

## Symbolism of Life in Beckett's "Waiting for Godot"

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Published, Accepted, Received  
24/11/2024, 04/05/2024, 17/04/2024

**Cite:** Mohammed, Shawqi A. D. & Saleh, Abdo S. H. (2024). Symbolism of Life in Beckett's "Waiting for Godot". *University of Lahej Journal of Applied Sciences and Humanities*, 1(1), 86-91.

### Abstract

The play 'Waiting for Godot' by Samuel Beckett, is considered a successful embodiment and skillful blend of form and meaning, dramatic structure and cognitive experience that Beckett wanted to express through his play. The play presents a clear picture of the theater of the absurd through a complex structure that aims to question the purpose of existence which is seen as meaningless waiting. It seems tedious and meaningless, but it addresses many fundamental questions of modern philosophy. The life is one of the questions the play seems to address.

The current research paper provides a detailed explanation of the main ideas that represent possible interpretations of the play's metaphors and their relevance to life. The researcher discusses the symbolism of life in the play and the significance of waiting, which is understood as life itself, as the condition of modern man, as hope, existence, purpose of life, and as the passage of time.

**Keywords:** Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, symbolism of life, absurd drama, existential philosophy.

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### 1. Introduction

Beckett's play 'Waiting for Godot', written in 1948 and first performed in 1953, is set somewhere in the country of Cackon where the two main characters are waiting for someone who never comes. Vladimir and Estragon doggedly await the appearance of the mysterious Godot who is always expected to appear at some point but never appears - only sending messengers to inform them that he will not be coming for that day but will certainly arrive the next day.

In this action-packed play, there are too many potential themes to enumerate. These obvious issues include issues of absurdity, alienation and loneliness, despair and hope, appearance and reality, doubt and ambiguity, time and life, and the human condition and relationship. But one topic that encompasses many of these things at once is the question of life – who are we as humans and what is our short life on this planet? Overall, the theme of life and its symbolism in Beckett's play 'Waiting for Godot' is complex and can be interpreted in different ways. In short, this article aims to discuss the

most important possible interpretations of this topic, and how Beckett presented his play as a symbol of the condition of modern man, of hope in life, of the goal and purpose of living, of human relations, of time, and of life itself.

## 2. The Analysis

'*Waiting for Godot*' is largely about the Absurdity. The play is devoid of any traditional plot, setting, dialogue, or character. It works according to its own laws, and its structure makes the audience (or reader) think about whether there is any sense in anything, whether anything is sure, whether anything will occur or anything to be done in the play ( or in life...).

Apparently, the endless waiting for the mysterious Godot, played by the main characters in the play, made the play one of the classic models of what is called the theatre of Absurd. The view that human life is aimless and meaningless, and that man, living in an unconcerned or antagonistic world, is often associated with existentialist writers. But when these authors crystallize their visions in plays and novels, they present them in a traditional way, generally consisting of traditional dialogue, clear linear plots, and realistic characters. But style, for a writer like Beckett, is not a random choice, but rather a necessity without which the picture is incomplete.

The philosophical orientation of Beckett's play is another matter, as Beckett was not a formal or doctrinal existentialist, but he certainly could not avoid being influenced by it during his stay in France, which coincided with a period of great ferment in existential philosophy. There is no systematic existential view in the play but a generally existential and absurd view of the human condition appears through very clearly. Vladimir and Estragon, and Lucky and Pozzo, are psychologically isolated from each other. Even with physical closeness, they feel lonely and estranged, as evidenced by their failure to communicate meaningfully. In that state of mind, everyone feels hopeless, feeling helpless in the face of an unchangeable fate. However, in contrast to the formal existentialists, Estragon and Vladimir hope, and it is this hope that sustains them through their persistent and monotonous existence. They are waiting for Godot, who will certainly bring them words of guidance and consolation, who will intervene to change their destinies. Vladimir and Estragon avoid confronting the logic of existentialism, which posits despair followed by a sense of futility, reducing humanity to absurdity, by maintaining hope in the coming of Godot. In this way, they achieve truly heroic dimensions.

This can bring us to another symbolic point, which is the symbolism of hope. Waiting in the play can be interpreted as hope. This is the quiet waiting carried out by the main

characters in the play, who expects the arrival of someone who will not come. The comedic situation in the play, apart from the characters, is the fact that Vladimir and Estragon seem naive enough to believe that Godot will arrive even after such a long wait and the many times he has not arrived. But this comic reality quickly turns into a tragic reality. Godot did not arrive and was supposed to give them a helping hand. This waiting represents hope, and if they have to wait this long, they know that it will lead to an important truth for them, which is the hope that Godot will help them. This can also be related to life matters, suggesting that people are always waiting for something, or a moment, to come, and after that thing or moment comes, they wait for another moment. Even if that moment is very important, the waiting is what makes it special. Hence, this waiting will make the moment when Godot arrives and they meet him a very important and special moment. Esslin says that,

[T]he habit of hoping that Godot might come after all is the last illusion that keeps Vladimir and Estragon from facing the human condition and themselves in the harsh light of fully conscious awareness. (2004, p. 59).

This means that the waiting they do, their optimism, and their non-giving up can symbolize their hope in life, which Godot symbolizes. They are waiting for Godot who represents the purpose of their life and who will make it meaningful. They do anything for optimism to create this hope and not give up. They do everything they can to combat boredom and pass the time, so they end up doing silly things to pass the time. Both main characters do meaningless activities to pass the time such as taking off the shoes and the hats and looking inside them, and repeating this action. The hat seems to be an element with an important symbolic significance and logical meaning in the play and is not just an accessory. All the characters in the play wear a specific type of hats called a bowler hat. This type of hat that they wear symbolizes the person's thoughts and beliefs, or simply represents the person himself. This is what Kennedy (2015) mentioned in his essay "Humanity in Ruin," where he emphasized that the bowler hat expresses the common hopes and aspirations of the upper class. (p. 190)

The title of the play indicates that it revolves around waiting, which is the main action in it, and from here it actually seems that nothing happens in it beyond this waiting. The main characters spend the entire play waiting for Godot, who never comes. Estragon wants to leave again and again, but Vladimir insists on staying in the hope that Godot will actually show up. The waiting of the characters on the stage is matched by the waiting of the audience as well. Beckett has deliberately constructed a play in which not only his characters but the audience also are waiting. Just like Estragon and Vladimir, during the

play the audience waits for a major event or climax. The audience may sometimes feel uncomfortable and, like Estragon, want to leave, but they are obliged to stay in the hope that Godot will indeed arrive later in the play.

Without hope there is nothing in life. Optimism ends without it. Hope is therefore necessary if one wants to live. It forces us to think twice about the importance of hope. Estragon and Vladimir have nothing to do, but they are optimistic. It is the only hope thanks to which they live and wait for Godot. Godot may be a helper or perhaps a god, but one thing is clear: they are both optimistic about their future. They believe that Godot will come and change their lives. The play ends in nothingness, but 'Wait and Hope' never ends. Estragon and Vladimir will come again tomorrow at the same time and place and will wait for Godot until he arrives. In this way, hope is one of the main themes of Beckett's play.

The movement in '*Waiting for Godot*' differs from the movement of the story in other traditional plays, in which the story is more or less in the forward line from beginning to end, whereas the story in Beckett's play is more like a circle. It can be said that the play has a beginning, but the beginning seems somewhat arbitrary because what happened before the beginning seems unimportant. The end of the play is also reminiscent of the beginning and creates a sense of circle rather than the traditional sense of closure that traditional stories generally provide. So perhaps '*Waiting for Godot*' can be described as 'all the middle'. This, of course, reinforces the absurd or existential idea that human life in the twentieth century no longer has meaning, purpose, or clear goal. Man in the post-modern era has lost his compass and faith in traditional norms and is looking for a more appropriate answer to the question about the meaning and purpose of life: "What are we doing here, that is the question." (Beckett, n.d. p. 60) And that life is an endless wait for a sense of purpose or an end that is unlikely to ever arrive. Viewed clearly, life appears to these thinkers as something we simply do while awaiting death, and the illusions that humans create to give their lives a sense of finality or purpose will not finally support the fully contemplative man of the twentieth century. Erikson (2007) embodies this idea by saying:

If there is meaning to the play, then it is the fact that human beings cannot live without meaning, ultimate or not, and our suffering is always made worse by life's apparent meaninglessness. But this, in turn, is made worse by our attempts to give suffering meaning, attempts that always fall short of the suffering itself. The hope for meaning becomes a source of suffering. (p. 266)

The play can be seen as an expression of the condition of modern man who has lost his confidence in this world, and has created a feeling of the futility of this life, which has

made him believe that he is living a futile life, a life without purpose or meaning. But as Camus (1991) says in his essays, a person can adopt some positions in order to confront the absurdity of existence. Accepting life as it is, is the best thing for a modern person. Modern man realizes the futility of this life without denying it or using distractions, just choosing to live this life as a period of time between birth and death. Thus, acceptance of existence could be what waiting symbolizes in the play. This last conclusion can be seen from the main characters' endless waiting, except that they do not accept the futility of their lives, and are therefore in a constant search. The only way they can be happy is to accept their life as it is.

The above explanation highlights the perseverance in trying to find a purpose in life, even if the result in the end is failure and even if there is no meaning to find, a person continues to search for this goal and purpose, so as Fifield (2015) stated, "Waiting for Godot can be read as an examination of existence in a world apparently without meaning." (p. 149) Erikson (2007) in his essay, also argues that "Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a play about basic striving for meaning in a world in which meaning is not forthcoming." (p. 258) The main characters are trying to find purpose and aim for their lives, and they have some kind of motivation. They want to meet Godot who, in this case, can represent purpose and goal in life to give hope to existence. Therefore, they come every day to the same place and wait until the end of the day. Even if this waiting is meaningless, they do not despair and are quite serious about their responsibility to wait for Godot who may or may not come and reward them for their loyalty and they assume that he will come tomorrow. They live their lives on the edge of hope and sadness. Because they carry the hope of meaning and direction, they acquire a kind of nobility that enables them to rise above their barren existence. It is not known when this date began, but one way or another, the end is certain. One day they begin the waiting process, one day it will end. One can imagine Vladimir and Estragon waiting by the tree until they die.

From the notes of the play, one can conclude that human life is what Beckett means by his play. Everything about the play seems to indicate that it is about human existence. It is possible, of course, to interpret waiting simply as human life and existence: the waiting, bracketed between birth and death, which we call life. In the first act for example, when Lucky gives a speech, it seems meaningless but at the same time incredibly important. It seems to be a metaphor that represents human life and destiny on this earth. Lucky's speech follows this pathetic display. In his presentation and philosophy, he explains human suffering and decline. In addition, Pozzo's speech that seems as a description of the human life cycle from birth to death by describing the movement of the sun from sunrise to sunset. With this metaphor, Pozzo depicts the cycle of life from cradle to

grave, as if he likened sunrise to the birth of a person, midday to the middle of a person's life, and sunset to the end of life. He concludes his speech by saying: "That's how it is on this bitch of an earth" (Beckett, n.d. p. 28). Macdonald (2015) argues that,

Waiting for Godot's significance and achievement were ascribed to its universal themes. It seems to many that the play was saying this is what the human condition (as opposed to a particular instance of life, in a social and political context) is like: a constant and unfulfilled waiting between cradle and grave: and all we on this blighted earth can do is to distract ourselves with pointless games and futile banter. (p. 50).

The play can also be a metaphor for habit and routine in life, as life can be viewed as a series of regular events in which people adhere to social rules. As a result, life turns into an incredibly monotonous and boring routine. Since this waiting does not involve any action, it is a good metaphor for the routine of life. It is this routine that leads to a feeling of futility, where one may believe that there is "nothing to be done," (Beckett, n.d. p. 6) in this life. This waiting comes from the standpoint of the meeting with Godot, which both Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for but continues to postpone their meeting, meaning that Godot is the one who represents this routine.

The waiting made the days seem the same and the characters seemed to spin in a time loop of repetition. Moreover, they seem to already know what their day will look like because they live in a repetitive pattern and routine. Today is a repetition of what happened yesterday and tomorrow is a repetition of what will happen today. From the beginning of each act of the play, "as before" is mentioned, indicating that this day is similar to the previous day. In addition, Vladimir says in the first act that "the essential does not change" (p. 15), which indicates that the events of the play take place at a single pace of repetition and unchangeability. Then later in Act One, when Vladimir asks Estragon what they did the day before, he replies: "Yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That [has] been going on now for half a century." (p. 49) This is the line on which the idea of routine is based, because they have spent half a century doing nothing but repetition. Esslin (2004) maintains that "routine of *Waiting for Godot* stands for habit, which prevents us from reaching the painful, but fruitful awareness of the full reality of being" (p. 59). So, it is this waiting that prevents the characters of the play from realizing their true condition. Godot, who symbolizes monotonous routine, is also a symbol of hope that something meaningful will happen in the future. This hope is what ignites their desire to live and prevents them from committing suicide and giving up their lives. The meeting with Godot is tantamount to achieving their goal, which in turn will give their lives meaning because it will be as if

they have accomplished what they dedicated their lives to. Based on this evidence, the characters are willing to spend their lives doing the same routine. But since the play ends in act two, this shows that these two acts are just a sample of the endless process of repetition until the end of time.

In addition, the play can attract the reader or viewer with its simple language used by the writer, which despite its simplicity contains very deep philosophical connotations. All the characters in the play speak in short, simple sentences (except Luck's thinking) that are coherent for everyone. The things they discuss are in themselves ordinary. At the same time, it is linked to life and the destiny of humanity. The play presents two types of relationship between humans. Mutual care and love form the basis of the relationship between the vagabonds while Pozzo and Lucky symbolize the exploitative relationship. People who care and love each other alleviate their precarious life circumstances and help others, while an exploitative relationship blinds one and mutes the other. The observation that blind Pozzo can see the future is ironic. Not only does he mock ordinary fortune-tellers, he also takes aim at the oppressive systems of the world that believe they know the future but remain unaware of the reality at hand. The play also seems to suggest that unruly people with mutual love and care are far above the pillars of law and order.

Finally, based on the common theme of waiting for someone who will never come, the play comes to represent humanity's helplessness and uncertainty about its future. Vladimir and Estragon, the main characters of the play, wait for Godot who never comes. His identity and the very fact of his existence have become ambiguous. In the context of the play, he is viewed in different ways – he may be a savior, a god, a vengeful tyrant, a rich employer, one who holds the future of the vagabonds in his hand, (at least (their) immediate future.) Critics have tried to solve this mystery by researching Beckett's life, history, and etymology without being able to determine who or what "Godot" means. In fact, Godot cannot be made to represent any single ideal idea or person in particular, because he represents absence.

### 3. Conclusion

Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' still has a great appeal as an absurdist drama. This play is considered one of Samuel Beckett's pioneering works and an important masterpiece in absurdist theatre. Darkness and nothingness prevail in this different kind of artistic creativity. In the traditional sense, this drama does not have a coherent idea, clear message, or progression and lacks all the criteria that qualify it as a drama. But at a time when uncertainty and doubts prevail, the drama succeeds in portraying "the hollow" in the truest sense of the word. In conclusion; it appears that the play is a symbolic metaphor of the human

condition and hope in life. The two characters hope and wait for a sign (Godot), but their metaphysical suffering does not end because that is the human condition. It seems, also, that the play addresses questions related to human existence and the way the characters appear and how the play is presented gives a clear idea of the kind of life the main characters present. Furthermore, the play looks as a symbolic representation of the customs and routine.

The life of the main characters is divided into its simplest form. They are trying to pass the time and their activities are limited to eating, sleeping, companionship, and waiting. Nothing happens to them or to their surroundings. They repeat only those activities that after a while become a kind of routine. Considering all these things, 'Waiting for Godot' is a very interesting play. This Play is very rich in terms of its philosophical implications. It is not just a play but a symbol of life.

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## رمزية الحياة في مسرحية بيكيت "في انتظار جودو"

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تاريخ النشر	تاريخ القبول،	تاريخ الاستلام،
٢٠٢٤/١١/٢٤	٢٠٢٤/٤/٥	٢٠٢٤/٤/١٧

للاقتباس: محمد، شوقي علي داغم، وصالح، عبده سعيد حسين. (٢٠٢٤). رمزية الحياة في مسرحية بيكيت "في انتظار جودو". مجلة جامعة لحج للعلوم التطبيقية والإنسانية، ١ (١)، ٨٦-٩١.

### الملخص

تعد مسرحية "في انتظار جودو" لصامويل بيكيت تجسيداً ناجحاً ومزجاً ماهراً بين الشكل والمعنى والبنية الدرامية والتجربة المعرفية التي أراد بيكيت التعبير عنها بواسطة مسرحيته. تقدم المسرحية صورة واضحة لمسرح العبث بواسطة بنية معقدة تهدف إلى التشكيك في هدف الوجود الذي ينظر إليه على أنه انتظار لا معنى له. يبدو الأمر مملاً ولا معنى له، لكنه يستعرض العديد من الأسئلة الأساسية للفلسفة الحديثة، والحياة هي أحد الأسئلة التي يبدو أن المسرحية تتعرض.

وتقدم الورقة البحثية الحالية شرحاً مفصلاً للأفكار الرئيسية التي تمثل تفسيرات محتملة لاستعارات المسرحية وصلتها بالحياة. ويستعرض الباحث رمزية الحياة في المسرحية وأهمية الانتظار الذي يفهم على أنه الحياة ذاتها، وعلى أنه حالة الإنسان المعاصر، وعلى أنه الأمل والوجود والهدف من الحياة، وعلى أنه مرور الزمن.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** صامويل بيكيت، في انتظار جودو، رمزية الحياة، الدراما العبثية، الفلسفة الوجودية.

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