

Waiting for god – a critique of christianity



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How does civilization progress? How do the ideals and standards of a society change over time and adapt to technological advances? Throughout the majority of recorded history, progress and change in this sense is the result of an antithesis, or an opposition to the societal standards, often found in the form of a counterculture. This change is the result of the population's dissatisfaction with the current state, whether it is a political, economical, religious, or cultural one. The counterculture succeeds through spreading ideas and influence to the general public to seek more support from the population, as there is power in numbers. This encourages artists, writers, musicians, directors, and anyone else with a creative output to promote their beliefs and viewpoints, as they possess the freedom to express their views and can use their popularity to influence the public. Contributing to the Theatre of the Absurd in support of the existentialism movement, Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* challenges religious values, particularly Christian values, through highlighting the faults and shortcomings of Christianity.

Released in 1953, *Waiting for Godot* was written at a significant pivotal point in British and American history, just before the rise of the counterculture in both countries. While the term "counterculture" can refer to any opposition to societal standards and tradition, it most commonly refers to a series of liberating movements occurring in both America and Britain in the 1960's that held ties with the Women's Rights movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the promotion of sexual liberation. The societal standards these movements protested exhibited Christianity's widespread influence over these two countries for centuries. Under Christianity's teachings, for

example, promiscuity and homosexuality were deemed immoral and sinful, and as a result the general public upheld societal standards, which discouraged that sexual liberation. Although many literary and artistic movements opposing Christianity's standards preceded Samuel Beckett, the counterculture had yet to shift society towards more accepting and progressive views, so Beckett's work contributed to the momentum that brought the counterculture into fruition by means of criticizing Christianity.

The titular character Godot mirrors the image of God in Christianity in many ways, most obviously in the similarities between names. While it seems as though this painfully obvious tactic is below the writing skills of Beckett, the repetition of Godot's name can subconsciously cause readers to think about God, simply by reading His name multiple times. Early on in to the first act, the main characters Estragon and Vladimir mention their communication with Godot through prayer. As Godot is never physically on stage in the play, this instance of prayer suggests a spiritual relationship between Estragon, Vladimir, and Godot, as there is little evidence presented throughout the play that instead characterizes Godot as a human. Furthermore, while the church often promotes the power of prayer during service, Vladimir and Estragon are quick to dismiss this power:

ESTRAGON. What exactly did we ask him for?

VLADIMIR. Were you not there?

ESTRAGON. I can't have been listening.

VLADIMIR. Oh . . . Nothing very definite.

ESTRAGON. A kind of prayer.

VLADIMIR. Precisely.

ESTRAGON. A vague supplication.

VLADIMIR. Exactly.

ESTRAGON. And what did he reply?

VLADIMIR. That he'd see.

ESTRAGON. That he couldn't promise anything.

VLADIMIR. That he'd have to think it over. (Beckett)

The uncertainty in this dialogue questions the power of prayer, suggesting Godot holds a very passive stance towards prayer and very rarely grants prayers. Additionally, the lines following hold more religious symbolism, in which Estragon and Vladimir note their only influence in the situation lies in worship, as in they cannot influence the outcome of the prayer aside from worshipping Godot. Furthermore, the two characters continue their dialogue to note the worship of Godot strips them of their rights, but when Estragon asks “ We lost our rights?” Vladimir replies, “ We got rid of them,” (Beckett) suggesting religion requires one to sacrifice their rights and free will as individuals in order to worship and obey a religious figure. This underlying theme of the text directly highlights the shortcomings of religion, painting it as a one-sided relationship in which the followers give up their free will to follow a religion that offers little in return. At the time of its genesis, this play

would have directly contradicted the societal standards that promoted the views of Christianity by satirizing the traditional religious practices.

As the play progresses, Beckett continues to present Godot in a negative light, particularly through the appearance of a young messenger towards the end of Act 1. A young boy claiming to work for Godot rushes onstage to inform Estragon and Vladimir of Godot's tardiness, and that Godot would surely arrive the next day. Upon further inquiry, the boy explains he shepherds goats for Godot, and his brother shepherds the sheep.

Additionally, the messenger claims Godot beats his brother, but not the messenger himself. This particular passage sticks out due to the frequent use of symbolism in the Bible regarding goats and sheep, as demonstrated in Matthew 25: 32, reading, " All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. (33) And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. (34) Then the King will say to those on His right hand, " Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...(41) " Then He will also say to those on the left hand, " Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels," (Ford). Unlike Beckett's presentation of goats and sheep, the Bible considers sheep the holy and righteous followers, while goats are represented as sinners who will burn in Hell. The messenger's claims of his brother being beat by Godot suggests the righteous followers of Christianity are abused and mistreated by their God, and rather those who do not follow God are not subjected to any like abuse or hellfire. This passage of Waiting for Godot notably opposes Christianity directly by

manipulating symbolism plainly stated in the Bible. Such an act would be seen as blasphemous in the church's eyes, but the very existence of such literature in the 1940's could inspire and provoke others who are skeptical or critical of religion and/or Christianity.

Beckett's absurdist techniques hold more meaning and purpose than they may seem; the circular dialogue, frequent repetition, and skewered timeline contribute to criticisms of Christianity. Through these literary devices, Beckett intends to present the suspension of waiting for Godot as a continual, never-ending occurrence. Vladimir and Estragon themselves cannot even remember how long they have been waiting, only aware that they are waiting and plan on continuing to wait until their meeting with Godot is fulfilled:

VLADIMIR. What are you insinuating? That we've come to the wrong place?

ESTRAGON. He should be here.

VLADIMIR. He didn't say for sure he'd come.

ESTRAGON. And if he doesn't come?

VLADIMIR. We'll come back tomorrow.

ESTRAGON. And then the day after tomorrow.

VLADIMIR. Possibly.

ESTRAGON. And so on.

VLADIMIR. The point is—

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ESTRAGON. Until he comes.

VLADIMIR. You're merciless.

ESTRAGON. We came here yesterday.

VLADIMIR. Ah no, there you're mistaken.

ESTRAGON. What did we do yesterday?

VLADIMIR. What did we do yesterday?

ESTRAGON. Yes.

VLADIMIR. Why . . . (Angrily.) Nothing is certain when you're about. (Beckett)

This dialogue presents the acts of worshipping and waiting for Godot as unfulfilling and meaningless, a never-ending cycle of waiting and being told to wait longer. This counters Christianity through Existentialism, using the fundamental beliefs of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus to question the overall meaning of religion. The philosophy of Existentialism held a very cynical view of human nature, illustrating the lack of purpose in life as a result of mortality (Cash). Most existentialists were likely atheists, as no religious beliefs in the afterlife or salvation could compliment the beliefs of existentialism, therefore the movement itself counters any religion.

Through the pointed dialogues of Waiting for Godot, Beckett uses his existentialist views to counter Christianity at a time when the religion was highly revered and largely influenced societal values. Due to his absurdist techniques, Beckett's play lacks an obvious theme, so in a broad sense,

many different meaning can be interpreted from it, all depending on the reader's background. However, Beckett's existentialism paired with textual evidence of religious references, one can begin to understand the writer's not-so-absurd views on Christianity.