

This one is enough  
for you?: vladimir and  
estragon as figures of  
the despair of p...

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“ We can always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?”[1] Samuel Beckett’s character Estragon asks his friend Vladimir in Beckett’s tragicomedy, *Waiting for Godot*. This postmodernist play has provoked an enormous amount of analysis, commentary, and criticism since its first performance in 1953. Intellectuals have not ceased trying to interpret Beckett’s intentions in creating such an obscure and disconcerting “ story” if one could even go so far as to call it that. The confrontations regarding the entities of self and existence that arise from such a work elicits a demand for further understanding that stems from each individual’s quest for truth. However Beckett has been notoriously silent to all inquiries on the subject matter behind his work. He has said, “ My work is a matter of fundamental sounds made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin.”[2]

Martin Esslin delves into Beckett and his concept of art and this very rejection of applying specific meaning to his work. He says, “[Beckett’s literary creations]- through their very uncompromising concentration on existential experience, also claim attention as human documents of great importance; for they constitute an exploration, on a hitherto almost unprecedented scale, of the nature of one human being’s mode of existing, and thereby into the nature of human existence itself.” [3] Esslin argues that because Beckett denies the observer a pre-existing set of concepts or ideas to his works, that they “ constitute the culmination of existential thought itself.”[4] Thus countless works today can be found associating Beckett with

the existentialist philosophers like Jean Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, and many more. However, this essay focuses in on Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and the ways it parallels Albert Camus' specific philosophy of absurdism as described in his essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus" and argues that Beckett's depiction of existence illustrates the consequences of failing to reach fulfillment through acceptance and revolt in such an existence as Camus describes.

To best illustrate the parallels between these texts, we must begin with a discussion of *Waiting for Godot*'s immediate association with the absurd. The play and Samuel Beckett himself both come to the forefront of most discussions involving what is today known as the "Theatre of the Absurd." The term came into use as a result of Martin Esslin's 1962 book by the same title, in which Esslin defines its purpose: "Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought." [5] The term is used less to describe a movement or a genre than a collective of post- World War II writers creating extremely unconventional drama to depict the existential dilemmas of the time, specifically the absurdist view of existence proposed by Albert Camus. In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus picks up where existential philosophy leaves off. In his acknowledgement of a godless universe, the reality that existence precedes essence, and that life has no objective meaning, he claims that existence is inherently absurd, and that this is the only reconcilable truth that man can cling to. The absurdity, he deduces, stems

from “ the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.”[6] This longing for clarity, understanding, and unity is one that Camus claims is inherent to human existence, and he refers to it as “ nostalgia.” The truth that man must exist in a world without reason, without understanding, and without hope is truly absurd.

Beckett’s depiction of the world itself through the voices and actions of the characters Estragon and Vladimir is indicative of the world’s irrationality and failure to satisfy man’s desires and needs. Camus says, “ The mind’s deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man’s unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity.”[7] The absurd reality is that the world cannot be this for us. The world is inherently disassociated from man, inhuman, and will forever be beyond the scope of man’s understanding or comprehension. As previously mentioned, it is the confluence of this unintelligibility and man’s desire for understanding of it that is the very essence of absurdity. Beckett’s created universe of purposeless acts, repetitive dialogue that consistently negates itself, disjointed time, and short memories lacks all elements of comprehensible reality. There is a lack of any objective conclusion or truth to much of anything, contributing to the sense of anxiety and dissonance that results from the play’s overarching theme of eternal waiting and suspension. The tension and dissatisfaction of the characters existing in this environment is apparent. After Estragon has “ despairingly” awoken from his dreaming,

Vladimir protests loudly for him not to share what he dreamt. Estragon, “gesturing to the universe” as Beckett includes in the stage directions, replies: “ This one is enough for you?”[8] Throughout the play Estragon and Vladimir both make outbursts such as, “ I can’t go on like this!” and “ This is awful!” in response to their conditions.[9] The world they exist in is utterly irrational and utterly unbearable. In addition to an irrational universe, absurdity springs from mankind’s desire to grasp it. According to Camus, this desire can never be fulfilled. Absurdist, alongside existentialist view commits itself to the absolute truth that there is no tomorrow and there is certainly no eternal—there is only the present moment in which one can exist, making life utterly meaningless. However, the history of man is one that constantly creates and puts faith in the fact that life has meaning and purpose. This is evident in religions in particular, and in every commitment to the eternal.

However it is also apparent in the average man who spends his daily life working towards the future, towards tomorrow. The need for man to ascribe purpose and order to his life is a basic one, and also, from an absurdist view, an impossible one. It is a falsity to live for anything, to aspire towards anything. The entire culmination of purpose for the days of Vladimir and Estragon is waiting for Godot. It is for this that they find themselves in an unfamiliar, empty place where “ Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes.”[10] Waiting for Godot gives Vladimir and Estragon a purpose in life, though a dreadfully boring and monotonous one. What is most devastating is that Godot never comes, which can and has been interpreted as an indication of the futility of existence, and the tragedy of devoting your life to

higher orders than the present moment. “ Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit.”[11]

Samuel Beckett and Albert Camus had similar conceptions of habit's place in the modern life. Camus explains that the absurdity of a life committed uselessly to the future is cultivated largely out of habit. But it is out of this monotony, this habit, which often emerges what he calls, “ moments of lucidity”—moments that absurdity is realized.[12] One of the ways that the absurd world is born into consciousness is the rising of the “ why” out of the daily repetition and rhythm. Camus declares that following this awakening to the absurdity of life is either a gradual return to the old rhythms or a “ definitive awakening” in which results either ultimate despair and suicide or recovery.[13] This moment can be detected in *Waiting for Godot* after Pozzo's exit in Vladimir's monologue in which he reflects on his confusion with reality, his inability to make sense of what is happening around him. “ Was I sleeping while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or 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? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will be there?”[14] We must ask then, where does this moment of realization and clarity of his condition leave Vladimir? Does he return to his monotonous life? Does he accept this reality? And if so is he to embrace it or to despair? Camus begins his argument for absurd philosophy with the question of the “ one truly serious philosophical problem... suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living.”[15] Camus' initial question regards

whether this absurd life devoid of purpose, directed towards nothing, and with no prospective except to embrace the hopelessness that all of this entails—is this life worth living? Vladimir and Estragon mention committing suicide repeatedly during the play.

In the first act it is depicted as means of entertainment, and Beckett even adds a touch of humor: Vladimir: What do we do now? Estragon: Wait. Vladimir: Yes, but while waiting. Estragon: What about hanging ourselves? Vladimir: Hmmm. It'd give us an erection. Estragon: [highly excited] An erection! Vladimir: With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow. That's why they shriek when you pull them up. Did you not know that? Estragon: Let's hang ourselves immediately![16] The two decide against the idea. They decide to wait and to hear what Godot has to say before they decide, clinging to their hope once more. Suicide is brought up again at the end of the first act and again in the second act in a more melancholy fashion, however because the characters lack rope, they cannot go through with it.

At the end of the second act, following Vladimir's "moment of lucidity" and the announcement that Godot is yet again not coming, he says, "We'll hang ourselves tomorrow," but then he follows it with, "unless Godot comes." [17] Camus concludes that an absurd life is one that must indeed be lived. He even says, "It [life] will be lived all the better if it has no meaning," referring to the vast amount of freedom that comes from living for nothing but the present moment, with no obligation or motivation except to live it. [18] He concludes that to escape the absurd life through suicide is in fact to annul its

very absurdity. Absurdity only exists within the combination of man, in all his desires for order, and the world in all its irrationality. To be rid of the rational man is to be rid of the absurd. No, the answer to the question of existence in absurdity cannot be suicide. Camus deduces that the way to live this life is to live it in revolt—revolt of despair and suffering. It is to live knowing fully the state of one's existence and to live momentarily anyway, with no pursuit except that of the present moment, and he says that joy can be found there. Vladimir's moment of lucidity brings him to a choice. He must accept this absurd reality that he has come to realize or he must deny it.

Vladimir's decision not to kill himself, however, does not indicate that he has accepted the knowledge he attains. Richard Duran argues that the existence chosen by the characters in *Waiting for Godot*, even if they do not kill themselves, is still a form of suicide Camus refers to as "philosophical suicide".[19] Camus uses the examples of existentialist philosophers Kierkegaard and Chestov to demonstrate the way in which those who find themselves aware of the absurd, discovered in that moment of lucidity, in an effort to "leap" from the struggle that implies: "total absence of hope, a continual rejection, and a conscious dissatisfaction," deny the absurd by attributing rationality to the world, despite evidence to the contrary.[20] Camus defines philosophical suicide as, "the movement by which a thought negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation," and adds, "For the existentials negation is their God. To be precise, that god is maintained only through the negation of human reason." [21] Kierkegaard, Chestov, and other philosophers and thinkers who have experienced this



moment of lucidity, and then denied it by promising some form of transcendence yet, have sacrificed knowledge in the pursuit of hope.

Vladimir's promise to return to wait for Godot at the end of the play, even after he has come face to face with the absurdity of it all, is an example of this murdering of knowledge and reason in exchange for some meaning in life.

It is interesting that, even though this moment of clarity for Vladimir occurs at the end of the play, an awareness of the absurdity of their existence suggests itself in the language of the two characters from the beginning. The very first lines of the play suggests the idea of surrender: Estragon: Nothing to be done. Vladimir: I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't tried everything. And I resumed the struggle.[22] Here we not only see an acknowledgement of life's futility from both characters, but we also see the first instance of Vladimir's relentless hope. Here it is important that we note the different ways that the two main characters approach the absurd and hope. Vladimir, though he seems to possess a sense of the absurdity of his life even before his moment of lucidity, holds on to the hope of meeting Godot more persistently than Estragon does. In the first few pages of the play, Vladimir makes disjointed commentary referring to the notion of suicide, " It's too much for one man. On the other hand what's the good of losing heart now, that's what I say. We should have thought of it a million years ago, in the nineties." [23] It seems as though, as the overwhelming vanity of life begins to enter into his mind, he seeks escape in killing himself.

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However, he does not have the courage, and thus continues to commit to hope, even though he is beginning to become aware of the uselessness. His clinging to a rational world is apparent in his acknowledgement of a system of morality. He reacts to Pozzo's abuse of Lucky: Vladimir: [exploding] It's a scandal! Pozzo: Are you alluding to anything in particular? Vladimir: [stutteringly resolute] To treat a man...[gesture towards Lucky]...like that...I think that...no...a human being...no.... it's a scandal![24] Vladimir is largely ignored by both Estragon and Pozzo. Estragon yells out: "A disgrace!" in support of Vladimir before he goes back to gnawing on bones, and Estragon is more concerned with Vladimir's age than the accusation set against him. In an irrational world, one without a God, one without a purpose— then morality itself is obsolete. The value of a human being could also be argued to be obsolete. Vladimir struggles with this throughout the play as he continues to attribute meaning and purpose to his meaningless and purposeless life.

Estragon, on the other hand, seems less aware of the general happenings that occur in the play. His memory is notoriously short, and Vladimir must constantly inform him of what is happening. The following exchange occurs repeatedly throughout the play: Estragon: Let's go. Vladimir: We can't. Estragon: Why not? Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot. Estragon: [despairingly] Ah![25] Estragon is only minutely aware of the entire purpose of his and Vladimir's life and must constantly be reminded what it is they are devoting themselves to. He is thus less committed than Vladimir, and seems to largely be engaged in this waiting simply because Vladimir is.

While Vladimir reflectively ponders suicide, it is Estragon who repeatedly suggests it. It could be argued that Estragon has already become overwhelmingly aware of life's absurdity and has already given up hope in a rational existence. His inability to remember what they are waiting for or what happened the day before or sometimes only minutes before, suggests that he exists only in his present moment, an absurd existence devoid of hope.

However, he is also unable to embrace this existence and enter into Camus' rebellion because of his tie to Vladimir and Vladimir's hope. Estragon often suggests that the two part ways. Estragon: I sometimes wonder if we wouldn't have been better off alone, each one for himself. We weren't made for the same road. Vladimir: It's not certain. Estragon: No, nothing is certain. Vladimir: We can still part, if you think it would be better. Estragon: It's not worth while now. [26] Estragon, though he has given up hope that Godot will ever come, is still bound to waiting for him and unable to accept his fate because of his bind to Vladimir, committing him to a tragic existence condemned to monotony that one is unable to even overcome. " I can't go on like this," he tells Vladimir at the end of the second act.[27] The two, in each their inability to truly embrace the absurdity of their lives, can only strive to distract themselves and avoid confronting it. They desperately try to remain occupied and to avoid silence—Vladimir especially. Estragon: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent. Vladimir: You're right, we're inexhaustible. Estragon: It's so we won't think. Vladimir: We have that excuse. Estragon: It's so we won't hear.

Vladimir: We have our reasons. Estragon: All the dead voices. Vladimir: they make a noise like wings. Estragon: Like leaves. Vladimir: Like sand. Estragon: Like leaves. ... [long silence] Vladimir: Say something! Estragon: I'm trying. [long silence] Vladimir: [in anguish] Say anything at all![28] Vladimir is aware of the knowledge creeping up on him, the unbearable reality of life's absurdity, and because he does not want to face it, it is essential that he not allow himself time to think, time to be conscious, to be lucid. Esslin proposes this as not only an avoidance of life, but an avoidance of one's very self, "The hope of salvation may be merely an evasion of the suffering and anguish that springs from facing the reality of the human condition." [29] If we propose that Estragon has already acknowledged life's futility, then he fears silence for a different reason. He is simply and devastatingly bored of this life that he knows is meaningless, and is unable to act against.

Perhaps the greatest devastation of Vladimir and Estragon's position is the fact that as Camus says, "Once man has admitted his truths, he cannot free himself from them. A man conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it." [30] They no longer possess the joys of ignorance and naivety towards absurdity and even in their efforts to escape their reality by fruitless hope or by distraction, the knowledge will never leave them. However, theirs' is also still a more tragic fate than that of the absurd man who, accepting absurdity, "lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime, aware of his limited freedom, his revolt devoid of future, and his mortal consciousness." [31] No, the fate of those who possess the truth but refuse to live it, is condemned to not only a meaningless existence, but a tormented one—forever stubbornly

reaching for something denying one's own knowledge that it cannot be attained.

Camus says that the only true tragedy of "The Myth of Sisyphus", a tale of Camus' absurd hero, is that he is conscious. Thus *Waiting for Godot* can be argued to be an example of the misery of life lived in refusal of Camus' revolt, the revolt that turns Sisyphus' fate from tragic to victorious, and even, as Camus says, happy. "The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn." [32] Camus argues that this scorn to one's fate, this facing the devastation of a fruitless fate and conquering it is the only path to happiness in an absurd world. By this 'yes' to one's "inevitable and despicable" destiny, man becomes in control of his existence on earth, and this struggle towards mastery of that existence, as Camus says, "is enough to fill a man's heart." [33] This is the only viable path to happiness. And this is what Vladimir and Estragon deny themselves in clinging to their routine, clinging to that last shred of hope, refusing to accept the truth that they will never be able to deny. They will return each day underneath the willow tree, and they will talk ceaselessly to avoid confronting the silence that brings with it the whisperings of truth. They will wait for Godot, even though they both know that he will never come. Estragon will try to dream, to escape briefly to some other universe, and Vladimir will wake him in fear of that other universe. And Estragon will ask again, "This one is enough for you?" And there will be no answer, only distraction, only waiting, until two fruitless and unhappy lives reach their meaningless and absurd end.

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[1] Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), 59.

[2] Samuel Beckett in a letter to Alan Schneider, printed in the *Village Voice* in March 1958.

[3] Martin Esslin, "Introduction," in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1965), 4.

[4] *Ibid.* 5.

[5] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Third ed. (England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1980), 24.

[6] Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus", *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1955), 21.

[7] *Ibid.*, 17.

[8] Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 8.

[9] *Ibid.* 58, 53.

[10] *Ibid.*, 32.

[11] Samuel Beckett, *Proust*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), 8.

[12] Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus", 14-15.

[13] *Ibid.*, 13.

[14] Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 81.

[15] Camus, “ The Myth”, 3.

[16] Beckett, Waiting for Godot, 9.

[17] Ibid., 84.

[18] Camus, “ The Myth”, 53.

[19] Ibid., 28.

[20] Ibid., 31.

[21] Ibid., 41.

[22] Beckett, Waiting for Godot, 1.

[23] Ibid., 2.

[24] Ibid., 19.

[25] Ibid., 6.

[26] Ibid., 44.

[27] Ibid., 84.

[28] Ibid., 52-53

[29] Esslin, Theatre of the Absurd, 61.

[30] Camus, “ The Myth,” 31.



[31] Ibid., 66.

[32] Ibid., 121.

[33] Ibid., 123.