

The Absence of Godot and the Dialectic of Desire: A Re-reading of *Waiting for Godot* from the Perspective of Lacanian Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

In *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett, through the absurd form in which “nothing happens”, dramatizes the crisis of meaning and the predicament of desire that confront the modern subject after the death of God. This paper re-reads the play through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. It argues that Godot is not a substantial symbol such as God, death, or hope, but the incarnation of the Big Other and a pure, empty signifier of desire. His fundamental absence is both the ontological precondition for the emergence and persistence of desire and a manifestation of the Real that exposes the incompleteness of the symbolic order. “Waiting” rather than a transition toward an endpoint, is the circular reproduction of desire itself: The highly repetitive structure of the two acts reveals the infinite deferral of desire and the self-deceptive construction through which the subject, by means of blind faith in the future, evades the nothingness of being. The master-slave relationship between Pozzo and Lucky, which mirrors the two tramps, reveals, under the double illumination of the mirror stage and the master-slave dialectic, the fate of the subject split and alienated in the gaze of the Other. The failure and rupture of language further attest that desire is ultimately unsayable. Beckett does not end in nihilism. By disclosing the truth of the dialectic of desire, he calls upon the subject to traverse the fantasy, confront the nothingness of existence, and assume responsibility and create meaning within the absurd, thereby opening an ethical possibility of redeeming the absurd.

Keywords

Waiting for Godot, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Dialectic of desire, The Big Other, The absurd

Introduction

In January 1953, *Waiting for Godot* premiered at the Theatre de Babylone in Paris. The audiences of that time had not yet recovered from the trauma of the two World Wars, yet in this drama in which “nothing happens”, they beheld a terrifying mirror image of their own condition: Two tramps, on a desolate road, waiting for a man who would never arrive. In this play, Beckett, through a minimalist stage and fragmented dialogue, tears open the thin veil of meaning that covers the post-war Western world.

This was an age in which “God is dead”. The verdict pronounced by Nietzsche a century earlier was transformed, after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, into a universal experiential reality. The traditional systems of meaning - religion, reason, and progress - collapsed, and people found themselves cast into a world without transcendental purpose and without ultimate redemption. How should the subject situate its own desire? How is

one to find a reason to go on living in the midst of nothingness? These are the central questions of existentialist philosophy, and they are likewise the difficult questions to which Lacanian psychoanalysis repeatedly returns.

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan points out that desire is not the craving for a particular object but rather originates in the fundamental lack of the subject's being. This lack impels the subject ceaselessly to pursue the object *petit a* that can never truly fill it. The essence of desire is therefore not satisfaction but a circular movement around lack. It is precisely in this sense that *Waiting for Godot* transcends the category of traditional drama and becomes the perfect dramatization of the dialectic of desire. Accordingly, this paper attempts to re-read *Waiting for Godot* from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis: To reveal Godot's ontological absence as the Big Other, to examine

the operative mechanism of “waiting” as the circular reproduction of desire, to analyze the alienated form of desire in the master-slave relationship together with the unsayability of desire in language. On this basis to inquire into a possibility of redeeming the absurd opened up by the play.

Godot: The desire-signifier of the Big Other and its fundamental absence

Within the textual world of *Waiting for Godot*, “Godot” remains throughout a spectral presence. He never appears on stage, yet through his absolute absence he controls the destinies of all those upon it. He has no concrete image, identity, or purpose, yet he becomes the pillar of meaning in the entire lives of the two tramps. From the standpoint of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Godot is by no means the “God”, “death”, “hope” or any substantial entity that traditional literary criticism has taken him to be. Rather, he is the incarnation of the Big Other (Autre) in the Lacanian sense, a pure, empty signifier of desire whose essence is precisely “fundamental absence”.

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan states that the Big Other is not a particular other person but the totality of the symbolic order, linguistic law, and cultural norms that preceded the existence of the subject. It is the origin and destination of the subject’s desire. The subject’s desire is in essence “the desire of the Other” - that is, desiring what the Other desires, longing to be desired by the Other, and thereby obtaining confirmation of one’s being in the gaze of the Other. In *Waiting for Godot*, Godot is precisely such a Big Other that precedes Estragon and Vladimir. They know nothing of Godot: They do not know his appearance, occupation, or dwelling, nor even whether he truly exists. They likewise cannot articulate what exactly they ask Godot to do for them, describing it only vaguely as “a kind of general supplication” and “a kind of prayer”. This utter ignorance of the object of desire is precisely what proves that Godot is not the real object of desire but rather the symbolized vehicle of desire itself.

Godot’s fundamental absence constitutes the core condition of his status as a signifier of desire. In Lacan’s view, desire originates in lack; the very being of the subject is lack, and this lack impels the subject ceaselessly to pursue the object that might fill it. Yet the object that could truly fill the nothingness of being does

not exist. All objects of desire are merely object petit a - the cause rather than the aim of desire, an unattainable surplus of jouissance. Godot is precisely such an ultimate object petit a, and his eternal absence keeps the subject’s desire forever in a state of being aroused.

Were Godot actually to appear, he would be degraded from an unattainable fantasy of desire into an ordinary, finite entity, no longer able to bear the entirety of the subject’s craving for meaning, and desire would consequently collapse. As the message repeatedly conveyed by the boy in the play runs: “Mr. Godot told me to tell you that he will not come this evening, but he will surely come tomorrow evening”. The repetition of this line is not a simple circularity of plot but a necessary requirement of the dialectic of desire - only by continually postponing Godot’s arrival can the tension of desire be maintained and the waiting continue.

The two tramps’ faith in Godot is, in essence, a submission to the symbolic order. They hand over the meaning of their existence to an Other whom they have never met and confirm their own identity through *waiting for Godot*. Vladimir says: “We are Waiting for Godot.” This line is not merely a description of their present action but, more importantly, a definition of their own existence. Without Godot, they would lose their reason for being and become two wandering ghosts drifting over the wasteland.

This dependence on the Big Other is precisely the universal fate of the modern subject. In modern society, in which God is dead and the traditional value systems have collapsed. People have lost their ultimate support of meaning and can only ceaselessly construct new Big Others to fill the nothingness of being - money, power, love, and success, all of which are modern versions of “Godot”. Like Godot, they can never truly satisfy the subject’s desire and can only make the subject exhaust life in an endless pursuit.

It is worth noting that Godot’s absence is not an incidental plot device but rather carries profound ontological significance. In Lacan’s view, the symbolic order itself is founded upon lack. It cannot cover the whole of being and always leaves a hard kernel of the Real that cannot be symbolized. Godot’s absence is precisely the manifestation of the Real, exposing the incompleteness and falsity of the symbolic order. The more firmly the two tramps believe that Godot will come,

the more the absurdity and nothingness of the world they inhabit are thrown into relief. Through Godot's absence, Beckett tears open the web of meaning so carefully woven by modern society, compelling us to confront the authentic state of being - a pure nothingness without transcendental meaning and without ultimate redemption.

Waiting: The circular reproduction of desire and the subject's self-deceptive construction

If Godot's absence is the precondition for the emergence of desire, then "waiting" is the manner in which desire is sustained and reproduced. Throughout *Waiting for Godot* there is none of the plot conflict and development of traditional drama. There are only two tramps waiting, day after day, without result. This seemingly monotonous repetition is precisely the vivid embodiment of the Lacanian dialectic of desire: Waiting is not a process leading toward some endpoint but rather the very movement of desire and a self-deceptive construction undertaken by the subject in order to evade nothingness. Lacan observes that desire possesses the characteristic of infinite deferral. The subject can never reach the satisfaction of desire, for once a desired object is obtained. It loses its charm and the subject immediately turns to the next object of desire. The essence of desire is not satisfaction but the ceaseless production of new desires. In *Waiting for Godot*, this infinitely deferred movement of desire is embodied in the circularity of waiting. If the two tramps cannot wait for Godot today, they return tomorrow. If they cannot wait until tomorrow, they return the day after. Their lives are cut into innumerable repeated "todays", each beginning in the same manner and ending in the same disappointment. This circularity is not simple repetition but the ceaseless reproduction of desire. Each promise that "Godot will come tomorrow" rekindles their hope and keeps them engaged in the next round of waiting.

The repetitive structure of the play perfectly illustrates this circular character of desire. The play is divided into two acts, and the second act is almost a replica of the first: the same country road, the same bare tree, the same evening, the same two tramps, the same waiting, the same passing of Pozzo and Lucky, and the same boy arriving with the message that Godot will not come. Even the characters' gestures and dialogues are highly repetitive: Estragon repeatedly takes off and puts on his

boots. Vladimir repeatedly takes off and puts on his hat. They repeatedly discuss hanging, repeatedly quarrel and make up, and repeatedly say "Let's go" yet never move. This extreme repetition breaks with the linear conception of time of traditional drama and transforms time into a congealed, circular ring. In this ring there is no progress and no development, only the eternal recurrence of desire. The subject engages in profound self-deception within the circularity of waiting. In Lacan's view, the being of the subject is essentially a kind of misrecognition (*meconnaissance*). We obtain a unified self-identity by projecting ourselves onto the image of an ideal ego. In *Waiting for Godot*, the two tramps' self-deception is embodied in their firm belief that Godot will come and that waiting is meaningful. Though they have been disappointed countless times and are filled with doubt about Godot's existence, they nonetheless choose to continue waiting. Vladimir says: "We'll come back tomorrow." Estragon says: "And then the day after tomorrow."

This blind faith in the future is, in essence, a defense mechanism directed against the sense of nothingness brought by the truth that Godot will never come. Were they to admit that Godot will not come, their waiting would lose its meaning, and their existence would consequently collapse.

Their ambivalent attitude toward suicide further exposes the essence of this self-deception. They discuss hanging several times, regarding it as the best way to escape suffering, yet they never put it into action. They find various excuses to evade it: "I don't trust it." "You're lighter than me, you go first". "It's a pity we haven't brought a rope." Behind these excuses lies their fear of death and, more deeply, their fear of the end of desire. Death means the end of waiting and the complete extinction of desire, whereas they need desire to sustain their own existence. As Vladimir says: "We are Waiting for Godot." Waiting is their way of being; once they cease waiting, they are no longer themselves. They would therefore rather live forever in self-deception, forever waiting for the Godot who will never come, than confront the nothingness of being.

This self-deceptive waiting also mirrors the universal existential condition of the modern subject. In modern society, people are surrounded by various fantasies of desire and ceaselessly pursue one goal after another,

believing that so long as they earn enough money, obtain enough power, or find perfect love, they will attain happiness. Yet when these goals are actually achieved, they find happiness still out of reach. We soon grow weary and then turn to the next goal. Like the two tramps in the play, we are forever waiting for the arrival of "Godot", unaware that Godot will never come. Our lives are endless waiting, a race of desire without a finish line.

Mirror and division: The alienated form of desire under the master-slave dialectic

In *Waiting for Godot* there is not only the desiring relationship between the two tramps and Godot but also the pair of mirror figures, Pozzo and Lucky. Their deformed master-slave relationship is a perfect combination of the Lacanian mirror stage and the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, profoundly revealing the alienated form of desire in intersubjective relationships. Through the contrast between the tramps and the master-slave pair, we can see more clearly the tragic fate of the modern subject, split and alienated within the symbolic order.

Lacan's mirror-stage theory holds that the subject, in infancy, acquires an incipient self-consciousness by identifying with the unified image in the mirror. Yet this self-identification is essentially a misrecognition, for the image in the mirror is an idealized, fictional unity that contradicts the subject's actual fragmented existence. This misrecognition leads to the eternal division of the subject: the division between the ego and the ideal ego, and between the subject and the Other. In *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo and Lucky are each other's mirrors. They see their own shadows in one another and, at the same time, confirm their own identities through one another.

The relationship between Pozzo and Lucky is, on the surface, one of master and slave: Pozzo ties a rope around Lucky's neck, wields a whip to drive him at will, calls him a "pig," and deprives him of all rights. Lucky, for his part, obeys Pozzo's every command, willingly carrying his baggage, dancing, and thinking for him, and even merely weeping silently when Pozzo is about to sell him. From the Lacanian perspective, however, this master-slave relationship is one of mutual dependence and mutual reversal. Both parties are alienated by desire, and neither possesses true freedom. Pozzo appears to be the powerful master, yet his master-identity depends entirely

on Lucky's obedience. Without the slave Lucky, he could not have been a master. He needs Lucky's existence to prove his own power and superiority. His desire is to be desired by Lucky, to be recognized by Lucky as master. In the second act of the play, after Pozzo goes blind, this reversal of the master-slave relationship is displayed with particular clarity.

The blinded Pozzo loses the capacity for independent action and depends entirely on Lucky to lead him. He says: "I can't see the road; you must take me along." At this point, although Lucky has become mute, he holds Pozzo's fate firmly in his hands. Pozzo is likewise transformed from an imperious master into a pitiful, helpless dependent. These episodes show that the master's power is founded upon the slave's obedience. Once the slave no longer obeys, the master's power vanishes into thin air.

Lucky's alienation is yet more profound. He is not only Pozzo's slave but, more deeply, the slave of the symbolic order. His "thinking" is a chaotic, meaningless pile of signifiers, devoid of logic and content. This indicates that his thought has been hollowed out by symbolic order, turning him into a pure signifying machine. He ceaselessly dances and thinks not because he wishes to do so but because Pozzo commands him to do so. He loses himself and becomes an instrument of Pozzo, a speaking object.

Still more pathetically, he develops a morbid dependence on this state of servitude. Pozzo says: "You can't drive such a slave away. The best thing would be to kill him." Lucky would rather endure Pozzo's abuse than leave him, for leaving Pozzo means losing the support of his existence. His desire is to become Pozzo's slave and to obtain confirmation of his being in enslavement.

The relationship between Pozzo and Lucky is a mirror image of the relationship between Estragon and Vladimir. Although the two tramps have no clear distinction between master and slave, a similar mutual dependence and mutual alienation are obtained between them. Vladimir plays the rational, leading role, responsible for thinking, planning, and deciding; Estragon plays the emotional, passive role, responsible for complaining, sleeping, and eating. They quarrel with and despise one another, yet they cannot part. Vladimir says: "One cannot bear it all alone." Estragon says: "We've been together for fifty years." Like Pozzo and Lucky, they seek the

meaning of their existence in one another and confirm their own identities through one another.

Whether the tramps or the master-slave pair, they are all alienated subjects, all trapped in the dialectic of desire and unable to extricate themselves. Their desires are all directed toward the Other, and they all long to obtain confirmation of their being from the Other. Yet this dependence on the Other ultimately leads to the loss of self. Pozzo loses his eyes, Lucky loses his voice, and the tramps lose themselves. All become mutilated, fragmented beings. Through the contrast between these two groups of characters, Beckett profoundly reveals the alienated essence of relations between people in modern society: We are all constructed in one another's gaze and devoured in one another's desires.

Conclusion

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, through its extreme form of the absurd, profoundly reveals the desiring predicament and existential predicament of the modern subject. From the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Godot is not a particular redeemer but rather the desire-signifier of the Big Other, and his fundamental absence is the precondition for the emergence and persistence of desire. Waiting is not the expectation of an object but rather the circular reproduction of desire itself, a self-deceptive construction undertaken by the subject to evade nothingness.

The deformed master-slave relationship between Pozzo and Lucky exposes the alienated form of desire in intersubjective relationships: All subjects are trapped in the dialectic of desire and lose their selves in dependence on the Other. The failure and rupture of language, in turn, demonstrate that desire is unsayable, and the subject is confined within the prison of the signifying chain, unable to express its authentic self.

Yet Beckett does not sink entirely into nihilism. Through absurd writing, he exposes the truth of desire and opens for us an ethical dimension of directly confronting the nothingness of being. This ethical dimension is founded not on the fantasy of Godot but on a sober recognition of the dialectic of desire. It calls upon us to traverse the fantasy of desire, take responsibility for our own existence, and create a meaning of our own within nothingness.

Waiting for Godot has been able to become an immortal

classic precisely because it touches upon the most fundamental question of human existence: In an absurd world without God, without meaning, and without redemption, how should human beings live? Beckett does not give us a clear answer, but through the waiting of the two tramps he shows us a possibility: Even if Godot will never come, we can still choose to wait, to uphold the dignity of humanity in waiting, and to seek the meaning of existence in the absurd.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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