

What is the Symbolism of Waiting in *Waiting for Godot*?

My essay is concerned with discussing the possible interpretations of the main theme of the waiting in Samuel Beckett's existentialist play "Waiting for Godot". As it is one of the most representative plays for the theatre of the absurd, "Waiting for Godot" is a complex play meant to question the purpose of the existence which is seen as a pointless waiting. Basically, regarding this topic, I am going to expound the main ideas which represent possible interpretations of this metaphor of waiting. The ideas to be discussed are: the title, the waiting understood as the modern man's condition, as the life itself, as the passing of time, as hope and also the waiting perceived from a religious point of view.

First of all, the title of Beckett's play is the one to assess the main theme of the text, namely the waiting. Waiting represents rather a state than an action as its meaning is that of resting in expectation, of doing nothing, but expecting something to happen. The gerund form of the verb is meant to accentuate even more this state. It also suggests the permanence of this state, the continuous waiting. After reading the book, one can notice the lack of the traditional plot which means that the action in the play is almost absent and Beckett's tragic-comic sense of humour. The two acts of the play seem to be identical as the background does not change (the only difference that the leafless tree from the first act grows leaves in the second one) and also the plot can be summarised as presenting two tramps staying on the edge of a road, by a tree, waiting for Godot. The fact that Godot fails to meet the two men suggests the pointlessness of waiting. However, this waiting is very suggestive in this play as it stands for the tragic waiting. The critic Martin Esslin, in his essay "Samuel Beckett: The Search for the Self" states that "Waiting for Godot does not tell a story; it explains a static situation" (Esslin, 46), suggesting that the purpose of this play is to describe a state, the waiting. The plot of this play is created by means of the accumulation of details and images, not through actions. It is this gradual accumulation of symbols that leads to the tragic dimension of the play and not the action.

Secondly, the waiting can stand as a metaphor for the modern man's condition. Taking into consideration the historical context, namely the two World Wars, the rise

of the technology meant to replace manpower, all the threatening new weapons, the different diseases, the human being becomes to feel alienated, to lose their trust in this world. The feeling of futility makes people believe they live an absurd life, a pointless life and, just as Camus argues in his essays, there are some attitudes that a man can embrace in order to confront the Absurd of existence. The one that best suits the modern man is acceptance. The modern man is aware of the meaninglessness of this absurd existence and despite this, he chooses to live this life. The consciousness of the futility of this life is tragic. From this point of view, the theme of waiting in the play can suggest the acceptance of this existence. Vladimir and Estragon are vainly waiting for Godot who, in this case can represent the meaning of life. And the fact that Godot is not coming suggests that life has no sense and that living is a pointless act. Even if Vladimir and Estragon think of suiciding by hanging themselves, they do not do it as they want to wait for Godot. This means that their waiting is pointless. The two days presented can also be just a part of their waiting. As they seem to remember having been in this place before, this fact suggests that this is what they usually do: they are waiting for the mysterious Godot to come. However, their effort proves to be in vain as, by the end of the day, a boy comes and tells them that Godot is coming tomorrow. The two tramps seem to be disappointed, but they are naive enough to think that Godot is really going to come tomorrow. Their destiny can be compared with the Sisyphus's as he was punished to uselessly roll up a boulder to the peak of a mountain. Pointless as this task may be, Sisyphus accepted it and the meaninglessness of his destiny. From this point of view, the character's destiny in *Waiting for Godot* and the Sisyphus's one are the same. They all adopt the same attitude, the acceptance. Even if Vladimir and Estragon also thought of suiciding, they did not do it, they accepted their condition. The difference between them is that Sisyphus is aware of the pointlessness of his action, while Estragon and Vladimir are not. Even if by the end of the play, Vladimir seems to realize the inutility of their waiting, he is not brave enough to tell it and he draws the same conclusion as before: they have to wait for Godot. The irrational waiting seem to become their purpose. The impossibility of the communication is also a mark of the presence of the absurd.

This state of waiting can also symbolize life itself as life can be perceived as a line of habitual events. People obey the rules imposed by society, they have their own priorities. They feel the necessity of balance, of constancy, without understanding

that their lives has turned into a incredibly boring routine. Vladimir and Estragon seem to feel that their lives took this path and this is the reason why they see it as a state of waiting. As this waiting implies no action, it represents a good metaphor for life. This state is the one which becomes the new reality in the play. This routine is the one which leads to the feeling of pointlessness, as one can get to think that there is "nothing to be done"(Beckett,1) in this life. This remark becomes an obsessive cliché during the play suggesting the tragic dimension of this life, the consciousness of the futility of this world, of the meaningless life. This waiting is triggered by the meeting with Godot, the one who keep postponing the moment:" Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening, but surely to-morrow"(Beckett, 33). This statement which has two recurrences in the text suggests that Godot is the one who postpones their meeting, meaning that Godot himself represent this routine. The routine of their lives is also suggested by the way the two acts are created as they seem to mirror each other. They are created through a sort of parallelism or an analogy suggesting that nothing new happens. The characters seem to be caught in a time loop. This is why Vladimir and Estragon feel that they confront the absurd of this life, the impossibility of the real communication in this irrational existence. Martin Esslin also points out that the" routine of waiting for Godot stands for habit, which prevents us from reaching the painful, but fruitful awareness of the full reality of being"(Esslin, 59). What the critic means is that this waiting is the one which prevents the characters of the play from realising their true condition. The waiting is only an illusion that help them cope with the inutility of this life. Godot, as he represents the habitual , is the one who represents hope, their hope that at a certain point in the future something meaningful is going to happen. This hope is the one that prevents them from hanging themselves or from giving up living. Their naïve hope that Godot will come is the one which inflames their desire for waiting, for living.

This point leads us to another interpretation of the waiting, namely waiting perceived as hope. this waiting can also be interpreted as hope. This quiet waiting is meant to anticipate Godot's arrival. However he is not coming. The comic situation in the play, apart from the characters, is the fact that those two people seem to be naive enough to think that Godot is going to come after so many times when he failed to do this. But this comic reality soon becomes a tragic one. Godot is not coming and he was supposed to help them. This waiting represents the hope, even if

they have to wait for so long time, they know that this would lead to a beneficial fact for them, as they hope for Godot's help. This can also be related to the mundane, suggesting that people always wait for something, they always wait for a moment to come and after coming, they wait for another moment. Even if that moment is so important, the waiting is the one that makes it special. Hence, the moment when they would meet Godot would be a very important moment because of this waiting. The critic Martin Esslin states that:

" [...]the habit of hoping that Godot might come after all is the last illusion that keeps Vladimir and Estragon from facing the human condition and themselves in the harsh light of fully conscious awareness"(Esslin, 59).

What Esslin means in this quote is that Godot represents the meaning of this life and this waiting can stand for hope as they do not want to give up to this struggle. They passively wait for a meaning, for Godot. Their fatuous waiting represents their hope that Godot is going to come, that their lives will finally make sense. They are aware of the feeling of uselessness as Vladimir states:" Let us do something while we have the chance! It's not every day that we are needed."(Beckett, 51) . His claim suggests their need of meaning. They need to feel useful, to make a sense out of nonsense.

On the other hand, the symbol of waiting can be understood as the passing of time. Time is an abstract concept, but the only state that make someone really face time is waiting. Time passes differently. When people have to do with different events, time seems to pass quickly, but when people have to wait for something to happen, time seems to pass slowly. Even if time is seen as an objective reality carefully calculated, it also represents an inner reality, the reality of the self which means that time is subjective. "Waiting for Godot" is a play that plays with both dimensions of time. The play is divided into two acts which represent two different days. Both days, Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot to come in the evening, in the same place. However, Beckett seems to show us the pointlessness of time through the unreliable memory of the two main characters. Even if the reader is given the impression that the action of the play happens in the same place, Vladimir and Estragon seem not to remember it. They have a vague feeling that they have already been there, but they are not sure about it. More than this, Estragon seems to forget everything, even the events happened in the recent past. As they have nothing to do while waiting, the two characters start discussing different things. Martin Esslin

argues in his essay that "waiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is in itself an illusion"(Esslin, 52). This means that while waiting, Vladimir and Estragon have to deal with time. However, time is subjective as they feel that they have only waited for two days, but there are some marks of the passing of the objective time which make us believe that the real period of time is even longer: the tree that grows leaves, Pozzo's sudden blindness and Lucky's dumbness. As the time passes, some elements in the play subtly change. Despite the passing of time, characters are not aware of it. In the second act, Pozzo even states that:" The blind have no notion of time"(Beckett, 55). This means that the passing of time does not affect him anymore as he is unable to notice the changes brought by it. This statement seems to reinforce the idea that all the characters in this play have no notion of time. They are not sure whether they have already met each other, Vladimir and Estragon know that they had already waited for Godot, but they are not able to remember how much time has passed since then, they are not even sure about what time of day is at the moment they talk to each other. This suggests that in "Waiting for Godot" time becomes subjective as it is perceived differently by every character. They seem to live in a timeless world.

From a religious point of view, this waiting can be understood as a struggle to find God. Even if Beckett himself denied that the play would have any religious connotations, Godot's name can represent a derived word from "God" . And this is not the only religious reference existing in the play. For example, the two tramps talk about the two thieves that were supposed to be crucified at the same time as the Saviour, they admit having read the Bible, even Pozzo tells them that"You are human beings[...]Of the same species of myself[...]Of the same species as Pozzo! Made in God's image."(Beckett,15). Pozzo's words also express one of the Christian beliefs, namely that men take after God. As they think so much of God, this can suggest that this waiting is just a metaphor for this life. It gets to be pointless because they know that God (Godot) would save them and that, as Christian religion teaches, the afterlife is a better place to live than this. As this life is just a transition to the afterlife, to Heaven, Estragon and Vladimir only have to wait to get a better life. As they are two poor tramps, they put all their trust in God. Martin Esslin states that:

"They are hoping to be saved from the evanescence and instability of the illusion of time, and to find peace and

permanence outside it. Then they will no longer be tramp, homeless, wanderers, but will have arrived home.”(Esslin, 53).

This quote suggests that Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for God, for Heaven, the place where they hope to be safe, the place they would finally be happy, the afterlife. In this world, they are only two wanderers who wait to get home, to a safe place. On the other hand, taking into consideration the author's assertion and the fact that this literary genre, the theatre of the absurd denies the existence of God, one can admit that Godot does not necessarily need to be God, but he can be seen as a unifying principle. This unifying principle is the one that people used to believe in. Even if Vladimir and Estragon are different, they are united through the necessity of meeting Godot. This prolonged waiting represents people's necessities of a unifying principle, something that can bring them all together, otherwise their world falls apart.

All in all, the theme of waiting in Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot" is a complex one and it can be interpreted in different ways. In short, this essay is meant to discuss the main possible interpretations of this theme which are: the waiting as a metaphor for the modern man's condition, as life itself, as a symbol for the passing of time and also as a religious metaphor.

Works cited

1. Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot: a tragicomedy in two acts*. Faber and Faber. 1986
2. Esslin, Martin. "SAMUEL BECKETT: The search for the self". *The Theatre of the absurd*. Vintage Books, 2004. *Google Cărți*,
https://books.google.ro/books?hl=ro&lr=&id=J7iQNB0p7Q4C&oi=fnd&pg=PA11&ots=xGl87n9wD7&sig=UWswFZ6DDse6izzRTVuwyZGur3c&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=waiting%20for%20godot&f=false. Accessed 24 April 2017.
3. Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*.
http://bokship.org/comingup/loveinthemorning/CAMUS_TheMythofSisyphus_Excerpt.pdf. Accessed 25 April 2017.

