THE SAGA OF FRIENDSHIP: WAITING FOR GODOT TO ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

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ABSTRACT

The marginal characters in Shakespeare’s Hamlet brought centre-stage by Tom Stoppard in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead thus imitating Beckett’s happening pair Estragon and Vladimir in the play Waiting for Godot. Now a question arises why at all there was the need of such pairs? They could have been like any other normal couple who were equally anxious for seeking their identities in a postmodern world! Realizing the possibilities of Godot’s arrival in December 2005 in Britain, this essay would trace the path through which Godot arrived, exploring the struggle in friendship. And in the process it would explore the kind of friendship which Estragon-Vladimir and Rosencrantz-Guildenstern shared to arrive at wisdom through experience.

KEY WORDS: Friendship, Homoeroticism, Sodomy, Civil Partnership Act

INTRODUCTION

“...clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most...”

Beckett, Krapp’s Last Tape

In his biography of Samuel Beckett, James Knowlson points out Beckett’s knack for European painting and many of the striking apparitions in his work reflect pictures which he most admired. Beckett himself confessed that the imagery in Two Men Contemplating the Moon, a painting by the German artist Casper David Friedrich had furnished the germ of the absurdist masterpiece Waiting for Godot. From The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York)’s own description of the painting: “The two men contemplating the sinking moon have been identified as Friedrich himself, on the right, and his talented young colleague August Heinrich.” It is possible that Beckett was inspired from such male bonding between the two and scripted them in the play Waiting for Godot.

The two characters Estragon and Vladimir are friends and they cannot live without each other. They often want to leave each other’s companionship but at the time of action “they do not move”. Though they are best of friends, they have “complementary personalities.” Martin Esslin in Theatre of the Absurd also suggested “the opposition of their (Estragon and Vladimir) temperaments is the cause of endless bickering between them and often leads to the suggestion that they should part. Yet, being complementary natures, they also are dependent on each other and have to stay together.” But as T.S. Eliot has said: “between the conception and execution falls the shadow,” staying together is not an easy task to perform.

Estragon’s and Vladimir’s journey in friendship seems to be threatened when Vladimir remarks, “they didn’t beat you?” and Estragon replies “Beat me? Certainly they beat me.” But who are ‘they’? Why ‘they’ “wouldn’t even let them up?” From the various verbal exchanges it has been understood that though Vladimir possesses a bit of memory, Estragon was not blessed with any. Throughout Act I, the mystery revolving the word ‘they’ has not been disclosed. But the only fact that has dominated the entire Act I is Estragon’s and Vladimir’s waiting for Godot. In Act II, Vladimir again asked
Estragon, “Did they beat you?” But this time Estragon remained silent with his head bowed. And when he was asked where did he spend the night he replies, “Don’t touch me! Don’t Question me! Don’t speak to me! Stay with me!” It is apparent that staying with each other is a major concern for both and for that reason they are assuring and confirming themselves to be beside each other forever. The man-hug which immediately follows after is adorned with a longing for each other and echoes what Eva Metman in the essay “Reflections on Samuel Beckett’s Plays” says:

They are full of frustrations and resentments and cling together with a mixture of interdependence and affection, easing their situation by calling each other childish names, Gogo and Didi. In these and other respects they are like an old married couple who always want to separate and never do so.

Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* though based on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in respect of language and characterization of the protagonists seems to be inspired by Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The coupling of Estragon and Vladimir, their battle for sustenance not only carried forward by Stoppard, but with his mastery he carried Beckett’s legacy in the context of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as well. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the protagonists share a friendship and as the play proceeds their bewilderment and angst, their metaphysical speculations and the games in which they indulge in to while away the time and overcome their fear for the unknown resemble Estragon’s and Vladimir’s actions in *Waiting for Godot*. Scholars have drawn many such inferences to establish the Beckett-Stoppard connection. But the choice of such pairings like Estragon-Vladimir and Ros-Guil perhaps remains a bit of an enigma. Like Beckett’s protagonists Ros and Guil have a few important differences between them. Guil has the stronger personality. He does not panic easily and reassures Ros and cheers him up whenever the latter is on the brink of despair. Guil is introspective and given to philosophical speculations. He is expansive and at times complacent. Ros is less given to philosophical questionings and is less imaginative. He is more practical and placid than Guil. At times he is exasperatingly obtuse but is never insensitive to his friend’s anguish and tries to distract him. Like Estaragon and Vladimir, they too are blessed with “complementary personalities.” *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a seriocomic meditation on life, death, language, the theatre, and free will. The play itself becomes a metaphor for life as its two principal characters struggle to find their way through a maze of events, lacking any memory of what has gone before and drawn inexorably toward their own deaths. Like all characters, their actions are predetermined by the playwright’s wishes, and they find themselves unable to perform any action that breaks with the dramatic flow of the plot—in their case, that of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Their first memory coincides with the first mention of their names in *Hamlet* and when they are not active participants in a scene from that play, they exist in a kind of limbo, where they search with increasing despair for the reasons behind their situation—that is to say, for the meaning of their lives.

At the end of their baffling journey lies their death, as inevitable for them (because of the course of *Hamlet*’s plot) as it is in each human life. Hints of death appear throughout the play, beginning with its title and Tom Stoppard’s assumption of familiarity with *Hamlet* on the part of the audience. During his first encounter with the Player, Guildenstern correctly interprets the actor as the harbinger of his own doom:

> It could have been—a bird out of season, dropping bright-feathered on my shoulder... It could have been a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way...I was prepared. But it’s this, is it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this—a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes echoes Estragon’s remark, “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.”

One can question why at all there was the need of presenting such pairs like Estragon-Vladimir and Ros-Guil. If *Waiting for Godot* is a play about waiting for meaning in the midst of meaninglessness, significance in the midst of
insignificance or even God and upon whose arrival Estragon and Vladimir will be saved from the futility of their existence, then they could have been like any other normal couple. God’s arrival is beyond any gender discrimination.

Like Estragon and Vladimir, Ros and Guil also suffer from the external forces. As they are the characters of the play *Hamlet*, their actions are pre-destined. But Stoppard, following Beckett’s steps highlighted the intrusion of the outsiders in between Ros and Guil. In *Waiting for Godot*, though the identity of ‘they’ is not revealed, but as the context of Ros and Guil are known, the outsiders are very much known to the spectators. In Act II of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, when Ophelia and Gertrude jointly leave the stage, Ros says: “(Peevish) Never a moment’s peace! In and out, on and off, they’re coming at us from all sides.” Therefore, the desired space the two couples are in need never happens. Unlike *Waiting for Godot*, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the royal characters as well as the players who were hired to perform the play “The Murder of Gonzago” disturb Ros and Guil with their occasional intrusion.

Friendship is best understood by the individuals who have defined themselves. It is a relationship which brings forth a simple truth that society has no power to play a pivotal role in this regard. The parameter of friendship solely depends on the people who are sharing this relationship. In *Waiting for Godot*, the two protagonists inspire of what they go through, remain good friends. But the occasional mention of Estragon’s physical abuse only highlights their helplessness and their existence is also in danger as Vladimir wasn’t there to rescue Estragon in the time of crisis. They are waiting for Godot in the midst of drab reality.

In the essay, “Beckett and Homoeroticism,” Peter Boxall mentions a possibility of homosexual relationship between Estragon and Vladimir. If they share a homosexual relationship, then the occasional phobias which creep in during the play, make Estragon and Vladimir two homophobes. As homophobia is generally used to refer to an individual’s pathological dread of same-sex love, Estragon’s and Vladimir’s fear from the unknown ‘they’, reveals the same.

Apart from Vladimir’s claim in the opening moments of the play that he has a tendency to ‘go all queer’; the verbal joke which Estragon cracks during the initial moments of the play also shows a possibility of homosexuality. The verbal joke is the story of the Englishman in the brothel. Estragon begins the joke soon after he ‘voluptuously’ pronounces the word ‘calm’ and notes that the English say ‘cawm’. Despite Vladimir’s protestations he begins, ‘An Englishman having drunk a little more than usual goes to a brothel. The bawd asks him if he wants a fair one, a dark one, or a red-haired one.’ At this point Vladimir yells, ‘Stop it!’ and exits.

Many of us perhaps accept the ending of the joke given by Ruby Cohn. In her version, the Englishman replies that he wants a boy. Shocked, the bawd threatens to call a policeman, whereupon the Englishman pleads. ‘O no, they’re too gritty.’ If we accept this version of the joke, then it is clear that the choice of a same-sex partner is a desired one.

Therefore, if the relationship of Estragon and Vladimir is a homosexual one, then Godot may be the social approval for which they are waiting. Martin Esslin said ‘the subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of human condition.’ Indeed they are waiting, but they are waiting with a purpose. They want to wait for Godot even if he does not come the next day. They are waiting for their betterment and throughout the play this waiting for Godot acts as a salvation for them. If Godot is the social approval, then the boy who comes at the end of each Act of the play is the messenger of the society. He informs the couple of Godot’s non-arrival. Estragon and Vladimir wait for Godot and the waiting goes on. As Ros and Guil are the characters of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and as their fate is tied to the context of *Hamlet*, they could have waited for Godot. At the end of the play *Rosencrantz and*
*Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard made Ros and Guil disappear in the dark. It is not clear whether they are dead or alive. If they are alive, then they too are in a sense waiting for Godot.

**CONCLUSIONS**

But their wait is over as Godot finally arrived in the form of The Civil Partnership Act on 5\textsuperscript{th} of December, 2005 in Britain. Arrival of Godot is highly contextual. In various parts of the world, Godot arrived in different point of time. The Soviet Union under Vladimir Lenin decriminalized homosexuality in 1922, long before many other European countries. (Now, it calls for a research whether Vladimir Lenin has something to do with Vladimir of *Waiting for Godot*). The Russian Communist Party effectively legalized no-fault divorce, abortion and homosexuality, when they abolished all the old Tsarist laws and the initial Soviet criminal code kept these liberal sexual polices in place. However, some left-wing figures have considered homosexuality a "bourgeois disease," a right-wing movement or a "Western disease". Lenin's emancipation was reversed a decade later by Joseph Stalin and homosexuality remained illegal under Article 121 until the Yeltsin era. The struggle to be together for the same-sex couples continued. They fought, they quarreled, they cried but all was in vain. But with the Civil Partnership Act, their struggle at last ended.

Now, the question is this: has the mystery which surrounds with the word ‘they’ has been resolved or not? Now, it is apparent that those who beat Estragon are the same people who were standing outside Belfast City Hall on the 21\textsuperscript{st} of December 2005, forming a large crowd and carried signs reading “Sodomy is Sin” when lesbian lovers Shannon Sickels and Graine Close became the first gay couple to get married in the United Kingdom. To the cheers and the strains of Dolly Parton’s 1972 hit “Touch Your Woman,” the pair took advantage of the brand new civil partnership law, which offers gay couples the same rights as heterosexual married couples in areas such as employment, property, pensions and inheritance.

Free Presbyterian clergyman David Mellven told BBC television: “Homosexuality in the Bible is described as an abomination. You cannot place something that is unnatural on the same level as something that is natural.” But in the Bible same-sex partnership is there. The traditional and mainstream religious interpretation of the relationship between King David and Jonathan has been one of platonic love and an example of homosociality. Some later Medieval and Renaissance literature drew upon the story to underline strong personal friendships between men, some of which involved romantic love. Jonathan loved David as himself, and this love, which David calls more wonderful than the love of women, is also expressed physically. In modern times, some scholars, writers, as well as activists have emphasized what they believe to be elements of homoeroticism in the story in order to support a sympathetic reading within the Bible of same-sex orientation.

Wearing traditional black morning suits, British pop-star Elton John, and David Furnish formalized their relationship as well on December 21, 2005 at historic 17th century Guildhall in Windsor, England.

The couples like Estragon and Vladimir as well as Ros and Guil and their male friendship are no longer threatened in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century. They might have born at the wrong time but their struggle at last ended. Indeed, Godot stands for God as this social approval came in force after a long battle and it is no less than a prayer. Martin Esslin writes, “If Godot is the object of Vladimir’s and Estragon’s desire, he seems naturally ever beyond their reach.” But Godot came, therefore, giving the final knell to all those speculations which were surrounded with the waiting as well as the object of waiting, Godot.

**REFERENCES**


