

## A structuralist reading of Act I of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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1 Nov 2023

Given that Structuralism became a prominent literary theory in France in the 1960s and that Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was written initially in a French version in 1948-9 and first performed in Paris in 1953, it might seem reasonable that Structuralism should be the *mode de choix* of analysis for this remarkable play. Structuralism is not concerned with the way that that literature expresses an author's intentions, nor is interested in the text's relationship to daily reality. Instead, the text of the work is deemed to be a structure that has meaning independent of author, reader and external reality. The important thing to structuralists is the methodology by which meaning is created and rather than actual meaning conveyed to the reader (Baldick, 2015). According to Barry (2002, p. 38-58), Structuralist analysis employs three related analytical methods: (1) the placing of the text in the contexts or larger structures such as a particular literary genre, or an underlying universal narrative structure, (2) an interpretation of literature as a parallel to modern linguistic analysis of language and (3) an application of the concept of the systems of signs to highlight systemic patterns and structures within the text. Initial readings of *Waiting for Godot* located it as an existentialist play, concerned with the assertion that life is meaningless and absurd. While this is perhaps a natural emotional response to the play, the use of Structuralist analytic techniques can help the critic take a more measured, even scientific approach, before proceeding to judgment.

Applying element (1) of Barry's definition seems initially rather difficult. *Waiting for Godot* does not draw on previous genres of narrative structures - it was perceived to be a radical departure in dramatic content and form. Traditional plays focus on a central conflict, e.g., *Hamlet's* "To be or not to be", and move through a climax to a final resolution. *Waiting for Godot* has no such structure. Rather conflict arises not from the plot but from language games between the characters. Tension is provided by the unending wait for Godot, unlike the cyclical flux of tension and resolution in a traditional play. The fact that we cannot easily perform (1) however is a useful Structuralist conclusion. By comparing the work to others, we establish that this work is fundamentally different from all others, and indeed is one of the root exemplars of a new genre, the Theatre of the Absurd.

The modern linguistic analysis mentioned in method (2) arises from the work of

Saussure and others who postulate that there is no inherent connection between a word and what it designates and that this relationship is maintained by convention only. This is a concept that is extensively explored by Beckett. For example, there is no explanation of the meaning of the word Godot in the play. It could be read to mean God, or perhaps to stand for the purpose in life that gives it meaning, or even death, which all humans inevitably have to wait for, but can never be certain of the exact time of its arrival.

The implication of (3) is that a structuralist analysis focuses on such structural elements such as binary oppositions (i.e., the contrast between two mutually exclusive terms), parallelisms (the arrangement of similarly constructed clauses, sentences, or verse lines in a pairing or other sequence suggesting some correspondence between them), inversions (the reversal of the expected of things) and equivalence (the substitution of one similar thing with another).

There are many binary oppositions within the play. Vladimir and Estragon are always present; however, Godot is continually absent - though discussion of his possible arrival and intentions does occupy much of Vladimir and Estragon's conversations. Vladimir and Estragon are unable to conclusively decide to leave or to remain until Godot arrives - they repeatedly flip-flop between active intentions and then passive acquiescence. Pozzo and Lucky depict the oppositions of a master/slave relationship, as well as the oppositions of articulate and mute, controlling and dependent. Of course, Lucky does briefly speak, but not with the lucidity of Pozzo - Lucky's monologue is an apparently disorganised, random stream of academic phrases – this is the antithesis of the lucid and conversational Pozzo. Interestingly, the direction of the controlling/dependent relationship is at least partially reversed in Act 2 when Pozzo, now blind, depends on Lucky's guidance. There is also much repetition. Indeed, much of Act 2 is a repeat, with modifications of the material in Act 1. Pozzo/Lucky arrive and then depart as a central piece of action in both Acts; however, their relationship is significantly modified as Pozzo is blind in the second act. The boy appears in both Acts as possibly an unreliable messenger from Godot. The tree, perhaps a central symbol, is present in both acts but has somehow grown leaves overnight in the second act. These binary oppositions, repetitions and modifications provide a structural framework within which Beckett is able to deploy a range of uncertainties and ambiguities.

Saussure's view that language is a system of signs, is an important aspect of Structuralism. Saussure argues that a sign is made up of a signifier which is simply a word, phrase, picture and so on, and a signifier which is a particular concept that the writer or artist

is using the signifier to represent. There is no inherent meaning in the signifier, it is just a convenient tag that refers to the concept in the signifier. Signs only have meaning because of their differential relation to other signs. So how can the idea of signs be used to explore *Waiting for Godot*? The art of taking off and putting on shoes and hats can be seen as signifiers which are repeated to give them prominence. Their significance is they are associated with the concept that we all have roles and identities in the mundane routines that occupy much of our daily lives and that artificial accoutrements such as hats and shoes in some way indicate or enable those roles. Pozzo's domination over Lucky can be read as a signifier of the oppression of the strong over the weak, or the dependency of the weak on the strong. The appearance of the boy can perhaps be a sign, in which the signifier is the boy's message and its signifier is the concept of a prophet making a Biblical prophecy. That might suggest that Godot is a signifier with some religious connotations - but there is no clear signifier to assign to this particular sign. Perhaps Godot is a signifier that refers to the absence of something. The word Godot seems similar to God, so is Beckett saying there is no God? However, since the play was first written in French, as *En attendant Godot* it is less easy in French to see a simple word association illuminating the signifier for Godot, since the French word for god is 'Dieu'. In the end, the names of all of the characters, but especially Godot, may be seen as signifiers without a clear signifier. These signs, with their opaque or floating signifiers, simply add to the feeling that Beckett is somehow signifying the elusive nature of the self. Beckett himself is silent on this issue: when asked by Alan Schneider, who went on to direct *Godot* in the United States, what it was really about, Beckett said, 'If I knew, I would have said so in the play' (Dickson, 2017). Perhaps more revealingly, in a written introduction, read before an early French Radio performance in 1952 Beckett says:

I don't know who Godot is. I don't even know (above all don't know) if he exists. All I knew I showed. It's not much, but it's enough for me ... As for wanting to find in all that a broader, loftier meaning ... Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo, Lucky ... Maybe they owe you explanations. Let them supply it. Without me. (Cohn, R. in Knowlson, E. and Knowlson, J., 2006, p. 122).

Beckett's intentions though are not a consideration in a Structuralist analysis. It is a basic tenet of structuralism that as long as the structure of the internal relations between the components of the story remains intact, then the individual units are replaceable. The meaning of the individual components is unimportant, it is their interrelation that is key. As

Eagleton (2008, p. 83) says “The method is quite indifferent to the cultural value of its object”. Thus, Beckett gives no physical description of Estragon and Vladimir - there is no indication of colour, ethnicity, size, age and so on in his stage directions. It is therefore up to the audience to place the characters in their own subjective cultural context.

How then does a Structuralist reading help us with dealing with *Waiting for Godot*? From Beckett’s comments we can see he delegates the extraction of meaning from his play to the audience. By removing specific time and place and the material ephemera of the real, everyday world, and replacing them with a richness of structural signs using structural techniques such as repetitions, binary oppositions, mirror effects and symmetrical or asymmetrical exchanges in the dialogue to add tension and interest, Beckett facilitates the audience’s study of interrelationships and interdependencies of his characters, one that enables the play to illuminate many different historical, social and political contexts.

(1544 words)

## References

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