

The Tragic Hero of the Modern Period: The European Concept

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Abstract

There is a hiatus between the Neo-classical and the modern period in the sense that, there was a dearth of tragedy in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries when comedy became the major dramatic form.

The 20th century was a time of immense anxiety in the world. This anxiety can be traced to the disorder in the modern life as a result of the breakdown in religious discipline. This paper therefore aims to look at the unique personal characteristics to present this new hero whose personal lack of order does not present a deviation from the system but confirms a dislocation in the system itself. The study provides extracts from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as the main text, Beckett's *Endgame*, Miller's, *The crucible*, *Death of the Salesman*, *All my Sons*, and *View from the Bridge* as supporting texts to present the European concept of the tragic hero.

Key words: Godot; Existential; Anti-hero; Pessimism Tramps; Materialism; Decadence; Nothingness

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INTRODUCTION

The 20th century is a complex age with an environment of crisis in which man began to question the value of biblical authority. It was a universe of disorder; a complex

universe steeped in confusion and anxiety. In the light of this confusion, both the poet and, dramatist, reject modern faith in the individual and suggest that man's disregard for standard authority, is wrong and at least some kind of authority is relevant needs to be sought for. The plays of these modern writers like Bernard Shaw, Arthur Miller and Thomas Beckett, are social plays in which an ordinary person becomes the hero. For examples John Proctor in *The Crucible*, (1957b) Eddie Carbone in *A View from the Bridge*, (1957c) Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Joan in *St. Joan* (1924) and Joe Keller in *All My Sons* (1957a) are seen to be involved, in one way or the other, in a struggle that results from their acceptance or rejection of an image that is the fault of the society's prejudices or values. Therefore, the 20th century tragic hero is a complex character, and there is the need to understand the nature of the tragic situation as it could be thematic or structural.

Moreover studies of the tragic concept has been put in perspective from the Classical period which defined and delineated its tragic hero based on the action and the context of the tragic situation; the Post – Classical Renaissance which defined its tragic hero based on the moral flaw of the tragic character and the Neo-Classical Revival which based its tragic conception on the notion of the appropriateness of characters-bienseance (Adade-Yeboah, Ahenkora and Amankwa, 2012; Adade-Yeboah and Amankwa, 2012; Adade-Yeboah and Ahenkora, 2012). There is a dearth of knowledge on the tragic hero of the modern; this paper fills the gap.

APPROACH

Hammersley's (2008) views are pertinent to readers of any work of art when he says, "the task is not just to produce a reading of a particular "text" but also to use this to illuminate general issues about human life". Therefore, textual analysis was used for effective delineation of the European concept of the modern tragic hero (Adade-

Yeboah, and Amankwah, 2012). To be able to present this new hero the views of Aristotle which is reiterated by Macaw (2008) is very crucial when he says, “the poet aims at the representation of life; necessarily, therefore, he must always represent things in one of three ways: either as they were or are, or as they said to be, or as they ought to be”. Again, the use of the textual analysis as suggested by Brown (1990) and McCaw (2008) is amplified by Atkins (1993) when he said that, “almost every literary work is attended by a host of outside circumstances which, once we expose and explore them, suffuse it with additional meaning.”

The justification of this close reading approach is that, it brings positive influences to scholars by enabling them to view “the ways in which texts upheld the moral issues and codes of behaviour (and) “teach” readers about life and human nature” (as cited in Termizi and Ching, 2012).

1. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

1.1 Beckett’s Context of the 20th century Tragic Hero

The 20th century plays of Thomas Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are great innovations. They question the formal structure that playwrights of previous traditions have felt obliged to respect, and constitute a mimesis or representation of a reality that recognizes and inscribes the formlessness of existence without attempting to make it ‘fit’ any model. Beckett (1961) wrote as follows:

“What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos, and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates. To find form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist”.

In the play *Waiting for Godot* (1961) which is my focus, Thomas Beckett presents a pessimistic vision of a man struggling to find a purpose and to control his fate. Beckett’s play clearly shows characters like Pozzo, Lucky, Vladimir and Estragon feeling hopeless, bewildered and anxious. The plot is down played, and a timeless, circular design emerges as two lost creatures who usually play as tramps, spend their days waiting but without any certainty of whom they are waiting for and whether he, or it, will ever come. *Endgame*, Beckett’s second play has only one act that depicts the running down of a mechanism until it comes to a stop. Yet *Endgame* like *Waiting for Godot*, groups its characters in symmetrical pairs. In a bare room with two small windows, a blind old man, Hamm sits in a wheelchair. Hamm is paralysed and can no longer stand. His servant, Clov, is unable to sit down. In two ash - cans that stand by the wall are Hamm’s legless parents,

Nagg and Nell. The world outside is dead. Some great catastrophe, of which the four characters in the play are, believed themselves to be, the sole survivors has killed all living being (Esslin, 1968).

1.2 The Hero and his Diverse Character Traits

One of the principal characteristic features of the 20th century hero is his diverse character traits. For example, in *Waiting for Godot*, there is no action, we see the characters engaging themselves in nothingness - much adoring about nothing. We see two grotesque tramps waiting by a wretched tree on a deserted country road for the arrival of a certain apparently important man called Godot. While waiting, both Vladimir and Estragon show inconsistency in their thinking processes and decision-making. For example, at the end of act 1, the Boy arrives and delivers a message to the tramps that Mr. Godot, with whom they believe they have an appointment, cannot come, but that he will surely come the next day. On hearing this, they both agree to leave yet their decision is not carried out:

Estragon: Vladimir:
Well, shall we go? Yes, let’s go
(they do not move)

Again, when Pozzo and Lucky first appear, neither Vladimir nor Estragon seems to recognize them; Estragon even takes Pozzo for Godot. But, after Pozzo and Lucky have left, we are surprised at Vladimir’s comment that they have changed since their last appearance. Estragon insists that he does not know them, while Vladimir claims Estragon knows them:

Vladimir: Yes you do know them No, I don’t
Estragon: know them not the same
Estragon: Why didn’t they recognize us, then?
Vladimir; That means nothing. I too pretended not to recognize them.

From the above conversation, we see a lot of inconsistencies in their thinking processes. Similar, in *Endgame*, Hamm tells Clov: “I don’t need you any more”. Yet, Hamm cannot do without Clov who serves him sincerely. Perhaps, Hamm does not believe that Clov will really be able to leave him. But Clov has decided finally to go and make a very sentimental speech:

Clov: *I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed I only see my feet, If I open my eyes, and between my legs a little trail of black dust. I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it... It is easy going ... When I fall I’ll weep for happiness*

(*Endgame*, p. 81)

As a blind man Hamm indulges in a monologue of reminiscence and self - pity, Clov appears, dressed for departure in a panama hat, a tweed coat, over his arm, and hastens to Hamm, motionless. When the curtain falls, he is still there. His decision to go has proved futile. Each time, the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot* move as a pair, yet under differing circumstances. For instance, in each

act, Vladimir and Estragon attempt suicide and fail for differing reasons. It is Estragon who suggests suicide but asks Vladimir to try it first.

Vladimir refuses on the grounds that he is heavier than Estragon is, Estragon argues that if he dies, Vladimir will be lonely:

Estragon: Let us hang ourselves immediately

Vladimir: Go ahead.

Estragon: After you

Vladimir: Gogo light - tree not break

Gogo dead. Didi heavy - tree break - Didi alone.

This unsettled argument makes them stop the suicide bid. Vladimir, who is easily convinced by Estragon's arguments really, shows passionate love. He says, "You're my last hope."

In *Endgame*, we find the old man Hamm to be childish. For example, he plays with a three-legged -toy dog, and he is full of self - pity. Similarly, Lucky carries a whip which Pozzo, his master uses to beat him. Lucky dances and sleeps when told to do so. Interestingly, even though Lucky is the servant of Pozzo, he is a great teacher. He teaches Pozzo all the higher values of life: "beauty, grace, truth of the first water". Hence, these pairs of characters represent the relationship between body and mind, the material and the spiritual sides of man, with the intellect being subordinate to the body. The diverse nature of their characteristics as analysed makes it difficult to determine their characters.

2.3 Complementary but Unique Character Traits of Heroes

Furthermore, in *Waiting for Godot*, the two tramps have complementary but unique character traits. For example, Vladimir is the more practical of the two. He tells Estragon what to do with his boots to free himself from the hurting feet.

Vladimir: "Boots must be taken off every day, I'm tired of telling you that. Why don't you listen to me?"

Estragon claims to have been a poet, and in eating his carrot he finds that the more he eats of it, the less he likes it. He is, however, the direct opposite of Vladimir because he likes things as he gets used to them. One character trait of Estragon is his forgetfulness. He forgets about past events as soon as they have happened, yet he can remember his dreams. He tells Vladimir: "I had a dream".

But Vladimir cannot bear with a dream. Hence he does not want to listen to Estragon's dream.

Estragon: I had a dream

Vladimir: Don't tell me!

Similarly, Pozzo and Lucky are equally complementary in their natures, but their relationship is on a more primitive level. For example, Pozzo is a sadistic master who drives Lucky with a rope on his (Lucky's) neck. Obviously, Lucky is the submissive slave. Pozzo is rich, powerful and certain of himself; he represents the 20th

century worldly man in all his facile and short sighted optimism and illusory feeling of power and permanence. Lucky on the other hand is a subservient servant who carries his own whip and is ready to carry out every instruction under the sun given by Pozzo.

Again, Nagg shows a trait of selfishness in his own speech and lacks the tenderness and loving care of a father for a son. This is amply shown in his speech when he is speaking to Hamm:

"We let you cry. Then we moved out of earshot, so that we might sleep in peace

(Endgame, p. 56)

Each of these three pairs - Pozzo - Lucky; Vladimir - Estragon; Hamm - Clov is linked by a relationship of mutual interdependence. Each desires to leave the other, each is at war with the other, and yet dependant on the other. Above all, each partner needs to know that the other is there: the patterns provide proof that they really exist by responding and replying to each other. In this respect, Beckett in the two plays is much influenced by the contention of the Irish Philosopher, Bishop Berkeley: "Esse est percipi" (To be is to be perceived).

The postulate, which informs much Existentialist thinking and which Beckett quotes in *Murphy* and places as the epigraph to *Film*, underpins the anxious desire of his characters, Pozzo, Lucky, Vladimir, Estragon, Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell to be noticed, as seen in Vladimir's utterance: " There you are again". There is therefore the desire on the part of the characters to embrace and be embraced; yet there is the realization that friendship is based on the need to give and receive pity. Clov, like Lucky, is the intellectual bound to serve the emotions, instincts, and appetites and trying to free himself from such disorderly and tyrannical master, yet doomed to suffer. The activity of Pozzo and Lucky, the driver and the driven, the waiting of Estragon and Vladimir whose attention is always focused on the promise of a coming; the defensive position of Hamm, who has built himself shelter from the world to hold onto his possessions, are all aspects of the same futile pre occupation with objectives and illusory goals. All movements are in disorder as Clov aptly puts it:

"I love order; it's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its place, under the last dust"

(Endgame, p. 57)

The novel that Hamm composes in *Endgame* is characterized by its attempt at scientific exactitude, and there is a clear suggestion that it is a disguised vehicle for the expression of Hamm's sense of guilt about his behaviour at the time of the great mysterious calamity when he refuses to save his neighbours.

2.4 Theme of Purposelessness of Thought

Estragon and Vladimir of *Waiting for Godot* engage in a long, meaningless conversation or cross - talk comic

fashion. In a similar dialogue between Clov and Hamm, we see this element of purposelessness of thought:

*Clov : There is someone there! Hamm: What distance? Clov :
Seventy ... four metres Hamm: Sex?
Clov : What does it matter?
Hamm: What is he doing?
Clov : I don't know what he is doing*

This, together with their dress and hats and boots echoes Charlie chaplain and the whole tradition of burlesque comedy.

Similarly, Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) we see characters sit and talk repeating the obvious until it sounds like nonsense thus revealing the inadequacies of verbal communication on the part of the characters. The combination of ridiculous, purposeless talk and behaviour of these heroes gives these absurd plays a dazzling comic surface, but there is an underlying serious message of metaphysical distress on the part of the heroes.

Of the two tramps in *Waiting For Godot*, Estragon has the least to say. His speeches are mainly short to the point and unimaginative:

*Estragon: Nothing to be done?
Vladimir: I am beginning to come round to that opinion.
All my life I have tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resume the struggle.*

The answer given by Vladimir in the above speech shows a contrast in character between

Vladimir and Estragon with regard to their speech-making abilities. Vladimir talks a great deal and often above his companion's head. He also draws a wide range of references in his talk, frequently quoting or half-quoting from the Bible. For example, he says, "hope deferred maketh something sick".

One of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* is the Boy, and supposedly, the messenger of

Mr. Godot. This Boy, like Estragon has the tendency to forget things at any point in time.

Even after meeting the two tramps for the second and subsequent times, he is not able to recognize them. This forgetfulness part of the Boy is a known fact to Vladimir: As a result when the Boy leaves their presence, Vladimir impresses it upon him:

*You're sure you saw me, eh.
You won't, come and tell me tomorrow
That you never saw me".
The Heroes mental torture of waiting*

Pozzo is one character whose emotions cannot be hidden. He feels the tormenting effect of their waiting which yields no results and therefore exclaims in his great final outburst:

*Pozzo: Have you not done tormenting
With your accursed time? ... One day, is that not enough
for you, Day we'll go deaf, one day we were
Born, one day we'll die, the same day...
They give birth astride of a grave,
The light gleams an instant, then
It's night once more"*

And shortly afterwards, Vladimir agrees:

*Astride of a grave and a difficult birth down in the hole,
lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps.*

2.5 Positive Traits of Characters

Other positive traits about these characters are their resilience to hardships and adversities and their hopefulness hopeless situations. For example, when there seems to be no sign of the object of their waiting for Godot, they still wait for him whose coming they believe will bring the flow of time to a stop:

*To night perhaps we shall sleep in his place, in the warmth, dry,
our bellies full, on the straw. It is worth waiting for that, is it not? 2*

Pozzo is portrayed as being materialistic and will prefer to sell Lucky for his material gains even though he cherishes the company of Lucky. This materialism on the part of

Pozzo seems to suggest his callousness and tyranny. Hence Lucky is dehumanized by Pozzo. Again, Vladimir and Estragon are portrayed as fickle - minded tramps whose thinking and decision making do not take cognizance of the consequence. For example, the tramps think the solution to their predicament is committing suicide which they consider preferable to waiting for Godot:

*We should have thought of it when the World was young ... We
were respectable in those days. Now it's too late.*

Yet, their favourite solution remains unattainable owing to their own incompetence. They thus become pretenders - pretending to be waiting after their disappointment at their failure to commit the suicide. Estragon far less convinced of Godot's promises than Vladimir, is full of anxiety to reassure himself that they are not tied to Godot, as is evident in their conversation:

*Estragon: I am asking you if we are tied
Vladimir: Tied?
Estragon: Tied - ed
Vladimir: How do you mean tied
Estragon: To Godot? Tied to Godot?
What an idea! No question of it.*

A close look at these lives based on Vladimir's last speech reveals that they are tied to Godot. They are only pretenders. Later in the play, we see that Vladimir lapses into some sort of complacency. This is what Vladimir has to say about their waiting:

*Vladimir: " We have kept our appointment... We Are not saints -
but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast
as much?"*

Estragon who proves to be volatile in speech and who claims to be a poet, immediately punctures Vladlmk's speech above by tetorting thus," Billions"

Unlike Estragon and Vladimir who have an objective in their waiting, and who are selfless, Pozzo and Lucky who have no appointment are egocentric wrapped

up in their tendency of taking pleasure in their own suffering and humiliation (Lucky) and inflicting pain and humiliation on another (Pozzo). It is evident that, Pozzo is naively over confident and self-centred. This he makes it clear in his speech: Pozzo: "Do I look like a man that can be made to suffer?" In the above speech, one understands the confidence and boastfulness of Pozzo. Even when he says there is a "soulful falling of the night," "we know he does not believe the night will ever fall on him. Likewise, Lucky, in accepting Pozzo as his master and in teaching Pozzo his ideas, seems to have been naively convinced of the power of reason, beauty and truth. Estragon, unlike Vladimir, but much like Hamm in *Endgame* has a profound sense of guilt and a feeling of self-condemnation. This trait is clearly demonstrated by Estragon in the second act when he believes Godot to be approaching his first thought is, "I am accursed" And as Vladimir triumphantly exclaims, "It's Godot! At last! Let's go and meet him", Estragon runs away shouting, "I am in hell. We see that the fortuitous bestowal of grace, which passes human understanding, divides mankind into those that will be saved and those that will be damned. Estragon actually becomes judgmental and condemns himself even before Godot passes any judgement.

2.6 Existential Heroes of Beckett

Furthermore, it can be said of these characters especially Vladimir, Estragon and Clov that they are very creative. For example, *Waiting for Godot* is structured on the promise of an arrival that never occurs, just as *Endgame* is structured on of a departure that never happens. This will seem to imply that these characters look forward to the future, yet if there is no past, there can be neither present nor future. In order to be able to project onto what cannot be located and is perhaps a non-existent future, the characters "invent" a past for themselves. They do this by inventing stories (Worton, 2001). For example, Hamm tells the story of a madman who thought the end of the world had come. In a similar vein Vladimir says to Estragon, "You should have been a poet" And in *Endgame*. Hamm says, "She was bonny once, like a flower of the field". These "invented pasts are invariably remembered with nostalgia.

The experience expressed in Beckett's plays is of a profound and fundamental nature. The plays reveal not only the experience and sense of the tragic difficulty of becoming aware of one's own self in the merciless process of renovation and destruction that occur with change of time but also the difficulty of communication between human beings the unending quest for reality in a world in which everything is uncertain including the self-deception of friendship (Esslin, 2007).

In *Endgame*, much like *Waiting for Godot*, we are confronted with characters who powerfully express the sense of deadness, of leaden heaviness and hopelessness. Furthermore, the two plays of Beckett make dramatic

statements of the human situation itself. They lack both characters and plot in the conventional sense because they tackle their subject matter at a level where neither characters nor plot exists. The characters presuppose that human nature, the diversity of personality and individuality, is real and that it matters. Plot can exist only on the assumption that events in time are significant. These are precisely the assumptions that the two plays put in question. Ham and Clov, Nagg and Negg (*Endgame*). Pozzo and Lucky, Vladimir and Estragon (*Waiting for Godot*), who have diverse character traits are the embodiments of basic human attitudes, which are personified virtues and vices. What happen in these plays are not events with a beginning and an end but types of situations that will forever repeat themselves (Esslin, 2007).

The sense of guilt of both Estragon and Hamm; Pozzo's intention to sell Lucky yet finding him a good companion; Pozzo's blindness as well as the dumbness of Lucky are all symbolic of human predicaments in their sinful modern world. These characters assume their own unique character traits and are not easily focalized. Clearly therefore, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* demonstrate that Pozzo, Lucky, Vladimir, Estragon, Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell in their respective plays are anti-heroes. This is because these named characters are existential heroes rather than tragic heroes as their world is without order and steeped in confusion and anxiety. Their personal lack of order, as we see of these new heroes of the modern period, is the very essence of the dislocation in modern society. It is in the light of this that these anti-heroes fit the tragi-comic genre of modern literature. The themes of these two plays include: the struggle between good and evil, appearance and reality; justice; social responsibility; hopelessness (nothingness). Godless mind wandering aimlessly and waiting, are indeed the sources of the tragic situations of the heroes, rather than the structural centre of the tragedy.

2.7 Similar Heroes and Heroines in Modern Works of Art

The other heroes like Shaw's Joan, Miller's Proctor (1957a) and Willy Lowman (1949) are examples of the modern tragic heroes of the 20th century. *St Joan* (1924) a dramatic representation of the clash of ideas and forces within the society, is a remarkable play which represents Joan as a character who has an ethereal force behind her and speaks with an unwavering authority. The heroine, Joan, struggles as a young maid to assert her spiritual call to see to the return of France into the hands of the French. Her resolute and brave character is seen in the play even till her death, which is suggestive of martyrdom, though Shaw does not show her as a winner or a heroine. Joan's restless nature in the play is predetermined by the fact that she hears her own 'voices' which direct her course of action. Her tragic situation where we find Joan dying

without being saved by the 'voices' she trusted in and leaned on.

Similarly, Miller's Proctor's actions underscore this religious fanaticism. For example, he does not believe in witchcraft and cannot believe that the Salem judges will condemn him for something that does not exist. Against this background, Proctor commits adultery but denies it to protect his family, name and conscience. This other side of Proctor's character casts a slur on his piety and his reputation.

Proctor's insistence on his good name and integrity is particularly striking and it is directly related to his concern for his family. This concern for the family is seen in his own speech:

How may I teach them to walk like men in the world that I sold my friends.

This cry of anguish of Proctor shows the inner conflict and struggle he undergoes. There seems to be the question of, "what must I strive to change and overcome?" which Proctor battles with.

2.8 The Tragic Source of the Heroes

It is commonplace to refer to Proctor as an honest man, much like Joe Keller in *All my Sons* (1957a). His honesty is basically to himself as well as to others and when he is not being honest he suffers accordingly. His guilty feelings, like Miller's heroes Eddie Carbone and Joe Keller which emerge in the plays *The Crucible* (1957b) and *All My Sons* (1957a) are painful human predicaments. From this point till the final decisions in the plays, this sense of guilt directs their humanities. For example, Joe Keller commits suicide because he cannot meet the standards of the ideal father and husband that his own son expects of him. Similarly, Eddie Carbone dies because he feels he has violated the rules of his society. All these are pressures which confront the modern heroes and they fall victim to the subduing weights of society and family. Clearly therefore, we see that the modern hero is caught in a trap set up by social and psychological forces.

The moral dilemma and a conflict found in the heroes' souls, their will-power to fight single-handedly against theocratic state (like what Proctor did), and Joan, who also rebels against the state and the church out of religious fervency, their sense of unworthiness, are all tragic sources in the plays.

CONCLUSION

The 20th century plays are molded in the use of myths to delineate at a deep level, the outcome of passion and the very nature of suffering. Beckett's, Shaw's and Miller's handling of their plots, structure as modern writers of the

European concept is much unlike the other classical and the post classical renaissance precursors.

The heroes and heroines of the modern era have diverse characteristics and traits and therefore cannot easily be focalized as having specifics and well defined traits. They are therefore seen more of anti-heroes/heroines rather than tragic. This is so because they lived in a world without order. The combination of ridiculous, purposeless behaviour and talk given the plays a dazzling comic surface, but there is an underlying serious message of metaphysical distress. There is an underlying cultural dimension in modern tragedy in that, the tragic hero or heroine is portrayed differently from one culture to another. This has implications for understanding the tragic hero in different cultural contexts.

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