

The Religious Meaning in *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract

Waiting for Godot is one of the classic works of theater of the absurd. The play seems absurd but with a deep religious meaning. This text tries to explore the theme in four parts of God and man, breaking the agreement, repentance and imprecation and waiting for salvation.

Keywords: Godot, God, Man

Samuel Beckett is a famous Irish dramatist and novelist and *Waiting for Godot* is his masterpiece. Since the play was published, it has been suffered different comments. Although it is recognized as the masterpiece of theater of the absurd, it is filled with religious feelings of the writer.

“Religious education he received in family and in church when he was in his teens has produced profound influences on his literary creation. Original sin, salvation, second coming of Jesus and other themes in *Holy Bible* have been ringing in his works.”(Sun, 2005, p.296) Beckett’s Religious theme has attracted the attention of the researchers. This article will explain *Waiting for Godot* on basis of the theory of Christian theology in order to help readers to understand the theme of the play more deeply.

1. God and man

In *Waiting for Godot*, both Vladimir and Estragon on stage, and Godot, who is away from the vision of the audience, bear a certain symbolic significance. Relationship between them suggests that of God and man.

Needless to say, Godot is similar with God in pronunciation, which is enough to trigger the audience's association with God. Of course, other descriptions of Godot in the play can also make the readers consider him to be God of Christianity.

From the description of appearance, Godot has similarities with God. The boy, a messenger, in the play is from Godot’s place and he is the only one who has seen Godot. The two tramps once asked him what color Godot’s beard is. There is a conversation between them.

Vladimir: Has he a beard, Mr. Godot?

Boy: Yes, sir.

Vladimir: Fair or... or black?

Boy: I think it’s white, sir.

Vladimir: Christ have mercy on us! (Beckett, 2006, P372)

It can be concluded that Godot wears a long white beard, which is in line with what God is like in the Holy Bible. John recorded he had seen the revived Savior in Revelation. He wrote, “he has golden belt in his waist. His hair is as white as snow like wool. His eyes are shining like fire and his feet are glittering as copper. When he speaks, his voice is like flood roaring.” (Zeng, 1994, p.696). The beard and hair of God is white as snow, and Godot’s beard is exactly the same. This is a description of Godot similar to God in appearance.

There are descriptions about Godot similar in God in spirit. In the play, Godot can save, or punish, or try or take care of man. The tramps in the play think that as long as Godot comes, they will be saved. If they do not waiting for Godot, they would be punished by him. The messenger boy said he and his brother keep sheep for Godot. His brother keeps the sheep and he raise the goats. In the Matthew of the Bible, there are words like this, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him. He will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. (Zeng, 1994, p. 624). He would bless his men and let them live in his glory as long as they remember the contract between God and man.

But what can man do? The modern people have aliened with God for a long time. They have lost the religious heritage and walked on the spiritual wasteland. The two tramps are the representatives of human beings. They are the modern incarnations of the modern people without the concern from the whole religion. There are some words in the play, which can prove this point. They go like this, “in this place, at this moment, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to

which a cruel fate consigned us!” (Beckett, 2006, p. 351) In the play, the two tramps are in an extremely awkward position. They are waiting for Godot from the very beginning to the end. But Godot does not come, which makes those waiting for him suffer a lot.

Then, why are the lambs of God abandoned? Why do the modern people suffer this?

2. Breaking the contract

Keeping promise is the theme in Old Testament and New Testament. There are five agreements between God and man and God would gradually complete the plan of salvation for man if man follows the contract. They are agreement of Noah, agreement with Abraham, covenant with Abraham, covenant with Moses, covenant with David and new testament, that is, the covenant of Christ and man. Covenant needs the agreement of both parties. It has constraint force and certain obligations to fulfill. But as for the relationship between God and man, God is the creator, and man is the subject of creation. The covenant between God and man is the gift from God.” (Sun, 2006, p. 306). The gift and the blessing from God can ensure man to live a comfortable life. But why man is reduced to waiting for salvation? It seems that the two tramps are waiting for Godot to be saved according to the promise, but Godot does not come. Actually the reason does not lie in Godot for his rudeness but in man, who breaks the promise first. It is just because man broke the promise first and they will receive the punishment of endless waiting from God. It can be seen that the breaking of the covenant by man is vividly demonstrated in the play by Beckett.

Estragon: You are it was this evening?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: That we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said Saturday. (Pause) I think.

Estragon: You think.

Vladimir: I must have made a note of it.

Estragon: But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? It is not rather Sunday (Pause.) Or Monday? (Pause.) Or Friday?

Vladimir: It is not impossible.

Estragon: Or Thursday?

Vladimir: What'll we do? (Beckett, 2006, p. 246).

According to the Bible, it was on Saturday that God made man. And it was on Saturday that Jesus passed away after he was crucified on Friday. He would revive on Sunday so on Saturday man is waiting his reviving. Such an important day becomes vague in the mind of human beings and the solemn date between God and human beings is abandoned. Man can not remember the date with God or even can not know which day he is alive. How can human beings obey the covenant, obtain the trust and understanding from God? Of course, they would not be saved by God.

3. Repentance and imprecation

Human beings lose the protection of God and become spiritually homeless. They talk nonsense, do funny movements, but in their bottom of heart, they are longing for the salvation by God. However, it is difficult to repair the relations between the man and God. God will re-test man for he needs man's loyalty. Thus what human beings need to do is to repent and pray.

Estragon: what?

Vladimir: Suppose we repented.

Estragon: repented what?

Vladimir: Oh...We wouldn't have to go into the details.

Estragon: Our being born? (Beckett, 2006, p. 240)

God creates man according to what he is like, showing his love to man. In Genesis of the Holy Bible, God says, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”(Zeng, 1994, p.22). As a result, men become the most favored creature of God. But eating the Forbidden fruits leads to the breakdown of relations between man and God. Men even declined to be obedient to God and refuse the identity of creature by God. “This is a reversal against creation. The downfall of man discloses that he longs for self-constructed and isolated existence instead of a limited creature. the most basic point in the breakdown in relations between man and God is that human beings want to go beyond the boundaries made by God.” (Xu, 2006,

P.143). What man had done violated God and was expelled from the Garden of Eden. In the era when *Waiting for Godot* was performed, men had become homeless on the wilderness. If man wants to return to God, he must confess to gain salvation. And God will display his attitude by the performance of human beings. There are words in the play to show such an idea.

Estragon: What exactly did we ask him for?

Vladimir: Were you not there?

Estragon: I can't have been listening.

Vladimir: Oh... nothing very definite.

Estragon: A kind of prayer.

Vladimir: Precisely.

Estragon: A vague supplication.

Vladimir: Exactly

Estragon: And what did he reply?

Vladimir: That he's seen.

Estragon: That he couldn't promise anything.

Vladimir: That he'd have to think it over. (Beckett, 2006, P.252)

Whether God accepted the repentance depends on the performance of human beings. Any betrayal is not allowed. Betrayal means the fall of punishment. Man is forced to wait without an end of time.

With the development of the plot, Godot delays in his coming and men has reached the brink of collapse. They cried out "Help".

Estragon: We'll soon see. Abel! Abel!

Pozzo: Help!

Estragon: Got it in one!

... ..

Estragon: Perhaps the other is called Cain! Cain!

Pozzo: Help!

Estragon: He is all humanity. (Silence)Look at the little cloud. (Beckett, 2006, P.357).

In Holy Bible, Abel and Cain are the two sons of Adam and Eve and the ancestors of all human beings. Their voices represent those of the entire human race of looking forward to the coming of the Lord once again to save the humanities suffering heavily.

4. Waiting for salvation

Waiting is the theme throughout the play. Although Godot breaks his promise, the two tramps have shown perseverance. Despite the heavy blow of painfulness, frustration and disappointment, they still keeps on waiting because that is their only hope for they believe only Godot can save them.

How to get salvation? Drama that the story of two thieves.

Vladimir: Our Savior. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other... dammed.

Estragon: Saved from what?

Vladimir: Hell. (Beckett, 2006, p. 242)

It is recorded in the Holy Bible that together with Jesus two prisoners were crucified. One of them said, "You're Christ, aren't you? You can save us and yourself!" But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." (Zeng, 1994, P. 646). The thief was saved because of his belief. On the cross, he knew what he had done was wrong and he believed Jesus would come again. So, Jesus told him just in that day he could be with Jesus in paradise. People who believe in God can be saved.

Waiting is a process God added for man's salvation. Suffering means tasting the life. Human beings learn to love

others in this process. In Act I, the two tramps can be seen to have gaps and Lucky is victimized by Pozzo. Only the boy following Godot lives a life with love. But in Act II, the two tramps sincerely embrace, and Pozzo becomes particularly dependent on Lucky. Furthermore, the tramps' help to Pozzo shows the fraternity among people. Human beings are changing towards what God want them to be.

Although Godot does not come, hope is still there. The withered tree in Act I has a few leaves in Act II. Although there are only a few leaves, after all, they are the embodiment of life. The wilting tree in spring bears some hope for the boring waiting. Human beings' waiting is no longer hopeless. Waiting gives significance to existence.

Waiting for Godot expresses the living condition of the Western people who have been out of contact with God and shows their effort to get rid of the situation. It is an anticipation to rebuild the meaningful system of the universe.” (Sun, 2005, P.319). Human beings will be patient to wait on, to wait for the arrival of Godot, and to wait for the realization of salvation. Beckett expresses his sincere thought of human existence in the play, which is seemingly absurd.

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