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Failure of Comedy in *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract:

Many critics suggest that Beckett's early plays are comic because they focus their analyses on the use comic elements. *Waiting for Godot* is one of Beckett's early plays, and it has been heavily analyzed and read as a comic text partly because its subtitle is "a tragicomedy in two acts" and also because of the comic techniques used in the play. The present paper, however, attempts to read the play as a piece in which comedy fails to produce any effects on the characters who remain apparently very desperate and frustrated throughout the play. The characters perform different comic acts, but they do not really feel amused or entertained. The paper suggests that the acts these characters put on stage are only means to pass time and avoid thinking about their predicament. The paper thus does not reject the comic reading of the play, but consider it a partial reading that does not capture the different dimensions of this text.

Key words: comedy, tragicomedy, meaninglessness, performance, futility.

Beckett wrote during the mid-twentieth century after two World Wars had rendered people confused and skeptical about the state of their society and its institutions. Ruby Cohn sees a connection between the cultural context of modernity and Beckett's work: "all faiths [totter] —religion and science, personality and ideology, family and nation, freedom and imperatives, subject and object—and Beckett's prose totters with them; he even plays up the slapstick comedy, like any competent clown" (4). Beckett,

who was fascinated by silent movies and Chaplinesque humor, employed the comic in his early plays to express those desperate times. In fact, Vladimir and Estragon, central characters in *Waiting for Godot* (1952), were originally envisioned to resemble Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Laurel and Hardy (Friedman 114). The play, is, however, both comic and tragic; Beckett labeled it “a tragicomedy in two acts.” The characters wear bowler hats, tell bad jokes, and carry on a meaningless dialogue to alleviate their frustration over waiting. Humor enables them to bear their unbearable waiting. It becomes an apparatus that includes, in Friedman’s words, “the cross-talk tradition of the vaudeville stage, the burlesque, the music hall, and the movies of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, and the Marx brothers” (111-12). The stage becomes a mini circus where the performers try to entertain themselves and the audience while awaiting Godot’s non-arrival.

The characters’ gestures and movements, especially Gogo and Didi’s— the removal of boots, hat games, offstage- urinating, unbuttoned fly and dropped trousers, stinking breath and feet, and even physical violence (Lucky’s towards Gogo) — are all part of the humor. Amid these instances of humor, the play’s subject matter is about despair and helplessness. Why does Beckett conceive the frustration of waiting in humorous terms? Did he, like comedy and humor critics and theorists (namely Freud) of the first half of the last century, perceive humor as an appropriate defense strategy against suffering and failure? Beckett’s early critics including, Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), Kenner in *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (1961), and Cohn in *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (1962), consider his early works comic because they focus on comic elements. Beckett’s later works, however, seem to shift from the comic to the tragic; Richard Simon claims that “...as these critics were establishing the essential comic nature of Beckett’s texts, Beckett stopped writing such comic texts” (86). Simon does not reject the comic reading of Beckett; rather, he thinks that it is only a partial reading that excludes what Beckett himself realizes later. It seems that Beckett came to the conclusion that laughter is ineffective which may explain why his works after *Happy Days* lack the comic dimension.

The characters in *Waiting for Godot* are neither laughing mirthfully nor feeling merry without laughing; they are in-between, trying to make

sense of their world. Following Simon, I suggest that the characters' comic routines are not necessarily comic acts; they might indicate a criticism against or a rejection of comedy. Vladimir at one point announces, "one daren't even laugh anymore" (8) because it is physically and psychologically painful. Within *Waiting for Godot*, laughter seems to be a mere pretense that the characters maintain in order to avoid recognizing their lack of agency. Much of the comedy in the play derives from the inappropriate means the characters employ to deny their tragic existence. The characters' laughter or humor does not offer relief; it is more like a mechanical movement that produces little or no effect. The play, therefore, might be called a comedy of incongruity in which characters use hat games, cross-talk, stories, jokes, and performances, to pass time while waiting. In this sense, then, the label tragicomedy may not mean that the play is a mix of the two. Rather, it may signify that middle position that most of Beckett's characters occupy: they are alive but do not enjoy living; they are dead but not in their graves yet; and they want to leave but they do not move. Therefore, the characters use the wrong routines to defy their inability to stop waiting. The laughter they produce is not of the surrealist who challenges his fate "by expelling a laugh with his last lungful of breath," as Cohn suggests (287). They are, like Hamm in *Endgame* (1957), bad chess players who are trapped between the only two certainties—birth and death. Perhaps Beckett wanted to show not only the predicament of waiting, but to show the futility of the comic routines to resist loss, hollowness, and meaninglessness.

The tragedy in Beckett's early work is manifested by a sense of entrapment that the characters experience and the failure of comedy to help them avoid thinking about their predicament. Hamm in *Endgame* and Winnie in *Happy Days* (1961), like Didi and Gogo, are trapped in a situation that they cannot change or escape. They are trapped by their physical limitations and their need for an audience to motivate themselves to live another day. Hamm repeatedly tells Clove to place him center stage so that he can start telling his story. While talking about the "old style" (13), Winnie begs Willie, "Oh you are going to talk to me today, this is going to be a happy day!" (23). She tries to persuade herself that everything is "no better - no worse - no change" (9). Ironically, neither Hamm nor Winnie is really alive. They exist on pain killers and rely on others to keep playing the game of life. Didi and Gogo are similarly tied to each other by their need for an audience

to keep their show going while waiting. Didi and Gogo, Hamm, and Winnie live in a state of denial; they exploit comic routines to reassure themselves of their existence. Gogo encapsulates the meaning of these routines in this line, “we always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?” (44). Therefore, the failure of the comic routines, regardless of their substance, is what the play conveys.

Because waiting is a futile process, Didi and Gogo do everything and anything they can to pass time and avoid thinking about what will happen if Godot does not come. Their life seems to be meaningless and only Godot’s arrival can provide coherence and meaning to them. Although Estragon’s opening declaration “Nothing to be done” (7) refers to his futile attempts to take off the boots, Vladimir’s immediate answer to it establishes the reality of their enduring situation, “I’m beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I’ve tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven’t yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle” (7). He thinks that he has tried everything he is capable of and now nothing is left but to wait for Godot. Waiting, however, means doing nothing; James Calderwood discusses the nature of waiting in these terms:

So waiting, which implies the absence of the waited-for, is itself mysteriously absent. Moreover, waiting is a self-erasing non activity, since it negates the transient activities we engage in while waiting. Jumping, whittling, reading, even staring in annoyance at our watch - whatever we're doing is nullified by virtue of our waiting. Although these activities are undeniably occurring, they are rendered parenthetical to what we are "really" doing —i.e., waiting. (33)

Gogo and Didi, likewise, do what they can— struggle with their boots and their hats, greet and embrace each other, tell stories and bad jokes, eat carrots and turnips, and talk to Pozzo and listen to Lucky—but they are negatively waiting. There is something daunting about waiting; that is why they seek distraction in these activities. Because Beckett purposefully removed almost all reference to the characters’ past experience or future prospect, it is impossible to tell why they are anxious about waiting or why they are waiting at all. Perhaps, the sense of uncertainty that the characters experience is what exhausts and renders them helpless. It is uncertain how long Didi and Gogo have been waiting or how long they will wait (maybe only until the curtain falls on stage). Moreover, it is uncertain whether Godot will ever come. But

their familiarity with each other suggests that they have been waiting together for a while by the time the play begins. In addition, the degeneration that Pozzo and Lucky undergo (the former becomes blind and the latter mute in Act 2) and the new leaves of the tree indicate an extended period of waiting. This indefiniteness is probably why they desperately fight the “nothingness” that threatens whenever they keep silent or ponder leaving each other. Gogo, at one point in Act 2, announces, “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful!” (27). They, therefore, do not care about what to do but how they do it; the “what” means nothing because it changes very little in the reality of their helpless situation:

ESTRAGON. I tell you I wasn’t doing anything.

VLADIMIR. Perhaps you weren’t. But it’s the way of doing it that counts, the way of doing it, if you want to go on living. (38)

Since the two are concerned with keeping themselves busy, they push each other “to return the ball” (9). Estragon in Act 1 urges, “Let’s make a little conversation,” and in Act 2: “Let’s ask each other questions” or “Let’s abuse each other.” Because they fear silence, repeatedly their words or the actions have little or no connection to what precedes or follows. Early in the play, Didi is alarmed and even appalled by the fact that they have nothing to say or to do following their first comic interaction (taking off the boots). The silence marked in the stage directions becomes like a cue for them to improvise or otherwise they will be forced to face the gloomy perspective of their present. Vladimir, responding to the silence, brings about a topic that contrasts sharply with taking off the boots, “One of the thieves was saved. (Pause.) It’s a reasonable percentage”(8). They are, thus, not concerned with what they do as long as they pass the time and evade the sense of “nothingness” that threatens to engulf them.

The tragic sense in *Waiting for Godot* comes not from the predicament of waiting; rather, it comes from finding ways to be occupied while doing so. The comic acts, which Esslin, Kenner, Cohen and others allude to as testimonies to the comic dimension of the play, do not seem amusing, at least to the characters. They carry very little comic effect or even relief for them. Estragon, for example, is in pain after taking off his boots and Vladimir cannot laugh heartily at the possibility of them being saved because it is

painful: “one daren’t even laugh anymore” (8). The elusive cheerfulness fades as soon as it surfaces because it is not genuine; it is merely a pretense or a distraction created by pointless actions. Vladimir in Act 2 presses Estragon to fake happiness: “You must be happy,” “Say I am happy” (38-9). Estragon’s expressionless response, “I am happy,” and his following question, “What do we do now, now that we are happy?” (39) indicate exactly the opposite. Didi and Gogo are in a conscious state of denial; they know that they are unhappy; nevertheless, they at least try to pretend to be. Didi in Act 2 is anguished for having to deal with a “Long silence,” so he urges Gogo, “Say anything at all!” (41). The audience may laugh and find it amusing to watch them looking either through their hats or boots, but these routines are not funny to them at all. Beckett himself did not support any production that might disturb the basic balance between comedy and tragedy—for example the Miami production 1956 which had been advertised as “the laugh sensation of two continents” or the Royal Stratford production of 1962, which was announced as the most uproarious comedy of the century (Bordewijk 145). Larry Held, who played Estragon in the 1984 production under Beckett’s co- direction, recalls Beckett’s attitude: “[in] fact, he finds a lot of the play very unfunny” (Duckworth 183). Cluchey, who played Pozzo in the same production, suggested that what Beckett was saying was this:

I want to cut out the weeds, to get back to the human plank, to reduce my philosophical content—not to make it obscure, but to give it a silence, to give it deeper silences, to disallow the puppetry of the characters, the vaudevillian aspect of the play, the clown and Chaplin routines, and to grow into the focus of the human condition in 1984. (Duckworth 180)

Cluchey admits that Beckett’s new insights and revisions to the original text were made only for the sake of this production; after all “the text is the text” for Beckett (Duckworth 185). Editing his play in this way nearly 30 years after its first production, however, leads to the same conclusion that Simon alludes to while denying what most of Beckett’s early critics conclude about the comic dimension of his early works:

Comedy has sometimes been defined as an inversion of the normal and the everyday, as the world turned upside down; Beckett’s literature is an inversion of that inversion, a perversion of the comic.

And therefore the comic elements in plays like *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* may not be incidental comic relief after all, but among the primary objects of the author's attack. (90)

If *Waiting for Godot* is examined within the context of Beckett's body of work, it would be almost evident that Didi and Gogo are not the "professional comedians" who recognize their failure and struggle triumphantly to get "another laugh" (Robinson 66). They are at best failed comedians or outcasts who are afraid to go back to a society where they will receive the same beating every night (at least Gogo). Each act of the play opens with a brief dialogue between Didi and Gogo about the beating and how bad it was. There is nothing funny in the beating; maybe what is funny about their situation is not being happy. The characters, then, are not performing comic routines to amuse themselves and the audience while waiting; they are forced into this situation, and they lack the choice to leave.

Performance is of central importance in the play as it is closely related to the conscious role that the characters enact while on stage. Because waiting is a negative activity, their performance on stage is about inventing new acts. What a clown or a comedian does for a living is inventing such acts; it is his craft, and with time it comes to be a natural process that occurs once the show starts. Didi and Gogo, however, are not that type of comedian; they struggle to start a conversation and they welcome any and all distractions. They engage themselves in different routines and joke painfully about how resourceful they are; Vladimir ironically remarks, "You're right, we're inexhaustible" (40) and Estragon, later announces, "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" (44). Their performances are not well-thought-out or organized which is probably why they are brief and fail to cheer them up.

As players on stage, their performances are rendered meaningless without "a willing audience" (Friedman 114) that motivates them to carry on the show. Didi and Gogo's friendship performs this function; Micheal Worton suggests that "each partner needs to know that the other is there: the partners provide proof that they really exist by responding and replying to each other" (71-2). They, therefore, seek audience in each other, but usually fail to find it. Each of them refuses to be audience for the other. When Didi wants to relate the story of the two thieves, "Shall I tell it to you?" Gogo tries

to stop him, “No.”. Didi gets Gogo to agree only by reminding him that “It’ll pass the time” (9). Gogo, in turn, tries to assume center-stage and tell “the story of the Englishman in the brothel,” but Didi refuses to listen; he also stops Gogo from telling him about his nightmares: “Let them remain private” (11). As performers, it is important for both of them to assume center stage; Friedman refers to this when he writes, “[though] barely able to recall old skits and routines, Didi and Gogo nonetheless vie for center-stage, compete for performative priority, even dominance, and insist on imposing themselves on their indifferent or hostile and begrudging audiences” (114). They are more or less like Hamm in *Endgame*, bad players who nonetheless wish to assume center stage. Although they find no pleasure in each other’s performances, they acknowledge their need to remain together if they were to continue performing while awaiting Godot’s anticipated arrival. This realization is probably what keeps them on stage together. They are tied to each other not only because they have to wait for Godot but because as performers they need each other as an audience:

ESTRAGON. I’m asking you if we’re tied .

VLADIMIR. Tied?

ESTRAGON. Ti-ed.

VLADIMIR. How do you mean tied?

ESTRAGON. Down.

VLADIMIR. But to whom? By whom?

ESTRAGON. To your man.

VLADIMIR. To Godot? Tied to Godot! What an idea! No question of it. (Pause.) For the moment. (14)

They are aware of their entrapment together, but they blame it on Godot. At the end of Act 1, when the boy tells them that Godot will not come today but that he will come tomorrow, they plan to stay together to keep the show going:

ESTRAGON. I sometimes wonder if we wouldn't have been better off alone, each one for himself. ... We weren't made for the same road.

VALDIMIR. (without anger). It's not certain.

ESTRAGON. No, nothing is certain.

VLADIMIR. We can still part, if you think it would be better.

ESTRAGON. It's not worth while.

Silence

VLADIMIR. No, it's not worth while now. (35)

In the midst of this bleak prospect, Didi and Gogo welcome any distraction that may offer them new ways to pass time and reinvent their performances.

One such distraction comes in the form of additional characters: Pozzo and Lucky. Although Didi and Gogo initially respond fearfully to Pozzo and Lucky's first arrival, it also arouses the curiosity of children in them and becomes a good resource for a later performance. In Act 2, they try to impersonate Pozzo and Lucky when they run out of tricks. They welcome Pozzo and Lucky's second arrival with excitement because they are tired of carrying on routines that exhaust their physical energies and yet offer no relief. After playing the hats exchange game, impersonating Pozzo and Lucky, pretending to abuse each other, and even mimicking the tree, Vladimir welcomes Pozzo and Lucky, saying "At last! Reinforcement at last!" and later, "We are no longer alone, waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for ... waiting. All evening we have struggled, unassisted. Now it's over. It's already to-morrow" (49-50). Didi and Gogo are unconcerned with what Pozzo and Lucky offer to them as an audience; rather, they are interested in how their presence will pass time. Again the "what" is of less interest than the "how." Didi ironically declares, "How time flies when one has fun!" and "time flows again already. The sun will set, the moon rise, and we away ... from here" (49-50). Although time is indefinite for Didi and Gogo because they are unsure which day of the week they are supposed to wait for Godot, they still feel the pressure of passing it. They,

therefore, engage themselves in whatever may guarantee the passage of time, which always proves difficult due to their failing physical and mental abilities as performers. Attempting to avoid admitting their failure, Didi announces, "We're not in form. What about a little breathing?" to which Gogo protests: "I'm tired of breathing" (49).

Didi and Gogo, although refusing to play role of audience for each other, assume a slightly different role when new characters are introduced; they become critics who evaluate what Pozzo and Lucky do. It seems that while doing this, they also implicitly include their own performances in the process of evaluation. Later in Act 2, Didi carries on this role and implicitly admits, "This is really becoming insignificant" (44) regarding their unsuccessful comic routines they employ. At first, Pozzo's authoritative tone forces them into that role, but later they seem not to mind being directed about what to do because it is natural in their world as performers. In fact, Friedman suggests, "[Pozzo] does at first seem little more than a bully or director: harshly ordering Lucky about, controlling the scene and those on it" (115). It seems that watching a performance other than theirs or that may be part of a bigger show that includes others is not a bad idea after all. Gogo admits that "the starin ... waiting" (16) affects their perceptions and ability to play their roles. Pozzo, however, is not a better performer than they are. Despite his intimidating presence, he is just another helpless performer looking for an audience, "Yes, gentlemen, I cannot go for long without the society of my likes (he puts on his glasses and looks at the two likes) even when the likeness is an imperfect one" (16). Before performing, he commands their attention, "Is everybody ready? Is everybody looking at me?" (20). Later, he is eager to know how he did: "How did you find me? Good? Fair? Middling? Poor? Positively bad?" (25). Didi and Gogo do not necessarily enjoy the act, but they tolerate it because it helps them pass the time; Didi at one point during Pozzo's show tells Gogo, "Keep my seat" (23). Again, they are not interested in the "what" but "how":

VLADIMIR. That passed the time.

ESTRAGON. It would have passed in any case.

VLADIMIR. Yes, but not so rapidly.

Pause. (31)

In contrast to Pozzo's act, they are anxious to stop Lucky's agonizing performance because the "what" is unbearably painful to them. Although highly fragmented, Lucky's monologue "makes them restless, despondent, and then provokes an assault" (Friedman 118). They try to remain oblivious of their condition, but it seems that both Lucky's dance, which resembles a dumb show, and his agonizing monologue cause them to realize that they are only bad players or failed comedians. They, therefore, use violence to stop Lucky's thinking. Thinking is exactly what they try to avoid throughout the play:

ESTRAGON. In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of
keeping silent.

VLADIMIR. You're right, we're inexhaustible.

ESTRAGON. It's so we won't think.

VLADIMIR. We have that excuse.

ESTRAGON. It's so we won't think.

VLADIMIR. We have our reasons. (40-1)

Although nothing really happens in the play—Godot's arrival in particular—it seems that what is not happening is the "thinking" as well. The absence of things is more significant than their presence in this play and in Beckett's other works. What is missing in Didi and Gogo's life is meaning, which they think will emerge from their meeting with Godot, so throughout the play they try to avoid thinking about what happens if he does not come. Their comic acts are aborted by the fact that they are not really working any more; comedy produces no joy for them, though it can at least prevent them from thinking for a time. They eat (Gogo onstage eats carrots and chicken bones, and Didi offstage as his breath stinks with garlic), converse, perform, and even urinate, but they never think. Didi wants Lucky to dance first, "I'd rather he'd dance, it'd be more fun" (26). If they do not want to think, they do not want someone else to do it for them because it is similarly tormenting.

If thinking is what the characters avoid in *Waiting for Godot*, then it seems that what they should do is clearly the opposite—to put their brains in a state of trance either literally or metaphorically. Gogo tries to sleep, but he is either disturbed by Didi (who feels lonely), nightmares or some strangers beating him. Because sleep is an ineffective option, they have to keep themselves busy. But all the characters, except for Lucky, have no occupation to keep them occupied. Lucky, in contrast, has the job of carrying things and entertaining others (his performance for Didi and Gogo). Didi and Gogo are looking for someone, like Pozzo, to tell them what to do in life—in their case, Godot is the answer. Performing comic routines on stage becomes their defense against the “nothingness” and uncertainty, but doing it as an appropriate alternative to thinking does not seem to work in the world which the play depicts. It offers no lasting relief, satisfaction, or even comfort. The failure of comedy represents, then, the predicament that the characters refuse to accept that is why they continue doing their routines throughout the play and may be beyond. Unlike comedy and humor theorists, whom I mentioned in the beginning of this paper, Beckett did not believe that humor was a potent defense strategy against despair and suffering. By presenting Didi and Gogo as failed comedians, Beckett seems to be suggesting the opposite—the failure of comedy. Simon, quoting Anthony Ludovici and Ernst Kris, suggests a different angle into thinking about comedy as an offense rather than a defense (92, 93). Drawing on this background along with what Beckett wanted to achieve in his final production of the play in 1984, *Waiting for Godot* seems more a criticism of comedy than praise for it. When the final curtain falls on the two tramps, they remain as helpless and desperate as they were before they perform their comic routines. They struggle to get another “triumphant laugh”, which Robinson and Cohn talk about, but I doubt they can.

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فشل الكوميديا في مسرحية "في انتظار غودو"

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خلاصة البحث

اقترح العديد من النقاد بان مسرحيات بيكت المبكرة هي مسرحيات كوميدية لانهم ركزوا في قراءتهم هذه على العناصر الكوميدية فقط. ان مسرحية "في انتظار غودو" هي واحدة من اوائل مسرحيات بيكت وقد تمت معالجتها وتحليلها نص كوميدي جزئيا لان عنوانها الملحق هو "تراجيديا كوميدية في فصلين" وايضا بسبب التقنيات الكوميدية المستعملة فيها. تحاول هذه الورقة البحثية قراءة المسرحية بوصفها عمل فني فشلت فيه الكوميديا في انتاج اي تأثير على شخصياتها التي ظلت تعاني طوال عمر المسرحية وبشكل واضح من الاحباط واليأس. تؤدي الشخصيات فصول كوميدية مختلفة ولكنها لا تشعر بالغبطة او التسلية. تقترح الورقة البحثية بان الفصول الكوميدية التي تؤديها الشخصيات ماهي الا وسيلة لتمضية الوقت وتفادي التفكير في معضلتها. وهكذا فان البحث لا يرفض القراءة الكوميدية للمسرحية وانما يعدها قراءة جزئية منقوصة لا تتغل كل ابعاد النص.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكوميديا, التراجيديا الكوميدية, خواء المعنى, الاداء, العبثية.

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