

Reexamining Positivity of Thinking in *Waiting for Godot* Through Camus's Absurdism

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Absurdity originated from French existentialism, and Martin Esslin, in categorizing *Waiting for Godot* as a theater of the absurd, ignores the positive aspects of Camus's absurdism and regards that as an existential tragedy of mankind. However, the author Samuel Beckett himself did not approve of such a definition, believing that Esslin's definition of theater of the absurd was too judgmental and pessimistic. Through the imagery of boots, ropes, hats and baggage in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett reveals the rootlessness, constraint and agony of the minds of people born into absurdity in the early 20th century. The *luck* of Lucky is Beckett's use of irony: people who have lost the ability to think for themselves escape the absurdity and dystopia of life and descend to slaves. Gogo and Didi, who are waiting and expecting, and thinking in the midst of absurdity, represent "Godot", the symbol of hope. Their endurance in waiting, akin to Camus's Sisyphus, underscores a form of existential defiance that challenges the notion of absolute pessimism in absurdist literature.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Camus, absurdism, think

Introduction

Samuel Beckett's work has undeniably French cultural roots, and although he was born in Ireland, his life was inextricably linked to France. After he graduated from Trinity College, Dublin in 1927, he went to the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, France, to work as a teacher of English in November 1928. During this time, through Thomas MacGreevy, he became associated with the French capital's cultural group, and in particular with Eugene Jolas, editor of the French avant-garde modernist magazine *Transition*, in which he went on to publish some of his early works such as *Assumption* and others. His first novel, *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, was also written in Paris. After the German occupation of France, he witnessed the Nazis' treatment of the Jews. Feeling "unable to do nothing about it", he became involved in the resistance organization GloriaSMH, and after the end of the Second World War in European area, he returned to writing, most notably with the play *Waiting for Godot*, the novel trilogy *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho: Three Novels*, all written first in French and then translated into English. For Beckett, it is difficult to distinguish between his Irish roots and his French roots as a stronger influence on his writing.

Waiting for Godot was "categorized" as a play of the absurd, and the key word "absurd" was derived from the French existentialist philosophy represented by Sartre and Camus. Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*, first

published in 1938, referred to the nature of the absurd: "Absurd: irreducible; nothing—not even a profound, secret aberration of Nature—could explain that" (Sartre, 1965, p. 185). In 1943, Albert Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he drew on both Sartre's term of "absurdity", but at the same time endowed positiveness to the absurd. He argued for several themes of the absurd and ultimately embedded his philosophy in the familiar Camusian figure of Sisyphus. Camus's absurdism recognized the following ideas: (1). The sense of the absurd arises from "the dissociation between man and life" (Camus, 2017, p. 81), and that the absurd arises and is inevitable between the limited rationalism and the powerful irrationalism and that "the only known is the absurd" (Camus, 2017, p. 99). (2). "The absurd only makes sense under the condition that people disapprove of it" (Camus, 2017, p. 100). In other words, it is by realizing the absurd and resisting it that life gains its own meaning. In this regard, it can be seen that Camus, on the basis of Sartre, emphasizes the positive significance of absurdity, and that life is full of absurdity, but what is more important is the courage and strength to face up to the absurd and resist it.

Theater theorist Martin Esslin argued that plays such as *Waiting for Godot* not only inherited the idea of the absurd from existentialist philosophy, but also went further in its artistic form, reaching a unity of content and form: "Artistically rather than philosophically speaking, the plays of Sartre and Camus are less appropriate as expressions of the philosophies of Sartre and Camus" (Esslin, 2003, p. 23). Esslin used the terms "theory" and "experience" to distinguish between the two. The absurd is embodied in existentialist reasoning in the form of "theory" and presented by the theater of the absurd in the form of "experience". It is worth noting that the positive aspects of this are partially lost when Esslin adopted Camus's absurdism to define the theater of the absurd.

Nonetheless, Esslin's creation of "the theater of absurd" still has its own merits, and has produced a great influence, even affecting the study of "absurdity" in China. As early as 1963, Dong Hengxun (1963, pp. 10-1) summarized the common characteristics of the French anti-drama school (most of which were also known as the theater of the absurd): (1). "Violation of traditional forms of drama"; (2). "Absurd": "There is no truth in the world, it is impossible for people to understand each other. The human existence is absurd"; (3). "Pessimism." The highly influential theoretical article "Absurdity and Absurd Postmodernism" reverses the relationship between the philosophy of absurdity and the theater of the absurd, showing that "absurdity originally referred to a theater genre in Western modernist art," a name defined by "Martin Esslin's famous work, *The Theater of the Absurd*" (Zhou, 1995, p. 27).

The conclusions drawn by many domestic textual interpretations of *Waiting for Godot* are often pessimistic and negative, ignoring the positive aspects of Camusian absurdity. For example, Zhu Hong argued that *Waiting for Godot* embodies "the general ideological characteristics of the theater of the absurd: the unknowability of the world, the impermanence of fate, the lowly state of man, the meaninglessness of behavior, and the paranoia about death" (Zhu, 1978, p. 215). Tong Shenxiu's study pointed to the theme of suicide in absurdist philosophy, but in his view, the characters in *Waiting for Godot* are incapable of even committing suicide: "Since life is full of inextricable pain and misery, man's only way out is death" and "Once they have the right to make a choice between life and death, they would undoubtedly. They will undoubtedly choose the latter. Unfortunately, they do not even have the right to make such a choice" (Tong, 1992, p. 40). From Esslin's introduction of the concept of "absurdity" into his "the theater of the absurd" to the domestic criticism of

Waiting for Godot at the end of the twentieth century, the pessimistic nature of “absurdity” has always occupied a mainstream position, while the positive aspects of Camusian “absurdity” have been largely ignored.

In the 21st century, there have been attempts to reconnect *Waiting for Godot* with Camus' philosophy of the absurd. For example, Ren combines the concept of absurdity and waiting, connecting Godot's act of waiting with Sisyphus's pushing of the stone, and points out the hope embedded in the act of waiting (Ren, 2013, p. 55). Focusing on the theme of suicide, Richard Durán analyzes the connotations of suicide in *Waiting for Godot* and Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, stating that “there is a striking consistency between Camus's work and Beckett's plays” (Durán, 2009, p. 991).

Therefore, on the basis of the close connection between the theater of the absurd and existentialism, this paper tries to re-examine with Camus's absurdism the theme of “thinking” in *Waiting for Godot*. The combination of “absurdity” and “thinking” will reflect Beckett's attention on the positive nature of the repetitive behaviors of waiting and thinking behind the seemingly incomprehensible, chaotic and fragmented plot of the play. Absurdity, pain, and hope are all closely linked to the keyword “thinking”. On the one hand, Beckett presents the rootlessness, the constraints and the agony of people's action of thinking in the 20th century, and the inability to “think” is not only a vivid situation of the characters themselves, but also a social situation in the post-modern period. But on the other hand, behind such pain, he still encourages “thinking” during waiting to face the absurdity and resist it with a spirit of Camus Sisyphus, so that life can regain its meaning and value.

The Rootlessness of Thinking

Camus points out that the major sense of absurdity comes from the separation of man from the world. “One feels an outsider in a world suddenly deprived of illusion and light. This exile is irretrievable, for nostalgia for the lost homeland and the expectation of a heavenly paradise are denied. This alienation of man from life, of the actor from his background, is precisely the sense of the absurd” (Camus, 2017, p. 81). Under the reflection on the traditional knowledge system, traditional religious beliefs and rational traditions have lost their absolute stability. On the one hand, the religion of “God is dead” could not provide support and solace. On the other hand, people in the early twentieth century discovered the limitations of Enlightenment rationality. The instability and uncertainty of faith and knowledge caused the rootlessness of people's thinking in the twentieth century. When tradition was broken, truth became a kind of interpretation and construction, in which absurdity was born.

Waiting for Godot embodies the absurdity of human thinking through the break with tradition, where thinking loses its stable foundation and everything seems broken and chaotic. People live in uncertainty, and all the traditional linear, logical notions of time and space are broken:

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

ESTRAGON: You think.

VLADIMIR: I must have made a note of it. (He fumbles in his pockets, bursting with miscellaneous rubbish.)

ESTRAGON: (very insidious). But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (Pause.) Or Monday? (Pause.) Or Friday?

VLADIMIR: (looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape). It's not possible”! (Beckett, 1954, pp. 10-11)

Lan Zheren (2004) once noted that this confusion of time represents a “temporal gravity and oppression”. This perspective emphasizes the suffering of people’s lives after the war, and the “repetition” of time represents the worthlessness and meaninglessness of life. At the same time, however, this confusion and repetition of time is also attributed to the collapse of the knowledge system and the realization that the traditional way of dating is only an artificial marker, a rational construct. Thinking without roots, people are unable to make accurate judgments between “effective but limited reason” and “constantly regenerating irrationality” (Camus, 2017, p. 103).

At the same time, as Camus puts it, it is through the “negation of reason” that one can establish religion: “God is sustained only by the negation of human reason” (Camus, 2017, p. 107); and Camus simultaneously denies the supremacy of the divine. In his view, such God-worship, the attribution to faith of all that is inaccessible to reason, is an abandonment of the real, an escape from the absurd itself. Combined with the implications of dates in Western religion, the uncertainty of dates in *Waiting for Godot* also represents the collapse of religious belief. In the *Old Testament*, God created the world in seven days, and that in the first six days he created the heavens, the earth, light, water, man, and other holy spirits, and then on the seventh day he finished his work and rested. And Saturday symbolizes the seventh day in the midst of creation and is known as the Sabbath. According to God’s will, people could rest and not work, but they could not do anything not related to worship (Warton, 2000, pp. 28-30). In *Waiting for Godot*, the two characters intentionally confuse “Saturday” with “Sunday,” suggesting, on the one hand, the overthrow of Saturday’s sanctity as the Sabbath, and Beckett’s questioning of the absoluteness of religion, announcing the collapse of Christianity as the foundation of Western meaning and values for more than a thousand years; on the other hand, it shows that a new “Sunday” has arrived, and that new beliefs need to be established on this rootless soil, and that they need a new “all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good” to replace God’s original position in Western civilization (Wang, 2000, pp. 82-3). Such hesitation is also reflected in the “pauses” that the author constantly emphasizes, each of which is a doubt about the traditional knowledge system in the language of the play, and each of which shows the hesitation of people’s rootless thinking and their expectation of a new system of thought.

From this point of view, the symbolism of the boot can be explained. The boot represents the situation of people’s situation of thinking, and the protagonists’ repeated taking off, putting on the boot and looking inside it is also representing the questioning of the traditional system.

Estragon with a supreme effort succeeds in pulling off his boot. He peers inside it, feels about inside it, turns it upside down, shakes it, looks on the ground to see if anything has fallen out, finds nothing, feels inside it again, staring sightlessly before him. (Beckett, 1954, p. 8)

This state of daring to question, which is neither blindly subject to reason nor religion, is exactly what absurd people should be. They discover the limitations of traditional thinking and are brave enough to break with authority and make new attempts. Such uninformed, trivial repetitions throughout the play all embody absurdity—a rootlessness of thought. Beckett once said, “It is the artist’s task now to find a form that accommodates chaos” (Worton, 2000, p. 74). He was trying to move away from the Joycean “omniscient” literature that he had originally relied on to a “clueless” literature:

The more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending towards omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance... My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable—as something by definition incompatible with art. (McDonald, 2006, p. 15).

He welcomes a new art form that recognizes chaos, because it is only when the chaos of twentieth-century life and the unreliability of traditional systems of knowledge and religion are directly revealed in literature that people can become aware of it and try to find ways of deconstructing it, making it possible to think independently, to break out of the conventional, and to rebuild their own systems of thinking and learning.

The Constraint of Thinking

It has already been argued that people's thinking is in a state of rootlessness, and the birth of new ideas is still in the predicament under the governing of the old beliefs, which, in Camus' view, is a kind of human "nostalgia". Carl L. Becker, in *The Heaven City of the 18th Century Philosophers*, points out that Enlightenment philosophy actually replaced the Christian "myth" of the Garden of Eden with "a naive faith in the authority of nature and reason" (Becker, 1991, p. 30). And when modern philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and others reaffirmed the power of the irrational, the myth forged by the Enlightenment once again shattered. And as the absurdists eagerly seek new ideas, the old dogma still haunts the multitudes like shackles and constraints.

Beckett emphasizes this constraint on thinking through symbols such as hats. At the beginning of the play, the hat makes an appearance as an important object that is closely associated with the act of waiting for Godot.

VLADIMIR: Sometimes I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer. (He takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, puts it on again.) How shall I say? Relieved and at the same time... (he searches for the word) ... appalled. (With emphasis.) AP-PALLED. (He takes off his hat again, peers inside it.) Funny. (He knocks on the crown as though to dislodge a foreign body, peers into it again, puts it on again.) Nothing to be done. (Estragon with a supreme effort succeeds in pulling off his boot. He peers inside it, feels about inside it, turns it upside down, shakes it, looks on the ground to see if anything has fallen out, finds nothing, feels inside it again, staring sightlessly before him.) Well? (Beckett, 1954, p. 8)

It is worth noting that the process of the character's "searches for the word" is linked to the process of taking off and removing the hat. The hat makes it easy for the reader to think of the head or the brain. It seems that the hat becomes the residence of thoughts, and the whole process of thinking and phrasing is inseparable from the hat, which is an external object. In contrast, the human brain, the inner self, is empty. Man's ability to think on his own is absent. Beckett's emphasis on the fact that "all" the characters "wear bowlers," and his repeated references to the characters probing into the hats in the hope of seeing inside them, and to their interchangeability from one character to the next, exemplify the symbolic importance of the hat.

At the same time, the hat, as an accessory worn on the head, is like a binding on the process of thinking. Beckett's depiction of Lucky's thinking process with the hat presents the depth of the shackles on people's thinking at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Lucky: Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqu with white beard quaquaquaqu 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 and suffers like the divine Miranda with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment plunged in fire

whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it will fire the firmament that is to say blast hell to heaven so blue still and calm so calm with a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing but not so fast and considering what is more that as a result of the labors left unfinished crowned by the Acacacademy of Anthropopometry of Essy-in-Possy [...] (Beckett, 1954, p. 28)

On the one hand, the fact that Lucky “can’t think without a hat” is itself extremely ironic. On the other hand, Lucky’s discourse is absurd and lacks basic logic precisely because he is bound by a plethora of traditional ideas. As Camus puts it, “by absurdity, I mean the conflict between irrationality and the desire to figure it out” (Camus, 2017, p. 92). The absurdity here is reflected in the fact that discourses representing traditional authorities, including the humanities, the arts, knowledge, and the religious realm, are mixed together in an irrational and confusing way. His thoughts are entirely constructed by others, and the old authoritative discourse dominates his thoughts.

As Beckett once said, “Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness” (Wang, 2016, p. 10). Through language, Beckett shows us that constrained thinking is either silent or impotent. How can a person stand up and make their voice heard? As Camus mentioned, only those who directly faced absurdity can gain meanings in life. Beckett still leaves them with hope—Godot. While waiting for him, they still try to think with their own bound minds.

The Agony of Thinking

Living in the world of absurdity, there are two types of corresponding images, slaves and death row inmates. Slaves are free: “Ancient slaves did not belong to themselves. Yet they experienced the freedom of not having to be responsible” (Camus, 2017, p. 120). The freedom of not having to think about one’s responsibilities and duties, of not having to be responsible for oneself, is an escape, an escape from the burdens and pains of life. He has given up his self-existence because of the absurdity of life; the slave’s mind has returned to the peace of death although his body still lives in this absurd world. The prisoner is the opposite of the slave, his mind recognizes the absurdity of life, realizes the end of his own death, but still bravely survives in the absurdity, even though he is imprisoned in the absurdity, but still faces up to the absurdity, and rebels against the absurdity, until death. Camus esteemed the image of the prisoner whose persistence is considered by him their resistance. He recognizes the existence of absurdity, but he believes more strongly in man’s rebellion against it.

Lucky and Pozzo are representative of the slave image. Beckett uses symbols such as rope and luggage to show Lucky’s servility. The “rope” symbolizes the ease and freedom of Lucky’s mind; he does not need to think independently or be responsible for himself. On the contrary, “baggage” symbolizes the pain and burden of Lucky’s body, because he gives up thinking and avoids thinking, he must bear the physical pain. Lucky’s luck is Beckett’s irony. He lacks the ability to think, no longer thinks, ignores the absurd, and thus sinks into the absurdity and loses himself. That’s his luck, but this also determines that Lucky is not a heroic figure. Pozzo seems to be the opposite of Lucky, who masters everything, but in fact, the rope binds people at both ends. The rope is also placed on Pozzo, who also fails to realize the absurdity of life, or rather, he fails to have the courage to face the absurd nature of life.

Vladimir and Estragon are the representation of the prisoner. We find that both of the characters are imprisoned in the process of waiting for Godot. They have recognized the absurdity of life, but they don't abandon themselves "in the world of the absurd, accepting its sepulchral nature, and finding their own voices among the ruins" (Camus, 2017, p. 95). In a world where intellectual traditions have collapsed, it is painful to realize the existence of the absurd and to have a sense of self, but instead of ending their lives by "suicide," they still try to think about the meaning of life.

VLADIMIR: When you seek you hear.
 ESTRAGON: You do.
 VLADIMIR: That prevents you from finding.
 ESTRAGON: It does.
 VLADIMIR: That prevents you from thinking.
 ESTRAGON: You think all the same.
 VLADIMIR: No no, impossible.
 ESTRAGON: That's the idea, let's contradict each other.
 VLADIMIR: Impossible.
 ESTRAGON: You think so?
 VLADIMIR: We're in no danger of ever thinking any more.
 ESTRAGON: Then what are we complaining about?
 VLADIMIR: Thinking is not the worst.
 ESTRAGON: Perhaps not. But at least there's that.
 VLADIMIR: That what?
 ESTRAGON: That's the idea, let's ask each other questions.
 VLADIMIR: What do you mean, at least there's that?
 ESTRAGON: That much less misery.
 VLADIMIR: True.
 ESTRAGON: Well? If we gave thanks for our mercies?
 VLADIMIR: What is terrible is to have thought. (Beckett, 1954, p. 40)

In the world of the absurd, just as is mentioned by Estragon and Vladimir, "what is terrible is to have thought". The man of the absurd lives in the misery just because they have noticed and found out the absurd nature of life. They are not those who ignore the absurd and try to pretend a good life, but those who think with all their efforts despite the misery of thinking. As the author admits, he initially wanted to name the play *Waiting*, "which focuses on the process of waiting for Godot rather than Godot himself" (Sun, 2020, p. 19). Expecting in waiting, thinking in absurdity, this endless waiting and unresolvable pain is like Sisyphus pushing the stone. Gogo and Didi's waiting is a static process of absurdity, while Sisyphus's pushing stone is a dynamic process of absurdity. They discover the absurdity of life, the finite nature of reason, but they still try to grasp life through their finite reason. The whole picture of life is unknowable, but they do not give up. They restore the greatness of life by revolting to give it its own value, throughout its beginning and end. Those who no longer think have become slaves and have lost themselves, while those who still try to grasp the meaning of life suffer from the pain of thinking, which is the proof of existence.

Vladimir and Estragon are the representative of Godot itself, and thinking in the process of waiting symbolizes progress and hope itself. Scholars have assigned a transcendental meaning to Godot, such as "Godot is a symbol of new life and hope" (Zhao, 2013, p. 81), "Godot is a kind of transcendental existence" (Wang, 2000, p. 82), "Godot represents God" (Esslin, 2003, p. 27). But "Godot" is actually hidden in the

nicknames of the protagonists, "Gogo" and "Didi". This positive symbolism has already been incorporated into the protagonist's agonizing thoughts during the waiting process.

Conclusion

Esslin's definition of absurdity from Camus is attributed to tragedy: the absurd is "not because the human condition is funny, but because it is deeply tragic in an age when the loss of belief in God and human progress has eliminated the meaning of existence and has made human existence essentially purposeless and hence plainly opposed to reason" (Esslin, 1960, p. 671). On the one hand, *Waiting for Godot* does reflect the prevalence of irrationalism as well as the collapse of faith and the loss of the authority of traditional concepts in the twentieth century with the absurdity and implausibility of the sets, action, and plot, but on the other hand, the characters in *Waiting for Godot* do not give up on themselves and lose their longing and hope for the future because of the realization of the nature of the absurdity of their lives, but rather, they are in the midst of life's absurdity. On the contrary, they think in the midst of life's absurdity, and are determined in the midst of waiting.

Beckett once stated that he did not accept the definition of an absurdist play, believing it to be too arbitrary:

I have never accepted the notion of a theatre of the absurd, a concept that implies a judgement of value. It's not even possible to talk about truth. That's part of the anguish. (Knowlson, 1996, p. 178)

The reason for this cannot be ignored that it is Esslin who loses the positive coloring of the word "absurd" when he borrows the definition of the word "absurd". Beckett does not see his plays as presenting an absolute pessimism and misery. Instead, from an ideological point of view, we see the production of absurdity in *Waiting for Godot*: how the traditions and previous systems constrained people when they try to think, and how human nature prompts people to think in spite of the pain. Through the imagery of boots, ropes, hats, and luggage in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett reveals the rootlessness, constraint, and agony of the minds of people born into the absurdity of the early 20th century. *The luck of Lucky* is Beckett's irony; people who have lost the ability to think for themselves escape the dystopia of life and become slaves. Gogo and Didi, who are waiting for something and thinking in the midst of absurdity, represent "Godot", the symbol of hope.

In *Waiting for Godot*, we see how the unreliable knowledge confuses people when they try to think, how the former system constraints people when they think, and how human nature urges people to think regardless of miseries. "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better" (Beckett, 1989, p. 101). People are waiting for Godot, the future may not hold any results, but the important thing is that they are waiting for Godot. People who give up, like Pozzo and Lucky, gradually lose their minds and lose themselves in life. We usually think of Estragon and Vladimir as two negative characters, but we overlook the fact that they are the last two human beings left at the end of the play who have been waiting for Godot. "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better" (Beckett, 1989, p. 101). They have a positive reflection on Godot's waiting. Life is as absurd as it can be, and all that man can do is to resist forever, to resist all absurdity and the unknown. The more you resist, the more you are free. To end with the last line of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "One should think that Sisyphus is happy" (Camus, 2017, p. 165). We can imagine that the whole process of waiting for Godot is positive.

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