

“Samuel Beckett: The Search for the Self”

(From the *Theatre of the Absurd*)

The first chapter deals with the life and major works of Samuel Barclay Beckett. It is titled as “Samuel Beckett: The Search for the Self”. The part begins with a reference to Samuel Beckett’s novel *Murphy*, in which the hero takes the ashes to the abbey theatre. So that instance itself underlines the coming of a new theatre, a kind of an ‘anti-theatre’. Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin in 1906. At the age of 14, he was sent to the Portora Royal School and in 1923, he entered the famous Trinity College, Dublin where he read French and Italian books and completed his BA degree in 1927. In 1928, he went to Paris, his meeting with James Joyce and soon he became a member of his circle, and there he started to write articles and also poetry. He won a literary prize too for writing poems. In fact, the poem he wrote was titled as “Whoroscope”. The poem had the famous French philosopher Rene Descartes as the main character who was thinking about time. The man was meditating on time and the poem was highly philosophical. At the age of 24, Beckett seemed to be launched on a safe and brilliant academic and also a literary career. He completed his MA degree, and at that time he wrote a study on the life and works of the German writer, Marcel Proust. The work was published in 1931. This study is considered as a landmark in the life of Samuel Beckett because we can easily trace the influence of Proust in the works of Beckett. For example, like the impossibility of the possession of love and the illusion of time. So, whenever we go through the works of Samuel Beckett, these two things are recurrent. The first one is the concept of love and the other one is, the illusion of time. Thus, it is clear that Beckett was highly influenced by Marcel Proust. Then Beckett continued to write poems and stories. He also did a few jobs, and later he moved from Dublin to London, and finally to Paris. He traveled extensively through France and Germany. When we analyze the works of Beckett, we can see the impact of travel. For example, the characters of Beckett, they are generally tramps or wanderers. For example, we have Vladimir and Estragon, the two tramps as characters in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett went on to publish an anthology in 1935 and the title of that collection was *Echoe’s, Bones and Other Precipitates*. He published his first novel, *Murphy* in 1938. In the meantime, he continued his connection with James Joyce. Beckett met Joyce whenever he passed through Paris, and one of the famous critics, named Richard Elmann has beautifully captured the essence of their relationship, He writes. “Beckett was addicted to silences, and so was Joyce. They engaged in conversations, which consisted often in silences, directed towards each other”. Though Joyce liked Beckett, he often kept him at a distance too. Once or twice, Joyce dictated passages from the novel, *Finnegans Wake*. This led to a popular misunderstanding too. Many people thought Beckett was the private secretary of Joyce, but Richard Ellman states he never held that position.

There is another story, and it's about the infatuation of Joyce's daughter, Lucia, for Beckett. She was a gloomy character and also a neurotic. And Beckett sometimes took Lucia to restaurants, cinemas and theatres. But when he realized the emotion of Lucia, he openly stated he came to the flat to see her father, that is, James Joyce and not Lucia. His novel, *Murphy*, narrated the story of the man in love with a girl named Celia. She's desperately in search of a job for her man so that they can get married, but he often eludes her again and again. Then appeared the first play of Samuel Beckett, which is titled as *Eleutheria*. It was written in French shortly after the war. It had three acts, and it narrated the story of a young man who tries to cut off from his family and other social obligations. When we analyze his works, we can see that, several characters of Beckett have the tendency to get away from the clutches of relationships, like that in *Murphy*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Eleutheria*, etc. In the meantime, he found a permanent home in Paris. At that time, another major incident happened in his life. He was stabbed. Beckett was stabbed in a Paris Street by an underworld person who demanded money from him. Later after getting out of the hospital, he went to meet the culprit in the jail. He met him at the prison and asked him, why he stabbed, and the answer was, there was nothing else to be done. This reminds us of the dialogue "Nothing to be done" from *Waiting for Godot*. Then, at the time of war, in 1939, he went to Ireland to visit his mother. On his return to Paris, he joined a group, which was known as 'Resistance Group' which justified war. In 1942, he went in exile when he came to know that many of his friends were in police custody. He found shelter in a peasant's house at a place near Avignon and one can see the reference of this place in *Waiting for Godot* as the "Macon country". In 1945, he returned to Paris and the years after 1945 are considered as the most productive period in Beckett's life. He wrote plays like *Eleutheria*, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* followed by novels like *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. Later he began to translate his works from French to English, especially after the request of the American director, Herbert Blau, who directed *Waiting for Godot*. In the next portion, Martin Esslin writes about Beckett's works like, *Endgame* which has two acts, *Krapp's Last Tape* and a few novels. Beckett also wrote for radio, television and cinema. He was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1969. In the next part of the chapter, Esslin gives a detailed analysis of *Waiting for Godot*.

There are nine chapters in the text, *Theatre of the Absurd*. It focuses on the lives and works of different playwrights associated with the school, 'Theatre of the Absurd'. In the second part of the first chapter, Martin Esslin gives a detailed analysis of the play, *Waiting for Godot*. Esslin writes, "*Waiting for Godot* does not tell a story. It explores a static situation". *Godot* deals with the post-world war scenario. The play presents two old tramps waiting on a country road by the side of a tree. They wait for Godot, and at the end, they realize that he cannot come on that day, but that he will surely come tomorrow. The idea is echoed in both the Acts of the play. At the end of the first act, Estragon says, "Well, shall we go?" to which Vladimir replies, "Yes, let's go". (But they do not move). The context is repeated

at the end of the second act too and it also ends with the same lines of dialogue spoken by the same characters in a reverse order. The two tramps also encounter another pair of characters, Pozzo and Lucky, the master and the slave. Beckett has used the peculiar repetitive quality of the “Crosstalk comedians”, a feature of the Comedy shows during the early 1900s and 1950s in this play. Crosstalk was a major technique employed by the performers of Stand-up comedy at that time and Beckett has perfectly added this concept in *Waiting for Godot* (comedy created through fast counters). He has also used the pattern of circus shows in the play. The characters at times behave like clowns which generates laughter among the audience. Beckett also uses physical humour in *Waiting for Godot*. For example, there is a particular instance where Estragon loses his trousers, which is basically physical humour.

Martin Esslin also discusses the characters of both Vladimir and the Estragon. Both are complementary personalities. Vladimir is more practical, while Estragon claims to have been a poet. Estragon dreams but Vladimir cannot withstand hearing about those dreams. Whenever Estragon goes to sleep, he dreams or rather he experiences nightmares while Vladimir is unable to sleep. Vladimir has a stinking breath as he takes garlic which is good for the kidneys while Estragon has a stinking foot. Every time, he tries to take off his boot and he suffers from a lot of pain. Vladimir remembers the past events, but Estragon forgets everything, including the episode of Pozzo and Lucky within a few hours. Vladimir is hopeful while Estragon remains skeptical. He remains doubtful always. Estragon likes to hear funny stories but Vladimir is upset by them. Estragon is clearly the weaker of the two, and it is Vladimir who often acts as the protector. Hence, they are complementary but also dependent on each other. Then he writes about the differences in the characters of Pozzo and Lucky. They are also complimentary in their natures. But their relationship is more on a primitive level. Pozzo is a sadistic master and Lucky, a very submissive slave. At the beginning, Pozzo is presented as a rich, powerful and as the representative of the worldly man. Lucky always carries heavy luggage, and he dances and thinks for Pozzo though he gets beating with a whip. Pozzo and Lucky represents the body and the mind, the material and the spiritual, the two sides of man. In the second act, Pozzo is seen as blind and Lucky as dumb.

Later, Esslin moves on to the discussion regarding the etymology the term ‘Godot’. It has been suggested that ‘Godot’ is the weakened form of the word, ‘God’. A few other critics refer to the various works of other writers, mainly comedies, and they believe that Beckett has taken the term from the character names who appeared in those comical works. Beckett himself was not sure about the identity of Godot and he once said that, he would have presented Godot on stage if he has known his identity. Moreover, the subject of the play is not actually Godot but waiting. The act of waiting as an essential and the characteristic aspect of human condition. In our lives, we always wait for something and Godot represents the objective of waiting. Beckett also wishes to portray the notion of time

because we experience time only when we wait. We forget time when we are active. In the final portion, Martin Esslin examines the various episodes in the play like the arrival of boy messenger, story of the two thieves referred to in the play with a biblical connotation, Lucky's thinking or rather his speech, which can be equated to the writing style of James Joyce, etc. The play is often considered as an allegory with various religious connotations. For example, it presents the fall of man from the garden of Eden, and also the hope of salvation. Martin Esslin states, "It is open to philosophical, religious and psychological interpretations, yet above all, it is a poem on time, evanescence and the mysteriousness of existence, the paradox of change and stability, necessity and absurdity". After the analysis of *Waiting for Godot*, Martin Esslin moves on to the discussion of Beckett's another play titled, *Endgame*, which deals with the theme of death. He also refers to the other works of Beckett and also points out certain striking resemblances of these works with *Waiting for Godot*. Esslin concludes the first chapter by stating, "Beckett's entire work can be seen as a search for reality that lies behind mere reasoning in conceptual terms".