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CONTRADICTIONS IN WAITING FOR GODOT AND ENDGAME

Aydın GÖRMEZ*

Abstract

Samuel Beckett's theatre reveals the frightful diseases of the humanity. Beckett pictures modern man as a stranger full of illusions and deprived of his past, values, and hopes. His world of plays cannot be explained by reasoning because it is not a reasonable world, though familiar it is. In such a maddening universe, language has lost its function and man has become more vulnerable and thus dependant because of his isolation and fears. However, all his efforts are in vain since all remedies prove futile. Finally, all these result in unavoidable contradictions.

Shocking the audience with the bare reality put on stage, the playwright exposes a pessimistic world view though this reality is the very thing the human beings experience in daily life. With this paper, I aim to reveal how masterfully Beckett's plays, *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, create an atmosphere in which contradictory elements go hand in hand.

Key Words: *Contradiction, Endgame, Modern man, Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot.*

GODOT'YU BEKLERKEN VE SON OYUN'DA ÇELİŞKİLER

Özet

Samuel Beckett'in tiyatrosu insanlığın korkunç hastalığını ortaya koyar. Beckett, modern insanı köklerinden, değer yargılarından ve umutlarından kopuk, hayallerle yaşayan bir yabancı olarak resmeder. Onun oyunlarının dünyası mantık ile açıklanamaz çünkü bu dünyanın kendisi mantıklı değildir. Böyle bir çılgın evrende, dil işlevini yitirmiştir, yalnızlık ve korkulardan dolayı insan daha da hassaslaşmış ve bağımlı bir hale gelmiştir. Ancak tüm çabaları boştur çünkü tüm çareler sonuçsuz kalmıştır. Sonuç olarak bütün bunlar kaçınılmaz bir biçimde çelişkilere zemin hazırlamıştır.

Sahneye koyduğu çıplak gerçeklikle izleyiciyi şok eden yazar, karamsar bir bakış sergiler. Ancak bu gerçek her gün yaşanılanların dışında bir şey değildir. Beckett'in *Son Oyun* ve *Godot'yu Beklerken* oyunları çelişkili öğelerin birbirleriyle uyum içinde olduklarını gösteren bir atmosfer yaratmıştır. Bu makaleyle, Beckett'in bu durumu ne denli ustalıklı bir şekilde ortaya koyduğunu göstermeye çalışacağız.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Çelişki, Godot'yu Beklerken, Modern birey, Samuel Beckett, Son Oyun.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Absurd Drama seeks to emphasize the absurdity of life, traditional and modern institutions. Since the decadence of these crucial elements is irreversible, there is no way for recovery. Absurd playwrights try to deconstruct any conventions and this deconstructing process has its roots in post-modern drama. Samuel Beckett is commonly regarded as "The progenitor of post-modern theatre" (Hinden, 1986: 400). His theatre is utterly subjective and seen as a "nihilistic reaction to the recent atrocities, the gas chambers and the nuclear bombs of the war" (Styan, 1981: 125). His main search is about the problem of existence and human identity. His plays reveal the tragic situation of mankind. *Waiting for Godot* unearths the deep subconscious realms of humanity successfully. *Endgame* has also many-layered meanings. Both plays are so powerful that they indicate both several autobiographical experiences of the author and represent a universal situation from which many could derive something from their own lives as Enoch Brater says: "Beckett now made us see as new things that were always there in

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front of our eyes, but never before in such sharp relief" (Demastes, 1998: 57).

His work is a sort of mixture of tragedies and comedies of humanity. Beckett classifies *Waiting for Godot* into tragicomedy (Uslu, 2001:197). The opposition and stress between what is said and actions constitutes comedy, and human failure and despair constitutes man's tragic condition. However, although Pozzo's fall is a clear sign of tragedy, his characters, like the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, are not "great souls suffering greatly" as in classical tragedies (Kennedy, 1987: 1148). The waiting of the pair produces comic results. Thus, combining fun with pain, and fear with laughter, Beckett creates a modern tragicomedy.

His plays, as is the case in Absurd Drama, do not aim to give a moral or social lesson. Beckett's theatre does not present a hopeful environment in which man is powerful enough to tackle his troubled condition but makes audience be aware of certain facts, including his mysterious condition, in a shocking way. Since it is also a theatre of shock, it presents the most frightful conditions of humanity the audience is not willing to see, such as chaos and death. It shows the troubled situation of humanity, diagnoses the disease, but does not suggest a prescription since it does not believe in the existence of such a treatment.

Throughout his lifetime Becket has been sceptic about the certain aspects of objects, hierarchies, and the reliability of the language. He has criticises ignorance and weakness most in his plays. Beckett tries to reveal the subconscious realm of the individuals through his personal feelings and experiences. Almost in every Existentialist and Absurd writers, the boredom and weariness they reflect on their works also afflict their own lives. For example, after a strenuous and hard life of work, Beckett puts aside his literary career and social responsibilities. He writes poems and stories, indulged in various jobs, moves from Dublin, London and Paris, respectively and travels different countries, such as France and Germany. Seemingly, the lonely tramps, he created in *Waiting for Godot*, are the result of these experiences (Esslin, 2001: 33).

Beckett has a close relationship with James Joyce during his stay in Paris. Joyce's unhappy daughter openly expresses her love for Beckett, but Beckett feels in an incorrigible alienation; furthermore, he adds that he "had no feelings that were human; hence he had not been able to fall in love with Lucia" (Esslin, 2001: 34). He reflects this problematic situation in his later works. *Murphy* tells the story of the hero who often escapes from any attempt to marry his girl friend. In his first but unpublished play *Eluetheria*, a young man tries to run away from his family and social responsibilities. The works mirror his search for freedom as well as his real life experiences. They reflect deep feelings, fears, anxieties and hopeless human condition (Esslin, 2001: 38).

2. THE MEANINGLESSNESS OF LANGUAGE

Beckett's plays reveal human condition with its basic and thus crude reality. For this reason, language does not follow a logical order because the inner world is reflected with the language. However, this reality is a frightful one. His characters do not have a world of pretensions. They do not filter, curb or polish what they want to say. They are extremely natural since what is uttered is deeply felt in their inner worlds. They give it in an open and direct way. This gives the impression that language is not used properly. If language cannot convey the messages in a correct way, then it is empty, dead. Clichés and repetitions are the result of this fact and they are derived from obsessions of the individuals.

The dialogues applied in Beckett's plays as well as in other absurdist writers are no more than the series of nonsensical words and inconsequential clichés which reduce those who speak to robotic characters. As a means, language is inadequate for the individuals to become "aware of the self, communicating with others, or comprehending reality" (Haney, 2001: 11). Language has lost its main function of communication, but what is worse, there is nothing to communicate. In each case, language is dead (Esslin, 2001: 32-33).

The power of silence and body language is apparent in his plays. In a world where language is no more than meaningless repetitions, silence is important in giving meanings; this is possibly why the playwright tries to convey some crucial messages with the voiceless characters, as Richard Ellmann says, "Beckett was addicted to silences" (Esslin, 2001: 34). Together with silence, body language also gains importance

where language loses its validity and function. For example, it gives clear messages in *Waiting for Godot*: Pozzo's dragging Lucky with a rope and whipping him, Lucky's kicking Estragon, Lucky's being overburdened, the falling of Pozzo, Estragon and Vladimir, Estragon's being beaten by an unknown group of people, Estragon's gnawing Pozzo's leftovers and carrot, tightening of Esragon's boots, and forcefully putting and removing a hat on Lucky's head.

Trying different ways such as silence and body posture, Beckett shows that one of the most contradictory situations is relying on language for communication. For all its uselessness and deficiencies, language is given as the only communicating means in real world.

3. THE DEPENDENCE OF CHARACTERS

One of the most contradictory elements in both plays is the pairs depending on each other ironically. Although Vladimir and Estragon are different and opposite characters in certain ways, they complete each other. Vladimir is the cleverer and more practical while Estragon has a rather passive personality. Estragon begins a word, but Vladimir completes it. Whereas Vladimir remembers past Estragon forgets anything even those just happened; the former guards the latter, insists on hope and poses a serious attitude; Estragon is beaten, sceptical and likes funny stories. Forming a whole, both are dependant. There is a similar relationship between Pozzo, the master and Lucky, the servant. While the first commands, the second submits. Lucky does whatever Pozzo wants him to do. He even thinks instead of Pozzo. Esslin points out that the couples also stand for the "two halves of a single personality" (67). Pozzo symbolizes body while Lucky stands for mind. There is a similar obligation of dependence in *Endgame*. Hamm is dependent on Clov's service and Clov on Hamm's food store, the only depot after a great calamity hit the world. Seemingly Clov serves as the legs and eyes of Hamm in addition to caring for him. They are both dependant characters. The relationship between Hamm and Clov recalls that between the tramps and that between Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir represents consciousness, Estragon subconscious realms, Hamm emotion, Clov reason (Esslin, 2001: 68). Separation equals killing, in that Clov's abandonment means death for Hamm, and also committing suicide for Clov. Clov is torn between the conflict of his feelings and reason, the desire to leave and the obligation to stay. At the end of the play, both Hamm and Clov admit that they are obliged to each other:

HAMM: I'm obliged to you, Clov. For your services.

CLOV: (*Turning sharply.*) Ah pardon. It's I am obliged to you.

HAMM: It's we are obliged to each other. (132)

Beckett's characters are childish because they reflect primitive human traits and follies. Their behaviours reflect this condition because they are to a great extent irrational and not understandable. Esslin suggests that characters, in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, are not characters in a traditional sense but "the embodiments of basic human attitudes, rather like the personified virtues and vices in medieval mystery plays..." (76). This situation also fits one of the definitions of absurd drama that it is a theatre of states rather than actions. This appears in the form of repetitions and clichés in the plays, notably in *Waiting for Godot*. This is also justified with the motionless posture of Clov when he is prepared to leave in the final scene in *Endgame*.

Dependability derives from powerlessness, which is one of the major elements in Beckett's works. The message is that human is weak. Vladimir and Estragon are so passive and numbed that they defer anything, for example they postpone their decision of committing suicide to another time after meeting Godot, but they forget even what they are to ask Godot. There is almost no sign of their being alive. Even the most ordinary habit of eating is carried out in an insipid way such as gnawing carrots. However high the positions are, they easily can be turned upside down due to the powerless nature of humans. Pozzo, the powerful, turns into a blind and weak man, and he seems to be one of the most powerless men in the universe though at first he was the most dominant character domineering not only Lucky but also other characters.

Since the pairs are worthless, cast-off individuals, we do not have even the slightest information about Estragon and Vladimir who are "nearly without attributes-aging tramps" cut off their roots and relationships (Haney,

2001:3). The individuals are too weak to seek a goal on their own. Therefore, they do not act personally but in pairs. Of the pairs, Pozzo and Vladimir seem to have more strength than their counterparts, and at the end of the play Pozzo becomes blind and Lucky dump, but still they are together. Furthermore, since being couples is not enough to tackle the dreary isolation of man, the pairs are in search of the third person or thing. This is Godot in the case of the tramps, and it is the reason for the aimless pilgrimage of Pozzo and Lucky. Dependability is given as a deadly disease though it does not suffice in dealing with their existential predicament.

Both the couples, Pozzo-Lucky and Estragon-Vladimir, have no reasonable or apparent goals. Pozzo takes Lucky to an unknown journey, and Vladimir pressures on Estragon to wait for an ambiguous and seemingly imaginary saviour. In this point, the playwright seems to interfere with this futile search attributing powerlessness to what is sought by giving the name Godot, "the weakened form of God" (Esslin, 2001:49). It is likely that what Beckett gives as a message is that: It is in vain whatsoever you do in order to escape from the troubled human condition. Nothing or nobody can save anyone, whether it is institutions, individuals or even the God.

4. OTHER CONTRADICTIONS

Time and space are major themes in *Waiting for Godot*. The couple seems to have no certain knowledge about time and place they live in. They try to pass time in this uncertain time and space. The stage in his plays is mostly simple and an almost empty space. Time either speeds up or slows down in his plays. As William S. Haney argues: "Endgame famously ends where it begins, and begins where it ends" (2001: 9).

Waiting is another important point in the play. It is an indispensable element of life. Throughout the life, one waits for something to come, and seemingly Godot symbolizes whatever one waits for. The expectations which involve waiting are endless: birth, growth, graduations, employment, marriage, having children and so on. This human condition reflects another contradiction. On one hand, one will be eager to wait for the next step or station to come; on the other hand s/he will try to escape the final one to come: the death. *Waiting for Godot* presents the dilemma between despair and hope in an interesting way because "oddly, the effect of the play isn't total gloom," and the audience "leave the theatre both amused and bemused by it" (Kennedy, 1987:1149).

The fact that nothing and nobody changes despite these changes in time in one's life is another message. The idea that everything changes is only an illusion because the changes occur in a vicious circle. And we witness these changes in a circular way. In other words, we are familiar with this changing process. It is like twenty-four hours a day. Although each hour is different, there are only twenty-four hours a day but no more. One repeatedly gets up at the same hour in the morning or sleeps at the same hour in the evening. As Pozzo says revoltingly: "…one day like any other day, one day he went dump, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day… (83).

Dualities are apparent in these plays. Main characters in *Endgame* consist of a master and his servant and two parents. Lazy and talkative Pozzo appears with heavily burdened, hardworking and silent Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*. The pairs, Vladimir and Estragon, and Hamm and Clov, are opposite characters. Hamm cannot stand, paralysed, and Clov cannot sit. Hamm is selfish, cruel while Clov seems to be a man of virtue. Hamm is a man of disorder, Clov of order. The duality is not confined with the characters, but there is a similar situation in terms of other elements in the play. The existence of two windows is an example in *Endgame*: one is for land the other for the sea.

In choosing a bare village road with a barren tree in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett openly criticises a world filled with violence, pretensions and lies, and other technology related affects. Two tramps away from this corrupt world are intentionally put in such an environment. And they try to look for a meaning in such an atmosphere. The relationship between the pairs, particularly between the masters and servants, emphasizes the injustices of the world. One of the most important images, suggesting that human being is devalued and turns into savage animals, is to put a collar around Lucky's neck and throwing bones before him, and Estragon's gnawing the leftover bones (Uslu, 2001:200). The brutality of man is emphasized in *Endgame*.

Hamm, the embodiment of selfishness, causes the starvation of many people keeping his food store closed. And now although there seem to be only four people in the world, they still hate one another. Although they live in the same house, there is no slightest sign of affection or feeling of share. As a result of estrangement, these people live in isolation. Either a physical or psychological barrier has separated them. Nagg and Nell, the parents of Hamm, are confined to their ash cans, Hamm is in his wheelchair and Clov is in his dreams.

Hamm is a contradictory character in any way. On one hand, he is so cruel that he kills many people, on the other hand acts as an emotional child who may easily break into tears if his three-legged toy dog is taken away. Ironically, he evokes the despotic leaders who mercilessly kill millions of people while shedding tear on the death of their domestic animals.

There is another contradiction in the case of absurd: while the characters crawl and suffer, the audiences laugh at their tragic situation. This produces an absurd as well as contradictory situation. The reader or audience feels a sadistic revelling seeing the weak creatures in pain (Styan, 1981: 127). "Straddling the fence between tragedy and comedy," the playwright portrays the characters whose suffering seems ridiculous. (Kennedy, 1987:1148). Although the messages these plays give are rather pessimistic, they lead to a sort of catharsis. As J. L. Styan argues, "what is negative may also embody some inducement to take positive action" (125).

Beckett's characters tend to forget anything easily. Estragon does not remember that they met Pozzo and Lucky just the previous day. Pozzo philosophically points out this unreliable human condition: "I don't remember having met anyone yesterday. But tomorrow I won't remember having met anyone today. So don't count on me to enlighten you" (82). The characters cannot think and understand their human condition, and the spectators cannot make out a meaning through traditional reasoning, but instead, rely on their intuitive feelings. (Haney, 2001: 3).

The characters wait for what they are not sure of. When Alan Schneider, the director of the first American production of *Waiting for Godot*, asks Beckett who is Godot or what Godot means, Beckett gives a rather ambiguous but meaningful answer: "If I knew, I would have said so in the play" (Esslin, 2001:44). This answer is ambiguous in that it is not a reply what Schneider wants to have. However, as a message it is clear enough to warn the reader or audience that it is not possible to derive an exact or single meaning out of his plays. What makes Beckett so powerful is his using these ambiguous situations leaving audience/reader in ambiguity and leading to several profound meanings complying even with opposite conditions.

We get the impression that there is a reaction against the virtues, such as favour and help. Estragon approaches Lucky, who is crying, to console him but he is kicked by Lucky. Then Estragon begins to cry. The Blind Pozzo almost creeps on the ground, and while Vladimir tries to help him to stand him up, he, too, collapses. What happens to Estragon is not different from what happens to Vladimir. All three now fall down and quarrel with one another.

In each work, there appear boys toward the end of the plays; either they represent a slight hope in this chaotic atmosphere, or the worst calamity to come, the death, as Hamm utters when informed about this boy: "It's the end, Clov, we've come to the end. I don't need you anymore" (131). Even this slight hope is an uncertain one, and most probably it is an illusion Clov dreams or pretends to see. Although the boy, in *Waiting for Godot*, turns up to bring messages from Godot, this does not go beyond the deferring the tramp's hopes, which deepens their illusionary expectations.

Vladimir and Estragon represent modern man who talks much but does nothing. What is said contradicts what is done in *Waiting for Godot* and in *Endgame*. For example, in several cases, Estragon says: "Let's go," but actually as the stage directions point out "they don't move." Similarly, although Clov has a great desire to escape from Hamm and his oppressive realm, the play ends with his frozen posture. This frozen state might be a sign of his impossible departure, because in spite of all his arrangements for a voyage to leave, he remains motionless at the door, his face directed towards Hamm.

5. CONCLUSION

The playwright purposefully does not give any scene in detail. Instead, a kind of evanescence covers the whole play. The more ambiguous his plays, the more messages they convey in number. *Act Without Words I* sums up what *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* try to give as the final message. The character thrown into the stage, which obviously stands for life, is directed by a whistle in order to achieve the dangling carafe of water. After failing in getting it despite all his efforts, he remains still giving up trying to get it. Because only after having enough of experiences, he gets the ultimate message of the futility of reaching the goals, which mostly turns out to be achieving the material possessions (Esslin, 2001: 74-75).

Thus any objective remains beyond the reach of the human beings because things that man covets to possess are in an imaginary dimension and man can only dream it as Clov implies: "I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust" (120).

The ever repeating failures and bubbling-like murmurings and mutterings symbolize the boring, monotonous and meaningless life. The futile efforts of man, the meaninglessness of the language and behaviours, the powerlessness of the humanity, the irrecoverable and inexorable alienation process are what Beckett underlines as the main reasons for indispensible contradictions.

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