

# Analysis of the Contradictory Combination of Despair and Hope in *En Attendant Godot* Written by Samuel Beckett

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**Abstract.** *En attendant Godot*, a masterpiece by Samuel Beckett, contains not only negative labels like "absurdity", "pain" or "emptiness and despair," but also many positive elements such as the author's thinking of survive, the call for the human to bravely face the despair and so on. At last, these positive spirit and negative external images together compose a contradiction. This article will analyze the contradictory combination of despair and hope in *En attendant Godot*.

**Keywords:** *En Attendant Godot*; Samuel Beckett; Contradiction.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Definition of Contradiction

The so-called "contradiction", according to Karl Heinrich Marx's theory of contradiction, refers to the contradictory and unified relationship that things themselves contain. In my opinion, "contradiction" in dramatic works can be seen on the one hand as the conflict or disharmony contained in the drama to achieve the effect of highlighting one side or creating a philosophical effect of antinomy, thereby increasing the charm of drama, on the other hand, because both sides of the contradiction belong to a whole system, the opposing parties often express the same topic, that is, the author's creative intention, and finally generates an antagonistic harmony.

### 1.2. Literature Review on Research of *En attendant Godot*

In *En attendant Godot*, there are many things worth exploring, such as the name of the characters and the construction of the script, which have profound implications. It is definitely not something that some domestic research in *En attendant Godot* can generalize using the terms of "absurdity", "irrationality", and "illogical". For example, the leaves of trees, whether the shoes fit properly and the characters fell down in the play, are defined as "absurd" and "unfounded" on page 191 of *History of Foreign Literature* (Second Edition) Volume 2 [1]. Yin Yuebin's *A Brief Discussion on En attendant Godot* and Chen Jia's *A discussion about the absurd theatre En attendant Godot* argue that his dialogues of characters, especially the Lucky's large and punctuated "thinking" in the play, is nothing more than innovative without reference value in terms of expression techniques. [2] In my personal opinion, these views are more or less limited.

In Liu Xiuyu's *Studies of Beckett's Drama*, the phenomenon of Chinese acceptance of Beckett's drama is described as follows: As mentioned earlier, Western researchers have already jumped out of the narrow perspective of the absurd and turned to multi-dimensional and multi-level in-depth exploration of playwrights; on the other hand, in China, many scholars still claim that Beckett must be considered as the absurd writer, and some playwrights and directors still interpret Beckett and his works from a one-way perspective, resulting in a single and rigid trend in the study and interpretation of Beckett.[3] In my opinion, Beckett's *En attendant Godot* naturally cannot analyze the characters and their script based on "absurdity" and the so-called "reflection of the author's dissatisfaction with the reality of Western society" like the examples above. The success of *En attendant Godot* in the San Quentin Prison in the United States shows its enduring charm in the entire western theater field. Just like comments of the prisoners, not only reflect people's hopes, but also meticulously depict the spiritual state and survival difficulties of people at that time, and more than that, also show other themes of human nature.



We can explain the contradictory combination of despair and hope in *En attendant Godot* from three perspectives: character setting, scene setting, and character relationships and behaviors:

## **2. Character Setting - Metaphors of Characters' Names**

### **2.1. The Connotation of Godot**

In *En attendant Godot*, the question of who "Godot" is has always been a controversial one, and even Beckett himself has not provided a clear answer. Some claims suppose that Godot refers to "God" because "Godot" is like English "God" with the French noun suffix "ot" in spelling. However, this statement seems to be unsatisfactory for Beckett who wrote *En attendant Godot* in French. So "God" seems more likely "Dieu" rather than "God". "Godot" referring to "God" may seem biased, but this idea has some merits in its specific connotation. In my opinion, "Godot" refers to the hope that leads people out of despair, and in its role positioning, it is a "savior" image similar to "God". The main characters in the play, *Estragon and Vladimir*, are nicknamed Gogo and Didi respectively which are combined with the French noun suffix "ot" sound similar to "Godot", indicating that the "savior" they are waiting for is themselves, the only hope that can save oneself from despair is their own.

### **2.2. The Connotation of Pozzo and Lucky**

Another group, Pozzo and Lucky, "Pozzo" in Italian means "well", which can also be extended to "depravity". Pozzo enslaves Lucky, grabbing food and even knowledge from Lucky himself, while he mistreats Lucky in every way possible, as Vladimir commented, "After sucking up all his blood, you kicked him away,"[4] while Pozzo defended himself by saying, "In the past... he was very attentive... he helped me... he made me happy... he made me better... and now... he assassinated me...[5]" From the performance in the play, we can know that Pozzo relies on Lucky everywhere, Similar to a group of people in our lives, they are extremely happy when fate cares for them, and only complain about the bad luck when things go wrong. All their achievements seem to rely on "luck" or "timing", and they rarely exert their initiative, always entrusting their fate or luck. The Pozzo in the play enslaves the Lucky, seems perky, but his appearance the next day suggests to the audience that his life is hopeless. Is there any hope if you left everything to "luck"? This is also a reflection of his name "well (depravity)", and the name of Luck naturally embodies the literal meaning of "luck" in life. In the appearance for two times, Pozzo was mistakenly identified as Godot by Estragon and Vladimir, while he believed that these two individuals were "of the same kind as Pozzo." [6] This shows that Pozzo, Estragon, and Vladimir is essentially the same. When "Godot" is considered as individual themselves, "Pozzo" can also be referred to as "Godot" to some extent, all three of them are waiting for "Godot(themselves)" to save themselves.

### **2.3. The Metaphor of Names**

In addition to these metaphors, what is intriguing is that Estragon seems to be a more common name in Western European countries, while Vladimir also seems to be a more common name in Eastern European countries. The name Pozzo comes from Italian, while Lucky is in English, written in conjunction with French in this article. The metaphor behind Beckett's characters' name also implies that this story depicts common psychological problems, questioning of existence, and solutions to life's despair (relying on oneself) in the Western world (and even all humanity).

## **3. Scenario Settings-Taking Withered Trees and New Leaves as an Example**

The setting of the scene in *En attendant Godot*, is very simple, with only a withered tree, a small mound, and the moon symbolizing the night. We will find that the withered tree also has the contradictory combination. The withered tree is mentioned twice in the play when Gogo and Didi want to hang themselves, and as the day passes, the withered tree actually grows new buds. The withered tree, which symbolizes death and despair, and the new leaf, which symbolizes rebirth and

hope (In Wang Qingyang's *A New Interpretation of the Tree Image in En attendant Godot in Literary Anthropology*, he combined the analysis of tree images in *the folklore of the Old Testament* by James George Frazer and believed that similar to the various scenes of dying under trees in *the Bible*, the tree here also serves as a literary image for Gogo and Didi's suicide and judgement. In his conclusion, the density or baldness of the tree symbolizes human's life, aging, illness, or death [7]), combine into one thing (a tree). Through the perspective set by the previous characters, we can already see Beckett's intention to create this image: despair and hope are unified in one individual, and people's despair can only be solved and faced directly by themselves. When we choose to face difficulties, unleash our initiative and not follow the flow, our focus on this tree will no longer be on the branches that break when hanging (despair), but on the new leaves that grow on it (hope). And why does the change in the tree only appear in the second act, rather than being presented to the audience from the beginning? And this is related to the argument below, which is not shown in this section.

#### **4. The Metaphor of Character Relationships and Behavior in the Two Acts**

##### **4.1. Two Pairs of Contradictions in Character Relationships**

Observing the relationship between the two groups of characters in the drama, we can find that they are also two pairs of contradictions: Estragon and Vladimir have been waiting for Godot together, but their behavior has almost always been "talking to themselves". Although the two have the same purpose, audience always seem to feel a sense of alienation between them. They seem to be united, but their hearts are isolated from each other, and their ideas are also different. On the surface, they are all waiting for Godot, but in reality, the "Godot" they are waiting for is different, because "Godot" represents themselves, and it can only be themselves who can save themselves, not anyone else; similarly, in the drama, it seems that Pozzo and Lucky should regard each other as enemy (because Pozzo always mistreats him). It seems that Pozzo uses a rope to drive Lucky, but isn't he driven by the rope that Lucky is holding? Because they were originally one person, the Lucky symbolized his luck, and they were inseparable from each other. Therefore, when the two of them fell in the second act, Estragon and Vladimir couldn't help Pozzo, because Pozzo himself was also the only one who could "help" Pozzo. It can be seen that through the contradictory relationship between characters, Beckett has shown us this truth: the despair encountered by humans needs to be faced and solved by humans themselves, because human's hope is human themselves.

##### **4.2. Behavior of Characters**

Analyzing the behavior of characters, we can also support the above viewpoint: Estragon and Vladimir, one complains that shoes don't fit his feet, and another despises hats that don't fit his head. The feet that wear shoes symbolize action, and the heads that wear hats symbolize thought (this symbol is also used in the article when Pozzo says that Lucky "can't think without hats"[8]). Both of these are what Beckett tells us how to do when facing despair in life: think and act, both of which are indispensable. These are also the only actions we need to do when facing despair. What is intriguing is that in the first act, Lucky first dances, then thinks, and their actual performance is completely different from what Pozzo praises. According to my guess, Pozzo's description isn't fault. Lucky can indeed "dance well" and make people think for several hours, but the order of the performance is problematic. Acting first and thinking later will only result in that Lucky can only repeat one action and be incoherent, so what we should do is "think first, then act", so that we won't be at a loss when facing the hardships and despair of life.

##### **4.3. Changes of Characters' Behavior in the Second Act**

Not only behavior of the characters in the first act worth pondering, but changes in their behavior in the second act also worth examining. From the second section, we leave a puzzle: why do leaves only grow in the second act? We will find that in the second act, Estragon and Vladimir have both found suitable shoes and hats, indicating that they have begun to find the way to face despair, so the withered

tree also germinates, implying that the two of them are beginning to realize what the so-called "Godot" is - their own thinking and actions. The shortening of the rope between Pozzo and Lucky indicates that Pozzo's dependence on Lucky has become stronger, and this reason (and also the result) is that Pozzo is blind (losing the opportunity to see the road clearly because he has been completely blinded by things like "luck" and cannot see his own life path), and Lucky is lame (luck cannot help people out of despair and destruction). He naturally cannot wait for his "Godot", just like his name, he will continue to "fall" without realizing it. And through this perspective of analysis, we also seem to understand the role of Boy: why Boy in different acts are different and don't have their own names? Because they symbolize the hearts of the two, he can be anyone. It doesn't matter whether Boy in the two acts is different or not, as long as he is the same gender as Estragon and Vladimir, and the young age of Boy also signifies that the two have not yet been fully awakened. But as Boy said, "he won't come (they haven't fully realized that the "Godot" that can make their "everything better" is themselves) but surely tomorrow (they will realize it sooner or later)". So with Boy's suggestion, changes happen in the second act. Many scholars have a pessimistic attitude towards the arrival of "Godot", believing that "Godot" will not come. However, from this perspective, I believe that "Godot" will definitely come, just like the new leaves growing on the withered tree. Estragon and Vladimir will eventually realize that they are the "Godot" they are waiting for. They may not realize it today but tomorrow. Today they will be waiting and despairing, and perhaps tomorrow they will be eventually awakened, "Godot" will no longer be an ethereal existence, but "themselves". Therefore, Boy firmly states that Godot will come, because Godot is just by their side, and this is also what we readers and audiences deeply understand: Godot, will come. And in this unconscious ending, the bored and hopeless "waiting" of the characters in the play and the hopeful audience outside the play who firmly believe that "Godot" will come also constitute such a contradictory combination of despair and hope, which better reflects Beckett's superb use of contradiction construction.

## 5. Summary

*En attendant Godot* shows all the things Beckett wants to express to the audience, and these are naturally beyond the scope of the so-called "absurd theater". And Beckett's contradictory combination of hope and despair has brought the eternal aesthetic charm of this work, making readers feel unforgettable after reading it. Perhaps they may find it slightly difficult to understand, or even confused, but after reading it, they can always feel a deep shock and resonance in their hearts, and even feel a sense of courage and strength. Because this work by Beckett contains commonalities that all humans share. Perhaps *En attendant Godot* belongs to the category of "tragedy", but the positive part it conveys to readers is that, facing life's suffering and despair, being brave to think and acting to pursue hope (it also contains the negation of Christ and the contemplation of survival in this play, which also points to a spirit - we must face the setbacks and hardships of life bravely, and achieve self-redemption, because in Beckett's heart, this redeemer should be human themselves [9]). The contradictory of this "tragicomic effect" makes every audience be attracted by the unique charm of this masterpiece.

In conclusion, *En attendant Godot* has an enduring charm as Beckett's contradictory construction gives his works high aesthetic value, and his works convey not so-called "absurdity" or "venting dissatisfaction with Western capitalism", but teach us to muster the courage with our own thinking and actions to face despair and suffering in the times and life, and unleash our own initiative and strength to bravely create your own future. This spirit also makes Beckett's works a monument in the history of human civilization, worthy of continuous research and exploration.

## References

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