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The Representation of Existential Anguish in Absurd Drama as Reflected in Beckett's Play: *Waiting For Godot*

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Abstract

This article intends to analyse the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett in terms of Existentialism within the genre of the Theatre of Absurd by investigating through the setting, context and use of language. It is argued in this thesis that as Samuel Beckett is concerned about human beings' problems of existence in the world in his plays, most of the time, he portrays the representation of human condition which makes his plays to be interpreted in the light of Existentialism. In the thesis, Existentialism as a philosophical movement has been introduced with its prominent names and examples, also the Theatre of the Absurd is explained in detail with its basic qualities to shed a light on how the characters' dialogues, monologues construct their existential anguish through the play while arguing that there are many existentialistic qualities in the play such as characters' searching for meaning and realizing the meaninglessness of the world and nothingness in the process of their waiting for Godot.

Additionally, the link between Existentialism and The Theatre of Absurd is illustrated with a view of the play to prove that *Waiting for Godot* carries the traces of both Existentialism and The Theatre of the Absurd while the characters suffer from the existential anguish. More specifically, this study tries to reveal the fact that Vladimir and Estragon, the main characters in the play *Waiting for Godot* suffer from existential anguish and basically explores how the existential anguish is reflected through the analysis of the characters' language by means of dialogues, choice of words, repetitions and silences.

Key words: *Existentialist Philosophy, Existential Anguish, Meaninglessness, Nothingness, The Theatre of the Absurd.*

Varoluş Kaygısının Beckett'in Absürd Tiyatro Olarak Gösterilen *Godot'yu Beklerken* Oyunundaki Temsili

Özet

Bu tez çalışması Samuel Beckett'in yazdığı *Godot'yu Beklerken* oyununu bağlam, mekan, zaman ve dil açısından inceleyerek oyunu ve içindeki Varoluşçu Felsefe ve Absürd Tiyatro unsurlarını analiz eder. Samuel Beckett, genel olarak yazdığı oyunların çoğunda insanların dünyada buldukları anlamsız durumu göstermeye çalıştığından, oyunları varoluşçu felsefe ve absürd tiyatro ışığı altında okunmuştur. Oyunda öncelikle Varoluş felsefesi önde gelen isimleriyle örnekler verilerek incelenmiş sonrasında Absürd Tiyatronun özellikleri anlatılarak bu iki akım arasındaki ilişki gösterilirken oyundaki ana konu olan karakterlerin varoluş kaygısında daha net gösterilemek istenmiştir. Bu oyunda da kendini sorgulama, dünyada kendine bir anlam bulamama gibi birçok varoluş felsefesi unsuruna rastlanır ve oyun zaman ve mekan açısından absürd tiyatronun özelliklerine yakınlık gösterir.

Bu tezde, ana karakterler olan Vladimir ve Estragon'un zaman ve mekandan bağımsız olarak yaşayışları, kendi varoluşlarının anlamını bulmaya çalışırken *Godot'*yu bekleme süresince hiçlikle yüzyüze gelmeleri ve tartışılır. Tez çalışması oyun sayesinde Varoluşçu felsefe ile Absürd tiyatro arasındaki bağı gösterirken, oyundaki karakterlerin varoluş kaygısından da muzdarip olduklarını vurgular. Bu çalışma özellikle oyundaki karakterlerin diyalog, monologlarının ve dil kullanımını detaylıca inceleyerek, onların kullandıkları sözcüklerin hissettikleri varoluş kaygısını nasıl oluşturduğuna ışık tutar. Karakterler, aslında farkında olmadan, seçtikleri ve tekrarladıkları sözcükler ve bazı diyaloglarda tercih ettikleri sessizliklerle kendi içinde buldukları varoluş kaygısını istemsizce ele verirler.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Varoluş felsefesi, Varoluşçuluk, Absürd Tiyatro, Hiçlik, Anlamsızlık, Varoluş Kaygısı.*

Introduction

This study aims at discussing the significance of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, investigating through the setting, characterization and use of language and how these features construct the "existential anguish" within the borders of Existentialism and The Theatre of the Absurd in the play. More specifically, this study tries to reveal the fact that Vladimir and Estragon, the main characters in the play *Waiting for Godot* suffer from existential anguish and basically explores how the existential anguish is reflected through the analysis of the characters' language by means of dialogues, choice of words, repetitions and silences.

The Twentieth Century was a period when both world wars occurred and, the Second World War being one of the devastating effect on both individual and society, has changed the entire course of human history leaving people disillusioned with the huge destruction caused by the bombs and resulting in the death of many people. The war was a brutal experience for all humankind from all countries which resulted in both ends and new beginnings. Second World War is one of the deadliest event in the history of the world. It started in 1939 with the invasion of Poland by Adolf Hitler and lasted for six years. The war was in many respects continuation of the disputes that are left unsolved in World War I. It was a war of power among the countries. Germany, Italy, France, Japan, Great Britain, United States, Soviet Union were the belligerents. The war ended in 1945, causing nearly 50 million people's death. The huge massacre of the Second World War victimized people not only physically but also spiritually. After the war, societies were collapsed, and there was a shortage of food as well as other human needs. People may have thought this post-war period to be temporary, however, their previous ordinary life has never been resumed again. People have lost their belief or trust in institutions. Having experienced the war for the second time, death of millions, and the destruction of many civilizations have turned human beings out to be strongly worried with their condition in the world. As a mortal entity, human being wanted to question the significance of their reality, and meaning, for which, reason and religion neglected to give a satisfying clarification. Being incapable of reaching absolute truth, individual's search became hopeless. Human beings lost their confidence in God as religion could not give any answer for the suffering and endless pain that was caused, especially by the wars. All these events paved the road to the emergence of Existentialism emerged, which mainly emphasize the significance of human existence, freedom, and choice.

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The gist of existential philosophy can be clearly explained through Jean Paul Sartre who is one of the leading figures of existential philosophy; “[M]an is nothing, but what he makes of himself” (Sartre 291). So, Sartre claims that human beings are not predestined with a certain purpose or meaning in life, they are determined by their free will, responsibility and choice, so they are responsible for creating essence and giving meaning to their lives. But, there is an important point to emphasize that the only thing that an individual cannot choose is the becoming to the world, namely, their existence. “You’re on earth, there is no cure for that” as emphasized by Beckett in his play *Endgame* (Beckett,18). Human beings are free to choose, and responsible for the results, but limited in their given situations. Hence, the condition of human being is in between creating their selves and the anguish that is the absence of certainty of the consequences of their choices. While freedom opens a wide door for the future, it also proposes instability. This process in which an individual is free to discover the self, and the probability that the quest for searching meaning might end with nothingness, is the reason of existential anguish as Sartre states in the quote below:

Sartre sees the origin of anguish in the feeling of a being which is not responsible for its origin or the origin of the world but which, because of its dreadful freedom to choose one form of action over another, is responsible for what it makes of its existence . . . (Bohlmann 35).

So, as human beings are not responsible for their origins, this responsibility of choice creates the existential anguish.

“The Theatre of the Absurd” was initially established by Martin Esslin, in his book with the same name “*The Theatre of the Absurd*” in 1961. In his work, Esslin, used this term, to allude to plays having certain qualities such as imaginary setting, meaningless acts, and, miscommunication mirroring anxiety, fear and frustration of human being. In accordance with that, plays do not have a proper plot which indicates the insignificance of human being in a meaningless universe. Esslin claims that the Theatre of the Absurd is an expression of the meaninglessness of human condition due to the insufficiency of rational thinking, because reason is not enough to explain the meaning of life anymore (Esslin XX). Therefore, it can be deduced that both Existentialism and The Theatre of the Absurd deals with the human condition; that is; all the questioning about existence, the quest for meaning and the existential anguish that comes through this process. Martin Esslin clarifies the basics of the Theatre of the Absurd by mentioning some of the playwrights whose plays are read under the light of the Theatre of the Absurd even if they do not want to be labelled as absurd playwrights. These are Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter.

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Samuel Beckett, with his literary works of art, has a unique place among those names that are mentioned in Esslin's book. Having been born into a Protestant minority family as an "outsider", being "the other" in the Catholic society of Ireland might be considered as a gift for him, leading him in his quest to become one of the prominent playwrights of the 20th century. Hence the main message through his works is the meaninglessness of human existence in the kind of world where people are excluded if they are not like the majority. Related to this, Martin Esslin states that the Beckettian themes stem mainly from Beckett's background in which he questioned himself with the question of "Who am I?" and tried to answer this question relentlessly (Esslin 1). Questioning "Who am I" since his childhood might be the reason that his existential characters deal with the same question throughout all his works. Additionally, the reason why his characters are reflected in the sense of despair and hopelessness might be related to his experience of the Second World War. During the war, Beckett moved to Paris and joined the underground resistance group, so he was in Paris during the Second World War and witnessed the war closely. The years in Paris was Beckett's most productive years. He wrote most of his novels, poems and plays in Paris. Having experienced the war and witnessing the loss of war, he focused on the human condition in his works full of meaninglessness and despair. In his plays, the characters are usually physically incapable of moving, and unable to change their present condition into the better. Besides *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett's plays such as *Endgame*, *Act Without Words*, *Happy Days* can be examined within the existential philosophy even if Beckett rejects his relation to any kind of philosophy. Beckett reflects basically the condition of human being and their existence in the meaningless world in those plays in different perspectives. The characters are free to choose their own ways to create meaning for their life, but in each play this freedom of choice turns out to be a heavy burden to carry and all the characters suffer in a different way. For instance, in *Endgame*, the main characters Hamm and Clov have a master-slave relationship. Hamm is disabled and in a wheel chair, while Clov cannot sit down because of the problem in his legs. The other characters Nell and Nag are in a rubbish can that they cannot get out of. All the characters are physically restrained. They cannot move and they are stabilized in their place, they realize that even being in the earth equals the suffering itself so they accept to suffer and the meaninglessness of their existence without trying to search for another option for themselves. The short play *Act Without Words*, on the other hand, reflects the character's suffering with his earthly existence which is shown through the physical objects he cannot reach. This leaves him without a choice over his existence. To begin with, he cannot leave his reality of being exposed to be thrown to the stage and incapability of

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reaching the objects. Thus, the spectator becomes aware that human beings are incapable of leaving their facticity and all their efforts are futile. Another play, *Happy Days* tells nearly the same story by means of lack of choice. Winnie and Willie are the main characters, Winnie is half buried in sand in the first act trying to accomplish her daily routines, but never questions her condition. Willie is there only to listen to Winnie. They are seemingly in need of each other not to feel alone. In the second act Winnie becomes more buried that she cannot move her head to look around. However, she does not question their situation, she can even seem to be optimistic while she is busy with her routine. She does not lose her hope that they will see happy days, may be trying to get rid of her existential angst, because physically she is incapable of act for herself or her husband.

Beckett indeed constructs a world which is not very far from the real world. Human beings are thrown to the world without being asked and they are free to create their own meaning in a world that is already deprived of any meaning after two world wars. Thus, human beings are in an endless anguish only because they exist. The reason why this study focuses on the play *Waiting for Godot* is that the characters are free to choose not to wait for Godot and leave the place and they are not physically restrained but as oppose to the characters in the other plays, they do not leave their duty of waiting for Godot. They might change something in their life if they search for meaning for themselves and get rid of their existential anguish. Indeed, they have a choice but they do not prefer it. While Hamm cannot move, and his family is trapped in the rubbish bin in *Endgame*, Estragon and Vladimir choose not to move. While the character in *Act Without Words* is thrown to the same place constantly, and has the fear of being not free, Estragon and Vladimir have the freedom to leave the place but they do not. Moreover, while Winnie is trapped in the sand and still being hopeful about future Vladimir and Estragon are conscious of their present situation and question themselves and still do not act to change something in their lives. Hence, *Waiting for Godot* can be distinguished from Beckett's other plays that freedom of choice does not prevent the existential anguish they feel that is hidden behind their words and the characters never act to end it instead they chose to put the responsibility on Godot.

So, Godot sustains the idea of waiting in the mind of Vladimir and Estragon. Through this waiting Vladimir and Estragon are relieved of the need to determine their own reality independently, for them existence is no more than an illusion, not to be taken seriously (Levy 227).

Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, originally written in French under the title *En Attendant Godot*, has been staged for almost 64 years, still with full house, and with full

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attention from its spectators. Since its premier in 1953, it has been one of the most debated plays among the critics as well as the directors of theatre, actors and actresses. The play has been in the heart of art magazines or newspapers which follow each performance. Many critics and writers have much to say about the play in their works. What makes Beckett's play so unique and thus popular for nearly half a century? What kind of messages, life lessons, or pleasure does the play offer to attract such attention? What underlines such popularity even though it is different than the traditional theatre in terms of its characterization and setting?

Beckett does not use the features of traditional theatre such as setting, context, characterization, and a solution in the end in his play *Waiting for Godot*. The play's setting comprises the simple country road and a tree where the main characters Vladimir and Estragon are constantly waiting for Godot who does not appear throughout the play. Even though they are interrupted by Pozzo, a master and Lucky, a slave, the passersby on two occasions, they are all alone trying to communicate to pass the time while they are waiting for Godot. There is no real communication between characters indeed, as most of the time neither do they listen to each other nor are they aware of the topic they talk about. They are as if thrown to the world which makes no sense, reflecting each human being who desperately tries to find a meaning in it. Considering all the features that are discussed above, the play *Waiting for Godot* can be read through the existential philosophy. In the light of this perspective, it is worth to investigate the play in respect to existential anguish.

While Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* has been read through Existentialism, this study does not intend to fit the play into any specific school of thought, but to underline where the play and existential philosophy intersect specifically, showing how his characters experience existential anguish while searching for meaning.

Waiting For Godot

The Play

This is a play for the thoughtful and discriminating theatre-goer. We are therefore, offering for a limited edition of only four weeks. I respectfully suggest that those who come to the theatre for casual entertainment do not buy a ticket to this attraction (Bair 488).

Samuel Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* in 1949 in French and it was performed at 1953 in the Left Bank Theatre of Babylon in Paris. Two years later Beckett translated the play into English and this version was performed in 1955 in London. The name of "Godot" in the play has been debated by critics for a long time because "Godot" has always been connoted with

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God, and created ambiguity around itself. Beckett has always rejected this title, stating that, “If Godot was God, I would have called him that” (qtd. in Bair 406). Although the play lacks the proper plot and eloquence of other plays of the period, it drew the attention of many people at the time, while being harshly criticised for straying so far from the concept of Aristo’s definition of a well-made traditional play.

[Waiting for Godot] has achieved a theoretical impossibility—a play in which nothing happens, that yet keep audiences glued to their seats. What’s more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice (Mercier, V.(n.d).

In *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett presents the complexity of the human condition in a meaningless world to the audience. Being one of the most important examples of the Theatre of the Absurd, the play reflects the quest for meaning, meaninglessness of existence, the absurdity of life, and encountering nothingness while searching meaning. The search for meaning is especially emphasized in this play via the concept of waiting for Godot, as this inaction of waiting can be considered as an individual’s endless waiting for a miracle which will give a meaning to their existence in life. Related to this, Martin Esslin claims that, Godot is a metaphor for waiting in the play:

The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. Throughout our lives we always wait for something, and Godot simply represents the objective of our waiting – an event, a thing, a person, death (Esslin 17).

The absurdity of the play is shown through the fact that Beckett leaves the question of the problems of human beings unanswered. The play only shows the stable situation of human beings after war; they lost their hope for the future, and their past is full of destructive memories of war. In relation to this, the play as an example of The Theatre of the Absurd, overlaps with the rise of the philosophical school of thought ‘Existentialism’ in terms of questioning the meaning of existence.

The playwright breaks the chains of typical characteristics of the theatre by minimalizing the characters, décor, and language. The play consists of five characters in total, but only two of them, Vladimir and Estragon, are the main characters. They eat, talk, argue, sleep, and think about committing suicide while they are waiting for Godot, who throughout the play, never arrives. The other characters are Pozzo, Lucky, and The Boy. Vladimir seems to be more sensible and responsible character of the two while Estragon looks as if he is the weaker and more helpless one. While Estragon usually focuses on his physical needs, such as complaining about his boots that hurt, Vladimir is mainly interested in serious problems of the world; “Was

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I sleeping while others suffered?" (Beckett 90). Pozzo and Lucky are the passersby who passes twice from the place that Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot. In their first passing, Lucky is tied with a rope to Pozzo who carries him, in the second act, they exchange roles because Pozzo is blind the rope is shorter to make it easier for Pozzo to follow. In both acts they are tied to each other with a rope. This idea of being tied is also a concern for Vladimir and Estragon who question their being tied to each other as well as Godot. At some point, Estragon questions whether or not they, like Lucky, are tied to Godot. Indeed they are because it is Godot that will give meaning to their lives when he arrives (20-21). The Boy is the messenger who brings news from Godot and gives some detail about Godot when Vladimir and Estragon asks. Seemingly, it is not certain that the boy is connected to Godot as there is no clarity about it throughout the play.

In the first act, the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon is shown. They complain about each other and their duty. They try to remember their duty, and argue about waiting in the right place and at the right time. Then all of a sudden they shift abruptly, talking instead about parting but in the end deciding to stay together. Estragon suggests they hang themselves, but after a discussion they reject the idea and go on waiting in case things will change with the coming of Godot. Lucky is thrown on the stage with a rope around his neck with Pozzo following holding the rope. Vladimir and Estragon initially believe that Pozzo maybe Godot, but after questioning him they learn that he is not. Estragon and Vladimir are happy as the time passes in conversation with Pozzo. Then a boy comes bringing a message that Godot cannot come that day but will come tomorrow.

In the second act, they are in the same place and waiting for Godot while discussing about Pozzo and Lucky, whom Estragon insists that he does not remember. Estragon again comes to the point of death by suggesting that Vladimir kill him. Estragon keeps on forgetting their mission of waiting and Vladimir constantly reminds him. Pozzo enters again; this time he is blind and has exchanged the roles with Lucky; now Lucky controls the rope as Pozzo is blind. They question their waiting again and the boy comes to bring the same news: Godot will not come today but will arrive tomorrow. At the end of the play they decide to give up waiting and move, but they stand still in the same place and do not move at all. "Godot shows us how is it our destiny to "pass the time [. . .] waiting for a meaning that will save us – save us from the pain, ugliness, emptiness of existence" (qtd. in Gendron 54). They stand motionless, as it is stated in the quotation, to wait for a meaning, or to be saved from the burden of existence.

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There is no real communication between Vladimir and Estragon but only an exchange of words. The repetition of words is also reflected in the action in the play. In the first act, Pozzo is the one who holds the rope and Lucky is the slave, whereas in the second act Pozzo turns out to be blind and even if he still holds the rope, the rope is shorter to enable him to follow, he still carries Lucky but the hierarchy has changed. It can be inferred that with these repetitions and cycles it is emphasized that nothing changes in the world; even if man acts, things stay the same; as Estragon says; “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful” (41). They suffer throughout the night. Estragon is beaten, he does not know by whom and why or he does not want to reveal. Sometimes he is hungry or has awful nightmares which Vladimir does not want to listen to but whatever happens they meet on the stage the next day. Vladimir does not suffer physically, but he has more intellectual problems thinking about the Gospels or biblical stories. They do not give up even if the only action they take is to wait for Godot who will save them from the boredom of waiting itself.

The play reflects the desperate situation of the people of Europe after World War II. They had lost their hope in the future, and their past was full of saddening memories of war. Their trust in God has been shaken because God did not or could not prevent the death and disaster caused by the war. Human beings have been left helpless in the universe, but still hope for something to happen to save them from this suffering of existence. In the play, Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot, who might change something in their lives that will add meaning to their existence. Winston Churchill describes the reason for this feeling; “What is Europe now? It is a rubble-heap, a charnel house, a breeding-ground of pestilence and hate. It is an atmosphere out of which Godot was born – the despair, hunger and disease of postwar Europe” (qtd. in Blau 28). In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett expresses the weariness of the human condition, the impossibility of communication, and the anxiety that is caused by freedom of choice. His characters are devoid of meaning in an absurd world and there is nothing meaningful that they can hold on. In addition to this, what makes *Waiting for Godot* different from other Beckett plays, is the stability that is related to the endless inaction of waiting for Godot. It might be connected to the people who were waiting for the war to end so that they can heal themselves from the destruction of war and start to hope for their future. Deirdre Bair writes in her biographical novel of Samuel Beckett that;

Waiting for Godot was written during a time in which Beckett wanted something very much and wished time to pass. . . he chose to write about the abstract idea of waiting for time to pass and for something important to happen in every man’s life. . . (Bair 406-7).

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If the time he wrote the play is taken into consideration, it is after the World War II and it can be assumed that Beckett was expecting a change to occur and was waiting for things to be different and maybe for the suffering to end. At the same time, the action of waiting in the play might be interpreted as either waiting with the hope that things might change in their life in a positive way, or it might be taken as a physical expression of hopelessness as nothing happens while they are waiting. The play does not carry any certain answer to this question. Even the dialogues between the characters are indecisive;

Estragon: (*Giving up again*). Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: (*Advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart*) I am beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it away from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (*He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon*). So there you are again.

Estragon: Am I?

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

Estragon: Me too.

Vladimir: Together again at last! We have to celebrate this. . ." (9)

This dialogue is from the very beginning of the play. Estragon says "nothing to be done", sounding very pessimistic about their situation and seeming to have already given up before even beginning to wait. They do not know how to view their existence, either to celebrate or lament about it. Whereas this despair is seen many times throughout the play, they are not sure about it. On the one hand they are hopeless, on the other hand they are ready to start all over again as can be seen in the dialogue above. Furthermore, Vladimir reveals their absurd situation in the following dialogue;

Vladimir: All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which – how shall I say – which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit. You may say it is to prevent our reason from foundering. No doubt. But has it not long been straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths? That's what I sometimes wonder. You follow my reasoning (80).

Vladimir is aware of the fact that they are in a vicious circle of waiting and wanting, which he does not want to become a habit, but in the end it does, as they never do anything else. As Esslin explains:

Waiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is in itself an illusion. The ceaseless activity of time is self-defeating purposeless, and therefore null and

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void. The more things change, the more they are the same. That is the terrible stability of the world (Esslin 18-19).

So *Waiting for Godot* reflects a portrait of desperate human beings trapped in the middle of nothingness. The characters are in the search of something that will save them from both their futile conversations and their waiting. Estragon and Vladimir question many things, the Gospel, dreams, stories, but in the end when they do not find anything significant amongst those issues, and then they suddenly decide to hang themselves. They cannot find a reason for their existence, they are free to leave the place and quit their duty of waiting for Godot, but they do not continue to have hope that things might change. "Waiting for Godot" sometimes does not mean anything to them, they even forget about him. This eternal freedom of choice and the awareness of which is forced on them means they can either wait or leave marking them as characters that suffer from existential anguish.

Existential Anguish in *Waiting for Godot*

The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell,
hell of heaven. John Milton

Here, I will argue the gist of the thesis which is the existential anguish that is seen through the dialogues of the characters Vladimir and Estragon in the play *Waiting for Godot*. The words and the meanings they repeatedly use will be exemplified to prove how the existential anguish is constructed via the dialogues and inaction of the characters in the play.

After World War II, most people realized that the established values and beliefs of society were no longer valid. In the face of this loss of faith in social institutions and morality, Existentialist thinkers declared that human beings were not provided with the essentials of living innately, thus it is the responsibility of people to find the meaning of their own life through the choices they make. Moreover, most people had become aware that there was no essence that defined their existence in life, fearing an encounter with nothingness at the end of their search for meaning. Having lost hope, all they are left with is emptiness. This sense of existential anguish rooted in nothingness was due to the fact that people could not find the meaning of their existence which caused anguish and hesitancy even if they were apparently free. In relation to this, Sartre claims that starting point of anguish is the feeling that human beings are not responsible for the existence of the world and themselves, however they are free to pick up any activity over another to create their own their reality (Bohlmann 35). Similar to Sartre's idea that is quoted in Bohlmann's remark, the theme of meaninglessness or

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anguish in *Waiting for Godot* stems from the burden of freedom and the responsibility of choosing their own path in life as reflected by the actions of the characters of the play.

At the beginning of the play Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot in the hopes that something, anything, will happen to change their current situation. They attempt to pass the time by occupying themselves by talking, arguing, eating, and sleeping. While they try to rid themselves of the boredom of waiting, they find they are trapped by a sense of nothingness because they do not know what to do next if they quit waiting. Essentially, they have become trapped in an endless loop, afraid to break this cycle because they fear the unknown. They question Godot, they dream of what might change if he arrives. They think of hanging themselves if he does not come: the weight of these endless choices makes them anxious.

My point is simply that the two men assess notions of being, faith, despair and salvation from seemingly opposite ends and yet arrive at the same point, generating a new spiritual enlightenment from the abyss of existential anguish (qtd. Mccandless 48).

There is nothing to do then, except to endure the silence or end it, so they break the silence. The first sentence Estragon utters is “Nothing to be done” (*Waiting for Godot*, Act One, P. 9). Meanwhile, he is trying to take his boots off, so it seems that by saying nothing to be done Estragon refers to his strife to take off his boots, but indeed he does not. The real meaning of this pessimistic phrase is understood when Vladimir enters the stage for the first time and starts to talk as an answer to Estragon.

Estragon: (*Giving up again*). Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: (*Advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart*) I am beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I’ve tried to put it away from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven’t yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (*He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon*). So there you are again (9)

Vladimir talks about his struggle in life about trying everything and not giving up. He might be implying that people should not give up trying to search for meaning in their life, but he finally comes to a point, agreeing with Estragon that there is nothing to be done that would find any meaning to their existence. It might also be referring to the idea that coming into the world, namely existence, is not the choice of an individual and there is nothing to be done to change the reality of being born. People are born to the world without being asked. This idea overlaps with existential philosophy’s absurdist foundations in a sense. Especially in Sartre’s perspective, the notion of existence is twinned with meaninglessness and absurdity. He

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depicts absurd as: “That which is meaningless. Thus, man’s existence is absurd because his contingency finds no external justification” (Sartre 628).

It is worthwhile to note that Vladimir and Estragon start the play with the quote of “Nothing to be done” (9). They clearly state their existential anguish at the very beginning. They are hopeless and unable to find a reason or explanation for their being except that they must continue to wait for Godot even though they are free to choose not to. They may try to find another option but they do not. As Levy writes in his essay, Beckett’s characters deceive themselves by accepting that there is nothing to do even if there are options;

In Beckett’s universe, to be is to be deceived, it is to believe, despite available alternatives that there is ‘nothing to be done’ but continue the same futility, nothing to be known but the same perplexity: What do we do now? (Levy, 237)

Their existence can also be seen as absurd because there is nothing to be done about it. They are already in the world, they cannot leave. They are seemingly aware of the nothingness of existence from the very beginning of the play.

The repetition of this phrase continues to the end of the play, but their level of anxiety and the possibility of having to face nothingness increases at each step and is reflected in the changing meaning of their words. The ambiguity of their situation triggers them to question the things around them, however they find no answer, ending up with a renewed feeling of nothingness. There is nothing to be done except waiting while another day passes and the characters become more fearful of their reality. This can be seen in the words they use, it changes suddenly as shown in the dialogue below;

Vladimir: Sometimes I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer. (*He takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, puts it on again.*) How shall I say? Relieved and at the same time. . . (he searches for the word) . . . appalled. (*With emphasis.*) AP-PALLED. . . Nothing to be done.

Estragon: Nothing.

....

Vladimir: . . . Nothing to be done (11)

At first, they repeat only the situation they are in and the phrase there is nothing to do. Then Vladimir utters the word ‘appalled’ which hints at the fear behind the incapability of doing nothing. The repetition of the quote ‘nothing to be done’ appears with a different use of the same words throughout the play;

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Estragon: Nothing to be done (*Waiting for Godot*. Act One, P.21)

Estragon: Nothing we can do about it (*Waiting for Godot*, Act One, P.23)

Vladimir: We've nothing more to do here (*Waiting for Godot*, Act One, P. 52)

Vladimir: There's nothing to do (74)

Repetition is central to the language of the play because it might be there to emphasize the message that is given again and again. A person is in the universe but it is against his own wishes. And worse, there is no way to change this outcome because there is nothing to do about it. They have to find their own meaning in the world which brings them to nothingness again because the world is deprived of meaning after the two world wars, and increasingly there is a sense that there truly is no hope. In Vladimir and Estragon's case, these repetitions stand for the emphasis on the meaninglessness of life. As it is remarked by İçöz in her article;

At the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon's "Nothing to be done" may seem to apply to that moment, but being repeated many times, the statement comes to convey the lack of purpose, meaning and freedom in the lives of Estragon and Vladimir. (İçöz 283).

As this phrase is repeated many times, it can be asserted that it puts an emphasis on the meaninglessness of life. Yet, there is nothing to be done because they have no control over their existence. However, it is still their choice to wait.

Vladimir: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. (*Pause.*) Unless Godot comes.

Estragon: And if he comes?

Vladimir: We'll be saved (94)

They are free to leave the place but they do not because of the hope, the very tiny chance that Godot might change their life and they might be saved from the meaninglessness of their existence that prevents them from leaving their routine of waiting until the end of the play. Normand Berlin, explains it very well in his essay;

Beckett is pushing doubt and ambiguity; he is dramatizing the "perhaps" of our lives, the question mark of our existence that contains much mundane comedy – those comic routines of ordinary daily life – but that also taps deep sources of anguish and frustration (Berlin 68).

The other possibility they explore is to hang themselves. They are waiting for the meaning of their life, but they want to be saved from the anguish of nothingness. This feeling of uncertainty brings them to the edge of committing suicide. They even wish they had not been born, because it would have saved them already from the pain of existence.

Vladimir: Suppose we repented.

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Estragon: Repented what?

Vladimir: Oh. . . (*He reflects.*) We wouldn't have to go into details.

Estragon: Our being born? . . . (11)

In contrast to Sartre's pessimistic view about the absurdity of life and the desperate situation of the individual, and in addition to Beckett's reflection of his characters as pessimists, stands Albert Camus. He believes that while the individual should be aware of the absurdity of life, they also should not give up exploring for meaning and this, in itself will give meaning to life. In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he explains the human condition stating that one should not give up hope of finding meaning in life because Sisyphus never does. Camus suggests;

It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear, on the contrary, that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. Living an experience, a particular fate, knowing it to be absurd brought to light by consciousness (Camus 36).

Thus, he is against both suicide and pessimism in the face of the meaninglessness of life. He highlights the fact that it is better to look for meaning instead of accepting life being predestined; and further, one should look for meaning even if life is absurd. As opposed to this idea, Vladimir and Estragon will commit suicide if Godot does not come, because Godot is their only hope and because they believe it is Godot that will help them discover the meaning of their life not themselves. They are hopeless refusing to look for another choice or way to find meaning, instead giving up, in direct contrast to Camus's idea. Even though Vladimir and Estragon want to end their suffering and anguish, they never dare to realize their plan of hanging themselves, but even thinking of it makes them different from Sisyphus. So, Gordon remarks;

The paradox of Camus's Absurdism, like Sartre's Existentialism, demands a tension between engagement and impotence and between logic and absurdity, where the awareness of life's ultimate meaninglessness – when placed at the recesses of the mind – allows one to live fully and without anguish in a random and disordered universe. But Beckett's heroes differ from those of Camus: they lack a sense of defiance regarding their lot in life. One would never imagine a weary, disconsolate Sisyphus at the end of his rope, either literally or metaphorically; but this is Vladimir and Estragon's frequent situation (Gordon 125).

Thus, Beckett's characters do not live their lives fully but suffer from the existential anguish compared to Camus's. Nonetheless, their attachment to their duty of waiting for Godot gives them a feeling of safety as well as responsibility, which allows them to cling to life. Doing nothing gives them a kind of confidence over their situation because their mission of waiting gives their lives at least temporary meaning. Stability and inaction make them anxious but as they

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still hope this mission will change something in their life in a positive way, they accept the suffering.

Vladimir: Well? What do we do?

Estragon: Don't let's do anything. It's safer

Vladimir: Let's wait and see what he says.

Estragon: Who?

Vladimir: Godot

Estragon: Good idea (18).

Even if this sense of safety of doing nothing while waiting for Godot relieves them for the time being, this feeling of safety does not last long. As far as the steadiness continues due to Godot's delay, they lose their hope again. Because waiting and doing nothing cause silence and boredom which triggers their anguish as it is seen in the quote below;

Vladimir: Say something.

Estragon: I am trying.

Long silence.

Vladimir: Say anything at all.

Estragon: What do we do now?

Vladimir: Wait for Godot.

Estragon: Ah! (*Silence.*)

Vladimir: It is awful (63).

At some point in the play, they accept that waiting is tiresome that it does not carry any meaning and that they should find something to do in order to forget about their anguish again. In the second act, while they are trying to take Estragon's boot off, Estragon suddenly decides;

Estragon: We don't manage too badly, eh Didi? Between the two of us?

Vladimir: Yes yes. Come on, we'll try the left first.

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

Vladimir: (*impatiently.*) Yes we are magicians . . . (69).

It may be deduced that Estragon is referring to their existential anguish, even though Vladimir is not sure because he believes that Estragon sounds like he is making a mockery of him finding meaning in their existence. Here a connection might be drawn to Sartre's *Nausea* in which he also tries to show the true reality behind the banal routine of humanity. Chris Falzon (2005) in his essay *Sartre and Meaningful Existence* explains it as;

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First of all, *Nausea* appears to be inviting us to shake off our ordinary, taken-for-granted presuppositions about the world, or more precisely, all the principles, categories and forms we might ordinarily appeal to in order to justify, organize, explain, give meaning, order, or point to the world from our eyes. They are the forms we try to impose on the world, the coverings or trappings that hide the world from our eyes. To abandon them is to discover the truth about the world, to confront things as they really are, to come face to face with brute existence --- meaningless, contingent, superfluous, absurd and nauseating (Falzon 105).

This excerpt clearly reflects the situation of Estragon and Vladimir since they constantly search for topics to argue about or some physical action to do that will keep them away from facing the meaninglessness of both the world and their mission of waiting. When they are in their routine they are not suffering anguish, but when everybody is gone and they start to think, their anxiety returns. In Cartesian philosophy, Descartes relates existence with thinking. "I think, therefore I am". (Descartes, xx) However, Vladimir states that thinking is dangerous; it is because of thought that their existence is painful.

Vladimir: We're in no danger of thinking any more.

Estragon: Then what are we complaining about?

Vladimir: Thinking is not the worst (64).

Thinking depresses them as it forces them to face the truth of their meaningless existence. Later, Vladimir says that it is not the worst, here he might refer to the worst thing which would be probably Godot's not coming and subsequent loss of all their hope to find meaning in their existence. It is very well explained in the quote below;

Amid the comic miscues and interruptions, Didi makes a distinction between "thinking" and "to have thought". "Thinking" they agree "is not the worst" because it lessens the misery of silence, but it is terrible to have thought in the past (and had it come to nothing) as well as to possess thought (Schlueter & Brater xx).

While they expect something to change with the coming of Godot, they might be hiding behind this instability of waiting and the so-called safety in which they somehow find a shelter that allows them not to think or act. They can ignore their responsibility to find meaning via waiting for Godot. They might also be suppressing their feelings of anxiety because of their condition: as helpless human beings in the world.

Estragon: We've lost our rights?

Vladimir: (*Distinctly.*) We got rid of them (19)

Martin Esslin writes that "The hope of salvation may be merely an evasion of the suffering and anguish that spring from facing the reality of human condition". (Esslin 27). Whether

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they lost their rights or not while waiting for Godot is Estragon's concern, but Vladimir supposes that they get rid of them while waiting. Here their right might refer to living in depth and a meaningful life, but Vladimir ignores the vitality of their rights and thus feels as if he is relieved when there is no burden to find the meaning of their lives. This dialogue clearly proves that as Esslin claims, their waiting is like an escape, what they get rid of is indeed their responsibility to discover the meaning of their lives, so they feel less anguish. Namely, they forsake their freedom by preferring to wait rather than to act. It is easier to wait rather than thinking about the true meaning of existence. "Rather than assume responsibility for their own lives, Vladimir and Estragon place their fate in the hand of Godot" (Duran, 987). As, Duran states in his article, Vladimir and Estragon give up their right to be free and wait for Godot to determine their fate.

They do nothing but only waiting, yet it does not prevent their anguish. It is obvious that while waiting they talk to each other and realize the endless trap of nothingness they are in; Estragon: Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it is awful (41). When they do nothing, nothing happens, so it irritates them as they realize the meaninglessness of existence. Existential Philosophy suggests that human beings define themselves and the world through their own subjective view of it, as Sartre explains in his essay *Existentialism is a Humanism*; "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (Sartre 291). As such, Vladimir and Estragon view themselves as hopeless, and that there is nothing to be done about their situation. It is because this is what they do to themselves and they are the ones who are responsible for this anguish because it is their choice. They are free to give up their duty of waiting for Godot at any time. They can try to accept the absurdity of their situation and live with it while exploring other avenues of life for meaning. Hence, their freedom becomes their fate. But it is this paradox, to either stay or leave, in which they struggle. This choice becomes their burden, and their freedom of choice is the cause of their anguish. "Beckett's sense of human condition, what makes it ironic and universal is not that they are trapped or condemned, but they are condemned to be free" (Blau 41).

Estragon: (*chews, swallows*). I am asking you if we're tied.

Vladimir: Tied?

Estragon: Ti-ed.

Vladimir: How do you mean tied?

Estragon: Down.

Vladimir: But to whom, by whom?

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Estragon: To your man.

Vladimir: To Godot? Tied to Godot. What an idea! No, question of it.
(*Pause.*) For the moment (20-21).

Vladimir does not give a clear answer to Estragon, he says “no question of it” like he does not believe that they are tied to him, but also says “for the moment” which gives the impression that for the moment yes they are tied to him. Alternately Estragon clearly seems to be bothered about waiting without end. “Estragon, far less convinced of Godot’s promises than Vladimir, is anxious to reassure himself that they are not tied to Godot” (Esslin 23). It is also significant that even though Estragon sees that Lucky is in a worse situation physically and mentally than himself, he seems to be willing to exchange places with Lucky, because Lucky is exempted from all the burden of questioning and finding meaning in life. When Pozzo complains about Lucky, Estragon asks:

Estragon: (*To Vladimir.*) Does he want to replace him?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: Does he want someone to take his place or not?

Vladimir: I don’t think so.

Estragon: What?

Vladimir: I don’t know.

Estragon: Ask him. (34).

Katherine H. Burkman highlights in her essay that Estragon would prefer to be in the place of Lucky, even he is a slave, instead of suffering of endless waiting of their blurred fate (Burkman 42). Godot means hope for them, so they are bound to the action of waiting. Even if they think they will be saved when Godot arrives, they are like slaves of Godot because there is nothing to do except doing nothing and continuing to wait. Estragon: (*Anxious*). And we? (19). Here Estragon is frustrated and constantly asks what to do, and what is going to happen to them when they meet Godot and where they will fit in in Godot’s life. So, for Estragon, it sounds better to be unaware of the things happening around him instead of suffering in the meaningless world while waiting for something that may not come. Additionally, Beckett himself confirms Burkman’s statement when asked about the meaning of Lucky’s name he answers as such: “I suppose he is Lucky to have no more expectations” (Bair 407).

In addition to being tied to Godot, from time to time they express their dissatisfaction about being tied to each other. They often think of separating and go on to their own ways.

Estragon: It’d be better if we parted.

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Vladimir: You always say that and you always come back crawling (62).

This suggestion of parting by each character goes on until the end of the play. But they never attempt to part in a real sense, that is, no one ever really leaves. They are unconsciously aware that it will be more unbearable to wait for Godot alone. Time will not pass and each one will become more anguished.

The uncertainty of their future is another reason for their anguish. Throughout the play they question themselves: are they in the right place, or have they confused the day they are to meet Godot? They think about their chances of success by discussing the story of two thieves in the Gospels, one of which was saved. Thus, they believe that there is a fifty percent chance that they can also be saved.

Vladimir: . . . One of the thieves was saved. *(Pause.)* It is a reasonable percentage. *(Pause.)* Gogo.

Estragon: What? (11).

This chance is again Godot, who might save them from their suffering of coming face-to-face with the meaninglessness of their existence or they may hang themselves if he does not come. Indeed, they represent the human condition in meaningless world. As McDonald writes in his essay;

But, *Waiting for Godot* is a play which, from the beginning, seeks to probe the 'why' of suffering. Or, perhaps more accurately, seeks to dramatise the condition of not knowing the answer to this question. It begins, after all, by asking why one of the thieves was saved but not the other. On what basis the selection was made? At the end of Act I, we discover that Godot beats one of the boys but not his brother, but for what reason? The boy does not know. The refrain within Lucky's speech, a parody of academic or philosophical attempts to understand the source of human suffering, is that human beings suffer 'for the reason unknown' (McDonald 39).

The characters resemble all humanity, thrown into the world, they try to discover the meaning of life when they have the opportunity. But their mission is impossible because of all the uncertainties in addition to waiting for Godot.

Vladimir: Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! *(Pause. Vehemently.)* Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not everyday that we are needed. Not indeed 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, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not, let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say? *(Estragon says nothing.)* It is true that when we folded arms we weigh

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the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species. The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners without the least reflection, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets. But that is not 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 to come – (80).

They believe that their mission of waiting for Godot somehow gives meaning to their lives, soothing themselves with the idea that they are superior when compared to others because they have been given a mission and they will be saved when Godot comes. Nevertheless, their thoughts change instantly; sometimes they even get suspicious about their very existence in the world, which only enhances their anxiety. When they convince themselves that they are lucky to have a mission which will save them from meaninglessness, they suddenly become anxious, again questioning their existence. For example, in the first act the boy sees them and talks to them but in the second act he does not recognize them,

Boy: What am I to tell Mr. Godot, sir?

Vladimir: Tell him . . . (*he hesitates*) . . . Tell him you saw me and that . . . (*he hesitates*) . . . that you saw me. (*Pause. Vladimir advances, the Boy recoils. Vladimir halts, the Boy halts. With sudden violence.*) You're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me! . . . (92).

These repetitions and pauses are very significant indicators of anxiety. They show that Vladimir indeed is afraid of the possibility that he does not exist. Estragon also exhibits the same fear when he asks Vladimir: "Do you think God sees me?" (76). They consistently try to confirm their existence through an outside authority, either God or the boy. They do this in the hope that the anxiety that is caused by their perceived uncertainty of their own visibility or existence will be cured. The possibility of being saved is what keeps them alive.

Although anguish is clearly seen through the dialogues of Vladimir and Estragon, it is only at the end that Vladimir admits their fear which leads to existential anguish and their continued suffering.

Vladimir: We wait, we are bored. (*He throws up his hand.*). No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there is no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let's get to work! (*He advances towards heap, stops in his stride.*) In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness (81).

Even if they become aware of the absurdity of their own existence, they never act to change it which is their choice. The play ends without any relief for either the characters or the audience. As Sartre puts it: "The only meaning in the world and our lives is the meaning we

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give them through our prodigious choices. (qtd in Falzon 112). They still insist on their ability to choose, but suffer the pain of existence because they do not move at the end.

Vladimir: Well, shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go.

They do not move. (94).

Consequently, they become the own cause of their anguish and as it is argued above, the words they use give their existential anguish away because they cannot stop repeating the anxiety they feel. Their indecisiveness goes on until the end of the play, they decide to leave, but they do not move. They do not end their anguish even as they suffer fiercely. They do not leave the place and give up waiting, thus the curtain closes leaving them to their endless anguish: waiting.

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