

Samuel Beckett's Absurdism: Pessimism or Optimism?

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Abstract

*This article is an analytical review of the argumentative issues of pessimism and optimism in two of Beckett's supreme representation of the absurd, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Inasmuch as some famous Beckettian critics have found optimism and happiness rather than pessimism and despair through their intuitive and subjective approach to the absurdity of Beckett's literary works, this survey is a review of the subjectivity of their interpretation against an objective study with a feasible analysis which helps to substantiate the matter of pessimism and despair in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*.*

Keywords: Pessimism, Absurdism, "Waiting for Godot", "Endgame"

1. Introduction

Samuel Beckett, as one of the towering absurdists, represents the absurdity of the human situation both in the form and content of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* truly artistically. In fact, absurdism in Beckett's literary works is an echo of the sordid atmosphere of the conditions which engulf Europe during World War II. However, for some critics and commentators Beckett's representation of the absurd is not only limited to the horrifying atmosphere of the Europe, yet his artistic representation of the desolated post-war Europeans, in his aforesaid masterpieces, are a well match with the purposelessness, senselessness, and absurdity of the universe in depth. In this short survey, I do not want to discuss the meaning of absurdity in Beckett's literary works, or how artistically Beckett has represented it, yet I want to go into the matter that whether Beckett's absurdism in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* inspires pessimism and despair or optimism and happiness. To do so, I try to make the two issues in Beckett, an argumentative one by referring to some commentators whose thinking is opposed to mine. I think these critics are trapped in subjectivism and in here, I will try to support my claim.

2. Discussion

Some renowned critics and commentators have tried to find optimism in the absurdity that Beckett puts in his works *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. These critics believe that one must face Beckett's works intuitionally in order to taste the fruit of them. These critics have tried to explain that, as readers of Beckett, we should not move merely on the surface and see superficial pessimism and despair, we must go through the matter deeply and look for genuine optimism and happiness, which are hidden by Beckett from those who have wider vision. Peter Brook, for instance, after considering Beckett's works symbolic and innovatory, and that the crux inside should not be told to us, has found some light deep inside Beckett's sad plays. Brook points out, "Beckett does not say 'no' with satisfaction; he forges his merciless 'no' out of longing for 'yes' and so his despair is the negative from which the contour of its opposite can be drawn" (*The Empty Space*, 65). Brook also considers this optimism a blinding factor, and states, "Sadly it is a wish for optimism that many writers share that prevents them from finding hope. When we attack Beckett for pessimism it is we who are the Beckett characters trapped in a Beckett scene" (ibid. 66).

If we read Brook's words once more, and more profoundly, then we can elicit the fact that Brook has accepted the pessimism in Beckett's work as a presumption and tries to take out something else through a matter of interpretation.

Another critic who rejects pessimism and despair in Beckett's works is Martin Esslin. Esslin, in his book *Absurd Drama*, discusses the nature of Beckett's plays and some others playwrights who were categorized and coined as the Theatre of the Absurd playwrights:

Nor is it quite correct that these plays, deeply pessimistic as they are, are nothing but an expression of utter despair. It is true that basically the Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely *because* there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation. (*Absurd Drama*, 23)

In his book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin rejects the issue of despair and pessimism in the Theatre of the Absurd, as well. He points out that these kinds of drama create a more real picture of the world in comparison to traditional dramas. They provide, accordingly, an opportunity for a modern human to face up to the truth of his current condition in the world with open eyes, and set him free from all illusions which cause him disappointment. Here, I prefer to use Esslin words as they are more eloquent:

Today, when death and old age are increasingly concealed behind euphemisms and comforting baby talk, and life is threatened with being smothered in the mass consumption of hypnotic mechanized vulgarity, the need to confront man with the reality of his situation is greater than ever. For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions – and to laugh at it. (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 337)

Eric Bentley is another critic who has found out optimism in Beckett's work, especially in *Waiting for Godot*. Bentley posits that there is dignity in Vladimir and Estragon's act of waiting to keep their appointment, even if Godot does not arrive. Accordingly, deriving pessimism from Godot's non-arrival is a mistake that some critics have made:

This philosophical mistake produces a mistake in dramatic criticism, for to remove the elements of uncertainty and suspense is to remove an essential tension – in fact the essential drama...In this waiting there is not an only an adjustment to desolation, there is a rebuff to desolation. Even the Auschwitz prisoners hoped, however improbably, to get out: it is not certain that Godot won't come. (*Samuel Beckett: The critical Heritage*, 110-11)

Yet, in my opinion, optimism and happiness do not come from people's pointless waiting for someone that they neither know nor have experienced before. That is why, at the end of the play, when they got some information about Godot from the boy, they are so frustrated, so scared.

These attempts by the critics to justify pessimism and despair, which are profound in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, is all evidence of Beckettian pessimism. These critics have tried to deny something which is sensed in Beckett's works vividly and profoundly. To justify their claim, they have clung to subjectivity in the matter of interpretation. These critics have encouraged the audience to look at *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* intuitionally, to find optimism and happiness. Esslin, for example, after explaining Beckett's implication for the absurd, which is artistic and poetic, concludes that Beckett's works must be evaluated subjectively. Esslin turns to the matter of subjective interpretation to escape the profound pessimism which is in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Unquestionably, these critics' claims have not been tangible for most critics and experts, insofar as they have not been able to justify their claims logically and clearly. In both *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, there are some lines which are evidence of despair and pessimism. The issue of pessimism is clear in Beckett's absurdism, and there is no need to grasp this intuitionally or subjectively. Words tell us what this truly means:

ESTRAGON: Nothing to be done. (*Waiting for Godot*, 22)

VLADIMIR: in an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness! (*Waiting for Godot*, 75)

HAMM: Can there be misery – [he yawn] – Loftier than mine? (*Endgame*, 93)

CLOV: The end is terrific!

HAMM: I prefer the middle. (*Endgame*, 115)

The pessimism in these lines is sensed easily, and there is no need for an interpreter to clarify it for us. The characters in Beckett's plays reflect what they truly mean through their words which are not ambiguous, and all this is evidence that Beckett's absurdism is pessimistic. In *Waiting for Godot*, the profound despair and pessimism reside in Godot's non-arrival. The two tramps' "conversations, like the waiting games they play, are a futile distraction from the destructiveness of time and the insatiability of desire" (McDonald 38). In *Endgame*, the purport of death overwhelms the whole play. It begins with Clove's words, "Finished. It's finished, nearly finished, it must be finished" (93). Charles R. Leyons points out that what Clove says at the beginning reminds us of the final words on the cross as the Gospel of St John records them: "...he said, it is finished: and he bowed his head and gave up the ghost" (John 19:30, quoted by Charles R. Leyons, 55). Moreover, Leyons posits, "The play [*Endgame*] does not work towards the clarification of meaning but, rather, towards the clarification of the impossibility of meaning" (61).

3. Conclusion

By way of offering a conclusion, I do not see any meaning or reasons in Beckett's characters such as, Estragon, Vladimir, Ham and Clovto value their existences or overcome the absurdity of the universe. They are unable to solve the problem of the absurd from inside. Beckett, in the aforementioned plays, does not show his readers a path to move forward; he leaves his audience alone at the bottom of the well of despair and pessimism. Beckett's characters try to keep themselves busy to avoid confronting the idea of death. What they do is attempt to escape. They are not brave enough to confront the reality of the absurd and accept it. That is why a Beckett audience member feels left alone when the play is over. He has not found that for which he was looking. He may think that the resulting feeling of despair and pessimism that he carries after watching the play might be the absurd.

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