

# Waiting for Godot

– A Play in Which the Main Characters' Lives are  
Presented as Meaningless

*I väntan på Godot*

– *en pjäs som presenterar huvudkaraktärernas liv som  
meningslösa*

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this argumentative paper is to study the play *Waiting for Godot* from a specific point of view. The statement of this thesis is that the lives of Vladimir and Estragon are presented as meaningless, and this claim is based on the analysis of the play and the study of other published scholarship that is associated with the topic. The thesis is divided into three chapters, each chapter discusses each argument and shed light on some philosophical concepts such as Existentialism, Absurdism, and Nihilism. However, the main focus is on the fundamental meaning of the lives of the main characters, Vladimir and Estragon.

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## Introduction

“There can be no doubt: for many intelligent and sensitive human beings that the world of the mid-twentieth century has lost its meaning and has simply ceased to make sense” (Esslin, 12-13). This is a perfect description of the idea of meaning during the era of Postmodernism, in which man has lost the belief in traditional conventions and was in search of a more convenient answer to the big question, as it is stated in *Waiting for Godot* “What are we doing here, that is the question” (73). This question is one of many dealing with the meaning of life.

The questioning of the meaning of life was a great subject during the twentieth century, in which some philosophers explained that man was neither brought to life for the worship of God nor to fulfill any previously determined purpose. The writer Jon Erikson comments on the idea of the meaning of life by stating:

“Meaning is valuable to us because it gives a relatively satisfactory shape for the formation and completion of our hopes and desires. Meaninglessness, therefore, would seem to be that which is formless, shapeless, lacking unity or coherence” (266).

What Erikson may possibly mean is that meaning is valuable and important to us because it gives a sense that we exist. Two philosophical schools that deal with questions of human existence are Existentialism and Nihilism, in which both define life as being meaningless however, the philosophy that explains how man confronts the meaninglessness of life, is called Absurdism. This philosophical school explains the absurdity in the human attempt to impose meaning. Furthermore, the drama that deals with the absurdity of human existence is called Theater of the Absurd, which is a label for innovative plays such as *Waiting for Godot* written by Samuel Beckett.

*Waiting for Godot* is a two-act play that seems to be boring and meaningless, however, it deals with many essential questions of modern philosophy. One of the questions that it seems to deal with is the meaning of life, which is the foundation of this thesis. This essay presents arguments from the point of view that the lives of the two main characters are completely meaningless. That is because the play presents a two-day sample of a lifetime being spent doing nothing but repeating the same activities every day. The content of the characters’ days is similar, they seem to live by a habit of being, with no real aim or purpose. Moreover, in act two, Estragon says “Yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That’s been

going on now for half a century” (59), which means that the main characters have wasted most of their lives doing nothing but waiting for Godot.

The second reason why one could interpret their lives as meaningless and absurd is that they seem to only want to pass time, and it is best when it passes rapidly. They spend time doing different activities, which are explained as absurd. The statement “It will pass the time” is repeated several times in the play indicating the importance of passing time.

Yet, despite the two arguments mentioned above, one could disagree by saying that the main characters have a purpose in their lives, which in turn gives their lives meaning, and this could be true but since their purpose is never fulfilled, and since they did nothing to change their situation, then the purpose they have is meaningless and adds no meaning to their lives. Furthermore, they are doubtful about their appointment with Godot. Not only that but also the reason they are waiting for him and in addition, they do not know what they want from him. The main characters wasted a lifetime doing nothing but passing time by repeating their habit of existing. In act two Vladimir says, “All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions ... they become a habit” (72).

Moreover, the purpose of this thesis is to analyze the play and show why this statement is reliable, all based on discussing the following research questions:

1. What is the meaning of the main characters’ lives in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*? What is the impact of repetition on the life of the main characters?
2. How does the play discuss absurdity according to Albert Camus’s concept of confronting the meaninglessness of life? What do the main characters do in order to pass time?
3. How can one sense the unfulfillment of purpose in the play? Do the main characters have a reliable purpose which in turn gives their lives meaning?

The following three chapters will discuss and analyze each of the questions above. The first chapter concerns the idea of repetition and living by habit and also discusses the play from the idea of the meaning of life. The second chapter analyses the absurdity of the characters’ attempt to pass time and also presents facts that support the idea that the main characters’ lives are meaningless. The third and last chapter deals with the counterargument by putting it into consideration and also giving further explanations that prove it wrong.

These three chapters will not only analyze the play but also shed light on various published books and scholarships that discuss the play. The materials used in this thesis are several books

such as the book *The theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett* edited by James Knowlson and Dougald McMillan, *Theatre of the Absurd* by Martin Esslin, *Philosophy of Samuel Beckett* by John Calder, and Paul Lawley's book *Waiting for Godot: Character studies*. Other materials that have been used in the process of writing the thesis are several articles that discuss the play and analyze it from a similar point of view.

Finally, since the play deals with ideas associated with terms such as Existentialism, Nihilism, and Absurdity, therefore a sufficient explanation for them is provided in the background section, which is accompanied by a brief overview of the play.

## **Background**

In this section, information is provided about the three philosophical schools Existentialism, Absurdity, and Nihilism. Moreover, to get a general idea of the content of the play, a simple and brief overview is also provided at the end of the section.

### **Existentialism**

Existentialism is a term that refers to a philosophical movement that began in the twentieth century, after the Second World War in France. The difference between the two views is based on the meaning of human existence. Atheist existentialism believes that life is completely meaningless with no purpose at all. This view is shared by the two well-known writers Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett. The Theistic version of existentialism argues that life is not meaningless and without purpose, but it is man who cannot realize the meaning of it. The idea of Existentialism is important because it helps in understanding the type of life presented in the play *Waiting for Godot*.

### **Absurdity**

Absurdity is a term that refers to the contradiction between man's desire to find meaning in his existence and the truth of life which is considered to be meaningless. The idea of Absurdity is presented in the eternal attempt to find meaning in a world that is considered to have no meaning at all. This term was also used as a label for innovative unconventional modern plays which later on were categorized as belonging to The Theatre of The Absurd. This type of theatre was defined and clarified by Martin Esslin, in his book *Theatre of The Absurd* in which he explains the idea of this type of theatre and provides a good analysis of the play *Waiting for Godot* (Esslin).

The idea of Absurdity is often associated with Albert Camus, who wrote about the diverse ways one could confront the idea of the pointlessness of life. He explains his ideas about human existence by using the Greek legend of Sisyphus in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus explains that man has two choices, either to accept the truth that there is no point in his existence or try to find something that gives his life meaning (Britannica, The Myth of Sisyphus)

## **Nihilism**

The basic meaning of the term Nihilism is that it stands for the rejection of all religious and moral truth. It claims that life is completely meaningless. This philosophical movement started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Britannica). It was known to be used by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in describing the disintegration of conventional morality in Western society. The concept of Nihilism denied the existence of God and any previously defined meaning to human existence.

## **An Overview of the Play *Waiting for Godot***

The play was originally written in French as *En attendant Godot*, it was published in 1952 (Britannica). The play consists of two acts and the characters are Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, Lucky, the two messengers and Mr Godot. The first act starts with the two characters, Vladimir, and Estragon, waiting by a tree on a country road for a person named Godot. While waiting, they talk about various things such as the Bible, two thieves, and consider committing suicide. Meanwhile, Estragon falls asleep, wakes up from a nightmare, and eats a carrot. In the middle of the act, a terrible cry is heard and Pozzo and Lucky enter the stage. Pozzo is holding one end of a long rope that is tied around Lucky's neck. Pozzo is a landowner who is taking his slave, Lucky, to the market to sell. Lucky carries a heavy bag, a stool, and a picnic basket, while Pozzo carries only a whip.

At first, Vladimir and Estragon mistakenly think Pozzo is Godot, but Pozzo declares that he is not Godot. Then Pozzo sits down and eats his picnic. In the meantime, Vladimir and Estragon inspect Lucky while he is sleeping. Once Pozzo has finished his picnic, Vladimir takes the leftovers chicken bones. Pozzo sits for a while smoking his pipe and they converse about Godot.

Before Pozzo and Lucky depart, Pozzo orders Lucky to entertain them by dancing and thinking aloud, then they depart, leaving Vladimir and Estragon alone, still waiting for Godot. Afterwards, a boy enters and tells the two men that Godot will not be coming today but will surely come tomorrow. The boy departs, the sun sets, and the moon appears. They stay for a little while chatting, then they say that they will go, but do not move, and sit still until the curtain falls.

In the second act, the play begins at the same time and in the same place. The few differences are that the tree has few green leaves on it which might indicate that time has passed. Estragon's



boots are at the front center of the stage, and Lucky's hat is on the stage too. Vladimir enters the stage and looks at Estragon's boots, then starts singing a song. After a while, Estragon enters the stage. The two men talk for a while, embrace, and then consider leaving each other alone, but decide to stay together. After talking for a long while, the two men find Lucky's hat, which they take and try it on and off, until they decide to play the role of Pozzo and Lucky.

Then suddenly, Pozzo and Lucky enter the stage. This time, the rope is short, and it is Lucky who is leading with Pozzo behind. Pozzo is blind and Lucky is dumb. When Lucky sees the two men, he stops and Pozzo bumps into him so both fall to the floor. They cry out for help. Vladimir and Estragon try to help them up but fall on the floor instead. They struggle for a long time before they get on their feet again and help Pozzo stand on his feet, then Vladimir asks Pozzo to make Lucky dance and think for them, just like the day before but Pozzo replies that Lucky is now dumb. He helps Lucky up and departs leaving the two men alone. When the sun starts to set, the messenger boy arrives and tells the two men that Godot will not come today but will surely come tomorrow. They talk with the boy about Godot, and then the boy leaves. The two men contemplate hanging themselves, but then decide to leave, but again do not move and instead sit still till the curtain falls.

## Chapter One

Jon Erickson in his article states that "Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a play about basic striving for meaning in a world in which meaning is not forthcoming" (258). The main characters try to find meaning in their lives, and they have some sort of motivation. They want to meet with Godot; therefore, they keep coming every day to the same spot and wait till the end of the day. But since they have spent more than a decade doing nothing but waiting for Godot, then the main characters have wasted their lives doing nothing but waiting and repeating their basic habit of passing time. This in turn gives a perception that their lives are meaningless, they waste it without a real aim that could both develop and improve their situation. In other words, this is the primary reason why the play is considered as presenting a meaningless life. The main characters do nothing but repeat the same essential things in order to pass time. They live by the habit of doing their daily routines. These ideas are discussed in this chapter.

### **The Act of Repetition in the Play**

*Waiting for Godot* has been translated into many languages and it has also been transformed into various versions to suit different purposes. The flexibility of the plot made it easily fit for various purposes. Ronan Macdonald highlights that in his book by stating:

Waiting for Godot's significance and achievement were ascribed to its universal themes. It seems to many that the play was saying this is what the human condition (as opposed to a particular instance of life, in a social and political context) is like: a constant and unfulfilled waiting between cradle and grave: and all we on this blighted earth can do is to distract ourselves with pointless games and futile banter. (50)

Through the observations of the play, one can sense the pessimistic view Beckett had about human existence as if human beings are born with no purpose and no real meaning. The misery is clearly presented in the play. Everything in the play seems to indicate that it is about human existence. In act one for instance, when Lucky gives a speech. A speech that seems to be meaningless but at the same time incredibly significant. It seems to be a metaphor that stands for the fate of man in the world.

Additionally, Pozzo's speech in the same act seems as if he describes the weather and the movement of the sun from sunrise and sunset, but with words that seem to refer to human existence. From cradle to grave, as if referring the sunrise of the sun to the human birth, how beautiful and young. The midday as if the middle age of man, in which man realizes the

meaninglessness of his life. Then the slow move toward sunset, and finally toward complete darkness. He finishes his speech by saying "That's how it is on this bitch of an earth" (35). By that metaphor, Pozzo pictures the cycle of life from birth to death.

If we put these ideas in consideration and look at the main characters of the play, then we might notice that they are in middle age and they seem to be lost and live a life that lacks any importance or significant meaning, they repeat their activities every day. From the start of each act of the play, it is stated "As before" indicating that this day is similar to a previous one. Additionally, in act one Vladimir states that "the essential doesn't change" (20), which only indicates that the acts and events of the play do not change and repeat themselves. In act one Vladimir and Estragon say:

Estragon: Another day done with.

Vladimir: Not yet.

Estragon: For me [it is] over and done with. No matter what happens. (52)

This demonstrates that the characters already know what is going to happen already from the start of their day because it is only a matter of repetition of something they already know. Then later in act one when Vladimir asks Estragon about what they did the day before, he answers "Yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That [has] been going on now for half a century" (59). This is the line on which the idea of meaninglessness is based because they have spent half a century doing nothing but waiting, without meeting with Godot, which otherwise would have given their efforts a final result. The meeting with Godot is like achieving their aim and would in turn give their lives meaning because it would be as if they accomplished to what they have devoted their lives. Moreover, in act one, Vladimir and Estragon declare that:

Vladimir: We [will] come back tomorrow.

Estragon: And the day after tomorrow.

Vladimir: Possibly.

Estragon: And so on.

Vladimir: The point is...

Estragon: Until he comes. (13)

According to the textual evidence above the characters are willing to devote the rest of their lives to do the same thing, until the end of time. But for what reason? At the end of the play, Vladimir confronts this strange situation they live in by thinking aloud:

“Was I sleeping, while the other suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake up or I think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot?... But in all that what truth will there be?” (82)

At that moment, Vladimir realizes that there is no stable meaning to anything. In this strange world meaning decays as soon as one tries to grasp it and that’s why he dismisses the thought as if he cannot look too closely at the fact that life is meaningless and the appointment that they claim they have is meaningless and they only repeat their daily activities.

In addition, in act one there are hints that signify that Estragon and Vladimir have seen Pozzo and Lucky passing by several times in the past. The hints are put in the following dialogue:

Vladimir: How they have changed!

Estragon: Who?

Vladimir: Those two. (44)

When Estragon protests saying that he does not know Pozzo and Lucky, Vladimir insists on saying:

Vladimir: Yes, you do know them.

Estragon: No, I don’t know them.

Vladimir: We know them, I tell you. You forget everything. Unless they are not the same...

Estragon: Why didn’t they recognize us then?

Vladimir: That means nothing. I too pretended not to recognize them. And then nobody ever recognizes us. (44)

The dialogue above reveals that the characters have met Pozzo and Lucky before, and this meeting helps them pass time. When Pozzo and Lucky leave and the boy comes to give them a message from Godot, Estragon asks the boy “What kept you so late?” (45). Signifying that he was expecting him to come, which indicates that Estragon somehow knew that Godot will not come. Moreover, Vladimir asks the boy “It was [not] you [who] came yesterday?” (47) This

signifies that a boy came the day before, and since the boy comes in act two, then this indicates that this waiting process has been going on continuously.

Additionally, when the boy leaves, Estragon says “off we go again” (45), not only at the end of act one but also at the end of act two, which is followed by Vladimir’s announcement that “Now it’s over. Its already tomorrow” (70). But since the play ends in act two, then this declaration shows that these two acts are only a sample of a lifelong process of repetition.

Waiting has made days seem the same, they keep repeating the essential activities every day. Moreover, Vladimir and Estragon seem to know what the pattern of their day looks like because they live by a habit, a habit of waiting and passing time. This idea is further explained in the next part of this chapter.

### **Living by a Habit of Passing Time**

The idea of living by a habit was not that obvious in the first act, because the events were presented for the first time, but the notion was recognized first in act two, when it is declared that “Next day. Same time. Same place” (50), and then when Vladimir talks to Estragon saying, “you again” (51). Furthermore, the characters seem to be aware of the fact that they live by habit, this is revealed in the part where they say:

Vladimir: One can bide one’s time.

Estragon: One knows what to expect.

Vladimir: No further need to worry.

Estragon: Simply wait.

Vladimir: We [are] used to it (35).

This part of the play shows that they know what is going to happen, and therefore they do not expect any change in the pattern of their day, they simply wait. In a study done by John F Valentine, he points out that the characters “merely exist, but do not experience the full richness of the temporal now, they lack a significant world and are doomed to the labor of constantly being forced to ‘kill time’” (140). This suggested idea could be right because Vladimir and Estragon try various kinds of activities in order to kill time and make it pass as quickly as possible. After meeting with Pozzo and Lucky in act one Vladimir indicates the importance of passing time rapidly by saying:

Vladimir: That passed the time.

Estragon: It would have passed any case.

Vladimir: Yes, but not so rapidly. (44)

Vladimir and Estragon have no perception of the importance of time and they have no memory, which means no clear sense of time. The absurdity of their situation and the idea of passing time is further explained in the next chapter, in which a more accurate analysis is provided. But for now, let us have a look at the following statement by Vladimir: “All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which- how shall I say - Which may, at first sight, seem reasonable, until they become a habit” (73).

This indicates that the characters are bored, so bored that it makes them suffer. Everything is ambiguous not only to the audience but also to the characters themselves. They spend their lives waiting, and this waiting might look reasonable, but after a lifetime of waiting, it becomes a habit. Therefore, everything they do is based on the habit of only trying to make it till the end of the day.

At the end of act two, Vladimir states that “we wait, we are bored. No, do not protest we are bored to death, there is no use denying it” (74). This confirms that they are very much aware of their situation. They know that they are wasting their time doing nothing in particular. Therefore, their lives are without any important content that could otherwise give their existence some kind of meaning.

In act two Vladimir refers to the habit of waiting and the habit of living as “a great deadener” (91) as if they live but are dead from the inside. This clarifies why they welcome the idea of committing suicide because in one way or another Godot seems to represent death and committing suicide is like achieving their purpose, which is meeting with Godot. They talk about committing suicide in both acts, and they think of it as a source of distraction and passing time as if they are not afraid of dying but instead welcome it because it seems as if it is what they are waiting for. This explains why Estragon says, “I can [not] go on like this” (85). The process of waiting is making them suffer. Therefore, Estragon further declares “I am tired breathing.” (70) and later on, Vladimir says “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it is awful!” (38). So, the main characters are tired of their habit of waiting and repeating the same routines. So, after all, the main characters are living in a cycle of doing the same things over

and over again without getting anywhere. The ultimate end to their suffering would be by disappearing, as Vladimir puts it “Your only hope left is to disappear” (67), which is death, and that is by meeting with Godot because Godot seems to be the final end for their misery.

Finally, to sum up, the meaning of life in the play *Waiting for Godot* is as suggested by Existentialist philosophy, without any particular meaning and the meaninglessness of it is presented in the play through the repetition of events and the insignificant of the main characters’ daily routines, which after a long while became a kind of habit.

## Chapter Two

“We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?” (62), this line is said by Estragon, suggesting that the main characters try to find an impression and meaning in their existence, by doing various kinds of activities and as mentioned in the previous chapter the characters spend most of their time doing nothing but trying to pass time. The idea of passing time and dealing with the meaninglessness of life is referred to as Absurd. The way of confronting the meaninglessness of life is best explained by Camus, who suggests a number of ways to deal with the pointlessness of life. This will be discussed in the first part of this chapter with the intention to associate to the main characters’ meaningless attempt to fill time with activities, which add nothing to their absurd lives but only helps them with their constant attempt to pass time. Additionally, the second part of this chapter is about the absurdity of the main characters’ language and action in the play, by relating to the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd which are explained by Martin Esslin. The purpose of this chapter is to support the second argument, which is that the main characters’ lives are meaningless, and they live an absurd life by trying to confront the meaninglessness of it by passing time through meaningless activities and useless dialogues.

### **Confronting the Meaninglessness of Life in *Waiting for Godot***

The idea of life as meaningless is something both Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett have in common, and that is because both present a pessimistic point of view of life in their literary works. One of Albert Camus’s works is *The Myth of Sisyphus* and one of Samuel Beckett’s literary works is *Waiting for Godot*. Camus in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* gives a brief explanation of how a man can deal with the meaninglessness of life. His explanation is that a man has two choices, either to accept the truth that there is no point in his existence or to reject the idea of meaninglessness and try to put meaning into life anyway (Britannica).

Moreover, Camus suggests various ways by which one can confront the meaninglessness of life (Britannica). These ways are taken into consideration while studying the play with the intention to explain the different activities that they do in their attempt to pass time and confront the meaninglessness of their lives,

The first suggested way of facing the meaninglessness of life is by committing suicide, which is an idea presented in the play *Waiting for Godot*, the main characters discuss the idea



twice, in both acts, as if they do not care about the idea of death and instead use suicide as a source of fun, as stated in act one:

Vladimir: What do we do now?

Estragon: Wait.

Vladimir: Yes, but while waiting.

Estragon: [(Turns head slowly to tree)] What about hanging ourselves?

Vladimir: Hmm. (It might) give us an erection.

Estragon: (Highly excited) An erection! (16)

But then after discussing the matter for a while, Estragon says “Do [not] let [us] do anything. It [is] safer.” (17), indicating that they do not mean suicide for the sake of dying but only to make time pass.

The second way of rejecting the meaninglessness of life and attempting to give it meaning is by using distractions such as drinking, eating, and enjoying life by fulfilling sexual desires. This idea is also presented in the play, Estragon asks Vladimir for a carrot and tries to sleep in both acts. Additionally, both the main characters do meaningless activities such as when Estragon takes off his boots, looks inside them hoping to find something inside, and then later in act one Vladimir takes off his hat, looks inside it, knocks on the top of it, and then puts it on again, and they repeat the same thing over again as if both the characters assume that there is something inside the boots and the hat. These incidents are reflected on by Zaenal Makhfuddin in her paper “*Meaning of life in Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot*” in which she states:

“The depiction of Vladimir and Estragon’s meaningless life is indicated by their silly activities like taking off the shoes then looking inside, shaking it hoping that something will come out. Taking off the hat and knocking the top like a circus, and also indicated by their communication that shows the meaninglessness of their life.” (120)

Besides the apparent meaninglessness of the activities with the hats and boots, the hat seems to be a symbolic element that has a logical meaning. All the characters wear hats, and not any type of hat but a certain one called the bowler hat. The type of hat one wears symbolizes one’s thoughts and beliefs, or simply represents the person himself. This is explained in the volume *Humanity in Ruins* by Sean Kennedy, who states that the bowler hat expresses the shared hopes and ambitions of the upper class (190). Furthermore, the hats in the play seem to have a

significant role. It seems to be the key to the characters' thoughts. If we take Lucky for example, he cannot think without his hat and therefore he stops his monologue once his hat was knocked off his head. In act two when Vladimir and Estragon find Lucky's hat, they put it on and play the role of Lucky and Pozzo. They exchange the hats back and forth for a while, and this incident could be a symbol of the unstable identity of the characters. It seems as if the hat represents the self of a person and is not only an accessory that belongs to the setting of the play (190).

The third way Camus suggests in rejecting the idea of life being meaningless is by believing in God and then the meaning of life is defined by the worship of God. This idea is not very obvious in the play, because the main characters never say that they believe in God, but on the other hand, Vladimir relates Godot to a Savior that is mentioned in the Gospels in the Bible and discusses its reliability. In addition, the characters did not talk about the Gospels for the sake of adding meaning to their lives by the worship of God, but instead for the sake of passing time:

Vladimir: shall I tell it to you?

Estragon: No

Vladimir: It will pass the time. (11)

Moreover, a fourth way by which Camus suggests that man can reject the meaninglessness of life is by having power such as a political or social status and using that power to give meaning to life. This is not really presented by the main characters but mostly by Pozzo, and the only time that the characters show a high social status is when they imitate Pozzo and Lucky and play their role for the sake of passing time.

The last way by which one can confront the meaninglessness of life is by accepting the meaninglessness of it without denying it or using means of distraction, just living life as a period of time between birth and death. This last proposed idea is presented by the main characters' endless waiting, but except that they do not accept the meaninglessness of their lives and therefore are in constant search for ways of distraction. The only way they can be happy is by accepting the pointlessness of their lives.

After all, one cannot deny the absurdity of the characters' lives, trying to pass time and make it pass as quickly as possible. The absurdity of the play does not only appear in their failed attempt to add meaning to their lives but also in their language, which is bizarre because it does

not always give a clear message. This is further explained in the next part of this chapter with the aim to explain the absurdity of the characters' meaningless lives.

### **The Absurdity of the Main Characters' Language and Action**

One of the things that makes the play absurd is the fact that the language and the dialogues between the characters do not always make sense and do not always match their deeds, for instance, at the end of both acts, Vladimir and Estragon say that they are going to leave, but do not move. These features of language and action in the play are best explained by Martin Esslin, he explains the absurdity of the play and also explains the features of this untraditional drama. Therefore, this part of this chapter is intended to shed the light on the meaninglessness of the characters' lives, by analyzing the meaninglessness of their language and action.

Esslin mentions that absurd plays, such as *Waiting for Godot*, "Neither have a beginning, nor an end" (xvii) and he explains that language is no longer a tool of communication (45). Which is exactly what it appears in the play. It seems as if the two acts are taken as a sample of a lifetime and therefore, it is unknown how this waiting process started and how it will end. Moreover, the characters converse using clichés that do not seem to make sense. Look for instance at the part in act one, in which they say:

Estragon: Pale for weariness.

Vladimir: Eh?

Estragon: Of climbing heaven and gazing on the likes of us. (48)

Exchanges of words like these and many others make some of the dialogues of the play ambiguous and confusing. Another mysterious part in the play is the song at the beginning of act two, which apparently seems to be about a dog, but it has a sense of a figurative meaning for something unknown.

Additionally, in act two Vladimir and Estragon admit that they cannot be silent and therefore they say, let us converse (55), which they do, and it appears as if they talk for the sake of passing time and not for the sake of saying anything useful or informative. They go on like that for a while by saying ambiguous things such as:

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves. (56)

The main characters keep going on for a while saying things about how the noise sound, they describe it as a rustle, whisper, and murmur. But the question is, what sound are they talking about? Why does that matter to them? These conversations are ambiguous and make them seem absurd, conversing about things that make no sense.

The play has no coherent idea in the sense that the story is mainly about what the characters do in order to pass time, and also how they confront the meaninglessness of their activities. The main characters converse with fragmented dialogues and meaningless clichés that do not seem to aim to develop the story of the play. There is no progress in the action. The play consists of two acts that differ a little from each other. The setting is bare and dislocated.

Furthermore, another thing that does not seem to make sense is the fact that the main characters devote their lives, coming every day to the same place, waiting the entire day doing nothing but passing time, for a person they hardly know. So, they waste their time for an uncertain purpose. This idea is further explained and demonstrated in the next chapter. Nevertheless, this uncertainty of important factors in the play adds to the absurdity of the characters' lives and their purpose is even more absurd because, if they are not sure of what Godot looks like, then how would they recognize him when he comes? As if the situation is not bizarre enough, Vladimir says, "he should be here" and then he continues saying "he didn't say for sure he [would] come" (13).

By close observation one can see that the characters are uncertain of almost everything, however, the only thing that they are sure of is the idea of waiting and passing time. *Waiting for Godot* does not tell a story, it presents an absurd life in which nothing is certain.

The characters in the play are presented in pairs and that is most likely symbolic because, in John Calder's book *Beckett's Philosophy*, Calder reflects on Beckett's philosophy and discusses his interest in the mind and body and the relation of the two (20) and this makes it possible to assume that there is a symbolic reason for the way the characters are presented. They are presented as if they depend on each other, one person completes the other. Pozzo and Lucky seem to present the slave-master relationship in which both need each other. Pozzo would not be a master without having a slave, and slaves are no slaves without a master. But the

relationship between Vladimir and Estragon is different, they seem to imply an idea about the relationship between the mind and body. Vladimir is like the mind, the sensible part of the human body. Someone that one can hold on to because Vladimir is the only one who confirms why they are at this location. He keeps reminding Estragon about the fact that they have an appointment with Godot. He is the solid point in the play by which the facts are presented. He has a better memory than the other characters in the play. Estragon on the other hand seems to serve the physical part of the human body. He presents the fundamental needs of it, the need for food, sleep, and comfort. In one way or another one can assume that Beckett presented the relationship between the human mind and body in the form of characters, characters that seem to have been stuck together for 50 years, and they cannot leave because they are tied to each other.

Finally, the main characters do whatever they can to fill their time with activities and they confront the boredom and meaninglessness of their lives by doing things that are similar to Camus's suggested ways of confronting the meaninglessness of life, but in some way, they fail in following any of the mentioned ways of adding meaning to life. Worst of all, they do not accept their situation and face it by admitting that Godot is not coming and that this whole appointment is meaningless. Instead, they do absurd things so as to pass time. They neither accept their situation, nor do they do anything useful to change it. In between all that, one can sense the characters longing for an end, not to the process of waiting but an end to life, the only hope they have left is to disappear.

## Chapter Three

The philosophy that discusses the idea of life from a completely pessimistic point of view is Nihilism. According to Nihilism, life is completely meaningless, and therefore it is useless to search for meaning, because there is none to find, and all attempts and motivations are only hopeless. Therefore, based on that, one could realize the reason the main characters failed in adding meaning to their lives built on Camus's explanation of giving meaning to life. None of the previously mentioned ways of adding meaning really worked and gave the main characters' lives meaning. Despite that, one could argue by saying that Vladimir and Estragon's lives are meaningful because they have a purpose which is meeting with Godot and that could be true because as mentioned in Chapter one, the characters have a motivation that makes them come to the same spot every day. However, what makes their motivation unreliable and meaningless is that they are uncertain of their appointment with Godot, and they have no logical reason to meet him. Therefore, this motivation is not trustworthy and besides that, even if this meeting would give the main characters' lives a sort of meaning, then that did not happen in the play and will most unlikely happen at all. These ideas of uncertainty and unreliability of purpose will be further analyzed in this chapter, with the intention to show why the counterargument is wrong and also present facts that will support the idea of the main characters' lives being completely meaningless.

### **The Aspects of Uncertainty in the Play**

The suffering of the characters in the play is the result of uncertainty. Uncertainty of the arrival of Godot, uncertain of whether they should keep on like this or just give up. As Estragon states in act two, "Nothing is certain" (50), which seems to be the best description of the play, in which nothing is certain and one cannot hold a grip on any facts, except that everything is meaningless, even their motivation in life seems to be meaningless because it is full of ambiguity.

The only character that seems to present facts in the play is Vladimir and even he, who is considered to be the more conscious of the two, reveals his uncertainty about knowing Godot. This is shown in the dialogue between the two characters at the end of act two:

Estragon: [...] Are you sure it was [not] him?

Vladimir: Who?

Estragon: Godot.

Vladimir: But who?

Estragon: Pozzo.

Vladimir: Not at all! (Less sure) Not at all! (Still less sure) Not at all! (81)

This type of exchange between Vladimir and Estragon shows how little they know about Godot, so little that they cannot be sure if Pozzo is Godot. Because if Pozzo is Godot, then it would mean that he had come twice, and they did not recognize him. So, the two men have an appointment with a person they do not know and can therefore not recognize even if he comes. In act one, the characters discuss that matter by declaring:

Estragon: [...] We hardly know him.

Vladimir: True... we do [not] know him very well... but all the same...

Estragon: Personally, I would [not] even know him if I saw him. (22)

Moreover, what makes this appointment more unreliable is the fact that they are not sure of the place in which they will meet Godot:

Estragon: (despairingly) Ah [yes] (pause). You [are] sure it was here?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: That we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said by the tree. (13)

This part of the play indicates that they hardly know about the place where they are supposed to meet Godot, by indicating that it is by a tree, then it could be any tree, and the place could be anywhere, and they could be waiting in the wrong place. In addition, what makes it even worse is that they are not sure of the day on which they were supposed to meet him. Ironically, they do not know for sure what day of the week their present day is:

Estragon: You [are] sure it was this evening?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: That we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said Saturday. (Pause.) I think.

Estragon: You think.

Vladimir: I must have made a note of it. [...]

Estragon: But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? [...] Is it rather Sunday? [...] or Monday? [...] or Friday?

Vladimir: It [is] not possible!

Estragon: Or Thursday? (14)

This shows that nothing is certain, and nothing has a real meaning, not the process of waiting, not their motivations to keep going on like this for a half-decade, nor the question of the real existence of Godot. Worst of all in act one, Vladimir says, “He did [not] say for sure he [would] come” (13), which somehow invalidates the whole purpose for which they have devoted their lives. The question is then, what is the aim of this appointment, and why did the main characters spend their lives waiting? This is further explained in the next part of this chapter, demonstrating the meaninglessness of both the aim and also of the main characters’ lives.

## **The Unreliability of the Purpose**

At the beginning of the play, the idea of the arrival of Godot seemed to be the main focus of the play, but then at the end, it appeared that it is not about Godot, nor is it about the appointment with him, this waiting and this purpose is only a cover for something else.

The characters are apparently waiting for Godot but in reality, they are waiting for death, because this appointment is only a way of passing time, just like everything else. This meeting with Godot is only a deceptive motivation that the characters have, all in order to impose meaning on their existence, which is true because as they say in act one:

Estragon: I [am] asking you if we [are] 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? What an idea! No question of it. (Pause.) For the moment. (20)

What this part of the play demonstrates is that the characters are not really tied to Godot, they do not really have to wait for him, and besides, they neither know what he looks like nor are they sure of his name:

Estragon: His name is Godot?

Vladimir: I think so. (20)

So, in other words, Vladimir and Estragon are not tied to this appointment with Godot, and if this meeting is so important to them, then why do they not do anything about it? They could follow the boy and meet Godot instead of waiting for him every day. So, this purpose that keeps them coming to the same spot every day is not based on something important, because as they declare it:

Estragon: What exactly did we ask him for?

Vladimir: Were you not there?

Estragon: I can [not] have been listening.

Vladimir: Oh...nothing very definite. (17)

As demonstrated in this dialogue the characters have not asked Godot for anything specific, and it is not like as if they need to be saved, otherwise, they would have said that they asked him to save them, but they instead say that they did not ask for anything definite means that they do not even know what they want from him. Then, the characters wasted their lives for a purpose that could have been meaningful, but that turned out to be completely meaningless. As a result, the characters suffer, not only because of the appointment with Godot but also because they are bored and want time to pass which in turn makes their lives pass, which is perceived through the dialogues of the characters. Look for instance at the incident when Pozzo declares that “I do [not] seem to be able to depart” and to that Estragon answers “Such is life” (43). These type of words about longing for death further strengthens the idea of waiting for death.

Moreover, Vladimir and Estragon failed in finding meaning in their life, they are struggling because they lack meaning, and it turned out that even their waiting is hopeless because their only purpose in life is waiting and eventually meeting Godot. To this idea, Erikson states that:

“If there is meaning to the play, then it is the fact that human beings cannot live without meaning, ultimate or not, and our suffering is always made worse by life’s apparent meaninglessness. But this, in turn, is made worse by our attempts to give suffering meaning, attempts that always fall short of the suffering itself. The hope for meaning becomes a source of suffering.” (266)

The above-mentioned interpretation of the play highlights the struggle in trying to find meaning in life, and the ultimate failure that follows because, in the end, it appears that there is no meaning to find, therefore as mentioned by Peter Fifield “Waiting for Godot can be read as an examination of existence in a world apparently without meaning” (149).

After all, this chapter has discussed why the purpose the characters have is unreliable. Furthermore, if the characters were really in need of meeting Godot, they could have tried to do something about it instead of wasting a decade waiting for him in the middle of nowhere, but ironically in act one they comment on their waiting by saying “Nothing we can do about it” (22) as if they do not have a choice, but at the same time, they know that they do not have to wait, but since they do not have anything else to do, then they wait. However, based on the concept of the meaning of life presented by both Existentialism and Nihilism, life is meaningless, therefore whatever they do, their life would still be meaningless. But one of the ideas is that one can add a simple meaning by devoting life to do something specific, and this is what the characters did, they devoted their lives to the meeting of Godot, but since they never met him, then their life is still with no meaning.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems to be clear that the play *Waiting for Godot* deals with questions concerning human existence and the way the characters appear and how the play is presented gives a clear idea of the type of life the main characters present.

This idea of life being with no meaning is suggested by the Existentialist and Nihilist theory in which life is basically with no meaning at all, and in this play, in particular, the meaninglessness of it is presented in the play through the repetition of events and the meaninglessness of the main characters' daily routines, which after a long while became a habit. A habit that they describe as a deadener.

Vladimir and Estragon do whatever they can to fill their time with activities and they confront the boredom and meaninglessness of their lives by doing things that are similar to the way Albert Camus explained confronting the meaninglessness of life, but in some way, they fail in following any of the mentioned ways of adding meaning to life. They spend their time doing absurd things for the sake of making time pass. They say that they have an appointment with a person named Godot, but in reality, this appointment is just another way of making time pass and Godot could be more than just a person, this name could stand for anything, and most of all, it seems to stand for death. The main characters are waiting for the end of their time.

After all, they know that their life is meaningless, therefore they struggle trying to make sense of it and they fail every time. One can sense the hopelessness in the air, the longing for an end to their misery. It is uncertain when the whole appointment started, but in one way or another, the final end is definite. One day they began their process of waiting, and one day it will end. One can imagine Vladimir and Estragon waiting by the tree until they die.

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