

# The circular structure of Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot

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One of the distinctive features of the absurd plays, which emerged in the 1950s at the hands of some major characters like Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett, is the unusual structure.

Waiting for Godot (1954) has a distinctive kind of structure. Its structure is circular. It has no logical exposition or resolution. The situation is usually static; nothing changes and nothing is solved for there is no solution to the problems of man in the hopeless world.

The present study aims to shed light upon such kind of structure as far as Waiting for Godot is concerned.

Usually, the term structure is applied to the general plan or outline of any artistic work. It is the relation of the parts or elements to the whole work. Alternatively, we can define structure as “the planned frame work of a piece of literature.”<sup>(1)</sup> In drama, the structure is the logical division of the action as well as the division into acts and scenes.

If we examine the structure of any traditional drama, a tragedy for example, we shall find it based on the following elements: First, the introduction, which creates the tone, gives the setting, introduces some of the characters and supplies other facts necessary for an understanding of the play. In Hamlet, for example, the bleak midnight scene on the castle platform with the supernatural appearance of the ghost sets the keynote of the tragedy. Second, the rising action or complication that sets the motion and contains by successive stages of conflict to the hero for example; the rising action in Hamlet is the ghost's revelation to Hamlet of the murder. Thirdly,

the climax or the turning point that is the highest spot of interest in any narrative fiction for instance; in **Hamlet**, Hamlet's failure to kill his uncle Claudius <sup>(2)</sup> at a prayer is the turning point of the play. Fourthly, falling action, which stresses the activity of the forces opposing the hero, the trend of the action, must lead logically to the disaster with which the tragedy is to close. Fifthly, catastrophe that marks the tragic failure, usually the death of the hero as an inevitable result of the play's action and gives a final presentation of the nobility of the dying hero as in the case of Hamlet's tragic death at the end of the play.

We go no far from our topic because such information about a traditional kind of structure is important to know how the structure of modern plays, especially absurd ones, is much more different. It has greater freedom. Plays of the theatre of the absurd often deny the traditional structure; they lack resolution or any neat exposition of the situation. Their structure is central to the thought of the play for it reflects the absurdity and meaninglessness of life. The situation is usually stagnant, nothing changes and nothing is solved for there is no answer to the dilemma of man in the desperate world.

**Waiting for Godot** is not constructed on along traditional lines with exposition, development, reversal and denouement; but it has a firm structure based on repetition and balance. The structure of this play like its meaning has intrigued critics; one critic has spoken of it as being "un dramatic but highly theatrical."<sup>(3)</sup> Another critic speaks of "Beckett's nation of summitry to suggest a static design, and he dismisses the possibility of dividing this play into Aristotle's beginning, middle and end."<sup>(4)</sup>

The play summarizes itself into to tramps sitting by the roadside waiting for a man named to come and employ them. They exchange strange ends of conversation, which are as meaningless and at certain times as "gross in their insistence on physical detail as anything to be heard inside an army camp."<sup>(5)</sup> Godot does not come but instead there appear Pozzo and his servant, Lucky. Both of them seem to be inhuman, one in his tyranny and the other in his servility. In the second half of the play the same pair, Pozzo and Lucky, are seen again but now the first one has gone blind and the latter cannot speak at all. Meanwhile, the two tramps continue waiting for Godot;

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they cannot even commit suicide; they have no rope to hang themselves; yet Godot does not come.

The structure of Waiting for Godot, as we mentioned before, is a firm structure based on repetition, the return of the leading motifs and on the exact balancing of variable elements.

The play is in two acts of unequal length, both of which is set in the same place and begins at the same time "early evening."<sup>(6)</sup> The use of repetition can be illustrated with an example of Pozzo having eaten his meal and lit his pipe then says with evident satisfaction: "Ah, that's better."<sup>(7)</sup> Two pages later Estragon makes precisely the same comment having just gnawed the remaining flesh of Pozzo's discarded chicken bones. Yet, the circumstances, though similar, are not identical for Pozzo has eaten to his full while Estragon has had a meager something. The repetition of the words is therefore an ironical device for pointing a contrast like that between Pozzo's selfish order to Lucky to give him his coat in act I and Vladimir's selfless spreading of his own coat round Estragon's shoulders in act II.

In addition, we witness Vladimir's song at the beginning of act II is just a life example, as the entire structure of the play is repetition and circular in nature. Let us together examine the song:

A dog came in the kitchen  
And stole a crust of bread  
Then cook up with a ladle  
And beat him till he was dead  
Then all the dogs came running  
And dug the dog a tomb  
He stops, broads, resumes:  
Then all the dogs came running  
And dug the dog a tomb  
And wrote upon the tombstone  
For the eyes of dogs to come  
A dog came in the kitchen  
And stole a crust of bread  
Then cook up with a ladle  
And beat him till he was dead

Then all the dogs came running  
And dug the dog a tomb  
He stops broads, resumes:  
Then all the dogs came running  
And dug the dog a tomb  
He stops, broads, softly  
And dug the dog a tomb<sup>(8)</sup>

Therefore, Vladimir's song is circular and repetitive. In addition, we notice that its ominous theme is death.

Both acts of the play take place in the same setting; there is simply a country road, which is not given a specific location with a single tree. The audience is never transferred to another location; all of the action takes place within one setting. In addition, both acts unfold at the same time of the day, in the evening. Time in act II is supposed to be the next day but as we witness that, there is no essential difference between that day and the day in the first act.

The same tendency towards repetition can be served in the action of the play. Both acts have the same kind of similarities in the sequence of action happened to the characters. Let us examine them together:

1. In both acts, the action begins with the same situation: in act I, Vladimir enters and Estragon observes, "so there you are again."<sup>(9)</sup> In act II, on meeting Estragon, Vladimir exclaims: "you again!"<sup>(10)</sup> And a little later, he said: "there you are again."<sup>(11)</sup>
2. Both acts feature a discussion of beating Estragon.
3. In both acts, there is a concern over Estragon's feet and boots.
4. In both acts, we listened to a discussion of Vladimir's difficulties with urination.
5. In both acts, there is a comic conversation involving carrots, radishes and turnips.
6. In both acts, Vladimir and Estragon contemplate the possibility of committing suicide by hanging.
7. In both acts, the only visitors upon the scene are Pozzo, Lucky and a boy.

**8.** Both acts end with the same words. Vladimir suggests at the end of act I: "Yes, let's go."<sup>(12)</sup> At the end of act II, Estragon's suggestion is identical; "Yes, let's go."<sup>(13)</sup> In neither case do they attempt to move.

The fact that such repetition in the action of the play is obvious and manifestly intended is significant and emphasizes the difference between traditional structure in the action and the circular structure of **Waiting for Godot**.

Vivian Mercier, a critic, believes that **Waiting for Godot** shows consummate stagecraft. Its author has achieved "a theatrical impossibility—a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What's more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens twice."<sup>(14)</sup>

Another feature of the circular is the contrasted characterization. The main characters in the play Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky find themselves associated and have joined in a complex sado-masochistic relationship for many years, but their nature obviously come into conflict: Vladimir is the neurotic intellectual type, Estragon is the placed intuitive one. Pozzo is the bullying extrovert while Lucky is the timid introvert. Thus, instinctively Vladimir sympathizes with Pozzo while Estragon experiences a degree of fellow- feeling for Lucky. Vladimir and Pozzo, like Estragon and Lucky, are at the extremes of the poised poles. Such characters are stylized to be without any clear identity. There is no development of the characters, no evolution and indeed, "there is no delving into the individual psychological make-up of the four characters. They represent universal man."<sup>(15)</sup>

Another distinctive feature of the structure is the way the writing of the play modulates continually from one tone to its opposite. A good example to such extreme change in tone from one to another is Pozzo's declamation on the subject of night, shift almost violently from the false sublime to the prosaically ridiculous and after rising to vibrant highs lapses to gloomy depths and ultimately to inevitable silence. After long pauses and silences, Estragon and Vladimir strikeRamji up and exchange vaudeville remarks:

Estragon: So long as one knows.

Vladimir: One can bide one's time.

Estragon: One knows what to expect.

Vladimir: No further need to worry.

Estragon: Simply wait.

Vladimir: We're used to it.<sup>(16)</sup>

The transition in the tone of the speech and conversation is masterly almost musical.

The nature of the dialogue in the play illustrates the circular patterns of structure, which has been suggested. In both acts, much of the dialogue is inconclusive and repetitive kind of conversation. Let us examine the following example: After a difference of opinion over a trivial matter, Vladimir and Estragon are reconciled and short silences follow. Such silence causes Vladimir to ask, "What do we now?"<sup>(17)</sup> Estragon's reply is a single word: "wait."<sup>(18)</sup> The same dialogue occurs after a similar pause in the second act when Vladimir declares that they must wait for Godot. This pattern of conversations occur a number of times whenever the characters have exhausted their trivial conversation and whenever they can no longer find some activity to help them pass the time, they think of leaving. Yet, the conclusion is ever the same: they must wait for Godot. Thus, such kind of conversation is like one draws a circle starting from one point and goes round to return to the same point. One critic has compared it to music: "Like music Beckett's work must be heard to be effective, the voice is as important as an orchestra, the silence as important as the sound and it is important as the meaning."<sup>(19)</sup>

Another best illustration of the nature of the dialogues in the play is provided by Lucky. In the first act, Lucky, at the command of his master, gives a long and justly well-known speech. It is in the form of theological address, which, at its core, has an apparently serious statement to make eliminating the non-sensual repetition and comic irrelevances. Lucky begins to make something like the following declaration:

Lucky: Given the existence... of a personal  
God. Outside time... who... loves us

dearly... And suffers... with those  
who... are... plunged in torment... it is  
established... Beyond all doubt... that  
man...<sup>(20)</sup>

The form of Lucky's speech or monologue is an unfinished question, which begins with a postulate of the existence of a personal God and ends with the image of an empty fossilized skull. Thomison, Gortesianism and Itegelianism are all strangely mixed inside Lucky's head.<sup>(21)</sup> From the point of view of coherence and logic, the speech ends at that point. The logical result of the assumption is never stated, the conclusion is never given and the ultimate meaning is lost in a maze of irrelevance and incoherence. Thus, Lucky's speech can be said to be typical of much of the dialogue found in Waiting for Godot or any kind of dialogue of absurd plays.

Another feature of the circular structure in Waiting for Godot is the theme of uncertainty. Vladimir and Estragon want to reassure their own existence of which they are not otherwise always certain since the evidence of their senses is so dubious. They are, in fact, in constant need of a re-assurance. They never get that feeling when Pozzo reappears in the second act and cannot remember having met them the day before. The little boy, Godot's messenger, too flatly denies ever having seen them before. Just before the boy makes his first exit, Vladimir asks him anxiously, "You did see us, didn't you?"<sup>(22)</sup> As if here too, we are not certain and with a solid reason too because the boy remembers nothing of them on his following appearance, Vladimir asks him, "It wasn't you came yesterday?"<sup>(23)</sup> And the child denies. This question, of course, suggests that the day represented in the first act is not the first one in the potential series of days in which Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot.

This kind of repetition of the structure of act I and act II holds open the possibility that similar days will pass in which the two meet at twilight to wait for Godot and be visited by a young boy who will offer the same message.<sup>(24)</sup> Again, as the boy is leaving, Vladimir asks him: "You are sure you saw me, eh? You won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me before."<sup>(25)</sup> However, it is a hopeless

question, like all other features reflects the circular, monotony and uncertainty of the existence of the characters. The circular structure is also clearly shown in the kind of themes reflected in the play. The problem of seeing in an indeterminate world has long preoccupied Samuel Beckett. In his works, "human beings no longer occupy a stable and privileged point in space and time from which they may visually organize, give meaning to, and institute relationships with other beings and objects."<sup>(26)</sup> The problem that affected Beckett and tries to find an answer for it in **Waiting for Godot** is how to get through life. The answer is simple: by force of habit, by going on in spite of pain, boredom and hopeless life. On these terms, Christ, according to Vladimir, was lucky because: "Where he lived, it was warm and dry and they crucified quick."<sup>(27)</sup> The opening words in the play present the theme of it, which is the suffering of being. This is clear when Estragon addresses Vladimir saying: "Nothing to be done"<sup>(28)</sup> and Vladimir's suggestion is that: "I'm beginning to come round to that opinion."<sup>(29)</sup> Thus, the subject of the play is how to pass the time, given the fact that the situation is hopeless.

In other words, the play is a dramatization of the themes that continually are repeated in Beckett's works: boredom and suffering of man. Such themes are fielding to the circular structure that we face in the play. There are many problems face everybody, yet it seems not to be solved until the end.

The play, then, is tragic in the sense that it portrays man as a victim of himself, a victim of his own finite nature.

From this study, we find that the structure of modern plays, like Beckett's structure in **Waiting for Godot** is totally unlike that of classical structure play. This play has repetitions, rounded events in which nothing changes and nothing is solved. Everything is static. There is no solution to the problems of man in the hopeless world.

The structure is central to the thought of the play for it is made to reflect the absurdity and meaninglessness of life and all the elements of the play: the characters, themes, setting, dialogue, etc. serve to reflect and emphasize the circular structure in Beckett's **Waiting for Godot**.

Because of the circular structure, we notice no development in the characters who end as they have begun. No answer is given to

their long waiting. Physically and spiritually, they are inactive, hopeless and in a bad need for some other force-a Godot- to change the monotonous life for them. Yet, such monotony will go on forever until Godot comes.

If Beckett has abandoned traditional dramatic perspective because of his loss of faith in the world order that made such a perspective possible, he has had to discover new techniques to tie together the elements of his drama. For, even though he presents a vision of a fragmented, diminishing, unseeable, purposeless universe and of a humanity which can find no place or identity in it, he does so in a highly formalized, controlled, and systematic manner. His drama does indeed portray the chaos in which we all exist, yet it succeeds, if not in lending meaning to the objects of his representation, at least in endowing them with form. Beckett has achieved a new vision; one might even say a new perspective, to tie the fragments of his dramatic universe into a firmly structured, esthetically pleasing whole. He exploits all of the varied ways in which drama can appeal to its spectators' senses and imaginations creating visual and audio echoes that irritate profound resonances within the hearts and minds of his audiences. However, even though Beckett's meticulous craftsmanship and dramatic genius produce highly united works, he leaves no doubt that what is being portrayed is a world where vision is impossible, due to the continual movement in time and space that infects all its inhabitants, observer and observed alike.

Beckett has employed everything to serve and testify those assumptions. Hence, the structure here has been extremely suggestive of the reality, of the torture and all-inclusive agony of the modern man who is lost in the world of mass-industrialization.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Coles Editorial Board, Dictionary of Literary Terms (London: Coles Publishing Co. Ltd., 1980), p.194.
- <sup>2</sup> Ramji Lall, Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot (New Delhi: Rama Brothers, 1988), p.150.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.150.
- <sup>4</sup> Anthony Hartley, "Review of Waiting for Godot in The Critical Response to Samuel Beckett by Cathleen Culotta Andonian, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), p.91.
- <sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, ed. Beryl S. Fletcher, (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p.42.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. , p.26.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid. , p.57-58.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid. , p.9.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. , p.58.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. , p.59.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. , p.54.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid. , p.94.
- <sup>13</sup> Vivian Mercier, "The Uneventful Event," in The Critical Response to Samuel Beckett by Cathleen Culotta Andonian, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), p.95.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. , p.99.
- <sup>15</sup> Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, ed. Beryl S. Fletcher, (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p.38.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. , p.41.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. , p.41.
- <sup>18</sup> J. L. Styan, The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p.220.
- <sup>19</sup> Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, ed. Beryl S. Fletcher, (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p.42-43.
- <sup>20</sup> Alec Reid, All I Can Manage, More than I Could (New York: Group Press, 1971), p.29.
- <sup>21</sup> Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, ed. Beryl S. Fletcher, (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p.52.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. , p.91.

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<sup>23</sup> Charles R. Lyons, **Samuel Beckett**, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1983), p.34.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Beckett, **Waiting for Godot**, ed. Beryl S. Fletcher, (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p.92.

<sup>25</sup> Jan Alison Hale, **The Broken Window** (United States of America: Library of Congress, 1948), p.183.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Beckett, **Waiting for Godot**, ed. Beryl S. Fletcher, (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p.52.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. , p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. , p. 11.

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