
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Use of Leitmotifs in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* features leitmotifs as devices to induce the repetitiveness that is usually inherent in absurdist plays. Previous research, which included analysis of leitmotifs in a literary text, viewed leitmotifs as formalistic elements and such research seldom delved into their conceptual implications in regard to the text. This paper aims to provide insight into this opening by analyzing the leitmotifs used in *Waiting for Godot*. The purpose is to find out how these leitmotifs are used to convey and underscore some of the key concepts or ideas of the play. The theoretical lens is provided by the philosophy of absurdism, and some conceptual understandings of hope/hopelessness and colour/colourlessness aid in this regard as well. Findings from the discourse analysis of the text's leitmotifs have been viewed in light of such theoretical and conceptual understandings to reach an assessment of how the leitmotifs assist in the play's conveying of these ideas. This paper's analysis of the leitmotifs of *Waiting for Godot* shows that - these leitmotifs highlight the text's prominent and cyclical states of waiting and going as well as emphasize the exhibited futile natures of fate and sleep, and by such association, they enhance the portrayal of, in addition to bringing elevated focus on, the play's depiction of the absurdity, hopelessness and colourlessness pervasive in the world of the 'absurd'.

KEYWORDS

Absurd, Absurdity, Godot, Leitmotifs, Hopelessness, Colourlessness

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1. Introduction

Analysing the leitmotifs, primarily found in musical compositions, of a literary piece can provide a space in which the central ideas contained within the text can be better understood; and the absurdist play - *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett contains several such leitmotifs which can be likewise analysed for similar reasons. Leitmotifs are recurring motifs and, as such - have the potential to provide a suitable surface on which the repetitive tendency permeated in absurdism can be reflected. Therefore, an absurdist play's inclination towards repetition and leitmotifs' inherent nature of recurrence could, at least in theory, form an efficient tandem. Despite this, not much research has been done on how leitmotifs in absurdist works can be conceptually connected to its key ideas. Most of the research done on absurdist plays' leitmotifs deals with their formalistic application. This leaves the room open for intriguing possible postulations. This research's objective is to study the use of leitmotifs in *Waiting for Godot* with the view to seek if the leitmotifs highlight and emphasize the key ideas of the play. It is library research, and therefore, data will be collected from printed books and journals as well as online resources. Also, being an analytical research, it will employ the method of critical discourse analysis in its study of leitmotifs found in *Waiting for Godot*. The central theoretical framework used for this research is absurdism. The investigation here will be focused, specifically, on how the usage of leitmotifs, e.g., waiting, going, fate and sleep, in *Waiting for Godot* is or can be connected to the plays' exhibition of the 'absurd' world and the adjacent themes of hopelessness and colourlessness. The section titled "Theoretical Framework" will deal with the key concepts relevant to this research, which are - absurdism, hopelessness and colourlessness. The section "Discourse Analysis" will study some of the prominent leitmotifs of *Waiting for Godot*. "Absurdity, Hopelessness and Colourlessness" is the obviously named section that will make the connection between the leitmotifs found in the previous section and the play's key ideas. In this paper, leitmotifs found in *Waiting for Godot*

will be analysed to establish how they are related to the play's prominent and circular states of waiting and going as well as to the exhibited futile natures of fate and sleep; and how that enables these leitmotifs in highlighting and emphasizing the play's portrayal of the absurdity, hopelessness and colourlessness endemic to the reality of an 'absurd' world.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper focuses on the relation between the leitmotifs in *Waiting for Godot* and the text's expression of 'absurdity.' Therefore, absurdism is used as the key theoretical lens. Additionally, also essential for this research - is the elaboration of the term 'leitmotif' as well as the exploration of the concepts of 'hopelessness' & 'colourlessness'.

2.1 Absurdism and the 'Theatre of the Absurd.'

The word 'absurd' denotes the human condition perceived in the ideological mindset informed by existentialism and nihilism and catalysed by the war-torn first half of the 20th century. In this condition, human beings suffer from the co-existence of this duality - seeking meaning in existence and failure in finding any. To further elaborate - Absurdism, which was based on Albert Camus' essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," postulates that human beings have the tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and are, ultimately, unable to find any. As human beings exist in this universe, their perception of the universe creates a need within them to find clear meaning in their own existence. But the universe itself is not responsive to this search. As a result, human beings cannot meet their need and are thus left unfulfilled. This unfulfilled condition is the 'absurd' condition. The 'absurd' is produced by the coinciding existence of the universe and the human mind, and such existence is unavoidable. The contradictory nature of this dual existence and the 'absurd' condition create a fundamental lack in human reality which results in a persistent state of uncertainty and distress and thus, imbues the human condition with a tragic tone and feelings of frustration. Such credence regarding the state of human existence stemmed from the belief that human life is fundamentally irrational, without purpose and essentially, out of harmony with its environment.

The notion that the human condition is 'absurd' existed before the 20th century, specifically in the ruminations of existentialist & nihilistic philosophical thoughts, and literary texts did incorporate this concept as well. But after the Second World War, some playwrights allowed the 'absurd' to dictate the constructions of their work, as in - the forms of their texts were structured to reflect absurdism. They are collectively called the 'Theatre of the Absurd,' after *The Theatre of the Absurd* by Martin Esslin. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a play belonging to - and commonly thought of as the first text of - this 'theatre'. To reflect the uncertainty, distress and consequential frustration of the 'absurd' condition, absurdist plays exhibit worlds without hope and colour through their formal constituents as well as different modes of repeated elements. Leitmotifs in *Waiting for Godot* are examples of such elements.

2.2 Leitmotif

The term leitmotif is taken from the German term 'leitmotiv', which translates to 'leading motive'. It was coined by Hans von Wolzogen and is usually associated with musical compositions and in terms of music - a leitmotif designates a recurring theme that is associated with a particular object, character or emotion throughout the whole work. In literature, Thomas Mann used the term 'leitmotiv' to denote a recurring theme, usually a theme that would dominate the work. This term refers to individual elements of a literary piece, for example - repeatedly appearing images or objects, repeatedly occurring character actions, or recurring words/phrases. Such leitmotifs are used by the author repeatedly to help in the overall storytelling by attaching key concepts and ideas with them. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, "waiting" (Beckett, 2007, p. 47, 93, 117, 121, 130, 139) and "I'm going" (Beckett, 2007, p. 45, 67, 69, 122, 123, 124, 134, 135, 142, 150) are examples of leitmotif.

2.3 Hopelessness

Hope, in the basic sense, denotes the feeling or state of wishing for an event or an object, with the underlying expectation that this wish might actually come true. In the writings of Ernst Bloch, hope is regarded as a yearning for utopia, i.e., hoping for a state of fulfilment. And Gabriel Marcel, in his writings, used the term hope to designate the disposition to rise above despairing situations - i.e., Marcel's 'hope' is more geared toward having a 'hopeful' disposition. Human beings contain both forms of hope regarding their existential situation. When humans first become aware of their existence in this universe, they are hopeful beings. This hopeful disposition is directed towards the hope of finding meaning in their being and thus providing fulfilment to existence. But the 'absurdity' of their condition inevitably makes them realize that this hope will never be realized, and all effort spurred on by this hope is ultimately futile. Thus, the 'hope' in the human beings' hopeful disposition turns into 'hopelessness'. This hopelessness is the dominating sensation of the human condition's 'absurd' reality, and this sensation is more akin to a void than an everyday feeling. An absurdist play can exhibit this hopelessness by creating a scenario - where something seems likely to happen, but then nothing actually ends up happening. Utilizing leitmotifs is one way of achieving that effect.

2.4 Colourlessness

The common definition of colour is that it is the spectral composition of perceptible light; in other words – colour is the ocular perception of the particular hue(s) of different things depending on how light is reflected off the said things. Perception of colour is essentially a form of contrast, i.e., we deem something to be of a particular colour in contrast with things that do not have that colour. As an abstract concept, thus colour can denote variety or change; that is – a realm of colourfulness is a realm of a multitude of possibilities. Inversely, colourlessness would suggest a lack of such possibilities. Remarkably, Colour eliminativism suggests that colour is not any particular quality in physical objects and relationalist theories of the colour postulate that colour perception is relational in reference to the perceiver and the circumstances in which the viewing takes place. In such theoretical postulations, as well in everyday notions of colour – one thing stands out as obvious: the perceiver's condition plays a significant role in the perception of things as being colourful. Similarly, the perceiver's condition can make something or things appear to lack colour or be colourless. In other words, a perceiver's condition influences how colour is saturated in their perception of objects in the world. But the human condition is 'absurd.' Irrespective of how things are done, the human existential meaning remains the same - unattainable. There are no other possibilities and no probable contrast in this human condition. This condition is the circumstance that causes the perceiver – a human being – to perceive the world as lacking colour. As such – the absurdist world is a colourless world. This is exhibited in absurdist plays, predominantly through stagecraft and the use of setting. However, leitmotifs' nature of recurrence, or repetition, can also demonstrate the lack of variety - which can be reckoned as a lack of colour - of the 'absurd' world. Furthermore, leitmotifs that do not lead to a substantial conclusion point towards the lack of possibilities of such a world - which again can be abstracted as a lack of colour.

3. Discourse Analysis

The discussion in this section will focus on an analysis of several leitmotifs from *Waiting for Godot* to understand and show how they relate to the key concepts or ideas of the play. These leitmotifs are manifested through the dialogues of the characters. In particular, waiting & going and subtle deliberation on the nature of fate as well as sleep are some prominently recurring motifs, i.e., leitmotifs, of the text. These leitmotifs will be analysed in this segment.

3.1 Waiting

"We're waiting for Godot" (Beckett, 2007, p. 47, 93, 117, 121, 130, 139) is a line from *Waiting for Godot* that is repeatedly delivered by Vladimir in the entirety of the play. This line, in other altered variations as well, is constantly recurring. Thus, it can be considered a leitmotif which is denoting how "waiting" is a central element of the play. This line appears in act 1 twice, and in act 2, it appears four times.

The "waiting" in the play never truly ends. But, whenever Estragon or Vladimir do or try to do something else, they end up in the same state of waiting. They are waiting for Godot, but while reading the script of the play, a feeling arises that Godot may never come. Even then, Estragon and Vladimir can do nothing else but wait. This leitmotif exhibits an absurdist ennui as this waiting symbolizes the human beings' search for meaning and value in life that is ultimately not accessible. This state also has an underlying tone of hopelessness. The characters, with their waiting, are hoping for the arrival of Godot, who keeps not showing up, making the situation hopeless. This hopelessness symbolizes the hopeless state of mankind postulated by absurdism. And, any mundane activity that keeps going on, such as waiting, eventually becomes uninteresting and lacks variety. So, the recurring motif of waiting in *Waiting for Godot* also depicts colourlessness.

3.2 Going

Throughout the play, the phrase "I'm going" (Beckett, 2007, p. 45, 67, 69, 122, 123, 124, 134, 135, 142, 150) repeatedly appears, sometimes through Vladimir and most of the time, through Estragon. In the play, even though the character(s) says that he is going, it does not amount to anything, and most of the time, other characters do not even address it.

This recurring motif, which is a leitmotif, signifies that these characters actually have nowhere to go, and even if they had someplace to go, there really is no point in going. The world shown in *Waiting for Godot* is in such a state that concepts of time and place do not mean much. In this world with such a state, no matter where Estragon and Vladimir go, they cannot find what they are looking for. Thus, the leitmotif of going becomes significant as it exudes the play's absurdity. Also, not being able to "go" or having nowhere to "go" paints a picture of this world in which it cannot offer hope in the form of escape, movement or anything else. This picture also depicts the world as lacking colour in terms of not having any variety in its setting. Thus, this leitmotif highlights and emphasizes the absurdity in this play while conveying its ideas of hopelessness and colourlessness.

3.3 Fate

Waiting for Godot starts with Estragon's realization, "Nothing to be done" (Beckett, 2007, p. 41). The line "Nothing to be done" (Beckett, 2007, p. 41, 43, 44, 57) constantly recurs, sometimes in altered forms, through either Estragon or Vladimir. This recurring

motif alludes to fate, as in, whatever has happened, whatever is happening, and whatever will happen, the characters have no control over any of these.

Estragon tries to take his boot off, but it will not come off, and he realizes there is nothing that can be done about it. Vladimir has the same realization when he tries to dislodge something from inside his hat. This realization that there is nothing to do takes a more philosophical turn when they are talking about how all human beings are different and nothing could be done about the essentials of each individual. The realization that comes from "Nothing to be done" (Beckett, 2007, p. 41, 43, 44, 57) points towards the absurdist philosophy of how human beings are ultimately not able to do anything in terms of their inaccessibility to the sought out inherent meaning and value of life. This leitmotif also carries the underlying idea of hopelessness as it shows how human beings cannot do anything. It also conveys the idea of colourlessness as there is "[n]othing to be done" (Beckett, 2007, p. 41, 43, 44, 57).

3.4 Sleep

The motif of sleep, or rather, disturbed sleep, recurs in the play more than once. It appears in both acts when Vladimir disturbs Estragon's slumber. Estragon says to Vladimir, "Why will you never let me sleep?" (Beckett, 2007, p. 49, 146). And in reply, Vladimir says, "I felt lonely" (Beckett, 2007, p. 50, 146). This leitmotif relates to absurdism's bleak, pointless outlook by juxtaposing slumber and solitude.

The absurdist movement postulates a world where human beings cannot fulfill their need for finding life's value and meaning. So, it is a world in which human beings' needs are not fulfilled, and they need reassurances from others for the justification of their existence. Now, sleep denotes a state of peace where all needs are fulfilled or can be fulfilled. But peace cannot be attained in an absurdist world. So, in this leitmotif, Vladimir's loneliness acts as a symbol of the unfulfilled need of human beings, Estragon's sleep acts as a symbol of the fulfilment of this need, and Vladimir's act of disturbing Estragon's sleep symbolizes the state of perpetual lack of fulfilment of this need. As the absurdist movement holds, the need of human beings cannot be fulfilled. So, Vladimir does not let Estragon sleep. The recurring motif of sleep thus highlights the absurdity in *Waiting for Godot*. And in the state which this leitmotif symbolizes, as the human need for value and meaning can never be achieved, this state is also shrouded by hopelessness. Furthermore, in such a world where needs cannot be actualized, interest and variety will also be lacking. So, the leitmotif of sleep also shows the colourless state of the absurdist world in *Waiting for Godot*.

4. Absurdity, Hopelessness and Colourlessness

Now the discussion will veer towards *Waiting for Godot's* usage of leitmotifs in regards to the absurdity in the play as well as its portrayal of hopelessness and colourlessness. On the basis of the previous discussion, this chapter will show that these leitmotifs highlight and emphasize the play's elements that showcase the 'absurd' reality of human existence as well as the concepts which are carried along with the portrayal of such a reality.

4.1 Absurdity

Absurdity is caused by the existence of the human mind in a universe where humans have the tendency to seek the inherent value and meaning in life but are unable to find any. *Waiting for Godot*, being an absurdist play, portrays such a state of existence. By studying the play's leitmotifs, it can be observed that the characters keep waiting for someone who does not show up. They keep wanting to go somewhere, but they never do. They keep facing the harsh truth that there is nothing to do. Estragon wants to sleep, but his need for slumber is always lacking fulfilment. All of these leitmotifs expound the play's absurdity.

The recurring motif of waiting represents the human tendency to seek the inherent value and meaning in life. The waiting does not produce any result, symbolizing how human beings are ultimately unable to find any such inherent meaning or value. The leitmotif of going brings attention to the world portrayed in the play. In this world, human beings, as represented by Estragon and Vladimir, have no place to go. Even if they had a destination, they could not find what they were looking for – the inherent value and meaning in life. The recurring motif of fate points out the human beings' lack of control in finding the immanent value and meaning in their lives. The leitmotif of sleep shows the crisis of mankind in an absurdist world. This motif highlights the conflict between the need that arises regarding life's meaning and value and this need's lack of fulfilment. All the leitmotifs of *Waiting for Godot* discussed in this paper allude to the human tendency to seek the inherent meaning and value in life and their lack of success or ability in finding any. Thus, these leitmotifs highlight and emphasize the absurdity in *Waiting for Godot*.

4.2 Hopelessness

An absurdist world is that of hopelessness. Human beings have the propensity for seeking innate meaning and value in life. This suggests that they have hope. But, in this world, this search can bear no result. So, the situation that human beings face is hopeless, as is their task of seeking. *Waiting for Godot*, being an absurdist play, exudes this hopelessness. Its discussed leitmotifs allude to this by-product of the absurdist world that is present in the play.

The leitmotifs of waiting and going symbolize the underlying hope of human beings that comes from their inclination towards finding life's inherent meaning and value. But, as the "waiting" never ends and the "going" gets nowhere, this hope does not amount to anything. The recurring motif of fate suggests that whether the hope of humans will come true or not, they do not have any control over it. The leitmotif sleep symbolizes the existence of this hope in human beings and how they cannot fulfil it in an absurdist world. All of the leitmotifs of *Waiting for Godot*, thus, depict the world of the play, and by extension, the absurdist view of the world, in a hopeless light. All of the discussed leitmotifs used by Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* hint at the hopelessness of the play and also the world proposed by the absurdist movement. Thus, these leitmotifs convey the underlying idea of hopelessness in *Waiting for Godot*.

4.3 Colourlessness

Colourlessness, like hopelessness, is a feature of the world proposed by the absurdist movement. As human beings are unable to meet the need of seeking intrinsic value and meaning in life, their existence is seemingly pointless. Thus, an absurdist world is a colourless world. The leitmotifs used in *Waiting for Godot* denote repetitive and pointless waiting and "not going," lack of activity and the pointless nature of trying to fulfil needs in the play's absurd world.

The idea of colourlessness can be discerned in *Waiting for Godot* through the leitmotifs as they show the world of the play and the absurdist world, by extension, as a place where there is no point in waiting. There is also no place to go or no place worth going. There is nothing to do in this world. And, basic biological demands like the need for sleep, symbolizing the absurdist notion of the human need for meaning and value, are not met. Furthermore, the motifs of waiting, going, fate and sleep are, as evidenced by the fact that they are leitmotifs, repeated. And after studying these motifs, it can also be observed that these actions are pointless. These pointlessly repeated tasks suggest that the characters do not have much to do, and they do not have many ways to pass their time, further suggesting a world where there is not much in terms of variation. So, the world presented in *Waiting for Godot* lacks interest and variety. Which means it is in a state of colourlessness. This colourlessness in *Waiting for Godot* is projected by the leitmotifs, and it refers to the broader sense of the colourless state of the absurdist world. Thus, the leitmotifs used in *Waiting for Godot* convey the idea of colourlessness.

5. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how the portrayal of the 'absurd' in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is facilitated by the use of leitmotifs. This research also shows how through these leitmotifs, the play's key underlying ideas of hopelessness and colourlessness, adjacent to the 'absurd' reality, are conveyed as well. In order to grasp the play in its entirety, it is essential to study its use of leitmotifs as they carry the key philosophical concept and ideas of the play. The recurring motifs of waiting, going, fate and sleep, as discussed in this paper, show the characters repeating pointless actions, having no place or no desired place to go, facing the lack of having anything to do and not finding what they are looking for. All of these features are offshoots of the languor pervasive in the 'absurd' world.

Waiting for Godot is a literary work associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, and as such, its driving concept or philosophy is absurdism. The leitmotifs found in the play and their recurring nature offer an appropriate reflective surface for absurdism's cyclical tendency. This enabled the concept of the 'absurd' or its manifestation in *Waiting for Godot* to be comprehensible through the study of the play's leitmotifs. Also, as discussed, hopelessness and colourlessness are features of the absurdist world. As the leitmotifs highlight and emphasize the absurdity in *Waiting for Godot*, its fundamental ideas of hopelessness and colourlessness are also carried by them.

This paper has its limitations, one being - it depends entirely on the printed books and journals available in Bangladesh and/or found online. Because of time constraints, this paper puts very limited focus on the contemporary society in which the play was written or society in general and on the applicability of the concepts and ideas conveyed by the leitmotifs in the real world.

5.1 Scope for further study

This study initiated some issues which have been discussed but not in length. These issues have the potential to be explored. While this paper studies the leitmotifs in *Waiting for Godot* in terms of their relationship with the play's absurdity, hopelessness and colourlessness, the play could be further explored by studying these leitmotifs through the scope of other critical theories, e.g., psychoanalysis.

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