

Notes on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (Genre: Play/Drama)

Theatre of the Absurd Essay:

The term **Absurd** means wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate. **Absurdity** is the quality or state of being ridiculous or wildly unreasonable. In the Theater of the Absurd, multiple artistic features are used to express tragic theme with a comic form. The features include anti-character, anti-language, anti-drama and anti-plot. The Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers perceive it.

- ✓ Questions of Existence.
- ✓ Distrust in Language.
- ✓ Illogical Speeches and Meaningless Plots.
- ✓ Re-establishment of man's communion with Universe.
- ✓ Emphasize on Abstract Values of Life.
- ✓ Vagueness about Time, Place and Character.
- ✓ Lack of communication amid characters.

It seeks to represent the absurdity of human existence in a meaningless universe by bizarre or fantastic means. Common elements in absurdist fiction include satire, dark humor, incongruity, the abasement of reason, and controversy regarding the philosophical condition of being "nothing". "the Absurd" refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life, and the human inability to find these with any certainty. The absurdist philosopher Albert Camus stated that individuals should embrace the absurd condition of human existence. In theatre, the word 'absurdism' is often used more specifically, to refer to primarily European drama written in the 1950s and 1960s by writers including **Samuel Beckett**, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter, often grouped together as 'the theatre of the absurd', a phrase coined by the critic **Martin Esslin**. Human life is naturally absurd, due to its being characterised by suffering, death and an absence of meaning. **Nihilism**: Everything is meaningless. **Absurdism**: Don't get depressed because everything is meaningless, rejoice in this fact and find your own meaning and purpose in a meaningless and purposeless world.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* largely deals with the absurd tradition. The play is without any plot, character, dialogue and setting in the traditional sense. The setting of the play creates the absurdist mood. This could mean Godot wants the men to feel the infertility of their life.

Summary

Act I

The play opens with two men, Vladimir and Estragon, meeting by a leafless tree, whose species is later speculated to be that of willow. Estragon notifies Vladimir of his most recent troubles: he spent the previous night lying in a ditch and received a beating from a number of anonymous assailants.

The duo discuss a variety of issues, none of any apparent severe consequence, and it is revealed that they are waiting for a man named Godot. They are not certain if they have ever met Godot, or if he will even arrive.

Pozzo and his slave, Lucky, subsequently arrive and pause in their journey. Pozzo endeavours to engage both men in conversation. Lucky is bound by a rope held by Pozzo, who forces Lucky to carry his heavy bags and physically punishes him if he deems his movements too lethargic. Pozzo states that he is on the way to the market, at which he intends to sell Lucky for profit. Following Pozzo's command: "Think!", Lucky performs a dance and a sudden monologue: a torrent of academic-sounding phrases mixed with sounds such as "quaquaquaqua". Lucky's speech, in a cryptic manner, seems to reference the underlying themes of the play.[8] Pozzo and Lucky soon depart, leaving Estragon and Vladimir to continue their wait for the elusive Godot.

Soon a boy shows up and explains to Vladimir and Estragon that he is a messenger from Godot, and that Godot will not be arriving tonight, but tomorrow. Vladimir asks about Godot, and the boy exits. Vladimir and Estragon decide that they will also leave, but they remain onstage as the curtain falls.

Act II

It is the following day. Vladimir and Estragon are again waiting near the tree, which has grown a number of leaves since last witnessed in Act 1, an indication that a certain amount of time has passed since the events contained within Act 1. Both men are still awaiting Godot. Lucky and Pozzo eventually reappear, but not as they were. Pozzo has become blind and Lucky has become mute. Pozzo cannot recall having met Vladimir and Estragon previously. Lucky and Pozzo exit shortly after their spirited encounter, leaving Vladimir and Estragon to go on waiting.

Soon after, the boy reappears to report that Godot will not be coming. The boy states that he has not met Vladimir and Estragon before and he is not the boy who talked to Vladimir yesterday, which causes Vladimir a great deal more frustration than he exhibited during their encounter in Act 1. Vladimir implores the boy to remember him the next day so as to avoid a similar encounter. The boy exits. Vladimir and Estragon consider suicide, but they do not have a rope. They decide to leave and return the day after with a rope, but again they remain as the curtain falls on the final act.

CHARACTERS:

Estragon : One of the two main characters of the play, along with Vladimir, Estragon is rather helpless on his own. In the beginning of the play, he struggles just to take off his boots, for example. Unlike Vladimir, he has no grasp of time, and is confused as to whether it is evening or morning in act two. Along similar lines, he has a poor grasp of people's identities. He doesn't recognize Lucky and Pozzo in act two, and at one point thinks Pozzo's name is Abel. He cannot even remember his own past, and tells Pozzo his name is Adam. Estragon repeatedly wants to leave, but each time Vladimir reminds him that they must stay and wait for Godot. While he often forms the dull-minded counterpoint to the more cerebral Vladimir, Estragon is still able to match Vladimir's verbal wit and once claims that he used to be a poet.

VLADIMIR: Perhaps the real protagonist of the play, Vladimir often seems to be more rational than his more nonsensical companion, Estragon. Unlike the other characters in the play, he has a sense of linear time and realizes that the events of act two essentially repeat those of act one. He is also able

to remember people's identities, unlike Estragon and Pozzo, who forget each other in act two. He seems to be the only one who is really outraged at Pozzo's horrible treatment of Lucky in act one, but he doesn't actually do anything to help him. Vladimir often tries to explain what is going on in the world—where they are, when they are—and to show evidence to support his theories. But such rational or "scientific" efforts never yield any solid insight, and by the end of the play Vladimir seems less sure than he did at the beginning. Vladimir relies upon Estragon's company as much as Estragon relies upon Vladimir: whenever Estragon leaves the stage for a brief moment, Vladimir panics out of his intense fear of loneliness and abandonment.

GODOT: While Godot never appears on stage or has any lines, he is such a significant absence in the play that he may be rightly recognized as one of the play's characters. What little we can gather about Mr. Godot comes from the dialogue of Estragon, Vladimir, and the boy he sends to deliver his message. The boy says that he watches over Godot's goats, and describes Godot as a relatively kind master. Whoever Godot is, Vladimir and Estragon are convinced that he alone will save them, so they wait endlessly for his arrival, which never comes. Because of his name's resemblance to God, Godot is often read as Beckett's pessimistic version of God, an absent savior who never comes to the aid of those suffering on earth.

POZZO: Pozzo runs into Vladimir and Estragon while journeying along the road in both acts. He abuses Lucky and treats him as a slave, pulling him around with a rope tied around his neck and having him carry all his things. While he exercises some relative power and authority over Lucky and acts superior to the other characters, he is nonetheless far from powerful himself. He panics when he loses things like his watch and is doomed to repeat his wandering every day, just as Vladimir and Estragon repeat their waiting for Godot. He is particularly helpless in act two, when he is inexplicably struck blind and is unable to get up after falling to the ground.

LUCKY: Lucky is Pozzo's slave, whom Pozzo treats horribly and continually insults, addressing him only as "pig." He is mostly silent in the play, but gives a lengthy, mostly nonsensical monologue in act one, when Pozzo asks him to think out loud. While all the characters on-stage suffer in different ways throughout the play, Lucky is the play's most obvious figure of physical suffering and exploitation as he is whipped, beaten, and kicked by other characters.

The main themes in *Waiting for Godot* include the human condition, absurdism and nihilism, and friendship. The human condition: The hopelessness in Vladimir and Estragon's lives demonstrates the extent to which humans rely on illusions—such as religion, according to Beckett—to give hope to a meaningless existence. The play consists of conversations between Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting for the arrival of the mysterious Godot, who continually sends word that he will appear but who never does. They encounter Lucky and Pozzo, they discuss their miseries and their lots in life, they consider hanging themselves, and yet they wait. Often perceived as being tramps, Vladimir and Estragon are a pair of human beings who do not know why they were put on earth; they make the tenuous assumption that there must be some point to their existence, and they look to Godot for enlightenment. Because they hold out hope for meaning and direction, they acquire a kind of nobility that enables them to rise above their futile existence.

1. Philosophical Viewpoints: The Absurd

Waiting for Godot is hailed as a classic example of "Theater of the Absurd," dramatic works that promote the philosophy of its name. This particular play presents a world in which daily actions are without meaning, language fails to effectively communicate, and the characters at times reflect a sense of artifice, even wondering aloud whether perhaps they are on a stage. Becket shows the world a way of escaping from sufferings of life. Life can be spent like Estragon and Vladimir: doing nothing, having irrational behavior, passing the ball and act ridiculously. Perhaps, absurdity is the only way to get through life. This is also a method to avoid criticism as it has been said that the best way to avoid criticism is to do nothing. Personally, I think that it is the most difficult way to get through life. While doing nothing and repeating silly actions, one can pass seconds but not whole life. It seems that Becket has preferred absurdity over existentialism. Anyhow, he has shown a way to go through life i.e. absurdity.

Waiting for Godot is a prime example of what has come to be known as the theater of the absurd. The play is filled with nonsensical lines, wordplay, meaningless dialogue, and characters who abruptly shift emotions and forget everything, ranging from their own identities to what happened yesterday. All of this contributes to an absurdist humor throughout the play. However, this humor is often uncomfortably mixed together with tragic or serious content to make a darker kind of comedy. Estragon refers to "billions of others," who have been killed, and describes being beaten by an anonymous "they." Lucky (whose ill-fitting name is itself darkly comic) is treated horribly and physically abused on-stage. And Vladimir and Estragon talk nonchalantly and pleasantly about suicide. All this has a discomfiting effect on the audience, who is not sure how to react to this absurd mixture of comedy and tragedy, seriousness and playfulness. In act one, Vladimir says, "one daren't even laugh any more," and his comment could apply well to the audience of Beckett's play, who don't know whether to laugh or to cringe at the events on-stage. The absurdity caused by the seeming mismatch between characters' tones and the content of their speech can be seen as a reaction to a world emptied of meaning and significance. If the world is meaningless, it makes no sense to see it as comic or tragic, good or bad. Beckett thus presents an eerie play that sits uneasily on the border between tragedy and comedy, in territory one can only call the absurd.

2. Meaninglessness of life

How is life meaningless? Newton came in the world and presented laws of motion. Was his life meaningless? Most of us would probably answer negatively. His laws are helpful for the whole world then how his life was meaningless? Well, Newton's laws are meaningless for him now. Not for us but for him. He died and took nothing with him. His laws are no more helpful for him. In this way, life is meaningless for him. As mentioned earlier, life is a journey from nothingness to nothingness. It is much difficult to understand meaninglessness.

3. Truth

Waiting for Godot is a play driven by a lack of truth—in other words, uncertainty. Characters are unable to act in any meaningful way and claim this is because they are uncertain of the consequences. Without the presence of objective truth, every statement is brought into question, and even common labels (color, time, names) become arbitrary and subjective.

4. Life, Consciousness, and Existence/Existentialism

The portrait of daily life painted by *Waiting for Godot* is a dismal one. It is repetitive and stagnant. It lacks meaning and purpose and entails perpetual suffering. The solution (which none of the characters take) would seem to be action and choice despite the ever-presence of uncertainty, and an awareness of one's surroundings and past actions. As one character says, "habit is a great deadener"—our actions should stem from conscious choice rather than apathy. Existentialism is the most important theme of "*Waiting for Godot*". In order to understand this theme we must have knowledge about theory of Existentialism. However, in simple words it means that every person is responsible for his actions and no second person is pulling his strings or controlling his fate. In other words (from oxford), existentialism emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free.

Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo and Lucky: are they all free? Are they themselves responsible for their actions. Can't say "Yes" nor can say "No". Lucky is not free. A person who is slave from childhood can't do anything to change his life. People beat Estragon every night and he is helpless. Samuel Becket has not answered the above said questions. We see every character has freewill yet some limitations are imposed on them. In case of Lucky, someone is pulling his strings whereas in case of Pozzo, Estragon and Vladimir they are free.

5. Time

Time presents a slew of problems in *Waiting for Godot*. The very title of the play reveals its central action: waiting. The two main characters are forced to whittle away their days while anticipating the arrival of a man who never comes. Because they have nothing to do in the meantime, time is a dreaded barrier, a test of their ability to endure. Because they repeat the same actions every day, time is cyclical. That every character seems to have a faulty memory further complicates matters; time loses meaning when the actions of one day have no relevance or certainty on the next.

6. Religion

Religion is incompatible with reason in *Waiting for Godot*. Characters who attempt to understand religion logically are left in the dark, and the system is compared to such absurd banalities as switching bowler hats or taking a boot on and off. Religion is also tied to uncertainty, since there is no way of knowing what is objectively true in the realm of faith.

7. Friendship : Friendship is tricky in *Waiting for Godot*, as each character is fundamentally isolated from each other. Relationships teeter between a fear of loneliness and an essential inability to connect. This tension is central to the play. The problems that keep characters apart vary from physical disgust to ego to a fear of others' suffering.

8. Freedom and Confinement

Every character in *Waiting for Godot* seems to live in a prison of his own making. Each is confined to a state of passivity and stagnancy by his own inability to act. The one character who is literally the slave of another is no more restricted than those who are technically free; in fact, he may be more free because he is at least aware of his imprisonment.

9. Suffering

Suffering is a constant and fundamental part of human existence in *Waiting for Godot*. Every character suffers and suffers always, with no seeming respite in sight. The hardships range from the physical to the mental, the minor to the extreme. Suffering drives some men to find companionship (so as to weather the storm together), causes others to abuse their companions (to lessen the suffering of the self), and motivates others isolate themselves (since watching people suffer is a kind of anguish on its own). We witness sufferings of Vladimir and Estragon in this play. They are living a miserable life. Estragon has been beaten by strangers every night but he is helpless. God has created this world and has forgotten it after its creation. It seems that Samuel Becket has given this message to the audience. Apart from Estragon and Vladimir, Lucky is also suffering. His life is more miserable than them. Sufferings of slavery class are evident in this play. We can say that Estragon and Vladimir are responsible for their miserable condition but Lucky is a slave and he cannot help himself. He can just wait for good times i.e. only death. Perhaps, he would find something good in afterlife. But in this life, he can't get peace. Vladimir's speech in this context is helpful.

10. Mortality

None of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* shy away from the fact that death is inevitable. In fact, death becomes at times a solution for the inanity of daily life. The main characters contemplate suicide as though it were as harmless as a walk to the grocery store, probably because there's nothing in their lives worth sticking around for anyway. They ultimately do not commit suicide because they claim not to have the means, but also because they are uncertain of the result of their attempt (it may work, it may fail). Because they can't be sure of what their action will bring, they decide on no action at all.

11. Importance of hope

Without hope, there is nothing in life. Optimism comes to an end without it. Thus, hope is necessary if one wants to live. This play also depicts this important theme. It forces us to think twice on the importance of hope. Estragon and Vladimir has nothing to be done yet they are hopeful. It is only hope due to which they are alive and waiting for Godot. "Godot" may be a help or maybe God but one thing is clear that both of them are hopeful about their future. They think that Godot will come and change their lives. The play ends with nothingness but "wait and hope" never ends. Estragon and Vladimir will come again tomorrow at the same place and will wait for Godot until his arrival. In this way, hope is one of the major themes of "*Waiting for Godot*".

12. Difference in human race

Difference in human races is also evident in this play. This theme has importance of its own. Lucky is a symbol of slavery class, whereas Pozzo refers feudalism. These characters present two types of human races. One is miserable, whereas second is happy. Samuel Becket has shown the inferiority of lower class and superiority of upper class.

13. Relationship

It is another important theme of "*Waiting for Godot*". Samuel Becket portrays different types of human relationships. There are four kinds of individuals in the play. Every character is a separate entity. Individually, they refer something but in a relationship they indicate something else. Vladimir's problems are mental; Estragon's physical. Pozzo and Lucky are presented to show the two

ances of men. But when these individuals are put into relations, they perform an important role. Nevertheless, three types of relationships are there in the play:

Relationship between Estragon and Vladimir

Association of Pozzo and Lucky

Relationship of Estragon and Vladimir with Godot.

14. Waiting, Boredom and Nihilism

Beckett's title indicates, the central act of the play is waiting, and one of the most salient aspects of the play is that nothing really seems to happen. Vladimir and Estragon spend the entire play waiting for Godot, who never comes. Estragon repeatedly wants to leave, but Vladimir insists that they stay, in case Godot actually shows up. As a result of this endless waiting, both Vladimir and Estragon are "bored to death," as Vladimir himself puts it. Both Vladimir and Estragon repeat throughout the play that there is "nothing to be done" and "nothing to do." They struggle to find ways to pass the time, so they end up conversing back and forth about nothing at all—including talking about how they don't know what to talk about—simply to occupy themselves while waiting. The boredom of the characters on-stage mirrors the boredom of the audience. Beckett has deliberately constructed a play where not only his characters, but also his audience wait for something that never happens. Just like Estragon and Vladimir, the audience waits during the play for some major event or climax that never occurs. Audience members might at times feel uncomfortable and want, like Estragon, to leave, but are bound to stay, in case Godot should actually arrive later in the play.

All of this waiting for nothing, talking about nothing, and doing nothing contributes to a pervasive atmosphere of nihilism in the play. Broadly defined, nihilism is a denial of any significance or meaning in the world. Deriving from the Latin word for "nothing" (nihil), it is a worldview centered around negation, claiming that there is no truth, morality, value, or—in an extreme form—even reality. This seems to describe the world of the play, largely emptied out of meaning, emotion, and substance, leading to characters who blather on endlessly in insignificant conversation. Given the play's deep exploration of the absurd humor and feelings of alienation that arise from this nihilistic understanding of the world, one could say that *Waiting for Godot* is, at its core, about nothing.

15. Modernism and Post-modernism

Written in 1953, *Waiting for Godot* was a somewhat late successor to the vibrant experimentation in art and literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries known as Modernism. Modernist writers saw themselves as dramatically breaking with the past and innovating in all aspects of art, literature, and culture. Beckett's play shares with Modernist works a fascination with pushing the boundaries of literary genre, representation, and etiquette, as well as an interest in language and thought prioritized above action and plot. However, the play can also be seen as somewhat Postmodern, belonging to the literary and artistic period following Modernism. Both Modernism and Postmodernism are rather vague terms, often used differently by different critics. Moreover, it is

also debated whether Postmodernism continues the aspirations of Modernism, or is a more radical break with it. In any case, Beckett's play sits on the fence between these two movements. While Postmodernism is difficult to define exactly, *Waiting for Godot* displays a number of the defining features of a Postmodern conception of the world. One of these is an alienation from tradition and a questioning of the grand narratives that were previously seen to have some kind of authority. This includes grand narratives of historical progress—that history is the story of human life continually getting better—as well as religious narratives like the Bible. There are some biblical and classical references in the play, but they are only used ironically. Estragon compares himself to Christ in act one, for example, but the comparison is rather ridiculous. And Pozzo invokes "Atlas, son of Jupiter!" but doesn't actually believe in the force of this classical reference (what's more, he gets his mythological family tree wrong). The religious and cultural traditions of the past have lost their authority and centrality in the world of the play. Another Postmodern feature of the play is a pervasive sense of entrapment or enslavement, but a lack of any central authority. Characters are often unable to move or get up from the ground for no apparent reason. Vladimir and Estragon are, in a sense, trapped in their place of waiting, even though no one is forcing them to stay. Pozzo is Lucky's master, but he is far from free or powerful. Everyone in the play seems to be trapped or enslaved in some way, but no one seems to be the master. The characters of *Waiting for Godot* are also profoundly disoriented: they don't know where, or when, they are. At times, the characters don't even know who they are, as Estragon cannot remember his own past, for example. Finally, some of Beckett's characters feel a separation from reality. Both Vladimir and Pozzo question, in act two, whether they are actually awake or are simply dreaming. This confusion of reality with a dream or a false representation is a central, common feature of Postmodernism.

Seeing Beckett's play as Postmodernist is more than just labeling it as part of a particular literary movement; it gets to the heart of the world Beckett represents, one defined by alienation, entrapment, disorientation, and a questioning of reality. With the play's lack of specifics regarding its place or time, the circumstances of its events, or the particular back stories of its characters, *Waiting for Godot* can even be seen as a kind of allegory for the Postmodern condition. Beckett wrote his play before Postmodernism really coalesced or was written about as a distinct period or movement. Nonetheless, while in some ways still belonging to Modernism, the play presciently depicts many of the defining aspects of a Postmodern world. In representing these negative features, the play can be seen as either a pessimistic indictment of the present or as a chilling warning of what the future might look like: as how Beckett saw the world to be or as he feared it might become.

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