

Marxist Analysis of Samuel Beckett's Play "Waiting for Godot"

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Abstract

This study presents the Marxist analysis of the play "Waiting for Godot". Since the play has several themes in it, it equally deals with the reasons of formation of different classes and the after effects of that in terms of alienation, exploitation and of the friction within these classes. In the play different characters stand for the different classes. However, with the help of Marxist theory, this analysis resulted in that the character of Pozzo and Lucky stand for Bourgeoisie and lower class respectively. For that matter specifically, a great deal of research work and sources have been referred to in the writing of this study. Besides this, the work resulted in finding other elements of Marxist ideology that are discussed and demonstrated by the writer. To conclude it, Beckett has successfully depicted the human conditions, especially the ill effects of class system after both the World War II and the rise of industrialization.

Keywords: Marxist Analysis, Alienation, Exploitation, Bourgeoisie, Proletariats

INTRODUCTION:

Although the play "Waiting for Godot" was, at first, written in French namely "En Attendant Godot" in 1949 by Samuel Beckett, it was translated in English by Beckett himself in 1954. After the translation of it, the play became widely famous throughout the European countries. It was performed at the stages and was appreciated by everyone who happened to watch it being played or managed to read it. However, the play was written just after the World War II had ended. And, the War and its consequences left significant influence on Beckett. Thus, he revealed the exact circumstances of the war in the themes of the play in nothingness, dehumanization and sufferings of humankind, along with the change in terms of class formation and class friction that brought about the question of Marxism specifically.

Moreover, the play is written in two Acts, each has its own themes and setting: Act 1 starts with the meeting of two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir. As for the setting, they meet under a tree in a nearby country road. The first is shown as a tired and beaten up, the other as a restless and sickman. However, both tramps express pleasure at meeting and knowing each other. But, Estragon loses his temper when he fails in taking off his boots, which have been

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pinching him for a long time. He asks Vladimir for help, but Vladimir does not pay heed to what he says. Vladimir himself, then, takes his hat off and turns it upside down, so that something may fall. But, nothing falls at all. By now, Estragon has successfully taken his shoes off. Now that they both are free, they started talking of here and there to pass the time.

Suddenly, from talking rubbish they start discussing the Bible. Each asks the other if he read the Bible or heard of stories related to it. This discussion makes Estragon bore and he therefore wants to leave, but he is reminded that they are here to wait for Godot. However, about Godot, none knew anything at all. Here, the situation gets worse and they disagree with each other for a while. Further, whatever activities they do, it is for the sake of passing the time of waiting. Because waiting makes them bored, and they start thinking of suicide. But, as usual, no one proceeds and both make excuses. In the meantime, they again, assure each other of Godot coming.

After this, there comes a complete shift in the play. Two other tramps, namely Pozzo and Lucky, join them. The arrival of these two shocks both Vladimir and Estragon, because they see that Pozzo is leading Lucky by a rope which is tied round Lucky's neck. More, Pozzo beats Lucky with a whip. As Lucky was carrying several things, when Pozzo sees the tramps waiting, he starts beating Lucky and all the items fall on the ground. But, Lucky manages to take all the things back.

However, Vladimir and Estragon try to help Lucky, but they are restrained to do so. Pozzo tells them that Lucky is a vicious and useless creature; therefore keep him at arm's length. Lucky, thus, face so much humiliation. Besides, Pozzo tells the tramps that he intends to go to sell Lucky at the fair. Although Lucky tries his best to please Pozzo, yet he fails and is humiliated time and again by his master in the presence of Vladimir and Estragon.

Further, to entrain the tramps Pozzo orders Lucky to dance and think before Vladimir and Estragon. The tramps enjoy themselves the dance, but are shocked to know that Lucky depends on the hat for thinking and whenever he is asked to do so by his master. And, unfortunately, that hat is owned by Pozzo. Therefore, Pozzo makes fun of Lucky and asks the tramps to remove the hat if they want to end his thinking. After this, both Pozzo and Lucky exit.

The moment Pozzo and Lucky leave, Vladimir and Estragon tell each other that their arrival was a source to pass the time. Then, they start once again talking rubbish. But, this

time, no sooner do they start, a boy arrives with message of Godot that Godot would surely come the next day. After getting this message, both think of leaving but none moves and, lastly, the curtain falls and thus the Act ends here.

Although the Act II has almost the same simple setting as is in the Act I, yet there are few changes in the setting that are worth mentioning here. For example, in the Act I, the tree under which they were sitting was leafless, but now few leaves have grown in it; and, unlike the Act I where nothing else was there, both Estragon's shoes and Lucky's hat are now lying on the stage. In the beginning of the Act II, Vladimir joins Estragon. They greet and welcome each other. At first, a little dispute erupts but it ends shortly. Therefore, they are frowned at each other and claim to be happy in the absence of each other, but gradually they become friends. They admit, now that they are united once again, they are happy to have each other.

OBJECTIVES:

- 1) To explore the characters exploitation within the classes in the play Waiting for Godot.
- 2) To discover the characters representation of class struggle in Waiting for Godot?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

RQ 1: How far do the characters demonstrate exploitation within the classes in the play Waiting for Godot?

RQ 2: How do the characters representation of class struggle in Waiting for Godot?

RATIONALE OF RESEARCH:

To begin with, after the rise in industrialization and, more importantly, the taking place of catastrophic events, such as World War II, the questions of class differences are found everywhere, be it any society or any literary piece of work. The elements and reasons of these phenomena and their after affects are brought under discussion by both writers and theorists in their artistic and philosophical works respectively, so was the scheme that was followed by Samuel Beckett. Throughout his play, Beckett has given clear depictions of the classes that have economic conditions as their basis and their byproducts in the form of alienation, exploitation and dehumanization of lower classes by upper classes. Also, he has argued that the fraction of every social formation that might be called upper class, no matter how strongly their economic basis be structured, they are shallow both morally and mentally. This, however, can be concluded from the leading characters of the play.

Lastly, the present study research questions also discuss both the reasons of the

division and the effects of that division end in the results of alienation and exploitation. For that matter I availed myself of a significant deal of study and understanding of the Marxist theory. Yet, besides other and this study, a great deal of research work can be done on the play from this perspective. As far as the findings are concerned, however, this study shows that the classes are discussed both artistically and critically by Beckett in his play.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the play *Waiting for Godot* deals with several themes in it, and given that Samuel gave no descriptions of it, many critics have given altogether different interpretations of it. Largely, it has been considered a play with religious, existential and absurd themes. But, to some extent, as it consists in it the ideas of what Marxism and Marxist critics has long been discussing, it has been therefore equally criticized from this perspective for conspicuously highlighting the problems of never-ending class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariats and its results in the form of alienation and economic exploitation of latter class by the former. Yet, despite all these studies, there remain gaps to a considerable extent that are to be critically analyzed, filled and based for further research from this perspective. This dissertation, however, is an attempt to identify those gaps and provides a basis for further research from a totally new perspective. Below are given studies that have so far been carried out with links to my studies:

For instance, a researcher, Dr. Alsharadgeh (2020), wrote a research paper, in which he discussed mainly the themes in the play which, according to him, has of course minimalist setting and the characters' clearly absurd dialogues and doings add to it. On the one hand, in the play, where the characters are shown as humans and its setting deals with human existence, while, on the other hand, their words and doings somehow demonstrate clearly the bitter truths about human conditions, especially that of sufferings and exploitations.

For example, as for Lucky's baggage, Dr. Alsharadgeh (2020) in his paper, argues that as Lucky never keeps down the items he has been carrying, unless he is ordered to carry out one of Pozzo's other favors, or to put things down. But, as Lucky has been used to carry burden for a long time, in no time, he loads himself with the burden again and again, even if he is not asked to do so. And, the baggage Lucky is always carrying has no item of his use, all the things, except a hat, are used by his master Pozzo for his comfort and pleasure. This,

however, is the clear example of carrying out others' burdens for their privileges.

Further, as for themes, Dr. Samer (2020), broaches another debate by highlighting Pozzo's rope. "Pozzo's rope represents the balance of power in the relationship between Pozzo, the master, and Lucky, the slave" (Samer, 2020, p. 36). With the help of that rope, Pozzo leads Lucky wherever he wants to and, Lucky has nothing to do with it. Besides, Lucky has always been the subject of Pozzo's battering by whips, but Lucky never dares ask question. Even, in the latter part of the play, Lucky, that he has now gone dumb, has been shown to lead astray by Pozzo, now that he has turned to be a blind himself. This is the example of not only slavery and clear exploitation of one's subjects but also of the mindset of Pozzo and the class he hails from. In other words, as Pozzo, depicted as a bourgeoisie in the play, holds the power, it is in his hands to deal with Lucky, shown as a member of the lower class, the way he sees an appropriate one. Because, in order to think, Lucky needs a hat to put on, which he carries with Pozzo's burden, and that hat is removed on Pozzo's orders. At times Lucky is given that hat, and, to show his power, it is taken back every now and then. This depicts Lucky's vulnerability.

Javed Akhtar, Khair Muhammad and Naila Naz (2015) write, in one of their research papers, that several different actions, dialogues and their meanings in the play are clear depictions of the late modernist bourgeoisie ideology. For example, they write that the reoccurring dialogue in the play "nothing to be done" (Beckett, 1956, Act one, p. 74) in one way or the other emphasizes on the meaningless and absurdity of human life, for which the modernist Bourgeoisie ideology stands up. Further, researchers state that the text of the play does not tell the truth in it. It is, however, full of contradictory actions and dialogues, and its text is hardly found united, as it is a play with composite plot structure. And, this all reveals the harsh truths. In fact, the play revolves around the themes of existential crises, lack of finding meaning and purpose of life, the always looming clouds of uncertainty, and, instead of finding ways to solve all these problems, the Proletariats are left to suffer and being exploited even more and more by the so-called powerful hands of Bourgeoisie ideology.

Moreover, another most important and worth mentioning findings of their research paper is that of loss of identity and dehumanization or subjugation of humans. "Waiting for Godot" depicts the loss of human identity or misrecognition of human beings in the capitalist social formation, expressing the bourgeoisie ideology. However, there is no doubt in that the text's dialogues and, most importantly, the actions refer to socio-political themes that are

clear depictions of Master-Slave connection between Pozzo, the master; and Lucky, the slave.

The researchers equally gave descriptions of Lucky's Character, as it stands in Pozzo's opposition, 'Lucky is the one that reflects the person from lower-class society' (Fidiullah, 2022). For instance, Lucky tied with a rope and being a slave, carries Pozzo's burden and disgustingly gets whatever is left after his master and other two tramps are done with eating and that is thrown by his master. The researchers also manage to state that, the class for which Lucky stands is also called urban working class or Proletariats. This class does not own enough of resources, therefore 'they work with their hands, bodies and minds' (Fadiullah, 2022). This brings about the exploitation of working class by Capitalists. Moreover, in that exploitation of lower classes, the capitalists go blind and sometimes intentionally close their eyes to avoid seeing what happens in their surroundings. "Pozzo's Blindness is an allusion to Capitalists", and "Lucky's dumbness is also an allusion to his weakness for not raising his voice" (Fidiullah, 2022). Thus, they conclude their paper by stating that the characters stand for the classes and clearly show the ongoing difference and struggle in classes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since I have taken to analyze the play "Waiting for Godot" from altogether different perspective than the usual research and studies have so far been carried out on it, I have chosen Marxism as a literary theory and would therefore critically analyze the play from this perspective. Although the play usually seems quite a religious or existential and sometimes philosophical one, yet a considerable research can be done on it by using different ideologies. Therefore, I have taken Marx as a theorist and his general ideology for my framework.

Therefore, with the help of Marxism as a literary theory, a Marxist critic can interpret the given text as the expression of contemporary class struggle. In other words, in Marxism, literature is not simply means to give expression of personal choices and tastes, most of the times. Also, it can be related to the social and political conditions of the time. In the words of Karl Marx, "the ruling ideas of every age are ever the ideas of the ruling class and men's ideas are the most direct emanation of their material state." (Marx, 1972: p.57).

However, historically, the basic ideology of Marxism was given by the German Philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883) along with his friend, Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). This ideology is named after the former, but latter also contributed equally in the formation

and spread of it. Together, in 1848, they wrote a pamphlet named Communist Manifesto. In that pamphlet, both philosophers discussed at larger and broader level the theory of class difference and the continuous struggle in every society, with the end results of this difference in the terms of alienation and exploitation. Marx argued that every society is divided into several social classes. According to him, it is only economic and materialism that is the basic foundation of division and it is also the base on which every social, political and ideological truth is built on. Moreover, Marx argued that the phenomenon of class difference would surely lead to the revolution and resultantly in the formation of communist society, in which there would be no distinction based of materialism. This, however, is possible only when the working class come to know of their rights. Again, this consciousness would come only when the working class struggles to stop being commodities of the upper class. Otherwise, the cycle would continue to go on, and nothing of significance would happen. Below are given the basic foundations of Marxist ideology:

BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE:

(i) Economic Determinism

This basic classification of things and ideas as “Base” and “Structure” further gave the idea of determinism. As many of the theories progressed in the latter half of the nineteenth century are determinist in their essence, that is, the theorists first found the base and then further theorized their ideas on it.

Similarly, Marx also followed the same course, but he termed that determinism as “Economic Determinism”. For Marx, human beings are nothing but the product of their social and economic conditions. Materialism and economics is the base of his theory. Marx as of the view that whatever ideology a man belongs to, whether he is conscious of it or not.

(ii) Reification or Commodification

In his theory, Marx argues that the great Industrial revolution has brought about with itself that idea of reification. By this term he means that those who do not own any means of production are somehow turned to be a thing or a machine, they are no longer considered humans and are treated as commodities. Moreover, Marx is of the view that, by doing so, capitalism dehumanizes the poor and workers to passive objects or marketable commodities. However, opposing this idea of reification, he is of the view that they should be treated as humans just like the rich. He, however, condemns this behavior.

(iii) Haves and Have-nots

“Haves” is the term in Marxism used for those rich who have in their hands the means of production, and “Have-nots” are those poor who do not own any means of productions and are bound to work under the rich and are therefore subject to exploitation and sufferings. Have-nots lead the poor to being commodities and treated as material things, not humans.

Methodology

Firstly, I applied the course of qualitative research by reading, re-reading and understanding the different interpretations of the play by different critics. As the play has a composite plot structure, a great deal of several allusions and other numerous meaningless and repetitive dialogues, I had to read and understand it thoroughly, with the help of a Comprehensive Critical Guide. After following this course of method, I then tried to understand what Marxism and its basic elements dealt with. I, however, selected few basic elements on which both Marx and Marxism emphasize, and highlighted those points in the play where these elements were eluded by both the writer and other different critics. Thus, I could understand the play and made the basis for my further research, with the relevance to the theoretical approach of Marxism.

Secondly, after getting the essence of the play, I made efforts to link the themes, dialogues and characters with the theory of Marxism. For that, I gathered together the already existing literature, which in one way or the other related with my topic. Therefore, few journals and other websites available on internet were of great help, especially the Google Scholar. With the help of these sources, I could access to whatever little already existing literature on the topic was available there. And, later on, I gathered together that materials and critically linked the play with Marxist theory.

As I made efforts to apply the theory of Marxism on the play *Waiting for Godot*, the problems and questions of class struggle, class differences and of the conflicts going on within these classes, and the results of this friction in alienation, exploitation and dehumanization of one class by the other, were mentioned not only by the writer or particularly Marxist critics alone, but all these problems were equally argued and discussed by different researchers, be they of Sociology, Cultures and Religions. All these researchers, including Marxists particularly, emphasized on this, that the play deals with foundational ideas of Marxism as much as it deals with the existentialism and other themes. The elements of Marxism are present there in its essence, as they are usually everywhere.

(iv) Textual Analysis and Findings

As this play deals considerably with the ideas of economic power, social classes and the friction between Proletariats and Bourgeoisie, below are given references from the characters and their dialogues in the play, also, an attempt in trying to link these with Marxist criticism has been made.

(v) Lines from the book

“Pozzo: ‘... I mean, I am bringing him to the fair, where I hope to get a good price for him. The truth is you cannot drive such creatures away. The best thing would be to kill them. And, Lucky weeps.’ (Beckett, Waiting for Godot, p.26)

From the above dialogues, it can be guessed that how cruel and harsh the system of capitalism has often been to the lower classes. Firstly, Pozzo considered Lucky a thing and tried to get a handsome profit by taking him to the fair and selling him there. Secondly, for Pozzo, Lucky was never a human being, but a thing to own and sell whenever the owner wished.

(iv) Alienation and its effects:

Marx argued that an alienated self is the byproduct of alienation done excessively. However, another exact example of alienation and its effects can be observed from this:

“Pozzo: Be careful! He is wicked.” (Beckett, Waiting for Godot, p.17) Pozzo introduced Lucky to Vladimir and Estragon in this way.

However, he introduced himself thus: *“Pozzo: let me introduce myself. I am Pozzo.”* (Beckett, Waiting for Godot, 17).

Abovementioned dialogues can be taken as the identity crisis the working or lower classes face. This can also be taken as an example of Upper class’ authority to give lower classes Identity. Further, as lucky has remained for a long time the subject to mental and physical torture, Lucky’s detachment from humanly qualities by Pozzo’s treatment is demonstrated from those two dialogues.

(vi) Base and Structure:

Interestingly speaking, the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky also depicts the idea of what Marx termed in his theory as Base and Structure. Pozzo is the example of

structure however Lucky represents the base. In other words, the way Pozzo appears comfortable is just because of the way Lucky suffers. In the play:

“Estragon: why doesn't Lucky put down his bags?”

Pozzo: It would surprise me if he put down his bags.” (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p.35) As it has already been mentioned that the base and structure are closely connected and are interdependent on each other, it can further be observed from the description given in the play:

“Enter Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo drives Lucky by means of a rope which is long enough to let him reach the middle of the stage before Pozzo appears. Lucky carries a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket, and a greatcoat. Pozzo, a whip.”

The above description given by the writer suggests that Pozzo's appearance is totally dependent on Lucky's suffering. In other words, the appearance of structure is completely dependent on the base, “Nothing to be done” (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*).

Most importantly, it is the reoccurring dialogue throughout the play. The Marxist critics comment that this sentence shows the miserable conditions of working class. And, for changing their conditions, as long as the reign of capitalism goes, nothing can be done to stop it. For instance, in the play, as Pozzo owns the food and goes blind, Lucky could have availed him a chance of running. But, he did not. This is demonstrated in the play, thus:

“Pozzo (now blind): On! Whip! (Lucky takes his place before Pozzo. Lucky puts everything, looks for whip. Finds it, but it into Pozzo's hand, takes up everything again.)

Pozzo: Rope?

(Lucky puts everything down, put end of the rope into Pozzo's hand, takes up everything again). Now that it has been far clear that the working class get used to its exploitation and sufferings that he cannot chose to take any other way and gets rid of it. But, as Beckett puts it, “nothing to be done” (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 1956)

(v) **Loss of identity and individual thinking**

Throughout the play, Lucky has been shown as an obedient servant, and he tries his best to please his master by dancing and remaining silent, no matter how much the master tortures and makes fun of him. Lucky's silence and dancing on Pozzo's orders can be

considered as futile attempts to be on Pozzo's good books. But, the thought of ownership of the land and food has turned Pozzo blind to the extent that he stopped bothering giving a slightest thought to his strange attempts. Pozzo rather demonstrates his power by asking him to do more strange things. For example:

“Pozzo”: he imagines that when I see him indefatigable I will regret my decision. Such is his miserable scheme. As though I was short of slaves.”

Pozzo states these words to Vladimir and Estragon and tells them, now that he had made the decision of selling him; he would never give it second thought. Because, he had sources, there were so many slaves to be found in no time.

“Vladimir (to Pozzo): tell him to think.

Pozzo: give him his hat!

Vladimir: his hat?

Pozzo: he cannot think without his hat!

Pozzo (to Lucky): think, pig! Stop! Forward! Stop! Think!” (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 1956).

These dialogues demonstrate what Marxism states that the choice of our thinking in capitalist society is limited. We can only choose and think of those certain things which the Bourgeoisie considers best for us. In short, our economic, social and political status defines our individuality, not vice versa. Our thinking capabilities, like Lucky's hat, are in the hands of others, especially of those who are in Marxist language termed as Haves! Or, in the play, in Pozzo's words:

Pozzo: His hat!

Pozzo: give me that! There is an end to his thinking!(Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 1956).

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion of all these dialogues and debates, it can be summed up that the capitalists never miss a chance to exploit the ordinary masses that do not own anything and are, therefore bound to work under them. The lower classes are, in turn, considered nothing but machines or valuable possessions which can be owned and profited by those cruel people of upper classes, as is the example of Lucky in the play, which is living on Pozzo's mercy. More, when the status of people is turned into machines, the capitalists consider them not humans and put them away from their humanly possible social relations. Then, being badly

disappointed by their harsh behavior, people victims of this behavior excommunicate themselves from humans and they start considering themselves machines. This excommunication results in the alienation.

Thus, by excommunication, they do not only lower their value, but they also lower and loses their individuality and identity. However, this crisis of identity and individual thinking is lost by two major characters namely Estragon and Lucky and, it is Vladimir and Pozzo who, like modern capitalists, want their name be known to everyone by doing false charity. Thus, at first, they exploit and, then, they try to make their ills and evils good by doing little acts of kindness. Finally, the play takes these problems with its plot, and Beckett has used his expertise in both creating, on the one hand, a famous and absurd play; one the other hand, an ordinary play full of political and social changes in it.

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