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## Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot': An Existential Absurd Play

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### Abstract

*"The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. Let us not then speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its predecessors."*

Man seems to be consciously or unconsciously attached to some potent logocentric authorities, who resist against new changes. If this sense of attachment is mixed with extremism and prejudice, it may lead to some irretrievable repercussions. The objective of this article is to scrutinize the play, 'Waiting for Godot' by Samuel Beckett through discussion and interpretation within the context of the existentialist literature. This article identifies the rationality of all such readings while attempting to fuse these outwardly differing views. By understanding the play within the context of Existentialism, new insights are uncovered as to what the play may be saying about the existentialist interpretation. The application of existential philosophical theories to various aspects of *Waiting for Godot* makes one feel how several common readings of the play relate and focus particularly on the relationships of the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, the figure of Godot, and the use of absurdity. Acts are meaningless, time does not flow successively, memory seems deceptive, existence is an impression or perhaps a dream and happiness is an extreme feeling and affliction is crystal clear through the situation of two tramps. The significance of this study is in decentring of any logo centric centres, which keep the characters of this play as well as the characters of this chaotic world shackled within messianically inherited whims.

**Keywords:** Beckett, Existentialism, Existentialism in Literature, Godot, existential key concepts.

### Introduction

The purpose of human life is an unanswerable question. It seems impossible to find an answer because we don't know where to begin looking or whom to ask. Existence to us seems to be something imposed

upon us by an unknown force. There is no apparent meaning to it, and yet we suffer as a result of it. The world seems utterly chaotic. We therefore try to impose meaning on it through pattern and fabricated purposes to distract ourselves from the fact that our situation is hopelessly unfathomable. "*Waiting for Godot*" is a

play that captures this feeling and view of the world, and characterizes it with archetypes that symbolize humanity and its behaviour when faced with this knowledge. According to the play, a human being's life is totally dependent on chance, and, by extension, time is meaningless; therefore, a human's life is also meaningless, and the realization of this drives humans to rely on vague, outside forces, which may be real or not, for order and direction. As we come across in "*Waiting for Godot*", it is so hard to live your life knowing the person you want to be with for the rest of your life who never actually notices you. Hoping that someone might notice you, wishing that this person feels the same one of these days, can be so hard to cope with. How long can we be hopeful? How long does a believer have to wait? Everyone is waiting for that somehow, someday. But why does it have to be this way? Why does every time we wait for somebody or something we mostly fail...? Maybe we fall in the trap of waiting; a waiting that has no solution except keep on waiting.

This study begins with a prelude to Existentialism, which is followed by a concise look at *Waiting for Godot*, and finally the play will be analysed on Existential bedrock.

## **Existentialism**

Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It is the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. It focuses on the question of human existence, and the feeling that there is no purpose or explanation at the core of existence. It holds that, as there is no God or any other transcendent force, the only way to counter this nothingness (and hence to find meaning in life) is by embracing existence.

Thus, Existentialism believes that individuals are entirely free and must take personal responsibility for themselves (although with this responsibility comes angst, a profound anguish or dread). It therefore emphasizes action, freedom and decision as fundamental concepts, and holds that the only way to rise above the essentially absurd condition of humanity (which is characterized by suffering and inevitable death) is by exercising our personal freedom and choice.

## **Existentialism in Literature and its Key Concepts**

Existentialism can be thought of as the twentieth century analogue of nineteenth-century romanticism. The two movements have in common the demand that the whole fabric of life be recognized and taken into account in our thinking and acting. As such, they express a form of resistance to reductionist analyses of life and its meaning for human beings. But there are also significant differences. Existentialism is typically focused on individual human lives and the poignant inevitability of suffering and choice for each individual whereas romanticism tended to be more oriented to the whole of nature and saw human beings as a part of that wider picture. Furthermore, romanticism flourished before the wars and genocides of the twentieth century whereas existentialism flourished amid those horrors.

### ***Freedom and the Necessity to Choose***

To be an existing human being means to be free. In contrast with almost, everything else in the world, a human being is not determined by 'laws of nature.' The human being has a unique freedom to determine his or her own behaviour. However, this freedom is in itself a kind of determination from which we cannot escape. We are 'condemned to freedom.' For the great majority, this tension is too great. As the pop group, Devo, put it in the 1980s, 'Freedom of choice is what you've got. Freedom from choice is what you want.' (Song lyric)

### ***The Lack of Norms and Anxiety***

Nature is an arena of facts, but the arena of human freedom is where norms and values feature. However, since nature does not supply them, our freedom is a freedom to make values and norms by which we will abide. The weight of this responsibility produces anxiety, also known as angst, or dread. For Kierkegaard, this is closely related to the guilt of a sinful existence.

### ***Meaning and Absurdity***

The fact that we are the ones who make the meaning of our lives also creates a tension when it comes to the validity of those meanings. There is a kind of bleak absurdity to the prospect of committing our lives to values and meanings that we know ourselves to have invented.

### ***Self-Deception and Authenticity***

Nevertheless, to hide from the knowledge of our freedom and pass off our responsibility onto other people, ideas or institutions as if they can take care of our anxiety and absurdity is to engage in 'bad faith,' to use a term used by Sartre. To exist as a human being means to be willing to take up the challenge of one's freedom. There is 'no exit' (the title of one of Sartre's plays) by which we could get ourselves off the hook.

### ***The Individual and 'they'***

The demand for authenticity also has a social and a political dimension. Some existentialists have been extremely individualistic, while some have been involved in liberation movements. Again, consider Sartre: his comment that, 'hell is other people' (*No Exit*, 1943) is famous, as is his active support of the Algerian struggle for independence from France. Heidegger characterized the threat to authentic existence as 'they': for example, 'they say one should always floss before bedtime'—who is 'they,' really, and who is 'one'? Where is the actual, existing person? On the other hand, Buber argued that authentic existence was impossible without a serious relationship with other persons.

### ***Irreligion and Religion***

The viability of religion is a contested matter among existentialists. Sartre argued that the existence of a God who was free, and so religiously interesting, would entail the cancellation of human freedom; but humans are free, therefore God does not exist. Others saw God as the ultimate Thou who, by engaging in relationship with us, could give authentic meaning to our otherwise absurd existence. Tillich was sympathetic to such a position.

### ***Waiting for Godot***

Two homeless men, Vladimir and Estragon are stuck near a tree and keep chatting on different topics. Indeed, the main theme of their topics is waiting for a seemingly superpower called Godot. As they are drowned in the world of waiting, they are joined by Pozzo and his slave Lucky. The unlucky Lucky amuses them by dancing and thinking and then both Pozzo and Lucky leave the arena. Soon after, the boy who is the

messenger and seems to link them to Godot comes and tells them that Godot is not coming tonight, but he will definitely come tomorrow. They decide to leave but it never happens. The next day, Vladimir and Estragon are joined by Pozzo and Lucky, but this time they are faced with a blind Pozzo and a dumb Lucky. Pozzo is not only blind but seems to have lost his sense of memory, when he says that he does not remember to have met Vladimir and Estragon the night before. The boy enters again and reports that Godot is not coming; Vladimir and Estragon decide to leave but as usual do not move and again keep on waiting...

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, although nominally about a pair of Rabelaisian existential tramps waiting for a mysterious Mr. Godot, actually summarizes post-World War II Europe, seen as godless "and lost in the void." Through the dialogue of two clownish tramps, Beckett enacts the essential concerns and futility of the mid-century human condition. The breakdown in the very foundation of culture is allegorized: Mid-century humanity stood in a crisis in the areas of epistemology, religion, family, sex, government, and economics. The fact that *Waiting for Godot* touches on each of these ultimate human concerns has prompted thousands of productions and translations into more than twenty languages. A brief description of the play and its inaction will help make several points clear.

The impact of *Waiting for Godot* in the areas of experimental theatre, philosophy, theology, and cultural criticism has been revolutionary. The Theatre of the Absurd was practically defined by the play. Traditionally, theatre has attempted to provide a standard intellectual and emotional catharsis for the audience and has acted as an agent that helps maintain social control by defusing untoward human emotions that might cause disruption of the status quo. In *Waiting for Godot*, rather than providing an emotional safety valve for the audience, Beckett deemed it more authentic and artistic to build up those pressures and help make them unbearable for the audience. In the absurdity of the play, the audience is brought face to face with its own spiritual schizophrenia. The viewer is confronted with the madness of the human condition. In observing two seedy tramps waste their lives waiting in vain for Mr. Godot who never comes, viewers catch a reflection of the dull routine and self-deception of their own lives.

*Waiting for Godot* reflects an era in which traditional frames of reference were no longer practicable. Søren Kierkegaard, often called the Father of Existentialism, authored multiple works that influenced modern existentialist writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Kierkegaard's writings, however, were Christian in nature rather than atheistic. By applying his philosophical theories to various aspects of *Waiting for Godot*, one can see how several common readings of the play could be related. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche introduced the concept of the death of God, and people have had to struggle with new theologies. The existential themes of alienation and emptiness are mirrored in the play. Beckett's play fits into the post-World War II French existential movement also represented by Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Beckett's play is a signpost proclaiming the end of humanity's spiritual heteronomy.

### ***Chance in Waiting for Godot***

Chance plays a major role in Samuel Beckett's "*Waiting for Godot*". In human life, chance rather than reason is the main influence on our lives. According to Beckett, life of humans is completely dependent on chance and as a result of this time would be meaningless. Chance has an impact on the value of time and it is also the underlying factor behind existence.

In "*Waiting for Godot*" it is suggested that existence is based on chance and by extension, human life is based on chance. Beckett established this very early on in the play. "One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage" (Beckett, 5). Vladimir here refers to the parable of the two thieves from the Bible. Perhaps Beckett's intention means that the fate of humans is determined randomly. There is an unknown percentage of chance that one will be damned to. There is no pattern behind it all and one does not know how big the chances of being damned or saved are. Therefore one can say that a life based on chance has no meaning.

If life is based on chance, humans need to rely on a Godot to give their lives a meaning. Vladimir and Estragon need Godot for that same reason. They need him to cope with their meaningless lives. No one, including Vladimir and Estragon, knows if Godot actually exists or if he will ever appear. However, it does not matter. Their belief in him gives them a meaning, a reason to live for, which is all they ask for. "What are

we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are *Waiting for Godot* to come" (Beckett, 91). Vladimir is saying that Godot is the only one that makes sense in this big confusion and as long as they can rely on him to come, they have a reason for living.

### ***Waiting for Godot from an existential outlook***

"*Waiting for Godot*" is an existentialist play because it has clear tints of existentialism in it. If we study the term existentialism we would come to know that it is a philosophical doctrine which lays stress on the existence with concrete experience and solidities. However, "*Waiting for Godot*" is an existentialist play for it embodies Christian existentialism. Christian existentialism stresses the idea that in God only, man may find freedom for tension.

According to the Atheistic Existentialism, it is based on the idea of Jean Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger who state that: Man is alone in a godless universe. We know that man is confronting the problem of his existence as a being. He is striving for his survival and to control the bridle of the pacing time. He is struggling to save his "individuality" and this very idea leads to the philosophy of existentialism.

The word "Existentialism" stands for one's "awareness" of one's "beingness". It stands for a vital principal of life. "*Waiting for Godot*" resembles the existentialist literature because it deals not only with existence or identity but also with the momentary and the internal time. The time mentioned in "*Waiting for Godot*" is related to man's mental condition. For instance, the major problem for the tramps is to make time pass in such a way that they are least bothered by it. Vladimir and Estragon constantly complain of the slowness of time passing and do their best to hurry it with their futile diversions. Estragon says "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (Act I, Page no. 35).

But we know that outside the natural time, its consequences flow on. For example, the tree has grown five or six leaves. Pozzo has grown blind and Lucky dumb. Here Estragon remarks, "They all change, only we not" (Act I, Page no. 41). It should be noted that waiting the natural course of time, they think they would relieve themselves from all of their problems

without doing any effort. They might die naturally and save the effort of hanging themselves.

There is a distinction between the momentary and eternal time for it deals with the question of existence and identity. This difference can also be seen in this play. In "*Waiting for Godot*" physical time is sometimes taken seriously and sometimes it is ridiculed or condemned. Estragon once succeeds in confusing Vladimir about the passage of time as well as about the day of week. In the same sentence the tramps speak of a million years ago and in the nineties. We have no reason to be certain that the second description is more factual than the first.

Doubts about time make the tramps doubtful about their existence and identity. One tramp claims to be of the part, it is doubted by the other. Their own identity and existence in time is also questionable. One day seems to have elapsed between the first act and the second, yet it becomes extremely difficult to differentiate this day with the previous or by any important physical evidence.

The play "*Waiting for Godot*" has all the traits of existentialism. Both Vladimir and Estragon represent the man in general who is facing the problems of his existence in this world. They are interdependent like all other man. Hope for salvation is the subject of play and is the problem faced by the whole human race. Representing the man in general, the two tramps realize the futility of their exercise and we note that they are merely filling up the hours with the pointless activity. Hence their 'waiting' is mechanical and deals with problem of existentialism.

From an existential outlook of the play, the whole picture shows a pretty hopelessness. Neither time nor existence, neither reality nor memory or the past have any meaning or significance. Acts are meaningless, time does not flow consecutively, memory seems deceptive, existence is an impression or perhaps a dream and happiness is an extreme condition and affliction is crystal clear through the situation of two tramps. They are on the point of becoming hollow philosophies of existence but demand no other equipment in an audience than the bond of common perception.

### ***Existential Views on Characters***

The main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting endlessly for Godot, a possible symbol of God.

Their pursuit seems hopeless. The existentialist belief that people are free to make their own decisions seems to be contradicted, however, for Vladimir and Estragon continually make decisions but are unable to carry them out.

The overall feeling of isolation in *Waiting for Godot* is existential. The fact that Vladimir and Estragon do nothing except *be* and *exist*, highlight existential themes. The two wait for Godot, instead of searching him out, and, though they want to leave, they never do. By the end of the play, one gets the feeling that the two will remain in that strange place forever, waiting for a man who will never come: "Vladimir: 'Well? Shall we go?' Estragon: 'Yes, let's go.' *They do not move*". (Act I, Pg. 43 & Act II, Pg. 93).

Another major theme in the play is that of loss of identity. Estragon and Vladimir are called only by their nicknames, Gogo and Didi, and Vladimir is also called "Mister Albert" by the boy messenger. Estragon and Vladimir do not seem to know who they are, and their pasts are distant memories that are somehow disconnected from them.

According to existential thought, it is the loss of identity that causes mankind's helplessness. This is why existentialists emphasized giving one's life a purpose. They would argue that God has not given your life a purpose, and therefore it can mean nothing, unless you give it meaning yourself. Beckett's play serves as a warning to its readers: do not do as Vladimir and Estragon do. Beckett warns against wasting one's life by "waiting" instead of "doing."

Pozzo also demonstrates this warning. Imagine the audience's reaction when, watching *Waiting for Godot* for the first time, they see Pozzo come on stage with Lucky on a leash, treating him like an animal or a slave. This must have had a big impact, and I would imagine that Beckett wanted it this way.

Lucky is all of us, he allows himself to be tied up and controlled and only "thinks" when he is told to:

"Pozzo: 'Stop!' (Lucky stops.) 'Back!' (Lucky moves back.) 'Stop!' (Lucky stops.) 'Turn!' (Lucky turns towards auditorium.) 'Think!'..."

Lucky: 'Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqu...' " (*Waiting for Godot*, Act I)

Lucky's "thinking" goes on for another three pages and consists of nothing but jumbled thoughts that seem

to be recycled from other places and are not Lucky's own thoughts or opinions.

Everyone is in danger of becoming Lucky. Many of us allow ourselves to be controlled by other people, social institutions, religion, etc and many seem content in only recycling others' ideas and thoughts instead of creating their own. *Waiting for Godot* still has much significance today, in that Beckett wanted to wake up his audience, to show how one can live one's life without meaning or purpose, and to make people contemplate and think about this, and may realize how they too are Estragon and Vladimir or Lucky, living one's existence waiting or allowing one's life to be controlled by another.

## Conclusion

*Waiting for Godot* is a poignant play about a ceaseless waiting, about repetition, the meaninglessness, the absurdity of waiting, of feeling (and being) suspended in time instead of moving forward in a meaningful direction and, about waiting for waiting and finally being imprisoned in one's mind. Its minimalist approach to dramatic form and imagery, peripheral dialogue, and theme of insignificance helped shape and define the Theatre of the Absurd and modern theatre. Whether critics denounced the play or acclaimed it, it was a landmark event in twentieth century Western culture and an expression of the crisis of the mid-century human condition. If, as is often believed, artists are the antennae of the race, Beckett proved prophetic in indicating the need for a new alternative. The old myths are obsolete; the new ones have not yet arrived, so we wait. Although the play has elicited diverse interpretations ranging from orthodox Christian to nihilistic atheist, most critics identify the play with post-World War II existentialism. In spite of the fact that Beckett did not identify himself as an existentialist, his plays express existentialism clearly and consistently, better, in fact, than proponents of existentialism who recommend it while not following their own recommendation. Theatregoers will continue to wait in line to see *Waiting for Godot* not because it diagnoses some cultural crisis or implies a solution but rather because it mirrors--with all of its concreteness,

ambiguity, and mystery--the process and integrity of life itself. Relentless seeking, questioning, and reaching for a better future, is perhaps the irreducible core of the human condition.

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