ABSTRACT: Vladimir and Estragon strive to survive in the austere stage conditions of *Waiting for Godot*. Their salvation is closely linked to irony, which is used as a tool in the deconstruction and rebuilding of their existence. The protagonists’ ironic perspectives on being, acting, and interacting provide the blueprint of Beckett’s dark humanism.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, drama, irony, Waiting for Godot

The function of irony in Samuel Beckett’s play is a major element deserving further scrutiny. In that regard, this article seeks to demonstrate that the efforts made by the protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, to change the unbearable conditions on stage are invested with irony. Indeed, the protagonists’ efforts to reach a state of well-being are manifested with ironic statements, behavior, and abstract images. The concept of irony is present in their mutual behavior and their contacts with the outside world. Thus their behavior and interactions remain coherent to point of conciliating reality and fantasy thanks to the unifying bond of irony.

The first contact on stage between the protagonists and Pozzo reveals a series of characteristics that govern social relations. Initially, Vladimir and Estragon wonder how to interact with Pozzo, who pleads for help. Their subsequent interaction with him proves much more dynamic and betrays three types of behavior: ignoring, abusing, and helping him. This enigmatic rapport is a reflection of the protagonists’ previous interaction. Vladimir and Estragon have already ignored, threatened, abused, and helped each other. Pozzo’s appearance on the stage disrupts the bilateral relationship between the protagonists and forms a triangle. This arrangement affords the characters an opportunity to play old games in a novel fashion.

Spurred by a fury of childlike enthusiasm, Vladimir and Estragon rush to Pozzo to experience “new” sensations. The protagonists manifest their psychological state with greater freedom in their interaction with Pozzo than with each other because he is defenseless. His helpless posture, lying on the ground, and the absence of his friend Lucky make him vulnerable to Vladimir and Estragon’s impulses: “The best would be to take advantage of Pozzo’s calling for help” (Beckett 51).
The protagonists’ cruelty is fundamental in the play. As Vladimir and Estragon are already condemned to endless suffering in the form of ceaseless waiting, the spectator might expect them to focus their game on a more optimistic issue. Instead, they heed the cries of desperation and seize the opportunity to immerse themselves in a game of suffering that does nothing but increase their own.1 The scene in which the suffering protagonists deliver blows to another defenseless creature projects a bitter irony: sufferers promote suffering in their search for salvation. Their observations and deductions regarding the infliction of punishment categorically exclude the possibility of being merciful toward another being in distress. At best, as they turn against Pozzo, the effectiveness of their dialogue is enhanced.

Listening with total indifference to Pozzo’s pleas for mercy, Vladimir suggests to Estragon to give Pozzo a hand (see Jacquart 115–237). The nature of the protagonists’ game changes unexpectedly. The torturers offer a helpful hand to their victim: “Perhaps we could help him” (51). Yet this seemingly benevolent sentiment is coupled with a mercantile stratagem: “We should ask him for a bone first. Then if he refuses we’ll leave him there” (50). The protagonists try to obtain things directly by asking, searching, and pausing, but Estragon takes advantage of the newly created situation to blackmail Pozzo. The audience winces at this scheme, as it presents a twist in the protagonists’ original behavior. Yet the discerning spectators are not fooled: they see through the protagonists’ impulsive acting and their veiled stratagem to take advantage of Pozzo. In short, they sense that the scene they are watching is driven by impulsiveness coupled with premeditation.

As a result, Vladimir and Estragon physically abuse the defenseless Pozzo. In the course of their interaction, the game is performed under the guise of verbal and mental wiles. In the latter case, the expressions of hope to see Godot and their plans to leave the “Godforsaken turf” (42) form a verbal safety net; whereas in the “interaction” with Pozzo, the protagonists’ performance takes on a physical form while they abuse or help the victim. The two contrasting behaviors form a paradigm in which the protagonists’ and Pozzo’s search for escape is based on verbal and physical manifestations.

Vladimir’s question, “You mean we have him at our mercy?” (51), marks the apex of the protagonists’ supremacy on stage. The protagonists’ erect posture with respect to Pozzo’s prone position confirms that Vladimir and Estragon finally have somebody under their control. The exhilarating sensation of power is a marvelous catalyst in the dramatic performance of the play, as the interaction with Pozzo offers an activity that is very distinct from the daily pretense of waiting for Godot. It gives them “the chance of a lifetime” (52) to be active, powerful, and controlling. In this game, the protagonists experience a dramatic reversal of roles: instead of suffering, they make Pozzo suffer. Instead of contemplating their own helplessness, they observe Pozzo’s
In the course of Vladimir and Estragon’s sadistic manifestations, Lucky replaces Pozzo. They see him through a dehumanizing lens and try to define the adequate implementation of abuse: “Make sure he’s alive before you start. No point in exerting yourself if he is dead” (56). Pummeling an object should function as a catharsis, but the protagonists need “to make sure” that the victim is alive and suffering. This sadistic requirement confounds the spectator and makes more complex the protagonists’ behavior that, at times, seemed to be based on purely mechanical acts.

The confirmation that Lucky is alive and the abuse that the protagonists wreak on his defenseless body takes an unexpected turn. The paradigm, “the suffering souls make another suffer” is replaced by its opposite: “the abused harms the abusers.” “With sudden fury Estragon starts kicking Lucky, hurling abuse at him as he does so. But he hurts his foot and moves away, limping and groaning” (56).

The dramatic reversal in the power balance is ironic: The power figure hurts himself in the act of abusing a weaker opponent. The irony of hurting oneself in the act of abuse presents a change in the protagonists’ and Lucky’s roles. The latter was initially an object of observation and abuse; yet in this scene, he becomes a player who influences the course of the game by literally stopping and hurting his foes. In the new power configuration, the circle of interaction is completed with an ironic twist: the intention to hurt bounces back and hurts the “villain.”

In the midst of these chaotic games, the playwright offers a moral lesson to the protagonists: one reaps what one sows. The lesson is ironic because the scenic context of the play seems void of all moral and ethical values; the suffering of the protagonists is a gratuitous occurrence, and its cause remains beyond the spectators’ scope of comprehension in terms of logic, time, and space. However, the quaint lesson acquires new dimensions as a sense of “justice” permeates through a dramatic setting to “punish” Estragon. Vladimir and Estragon, characters initially perceived as victims, become objects of the audience’s derision as they “intentionally” allot suffering to a helpless person. The noose of guilt that tightens around Vladimir and Estragon’s game has an ironic connotation. The audience “condemns” the protagonists to the well-deserved suffering in which it discovered them when the curtains opened, thus reinforcing the initial “stage-imposed” punishment. The condemnation coincides with the protagonists’ unexplained destiny that was initially the cause of the audience’s commiseration. The protagonists’ plight is the product of the play’s setting from the opening of the curtains, while the audience’s condemnation forms as the play unfolds.

The puzzling aspect of the stage in which power, violence, and futility entwine is intensified with the generous help that the protagonists unexpectedly offer to Pozzo. Their cruelty mixes with a tendency to help:
Vladimir: He wants us to help him to get up.

Estragon: Then why don’t we? What are we waiting for? (They help Pozzo to his feet, let him go. He falls.)

Vladimir: We must hold him. (They get him up again. Pozzo sags between them, his arms round their necks.) (54)

Contradictory tendencies, abuse and help, represent opposite poles in the protagonists’ performance.

From a psychoanalytical point of view, the protagonists manifest the need to save Pozzo as they are unable to save themselves. This transference of focus from themselves to the weaker man is similar to their observation of his suffering. The protagonists’ projection on Pozzo reflects their identity crisis. They do not know him and, more important, they do not know themselves. Vladimir and Estragon cannot understand their plight although they are steadfastly peering at its reflection in Pozzo. Seeing but not understanding is the enigma of their ironic predicament.

Godot’s lack of identity contributes an additional dimension to Vladimir’s and Estragon’s situation. On the one hand, his identity is confused with Pozzo’s, and on the other, it continuously fluctuates from the concept of “savior” (32) to somebody who could harm them: “Your only hope left is to disappear. [. . .] Estragon goes and crouches behind the tree” (47–48). The margin of uncertainty indicates that the protagonists do not have the slightest idea about Godot’s nature or disposition.

The presence of contradictory concepts in the play’s structure, as we have seen in the tentative creations of Godot’s identity, is also reflected in the ease with which the characters create and cancel diverse scenarios and thus provoke and resolve heated disputes. Both impulses, causing and resolving a dispute, stem from the sheer love for the game: “That’s the idea, let’s abuse each other. [. . .] Now let’s make up” (48). This type of inconsistency was also observed in their interaction with Pozzo. The oscillation between belligerent and pacific behavior has no regulating mechanism. As far as the spectator can determine, the protagonists act by chance and without premeditation.

Intentions with respect to Pozzo are immediately implemented into action, which leads the protagonists to either abuse or help him to stand up. But when the intentions are self-centered, they dissipate, as was the case with their intention to leave. The reason that determines or explains their behavior—action or passivity—remains enigmatic.

The protagonists also consider the option of suicide. The “purpose” of suicide is to provide an additional dimension to the search for a solution to their problematic existence. In some measure, death is a congruent alternative for their situation: the inscrutable aspect of death is the key to an incomprehensible existence. On the other hand, suicide is incongruent with the situation
because the protagonists are resolving one unknown with another, life with death. The existential conundrum has an ironic dimension: trying to reconstruct their unstable existence, the protagonists risk pushing it over the rim and transforming it into nonexistence. At the impasse of existential doubts, Estragon suggests to Vladimir, “The best thing would be to kill me [. . .] ” (40). Yet, suicide and definite departure remain on the level of conjecture because carrying it out would end the search for the solution to Vladimir’s and Estragon’s existence. The materialization of option, suicide, or exit, would be incongruent with the nature of the play, which is based on endless searching.

At this point, the spectator begins to perceive the incompatible contradictions of staying and leaving, living and dying, as the basis for the play’s performance. The general feeling of impossibility to change the situation spans the play and the irony of hopeless search establishes a balance between opposite forces.

In the second phase of the play, the mental game is introduced as a stratagem to escape. Vladimir tries to brainwash Estragon by infusing the concept of well-being into his mind: “You must be happy too, deep down, if you only knew it” (38). In this particular statement, Estragon’s hypothetical, mental state is representative of the dramatic ambience that the protagonists try to create on stage to continue playing the ironic game of waiting. Vladimir tries to convince Estragon that he is happy and immune to suicide: “Say you are happy, even if it’s not true” (39).

Vladimir’s insistence on their state of well-being proves to be fruitful as he and Estragon initiate a frenetic and reiterative declaration of happiness: “I am happy,’’ “So am I’’ (twice), “We are happy’’ (twice), and so on (39). Clearly, the emphatic “I am happy’’ is ironic as both are on the brink of suicide (see Kerbrat-Orecchioni 195–221). But their plight and the resulting need for a remedy catalyze their euphoric bursts of happiness. Although these exclamations seem to be a liberating element in the protagonists’ dilemma, they are as ironic as kicking Pozzo. The feeling of well-being was intended to free the protagonists psychologically; instead, it shackles them to the stage. The exclamations of happiness cancel their plans for escape by departure or suicide.

The exclusion of escape is based on the calculation that because living conditions are good, there is no need to change them, hence departing or suicide are out of the question. In this case, the irony is not based on a futile effort to escape, but on the confirmation of the vile conditions that govern their lives. Once reality is set aside, the play is fully invested with irony. The action shifts from searching for a solution to the cerebral creation of an idyllic world. The fluctuation in the characters’ moods is not limited to the protagonists—it also involves Pozzo who was initially subjected to sadistic experiments. Pozzo’s involvement in wavering intentions, weak decisions, and varying activities confirm the general mood of the stage where instability rules.

In Pozzo’s perplexing soliloquy, the drastic changes in tone permit the spectator to perceive the incongruence between the imaginary and real worlds.
His dramatic eloquence is based on the cumulative effect of gestures, voice inflections, and the semantic content of the poetic inspiration:

(lyrical) tirelessly torrents of red and white light it begins to lose its effulgence, to grow pale [. . .] pale, ever a little paler, a little paler until (dramatic pause [. . .]) pppfff!!! finished! It comes to rest. But—(hand raised in admonition)—but behind this veil of gentleness and peace night is charging (vibrantly) and will burst upon us (snaps his fingers) pop! like that! (25; emphasis added)

Pozzo’s intense inspiration, punctuated by lyricism and the profusion of colorful lights, spurs the creation of delusions. The flux of inspiration is intensified by pauses and vocal inflections as the dramaturge points out in the stage directions: “dramatic pause” and “vibrantly.” These changes indicate the creation of a setting distinct from the circumstances in which the protagonists live, as we have seen in the euphoric exclamations: “We are happy!” But the raising of Pozzo’s arm, as if to prevent the light from fading, is an ironic sign of his exaggerated optimism. This warning gesture uncovers the burden hidden under the ironic guise of a charming evening and, effectively, an instant later, the light and inspiration fade away.

Pozzo’s warning concerning the “charming night” and its “veil of gentleness and peace” (25) forces the spectator to interpret the idyllic descriptions warily. The ironic versification subtly reveals the protagonists’ tragedy (see Bennett 274–76) and uncovers from under the veil of illusions a nightmare that does not vanish despite poetic creativity. The dramatic ending of Estragon’s lyrical inspiration, tainted with a nuance of vulgarity, confirms the protagonists’ incapacity to cancel the scenic conditions and to remain in the setting of an enchanting evening.

(his inspiration leaves him) just when we least expect it. (Silence. Gloomily.) That’s how it is on this bitch of an earth. (25)

Indeed, the dreadful reality neutralizes Pozzo’s dramatic and poetic creativity. Just as he snaps his fingers, the enchanting evening vanishes and unveils the protagonists’ reality. The inspiration remains a testimony to the ironic poetry that intended to transform the waning light into a luminous effervescence.

During the performance of the above two passages, the spectator feels the changes in speech and dramatic nuances (see Rotjman 106–21). Thus, Pozzo’s gestures and tone of voice are more poignant than a potential exegetic description of the protagonists’ plight. Pozzo’s attempts to re-create his poetic inspiration on stage are a testimony to the dire need to transform his existence into a game of hypothetical possibilities. The ironic veil and its illusory effect fade away with the pale scenic lights and force the protagonists to readapt themselves to their previous condition. The return to a passive tone and slow enun-
ciation at the end of the poetic presentation indicates the end of one dramatic inspiration and the beginning of the next.

Once the poetic game ends and its lyrical effects dissipate, the protagonists contemplate the possibility of suicide. They compensate anew for their inability to change the situation by pretending, playfully, that it is not desperate. Estragon simply notes, “One knows what to expect” (25). Pozzo confirms Estragon’s illusion about their well-being, based on endless waiting: “No further need to worry,” and the game of ironic creations takes the form of complacency: “We’re used to it” (25).

The return to the customary situation, “We’re used to it,” is a partial admission that the reality cannot be changed. Vladimir and Estragon’s joyful exclamations and Pozzo’s lyrical expressions have been stemmed by the return to the onstage reality. The opposite aspects of these efforts, one highly terse and reiterative, the other lyrical and ever changing, characterize the play’s very nature: the quest for salvation changes but never dies out.

The ironic games acted out in this play, entailing physical violence, philanthropic help, and escapist fantasy, engage characters and spectators alike in the search for a solution to the protagonists’ and spectators’ plight. The search is inconclusive, but the efforts and energies invested in such a quest converge in a bond of mutual dependency.

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1. In Happy Days, Winnie and Willie choose more pleasant topics to steer their attention away from their plight.
2. Stanislavski elaborates the concept of “internal forces” that resonate in Vladimir and Estragon’s relationship (68).
3. Robbe-Grillet explores the conjunction of stage and psychological elements in Beckett’s dramatic “space” (205–18).
4. For the dramatic effects posed by the presence of death, see Duckworth (163–76).
5. The concept of happiness through “ironic creation” is discussed by Kierkegaard (412–34).
6. Beckett himself refers to the raising of the hand as “admonition” (25).

WORKS CITED
