

The Loss of Self in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* encapsulates man's loss of the self after the Second World War in Europe. At that time people face so much terror that they start to feel nothingness in everything. Life becomes vulnerable in the complex post-world war era. In this play, the characters deal with humanity's crucial challenge of existential crisis concerning futility that leads towards the temptation of committing suicide in a meaningless world of absurdity. *Waiting for Godot* represents uncertainty, nothingness and identity crisis of the characters particularly the characters of Vladimir and Estragon. However, Beckett makes the plot limited and open ended to show the absurdity of human existence. Hence, this study aims to explore the existential crisis of the characters to show how they lose themselves in the post-World War II time. Additionally, in order to explore the loss of the self and existential crisis of the characters, this paper emphasizes on the various aspects of existential philosophy and theory. In line with the research objective, this study incorporates a qualitative research design using 'textual analysis' as its primary methodological approach. Through a 'close reading' of the text, the study uses existentialism as its theoretical basis.

Keywords: Self, Existential Crisis, Godot, World War, Europe

Existential philosophers and absurdist playwrights play a significant role in reflecting and representing the trouble of existentialism. Their writings from the late 19th and early 20th century tackle the topic of God and the absurdity of life. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is not an exception. *Waiting for*

Godot is a philosophical exploration of the human state, specifically in the context of post-World War II Europe, where traditional structures of religious, social and philosophical meaning are questioned. It portrays a clear picture about what contemporary European people are going through. It actually deals with the contemporary “conflict between living either by an existential philosophy that gives the individual the chance to detect the meaning of his/her life, or through the religious beliefs” (Asma, 2018). Here, Beckett is reluctant to represent meaning because he wants to lead his readers to search for meaning. In this regard, according to Mahanta’s analysis, “*Waiting for Godot* presents an eternal dilemma of human life, an endless tug-of-war between hope and despair, between a desire for life and an equally intense longing for the release that only death can bring.” (Biswas, 2006, p. 116). Therefore, the objective of this research is to investigate Beckett’s portrayal of the loss of self in *Waiting for Godot* from an existential perspective. However, in order to accomplish this objective, the study answers the following research questions:

1. How do the characters, dialogues, and dramatic structure of *Waiting for Godot* represent the loss of self?
2. How do existential concepts like alienation, meaninglessness, absurdity, despair and anguish effect the characters’ identities in *Waiting for Godot*?
3. In what ways does Beckett’s illustration of identity support a universal existential interpretation of the post-war human condition?

Drawing on the preceding discussion, this study examines the representation of the loss of self in *Waiting for Godot* through an existential framework by exploring Beckett’s construction of fragmented identity of the modern individual.

To provide the necessary context, a background study is needed before exploring the loss of self as portrayed in *Waiting for Godot*. As we can see, the twentieth century has experienced two brutal wars that has destroyed European individuals’ lives in a number of ways. As a result, the people of Europe have no hope or religious belief. Existentialists are prompted to reconsider the purpose of human life in the world by this circumstance. They reinterpret existence and connect it to essence in accordance with their personal convictions. For example, Sartre asserts that essence is a matter of

human choice (Sartre, 2007, p. 23). In contrast, Kierkegaard argues man's existence as related to God (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 45). Though existentialists have different opinions regarding existence, their main concerns were on individualism, personal choice and freedom (Warnock, 1970, p. 12). After a certain point in our lives, we all ponder about the purpose of our lives. Such moment comes from a psychological thought process referred to as an existential crisis. The word "existential crisis" was first used literally. The Jewish people's genuine survival in Hitler's Germany is described by the phrase "existential." Following World War II, the existential crisis is viewed from a more philosophical perspective, emphasizing the individual rather than a group of people who are in danger of dying (Walker, 2001, p. 33). Additionally, social scientists began using the phrase in the 1950s to describe internal conflicts and existential and purpose-related concerns from a psychological and spiritual perspective. Because existential crises cause stress, anxiety, and sadness. An existential crisis is connected to the discipline or study of philosophy and is associated with abstract conflicts within the self. To put it another way, the phrase "existential crisis" is related to "existentialism," a school of thought that focuses on the nature of existence. Existentialist philosophy states that people experience an existential crisis when they doubt the value, meaning, or purpose of their lives. (Islam, 2017, p. 6). However, it is tied to pessimistic speculation on purpose in life. It can lead one ultimately to lose one's own self. One such scenario is perceived from the play *Waiting for Godot*. The characters are left with nothing to hope for and nothing to trust in as the play depicts a world devoid of any indication of human civilization, including its conventions, rituals, beliefs, and habits. They seem to have no purpose in life either, other than waiting for someone called Godot. They wait for him in the hope that he will answer their questions and give them some form of meaning. Yet, the whereabouts of this 'Godot' remains a complete mystery, which neither one of the two men are actually willing to solve. It is perhaps the fear of the state of nothingness that will come after finding out the truth. Because even if they succeed to meet Godot, there remains a question about the next move of the characters. In *Waiting for Godot*, characters are actually burning with the crisis of existence that makes them incapable of finding their own identities. Therefore, recent study has continued to interpret the play through the lens of existential philosophy. In *Waiting for Godot: A Solution to Existential Crisis*, Haque and Talukder (2021) contend that Beckett depicts people who are overcome by alienation,

dissatisfaction, loneliness, and meaninglessness. The writers claim that Vladimir and Estragon's constant search for meaning but imprisonment in futility serves as an example of the existential problem facing contemporary mankind.

While evaluating the play we see that *Waiting for Godot* depicts the incidents of two consecutive days in the existence of Beckett's non-heroes Estragon and Vladimir. They are in a debate whether to commit suicide or not. There is a little hope in their hearts that Godot will come to make their life meaningful. It is observed that 'waiting' is their only task in the play because they are not involved in any significant action or task other than waiting. While waiting the two friends make themselves busy with meaningless activities. On both days, they meet a master and his slave named Pozzo and lucky respectively. Each day ends with a young boy who is sent to give the message that Godot will not come. In this regard, a critic opines, "The play resolves around the concept of waiting, and so whether Godot comes or not is immaterial and it is the waiting which constitutes the real human experience" (Anders, 1980, p. 145). Since they are so profoundly lost, they no longer recognize their origins or purpose. Therefore, the following statement is worth mentioning, "With only the haziest fragments of memory and no future prospects, they exist in a static perpetual present" (Biswas, 2006, p. 121). Beckett expresses that their waiting does not have any significance as they do not achieve what they want. Sharma and Kumar (2025), in their "Significance and Role of Time: *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett", show how Beckett's circular understanding of time binds Vladimir and Estragon in an unending present where significant human growth is impossible. Though the effects of this temporal paralysis on the characters' sense of self are not completely explored, their study shows that frozen time undermines hope and agency. Additionally, the play represents the meaninglessness of human condition as there is no setting, no beginning, middle or end of the play. Nothing happens except that two men wait for Godot. The whole play carries evidence for a pretty hopelessness indicating that the characters of the play are indifferent to "Neither time nor existence, neither reality nor memory or the past have any significance" (Islam, 2017, p. 8). On top of that, all the characters of the play represent the purposeless existence and loss of self of modern men who struggle to survive in the absurd world.

If we analyze the activities of the characters of the play, we notice how feelings of the loss of self and nothingness of life can lead a human being to an ultimate loss of the soul. First and foremost, we can focus on the character of Estragon. In the play, Estragon is a ridiculous character. He continuously intends to leave but his intention of waiting for Godot is stronger. He often spends his time trying to fall asleep, unless he is sleeping already. His feeling of the loss leads him to such a pathetic condition that he has no grasp of time. In act II, he does not realize whether it is morning or evening. He hardly understands what is happening around him. He even does not feel any hesitation for begging money or eating discarded chicken bones from a stranger (Pozzo). Estragon does not bother about religion or philosophy either. Estragon relies on Vladimir in terms of looking after himself, understanding and remembering different aspects (Anders, 1980, p. 147). He acts as Vladimir's follower who only follows the order rather than initiates it. Here, a small conversation between Vladimir and Estragon is relevant which supports the hopelessness of Estragon,

Estragon: Let's go:

Vladimir: We can't.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot.

Estragon: (despairingly) Ah! (Beckett, 1954, p. 47)

It is to be noted that in this play, Estragon is in a constant state of anxiety which is a part of existential crisis and the loss of self. He wants to leave Vladimir but has the lack of courage to leave alone which indicates his lack of control upon himself. Vladimir is a floater who allows life to control himself. To him taking action is unsafe, and he says, "Don't let's do anything. It's safer." (Beckett, 1954, p. 195). Moreover, Estragon's actions reveal the characters' reluctance to act, as both Estragon and Vladimir perceive doing nothing is safer than making a decision. Estragon seems to think that inaction protects against failure since it removes the possibility of making poor decisions or making mistakes. However, in reality, inaction is no safer than action, although Estragon fails to identify this truth. Hence, his inability to make decisions or take action exacerbates his loss of identity rather than saving him from pain. Nevertheless, sometimes we find him as a philosopher when Estragon and Vladimir have the following conversation:

Estragon: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?

Vladimir: (impatiently) Yes. . . yes, we're magicians. (Beckett, 1954, p. 292)

It is obvious that Estragon wants to feel his existence in the world. But his lack of action and choice cannot make any difference between life and death. Thus, he becomes a perfect embodiment of being a suffering modern man who loses his self, identity and ultimate existence in the world.

Notably, the character of Vladimir is the one who basically moves forward the plot. He is comparatively optimistic, noticeably an initiator. In addition, he is the one character who is most hopeful about the entrance of Godot in the play. He constantly motivates Estragon to keep on waiting. It seems that Vladimir has much faith in supernatural powers. He is the philosopher of the play as he contains the voice that expresses the existentialist stream of the play. To Vladimir, life does not possess any meaning because the outcome of life remains the same which is death. Consequently, he declares, "We wait. We are bored. No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it... In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness" (Beckett, 1954, p. 73). He possesses some sense of religious belief, particularly of Christianity. For example, he knows about two thieves who were crucified on either side of Jesus which Estragon does not know. He also possesses a general concern for mankind. When Lucky and Pozzo cry for help, Vladimir interprets it as a chance to help the humankind which indicates his intention of not losing his self in his subconscious mind. That is why, he suggests, "Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not." (Beckett, 1954, p. 526)

Vladimir indeed tries to live with dream, belief and aspiration. Yet, as Godot never really shows up, he is depressed. However, Vladimir fails to comprehend the concept that waiting for Godot is a choice in itself. From an existential standpoint, Estragon's waiting binds him to an existence that

progressively undermines his sense of self since he deliberately chooses to wait. However, it is again noteworthy that Vladimir always chooses to renovate his appointment with Godot. In this way, he is self-damning himself.

Notably, in *Waiting for Godot*, we also become introduced with a representation of self-obsessed modern man Pozzo who only focuses on himself. He takes pride introducing himself: "I present myself: Pozzo." (Beckett, 1954, p. 41) He is directed by his selfish concern. He has emotions like other characters. Yet, he is different from others because he possesses superiority and power. In the first act, Pozzo acts as an authoritarian figure. For instance, Lucky is treated as a slave by Pozzo. However, their being tied together directs their goal as fixed together. He considers Estragon and Vladimir as inferior beings. He finds human likeness within them although "likeness is an imperfect one" (Beckett, 1954, p. 52). According to him, he is bound to be a part of the society since there is no society as he likes. Though he is apparently powerful, he cannot conceal his anxiety when he loses his watch. Besides, we find inconsistency within him when he is busy with nothing but wandering. However, his dominance does not last long. He experiences a radical transformation between the two acts. In act two, he loses his eye sight portraying the lack of far sightedness of modern man in defining own existence. When he enters for the second time, he falls down immediately and cannot manage to stand up which also shows human's lack of balance in maintaining the life and relationship which ultimately leads to self-destruction. Therefore, he "remains this way for the rest of his scene, helplessly moaning and bemoaning his fate and condition" (Islam, 2017, p. 12). Thus, when Pozzo and Lucky come closer by shortening the rope, Pozzo falls from his position of omnipotence. His pomp and extravagance have lost within a short period of time which obviously indicates the meaninglessness of life and position. Thus, although he presents himself as Pozzo in the first act, he has forgotten who he is in the second act. We see, the two trumps get his response by calling him with other names,

Vladimir and Estragon: Pozzo! Pozzo!

Vladimir: He moved.

Estragon: Are you sure his name is Pozzo?

Vladimir (alarmed): Mr. Pozzo! Come back! We won't hurt you!

Silence.

Estragon: We'll soon see. (He reflects.) Abel! Abel!

Pozzo: Help! (Beckett, 1954, pp. 76-77)

Subsequently, for Pozzo, time becomes immaterial and life does not have any meaning because “the things of time are hidden from the blind.” (Beckett, 1954, p. 68)

Nonetheless, Lucky is the obvious contrast to Pozzo. His life is completely devoted to gratify his master Pozzo. He has no fixed purpose in life. His all actions are related to enslavement that cannot be an action of conscious and free-willed human being. According to Belevicius (2014, p. 4), “If he is ever freed, his life would cease to have any significance”. Everything is arranged in such a way that Lucky is only allowed to speak if ordered. He is not only tied by rope; he is but also bound to think and dance at his master’s will which shows his loss of self and eventual self-destruction. Even some abusive words like ‘hog’, ‘pig’ etc. do not create any effect on him. However, he can be considered as lucky because he has no need to find out things for passing time, which is a major activity of the other characters. Pozzo orders him what to do, he maintains and that is why, he is lucky since his actions are entirely determined by others. According to Beckett he is lucky because he has “no expectations” (Belevicius, 2014, p. 2). Thus, he is saved from the dilemma and agony of choice. Moreover, it is incorrect to describe Lucky as a sufferer since he does not realize that he is suffering. In this context, Biswas (2006, p.144) says, “For him existence is existence with Pozzo and his mind is insensitive to pain, humiliation and indignity. Most of his activities are unpredictable as well. At the same time, it is very surprising that in act one, he kicks Vladimir on the leg because Vladimir tries to help him. Even he does not maintain coherence in his speech. A person’s unorganized speech and language define how a human being loses his control upon himself and makes himself a representative of confused modern man. It seems that his survival in the post-world war Europe is a parody of human existence.

In the meantime, in this play Godot is represented as the hope of salvation because, “All through our lives we wait for something, and Godot basically presents the purpose of waiting- an event, a thing, a person, and death” (Boxall, 2000, p. 24). It is believed that Godot will shield people from their sorrow. However, no one in the play actually sees him. The audience knows about him through the conversations of other characters as from the boy’s perspective Godot does nothing:

Boy: I didn't see anyone, Sir (Silence).

Vladimir: What does he do, Mr. Godot? (Silence) Do you hear me?

Boy: He does nothing, Sir. (Beckett, 1954, p. 85)

Although Godot is physically absent on the stage, his promise affects almost all the actions of the play which is very significant in unveiling the loss of self in *Waiting for Godot*. At times they reflect on committing suicide but then choose to continue to wait for Godot, though there is no certainty of the benefits or rewards of doing so. Godot presents their vague sense that they will ultimately have some type of meaning or conclusion in their lives. Yet it is equally uncertain when this meaning or conclusion will appear, if ever. Erdem (2025) puts up the idea of Godot as the “divided self,” contending that the absence of Godot represents internal psychological struggle and fractured identity. He argues that the characters’ never-ending waiting is a reflection of an internal conflict rather than just an outward expectation, drawing on existential philosophy. While this interpretation advances identity studies in Beckett criticism, it does not analyze how ordinary experiences like repetition, ambiguity, failed communication, and reliance eventually erode personal identity; instead, it focuses on symbolic duality. According to Beckett, a person must have a logical foundation for their existence, yet his characters are unable to do this. It drives people to pursue a pointless desire since “Godot is the denial of all human values, social and individual, physical as well as spiritual” (Biswas, 2006, p. 143). Here, Beckett attempts to depict the inconsistency through the dissatisfaction of life’s expectation to reveal that in spite of having human action mankind gains nothing. It is very significant that human life will finish as “it began in nothingness and reduce achievement to nothing, making the waiting of the two tramps completely meaningless” (Yuehua, 2007, p. 72). The play is revisited by Akhter and Al-Kadery (2025) using the united viewpoints of nihilism and existentialism. Similar to Yuehua, according to them, the cyclical pattern deepens humanity’s struggle with a meaningless universe and that Godot’s constant absence represents the difficulty of finding absolute meaning. However, they do not focus much on how these existential circumstances change the protagonists’ self-perception.

In order to understand the loss of self of *Waiting for Godot*, it is crucial to remember that Vladimir and Estragon encounter Godot’s messenger twice: once near the end of Act I and again at the close of Act II. When he arrives,

the only message he is to deliver the two tramps that Godot will come the next day and he acts as if he had no knowledge of delivering the same message the previous day. This is Beckett's art of showing hope as an illusion when his characters are almost broken facing the absurdity and meaninglessness of the world. He also presents the recurring nature of day-to-day life of human existence as human beings spend every day thinking to make tomorrow better in the hope that someday they will discover the true purpose of life but in vain. At the end of two acts, it can be inferred that though Vladimir and Estragon are physically independent they are mentally stuck by some unfamiliar force, which confines them in the situation of a dilemma. Life is a kind of trap that limits and binds them because they have lost their selves. They repeatedly agree to move but they cannot because of the existential crisis they face after the second world war. The end of act one as follows:

Vladimir: Well, shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go.

They do not move (Beckett, 1954, p. 46).

Since their objective is insufficient to inspire action, the conclusion of act two is exactly the same. Their incapacity to act prevents them from accepting their own destiny. They are still confined with the fake optimism in the arrival of Godot to solve this deadlock which clearly indicates the loss of self and the identity crisis of the characters correspondingly. According to Birkett (1987, p. 19), Vladimir and Estragon commit themselves "to a pattern of dependence that they have lost their rights, including the right of freedom". Beckett demonstrates that through Estragon's inquiry, "We've lost our rights?" (1954, p.11) and Vladimir's reply, "We got rid of them" (1954, p. 11). In reality, the tramps are so devoted to wait that their freedom of choice is entirely invisible to them. Estragon and Vladimir represent human emotions as the epitome of damaged mankind. They suffer a lot but equally show a glimpse of delight and excitement. The play depicts man as "a victim of his own finite nature, the limitations of reason as well as of imagination. It also shows that the will is limited and yet capable of putting man in a willful false optimism if not a willful lack of preoccupation with the tragic elements of his existence" (Yuehua, 2007, p. 75).

In closing the analysis, it can be said that *Waiting for Godot* focuses on existential crisis portraying the feelings of meaningless lives of European

people who struggle to survive in the absurd world. Here, Beckett tries to disclose the fact that “existence seems to be something imposed upon us by an unknown force and we suffer as a result of it as there seems no apparent meaning” (Yuehua, 2007, p. 70). Estragon and Vladimir do not recognize if they have any existence or not. They claim that Godot has something to give, but they know deep down that Godot will never materialize. They are the victims of false commitments. The most terrifying thing about their waiting is that they do not know why they are waiting. It is apparent that they wait for the sake of waiting. They do not know “what to expect from life or what to expect from their precious Godot” (Islam, 2017, p. 17). The agony of breathing continues in their lives. Their existential crisis is so awful that sometimes they are unable to remember anything about the previous day. They do not exist in their lives as memory is essential to identity formation. Lucky and Pozzo, the other characters, are also objects of the environment. They cannot justify what they have done. Throughout the play, the characters have no way to identify themselves. They live in a place where life has no meaning. When a person’s condition is called into doubt, the belief in a superior force appears to be weaker. Additionally, *Waiting for Godot* illustrates the depth of human misery because nothing noteworthy occurs during the play and everyone is forced to wait in vain. *Waiting for Godot* is a metaphor for post-World War II society. Their inaction and poor communication reveal their lack of self-awareness and existential anguish. A character’s lack of identity in *Waiting for Godot* enables us to observe their genuinely and helpless existence. It makes us look at life in a different perspective, where we are forced to confront ourselves and ask what is the actual meaning behind the existence of oneself and by having such realizations, we actually somehow manage to lose ourselves in an ocean of wonders and thought.

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