

The Parable of Salvation or Damnation: A Study of Samuel Beckett's Biblical Allusions in *Waiting for Godot*

“Do not despair- one of the thieves was saved; do not presume- one of the thieves was damned.” - St. Augustine¹

Mohammad Kamal Hossain*

Asma Alam**

Abstract: Equivocally referred Biblical allusions in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* conform significantly to the playwright's uncertain vision of the Christian creed as projected in many of his major works. The ambiguous nature of the scriptural references in his plays has very often been attributed as the most convincing reason to the perception of Beckett as a skeptic or in some cases as an atheist. The present study intends to examine the Biblical allusions used in *Waiting for Godot* with a view to understanding the dramatist's real objectives behind using them. Uncertainty about the quintessence of some fundamental Christian truths is presented through cryptic references to the Biblical contents. The intricate web of scriptural references in the play serves the purpose of presenting a vision of hopelessness and chaos at the core of human existence. The possibility of redemption for humanity is denied through the ambiguity reflected in the numerous references to Biblical parables. One major finding of the present study is the fact that, through his characters' Biblical citations Beckett seems to oscillate between the realms of faith and faithlessness. The present study concludes that the Biblical allusions in *Waiting for Godot* do not foreshadow any change in the immobile lives of the characters, instead, it only adds to the intensity of what is already there.

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* pensively demonstrates the equivocal motif of some central truths of Christianity concerning the question of redemption, which becomes evident from the playwright's idiosyncratic Biblical allusions and numerous references to the existing body of Christian ethics. The very title of the play has contributed significantly to this consideration. Even if we reject for instance, the idea of reading the play as a religious parable we are still impelled to consider the exalted position of the playwright who undertakes the task of writing a play solely about the monotonous act of waiting. During the entire development of the play nearly nothing is likely to come about and yet its audience is supposed to be convinced of waiting for a sensible and meaningful finale. Beckett renders the characters and audience waiting for something they consider to be of paramount importance. The quest for such highly important objective invariably leads the audience towards a final resolution. Only for an omnipotent being who has the power to change everything at his will, the characters can wait with such anticipation disregarding the empirical impossibility of his arrival.

After multiple interpretations of the Biblical allusions in *Waiting for Godot* critics have often pointed out the purposeful satiric use of the Biblical material by the dramatist. As Boxall observes, “In *Waiting for Godot*, [...] the Biblical echoes are mocking echoes, probably because Christianity (like love, another major Beckett target) seemed to promise so much to man. Vladimir thinks of the thief who was saved, only after he declares man's foot is at fault [...]” (Boxall, 2003, p. 85). For Gerard Durozoi, “the matter is more straightforward; [...] he asserts that Beckett's use of the scriptures is straightforwardly satirical and dismissive” (Bryden, 2004, p. 163). Sometimes it has been inferred

¹ Quoted in Esslin, Martin. (2001), *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Methuen, London, P. 53.

* Mohammad Kamal Hossain is currently working as Senior Lecturer, Department of English in Daffodil International University, Bangladesh.

** Asma Alam is currently working as Lecturer, Department of English in Daffodil International University, Bangladesh.

that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a specimen of the verbalization of an atheist's gloomy meditations. On other occasions, it has either been perceived as a testimony of a skeptic or simply as the repeated promulgation of a frantic blasphemy inspired by the mysterious manifestations of human sufferings in a nonchalant world. Eric Bentley suggests, "[...] he does not write from the standpoint of atheism but, theologically speaking, from that of skepticism" (Bentley, 1956, p. 107). The clear divide among the critics coupled with crucial facts dug from the depth of Beckett's biography appears to be indicative of a cryptic nature of the playwright's Biblical allusions in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's enigmatic vagueness in this respect is furthered by the distinctive way which is often derogatory in nature, his characters play on Biblical facts while waiting for the unexplainable Godot. The retrospective speculations of the suffering characters in relation to the nebulous question of redemption also add some fuel to the assumption of ambiguity regarding Beckett's use of the Biblical materials in the play.

According to many critics, Beckett was born on the Good Friday in 1906 which was incidentally the thirteenth Friday of the year. This coincidence undoubtedly had tremendous impact upon the works of the playwright. His entire works unmistakably evolves around sufferings akin to human existence. He was haunted by the vital question of salvation of the human race, which seems to be the central preoccupation of the playwright. Supti Sen finds, "Christianity is an indirect influence in Beckett's work, present in the background. The image of Christ (not of God) and the question of salvation are among his recurrent themes" (Sen, 1970, p. 70). One of his late works, *Company*, has reflected very vividly the notable impact of the coincidence of his birth-date with the very day when the Saviour was crucified. As a consequence of this biographical connection with the crucifixion of Christ and Christ's life story, Beckett has created some of his masterpieces to delineate the human predicament in a mysterious universe.

Biblical allusions in *Waiting for Godot* begin to appear from the very initial phase of the play. In the opening scene, as a reaction to the repeated physical assaults received from unknown opponents and discomfort caused by unmatched boots, Vladimir abruptly announces, "One of the thieves was saved²," (WFG, Act-I) and stubbornly insists on telling the rest of the story to his unwilling listener, Estragon. Behind this apparently incidental mention of a Biblical episode two very important dramatic facts are presented for our consideration: the gravity of the story in contrast to the gloomy context in which it is recalled and the historical problem emphasized by nineteenth century Higher Criticism³ that Biblical versions in many places differ very drastically from each other. The integral effect of these two factors together is undoubtedly an evocation of uncertainty in the minds of the audience regarding the dramatist's religious convictions. The apparent accidental nature of the actual Biblical incident testifies to Beckett's dubious use of the incident in his play. As Esslin observes:

[...] It is the shape of the idea that fascinated Beckett. Out of all the malefactors, out of all the millions and millions of criminals that have been executed in the course of history, two, only two, had the chance of receiving absolution in the hour of their death in so uniquely effective a manner. One happened to make a hostile remark; he was damned. One happened to contradict that remark; he was saved. [...] (Esslin, 2001, p. 54).

The subsequent references to Biblical contents revolve around this central episode linked with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and serve the purpose of giving a kind of completion to the ambiguous

² Textual citations from *Waiting for Godot* used in this essay are from: Beckett, Samuel. (1955), *Waiting for Godot*, London: Faber and Faber. For convenience of uses *Waiting for Godot* has been mentioned hereinafter as WFG.

³ **Higher criticism** is a branch of literary analysis which flourished in the nineteenth century. The higher critics investigate the origins of any text: as applied in biblical studies it naturally investigates first of all the books of the *Bible*. The questions raised by higher criticism are widely recognized by many traditional Christians as legitimate questions, yet they often find the answers given by the higher critics unsatisfactory or even in some cases heretical. –Authors.

attitude expressed through the first mention of this incident. All Biblical references in *Waiting for Godot* are in one way or the other associated with the ultimate fate of humanity, possibility of their attaining salvation or the extent of suffering inflicted upon them while waiting for inexplicable miracles to take place liberating them from the recurring pangs of life.

The arrival of Godot is repeatedly foreshadowed, and it is tenaciously believed in by Vladimir and Estragon that, the arrival will save them from all possible adversities of their tormented existence. Any reader possessing even a little acquaintance with Christianity will at this point be able to deduce an analogy with Jesus Christ's Second Coming. If the play is not regarded as utterly insignificant and literally devoid of any substantiality, we can see the unmistakable parallel even though we might not identify Godot blatantly with the Christian God. We find the characters of the play waiting with an uncertain hope for salvation which in secular standards can stand for a whole range of connotations. Unlike the Judeo-Christian audience who would become aware of the fact that, they are still awaiting the resurrection of their Messiah, we might search the ontological significance of Godot from many other standpoints as well. No matter from which perspective we are approaching the enigmatic idea enveloping the identity of Godot we are bound to discover the uncertainty of Beckett as his spiritual oscillation between the possibilities of salvation and damnation will never fail to captivate our attention. Beckett's semantic implications hidden behind his Christian allusions in the play are in many occasions ambiguous. No matter how we read the play Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is full of ambiguity created by the playwright's unorthodox references to the orthodox religious convictions.

The withheld identity of Godot has caused more than anything else a sense of sheer uncertainty among the characters and among the audience of the play for more than half a century. It has accelerated the efforts of reading the play ever since its publication as a religious parable, a fact which has received denial from many corners as well. The characters' response to Godot are varied and moulded in accordance with their personal choices and idiosyncrasies. Vladimir is presented as hopelessly hopeful about the arrival of Godot, if he "does not come this evening, then he will certainly arrive tomorrow, or at the very latest the day after. Estragon, much troubled by his boots, is less confident. He thinks the game is not worth playing, and is ready to hang himself." (Hobson 1955, p. 94). However, the "ambiguity of their attitude towards Godot, their mingled hope and fear, the doubtful tone of the boy's messages, represents the state of tension and uncertainty in which the average Christian must live [...]" (Fraser, 1956, p. 99). Beckett's personal conviction regarding theology also plays an important part in his characteristic references to the *Bible*. The lack of certainty over the question of salvation is partly due to the dramatist's distinctive understanding of the world he lived in. Eva Metman rightly concludes,

[...] Vladimir tries to make Estragon participate in his own fears about the question of salvation, damnation, or mere death, but Estragon remains unmoved. Vladimir talks about the two thieves who were crucified beside the Savior and he ponders the fact that only one of the four Evangelists mentions that one of the thieves was going to be saved. (Metman, 1965, p. 126).

The purpose behind using such allusions in the play is not to provide any certainty about any theological or secular speculations concerning the human predicament and the effect sought after is that of uncertainty, chaos and disintegration.

The uncertainty and ambiguity about the fundamental essence of the Christian truths presented in the play emerges from the oscillating pattern of affirmation and negation of these ideas by the characters. The juxtaposition of opposite extremes which simultaneously accounts partially for the ecumenical comedy of *Waiting for Godot* and causes the reader to conclude of Beckett as hovering above Christian theology in search of the truth akin to human predicament. Beckett's own assessment of the Biblical materials run as: "Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly

familiar, so naturally I use it” (Duckworth 1972, p. 18). The assertion “One of the thieves was saved” (WFG, Act-I) is immediately followed by a comical but sternly materialistic response: “It’s a reasonable percentage” (WFG, Act-I). The casual temperament of this response introduces contemplation of a completely contrasting order: the temporal world of cost-benefit analysis unlike the spiritual order of eternal salvation. The implicit irreverence behind this abrupt change from the spiritual to the temporal shocks and surprises us, and from this experience of shock and surprise emerges the obscurity regarding the playwright’s true intentions behind choosing such references. The sanctity of the most dignified book of the Judeo-Christian tradition is reduced to the status of some attractive coloured maps. Jesus Christ, the central figure in Christian faith becomes a source of comic entertainment when the declaration: “Our Saviour” is perfectly counterbalanced by the immediate question: “Our what?” Vladimir momentarily forgets a very ordinary theological word and rummages for the opposite of ‘saved’ and eventually remembers ‘damned’. The numerous juxtapositions administered in *Waiting for Godot* and the desperate rapidity with which they are presented undeniably inspires the opinion that elements of uncertainty were lurking in the background of the dramatist’s psyche about the Biblical incidents and parables he referred to.

The New Testament account of the story mentioned by Vladimir runs as: “One of the criminals hanging there also insulted Jesus by saying ‘Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and save us!’ But the other criminal told the first one off, ‘Don’t you fear God? Aren’t you getting the same punishment as this man? We got what was coming to us, But he didn’t do anything wrong.’ Then he said to Jesus, ‘Remember me when you come into power!’ Jesus replied, ‘I promise that today you will be with me in paradise.’” (Luke 23: 39-43, *God’s Promise for People of Today: The Contemporary English Version*⁴). The confusion behind Vladimir’s innocent reference to this Biblical story arises from another version of the same incident by another evangelist that runs as: “The chief priests, the leaders, and the teachers of the Law of Moses also made fun of Jesus. They said, ‘He saved others, but he can’t save himself. If he is the king of Israel, he should come down from the cross! Then we will believe him, if he wants to. He even said he was God’s son.’ The two criminals also said cruel things to Jesus.” (Matthew 27: 44, CEV). Through the utterances of Vladimir Beckett is pointing towards the visible incongruity between the two versions of the same story by two evangelists. The sense of uncertainty in this matter is further intensified by yet another version of the same story by another evangelist that negates the presence of any thieves at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus saying: “[...] The two criminals also said cruel things to Jesus.” (Mark 15: 32, CEV).

Vladimir is obsessed with the incongruity of the different versions of the same theological episode. He repeatedly contemplates on this story as he thinks, “there is a fifty-fifth chance” of salvation, “but as only one out of four witnesses reports it, the odes are considerably reduced” (Esslin, 2001, p. 54). Vladimir wonders: “how is that of the four evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved? The four of them were there – or thereabouts, and only one speaks of a thief being saved” (WFG, Act-I) On the other hand, his materialistic counterpart, Estragon is weary of any significance of this story and is utterly unwilling to pay any heed to it. He responds to the story with a comical gesture, “I find this really most extraordinarily interesting” (WFG, Act-I) He evades the serious problem of nineteenth century Higher Criticism with a simple remark, “Who believes him?” Vladimir’s effort to reinforce the solemnity of the episode with: “Everybody (believes him). It’s the only version they know” (WFG, Act-I) is equilibrated with Estragon’s sweeping observation “People are bloody ignorant apes” (WFG, Act-I). The experience for the audience at this point is both shocking and amusing. They suddenly come to realize the awe inspiring fact that they also may have no or only a

⁴ All subsequent references to the Bible are from: *God’s Promise for People of Today: The Contemporary English Version*, (1995). Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville. For convenience of uses it has been mentioned as CEV.

vague knowledge of the salvation of one of the two thieves crucified simultaneously with Jesus Christ. The pendulum of belief swings to and fro between the hemispheres of faith and faithlessness with the gradual progress of the play. Outwardly nothing seems to be happening out there but inwardly, a catastrophic conflagration is in progress around the question of salvation.

The tree in *Waiting for Godot* also plays a key role in portraying the playwright's troubled vision of uncertainty residing at the core of human existence. From one perspective the growing of four or five leaves indicates the presence of a flickering ray of hope and from another it stands only to symbolize a passage of time. The tree can also be interpreted as being the symbol of an empty cross. The pangs and sufferings are there but there is no one to endure it on behalf of the entire humanity. By this dramatic presentation of the tree as an empty cross, and many other Biblical symbols of the play, the Christ who is evoked in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* "is not the triumphalist version: Christ Pantocrator, the majestic Second Person of the Trinity, the one throned in glory, [...] (rather) it is the man of suffering, the bloody, suffering, enfleshed Christ, rendered object, victim, by the human imposition of crucifixion" (Bryden 2004, p. 161-2).

The tree is the only spatial element in the entire setting system of the play that delineates a conceivable relationship between the characters and the land they drift around. Vladimir tells that Godot asked them to meet him 'by the tree.' The characters of the play are supposed to wait near this tree not for salvation but for the uncertain arrival of Godot, a figure whom they do not even know. The tree of knowledge and life in the Garden of Eden is now contemplated by the characters as a possible instrument in which they can hang themselves. The tree thus, epitomizes the human crisis that found its way in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as a consequence of the playwright's ambiguity concerning the Christian religion as a whole.

References from scriptures have been augmented to achieve two diverging objectives: first of all it attributes a tragic theme to the play and in addition to this; it gives the play its characteristic sardonic tone of humour that reverberates throughout the play. The theme indicates that, suffering is an unavoidable infiltrator unto human life, transforming it into a kind of hell in itself; the sardonic tone of humour compels the audience to see some major episodes of the Christian tradition, previously revered to be good news from God, as really bad news. Those who trusted the Biblical story mentioned by Vladimir without any second thought are actually the butt of the humour here. The unbearable psychological pressure of the act of waiting is compensated by the concomitant hope of salvation. Consequently, the characters are transfixed in the vicious cycle of hope and disillusionment. However, "Hope deferred maketh the something sick," Vladimir says, echoing Proverbs 13:12, (CEV), "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life." Waiting for something which is not likely to arrive in reality makes the heart sick. And yet, by a withered tree, alongside a rugged road, Gogo and Didi continue to wait as if believing in another verse of the scripture, "It is good to wait patiently for the Lord to save us" (Lamentations 3: 26, CEV).

The Crucifixion story is sustained throughout the entire play as a metaphor of suffering and pain. Fraser observes rightly when he says, "what *Waiting for Godot* essentially is is a prolonged and sustained metaphor about the nature of human life" (Fraser, 1956, p. 99). The possibility of salvation under the human condition remains behind the backdrop of every little action the characters decide to perform on the stage. The crucifixion story is never fully forgotten by the characters as they never can escape their miserable present. It is reminded with regular intervals by comments like, "Crucify him like that! After so many years!" or "To every man his little cross," or simply by Estragon's crucifixion posture when he does the exercise "the tree" (WFG). The repeated utterances about the original Biblical story are actually used for the purpose of comparing the personal sufferings of the characters with it. The suffering of Jesus Christ is considered rather 'quick' in comparison to the unbearable agony offered by their distressed lives. Vladimir's repeated complaints about the

inconsistency in the Bible are due to his preoccupation with pain, repentance and the fading possibility of salvation.

Moreover, when Estragon is reminded by Vladimir that it was too cold for him to go out without his boots on, he alludes to the fact that Christ was barefooted when paraded towards the crucifixion spot.

Vladimir: But you can't go barefoot!
Estragon: Christ did.
Vladimir: Christ! What's Christ got to do with it? You're not going to compare yourself with Christ!
Estragon: All my life I've compared myself to him.
Vladimir: But where he was it was warm, it was dry!
Estragon: Yes. And they crucified quick.

(WFG, Act I)

Vladimir quickly points towards the geographical fact that Christ went barefooted in a comparatively warmer climate. From this spatial difference Estragon concludes that the warm climate was the reason of the quick crucifixion of Christ. The interesting thing to notice here is that in comparison to the quick crucifixion of Christ, Estragon and Vladimir and possibly the rest of humanity are destined to have an extended period of time for their crucifixion, in other words, for their sufferings in the unpleasant circumstances of the world. This inference enhances the conception of waiting under uncertain condition for an indeterminate extension of space and time.

Vladimir's excitements are observable when he thinks that Godot has finally arrived to save them. But his excitements are vexed by Estragon's: "Pah! The wind in the reeds" (WFG, Act-I). Because of his cultural orientations Estragon's subconscious mind responds with another reference to a Biblical verse. The Biblical incident recalled here is Jesus's remark about John the Baptist: "What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? [...] For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee" (Matthew 11: 7-10, CEV). Flickering hope of salvation like this, complemented by immediate disappointment, sardonically indicates the staggering degree to which Vladimir and Estragon have been misguided by their decadent culture, prompted into awaiting the impossible to happen or the nonexistent to arrive at their rescue.

The possibility of salvation is repeatedly contemplated and scrutinized through the use of different Biblical allusions as frame of reference. Vladimir's brooding comments: "When you seek you hear. [...] That prevents you from finding. [...] That prevents you from thinking" (WFG, Act-II) is nothing less than a distorted mimicry of: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened" (Matthew 7: 7-8, CEV) Or, Luke 11: 9-13, "So I tell you to ask and you will receive, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you. Everyone who asks will receive, everyone who searches will find, and the door will be opened for everyone who knocks (CEV)." The twisted presentation of Biblical verses corresponds to the disillusioned character's lack of faith in their religion and the possibility of attaining salvation. Vladimir ponders over the question of redemption like a wandering soul creating a self-entangling labyrinth out of the Biblical verses. Throughout the play he is never detached with the overwhelming question of salvation and goes on playing with words when he finds no other games to play or no more hopes to sustain him.

The character of Pozzo has been portrayed as an universal parody of God the father. Though Pozzo denies even any possible acquaintance with Godot, he mentions about Estragon and Vladimir that they are "on my (his) land." Pozzo appears to be "not particularly human" but he is happy to meet

“the meanest creature”, “of the same species as Pozzo! Made in God’s image”, “even when the likeness is an imperfect one” (WFG, Act-I). Estragon and Vladimir on the other hand, are the specimens of suffering humanity. Godot at this point mirrors a distorted reflection of the received image of God. Godot is described as having a white beard, messengers, and a very strict code of discipline. Deviation from his code of conduct often results in severe punishment for his attendants. The implicit sense of irony and the sardonic tone of tragic humour of these references maintain the initial argument of the play, first suggested by the Biblical episode relating the two thieves, operating till the end of the play. The possibility of a theological salvation for Estragon and Vladimir is suspended but not negated all together.

The presentation of Lucky’s character also demonstrates the circumstantial impossibility of a salvation for Estragon and Vladimir. The strong parallel between Christ and Lucky, acknowledged by many critics, inspires us to imagine Estragon and Vladimir as the two thieves, crucified with Jesus. They also fail to recognize the Saviour and inflict humility upon Lucky who carries the burden of Pozzo’s bags like a perpetual cross. He too is led towards a public fair where he will be vexed and sold. He stumbles like Jesus with the mighty weight of his burdens. The two tramp’s attempt to make him “feel less forsaken” is identical to the attempt of Veronica who wiped Jesus’s face. We are informed that in the play’s antecedent Lucky “used to dance the farandole, the fling, the brawl, the jig, the fandango, the hornpipe” (WFG, Act-I). But at present he can no longer dance or speak using the intelligible signs of the language system. Ruby Cohn’s minute observation in this regard goes as,

[...] Lucky’s monologue displays Western civilization as shards of religion, philosophy, science, art, sport, and modern industry. In that monologue, Lucky utters the word “unfinished” seven times; his sentences do not finish, and his monologue is not permitted to finish. Named with devastating irony, Lucky is modern man with his contradictory unfinished fragments. (Cohn, 2007, p. 50).

This refers to the degeneration of the spiritual values of the Western civilization. The French translation of the word tennis, repeatedly mentioned in Lucky’s speech, stands for ‘a game of the palm’ has been identified as a reference to the stigmata of Jesus. The tears are indicative of Mary Magdalena’s tears upon her discovery of the empty grave of Jesus. Each of the Biblical allusions in Lucky’s speech point toward: “labors abandoned left unfinished.” In spite of all the miracles and sacrificial actions Christian faith is essentially left incomplete. It fails to give any conclusive answer to the bewildering question of salvation.

Towards the end of Act I of the play the boy messenger comes with the news that Godot will not arrive today but surely he will come on the day after. The boy is cautiously inquired about the nature and principles of Godot. We come to know at this point that Godot beats the boy who takes care of the hoard of sheep and does take pity on the boy who takes care of the goats. This special distribution of Godot’s mercy recalls another Biblical account about the Day of Judgment: “When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations; and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. [...] Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. [...] And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.” (Matthew 25: 31-46, CEV).

This implicit reference to a Biblical episode causally related to the crucifixion story, mentioned at the outset of the play, is sequential and serves a complementary purpose. It gives a kind of completion to the hypothesis that was initiated by the crucifixion story. Jesus was stripped of his

clothes and was humiliated publicly in the previous episode, but now he is restored to his full glory and befitting honour. In the earlier reference he was sentenced to a cruel death but here he is the one who is in charge of everything. This whole event foreshadows a kind of change that is going to take place but fails to deliver any promise regarding the fate of the characters on the stage who decide to go but fail to demonstrate any locomotion. By alluding to the Day of Judgment this reference actually deepens the spiritual crisis of the characters.

This parable in particular is definitively about salvation and damnation where the sheep represents those who are saved, and the goats damned. The point worth noticing here is the fact that the boy who brings the news about Godot to Estragon and Vladimir is the goatherd. The ironical presentation of a Biblical incident relating God lies in the fact that this alteration is done not to clarify anything but only to intensify the chaos that engulfs the ultimate destiny of the characters. This alteration further aggravates the previous ironies about Christian truths. "How easily could the roles have been reversed. These, after all, were not well-considered judgements, but chance exclamations uttered at a moment of supreme suffering and stress" (Esslin, 2001, p. 54). The presence of sheer luck and accidental chance behind a serious event like attaining absolution is sardonically emphasized by Beckett here.

It is to be noted that no clear indication is given about whether Godot will ever arrive or not. The second act of the play also ends in an identical fashion where the new messenger furnishes Estragon and Vladimir with the additional piece of information that Godot has a white beard which scares Vladimir to the extreme limit causing him to plea for mercy echoing the suffering Christ, "God have pity on me! [...] On me! On me! Pity! On me!" (WFG, Act-II) Instead of providing any assuring impressions Beckett only adds to the confusion regarding the possibility of any salvation in the minds of his characters with the ironical references to the Biblical incidents. It is a very tragic situation that the fate of the characters remains suspended between the prospect of salvation and the dismal possibility of eternal damnation.

Another Biblical parable contributes to the conception that Vladimir and Estragon are not going to be saved by anybody. This parable corresponds to the very familiar Biblical story about the wise and foolish virgins: "[...] Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him [...]" (Matthew 25: 1-13, CEV). We hear an echo of this verse in Vladimir's ecstatic declaration, "It's Godot! We're saved! Let's go and meet him!" Like the virgins of the Biblical story these two 'forsaken' characters have waited for the arrival of someone supremely important to them. In the actual Biblical story the bridegroom finally arrives and leads those who are ready for the wedding banquet. On the other hand, the two tramps upon the stage are not saved by the arrival of Godot proving Estragon dreadfully right when he says, "we are in hell." The wisdom of Vladimir's Christian world appears to be devoid of any elements of truth in it. He is baffled by the confusing question whether he has waited long enough; perhaps Godot is likely to come tomorrow 'without fail'.

Vladimir does not appear to be consciously alluding to this Biblical parable. Essentially, the quintessence of tales like this one and many others have long been there, dormant in the depth of his psyche, giving his faiths and beliefs specific shapes. He has inherited these faiths from his culture which seems to be dysfunctional when placed vis-à-vis the malignant threats posed by the tragic realities of life. Obviously a release from the agonized existence seems to be the only fitting solution available at hand as he is constantly assailed by the harrowing question of redemption: "your only hope left is to disappear." In spite of all the adversities of life Vladimir and Estragon choose to keep on waiting with the visionary hope of a forthcoming salvation, even though all the Biblical parables- the two thieves, the sheep and the goats, the wise and foolish virgins, the bridegroom- endlessly vex those glimmering hopes.

The character's choice to wait in spite of all the hazards they face suggests the presence of hope, no matter how slight it might be. Though the possibility of redemption does not seem feasible under the empirical microscope of evidences, the characters decide to wait, not for Godot or God but because of the hopeless hope they share. Esslin rightly concludes, "The hope of salvation may be merely an evasion of the suffering and anguish that spring from facing the reality of the human condition" (Esslin, 2001, p. 61). Beckett's vision of life as a playwright thus, was essentially tragic but still there are elements of flickering hope. Struggle and hope are the only guiding force for the tormented characters of Beckett. The labyrinth of scriptural references in the play is meant to fulfill the function of reminding the audience of the presence of hopelessness and chaos at the very core of human existence. Eva Metman rightly observes, "[...] the play seems to imply that, today, religion altogether is based on indistinct desires in which spiritual and material needs remain mixed. Godot is explicitly vague, merely an empty promise [...]" (Metman, 1965, p. 125). The recurring cycles of hope and hopelessness intensify the foggy atmosphere of uncertainty engulfing the predicament of human beings.

Their common adherence to the surreal hope of salvation forms a kind of bondage that pins them with the tree of knowledge. They wait not to be enlightened with the revelation of their destiny but they do so as waiting is the only thing they can do until their destiny is unfolded. Beckett does not picture them as waiting to be saved or damned but captures them in the middle of something they can hardly comprehend. They refer to Biblical verses as a consequence of their cultural orientation. The casualness and ambiguity behind these references are results of the failure of their culture and religion to provide any definitive solution to their problems. References to the Bible at regular intervals are co-related to the character's periodic return to their culture and religion in search of hope and aspiration. Beckett's ambiguity about Biblical concepts as presented in *Waiting for Godot* reflects the presence of palpable ambiguity regarding those Christian ideas. The absence of the possibility of salvation corresponds proportionally to the failure of Christianity to provide any definitive answer about the ultimate destiny of humankind. The characters of the play are haunted by the illusive question of salvation or damnation as the players of life are endlessly tormented by the same. In the final analysis, there is no qualitative difference between the dilemma that engulfs the characters of the play and the uncertainty in which human life remains immersed.

Against the bleak background of the play's dreary atmosphere hope seems like a nonexistent entity. The characters are neither sustained by their present nor are they assured of the possibility of a comforting future. The verses they remember from the Bible can be interpreted as a source of hope and at the same time it induces fear. The accumulated knowledge of the Christian tradition fails to give any solemn affirmation of a bright future to the characters of *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir believes in the Biblical verses he remembers but Estragon fails to find any hope in them. Through the contrasting characters of Vladimir and Estragon Beckett presents the dialectics of hope and hopelessness. The subtle conflict of hope and hopelessness gives birth to uncertainty. Vladimir upholds a truth which proves to be devoid of any substantiality while Estragon drifts towards the contemplation of suicide which he will never be able to execute.

By the end of the play the two tramps are left alone in the no man's land between day and night, between life and death, between salvation and damnation. Like the approaching darkness at the end of the day the shadowy atmosphere of the play makes it difficult for them and for the audience to comprehend their predicament. When everybody leaves the stage including the master and the harlequin or the messenger, the two tramps remain. Humanity with all its vulnerabilities always remains. In spite of their repeated declarations the two tramps cannot go away. They are still waiting for Godot, and will continue to do so. While waiting, out of their idle conversation emerges the intriguingly ambiguous and most provocatively negative epistemology of the mechanics of human

faith. When the scenery gets too drab and the action too slow, they call each other various names and swear to part for ever- but then, there's no place to go!

Through this hopeless hope of his characters Beckett presents his tragic vision of life where waiting is the only tangible thing to be done. Presented in the midst of an incomprehensible torrent of apparently meaningless words, the Biblical references actually serve the purpose of catalysts in the playwright's demonstration of the impossibility of any easy or ready-made solution for the quandary of his characters. Dr. Supti Sen rightly observes, "[...] in *Waiting for Godot* the Biblical element is more than a device to secure popular appeal. It is more advisable to regard this element as a major symbolical instrument to suggest the picture of a meaningless waiting in blind faith" (Sen, 1970, p. 73). The Biblical allusions in *Waiting for Godot* do not initiate any qualitative change in the dismal gloom of the play's paralyzed plot, instead, it only adds to the intensity of what was already there. Beckett therefore, disclaims the unpleasant authority of delivering the final verdict about the question of salvation of the human race through his ambiguous references to the Biblical parables.

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