

# 'Waiting for Godot' - A Christian Criticism



- Mrs. Jeyanthii Ravichandran\*

## Abstract

Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' is a play of Theatre of the Absurd. The use of Christian mythology plays a vital role in the play 'Waiting for Godot'. Beckett used Lucky as a symbolic figure of Christ. Lucky talks in complexity, mimicking scientific style, parable, pseudo-scientific manner etc. The theme of the two thieves on the cross, the theme of the uncertainty of the hope of Salvation and the chance of bestowal of divine grace – all pervade the whole play. Godot treats the boy (who is his messenger and looks after the goats) kindly. But the boy's brother, who looks after the sheep, is beaten by Godot. The parallel to Abel and Cain is evident here. Godot's coming is not a source of pure joy. Estragon thinks he is accursed while Vladimir feels that at last, the Saviour has come. Vladimir's and Estragon's waiting might be explained as their steadfast faith and hope, while Vladimir's kindness to his friend and the two tramps' mutual independence might be seen as symbols of Christian charity. It is their faith that puts the tramps on a higher plane, compared to Pozzo and Lucky – according to Christian interpretation. Pozzo is over-confident and self-centered. He is not concerned with the meaning of what he recites, but only with its effect on his listeners. He is therefore taken completely unaware when might falls on him and he goes blind. Lucky on the other hand, in accepting Pozzo as his master and teaching him his ideas, seems to have naively convinced of the power of reason, beauty and truth. Vladimir and Estragon are less naive and do not believe in action, wealth or reason – hence they are superior. The hope of salvation as an evasion of human suffering and anguish does not invalidate the religious implications of the play.

**Keywords:** Lucky Christ, Saviour, Christian, Pozzo

Samuel Beckett may have denied the use of Christian mythology in Waiting for Godot, but the character of Lucky proves otherwise. We can read Lucky as a symbolic figure of Christ, and, as such, his actions in the play carry a criticism of Christianity, suggesting that the merits of Christianity have decreased to the point where they no longer help man at all.

The parallels between Christ and Lucky are strong. Lucky, chained with a rope, is the humiliated prisoner, much as if Jesus was the prisoner of the Romans after Judas turned him in. Estragon beats, curses, and spits on Lucky exactly as the Roman treated Jesus when preparing him for crucifixion. Lucky carries the burden of Pozzo's bags like a perpetual cross, and he is being led to a public fair where he will be mocked and sold; the Romans paraded Jesus on the hill where for public scorn. As Jesus fell three times under the weight of his burden, Lucky falls many times with the weight of the luggage, stool, coat, and picnic basket. Furthermore,

Estragon wipes Lucky's eyes as if Veronica wiped Jesus' face-so he will "feel less forsaken", which alludes directly to Jesus' cry from the cross: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" [My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?] (Mark 15:34). Lucky slowly chokes as the rope cuts into his neck as crucifixion suffocated Jesus.

In that vein, Pozzo says he took on Lucky explicitly, and Christianity by extension, to "understand beauty, grace, truth of the first water". However, he soon feels both have outlived their usefulness:

*Vladimir: After having sucked all the good out of him, you chuck him away like... a banana skin. Really...*

*Pozzo: (groaning, clutching his head) I can't bear it... any longer...the way he goes on...you've no idea...it's terrible...he must go...(he waves his arms)...I'm going mad...(he collapses, his head in his hands)...I can't bear it...any longer...*

*Pozzo: (sobbing) He used to be so kind...so helpful...and entertaining...my good angel...and now... he's killing me*

This exchange establishes a period with two windows, then and now. In the past, Pozzo had benefitted from Lucky; now, the benefits are gone. Something, therefore, has occurred in the time between the two windows that has reduced Lucky's capabilities and overall effect (this change will be further explored later). Furthermore, it is an abstract effectiveness, rather than a material effectiveness, that has deteriorated because Lucky remains an adequate luggage carrier. Lucky can no longer offer what calmed and satisfied Pozzo's spirit, instead, he torments it. When Pozzo says that Lucky is killing him, he is not referring to any violent acts by Lucky, but rather, to what constitutes spiritual abuse. While he was once a benefit, Lucky now becomes a liability to Pozzo, prompting his plans to discard the slave. Describing the disposal of a faithful human in terms of the comic symbol of a banana peel further reduces the worth of Lucky: a banana peel is trash.

If we consider Lucky as a symbol for a dying Christ, this exchange shows two things. First, Jesus' redemptive sacrifice is no longer worth what it once was. Second, this failure translates into the spiritual failure, or even the liability, of Christianity.

The allusion to Christianity suggests that, like the dance, the religion has changed as the actual foundations of its faith - Jesus' actions and words- have deteriorated from graceful fluidity to rusty creaking. Christ's eloquent surface stories, which underneath held true meaning, have become Lucky's words, and though Lucky "used to think prettily once," he now speaks in a running babble that borders on intelligibility. Lucky's speech is like a runaway parable; his verbal "tirade" almost conceals all meaning. Upon close examination, however, it furthers the idea of the dwindling value of the Christian faith.

Lucky talks in complexity, mimicking scientific style. He states givens and cites texts, but his speech lacks the coherence and organization of a science. The quaquaquaqu loosely translates into series of stuttered "which's" and shows a roughness far from the "beauty" and "grace" once shown Pozzo. Underneath this scientific incoherence, though, Lucky states the subject of his discourse: Christ, the "personal God." The opposition of the scientific tone and the topic of faith hint at the constant struggle for one to find its place within the other. In this speech, faith and science actually detract from each other, diminishing both of their values. This duel between ideas and language will come up again in the future exploration of Bishop Berkeley, a scientific theologian.

As Christians believe, Christ was God as well as a human, with all of humanity's accompanying strengths and weaknesses. He was literally God as a person ("personal God"), and he lived among heights of humanity's shortcomings, which Lucky paraphrases in three cryptic

"A" words. "Apathia" is a lacking of caring; "Aphasia" is an inability to speak; and "Athambia's" meaning is unknown to me, but I would point out its proximity to atheism or the belief in no God. Christ was introduced into the "A's" of a spiritually empty world, which lacked interest, expression, and belief in God. With his simple, yet powerful words and his miracles, Christ had the tools and the opportunity to fill man's hollow. Yet the emptiness is still present- it is even the stimulus for Lucky to mention the three "A's" in his present discourse. Christ failed to fulfill his purpose.

Lucky continues his tirade in the same manner, speaking of the antipodal places in Christ's teachings, heaven and hell:

*...that is to say blast hell to heaven so blue still and calm so calm so calm with a calm, which even though is intermittent, is better than nothing...*

Lucky's stilted rhetoric generally restates what Christ preached, but it also shows how Christ's teachings can be confusing and contradictory. One way to interpret the punctuation- less passage is to separate "blast hell" from "to heaven" and treat them as two separate commands. The command then becomes an instruction to turn away from the temptations of hell and look toward the peace of heaven. This is, of course, the central theme of many of Christ's teachings. Why then would Lucky express it in such a way that allows one to read the phrases together? Connected, the passage tells us to "blast hell to heaven," or place sin and temptation together in the middle of heaven. This would not only disrupt heaven's peace, but also flatten the entire structure and hierarchy of Christianity, placing God and the Devil, Good and Evil, on a level plane. Furthermore, why would Lucky point out the weaknesses of the faith, that heaven's calm is "intermittent" and merely "better than nothing?" Because the creation of a faith immediately creates the shortcomings of the faith as a corollary. Christ's words, as retold by Lucky, establish the spatial hierarchy of the Christian faith and simultaneously flatten that same space, as well as the same faith.

Lucky is not finished; he persists, exploring a similar idea:

*... that man in short that man in brief in spite of the strides of alimentation and defecation wastes and pines wastes and pines and concurrently simultaneously...*

Lucky then begins to explore how the faith is reduced, placing his argument in the context of his pseudo-scientific talk: "no matter what matter the facts are there". The dual "matters" allude to Bishop Berkeley, whose name appeared in the book five lines above this quote. Berkeley was an Irish Bishop who attempted in his writings to reconcile science and the Christian doctrine. He said that matter exists if it is perceived by some mind, and that matter, therefore, exists because God is always thinking of everything. In effect Berkeley was able to harmonize God and science. Science exists because God thinks about it; thinking about science constitutes God. Now the Bishop is dead, literally and metaphorically. Lucky's tirade makes a weak attempt to

revive the Bishop's ideas by putting the language of science and faith together. Instead of harmonizing, they clash. In the context of this dissonance, in a desperate attempt to save faith in the face of questioning, the quote is a command just to accept the evidences of faith even if science disagrees—"no matter what matter". Faith now disregards science, and because of this, it is in a much weaker position to defend questions without scientific support to back it up. Christianity's strength has been reduced.

Lucky finally brings to a close his discourse with an encyclopaedia of unheeded evidence of Christianity:

*...in spite of the tennis on on the the beard the flames the tears the stones so blue so calm alas alas on on the skull the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the labors abandoned left unfinished...*

This portion of the text points in many directions towards on purpose. Some creative research seems in order. Tennis originally named as jeu de paume, which translates "a game of the palm." This could allude to Christ's stigmata, which he showed to Thomas as evidence of his identity and resurrection. The flames allude to the Pentecostal flames that descended upon the apostles as tongues of fire, filling them with the Holy Spirit and allowing them to speak in foreign tongues to communicate the word of God to foreigners.

The tears, I think, refer to Mary Magdalene's tears upon finding Jesus' tomb empty. She then saw a man who asked her why she was weeping, to which she replied because Jesus' body had been removed from the tomb. That man then revealed himself Jesus, and Mary became the first witness of Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Likewise, the stone refers to the giant stone, which was sealed over the opening of Jesus' tomb. According to Matthew, an angel appeared to the tomb's guards, moved the stone as if it were a pebble, and made the guards believers. Lastly, the skull refers to Golgotha, or Skull Place, where Jesus was crucified. At this place, according to the New Testament, the earth shook as God eclipsed the sun at the moment Jesus died, fulfilling Christ's own prophecy of the events of his death. The passage lists evidence of evidence, but its fragmentation and sheer eclecticism work to undermine the value of the evidence, and by extension, devalue the faith.

Still, each allusion is an allusion to evidence, which makes the final words of the quote even more significant: "labours abandoned left unfinished." Despite all of the

witnesses and miracles, words and actions, the Christians faith is abandoned and left unfinished. The Christian campaign, even Christ's revelations, cannot out shadow its empirical shortcomings and truly mollify man. Thus, it fails.

People at one time experienced and believed the evidences when they happened. People at one time gained help, or at least comfort or entertainment, from Christ and Christianity. But just as Christ then abandoned his life on the cross, leaving his future unfinished, and man has now abandoned the Christian faith, never translating its teaching into reality. One could say man only followed Christ's example.

The tirade finally ends when Pozzo, Estragon, and Vladimir triumphantly tackle lucky, like the mob which turns upon Jesus, silencing him, shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Lucky serves Pozzo well, insisting on carrying his burden. But his burden is an empty symbol: bags filled with sand. In the same way, Christ, by his example, taught humanity to shoulder burden, but, according to Waiting for Godot, the burden is not worth carrying. Christ was both the beginning and the end of Christianity, just as Lucky began his service with high intensions, but ends as a slave who speaks only gibberish, on his way to the auction block. In the end, they both destroy what they hoped to create.

## Reference

1. Hegel, Georg Winhelm. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller. New York: U of Oxford P, 1979.
2. Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1963.
3. Graver, Lawrence. *Waiting for Godot*. 5th ed. New York: U of Cambridge P, 1999.
4. Esslin, Martin, Ed. *Samuel Beckett: A collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice-Hall, 1965.
5. Cohn, Ruby. "Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett." In Esslin,
6. Beckett, S., "One Evening" in *Journal of Beckett Studies*, No. 6, Autumn 1980, Florida State University. <http://www.english.fsu.edu/jobs/num06/jobs06.htm> December 6, 2003.