

Similar and Different “Waitings”

—A Comparative Reading of *Waiting for Lefty*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *The Bus*

Station

Zhao Luhua

School of Foreign Languages, Chongqing Three Gorges University, Wanzhou 404100, Chongqing, China

zhaolunxiao@163.com

KeyWords: waiting; Clifford Odets; Samuel Beckett; Gao Xingjian; life; hope

Abstract. These three plays are in a degree involved in the same theme of "waiting". In the broadest sense, the three "waitings" share some conceptions, but in a narrow sense, each waiting in each of the three plays reveals different meanings. This paper discusses the different symbols of the three waitings according to their different cultural backgrounds, explores the same meaning of them on the basis of the same background—in the same world of great lifism, and finally puts forward the rational attitude towards life and the waiting in life.

1. Introduction

The theme of "waiting" is embodied in American playwright Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*, Irishman dramatist Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Chinese (now French) writer Gao Xingjian's *The Bus Station*. The three authors come from three countries, that is, from different cultural backgrounds, so, naturally, they reveal different connotations of waiting in their play respectively. However, in the broadest sense: great lifism, the ultimate purpose of concern of all literature of various national backgrounds is the same: life and the fate of the whole mankind. Thus, it is safe to say that the three plays must share something profound and universal.

2. The summaries of the three plays

2.1 The summary of *Waiting for Lefty*

Clifford Odets placed *Waiting for lefty* on Broadway in 1935. This was the year in which Clifford Odets won recognition as one of American leading dramatists. *Waiting for lefty* is about a tax-drivers strike. A union meeting is going on. The drivers are trying to decide whether to strike or not. The union boss, who has sold out to the companies, is trying to keep them from striking. These drivers are waiting for Lefty, a character fighting against the corrupted union boss and trying to get the people to strike for higher wages. In the course of waiting, people, all the time, come up on the stage and tell their stories, while the union boss is smoking a cigar. Throughout the play, the people are waiting for Lefty before they make a decision to strike, but he never appears. Meanwhile, they keep talking about their bitter lives. Finally, there comes a shout from the back of the meeting hall which interrupts everything. Someone runs in and says, "Wait a minute! We've found Lefty! We found him in an alley with a bullet in his head!" In the end, some of them get conscious that they can unite and fight by themselves. [1]

2.2 The summary of *Waiting for Godot*

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was published in book form in 1952 and was put on stage

in 1953. Two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, meet near a bare roadside tree as they daily meet. They are waiting for Godot. Estragon fusses with his boots and Vladimir with his hat. Estragon naps but cannot recount his dreams because Vladimir will not listen. They discuss separation but make up, suicide but delay it, and discuss vegetables, religion, Vladimir's urinary troubles and Godot. Passing by are two travelers, Pozzo and his serf Lucky. Pozzo with a whip in hand, who owns the surrounding land, introduces himself, discussing selling the surf. Lucky on a leash, carrying Pozzo's coat, etc., weeps but kicks Estragon when Estragon offers him a handkerchief. After a stop, Pozzo and Lucky resume their traveling. A goatboy comes and brings a message: Godot will not come today but come tomorrow. The two tramps decide to leave, but stand still. The next day the withered tree has four or five leaves. Estragon and Vladimir restart waiting with games, light gymnastic exercises, and philosophical talks. Pozzo, now blind, and Lucky, now dumb, return and collapse. The tramps deliberate on whether to help or not. Finally, they help Pozzo up. Pozzo drives Lucky into traveling on. Vladimir soliloquizes on his predicament. They wait and wait. The goatboy brings the same message: Godot will come tomorrow. Night falls again. Agreeing to go away, Estragon and Vladimir stand still. [2]

2.3 The summary of *The Bus Station*

Gao Xingjian published his *The Station* in 1983. This play is about eight people, including a silent middle-aged man, an old man in his sixties, a girl of twenty-eight, a hothead of nineteen, a man with glasses, a mother, a master, Director Ma, waiting at a bus station for bus to the county seat. These people, except the silent man, all have something, important or unimportant, to do in the county seat. The old man, a chess player, is going to play chess with a member of national team; the mother goes there to take care of her son and husband; the master, a cabinetmaker, is hired by someone in the county seat to pass on his fine skills; the man with glasses plans to do reviewing for college entrance examination; the girl goes to make a date with her boyfriend; the hothead just goes to drink a glass of sour milk; Director Ma is invited by a party of connection to attend a banquet. The silent man is just reading a book, or looking on uneasily, not getting involved in other things. A bus comes, but does not stop to pick them up. Then, a second, a third one comes by, without stopping yet. They still continue to wait for next one. In the meantime, they criticize the hothead for his not getting in proper order when trying to get on the bus, and shout curses for not getting on. They talk about their own troubles. They talk and argue about other various topics. They discuss whether they should leave, but not agree on it. Many buses pass by, and no one stops. Only the silent man with music of different themes walks toward the county seat. The others keep on waiting. Ten years has passed. All has changed. It is just then that they find that the station where they wait for bus has been abandoned for long. They, finally, agree to walk to the county seat, with the help of one another. [3]

3. The similarities of the waiting in the three plays

Firstly, all the three waitings end in disappointment. In *Waiting for Lefty*, People rest their hope on Lefty, a courageous and radical man, but Lefty is shot dead when he is finally found. Likewise, in *Waiting for Godot* the goatboy brings again and again the message that Godot will not come today, and it is unknown when Godot will come and whether he will really come; obviously, such a person named Godot will never come and actually never exists. Actually, we know that Lefty and Godot both are the incarnation of God. God is always the great and ready helper that those who believe in Christianity turn to when they get into trouble. Taxi drivers wait for God to help them out of the sad and exploited life and with the struggle against the greedy and cruel bourgeoisie. The two

tramps wait for God to tell them who they are and what the meaning of life is. Unfortunately, "God is dead". [4] God will bless no one any longer. That is to say, there is factually no one who can help them out. Similarly, in *The Bus Station* there are eight people who together wait for a bus at one station. They have been waiting there for ten years, but no bus once stopped for them. In fact, no one will stop forever at the station where the eight people are waiting for a bus to the county seat, since the station was abandoned long before. What they all await for so long a time will never come up. Therefore, all the waitings in the three plays end hopelessly and thus meaninglessly.

Secondly, the waitings, at least, in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Station* are absurd. In *Waiting for Godot*, the two tramps do not know who is Godot, what Godot looks like, and why they wait for Godot. They just wait mindlessly and foolishly. They cannot decide to give up. They do not know how long they will continue to wait. In like manner, in *The Bus Station*, of the eight people, no one finds that the station where they stand has been abandoned for a long time until they have been waiting for ten years there. During the longtime waiting, those who just go to do really unimportant things in the county seat should have made their mind to stop waiting. The two writers, through the absurd waiting, reveal the absurdity in real life of the modern society.

Thirdly, the three dramatists, in their plays, show their strong concern with life and the fate of man. They are trying to explore a better way for human life. It can be legitimately said that the three plays all reveal that waiting is in the process of life, is another form of life, though waiting may be of different natures, of different forms and of different results, and that the three "waitings" leave us pondering in real world what we wait for, whether we should wait or not, and where and how long we should keep waiting. All these questions are directly and closely relevant to the process and the meaning of life.

4. The differences of the waiting in the three plays

Waiting for Lefty happened during the period of the Great Depression in America. And then, the international communist movement was surging forward. Odets himself, as a member of the American Communist Party since 1934, is positive and optimistic. He believes in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and reveals in his play the ill effects of capitalism and discusses the ways the common man can combat them.[5] Although the taxi drivers themselves cannot decide whether to strike or not and wait for Lefty to come to make a decision and to lead them. When they discover Lefty has been murdered, rather than deflate them, the news rallies the men, and they finally realize that they should unite and rely on themselves to fight for a new world. The ending is positive. People do not get into despair because of Lefty's not coming and death; they do not have to wait for the god-like Lefty to save them, but depend on themselves to make a new world. So the waiting of Clifford Odets is not completely meaningless and blind. It offers people a stirring vision of hope. There is a result of waiting, and the result is that waiting is no help and that it is time to get united and take action.

Samuel Beckett's philosophy is one of pessimism. This is fully revealed in this play. *Waiting for Godot* is the criticism of capitalism and, further, is the doubt and negation of the whole mankind. The two tramps wait for a man named Godot who never comes. Godot is so extremely significant to them and is the spiritual prop of them, but they do not know who is Godot and what he looks like. Most importantly, they do not know that their waiting is meaningless. Through this play, Beckett regards the social disaster of capitalism as the one of all, the existence of the world and the hope for the future as absurd, and holds that the future of man is uncertain and unknown. Samuel Beckett in the play discusses the absurdity of human life. He tries to explore an answer to such questions as "Who am I?" or "What am I living for?", but in this world of absurdity he cannot find the answer.

So the waiting of Beckett is thoroughly meaningless and hopeless. Time is killed in the waiting; moreover the meaning and value of life is killed. Waiting is obviously fruitless, but waiting, actually passive waiting is going on, no any action taking place.

People live in unrealistic hope. The hope is misty and cannot be realized. However, man does not despair because he often gets disappointed; on the contrary, he suffers more disappointment, he feels more hopeful. Finally, life runs out in the waiting. Hope is no hope, but man does not give up the waiting for it even in despair. Thus time becomes insignificant. Life seems repetitious, empty, boring, with no meaning in the sense of "purpose" or "progress". It is safe to say that this kind of waiting is irrational, absurd and passive, and this meaningless waiting is the reflection of the negative and pessimistic outlook on life and on the world of Beckett.

The Bus Station is the criticism and rethinking of too-lefty politics and the ten-year Cultural Revolution which took place from 1966 to 1976 in China. In *The bus Station* people know clearly what they wait for and why they wait—the waiting is not blind, not like the waiting of those two tramps. Besides, though the eight people's waiting is absurd and hopeless, it is not fruitless, because the waiting finally leads to action: going on foot to the destination. The ten-year absurd waiting results in the fact that they finally got to know that their waiting was meaningless, just wasting their precious time, which, very early, the silent man had been aware of. Fortunately, they were not so blind, negative, pessimistic and passive as the two tramps, and they gave up waiting as the silent man did previously. In the end, the rest of them helped one another to walk toward to the county seat on foot. It goes without saying that the people who are waiting in Gao Xingjian's play is realistic, rational and fruitful, not pessimistic and despaired, although they get clear after undergoing a ten-year-long waiting. Through this play, the writer conveys such ideas as not idling away time, not blindly following others, not negatively waiting, and urges people to actively progress, to make up for the wasted time and to struggle for their goals.

5. Conclusion

Writers of all cultures and of all historical stages have never stopped concerning themselves with the fate of man and never stopped exploring the meaning of life. But some are pessimistic, and some are optimistic. Through the three waitings, it is apparent that writers of different cultural backgrounds and of different periods of history do not have the same ideas towards life and the value of life. Indeed, life is the course of waiting, and the value and meaning is also in the waiting with a clear and significant goal. But life should not be waiting only, especially, passive and negative waiting only. In the modern world, where cross-cultural communication and impact frequently happen, we should be sensibly faced with the pessimistic philosophy from the western materialistic society. The value of life can only be fully realized in the optimistic progress with a clear and meaningful purpose. In the long and short process of life, we should take timely and valuable actions while waiting.

References:

- [1] Quinn, Arther Hobson, 1943. *A History of the American Drama: From the Civil War to the Present Day* [C]. New York.
- [2] Luo Jingguo, 1996, *A New Anthology of English Literature (Volume II)* [C]. Beijing: Beijing University Press.
- [3] Gao Xingjian, 1985, *The Collection of Gao Xingjian Drams*[C]. Beijing: Qunzhong Press
- [4] Nietzsche, Friedrich, 2005. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Tran. Thomas Common. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [5] Chang Yaoxin, 1990, *A Survey of American Literature*[C]. Tianjing, Nankai University Press.