

MIZORAM UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Presentation and assignment on
Existentialism with Reference to the Play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel
Beckett

Submitted to
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2nd Semester
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Continental philosophy, that is philosophy after Hegel especially in the European continents, has branches of philosophical thoughts such as existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, deconstruction and critical theory. The first is of our concern that Existential movement rooted in the 19th and 20th centuries as the gradual aftermath of World War-II(1939-1945), the ideological base of which is on the philosophical discourse on the existence of human being. Basically, it is a revolt against traditions and conventions. The themes of this philosophy can be generalized that traditional and academic philosophy is sterile and remote from the concern of real life therefore the later philosophy is focusing on the individual's own confrontation with the world. The world is irrational as it is beyond the total and accurate comprehension through philosophy and as a result of which it is absurd for there is no ultimate explanation for why it is the way it is. Human existence is pervaded by senselessness, emptiness, triviality, isolation and inability which are factors responsible for anxiety, dread, self-doubt and despair. And most of all, the individual confronts the necessity to choose how to live within the absurd and irrational world. The existentialists do not agree with the solvability of these existential predicaments and life is but deterioration and have no value if not struggled with these predicaments persistently. It is a belief in individuality, his freedom and rights and advocates man's existence with no external or internal barriers in the essential and inevitable existence of suffering and misery.

The chief exponents of this philosophy are Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard(1813-1855), German philosophers Frederich Nietzsche(1844-1900) and Martin Heidegger(1889-1976), French writer-philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre(1905-1980), Albert Camus(1913-1960) and a famous feminist Simon de Beauvoir(1908-1996) for instance. For Kierkegaard, the fundamental truth of existence does not lie in representation such as ideas, propositions or symbols, but are in the immediately lived, felt and acted. Accordingly, for Nietzsche, Heidegger and Albert Camus, the nature of life itself is a matter of "being" or "becoming" and in the significance of death. Existentialism has had many influences on disciplines like Psychoanalysis and Arts and literature such as, Dadaism, Expressionism, Surrealism and Theatre of the Absurd. However, in accordance with the discourses of these philosophers and writers, the key factors they emphasize are anxiety, freedom, existence, irrationality or absurdity which are exposed and exhibited in the play we are dealing with. For our task is the reciprocal bridge between

existentialism and an absurd play, for which Sartre and Camus are crucial figures in the context. To Quote Sartre from his "Existentialism and Humanism", he states that "...man exists first, experiences himself, springs up in the world, and that he defines himself afterwards."(Moore and Bruder 196) And in analogy to this statement Camus in his *Myth of Sisyphus* states, "This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction. For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers."(Moore and Bruder 200)

Basically, Existentialism is of two dimensional ideologies, but their foundational structures are of the same criteria. Their discrepancies lie in centering for the structure. The dimensions are Theistic and Atheistic existentialisms. Accordingly, the existentialistic interpretation of the play *Waiting for Godot* can be based on the same as Vladimir represents theistic existentialist and Estragon atheistic existentialist. They both are trying to find sense and meaning in life, in a manner of which Vladimir seeks meaning through a belief in someone he does not know and Estragon through the experience in life itself. Therefore, it is within the main existential domain itself there is a dormant clash of clans between the two existential creeds. The play can mostly be regarded as a reasoning conflict between the concept of meaning in life or existence.

The whole story of the play can be summarized as the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, keep waiting for Godot whose identity they are not sure of. On their pretext of waiting, their dialogues and events convey the sense of existential elements. The dramatic structure of the play deviates from the traditional standards as it contains no such things as development, reversal and denouement. Characters do not indulge in Shakespearean conflicts nor are there any melodramatic scenes and sensational sights as it is the reasonable breakaway from the conventional norms that characterizes the sense of existentialism in one aspect. The structure of the play centers on the repetition of habitual actions. And this repetition signifies the meaninglessness and inactivity in life. It is a representation of stagnant life. The play shows that the individual must take action in life as he exists instead of waiting for salvation imagined to be brought by a super-being or deity that is out of comprehension but to take matters of life into account to create meaning by the innate freedom of man. It also appears that Beckett tries to question the concept of faith in the supernatural being.

As the play begins, the two tramps are already outcasts of society and are in a deserted place with which they are as well unfamiliar. And throughout the play they are intimidated by their unpredictable meeting with Godot. Their state of being outcasts and their uncertainty about meeting with Godot creates the sense of alienation for they have no alternative expectation, especially in the case of Vladimir. The sense of this alienation is disguisedly displayed by their habitual actions and the fear of losing each other. On their waiting the frequent reminding of Estragon by Vladimir that they are waiting for Godot suggests that Vladimir is one who trusts in spiritual entity for guidance and enlightenment. On the contrary of which the existential philosophy of human experience in the physical world is what Estragon seeks as in their dialogue in Act-I:

Vladimir: Well, what are we to do now?

Estragon: Let us not do anything at all. It is safer that way.

Vladimir: Let's wait and see what he has to say.

Estragon: Who do you mean?

Vladimir: I mean Godot.

Estragon: That is a Good idea.

Vladimir: We should wait till we know what our position now is.

Estragon: On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes.
(Varshney 92)

Here Vladimir is depending on Godot to tell him what he needs to know regarding his existence, while Estragon asserts that they do not have the time to wait and that they should take action on their own before it is too late. Estragon's suggestion suggests that they do not have time to wait for someone who may or may not exist with whom they are not even certain about whether or not they have any engagement. Rather, they have to make the move in their own present life or existence before their time runs out. The metaphor of the cooling iron suggests that humanity does not have enough time to wait for their spiritual ponderings to offer them enlightenment, that the chance will pass, and their efforts will not take effect once it does. It is Estragon who follows the notion of no longer waiting on religion for answers and going to the philosophy of atheistic existentialism.

Around the first quarter of Act-I, Estragon tries to share his dream with Vladimir which Vladimir insists him not to do it. It suggests that instead of looking into a universe he could never understand, Vladimir should listen to Estragon's dream which is based on human experience and is comprehensible to human beings. Here, it refers to the statement that one should Place more emphasis on personal or physical experience as a means of discovering profound truth rather than looking into the domain beyond human perception. Proceeding to the scene of Pozzo and Lucky in Act-I, their relationship reflects some people have with their religion. When Estragon asks about why Lucky does not relieve himself of the weight he carries, Pozzo replies that it is because Lucky tries to impress him. This signifies how a religious person would bear certain burdens such as ritualistic practices like daily morning prayer or going to church to please the higher beings for instance. In Act-II, at least one of the weights carried by Lucky turns out to be a bag of sand which is the symbol of an extra weight. The situation with Pozzo and Lucky can be a signification of an expression of the atheistic existentialistic notion that religious practices serve no actual purpose which is an unseen weight keeping them from the enlightenment that the very existence of physical world can offer.

At the later part of Act-II, when the boy informs that Godot is coming, Vladimir never goes so far as to the question how reliability of the information the boy gives him. He even abruptly changes the subject when it would make more sense to push on the subject when he is given the suspicion by the boy that Godot does nothing. It appears as if it is a statement about the case of blind faith in religion. Say for instance, most religious people are taught not to question the will of God and take for granted what they are told, which is equally as pointless as Vladimir's blind faith that Godot would come based on what the boy tells him. The two tramps spend their present time finding ways to simply kill the time focusing on the future neglecting the present for which they have no certain memory of the past. It is an ironical implication of the fact that people who spend their lives to attain bliss in life after death and to understand the meaning of life should instead focus on the past so that they can make a meaningful life and not ending up wasting.

Eventually, the pattern of time appears to be circular or cyclic as oppose to a linear. Linear time seems to have broken down, as events do not develop with inevitable climaxes traditionally. The boy returns with the same message, Godot never comes and tomorrow never seems to arrive. The tramps are all the time drawing close to a value but never reaching it. They

portray the horror of their uneventful repetitive existence as no one comes in the end of the play. And the waiting becomes the ultimate way of them as well as human in general. Here we find the absurdity and nothingness which is the reality of human existence on which the existential philosophy as a whole is based. The play then, offers compelling evidence in adherence to existential philosophy as a more suitable means of pursuit for the meaning of life through life or existence itself.

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