

Psychoanalytic Analysis of the Characters in Beckett's "Waiting for Godot"

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Abstract: *Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot which is a renowned play written after the World War II primarily focuses on its post-war-period characters. The play is categorized into "Theatre of the Absurd", and several studies were conducted on the post-war period and its impressions in the play. Besides, it called forth many studies on its political, biblical, psychological, and philosophical interpretations in literature. However, there were not enough studies about a full-psychoanalytic analysis of the characters. So as to fill this gap, the present study aims to analyze the two protagonists Estragon and Vladimir, and the hidden character Mr. Godot in terms of the Freudian Theory of Personality. The study benefited from a discourse analysis of these three characters according to Freud's "the id, the ego, and the superego" triangle. When deeply analyzed it was concluded that Vladimir who is the first voice in the play symbolizes "the ego", Estragon who has the second voice symbolizes "the id", and Mr. Godot who has a hidden voice symbolizes "the superego" of Freud's Theory of Personality. In addition, as in the case of the id, the ego, and the superego, these three characters cannot be separated from each other; they all contribute to the plot and stage development of the play.*

Keywords: Waiting for Godot, theatre of the absurd, the Freudian Theory of Personality, characterization in Waiting for Godot, Sigmund Freud

1. Introduction

Samuel Beckett's most noted play *Waiting for Godot* which is a modernist one was originally written in French in 1948. The play mainly focuses on the psyche of the characters; in fact, post-war community. It was written in the era when the World War II had just terminated and caused large depression on the communities. This play has been categorized into "Theatre of the Absurd" as Hussain (2014) suggests: "Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' belongs to the tradition of the Theatre of Absurd" (p. 1479). In his reputed play, Beckett handles existentialism as a philosophy filling it in a harmony with the World War II. The play also has some biblical allusions and covers some criticism about Christianity. The characters in the play find themselves in an unending despair; their dialogues which include uncompleted speeches, contradictions, and repetitions sometimes appear uncertain and meaningless although one may find deep philosophical ideas in them. Furthermore; not only time and setting but also reality in the play is not explicit. When literature is reviewed in this context, it could be asserted that there were many studies on political, biblical, psychological, and philosophical interpretations, and post-war atmosphere of the play. Surprisingly, it seemed that there were not enough studies about a full-psychoanalytic analysis of the characters. In order to fill this gap the aim of the present study was to analyze the two protagonists Estragon and Vladimir, and the hidden character Mr. Godot in terms of the Freudian Theory of Personality. Hence, the voices of these three characters in the play were supposed to be deeply analyzed so as to fulfill the purpose of the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sigmund Freud and the Freudian Theory of Personality

Sigmund Freud who is noted as the father of psychoanalysis asserts in his theory that people's behaviors are directed by a part of the mind called unconscious. He reveals that there is deep and largely unattainable data in this part of the brain which means this kind of data is not easily brought to the surface with one's free will. Later, Freud compares this unconscious mind with conscious and preconscious mind drawing a parallel between the brain and an iceberg. He defines conscious as the data in a particular time period and preconscious as the data that can easily be brought to conscious. These data mentioned might be one's thoughts, feelings, perceptions, wishes or memories, and they might exist in one or more. Considering this triangle, Freud (1920) implies that unconscious is the wider circle which covers conscious and preconscious, and everything preconscious and conscious has its first step in unconscious.

Thereafter in 1923 Freud developed his Freudian Theory of Personality covering definitions and detailed explanations of the id, the ego, and the superego triangle. Freud (1933) defines the id as people's needs, desires, and passions. It is the core of one's instinctive and unconscious mind. It has no rules, no time, and no space, no values, and no morality; it is just governed by one's libido and tries to reach the immediate pleasure. It is "the untamed passions" (Freud, 1933). However, Freud (1923/1961) asserts that the id occupies the largest place in one's mind and it is the most favored one dominating one's behaviors. Freud (1923/1961) suggests that someone's passions and desires are placed in the id part of his/her mind but they are kept buried in subconscious since he/she is generally afraid of facing them.

According to Freud (1933) if there is id somewhere, there must be ego as well. The ego has three masters: the id, the superego, and the external world. The ego is the most conscious and defensive part of one's mind. Moreover, it is supposed to meet the demands of the external world, obey the rules of the superego, and satisfy the libido of the id like a large bridge among them. It serves for "reason, sanity, and circumspection" (Freud, 1933). Freud concludes that the ego is the part of the id dominated by the external world; however, it is supposed to direct the id according to the reality principle, and control its unreasonable urges (1933). The ego undertakes the duty of controlling the unending desires of the id indicating both the external world and the superego. On the other hand, the ego is supposed to realize the intentions of the id but if it is forced to face its weakness it poses an anxiety: reality anxiety of the external world, moral anxiety of the super ego, and the neurotic anxiety of the impulses of the id (Freud, 1933).

The superego is a moral police representing the parental prohibitions; it is the critical agent (Freud, 1933). It has social and cultural requirements, and substitutes for one's father, boss, master, or even the God in his/her mind. Trying to satisfy the society's desires, the superego is completely in conflict with the impulses of the id, and partly with the ego. Having certain norms and rules, the superego watches the ego in its each movement. If its norms are not fulfilled the superego punishes the ego with the feelings of tension, inferiority, and guilt (Freud, 1933).

2.2 The Characterization in "Waiting for Godot"

There are six characters in the play *Waiting for Godot*: five of them are on the stage, and one of them is behind the stage, unseen. The characters on the stage are the two protagonists Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, and the messenger boy. The character behind the stage is Mr. Godot who could be defined as "a hidden character" throughout the play. All the characters apart from Lucky have their own voices; Lucky could only speak when his master Pozzo commands. Moreover, they have no time, no past, and no purpose for living; they only try to find a way to pass time. In this context, Bloom (2008) asserts that "Beckett goes beyond the mere rejection of traditional narrative dramaturgy and character development to make space, time, the senses, and logic take on the dimensions of characters on stage" (p. 132). However, the characters in the play give the audience the feelings of strangeness and meaninglessness as Lahu (2016) suggests: "Samuel Beckett has presented all the characters in a way that all seem meaningless and strange like plot of the play" (p. 3). Besides, there is no character development (Kern, 1954): "one is what one is", "the essential doesn't change" (Beckett, 2011, 1. 26).

One could not categorize Beckett's characters easily since they appear to occupy no certain places in the play. "They are positioned, strangely, between individuality and stylization, between relatedness and independence, between pattern and autonomy, between 'flat' and 'round', between surface and depth, partaking of opposite spheres but never fully classifiable within either" (Lawley, 2008, p. 21-22). Even so, the characters in the play represent abstract or spiritual

meanings (Graver, 2004). They have no past in the play although Vladimir tries hard to remember about 'yesterday'. They are presented to utter similar but meaningless conversations in both acts. The characters seem to be tabula rasa making the audience have deeper thoughts about 'existentialism'. Thus, it could be concluded that Beckett's main purpose in the characterization process of the play is actually characterizing man's existence (Roberts, 1980).

3. Methodology

This study benefits from a discourse analysis of the two protagonists Estragon and Vladimir, and the hidden character Mr. Godot in the play according to the Freudian Theory of Personality. The voices of these three characters were analyzed deeply and the characters were subject to a complete psychoanalytic analysis with regards to the Freud's "the id, the ego, and the superego" triangle.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

When the play is subject to a discourse analysis in terms of the Freudian Theory of Personality it could be asserted that the two protagonists Vladimir and Estragon, and the hidden character Mr. Godot are all representations of Freud's ideology of the mind. Estragon symbolizes the id, Vladimir symbolizes the ego, and Mr. Godot symbolizes the superego. First of all, Vladimir is the most rational character in the play as the ego is the most rational one among these mental personalities. Estragon behaves with his impulses throughout the play as the id does, and Mr. Godot is a God-like figure having norms, rules, and prohibitions as Atkinson (1956) suggests: "It seems fairly certain that Godot stands for God".

It appears that Estragon is psychologically dependent on Vladimir, Vladimir is spiritually dependent on Mr. Godot, and indirectly Estragon is dependent on Godot. Vladimir implies his commitment to Godot in the scene of the discussion to hang themselves or not: "Let's wait and see what he (Godot) says" (Beckett, 2011, 1. 19). Besides, he is the one always insisting that they cannot go anywhere since they are waiting for Godot. On the other hand, Vladimir indicates Estragon's dependence on him telling Estragon: "You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it" (Beckett, 2011, 1. 3). Furthermore, Vladimir suggests that Estragon would lose his way without him:

ESTRAGON: (coldly.) There are times when I wonder if it wouldn't be better for us to part.

VLADIMIR: You wouldn't go far (Beckett, 2011, 1. 15).

As in the case of the id, the ego, and the superego Vladimir, Estragon, and Mr. Godot cannot draw apart although Estragon occasionally states they should. Besides, Vladimir thinks Estragon could not defend himself if they parted. He presents protection for him implying that he would not let anyone to harm his friend Estragon whatever happens:

VLADIMIR: (vexed). Then why do you always come crawling back?

ESTRAGON: I don't know.

VLADIMIR: No, but I do. It's because you don't know how to defend yourself. I wouldn't have let them beat you (Beckett, 2011, 2. 89).

Vladimir's protection for Estragon recalls the position of the ego: it tries hard to protect the id from the punishment, strictness, and tyranny of the superego. Vladimir displays protection for Estragon in the scene where Lucky hits him in the leg; he offers to help. Moreover, Estragon cannot wear his boots without Vladimir's help in Act II. Likewise, Vladimir covers Estragon with his jacket when he falls asleep. Moreover, when Estragon has a nightmare Vladimir tries to calm him down. As he is the one always recalling that they are waiting for Godot, Vladimir seems certain that Godot will punish them if they give up waiting for him:

ESTRAGON: And if we dropped him? (Pause.) If we dropped him?

VLADIMIR: He'd punish us (Beckett, 2011, 2. 161).

On the other hand, Vladimir cannot recall the past without Estragon since he believes he is a witness about the past. This case is similar to the fact that the ego takes its energy from the id (Freud, 1933). Furthermore, towards the end of Act II Vladimir starts to question about reality, time, and place they are in. He wonders whether he is awake or not; he falls into a reality anxiety. Likewise, when the ego is forced to face its weakness, it breaks into a reality anxiety about the external world (Freud, 1933).

Mr. Godot is supposed to punish Vladimir and Estragon, as it is the case of the superego since if its norms are not fulfilled the superego punishes the ego and indirectly the id with the feelings of tension, inferiority, and guilt (Freud, 1933). In both Act I and Act II, Vladimir feeds or offers to feed Estragon with carrots and turnips when he is starved. Vladimir believes that it is his duty to do what Estragon desires. Similarly, the ego realizes the intentions and satisfies the impulses of the id like a rider who has to direct his/her horse in the way it itself wishes to go (Freud, 1933).

Moreover, in Freud's ideology of the mind, the superego does not communicate with the id; rather it communicates with the ego. In the scenes where the messenger boy comes in the end of both Act I and Act II, the boy as a messenger of the superego -Godot- wishes to talk to solely Vladimir when he appears. He abstains from Estragon since Godot prefers to send no messages to him.

Considering all the clues discussed above it could be asserted that Vladimir who is the first voice in the play symbolizes "the ego", Estragon who has the second voice symbolizes "the id", and Mr. Godot who has a hidden voice symbolizes "the superego" of Freud's Theory of Personality. In addition, as in the case of the id, the ego, and the superego, these three characters cannot be separated from each other; they all contribute to the plot and stage development of the play. They cannot be complete characters even in the lack of one party. Similarly, it is the same case considering the id, the ego, and the superego of Freud. The mind cannot function well with the lack of each one in this triangle. Freud makes

this verdict explicit suggesting that in the place where the id is, there should be the ego; and, for the ego to function properly there should be the superego as well (Freud, 1933).

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