International Journal of Education and Social Science; Vol. 13 No. 1; January 2026
ISSN 2410-5171 (Online), 2415-1246 (Print)
Published by Research Institute for Progression of Knowledge

Culture at the Crossroad: Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter in a World of Cultural Fusion and Confusion

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Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, who are among the iconic 20th-century playwrights, lace their plays with wavering, perplexed, and repugnant cultural mimesis, as their characters sporadically hang on weird pieces of attitudes and behaviors in their struggle in a world in collapse. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, as well as Pinter's *The Caretaker* depict cultural fusion and confusion as they grapple with emptiness and existence. "*Godot* dismantles religion and philosophy to reveal the emptiness of teleological truth, whereas *The Caretaker* ultimately transcends theatricality by realising arguably the only truth we have, existence itself" (Knowles 77). *The American Heritage Dictionary* perceives culture as the patterns of behavior, arts, belief systems, institutions, and thought, especially as expressed in a particular community or period. Culture, therefore, deals with a set of characteristics by which groups of people are recognized. Therefore, there is a link between identity and culture. This essay grapples with problems of personal identity and damaged cultural values in the works of top tier modern writers. It examines the ignorance of characters about their origin, hatred of other cultures and the inconsistencies about names in the plays of the playwrights in question.

Beckett's characters in *Waiting for Godot* lack sufficient information about their own cultural background. The lack of detailed information about Estragon and Vladimir shows how difficult it is for modern humanity to be identified with any culture. Although the absence of details that would give necessary clues to the identity of Beckett's tramps suggests that they are twentieth-century "everyman", it reveals the crisis of identity in the modern world. Talking about Beckett's characters, Janis L. Pallister infers that "Their broken-down moral codes are mere remnants of civilization, ineffective in coping with the nothingness their existence represents. Happiness, a supposed outcome of moral codes, is for these men a mirage in the desert of their lives…these men are meant to stand for the lives of all men" (80-81).

The identity of Beckett's characters cannot easily be established in terms of age, place of birth, residence, ethnicity, nationality, family, friends, professions or possessions. From bits of information gathered from the play, Beckett's characters in *Waiting for Godot* seem old, but it remains impossible to know how old they are. They are beyond their prime but knowing how old they are is a daunting task, even to them. Their places of origin, which would constitute part of their identity, are not easy to establish. They speak vaguely about familiarity long ago with the "holy land", and of picking grapes. Pozzo, the only character who attempts to give us clues to his social status and habitation, provides us with bits of scattered information. He gives the impression that he owns the land adjacent to the road upon which Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for Mr. Godot, and that he has many slaves and great wealth, yet one cannot clearly decipher Pozzo's identity.

The identities of Beckett's tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, cannot be established either. In the first act of the play, Estragon tells Pozzo that they are not of the region, "We're not from these parts, Sir" (15), but in the second act he insists that he has never been anywhere else: "No I was never in the Macom Country! I've puked my puke of a life here, I tell you! Here! In the Cackon country" (40). This ambivalence makes it impossible to establish their current place of residence and their origins.

From the professional perspective, it is difficult to say with certainty the identity of the above characters. Pozzo, at different parts of the play, appears as a farmer, politician, and a businessman, but at no point is one able to choose one profession over the other. Although Pozzo seems to be a caricature of a twentieth-century politician, there is no ultimate certainty about his profession, yet he represents modern humanity. No wonder, Frederick Busi insists that "*Waiting for Godot* is above all a play that aspires universality but was not created in a vacuum; to a certain extent it is a reflection of the civilization that produced it" (69).

Lucky's profession is also not clear. We know he is one of Pozzo's many slaves, and that he has been hardworking, but we do not know the services he renders to Pozzo nor what he was prior to enslavement. His blindness suggests old age but very little is known about his past. Lucky's long, repetitive, and disjointed speech or say tachylalia points to some form of education, but it seems more like a satire about modern intellectuals than a depiction of an academic profession. While Pozzo suggests that Lucky used to be a very good thinker, he may have been an academician of some sort, but that, too, is a very distant conjecture.

The obscurity of Pozzo's identity is also true of Estragon's. Estragon tells us that he was once a poet. Notwithstanding this assertion, his poetry is not evident anywhere. The identity of Godot whom they count on for deliverance is also very sketchy. Although through these tramps and the boy one knows that Godot owns sheep, goats, servants, and has a long white beard, his identity remains elusive. Nevertheless, his presumed position of authority and power and the fact that he has a residence places him high above Vladimir and Estragon "…who have come from no where in particular and no where in particular to go (Tynan 11).

Crises of identity also arise from the names of characters. Vladimir and Estragon deform Pozzo's name to "Bozzo" and "Gozzo". Estragon also calls Pozzo "Abel". Pozzo, on his part, distorts Godot's name to "Godin" and "Godet". In the same vein, Estragon is called "Gogo". In addition, he tells Pozzo that his name is "Adam". Vladimir accepts the name "Didi" and Lucky is called "pig", "cain", and "hog". This multiplicity of names characterizes the ambiguity that characterizes modern humanity. To Estragon, since there is no certainty about Pozzo's name, they (Estragon and Vladimir) have "To try him with other names, one after the other" (53). Because modern humanity, as these characters epitomized, has almost no mark for identification or is almost indistinguishable, his/her cultural identity is similarly in collapse. To Katerine H. Burkman, "Beckett's drama reflects a world that has little human community and is all but devoid of cultural and moral value" (34-35). The absence or decline of culture signals the death or erosion of behavioral patterns such as customs, traditions and habit cluster. This ruin leads us to evidence of the shredding of culture which would otherwise constitute norms which strengthen the moral foundation of humanity. According to David Schneider in *The Relevance of Culture*, culture deals with the basic premises of life and spells out:

> What its units consists in; how these units are defined and differentiated; how they form an integrated order to classification; how the world is structured; in what part it consists and on what premises it is conceived to exist, the categories and classifications of the various domains of the world of man and how they relate to one another and the world that man sees himself living in. (14)

The decay of cultural identity in *Waiting for Godot* pinpoints the disappearance of human perception of exactly those socializing influences that constitute life.

This vagueness of identity in *Waiting for Godot* is also prevalent in *Endgame*. The setting of *Endgame* as well as the relationships of its characters are all vague and generic. The names of the four characters in the play, namely Hamm, Nagg, Nell and Clov cannot be tied to any nation or culture with certainty. One knows very little about their past, that is, about their occupation and living conditions before entering the "shelter". Moreover, one is not quite sure about the motivating factors that caused their behavior. They display generic and primal archetypes of behavior, devoid of any cultural, historical or national specificity. As the play evolves, we are told that Hamm's parents kept him out of earshot while he was young and needed their help, and that Hamm refused Clov a bicycle. He is also said to have refused Old mother Pegg oil for her lamp and similarly refused the parents of a starving child food. At no point in the play are these behaviors explained, nor do we know the profession of Hamm that provided him much wealth and exposed him to beggars. The parents of Hamm, Nagg, and Nell, say nothing about their past except for the fact that they had an accident that led to the loss of their legs.

This information is all we have and their lives remain so sketchy that one cannot establish any genuine identity of the characters. Once individuals, who are to be carriers of culture, are indistinguishable, culture, too, becomes opaque. Their rootlessness speaks to no sense of direction. An individual without a culture in which he or she can identify is like a tree without support, without roots. This void leads to what Morris Freillich, quoted in David Scheneider in *The Relevance of Culture,* calls "deciding what is …what can be…what one feels about it, and for deciding how to go about doing it (3-4). Culture functions to establish the social meaning of existence, and since every aspect of life seems to have a connection to culture, the cultural void in *Endgame* is a cataclysmic problem and "seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our own time" (Esslin 4).

Pinter, like Beckett, gives very little information about the past of his characters. The suspense these authors create is timeless and universal. Harry Derbyshire Harold holds that "The tenacity of Harold Pinter's association with the Theatre of the Absurd can partly be ascribed to the attractiveness of cultural shorthand…." (48). Indeed, the obscurity in the lives of characters limits the understandable sets of problems and interest with which we might identify them. Humanity becomes unpredictable since little is known about one's past life and those factors which would otherwise influence one's present behavior. While Beckett's scenarios seem perhaps to operate in the extremes as concerns these issues, the notion of cultural collapse is a bit different in the plays of Pinter and Fugard. These playwrights present a world of cultural malice and decay. At the same time, one notes that many of the characters hide behind the vagueness of their own identity. That is, characters tend to hide their names as well as obscure their existence in a cultural jungle where to be known is to risk the threats of exposure or to be vulnerable to attack.

In Pinter's *The Caretaker*, Davies goes about with a false name. He tells Aston that his papers at Sidcup have his real identity. "We gather that he's spent much of his life on the road and that he's just been working in the kitchen of a café, but otherwise we learn all we need to know about him through what he says – and above all through what he leaves unsaid" (Hayman 59). His papers, we are told, are kept by a man he knows but does not reveal the name. The following dialogue between Davies and Aston shows the problem of false identity:

Davies: I got my papers there! (pause)
Aston: What are they doing at Sedcup?
Davies: A man I know has them. I left them with him. You see?
They prove who I am! I can't move without them papers. They tell you
Who I am. You see! I'm stuck without them.
Aston: Why's that?
Davies: You see, what it is, I changed my name! Years ago. I been going around
under an assumed name! That's not my real name.
Aston: What name you been going under?
Davies: Jenkins. Bernard Jenkins. That's my name. That's the name I'm known,
anyway. But it's no good me going in with that name. I got no rights. I got an insurance card here. (He takes a card from his pocket). Under the name Jenkins. See? Bernard Jenkins. Look. Look. It's got four stamps on it. But
can't go along with these. That's not my real name…..
Aston: They should have stamped their card.
Davies: It would have done no good! I'd have got nothing anyway. That's not my
real name….
Aston: What's your real name then?
Davies: Davies. MacDavies. That was before I changed my name. (28-29)

The foregoing dialogue speaks to the fact that modern humanity goes around under false pretenses and consequently makes personal identification difficult. The main problem Davies faces is that he has no "rights" for the name (Jenkins) he bears. The name written on his insurance card, Jenkins, does not match his real name, MacDavies. Davies' insurance has expired, and he has resorted to altering his name rather than buying a new insurance card. He gives the impression that he has no identity since only his papers at Sidcup could prove who he is. He is stuck without these papers, yet he has been in that state for about fifteen years, "oh, must be…it was in the war…must be…about near on fifteen years ago" (30).

The following dialogue shows that Davies is either ignorant about his origin or that he prefers to hide it for no apparent reason:

Aston: What did you say your name was?
Davies: Bernard Jenkins is my assumed name.
Aston: No, your other name?
Davies: Davies. MacDavies.
Aston: Welsch, are you?
Davies: Eh!
Aston: You Welch? Pause.
Davies: Well, I been around, you know…What I mean… I been about….
Aston: Where were you born then?
Davies: (Darkly). What do you mean?
Aston: Where were you born?
Davies: I was… uh …oh, it's a bit hard, like to set your mind back…see what I mean…going back…a good way…lose a bit of track, like …you know….
Aston: (Going to below the fireplace). See this plug? Switch it on here, if you like fire. (24-35)

The above dialogue suggests that character's nationalities or origins might be known from their names. Aston, after listening to the name of Davies, inquires whether he is a Scottish, but Davies avoids this question. That means without our true names or an understanding of our places of origin, the identity of a person can be hard to know. Davies' ignorance or reluctance to reveal his origin compels Aston to give up. He quickly changes the subject by talking about the plug.

Through Davies, Pinter makes it difficult to know Davies' background. In Act Two, Davies tells Aston that little information is known about him, "Of course I got plenty of other cards lying about, but they don't know that, and I can't tell them, can I, because then they'd find out I was going about under an assumed name. My real name is not the one I'm using, you see. It's different. You see, the name I got under no ain't my real one. It's assumed" (53). It is ironic that Davies hides his identity yet seeks to know that of others. After knowing the identity of others, Davies tends to discriminate against them. He is a racist, as he downgrades other races in a bid to show that his race, which he conceals, is superior. Davies shows his hatred for other races right from the time he enters Aston's room. While still standing and hoping to get a seat, he bitterly complains about the Greeks, Poles, and Blacks. This animosity for other races is seen in the dialogue between Davies and Aston:

Davies: Sit down? Huh… I haven't had a good sit down…I haven't had a proper sit down…well, I couldn't tell you….
Aston: (Placing the chair). Here you are.
Davies: Ten minutes off for tea-break in the middle of the night in that place and I Couldn't find a seat, not one. All them Greeks had it, Poles, Blacks, Greeks, the lot of them, all the aliens had it and they had me working there … they had me working….
(Aston sits on the bed, takes out a tobacco tin and papers and begin to roll himself a cigarette. Davies watches him). All them Blacks had it, Greeks, Poles, and the lot of them, that's what, doing me out of a seat, treating me like dirt (16-17).

Davies' hatred for the Greeks, Poles and Blacks is evident here. In this short dialogue, Davies uses each of the words "Greeks" and "Blacks" three times. The word "Poles" is used twice. The frequency and the derogatory way in which he uses these words show that their presence disgusts. Moreover, he is upset both by their apparent legion and by their apparent privilege, and the fact that they are all foreigners; "all aliens had it". "In the same way the frantic search of territory of one's own, a safe haven from which that world can be excluded – the territorial element of Pinter's work – also emerges as merely an aspect of that basic realization of the ruthless brutality of the times, a panic-stricken desire to shelter from a world pervaded by terror and torture" (Esslin 29), thus other races cannot be trusted.

Furthermore, Davies complains that he was given instructions at a café, by a mere "Scotchman". Davies vows, "I'll get him. One night I'll get him. When I find myself around that direction" (19). In addition, Davies inquires from Aston whether he has neighbors.

He says he noticed their heavy curtains pulled across next door as they came in. He is agitated when told by Aston that his neighbors are Indians. Davies' agitation is glaring:

Aston: Family of Indians live there.
Davies: Blacks?
Aston: I don't see much of them.
Davies: Blacks, eh? (Davies stands and moves about).

After being told that Aston's immediate neighbors are Indians, Davies who had been worried about the Greeks, Blacks and Poles at the café, now questions Aston about the number of Blacks around his residence:

Davies: How many more Blacks you got around here?
Aston: What?
Davies: You got any more Blacks around here? (22-23)

Aston seems to be fed up with Davies' racism and does not respond to many of the questions he asks. This is not the only instance in *The Caretaker* where Aston ignores Davies' questions about Blacks.

The moment Aston tells Davies that there is a lavatory down the landing which has a sink, Davies immediately questions whether Blacks use it and whether they ever come into Aston's room:

Aston: There's a lavatory down the landing. It's got a sink in there.
We can put this stuff over there.
(They begin to move the coal bucket, shopping trolley, lawn-mower and sideboard drawers to the right wall).
Davies: (stopping). You don't share it do you?
Aston: What?
Davies: I mean you do not share the toilet with them Blacks, do you?
Aston: They live next door.
Davies: They don't come in. (Aston puts drawer against the wall).
Because, you know…I mean…fair's fair…. (27)

Davies stops moving the coal bucket, shopping trolley, lawnmower and sideboard drawers to be assured that Blacks do not use Aston's toilet, and that they do not come into the room in which he presently lives with Aston. After getting no response from Aston, Davies resorts to lecturing him on the necessity of staying away from the Blacks. He says Aston knows that "fair is fair", that is, being light in color is a gift that should be maintained and respected. In other words, Aston's fair complexion and his presumption of the "right" of special privilege should not be contaminated by the dark color and assumed bad manners of the Blacks. Davies ends up using the presence of the Blacks around him to his own egoistic advantage. Davies invents a scapegoat to avoid responsibility for his own embarrassing conduct. He blames his snoring and jabbering on the Blacks as the dialogue below demonstrates:

Aston: (Crossing to the bed with a toaster). You woke me up. I thought you might have been dreaming.
Davies: I wasn't dreaming. I never had a dream in my life.
Pause.
Aston: May be it was the bed.
Davies: Nothing wrong with the bed.
Aston: Might a bit unfamiliar.
Davies: There's unfamiliar about me with beds. I slept in plenty of beds.
Pause.
I tell you what, may be it were them Blacks.
Aston: What?
Davies: Them noises.
Aston: What Blacks?
Davies: Them you got. Next door. May be it were them Blacks making noises, coming up through the walls.
Aston: Hamm.
Davies: That's my opinion. (31)

This dialogue presents Davies as a man who likes to profess the superiority of his culture.

He fiercely refuses to having made noise in his sleep. His questions "jabbering?" "Me?" suggests that he is superior and cannot behave in a mean way. To him, he does not see any sense in Aston's accusation that he is jabbering but instead finds it normal for a person from a different race or culture to jabber. His feelings about the Blacks bias his judgment. Davies does this because he wants jabbering (which he apparently considers to be personal embarrassment) to be blamed on those (Blacks) he hates rather than upon anyone in his own world. Aston, of course, knows that Davies is the source of the noise, wakes Davies up in Act Three and gives him the same blame. Davies, after realizing that he has not succeeded in his attempt to blame jabbering on the Blacks, makes a U-turn by arguing that Aston cannot stop him from breathing, "I'm an old man, what do you expect me to do, stop breathing?" (75). Talking about Davies, Ruby Cohn infers, "…the final curtain falls on an old man's fragmentary (and unheeded) pleas to remain in his refuge" (78). Davies can no longer conceal his flaws.

Based on the foregoing, one can safely infer that the world of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, as depicted in their plays, especially in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *The Caretaker*, steams of cultural fragmentation. The obliviousness of characters about their origin, abhorrence of other cultures and variations in their names are prevalent, suggesting, as it were, the fused and confused cultural identity and awareness of modern humanity. "Certainly, it must have been the relatively straightforward nature of *The Caretaker* that helped to account for its success" (Hinchliffe 80) as Pinter captures modern humanity in a unique way. Caught at the cultural crossroad, characters in the works of Beckett and Pinter gasp for their true identities while exhibiting cultural animosity.

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