

How is alienation stylistically dramatized in waiting for godot and in death of e...

[Psychology](#), [Success](#)



In the previous chapter we have shown how the alienation pervades both of the plays thematically. The present chapter concerns with the stylistic devices which are used by Arthur Miller and Samuel Beckett to support the thematic preoccupation. Since we are concerned with the study of drama, we judge important to include an examination of the stagecraft; that is to say the technical aspects of the two plays. The most important point to insist on is that *Death of a Salesman* and *Waiting for Godot* belong to two different, if not opposed, theatrical movements - Realism and Absurdism, respectively. As a matter of fact, the difference between Realist and Absurdist dramatic techniques is manifested by a difference in the way themes are conveyed. We presume, therefore, that alienation in *WfG* and in *DoS* is differently dramatized.

The central character of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman, is a washed-up, depressed, pessimistic man who always wanted to be bigger than he was. Beckett's play is presented in a very realistic manner; the play purports to be conducted in a style that simulates the everyday workings of real human life. The characters have a sense of time and space, behave realistically, and nothing happens in the play that could not happen in real life. The Realism and naturalism present in the play is offered most uniquely through the characters, as Willy's existential crises, which carry the themes of the work, are presented as a relatable modern malaise that the audience can respond to.

Willy Loman, at the end of the play, commits suicide by crashing his car.

Willy, now middle-aged and struggling with growing old and unimportant, is

an extremely frustrated character throughout the play. He does not like the fact that he did not get the chance to become someone important before he grew too old to do so, and he wants his own children to achieve that success. This sense of self-delusion grows to the point where he believes that, after having had a tearful reconciliation with Biff, that Biff wants to follow in his footsteps and become a businessman. Following through with this fantasy, Willy gets into his car and crashes it, killing himself so that Biff can use the insurance money to live out the American Dream that he so failed to do. The play's fascination with the American Dream is part of the way in which it carries its themes via Realism - by simulating everyday life, the audience can better connect with these concerns.

Willy kills himself and leaves this legacy for Biff as an attempt to make amends for the horrible treatment he gives his son. Willy's relationship with Biff is strained at best; Biff rejects Willy's approach to the American dream, while Willy works hard to get him to follow in his footsteps. " I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!" Willy says at one point; this is meant to solidify the sense of misplaced pride he feels in himself, placing himself in competition with Biff as a member of the family (Miller, p. 152). Willy's attitude of favoring personality over hard work makes him teach terrible values to his son - when Biff steals a football from the locker room, Willy merely says, " Coach'll probably congratulate you on your initiative!" (Miller, 1949). Biff's relationship with Willy is further strained when Biff catches Willy with another woman at a hotel; from that point on, Willy knows

that Biff no longer respects him, and is constantly looking for ways to make amends.

Willy's tensions with his son, and throughout his life, stem from the central core conflicts that lie at the heart of Willy's perspective. Throughout the play, Willy insists to his two sons that, in order to succeed in life, you need to be "well liked" and have "a smile and a shoeshine" (Miller, 1949). Willy believes that the key to success in life and in America is just to ingratiate yourself with everyone around you. Once that is accomplished, you do not have to work as hard, and you can coast your way to success through your connections. However, this perilous way of pursuing the American Dream is very costly, and often robs Willy of his dignity. Willy is obsessed with technology, for example Willy's love of cars as a symbol of the American Dream. Now middle-aged at the time of the play, Willy is tense, uncomfortable, and delusional; even at the worst of times, Willy commits to his goal, and is adamant that this is the way to success. Willy's perspective is the key of the "relentless competitiveness at the heart of the American capitalist dream," and this is what causes him to neglect what is really important - his family.

Willy Loman is an immensely tragic character brought down by his own misplaced idea of the American dream, fitting in quite closely with Realist notions of credible locations, dialogue and situations. He believes that in order to be successful, you just have to look good and speak well; there is no sense of initiative or prowess in place for him. This causes him to lash out at his sons, who are not succeeding as he would like them to, and this

distances him from them even further. Willy and Biff grow further apart, as Biff hates Willy for forcing such unwanted, high expectations on him, and Willy hates Biff for not succeeding where he failed. After the cathartic experience that Willy and Biff have, where they finally acknowledge their love for each other, Willy decides to make the ultimate sacrifice so that Biff can have the chance to make a better life. In this way, Willy comes through as a father and as a man, even though his actions were ultimately misguided - still expecting Biff to be a businessman, when that is not what he wanted. Still, the impetus for his suicide is one of love and benevolence, meaning a sense of progress for Willy at the end of the play.

Waiting for Godot is not nearly as plot-driven and naturalistic as Death of a Salesman, and follows Absurdist principles of setting and plotting. The play merely follows Vladimir and Estragon, two travelers who wait at a single location endlessly waiting for someone named Godot to arrive. Rarely is it that a play's title so succinctly describes the plot, but that is literally what occurs over the course of the story - two characters are waiting for Godot. While some other characters present themselves and interact with Vladimir and Estragon, the entire purpose of the play is to convey a series of events in which nothing of consequence happens. The two merely spend the running time of the play occupying each other and making sure they are there when Godot arrives. This is at the core of Absurdism; the setting is never clearly defined, and the inherent silliness and nonsensical nature of what is happening and who the characters are is taken at face value. In real life, two people would not be waiting for an unknown figure and eventually

kill themselves in an unidentifiable void; the fact that these extremes of the way reality is presented exists is evidence of the play's Absurdist tendencies.

The characters of *Waiting for Godot* are on both a literal and metaphysical journey throughout the play; they search for meaning in their own lives just as they wonder why Godot has not shown up yet. The opening line of the play denotes the meaninglessness that has followed them up to this point: "Nothing to be done," says Estragon, to which Vladimir argues that nothing is actually a tangible thing, and that thing has to actively be "done." This is a classic example of attempting to derive meaning from meaninglessness; in embracing the futility of life, they choose to actively work toward that futility and metaphorically swim downstream. The action to which Estragon spoke his first line was in reference to his attempts to remove a boot, which turns out to be a metaphor for both life and the action of this play - Estragon works and works to get the boot off, only to find nothing inside the boot. This can be likened to the search for meaning in life, which we often work hard to do, only to be rewarded with nothing. This is also Beckett's message; no matter how hard we try, you will not find anything inside the boot. In Realist theater

The entire play is ostensibly about the primary two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who wait for something that will never come. The deliberate transparency of the plot and the lack of truly detailed character history or personality of the two leads allow the audience to insert themselves into the situation, projecting themselves onto the characters and using the philosophy of the play to power their own viewpoint. Absurdism allows for open-ended staging and play setting, making the themes much more

apparent to the viewer (since they are not couched in realistic behavior and staging of the scene). The clear analog for Godot is God; as such, the two are waiting for God - their deity, their savior. Will He come? What happens when He comes? Do Vladimir and Estragon even know? These questions leave the play as mysterious as life itself, and just as meaningless.

In Absurdism, much of the staging and the plot is vague, not understandable, and opaque by design, to leave some of the interpretation up to the audience. In *Waiting for Godot*, God is shown to be an even more intangible force by not showing up. God, alternatively, simply leaves Vladimir and Estragon alone - the world, and anything that could control it, simply could not be bothered with such small beings as they. Beckett notes that life is arbitrary by having events happen by chance alone, and these events are often calculated by "percentage." Numbers and chance, not divine design, dictate the events of the world in both of these plays. God is silent throughout, and the characters are left to deal with the chaotic worlds in which they live.

Absurdism often exaggerates the importance or intensity of actions to make the characters seem sillier or more dramatic than the subdued performances and plotting of a Realist play. Most of the actions that Vladimir and Estragon engage in throughout the course of the play are to pass the time - the pair's constant waiting is meant to exemplify the entirety of the life experience, and as such they are simply whiling away the hours until their time is up. The nature of Godot (or God) is just as mysterious and unknowable as the universe, and is indicative of the loose understanding we have of life. Godot

is uplifted by the two as a destination, a purpose, and a meaning - they claim that they are acquaintances of his, but they do not know him very well. In fact, they admit that, if they were to come across him, they would likely not know it. However, they still hold out hope that he is coming, and that they will finally be finished with their constant waiting. Often, they think that Godot is almost there to which they cry, " We're saved!" The use of this word implies that Godot will bring them salvation.

Even when they attempt suicide, they do so with a resigned acceptance; neither of them are particularly heartbroken that their lives are about to end, likely because they never assigned meaning to their lives in the first place. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon are stuck in their current location, waiting without end, for someone that will never come. The world of Godot forgets about these characters entirely. The characters are then left to wait and ponder their significance in a world they cannot affect and vice versa.

In *Godot*, Vladimir talks about the parable in the Bible about two thieves. " One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage" (Beckett. p. 8). Here, he uses the word percentage to refer to the rate at which people die; this helps to hammer home the fact that people die in completely random ways, and that death is merely an unexpected but normal outcome of certain events. The unimportance by which someone dies makes it clear that life can be taken away at any time, even without cause; this helps to show the point that life is meaningless because it cannot be controlled.

Both plays, on the whole, deal with the importance of frustration and unmet expectations - Loman wants to be relevant and a successful man, and Vladimir and Estragon wish for Godot to show up. This frustration comes in the form of nothingness, which is made literal in *Godot*, but more metaphorical in *DoS*. Vladimir says of their location, " You couldn't describe it it's like nothing." This is one of the fundamental tenets of Absurdism, and what sets it apart from Realism - nothing can be nothing in Realism, but the senseless nature of nothing fits in with Absurdism.

In *Waiting for Godot*, this same meaninglessness also drives Vladimir and Estragon, but they are somewhat more accepting of it; the character's acceptance of the strange and bizarre also fits in with Absurdism. Even their attempts to kill themselves are half-hearted, as they seemingly find any excuse to refrain from going through with it (e. g. the ropes they use to hang themselves with are too short). These attempts at suicide are indicative of man's struggle to take control of lives in which they have no control. Vladimir and Estragon feel their nothingness most acutely in these moments, as they demonstrate the lack of restfulness that comes when one is waiting for something they inherently know will never arrive. Vladimir and Estragon, like Lear, feel their insufficiency and their unimportance; because life is unimportant, they are unimportant by extension. Lear becomes mad and the two men waiting for Godot become suicidal and despondent as a result.