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Godot as the Divided Self: Waiting for Godot while Godot Has Already Been on the Stage

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Abstract

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is a milestone play that captures the feelings of confusion, isolation, and the search for meaning after World War II. The play carries existential ideas through existential philosophy drawing on the ideas of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Its main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, represent humanity's struggle to find purpose as they wait endlessly for Godot, a figure who never arrives. This waiting becomes a powerful symbol of the human desire for fulfilment in a world that offers no clear answers but when we examine the identity of the Godot, it can be easily seen as the divided self who has already existed on the stage as Vladimir and Estragon.

The play explores themes of identity and relationships. Vladimir and Estragon rely on each other, showing how our sense of self is shaped by others. However, their repetitive conversations and actions reveal how hard it is to find stability or meaning in life. Beckett contrasts hope and despair, action and inaction, to emphasize the contradictions of human existence.

With its simple setting and dialogue, the play highlights life's uncertainties and the human tendency to keep searching for purpose. Godot, who acts as if never appears, stands on the stage as Vladimir and Estragon from beginning till the end of the play.

Keywords: Waiting; Self; Divided; Post-war; Absurd play; Existentialism

Godot as identity of Vladimir and estragon: fragmented, incomplete nature of the self

Waiting for Godot is a groundbreaking work in modern theatre, capturing the post-war mood and reflecting existential and absurdist ideas. Written after World War II, the play expresses the widespread feelings of disillusionment, isolation, and the search for meaning that defined the era. The war's devastation left people questioning their ideals and the purpose of life, themes that are deeply embedded in Beckett's work. Influenced by Albert Camus's idea of the absurd—the conflict between humanity's search for meaning and the universe's



indifference—the play offers a darkly humorous view of human life. Existentialism is central to *Waiting for Godot*, drawing ideas of Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Existentialism suggests life has no built-in purpose, and individuals must create their own meaning in a chaotic world. Beckett’s characters, Vladimir and Estragon, reflect this struggle. Stuck in an endless wait for the mysterious Godot—who never comes—they search for purpose in their lives. They spend their days waiting endlessly for a figure who never appears. Their waiting becomes a powerful symbol of humanity’s longing for fulfilment and the endless pursuit of meaning. Through their simple and repetitive conversations, their anxieties about identity and the fragmented, incomplete nature of the self are revealed. Beckett deepens these ideas with contrasts like hope and despair, action and inaction, and meaning and meaninglessness. These opposites shape the story, highlighting the contradictions of human existence. Vladimir and Estragon go back and forth between hope that Godot will come to save them and despair at his absence. This tension portrays the absurd human condition: people search for meaning, but the universe offers no certainty of it. Beckett captures this paradox, showing how hope can both sustain and frustrate us. The play also examines the idea of identity as incomplete and dependent on others. Vladimir and Estragon depend on each other, showing how identity is shaped through relationships. At the same time, their interactions reveal how hard it is to form a stable sense of self in a world filled with uncertainty. Their act of waiting itself becomes central to their existence, symbolizing humanity’s broader struggle for self-discovery and the endless delay in achieving completeness.

By exploring post-war disillusionment, existential and absurdist ideas, and the complexities of identity, *Waiting for Godot* offers deep insights into human existence. Beckett’s use of minimalism, repetition, and irony emphasizes these universal themes, making the play a timeless reflection on life. Its lasting impact lies in how it confronts audiences with life’s uncertainties and invites them to find their own search for meaning in an absurd world.

Estragon: (giving up again). Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: (advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart). 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 yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon.) So there you are again.

Estragon: Am I?

Vladimir: I'm glad to see you back. I thought you were gone forever.

Estragon: Me too.

Vladimir: Together again at last! We'll have to celebrate this. But how? (He reflects.) Get up till I embrace you. (Beckett, 1953, 3)

Estragon’s opening line, “Nothing to be done,” immediately sets a tone of hopelessness and frustration, reflecting the despair that runs through the play. This statement isn’t just about their current situation but expresses a deeper feeling of being stuck in a confusing and meaningless world. Vladimir’s response, shifting between hope and despair as he talks about trying to “resume the struggle,” emphasizes the tension between giving up and pushing forward. Their back-and-forth introduces the themes of dependence and duality that are central to their relationship and the existential questions in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. As Sartre suggests.

The world is human. We can see the very particular position of consciousness: being is everywhere, opposite me, around me; it weighs down on me, it besieges me, and I am perpetually referred from being to being; that table which is there is being and nothing more; that rock, that tree, that landscape—being and nothing else. I want to grasp this being and I no longer find anything but myself. This is because knowledge, intermediate between being and non-being, refers me to absolute being if I want to make knowledge subjective and refers me to myself when I think to grasp the absolute. (Sartre, 1943, 297)



Being can be grasped and we can find anything but ourselves like the duality of the self-found in *Waiting for Godot*. The dependence between Estragon and Vladimir is clear in how they interact. Vladimir feels relieved to have Estragon with him and suggests they celebrate being together, which shows the repetitive and cyclical nature of their bond. Their relationship isn't just friendship but something they need to confirm their existence in a meaningless world. Together, they represent two parts of a divided self, showing opposing yet connected traits like action and inaction, hope and hopelessness, and taking risks versus seeking safety. This duality reflects the complexity of the human mind, where conflicts and contradictions are a natural part of life. Godot, the mysterious figure they are waiting for, adds another layer to this idea of identity and meaning. In a way, Godot symbolizes the self that Vladimir and Estragon already display on stage. Their divided identity suggests that the unity they are looking for in Godot is already inside them, even if they can't recognize it. This highlights unified self and the existential condition of human's tendency to constantly search for meaning. As Jean-Paul Sartre mentions in *Being and Nothingness*, "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself," (Sartre,1943) showing how the characters struggle to balance the opposing sides of their own personalities. Vladimir and Estragon's waiting becomes a strong metaphor for humanity's constant attempt to create meaning in an indifferent universe. As Özen states although determinism is accepted as true, it is never enough for young man to solve his dilemma. Nothing can make us freed from this burden of responsibility. (Özen, 2013, 668) Özen adds that first we exist and then we shoulder to create ourselves which is a lifelong process and therefore we generate our essence by means of our choices. We are nothing more than what we do. The only restriction on our freedom is that we are not free to avoid making choices. (Priest, 2001, 15-17).

Their endless waiting also reflects Martin Heidegger's idea of *Geworfenheit* ("thrownness"), which describes how people are thrown into life without a clear purpose or direction. Estragon and Vladimir's lives are shaped by this feeling of being dropped into a world where they have to create their own meaning. Their divided identity and their constant shifts between hope and despair reflect the disillusionment felt after World War II. Beckett captures this existential uncertainty and the loss of traditional values in the modern world.

The divided and ever-changing self that Beckett shows in *Waiting for Godot* is full of uncertainty and shows the broader existential condition of human. Estragon and Vladimir's relationship shows the inner conflicts that are part of human existence, as they try to balance the different sides of themselves. Their waiting, filled with both hope and despair, symbolizes humanity's endless search for meaning in a chaotic and fragmented world. Through this, Beckett powerfully comments on the nature of identity, existence, and the human condition.

Estragon: This is how it is. (He reflects.) The bough the bough (Angrily.) Use your head, can't you?

Vladimir: You're my only hope.

Vladimir

When I think of it all these years but for me where would you be (Decisively.) You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it. (Beckett, 1953, 19)

Estragon's frustration, seen in his comment, "Use your head, can't you?" shows his impatience and contrasts with Vladimir's reflective behavior. Estragon focuses on practical issues, while Vladimir tends to reflect deeply. This difference highlights a recurring dynamic between them, where Vladimir is in the thinker role and Estragon is more concerned with immediate needs and physical concerns. This portrays a common tension in life: the struggle between thinking about life's bigger questions and dealing with day-to-day realities as existential tension between action and contemplation, a central theme in the play.

When Vladimir says, "You're my only hope," it shows how much dependency he has on Estragon—not just physically but also emotionally and existentially. Vladimir derives purpose and identity from their companionship, suggesting that their bond serves as a life buoy against the void of meaninglessness. His statement that Estragon would be "nothing more than a little heap of bones" without him reinforces this mutual dependency. It shows Vladimir sees himself as a protector and believes their literal and existential survival depends on each other.



Vladimir's identity and sense of completeness are shaped by his relationship with Estragon. This exemplifies existential ideas, like those of Jean-Paul Sartre, who emphasized the role of interpersonal relationships in shaping identity and existence. Vladimir's waiting for Godot represents his need to face himself and find inner resolution.

Vladimir's waiting for Godot represents the human search for purpose in a confusing and meaningless world. By waiting, he rebels against despair, similar to the ideas in Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus said life doesn't need inherent meaning to be valuable; searching for meaning gives it value. This existential defiance is shown by Vladimir's struggle to find meaning in waiting, even though it seems pointless. The repetition of hope, even when faced with constant disappointment, reflects the human desire to keep going.

Estragon's responses, such as "Oh stop blathering and help me off with this bloody thing," interrupt Vladimir's fragile sense of purpose. Estragon's lack of engagement with Vladimir's thoughts introduces a sense of isolation within their relationship, despite their physical closeness. This makes Vladimir's existential struggle to find meaning even harder, as he feels isolated even within their companionship.

Vladimir's thought, "Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower... Now it's too late," expresses regret about lost opportunities as fragility of their hope. The image of climbing heights, paired with the realization of missed chances, reflects the human tendency to look back with longing while facing life's limitations. This idea ties to Camus's thought that "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart." (Camus, [1992] 1955, 111). Vladimir's nostalgia emphasizes that hope is both inspiring and filled with the sadness of unfulfilled dreams.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus expressed the idea that "It now becomes clear on the contrary that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning." (Camus, [1992] 1955, 53). This statement about the living the life all the better by being cleansed from any possible meanings embodies his philosophy of the absurd, which challenges traditional notions of life's purpose. Unlike Schopenhauer, who saw life as inherently full of suffering and considered suicide a possible solution, Camus firmly rejected this perspective. He argued that suicide is a futile act, as it does not resolve the lack of meaning but instead serves as an escape from facing life's inherent absurdity.

For Camus, the lack of ultimate meaning in life is not a cause for despair but an opportunity. By recognizing the absurdity of existence—that is, the conflict between humans' desire for meaning and the universe's indifference—individuals can choose to live fully and authentically. Rather than turning to religious faith or a transcendent power to provide meaning, Camus urged people to confront the absurd directly. He believed that a fulfilling life could be achieved by embracing the struggle and dedicating oneself to personal passions and pursuits. Through this defiance, life becomes meaningful precisely because we create our own sense of purpose in the face of absurdity.

Vladimir's expression of feeling "relieved and at the same time... appalled" encapsulates a profound moment of self-realization.

Vladimir

Sometimes I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer. (He takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, puts it on again.) How shall I say? Relieved and at the same time (he searches for the word) appalled. (With emphasis.) AP-PALLED. (He takes off his hat again, peers inside it.) Funny. (Beckett, 1953,5)

It reveals his awareness of an inner conflict—a simultaneous yearning for clarity and an aversion to confronting the unsettling truths of his existence. This duality is at the heart of his existential struggle, as it is for many of Beckett's characters, reflecting the human condition in a state of perpetual tension between hope and despair.

Vladimir feels a brief sense of relief, as if discovering meaning or resolution in life's uncertainties. However, this relief is quickly replaced by a feeling of being "appalled," as he grapples with the consequences of such a discovery. The themes of *Waiting for Godot* suggest that life may lack inherent meaning, and the act of waiting—whether for Godot or some form of salvation—might be futile. This possibility terrifies Vladimir, as it challenges the structures



and hopes he depends on, exposing them as illusions. His fear is intensified by how he hesitates and emphasizes the word “appalled,” revealing a reluctant acceptance of his deep dread. By saying the word aloud with emphasis, Vladimir externalizes his inner turmoil, making the fear more tangible. This is not just a fear of the unknown, but a fear that the truths he seeks could strip him of purpose and identity. His repeated action of removing his hat, looking inside, and shaking it becomes a powerful metaphor for his introspection. The hat, becomes a symbol of his psyche – a container for thoughts, fears, and questions he cannot fully say. His compulsive examination of the hat underscores his futile attempt to find something tangible, some evidence of meaning, within himself. Yet, the hat is empty, mirroring the barrenness of the landscape they inhabit and the emptiness he fears within his own existence.

This moment of self-realization also illuminates Vladimir’s relationship with fear as a fundamental aspect of his being. His dread is not merely a reaction to a specific event or realization but an intrinsic response to the act of questioning itself. The deeper he delves into the nature of his existence, the more appalling the potential answers become. This reflects the existentialist idea that self-awareness often leads to an encounter with the absurd—a confrontation with the lack of inherent meaning in life. By dramatizing Vladimir’s fear, Beckett underscores the paradox of human existence: the desire for understanding is counterbalanced by the dread of what that understanding might reveal. Vladimir’s hesitation to embrace the full implications of his self-awareness mirrors the broader human reluctance to confront existential truths. It is easier to wait, as Vladimir and Estragon do, than to face the void directly.

In this moment, Vladimir’s vulnerability is fully exposed. His self-realization is not a triumphant epiphany but a destabilizing encounter with the limitations of human understanding. It emphasizes the existential plight of Beckett’s characters and, by extension, humanity: the pursuit of meaning is fraught with the terror of confronting a reality that may be indifferent or incomprehensible. As Donegal states, Sartre describes the interaction between consciousness’s as a never-ending battle for subjectivity:

While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me. We are by no means dealing with unilateral relations with an object-in-itself, but with reciprocal and moving relations. (Sartre, 1943, 364) Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others. (Donegal, 2012, 15)

Through this brief exchange, Beckett captures the essence of Vladimir’s existential fear and the universal human struggle to reconcile the search for meaning with the dread of what lies beneath. This fear, rooted in the truth of his existence, becomes a defining feature of his character and a microcosm of the play’s exploration of the human condition.

Boy: Mister Albert?

Vladimir: Yes.

Estragon: What do you want?

Vladimir: Approach!

The Boy does not move.

Estragon: (forcibly). Approach when you're told, can't you?

The Boy advances timidly, halts.

Vladimir: What is it?

Boy: Mr. Godot



Vladimir: Obviously (Pause.) Approach.

Estragon: (violently). Will you approach! (The Boy advances timidly.)

(Beckett, 1953, 74)

Pozzo: True. (He sits down. To Estragon.) What is your name?

Estragon: Adam.

(Beckett, 1953, 74)

These dialogues in "Waiting for Godot" also shows themes of uncertainty and the loss of identity after World War II. Vladimir and Estragon, the main characters waiting for Godot, live in a world where their names are not fixed. Estragon says his name is Adam, and Vladimir uses Albert, Didi, and Gogo. This portrays their struggle to hold onto a clear sense of self, reflecting the confusion and instability many felt after the war. Their focus on Godot's name highlights their longing for purpose, which overshadows their own identities. The boy's interaction with Vladimir and Estragon also reflects their unstable identities. Even though they repeatedly tell him to come closer, the boy hesitates, mirroring their own uncertainty. His message from Godot offers them a small hope, but their mix of kind and harsh behavior shows their frustration. The boy's unclear role and reluctance to approach them emphasize how elusive the answers they seek are, reinforcing the theme of endless waiting.

The use of multiple names—Albert, Adam, Didi, and Gogo—symbolizes the human struggle in an absurd world. Vladimir and Estragon's acceptance of these names shows they understand that identities are not fixed but rather arbitrary in a meaningless world. When Estragon calls himself Adam, it could symbolize a universal human experience, while the nicknames Didi and Gogo add a sense of closeness but also blur individuality. Their fixation on Godot's name contrasts with their lack of care for their own names, showing how much they rely on Godot as a source of hope and purpose.

The way names and identities are used in Waiting for Godot highlights the confusion and search for meaning after the war. The characters' shifting identities reflect a world where old values and structures no longer hold. Their focus on Godot instead of themselves shows humanity's deep desire to find meaning in a world that often feels meaningless. This exploration of identity and waiting makes Beckett's play timeless and the amount of time spent while waiting for Godot loses its meaning, only the importance of self remains on the stage.

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