

Why live today when
you may die
tomorrow?



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To existentialist writers, the universe is a foreign and indifferent place. Every aspect of creation, including the universe itself, is pitted against the individual. Existence is meaningless and oblivion both before birth and after death-save for the fact that great suffering and anguish mark the plight in between these ends. Samuel Beckett, an individual born in an era of such beliefs explores the ever-excoriating question: In a world such as this, what is the point in living? History of the Play and the School of Thought

En Attendant Godot, translated to Waiting for Godot, is widely considered a critical work of Absurdist literature and one of Beckett's more famous pieces. Originally penned in French during the late 1940s, Beckett himself later translated the play into English. Met with widespread controversy because of its seemingly illogical and irrational themes, it later gained popularity by word of mouth. The Absurd is a term applied to the theory that human beings live in meaningless isolation in an indifferent universe. Many of its characteristics stem from the philosophical base known as existentialism, which views humans as moving from the nothingness from whence they came to the nothingness in which they will end through an existence marked by anguish and absurdity. Furthermore, literature considered to be a part of the Theater of the Absurd implies that its theatrical content is meant to be irrational. The purpose of this irrationality and the movement on the whole is to forcibly abolish the concepts of " dramatic progression, direction and resolution" while the " characters undergo little or no change, dialogue contradicts actions, and events follow no logical order" (Fiero 74).

Additionally, it strives to drive a wedge between the intellect and the body, though in turn recognizing that one could not survive without the other.

ThesisBeckett wrote this play with the glaring intent of creating a world in

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which metaphorical, theological, and practical matters of existence come crashing into a small two-act foray that examines the purpose of living in a universe where nothing is done and nothing can be done. Because *Waiting for Godot* is a widely acclaimed existentialist play, it is important to extract the aspects that make it such in order to argue that Beckett does in fact contradict this supposed "meaninglessness of life." First, Beckett creates a world that seems to be markedly indifferent, as best exemplified in the stasis of events and the prevailing sense of futility that envelopes the characters. Additionally, the human condition is notably laborious and troublesome, best delineated through the characters' daily trials and tribulations. Intriguingly, Beckett also adds a slight twist to this depressing atmosphere that yields Vladimir and Estragon's *raison d'être*. Although Beckett generates a world that is so indifferent and a struggle to be so insurmountable, Vladimir and Estragon—the blatant poster children of the human race—somehow find hope that enables them to "keep on keeping on." Indifferent Universe

Throughout the course of the play, Beckett develops a mentality that seems to transcend the stage and represent the world at large. He creates this perception of the universe both directly and indirectly—ranging from the subtleties of the setting, to the direct commentaries in the dialogue, to the pervasive lack of recognition and identity. The first aspect that is blatantly apparent is the sparsely adorned stage and seldom use of props. In the stage directions, there is no mention of these features except for the barren tree. The tree has no leaves, exemplifying the overbearing theme of indifference and starkness. This tree serves as a symbol for the "lack of hope and beauty in Beckett's nightmarish design" (Kermode 170). Moreover, as mentioned by the characters themselves throughout their dialogue, "nothing happens,

nobody comes, nobody goes" (Beckett 27). They remain, these " shiftless tramps," still awaiting the coming of their great savior Godot (Mauriac 75). Until he arrives and gives their lives meaning, they are destined to linger in a sort of purgatory-neither saved nor damned. " Nothing can be done" to rectify the situation because their very purpose on stage and in life is to await the arrival of the famed Godot-a character over whom they have no control (Beckett 14). Unbeknownst to the characters, but quite evident to the audience, Godot has never and will never arrive. Therefore, life has never and will never change. There is an overwhelming air of stasis and " life becomes monotonous and life itself a habit" (Wellwarth 39). Their actions and interactions have become so routine that they dwell in the same meaningless banter they have carried on for the last half a century, proclaiming that " habit is a great deadener" (Beckett 42, 58). Because Godot shows no intention of ever coming, " the ultimate is meaningless, then the intermediate is meaningless as well" (Wellwarth 50). More symbolic than both the setting and dialogue is Beckett's use of the absence of recognition and identity. Without having a defined identity and being associated with that identity through recognition, people cease to have an effect on the world. Once they have an identity, the universe ceases to be so indifferent-after all, when an individual is able to impact the cosmos, the world is " no longer so foreign and apathetic" because it possesses a part of that person (Gordon 43). In Beckett's world, there is a constant search for self: Estragon calls himself Adam, Pozzo is mistaken for Godot, and neither the small boy nor Pozzo remember Vladimir and Estragon from the previous day (Beckett 25, 15, 32, 56). Because the characters' existences do not develop from day to day, they seem to subsist in a world that begins and ends in nothingness.

Essentially, the world and all of its creation is indifferent to the plight of these “playthings of eternity” (Abel 83). Cruel Universe Beyond living in a world that is unconcerned with them, Vladimir and Estragon serve as allegorical beings that muddle through the anguish of the human condition. They are no longer characters but “they transcend the stage to become mirrors of our own meandering experiences” (Mauriac 81). From the most seemingly simplistic daily routine to an overwhelming sense of struggle, Vladimir and Estragon attest to the difficulty of enduring in an existential world. Both mornings in the play are met with Estragon gathering himself together after having been beaten the previous night. Neither the assailants nor the reason for the attack are revealed, simply that he is left in a ditch to die (Beckett 7). This signifies that destiny dictates that Estragon will be “beaten the next night, as well as the night after that, in an endless cycle”—his fate is cruel and inescapable (Kermode 169). Similarly, Estragon’s toil to remove his boots implies that even the most inane challenges wear on the mortal soul (Beckett 7). He becomes fatigued with the effort and cries that this “is too much for one man to bear” (Beckett 7). Vladimir makes a poignant comment that this scenario is quite indicative of human nature, “blaming on his boots the faults of his feet” (Beckett 8). Humanity is inherently flawed and destined to suffer the pangs of daily life. Furthermore, Pozzo’s enslavement of Lucky exhibits humanity’s proclivity towards cruelty against one another. Lucky is dragged about throughout all of eternity by a leash that chafes his neck, held by a man who will keep him so long as he is found useful (Beckett 18). Slavery in literature is by far one of the “most symbolic instances of human suffering,” not only because the loss of freedom is tragic but also because its history is based in fact (Gordon 103).

To be subjected to such treatment is dehumanizing, torturous and real. Although the leash that binds Lucky is literal, there is often some sort of metaphorical shackle that restricts people from attaining their full potential, be it socially, financially, or racially inflicted. These chains are the foundation of human struggle because often times they appear to be breakable, when in the harshness of reality they are not. While *Waiting for Godot* places great focus on the act of suffering, its major philosophical underpinnings rely upon the nature and mentality of suffering. The characters are all too aware of their predicament and subsequent anguish, as revealed in their speech. Estragon, for example, feels as though “ all [his] lousy life [he’s] crawled about in the mud,” having little more consequence or benefit than a base creature (Beckett 39). Such images as “ crawling” and filth indicate that Estragon labors to extract himself from this vile existence but that effort is found futile-he will forever remain in the muck. As if the repetitiveness of the daily life is not torturous alone, the events themselves are grounded in turmoil and strife. And Then There is Hope Amidst a world so embroiled in apathy and hatred, what is the purpose of existence? How can a body stand to live day in and day out when all that he or she knows is suffering? Beckett, an atheistic existentialist, examines these burning questions and attempts to address them through small hints throughout the play. At first glance, yes, Vladimir, Estragon and the others seem to live in a world of inconsequence and human suffering-but, with a careful look closer, their lives seem to have meaning and their actions tend not to be so irrational. There seems to be a prevailing theme of hope, represented by the once-barren tree, the desire for companionship, the faith in salvation, the desire to serve a purpose and to exist beyond self and mortality. The tree that served as a barren gallows in

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the first act springs forth and “ is covered with leaves” (Beckett 42). This birth of nature breeds a sign of new hope. Depicting an image rooted in Christian doctrine, “ that which was thought to be dead has arisen” to new life (Hughes 26). Moreover, Vladimir and Estragon become closer friends and confidantes because of all the time and trust they have invested in one another. During the scene in which they discuss committing suicide, Estragon claims that Vladimir should go first because he is heavier, reasoning that should Estragon go first and kill himself and Vladimir attempt to go second and break the bough, Vladimir would be left to wander about all of eternity alone (Beckett 12). Although there is often talk of leaving one another to pursue a better life alone, neither can bring himself to leave because they serve as each other’s strength and support. When all is silent, “ it’s the heart” that remains (Beckett 30). Companionship is a highly recognizable form of hope. Although the audience senses that Godot will never arrive, Vladimir and Estragon cling to their faith in salvation. In their discussions of the Bible, one particularly critical passage is mentioned-the fact that Luke is the only Gospel writer to include an excerpt about the thief being saved during the crucifixion (Beckett 8). Vladimir clings to this belief, recognizing that despite the fact that a mere “ fourth of the writers mention this sinner and of this, only half of the sinners are actually saved,” it still serves as a “ reasonable percentage” (Gordon 19, Beckett 8). Nevertheless, Vladimir and Estragon are faced with a daunting task of living day to day. They often come close to losing all of their hope: Estragon: I can’t go on like this. Vladimir: That’s what you think...We’ll hang ourselves tomorrow. Unless Godot comes. Estragon: And if he comes? Vladimir: We’ll be saved (Beckett 60). After all of their doubts and temptations, these characters are resolute

to wait for Godot “ until he comes” (Beckett 10). Although they cannot be certain that salvation exists, they choose to focus on the fact that they cannot be certain that it does not exist. Some may call it naiveté; others call it faith. A fourth reason that Vladimir and Estragon find reasons to live is that they desire to serve purpose. Psychological analysis reveals that “ the human creature...is continuously compelled toward purposeful activity,” regardless if that activity is expected to yield a beneficial result (Gordon 66). Throughout the play, Vladimir seems to have a heightened awareness of his call to duty as well as the potential futility of his vocation: “ All mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us” (Beckett 51). These two vagabonds may seem to banter back and forth over meaningless matters, but their conversations truly have meaning because “ questioning and expectation do give life dignity” (Barrett 84). Their determination to question and evaluate their condition, however hopeless it appears, is a key to their reason for existing. Fifth and finally, the fear of mortality and the desire to exist beyond oneself is another compelling force that inspires Vladimir and Estragon live until the following day. They crave to “ step beyond their temporal phase and attain an ever-lastingness” (Gordon 142). Although they encounter many setbacks in their discourses with the other characters through lack of recognition, they “ always find something...to give [them] the impression [they] exist,” which happens to be Estragon’s boots left onstage from the previous night (Beckett 44). Perhaps most importantly, the action (or rather inaction) that proves to be most indicative of their undying hope is that after each day’s trials, Vladimir closes the scene by saying, “ Let’s go,” paired with the stage direction that states “

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They do not move" (Beckett 35, 60). They struggle through doubt, violence, and monotony, but each day they remain resolute to believe that the following day will prove to be different. Conclusion Vladimir and Estragon seem to be stuck in the same general sequence of events. Each morning Estragon struggles to gather himself from the beatings, they encounter the same three people, and witness similar sequences of events (Godot's absence). Regardless of the design of the indifferent cosmos and the cruelty of the human condition, Vladimir and Estragon manage to discover a reason to survive in each other's companionship, hope for salvation, and the desire to serve a purpose and exist beyond mortality. Many people struggle with the question of why they exist. Without an answer, facing the possibility that existence is in fact meaningless, and knowing that the body is mortal, we long to affirm our existence by impacting the world in some meaningful way. We want to live on in memory because we cannot live on in body. This desire for legacy may be the main reason that atheistic existentialists continue living from day to day-the reason that they write and create, the reason that Vladimir, Estragon, Beckett himself, and many of us keep going in an unknowable world. Works Cited Abel, Lionel. " Beckett and Metatheatre." *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (1963): 83-5. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Riley, Carolyn and Barbara Harte. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1974. Barrett, William. " They Also Serve." *The Times Literary Supplement* No. 2815 (10 February 1956): 84. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Matuz, Roger. Vol. 57. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1990. Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press, 1954. Fiero, Gloria K. " Theater of the Absurd." *The Humanistic Tradition*. 4th ed. Vol. 6. Boston: McGraw Hill Companies, 2002. 74. Gordon, <https://assignbuster.com/why-live-today-when-you-may-die-tomorrow/>

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