

## Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: An Analysis of Lucky's Enigmatic Speech

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### **Abstract:**

*Beckett's Waiting for Godot can be a linguistically challenging text which provides deep insight into the psychology of human speech. That our language shapes out of the jelly of words in the Chomskian deep structure becomes the pivot of Beckett's language experimentation in the form of nonsense that we often dissolve in in the moments of intense feeling. Lucky's speech is one of the most subjective and the most poetic of the moments in the play. Besides, the speech is also reflective of the structure of the play. This essay aims at bringing out the intensity of the feeling breaking the apparently haphazard linguistic structure, and thereby showing the meaning of the ostensibly meaningless existence.*

One of the greatest innovators in modern theatre, Samuel Beckett is acclaimed for his technical virtuosity in the plays with their varied themes, and linguistic and stylistic features. In terms of theme, form and language, his *Waiting for Godot* is probably the most discussed and critically acclaimed play. Of the many unusual conventions, manipulation of the character of Lucky in the play is among the most interesting and deserves particular critical attention.

Lucky is one of the four major characters in the play and constitutes one important pair with Pozzo. But oddly enough, he is nowhere found to engage in any dialogue with anybody in the play. He communicates with other characters is responsive and animal-like. He never initiates any dialogue in the play, nor does he come out with a single meaningful utterance in response to the commands and directions given by his master Pozzo. He exhibits sheer unthinking compliance with what he is asked to do, which is typical animalistic behaviour. This animal behaviour of Lucky is suggested in the play by his very appearance on the stage like a beast of burden and the rope hanging round his neck the other end of which being held by Pozzo. The following stage directions clearly present Lucky more as an animal than as a human being:

Enter Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo drives Lucky by means of a rope passed round his neck, so that Lucky is the first to appear, followed by the rope which is long enough to allow him to reach the middle of the stage before Pozzo appears. Lucky carries a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket and a greatcoat. Pozzo a whip.

(Crack of whip. Pozzo appears. They cross the stage. Lucky passes before Vladimir and Estragon and exit. Pozzo at the sight of Vladimir and Estragon stops short. The rope tautens. Pozzo jerks it violently.)

Noise of Lucky falling with all his baggage. Vladimir and Estragon turn towards him, half wishing half fearing to go to his assistance. Vladimir takes a step towards Lucky, Estragon holds him back by the sleeve. ( pp. 21-22)

The repeated questions of Estragon about him express more vividly and graphically his beast-of-burden-like behaviour.

Lucky's performance in the play looks like that of a circus animal, while Pozzo performs like a ringmaster. The following extract from the play will substantiate the point:

Pozzo: Good. Is everybody ready? Is everybody looking at me? (He looks at Lucky, jerks the rope. Lucky raises his head.) Will you look at me, pig? (Lucky looks at him.) Good. (He puts his pipe in his pocket, takes out a little vaporizer and sprays his throat, puts back the vaporizer in his pocket, clears his throat, spits, takes out the vaporizer again, sprays his throat again, puts back the vaporizer in his pocket.) I am ready. Is everybody listening? Is everybody ready? (He looks at them all in turn, jerks the rope.) Hog! (Lucky raises his head.) I don't like talking in a vacuum. Good. Let me see. He reflects. (p. 30)

Pozzo's addresses of Lucky in animal terms like pig, hog are to be noticed here.

Lucky never does anything on his own in the play, rather, like a faithful performing animal he complies very quickly with all the directions of his ringmaster. Accordingly, at the master's command he entertains both Vladimir and Estragon first by dancing, and then by reflecting. While thinking aloud, he utters for the only time in the play a long speech, which seems incongruous, repetitious, unintelligible and absolutely meaningless. This unconventional long speech is unpunctuated, fragmented, and only seemingly inconclusive. However, instead of having some cursory glances at the speech as many critics (Fletcher and Fletcher, Williams, Atkins, Esslin) did, if we have a close look at it, we will find the speech highly intelligible and meaningful. Moreover, the speech is indeed indispensable to an understanding of the production as it has been documented that when Beckett rehearsed his own production of the play, he began with Lucky's speech (Nastos 1). In this paper, therefore, we will have a look at the speech in detail and try to demonstrate that the speech is not only intelligible and structured, but contains the main message of the playwright reflecting both the form and theme of the play. In so doing we will have a look at both the language and the theme of the speech.

The prime aspect of the speech is that it is reflective of the structure of the play. In itself, the speech lacks the conventional structure and literal meaning. There is no logical development of thought in it. There are statements, but they are in fragments. The speech is full of repetitions of the phrases like 'given', 'for reasons unknown', 'but time will tell', 'established beyond all doubt', 'waste and pine', 'the skull' etc. Thus the whole speech anticipates the structure of the play. Like the speech, the play is lacking in any conventional structure. The structure of the play is circular and repetitious. We find the repetitions of the refrains like 'nothing to be done', 'we're waiting for Godot' etc. throughout the play. Thus, as Esslin rightly points out, plays like this 'have neither a beginning nor an end' (Esslin 22). Secondly, the speech reveals a denial of rational schemes and an antipathy towards the process of thinking which are also central to the understanding of the play. The speech definitely pronounces some doctrinal statements on some metaphysical issues like God, man and universe. But some nonsensical elements obtrude, turning it into a specimen of non-communicative speech. This is because the disintegration of language is central in Beckett's drama and in *Waiting for Godot* we find just the beginning of this disintegration process. Niklaus Gessner (quoted in Esslin 87) has listed ten different modes of disintegration of language to be found in the play. These include misunderstandings, double-entendres, monologues, clichés, repetitions of synonyms, inability to find the right words, 'telegraphic style' and the dropping of punctuation marks, such as question marks, as an indication that language has lost its function as a means for communication, that questions have turned into statements not really requiring an answer. According to Fletcher, all these modes culminate in Lucky's speech. For example, the Latin term *qua* (as, in the capacity of) is a very common term in scholastic theological debates, but the mere repetition of the term by Lucky in the speech like *quaquaqu* creates an absurd sound adding a derisive note to the speech. The same can be said about manipulation of the sounds like *Acacacademy* and *Anthropopometry* in the speech. Moreover, the speech is full of various academically high-sounding words like *aphasia*, *apathia* and *athambia*. Thus, the speech is the culminating example of disintegration of language, which we find significantly dispersed throughout the play. Because, as Martin Esslin points out, 'in a purposeless world that has lost its ultimate objectives, dialogue, like all action, becomes a mere game to pass the time' (Esslin 86). Thirdly, the speech seems to be a quasi-theological address, which, at its core, has apparently a serious statement to make. As mentioned earlier, the speech suffers from some nonsensical obtrusions. If all the nonsensical repetitions, comic irrelevancies, the illogical modifiers and incomprehensible statements are eliminated from the speech, Lucky is found to attempt to make a declaration like the following:

Given the existence of a personal God who loves us dearly, with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell;  
 And suffers with those who are plunged in torment;  
 And considering that it is established beyond all doubt that man in spite of the progress wastes and pines;  
 And considering what is much more grave, the great cold, the great dark, the air and the earth, abode of stones, in the great world;

Alas alas, on, on;  
To shrink, pine, waste;  
Alas alas, on, on;  
The skull, the skull, the skull. (Williams 349)

From the above, it is clear that the speech is an apt example of disintegration of language, of how language can be made forcefully non-communicative and nonsensical. But when the nonsensical elements are put aside, the speech looks logically structured and quite intelligible. The declaration further reveals that Lucky attempts to make a statement about God and man but fails to come to a definitive conclusion. This again clearly reflects the absurd condition of all human beings that they are incapable of making any meaningful statement. They can make only certain assumptions about God and formulate some hypotheses about God. One must finish a discourse about God as Lucky does by repeating the phrase 'for reasons unknown'. Equally interesting is the fact that any statement or discourse made by man on any metaphysical issue is, by its nature, lost in a maze of irrelevance, absurdity and incoherence--- without an ending as is evidenced in Lucky's speech. The same happens whenever characters in the play attempt at any metaphysical issue. Therefore, the speech clearly highlights the message of the play that man's final comment about God or on any metaphysical issue is bound to flounder to nothing more than a bit of garbled noise having neither a coherent statement nor a conclusion.

In spite of the apparent unintelligibility and lack of structure as mentioned above, according to the critics, the speech falls into two parts: formal and thematic. Anselm Atkins divides the formal structure into three parts. 'The first, which ends with the phrase 'better than nothing' is the unfinished protasis of a theological or philosophical argument presented in the rationalistic geometrical mode of Descartes and Spinoza' (Atkins 95). The second part starting with the phrase 'but not so fast' is an incomplete fragment of a rational argument. It is the last half of an objection to the unfinished protasis in the first. The third part starts with the phrase ' . . . and considering what is more' and is a second objection in parallel with the earlier one. Horst Breuer (quoted in Fletcher and Fletcher 65) sees the thematic breakdown as follows: (a) Absence of God; (b) Shrinking of man; (c) World as chaos.

However, on closer examination of the speech, we become aware of thematic implications of the speech with particular clarity. This is also demonstrated by the reactions made by other characters while Lucky is delivering the speech in the play:

*During Lucky's tirade the others react as follows:*

*(1) Vladimir and Estragon all attention, Pozzo dejected and disgusted. (2) Vladimir and Estragon begin to protest, Pozzo's sufferings increase. (3) Vladimir and Estragon attentive again, Pozzo more and more agitated and groaning. (4) Vladimir and Estragon protest*

*violently. Pozzo jumps up, pulls on the rope. General outcry. Lucky pulls on the rope, staggers, shouts his text. All three throw themselves on Lucky who struggles and shouts his text. (p.42)*

Thus the reactions of other characters make it clear that the speech communicates a particular message to them. In the first part of the first half of the speech there is an attempt to describe a personal God 'who . . . loves us dearly' and 'suffers . . . with those who . . . are plunged in torment'. In the second part there is the description of various progresses made by man like 'the strides of physical culture' and 'the practice of sports . . . of all kinds . . . of all sorts' in 'autumn summer winter'. In the third part of the speech there is the description of man's declining condition where 'in spite of' all the progresses man 'is seen to waste and pine . . . to shrink and dwindle'. Thus, the speech tries to make a kind of statement: 'that in spite of a existence of a loving God (of sorts) and progress of various kinds, man is in full decline' (Fletcher and Fletcher 66-67).

The second half of the speech seems to deal more with the basic and ultimate concerns of human life. It shows the dying and decomposition of matter and the inability of man to have any control whatsoever of it. The human cities (Feckham Peckham Fulham Clapham Connemara) and 'the labours lost of Steinweg and Peterman' turn into 'plains', 'mountains', 'seas' and 'rivers' which in turn dissolve into the basic elements like 'water', 'fire', 'air' and 'earth'. Finally, we find the obsessive images of 'stones', 'cold', 'grave' 'death' and 'skull'. There is also reference to the cycle of the seasons of the year ('autumn, summer, winter') in the speech. Thus, we see, the speech encapsulates the whole life cycle of man on earth.

Lucky's speech is often considered the most incomprehensible part of the play. But, as our discussion reveals, this incomprehensible part contains the total message of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. It is really an obscure part. But in the words of Oliver, "the absurdists are not afraid of obscurity in art since they employ it as a direct symbol of the obscurity they find in life" (Oliver 7). The most intense moments in the play lie in Lucky's enigmatic and bewildering speech.

<sup>1</sup> All the textual references are made to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Second edition, London: Faber and Faber (1965)

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