
UNIT 4: THEMES AND ISSUES-I

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this Unit are to discuss in detail various aspects of *Waiting for Godot*.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A reading of the first three Units should have by now given you an idea of what the play is about. In this Unit we propose to discuss *Godot* (i) as a tragicomedy, (ii) as an absurd play, (iii) as an existentialist play, and finally, (iv) its structure.

4.2 GODOT AS A TRAGICOMEDY

As we pointed out earlier, Beckett, in his English translation, calls *Godot* a tragicomedy, while in the original French it is merely a "*piece en deux actes*." *Waiting for Godot* is a tragicomedy because it combines tragic and comic elements.

Jacobsen and Mueller point out the "constant simultaneity of tragedy and comedy" in *Godot*. If according to them, its barrenness situates the tragedy, then its construct makes possible the comedy. David Grossvogel speaks of "part-tragedy, part comedy" in the play.

Let us first see why *Waiting for Godot* is not a tragedy, in spite of undertones of tragedy in it.

Waiting for Godot cannot be called tragic in the traditional or any other sense because it lacks the kind of sublimity which is believed to be the common attribute of most tragedies. Yet we observe that *Godot* depicts a despair which in view of the slenderness of hope in it, is nothing short of "heroic," heroic in the manner of "robust optimism." Estragon and Vladimir will come back and wait for *Godot* day after day, although through their daily experience, they should know in their heart of hearts (See Vladimir's response to the Boy's arrival on the second day--he seems to be able to anticipate the message from *Godot* "Here we go again") that *Godot* will never come, there is really little hope which they can look forward to. Besides, it won't help even if he comes and is willing to grant their request, for they did not ask him to do anything tangible for them. What they said to him was only "a sort of prayer, a vague supplication" (p.).

There is also something very moving in the plight of Estragon, who sleeps, as the Boy tells Vladimir that *Godot* won't come even that day. His being beaten by the mysterious persons, in Act I, in addition to the kick from Lucky underscores his unenviable position fate has consigned him to.

In the second Act Pozzo has all but disintegrated. He, thus, acquires a near tragic status. His pitiable cries in the second act are in stark contrast to his demeanour in Act I. His cries of "help" however, do not remain specific but also symbolize human suffering. The tragic element is more explicit in Pozzo-Lucky relationship. Pozzo, like Marlowe's Tamburlaine is, in Act I, arrogant and domineering, treating Lucky as beast of burden. (Tamburlaine too yokes his vanquished Asian potentates, to chariot, and compels them to pull it.)

All through the play Vladimir has behaved as a sober, level-headed person capable of enduring hopeless agony patiently. In the second Act even his pain seems beyond endurance, as we see in his soliloquy in which he repeats a sentence of Pozzo, elaborating it so as to give it an altogether new significance:

Astride of a grave and difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries (he listens). But habit is a great deadener.

Vladimir and Estragon create a situation of pathos. It is their dissimilarities--and also their deep sense of mutuality--which bind them together. The relation between them is so profound that it evokes in the spectators and readers a sympathy for them.

Waiting for Godot is also a dramatic statement of the human situation itself. The play is a metaphor of one's tragic awareness of one's own self. The self that is caught up in the endless process of decay and destruction.

In spite of a tragic scenario building up, the play successfully avoids being a tragedy. How is it achieved by Beckett? Let us see.

Beckett deals with such a tragic situation of human life comically, and thus offers us a subdued form of comedy to illustrate Nell's profound dictum in *Endgame*:

To (be able to) laugh at our misery is the only way we have found of coming to terms with it.

You must have observed that the two tramps invent various games to fill the "void" that their life is. This is amply illustrated by Vladimir and Estragon when they make such statements: "... we are inexhaustible" (62) and "We always find something . . . to give us the impression we exist?" (p.69). This innovative skill of theirs keeps them going in a world which otherwise is very stifling.

Further, Beckett uses various devices to camouflage the tragic nature of their situation. Lawrence Graner is of the opinion that *Waiting for Godot* is a resolutely

comic play, its comedy is borrowed from the most direct of all forms of humour, the circus. As has already been pointed out in Unit 1 Section 'Distinct features of the play,' *Waiting for Godot* has many touches which are genuinely comic, whether because of wit of the dialogue or the humour of character or situation or mime. There is also comedy on the lower plane, comedy of the type seen on the music hall stage. Quite understandably this occasionally degenerates into the farcical, or it would be more correct to say that it assumes the aspect of the Absurd. Often, of course, the comedy is not unalloyed with more serious implications, so that the total atmosphere is closer to "dark-comedy." The wit is at times a cover for a more profound response.

Estragon's mime when he struggles to take off his shoes and gives up in frustration, is soon followed by Vladimir's Chaplinesque gait and his cry of pleasure. The two emotional states are at variance. Either the two do not feel together or they misunderstand each other, at times deliberately. Again, Vladimir utters characteristic feminine banalities "Boots must be . . .," and "There's man all over for you, . . ." The two statements, we note are maternal and "wifely," respectively. The question that needs to be asked is whether these lines are solely pathetic, comic, or a mixture of the two. It appears they are both. The pieces of mime are funny, but moving too.

Throughout the play there is a sort of tragi-comic double vision--in a single utterance and action. Tragic and comic feelings are visually underscored by mime. For example, Vladimir is determined not to hear Estragon's nightmares. The latter pleads with him in vain to listen to him, saying that there is nobody else to whom he may communicate his private nightmares. When Vladimir is unrelenting, Estragon turns the tables on him by implying that Vladimir is afraid of listening to his dreams because he finds it impossible to cope with another nightmare, the Universe, in which he himself is placed:

Estragon	:	I had a dream.
Vladimir	:	Don't tell me!
Estragon	:	I dreamt that . . .
Vladimir	:	Don't tell me!
Estragon	:	(gesture towards the universe): This one is enough for you?

Here, Estragon's buttonholing of Vladimir is quite comic; his dream is tragic; and, reference to the Universe makes it existentialist, simultaneously. Notice how the three elements interpenetrate each other.

Further, sometimes the wit arises from the fact that one of the speakers, either really mistakes the meaning of the other, or pretends to do so; i.e., the speaker puts a construction on the words of the other. Thus, when Vladimir wishes to tell Estragon that he has done "enough" of begging and must stop it now; the latter applies the word to the five francs he has asked for from Pozzo, rather than to his own beggar like behaviour, which is actually intended by Vladimir. Look at the exchange between Estragon, Pozzo and Vladimir:

Estragon	:	Even ten francs could be welcome.
Vladimir	:	We are not beggars.
Pozzo	:	. . . But is it enough, that is what tortures me, is it enough?
Estragon	:	Even five.
Vladimir	:	(To Estragon, indignantly) : That is enough!
Estragon	:	I couldn't accept less.
Pozzo	:	Is it enough?

See how Estragon deliberately misunderstands the word "enough" and adds to the comic effect of the situation.

Another example of farcical situation is when Pozzo, not knowing the reason why Vladimir has gone away, says to Estragon that Vladimir ought to have waited. Estragon, who knows why Vladimir couldn't have waited longer (since he was feeling the pressure of a full bladder), makes a witty comment on it.

Estragon : He would have burst.

The use of the word 'burst' combines, both the farcical and the pathetic elements--as Vladimir suffers from enlarged prostate gland.

During the course of the play the ways by which the two tramps pass time seem funny at first sight, yet we feel that all of us at some time or the other, pass our life in such transparent deceptions. We, thus, see that Beckett uses various devices to subsume the tragedy of life by interlacing it with comedy.

4.3 TRAGIC, COMIC, ABSURDIST AND *GODOT*

Let us see to what purpose Beckett uses the tragic and comic elements in the play, and how effective is their "commingling" in portraying Man's valiant attempts to face up to the absurdity of life.

Explaining the absurdists' resistance to "the traditional separation of farce and tragedy," Oliver I. William states that "the subject of the farce is the same as that of tragedy: the terrible or comic discovery of man's absurdity, ignorance and impotence. The essential difference between the two forms is one of quality: farce arouses laughter and tragedy draws out tears--tragedy awakens our sympathy, while farce dispels our sympathy and frees our cruelty." William goes on to add that the absurdists, as Euripides once did, "commingle the qualities of farce and tragedy, making us laugh at that which hurts us most, making us weep at that which is most foolish in our nature." Most absurdists are best described as "ironists."

The absurdists' picture of life--reasonable though it is--is not a very popular view. A confrontation with the absurdity of one's condition is an inescapable prerequisite if one hopes to live sanely. William asks how then to administer this view to an audience optimistically rooted in the certainty of faith--be it a God, or culture, or even in potency of their own individuality. The answer, according to him, is simple: pretend to give them something else. Make the play as amusing and sensational and surprising as possible but bury the message in symbols. The ironic approach to life and dramatic action is justified rhetorically since most of the audience finds it difficult to equate the farcical cavorting with anything as disturbing as absurdity. Furthermore, this approach is also justified thematically since the absurdist thinks of life in the light of a tragic joke or comic tragedy.

4.3.1 *Godot* and the Theatre of the Absurd

In section (ii) Unit 1, '*Waiting for Godot* and the Theatre of the Absurd' we have said that an absurd play reflects the arbitrary and irrational nature of life, usually through an arbitrary structure. Let us look at *Godot* as a play written in the "tradition" of the Theatre of the Absurd.

What do we mean by absurd?

In philosophy, the term absurd means out of harmony with reason, or plainly opposed to reason. The word is a compound of the Latin prefix *ab* meaning 'from' and the Latin adjective *surdus* meaning irrational. Thus, philosophically the term applies to a vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world, and his relationship with the universe. The idea of the absurd condition of man has arisen

mainly from the need to provide an explanation of man's purposeless existence in a world which seems to be devoid of any meaning.

According to William, "The absurdist playwrights believe that our existence is absurd because we are born without asking to be born, we die without seeking to die. We live between birth and death trapped within our body and reason, unable to conceive of a time in which we were not, or a time in which we will not be--for, nothingness is very much the concept of infinity: something we perceive only in so far as we cannot experience it. Thrust into life, armed with our senses, will and reason, we feel ourselves to be potent beings. Yet our senses give the lie to our thought and our thought defies our senses. There, ultimately, comes a sense of helplessness and impotence--something, which the plays of Beckett also deal with.

What do the absurdists deal with?

The Absurdist playwrights deal with purposelessness of life and human existence which they find out of harmony with its surroundings. The Absurd Drama as a genre is based on the tenets summarised by Albert Camus in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942). The situation of Sisyphus (see Notes Unit III), for ever rolling a stone up a hill, for ever aware that it will never reach the top is a perfect metaphor for the play *Waiting for Godot* too.

Such a futile action symbolises all human effort on earth. Awareness of this lack of purpose in all we do produces a state of metaphysical anguish which is the theme of writers in the Theatre of the Absurd. This idea is allowed to shape the form as well as the content of the plays; all semblance of logical construction of the rational linking of ideas in an intellectually viable argument, is abandoned, and instead the irrationality of experience is transferred to the stage.

So, in *Waiting for Godot* everything can be looked up as a metaphor for the human situation at its most 'absurd.' *Godot* could be taken for anything or nothing. Similarly with regard to Vladimir's and Estragon's journey through time, it is pointless to consider whether it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive, because arrival is never seriously in question and even hope is scarcely possible.

Just as we quizzically question the purpose of life, so do we question the plays of Beckett and what they are about. Usually they leave the audience with a vague sense of uncertainty about the theme of the play. Indeed, Beckett himself has made gentle fun of spectators eager to know what his plays mean or who is *Godot*? In his third full length play *Happy Days*, he has his heroine Winnie (who is throughout the play largely buried in a mound of earth, first up to her waist, then up to her neck) take exception to the comments of a couple of passers-by who want to know "What's the idea? . . . stuck up to her diddles in the bleeding ground? What does it mean? What is it meant to mean? To herself obviously, she does not mean anything, she just is. And in all of Beckett's plays we find a similar avoidance of exact definition. It is because either Beckett himself does not know, or is not willing to define for himself, who *Godot* is, what Winnie means, what is the significance of master-servant relationship in *Waiting for Godot* and in *Endgame*, or any other of the questions which arise while watching his plays. Beckett's attitude to the sense of uncertainty that he sees around himself is reflected in a remark that he made about himself: ". . . I have never in my life been on my way anywhere, but simply on my way." His life seemed open-ended, as are his plays.

We will discuss the structure of *Godot* later. Here, however, let us see how the structure of the play and the idea of 'absurd' form the warp and woof of the play.

Beckett rejects the received logic of form and conventional structure, so that both form and content support the representation of what may be called absurd predicaments. In fact, as Beckett reminds us, in art matter and form must be the same thing. The structure of Lucky's discourse, for example, disjointed and incoherent as it

may seem, is representative of irrationality and the mess called life. That is why it makes sense or has a logic of its own in the ultimate analysis.

But one must ask whether the writer of the absurdist play does believe in the total meaningless of life and human existence. If the author were totally convinced of the meaninglessness of life, why would he go on living? Also, wouldn't it be pointless to go on writing about the act of living? The mere fact of writing is an expression of meaning by imposing some kind of an order or value on experience. As Eric Bentley remarks, "Artistic activity is itself a transcendence of despair, and for unusually despairing artists that is no doubt chiefly what art is: a therapy, a faith."

Therefore, paradoxical as it may seem the very act of writing about despair or the mess of life, is an attempt by the absurdist writer to impose an order on 'disorder.'

4.3.2 Theatre of the Absurd and the Audience Response

Writing about the absurdity of life and theatre Martin Esslin states that the theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of human conditions; it merely presents it in 'being'--that is, in terms of concrete stage images of the absurdity of experience. Besides, the audience is often confronted with characters whose motives and actions largely remain incomprehensible and ridiculous, hence it is almost impossible to identify with them, even when the subject matter itself is of a serious nature. Then, how does the playwright elicit empathic response from the audience?

The playwright uses various devices to achieve it: it is done by actual separation of the speaker from his words, by burking and hiccuping to defeat heroic proportions the character may assume, by direct address to the audience breaking the illusion of being in a theatre, and by use of asides, etc. These make emotional identification with the characters difficult. Instead, a new form of empathic response is produced--one through direct experience and through the metaphor of direct expression. The dramatists of the absurd, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Adamov seek not so much to create an initiation of absurdity as to conceive a work of art which when heard or read will transport the audience into the very sense of absurdity--will draw them into the very experience itself.

Hence, communicating an experience of being sums up the purpose of absurdist drama.

4.4 GODOT AS AN EXISTENTIALIST PLAY

What is existentialism?

Existentialist thought starts from the view that in our age man no longer knows what he essentially is. Existentialism portrays man as thrown into this world as a diseased animal. The very fact of his being conscious is his disease. Existentialism is opposed to all forms of utopian thinking. It constantly underlines human finitude, and the misery and despair that dog human life from cradle to the grave.

What is valuable in the existentialist thought is not the exaltation of the antirational--this is a negative feature of the thought. Rather, what is of great value is the passionate insistence that human existence has many elements that cannot be fitted into the tidy logic of philosophy. Or as Ernest Hemingway states: "there isn't always explanation for everything." Existentialism, however, has founded a logic of persons in addition to the logic of things.

According to Katharine M. Wilson:

Waiting for Godot exactly fulfils Sartre's definition of an existentialist play as one which sets out to present the contemporary situation in its full horror so that the audience, finding it unendurable, may feel forced to remedy it.

Eric Bentley talking about man's hopeless position in a universe devoid of meaning and purpose, as reflected in *Godot* observes that:

Samuel Beckett's point of view seems close to that of Anouilh or Sartre. *Waiting for Godot* is, so to speak, a play that one of them ought to have written. It is the quintessence of "existentialism" in the popular, and most relevant sense of the term--a philosophy which underscores the incomprehensibility, and, therefore, the meaninglessness of the universe, the nausea which man feels upon being confronted with the fact of existence, the praiseworthiness of the act of defiance man may perform--acts which are taken, on faith, as self-justifying, while, rationally speaking they have no justification because they have no possibility of success.

Waiting for Godot is also about the emptiness of modern world that does not know that it is empty. What is incomparable in this great solitary play is its insistence upon sending us back to the darkest part of the spirit that created it and upon permitting illuminations only through darkness. In *Godot* the characters like Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky and Pozzo are seen struggling with the irrationality of experience.

Charles McCog urges that we distinguish between "nihilistic existentialism" of Sartre and Christian existentialism of Kierkegaard, and insists that the latter offers one of the essential keys to Beckett's play. Martin Esslin also leans strongly towards Kierkegaard as a shaping influence on Beckett. Yet he insists elsewhere on the Sartrean (nihilistic existentialism) side of *Godot*. Although Beckett himself is not aware of any such influence, his writings might be described as a literary exposition of Sartre's existentialism. In the play there is a perpetual series of rebounds, in which man is constantly thrown back into his solitude. All of Beckett's characters are in essence solitaires: for Beckett, man is not or never willingly, a social animal.

In *Waiting for Godot* the non-action of futile waiting by the two tramps is enacted twice. In the play we are not told who *Godot* is and what the two characters really expect him to do for them. They keep on *Waiting for Godot*, but *Godot* never comes to meet them. The play, therefore, shows how man is thrown back into solitude and non-action. The two tramps *Waiting for Godot* may be representing human beings whose waiting may thus be humanity's vain hope of salvation or as others call it "hopelessly hoping."

The final night makes all waiting unnecessary. The way the two tramps pass time is indication of boredom and triviality of human activities, the lack of significance in life and the constant suffering which existence is. Suffering, as per existentialism is an inseparable part of human condition. It remains unmitigated: "The tears of the world are a constant quantity" (p.33), or, mark, "No use struggling . . . the essential doesn't change" (p.21). Vladimir and Estragon suffer intensely and incessantly. Vladimir cannot laugh without suffering excruciating pain "One dare not even laugh" (p.5). In Act II both Pozzo and Lucky have suffered great physical affliction. There doesn't seem to be any reason for it all.

The hope of salvation may be merely an evasion of the suffering and anguish that has sprung from facing the reality of the human condition. Martin Esslin is of the view that "there is here a truly astonishing parallel between the existentialist philosophy of Sartre and the creative intuition of Beckett. If, for Beckett as for Sartre, man has the duty of facing the human condition as a recognition that at the root of our being there is nothingness, liberty, and the need of constantly creating ourselves in a succession of choices, then *Godot* might become an image of what Sartre calls "bad faith."

Writing about Existentialism and *Waiting for Godot* Andre Gunthers has given a somewhat hopeful and positive interpretation of man's existentialist existence. In the twentieth century there appears to be nothing to do any longer since "actions" have become more and more questionable . . . because millions and millions of people who are in fact still active, increasingly feel that they are acted upon: that they are active without themselves deciding on the objective of their action, without even being able to discern the nature of their objective or because they are aware that their activity is suicidal in its objective. In short, action has lost so much of its independence that it itself has become a form of passivity, and even where action is deadly strenuous or actually deadly, it has assumed the character of futile action or inaction. That Estragon and Vladimir, who do absolutely nothing, are representative of millions of people, is undeniable.

In addition, Estragon and Vladimir lack firm outline about their character and personality and we have only the scantiest biographical data. They are defined not in relation to time, place, or social circumstance, but in relation to eternity and to human longings for a sense of purpose. The problem of Vladimir and Estragon is that they are alive. Like everyone and like Everyman, they are trapped between birth and death. What is happening to them does not seem to be consequent either on a specific set of circumstances (situations) or on their behaviour patterns (characters).

But they are so fully representative only because in spite of their inaction, and pointlessness of their existence, they still want to go on, and thus do not belong to the tragic class of those who consider suicide. And it is not despite the pointlessness of their life that Estragons and Vladimirs wish to go on living, but, on the contrary, just because their life has become pointless, ruined by their habit of inaction or of acting without their own initiative, they have lost their will power to decide not to go on, their freedom to end it all, to terminate it.

It is with this kind of life, with man who continues existing because he happens to exist, that Beckett's *Godot* deals. But it deals with it in a manner basically different from all previous literary treatment of despair. Estragon and Vladimir seem to be saying, "We remain, therefore we must be waiting for something." And: "We are waiting, therefore there must be something we are waiting for."

To characterize this mode of life in which man continues to wait merely because he happens to be, French commentators have used Heidegger's term "Geworfenheit" (the fact and state of having been "thrown" into the world). Quite wrongly. For while Heidegger, in using this term, designates the contingency of each individual's being just himself (and demands that each take possession of his contingent being in order to make it the basis of his own "design") the two heroes of Beckett's play do neither, like the millions whom they represent. They neither recognize their own existence as contingent, nor think of abolishing this contingency, transforming it into something positive with which they can identify themselves. Their existence is far less heroic than that meant by Heidegger, far more trustful, far more "realistic."

Vladimir and Estragon conclude from the fact of their existence that there must be something for which they are waiting; they are champions of the doctrine that life must have meaning even in a manifestly meaningless situation. To say that they represent "nihilists" is, therefore not only incorrect, but the exact reverse of what Beckett wants to show. As they do not lose hope, are even incapable of losing hope, they are naive, incurably optimistic ideologists. What Beckett presents is not nihilism, but the inability of man to be a nihilist even in a situation of utter hopelessness. Part of the compassionate sadness conveyed by the play springs not so much from the hopeless situation as much as from the fact that the two heroes, through their waiting, show that they are not nihilists. It is this defect which makes them so incredibly funny.

4.5 STRUCTURE OF *GODOT*

The play seems to have been constructed primarily on sets of binaries. Beckett once said, "It is the shape that matters." He was referring to a remark of St. Augustine's "Do not despair one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned," but it applies to his own play more aptly. Referring to the two acts of the play, Beckett maintained, "One Act would have been too little . . . and three Acts would have been too much." The two Acts purport to dramatize two consecutive evenings in the life of its central characters. The play has a symmetrical structure like a mathematical formula in which one side balances the other. This symmetry is evident in the manner Beckett conceives things in pairs: two Acts, two messenger boys and two sets of characters, and each set a pair again--pairs of apparently disparate constituents, yet complementary.

Let us see whether structure of *Godot* is symmetrical or asymmetrical

As stated earlier the play has a 'symmetrical' structure. The apparent symmetry of the play is like the order that every human being attempts to impose on the constant flux of discrete phenomena around him. You'll notice that everyday routine of a human is apparently the same--but scratch a bit and the differences come to the surface.

Let us compare the opening and ending of each Act, the sequence of events like the entry of Pozzo and Lucky and the Boy, and the stage directions in the two Acts as also the dialogues.

Do you find a symmetry--a similarity--in the two acts?

You will observe that both acts start with the union of the two tramps. Similarly the ending of each act is almost identical. Further there is a repetition of certain incidents in the second act; arrival of Pozzo and Lucky, coming of the messenger Boy towards the end to announce that *Godot* will not come that day etc. Such a repetition strikes a balance between two acts.

Similarly in both acts Estragon handles food (p. 20, p. 68), plays with his boots (p. 11, 69), sleeps (p. 15, 70), in both acts the two central figures contemplate suicide (pp. 17-18, pp. 93-94), etc. The comparison of the events in the two Acts shows there is repetition, but a closer reading will bring out the difference, which underscores the asymmetrical nature of the structure of the play.

The following table will further illustrate the asymmetrical nature of the play's structure:

In Act I	In Act II
Estragon accepts a carrot	Estragon rejects a radish
Takes off his shoes	Finds his boots too big
Nibbles a chicken bone	Recalls it as a fish bone
Estragon rejects suicide as the survivor will be solitary	Defers suicide for want of a suitable rope
Tree - bare	Has sprouted 4-5 leaves
Lucky is Pozzo's slave	Symbolically, Pozzo is slave to Lucky
Boy arrives	Boy denies he is the same who came the day before

Besides, we notice that the events and stage-directions, dialogues, etc. in the second Act do not exactly repeat those of Act I. You must also have noticed that the punctuation of the last spoken lines of each act is different and the lines are switched from one tramp to the other. You may try to find more examples showing similarities and dissimilarities in the two Acts.

Beckett was impressed by the syntactical balance of St. Augustine's statement mentioned earlier. He is reported to have told MacGowran that St. Augustine's remark is the key to the whole play. Further, Beckett told Harold Hobson that the production of the play should bring out stylized movement--a movement which relies heavily on asymmetry.

The asymmetrical structure of the play helps achieve a disparity between the two time scales: the human and the natural. Look at the stage direction that precedes Vladimir's song at the beginning of Act II. It reads: ". . . the tree has four or five leaves"--which denote cyclical phenomenon in nature, although we have just read in the beginning of Act II: "Next day. Same time. Same place." Does Beckett, thus, seek to remove the play from its temporal locations? He has also stripped the stage of physical details other than a mound and a tree. Does Beckett underline the difference between human and natural time scales?

It is these stage directions that initially connect the two acts.

Duckworth is critical of Vivian Mercier who described *Godot* as a play in which "nothing happens twice."

Duckworth highlights the circularity of the whole structure; "the return to zero leaves us with an overall impression of the monotony and futility of the eternally repeated ritual enacted on that deserted road. The symmetry, and the differences between the two Acts--by which our interest has been kept alive--are quietly subordinated. Beckett thus solves the immense problem of how to create repetitious monotony without being repetitious and monotonous."

Going a step further Duckworth also discerns the Aristotelian elements or the conventional structure in the play when he says that it is not really true to say that "the categories of exposition, inciting moment, rising actions, turning point, falling action, climax and conclusion are not observed in any strict sense" in *Godot*. These categories do exist in each act--with the notable and inevitable exceptions of the inciting moment (i.e. incitement to action), for, this is theatre of situation, of inaction. The order in which they (the categories) appear is changed, however: exposition (of underlying themes), rising action (in the sense of increased activity, especially in Act II, climax (arrival of Pozzo and Lucky), turning point (the boy, announcement that *Godot* is not coming), falling action: (LXXXIX - XC, Duckworth).

How does the choice of two acts help in achieving dramatic interest in spite of repetition?

It would be pertinent to recall here Beckett's statement that "One Act would have been too little. . . . and three Acts would have been too much."

According to Duckworth, the situation in *Godot* is one of monotonous sameness, and Beckett had to suggest this perpetual recurrence in the most economical way possible. Surely, one act would have been too little, three too much. Two is the magic number denoting continuous repetition--not just a single repetition, explains Duckworth. In our everyday vocabulary (we use or repeat a word to convey a sense of continuous repetition), it went on and on, it grew smaller and smaller, it went round and round . . . for ever and ever, etc. In Act I, it is hinted that exactly the same thing happened before the beginning of the play; by the end of Act II we realize that the cyclic pattern will continue like an unbroken circle until the end of time.

Duckworth finds the structure of *Waiting for Godot* "tight and economical" and is critical of Hugh Hunt who opined that "Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* . . . symbolizes that chaotic state of existence by a corresponding anarchy in the construction of the play itself. Play architecture as it was understood by the writer of the well made play . . . has given place to a seemingly abstract void in which plot, or dramatic story telling, is almost non-existent." Duckworth further quotes M. A. Scott who found "absolute clarity of form" (in *Godot*) that is possessed by such modern masterpieces as Kafka's *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*), Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Camus' *La Peste*, and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*," in spite of its meaning being obscure and ambiguous.

The structure, as stated earlier, appears symmetrical, but is asymmetrical at one level, too. "Within the symmetrical, circular structure of each act there are smaller circles represented by

- Vladimir's repetition, pantomime, taking off his hat and knocking out an invisible foreign object
- Estragon's repeated fussing with his boots
- Lucky's recurrent acts of picking up and putting down the luggage
- the hat-exchanging routine
- Vladimir's endlessly repeatable round-song at the beginning of Act II."

Besides, "We are *Waiting for Godot*" recurs in the play like a refrain. It occurs three times in the first Act and a dozen times in Act II, indicating an increasing impatience as time goes on. The monotony becomes imperceptibly cumulative and more unbearable for the two tramps as the play progresses.

One thing that has to be borne in mind is that the structure of the play is sustained by the themes which keep recurring both in Act I and Act II.

Both Acts continue with reference to the tree and "to the capriciousness of memory." In Act I it is Estragon who remarks that they were by the tree the day before; in Act II it is Vladimir, and Estragon remembers nothing, a little diversity within the repeated pattern, such dissimilarities and variations within the seeming similarities make the structure asymmetrical as has already been pointed out.

Further, the structural balance of two acts is subtly varied by the relation of Pozzo-Lucky scene to the structure of each act. The dominant factor in Act I is the Pozzo-Lucky scene, whereas in Act II the first half is taken up by the two tramps preceding the return of Pozzo and Lucky from the fair. This happens in the middle of the Act. Note how the two of them contribute to the theme of the play in each Act.

In Act I it is hinted that exactly the same things happened before. By the end of Act II we realize that the cyclic pattern will continue like an unbroken circle until the end of time.

Cyclic pattern notwithstanding there is an accompanying "down movement" and the shadow of the first Act gets darker as the play progresses. The darker side is explicitly articulated by Pozzo and further expanded by Vladimir in the statement about human life and birth. ("They gave us birth astride of a grave. . .") It is further suggested in various ways: Lucky has degenerated and has worsened in Act II, Pozzo has lost his possessions one by one, besides he has gone blind and cannot stand up in Act II. Vladimir and Estragon too have degenerated--earlier they were presentable enough to be admitted to Eiffel Tower but not now. In Act II Pozzo has nothing to eat at all; the more Estragon eats of the carrot, the worse it gets--the two tramps find

communication more difficult in Act II. In addition there is a greater lack of coherence; the pauses are longer and often there is a painfully strained effort to keep up the dialogues. Estragon is more sulky and depressed and Vladimir agrees at the end of the play to the idea of suicide. The structure of *Godot* thus achieves the rare quality of being both static and dynamic--a quality which is defined at the beginning of Act II with Vladimir's round song.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed *Godot* (i) as a tragicomedy, (ii) as an absurd play, (iii) as an existentialist play, and also its structure. The play states metaphysical anguish of the Theatre of the Absurd. We are left to dwell in the irrationality of experience that is transferred to the stage.