

Minimalist Art and the Iconization of Trees in Waiting for Godot

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ABSTRACT

The minimization of performance art is aimed at presenting human darkness and innocence in a philosophical interpretation. This is what Samuel Beckett presented in his 1953 performance *Waiting for Godot*. Art minimization makes the number of props less, but is able to visualize the desired thematic of the script. This minimalism, which is supposed to display simplicity, becomes more “luxurious” due to the presence of iconic things from absurd performances. In the midst of the minimalist, gloomy, and arid decorations in *Waiting for Godot*, the tree becomes the center of attention. This tree becomes something very iconic and will strongly remind the audience of the show. The process of something becoming iconic is called iconization, which is a “deliberate” process. Beckett allegedly deliberately iconizes the tree, with a number of realities in the text (textual) and the reality of the performance (atmospheric). This iconization and minimization is intended to make the performance more basic and simple, less philosophical and metaphysical. This article is the result of an analysis of several texts written by Samuel Beckett.

Keyword: Absurd theatre, iconization, minimalist art, minimization of performing arts, *Waiting for Godot*

INTRODUCTION

The post-war era of contemplating life that began in the 1950s gave birth to minimalist forms of performance. These forms are one of the manifestations of a life that has no purpose, is futile, and has no true meaning, as an implication of the prolonged depression in that era. Samuel Beckett, a playwright who Esslin (1961) calls an absurdist, started the minimalism of the drama since *Waiting for Godot*. This play represents a pessimistic, gloomy view of human existence, and eliminates the belief in an all-powerful supernatural force.

The show, organized and produced by Samuel Beckett, will feature very minimalist decorations and props.

Minimalism in the perspective of art is defined by using the smallest thing or amount in the creation of a work of art (Yücetoker, 2014, p. 11). Minimalist art is often called *ABC art*, *reductive art*, and so on in other disciplines. However, in the development of contemporary art, this seemingly minimalist art actually describes something that is also minimalist, but is often interpreted differently in the viewer’s perspective. This is due to the multiple interactions of the audience with the minimalist art, both visual and emotional (Weng, 2020, p. 150).

Minimalist performance art is intended to represent the innocence of human beings, as well as the darkness and obscurity of

the world around them. This has led to the perspective of many scholars that absurdist theatre performances, especially *Waiting for Godot*, are full of philosophical interpretations. Although Beckett himself continues to reject what many critics and academics say about him being called philosophical and close to Albert Camus' absurdist thought. Beckett mentions that he does not understand what the philosophers who are associated with his works have written and mentioned. Instead, Beckett mentioned his interest in Dante.

Beckett's interest in Dante is quite at odds with the outcome of the show, given that Dante is a very strong Catholic. *Waiting for Godot*, which was staged in Paris in 1953, London in 1955, and New York in 1956, featured five actors, a bleak and minimalist set design, and featured futile beliefs, meaninglessness, and the absence of truth. The atmosphere of pessimism and uncertainty became the main colour of Beckett's works until his subsequent works with a total of about 31 plays with the same characteristics. This feature is considered Beckett's way of using epistemic modality to defamiliarize the discourse on *Waiting for Godot* (Demir and Durgun, 2022, p. 24).

This atmosphere gave birth to a new form of theatre called the theatre of the absurd. Names categorized as absurdist such as Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, and more recent names such as Albee, Stoppard, and Pinter are considered Beckett-influenced, based on Camus' Absurdism. In addition to Esslin's categorization and conventions of absurdist theatre, performance minimization characterizes the performances of Beckett and subsequent absurdist (Esslin, 2014, p. 45).

METHOD

This article uses data analysis techniques in the form of literature

studies with qualitative research methods. Qualitative research methods are research that emphasizes the exploration and understanding of the meaning of a social reality. A number of steps taken in this research method are data analysis from a number of literature sources, with the results in the form of narrative data presentation, not quantitative (Cresswell, 2016, p. 245). Whereas in literature studies, searching and organizing literature sources is carried out before conducting an analysis related to the problem to be studied. Creswell also argues that literature study is done by organizing literature according to the topic, and finding the most needed documents for the study. Thus, a number of conclusions from previous researchers are mandatory as references for analysis and interpretation.

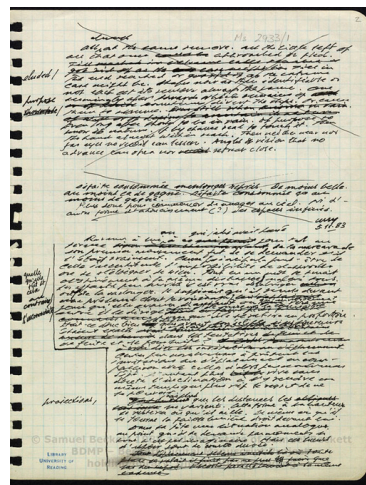


Figure 1. Samuel Beckett's performance notes
(Source: Website beckettarchive.org, 2024)

This paper attaches a number of literatures ranging from primary sources, namely those written by Beckett himself, as well as what Beckett wrote for others. Then, there are some gaps to be re-analyzed, such as the comparison of the first and subsequent directing records, or in different cities. The relevant articles collected start from those published at the time of Beckett's performance, in the 1960s.

However, the author also includes more recent sources, up to publications in the 2020s. This is to capture the development of the interpretation of the work from the time of the first performance to the interpretations of researchers in recent years. The collection of literature helped me to understand the main topic discussed in this article, giving me a clear direction for redefining, as well as new interpretations. Author will compare and contrast several texts written by Samuel Beckett himself, namely play scripts, directing notes, and staging designs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Waiting for Godot as a minimalist art

The performance of *Waiting for Godot*, according to Beckett in his letter to Allan Schneider, was intended to present the most basic voices. Not the deep and headache-inducing philosophical stuff, as some academics have said about his work. See how one of the following snippets of his letter:

“... My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended), made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin”. (Craig Fehsenfeld, Gunn, & Overbeck, 2016, p. 114)



Figure 2. Staging Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* by Shakespeare Theatre.
(Source: Website shakespearetheatre.org, 2024)

The show is minimalistic and leads to simplicity of thought, characterized by simple stage design, few characters, gloomier lighting, simple music, and the absence of plot. Added to this is the lack of purpose in life, and the atmosphere of absurdity that is presented through each story. This message is reinforced by Lucky's phenomenal monologue scene that mocks all the nonsense talk from all the other characters (Vladimir, Estragon, and Pozzo).

Lucky's scene is not to be read through the text, but to be watched through the performance of the play. Reading the text will make the reader grope for what Lucky really wants to convey. Seeing the performance, however, makes it clearer that Lucky is more appropriate to be called a singer than a philosophical oration (Rick, 1993, p.67). Lucky is also a person who does not care about anything, living his life without meaning, so he is not burdened by anything. Lucky is a person who has no burden of ideals, hopes, nor does he wait for anyone like Vladimir and Estragon. He gives meaning to his own life by comedizing, stylizing, and caricaturing his life to be enjoyed.

Beckett makes an effort to visualize simplicity, as well as presenting the character Lucky so that his viewers still see his work as a simplicity. Therefore, the minimalist set design is also intended to support this. According to Beckett, the show is to be witnessed, not thought about. So, watch and enjoy it by laughing or crying, and think about it later after returning home as contemplation. This is implicitly conveyed through his famous quote, “*dance first, think later. It's the natural order*” (in Petras & Petras, 2011, p.35).

This minimization leads to Beckett's desire for the show to be read very simply and fundamentally. If Beckett

(and absurdism) strongly rejects meaning applied to the world (Sartre, in Camus, 2020, p.66), then why search for meaning behind *Waiting for Godot* by getting too philosophical and metaphysical. This minimization leads to Beckett's desire for the show to be read in a very simple and more fundamental way (Abbas, 2019, p.47). This work is not an idea, or an artistic plan to go beyond drama (post-dramatic), but a glimpse of a number of human moments faced with the absurdity of life. *Waiting for Godot* is a series of such moments neatly stitched together, and spun around, as well as over and over again.

Watching the minimalist form of *Waiting for Godot* will force the audience not to be mesmerized by the visual beauty, the good looks or beauty of the actors, the beauty of the story and its plot, and the beauty of the choice of words in the dialogue. The audience will see it as an intellectual experience, as said by Foucault (in Hardy, 2010, p.35), that when watching *Waiting for Godot*, he gets an intellectual experience that personally becomes the most important experience in his life.

"At all events, one thing at least must be emphasized here: that the analysis of discourse thus understood, does not reveal the universality of a meaning, but brings to light the action of imposed rarity, with a fundamental power of affirmation" (in Hardy, 2010, p.67).

Foucault states that trying to analyse or find the meaning of a particular discourse will not provide a universal meaning. Instead, looking at the actions that are rarely done by the average person in *Waiting for Godot*, will lead us to the fundamental power of the affirmation of the practice with the viewer's personal life.

The minimalist design of the show leads the reader to think simply about what Beckett is trying to convey. Beckett

refuses *Waiting for Godot* to be considered an allegory of religious belief, nor does he refuse to be considered a philosopher. In fact, although he continues to be associated with a number of absurdist philosophers, Beckett is not a philosopher, he is a writer who writes plays. With a similarly minimalist mindset, why not think of *Waiting for Godot* as a story of waiting, or just a story of waiting?

Minimalism is also found in the absurdist-style plot of the show. The plot of the play, especially *Waiting for Godot*, is more circular than conventional Aristotelian drama. There is no climactic peak, and even if there is, it does not exceed the peaks throughout the play. This is also a form of minimization in absurdist theatre. However, it needs to be emphasized that absurdist theatre, as formulated by Esslin, cannot be defined as theatre that promotes absurdism. Absurd theatre is a form of theatre that has a certain pattern, and that pattern is very different from realism theatre, or other styles and forms of theatre. Some of the plays written by Albert Camus, for example, are forms of drama that emphasize absurdism, but are not classified by Esslin as absurdist theatre.

The repetition in the play is also intended to make the viewer focus not on how time passes, but how it makes them feel. What Vladimir and Estragon do through the tedious waiting time, until the show ends. However, this simplicity is made all the more "luxurious" by the iconic presence of absurd performances.

Amidst the minimalist, gloomy, and barren décor of *Waiting for Godot*, the tree is the centre of attention. This tree becomes a very iconic thing, and will strongly remind viewers of the show. This process of something becoming iconic is called iconization, which becomes a

“deliberate” process. Beckett allegedly intentionalized the process of iconizing the tree, with a number of realities in the text (textual) and the reality of the performance (atmospheric).

Such classification is very important, as it helps viewers and researchers to capture the true message of the performance as a whole. Classification makes a study of a work of art truly focused (Aroara & Elgammal, 2012, p.2). For example, in fine art, two paintings that both paint the same place will present different aesthetic perceptions if they are presented in different styles (such as realism and impressionism). Two songs that share the same theme of heartbreak will be perceived differently if they are performed in different music genres (such as heavy metal and jazz). The same goes for theatre. Ionesco’s *Bald Soprano* and Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* will give similar meanings and aesthetic impressions. It will be very different when you see a performance with the same theme of waiting and loss, such as *Pelukis & Wanita* written by Adhyra Irianto and *Ayahku Pulang* written by Usmar Ismail. Both are works with different forms and styles of theatre, so the aesthetic perception captured by the viewer is very different. This shows that it is very important to classify the style and form of a work of art first before interpreting or perceiving it aesthetically.

B. Iconises Beckett’s Tree

Iconization comes from the word iconize, which means to portray (someone) as an icon¹. This word is also synonymous with iconify which, according to the Oxford dictionary², means an action to reduce an image on a computer screen to a very small

symbol. At the linguistic state, the way to do iconization is by using inventory phonemes that are interjected with conventional syllable structures, thus making regular sound changes occur. Meanwhile, still at the linguistic point with hermeneutic emphasis, a word that is part of a speech is interjected with metaphor or metonymy, which makes the original meaning disappear (Hinterwaldner, 2017 p.124). Both iconization and iconify (which refers more to computer programming) come from the word icon which means a statue or image made to resemble the original (Verhoeven in Uyun, 2020, p.37). Until the word is drawn into linguistic terms to refer to a sign that refers to a certain larger object.

The main point of iconization is to emphasize a small thing intentionally to make the small part more prominent than others (ibid, 2017, p. 125). It takes a planned and manipulative action to make the most desirable part of a detail take center stage. For example, in social life, some types of clothing are constructed by the media and cultural industrialization into Islamic clothing. Of course, the purpose of this construction is for business and profit. So, fashion companies that are able to make a garment into an icon for Islamic clothing will control the market share. A large and complex religion is reduced to a small item of clothing. This is an example of iconization that can even be done to reduce a very large and complex social environment into a small and memorable icon.

Iconization as a process of making something an icon is intended for certain meaning transactions. In a linguistic perspective, Chomsky (1981, p.38) calls iconization the process of making something as something that reflects a certain reality. The icon is not the reality it depicts, but rather its simplified form. Therefore, iconization is a process that

¹<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/iconify?q=iconify>

²<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>

reduces (as well as simplifies) the reality depicted. The construction of the statue of *Fatmawati Menjahit Merah Putih*, which is then intended to be an icon of Bengkulu City, does not essentially depict the geographical reality of the city. Likewise, the depiction of the Tiger (*maung*) as an icon of Bandung does not depict the reality of Bandung in general.

It can be concluded that the process of iconization is the process of distilling a larger thing into something smaller but iconic. The goal is that when seeing the small iconic thing, it will be immediately impressed by the previous bigger thing. When looking at a statue of Fatmawati Sewing Merah Putih, one will immediately think of Bengkulu City and all sides of life in the city. When seeing a statue of a tiger (*maung*), then someone will immediately remember the city of Bandung and all sides of life in the city. Likewise, when seeing a deciduous tree alone in an arid place, one will immediately imagine the drama *Waiting for Godot*. That's how the process of iconization works, from the planned to the unintentional.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the bare tree has always been iconic. The tree is the only decoration of the empty street in the *Waiting for Godot* stage setting. Beckett never explicitly tells us what he is trying to symbolize through the tree. The tree is completely bare in the first act, then grows about four or five leaves in the second act (Igweonu, 2020, p.67).

At the beginning of the second act, Vladimir tries to remind Estragon about the appearance of five new leaves on Estragon. Vladimir also shows anxiety, but it is ignored by Estragon. Vladimir tries to find the meaning of the birth of the five leaves, and Estragon ignores this fact (Kibin, 2023, p.1). Nevertheless, the scene makes the attention on the tree quite dominant.

Especially, when the two people try to commit suicide at the tree in question.

The oddity of the leaves growing on the tree in *Waiting for Godot* in just one night (Piacentini, 2002, p.39) also suggests that the time passed by Vladimir and Estragon is not one night in normal reality. This shows that the tree is the only remarkable thing in the minimalist and boring setting of *Waiting for Godot*. The prominence of the tree amongst the barren, empty, and bleak setting suggests an attempt to iconize the tree.

The iconization of the tree in *Waiting for Godot* has been the most dominant thing in the journey of the play for at least the last 70 years. The tree and the mysterious Godot have become intertwined with talk of the work. Godot is homogeneously interpreted as a god, an Abrahamic god, and other supernatural saviour beings. But the tree presents a completely different interpretation. Todd (1967, p.88) describes the tree as a tree of knowledge that is closely related to Christian interpretations, but Todd immediately rejects that this is a "religious drama".

The attempt to iconize the tree is successful, as it is the very thing that will immediately remind one of *Waiting for Godot*. Artist Paul Chan, for example, while traveling in New Orleans after the Katarina disaster in 2006 saw a bare tree standing among the barren streets and piles of rubble (Chan, 2009, p.78). This immediately inspired Chan to stage a performance of *Waiting for Godot* at that location and was watched by New Orleans residents still in a state of post-disaster depression (Thompson, 2015, p.49).

In Sarajevo, Serbia, in 1993, Susan Sontag staged *Waiting for Godot* in the ruined streets of Yugoslavia. As the setting of *Waiting for Godot* in general, a bare tree stood near the street (*ibid*, 2015, p.87).

Waiting for Godot has always been associated with a bare tree, as it is iconic. Every new performance of Waiting for Godot will bring out the bare tree in various forms and versions. This is the iconization of the Waiting for Godot tree that has been done since the beginning. Iconization is defined as a process of symbolization that is unique, authentic, and related to culture and inheritance (Naumov and Weidenfeld, 2019, p.79). The process of iconization will be related to the process with what is called flagshipness or a flagship product/object/symbol/icon that refers to a place, time, geography, brand, and others (*ibid*, 2019, p.82). In this case, iconization is also related to Beckett's artistic effort to make his bare tree an icon of the Waiting for Godot performance.

The growth of five leaves is interpreted as a symbol of hope (Iqweonu, 2020, p.68), but the reality that occurs in the script and on stage is the opposite of this dominant interpretation. This can be seen from the following snippet of dialog between Vladimir and Estragon (Beckett, 2011, p.4)

...

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

[...]

Vladimir: Rather they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

Estragon: They rustle.

[...]

Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like ashes.

Estragon: Like leaves.

....

Discussing about the leaf is repeated three times, with almost the same structure. The repetition directs and imposes the same meaning, which is that the leaf symbolizes

nothing to them (Maslowski-Bethoux, 2012, p.116). The leaves that grow do not become hope, but sound like the sounds of death.

They repeat it three times, discussing the leaf with almost the same structure. The repetition directs and imposes the same meaning, which is that the leaf symbolizes nothing to them. The leaf that grows does not become hope, but sounds like the sounds of death.

This repetition is a metaphor for the absurdity of life, which also characterizes the theatre of the absurd (Handayani, 2019, p.45). This condition is an illustration of humans who persist in waiting for something supernatural that they believe can change their lives and save them. In fact, what you want to achieve is in your own hands, and can only happen because of your own efforts. At the same time, this repetition leads the audience to continue to increase the intensity of their focus on the bare tree. This is then inferred as an attempt that may or may not be intentional by Beckett in the iconization of the tree.

C. Purpose of Tree Iconization

Abbas (2019, p.2) mentions that the type of tree in Waiting for Godot is not identified. However, they still talk about the tree in Act I and Act II. The leaves on the tree grow randomly, although most directors working on the show put five leaves in the second act. Abbas' opinion is that the minimalist technique used in the play makes the plot and the actors' body reflectivity become one. Meanwhile, the tree in question becomes more prominent in each set. In other words, the minimalization used is intended to accentuate the presence of the tree whether intentional or not.

Koczy (2018, p. 5) argues by quoting Beckett that the design of the performance piece Waiting for Godot is not actually minimalist. Instead, the design is

maximized. Beckett's own writing states this as quoted by Koczy. That means, there is Beckett's maximum effort to design his works, including *Waiting for Godot*. However, Abbas (2019) captures it as a minimization of art. It can be inferred that Beckett planned to maximize "something" from the work.

The tree in the work is one of the things that Beckett maximizes. Even in the latest performance of *Waiting for Godot*, which stars the best actors such as Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart, as well as a stage director of the same caliber as Sean Mathias, the tree is still the most highlighted thing. You can see the poster and photos of the show below.



Figure 3. Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart play *Waiting for Godot*.
(Source: New York Times, 2022)



Figure 4. Poster *Waiting for Godot*
(Source: ianmckellen.com, 2024)

This tree is in fact the main breath of the show. It depicts a regeneration that is full of hope and growth, yet empty and lonely. It also depicts the loneliness and meaninglessness felt by Vladimir and Estragon, and has led to many interpretations from readers (or viewers) of *Waiting for Godot*. Some relate it to the cross and Jesus, others to the *Khuldi* fruit tree in heaven. Some interpret it through the perspectives of absurdism, atheism, and existentialism. The tree has become the icon of *Waiting for Godot*, which makes anyone who remembers the show remember the tree. On the other hand, when you see a tree standing alone on the ground after a disaster or war, you will immediately think of *Waiting for Godot*.

CONCLUSION

Some of the plays in *Waiting for Godot* that directed by Beckett, there are a number of minor changes that are not found in the full script. These changes can be found in *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot* (Beckett, Knowlson, & Gontarski, 2019, p.48). In the book, a number of definitive changes to both movement and text provide significant changes. Some notable changes include that the two characters (Estragon and Vladimir) are already on stage from the moment the screen opens. This is different from the fully scripted version in the *Complete Dramatic Works* (Beckett, 2006) and *waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in 2 acts* (2011), where Estragon stands alone and tries to take off his shoes, while Vladimir comes from outside.

Changes also occur in the text, especially when compared to the original (French) version. For example, Vladimir says "you must believe in *Roquette*" in the French version, but in the English version

it becomes “*you must be confused with La Roquette*”. The meaning that previously referred to the Roquette area in France, which is an area with many Jewish schools, changed to La Roquette, which is a prison where the death penalty with the Guillotine knife is located. Beckett’s cuts, changes, and so on are made to his text with the influence of the circumstances, the place of performance, and the geopolitical situation in the place of performance.

Beckett also changes the question Vladimir asks the Boy (the messenger boy) who comes at the end of each act to inform him that Godot is not coming. Vladimir asks if Godot has a beard, which Boy confirms. The next question is “...*is his beard pretty, or is it black*”, to which Boy replies “*I think it’s white*”. This is what is considered to point to a certain “god”. To prevent people from pointing to a “god”, Beckett changed the text to “...*is it pretty, black, or red?*”. The question resonates with Estragon’s story of a man who comes to a brothel and is asked to choose a woman who is beautiful, black, or red-haired. It changes the previous perspective from “*supernatural creatures in the sky*” to “*pleasure*”.

Based on this explanation, it can be concluded that Beckett continues to try so that the play *Waiting for Godot* can continue to be seen in a minimalist and simple way. Beckett wants to convey that this minimalist performance has a meaning that is not too complicated to understand, is also very fundamental, and directly targets the inner experience of the audience.

The iconization of the tree is Beckett’s way of suggesting the viewer. Iconization is intended to provoke a person’s memory with a memory that is much simpler and easier to remember. There is no need to take a picture of the entire city of Paris, but

just in front of the Eiffel Tower, it already depicts you in Paris. This is also what Beckett planned with the iconization of the tree in *Waiting for Godot*. Just like in New Orleans and Sarajevo, one will immediately think of his or her personal experience while watching *Waiting for Godot* when encountering a bare tree standing near a barren street, or a post-disaster area.

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