

## Waiting for God? Oh.

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In *Waiting for Godot*,<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett presents an image of God and the need for meaning. This is accomplished in part through Vladimir and Estragon's on-going dialogue about Godot, who can be taken as a representation of God (or, if not a deity, as a force of change or meaning). It is also accomplished through discussions and speeches explicitly centering on God. The speech by Lucky is perhaps the most compelling yet difficult example of this.

Although it can be overlooked as only a welcome moment of silly distraction in a long, sometimes tedious play, the slave Lucky's speech is in fact quite a significant set of lines. There is profundity in its lunacy. At the beginning of the speech, Lucky states, "...a personal God...outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia, divine athambia, divine aphasia, loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell..." (Beckett 45). While Lucky himself has evidently suffered some type of cognitive breakdown (and continues to suffer from aphasia, judging from the incoherent nature of the speech), it seems that he was once an educated, capable person, considering his vocabulary and intimations of education. The intelligent nuances of the speech are Beckett's manner of communicating a central idea in the play to us: the nature of God and his relationship to man.

Lucky first describes God as personal. God, or something saving like God, is sought by Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, and Lucky, but in an individualistic, rather than communal or religiously organized manner. They seek a

deity out of desperation and need for meaning and validation of their existence. The personal way in which the characters reach for God is much the same manner in which they relate to each other. They are separate, unentwined entities sharing a stage. The references of Vladimir and Estragon to God and the Bible are not so much reverent as speculative, yet both of them are waiting for Godot, for their personal savior. Lucky also describes God as being unrestrained by time. For Vladimir and Estragon especially, such a quality in them would be a blessed relief. A God unrestrained by time is a God without knowledge of human suffering such as the suffering of Vladimir and Estragon, for their trouble is caused by their desire to find a way to fill time, culminating in a series of activities and largely pointless diversions to keep time moving along.

Lucky's fabrication of the word '*apathia*' can be taken to mean apathy. Clearly, with Godot's continued failure to arrive at the appointment with Vladimir and Estragon, the symbolism is that God, or that life change or event which can rescue humanity, is apathetic, disinterested, not of help to the suffering. Perhaps most telling is the phrase "who loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell" (Beckett 45). Just as Vladimir and Estragon put their hope in Godot for their rescuing of sorts, continuing to stand by the same tree day after day until he shows up, so Beckett presents the suggestion that God forsakes the needs of some. Vladimir and Estragon believe that eventually through the passage of time, Godot will arrive for his appointment with them. Vladimir and Estragon are representations of those exceptions to God's love, to meaning, to salvation.

It is apparent that Vladimir and Estragon live passive lives. Estragon states, after being

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting For Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (New York: Grove Press, 1954) It might be worth noting here that Beckett chose to emphasize the first syllable when pronouncing Godot's name.

beaten as he is every night, “I tell you I wasn’t doing anything” (Beckett 65) to which Vladimir responds, “Perhaps you weren’t. But it’s the way of doing it that counts, the way of doing it, if you want to go on living” (Beckett 65).

Focusing on this set of lines while keeping the general theme of the play in mind, I find a startlingly exact description of the lives of Vladimir and Estragon. They do not do much of anything; however, Vladimir’s remarks highlight the need for them to find a way to live such that their lives count for something. Unfortunately, their only activity is waiting, and waiting is inherently passive.

Another significant reference point is the underlying theme of exploitation. Lucky’s desperate attempt to prevent Pozzo from selling him brings to mind the kind of exploitation that has occurred between employer and employee, or between industry workers and big business. Vladimir and Estragon must subject themselves to a certain degree to whomever or whatever Godot is. For example, when discussing the deal between them and Godot, Estragon asks, “We’ve lost our rights?” (Beckett 15). Vladimir responds, “We got rid of them” (Beckett 15). In light of their agreement with Godot, Vladimir and Estragon have subjected themselves to his will, at least to some degree. In a similar way, each person, whether in her dependence on another or in her belief in God, must surrender some part of her free will, and often, particularly in the case of religion, she must surrender her freedom of thought or freedom to question, as well.

Near the end of the play, Estragon asks Vladimir what would happen if they stopped waiting for Godot. Vladimir tells him, “He’d punish us...Everything’s dead but the tree” (Beckett 107). Two possibilities in meaning arise from this passage. In stating that Godot would punish them should they fail to keep their appointment Vladimir is perhaps referencing a kind of fear that often keeps

people chained to their passive life-choices, or to their belief in God. This is a fear that can keep people waiting for God to show up, or for some external force to make their life change, so they won’t have to abandon their hopes and face going on with their life on their own initiative. Vladimir’s proclamation that “everything is dead but the tree” is an utterance reflecting his ultimate desperation, and seems to echo Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy, most importantly the infamous pronouncement “God is dead” spoken by the titular character in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the interplay of this dialogue, Vladimir and Estragon reveal their need to be recognized. Vladimir, for example, longs to be remembered by the boy who comes to tell them Godot will be coming tomorrow. This recognition (which never arrives) holds the promise of a confirmation of his existence. More quintessential even than their need for human recognition is Estragon’s critical question to Vladimir: “Do you think God sees me?” (Beckett 87). For Estragon, this is an expression of his need for what might be considered the ultimate confirmation of his existence and value. But Vladimir is unmoved by Estragon’s quest for validation: “You must close your eyes.”

Through his characters, Samuel Beckett presents a unique depiction of the manner in which human beings view God or seek after meaning in life, as well as the ways in which they relate to one another and their world. The result is a work of existentialist philosophy, one that suggests a subtle, nagging sensation of the necessity for humans to generate their own definitions of meaning.

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<sup>2</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1961). See also F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1974), §§108-125 and 343.

