

FLUX BETWEEN THE METAPHYSICS OF PRESENCE AND ABSENCE: COHABITATION OF MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S "WAITING FOR GODOT"

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ABSTRACT

*As an experimental play, *Waiting for Godot* created a new revolution in theatre. It has the elements both of modernism and postmodernism. The simultaneous presence and absence of hope (which is tied with a higher being) gives the play a paradoxical structure. Alongside introducing the Derridean concepts of polysemy (multiple meanings) and indeterminacy (no absolute referent), the identity of Godot creates a flux between the metaphysics of presence and absence. For a postmodernist critic, "*Waiting for Godot*" has modernist overtones, and Godot himself represents a meta-narrative that prevents the tramps from ever achieving the freedom they so desperately seek. For Godot to be a meta-game, he would have to be a known or finite quantity, yet in the play he remains unknown and infinite. Moreover, the play involves not the lack of meaning but an excess of meaning produced by the liberating play of language. Yet the deconstructive free play of language is liberating only in a finite sense, since the movement of 'différance' remains within the boundaries of thought without intentionally giving access to the unboundedness of pure consciousness, which it indeed rejects as an illusion. To say that Beckett's play presents a totalizing modernist view in an infinite postmodernist world, therefore is to (mis)identify and to belie the true impact of the play as a complex aesthetic vehicle for expanding consciousness.*

Keywords: *Absence, Différance, Logocentrism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Presence.*

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* created a new revolution in theatre as an experimental play. It was written during the half-a-dozen years (1945-50) when Beckett's genius was at its white heat and his output was most prolific. The play first appeared in print in 1952. It was produced for the first time on January 5, 1953 in Paris. *Waiting for Godot* proved to be the most influential play in post World War-II Europe and is seen today as one of the existential classics of twentieth- century literature. It has the elements both of modernism and postmodernism. Modernist art often features fragmentation and disruption at the level of form, though it generally attempts to recuperate a sense of order and faith in universal values at level of content or overall effect. In other words, the modernists attempt to shore up the grand narratives, the absolute truths and values, out of "... the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot, in a review of Joyce's "Ulysses"). On the contrary, postmodernist art greets the absurd or meaningless confusion of contemporary existence, and uses strategies like parody and pastiche to undermine a sense of order, timeless values, universal truths, and grand narratives. In doing so it emphasizes surfaces at the expense of substance and depths. Besides, the simultaneous presence and absence of hope (which is tied with a higher being) gives the play a paradoxical structure. In fact, my paper tries to present the flux between the metaphysics of presence and absence, and, thus, my attempt is also to trace the cohabitation of modernism and postmodernism in Beckett's "Waiting for Godot".

Both of these two terms- 'presence' and 'absence'- refer to the fundamental states of 'being'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines these words as self- referential: " the fact or condition of being present" and " the state of being absent or away". The problems of these words arise from the fact that they depend upon the notion of 'being'. The OED defines 'being' as " to have or occupy a place ..somewhere ..Expressing the most general relation of a thing to its place". Thus, 'being is not inexplicable or transcendent, but exists within a framework or state. Therefore, the notions of 'presence' and 'absence' explicitly depend on the states they are found, such as, images , representations ,etc. From the ancient times, philosophers have debated the relative absence and presence within such states. In *Phaedrus*, Plato advocates for unmediated truth of speech over the mediation of writing. According to him, the unmediated truth of speech comes from the presence of the speaker , while the writing mediates this presence. So, representations in the form of images or writings present 'presence' through mediation. But Derrida believes that these mediated forms are the only available forms of presence because meaning can't appear outside of a medium.

Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence puts forward a play of 'absence' and 'presence'. He writes that 'there is nothing outside the text' [il n'y a pas de hors-texte]. Thus, his argument conforms to that of Aristotle who recognises the inescapability of representation. It is impossible for signification to be absolutely present. For Derrida, linguistic meaning is determined by the 'play' of differences between words – a play that is 'limitless', 'infinite', and 'indefinite' – and not by an original or intention existing prior to and outside language, the 'transcendental signified'. Derrida coined the term *differance*, meaning both a difference and an act of deferring, to characterize the way in which meaning is created through the play of differences between words.

Beckett's portrayal of postmodern life can be viewed as stark, hopeless, and ironic: where language does not have a decidable meaning; humans lack the assurance of roots and any foundational concept; and communication continually breaks down. *Waiting for Godot* illustrates the desire to prove one's existence and make sense of the world. Estragon and Vladimir have only language to rely on to prove their existence and maintain their sanity in a seemingly hopeless world; however, language is an inadequate system in reaching any type of abstract truth or foundational assurance. Beckett paints the reality as he sees it – as an endless stream of signifiers, signifying nothing much at all. Beckett's technique, to demonstrate the lack of referent (or signified) in language, illustrates the lack of meaning not only in language but also in life.

Beckett does not provide the reader/viewer with a definitive, logocentric text with decidable meaning – nor is this his purpose. The idea of 'logocentrism' is that the spoken word guarantees the existence of somebody doing the speaking – thus it reinforces the great humanist ideas, like that there is a real self that is the origin of what is being said. Derrida calls this idea of the self that has to be there to speak part of the metaphysics of PRESENCE; the idea of being, or presence, is central to all systems of Western philosophy. Presence is part of a binary opposition presence/absence, in which presence is always favoured over absence. Speech gets associated with presence, and both are favoured over writing and absence; this privileging of speech and presence is what Derrida calls LOGOCENTRISM. Derrida's concept of deconstruction implicitly questions the validity of the underlying structures upon which other 'truths' lie; this concept is fundamental to his philosophy and can be readily applied to Beckettian drama. Beckett does not presume to present a closed hermeneutic system with decidable meaning. Instead Beckett's dramatic work challenges the reader/viewer to become actively engaged in the text – with its words and silences.

In "Waiting for Godot", Estragon and Vladimir experience confusion at the "loss of presence". At the core of this confusion, the lack of meaning in language and thus, the failure to communicate with the other; the lack of a referent or a transcendental signified to which they may ground their existences; and the void that is their lives, Estragon and Vladimir wait for someone who, it seems, will never come. As Vladimir states: "...what we are doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come..." Godot is their reason for being, without him they are nothing – he gives meaning to their lives. Although he bares no inherent truth, the idea of Godot gives a degree of certainty to the uncertainty that is their lives. Here lies the flux between the metaphysics of presence and absence. Beckett's technique of using language that does not communicate meaning or attempt to "get to" the truth of existence is revolutionary for it forces us to question the "truths" to which we cling.

Like a modern text, Beckett's dramatic world is filled with ritual behaviour, fragments of old myths, and symbols and they bespeak a meaningful redemption from the void or absence. But the point that Beckett tries to make is to show the futility of these instruments of culture to establish any kind of meaning or the metaphysics of presence in the world.

In fine, for a postmodernist critic, "Waiting for Godot" has modernist overtones, and Godot himself represents a meta-narrative that prevents the tramps from ever achieving the freedom they so desperately seek. Estragon and Vladimir are tricksters and are engaged in the play of language games. All their games point to one meta-game, the grand –narrative centred on Godot, and that they are content to play their comfortable modernist games within this grand narrative, rather than attempt to break out through a postmodernist misuse of language for the sake of progress and discovery. For Godot to be a meta-game, he would have to be a known or finite quantity, yet in the play he remains unknown and infinite. Moreover, the play involves not the lack of meaning but an excess of meaning produced by the liberating play of language. Yet the deconstructive free play of language is liberating only in a finite sense, since the movement of 'differance' remains within the boundaries of thought without intentionally giving access to the

unboundedness of pure consciousness, which it indeed rejects as an illusion. To say that Beckett's play presents a totalizing modernist view in an infinite postmodernist world, therefore is to (mis)identify and to belie the true impact of the play as a complex aesthetic vehicle for expanding consciousness. Beckett's work brilliantly illuminates the dual nature of the self a co-existence of the everyday thinking mind and the underlying witnessing pure awareness, the source of all play, all beginnings, and repetitions.

References:

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