

Camus and the Absurdity of Existence in *Waiting for Godot*

Angela Hotaling
SUNY Oneonta (Oneonta, NY)

Abstract: Albert Camus' argues in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that human life is absurd and purposeless. Humans grapple with becoming conscious of the absurdity of existence, and this realization causes one to suffer. Basically, with the Death of God, men are deserted from God, and all of the meaning that God gives. One has to unhinge oneself from the desire for life with a meaning, and live amidst the absurdity. In this paper, I compare Camus' views in *The Myth of Sisyphus* to Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*. I also mention Nietzsche's contribution to the existential tradition and how it sets up the dilemma of human existence that Camus is attempting to discuss. Man's desire for a meaningful life is present in *Waiting for Godot*, and I explore the many forms in which this desire for meaning can consume one's existence.

“Waiting for Godot” is a play written by Samuel Beckett. The play is classified by Grove Press as a tragic comedy, and additionally is seen by critics such as Martin Esslin, in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, to be part of the “theatre of the absurd.” To me it seems to parallel existential thought and themes throughout the existential tradition. The scenery of the play is simple, consisting of only a tree. The exact location is unknown and it appears that the characters are placed in some “distant region” that could be anywhere. The simplicity of the scene in which both acts of the play take place seems to symbolize a much more complicated and absurd existence located in space and time. The play has two acts, the first which spans a day and the second which is the next day. The characters in “Waiting for Godot” and their location represent man suffering from Albert Camus' concept of nostalgia. (*The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus in *Basic Writings of Existentialism* edited by Gordon Marino) The setting that Beckett creates for the characters is simple and desolate, and could be seen as man's struggle to find a distinct place or existence full of meaning and sense. The characters are far from this discovery of meaning and sense, therefore, they are stuck waiting amidst nothing. “It's

indescribable. It's like nothing. There's nothing. There's a tree." (Vladimir, "Waiting for Godot" P. 56)

The play is focused on the characters Vladimir and Estragon. The dialogue between the two is the crux of the play. Vladimir and Estragon argue and question one and another for two acts without ever finding solutions or clarity. Estragon finds it difficult to wear his boots and remember days passed. Vladimir struggles with inaction and what seems to be overall discontent. The two are waiting, "Waiting for Godot." This appointment with a "man" who apparently does nothing but fails to show up seems to mean a lot to Vladimir and Estragon. It doesn't seem like the two men even know why they are scheduled to meet with Godot, and find the waiting boring, and the boredom frustrating.

The focus of the play is the struggle of the characters to fill up the time they wait with meaningful discussions and acts. The waiting is all these two ever do, and they constantly contemplate leaving and suicide. The contemplation of suicide is important in a number of ways including; the severity of their boredom, and lack of meaning without Godot. Thoughts of leaving always end in hope of Godot's arrival and complete fear of what there will be without this waiting. It seems as though the characters are stuck. In the first act, a little messenger boy arrives to tell the men that Godot will not arrive that night but tomorrow night he will surely arrive.

Two other characters join Vladimir and Estragon. Pozzo and his dog Lucky disrupt the format of how Vladimir and Estragon get on during their desperation. Pozzo, a high-energy and overly opinionated man confuses the two men about time, naming, and subordination. Pozzo keeps his dog, Lucky, confined on a leash and basically has made

him a slave. Lucky never puts down the bags and is prompted to work and perform for Pozzo. The presence of Pozzo and Lucky seems to irritate Vladimir and Estragon even though the presence of the irritation is fleeting and almost forgotten completely once it's gone.

The next day, in the second act, Estragon forgets all together that Pozzo and Lucky had even come. Estragon forgets things done in days passed and the whole play seems to circle around the concept of time. The two are aware of time because they constantly search for ways to "pass the time." But, when it comes to reflecting on times passed, memory, and repetition, the two are not only confused by it, they are haunted by it. When trying to decipher whether they are in the right place and time for the meeting with Godot, Estragon panics, "But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? Or Monday? Or Friday?" (Waiting for Godot P. 11)

When Pozzo and Lucky return in the second act, Lucky is blind and Vladimir and Estragon are grappling with the waiting and the meaning of it *all* even more. Pozzo wants help and Estragon and Vladimir are too beside themselves to give any assistance. The little messenger boy arrives again to inform the men that Godot will not come that night, but he will surely arrive tomorrow. This makes the reader question how long this cycle has been going on for. Vladimir and Estragon, frustrated and discouraged contemplate not showing up and decide that when they arrive tomorrow they will bring a rope to hang themselves. "And if we dropped him? If we dropped him? He'd punish us." (Waiting for Godot P. 60)

Vladimir and Estragon depend on Godot's arrival for meaning. Their days are spent awaiting Godot's arrival. The waiting is the hardest part and the men constantly

ask “What’ll we do?” (Waiting for Godot P. 44) Not only is the waiting difficult, but figuring out what to do while waiting is difficult. Without Godot, the men have lost the meaning to their days. What is the “punishment” for dropping Godot? It is essentially the loss of meaning. The waiting at least gives the men *something* to do and without it, they are even more lost within a sea of meaninglessness. This is why the only options that seem available to the men are waiting or suicide. Vladimir and Estragon are struggling with Nihilism.

Nietzsche’s “existential” philosophy is a response to the philosophic tradition of Western thought. Most beliefs and views of reality that one holds are illusions. Reality as one knows it and all of the comfort that it gives is nonexistent. After *The Death of God* life loses all meaning. As mentioned, Godot seems to symbolize God. “God,” not necessarily in Christian terms, but the concept of a being that has created man with a purpose. It is God that offers universality, unity, and clarity. Nietzsche was influential to the Existential tradition, but denied being classified as an existentialist. Camus also denied being classified as an Existentialist but says, “We turn toward God only to obtain the impossible.” (Sisyphus P. 464) The impossible here means understanding the world and truth aside from human conceptions. The impossible is to understand absolute truth and the way the world is independent of our conceptions. This is when one can turn to God and “obtain the impossible.” Accepting God, as Kierkegaard attempts, is when Camus’ concept of philosophical suicide is at its highest degree. Camus says that “Kierkegaard was swallowed up in his God.” (Sisyphus P. 473) Camus’ concept of philosophical suicide is when by claiming that life is meaningless, one attempts to find meaning amidst the meaninglessness. After finding life meaningless, one attempts to

escape it, however, Camus claims that to escape the absurdity of existence is philosophical suicide.

God offers a map to use while navigating through life. Nietzsche claims that the idea of God originated from the idea that men on earth owe something to those who have died. "It is only through the sacrifices and accomplishments of the ancestors that the tribe exists-and that one has to pay them back with sacrifices and accomplishments: one thus recognizes a debt that constantly grows greater." (*Genealogy of Morals*, by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Basic Writings in Existentialism* edited by Gordon Marino P. 179) Thus, one feels indebted to God through fear and one must redeem oneself before God. The fear that is evoked by God and felt by man gives man a purpose to his life by demanding that the guilt be repented throughout his life. Therefore, with this fear, man's life is made purposeful. There is also the Platonic tradition of truth and the belief that truth is transcendent that Nietzsche is responding to. This is similar to the notion of God and how it serves as a map. Therefore, one has purpose to life with God's existence. The purpose is reached through devotion to God, or the Platonic notion of truth. "People are bloody ignorant apes," Estragon claims when Vladimir is discussing the Bible. But isn't God and Godot the same concept? The two men feel as though they have to wait for Godot because of the meeting.

For Nietzsche God never existed, similar to Godot, and it is simply the death of the *idea* of God, or Godot. It could also be seen as a God that has deserted man, or Godot has deserted Vladimir and Estragon by failing to show up. This is the position of the Nihilist. Considering the whole purpose for the creation of God (to give meaning), the Nihilist finds the reality of meaninglessness. One desperately wants to find meaning and

purpose, but refuses to be deceived by the belief in religion, faith, and truth. In “Waiting for Godot,” by Samuel Beckett, Vladimir and Estragon wait desperately and absurdly for a “person” that is never going to come. The two characters, inundated in what Kierkegaard would call “despair,” are not only struggling with becoming conscious of the nihilistic reality of life, but also in Camus’ view, the absurdity of existence. The characters in “Waiting for Godot” have not yet become conscious of the absurdity of existence, and they are struggling with becoming conscious of the absurdity of existence. To Camus, this is precisely what can lead one to contemplate suicide, which the characters do.

In Camus’, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” he portrays man as having a “wild longing for clarity.” (Sisyphus P. 445) That which seemed clear has turned out to highlight one’s ignorance and gives one “nostalgia” for understanding, meaning, and clarity. This “nostalgia” for meaning consumes one’s existence and the disappointment when no meaning is found leads one to ask the question of suicide. The characters of “Waiting for Godot” ask that question a number of times. They contemplate hanging themselves on the tree that they wait next to. As suicide can be thought of the ultimate conclusion to a meaningless life, Camus would respond by claiming that suicide is an attempt to escape from the consciousness of absurdity. It is similar to his concept of philosophical suicide, in that one attempts to find meaning in life, while disregarding or suppressing its obvious meaninglessness. In this lies a contradiction that can be seen also with “plain suicide.” One claims to have found meaning (death) after asserting life’s meaninglessness. If the search for meaning leads one to discover the meaninglessness of existence, no *kind* of meaning can be found. The only “solution” to this kind of

discovery is maintaining consciousness of it. “Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it.” (*The Myth of Sisyphus* P. 479)

“To every man his little cross, till he dies, and is forgotten.” Vladimir complains. (*Waiting for Godot* P. 40) “In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of remaining silent,” Estragon replies. It is difficult for the two men to figure out what to do. Death seems so attractive, because it seems to end the confusion of existence. To Camus, this is exactly the thoughts of the absurd man struggling with nostalgia. The nostalgia is the desire of man that his existence has purpose and transcendent meaning. The “absurd walls” that close in upon man is the clearer and clearer consciousness that life might not have any meaning or real truth. “This very heart which is mine will forever remain indefinable to me. Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled. Forever I shall be a stranger to myself.” (*Sisyphus* P. 453)

“But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not...What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot.” (*Waiting for Godot* P. 51-52) This is clearly an example of Camus’ notion of philosophical suicide. Nothing else makes any sense, so why not devote oneself to something that could make it all worth while? To Camus, when one realizes that the world does not match up to one’s conceptions and ideas about it, the problem of absurdity arises. With the *Death of God* and one’s realization of one’s unavoidable ignorance of the world makes the “feeling of the absurd become clear and

definite.” (Sisyphus P. 455) As already mentioned, Camus’ response to philosophical suicide is that it is an “escape” from the absurd and that the “struggle is eluded.”

Vladimir and Estragon are “waiting” for the meaning to their lives. This meaning is symbolized by Godot. When Godot doesn’t arrive, or to put it in Camus’ terms, when meaning is not found, one is surrounded by illusions of meaning and “nostalgia” or one’s “thought” and hope for meaning and clarity. “What is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for the clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.”

(Sisyphus P. 455) One has a desire to understand the world and classify it within the realm of human comprehension. The problem of the absurd arises when one realizes that those that have attempted this classification are not certain, and in consequence leaves man to his own knowledge, which falters at an even higher ground because of the importance of clarity within the “human heart.” This is the “struggle” and why the characters in “Waiting for Godot” are constantly dealing with what to do without Godot.

What the characters do while waiting seems to frustrate them endlessly. Vladimir says, “Let us do something while we have the chance,” as opposed to inaction. The fruitlessness of how the waiting is spent seems to severely frustrate Estragon and he is constantly relying upon his habit. Estragon puts on and takes off his boots numerous times throughout the play. It is the “ridiculous character of habit,” (*Sisyphus* P. 443) to Camus that allows one to suppress the absurdity. When Estragon questions whether his boots are actually his boots, he is becoming “conscious” of his “ridiculous” habits. “A man who is conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it.” (The Myth of Sisyphus P. 463) He seems to become more frustrated after “losing” his boots, which can be explained by Camus’ “nostalgia” or Keirkegor’s “despair.”

Either way, consciousness of one's nostalgia or despair is harder than being unaware of it. Others are unaware of this meaninglessness and convinced that they are free. With this awareness, existence is absurd, and life is more difficult to accept. Consciousness of one's despair might make it more difficult, however; it might be only that which sets one free. Free from what? Free from the *illusion* of freedom. It is the illusion of freedom that God or religion gives, or freedom from the meaning that Godot gives. Along with the illusion of freedom that religion, or Godot gives, is the illusion of meaning and purpose. One uses that illusory freedom to choose what is "important" or "meaningful," but considering the freedom of one's choices aren't real, the importance of one's choices is also an illusion. "The return to consciousness, the escape from everyday sleep represent the first steps of absurd freedom." (Sisyphus P. 483)

Not only is the place in which they wait indistinguishable, the time that passes is impossible to discern. Pozzo claims to have no concept of time and the only concept of time Vladimir and Estragon seem to have is that which depends upon Godot's arrival. The waiting that the characters endure extends through time and "seizes" their concept of recognizing time in any other way. They are merely depending on Godot's arrival and measuring time against this. "Time carries us...He belongs to time, and by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy. Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything to him ought to reject it." (Sisyphus P. 449) It is as if Godot will have the answers to questions or make their lives more bearable, or clearer. "We're waiting for Godot." The two men wait for the *time* that Godot will arrive, but what will Godot do for them? Does anything else matter other than Godot's arrival?

What's the point of doing *anything* while they wait? Why not drop Godot and exercise their "freedom of action" (Sisyphus P. 481) by traveling with Pozzo and Lucky?

Pozzo, who is unaware of Godot's "existence", and manages quite fine without Godot, is unaware, and therefore, not conscious of the importance of the meeting that Estragon and Vladimir wait for. Is he more content? In the first act Pozzo, symbolizes society's contentment with subordination and ignorance to life's purpose. Pozzo is ignorant of life's absurdity and therefore, more content to live an existence based on habit. This is why Pozzo irritates Estragon and Vladimir so much. The two men are depending on Godot to make sense of it all. When really, there is no sense to be made.

In the second act Pozzo screams for help countless times and when Vladimir and Estragon finally decide to help him, they discover that he is now blind and beside himself. Pozzo does not remember meeting the two men the previous day and gets extremely agitated when asked about time and his memory. It seems as though Pozzo is falling prey to his own nostalgia. He has lived with control; control over Lucky, and control over his travels. Now that he is blind he has lost control and thus, has lost meaning. He demands "Pity," but the two men have nothing to offer. Vladimir asks Pozzo, "What do you do when you fall too far from help?" Pozzo, leaving, answers, "We wait till we get up. Then we go on!" (Waiting for Godot P. 57) It seems as though Pozzo's characters makes a dramatic change in the second act. Has he become conscious of the absurdity?

Along with one's desire to find meaning in life, one is also striving to be recognized as an individual. All humans want to have meaning and significance, and also be recognized by others as significant. The characters in "Waiting for Godot" seem to

lose all ability to distinguish living things from other living things. Whether or not it is a name that cannot be remembered, or whom had which memory, it is apparent that Beckett is attempting to show the unity of humanity in the context of all humans are alone to “examine the odd vegetation of those distant regions.” (Sisyphus P. 446) Once one is conscious of the absurdity of life, reasons why *you* are important and significant seem to fall away. This consciousness makes one indistinguishable from any other meaningless individual. Pozzo’s misnaming of Godot, symbolizes Godot’s versatility in what “he” actually symbolizes. Also, when Pozzo does not answer to his name, Estragon claims that Pozzo represents all humanity. Naming is arbitrary and the subject is only part of the world that is really in the same position as all others.

It becomes apparent to the characters that Godot is not going to arrive. The time spent waiting for “his” arrival was wasted, or was it? They begin to question the little boy who is seen as Godot’s messenger, about Godot’s existence. When asked what Godot does the little boy replies, “Nothing.” (Waiting for Godot P. 58) Godot will never come and the clarity that Godot might offer will never be reached. The option to the two men becomes whether to wait or commit suicide. “I can’t go on like this.” (Waiting for Godot P. 61) Camus would agree that when faced with the absurdity of existence, man feels as though he ought to give into philosophical suicide or actual suicide. But, what if the answer is amidst the time spent waiting. What if that’s all there is? What if we are *all* “waiting for Godot?” “We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?” (Waiting for Godot P. 45)

“Meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.” (Sisyphus P. 442) In “Waiting for Godot,” the characters Vladimir and Estragon anxiously wait for Godot to come.

Their lives are spent waiting. They think that when Godot finally comes, they will be fulfilled or something. By, what? Godot will bring purpose and meaning to Estragon and Vladimir's life, and nothing else seems to have the ability to do this. Camus would agree, but would respond by claiming that the characters must accept the lack of meaning. The two men must not put faith in Godot to supply meaning because he is *not* going to come. Vladimir and Estragon could possibly be in the same exact position that Kierkegaard is in. "We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?" (Waiting for Godot P. 52) He takes a leap of faith that God provides all meaning, but unable to attain God and the pure faith that is necessary to escaping despair. Even though to Camus, this escape is still a form of despair. What's left for them if they leave? If they decide to wait, they will forever be stuck in this despair, or nostalgia. It appears as though they will be considering at the end of the play when they decide to leave, but do not move.

When one does not give in to Camus' concept of philosophical suicide, or like in "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett, when the characters are struggling on the edge of philosophical suicide, an extreme upset to one's existence arises. Without God, or Godot, life appears to be meaningless. When all science can do is "explain this world to me with an image," (Sisyphus P. 454) truth seems so distant from "me," the subject. In order to understand anything I have to "reduce it to the human." (Sisyphus P. 452) Reducing what is "true" to the human distances one from the truth because of the limits to human understanding. To Camus, no clarity about this world can be reached. Does this mean that the world is absurd and thus, one is doomed to live an absurd and meaningless existence? Or, does it mean that one cannot understand the world and

because of this, one suffers from the nostalgia of the desire to understand? Perhaps without this profound desire for clarity and meaning, nostalgia and an absurd existence is avoidable. But, is the desire itself avoidable? For Vladimir and Estragon the desire consumes them. Godot is the only explanation and even *that* isn't sufficient because "he" has no reality. When it is impossible to explain the world without "reducing it to poetry," (Sisyphus P. 454) life is either meaningless, or meaningful, but if this meaning is beyond one's understanding, does that make it meaningless?