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Beckett and Brecht: Thoughts on the Human Condition

To playwrights of the WWII era, the classical Aristotelian model of theater was insufficient in conveying the true nature and problems of the world. For hundreds of years, audiences were entertained by relatable and realistic characters on stage, emotionally invested in their captivating stories. Greek audiences waited in suspense as Oedipus met his horrible fate, one he had tried so hard to avoid, and even now, through the same style of theater, people find themselves lost in the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. However, by the time people finish watching these plays, they have gone through a catharsis that frees them of any further thought about what they have just seen. The curtain falls and the stories of the characters remain behind it, their conflicts forever part of a fictional world. In changing the type of emotional impact that their plays had on audiences, writers in WWII sought to make people think beyond what was happening on stage, applying the conflicts they saw to their own lives even after they had left the playhouse. Two types of theater arose to accommodate this new purpose. The theater of the absurd, whose major figure was Samuel Beckett, attempted to showcase the human condition as confusing and incomprehensible. Through erasing the concept of time, displaying the inability of language to explain the world, and creating static characters and plotlines, Beckett suggests in his play *Waiting for Godot* that people's efforts to improve their conditions are futile. On the other hand, Bertolt Brecht's epic theater sought to teach audiences that humans imposed conditions

upon themselves, and thus had the ability to change them. In his work *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Brecht uses an episodic plot and the *Verfremdungseffekt* to point out the flaws in his static characters, suggesting, unlike Beckett, that the audience should rise above such characters rather than be like them. Though neither playwright left their contemporary audiences satisfied with their lives, both confronted the problems of their war torn world with a brutal honesty that would challenge ideas on the mutability of the human condition.

For both Beckett and Brecht, Aristotelian theater was problematic in that it offered relatable narratives, ones that made people feel like they could understand the world and feel complacent in it. Aristotle insisted on plays with a clear beginning, middle and end, detailing events that were all related to each other. A story that was connected from beginning to end had a reason behind everything that happened, and each character had a motive that would move the plot forward. Thus everything on stage made sense to the audience and, by its logical nature, had the potential to explain what occurred in real life. To Aristotle, “the episodic [were] the worst of all plots and actions,” because these would confuse audiences and not allow them to become invested in the stories of the characters (Krijanskaia 338). However, to Beckett and Brecht, such episodic, or even nonsensical, plot structure catered to a better representation of the human condition. For them, the post-war world was chaotic and disappointing, leaving people wondering if, as suggested in Aristotelian plays, there were in fact concrete and justifiable reasons for everything. Playwrights broke away from traditional plotlines not only to convey their feelings of loss and disillusionment at the time, but to make audiences question the idea of a comprehensible world. A consequence of this was audience disconnect from the play, because people were in the troubling situation of trying to understand what was happening on stage. This

contrasts with the main goal of Aristotelian theater, an emotional catharsis that “intended to maintain the emotional balance of the individual” (Winston 193). If a play was successful, it would instill pity and fear in the audience, feelings that would dissipate as the play reached its resolution. However, neither Beckett nor Brecht offer such freeing resolutions in their plays. This paper will discuss how, instead, both playwrights broke from expected representations and uses of time, language, and character development to address the problems they saw in the post-war world, each conveying different conclusions about the human condition to their audiences.

Time

For both Beckett and Brecht, the way time is perceived heavily impacts how much control people feel they have over their own lives. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett breaks from a linear plotline to create the impression that his characters are stuck in an unchanging situation, a belief he extends to the real world. Rather than having a story that escalates to a climax and reaches a resolution, Beckett writes a play in two acts that mirror each other in both their structure and monotony. In the beginning of both acts, the protagonists Vladimir and Estragon meet up after having been separated for a short time, and then spend the rest of the act waiting for the mysterious Godot, who never comes. Irish critic, Vivian Mercier, summed up the play when he said, “[Beckett] has achieved a theoretical 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.” The subtle differences between the two acts are the only indications of time, and even then they are vague and seemingly irrelevant. The opening of the first act states that the characters are on “A country road” with “A tree,” presumed to have no leaves, while the opening of the second places

the characters in the same setting, except with “four or five leaves” on the tree (1, 47). Typically growth would symbolize the coming of spring, or some other significant change over the passage of time, but for Beckett this is not the case. The fact that he does not specify the country, the tree, or even whether there are four or five leaves suggests that these indications of time and place are unimportant. Time and setting, which are central to the progression of most plotlines, are thus made stagnant and unknowable to the audience. In light of the disastrous events of WWII, this confusion implies that people in general cannot precisely perceive time, but are lost in it and therefore cannot control it.

The lack of progression does not miss the attention of the characters themselves, who become infuriated with the hopelessness of their unchanging situations, which in turn conveys the same frustration to the audience. Although Beckett does not specify the passage of time in his play, the characters, in their never ending wait for Godot, are inevitably aware of its presence in their lives. When Vladimir tries to point out the appearance of leaves on the tree, commenting on the changing scenery, Estragon replies, “All my lousy life I’ve crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery! [Looking wildly about him.] Look at this muckheap! I’ve never stirred from it!” (51). In this outburst, Estragon relates the internal turmoil he has been feeling, shooting down Vladimir’s optimistic words to point out the tiring and hopeless condition of waiting, whether it be for Godot or change in general. For Beckett, “Godot simply represents the objective of our waiting—an event, a thing, a person, death” (Esslin 50). While the characters wait, the audience is also waiting for something to happen. However, as the minutes tick by, the audience members find that time does not simply flow constantly, but rather is a “disaster or catastrophe” that “arrives primarily, and scandalously, because it is always already here,

weighing on us, insisting on its absence but irreducible gravity” (Lavery 216). In his unconventional use of the concept of time, Beckett simultaneously erases human perception of time as a linear and comprehensible entity and stresses its intangible omnipresence. Though not as dramatic as in the war, time in the play is a force that surrounds and presses down on people, never quite in their control and thus never able to meet their expectations.

While Beckett stresses the irrelevance of time in his play to make people feel trapped in their conditions, Brecht showcases human influence on time to make his audiences realize that they have control over the world around them. Although his audience consisted of those who had gone through WWII, Brecht sets his play in the Thirty Years’ War, taking audience members back in time to make them see the origins of the problems in the present. Of epic theater, Brecht said, “We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself” (Winston). Thus he hoped the story in his play would transcend time and deliver a message to the present, forcing audiences to apply the events on stage directly to their own lives. While the Thirty Years’ War happened 300 years before WWII, it saw the rise of the military industrial complex, a system wherein a capitalist economy partners with the national military so that both may profit. Thus, especially in times of war, the individual’s monetary and social success is heavily dependent upon his or her role in the economy (Smith). On the one hand, the longevity of this system through WWII gives it a sense of permanence, and thus impossible to expunge. However, in assigning a name and starting point to the system people are stuck in, Brecht in fact suggests that in seeing the human causes of such a system, one can find ways to end it.

The tie between the war and the military becomes integral to the story of Mother Courage in the play, who capitalizes on the war to sell goods. The opening of the play characterizes Mother Courage as a merchant, and places her in relation to the war by stating that it is “Spring 1624. The Protestant King of Sweden invades Catholic Poland” (5). Unlike to Beckett, the specification of time is important to Brecht, because it not only gives context to our own lives, but it is influenced by human actions. While the progression of the war is being shaped by the King’s commands, Mother Courage’s actions are being shaped by the war. Thus time is connected to humans in two different ways, one in which a person controls time and one in which a person is controlled by it. In fact, every act in the play opens like this, with an indication of time and a new situation for Mother Courage as a result of the changes in the war. Although Brecht skips years between each act, making for an episodic plot, the result of his defining time relative to his characters is that time is not simply a weight pressed upon people, but an integral part of their lives that they can perceive and control. As we will see later, while his characters fail to control the time given to them, much like Beckett’s characters, Brecht hopes that in seeing their mistakes, the audience will learn to take time into their own hands.

Language

Language in both plays functions similarly to time, in Beckett’s piece adding to the displeasure and confusion of the characters and in Brecht’s giving greater specification to the audience about what is going on and how it applies to the post-war world. In the scene wherein the protagonists meet Pozzo and Lucky, we see Beckett employing ironic speech not to create a deeper meaning, but to stress the monotony of his characters’ lives and their frustration with it. When Vladimir and Estragon see Pozzo, they think that he is the Godot for whom they are

waiting. But when Pozzo tells them that he is not Godot and asks who Godot is, Vladimir hesitantly replies, “Oh he’s a...he’s a kind of acquaintance” (15). Although the word “acquaintance” implies familiarity, the two actually do not know who they are waiting for, leading to the mix up with Pozzo. Estragon admits, “Personally, I wouldn’t even know him if I saw him,” and continues on to say that “the dusk...the strain...waiting...I confess...I imagined...for a second...” (15). Although this reversal at first seems ironic, Beckett actually uses his characters’ speech to imply nothing further than the disappointing nature of their situation. The ellipses in Estragon’s speech drag it out, much like how the time spent waiting for Godot has been dragged out. Thus the reader sees Estragon and Vladimir’s situation reflected in their speech; the pauses between the words representing the periods of boredom and hopelessness between encounters that make the characters think that their waiting has been worth something. But instead, characters like Pozzo come along rather than Godot, and the two characters, along with the audience, are left continuing on in their wait, much like how Estragon’s speech ends with ellipses, implying an unwanted and tiring continuation rather than a satisfying ending.

In the following scene, Beckett uses language to reflect the convoluted and unstructured nature of life, one that is neither comprehensible in the present nor ever will be. This scene, wherein the previously silent Lucky delivers a long speech to the audience, represents a central belief of the theater of the absurd, which is “the fallibility of language as a medium for the discovery and communication of metaphysical truths” (Esslin 34). Beckett borrows familiar speech from different areas such as academia and religion, yet he uses them in a way that does not make sense. He opens with:

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua 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. (33)

Here, God represents “a mixture of authoritarian discourses” characterized by apathia (apathy), athambia (imperturbability), and aphasia (muteness), incapable of adequately serving and caring for his people (Koshal). Lucky, with his words coming out in a jumbled mess, cannot explain why there are “some exceptions” to the love given by this figurative God, saying that there are “reasons unknown but time will tell.” He repeats this last line throughout the speech, much like how he strangely repeats “quaquaqua” in the introduction, implying that he himself does not understand the very thoughts he is trying to express. Although Lucky hopes that “time will tell,” time in itself has not offered, nor seems to have the potential to offer, the characters any consolation despite their patience. Adding to the lack of promise in waiting is the fact that God lives “outside time without extension,” making him as intangible as both time and those parts of the human condition that he supposedly controls. This futile search for understanding is also inherent in the structure of the speech, which is a run on sentence, never quite ending anywhere, much like Vladimir and Estragon’s wait for Godot. The implied “ending” is written in the form of ellipses, similar to how Estragon’s speech before ended in ellipses, modeling a dragged out continuation.

Brecht, on the other hand, specifically relies on his characters’ speech through the *Verfremdungseffekt* to develop his argument against civilian complacency and incite action against world problems. In the *Verfremdungseffekt*, translated as “the alienation effect,”

characters direct their speech towards the audience, making people aware that they are watching a play and separating them from the events of the play itself. Brecht hoped this would inspire “genuine participation” of the audience, unlike in Aristotelian theater wherein “the audience is entangled in the action on stage,’ a process which is bound to ‘exhaust their power of action’” (Politzer). Although the audience is not involved in the play in that they are not emotionally connected to the characters, they are still connected to the conflicts. This is because Brecht purposefully has his characters address issues that people in the audience would have known. As a result, the commentary found in his uses of the alienation effect are directed at the audience so that people may look at their problems differently, and hopefully be able to solve them.

In one such speech, Mother Courage ironically, and disapprovingly, points out that she is not courageous, but that poor people are, in a way that is self-destructive. She argues that these people need courage “to get out of bed each morning, or plough a potato field in wartime, or bring kids with no prospects into the world—to live poor, that takes courage” (125). This living situation would have been familiar to audiences at the time, since many countries were left with war torn economies and little hope for improvement in their daily lives. Despite their downtrodden states, they carried on, as Mother Courage points out, supporting “the Emperor and his heavy throne and the Pope and his stone cathedral” (125). Her statement alludes to not only people’s support of the government and church, but also its enterprises, including war. In following the commands of their leaders, the people possess what Mother Courage calls “perverted courage, because what they carry on their backs will cost them their lives” (125). In other words, in not having enough courage to get rid of the weight of their situations—the physical and psychological impacts of living in a war—people resign themselves to a detrimental

state of being. The biting tone that Mother Courage adopts while saying all of this suggests her disapproval towards this way of living, which in turn causes the audience, to whom she is addressing her speech, to feel disgust towards itself. Ironically enough, Mother Courage does not follow her own advice throughout the play.

Brecht's protagonist comes to embody the very "perverted courage" she accuses the poor of possessing, something the playwright did on purpose to point out the problem with people following the flow of time. In the third act of the play, wherein Mother Courage is trying to negotiate the sale of bullets with a quartermaster, she says, "The King will never be defeated...because everyone knows he's in the war to make a profit...If it's business, it makes sense" (61). Unlike in the scene wherein she discusses courage, here Brecht uses the *Verfremdungseffekt* to show how the protagonist, like many people of WWII, allows herself to get caught up in the capitalist system, the need for money controlling her actions. She herself follows the king because what he is doing "makes sense" to her, and in this way subjects herself to the same "perverted courage." Not to mention, Mother Courage literally goes where there is money, traveling on her wagon to sell goods throughout the war period, allowing the progress of the war to direct her life. As a result of trapping herself in the military industrial complex, Mother Courage loses control over other parts of her life. While she continues to bargain over the bullets, her son is killed, and another character scolds her and says, "Look what you've done with your haggling and hanging on." (95). The thought of her son slips from her mind as she finds herself overly involved in her bargaining, and she becomes a victim of the military industrial complex rather than one of its beneficiaries. In this way, Mother Courage becomes an example of how following the king and the war, rather than going against them, will "cost lives,"

in this case that of her son. In showing this ironic turn of events for Mother Courage, Brecht uses her speech to convey a consequence of human inaction against the systems pushed upon them, unlike Beckett who uses his characters' speech to make the audience feel that there is no system and therefore no way of escaping the harsh conditions of the world.

Character Development

Not only do their characters' words convey Beckett and Brecht's opposing views on human control over their own living conditions, but the outcome and implied commentary on these characters' lives also add to their respective arguments. From the beginning of the play, Beckett makes it evident through his characters' dialogue and decisions that people are incapable of escaping the harsh, "incomprehensible" world. He places his protagonists alone on the side of the road, conveying a sense of human isolation characteristic of the theater of the absurd, and uses their actions—or rather lack of actions—to display the "irremediable character of the human condition" (Esslin 332). The opening shows Estragon trying to remove his boot, but he eventually gives up and says, "Nothing to be done" (1). Already, Beckett has his audience thinking about the futility of human effort. This idea is reminiscent of that seen in Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, an essay that helped define absurdism and influenced writers at the time like Beckett. In the myth, Sisyphus is condemned to rolling a rock up a mountain, his labor never worth anything as the rock always rolls back down. For Camus, a man going through this endless cycle eventually "lacks the hope of a promised land to come," a situation that Beckett sets up for Estragon at the beginning of the play (Esslin 23). Beckett's placement of this scene at the start of his play is as strategic as his phrasing of Vladimir's subsequent response. Rather than help or encourage his friend, Vladimir agrees with his inaction, saying, "I'm beginning to come round to

that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle" (1). Vladimir's response expands Estragon's situation to other parts of life, and also contributes to Camus' argument that a man who sees the futility of his own efforts will eventually lose hope. In saying "you haven't yet tried everything," Vladimir is telling himself to keep hoping for something better. However, the fact that he begins to accept Estragon's idea that there is nothing left to be done suggests that this hope is useless. Beckett, through this introductory dialogue and reapplication of Camus' ideas, shows the audience that the human condition is tragically unchanging.

Brecht, on the other hand, opens his play with the use of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, demonstrating through a sergeant's zeal the crudeness of war and why people need to work against it. Whereas a part of Beckett's work was inspired by a Greek myth, Brecht's work sought to make audiences an active part of such myths. Drawing on the myth of Prometheus, Brecht said that the theater was a place for audiences to "not only hear how Prometheus was set free, but also train themselves in the pleasure of freeing him. They must be taught to feel in our theatre all the satisfaction and enjoyment felt by the inventor and the discoverer, all the triumph felt by the liberator" (Hodgson 163). In the case of *Mother Courage*, Brecht hoped that people would become their own liberators from war. At the beginning of the play, while the sergeant and an army recruiter struggle to find men to serve in the war, the sergeant addresses the audience and says, "The problem with these people is they haven't had enough war" (5). Unlike the demoralized words of Vladimir and Estragon, the sergeant's words suggest the need for greater action, which, in this case, is more fighting. However, Brecht was aware that audiences at the time would not have swallowed these lines as easily as they did those of Vladimir and Estragon,

because they had been living through WWII and thus knew the consequences of war. Instead, Brecht uses the feelings of discomfort that his audiences had about war to make them realize that “war is nothing less than the greatest scourge of man’s making” (Freedman 158). The sergeant goes on to say that “Everything rots in peacetime” and that “War makes order, order makes war,” as if attempting to teach his audience a lesson about the good of war in real life rather than actually talking about the lack of support for the war in the play. The sergeant’s tone is didactic but also condescending, making the audience reluctant to accept his words just as it is reluctant to accept war as a means to achieve order. In making his audience feel disdain for the sergeant rather than admiration, Brecht encourages members of his audience to go against proponents of war instead of supporting them.

The contrasting views of each playwright are reiterated in the endings of their respective plays, both of which display the lack of progression in their characters’ lives but with differing effects. At the end of the first act of *Waiting for Godot*, after seeing the futility of their efforts, Estragon asks, “Well, shall we go?” to which Vladimir replies, “Yes, let’s go.” At the end of the second act, these words are repeated, except the speakers are switched. However, despite their urge to do something else, Beckett writes both times that “They do not move,” leaving them stuck in not only their situation but in the never ending condition of waiting. The audience, having sat through the entire play, is thus also left in waiting. At the same time, *Mother Courage and the Soldiers* in Brecht’s play likewise continue in their same condition at the end of the play. The soldiers are seen marching into battle, while Mother Courage asks to go with them. As the soldiers march, they sing, “The day of wrath will come like thunder / But who has time to make amends? / You march in line, but never wonder / How it began and where it ends” (204-205).

Here, Brecht once again uses his characters' speech in the *Verfremdungseffekt* to make his audience realize the flaws in those very characters. Although the soldiers continue to march, continue to follow the progression of the war, Brecht wants his audience to realize that this is not only mindless and detrimental, but is something that the viewers cannot do if they are to save themselves. The audience is presumed to be in the same situation as Mother Courage and the soldiers, marching in line with the events of the war that just occurred, thinking that their lives are in shambles and out of their control. However, it is Brecht's hope that in seeing the soldiers and Mother Courage blindly follow the war, the audience will start to think for themselves about "how it began and where it ends," and take action to end it themselves.

For hundreds of years, Aristotelian theater was sufficient in explaining the world and representing it. However, with the tragedies of WWI and WWII, such a model was not enough to truthfully portray the events of real life anymore. Rather than give audiences hope and inspiration through heroic characters in their plays, Beckett and Brecht forced audiences to see the ever present problems in their lives. Although Beckett viewed these problems with dejection and resignation, Brecht viewed them as an opportunity for people to go after a better life. Tony Kushner, who created a translated version of Brecht's German play into English, once quoted him as saying, "You'll go down if you don't stand up for yourself. Surely you must see that." Through his play, Brecht hoped that people would see that they in fact did have control over the human condition, that they had been shaping it all along. In putting the responsibility of the war on his audience, Brecht makes people the agents of their own lives. It is in realizing that we humans do in fact have control over our lives, rather than giving up in the face of failure and disorder, that we are able to rise from the ashes of war.

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