

Yasmine Porath  
Leon 10b  
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*Between The World and Me* and *Waiting For Godot*: How Escaping Absurdities Obstructs

Authenticity

Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* focuses on racism, while Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*, the experience of two men waiting to be saved, yet both texts convey the absurdity of the human condition and mankind's impulse to find meaning in life. Despite the different illustrations of the difficulty of life, both authors indicate that relationships with love are the most valuable thing humankind can achieve. Coates and Beckett demonstrate how religion and worship are forms of self-deception which people use to escape life's absurdities, when in reality love should be used in order to embrace them, thus allowing an authentic life.

Coates, through the physical and Beckett through the metaphysical, illustrate life's absurdities. In *Between The World and Me*, Coates writes to his son about the dangers of being a person of color in the United States: "The police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body... The destroyers will rarely be held accountable... And all of this is old for black people"(Coates 9). The very idea that one should fear an agency designed for protection conveys the absurdity of the situation in America. "All this is old to black people. No one is held accountable" implies that the struggle of black people is ongoing and that the inequality they face and have faced for centuries, will not disappear. Furthermore, while American citizens would prefer to consider their nation one with ethics and morals, the lack of accountability for the murders of human beings, enforces the severity of the oppression faced by the black community. *Waiting For Godot* mirrors Coates's insight with a different approach focused on the problems of mankind as a whole. Through *Waiting For Godot*, Beckett argues similarly to Coates, that life implies never-ending struggle; Estragon and Vladimir illustrate this stagnant struggle in their interpretation of life:

VLADIMIR. I get used to the muck as I go along[...] Nothing you can do about it.

ESTRAGON. No use struggling.

VLADIMIR. One is what one is.

ESTRAGON. No use wriggling.

VLADIMIR. The essential doesn't change.

ESTRAGON. Nothing to be done. (Beckett 13)

By comparing life with “the muck”, Vladimir comments on the futility of his life that he has come to accept. “Nothing to be done” signifies how life has no meaning and although one can choose to fill their life with distractions to convince them otherwise, the reality is that “the essential doesn’t change” so such activities are pointless. In addition to dialogue, Beckett further illustrates the concept of life being absurd using stage directions such as Vladimir as looking for insight in a hat. Through these absurd gestures, Beckett remarks on the meaningless of man’s actions. Obviously no hat can provide one with answers, however, man is so desperate for answers that he will absorb anything that gives him purpose, a concept further illustrated through Vladimir’s reliance on Godot. Through these harsh realities, Coates and Beckett demonstrate man’s eternal struggle in the absurdity of life.

Religion and worship are self-deceptions that enable people to escape the absurdities of life as illustrated by Coates and the characters of *Waiting For Godot* illustrate. Coates claims he “Could not retreat, as so many did, into the church and its mysteries” (Coates 28), for being satisfied with an answer such as ‘God works in mysterious ways’ means to accept that everything happens at the will of God and therefore the oppressors should not be held responsible for their actions. He illustrates this point when he speaks of the responsibility that America has to keep its citizens safe in the aftermath of Prince’s death: “The need to forgive the officer would not have moved me, because...I knew that Prince was not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country...When the assembled mourners bowed their heads in prayer, I was divided from them because I believed that the void would not answer back” (Coates 79). To Coates, religion serves as a coping mechanism to escape reality; although they provide comfort to those unable to face the absurdity, the belief of an afterlife or excuses for the death undermine the reality of the situation. Furthermore, Coates acknowledges that “Prince’s religious zeal, his abiding belief that Jesus was with him” (Coates 78) did nothing to save him from the racism of his country, yet his mourners continue to put their faith into God. Thus, religion serves as self-deception because it allows one to hide from the grave reality and believe that there lays meaning in such atrocities as the murder of an

innocent person; Beckett illustrates the same point through the worshipping of Godot. Estragon and Vladimir spend their time awaiting Godot as a method of trying to escape the reality that life has no meaning. Even Vladimir who appears to have faith in Godot, acknowledges the fact that his faith serves more for himself than for Godot:

VLADIMIR. It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species....But that is not the question. What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come-  
ESTRAGON: Ah!" (70).

Vladimir recognizes that life has no meaning and through the line "we are no less a credit to our species", that nothing they do has any impact. The two have found an easy way out of dealing with this burden by making the purpose for their lives to wait for Godot. Estragon's appalled response shows how he, like most people, tries to avoid the absurdity of his life. At a later stage Vladimir reflects on his waiting:

VLADIMIR. "We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?  
ESTRAGON. Billions" (Beckett 70).

Beckett portrays how people think that by worshipping something greater than themselves, they give themselves importance, as seen by Vladimir questioning the multitude of people like himself. Illustrated by Estragon and Vladimir, people use worship and religion as an excuse for the way in which they've lived their lives. The two have literally done nothing, except waste possibly over fifty years waiting, and yet Vladimir takes pride in continuously putting his faith into the highly unlikely. This correlation between the importance that Godot gives Vladimir parallels that of religion and the African-American community. Through this, Coates and Beckett both illustrate how religion and worship are just distractions to generate hope of a greater purpose and more meaningful life.

By engaging in these forms of self-deception, people neglect the importance of the present and consequently life. Coates's criticizes religion for downplaying the reality that his people face: "The meek shall inherit the earth' meant nothing to me. The meek were battered in West Baltimore, stomped out at Walbrook Junction, bashed up on Park Heights, and raped in the showers of the city jail" (Coates 28). To say the meek shall inherit the earth one day suggests that one should accept the

present condition, regardless of how disgracefully horrendous, because of the belief that if they sit around and wait, things will improve. Coates expresses how religion romanticizes the idea of the meek, the patient and docile, in order to remove attention from the reality of the constant oppression his people are under. By illustrating the physical body, Coates dispels this romanticization of essence in death: “Our bodies are our selves...my soul is the voltage conducted through neurons and nerves... my spirit is my flesh...Prince Jones was one of one, and they had destroyed his body, scorched his shoulders and arms, ripped open his black, mangled lung, kidney, and liver” (Coates 79). By eliminating the belief in anything beyond the destruction of the human body, Coates applies much more value to the body and therefore much more importance in protecting it and enjoying life within it. Concentrated on the preciousness of life, Coates writes to his son: “Our moment is too brief. Our bodies are too precious. And you are here now, and you must live- and there is so much out there to live for...the warmth of our particular world, is beautiful, no matter how brief and breakable” (Coates 146). Coates demonstrates his belief that living in a harsh reality remains more fulfilling than burying oneself in empty promises of a better future. Coates urges “struggle over hope” (Coates 71), further insisting that regardless of life’s absurdities, living in the present remains valuable and one should embrace it rather than use self-deceptions to suppress it.

By worshiping Godot, Estragon and Vladimir neglect the importance of the present and consequently waste their life. As they wait, the two try to come up with ideas to make the time pass:

ESTRAGON. What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR. Hmm. It'd give us an erection.

ESTRAGON. (highly excited) An erection! Let's hang ourselves immediately!” (Beckett 9).

Obviously so fatigued of waiting for Godot, killing themselves appeals to them as a better means to pass the time. They have no obligation to wait and could easily leave, but would prefer to kill themselves, proving that they obviously do not value their lives because they have chosen to devote them to something so futile. Although supposedly only a day has passed, when Vladimir and Estragon return to their usual spot, they find the tree has sprouted leaves:

VLADIMIR. Look at it. [They look at the tree.]

ESTRAGON. I see nothing.

VLADIMIR. But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And now it's covered with leaves. [...]

VLADIMIR. In a single night.

ESTRAGON. It must be the Spring.

VLADIMIR. But in a single night! (Beckett 51)

Since no tree can sprout leaves overnight, the reality must be that much time has actually passed and Vladimir and Estragon, so immersed in waiting, are divided from reality to the extent that they fail to pay attention to their surroundings. In act II, upon the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky, Vladimir exclaims “At last! Reinforcements at last![...] We were beginning to weaken. Now we’re sure to see the evening out” (Beckett 67). Once they exit he says: “that passed the time”(Beckett 80), demonstrating how because he and Estragon are always so focused only on passing the time that they see everything only as a distraction. Instead of viewing Pozzo as a human being, Vladimir views him only as a means of getting them through their boredom, inauthenticity that manifests itself because of their choice to wait for Godot. Due to the constraint of waiting for Godot that they have placed on themselves, Estragon and Vladimir disregard the importance of their time, and thus their lives.

Love, as paralleled in the relationships between Coates and Samori and Estragon and Vladimir, allows one to embrace life’s absurdities, thus taking advantage of the present and leading an authentic life. Coates claims that he never felt the need to create purpose through religion because of the validation he gains from his relationships: “I didn’t always have things, but I had people....whatever my lack of religious feeling, I have always loved people and that broad love is directly related to the specific love I feel for you” (Coates 88). The religious experience of belonging to something greater than oneself, Coates receives from the love he gives and reciprocates. Unlike a God, whose existence or objectives are unknown, a relationship such as the one between Coates and his son is rooted in reality. Following the announcement that the shooters of Michael Brown were to be set free, Coates approaches his crying son by accepting the reality: “I didn’t hug you, and I didn’t comfort you. I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay... this is your body, and you must find some way to live within all of it” (Coates 12). Rather than trying to feed him false hope, Coates conveys to his son the wisdom that comes “In accepting both the chaos of history and the fact of my total end, I was freed to truly consider how I wished to

live” (Coates 12). When people choose to shy away from the truth, they agree to live in a false reality where they are powerless in the face of a God. By putting faith only in oneself and one’s relationships, Coates manages to choose what he wants to be.

Beckett illustrates the importance of Estragon and Vladimir’s relationship because they need each other: “ESTRAGON. We don’t manage too badly, eh Didi, between the two of us?... We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?” (59). Essentially, the affirmation of their existence that they give one another counteracts the fact that neither Pozzo nor Lucky claim to remember them and Godot will never meet them. When seeking a distraction, the two decide to hang themselves from the tree:

VLADIMIR. After you. [...] You're lighter than I am.

ESTRAGON. Just so!

VLADIMIR. I don't understand.

ESTRAGON. (with effort) Gogo light—bough not break—Gogo dead. Didi heavy—bough break— Didi alone. Whereas—

VLADIMIR. I hadn't thought of that (Beckett10).

Although their situation is painful to the point that they want to kill themselves, Estragon emphasizes that having each other remains the only thing that makes life bearable and therefore for one of them to be left alone would be intolerable. Furthermore, what happens after his death has nothing to do with Estragon, yet he still shows concerns for Vladimir’s future, depicting that by not seeing each other as a means to gain anything, they only need love from each other and this causes them to treat each other with authenticity. Through both these relationships, the authors illustrate how love remains the most important thing that one can acquire in order to deal with reality, and through these relationships, one can find authenticity among life’s absurdities.

By emphasizing the absurdities of life in man’s struggle to find purpose, both *Between The World and Me* and *Waiting For Godot* illustrate how one must not use self-deceptions such as religion and worship to try and hide from their reality. Instead, a loving relationship, the most important valuable thing one can hope to achieve in their lives, should be used to embrace the absurdities and therefore enhance life, and create one’s own path.