Why are We Waiting? Habit and the Role of Consciousness in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.
Abstract

The controversial play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett is a play in which nothing but waiting really seems to happen. Throughout the play, the two characters Vladimir and Estragon continue waiting for Godot despite the fact that he never comes. While they are waiting they appear to conduct absurd and meaningless exchanges and games to pass the time. This essay explores the nature of the waiting for the absent character Godot: what is implied by this persistent waiting and what is the result of them doing so? The essay tries to explain the waiting through exploring the ideas of habit. Furthermore, it also deals with existential theories of consciousness and meaning through the ideas of Sartre.

The essay argues that the meaning of the play emerges through the two characters’ act of waiting, and that the seemingly meaningless activities that Vladimir and Estragon perform are highly important as they provide the two characters with their *raison d'être*. The essay also shows that the two characters’ existence is dependent on Godot, because through the acknowledgement that he exists and in the hope that he will come to save them, they create their own rationale for waiting, regardless of it being true or not. Thus Vladimir and Estragon are able to create their meaning by choosing to continue waiting for Godot. They are also able to create this meaning through the conscious interaction between their surroundings and one another by the games they play while waiting. The essay also argues that the waiting is a conscious choice, and that the seemingly unreflective habitual games they play are as well. Furthermore, the choice of waiting is then reflected in the audience by their conscious choice to watch the play and join the character in their waiting for Godot. Thus, Beckett has created a play in which the focus is the experience and meaning of waiting, regardless of whether the one on which we are waiting will come or not.

**Keywords:** Waiting; Meaning; Habit; Sartre; Proust; God; Consciousness
“The condition of man is waiting, and the activity of man is to pass the time while waiting.”

- Normand Berlin

The poet and dramatist Samuel Beckett is one of the most influential authors of the 20th century. His minimalistic works are teeming with dark humour and absurdity and he has become known both as the last modernist and as the first post-modernist.

Numerous articles and critical essays have been written on Beckett’s works. In The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett, Rónán McDonald aptly summarizes some of the most prominent critics who have greatly influenced the field of Beckett studies. Among them, for example Ruby Cohn who has written several articles on the “Beckettian comedy”, and the dark humour present within many of his plays, including Waiting for Godot. Martin Esslin who published the famous The Theatre of the Absurd and Hugh Kenner whose writing has explored the philosophical aspects of Beckett’s works (Mcdonald 118).

Composed between 1948-1949, Waiting for Godot1 is one of Samuel Beckett’s most well-known and controversial plays. The play’s minimalistic setting consists of only a tree by a road where two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for a character called Godot. Throughout the play Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot, and throughout the entire play, Godot never comes. Early in the play Vladimir states that “He didn’t say for sure he’d come”, a comment that foreshadows the possibility and knowledge that he may never come (Godot 16). When asked by Estragon what will happen if he doesn’t come, Vladimir merely states

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1 This will serve as my primary source and all further references to the play come from this source; Samuel Beckett, The Complete Dramatic Works found the works cited list. Henceforth I will refer to this source as Godot only.
that they will simply “Come back tomorrow” (16). It is the two characters’ decision to continue to wait that makes up the main plot of the play. Although they realise at the end of each day that Godot will not come, they still know that they “have to come back tomorrow” (Godot 86). And so it continues throughout the play. Vladimir and Estragon constantly question their reality, and fail to grasp any objective truth; they are always unsure about their surroundings, as well as about the time and the events that have occurred as they have waited. Each day they also fail to remember what they were doing yesterday. They always question things, such as the nature of the tree they wait beside, and if they are waiting in the right place altogether:

ESTRAGON: [despairingly]. Ah! [Pause.] You're sure it was here? VLADIMIR: What? ESTRAGON: That we were to wait. VLADIMIR: He said by the tree. [They look at the tree.] Do you see any others? (Godot 15)

However there is one thing they remain sure about, and that is that they are waiting for Godot; and that if Godot does come, they shall be “saved” (88). Although both Vladimir and Estragon numerous times express the desire to leave, and to stop waiting altogether, they always come to the same conclusion: they cannot, because they’re “waiting for Godot” (Godot 63). At the end of the play it becomes clear that Godot will never come, but Vladimir and Estragon still continue to wait for him and this is effectively what constitutes the dramatic energy in a play where nothing seems to happen.

The Irish literary critic Vivian Mercier once commented that Godot is a play in which “nothing happens, twice” (qtd in Conti 277). This “nothing”, however, is in part the continuous waiting for the absent Godot but it is also the exchanges that happen between Vladimir and Estragon throughout the play. Although it can be perceived like nothing ever occurs in the play, Vladimir and Estragon do in fact wait, and the waiting is what happens. There are also a few characters that actually do come, such as Pozzo, his “slave” Lucky and a boy who works for Godot. Pozzo and Lucky appear once in each act, and they interact with Vladimir and Estragon. The boy comes each night to deliver a message from Godot, saying that “he won’t come this evening but surely tomorrow” (Godot 49). Things do in fact happen, and someone does come to Vladimir and Estragon, but Godot is never one of them.
Beckett has been credited for exploring existential and philosophical ideas in his work, often through the means of comedy and absurdity. Existentialism is present in *Waiting for Godot* as it portrays the seemingly absurd habitual existence of Vladimir and Estragon who always comes back every day to wait for Godot: who does not come and whom they do not seem to really know. Vladimir and Estragon invent language games and have nonsense arguments and discussions; seemingly to merely pass the time as they wait for Godot to come. They play both with each other as well as with Pozzo and Lucky. One such game they usually do is to play with words, and seemingly talk past each other, which Vladimir refers to as “exercises” in this example:

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VLADIMIR: We could do our exercises.
ESTRAGON: Our movements.
VLADIMIR: Our elevations.
ESTRAGON: Our relaxations.
VLADIMIR: Our elongations.
ESTRAGON: Our relaxations.
VLADIMIR: To warm us up.
ESTRAGON: To calm us down
VLADIMIR: Off we go. (Godot 71)
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The games they play can also take the form of a physical exercise such as Estragon’s reoccurring struggle with his boots, which in this example also turn into a language game:

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VLADIMIR: This is becoming really insignificant.
ESTRAGON: Not enough. [Silence.]
VLADIMIR: What about trying them?
ESTRAGON: I’ve tried everything.
VLADIMIR: No, I mean the boots.
ESTRAGON: Would that be a good thing?
VLADIMIR: It’d pass the time. [Estragon hesitates.] I assure you, it’d be an occupation.
ESTRAGON: A relaxation.
VLADIMIR: A recreation.
ESTRAGON: A relaxation.
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*(Godot 64)*

Vladimir and Estragon always conclude that they have successfully “passed the time” after each game is finished, and also after a visit from Pozzo and Lucky. Even before

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2 The ideas from critics such as Cohn, Kenner, Esslin, Calder etc. are mentioned in the introduction.
a game or discussion is started, they comment that it would pass the time, as seen in the example above. After each game or discussion is over, they ask what they are to do now, which always is to wait for Godot. After each game or discussion is played out, Jeffrey Nealon argues that they always refer back to Godot since the waiting for him is the real game: their “metagame” and “metadiscourse” (46). He explains that Godot imposes a metaphysical limit to their gaming, which also becomes a limitation through a spatial metaphor since Vladimir and Estragon cannot leave (46). In fact, when Pozzo and Lucky are about to leave Vladimir and Estragon in act 1, Pozzo comments on this inability to leave as well: “POZZO: I don’t seem to be able to…[Long hesitation]…to depart.” ESTRAGON: Such is life” (Godot 46).

I agree with Nealon, however I would argue that the seemingly absurd and comical exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon can be interpreted as an existential metaphor, and that their habitual lives can be an existential exploration of waiting and meaning. Also, their lives are limited by and dependent on the presence of Godot, and that this is made clear by their continuous waiting. Therefore, although the aspect of absurdity and humour are very prominent in the play—visible for instance in Vladimir and Estragon games—I will argue that Waiting for Godot can be interpreted in existential terms, and that the main focus of the play lies in the two characters’ actual waiting for Godot as their way to create existential meaning.

Although Godot never comes, he might still be the most important character in the play and the most important character for Vladimir and Estragon’s existence. Therefore Godot becomes an important feature to discuss within the essay, as Normand Berlin describes: the question on “Who is Godot” is “the most prodding question in a play filled with questions” (422). Berlin also argues that Waiting for Godot prods the audience to create something out of “nothing” (424). I will argue that this is also what Vladimir and Estragon are doing throughout the play through waiting, and through the games conducted while waiting. They always find something to give them the “impression that [they] exist” (Godot 64). Clearly, the two characters manage to create something out of nothing, as Berlin puts it. Indeed as Vladimir comments, they are “magicians” (64).

Godot’s inability to appear serves as an important feature to discuss within this essay, and more importantly, the reason why Vladimir and Estragon simply continue waiting for him and why they need to play these games to “pass the time” as they are waiting. I will argue that it is the act of waiting that gives Vladimir and
Estragon’s existence meaning. As Berlin so aptly states, “The condition of man is waiting, and the activity of man is to pass the time while waiting.” (424). Waiting also becomes something that the audience experience when viewing the play; because they are waiting for Godot just as much as Vladimir and Estragon do. The nature of the characters’ waiting will be discussed in relation to the idea of habit, and to whether their seemingly habitual existence is a result of a conscious thought and decision or not, i.e. if they have reflected upon their existence. Furthermore, I will investigate the nature of the character Godot, and why it is so important to wait for him. Finally, I will use the existential theories of Sartre to explain how Vladimir and Estragon’s habitual existence of waiting and playing games actually is their tool to cope with and to create meaning with their existence.

The idea of Habit

Beckett’s work has been greatly influenced by the ideas and works of Proust, especially by his idea of habit, which can be found in most of Beckett’s works and most certainly in Waiting for Godot. Proust ideas of habit circulates around the notion that habit is an impediment to knowledge and a means of dulling ones senses, as Beckett describes, it is the “ballast that chains the dog to its vomit.” (Proust 19). Beckett seems to make his characters struggle with this notion within his plays as much as he does himself. This continuous waiting for Godot, and the decision to repeatedly come back to wait might be a result of habit and not of a conscious decision, since it appears that Vladimir and Estragon have been waiting for Godot quite some time. “A habit, from the standpoint of psychology, is a more or less fixed way of thinking, willing, or feeling acquired through previous repetition of a mental experience.” (Andrews 121). Since Vladimir and Estragon have been experiencing this particular event before, they might simply continue to do so because they have always done so. To come back and wait for Godot is in these terms an automated and un-reflexive behaviour, based on the previous experiences of waiting for him. Andrews further explains that habit “lies outside of consciousness” and that it is “the more or less fixed course of consciousness with repeated experiences; the shaping of the familiar consciousness rather than that consciousness itself;” (121-122). This suggests that Vladimir and Estragon are not just waiting out of familiar habit, but that
it is also an unconscious decision based on previous experiences and not a choice. Ulrika Maude explains habit as a form of memory: “Habits formed by repeated actions are amassed in the body; these do not represent the past, they merely act it” (815).³ These memories are not “true” as they are acquired through repetition, and therefore only becomes habit-memory (815). This connection Maude presents between habit and memory might further explain how Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait out of mere habit since the only thing that they are able to remember is that: they are waiting for Godot, that they have been doing so and that they must continue doing so. These memories might be their habit-memories, since they have trouble remembering anything else. As a result, it seems likely that what they end up in is a repetitive unconscious habitual existence, without a particular meaning or will.

However, if this habitual existence Vladimir and Estragon experience each day would be enough for them, they would not be so intent to entertain themselves with language games and discussions as they wait. When they find themselves in need of doing something after concluding yet another game with Pozzo and Lucky, Estragon finds delight in Vladimir’s attempt to start a new discussion:

ESTRAGON: Let's go.
VLADIMIR: We can't.
ESTRAGON: Why not?
VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.
ESTRAGON: [Despairingly.] Ah!
[Pause.]
VLADIMIR: How they've changed!
ESTRAGON: Who?
VLADIMIR: Those two.
ESTRAGON: That's the idea, let's make a little conversation.

(Godot 46-47)

Vladimir and Estragon’s continuous need to entertain themselves to “pass the time” might, as Maude describes it, be because the stimulus—received from their repeated sensation of waiting—gradually diminishes, and therefore provokes a need for some sort of action to maintain it (814). Maude argues, through Ravaisson here, that this action produced however is more of a “tendency” which is irremediably excluded from will or consciousness (814). It also becomes a habit: Their actions become unreflective, which according to Ravaission is the second nature that goes beyond both

³ Maude is quoting Bergson here and is referring to his theories on habit and memory to explain her ideas.
will and consciousness (qtd in Maude 814). In other words, the actions created out of habit are not conscious actions. In view of this idea, Vladimir and Estragon might be simply waiting and conducting their different games and discussions as a result of their habitual waiting for Godot, i.e. their waiting could be seen as an unconscious, unreflective and subsequently meaningless action. Furthermore this seemingly meaningless existence could be the simple explanation of Vladimir and Estragon’s existence and their reason to continue waiting. Maude writes that “a living being which did nothing but live would need no more than this [habitual existence].” (815). In light of this the two tramps should be content with their existence. However, I would argue that there is much more than habit devoid of meaning here as Vladimir and Estragon do reflect upon their lives and realise that they are not happy, because they suffer: “VLADIMIR: This is awful!” (59), “ESTRAGON: I'm in hell!” (69) and “ESTRAGON: I can't go on like this” (87). I would argue that Vladimir and Estragon find relief when they find a new game to conduct—in order to pass the time—because they find comfort in distracting themselves from the pains of waiting, their suffering:

ESTRAGON: [having tried in vain to work it out.] I’m tired!
[Pause] Let’s go.
VLADIMIR: We can’t.
ESTRAGON: Why not?
VLADIMIR: we’re waiting for Godot.
ESTRAGON: Ah! [Pause, Despairing] What’ll we do, what’ll we do!
VLADIMIR: there’s nothing we can do.
ESTRAGON: But I can’t go on like this!
VLADIMIR: would you like a radish?
ESTRAGON: Is that all there is?
VLADIMIR: there are radishes and turnips.
ESTRAGON: Are there no carrots?

(Godot 63)

Here Estragon becomes distracted by the new discussion about vegetables Vladimir initiated, and subsequently Estragon becomes freed from his despair, for the moment at least. Because they acknowledge that they suffer, it not only shows that they are conscious but also that their “habitual” games are a conscious decision.

“As Bergson claims, habit is not enough to explain the human existence although; it may explain the existence of animals and animal life” (Maude 815). We

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4 Quoting Bergson
therefore need something more to explain the existence of Vladimir and Estragon and the nature of their waiting. Maude has recognised that Beckett seem to view habit in negative terms, as an “impediment to knowledge and understanding” (815). I concur with Beckett who writes that “the pernicious devotion to habit paralyses our attention, drugs those handmaidens of perception whose co-operation is not absolutely essential.” (Proust 20). However, I also argue that Beckett acknowledges that habit is necessary: “The fundamental duty of Habit, about which it describes the futile and stupefying arabesques of its supererogations, consists in a perpetual adjustment and readjustment of our organic sensibility to the conditions of its worlds” (Proust 28).

Human beings need habit and in Proust Beckett writes: “If there were no such thing as Habit, Life would of necessity appear delicious to all those whom Death would threaten at every moment, that is to say, to all Mankind.” (29). This idea surfaces also in Godot as Vladimir acknowledges that “Habit is a great deadener” (84). The fact that Vladimir is fully aware of this disproves that he is unconscious and unable to reflect upon their existence. Furthermore, habit is also something that is necessary and not inherently bad just as Beckett himself writes. It may perhaps be a means of distracting oneself from the fear of death or in this case Vladimir and Estragon’s way of distracting themselves from the suffering their waiting for Godot produces. Clearly Beckett also acknowledges the positive implications of habit on human existence, and it seems that he uses habit in both a negative and a positive sense in Godot. I therefore argue that Vladimir and Estragon’s waiting is not a habitual unconscious decision, but on the contrary, it is a conscious choice. Moreover the habitual games they play are not unconscious and meaningless but help them to cope with Godot’s absence.

The Idea of Godot

So, then, what is the identity of this mysterious character “Godot”, and why is it so important to wait for him? The physical absence of Godot might suggest that he attains another abstract or spiritual form and that they are therefore not waiting for an actual person. As Alain Robbe-Grillet has suggested, the interpretations and attempts to explain what Godot is, or symbolises are numerous (qtd in Conti 279). Perhaps to the many biblical allusions within the play may be seen to imply that Godot is symbol for God. Clearly, Beckett’s works are filled with Christian symbols and motifs. Godot is for example described with as having white beard, a commonly perceived
characteristic of God (*Godot* 85-86). Mary Bryden has acknowledged Beckett’s many biblical allusions as a result of a “long fascination with […] Beckett’s religious landscape,” and has dedicated an entire book to this subject in which she discusses the “idea of God” (1). With Bryden I believe that it is possible explore the idea that Godot may be seen to represent God in the play; although Beckett himself has stated that if he had meant God, he would have written so (McDonald 30). The play was written in the aftermath of the Second World War, which Beckett experienced “first hand” which might explain the dystopian landscape in which the play is set (McDonald 14).

Lukács claims that Beckett’s work is “tied to an account of the catastrophic fate of civilisation after the war” (qtd in Conti 280). Possibly, it is the sense of disillusionment that Beckett wants to portray in the play through creating an allegory of people’s sense of disenchantment of the meaning of life and God after the war. This sense of meaninglessness is represented by Vladimir and Estragon’s waiting for a “Godlike” figure which never comes to “save” them. In a sense, it gives the impression that there is no God, because in the play there is no Godot.

Although Godot never appears to save Vladimir and Estragon, they still persist with their waiting for him. The waiting is—as previously stated—the only thing that they are certain about, and the only thing which they are consistent with. This might suggest that the meaning, and the point of them coming back each day, lies in the act of waiting rather than the failure of meeting the—perhaps Godlike—Godot. Norma Kroll argues that *Waiting for Godot* is a play which has a “universe plagued by disjunctions, a universe which serves as evidence that God's detachment has become so extreme that he seems virtually powerless.”(532) This can be seen for example, in the dialogue. As Estragon starts to eat a carrot, he suddenly remembers a question he wanted to ask Vladimir, namely if they are tied to Godot (*Godot* 21-22). This idea of being “ti-ed” could be seen to symbolise their devotion and connection to Godot. The tie represents their spiritual bond with him, partly because they perhaps might be religious believers and partly because they, as humans, are his created children according to the bible. Although Estragon states that they are not at first, he still has to ask Vladimir. Estragon changes his formulation to “Ti-ed”, separating the word into two parts, further indicating that the tie—bond—might be separated. However this time it is held together very lightly, grammatically by a thin dash; by their minds it is hold together by their uncertainty, illustrated by Vladimir’s response. To him, there is “no question” that they are tied to Godot (22). I agree with Kroll, that
the idea of their relationship is both figurative and literal in this sense, and that it has a “binding force” (539). However, this tie they speak of is only there “for the moment”, which indicates a temporal state, which might change. This shows a conscious realisation that they are in fact in need of Godot—being tied to him—and that this connection is uncertain. Because they cannot know for sure what his appearance or abandonment might result in.

In *Samuel Beckett and The Idea of God*, Bryden claims, that Beckett is more prone to dismissing certain characteristics of God rather than to dismiss his existence entirely within his works (125). I agree that this is also applicable in *Godot* since the interpretation and possibility of a God is present. Albeit there are certain characteristics of God that Godot seems to be lacking. According to A . C. Grayling, Godot is not an “interested God” who personally interacts with his subjects (qtd in Kroll 531). When Vladimir and Estragon speak to the Boy—who works for Godot—they ask what Godot does exactly, to which he responds with “nothing” (85). Bryden continues to comment on Simone Weils writing on the theology of waiting: that waiting “is not a matter of passivity but of attentiveness” (Bryden 128). I agree with Bryden here because despite Godot’s “ungodliness” and passiveness, Vladimir and Estragon persist in waiting for him. They wait attentively for him; by observing that he did not come and also that they must continue to wait for him. Weils explains this by arguing that one can only direct and change one’s gaze towards God, not to look for him, as he is the one who must look for us. (129). Perhaps this might indicate that God only needs to look upon us. This is where Bryden so aptly points out that God, within the works of Beckett, fails to do just this for his characters: “A look may be all that is required, but a repeated look towards God without assurance of an answering one requires a strong and consistent faith” (130).

This faith might be exactly the thing that makes Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot: the realisation that they need him regardless, and therefore believe in his existence whatever it may be. They need to be looked upon, or at least believe that they are. It is not the question of what he is, but rather the acknowledgment that he exists. When playing yet another game, this time of a humoristic name calling, Vladimir and Estragon continues to jump around from one foot to the other. Vladimir insists that Estragon should “do the tree”, and when he does he staggers about on one leg. At this moment Estragon asks: “Do you think God sees me?” (*Godot* 71). Vladimir answer by instructing that: “You must close your eyes” (71). This comment
might just be another one of their games or a significantly insightful realisation of Vladimir that it is equally if not more important to perceive as it is to observe Godot in this sense. It also shows that two characters are reflecting on, and are aware of, the significance of their actions: they are playing games but their games are not nonsensical or without purpose. At this point in the play, Pozzo and Lucky arrives again, but ironically, Pozzo, whom they previously mistook for Godot is now blind and cannot see them: “VLADIMIR: do you not recognize us? POZZO: I am blind” (Godot 79). When Pozzo has left they still are unsure whether it really was Godot or not, or whether he actually saw them: “VLADIMIR: it seemed to me he saw us”, ESTRAGON: are you sure it wasn’t [Godot]?” (84). In context of these examples, I agree with Kroll when she comments that neither of the two tramps are sure that the “sustaining observer is God” however they nonetheless know that this “cosmic observer” is vital (534). Vladimir states in his famous soliloquy: “At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he known nothing, let him sleep on.” (Godot 84—85). This statement not only show that he is convinced that he is observed by “someone”, this also reflects that the audience share in the experience of waiting as well, and that they might serve the function of “observers” in this sense. Clearly, the plays itself, much like the two characters in the play, depend on the idea of a “sustaining observer”. Through these exchanges between Vladimir, Estragon and Pozzo it shows that the identity of Godot or his “real” ability or divinity is not as important as his—perceived—existence and observation.

Much like habit, their look upon (God)ot becomes a familiarity of conduct as Vladimir and Estragon cry out to him several times : “God have pity on me!”(Godot 71). “Cursing provides a kind of continuity of engagement.” Bryden argues, and although Vladimir and Estragon do not curse Godot, they acknowledge that he exists by crying out to him and therefore achieve this continuity of engagement (Bryden 131). By crying out to him they verify to themselves that he exists and that he is indeed observing them. It becomes part of their comforting routine much like their games. In essence, it is the continuous waiting for Godot to come that gives them a continuity of engagement—or purpose if you will—which shows that they need him regardless of his identity, divinity or ability.

As I have argued earlier, Vladimir and Estragon need their numbing habitual games in order to lessen the suffering of waiting. Moreover I argue that the suffering is in part caused by the realisation that they need Godot and that they do not know if
he will come or not. As Kroll so aptly puts it “their destiny ultimately depends on the possibility of being seen by Godot.” (534). If they are being seen by Godot is something that they cannot know or be sure of. Kroll has recognised that Beckett has described this suffering of waiting when analysing one of Proust’s characters called Albertine, in the novel Albertine disparue (533). Beckett has described her as the one "who has promised to come and who does not come" which is quite obviously similar to Godot, and her failure to come creates an “irritation” and a “moral anguish” within those who wait for her (Proust 50). However, Beckett means that they wait for Albertine not with their minds or ears, but with their hearts, which is what I would argue is exactly what Vladimir and Estragon are doing with Godot. They cannot see or hear Godot, yet they believe that he is there.

The statement that he gets used to “the muck” as he goes along might indicate that Vladimir gets used to the idea of being tied to Godot and not knowing whether he exists or if he is coming (Godot 22). He might simply be satisfied with their continuous engagement his perceived existence enables. In the end both Estragon and Vladimir agree that there is no use struggling against this predicament because “the essential doesn’t change.” (22). They are what they are. That which is essential to them might simply be that they know that they need Godot and that they must wait for him regardless of whether he comes or not. The situation strongly suggests that it is neither the identity of Godot, nor his absence that is important for them; it is mainly that he is perceived to exist, that they believe that he is observing them. The uncertainty of whether Godot or “God” comes to give them their salvation or not, the answer itself is seems less important and less significant to them as the essentiality of them waiting for him.

The idea of waiting

Vladimir and Estragon are faithfully waiting for Godot, and finds it essential to wait for him regardless of his identity or if he will come or not. They find comfort in the games they play while they are waiting, as a distraction from the suffering their uncertain waiting causes. When they find a game to play, they are relieved. Vladimir discovers Lucky’s hat, and a long game of hat switching ensues he states that “Now our troubles are over” (Godot 66—67). The games therefore seem to keep them occupied and relatively happy. As I have argued the meaning of existence is found
through waiting for Godot, and is expressed in their games as they are waiting. But how do they create this meaning, and are they conscious of this?

In order to establish that waiting gives them meaning; one must first explore how meaning is created. In Sartrean existentialist terms, human beings can create mental representations of things, but the consciousness itself is nothing; it simply is “for-itself”. By contrast, objects and things lack consciousness and we can determine only that it is “in-itself” (Sartre 800). However consciousness is as Sartre explains, always conscious of something, and it is through the interaction between the “for-itself” and the “in-itself” and subsequently “for-others” that humans are able to create their reality and meaning (800). According to Sartre there are also two kinds of consciousness: the reflective and the unreflective—the latter only present in consciousness of objects without knowledge. The reflective consciousness is how the consciousness tries to become something: the “for-itself” is in order to be to itself what it is.” (Sartre 806). Vladimir seems to be the one who represents the consciousness of the “for-itself” most clearly, as he is the one who is able to remember—although very limited—things; he is the one who notices changes in the things around them. He is the one who for instance notices that the tree by which they are waiting has grown leaves, to which Estragon comments “I see nothing” (Godot 61). Estragon on the other hand, then, is the consciousness which is more connected to the “in-itself”. He is unable to “see”, and never remembers previous events or things, nor does he really care: “VIADIMIR: Do you not remember?” “ESTRAGON: I’m tired” (61). However, it is through the help of Vladimir that he is able to remember. By Vladimir urging him to “Try and remember.” he ultimately does: “[With assurance] Yes, now I remember” (61). Therefore Estragon’s consciousness is also “for-itself” through “for-others” i.e. Vladimir.

Lance St. John Butler explains that freedom becomes a fundamental part of this explanations, as I (the “for itself”) can choose what I will do after the motives and desires (i.e. the interactions between the “in itself”) have been taken into account (76). In short, one chooses what values, beliefs and actions one will have and take, and therefore the choices will “confer value” according to Sartre; the self is therefore created, and becomes a “foundation of values” (Butler 76). In context of these theories, I would argue that both Vladimir and Estragon are the knowers who perceive their world, not simply mindlessly being by itself, “in-itself”, but reach a state of being by their consciousness of the objects around them. At one point in the play
Vladimir and Estragon discuss why Estragon has thrown his boots away, and why—as they found them again—they are not the same boots according to Estragon: Vladimir reflects briefly and comes to the conclusion that “Someone came and took yours and left you his.” (Godot 63). Estragon accepts this explanation and with the help of Vladimir yet again, puts them on. This serves as a perfect example of their conscious interactions with their surroundings, and how they are able to explain their existence through it. Regardless if the explanations Vladimir presented shows the truth about whether the boots where switched or not or, again, if Godot really exist or not, the important thing is that they believe it is so. After these explanations have been made they choose what to do with them i.e. putting the shoes on and continuing the waiting for Godot. Therefore the choice means something. Through the interaction between objects and also one another, Vladimir and Estragon create a foundation of values, a self, by choosing their actions and beliefs, i.e. choosing to continue to wait for Godot and to play games with each other. Through their choices they have therefore conferred value, which is meaning. And it is through the awareness of the existence of Godot, and that they need him that they are able to create this meaning: because without Godot, there would be no one for them to wait on and subsequently no meaning which they can create by their waiting.

As stated earlier, man’s consciousness is nothingness, and this consciousness is free as it is always able to choose. Sartre explains that this freedom is not a simple quality; it is his very being (803). As the consciousness and the self it creates is always dependent on choices, it is inherently free and unbound. Butler argues that one creates oneself by choosing between ones possibilities regardless of the motives because as he states: “if the motive determined the action I would not be free” (88). This means that one effectively and constantly shape and (re)create oneself by choosing to do or be certain things or not i.e. choosing to smoke or not: choosing to become a smoker or a non-smoker. Vladimir and Estragon are constantly faced with situations in which they must choose something; the most significant choice being to stay and wait for Godot. Yet Vladimir and Estragon do have the possibility to leave, and to stop waiting for Godot. They should be free to make this choice, but they simply cannot. They know, they are conscious, of the possibility that Godot will come and save them, yet this is only a possibility and this is why they suffer. It creates anguish according to Sartre (68). This anguish is the knowledge they must make a choice and that this choice will have consequences. Butler explains that although man
has a freedom of choice it “may or may not coincide with his freedom of obtaining” (77). They can choose to wait for his salvation, which does not necessarily mean that they can get it, and they know it. They can reflect upon the possibility of Godot’s salvation, and equally of all other possibilities, perhaps that of abandonment. They can therefore choose to wait for him to come and provide this salvation, but it is still only a possibility. Sartre explains that possibilities—like the one Vladimir and Estragon face—are “not sufficiently effective” (68). Yet they seem to decide that this wait is the better alternative. Vladimir and Estragon are able to reflect upon their existence and therefore feel anguish. Sartre writes that one feels “anguish in the face of the future”, since it has only “an undetermined future to offer” (68–69). Just as Vladimir and Estragon’s future, it is also undetermined. Vladimir and Estragon might therefore use these distracting games not only to create meaning but also to escape this anguish. In this example Vladimir and Estragon are once again trying to come up with something to do, when their previous language game has ended:

Vladimir: No no! [He reflects.] We could start all over again perhaps.
Estragon: That should be easy.
Vladimir: It's the start that's difficult.
Estragon: You can start from anything.
Vladimir: Yes, but you have to decide.
Estragon: True.
[Silence.]
Vladimir: Help me!
Estragon: I'm trying.
[Silence.]
Vladimir: When you seek you hear.
Estragon: You do.
Vladimir: That prevents you from finding.
Estragon: It does.
Vladimir: That prevents you from thinking.
Estragon: You think all the same.
Vladimir: No no, it's impossible.
Estragon: That's the idea, let's contradict each another.

(Godot 59)

Vladimir states that they could start “all over again” when initiating the start of a new game. This might simply mean the start of a new game, or maybe the start of a new self, a new set of values: a new meaning. Estragon realises that this game, this questioning, is the “idea” itself; the point of the games that is. This game creates meaning and prevents them from “thinking” and “finding”. Thinking and finding
might in this sense allude to the reflection and realisation of the undetermined and only possible future they have. This is what shapes their suffering. This example also shows that Vladimir and Estragon does not have what Sartre explains as “bad faith”. Bad faith is the result of a conscious “for-itself” being who tries to escape the responsibilities of freedom, and tries to become an object of “in-itself” who refuses to acknowledge his freedom (Sartre 800). It is simply impossible for a being of “for-itself” to become an object since we are conscious; therefore it becomes a lie (800).

Through the exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon, they are able to distract themselves from anguish of their choices, but still avoid “bad faith” as they do not deny them. They refrain from becoming mere “objects of waiting” by being conscious of their choice; the distractions are merely there to help them cope with the choice of waiting for Godot—and all the unknown consequences thereof—and not to deny its implications.

Although Vladimir and Estragon consciously choose what to do and what to be, and subsequently create meaning through the waiting for Godot, they might not be aware what they have obtained themselves. This is why they repeatedly need to affirm their need for Godot. Butler explains that the self concludes everything that is about oneself, that “happiness is what “I” am feeling” (88). Vladimir and Estragon say that they are happy and so they therefore become happy (Godot 56). They can therefore conclude that the “I” is happy. They then also conclude what to do now that they are happy, which is to continue waiting for Godot. Waiting, then, seems to be an important factor to the creation of meaning and self.

Vladimir asks Estragon several times if they are to hang themselves and therefore one might argue that they once again make a choice which creates self and meaning (Godot 18). But here lies a paradox, because they seem as unable to hang themselves just as they are unable to stop waiting for Godot. I agree with Butler as he argues that Beckett illustrates mans “condemnation to freedom” by the characters inability to hang themselves (96). Vladimir and Estragon have created a reality, self and a world by their choices; a world with a specific set of rules which they now cannot overthrow (96). One cannot choose to not to choose, which their death would result in: a state of “choiceless oblivion” (96). Just as in their denial of “bad faith”, they cannot renounce their freedom of choice, they cannot become objects. Although in real life human beings choose to commit suicide, to Vladimir and Estragon, this is not an option. Their reality and the specific rules that delimit it—waiting for Godot—
are much like the ones Nealon describes: it is a static, universal metagame imposed by
the “grand narrative” of Godot, which they cannot transgress or disrupt (46). Vladimir
and Estragon’s existence and meaning are dependent on the perceived presence of
Godot. They are conscious of his existence and their need of him and this realisation
cannot be undone, it cannot be un-thought. Their inability to hang themselves as well
as their inability to stop waiting for Godot, illustrates the idea that to stop waiting for
Godot might be the same thing for them as to simply die. That it is no option
whatoever. The reality of Godot, and the waiting for him enables the foundation in
which their consciousness, self and meaning can exist. They simply cannot overthrow
their reality.

In conclusion, there is indeed a lot of waiting within the play Waiting for
Godot. This waiting, although it could be seen to be an unconscious mindless waiting
created out of habit within a godless universe, it is not. Although habit plays a major
part within the play, through the repeated actions and activities of Vladimir and
Estragon, it is neither unconscious nor mindless; but reveal how Vladimir and
Estragon not only actively chooses to wait for Godot but also that this is the entire
point of their existence and meaning. Without (God)ot’s presence, real or perceived,
divine or not, there would be no reality or foundation on which to build the symbolic
house of meaning upon. In Sartre’s terms, to choose to stop waiting for Godot would
be the equivalent of choosing to live without living, being without being, which is
impossible. And because they know that this is impossible, they prove through their
denial of bad faith that they are conscious of their choice and existence. This
prolonged waiting, which happens throughout the play, leaves many irritated and
frustrated. It had been said that it is play in which little or nothing happens, and it
seems as many who watches the play simply wait for the whole play to “really” begin.
The essence of the play, much like with Vladimir and Estragon’s existence, might lie
in the experience of waiting; it is not merely a play in which we wait for something to
happen. Beckett might want to make the audience of his play experience the same
waiting as Vladimir and Estragon do; because the audience has, just as Vladimir and
Estragon, chosen to come and wait for Godot. In a sense, Beckett has therefore
created a metaphysical theatrical experience in which the audience experience the
same anguish of a choice of waiting as the characters of the play. This theatrical
experience is not only a play about waiting for someone that does not come: Beckett
has created a play about the creation of meaning.
Works Cited


