

## ***“The Human Condition” in Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot***

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### **Abstract**

In his essay about two painters, the van Velde brothers, Samuel Beckett presents a view that both men share a profound interest in “the human condition,” which precedes their interest in painting. This view relates to Beckett’s own conception of art. He himself was interested in “the human condition” in his creation of art. Beckett experienced the devastation of the Second World War. Through his work (e.g., *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*), he explored the condition of those who survive in the world in its extremity. This paper sheds light on “the human condition” revealed in the act of waiting in *Waiting for Godot*, a French play written in 1949. The play depicts the human condition as the condition of being “tied to Godot.” This condition implies the human finitude—the tormenting in-between condition—being short of the world and that of never being able to escape from the here and now. At the same time, this condition of being “tied to Godot” indicates one last ounce of belief in the world. By disclosing this invisible “tie,” *Waiting for Godot* evokes “the link between man and the world” (Deleuze) in the audience’s mind.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, The Human Condition, Waiting

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## Introduction

In his essay about two brother-painters, Bram and Geer van Velde, “La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon” (1945), Samuel Beckett presents a view that both men share a profound interest in “the human condition,” which precedes their interest in painting. While stressing the importance of not confusing their paintings because they belong to two absolutely distinct series (1984, p. 124), Beckett maintains that their artistic attitudes are grounded on “the same experience” (p. 129). Behind their surface difference, “the profound meaning” is hidden (p. 130). According to Beckett, “the same experience” that the two brother-painters share means that they are interested not so much in the painting as in “the human condition” (p. 129). At the end of the essay, he suggests that “true humanity” is found in their paintings (p. 132).

This view relates to Beckett’s own conception of art. He himself was interested in “the human condition” in his creation of art. After experiencing the devastation of the Second World War, through his work, for example, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*, Beckett explored the condition of those who survive in the world in its extremity. Furthermore, in “The Capital of the Ruins” (1946), a short radio piece of reportage on the Irish Red Cross Hospital in the bombed-out city of Saint-Lô, Beckett presents his view that catastrophic experiences lead us to rethink the human condition. In the essay’s end, he refers to the possibility that those who were in Saint-Lô experienced “a vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again” (1995, p. 278). This paper sheds light on “the human condition” depicted in *Waiting for Godot*, a play written in French in 1949, and examines how it is linked to the question of human finitude revealed in the act of waiting. We will perceive how this act of waiting is connected to our belief in the world by referring to Gilles Deleuze’s observation on “the link between man and the world.”<sup>1</sup>

## The Human Finitude

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon, two tramps, abandoned in a vast ruinous space, wait for the arrival of someone named Godot. A distinctive characteristic of this play is that “the human condition” is revealed in the act of waiting. In the situation in which all is uncertain, the only certain aspect is that Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot.

VLADIMIR: ... What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come –

ESTRAGON: Ah!

POZZO: Help!

VLADIMIR: Or for night to fall. [*Pause.*] We have kept our appointment, and that’s an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment.

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this discussion is adapted from my article written in Japanese, “Beckett no Sozoryoku to ‘Ningen to Sekai no Kizuna’ (Beckett’s Imagination and ‘the Link between Man and the World’)” in *Journal of Modern Languages and Cultures* Vol 19, 2018, pp. 1–15.

How many people can boast as much? (Beckett, 2006, p. 74)

As this exchange indicates, this play illustrates an image of two tramps waiting for Godot in the “immense confusion.” For Beckett, this is an archetypal image that he wanted to present in this play. Not only in this play but also in other works, Beckett was interested in showing “the archetypal.” Beckett, when asked by Martin Esslin whether he was influenced by Joyce, said that unlike Joyce, “he wants to come down to the bedrock of the essentials, the archetypal” by “tak[ing] away all the accidentals” (Knowlson & Knowlson, 2006, pp. 48–49). Beckett added that the archetypal is “exactly what the clown/tramp [in *Waiting for Godot*] is” (p. 49). It is “a human figure that is completely real but at the same time not encumbered by any sort of accidentals,” and it concerns “his essential soul” (p. 49). Now we can question, what does the act of waiting in this archetypal image of two tramps mean?

First, one could say that the “human condition” disclosed in this act of waiting involves human finitude. In *Waiting for Godot*, the human finitude is revealed as the experience of the extreme condition characterized by the deprivation of the world, from where there is no escape. This situation is plainly expressed by Estragon’s words, “Dreadful privation” (Beckett, 2006, p. 13). Thinking of the “[d]readful privation” depicted in this play, we cannot ignore a specific experience of historical deprivation upon which this play is based. Andrew Gibson writes, “Beckett lodges *En attendant Godot* in a specific experience of historical deprivation. More importantly, the play refuses to look beyond that experience. It rather insists on its significance, as opposed to the discourses of a bankrupt positivity. It offers us no superior perspective on and does not attempt to redeem the experience of deprivation” (Gibson, 2010, p. 107). However, simultaneously, we could understand the “[d]readful privation” depicted in this play as what indicates the ontological deprivation, the condition of being short of world.<sup>2</sup>

This condition of being short of world, or being dispossessed of the world, is found in the fact that nobody can verify Vladimir and Estragon’s existence. In other words, they are forsaken by the world. Unlike Pozzo and the boy who are natives of this region, they do not belong to any particular place in this world. They are deprived of the sense of belonging itself. Vladimir says, “In an instant all will vanish and we’ll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!” (p. 75), suggesting that they are already very close to that situation occurring. Among the characters in the play, Vladimir is aware of this condition of being short of the world and suffers from it. Near the end of Act Two, the boy comes and starts talking to Vladimir. Being asked

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<sup>2</sup> On the condition of being short of the world in Beckett, see Steven Connor, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination*, pp. 176–182. Referring to Heidegger’s threefold distinction—stones, animals, and men—especially his argument that “the animal is poor in world [weltarm]” in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, Connor holds that “there is an intriguing resonance between Heidegger and Beckett, in the idea of poverty in the world” (p. 179). Connor holds that “the condition of being *weltarm*, or short of world, is what constitutes the particular kind of worldliness of Beckett’s work, which is a work, not so much of trying to escape from the world as of trying to find a way to have your being, or better still, to have had your being, in it” (p. 180).

by Vladimir, “Do you not recognize me?” the boy says, “No, sir.” Vladimir responds, “It wasn’t you came yesterday.” The boy repeats, “No, sir” (p. 85). He doesn’t recognize Vladimir although Vladimir believes they saw each other yesterday. Then, they have the following exchange.

BOY: What am I to tell Mr. Godot, sir?

VLADIMIR: Tell him . . . [*He hesitates*] . . . tell him you saw me and that . . . [*He hesitates*] . . . that you saw me. [*Pause. VLADIMIR advances, the BOY recoils. VLADIMIR halts, the BOY halts. With sudden violence.*] You’re sure you saw me, you won’t come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me!

[*Silence. VLADIMIR makes a sudden spring forward, the BOY avoids him and exit running. Silence. . . .*] (p. 86)

Vladimir’s words and his sudden violent move toward the boy indicate his suffering and desperate need to receive recognition of his existence. This recalls Beckett’s distinction between “the ultimate penury” and “the mere misery” in “Three Dialogues.” He holds that they are essentially different. The former is the condition of “being short, short of the world, short of self,” that is, being dispossessed of the world itself. The latter pertains to the misery of having insufficient necessities and food. According to Beckett, the former is “a predicament,” and the latter is not (Beckett, 1984, p. 143). Although Beckett’s essay notes this distinction regarding the artist’s experience, this can be applied to the condition of two tramps in *Waiting for Godot*: Beckett wanted to present not so much “the misery” as “the ultimate penury” found in their condition. Furthermore, the repetition of a phrase, “Nothing to be done,” uttered by both Estragon and Vladimir in the beginning part (Beckett, 2006, pp. 11–13, 22), suggests that they can do nothing in or toward the world except waiting. They are deprived of the world in which they can act.

At the same time, the play repeatedly stresses the fact that the two tramps are imprisoned in this particular situation in which they wait for Godot by a tree in a barren landscape. All through the play, Estragon and Vladimir repeat almost the same exchange. To Estragon who says, “Let’s go,” Vladimir responds that they cannot go because they are waiting for Godot (for example, p. 15). Although Estragon and Vladimir feel bored to death (p. 75), they cannot escape this circumstance. At one point, this imprisonment is described by the expression, being “tied to Godot.”

ESTRAGON: [*Chews, swallows.*] I’m asking you if we’re tied.

VLADIMIR: Tied?

ESTRAGON: Ti-ed.

VLADIMIR: How do you mean tied?

ESTRAGON: Down.

VLADIMIR: But to whom. By whom?

ESTRAGON: To your man.

VLADIMIR: To Godot? Tied to Godot? What an idea! No question of it. [*Pause.*] For the moment (p. 22).

This phrase of being “tied” designates the sense of being restricted or limited to a particular situation or place. Additionally, the play shows that Estragon and Vladimir do not even have the power to hang themselves. Thus, it emphasizes the impossibility

of breaking out of this confined state of being “tied to Godot,” that is, being “tied to” the here and now.

The act of waiting in the sense discussed above involves what Steven Connor writes about “radical finitude” in Beckett’s work. He calls Beckett’s modernism “worldly modernism” by arguing that his modernism returns us and itself to, rather than detaching us from, the world (p. 9). Connor adds that Beckett’s work presents “the extreme immanence required to live in this in-between condition—never at home in the world—but unable to be anywhere else than in the world.” (p. 9). “This in-between condition,” “the thisness of an intensely present sense of abeyance,” is described as “Beckett’s radical finitude” (pp. 11–12). In other words, the finitude that Connor recognizes in Beckett is different from the finitude found in Heidegger’s “being-towards-death,” the finitude of mortality. Beckett’s finitude involves “the inescapability of limit or restriction” (pp. 190–191). This finitude means “the coiled conjuncture” of two contrasting aspects. One facet is “a kind of privation in the heart of being, an awareness of the ever-present possibility of loss.” The second aspect is “the inability to live anywhere else *but* in the here and now,” “embeddedness, the impossibility of ever being otherwise than at a specific place and time, ‘en situation’” (p. 191). It is precisely this finitude, “this in-between condition,” that *Waiting for Godot* exposes.

### **“The Link between the Man and the World”**

We have seen how in this play the act of waiting reveals “the human condition,” which is inseparable from the human finitude, the paradoxical condition of being short of the world and of never being able to escape from the here and now. In this “human condition,” the act of waiting indicates one last ounce of belief in the world. In other words, if no belief in the world were present, there would be no waiting. Kiyokazu Washida, a Japanese philosopher, writes that “‘waiting’ is a meager act that is left to those who have given up all solutions that were possible here and now. Yet, without last ounce of belief in the world, they cannot even wait” (p. 32). The sense of waiting depicted in this play is radically different from our customary sense of waiting, for instance, waiting for a bus or for mail. It pertains to keeping ourselves open to the arrival of something without any definite promise. *Waiting for Godot* presents this image of two tramps who, through waiting, maintain a relation to the world, albeit barely.

This act of waiting, or the condition of being “tied to Godot,” can be thought of in light of Deleuze’s idea of “the link between man and the world.” In Chapter 7, “Thought and Cinema” in *Cinema 2*, Deleuze discusses how the modern world is becoming less human and in it “the link between man and world” is being lost:

The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. . . . The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible which can only be restored within a faith. Belief is no longer addressed to a different or transformed world. Man is in the world as if in a pure optical and sound situation. . . . Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link. . . . Restoring our belief in the world—this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being bad) (pp. 171–172).

Thus, Deleuze asserts that in modern society, wherein people no longer believe in the world, cinema has the power to restore “the link between man and the world,” that is, “our belief in the world.” Moreover, he speaks of Rossellini’s remark that “the less human the world is, the more it is the artist’s duty to believe and produce belief in a relation between man and the world, because the world is made by men” (p. 171). Considering Beckett’s art concerning this observation about modern cinema and belief, one could say that *Waiting for Godot* is an attempt to present “the link between man and the world.” Through the archetypal image of two tramps waiting for Godot, that is, being “tied to Godot,” Beckett endeavored to indicate this link or “the last ounce of belief in the world.”

According to Deleuze, this belief can be restored only insofar as people are “confronted by something unthinkable in thought,” meaning that thought is “brought face to face with its impossibility” (pp. 168–169). He writes, “To believe, not in a different world, but in a link between man and the world, in love or life, to believe in this as in the impossible, the unthinkable, which none the less cannot but be thought” (170). Here, it is suggested that belief in the world is intimately connected to belief in the unthinkable in thought. Later in the text, Deleuze describes the unthinkable in thought as “a point of the outside.” Concerning cinema and thought, Deleuze writes that in the montage in Welles, Resnais, and Godard, “the power of thought gave way . . . to an unthought in thought, to an irrational proper to thought, a point of outside beyond the outside world, but capable of restoring our belief in the world” (p. 181). Thus, Deleuze holds that belief in “a point of outside,” the unthought in thought, restores our belief in the world. To return to *Waiting for Godot*, one could say that the figure of Godot, which constitutes the absent center of the play, corresponds to this “point of outside.” Waiting entails trying to keep ourselves open to this “unthought in thought.”

## Conclusion

*Waiting for Godot* depicts the human condition as being “tied to Godot.” This is the “bedrock of the essentials, the archetypal” that Beckett intended to convey in writing and directing this play. As explained, this condition of being “tied to Godot” implies the human finitude—the tormenting in-between condition—the condition of being short of the world and that of never being able to escape from the here and now. However, at the same time, this condition of being “tied to Godot” indicates one last ounce of belief in the world. By disclosing this invisible “tie,” *Waiting for Godot* evokes “the link between man and the world” in the audience’s mind. One might even say that it carries the power to induce the audience to believe in the link.<sup>3</sup> Thus, through this play, Beckett presented a paradoxical possibility that our belief in the

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<sup>3</sup> This is related to the fact that *Waiting for Godot* has been regarded as having a political aspect or power. As Morin writes, Beckett’s plays have the capacity “to give rise to transformative political allegories” as shown in the work of the San Quentin Drama Workshop. She observes that “Some performances of *Waiting for Godot*—in particular, the bilingual Hebrew-Arabic production directed by Ilan Ronen in Haifa in 1984 and Susan Sontag’s 1993 production in Sarajevo—have been celebrated for their capacity to generate political metaphors appropriate to times of great international tension” (Morin, p. 9).

world is revealed in our extreme condition of finitude, in the predicament of what he calls “the ultimate penury,” as in our experience of the devastation of the world in various catastrophic events.

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