



Nihilism, Absurdity and *Waiting for Godot*: An Existential Approach

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Abstract— This paper explores Samuel Beckett's absurdist masterpiece, *Waiting for Godot* 1953, through an existential lens, focusing on the interplay between Nihilism and the human condition. The play portrays Vladimir and Estragon. Two characters perpetually waiting for the enigmatic Godot whose arrival holds the promise of meaning or salvation. However, Godot's constant absence and the play's cyclical structure evoke a sense of futility and the potential meaninglessness of existence. Their wait seems pointless, reflecting a nihilistic view where life has no inherent meaning or grand purpose. By depicting the characters' struggle with nihilism and the absurd, Beckett challenges us to confront the absurdity of life in which modern literature delves. This paper will focus on the modern theories, Existentialism and Nihilism, and how the play embodies core existential themes and the struggle of the main characters to confront with their freedom and responsibility to create their own meaning in a different world. By exploring nihilism and existential themes, the paper sheds light on *Waiting for Godot* as a profound exploration of human search for meaning in a potentially meaningless universe.



Keywords— Nihilism, existentialism, absurdity, meaninglessness, human condition.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the desolate landscape of existential philosophy, nihilism stands out as a stark reminder of the potential meaninglessness of existence. Stripped bare of inherent purpose, life in a nihilistic framework becomes a struggle to create meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe. Nihilism often leads to a rejection of meaning-making attempts, sometimes resulting in apathy, cynicism, or even a desire for destruction of existing systems, while absurdism is a belief that there is a fundamental conflict between humanity's innate desire to find meaning and purpose in the universe and the universe's apparent lack of inherent meaning. This conflict creates the "absurd." Samuel Beckett's absurdist masterpiece, *Waiting for Godot*, throws us headfirst into this bleak yet strangely comical world. In the face of an indifferent universe, what meaning can one ascribe to existence? This is the central question that plagues humanity, and philosophers like nihilists argue that

life is inherently meaningless. "Sartre likes to say that all of our experiences and actions are in some sense chosen, but he does not mean that when we are confronted with something we decide how it will look to us, how we will feel about it, what we will think about it, and what we will do about it" Webber :iix . Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, throws us into a world devoid of inherent purpose, where Vladimir and Estragon wait endlessly for the enigmatic Godot. Through their repetitive routines, illogical conversations, and desperate attempts to fill the void, Beckett masterfully portrays the themes of nihilism, highlighting the absurdity of existence and the characters' struggle to create meaning in a meaningless world.

This paper will delve deeper into the play's exploration of nihilism, examining how Beckett utilizes language, setting, and character interactions to depict the human condition in a universe devoid of grand purpose. *Waiting for Godot*." by the Irish writer Samuel

Beckett's. It was first performed in 1953 with the subtitle "a tragicomedy in two acts," *Waiting for Godot* is Beckett's adaptation of his own original French-language play, *En attendant Godot*. The two characters, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), have a number of conversations and interactions as they wait for the title character, Godot, who never shows up. It is an example of Absurd Drama. The horrors of World War II and the decline of traditional belief systems left many questioning the inherent meaning of life. This philosophical shift is reflected in the works of existentialist and absurdist writers, with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* serving as a prime example. Through the play's exploration of nihilism, Beckett confronts audiences with the absurdity of existence." The paper will analyze the cyclical nature of the play, with each day resetting, mirroring the concept of eternal recurrence, a core tenet of nihilism. It will explore how the characters' forgetfulness and contradictory statements dismantle any sense of objective truth or purpose. The paper will examine the elusive Godot as a symbol of a transcendent meaning that remains perpetually out of reach, leaving the characters in a state of existential despair. The study employs a qualitative research approach that mirrors modern literary theories, Nihilism and Existentialism. It will focus on the literature review and the previous study of *Waiting for Godot* from different perspectives. By Close reading of *Waiting for Godot*, paying attention to elements that reflects meaninglessness and absurdity we consider repetitive dialogue, the desolate setting, and the characters' lack of purpose. The study will identify specific scenes or lines that exemplify nihilistic ideas and how do Vladimir and Estragon grapple with the concept of a meaningless existence.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Khushboo (2021), explained that the play *Waiting for Godot* depicts the conflict between adhering to rigid, ethereal beliefs and adopting an existential perspective, which maintains that a person must discover the meaning of life via intimate, localised interactions with nature.

Makhfuddin & Fabiola D. (2014), explained that the meaning of life is revealed in *Waiting for Godot*, where Albert Camus's idea of The Myth of Sisyphus suggests that there is no purpose to existence.

Withanage (2011) explored that, "The essence of their behaviour reflects the common situation in the human condition, and men's despair at being unable to find a meaning for his existence. The miserable condition of life in the present, the constant effort to make it fruitful and the failure to succeed in this is portrayed in *Waiting for Godot*". (n.p., 2011)

Cornwell (2016) explored that, "Introduces the concept of the absurd, which is frequently used in literature and is defined as something applied to the modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe with no meaning or value". (2)

Hooti & Torkamaneh (2011) states the play *Waiting for Godot* explores a number of important themes, including endless waiting, repetition, meaninglessness, and absurdity of waiting, as well as feeling stuck in time rather than making progress towards a purposeful goal. Finally, the play explores the theme of waiting for waiting and being imprisoned in one's own thoughts.

Hooti and Torkarmaneh (2011) researched that, "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". (48)

Rana (2022) researched that, "Existentialism as a philosophy became popular after World War I when the entire Europe was in the moral crisis of, to be or not to be... The existential philosophy delved into the exploration of meaning of human existence. Whether we first exist or whether we exist only when we are conscious of our existence is quite debated among existentialists. "I think therefore I am."". (117)

Batta and Akhter (2017) explain the existentialism as that the philosophy of existentialism has long maintained that philosophy ought to address issues and circumstances that arise in the actual world, such as crime, sex, death, and birth. During the 20th century, this style of thinking became quite popular. It focuses on how humans come to exist and how they discover their own way. Existentialistic philosophy seeks to understand the inner self and free agency.

Akhter (2015) stated that, "Waiting for Godot" is an existentialist play. It presents many themes of existentialism such as absurdity, nothingness, futility, uncertainty, nihilism, thoroughness into being, angst (anxiety) and disappearance of solutions on the part of human beings, who are in turn left exploited, suffered and bewildered by powerful forces of the bourgeoisie prevalent in the social formation". (7)

Slocombe (2003) explains Nihilism as, "The rise of nihilism as a cultural force historically begins with the rise of scientific atheism in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and, as such, is deeply rooted in European experience". (16)

Calderwood (1986) justified the title as, “The perfect title of a literary work, one might expect, would be, as it is in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a synecdoche, a particularly meaningful part from which the reader could infer the whole”. (363)

Akhter et al., (2015) stated that, “Samuel Beckett uses the symbol of Godot in the play, to portray human situation in modern capitalist social formation and this conflict comes to a head in the meaning of Godot, in which the text of the play is ambiguously torn between contradictory meanings. In this way, “Waiting for Godot” becomes an ambiguous play and ideological basis of this ambiguity is that the play reveals human suffering, exploitation and oppressive effects of modern capitalism on human beings; and at the same time it suggests a reflexive practice of distrust that any action to change the modern capitalist social formation is futile and absurd”. (47)

Ghanbari (2008) states that the way that guy is portrayed in this drama suggests that the timing is ideal for the saviour to show up, but he pushes it until the next day. Beckett intended to highlight the state of humanity as well as the waiting process. Waiting gives man hope for the future and acts as a form of tranquillizer.

Breuter (1976) points out that in addition to existentialist, sociological, Marxist, and even biographical readings, the most prevalent interpretations are religious in nature, where the well-known Mr. Godot—who makes no appearances in the play—is seen as a *deus absconditus*.

Khan, et.al (2015) explored modern man's life is the subject of Beckett's play. It talks on the state of human existence. The play *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett lacks a traditional storyline, inspirational characters, and a distinct locale.

Khan et al., (2015) states that, “Absurdism” means something silly, foolish, nonsensical, purposeless, confusing. Martin Esslin was the first who used this term “Absurd” in his book. This term basically used to describe the irrational, nonsensical, foolish and silly aspects of human life. It is a philosophy which based on the belief that this world is meaningless, purposeless and irrational and also the existence of human beings is useless, meaningless and irrational”. (312)

Albert (2015) explains the play as there are various forms of absurdity, anguish, nervous waiting, and utility. Man is perplexed by his existence and his transience, and he believes that since he is meaningless, he should pass away as quickly as possible. The play is also an absurdist drama because of these existential overtones. Thus, the play is absurdist from the perspectives of structure, topic, motif, characters, mood, setting, and language.

III. ANALYSIS

Have you ever felt like your actions had no real consequence, and the world continues to spin regardless of your choices? This feeling of insignificance lies at the heart of nihilism, a philosophy explored in Samuel Beckett's absurdist play which is a cornerstone of the Theatre of the Absurd, and its central theme is deeply intertwined with nihilism. The play doesn't preach nihilism, but rather portrays a world devoid of inherent meaning, forcing the audience to confront the existential void. *Waiting for Godot* is about two men, Vladimir and Estragon, who stand by a barren tree endlessly waiting for someone named Godot. The core of the play's nihilistic message lies in the act of waiting itself. Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot, a figure whose identity and purpose remain a mystery.

“ESTRAGON: *Charming spot. (He turns, advances to front, halts*

auditorium.) Inspiring prospects. (He turns to Vladimir.) Let's go.

VLADIMIR: *We can't.*

ESTRAGON: *Why not?*

VLADIMIR: *We're waiting for Godot.” Act one*

Their wait is seemingly endless and pointless, with no guarantee of Godot's arrival. This futility highlights the absurdity of human existence. Life, like their wait, may have no clear purpose or destination. The arrival of Godot is perpetually uncertain, and the play offers no clear explanation of who Godot is or why they are waiting. The central theme is the absurdity of the situation.

“VLADIMIR : *He didn't say for sure he'd come.*

ESTRAGON: *And if he doesn't come?*

We've no rights anymore?” Act one.

Vladimir and Estragon pass their time with repetitive conversations, silly games, and philosophical musings to cope with the monotony of waiting. Throughout the play, they question whether they are at the right place, on the right day, or even waiting for the right person. A boy arrives twice, claiming to be a messenger from Godot. He delivers the message that Godot won't come today but surely will come tomorrow. He appears at the end of both Acts, delivering messages from Godot. The information he provides about Godot is inconsistent, raising doubts about his reliability. But Vladimir and Estragon contemplate leaving and ultimately decide to stay and wait again the next day.

Existentialism is a form of philosophy that explores the issue of human existence. Existentialist philosophers focus on questions of meaning, purpose, and value in life. In this absurdist play, it seems that there is no

plan for anything except waiting aimlessly. Godot, who never arrives, symbolizes the lack of inherent meaning in life. Vladimir and Estragon wait endlessly for something that might not even exist, highlighting the absurdity of their situation and perhaps of existence itself.

Circularity and Repetition in the play's cyclical structure, with days seemingly repeating, emphasizes the feeling of pointlessness. Their routines and conversations go nowhere, mirroring the search for meaning that may never be found. "We can make a similar point about behavior. Your actions are not merely ones that proceed from desires or habits of yours, since these could have been implanted in a way that leads us to deny that they themselves are genuinely yours. For an action to be yours, for you to be responsible for it, it must proceed from some aspect of your psychological make-up that is genuinely yours." Webber:155. Vladimir and Estragon constantly question their situation and each other, reflecting the existential anxiety of facing a meaningless world. Pozzo represents a form of authority, controlling Lucky like a slave with a rope. This master-servant relationship forces the audience to consider the nature of power, cruelty, and dependence.

"Enter Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo drives Lucky by means of a rope

passed round his neck, so that Lucky is the first to enter, followed by the rope which is long enough to let him reach the

middle of the stage before Pozzo appears. Lucky carries a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket and a great goat, Pozzo a whip." (Act one)

Pozzo and Lucky are representing different aspects of humanity. Pozzo embodies arrogance and dominance, while Lucky represents the downtrodden and silenced masses. Their decline (Pozzo becoming blind and Lucky rebelling) reflects the absurdity of human existence. The change in their dynamic between Acts 1 and 2 (Pozzo being blind and dependent) suggests the cyclical nature of life. The powerful become weak, and the oppressed may eventually rebel. Beckett uses Pozzo and Lucky as a theatrical device to introduce themes, move the plot forward, and provide comic relief (albeit dark humor) within the play's overall seriousness. Their decline throughout the play raises questions about the inevitability of suffering, the meaning of power, and the impermanence of everything. Are we all ultimately doomed to become dependent and powerless like the blind Pozzo? The way Pozzo lords over Lucky and Lucky's nonsensical speech contribute to the play's dark humor. This absurdity emphasizes the meaninglessness of their actions and the futility of their journeys.

Godot is the play's central mystery. It could represent anything; God, hope, salvation, or simply something to give their lives meaning. The lack of a definitive answer is part of the play's brilliance, allowing audiences to find their own interpretations. The tree also is a symbol of barrenness and isolation. It offers no shade or comfort, reflecting the characters' bleak situation. The characters' routines and conversations are full of repetition, highlighting the cyclical nature of their existence. Vladimir and Estragon taking off their boot representing the silly act in a cyclical routine.

"ESTRAGON: Taking off my boot. Did that never happen to you?

VLADIMIR: Boots must be taken off every day, I'm tired telling you that. Why don't you listen to me?

ESTRAGON: (feebly). Help me!

VLADIMIR: It hurts?

ESTRAGON: (angrily). Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!" (Act one)

Vladimir and Estragon engage in silly games also to distract themselves from the futility of their wait. These acts become a metaphor for humanity's attempts to create meaning in a meaningless world. "VLADIMIR: (stooping). True. (He buttons his fly.) Never neglect the little things of life "(Act one). The play grapples with questions of existence and the lack of inherent meaning in life. The situation itself - waiting for someone who never comes - is inherently absurd. Beckett highlights the absurdity of human existence in a seemingly indifferent universe.

Despite the pointlessness of waiting, Vladimir and Estragon cling to their routine, demonstrating the human need for comfort and familiarity. The characters struggle to communicate effectively and their memories are unreliable. This reflects the difficulty of finding connection and meaning in a fragmented world. Through their games and stories, Vladimir and Estragon engage in a creative act. This act, though ultimately futile, demonstrates a human impulse to create meaning even in the face of the absurd. Vladimir and Estragon's meaningless tasks, like taking off and putting on their shoes, highlight the absurdity of their situation. Their conversations go nowhere, often looping back on themselves. Even though they contemplate leaving, Vladimir and Estragon remain dependent on the routine of waiting. This reflects the difficulty of achieving true freedom and the comfort of familiar patterns, even if absurd.

"We've no rights anymore?

Laugh of Vladimir, stifled as before, less the smile.

VLADIMIR:

You'd make me laugh if it wasn't prohibited.

ESTRAGON: *We've lost our rights?*

VLADIMIR: *(distinctly). We got rid of them.*

*Silence. They remain motionless, arms dangling, heads
sunk,
sagging at the knees.*

ESTRAGON: *(feebly). We're not tied? (Pause.) We're
not—*

VLADIMIR: *Listen!*

They listen, grotesquely rigid. #

ESTRAGON: *I hear nothing.*

(chews, swallows). I'm asking you if we're tied.

VLADIMIR: *Tied?*

ESTRAGON: *Ti-ed.*

VLADIMIR: *How do you mean tied?*

ESTRAGON: *Down.*

VLADIMIR: *But to whom? By whom?*

ESTRAGON: *To your man.*

VLADIMIR: *To Godot? Tied to Godot! (Act one)*

This absurdity of communication reflects the difficulty of finding meaning through language in a nihilistic world. The characters' forgetfulness and conflicting accounts of the past highlight the subjective nature of experience and the difficulty of constructing a solid sense of self. Their games and role-playing can be seen as attempts to create meaning and define themselves through stories and actions, even if temporary. The play is filled with dark humor, a way to cope with the bleakness of their situation. The characters mock themselves and each other, highlighting the absurdity of their existence. Pozzo's control over Lucky can be seen as a metaphor for societal expectations and external forces that limit our freedom. "Beckett utilizes a series of literary techniques, including repetitive dialogue, a barren setting, and the characters' reliance on games, to expose the absurdity of existence and the nihilistic themes embedded within *Waiting for Godot*."

When Lucky breaks free and speaks incoherently, it could represent a temporary escape from imposed meaning, but it also raises questions about authentic communication in a meaningless world. The beauty of existentialism is its openness, "*Waiting for Godot*" becomes a powerful exploration of the human condition, stripped bare of external meaning.

IV. CONCLUSION

Waiting for Godot is considered a landmark of the Theatre of the Absurd. It explores themes of meaninglessness, existence, and the human struggle to find purpose in an uncertain world. *Waiting for Godot* remains a significant play in modern theatre. Its exploration of existential themes and its use of absurdity continue to resonate with audiences. The play's open-ended nature invites discussion and interpretation, making it a timeless work that can be revisited again and again. The characters' repetitive routines, forgetfulness, and nonsensical conversations emphasize the lack of meaning in their lives. They attempt to create meaning through games and stories, but these efforts are ultimately futile. The play suggests that traditional sources of meaning, like religion or societal roles, may be unreliable or absent. Beckett's genius lies in presenting nihilism not as a philosophical statement but as a lived experience. The audience grapples with the characters' anxieties and the absurdity of their situation.

Waiting for Godot doesn't offer answers, but rather prompts questions. Is there meaning in life? How do we cope with the absurdity of existence? By leaving these questions unanswered, the play challenges audiences to confront their own existential anxieties and forge their own meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. The act of waiting in *Godot* becomes a metaphor for the human condition. We are all, in a sense, waiting for something – for meaning, for purpose, for salvation. But the play suggests that this wait may be ultimately futile. The play never reveals who or what Godot is. This ambiguity allows the audience to project their own interpretations and anxieties about the search for meaning. By not providing answers, "*Waiting for Godot*", challenges the audience to grapple with existential questions and create their own meaning in life. By exploring these deeper layers, "*Waiting for Godot*" becomes a rich exploration of the human condition in an absurd world. It doesn't offer easy answers, but encourages us to confront the complexities of existence and find meaning through our own choices, connections, and even laughter in the face of the void world. By depicting the characters' struggle with nihilism and the absurd, Beckett challenges us to confront the meaninglessness of existence. He offers no easy answers, but the play's dark humor and exploration of the human condition can be a powerful way to engage with these profound questions. An existentialist might start with a nihilistic view of the universe as inherently meaningless but then move towards the creation of personal meaning. Similarly, absurdism acknowledges the potential for nihilistic despair but offers a different response – one of defiance and acceptance.

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