

The Silence of Waiting: Pauses, Absence and The Failure of Communication in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract

*One of the most renowned themes in post-war literature is the use of absurdist themes and deconstructive methods. After the Second World War, scepticism regarding traditional institutions of meaning and belief became widespread. The works of Samuel Beckett correspond to this very idea. His works depict a world in which conventional structures of meaning become unstable and uncertain. *Waiting for Godot* is probably one of the most celebrated works authored by Samuel Beckett. The entire play is structured on the idea of waiting for a mysterious figure named Godot. Interestingly, Beckett never reveals anything about him. The present paper analyses this theme of waiting and comments on the use of silences and pauses in the play. It is an attempt to explore the use of absence by analysing the element of mystery that surrounds the identity of Godot and his failure to arrive, while also shedding light on the inability of language to express one truly.*

Keywords: Absence, waiting, silence, pause, absurd, deconstruction, communication, meaning, language.

Introduction

Waiting for Godot is one of the most famous plays authored by Samuel Beckett. The play is known for its existential themes and the powerful use of silences and pauses by Beckett. Most of Beckett's drama is rooted in the idea of dismantling binary oppositions. Throughout his career, Beckett has created many dramas that have proved to be an essential part of the Theatre of the Absurd. His absurdist themes produce even more depth when combined with the use of

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elements like fragmented language, instability, and silences that disrupt the dialogue. As the title suggests, the play is all about waiting. The two main characters in the play, Vladimir and Estragon, also known as Didi and Gogo respectively, do nothing except wait for Godot. The play never definitively establishes Godot's identity. The play is composed of two acts. Interestingly, both of them are almost identical, which reinforces the element of circularity and repetition, which is central to Beckett's drama.

The play begins and ends with the same thing, i.e., waiting. As the first Act opens, we can see both Vladimir and Estragon waiting at the side of a road. The entire scenery is rather barren and lifeless. There is not much detail in the background of the play, which is also an essential element of Beckett's drama. He rarely provides details regarding the background or setting of the play or the characters. They sit there near a tree as they wait for Godot. We can see them talking about religion and the Bible. Vladimir tells Estragon about the Bible and the gospels. Estragon soon expresses his desire to leave, but Vladimir reminds him that they can not leave and that they must wait there for Godot. They start arguing whether they are in the correct place or not and whether Godot was scheduled to arrive that day. Soon, Estragon falls asleep. However, he is woken up by Vladimir almost immediately, as the latter tells him that he felt lonely without him. This suggests that their identities are not independent. They depend on each other for their existence. Their personal identities are highly unstable and questionable.

In most of the play, nothing important happens. Both just sit there talking about absurd things as they wait. At one point, Estragon also suggests that they should hang themselves on the tree, but they ultimately do not do so, as they are unable to decide who should hang himself first. After this, they simply go back to waiting for Godot. Vladimir also says that they are tied to Godot when Estragon asks him. After this, two more characters enter the stage: Pozzo and Lucky. Lucky is portrayed as Pozzo's slave. He has a rope tied around his neck, and Pozzo whips him like an animal. Estragon confuses Pozzo with Godot, but the misunderstanding is soon cleared when Pozzo introduces himself. After a brief interaction and after Pozzo hits Lucky several times and treats him badly, both of them leave. Estragon and Vladimir continue to wait there. After a while, they are informed by a little boy that Godot will not arrive that day but will surely arrive the next day. The rest of the play involves Vladimir and Estragon sitting in the same place waiting for Godot. Nothing important happens. Estragon tries to talk about his dreams; they try on hats for a while, have a brief argument, and eventually make up.

A little while later, Lucky and Pozzo return to the stage. Pozzo has gone blind, and he is being led by Lucky. There is a lot of confusion in the play. Pozzo cannot remember Vladimir or Estragon even though it has only been one day since they met. Additionally, none of the characters have a reliable memory. All of them have conflicting opinions and recollections of the same event, which asks the readers question what is correct. They also have no idea about the time. While Vladimir thinks it is evening, Estragon feels that it is morning. The same thing repeats throughout the entire play. In the end, both continue waiting for Godot.

This play captures the absurdist themes in Beckett's works. Another important aspect of this particular work by Beckett is how he has portrayed the use of pauses, silences, absences, and the failure of language. In traditional thought, speech and language are given immense importance as the primary tools for communication and expression. Beckett highlights how this is not always true and how language and speech are often unstable and unreliable, and inherently meaningless.

The Use of Pause and Silence in Waiting for Godot

Waiting for Godot is one of the most celebrated dramas authored by Samuel Beckett. The entire structure of this play is absurdist, including its theme, the narrative techniques, the stylistic devices used, and the mysterious and uncertain aura that can be felt throughout the play. Beckett uses more pauses and silences than actual dialogues or effective speech. His main mode of communication is never speech. In fact, speech plays the role that silence has played in traditional literature and thought. Beckett's characters speak more through their silence than their dialogues. Their dialogues often act as a barrier or obstacle. They are used as a cover to hide what the character is feeling. For example, in *Happy Days*, Winnie talks a lot. Some people might interpret her dialogue in a manner that they feel that they are understanding what she feels and thinks. However, this is not true. If we look closely, we can understand that she speaks this much not to express her feelings or thoughts, but she does this so that she can keep her actual thoughts, desires, and feelings hidden inside her. This is the actual use of speech in most of Beckett's creations. It hides more than it reveals.

Pauses play a very important role in literature, especially drama. Conventionally, many people feel that pauses just operate as a temporary stoppages or disruptions in a dialogue, which may signify that the characters are thinking, processing, etc. They may also be used to emphasize something. However, all of these are rather limited. Beckett portrays how pauses have so much more value and meaning. In *Waiting for Godot*, pauses become an integral part of the plot.

They are not just temporary interruptions. They are a part of action itself. Silence and stillness in this play have a lot of significance. They give a lot of meaning and depth to the play. It is not merely a gap between actions or dialogues; it contains significant meaning and compels the readers and the audience to interpret the scene on their own. It makes the work so much richer for the purpose of deconstruction, which would not have been possible with the use of conventional language and other communicative tools. Maytham Abdulrazzaq Abbas writes:

“There is no communication or change throughout *Waiting for Godot*. It’s a circular, repetitive, cliché-ridden, misunderstanding-packed, contradictory mess, just like the rest of us. Characters never stop talking, as if trying to stuff the empty air and pass the time, but their speech seldom connects or moves things forward. The nonsensical monologue of Lucky is an incredible example of the entropy of language. The repeated stage directions for “Silence” interrupt these lacunae of speech, emphasizing that words are not sufficient to express the characters’ internal lives, nor can they change their situation. According to Matosoğlu (2012), these long silences and pauses in *Waiting for Godot* “are a reflection of the characters’ failure to communicate adequately, [and their] loneliness and hopelessness” (83). The silence is more powerful than that broken dialogue, an expression of the characters’ incomprehension, the futility of any attempt they might make to give voice to that meaning.”

In this play, pauses create an atmosphere of suspension and mystery. The readers and audience do not know what is about to happen. Not only does this make the play interesting, but it also allows the readers and audience to actively participate in understanding and interpreting the play. In the play, we can see how Vladimir and Estragon are always in a state of uncertainty and postponement. They have no idea what is going to happen next or when Godot will arrive. In fact, they do not even know if he will ever actually arrive. This dramatic tension is made even more intense and interesting with the use of pauses. The pause is also a very good tool for understanding how the characters in the play are stuck. They are incapable of moving forward in their life, physically as well as emotionally. Both Estragon and Vladimir talk about getting up and leaving but they never actually do. Traditionally, pauses are almost always followed by dramatic actions, dialogues, or some revelation. However, none of these follow the pauses in Beckett’s creations. All these pauses are just an end in themselves. This makes the audience feel the exact uncertainty and confusion that the characters or Beckett are feeling.

In traditional thought, silence is more powerful than speech. It is often expressed that they do not carry any meaning on their own, and that their only function is to supplement language and

highlight its importance and ability to carry meaning. However, the silences in Beckett's works are an active dramatic presence in themselves. They do not merely indicate that the characters have stopped speaking or moving; they also highlight how they are feeling uncertain, hesitant, or exhausted etc. It highlights the fact that sometimes it is impossible to find an adequate response, and even when one can find such a response, it is not always possible to communicate it using words. It is in fact very hard to express complex human emotions, experiences, and feelings in mere words. This is why silence is so important. It is able to convey so much without saying anything expressly. Not only does it expose the inadequacy of language, but it also gives expression to existential uncertainty. The characters have no idea about Godot's arrival. They do not even know if he will ever arrive. They live in a constant state of uncertainty. Their silence is what reflects this uncertainty and confusion. Silence is not just 'nothing'. Instead, it should be understood as a meaning that can never be fully understood or expressed. It is something that people must face on their own, despite the discomfort.

Waiting And Suspension

In *Waiting for Godot*, the act of waiting is very important, as the title of the play itself suggests. It creates suspense and confusion among the readers as well as the characters. We can see how Vladimir and Estragon keep waiting without a conclusion. There is no definite duration for which they must wait. They have no other option but to wait. They also do not know when to give up, as every time they think about giving up, they are told that Godot would definitely arrive soon, and then he does not. This creates an endless cycle, where the characters remain suspended with no resolution. Their waiting has no end. It keeps getting pushed further and further every time, making the atmosphere even more tense and uncertain.

The fact that Vladimir and Estragon wait for him, it becomes even harder for them to leave as their act of waiting creates an impression that *Waiting for Godot* is an important task. Just because they have been doing it for so many days, they feel that quitting now is just not an option. They have invested so much of their time and energy into this act that it has become impossible for them to quit waiting at this point. They continue waiting only because they hope that waiting will finally lead them to a point where they do not have to wait anymore, i.e., Godot will finally arrive. However, this never happens and the act of waiting continues. This creates a paradox. They do a particular act (waiting) in hopes that doing it for long enough will mean that they will not have to do it anymore, but this never happens. Their waiting never finds a conclusion and they remain stuck.

The fact that the two acts in the play are identical and have the same basic element of waiting makes it cyclical. There is no major change. This element of repetition can be seen throughout the play. The characters wait, Godot does not arrive, they decide to leave, they do not leave, they keep waiting, and everything happens again. There is no progression in the play. There is only repetition. Time passes, but nothing changes. Because the characters are so hopeful about a change in the future, they never want to face the fact that things might never actually change.

In the play, there is a lot of uncertainty in terms of time. There is a lot of confusion. The act of waiting creates temporal suspension. The relationship between past, present, and future, is rather disrupted and confusing. In the play, there is no present that exists without the anticipation of the future. Vladimir and Estragon exist in the present, but their entire attention and focus is directed towards the future where they hope for the arrival of Godot. There is nothing in their present that is independent of this constant anticipation of the future. The present is controlled by the future. At the same time, the present is uncertain because the past is not clear. The characters have trouble remembering what happened in their past. Their memories are unreliable and uncertain. They cannot remember things or events correctly, which creates confusion and leads to temporal instability.

The Absence of Godot

The absence of Godot is a major thematic concern in the play. This is very important as it makes a significant departure from the traditional thought and approach. Conventionally, it is assumed that presence is more important than absence. This is a part of the binary opposition that has been heavily criticized by Jacques Derrida. Absence is treated as nothing meaningful or capable of containing any depth. It is understood as the lack of presence. However, in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, we can see how he dismantles this idea. In this play, the entire storyline, narration, and structure is based on the fact of the absence of Godot. Although Godot never appears on stage, his anticipated arrival structures the actions and conversations of Vladimir and Estragon. In fact, Godot's presence becomes important for the play only because he is absent.

Throughout the play, Godot remains absent from the stage. The characters are always waiting for his arrival. They do not have any clue about the same. In fact, whatever the characters do, say, or refrain from doing or saying, is influenced by the absence of Godot. This absence is the reason behind almost all their decisions. If we look at the structure of the play, it becomes clear that it is driven by the absence of Godot. Had he arrived, there would not have been any story

for the play. The play captures what the characters do in the absence of Godot as they wait for his arrival.

His absence gives birth to the act of waiting, which is essentially rooted in the expectation of arrival. The entire act of waiting, which is central to this play, is built on the fact of Godot's absence. Godot's absence essentially drives the entire story of the play. Preety Priya and Vibhash Ranjan write:

The characters' dependence on Godot mirrors humanity's reliance on external systems—religion, ideology, or authority—to provide meaning. Yet Godot never arrives, reinforcing the absurd realization that such expectations may be futile. The endless waiting becomes both a source of suffering and a means of survival, as it gives Vladimir and Estragon a reason to continue existing.

Another important feature of Godot's absence is the paradox it creates. The characters constantly wait for someone who never actually arrives. They do not even have any guarantee that he will ever arrive. They have nothing to hold on to but the words of the boy who tells them that he would arrive the next day. Both Vladimir and Estragon structure their complete schedules and routines around a future event that never actually takes place. They are disappointed multiple times when Godot does not arrive, but they do not let this stop them from waiting for him. This creates a cycle of disappointment and anticipation. Every day, they sit at the same place, waiting for Godot, who never arrives. Then they are told that he would arrive in the future, which again gives birth to hope and anticipation. Once again, Godot does not arrive, leading to disappointment, thereby creating a never-ending cycle.

Language Without Communication

In the entire play, there are multiple dialogues. However, there are very few instances where these dialogues are able to communicate something meaningful. Most of the time, they are just empty and meaningless. Such dialogues are nothing more than meaningless chatter. Such a structure and approach highlight the inability of language to produce meaning.

Language is often regarded as the primary vehicle for communication. It is understood as essential for expressing one's emotions, thoughts, and ideas. However, Beckett highlights how this is not actually true. In his plays, especially in *Waiting for Godot*, language fails as a stable or transparent medium of communication, but its failure itself becomes meaningful. Words do not feel sufficient to the characters when it comes to carrying the burden of their true emotions.

In such a moment, silence becomes crucial as it forces the characters as well as the readers to confront what they are feeling, experiencing, and going through. This is not easy for the characters. Hence, they engage in meaningless conversation to avoid having to confront reality. Rawiya Kouachi explains this in the following words:

Vladimir and Estragon throughout the play try to overcome silence because it reminds them of the void of their lives. To fill the silence, characters speak for the sake of speaking and talk incessantly to escape the terrifying silence of the nothingness in which they are entrapped. They are idle and have nothing to do. (Kouachi 178)

While speech is traditionally understood as a medium for a meaningful exchange, in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, this speech is reduced to a verbal activity with no meaning at all. We see how Vladimir and Estragon are constantly engaged in a conversation with each other. Despite this, there is no meaningful exchange between the two. Their words are not intended for communication; instead, they just fill the emptiness of the situation. Here, it becomes very important to understand the difference between speaking and communication. While the characters are constantly speaking, they are not really communicating with each other.

A major tool used by Beckett to destabilize communication is repetition. Everything in the play seems to be recurring without any meaning. This applies to words, questions, situations, etc. This way language keeps moving but there is no real progress. This is similar to the lives of the characters who keep waiting but nothing fruitful happens. Additionally, there are a lot of questions in the play. Vladimir and Estragon ask a lot of questions to each other about Godot, their lives, and other things. However, there are no answers in the play. Most of these questions are left hanging. If some of them are answered, the answers are rather confusing and meaningless.

“VLADIMIR: say something!

ESTRAGON: I'm trying.

Long silence.

VLADIMIR: (in anguish) Say anything at all!

ESTRAGON: What do we do now?

VLADIMIR: Wait for Godot

ESTRAGON: Ah!

Silence” (Beckett 41-42)

Conclusion

Hence, it is evident that *Waiting for Godot* is not just a mysterious play, it is a very good and intellectual take on the use of deconstructive tools in understanding and analysing a text. Samuel Beckett has established himself as a writer who is known for his absurdist themes, unusual structure, and peculiar forms. His works are so much more than just mere plays or pieces of literature. They dismantle the very institutions that have been relied upon by society for years and years. He exposes the limitations of these institutions and highlights how they are unreliable and unstable. The use of pauses, silences, and absences in the play highlight how meaning is always deferred and never truly present in a text. The failure of communication in the play reflects the writer's criticism of the traditional approaches concerning language and speech.

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