

## Vladimir's Tragic Situation in *Waiting for Godot*

**Satoshi Tokunaga**

In *Waiting for Godot* (*Samuel Beckett ; The Complete Dramatic Works*, Faber, 1986. pp. 7-88. I'll write down the page number of this text at the end of quotations.), the number of persons present through Acts I and II is five : Estragon, Vladimir, Lucky, Pozzo and a boy.

It is needless to say that the main action of this play is to wait for Godot as titled, but the true character of Godot never appears from the beginning through the end of this play.

Though the main action is to wait for Godot, Vladimir and Estragon are the only people who are waiting for Godot. These two people from one group present a striking contrast to the group consisting of Pozzo and Lucky. Vladimir and Estragon are tramps, and wear similar clothes, but they do not have the same character and thought. When we further examine the character of Vladimir and Estragon, we shall discover a great difference between the two. To confirm the difference will be very helpful in our understanding of this play.

On the stage at the beginning of Act I, we can see nothing but a tree, a low mount and a rear screen lighted by red color. Estragon is sitting by a tree on a country road and trying to take off his boot. It is evening.

Vladimir enters a few minutes later. He meditates, talking to himself. His appearance on the stage impresses us as a special character.

I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (p. 11)

He reminds us Shakespeare's young hero Romeo when he first

appears on the stage, musing over love. Vladimir is a meditator similar to Romeo.

When Vladimir pantomimes with his hat, we can recognize his character and his status in this play.

Stage directions say,

He takes off his hat, peers inside it, fells about inside it, shakes it, puts it on again. (p. 12)

His hat is symbolic of his way of living. Though we must consider this pantomime as contrasting to Estragon's movement of his boot, it is easy for us to see him as a thinker and an idealist.

Estragon also shows us, by pantomimes with his boot, his character and his status.

S. Beckett let Estragon pantomime as follows :

Estragon with a supreme effort succeeds in pulling off his boot. He peers inside it, feels about inside it, turns it upside down, shakes it, looks on the ground to see if anything has fellen out, finds nothing, feels inside it again, staring sightlessly before him. (pp. 12-13)

While Vladimir deals with a hat, Estragon examines his boot. In contrast to a hat symbolic of thinking a boot is symbolic of action. It suggests that Estragon should have nothing to do with meditation. He may be a man of action. He thinks of everything in a realistic way.

On the stage when Pozzo and Lucky first appear, we can see a curious scene. When Pozzo finishes eating his chicken and throws away the bones, Estragon asks him for the bones. Judging from the scene, he has no pride in him. He is nothing but a real begger.

Vladimir seems to be a devout Christian, because he reads the Bible well and recognizes some subtle differences among the four Gospels.

He says,

---

How is it? — this is not boring you hope — how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. (p. 13)

This speech suggests that he should search his mind for being saved. Although he is obsessed with an idea that the Saviour will come, a question of being saved does not admit of any solution.

Vladimir seems to be a typical Catholic, but it does not seem to me that Estragon is a Christian.

When Vladimir asks Estragon if he has ever read the Bible, Estragon answers, "I must have taken a look at it." (p. 13) Estragon lives in the world unrelated to the Bible and knows nothing about the Gospels.

The following dialogues prove it.

Vladimir : Do you remember the Gospels ?

Estragon : I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy. (p. 13)

Estragon's world has nothing to do with the Gospels. He seems to live in the world far away from the idea of God. The object of a Catholic's visit to the Holy Land is to share with other Christians the suffering of Christ and its moving. Contrary to it, Estragon's object is a pleasure trip.

Estragon is afraid of Hell. His idea of Hell differs from Vladimir's. For Vladimir, Hell does not mean an imaginary area where sinners must go after death. It is the actual sufferings that gather around us. He searches for the Saviour who saves human beings from the sufferings.

Now the most important thing for Vladimir is to recognize the reason why Jesus Christ saved a thief. We can not understand why he tries to recognize the reason. But he seems to make no doubt that recognizing the reason is a clue to a solution of the urgent problem, "to be saved by

God. ”

Vladimir says to himself again and again,

The four of them were there — or thereabouts — and only one speaks of a thief being saved. (p. 14) ... But one of the four says that one of the two was saved. (p. 15) ... But all four were there. And only one speaks of a thief being saved. (p. 15)

Why did one of the four Gospels say so ? Why was one of the two thieves saved ? These questions are always hanging about him. He is always sunk in meditation and tries to recognize when the Saviour will come and what being saved is. The fact that one of the four Gospels does not agree with the others makes Vladimir doubtful about “to be saved by God.” He can not reach a conclusion from his doubtful situation. The doubt makes the foundation of his faith swing. He gets lost and is puzzled. After all, from the difference among the Gospels he seems to count the probability of being saved. When he says, “One of the four says that one of the two was saved.”

Estragon says to Vladimir who asks himself repeatedly,

Well ? They don't agree and that's all there is to it. (p. 15)

This simple answer suggests to us that Estragon is a realist. Vladimir meditates and tries to keep away from the shameful or disgraceful things of reality. On the contrary to him, Estragon desires that his frustration will be actually dissolved. Estragon says about his ‘private nightmare’, “You know the story of the Englishman in the brothel ? ... An Englishman having drunk a little more than usual proceed to a brothel. The bawd asks him if he wants a fair one, a dark one or a red-haired one.” (pp. 17-18) Suddenly Vladimir repeatedly cries, “Stop it.” And then we see Vladimir who exits hurriedly and Estragon who follows Vladimir as far as the limit of the stage. Vladimir considers Estragon's nightmare as the defilement of night.

There is a quite difference between them about ‘night’. To Estragon, ‘night’ means an outlet for his frustration. Any depraved behavior is per-

---

mitted in the dark of night.

Vladimir is waiting for the night as well as Godot. This world that Vladimir would not accept is expressed as 'day'.

As regards 'day', we can learn it Pozzo's speech.

He can no longer endure my presence. I am perhaps not particularly human, but who cares? [to Vladimir] Think twice before you do anything rash. Suppose you go now, while it is still day, for there is no denying it is still day. [They all look up at the sky.] Good. [They stop looking at the sky.] What happens in that case ... (p. 29)

This world is now 'day', and when this world will be over, 'night' will come. The Saviour will appear through the dark of night with his Light, so he is waiting for 'night'. In the night, at "the lightening flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other", (Luke 17 : 24, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*) another world, that is, "the kingdom of God", Vladimir desires will be realized.

At the center of another world Vladimir desires the Saviour exists, and all the human relations go around the Saviour. Their bond is love, sympathy and compassion.

This world, that is, our present situation, is the merciless world where the stronger prey upon the weaker. He firmly believes that all mankind would not want this merciless world.

Vladimir says,

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! [Pause. Vehemently.] Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which

a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say? (Estragon says nothing.) It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species. The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners without the least reflection, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets. But that is not the question. What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come—(p. 74)

A realistic man, Estragon, is interested in the mysterious thing behind the reality. He can't believe in God not because he has never seen Him but because he lives in the world unrelated to God. Though he is waiting for Godot, he sometimes forgets the name of Godot. The name does not matter for him.

As far as Estragon, the word 'Godot' can't go from a symbol into significance. It is impossible to say with certainty the reason why he is waiting for Godot. It is impossible to understand what he expects from Godot. Godot is a symbol that has no clear significance.

While Vladimir emphasizes that they are waiting for Godot, Estragon is not interested in Godot we can see the large gap between them

Vladimir. Tied ?

Estragon. Ti-ed.

Vladimir. How do you mean tied ?

Estragon. Down.

Vladimir. But to whom. By whom ?

Estragon. To your man.

Vladimir. To Godot? Tied to Godot What an idea! No question of it. [Pause] For the moment.

Estragon. His name is Godot ?

Vladimir. I think so.

Estragon. Fancy that ... (p. 22)

These dialogues tell us about two important points. One point is that

---

Estragon is feeling 'tied'. Waiting for Godot deprives him of his freedom. All he wants is freedom. Godot is a burden, and it puts a heavy burden on him. Another point is that he does not know anything about Godot, or maybe forgets whom Vladimir considers as the Saviour. This fact suggests to us that he should be an existentialist who denies the existence of God or the coming of the Saviour.

Vladimir believes Godot is coming. He thinks that Godot's absence means the absence of a center of the world. His distress is that he exists far and away from Godot. When Estragon asks of Vladimir if his name is Godot, (p. 22) Vladimir answers that he thinks so. The answer "I think so" (p. 22) presents us the time-distance from Godot. About two thousand years have passed since Jesus Christ disappeared.

Supposing that Godot means God, we could recognize that he is waiting for Christ. As far as the Christians who believe the reappearance of Christ, two thousand years are too long to wait. We can confirm that for Vladimir Godot means, but it is impossible to confirm what Estragon is waiting for.

The significance of Godot is ambiguous and disjoints the relationship between them.

All that we can say definitely is that Estragon is a severe critic of civilization. He stands outside this world. He is always looking at the reality of this world in the distance.

He says,

People are bloody ignorant apes. (p. 15)

He has no ideal and no object he criticizes this world. He can express his view as sensational words but he has no ability to reform the world.

Vladimir and Estragon always love talking without working. They do not settle down and they never mind sleeping in the open. They do not need the daily necessities which we need in the modern civilization. We are paralysed in a flood of the material things. The two men's existence itself makes the mockery of our modern life.

The world of this play can be divided into two worlds. One is the world where Vladimir and Estragon live. The other is the world where

pozzo and Lucky live. The bond between Vladimir and Estragon is their purpose in meeting Godot. They are waiting for Godot, encouraging , quarrelling and consoling each other. Compassion is the strongest bond between them.

Vladimir says, "Everything's dead but the tree. ... A willow." (p. 87) and then Estragon says, "Why don't we hang ourselves ? ... You haven't got a bit of rope ?"

They have examined this world and have tried to see if this world is worth living in. And they reach a conclusion that everything in this world is dead except a willow - tree. It is impossible, from their dialogue, to recognize the reason why nothing but a willow-tree is dead. It is an absurd, groundless conclusion. And it does not seem that the willow-tree has some important meaning in the Bible and the religious history.

They want to hang themselves on the willow-tree. Though the reason why they want to commit suicide cannot be known, they need a bit of rope and a tree. A willow-tree can not support one of their bodies with a rope, because it is very flexible and easy to break. Their dialogues about hanging themselves include absurd humour.

They make a choice between this world, that is, the world where we live, and another world, that is, the world we desire. When they desert this world and want to go into another world, a rope will serve their accomplishment. The rope has a metaphorical meaning and it expresses the bond between this world and another world.

The rope with which Pozzo binds Lucky to himself has a literal meaning and is different from the rope which Estragon and Vladimir want, because the bond between Pozzo and Lucky differs from that between Vladimir and Estragon. Pozzo and Lucky have no compassion on each other. They would not help each other. Their bond is nothing but violence. There is a social hierarchy based on wealth in the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky. In the civilized society, wealth and power produce a social status. Relationship between employer and employee in a company exists there. Our present situation is full of these cruel relations.



---

Consider the relationship between Pozzo and Vladimir. There is no bond between them. But their relationship presents us with an important problem.

Pozzo says,

The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. [He laughs.] Let us not then speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its predecessors. [Pause] Let us not speak well of it either. [Pause.] Let us not speak of it at all. (p. 33)

Pozzo is a landlord. In this play the word 'landlord' extends from its literary meaning to metaphorical meaning. He is a ruler of a capitalistic world as well as a ruler of his land. Though Vladimir is not Pozzo's servant, he is a tramp within Pozzo's world. Pozzo demands of Vladimir the acceptance of his world as it is.

In Act II, Pozzo's power withers, but Vladimir can not find out any indication of another world that he wants. He must live alone in chaotic state. In the state, he vaguely keeps waiting for the Saviour, Godot. The chaotic state does not bring the hope to him but, on the contrary, it lets him fall in the depth of despair. Vladimir's situation deepens his despair without changing for better. His situation is tragic. It is impossible for Vladimir to escape the hopeless, merciless situation.