

# INTERNATIONAL RESEARCHERS

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*Parisa Shams*

**Volume No 1 Issue No.3 September 2012**

**[www.iresearcher.org](http://www.iresearcher.org)**

**ISSN 227-7471**

THE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL "INTERNATIONAL RESEACHERS"

[www.iresearcher.org](http://www.iresearcher.org)

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# WAITING FOR GODOT AND THE QUESTION OF HUMANISM

Parisa Shams

MA student of English Literature, Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Shiraz University

(IRAN)

[parisa.shams88@gmail.com](mailto:parisa.shams88@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

*Waiting for Godot* centers around humanism as it delves into the minds of human beings, their relationships, the sufferings they go through and the absurdity of the life they are living. Vladimir and Estragon, as representatives of human race, are struggling with life as helpless, disappointed creatures destined to wait for the unknown. While a humanistic view would suggest that human beings try to improve their lives and pursue their dreams, Vladimir and Estragon spend their time waiting helplessly for Godot to save them from their mental and physical pains. As such, they fail to relieve their pains, to communicate, to make heads or tails of time and place- they are stagnated. Just as humanism takes notice of human potentials, ideals and problems, the play brings about humanistic concerns in three axes of human nature, relationships and sufferings. This paper aims at investigating *Waiting for Godot* to show how the question of humanism is raised and dealt with by Beckett.

**KEYWORDS:** Waiting for Godot; Beckett; humanism; anti-humanism

## 1. Introduction

Humanism is a philosophical movement emphasizing “the unique qualities of humans, especially their freedom and their potential for growth” (Weiten 392). Humanists stress free will and our ability to choose to have a more meaningful life. They emphasize human strengths over their weaknesses, and that human beings are not victims of deterministic forces. The Humanists’ optimism reaches its height in the theories of Carl Rogers. He urges that everyone has a need to self-actualize, which is a tendency towards growth and realization of their full potential.

Taking a look at *Waiting for Godot*, this paper investigates these humanistic concerns expressed in the course of the play in three axes of human nature, suffering and relationship, and analyzes them so as to reveal whether or not Beckett’s portrayal of these humanistic concerns is in line with the basic assumptions of humanistic theories manifested namely in the work of Carl Rogers.

Based on the optimistic view of human represented by humanists such as Maslow and Rogers, free will is an indispensable part of human nature, and the only one who can determine the path of one’s life is human himself. By investing his hope in his own self, man must attempt to step forward in the path of self-growth, exhibit the power to solve his problems and take the matters into his hand. The humanist perspective emphasizes the necessity of freedom in all aspects of cultural, economical and political life, and believes in a morality that connects human values with worldly relationships so that he can move further in the path towards freedom and happiness.

*Waiting for Godot* deals with the same humanistic concerns, but provides evidence to undermine the optimism adhered by the humanists as it depicts the absurdity of humans’ status in this universe; a situation which pushes human beings far away from being simply able to do what they ought to. The challenge is whether human beings can shape their own destinies, and whether they can fulfill the humanists’ expectations of man’s way of life. Human nature, sufferings, and relationships as discussed afterwards are meant to designate how Beckett’s humanistic concerns are manifested in his absurd depiction of the realities of human life.

## 2. HUMAN NATURE

Essential to humanistic approach which has its roots in existentialist thought, is the nature of man and the assumption that human nature is endowed with free will, intellect, and self-actualization. However, in *Waiting for Godot*, characters do not exhibit the notion of free will, as they seem to be confined to waiting, unable to get rid of it. Although they do not know if the person they are waiting for will ever come or not, they keep on waiting all day long.

They are not even sure if they are waiting in the right place; the only thing they know is that they have to expect somebody's arrival. It seems as if they are doomed to wait, waiting from which there is no escape.

Life, itself, is portrayed as a period of waiting; waiting for an event, a person, and eventually death as the only way to escape the pains of life (Yuehua 70). Vladimir and Estragon's waiting is of a special kind. They cannot be sure about the best course open to them; they cannot get the essential knowledge either. As long as they are ignorant, they are impotent (Reid 50-51). Whenever Estragon suggests: "Let's go", Vladimir reminds him that they cannot go away since they are waiting for Godot. They are not able to determine their own fates. They decide to take action, they try to go away; but, they fail to make the slightest movement.

The fact that they rely on Godot to show up and save them from misery, is the indication of their failure to take matters into their hands as a free man ought to do; therefore, there is no salvation for them. Characters manifest no ability to make decisions for themselves. Pozzo and Lucky are trapped in a master-slave relationship. In the first act, Lucky is a subject creature; he has no choice as he is treated like a dog who should just do what his master, Pozzo, tells him to. He cannot even think without being allowed to. In the second act, this is Pozzo who, having gone blind, becomes dependent on lucky and helplessly in need of help. Vladimir and Estragon- whether bound to waiting, the pains of life or the company of one another- cannot even commit suicide although it seems to be the only means of getting away from the misery of existence.

Beckett is a writer who confronts the realities of existence. The characters continue onwards because they have no alternative but to go on. This is the way of life, as Knowlson implies, birth, suffering and death are all connected (White 1-2). No one can cure the pains of life, so they must be endured. In this process of enduring, Beckett's people reveal unexpected virtues- sympathy, love, and a determination to endure. At the time when Vladimir and Estragon speak of hanging themselves, Estragon refuses to be the first to hang himself because he is afraid that his weight would break the branch and Vladimir would be left alone (Reid 56). Perhaps by nature, human beings are not evil, although they live in a world which renders nothing unto them but pain.

Man is struggling with the jest of humanity and is constantly trying to make sense of his own existence as a human being. Estragon in addressing Vladimir says: "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression that we exist?" (Beckett 60). It seems as if human beings cannot go beyond this mere "impression" of existence. Human existence, when delved into, proves to be a matter of high absurdity. Existence is absurd because being human and existing are mutually contradictory. The paradoxes of existence are as endless as its absurdity. In the words of Breuer:

We are all like a donkey running after the carrot dangled in front of its nose by its rider...we would be both donkey and rider, but the donkey part in us would just love to forget that we are also the rider who holds the carrot (233).

"Who am I?" is a question the answer to which has not yet been revealed to man. The I- the identity of man -is a concept that can neither be spoken of nor written down. The I by itself cannot affect and be affected by the external world. As Hesla notes, "the being of the I is restricted to the art of thinking, and here it is radically free" (qtd in Pattie 38). Thus, as long as Vladimir and Estragon cannot stop thinking, they illustrate that they exist. Even Lucky, who, in appearance, exhibits nothing of human traits, cannot stop thinking, and is forced to stop "thinking aloud" by his hat being removed. Thinking guarantees one's existence; "*Je pense donc je suis*", but what can give man the feeling that he has control over the world is not existing, but the ability to make choices and to take his life into his fist. However, at times, Beckett's characters feel the heavy burden of life so deeply that they even doubt their own existence. They wait all day for the night to come, and all night for the coming of the next day, in the vain hope of so-called Godot's arrival. What the world offers to them is so absurd that they feel annihilated, then, in fear, they try to do things to reassure themselves or the other that they are not dead.

What is, then, the fate of man who fails to take matters into his hands? Man who, in the words of Pattie, is "caught between an indifferent God and an inhospitable nature" (75), had perhaps better put faith in himself rather than in Godot, God, Savior and such. When man believes in himself, "will" comes to his rescue and slows down the pace of his destruction. Waiting for anything the existence of which is either believed or doubted, leads man to a life of relative inaction. It is true that nothing can heal the pains of life and change the world, but the awareness that no savior is there to come to his rescue would prevent man from helplessly filling time with waiting in ignorance. As Alec Reid quotes from an existentialist, "Godot is a general expression of the futility of human existence when man pins his hope on force outside of himself" (30).

Therefore, Beckett presents us with the picture of man as one who has invested their hope in a supernatural or absent savior, rather than standing on their feet and determining their own fate as they are supposed to. Human

beings are creatures who are trapped in a lifelong struggle to make sense of their existence, and it seems as if they cannot actualize their true selves and step into the course of growth unless they come to realize the essence of their being. Hence, as they find themselves trapped in a state of meaningless existence, they end up being stagnated in misery.

### 3. HUMAN SUFFERINGS

Closely related to quiddity of human nature is the quality and manner of his existence. By taking a look at the circumstances of man's life, it is evident that the notion of suffering has been a dispensable part of human existence; in other words, existence without suffering is not imaginable. This is as well, the case with *Waiting for Godot*, where suffering is presented as a regular, expected part of daily life. As Pozzo beautifully puts it, "The tears of the world are a constant quantity" (Beckett 24).

For Beckett, to have physical being at all is to be in a sense handicapped, as if human beings are trapped in their degenerating body. (White 9) Physicality is a source to both physical and mental pains. Therefore, the fact that human beings exist as physical beings is per se adequate reason for their constant suffering, a bitter explanation for the pains woven into the fabric of human life.

At the very beginning, Estragon is seen endeavoring to remove his boot in order to relieve himself from the pain in his foot. As a wanderer whose journey will never end, Estragon is limited by his sore feet and will never be able to reach a safe place to rest. When asked where he spent the night, he goes on to answer that he was beat at the ditch where he had stayed the previous night. In a similar way, Vladimir suffers from physical pain. The exact nature of his ailment is not revealed, though it is certain that his problem is bladder related. He experiences pain when passing urine, so he has to refrain from laughing in order to reduce the number of times he must run off to relieve himself. He has to refrain from happiness in order to cope with his urinary problems. Both Vladimir and Estragon are physically and psychologically handicapped due to their physical decay and its influence upon their mental state (White 9).

Lucky is also the paragon of misery. Being tied and having an inevitable running sore in his neck, he does anything to persuade his master not to let him go. Having gone through the process of physical decline, in the second act, Pozzo has gone blind and Lucky is dumb. Pozzo cannot even remember that he was able to see the other day. He has become dependent and submissive; calling to mind the patient/carer coupling. Through this drastic decay of faculties Beckett emphasizes the shortness of life; a life in which birth and death happen simultaneously and we only have enough time to experience the suffering. As the time passes, our plight deteriorates. Like the biblical idea of being born into sin, Beckett suggests that human being after birth is effectively tarnished (White 10-11).

Lameness, blindness and deafness also, in a symbolic way, represent the imperfections of the human body for which there is no single solution (White 11). In Bible it is possible to be saved from defectiveness, but in Beckettian world there is no release from suffering, as Pozzo says: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (Beckett 1990:83).

So man is born to be put to his grave immediately, and life- that one instant of light- does not allow time for youth; it's over before he can acknowledge it. He just goes on, not to survive, but to reach the next day, where he will be one step closer to death and nearer the end of suffering. So as long as man is alive, he is a physical being, and being physical means to be damned (White 12). Being not only a source of suffering, physical decay, to double the pain, serves as a source of great influence on man's mental state. Mental suffering is, therefore, not only due to unmet expectations, but also to Cartesian dualism of body and mind.

On the one hand, man wishes for things he can never obtain. Godot primarily exists in the minds of Vladimir and Estragon, as a source of power. He is an image of authority deeply wished for, so that the two tramps consider waiting for him a major preoccupation. The fact that they rely upon the existence of an eternal being, to the neglect of personal responsibility, is Beckett's object of criticism. The situation of Godot is a wearisome threat of boredom. This monotony of waiting is inevitably along with the line moving toward age and death. Once caught up in the waiting, no instance of time can ever be decisive again. Waiting, as the condition of man, involves an acceptance both of death and of life. As they go on waiting, everything grows increasingly boring and irksome. Life consists of waiting, an existential premise which has its own agonies and dreads (Hoffman 150-160). No matter how wholeheartedly man dedicates his life to waiting, the subject of his waiting is never to show up.

On the other hand, in such a world subject to decay, mind, which is trapped within a body that is essentially perishing, is prone to deterioration in a similar way. Physicality serves as a source of suffering to the mind, so much so that to be physical is to suffer. Body is a hindrance, from which even death cannot provide a release. Perfection does not exist in the world of Beckett. Characters suffer because of the inadequacy of their human body. Man decomposes as he goes on living. Body and mind are at odds; mind is active while body is failing as man grows old (White 2-3-4).

Man- trapped in the constant process of physical and mental decline, unable to comprehend life, and under the destructive influence of time- starts suffering from mental weariness. Being unable to escape his past, man idealizes memories, and invents new ones, to reduce the pain of present existence. Estragon always forgets that he has been waiting in the same place the other day, and Vladimir always talks about it with doubt. The boy brings the same message from Godot over and over again and he does not recognize the tramps. As far as memory is concerned, everybody tries his hands at remembering, only if it leads to forgetting- forgetting the pains. Time is cruel to man; its passage offers nothing but erosion, pain, and mortality.

Mortality, as such, is a process to be endured (White 58). While man grows old, he goes through the process of death. Aging involves physical degeneration, and an impairment of mental faculties combined with spiritual attrition (White 95). Life, to add up to the pains of the spiritually-dead man, becomes an absolute monotony. Stagnation makes it more and more difficult to tolerate the pains of existence. Every day is the same as the other except for the fact that the cuts of body, mind, and the spirit run deeper. Time, when restricted to waiting, appears to be refusing to pass if the mind cannot be distracted or amused by some new experiences of any kind.

*Waiting for Godot* is about the compulsive need for action, if only in order to make the time pass (Pattie 75). As Vladimir says, "Habit is a great deadener". Life is a succession of habits, making a vicious cycle out of existence. Therefore, habits and lack of entertainment speed up the pace of man's constant and gradual death. In the course of the play, Beckett's characters, desperately struggling against termination even though an instinctive struggle it might be, are all the time concerned with the passage of time and yearn to do anything to make time pass more quickly. Since there is "nothing to be done", they try conversing, telling stories, singing, dancing, eating, hanging themselves, and thinking; anything that can take their minds off the miseries of life. By so doing, they, whether willingly or unwillingly, get themselves involved in communicating with one another; this is the portrayal of human relationship that gives the play most of its human element.

Humanistic perspective emphasizes that man has a desire to preserve himself on a physical and psychological level, and that he is capable of coming up with solutions to all his problems. However, the characters of *Waiting for Godot* struggle with physical and mental pains, and at times it seems as if they did not take action to get over these problems and improve their situation. Even when they try to change their situation for the better, they are seemingly doomed to fail. Whether Beckett puts the blame on his characters for being ignorant of their miserable situation, or on the absurd philosophy of life which allows little room for growth and happiness as pain is an inseparable part of existence, it is evident that there exists a need for action and a switch of perspective on the part of human beings. Waiting for a savior to come to one's rescue would never free man from his miseries.

#### 4. HUMAN RELATIONSHIP

Man, being absurd by nature and stuck up in a world of meaninglessness, finds it difficult to communicate and express himself. He wishes to shout himself out, but he neither finds any words to express himself nor any ears to hear his voice. At times, in spite of being among others, he feels absolutely lonely. He is received with indifference when he is most in need of sympathy, and is treated violently when he sincerely yearns for compassion. Man, unable to understand his own self, fails to get himself involved in a desirable relationship with other human beings. In the world of absolute absurdity, man-man relationship is of no exception.

In spite of the oddity of their relationships, togetherness is what supports the survival that Beckett's people crave. While the characters are waiting for their fates to unfold, it becomes evident that the little power of their survival would fade away without their partner standing beside them (Mandel 4). Besides, Beckettian people have to repeat themselves over and over again, yet, they are always prone to failure in conveying their message. To be misunderstood appears to be a necessity, and senseless utterances seem to be an inevitable part of speech production. Although man is unable to go beyond such communicative hindrances, he cannot give it all up either and remain alone- he is in need of attention and affection.

Estragon often threatens to leave his partner, but he is the one who most often feels the need for affection (Fletcher 50). They are not able to leave each other as long as the need for affection keeps them dependent on one

another (Fletcher 53). Their interaction, on the other hand, offers them a temporary shelter from their awareness of time (Mandel16). Characters cannot be independent of one another even if they are by nature cruel and by circumstance in authority. Pozzo, in spite of being a cruel exploiter who never doubts his proprietary rights, illustrates the futility of human tyranny by exhibiting a need for attention and taking pleasure in declaiming before an audience. In the second act he becomes even more dependent and having gone blind, reclines on his degenerate servant (Fletcher 51-52).

A tendency toward violence is seen in the way characters treat one another. Pozzo torments Lucky, Estragon kicks him to take revenge, and Vladimir hits Pozzo to make him silent (Fletcher 61). It seems as if man cannot avoid aggression and exploitation although he is desperately bound to communication.

Beckett's people are alone though they are in the company of others. Within his mind, man is damned to exist alone. Despite company he cannot fully connect with those around him, since his individuality and his questionable identity makes him stay ultimately solitary (White 72).

It seems that characters in the play reach nowhere as they try to achieve an accepted level of communication. Beckett exhibits the life of his characters in a political, cultural and economical system void of liberty and morality. A humanist view would urge that part of man's attempt to attain a good life is to take part in activities that contribute to the welfare of the community, but in Beckett's world, Pozzo practices exploitation, and Vladimir and Estragon pass time with idleness and casual aggressiveness. Beckett's people fail to give their relationships a direction causing development in themselves and their society.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Man is a lonely paradox struggling with the contradictions that put him through ultimate torture. His life is a period of senseless waiting to which he is expelled by birth, and while going through the process of constant decay, he experiences death moment by moment. As long as man pins his hope on something outside himself, he will be deprived of the ability to overcome his stagnated situation. Life is endowed with suffering and man is enriched with pain partly because he is unable to take the responsibility of confronting the realities of existence. Beckett depicts the current status of man living in a meaningless universe, and laments his follies. Man as portrayed by Beckett, is, at times, failing to satisfy the need to preserve himself on physical and psychological levels, as he is becoming obsessed with false values like putting too much hope in God to the extent of forgetting his own responsibilities and denying his capabilities.

Thus, Beckett portrays the current state of humanity as different from what human beings are expected to be and deplores the desperate status of human beings in conflict with the world within and without. Rather than being an anti-humanist or an optimist humanist, Beckett views the condition of man as it currently is, and by exposing the hindrances with which man is faced in shaping his destiny, relating to the universe, defeating the difficulties and moving towards self-actualization, he not only criticizes the current situation, but also urges a revival of humanism-the manifestation of freewill, intellectuality, and self realization. *Waiting for Godot* is, therefore, a reminder for human beings of their potentials and of their duty to take the path towards taking action and responsibility.

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