

Waiting for Godot and its Use of Religious Motifs

VLADIMIR:

Did you ever read the Bible?

ESTRAGON:

The Bible. . . (He reflects.) I must have taken a look at it. (p. 5)

In *Waiting for Godot*, nothing is as it seems. This perplexing yet captivating play is rich in religious vocabulary and Christian imagery. The latter in particular is a repeating central motif. Biblical references, some obvious and some obscure, are never straightforward in their implications. Understanding the religious language that underpins so much of *Waiting for Godot* is essential in getting to the heart of the play. The play uses religion as a powerful literary device to divulge the comic contradictions of life and interpretation. This paper will examine how religious undertones in *Waiting for Godot* are used to dramatize and gravely parody.

The language of *Waiting for Godot* is laced with religious apparitions. Religion seems to subliminally swathe over the entire play. Beckett comes across as an author who is well-versed in theology. His knowledgeable references to Christianity and his subsequent treatment of the subject necessitate a nuanced reading. Using Christianity as a device, Beckett has created a world that is unrooted, stripped of context; one that is absurd, mystical, and comic.

On page 4, in its first direct reference to the bible, Didi misremembers a verse from Proverbs.

VLADIMIR:

(musingly). The last moment . . . (He meditates.) Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that?

Here he is trying to quote Proverbs 13:12,

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.”

The full verse encapsulates Gogo and Didi’s condition almost precisely. They go on waiting for a man who does not arrive; they continually defer hope. But Didi forgets the verse midway, fumbling up the sentence. Didi speaks using sacred, historical, and haunting words, but out of context, adulterated, and short of making any profound point. Almost tongue in cheek, he asks, “who said that?” He speaks holy words in a tossed-off, blasé manner that undermines whatever significance these scriptures have in our world.

Later in the same act, Didi discusses the two thieves who were crucified alongside Christ. Supposedly, one was saved, and one was damned. The pair of thieves immediately strike a resemblance to the pair of tramps, and one wonders about their redemption. But Didi is not concerned with salvation. Rather, he is more interested in the ambiguity of the event as recounted by the Evangelists. The conversation derails into talk of which Evangelist to believe and Didi even concludes that perhaps both thieves were damned. Their trifle back and forth in the face of possible damnation suggests that to Gogo and Didi, the parables of Christianity are mere stories to pass the time.

ACT I

A country road. A tree. (p. 1)

The spindly tree that Gogo and Didi wait at is another subversion of Christian imagery. Its presence alludes to the various “trees” of Christianity. The tree of knowledge, where the original sin was committed and chiefly the cross, on which Christ died. Didi recounts that Godot asks for them to wait by the tree.

ESTRAGON:

Looks to me more like a bush.

VLADIMIR:

A shrub.

ESTRAGON:

A bush. (p. 9-10)

Gogo and Didi then begin arguing about whether the tree is even a tree, perhaps it is a shrub, or perhaps a bush? The tree, laced with religious allegory, looms overhead while its physical uncertainty to even exist as a tree is questioned by the main characters. In act two, to pass the time, Gogo and Didi imitate Lucky and Pozzo.

VLADIMIR:

Behind the tree. (*Estragon hesitates.*) Quick! Behind the tree. (*Estragon goes and crouches behind the tree, realizes he is not hidden, comes out from behind the tree.*) Decidedly this tree will not have been the slightest use to us. (p.94)

The gangly tree is not even stout enough for Didi to hang from (p. 16), not even ample enough to hide Gogo; can it withstand the implications of its interpretation as the cross? Despite its obvious and necessary association with the cross, the puny physicality of the tree seems to represent its spiritual unimportance. Whatever allegorical value the tree had held in reference to Christianity is undermined by its physical deficiencies.

This subversion of theological references is central to the world-building of Beckett's enigmatic story. While most of the language of *Waiting for Godot* is simple and sparse, the play manages to evoke haunting imagery with the power of religious language. One can look at the play's many biblical references as grotesque re-enactments. Beckett recounts these entangled, evocative biblical narratives in a world void of substance. He frequently asserts and then withdraws any significant religious meaning in the text. It invites the reader to interpret but leaves only mystery and ruin. This reframing stirs within the viewer a doubt about all that is sacred and meaningful.

The eponymous Godot is often alluded to be a God-like figure of salvation. Phonetically, Godot sounds like "God", and one cannot help but associate the two. Regardless of its intentionality, Beckett was surely aware of this association. Similar jarringly deliberate religious word choices exist within the text. On page 45, when Pozzo asks for his name, Estragon replies "Adam". A few pages later, Vladimir is referred to as "Mister Albert". These are presumably their first names. The name "Adam" immediately strikes within the viewer the biblical image of the first man. In a play of nonsensical occurrences, the name "Adam" is a recognizable construct. Yet, there are no other contextual clues that build on this reference. Vladimir's name "Albert" in contrast feels plain and nonsensical. Seemingly, Vladimir and Estragon's first names just happened to be Albert and Adam. Here, the text challenges the

viewer's need to imbue meaning into the play, to read between the lines, more than what there is on the pages. The play, using the historicity of Christianity, rejects this notion and presents us with an inexplicable reality, where what is profound and what is paltry become one.

The plain insignificance yet purposeful inclusion of "Adam" reveals much about what the play is getting at with its religious allegories. The play says that reality is incongruent, complex, and often absurd. In one's attempt to find meaning and hope in the moments that connect our lives, we fail to see reality as it is. Gogo and Didi wait for Godot, they wait for meaning, for an explanation to come and alleviate their sufferings. This reflects the audience's desire for resolution and meaning in their interaction with the text. In the same way that Didi seeks to be seen by Godot, "tell him you saw me" (p. 118), viewers desperately seek identification within the play. With its haunted religious imagery, the play acknowledges and provokes the viewers' expectations and understanding of the world. The text gives us no comfort of certain interpretations and aims to strip of pretense, of preconceived notions.

The religious element of the play also brings forth the concept of multiplicity and ambiguity. Lucky's stream of consciousness (p. 54), which is about as "eventful" as the play gets requires further examination. In his speech, he talks of "a personal God ... with white beard" of fire, flames, and torment, of heaven, and hell. In a way, Lucky's speech is reflective of the play as a whole and carries with it the spirit of the play. His speech is given without knowledge of language and form. It is filled with not just stammered gibberish but also astute religious observations. Lucky's speech is at once nonsensical and profound.

Similarly, at different instances of the play, the Tree takes on the Tree of Knowledge, at another instance, it is the cross of Christ, and at another, it is just a scraggy tree that one cannot even hang from. Pozzo at one instance is Godot, at another instance he is God, and at another, he is Fortuna the goddess of fortune.

One may view the play's subversion and dismantling of long-held religious beliefs to be a critique of salvation in religion. But paradoxically, for the play to subvert religious themes and reveal their contradictions, it necessitates and reinforces religion as a powerful construct. In *Waiting for Godot*, religion is at once meaningless and all-important. The play urges that we should not confine ourselves to define Godot, or any other aspect of the play in concrete, for that disallows the beautiful fluidity and uncertainty of the play, and of life to flow.

ESTRAGON:

I can't go on like this.

VLADIMIR:

That's what you think. (p.121)

To conclude, Is Godot God? Perhaps. Are Didi and Gogo waiting for salvation? Perhaps. Though perhaps Godot is Godot, and Gogo and Didi are merely waiting. *Waiting for Godot* is set in a nonsensical world, stripped bare of action and meaning. In a way, the play is agnostic. It does not operate on the presupposition of salvation in religion, nor does it make an existentialist exclaim about the death of God. Rather, it lays bare what the human condition is like when stripped to its core. The play says that life is boredom and suffering, but you can still go on. The play says religion is contradictory and salvation is never certain,

but you can still have faith. Life is indeed contradictory, bleak, and perhaps meaningless. Yet, in the words of Lucky, we must resume, alas, and go on.

Word Count: 1559

Works cited:

Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010.

New International Version Bible