



Religious Dilemma in *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract

Waiting for Godot is a play by Irish playwright Samuel Beckett. There is a remarkable use of biblical material in *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett. A significant portion of the play is rooted in scriptural allusions. It should be noted that these biblical allusions are not intended to support religion, but rather to mock and challenge the validity of biblical doctrines. As some critics argue, references to biblical texts “may be ironic or even sarcastic”. Therefore, the article explores and elaborates religious dilemma in *Waiting for Godot* in light of the connection between the book’s descriptions and Biblical allusions. By exploring *Waiting for Godot* in association with religion in Western literature, this thesis may offer a new interpretation and enrich the comprehensive understanding of this novel to some degree.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Waiting for Godot, God, Beckett and Religion

1. Introduction

Samuel Beckett is an author, playwright, and critic, and in 1969, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. It is his plays, particularly *Waiting for Godot*, that are perhaps most well-known. He wrote in both French and English. Early in his life, Beckett was raised in a household dedicated to religious practice. His mother instilled in him the values of piety and discipline through her own example. According to Vivian Mercier, the Beckett family lived in Foxrock, an affluent suburban area populated primarily by Protestants. It is important to note that the Beckett family belonged to the Church of Ireland. After being brought up as an Anglican, Beckett later became an agnostic, which influenced his writing. According to the belief system of agnosticism, God, the divine, or the superna-

tural cannot be known or observed.

Waiting for Godot is a play by Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, which depicts two characters, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), who engage in an assortment of conversations and encounters while waiting for the titular Godot, who never shows up. The play is Beckett's translation of his original French-language work, *En attendant Godot*.

In addition to being the first theatrical success of the Theatre of the Absurd, *Waiting for Godot* was a significant innovation in drama. The theatre of Absurd is a creation of the post-World War II era. A way of finding relief after the two terrible wars is the purpose of its creation. This allowed the people to confront the universe in a dignified manner, devoid of what had once been its focal point and *raison d'être*—faith and God. As a witness to both World Wars and a participant in the Second World War, Beckett lived through them both. In the period when the play *Waiting for Godot* was written, the entire continent of Europe was plagued by nuclear fear. As a result of witnessing such desolation and devastation, people's faith in God as a superpower was destroyed. Within this particular framework, existence appeared purposeless, and there existed a conviction that either God had no regard for humanity or did not exist. In his works, Beckett conveyed his genuine sentiments regarding existence, God, freedom, and the human condition in contemporary society. As a result, he begins to doubt long-held beliefs about religion and the absurdity of human life [1].

Beckett's extraordinary utilization of biblical material in *Waiting for Godot* is noteworthy. The play is replete with scriptural allusions. In Acts I, the young child states that he and his sibling are responsible for Godot's sheep and goats. Beckett's incorporation of the parable of the two criminals from Luke 23: 39-43 and the subsequent discourse on contrition offer numerous nuances for interpretation. The solitary tree is readily identifiable as symbolic of the Christian cross or the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Some consider God and Godot to be identical. An additional, albeit less obvious, potentially religious aspect of the play is Pozzo's period of blindness, which causes him to resemble Bartimaeus or "The Blind Beggar" from the Bible. This interpretation is reinforced in the opening scene of the first act when Estragon inquires of Vladimir regarding the nature of his request to Godot:

Vladimir: Oh ... nothing very definite.

Estragon: A kind of prayer.

Vladimir: Precisely.

Estragon: A vague supplication.

Vladimir: Exactly [2].

Other explicit Christian elements that are mentioned in the play include "repentance, the Gospels, a Saviour, human beings made in God's image, the cross, and Cain and Abel".

As stated by a biographer, "Beckett always possessed a Bible, at the end more than one edition, and Bible concordances were always among the reference books on his shelves." There was no shortage of openness from Beckett himself:

“Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar so I naturally use it.” But rather than being employed to bolster religious beliefs, these biblical allusions are utilized to ridicule and call into doubt the veracity of biblical principles. Alternatively, Cronin claims that these references to biblical texts may be ironic or even sarcastic.

This paper is devoted to an examination of the religious dilemma in *Waiting for Godot* in light of the connection between the book’s descriptions and Biblical allusions, in order to acquire a more profound comprehension of the theme and development of *Waiting for Godot*.

2. Waiting for What? Waiting for God

In Act One of *Waiting for Godot*, two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, wait for Godot while standing by the roadside near a fallen tree. They are uncertain as to whether they have arrived at the correct location, whether today is the right time, whether Godot will appear, whether they have correctly identified him, or what they have requested of him. However, they wait. What are they waiting for? They’re waiting for Godot. They’re waiting for God.

The matter concerning the identity of Godot has generated considerable controversy. In response to Colin Duckworth’s direct inquiry as to whether Pozzo was Godot, Beckett stated: “No. It is just implied in the text, but it’s not true”. When asked who Godot was, Beckett responded as follows: “If I knew, I would have said so in the play.” This response compelled the critics to present diverse interpretations regarding Godot’s identity. The term “Godot” inherently implies a diminished or attenuated form of the noun “God”. Further evidence that “Godot” represents God is found in the French adaptation of the play *En Attendant Godot*, which appears to contain an allusion to the book *Attente de Dieu* (Note: the French word for “God” is “Dieu”). What’s more, the descriptions of the Godot in the play come from the descriptions of the God in the Book of Daniel from the Old Testament.

Daniel sees the God in his dream. He says that the God sets in place with white clothes which are as white as snow. And the God’s head is also white which as white as wool, and his throne is flaming with fire. A river of fire comes out before him and so many people serve for him. The God sits and the books are open. The God is given the authority glory and solemn power. All the people all the countries believe in him and his power is everlasting. Daniel says about the God in another his dream. The God dresses in line with a gold belt and his body likes chrysolite. The face of the God likes the lightening and his eyes like flaming fire. God’s arms and legs like the shining bronze and his voice sound like the common person (The Old Testament, 7-10).

Estragon and Vladimir have asked the boy the color of the beard of Godot. The answer is white, then Vladimir says may the God bless us. It is obvious that Godot is the God [3]. However, Beckett’s Godot (God) is a whimsical being who never keeps his word; he punishes the boy responsible for tending to his sheep

without justification, while treating favorably the boy entrusted with the care of his goats. The significance of sheep and goats in the Bible is evident. Beckett contends that God's interactions with humanity are capricious, thereby disproving the biblical concept of a just and affectionate father.

3. God Is Here

According to the boy, a local youth, this is the first time he has met Vladimir. He claims to have been absent yesterday. He affirms that he is employed as a goatherd by Mr. Godot. Shepherding is the occupation of his brother, whom Godot beats. They are both fed by Godot, who then grants them lodging in his hayloft.

It is apparent that the boy is a reflection of God. "Shepherd" is a metaphor that is applied to God, especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition (e.g. Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34), and as a reference to Jesus in particular, who describes himself as a good shepherd in Bible. In ancient times, shepherds were a significant part of the ancient Israelite population [4]. Furthermore, many biblical characters were shepherds, including the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, the twelve tribes, Moses and King David, as well as Amos, who lived near Tekoa, a rugged region in the Old Testament. Shepherds were notified of Jesus's birth by angels in the New Testament. A shepherd's crook is also associated with the insignia of priests, with Roman Catholics and other Lutherans, as well as Anglicans adhering to this metaphor. As a consequence in both cases, it is implied that the faithful are the "flock" that needs to be attended to. According to Jesus, Peter was instructed to "feed my sheep", so the pastoral metaphor is derived from that injunction. In most Christian denominations, the term "Pastor", which comes from the Latin word for "shepherd", refers only to clergy members. In the Bible, there is a strong emphasis on the Good Shepherd. Several ideas are conveyed through this illustration, including God's concern for his people [5]. As a metaphor, sheep in need of a shepherd illustrates the situation of humans to put themselves in harm's way and their inability to guide and care for themselves without God's direct assistance and guidance.

The boy came twice in the play, which means that God came twice, God appeared twice. The two main characters Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for God (Godot), finally God comes, God is here.

4. Turning a Blind Eye to God

In the play, the boy comes twice as Godot's messenger. But nobody recognizes him, nobody recognizes his identity as Jesus Christ. It is a paradox. The title "Waiting for Godot" shows that the author is emphasizing waiting for God. In the play the two characters Estragon and Vladimir keep engaging in meaningless conversations and actions also just waiting for God. They are waiting for the coming of God (Godot). However, when the boy came, God came, they cannot recognize him.

At a tree by the side of a country road, the two characters wait for Godot. The tree is a very interesting image in the play. The tree's leaves are bare in the first act, then they are growing in the second act. In the play, Estragon has a conversation with Vladimir.

VLADIMIR:

We're waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON:

(despairingly). Ah! (Pause.) You're sure it was here?

VLADIMIR:

What?

ESTRAGON:

That we were to wait.

VLADIMIR:

He said by the tree. (They look at the tree.) Do you see any others?

From their conversation, it can be seen that they made an agreement with Godot (God) to meet under the tree. The tree is the Biblical word which Beckett borrows from The Bible. In Christianity, the tree is the tree of Knowledge of good and evil. Among the two trees that are specifically mentioned in Genesis 2 - 3 as both trees of life and the knowledge of good and evil in Christianity, the tree of knowledge of good and evil is one that is specifically mentioned [6]. As described in Genesis 2, God places Adam, the first man, in a garden with trees whose fruits he may eat, but forbids him to consume fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In response to this command, God creates Eve, the first woman. It is in Genesis 3 that Eve eats the forbidden fruit after being persuaded by a serpent, and she also gives a taste to Adam. They are therefore expelled from the garden by God. The phrase "good and evil" can simply be interpreted as "everything". It is illustrated by the Egyptian expression "evil-good", which generally refers to "everything". As the term indicates, a "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" refers to a tree whose fruit provides knowledge of all things. In fact, knowledge about the world is knowledge about the self, because people get self-knowledge by perceiving the relationship between themselves and the world.

The two characters Estragon and Vladimir are waiting under the tree for Godot. Because the tree represents God, they are close to God, but they are not aware of it. The two characters did not pay attention to the change of the tree. It shows that the vast majority of people are blind to truth, blind to knowledge, and blind to God [7]. Estragon and Vladimir think only of committing suicide on the tree, the tree is only an instrument of suicide for them. In a word, the tree of Knowledge of good and evil is still there, God is still there, but they turn a blind eye to God.

Moreover, they've been waiting for Godot, waiting for God. But God is always there. As recorded in the Hebrew Bible, Moses was asked to announce to the Israelites what the gods had sent him to them during the encounter of the burning bush; God responded, "I am who I am". So, God is always there. Waiting for

God means that they're not with God.

In the end, the fact that they are awaiting Godot (God), cannot recognize the boy's identity as Jesus Christ, and don't notice the change of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil all indicate that the two characters are not with God. It's a paradox. They are waiting for God, God comes and they don't recognize him, and they're still waiting endlessly [8]. What does Beckett mean?

5. Conclusion

A discussion of Samuel Beckett and the problem of God is an exploration of ambiguity. Due to the fact that he uses biblical allusions and religious references, which are familiar to him on the one hand, and on the other hand he reduces God, the divine, and religion to a ridiculous level. When critics attempt to analyze his viewpoint toward God, this double attitude toward his religious heritage has caused much confusion and controversy. As a result, Beckett is criticized for his negative attitude toward religion, as well as for his positive attitude toward God. So, Beckett is ambivalent on the subject of God [9]. His ambivalence about God is also reflected in his play *Waiting for Godot*. As well as focusing on the tragic condition of people, the play highlights the waiting for Godot (God) to rescue them. Although the play emphasises the need for salvation, it also appears to deconstruct the idea by satirizing it and by making the absurdity of waiting for God to intervene apparently. By depicting the uncertainty regarding religion in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett attempts to illustrate the absurdity of his situation. His paradox in religion leads to the religious dilemma in his work *Waiting for Godot*.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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