and is also somewhat insulted. The border between fantasy and reality disappears, and we are looking at a character who is speaking about us, but the implicit boundaries are still too strong for either side to truly connect. Furthermore, he claims that we are like him, claiming that he is asleep (in fantasy), and it is the same claim he makes of Estragon, so by extension, we are no different than he is! This statement highlights the arrogance of perspective and the arguable context of reality versus fantasy. Matthew Davies provides some excellent insight into this phenomenon in his examination of this particular subject, noting, "Perhaps as an attempt to reconcile, or at least equilibrate, this ontological servility [of the characters], Beckett set about manipulating the audience's environment", "That the audience is kept at a distance from Beckett's pathetic farces, forced to watch from the other side of the mirror, validates the bleak honesty of the picture" (16, 6)". Although the characters and the audience can both attack the fourth wall, neither are able to break through, equating the two realities.

Of all of this, we could say that we are not the same. Times change, locations change, and situations evolve in the real world. We could say all of this to discredit the claims of the characters in these plays and they would be both truth and lies; they would

be ignorance and wisdom. The human nature and condition is such that emotion and experience will never evolve. Everything that is around us is equivalent in significance to that which has always been around us. The ambiguity as to the progression and contextual identity is something that nonfictional people have in common with Beckett's characters, "Beckett makes his characters seem complex and moving even though their lives are unclear and depleted, their agency over their fates perpetually ambiguous." (18). We have new methods of communication and technology, as well as new insight and methods, but at the end of the day, mankind still struggles in the same struggles as always. For one form of oppression, another arises, and for every form of enlightenment comes a new school of ignorance. The very notion of meaning cannot be proven or disproven, so the chaotic surroundings of our reality is more similar to Beckett's pseudo-metaphysical environments of allegory and metaphor than anyone would wish to be the case. Perhaps this bears some significance as to Beckett's unwillingness to talk about his plays. The environment and props are stripped away to show that environments and objects are insignificant, and if this is Beckett's opinion, then so are plays insignificant. Character interactions merely pass the time because passing time is all that we, people, do. Humor is based on misery because it is funny that we would place the misery of purpose and various sufferings upon ourselves, yet we do. In these two plays, the human animal is represented without all of the distracting bells and whistles that typically accompany humanity in the real world, so we have a much clearer picture. With his unique representation of the virgin human animal by some peculiar but relatable characters, Samuel Beckett provides an overview of the funny little creature that is the human.

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