

A Comparative Study of Narrative and Philosophical Dimensions Between the Novel “No One Writes to the Colonel” and the Play “Waiting for Godot”

Yue Liao

*Chinese Department, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China
20220702327@mail.gdufs.edu.cn*

Abstract. Gabriel García Márquez's novella *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1958) and Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1952), though belonging to different genres, are seminal works from the 1950s that profoundly explore the human condition of waiting in the post-World War II era. This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of these two texts to elucidate both the universal and the particular dimensions of the "waiting" motif within postwar literature. It argues that each work, through its unique generic conventions, presents a distinct response to existential uncertainty. Márquez's social realist approach grounds the colonel's interminable wait for a pension in a specific socio-political context, portraying a struggle against systemic oblivion with tangible, human resilience. In stark contrast, Beckett's absurdist drama employs abstraction and cyclical dialogue to deconstruct meaning itself, presenting waiting as a metaphor for the existential void. Consequently, these works articulate two pivotal modes of twentieth-century resistance: Latin American magic realism confronts absurdity with flesh-and-blood persistence, while European absurdism meets it with ironic deconstruction and metaphysical fragmentation.

Keywords: Gabriel García Márquez, Samuel Beckett, Waiting

1. Introduction

In the 1950s, world literature presented profound reflections and changes in the aftermath of World War II. García Márquez's novella "No One Writes to the Colonel" and Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot" were born in different cultural backgrounds, but together they capture the core dilemma of human beings in the post-war era - "waiting." This theme is not only a continuation of war trauma, but also a profound metaphor for the state of individual existence in modern society.

Both of them are regarded as classic works with the theme of Waiting, but the existing research on "No One Writes to the Colonel" mostly focuses on the novel techniques, background and other contents. For example, in the article "A Study of 'No One Writes to the Colonel'", Zhihong Qin analyzed it in terms of its hero, its language, and the author's background [1]. In contrast, the existing research on "Waiting for Godot" mostly focuses on the characteristics of absurd drama. For example, in his article "Feeling the Absurd Life Witnessing the Anti-Drama Technique-People and Their Situations in the Play", J. H. Lam says, "The most effective way to 'inspire' and 'purify' from

Beckett's plays is not to interpret, analyze or interpret it in the traditional way, but to pay special attention to the 'novel form' of his anti-drama [2]. Most of the existing research on the two works focuses on a single text analysis and rarely puts the two in a cross-genre comparative perspective.

The paper aims to explore How do 'No One Writes to the Colonel' and 'Waiting for Godot' express the theme Waiting from the perspective of social reality and philosophical abstraction, through the genre differences between fiction and drama? How do the similarities and differences between them reflect the two resistance postures of the post-war human situation? By the means of close reading which focus on the description of the 'waiting' scene in these two works, this study will analyze language and structural characteristics to make a narrative comparison of the works, then explore the differences between the novel's inside excavation of the characters' psychology and the drama's outward display of absurd behavior, and explain the different meanings of 'waiting' at the level of existentialism and social criticism, which reveals the two kinds of living postures in two literary forms : one is to fight against fate with flesh and blood, and the other is to dispel fate with complete nothingness.

2. The theme of waiting in post-war literature

2.1. Historical roots of the postwar theme of waiting

The end of the Second World War did not bring peace and stability. On the contrary, the rapid formation of the Cold War pattern, the shadow of nuclear weapons, the collapse of the colonial system, and the political turmoil on a global scale plunged the post-war world into a new uncertainty. A sense of uncertainty is not only reflected in international relations but also has a profound impact on the common mental state.

This sense of uncertainty was reflected in literature, making waiting a common theme in many literary works of this period. Post-war life waits for reconstruction, colonies wait for independence, and families wait for news of separated relatives, waiting for not only the continuation of the trauma of war, but also the embodiment of confusion and anxiety about the future. This collective Waiting mentality is further exacerbated by the Cold War's nuclear deterrence and sharp ideological antagonism. People lived in a state where they were unresolved, neither able to turn back to the past nor look forward.

2.2. The development of the theme of waiting in literature

In literary history, Waiting is not a new theme, but its connotation has undergone a fundamental transformation since the 20th century. In traditional literature, waiting often had a clear purpose and outcome, such as Odysseus' journey home in Homer's epic "The Odyssey", or Noah's wait for the floodwaters to recede in the Bible. These kinds of waiting ultimately pointed to some form of redemption or completion.

However, post-war literature completely deconstructed this purposefulness. Writers such as Beckett and Camus elevated Waiting from a narrative tool to a symbol of the essence of existence. For instance, Camus proposed in "The Myth of Sisyphus" that human existence itself is a meaningless repetition, while Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" concreted this philosophy into the eternal wait of two vagrants for "Godot." This transformation marked the shift of modern literature from traditional narrative to existentialist expression, where waiting is no longer for a certain outcome but becomes the norm of the human condition.

2.3. The typicality and transcendence of the two works

Although rooted in their respective regional cultures, "Waiting for Godot" and "The Old Man with His Hat in the Wind" transcend the limitations of a single historical context through the universality of Waiting, becoming symbols of the common predicament of humanity. In "Waiting for Godot", the absence of Godot is a microcosm of the ultimate questions of humanity - whether it be God, meaning, or salvation, all are essentially illusory promises that never arrive. Meanwhile, Márquez endows Waiting with the flesh-and-blood pain of social details such as hunger and poverty. The colonel's letters symbolize the deception of power over the individual, while his persistence showcases the resilience of the Latin American people in the face of despair.

3. Core differences in expressive techniques

3.1. Presentation of the perception of time and space in waiting

3.1.1. "No one writes to the colonel ": the materialization of cyclical time and daily space

In the novella "No One Writes to the Colonel ", Márquez materializes waiting as a tangible state of existence through a cyclical time structure and specific spatial coordinates. The novel begins with the repetitive phrase "It was October again", setting the tone and suggesting that the colonel's wait has long been trapped in an endless cycle [3]. Through the repetition of details, Márquez intensifies the perception of time's stagnation: the colonel's precise calculation when counting coins, his mechanical actions when feeding the rooster, and his wife's repeated questioning of "what to eat" all elongate subjective time in the torment of waiting.

Furthermore, Márquez constructs the daily nature of waiting through a series of specific spatial transitions (the dilapidated home → the post office → the doctor's clinic → the coffee shop). The post office symbolizes the intersection of hope and disappointment, the doctor's clinic implies the approach of aging and death, and the coffee shop, as a social venue, becomes the colonel's last place to maintain his dignity. These spaces are not only the backdrop for the plot but also the externalization of the waiting psychology. Through meticulous environmental descriptions and the creation of a psychological atmosphere, the novel immerses readers in the colonel's solitude and tenacity, allowing them to experience the weight of Waiting within a realistic framework.

3.1.2. Waiting for Godot: the failure of linear time and the solidification of abstract space

Contrary to the concrete treatment of time in novels, Beckett's Waiting for Godot completely dissolves the linear logic of time. Both acts of the play begin with the same twilight scene, and the fragmented memories and repetitive actions in the characters' dialogues change physical time into an eternal standstill. The messenger boy in the play always delivers the same message: "Mr. Godot asked me to tell you that he won't come tonight, but he'll surely come tomorrow night [4]." However, in the second act, Godot does not show up, while the time, place, and scene remain unchanged. This vague and hopeless state of "tomorrow never coming" directly proclaims the meaninglessness of waiting [5].

In terms of spatial representation, Beckett employs a minimalist stage design, featuring only a country road and a withered tree. Even the few leaves that seem to grow on the tree between the two acts appear like absurd accidents. This extreme scarcity and incomprehensibility of space force the audience to confront the physicality of Waiting itself rather than any possible narrative logic behind it. When Vladimir and Estragon mechanically repeat their dialogue on stage, the audience is

compelled to experience the meaningless repetitive actions and sluggish conversations with the characters. This simultaneous forced participation makes the absurdity of Waiting not only a viewing object but also a profound psychological experience.

3.2. The visual representation of waiting

3.2.1. "No one writes to the colonel ": the social nature and survival metaphor of symbols

In the novel, the colonel's waiting is conveyed with profound meaning through practical objects. The rooster, as the core symbol, represents both the colonel's hope for survival and his dignity. At the social metaphorical level, the symbol of the cock is not only the relic of the colonel's deceased son but also related to the cock-fighting culture in Latin America. Whether it is the psychological feeling of the colonel when he carried the cock home: "This afternoon - another Friday afternoon without any letters - people woke up," or the words relayed by his wife: "They said that this cock is not ours, but it belongs to all the people in the town [6]." All these suggest that the rooster has become a spiritual symbol for the entire town in its fight against oblivion and historical violence.

In contrast, the never-appearing letters become a metaphor for institutional deception. The absence of the postman and the gossip of the neighbors constantly reinforce their existence, yet they always refuse to fulfill their promise. The colonel himself stated: "In this matter, I had no strength at all... My old comrades all died during the process of waiting for the letters [6]." At this point, the letters have transcended being specific objects and have been alienated as a symbol of a commitment. The colonel's waiting for the letters is essentially his last faith in the spirit of the national contract, and the collapse of this faith constitutes the sharpest social criticism of the novel.

3.2.2. "Waiting for Godot": the absurdity of symbolism and purposelessness

The symbols in "Waiting for Godot" were completely stripped away of any social reference and became pure carriers of absurdity. "Godot" as the object of waiting had its basic reference completely eliminated. The symbol no longer pointed to any definite referent; instead, it only produced a temporary meaning effect within the system of differences. Godot could be the awaited God, savior, death, or pure nothingness. Its existence was no longer significant [7]. The act of waiting itself became the sole reality of existence. The props in the script were also deprived of purpose. The repeated wearing and taking off of boots, and the swapping of hats, all became meaningless actions to fill time, completely out of their functional use, and took on symbolic meanings, reflecting the characters in the play and even the entire human race's obsession and pursuit of purpose and meaning [8].

The differences between these two symbol systems are deeply rooted in their respective cultural soils. Márquez presented waiting as a pervasive state of suffering throughout society through the cycle of time and concrete space, reflecting the metaphorical connection between magical realism and reality in Latin American literature traditions [9]. Beckett, through the fixation of time and the absence of symbols, deconstructed the ultimate meaning of waiting, reflecting the deconstruction of the meaning of existence in European absurdist drama. The differences between the two precisely reflect the two poles of the Waiting theme - the suffering of reality and the absurdity of existence.

4. The characteristics

4.1. Textual characteristics and character development

4.1.1. "The colonel whose letters nobody wrote": the novel as "a mirror of society" with the depth of characters

Lukács pointed out in "The Theory of the Novel" that the essence of a novel lies in revealing the overall nature of society through individual destiny. In "No One Writes to the Colonel", the colonel is a perfect embodiment of this theory. As an old soldier forgotten by the state, the character of the colonel is vividly portrayed through meticulous psychological and action descriptions. The unique temporal extension characteristic of the novel's style allows the narrator to delve into the inner world of the character, presenting war traumas in memory flashbacks, such as the lingering pain of the son's death and memories of "the past years", making waiting not only a current predicament but also the continuation of historical violence. Through the limited third-person perspective, Márquez maintains an objective distance while allowing readers to empathize with the colonel's loneliness. This "telling" mode makes the novel a diagnostic book for Latin American social reality - the personal tragedy of the colonel reflects the collective trauma of the entire Latin America under colonial legacies and military dictatorship [10].

4.1.2. "Waiting for Godot": drama as "philosophical allegory" and the disappearance of characters

Contrary to the introverted nature of novels, Beckett's plays completely overturned the traditional rules of character portrayal. Vladimir and Estragon have no credible past, and even their names can be interchanged. Their flattened treatment precisely meets the requirements of Brecht's "alienation effect" - the audience cannot identify with the characters and can only calmly examine the act of Waiting itself.

This character portrayal originated from the spiritual crisis in post-war Europe: after Auschwitz, the traditional humanistic beliefs collapsed, and the human subjectivity was deconstructed. The fragmented lines of the lucky ones are precisely the remnants of European civilization's memory, and their disordered perception of time metaphorically represents the rupture of historical continuity. The "presentation" mode of drama, through the mechanical repetitive actions of the characters and the broken dialogues, directly visualizes the absurdity of existence, making the stage a laboratory of existentialism.

4.2. Historical anchors of the narrative strategy

4.2.1. The trauma of the thousand days' war in the novel

By inserting fragments of the Thousand Days' War (1899-1902) into the colonel's recollections, Márquez placed the individual's waiting within the context of Colombia's century-long violence. This civil war between the conservative party and the liberal party which had claimed more than 100,000 lives shaped the collective memory of "los fracasados" in Latin America. The repeated long waiting in the novel is actually an epitome of the disillusionment of the Latin American people with the promise of modernization. Emphasizing the details such as repeated questioning of the colonel's wife and the gradually scarce material resources, the novel reveals the survival predicament behind the waiting [11].

4.2.2. The trauma of the thousand days' war in the novel

Beckett's deliberately blurred temporal background precisely corresponds to the spiritual ruins of Europe after the war. Vladimir's chaotic citation of the Bible, declaratory language, and Pozzo's sudden blindness reveal the widespread spiritual crisis that exists universally in the post-war world after the collapse of rational and scientific ideals [12].

If Márquez uses the "time inclusiveness" of the novel to anchor the waiting in the social history of Latin America, then Beckett abstracts it into an existential allegory through the "spatial immediacy" of the drama. The choice of literary styles by both is not accidental - the novel requires the specificity of history to carry the collective memory, while the drama relies on the absurdity of the scene to question the essence of humanity. However, whether it is the stubborn dignity of the colonel and his wife when facing institutional betrayal, or the continued waiting of Vladimir and others in the void, all demonstrate the human resistance posture in a desperate situation.

5. The final of waiting: the contrast between social justice and redemption

5.1. The colonel's wait: the dilemma of historical justice and dignity

The Colonel's wait has a clear historical orientation; he hopes that the government will provide pensions for war veterans. This demand gives his wait a dimension of social criticism. Márquez concretes this wait through material details, making it the torment of survival, while the "eating feces" black humor pushes the wait to the brink. This silence itself is a complaint against the political reality of Latin America. His wait thus becomes a survival posture towards history - even though he knows it is hopeless, he still maintains his own dignity through daily coffee rituals and feeding the rooster, making the wait itself a resistance against oblivion.

5.2. The waiting of Vladimir: the dismal realization of redemption and the cycle of existence

In contrast, the waiting in "Waiting for Godot" completely strips away historical and social attributes, becoming a purely metaphysical predicament. The waiting of Vladimir and Estragon has no specific goal; all that remains are empty promises and self-destructive language games. Their very existence becomes the embodiment of the waiting – not the people are waiting, but the waiting constitutes the entire content of being human. In this extreme absurdity, waiting is no longer a process leading to a certain endpoint; it directly becomes the ultimate form of existence, a survival allegory at the end of a civilization.

5.3. Common core: waiting as proof of existence

The nature of their waiting is quite different. One points to social justice while the other to the redemption of nothingness. They both jointly reveal a fundamental survival situation of human beings: Even if waiting is doomed to be fruitless, people still need to define themselves in the process of waiting. The two works jointly completed the diagnosis of the post-war human condition: whether the object of waiting is specific justice or abstract redemption, the act of persisting in waiting itself has already become the last bastion defining what it means to be human.

6. Conclusion

By comparing and reading the play "Waiting for Godot" and the novel "No One Writes to the Colonel ", this article analyzes the handling of the same theme of waiting by the two artistic forms. Facing the universal state of waiting among humans, the value of literature does not lie in providing answers, but in transforming waiting into an observable artistic form: the novel personifies waiting through internal-focused narration, giving it a realistic weight and criticality, while the play philosophizes about waiting through dramatic irony, making it a metaphor for human circumstances. The comparison between the two precisely reveals that the spectrum of the Waiting theme ranges from the concrete and the abstract, also from the social to the existential.

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