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What Makes the Characters' Lives in Waiting for Godot Meaningful?

Joneal Joplin, who has directed Samuel Beckett's play, Waiting For Godot, said:

Are we there yet? We said it as children; we are plagued by it as adults. No matter how short or long the trip, no matter how entertaining or boring the company, no matter how beautiful or inviting the scenery, the destination was all we could think about, and we often missed the best part of the trip: the journey itself.

Many people have speculated that the terribly bleak play is centered around a quest for meaning, but how is meaning derived? Can it be measured? Is it the journey, as Joplin infers, that makes life meaningful? In Waiting for Godot, Beckett argues that humans discover meaning in their lives through freedom of choice, routine, and companionship in their journey through life.

Freedom of choice is very important in peoples' lives. It gives them the sense that they are in control. In Waiting for Godot, it is inferred that Vladimir and Estragon, the two main characters, symbolize all mankind, because they are the only characters always present on the stage. Beckett also gives neither Vladimir nor Estragon strong character defining traits, so they seem as if they are universal human beings. In fact, the reader finds it difficult to distinguish the two during much of the first act, because Beckett has purposely stripped away most of the characterization to make them seem universal. Throughout the play, however, it is quite clear that Vladimir and Estragon make a conscious choice to wait for Godot. As Vladimir says, "He didn't say for sure he'd come" (8). They seem to be under no obligation to be waiting except by their own choice. Another example of their freedom of choice is when Estragon says, "And if we

dropped him?" (107). Vladimir responds, "He'd punish us" (107). Godot would have no reason to punish Vladimir and Estragon if they did not have a choice. Vladimir also makes their meeting seem to be a kind of proposition when he says, "I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it" (13). This statement and the other statements all appear to strengthen their belief that they are the ones in control, and thus make them feel their life is important and meaningful giving them a purpose.

Boredom, which could be said to be inactivity resulting from being unable to choose one's actions or the opposite of freedom of choice, greatly weakens a person's belief in his/her life's meaning. Estragon opens the play by saying, "Nothing to be done" (2). Vladimir immediately follows saying, "I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me... And I resumed the struggle" (2). This boredom or inactivity creates an atmosphere for self-doubt in Vladimir and Estragon's lives' purposes. Neither is willing to readily admit that he is bored and thus inactive, because he knows the consequence is living a less meaningful life. Instead they prefer to go on living their lives denying their boredom by saying things like, "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression that we exist?" (77).

Contemplating suicide is one of Vladimir and Estragon's only means for combating their boredom. It gives them the sense that they are again in complete control of their lives, and thus can end them at any point. The idea of Vladimir and Estragon committing suicide by hanging themselves is certainly important to Beckett, because the notion of them hanging themselves is discussed multiple times. Hanging themselves is brought up twice by Estragon: "What about hanging ourselves?" and "Why don't we hang ourselves?" (12, 108). They, however, are never able to act upon this impulse, because they deem it safer to do nothing at all. As Vladimir says, "Don't let's do

anything. It's safer" (13). Despite their inactivity, they still perceive that they are in complete control of their lives by having this opportunity, and thus their life must be meaningful.

Routine or habit creates a rational base for people to live their lives from. Routines protect people from what cannot be controlled and help them combat the feeling of emptiness. Merely participating in a routine can also help pass the time. As Vladimir says, "habit is a great deadener" (105). By this, he means habit numbs the mind making time seem to pass more quickly. Discussion between Vladimir and Estragon becomes the major routine the characters use to accomplish this. Discussion is used to combat the silence and emptiness in both their lives. This is indeed the case in Vladimir and Estragon's following dialogue when Vladimir is offering to tell the story of Christ's Crucifixion:

Vladimir: Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story?
 Estragon: No.
 Vladimir: Shall I tell it to you?
 Estragon: No.
 Vladimir: It'll pass the time. (6)

Another example of the importance of discussion in their lives is shown when Vladimir says, "Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you, once in a while?" (6). He says this scolding Estragon for not contributing his part to the conversation to help pass the time.

Throughout the play, Vladimir and Estragon's trivial, routine, actions are used to fight the emptiness they are feeling in their lives. Beckett purposely uses a tree as the only prop on stage to give the audience the feeling of emptiness as well. An example of their trivial actions is the switching of hats between Vladimir and Estragon (80-81). Another example is Vladimir feeding carrots, radishes, and turnips to Estragon (16, 76). Vladimir ends one of these trivial feedings saying, "This is becoming really insignificant"

(76). Both these examples show Vladimir and Estragon's actions that are executed almost solely to fight the nothingness in their lives.

The act of waiting for Godot becomes another routine that Vladimir and Estragon use to pass the time and give their lives meaning. Beckett gives the audience the sense that their waiting has gone on for an indefinite amount of time. This is shown in Vladimir and Estragon's dialogue:

Vladimir: We know them [Pozzo and Lucky], I tell you.

Estragon: Why didn't they recognize us then?

Vladimir: That means nothing. I too pretended not to recognize them. (52)

The same conclusion can be drawn when Vladimir speaks to the boy saying, "I've seen you before, haven't I?" (54). These lines suggest these same events have been occurring for quite some time. Vladimir and Estragon use the routine of waiting to derive meaning and purpose in their lives.

The insignificance of time in Waiting for Godot corresponds to the importance of the routine of waiting to pass the time throughout the play. Time has absolutely no significance to the events in the play. It is essentially an illusion. At one point Vladimir says, "Will night never?" and then concludes, "Time has stopped" (36, 37). Vladimir and Estragon end the play, just as they began it: waiting for Godot. They have made no progress. A barren tree ironically grows leaves overnight and the transition from day to night is nearly instantaneous. The situation with Pozzo and Lucky also illustrates the insignificance of time in the play. In Act I Pozzo is seemingly healthy, and certainly able to see. He is traveling to market to sell Lucky, who "used to be so kind... so helpful... so entertaining," but is now unbearable to his master (34). This is Pozzo and Lucky's situation in Act I when they first meet Vladimir and Estragon. The next day (Act II,) however, their situation has completely changed. Pozzo is blind, and Lucky is now mute.

Pozzo has no recollection of the meeting the day before. When Vladimir asks when he became blind, Pozzo responds "I woke up one fine day as blind as Fortune" (99).

Vladimir, who is skeptical, asks him for more details. Pozzo quickly responds, "Don't question me! The blind have no notion of time. The things of time are hidden from them too" (99). When Pozzo asks Estragon Vladimir's age, he responds, "Eleven," once again illustrating that time has no meaning to the characters (26). Time is indeed significant to the interpretation of Waiting for Godot, but serves no significant purpose within the play itself.

Companionship, in this play, may perhaps give Vladimir and Estragon the greatest sense of meaning in their lives. Neither Vladimir nor Estragon could bear living alone despite Estragon's repeated statement: "I sometimes wonder if we wouldn't have been better off alone, each one for himself" (58). Each has too great a need for a friend and their actions are interdependent on one another. In Jean-Paul Sartre's book, Existentialism and Human Emotions, he says, "I cannot be anything unless others recognize me as such. In order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person. The other is indispensable to my own existence, as well as to my knowledge about myself" (Sartre 38). Vladimir recognizes Estragon as a necessary companion and vice-versa so each is able to qualify himself as a meaningful person. The two characters derive much of their self worth from their companionship and what they do for one another. Estragon seems weak and irresponsible, so Vladimir always comes to his aide. For example, Vladimir helps Estragon get his boots on saying, "Yes yes. Come on, we'll try the left first." (77). Vladimir is also the one that seems to be responsible for feeding Estragon. When Estragon violently says, "I'm hungry," Vladimir cheerfully responds, "Do you want a carrot," as if feeding Estragon is his most appealing duty (18,

16). Both these examples contribute to Vladimir feeling that his life is meaningful.

Vladimir and Estragon certainly share the strongest desire for companionship. This is apparent in the following dialogue:

Vladimir: Gogo!
 Estragon: Didi!
 Vladimir: Your hand!
 Estragon: Take it!
 Vladimir: Come to my arms!
 Estragon: Your arms?
 Vladimir: My breast! (85-86).

Another example of their desire for companionship is when Vladimir says, “I’m glad to see you back. I thought you were gone forever. We’ll have to celebrate this. Get up till I embrace you” (2). Companionship, in this play, is certainly important to both Vladimir and Estragon, and it may in fact give their lives the greatest meaning.

Beckett, throughout the play, presents human purpose through the bleakest possible fashion. The play is encompassed by uncertainty. Will Godot ever come? What day is it? How long have we been together? How old is he? Is Pozzo really blind? Did the same boy come yesterday? All these questions and many others are left unanswered. Beckett has also stripped theater to only its bare essentials. He casts only five total characters; all are introduced with little or no background information. All that is given for the setting is that it is evening on a county road. The introduction from Stages of Drama summarizes theatrical characteristics from Beckett’s Waiting for Godot saying:

It undercut their [the readers’] ideas of plot with its persistently illogical and purposeless activity; it questioned their ideas of dialogue with its endless contradictions between language and action; it defied their ideas of spectacle with its stage bare except for a tree. (Klaus 977)

“Waiting for Godot” is Beckett’s bleakly portrayed interpretation of how mankind derives meaning from life. Vladimir and Estragon believe they have made a conscious choice to wait for Godot. They find comfort in passing the time through their trivial conversations while munching on carrots and turnips. Even more importantly, though, they have each other to help pass the time. It is indeed the journey that makes life most meaningful: the freedom of choice, the trivial daily routines, and the inspirational companionships on the journey through life.

Beckett, Samuel. “Waiting for Godot.” New York: Grove Press, 1954.

Klaus, Carl H., Gilbert, Miriam, & Field, Bradford S., eds. Stages of Drama. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1999. 977-979.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Existentialism and Human Emotions. New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995.