

## Existentialism in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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### Abstract

As discussed in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, existential philosophy holds that each person must understand the meaning of existence through personal experience. This argument is backed up by the play's dialogue and action, as well as quotes from Samuel Beckett and his critics. The aim of this paper is to analyse this work particularly in the context of the idea of existentialism.

### **Introduction**

According to existential philosophy, each individual must learn the meaning of life by personal experience in the earthly world, as depicted in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The play's dialogue and action, as well as phrases and concepts from Samuel Beckett and his detractors, are used to support this claim. Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, for example, are clearly portrayed as human beings by Günther Ander. His thesis is that the characters Beckett chooses to portray modern man can only be clochards, beings cut off from the world's design and having nothing to do with it (142). Assuming that Vladimir and Estragon represent humanity, Günther's comment contradicts this study because Vladimir and Estragon are part of the world, but lack adequate perspective of it. A closer look reveals that Vladimir represents the religious and spiritual portion of humanity, while Estragon represents the more ideal existentialist portion of humanity that decides to stop waiting and establish the meaning of life based on tangible and physical experiences. An example of discourse supporting this idea is as follows: 'Vladimir: We'll see what he says. Estragon: Godot. Estragon: Nice. Vladimir: Let's see where we stand. However, it may be best to hit the iron before it freezes'. Although Vladimir relies on Godot to inform him of his existence, Estragon asserts that they cannot afford to waste time and must act quickly before it is too late. Humanity does not have enough time to wait for spiritual ponderings

to bring them enlightenment, that the chance will pass and their efforts will be in vain. The play suggests that Estragon and Vladimir go their separate ways immediately, before it is too late. Estragon is the one who abandons religion in favour of existentialism. Another incident in the Estragon-Vladimir discussion that portrays Vladimir as authentically pious and Estragon as progressive humanistic: 'Estragon: Nice place. (He turns, advances to front, halts.) Now: We can't. Why not? Vladimir: We await Godot. Estragon: (despairingly). Ah!' (8). Once again, Estragon seeks the existential philosophy of human experience in the real world in his wish to go for "inspiring prospects," and Vladimir's recommendation that they stay and wait for Godot to educate them reflects this human propensity.

## **Plot Review**

*Waiting for Godot* is about two men, Estragon and Vladimir, who are looking for a Mr. Godot. "Personally, I wouldn't know him if I saw him," Estragon acknowledges.<sup>1</sup> Estragon also remarks, "... we hardly know him." The play's indefinable Mr. X is never defined, therefore the identity of Mr. Godot is unimportant. Waiting for someone or something that never appears is a significant part of the play. Due of our insatiable curiosity, Western readers may naturally speculate on Godot's identity. But, according to Beckett, Godot's identity is a rhetorical inquiry. To recognise the purpose of action in two guys on a mission, not to be distracted from their compulsive quest.<sup>2</sup>

"... Let's go. We can't. Why not? Vladimir: We await Godot." Existentialism is based on the idea that humans are not controlled by a pre-existing almighty being like God. "He didn't say for sure he'd come," Vladimir continues, "but we'll wait till we know exactly how we stand." Boredom or waiting, which is simply the breakdown of regularity or habit, forced people to reflect carefully about their identity or circumstances, according to existentialist Albert Camus. There is a need to share experiences and the pain of finite existence which is shown in the play's positive attitude. There are clear traces of existentialism in "Waiting for Godot". Existentialism is a philosophical system that emphasises man's existence with his tangible experience and solidities. Waiting for Godot is a Christian existentialist play. Christian existentialism emphasises that man can only

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/the-hopeless-human-predicament/article4322665.ece>

<sup>2</sup><http://chauhansejal311315.blogspot.com/2014/09/topic-is-waiting-forgodot.html>

find freedom in God. Atheistic Existentialism is founded on the philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger who argue that man is alone in a godless universe. *Waiting for Godot* is a Christian existentialist play, according to both theories. We know that man faces the difficulty of existing as a being. He fights for his life and to manage the facing time. He is fighting to save his "individuality," which leads to existentialism. Existentialism means "knowledge of one's beingness". It represents a life principle. *Waiting for Godot* resembles existentialist literature since it deals with both existential and internal time. *Waiting for Godot* refers to a man's mental state. For example, the tramps' main issue is to pass time in a way that does not annoy them. Vladimir and Estragon frequently grumble about passing the time and try to speed it up with their useless diversion. Nothing happens, nobody comes or goes, and it's dreadful. But we know that its effects go beyond natural time. The tree has five or six leaves. Pozzo is blind, Lucky is dumb. Estragon says they all change, but we don't. Notably, they believe that by waiting for the natural course of time, they will be free of all their difficulties.<sup>3</sup>

They could die naturally rather than hanging themselves. Momentary and everlasting time deal with existence and identity. The play shows this. Time is both seriously treated and mocked in *Waiting for Godot*. Estragon once misled Vladimir regarding time and weekday. Nostalgia and the nineties are tramp talk. There's no reason to think that the second description is better. Time doubts make tramps question their existence. One tramp doubts the claim of another. Their very existence in time is under doubt. A day seems to have passed between the first and second acts, despite the lack of physical evidence. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon represent the average man and his worries in this world. And they are related to all men. The subject of salvation impacts the entire human race. We can tell that the two tramps are wasting their time, much like every man. So, their 'waiting' is mechanical and existential.<sup>4</sup>

*Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett, was premiered in Paris on January 5th, 1953. Many individuals were left puzzled by the play's meaning. You can call it socialist, avant-garde, existential, or plain boring. "My work is a matter of fundamental sounds made as fully as

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<sup>3</sup><https://literariness.org/2020/07/27/analysis-of-samuel-becketts-waiting-for-godot/> ;

<http://epicnotes1.blogspot.com/2017/05/waiting-for-godot.html>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.cssforum.com.pk/css-optional-subjects/group-v/english-literature/7165-waiting-godot-existentialism.html>

possible,” Beckett declared “Let the overtones give folks headaches.” I shall claim that the drama is existential. Some argue that Beckett's work isn't existential because he never identified it as such. They may also note Beckett's disassociation from philosophy: "I never read the philosophers; I don't understand what they write." This is valid. How can you label a work that the author has rejected? Egocentric, n'est-ce pas? However, by focusing on Beckett's words rather than the work itself, they miss the entire tone and message of *Waiting for Godot*. They also neglect existentialism. Existentialism promotes choice. If Beckett was an existentialist, he might have said the contrary so that readers could decide for themselves what the play meant. The sense of loneliness portrayed in *Waiting for Godot* is existential. Vladimir and Estragon's simply being and existing highlights existential themes. They don't go looking for Godot, and they never leave. “Vladimir: ‘Well? ‘Shall we?’ ‘Yes, let us leave.’ They stay put.” Loss of identity is another key issue in the drama. The boy messenger calls Estragon and Vladimir by their nicknames, Gogo and Didi. Estragon and Vladimir don't appear to know who they are, and their pasts seem remote and unconnected. Man's powerlessness, according to existentialists, stems from loss of identity.<sup>5</sup> That's why existentialists stressed giving meaning to life. They would say that since God has not given your life a purpose, it is meaningless unless you give it significance. In Beckett's play, readers are warned not to follow Vladimir and Estragon. Beckett warns against squandering one's life by "waiting." Pozzo also warns. Imagine the audience's reaction as Pozzo enters the stage with Lucky on a leash, treating him like an animal or a slave. This must have had a significant impact, and I'm sure Beckett desired it. Lucky for us, he lets himself be restrained and only “thinks” when told: “Pozzo: ‘Stop!’ (Lucky halts). ‘Back!’ (Lucky recoils.) ‘Stop!’ (Lucky halts). ‘Turn!’ (Lucky faces auditorium.) ‘Think!’... ‘Given the existence of a personal God quaquaquaquaa...’ This is followed by three pages of incoherent views that seem to be recycled from other sources and are not Lucky's own thoughts or opinions. Anyone may become Lucky. Many of us let others, societal structures, religion, etc. rule us, instead of developing our own. To make people reflect about how they too can be Estragon, Vladimir, or Lucky, living their lives waiting or allowing their lives to be ruled by others, is the relevance of *Waiting for Godot*.

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<sup>5</sup> - A. Arun Daves\*Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot': An Existential Absurd Play St. Joseph's Journal of Humanities and Science (Volume 1 Issue 2 August 2014) 20-25

## **The Work's Theoretical Framework in the Context of Existentialism**

The existentialist movement began in Europe in the mid-19th century and peaked in the mid- to late-20th century. Existentialism explores the essential elements that are regarded to be the essence of human existence. The main tenet of existentialist philosophy is that humans define meaning in life. Existentialism denies the existence of God and believes that nothing controls the cosmos. The idea is to make reasonable decisions in an illogical world. The movement in philosophy and literature emphasises individuality, choice, and life. The meaning of life is questioned. Primarily, existentialism emphasises that every human being is on a search to find meaning in their lives. Existentialism is creepy because it typically suggests that existence has no purpose or explanation (denying God) (Larsson 128). The movement's original leaders, Soren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre, are two examples of opposing existentialist philosophers. Sartre blends religion with his theories on the three stages of awareness (Larson 128). When it comes to existentialism, Larson defines the main distinctions between Sartre and Soren as "contradictory presuppositions" that "yet represent comparable points of view" (Larson 128). Despite the variations in the foundations upon which ideas grow, both authors in this situation have rational reasons upon which to build their work. Soren Aabye Kierkegaard was the youngest of seven children and a philosopher, theologian, and literary critic. After his death in 1855, he came to be considered a major existentialist. His works are a collection of disdain for the Danish state church, for which he was called "the father of existentialism." Various social critique discourses lead him to choose to renew Christian faith within Christianity. To accomplish this, he developed vivid depictions of biblical figures to revive Christian faith within Christianity. To further understand his ideas and writings, one must study his upbringing and environment. His biography is central to many of his works, especially his relationship with his father and his fiancée. His father had a big impact on his life's work. His father's sorrow, remorse and anxiety... but most significantly "his emphasis on the dour features of the Christian faith". His father's guilt before God was a tremendous source of stress. His father believed his children would inherit his crimes, such as getting his mother pregnant without marrying her. This, according to his father, would enrage God, causing consequences. God would punish this sin by taking the lives of all his seven children at the age of 34 (Jesus Christ's age at his crucifixion).

The engagement with her fiancée ended. It helped him commit himself to religious vows and enhance his outsider status when he broke the engagement. This absolved him of his traditional duties as a man, leading him to idealise women. His rhetoric and stress was on becoming a practicing Christian. This was challenging, since Denmark had shifted from a “mediaeval” to a capitalist society. The social context made it impossible to grasp who you are, resulting in highly fluid social identities. Given this issue, we needed a discourse that would help individuals transcend the social identities imposed by capitalism. His fundamental message was that everyone was equal before God, regardless of societal roles or gender. Inspired by Socrates, he used sarcasm and humour in his work to express his own beliefs. He often distanced himself from his own published literary work. He often utilised pseudonyms instead of his actual name so that the reader's experience of the work was not influenced by the writer's social level.

### **Spirituality as a Strength**

Regarding Christianity, Soren sought to emphasise its inverted dialectics. He wanted his audience to see spirituality as a strength, not a weakness. He believed that Christianity was something to be lived, not taught. The three existential stages (also known as the three stages of consciousness) are the foundation for becoming one's true self, according to Soren. These levels are: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. The initial stage of life (the aesthetic stage of awareness) is concerned with pleasure and imagination. To further explain, the goal for an individual who lives an aesthetic life is to immerse and gratify the sensuous experience, to enhance the concept of possibility over actuality and to avoid boredom.

The aesthetic person is typically overwhelmed by his need to indulge his sense of pleasure and imagination without regard for others. The second stage of life (the ethical stage of consciousness) is difficult to define because it has multiple implications in labour. But it is basically concerned with social standards. McDonalds calls these standards "reasons to make sense of or explain a behaviour within a group". In essence, the ethical lifestyle is preferable than the aesthetic lifestyle since it leads to a more unselfish way of life. The ethical person cares about the consequences of his activities. The religious stage of consciousness is the ultimate level of existence. As stated previously, the Christian faith was to be lived, not taught. Soren thought

Christianity was a subjective faith. That is, the relationship between God and oneself was exactly as desired, hence what was taught in church was irrelevant to becoming a good Christian.

All periods of life are to be part of a person's life, and then this is to be meaningful and attempt full independence. The three levels of consciousness are best discussed and demonstrated in the 1843 book *Either/Or* of Soren. The book has two portions, both authored under pseudonyms. The first half was written by "A" and "Johannes Climacus". Part 2 of the book uses the pseudonyms "B" and "The Judge," but B and The Judge finally merge into one character as a letter to A. A is convinced that imagination and pleasure are the best techniques for obtaining artistic pleasure. Specifically, Johannes is fueled by the prospect of seduction with no concern for anyone else. The Judge disputes A's aesthetic lifestyle, arguing that living an ethical life is preferable. He tries to persuade A by using marriage as a tool and adding aesthetic accents. Part 2 finishes with The Judge receiving a moral speech. This speech refutes both ethical and aesthetic lifestyles and advises accepting God. Like *Waiting for Godot*, the book is written in a way that "the message" is found "in between" the lines. This way, the readers can make their own judgement and conclusion, resulting in subjectivity due to personal viewpoints. The book's goal was to urge readers to remove themselves from social standards and build their own identities (Mackey 53).

Jean-Paul Sartre, the famous French philosopher, writes about another perspective inside existentialism. Sartre's view of existentialism differs from that of Soren. The distinctions between existentialism's perspectives help distinguish and contextualise both philosophies. Existentialism, according to Jean-Paul Sartre, is a philosophy of self, ethics, and (un)consciousness. That is, existential philosophy seeks to understand "...human existence rather than the world as such". Existentialism is explored in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1969). In the book, Sartre introduces the reader to his rejection of the concept of noumenon, which indicates that humans have no way of experiencing the external world and that our only access is through our senses. Sartre proposes an unlimited number of ways to experience the universe. Sartre then compares and contrasts the unconscious and aware selves. Sartre's ambiguous, indefinite ego seems to be what defines man. "Consciousness is always consciousness of something...is defined in connection to something else...", he writes. It is self-existent. In the book's introduction, Sartre distinguishes between two forms of being phenomena: transcendence

and consciousness. Consciousness is “...always ‘of something,’ and so defined in reference to something else.” It has no other nature and is hence transparent. Due to the spontaneity of consciousness, any attempt to comprehend the for-itself within a conscious experience would fail. To clarify, there is consciousness and the object of consciousness. Due to the concept of nothingness, this classifies two independent beings, the in-itself and the for-itself. Sartre describes the two sorts of being as the in-itself being independently of the for-itself, its existence unjustified. Consciousness defines its existence. However, the for-existence itself is determined by its lack of self-identity. Sartre argues that consciousness is required to base oneself as a conscious person. It becomes what it is (a void), free to develop its own being. Consciousness is a spontaneous original choice that depends on the individual's freedom. In essence, the for-itself is a lack that becomes a being through the world's nothingness. *Being and Nothingness* is also an inquiry of what it is to be human, using ontology (the area of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being) to describe and guide the investigation. Sartre's ontology divides emptiness into two categories: consciousness (the source of all meaning) and in-itself (the void).

## **Conclusion**

The picture painted by Samuel Beckett is a fairly bleak picture. Time, existence, reality, memory, and the past are all meaningless. Life is an impression or possibly a dream, and both happiness and misery are clearly obvious in the circumstances of two tramps. They are on the verge of becoming vacuous philosophies of existence, but they require no more than a common perspective.



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