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TEACHING AN ANTI-CHRISTIAN TEXT FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE:
THE CASE OF S. BECKETT'S "WAITING FOR GODOT"

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INTRODUCTION

Samuel Beckett's *WAITING FOR GODOT* (1952) has been acclaimed as one of the most significant plays of the post-Second World War era. Martin Esslin, one of the pioneering critics of the play, calls it "one of the successes of the post-war theater" (39). Poet Kenneth Rexroth, concurring with playwright Tennessee Williams, says that *GODOT* is the greatest play since Pirandello's *SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR* (244). For Andrew Kennedy, Beckett's change of status "from the obscure avant-garde writer to the world figure" (Beckett was awarded the 1969 Nobel Prize for Literature) is attributed to the fame of the play (1). And David Gates, in an obituary for Beckett that he wrote for *NEWSWEEK*, calls *WAITING FOR GODOT* the most influential play of the 20th century" (43). Indeed, that Robin Williams and Steve Martin, whom Jack Kroll (also reporting for *NEWSWEEK*) calls "America's two best comic actors" acted in it in a prestigious off-Broadway theater as recently as 1988 testifies to the play's lasting importance; no wonder Kroll calls *GODOT* "the most famous play of the century" (87).

Ironically, the critical acclaim of the play is not based on its form as a "well-wrought urn," to borrow Cleanth Brooks' metaphor. Commenting on the body of plays that have been given the label of "Theater of the Absurd" to which *WAITING FOR GODOT* belongs, Esslin writes,

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by the subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play has to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings. (21-22)

If the value of the play does not lie in its form, as Esslin convincingly argues, then, many critics contend, it lies in its theme: the absurdity of the human condition.

Eugene Ionesco defines "the absurd" as that "which is devoid of purpose.... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (qtd. in Esslin 23).

The sense of despair and rootlessness that is the characteristic of the Theater of the Absurd, as Esslin explains, was mainly a result of the Second World War, which shattered many artists' hopes for mankind in progress and shook their religious faith (23).

SUMMARY OF "WAITING FOR GODOT"

Two tramps , Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for a certain Godot

under a tree near a road. They are visibly in a desperate position: they are hungry (all they have for food is a carrot and a turnip), they are shabbily and uncomfortably dressed (Estragon's boots, which are too small for his feet, hurt him, and his pants are so large that they sometimes fall off without him realizing), they have no shelter (at night they sleep in a ditch), and at one time they contemplate committing suicide (they only decide against it because they are afraid one of them might survive the attempt). Indeed, their sight on stage, one can imagine, is pitiful. A stage direction in one instance describes them as being "motionless, arms dangling, heads sunk, sagging at the knees" (9). Their only salvation from this condition of despair, they hope, lies in the coming of Godot, of which they are uncertain; and even if he were to come, they are not sure of what he would offer them. Both acts one and two, which comprise the play, end with the messenger from Godot informing them that he is not coming that day, but that he would "certainly" come the next day.

"WAITING FOR GODOT" AS AN ANTI-CHRISTIAN TEXT

That WAITING FOR GODOT is an anti-Christian text is evident from the very beginning of the play. Vladimir, the more reflective and philosophical of the pair, has closely read and rigorously analysed the gospels on the subject of salvation, probably to see if he and Estragon have any chance of being saved from the drudgery of their lives by the coming of Godot. His focus of study is the two thieves who were crucified with Christ. One of the thieves, Vladimir tells Estragon, "is supposed to have been saved and the other damned" (9). By mathematical logic, this gives the two characters fifty percent chance of being saved, a percentage which is abundant for the skeptical Vladimir. His skepticism is however aggravated by more mathematical logic: "How is it that of the four evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there -- or thereabout -- and only one speaks of the thief being saved.... One out of four" (9). This logic then further reduces the percentage of the chance of salvation to twenty five. Even worse, however, Vladimir says that "of the other three two don't mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him" (9). This, for Vladimir, dashes any hope of salvation, for the percentage has been reduced to almost null.

Clearly, Vladimir does not approach the Bible from a Christian world view, which holds the Bible to be "inspired, inerrant, and authoritative" (Bruce L. Edwards and Branson L. Woodard, Jr. 303). Rather, for Vladimir, the Bible is just like any other text whose "truth" must be tested by logic. In this case, Vladimir has found the "truth" of the Bible to be fallible, hence the anti-Christian stance of the play.

RATIONALE FOR TEACHING THE TEXT IN A CHRISTIAN INSTITUTION

Besides being anti-Christian, WAITING FOR GODOT is undoubtedly one of the most complex texts in World literature. Thus the basis on which Andrew Kennedy says that the play has "become a set book in secondary schools" (1)

is questionable. From my experience of teaching the text to college freshmen and sophomores, the teaching of it in high schools would only serve to confuse students.

However, notwithstanding the text's complexity and anti-Christian stance, it is an important piece of literature in that it expresses a "zeitgeist" -- a spirit of an age, which is a pervasive skepticism of all traditional values -- in short, a loss of faith. And as one Christian critic has pointed out in regard to the play, "many of us lately have found ourselves returning again and again to meditate upon its profound testimony about the condition of man in our time" (Nathan S. Scott, Jr. 84).

Teaching WAITING FOR GODOT from a Christian perspective in higher institutions of learning is therefore not only desirable but also indispensable for two main reasons. First, it will make students understand that in contemporary literature, the importance of a large body of texts is not based on their intrinsic value (their form and moral content), but on the ideologies and world views that are current and that inform those texts. Second, as future professionals and parents who would soon be charged with the responsibility to nurture young minds, the teaching of GODOT from a Christian perspective would warn them to be reasonably suspicious of the concept of "greatness" of works which, since the institutionalization of literature (mainly academic criticism), is becoming more and more an ideological construct. Indeed, a close and analytical reading of GODOT would reinforce the students' critical sense in discerning ideologies, philosophies, and world views in literature that are signs of the times and that are counter to their Christian faith

OUTLINE OF STRATEGIES FOR A CHRISTIAN TEACHING OF "GODOT"

In teaching an anti-Christian text, it is important that one guard himself/herself against being didactic -- that is, telling students, before they have even read the text, that it is anti-Christian. The teacher's role, rather, should be to make students arrive at that conclusion through some strategies.

Being an abstract play, one that violates almost all the conventions of playwriting and perhaps the first of the kind students would be reading, it would be helpful to first assign the reading of the first act and to ask students to come to the next class meeting prepared to discuss their emotional responses to the text. Using this strategy would enable the teacher to introduce a relatively recent theory of reading literature, reader-response criticism, which has brought much vitality to Christian poetics. The approach, which is avowedly subjective, places the reader's (student's) identity at the center of the reading; in other words, the student as a moral being (and not just a passive recipient of the author's values, especially if they are counter to his/her own), is empowered to assert his /her values and beliefs during the process of the reading. As Patricia Ward observes, "the ethics of reading involves...an awareness of values of standards for action; as we read, our values are brought in contact with those of the implied author and of the fictional world of the text" (187). Also borrowing the concept of "interpretive community" from Stanley Fish, one of the first theorists of reader-response criticism in the United States, Leland Ryken redefines the term and shows how it can be

applied in Christian criticism (and by implication in Christian teaching).

"An interpretive community," he writes,

is simply a group of scholars who share a common set of interests, beliefs, and who read and discuss literature in terms of that agenda. Every literary critic belongs to one or more interpretive communities. Christian literary critics are such an interpretive community. (23)

Reader-response criticism therefore allows the teacher to encourage students to react emotionally in their reading and to note how their values and sensibilities are being confronted by the totality of the text. By reading aloud some excerpts from one or two books that address the question of the identity of the reader (his/her background, values and beliefs), the teacher would reassure the students that indeed the activity is a legitimate one. The discussion, however, must not be done in an unorganized way. Acting as a moderator (but certainly one with an agenda), the teacher can ask questions that lead to establish that the students belong to a reading community whose unifying force is the Christian world view.

Having thus defined the world view from which to approach GODOT, the teacher may proceed to ask students to comment on the text with regards to the conventional categories of literary analysis, namely setting, plot, characters, language and themes. Since GODOT is a kind of allegory whose meaning the reader has to dig deep to bring to the surface, of the categories above characters should receive the most attention since they are the author's device of expressing his philosophy or ideology. Finally, the discussion of the text can end with the teacher telling the students about the little that is known about Beckett's life and the philosophy that informs the text.

A SAMPLE OF STUDENTS' LIKELY REACTIONS TO "GODOT"

It goes without saying that it would be foolhardy to teach GODOT to students who have not been exposed to a relatively wide range of literature and its genres. Ideally, GODOT should be taught after the class has read and discussed a tragedy (for example Shakespeare's OTHELLO or HAMLET) and a comedy (for example Moliere's TARTUFFE or Oscar Wilde's THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST). By reading GODOT after these two genres, students would have a common frame of reference since the play is a tragicomedy.

Naturally, having not been introduced to reader-response criticism, their comments on GODOT would be made in the analytical mode. They would be tempted to talk for example of setting, plot, characters, language and the like. However, as Esslin has aptly explained, the play violates almost all the conventions of the above. The initial reaction of students, therefore, should be expected to be one of bafflement, bewilderment and even frustration. Comments likely to be made are: "the play is `weird` or strange"; "the characters [Vladimir and Estragon] are indistinguishable from each other"; "you can't tell who is speaking"; "the language doesn't make sense." While students are making these comments and several others in a similar vein, the teacher should nod in approval and reassure them that they are on target and that they have, contrary to what they had thought,

made much progress in understanding the play. For the teacher, these reactions should serve to introduce the play as being unconventional and subversive (in the sense that it subverts almost all the norms of appreciating what is traditionally known as good literature). After making this observation, the teacher may proceed to discuss in brief (save the characters who would later be analysed in more detail) how Beckett violates the conventions of setting, plot and character development in realistic literature.

SETTING

A formal discussion of the play may begin with the questions of where and when the action of the play takes place. In a realistic text, the author usually gives the time and the real name of the place. Even when the name of the place is fictitious, the reader may infer from various signs in the text where and when the action is taking place. For example, although in George Orwell's ANIMAL FARM the setting seems to be England (the name "Manor Farm" is English) and most of the characters are animals, a competent reader knows too well that the setting is Russia from the Bolshevik revolution to the Stalin era.

This brief reminder of the concept of setting in realism will trigger the class to realize that the setting of GODOT (by a road under a tree) cannot be geographically and temporally located, nor do the names of the characters give any clue: Estragon sounds French and Vladimir Russian. This, students should be told, has made many critics to conclude that the stage of the play is the world, or at least could be anywhere in the world.

PLOT

In discussing plot, the teacher should also begin with its definition in realism, which is an action that has a beginning (situation), a middle (conflict) and an end (resolution of the conflict). With this background in mind, students should not find it difficult to note that there is not much of a plot in GODOT: Vladimir and Estragon are waiting (hardly an action) for Godot who never comes. However, the students may still be asked here to search in the text for explicit statements that say that nothing really happens, such as: "nothing to be done" (8); "don't let's do anything" (12); "in the meantime nothing happens" (26); "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (27).

CHARACTERS AS SYMBOLS

At this stage of the teaching of the text, it should be quite clear to the students that GODOT is not about the social or political situation of

any particular people or individuals. As Andrew Kennedy observes, the characters' names, Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo and Lucky, are respectively French, Russian, Italian and English (35). That the main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are stripped almost to the bare of any social background has led many critics to convincingly conclude that they represent Everyman, Vladimir representing the intellectual dimension and Estragon the physical dimension of man.

Without first giving this revelation to students, the teacher may assign them to look closely at the two characters and to write on a piece of paper any noticeable differences between the two, using the binary opposition model (for example good/evil, light/darkness, sun/moon). The following is likely to be the consensus of the class:

VLADMIR

He often takes off his hat and peers inside it as if it contained something.

He has read the Bible thoroughly. He scrutinizes the Bible, especially the gospels, on the subject of salvation.

His breath stinks.

He has a sense of dignity.

He has a good memory.

He is compassionate.

He has a will to live.

ESTRAGON

He often takes off his boots and peers inside them as if they contained something.

He has no interest in Bible stories. All he remembers from the Bible are the maps of the Holy Land which were painted in color; he particularly remembers the color of the Red Sea, which makes him thirsty.

His feet stink.

He has no sense of dignity.

He has a bad memory. He only remembers who gave him food and who kicked him the previous day, things that have to do with the body.

He is violently inclined.

He once attempted suicide by drowning in the Rhone and Vladimir fished him out.

If these differences are probed from students and orderly put on the blackboard for all to see, it should not be hard to convince them (if they have not reached the conclusion themselves) to agree with many critics that Vladimir and Estragon are the intellectual and physical components of man.

Although one would be tempted to use the usual dichotomy body/spirit, on a closer look Vladimir hardly represents the spirit; after all, "his breath stinks" (33).

Students here, as elsewhere, should be asked to give other textual evidence to show that the two characters are actually one. For example, Vladimir and Estragon say that they have been inseparable for the past fifty years. Also, their reason for not committing suicide to escape their misery is that they are afraid one of them may not die. In fact, many times they think that their lot would be better off if they separated and they decide to do so, but they do not act on it.

Clearly, this analysis of Vladimir and Estragon logically leads to the conclusion that the play is about man in general waiting for Godot. At this stage of teaching the text, the question of Godot's identity seems quite pertinent.

WHO IS GODOT?

While there has been much debate among critics as to who Godot is, it is perhaps in his identity that Beckett is most explicit. In the process of identifying the character, students should be informed that although Beckett's mother tongue was English, he wrote the play in France and in French, thus making it difficult for his French readers to immediately recognize the word play in "Godot." When later he himself translated the play into English, the word play was readily recognized. Godot, as many critics maintain, is a diminutive of God. He is a supremely powerful being, for it is he who holds in his hand the future of mankind -- Vladimir and Estragon.

Indeed, it is during the discussion of Godot that students can reflect on the contemporary institution of literature and its standards for "greatness." Beckett's Godot (God) is a capricious being: he promises but never fulfills; he beats the boy who takes care of his sheep for no reason whatsoever and treats well the boy who takes care of his goats. The biblical symbolism of sheep and goats is only too obvious. For Beckett, God is arbitrary in his dealings with man, and the biblical image of a just and loving father is a false one.

That GODOT then is "a great work of literature" should make students realize that contemporary standards of greatness are no longer based on the old dictum that good literature is that which delights and enlightens, but rather that which subverts these old values.

The discussion of Beckett's concept of God and Vladimir's questioning of the Christian theology of salvation should lead to other anti-Christian themes in the text, for example the theme of waiting idly and in doubt (as opposed to the Christian theme of waiting and watching), the theme of chance (as opposed to the Christian theme of design and purpose), and the theme of the anguish and emptiness of existence (as opposed to the Christian theme of purposeful living).

Finally, after the discussion of the text has been exhausted, the teacher may select aspects of Beckett's life and philosophy that inform his work. Having lived in Paris from 1936 until his death in 1989, he could hardly have escaped the influence of the existentialism of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. The teacher may here explain the tenets of the philosophy and its implications for Christianity.

LIFE AND THOUGHT OF S. BECKETT

Born in 1906 in Dublin, Ireland, of a middle-class protestant family, Beckett studied French and Italian at Trinity College from 1923 to 1927. Francis Doherty (14) suggests that it is during this period that Beckett lost his Christian faith. In one of his rare interviews Beckett told Tom F. Driver:

I have no religious feeling. Once I had a religious emotion.... No more. My mother was deeply religious. So was my brother.... The family was Protestant, but for me it was irksome and I let it go. My brother and mother got no value from their religion when they died. At the moment of crisis it had no more depth than an old school tie. (qtd. in Doherty 15)

After graduating from Trinity College, Beckett taught English at the famous Ecole Normale Superieure (from which existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre had just graduated). In 1930, Beckett returned to his old college in Ireland to do graduate studies. He read and was influenced by Rene Descartes, the French philosopher who is said to be the father of Enlightenment. Writes Doherty: "He used his interest in the life of Descartes to complete a poem for a competition for a poem ["Whoroscope"] on Time" (13). Even more remarkable in Beckett's work is Descartes' dialectic, which has been dubbed "the method of doubt." "For Descartes," writes Robert C. Solomon, "certainty is the criterion, that is, the test, according to which our beliefs are to be evaluated. But do we ever find that certainty? It seems that we do at least in one discipline Descartes suggests -- in mathematics" (12), hence the mathematical logic by which Beckett seeks to disprove the Christian theology of salvation.

Another philosophical thought that was later to influence Beckett was the atheistic existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, a French writer who, like Beckett, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and also declined to receive it.

"Atheistic existentialism which I represent," Sartre wrote, "states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence...and that this being is man" (qtd. in Solomon 278). Thus for this brand of existentialism, God and religion are human inventions. Hulga, a character in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Good Country People" who has a doctorate in philosophy, sums up atheistic existentialism and the philosophy of nihilism to which she subscribes. Since there is no God, she reasons, "we are all damned, but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there is nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation" (328).

In 1938, Beckett settled permanently in Paris and devoted his life wholly to writing. Besides being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1961 he shared with Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentine writer, the International Publishers' Prize. Among his famous works, in addition to GODOT, are a trilogy: MOLLOY (1951), MALONE DIES (1951) and THE UNNAMABLE (1953), which are also existentialist reflections on the absurdity of life.

CONCLUSION

To illustrate to students that the perception of reality is determined to a large extent by the author's world view (for example Beckett's world view makes him to discourse on the theme of salvation using the two thieves instead of Jesus' crucifixion), the teacher may require his/her students to read, immediately after *GODOT*, the book of Job, whose existence was even more wretched than Vladimir's and Estragon's and yet he could say, "For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth" (Job 19:25).

Or, from the body of American literature, the teacher could assign Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People," a short story which looks at the subjects of nihilism and atheism from a Christian perspective. By comparing Beckett and O'Connor, two Western writers living and writing in the same period, the students may appreciate the fact that in spite of the pressure to conform to literary standards, there are still writers who do not compromise their Christian integrity.

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