

Original Article

Masses on Hold: Economic Precarity and Post-Catastrophic Survival in Beckett's "Waiting for Godot"

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Abstract : Samuel Beckett's widely acclaimed play *Waiting for Godot* (1952) is typically interpreted as an absurdist play with an examination of existential meaninglessness and futility of human life. My paper attempts to interpret it through the framework of economic precariat and precarity and post-catastrophic survival, drawing on the theory of Guy Standing established in *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* and discussed by James McNaughton's *Samuel Beckett and The politics of aftermath*. The paper contends that the four characters- Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, and Lucky exist within a social order marked by material instability, deferred sustenance, and degraded forms of labour, rather than metaphysical despair. Waiting is conceptualized as a form of unpaid labour, while acts of consumption, bodily exhaustion, and dependency expose the economic logic that structures the play's world. Through detailed analysis of suspended temporality, the "economy of the leftover," coerced labour, and the persistence of authority following collapse, this paper demonstrates that *Waiting for Godot* presents precarity as a prevailing condition. Beckett's post-catastrophic setting anticipates contemporary manifestations of economic uncertainty, in which survival supplants progress and endurance becomes the principal mode of existence.

Keywords: *Aftermath, Beckett, Labour, Precarity, Waiting.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is widely interpreted as a work of existential absurdism in which human existence is rendered futile and their daily struggles result in absurdity and 'meaning' is continually deferred. My paper attempts to look at the 1950s Beckett play and the lives of its four characters- Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky and Pozzo through a lens of post-catastrophic economic survival. The characters inhabit a world in which waiting, consumption, and bodily degradation reveal structural precarity rather than abstract existential despair. The characters reside in a post-catastrophic, as theorised by James McNaughton in his *Samuel Beckett and the politics of aftermath* structured by temporal uncertainty and somatic stress where their sole currency is one another.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

In *The Precariat: The new dangerous class* (2011), Guy Standing proposes the theory of the economic precariat, reclassifying the class structure under neoliberal economic conditions. Standing identifies the precariat as an emerging social formation marked by instability, insecure livelihoods, and the erosion of long-term economic and social protections. Unlike the pre-established proletariat class positions, the precariat exists without predictable access to employment, income or institutional security, producing lives structured around uncertainty and endurance rather than progress. This framework provides a productive lens for reading "Waiting for Godot", where survival is contingent, sustenance is deferred and time fails to generate stability and recognition. It can be argued that in Beckett's plays, the precariat class does not exist in mere vacuum, their condition is instead embedded within a post-catastrophic social order.

The precariat, as an emerging social formation, is marked by social instability, insecure livelihoods and the erosion of long-term economic and social priorities. Unlike the pre-established proletariat class position, the precariat exists without predictable access to employment, income, or institutional security, producing lives structured around uncertainty and endurance rather than progress. This framework offers a productive lens for reading *The Waiting for Godot* where survival is contingent, sustenance is deferred, James McNaughton's concept of the 'politics of aftermath' provides a framework for understanding the temporal and material conditions of Beckett's dramatic world. McNaughton's concept of 'aftermath' examines the economic and social collapse of such a society. In *Waiting for Godot* this condition is reflected in a landscape where social institutions and structures persist without offering protection. Time continues, but it no longer guarantees progress; survival replaces recovery as the dominant mode of existence. Standing's concept of economic precariat, McNaughton's 'aftermath'



clarifies how Beckett's characters endure prolonged uncertainty, where 'waiting' itself becomes a form of labour and somatic stress as the dominant condition of economic uncertainty.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon's repeated insistence that they must wait 'until he comes' [1] functions as more than a religious allegory; it foregrounds a state of 'suspected temporality' that characterizes the 'precaritized mind' [3]. In this 'politics of aftermath' time has been stripped of its linear, productive capacity. The play's loop is captured in the famous lament, "Nobody happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" [1] is the aesthetic realization of what Standing calls 'work-for-labour'[2]. This is the unpaid, exhausting time the precarious subject must spend just to remain available for an opportunity that may never materialize. Their inability to distinguish "yesterday" from "today" is not a simple absurdist trope, but a symptom of "temporal instability" found in a post-catastrophic social order [2]. For the two tramps, as for the modern gig-worker, the promise of Godot acts as a "deferred guarantee", a structural carrot that mirrors the perpetually deferred promises of welfare or institutional security [1]. Consequently, "waiting" is transformed from a passive state into a challenging form of endurance, where the body absorbs the "somatic strain" of uncertainty while time fails to generate any accumulation of capital or security. As a result, waiting itself becomes a form of labour, requiring endurance without compensation, while the body absorbs the strain of prolonged uncertainty and anxiety. Vladimir and Estragon, precariats here, do not simply wait but survive within time that no longer works in their favour.

Beckett cements the brutal hierarchy of the precariat and those tagged as "denizen" in Act I through the spectacle of Pozzo devouring a chicken while Vladimir and Estragon look on with "longing" [1]. Pozzo here stands in for the archetypal "rentier", whose authority is derived not from the labour but from his absolute control over the resources in politics of aftermath [2] [3]. His consumption is quite theatrical, grease spilling all over his face, and bones discarded while the tramps look on. It is a mockery of their scarcity. When Pozzo finally tosses the bones aside, "having sucked all the good out of them"- they transition from nourishment to refuse, yet they remain valuable for the pair, who rush to extract whatever meagre sustenance possible. The bones stand in as the skeletal resources the precariat is handed down, on which they must survive. As Estragon "makes a dart" for the bones, the scene exposes a dependency where survival is organised entirely around the discards of the elite. This "economy of the leftover" strips the agency of the precariats; they are not participants in the market exchange but scavengers of a "post-catastrophic social order" [2]. Even the earlier debates over the quality of turnips and carrots and their wish for one over the other reinforce the condition of their "constrained choice" [3]. In the 'ditch' that the marginalized denizens like Vladimir and Estragon inhabit, the food loses its status as a commodity and becomes a tool for somatic control, proving that survival is a state of perpetual compliance managed by those who hold the proverbial 'rope', individuals like Pozzo, holding this position as the new bourgeoisie.

The dynamics between Pozzo, a capitalist figure and Lucky, his "bonded labour", offer a stark look at the condition of the precariat in the post-catastrophic world order, where the body and the physical labour translate into currency. Pozzo's role in the play is that of the capitalist 'god'. In the current world economic order, the class of Pozzo, not Godot- becomes the end-all and be-all. He is in possession of both the labour and the resources- rope, chicken and even Lucky himself. Lucky here is the indentured labour himself, a member of the 'educated precariat' sector, skilled individuals unable to find work matching their skill-set, thus resorting to becoming canon fodder for the capitalistic system and undergoing emotional and somatic slavery. Once an independent individual, his loss of agency has also resulted in a loss of intellectual capabilities, now only prompted by Pozzo's "think!" [1]. Lucky's infamous 'thinking' monologue is not an intellectual feat, but rather a 'performance'-a task he has to complete to keep his employment. His loss of speech is evident in his supposed gibberish speech, with sentences like "the skull the skull the skull...unfinished" [1], hinting at the sorry plight of the educated precariats in the late-capitalistic world.

Lucky's labour extends beyond into what may be understood as a form of afterlife labour, work that persists even after the economic usefulness has been depleted. Within McNaughton's *Samuel Beckett and the politics of aftermath*, labour does not end with the collapse of but continues in the ruins of the apocalyptic society, in much degraded, baser forms. Lucky is tied, made to think, and perform obedience. His continued suffering serves no economic purpose except to sustain Pozzo's authority. This condition mirrors the experiences of the precariat whose labour often exists beyond wages, labour contracts, or recognition, demanding constant availability without reward. [3] Lucky's attempts to be 'useful' and not to be discarded into the 'Lumpen' category like Didi and Gogo stem from existential anxiety. The precariat, in this sense, his labour belongs not to life but to the economic afterlife where exhaustion shows how the precariat's sense of self stems directly from their labour. He is the precariat archetype for the "work-for-labour" cycle. The post-catastrophic society does not reward such ceaseless crises with stability;

instead, it burdens their survival.

Pozzo's blindness in Act II, scene VII, is not a simple moral reckoning but marks a metamorphosis in his capitalistic position. Even when physically incapacitated, Pozzo continues to command Lucky, issuing orders amidst his own cries for "Help!". Unable to see, repeatedly falling and begging the lumpens for assistance, he nonetheless retains authority. This persistence of power endures through habit, dependency and fear. Within a post-catastrophic order, this endurance that when collapse arrives neither cleanly nor equally. Pozzo's fall generates confusion rather than redistribution, and Lucky's condition does not improve after his master's impairment. Instead, Lucky is burdened with both his own exhaustion and Pozzo's vulnerability. A 'lumpen' rebellion momentarily arises when Vladimir and Estragon berates and kicks Pozzo- "Vladimir: It's this bastard Pozzo at it again...kick him in the crotch" [1] - yet his authority remains unbroken. Beckett presents a world where deterioration of the capital does not liberate the labour; instead, labour is forced to reconfigure their conditions to accommodate the changed conditions without a promise of improvement. Beckett briefly suspends individual identity in the exchange where Vladimir and Estragon cry out "Abel" and "Cain" only to receive the same response- Pozzo's repeated cries for "Help!". Detached from moral or biblical distinction, Pozzo becomes, as Estragon observes, "all humanity." As McNaughton notes, in a post-catastrophic economy, naming no longer produces recognition or responsibility; it merely fills the time. Boundaries between master and servant, capitalist and lumpen, collapse without dismantling the structure that binds them. This is not a carnivalesque inversion, upholding the marginalized, but breakdown of the structure of society itself. Ultimately, what remains is shared precarity.

IV. CONCLUSION

Reading *Waiting for Godot* through the lens of economic precarity, rather than as a meditation of existential meaninglessness, it situates the floating characters of Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky, and Pozzo in the play as sustained engagement with survival under conditions of instability. Vladimir and Estragon's suspended waiting, Lucky's decay of intellect, and his coerced performance of labour, and Pozzo's deteriorating authority together construct a post-catastrophic economy in which the flow of time holds no value, and labour no longer guarantees security. Drawing on Guy Standing's concept of the economic precariat and James McNaughton's politics of aftermath, this paper attempted to argue that Beckett had assembled a world where social structures persist and collapse without justice and endurance becomes the dominant mode of existence. Ultimately, Beckett's precariat figures do not resist; they endure. Waiting becomes a form of unpaid labour, and somatic stress and breakdowns are normalised. Survival itself becomes the goal of their economic life. This lack of resolution is not a failure of politics but its exposure. *Waiting for Godot* refuses the narratives of progress or redemption, offering instead a mirror for the contemporary conditions of global precarity, where promises of stability, employment, and institutional care remain perpetually deferred. Beckett's post-catastrophic world thus anticipates a present in which precarity is no longer an exception but a governing condition, in which the act of waiting, without guarantee, without an end, defines the lived experience of economic uncertainty.

A. Conflict of interests

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B. Funding Statement

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V. REFERENCES

- [1] Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*. Faber and Faber, 1956. McNaughton, James. *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath*. Oxford University Press, 2018. Standing, Guy. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.