

# The Theatre of Revolt/Change, the Literature of the Absurd and the Theatre of Non-Communication: Manifestations in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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## Abstract

Revolts lead to changes irrespective of good or bad. It is universal and fights against the basic conventions and traditions. Such rebellions manifest explicitly through arts, culture and literature. Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (*WFG*) offers multiple narratives, divergent perspectives and intriguing aspects to the readers. During the course of man's existence, s/he undergoes pangs of anguish, loss of life, silence and non-communication, etc., which is reflected in the literature of the absurd. Absurdity and non-communication surfaced in the aftermaths of the horrors of the Second World War due to man's loss of faith in established institutions. Existentialism postulates that the human situation is essentially aimless, absurd and futile. Does the world necessarily appear to be so? How are these issues—purposelessness in life, simulacra, plotless play, context-less et al. tackled in *WFG*? What impact do these existentialist philosophies have in man's everyday life especially in the contemporary scenario or are they decontextualized? Is the play totally nihilistic? Are there deeper layers of meanings beneath the senseless, farcical prattle? What role does silence and non-communication play in today's postmodern world? These are the questions that this research paper seeks to find out. As a qualitative study, this article uses a normative approach—literary analysis, in seeking to find a solution.

## Keywords

Existentialism, Non-Communication, Revolt, Silence, Simulacra, Theatre of the Absurd

## 1. Introduction

Post World War II threw up a host of neoteric narratives most notably in Europe and England. During this critical period of emergency, the lives of the ordinary citizens were affected the most. Hunger, famine, poverty and mass killings accompany the order of the day. Amidst such a humanitarian crisis emerged philosophies and movements like Absurdity, Existentialism, Expressionism, Sadism, and Surrealism to name a few. The scientific and technological progress which had so far helped to alleviate human sufferings suddenly did a volte-face in playing a lead role in destruction of mankind through the invention of atom bombs. Such man-made catastrophes exposed the vile nature of humans and posed a threat not just to humans but to the entire fragile universe. Driven by madness and void of any guilt, the scientific community was obsessed with inventions and scarcely considered the humanistic aspects in their approach. Against this backdrop were born these movements that brought the much needed relief for humanity.

Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, Kierkegaard, Sigmund Freud, and Samuel Beckett to name a few, are among those authors, playwrights and novelists from Europe who emerged as a beacon of hope during this turbulent period. Even among these thinkers, Camus differs from others, especially Sartre with regard to the philosophy of existentialism. This study primarily focuses on Samuel Beckett's iconic drama *Waiting for Godot* as an object of study and how it set a trend for others to follow through his literature/theatre of the Absurd. While doing so, this work dwells on the relevance of existentialist philosophies in today's postmodern globalized world and attempts to explore its possible impact on human lives. Post-modernism, per se, vouchsafes in the absence of any metanarratives and the micro-narratives are deconstructed, and demystified only to usher in "heteroglossia". Whether existentialism can be decanonized to provide any other meaning for existence? Humans are always in an elusive quest for something or nothing as their lives are caught in a vicious cycle of absurdism and then introspecting to avoid the problem of absurdity itself. This article examines the tension prevailing in everyone's lives searching for a purpose and the world's stoic refusal to answer it.

## 2. Existentialism, Absurdity and the Theatre of the Absurd

"That which is meaningless. Thus man's existence is absurd because his contingency finds no external justification." (Sartre, 1956: p. 628)

The term absurd is applied to a number of works in drama and fiction and was coined by the Hungarian critic Martin Esslin in his seminal book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Esslin, 1961). He believes that the dignity of man lies on his/her efficacy to confront the "senselessness and meaninglessness of their existence to accept it freely without fear, without illusions, and to laugh at it" (EduBirdie, 2022b).

"Absurd" originally means "out of harmony", in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical. In common usage in the English speaking world, "ab-

surd” may simply mean “ridiculous”. But this is not the sense in which Camus uses the word, and in which it is used when we speak of *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Esslin, 1961: p. xix).

It has the sense that the human condition is utterly absurd and this state can only be adequately represented in works of literature that are themselves absurd. The absurdist movement owes its genesis to the philosophies of expressionism, existentialism, and surrealism and in the fictions of the French writer Franz Kafka in the 1920s. Most of the playwrights belonging to this school of thought believes and employs the dictum that the human world is a hollow one and man has ceased to live. H/she only exists and follows the “existentialist philosophy of absurdity and nothingness”. These philosophical insights get reflected in their literature as well and is marked by lack of plot, development, characterization, suspense or plain commonsense (Esslin, 1961: p. xvii). It is an avant-garde movement, which “demystified the structure and subject matter” (Bennett, 2011: p. 1) of these plays in the 1950s by “arguing that the reader or audience member must judge these plays not by the standards of the traditional theatre, but by the standards Esslin set forth for what he called the Theatre of the Absurd” (Bennett, 2011: p. 1).

The current movement emerged in France after the horrors of World War II. It began as a rebellion against essential beliefs and values of traditional culture and traditional literature. Earlier conventions assumed that human beings are fairly rational creatures who live in a partially-intelligent universe and that they are a part of an ordered social structure in which they may be capable of heroism and dignity even in defeat. The revolt against this earlier customs was spearheaded by existential philosophers like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Both viewed man as an isolated existent (being) who is cast into an alien universe. They conceived the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value or meaning and represented human life (as it moved from the nothingness from which it came towards the nothingness where it must end) as an existence which is both painful and absurd. Ionesco defined his understanding of the Theatre of the Absurd as follows: “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Ionesco, 1957 cited in Esslin, 1961: p. xix).

Existentialism, in simple terms, means the capability of the individuals to choose, decide, and think about themselves making them completely independent and free. While doing so, people are able to question through their experience about their inner self. Besides this, they investigate their inner being—why things and people exist and what the meaning behind their existence is. During this process of inspecting, they conclude that life is meaningless and has no purpose. On the other hand, absurdity or absurdism says no to the existence of the basic meaning of human life. Neither does it concern itself with the meaning of reason behind life’s existence. Rather absurdism negates existentialism by arguing that any attempts to find cause or reason is essentially futile.

The theatre of the absurd, as a genre, postulates no conceived plot, no explicit

themes, lack of a proper structure in theme and presentation. Neither as a movement had it any consciously crafted philosophical doctrines nor any organized format. Unlike traditional dramas which are characterized by logic, closed endings, linear structure and adhering to the cause-and-effect syndromes, the theatre of the absurd shows no propensity towards all these. Briefly put, The Theatre of the Absurd “tends toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. The element of language still plays an important yet subordinate, part in its conception, but what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters” (Esslin, 1961: p. xxi).

As a movement, the Theatre of the Absurd did not arise out of any organized deliberations, rather as an independent development from playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Arthur Adamov. For these dramatists, the external world appears to be menacingly unfit to live peacefully with fellow beings, cut-throat relationships with each other, and exhibiting cannibalistic tendencies. Notwithstanding these, they showcased their works with vaguely uncomfortable scenes and settings, a frightening, seemingly incoherent and strange world. In due course of time, the audiences too got acclimatized to this innocuous binary of familiar and the strange. More so, it was hauntingly poetic and impressive. Strangeness became familiar because “these esoteric avant-garde make so immediate and deep impact” (Esslin, 1961: p. xvii). Furthermore, Esslin says, WFG confronted everyone with a situation in some ways analogous to their own. Nevertheless, the Theatre of the Absurd “have no story or plot to speak of...without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets...have neither a beginning nor an end...seem often to be reflections on dream and nightmares...and consist of incoherent babblings” (Esslin, 1961: p. xviii).

### **3. Literary Analysis of the Play “Waiting for Godot”**

Samuel Beckett’s iconic play, “Waiting for Godot” (WFG), is a masterpiece of absurdist theatre that delves into the human condition, revealing absurdity, uncertainty, and despair that accompany man’s existence. Until the end of the play nobody, including the characters and the audience, readers as well, knows the identity of Godot. Whether Godot symbolizes God or just any other mythological character is left to the readers to decide, with no ending too. Structurally, WFG comprises of just two acts featuring two main characters—Estragon and Vladimir. Both of them await a third character, presumably, Godot, who remains invisible throughout the play. He never appears anywhere. Besides this, there are other three recurring characters—Pozzo, Lucky and the messenger boy from Godot, who appear only towards the end of the play. Nevertheless, WFG is an amalgamation of elements like physical, theatrical and visual at work. Despite the fact that WFG comprises no plot, yet it compensates for this by positing an array of themes ranging from the absurdity of life, uncertainty and doubt, alienation and isolation, the search for meaning, time and its relativity, the illusion of hope—simulacra and

the act of waiting, all leading towards the existential predicaments in life that man everyday confronts.

The play highlights the absurdity of human existence, where the characters wait endlessly for something that may never arrive, mirroring the futility of human endeavours as in the case of the two tramps (Estragon-Gogo and Vladimir-Didi) but with expectation for Godot who is said to appear near a tree on a countryside. Being unsure of themselves, the tramps fumble all along and indulge in a lot of clowning and antics. They are met by a master and his servant—Pozzo and Lucky. Lucky has a rope around his neck while Pozzo holds the other end of the rope. Pozzo controls and maltreats Lucky all the time. As Godot doesn't appear, the tramps wait for him in the same place the next day (tomorrow). However, a boy appears with the message that Godot will come but fails once again. The tramps experience the horror of waiting hopelessly doing nothing. They experience utter boredom and understand the pangs of meaninglessness. Mortally fed up with waiting, all of them decide to make a move, but they do not move at all. Ignorance and boredom are also emphasized here as these take place in everyone's lives. Quite possibly a mood of despair is discernible throughout the play notwithstanding anguish and uncertainty.

#### Uncertainty and Doubt

Godot's absence and the characters' uncertainty about his arrival embody the existential doubt that pervades human life, leaving everyone questioning the meaning and purpose of the existence. In the play there is no proper leitmotif and none of the characters even have a slightest hint of who and where Godot is. A sense of metaphysical anguish staking high on the absurdity of human condition appears to be the overarching symbol in this play WFG. Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, all leave the scene amidst the dark clouds of uncertainty and doubt of their tomorrow. Nothing is known to them or is revealed to them except "a storm of frustrations and indignation which is always caused by works in a new convention" (Esslin, 1961: p. xxiv).

#### The Search for Meaning

Vladimir and Estragon's wait for Godot serves as a metaphor for humanity's search for meaning, purpose, and connection in a seemingly indifferent world. The whole play is an extended metaphor. For instance, the audience feel that they don't watch the play, but are at home waiting for death. A purgatory instinct (suffering) is created by its immobility. There is no freedom within the deterministic limits of man's existence. With no movement at all, the play is an affirmation of denials. It is an essay of existential philosophy. "Within the theatre of the absurd that *Waiting for Godot* is staged, the absence of meaning finds expression in its conspicuously strange characters (EduBirdie, 2022a)."

#### Time and Its Relativity

The play's non-linear structure and the characters' distorted sense of time illustrate the relativity of time and its subjective nature. Nothing happens twice in the play, yet always something goes on, thus building a tempo wherein the difference

between morning and evening gets blurred. Yet the actions are always unmotivated. There is no meaning in concepts like time, space, cause, and effect. Thus a picture of total nihilism is presented. Besides this, the repetitive dialogues in the play *WFG* accentuate the volatility and abstruseness of time. One poignant scene where Beckett captures the indefinability of time is:

Estragon: For the moment.

Pozzo: What time is it?

Vladimir: (inspecting the sky), Seven o'clock...eight o'clock...

Estragon: That depends what time of year it is.

Pozzo: Is it evening?

Silence. Vladimir and Estragon scrutinize the sunset.

Estragon: It's rising.

Vladimir: Impossible.

Estragon: Perhaps it's dawn.

Vladimir: Don't be a fool. It's the west over there.

Estragon: How do you know?" (Beckett, 2006: p. 118, Act II)

Furthermore, Beckett reiterates the notion of time through the character of Pozzo by telling "Don't question me! The blind have no notion of time. The things of time are hidden from them too." (Beckett, 2006: p. 120, Act II)

#### The Illusion of Hope-Simulacra

Godot's promised arrival serves as an illusion of hope, perpetuating the characters' attitude of waiting patiently, and thus mirroring humanity's tendency to cling to hope despite the uncertainty of its fulfilment. Waiting doesn't bring any hope. The tramps represent the world of resignation and waiting. Both of them live in mutual hatred for each other but they fear to get separated. On the other hand, the character Pozzo is symbolic of a world of effort and action, of power and exploitation. Lucky is exploited but both are consumed at the end. The play *WFG* presents an illusory world of man where s/he exists meaninglessly with no sense of direction in life. Things occur without any significance. Both the characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are a sort of simulacra on man's everyday life spending most of the time paying attention to trivial issues and become engulfed in this vicious lifecycle. People in order to escape from the harsh realities engage or like to live in an illusory world. But Vladimir and Estragon create awareness among the readers and audience alike to accept the absurdity of life.

#### The Act of waiting

Waiting is an essential aspect of every human and this is one of the major themes in this play. People wait in their lives for sundry issues like job, marriage, personal growth, and return of something dear to one's heart, reunion with friends or even a love-letter et al. Similarly, the two tramps—Vladimir and Estragon, wait endlessly for Godot, an unknown person or thing!! No wonder, the action is that of waiting and waiting, ostensibly for nothing. The tramps undergo a lot of suffering in waiting for Godot. Waiting is not a bed of roses for everyone. It

endures pain and produces a lot of irritation. Waiting for nothing is outlandish and offers meaninglessness. However, on a positive note, endless waiting reflects the gut instinct on the part of some individual who are primarily achievement oriented. But not all people exhibit this attitude and the characters in WFG echoes the sentiments of day-to-day life of a common man.

#### 4. The Phenomenon of the Angry Young Man—The Theatre of Revolt/Change

Revolt or rebellion, in ordinary parlance, means protest against the existing system and ushering a change. Modern drama ought to be examined as an expression of revolt, which have been the game-changers in the plays of Anton Chekov, Eugene O’Neil, G.B. Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, and Harriet Brechet Stowe among others. Like carnival, revolt is an expression of pent-up feelings of angst, dissidence and notions of self-reflexivity. Revolt led to a change in the mindset of the audiences. By theatre of revolt, [Brustein \(1991: p. 13\)](#) says that “the theatre of the great insurgent modern dramatists, where myths of rebellion are enacted before a dwindling number of spectators in a flux of vacancy, bafflement and accident.” He elaborates this by tracing the genesis of the theatre of revolt is an “inevitable consequence” of a long process which began in the Middle Ages and has roots in nineteenth century Romanticism ([Brustein, 1991: p. 14](#)). Here the notion of revolt becomes a contested site from the dramatists’ belvedere wherein these people become the fulcrum of change and usher a new era in the style, form of the drama. However, in the modern drama the onus of bringing about an uprising was laid down by Henrik Ibsen followed by G.B. Shaw. Similarly, in the American drama, this trend in stage management and lighting effects was led by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Eugene O’Neil to name a few. British and American drama, in this respect, were quite distinct in that, the dichotomy existed in terms of form and substance regarding revolt. Alienation was the predominant theme among the American dramatists and even among novelists as evident in Herman Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* published in 1927. [Brustein \(1991\)](#) feels that the revolt of the dramatist is more important and imaginative than practical. While being labelled as a rebel dramatist, these playwrights begin “to celebrate, secretly or openly, the values of the extreme—excess, instinct, emancipation, ecstasy, drunkenness, rapture, revolt” ([Brustein, 1991: 16](#)).

Revolt is viewed as a harbinger of change and at the centre of every revolt lies an angry young man who yearns for turning the tide in his/her favour. Under each revolt the unwanted things are purged by the disgruntled who now looks for an upheaval in his/her fortune aims for a total transformation. In the past, revolts has led to renaissance and reformation. Regarding revolt, [Brustein \(1991: p. 15\)](#) admits that Fredrick Nietzsche remains the most seminal philosophical influence on the theater of revolt. Albert Camus writes that all modern revolt is “born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition” (Camus cited in [Brustein, 1991: p. 15](#)). Brustein, comments that sometimes,

the revolt is quite imaginary and practical as seen in the works of Ibsen and Shaw where it has a utilitarian value unlike in the plays of Brechet, the revolt is designed to lead a political revolution. One imminent fallout of revolt is estrangement. Many a dramatist had faced such exiles in their personal lives. W. B. Yeats, Irish playwright has bequeathed another dimension to the theatre of revolt wherein the one-act play was “an excellent expedient for the little theatre” (Yeats, 1917: p. 119). For Yeats, this is more than revolutionary and he supplements further by adding that the “influence of the Little Theatre on the Drama as an institution is educational and exemplary rather than revolutionary”. A unique fall of the revolt of the dramatists is that most of the dramatists mentioned in the earlier paragraph have to go on exile and forced to lead an isolated life.

“The theatre of revolt, in other words, is extremely self-conscious and self-involved, as befits a Romantic movement,” says Brustein (1991: p. 18). Still, for Brustein, the theatre of revolt is only partially subjective and according to him, “a play proceeds by dialogue, and dialogue implies debate and conflict. Without debate, the drama is propaganda; without conflict, mere fantasizing”. One can witness all these elements of protest in the play WFG, embossed with a cornucopia of conflict, dialogue and debate. Simply put, the theatre of revolt, as put forth by Brustein, is “the temple of priest without God, without an orthodoxy, without even much of a congregation, who conducts his service within the hideous architecture of the absurd” (p. 20). He broadens the horizon of the theatre of revolt by categorizing it into three—“*messaianic, social and existential*” (p. 20). Unfolding it, “*Messianic revolt* occurs when the dramatist rebels against God and tries to take His place, the priest examines his image in the mirror. *Social revolt* occur when the dramatist rebels against the conventions, morals, values of the social organism, the priest the mirror on the audience. *Existential revolt* occurs when the dramatist rebels against the conditions of his existence, the priest turns the mirror on the void.”

## 5. Existentialism

Existentialism is to be approached in terms of both as an idea and a movement that contained this philosophy of laying primary importance to individual liberty, existence, and the choice that is available before any person. The nihilistic perspective of nothingness stems from the paradoxical viewpoint of Albert Camus (Bennett, 2011: p. 3). Highlighting the existential crisis, Beckett underscores the struggles confronting the characters in the play WFG. Most often, they reflect the trials and tribulations of man in his/her day-to-day life, grappling with identity, purpose, and the uncertainty of existence. From the beginning of the play WFG, Beckett introduces the sentence through the protagonist Estragon feeling frustrated about not able to take off his boot “Estragon: (giving up again). Nothing to be done.” (Beckett, 2006: p. 5) This notion of “nothing to be done” echoes along with the much repeated phrase “Let’s go. (They do not move)” throughout the play is symbolic of the gloomy predilections encircling every human minds.

WFG's style of narration departs from the traditional theatrical narrative in conveying its "meaning—that is, the physical limitations to an earthbound human existence that circles towards purposelessness" (EduBirdie, 2022a).

The repetitive structure of the play, with Vladimir and Estragon's wait for Godot repeating itself, suggests the cyclical nature of existence, where events and experiences recur without progress or resolution. Kafka's *The Trial* (Kafka, 2024) and Camus's *The Stranger* (Camus, 1988) reflects the existential aspects in the protagonist's life wherein they grapple with the meaninglessness of life coupled with the inevitability of death. In its very similitude like these two novels mentioned above, WFG brings out the alienation (Lucky suffers this as a result of being a slave to Pozzo), the moral complexity and the absurdity of human existence through endless waiting. Besides this existential quandary poses profound questions to the audience and the readers alike challenging the darkness and uncertainty that underlie human experience. Several attempts to instil faith and rekindle Estragon's memory goes in vain thus cementing the existential stance. Existentialism manifests itself through its characters all along the play with every one of them indulging in repetitiveness, meaninglessness, the futility of life, irrationality, and questioning each other but at the same time they are seized with haunting anxiety, unwilling and unable to agree to a common agenda, highlighting their individual aspects and thinking in their lives.

Each of the characters in WFG, despite their physical proximity are unable to connect with each other. Rather they do possess varying metaphysical anguish which reflect the alienation and isolation that can accompany human existence. For all the four characters, life has become meaningless, their beliefs shattered and are alienated towards the end. Symbols like forest, mountain reinforce this idea of existentialism. "But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of promised land to come" (Camus cited in Esslin, 1961: p. xix). Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, all seem to have been consumed in this labyrinthine existential system engulfed by endless struggle, unrestrained torment and the utter uselessness of existence.

Exploring the works of Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett's WFG, it can be deduced that no clear cut answer emerges from them. Such unfounded resolution highlights the ambiguity and variedness of human existence especially the two characters Vladimir and Estragon's patient waiting for Godot just only exposes the universal quest for purpose and significance. With no ostensible meaning, the play meanders through the rough terrains of irrationalism, exhaustion (as displayed by Lucky and Estragon in the play), fading and fragile memories (of Estragon, Lucky and Pozzo), leading to a cul-de-sac position. Binary opposites like memory and forgetfulness, hope and despair, life and death mirrors at every point in the play WFG thus symbolizing the ephemeral nature of human experience. While Vladimir is the prototype of memory and hope, others are a caricature of forgetfulness and despair. However, in the second Act, Vladimir

and Estragon are shown oscillating between optimism and pessimism. Both of them are tantalisingly split in such a manner that Estragon scarcely remembers of the events happened in their previous encounter while Vladimir tries his best to rekindle the past, thus reflecting the human struggle to maintain hope in the face of uncertainty. Not surprisingly, WFG also embark on allusions to death and decay which serve for humanity a timely reminder vis-à-vis the inevitability of mortality.

## 6. Silence and Non-Communication

Silence, as the name suggests not using any word or sound during the process of communication. Every untiring efforts of humans are downplayed thus leading to hope and disillusionment. The play critiques the futility of human actions, as the characters' attempts to pass time, observe and maintain silence, find meaning in it, and connect with each other ultimately lead to nothing. While deconstructing WFG, there appears multiple layers of meaning hidden in this seemingly meaningless text. The dialectics in the play point out the bizarre relationship between meaning and meaninglessness, silence and non-communication leading to nothingness. However, the ineffectuality of human endeavour leads to a kind of grotesqueness. By grotesqueness, it might be interpreted here to mean the actions of the characters as an outrageous ridicule. By positioning in a weird manner, the characters are an embodiment of laughter not the type envisaged during a carnival. Perhaps it could be a surreal experience amidst the chaos, dust and din caused by people's mad pursuit of materialistic culture. During the process of interaction among the four characters in the play WFG, the phenomenon of grotesque appears to be overarching and this grotesque displayed through the actions of characters, cannot be construed to be grotesque per se but rather an epistemic one in silence. For instance, the dress and mannerisms of Lucky and Pozzo are to be viewed as more silence than grotesque. In a way, Beckett, conveys silence through grotesque.

Albert Camus in his seminal work *The Myth of Sisyphus* claims that absurd arises out of the "confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world (Camus, 1979: p. 32). Silence, at the outer level posits no meaning. But when rummaged further, even silence offers meaning. Being in a silent mode indicates ruminating wild thoughts and gives work to the brain. The play WFG presents the total condition of man—his inability to communicate the conflict within the human static world. From silence and meaninglessness, there emerges meaning as put forth even by John Keats in his poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear, but more endear'd." (Keats, 2011)

Quite akin to the piper playing a tune in Keats' poem which cannot be heard, here too, in the play WFG, Beckett depicts a frozen static image of time wherein the notion of silence, non-communication and waiting are all interlinked and are deeply hidden effusing only meaninglessness.

From a liberal standpoint, silence's outreach is far and profound in that by linking to absurd, it defies reason, and thereby overlaps grotesque. However, in a wider sense of the term, silence and non-communication in the play WFG, flaunts lack of understanding and meaninglessness. It celebrates chaos through broken dialogues spoken by Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo & Lucky. But a meaning can emerge from silence and possibly be derived through waiting. Notwithstanding this, one needs to be patient till time favours the deserved lot as in the case of Estragon and Lucky. Estragon is seen to be grappling with his efforts in untying his boots while Lucky, the slave of Pozzo can be considered to be a proletariat and is being exploited by his master Pozzo. Despite the fact that the play WFG subverts logocentric meta-narratives, there is hardly any discernible utterance of protest—especially by Lucky. Lucky possesses all the freedom to choose just like any other person but it only illustrates the agony and suffering of the masses silently everywhere around the world, thus waiting for change in the form of hope and time. In the context of an argument, silence may not only mean implicit agreement or acceptance but also timid form of refusal or denial of something deemed not worth even a discussion as explicitly reflected in this play WFG.

Time dilation transpires in the entire play through the pangs of silence which gets endlessly stretched. Very often, the two protagonists in the play WFG—Vladimir and Estragon, are used to uttering the words silence throughout. Later when Pozzo and Lucky appear in the second Act, silence predominates dialogues which are absurd and incoherent. With the possible exception of Vladimir, the other three characters speak nonsense as the dialogues are devoid of clarity, meaningful ideas and wit. Instead they keep babbling throughout the play with the audience unable to hear anything. Curiosity gets all the more increased because of such chaos and the ensuing silence. Silence is presented through a series of dialogues which are discursive, dreamlike and fragmented as for instance here

“Vladimir: You should have been a poet

Estragon: I was. (Gesture towards his rags.) Isn't that obvious?

Silence.” (Beckett, 2006: p. 9, Act I)

Apparently, Beckett brings to light the economical plight of the poets by indicating that all poets are poor and does not have enough money to look after their basic needs in life. The dichotomy of wealth and poets are contested through the aspect of silence which can be interpreted to mean acceptance of Estragon's poor economic condition which is displayed through his torn ragged clothes.

Silence plays a key role in WFG as it appears regularly from the beginning of the play till the end. Perhaps silence is symbolically used to ruminate and decontextualized to wait or be patient, whatever it may be, the meaning of silence is left to the audience to interpret and comprehend. Silence takes place through an eerie silence wherein nobody talks providing the audience to judge the meaning. In another manner, silence occurs through a strange juxtaposition of banal dialogues and frequently contradictory thoughts and feelings (by the tramps Vladimir and

Estragon). Yet, the third type of silence happens making the audience develop the ability to find resonance in the story with no plot. It “is a subconscious conglomerative process, the assemblage of a fragmented dialogue that draws on slapstick comedy to make the strange familiar” (EduBirdie, 2022a). In a way, the play evokes Sigmund Freud’s theory of the unconscious mind (EduBirdie, 2024). The Futility of silence and non-communication in human connection is emphasized through the relationships between characters, which are fraught with misunderstandings, highlighting the difficulties of genuine communication.

“Estragon: Off we go!  
They embrace. #  
They separate. Silence  
Vladimir: How time flies when one has fun!  
Silence.” (Beckett, 2006: p. 103, Act II)

Banal/fragmented dialogues, uttering non-sense or consciously making the play nonsensical either consciously or unconsciously or both also connotes silence because the characters do not want to communicate properly for the readers or viewers to comprehend. Perhaps it could be that they would like to grapple the hidden meanings behind such weird presentations. More possibly, the probable logocentric societal values are also undermined through silence in the above mentioned forms of exposition in this play.

## 7. Waiting for Godot as an Absurd Play—A Contemporary Critic of Modern Societal Values

“At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.” (Camus, 1979: pp. 31-32)

Generally, drama involves action. But this play WFG represents inaction and boredom. Hence the play itself is absurd. It is essentially absurd in a double sense that it is grotesquely comic and it is highly irrational coupled with non-consequential. WFG is a parody not only of the traditional values of western culture but also of the conventions of the traditional drama. It is seemingly lucid but eddying (going around in a circular movement) and the pointless dialogue is often funny. Moreover, its gossip and slapstick mode are used to project metaphysical alienation and tragic pain. Yet the characters carry on, even if in a life without purpose trying to make sense of the senseless, and to communicate the uncommunicable. Besides this, the farcical situations only add to their absurdity. Absurdity, it can be said that, leads to silence or being in a state of incommunicado. “Human beings are naturally inclined to want and expect the world to be intelligible (Foley, 2014: p. 6).”

Bennett (2011) is of the opinion that Albert Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* is central to the understanding of the Theatre of the Absurd. He goes on to state that WFG “is a recast myth of Sisyphus” (Bennett, 2011: p. 3). Despite the fact that the

word “Absurd”, in ordinary parlance has come to be understood as something incomprehensible, nothingness, yet when the play *WFG* was staged at the San Quentin penitentiary before an audience of convicts, ironically the convicts did not find it difficult to understand the play (Esslin, 1961: p. xv). Everybody listened and watched the play with rapt attention and the question that aroused great curiosity among academics and intellectuals alike was “Why did a play of the supposedly avant-garde make so immediate and so deep an impact on an audience of convicts” (Esslin, 1961: p. xvii). Many critics condemned the play for its unsophistication, lack of plot, development, characterization, suspense or plain common sense (Esslin, 1961: p. xvii). But the reception received at San Quentin and other places testify to the fact that albeit they were “dismissed as non-sense or mystification, have something to say and can be understood” (Esslin, 1961: p. xvii). Perhaps the reason could be that unlike the conventional plays these plays of revolt or absurd pursue ends quite differently from them in every aspects of modern drama. Moreover, the absurd plays might be reflecting the emotions and thinking of the mass or mass representative of the attitude inherent in an average European mind after the Second World War. Esslin (1961: p. xviii) sums up in this way, “The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war.”

The development of the Theatre of the Absurd itself was not a “self-conscious movement” according to Esslin (Bennett, 2011: p. 4). In fact, “this theatre is an expression, and one of the most representative ones—of the present situation of Western man” (Bennett, 2011: p. 4). *WFG* fully exploits it to the hilt about the predicament of the western people in the post war situation and unshackles the predetermined notions which had made them very complacent and reduced man to a state of inertia. Such docility steeped in their minds had to be eradicated of their cobwebs encircling them. *WFG* and other absurd plays came as a panacea for this irrationalism persisting in human minds during this period. For instance, the element of dependency was highlighted in *WFG* through Vladimir and Estragon depending on each other awaiting for the arrival of Godot. Beckett proves that it’s pointless to wait and every individual is quite capable of acting independently, taking his/her own judgements based on their wisdom and rationality. He stresses independence in place of dependence. Towards the end of the play it can be noticed that when both Vladimir and Estragon consider committing suicide, Estragon does not want to hang himself first because the rope and the branch of the tree will either break unable to bear his weight and so Vladimir might be stranded alone. So, even in death, they depend on each other after they fail in their first attempt to hang themselves. Both of them decide to come the next day and repeat the same process of suicide.

“Estragon: Why don’t we hang ourselves?”

Vladimir: With what?

Estragon: You haven’t got a bit of rope?

Vladimir: No

Estragon: Then we can't.

Silence.

.....

They each take an end of the cord and pull. #

It breaks. They almost fall." (Beckett, 2006: pp. 130-131, Act II)

Hence, it can be deduced that "the Theatre of the Absurd is not absurdity, but about making life meaningful given our absurd situation" (Bennett, 2011: p. 4). Contemporary context posits before man a piquant situation where s/he confronts technology vs tradition, materialism vs spiritualism, science vs humanities, nationalism vs patriotism et al in everyday encounter. Some of the commonalities running through all these above mentioned binaries could possibly be outer celebration vs inner search for meaning exemplified through silence and non-communication. But this ought not to be substituted for alienation, which again is a by-product of materialism. Beckett's WFG highly comes to the rescue of people suffering from these syndromes of frustration, and hoping against hope.

## 8. Waiting for Godot as a Christian Play

Expectation raises one's hope. The basic idiom of the play is Christian. By Christian, it does not mean focusing on the religious aspects of Christianity per se, but the ideals that are enshrined in Christianity. Despite the roaring success of the play WFG, there has been no serious attempts to define its theme. Quite similar to George Bernard Shaw's play *The Pygmalion* (Shaw, 2002) WFG offers no ending as it is left to the decision of the audience or the reader to judge on his/her own merit. Beckett's other novels, notably, *Molloy* (Beckett, 1955) and *Watt* (Beckett, 1970) are typically absurd, but WFG is least disgusting or boring. Rather, like a whirlwind, it extracts from the idea of boredom, the most genuine pathos and enchanting comedy. While the message of these two novels are one of blank despair, the message of WFG ambles along religious consolation. The audience leave the theatre not feeling bored or despaired but with a feeling that a new light has been cast on life's meaning at several deep levels.

The fundamental imagery of the play is Christian. Beckett's heroes are primarily the two tramps (Estragon & Vladimir) who have come from nowhere in particular and have nowhere to go living in a state of apparently fruitless expectation. They receive messages through a little boy from the local landowner Godot, who presumably is expected to appear in person tomorrow. But the day never does come. Hence, their attitude to Godot is one partly of hope, and partly of despair. Besides this, the orthodoxy of this symbolism, from a Christian point of view is obvious—the tramps with their rags and misery represent the fallen state of man. The squalor of their surroundings, their lack of a stake in the world represents the idea that here in the world no abiding city can be built. Moreover, the ambiguity of their attitude towards Godot, their mingled hope and fear, the doubtful tone of the boy's messages, all represent the state of tension and uncertainty in which the

average Christian must live in this world avoiding presumption and also avoiding despair. Besides this, the occurrence of the words like crucified, Hell, Savior, The Bible, Holy Land, The Dead Sea, The Gospels, the two thieves, repent et al are intermittingly spread throughout the play.

“Vladimir: Where was I...How’s your foot?

Estragon: Swelling visibly.

Vladimir: Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story?

Estragon: No.

Vladimir: Shall I tell it to you?

Estragon: No.

Vladimir: It’ll pass the time. (Pause). Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour. One -

Estragon: Our what?

Vladimir: Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the

Other... (he searches for the contrary of saved) ...Damned.” (Beckett, 2006: p. 10, Act I)

Savior, as everyone knows, is a significant reference in The Bible wherein it is referred to as a person of immaculate heart filled with compassion, love, loyal, and rational mind. A rational person can decide on his/her choice of freedom and completely responsible for their actions—be it absurd or wise. And so are the existentialist predicaments which are highlighted in this play WFG. The man-God dichotomy is presented through the interplay of the two main characters presented above besides the display of symbols like tree, willow et al. Yet another obvious aspect Beckett reveals here is the concept of man being free and sometimes being a slave of himself as presented through the character Lucky. Lucky is also an irony wherein the word itself is in direct contrast to his actions and the treatment he receives at the hands of his master Pozzo.

Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo) represent something far higher than the other two characters, the masterful and ridiculous Pozzo and his terrifying slave Lucky. While the first pair Didi and Gogo stand for the contemplative life, the next pair stand for the life of practical action taken mistakenly as an end in itself. The so-called practical man or the man of action has to be set on his feet and put on his way by the contemplative man. S/he depends on the contemplative man for such moments of insight, of spiritual communication as it occurs in his/her life. It is noteworthy that Didi and Gogo are bound to each other by something that is not absurd to call charity. They treat each other with consideration and compunction (always drawing away, but drawing together again). But Pozzo and Lucky are drawn together by hate and fear. Their lot is increasing misery. But Gogo and Didi don’t change till the end as their state remains one of expectations. One pair (Gogo and Didi) is shown having high hopes and expectations that Godot will appear and their period of waiting can be interpreted to mean wandering in darkness

resulting in enlightenment or the road to Christ as the case may be. However, the other pair (Pozzo and Lucky) fervently needs to overcome the ignominy that they might have suffered in the past and thus seeking redemption by turning towards the Savior.

WFG stands for a modern morality play on permanent Christian themes. Albeit the Christian basis of the structure is not obvious, the incidental symbolism and the dialogue point out the glaring contested sites. For instance, through the use of dialogue, the tramps talk about “two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour”. However, the effect of the dialogue on the stage is a momentary one, which reveals the glib Didi and the resentful, inarticulate Gogo with the two thieves and to see in each of them, an overmastering concern with the other’s salvation. Godot poses for an anthropomorphic image of God (God looking like a human in form and personality). No wonder, this could be the reason for Vladimir getting alarmed in Act II when he hears that Godot, Ancient of Days, has a white beard. Prior to this scene, in Act I, Vladimir and Estragon confronts the boy coming with a message from Godot saying that he will not come today. While conversing further, Beckett brings to the fore the Christian symbol of Jesus as a shepherd through these dialogues:

“Vladimir: Ah, you have a brother?

Boy: Yes, Sir.

Vladimir: What does he do?

Boy: He minds the sheep, Sir.” (Beckett, 2006: p. 65, Act I)

WFG clearly exhibits Christian symbols regularly. For instance, the tree on the stage (though a willow) obviously represents both for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (and when it puts on green leaves for the tree of life and for the Cross. When Didi and Gogo are frightened in Act II, the best thing they can think of doing is to shelter under its base. But it gives no concealment, and it is perhaps partly from God’s wrath that they are hiding; for it is also the tree of Judas, on which they are recurrently tempted to hang themselves. Didi and Gogo do not complete their pilgrimage nor is it meant clearly anywhere in the play that they will complete it successfully. Hence WFG can be viewed as quite different from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century anonymous morality play *Everyman* and John Bunyan’s 1678 Christian novel *The Pilgrims Progress*. The peculiar bitter ambiguity of the use of the Christian material is most palpable, perhaps in the dialogue about Gogo’s boots towards the end of Act I

“Vladimir: But you can’t go barefoot

Estragon: Christ did

Vladimir: Christ! What has Christ got to do with it? You are not going to compare yourself to Christ?

Estragon: All my life I’ve compared myself to him...” (Beckett, 2006: p. 68, Act I)

Additionally, another paradigm emerges out of these metanarratives in the play

WFG such as the interplay between the comic elements and the extent of philosophical depth effusing out. Generally, any drama presupposes that its components vary according to the needs of the audience and to the contingencies surrounding during that period. However, WFG differs from all these aspects in that it vouchsafes a new era in the dramatic composition and raises audience to a new level of thought and discussion. Its revolutionary outlook in both form and content bestows to the reader an amalgamation and acclimatization of various features subsumed in the play. All the four characters play out comically and penetrate deep thoughts into the audience mind. Comedy, here, is not a slapstick, rather it is intended to make people think and connect them philosophically with the outer world. Consequently, words like absurdity, existentialism, chaos, meaning, interpretation and relevance of silence in the modern context became a common parlance, thus sometimes raising the supernatural to a sublime level. Perhaps this could be a fitting tribute to the genre of drama from Beckett.

### **9. Relevance of Waiting for Godot in the Contemporary Context**

What is the significance of Beckett's play WFG especially in the contemporary postmodern world? Does it bear any semblance to the happenings all over the world? Perhaps the answer to these questions presents a host of issues that are likely to be dealt with in this neo-colonized world. Undoubtedly people live in a situation engulfed by presumptive consumerism driven by the madness to make quick money in order to sustain their lives. In this hot pursuit to achieve their dreams, often people get trapped in a whirlpool of absurd cycle with no end and undergo a humungous ordeal to avoid this problem of the absurd. Quite similar to black holes, the problem of the absurd is complicated to the extent that man's attempt to identify the meaning behind this. With the outer world failing to address individual's problems, tension mounts on their mind only to attain the nadir stage. Careers, goals, and rewards continue to haunt the spectra of human lives. In this mad pursuit, financial stability becomes the prime factor and people had less time to ruminate on absurdity and meaninglessness in their lives. Nonetheless people weren't aware of these existential developments in a corporatized world. While the success was attributed to their hard work, the reasons for failure were ascribed to something out of everyone's reach. People were made to believe the existence of destiny and the hand of the supernatural in every act of man.

### **10. Conclusion**

One of the most significant and pressing questions to emerge out of this absurdity is to ponder over the question: what is life and is it worth living? Based on the above said discussions, it poses a formidable challenge to humanity. Which is governing human existence? Is it absurdity or vice-versa! From Albert Camus's point of view, it is important to keep absurdity alive and no attempt ought to be made to destroy it. Should man attempt to abolish it, it is tantamount to escape from it.

Hence it is wiser to keep absurdity alive as the play WFG characterizes the struggle for human values especially in the contemporary situation. Ontologically speaking, it represents the absence of hope. Can WFG be read as an existential tale or a prophecy of human disillusionment or even a parable that brings to the surface the multi-layered maze that lies at the heart of every human being?

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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