

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Absurdity and the Existential Approach in Beckett's Major Plays

Dr. Asma Siddiqui

Guest faculty, Hamidia Girls' Degree College, University of Allahabad, India;

asmansiddiqui@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett's play reflects the intellectual and cultural crisis of the post-Second World War era, foregrounding the fundamental question of human existence, meaninglessness, alienation and uncertainty. This paper explores the absurd and existential approaches in Beckett's major plays, namely *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *All That Fall*, *Happy Days*, and *Krapp's Last Tape*. Drawing upon the philosophical premises of Existentialism and the dramatic conventions of The Theatre of Absurd, the study examines Beckett's representation of individuals confronted with an apparently meaningless existence and the persistent yet futile desire to find purpose and certainty. His characters experience isolation, anxiety, repetition, fragmentation and the absence of meaningful communication, which together reveal the existential predicament of modern humanity. At the same time, Beckett employs circular structure, silence, pauses, repetitive action, fragmented dialogues and unconventional dramatic situations to construct an absurd theatrical world. The paper argues that absurdity in Beckett's drama is not merely a theatrical technique but a philosophical expression of the human condition. His plays expose the tension between human longing for meaning and the apparent absence of any inherent meaning in existence. Thus, Beckett's drama represents a significant convergence of existential philosophy and absurdist theatrical aesthetics.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett; Absurdity; Theatre of Absurd; Nothingness; Existentialism

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

The very term “absurd” means something irrational; it conveys a pervasive attitude rather than a system of thought. The term “Theatre of the Absurd” conveys the irrationalism, helplessness, and absurdity of life in dramatic form, rejecting realistic settings, logical reasoning, or a coherently evolving thought. Though the mood and dramaturgy of absurdity were reflected in Jarry’s French play *Ubu Roi* (*Ubu the King*), they find their roots in Surrealism and Expressionism. Tracing a little deeper, the idea and notion of the Theatre of the Absurd are like that of Existential philosophy. Existential philosophers thought that this world is nothing to human beings, and that human beings are like aliens in this universe who don’t know their importance or meaning in it. They have an isolated existence and represent human life in its fruitless search for purpose and meaning, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end as an existence which is both anguished and absurd. Having witnessed the destruction of World War II, Existential philosophers expressed their emotions towards people drowning in meaninglessness. According to the Existential philosophers, the universe has no inherent truth, value, purpose, or meaning; they believe in nothingness. Existential philosophy therefore emphasises that meaning is not something predetermined or given by the universe; rather, it is created by individual through their choices, actions, and experiences. Human beings are confronted with freedom, uncertainty and the responsibility of giving meaning to their own existence. In this sense, nothingness becomes not merely an absence of meaning but a condition that compels individuals to create their own meaning and purpose.

The followers of Existential theory differed from one another in their doctrines and attitudes. Since World War II, there have been two major developments in Existentialist thinking: one, Christian Existentialism, which believes in the existence of God — as in *Waiting for Godot*, where the character Vladimir says to Estragon, ‘We can’t go because we are waiting for Godot’. The term ‘Godot’ may mean God or someone special who will come and solve their problems, or it may mean freedom from their tension and problems in their life. The other, Nihilistic Existentialism, did not believe in God as a ‘saviour’; their idea was that man is alone in a godless universe. In *Endgame*, the world outside is dead for the four characters — Nagg, Nell, Clov, and Hamm. These four people believe that they are the last survivors of the race after some great catastrophe; in this aesthetic philosophy, man has no reality if he unthinkingly follows social law or convention.

Samuel Beckett (1906–89), the most eminent and influential Irish writer in this mode, thought and felt the destruction, horror, and human condition after World War II, shown in his dramas such as *Waiting for Godot* (1954), *Endgame* (1958), *All That Fall* (1956), and *Happy Days* (1961). He is an artist of great originality and even greater purity who has always refused to make any concessions whatsoever to his public. He is the man who wrote the play *Waiting for Godot*, which changed the whole of contemporary theatre. His works reflect the existential condition of human beings, marked by isolation, uncertainty, suffering and the absence of any fixed meaning. Beckett presents a world in which human existence appears fragmented and purposeless, leaving individuals to confront the nothingness surrounding them. Yet, his characters continue to wait, speak and endure, suggesting the persistence of human desire to find meaning in an otherwise meaningless existence. Thus, Beckett's drama becomes a powerful representation of existential philosophy and the modern human condition. Believers in Existential theory say that the world isolates human beings in an existence devoid of God and absolute values. An Existentialist playwright may, as Beckett does, show an unwillingness to communicate with one another. Beckett's *Act without Words* contains no dialogue, and in his *Krapp's Last Tape*, a single character addresses only his own tape-recorded voice.

Waiting for Godot (1954), Beckett's most famous play, brought absurdist principles to popular audiences and raised the question of human existence in this universe. *Waiting for Godot* presents two tramps in a desolate, lonely place, waiting fruitlessly and hopelessly for an unidentified, mysterious person, Godot, who never appears in the whole drama because he may or may not exist; they think they may have an appointment, and around this theme the whole drama moves. In the whole drama, nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, but there is tension in characters who hope in this hopeless world. Throughout the play, doubt, tension, negative thinking, and dilemmas are present, clearly showing the impact of World War II. The play reflects the post-war sense of disillusionment, uncertainty, and spiritual emptiness that affected human life. The endless waiting of Vladimir and Estragon symbolises the helplessness of individuals who are unable to find a definite purpose or direction in life. Their repeated conversation and actions further emphasise the monotony and meaninglessness of existence. Through this absurd situation, Beckett portrays the existential anxiety of modern human beings living in a world without certainty or predetermined meaning. The characters of *Waiting for Godot* (1954) are clownish vagabonds. Their dialogues are pointless. They live in a meagre and isolated existence. There is no proper aim to their life because they are not sure of their existence in this world, so they waste their time in purposeless work.

After World War II, man's life became so barren, isolated, and full of doubt that he had nothing to fill his time, nor did time have any importance in his life. There is no permanent or actual aim of his life in which he could use his time. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon have much time, which they could use in any creativity, but they wasted their time in useless conversation and fruitless waiting. One was busy putting on a boot, and the other was waiting uselessly. Time is "obliterated" in moments of rare, supreme illumination that suffice to give meaning to our existence, imprisoned in habit and time, and art exists to express such illumination and its significance. Time in this timeless play is simultaneously present and absent.

In the dialogue form of *Waiting for Godot*, we can see the impression of World War II: 'There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express, and even more, the writer cannot express and yet he must express'. This happened because everyone was very fearful of the contemporary condition, so that, on the one hand, man had lost true seriousness, and, on the other hand, laughter.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the most profound and complex of all these is "God." Because of World War II, man thinks that his life is not secure, and the question arises in his mind: in a scientific world, is man doubtful of his existence in this universe? From this notion, negative thinking has grown bolder, even within religion. The scientific God, imagined by men, is merely comic; God himself is hated and despised. But according to Christian Existentialists, God is a 'savior', and in the drama *Waiting for Godot* both characters, Vladimir and Estragon, waiting for Godot, who may or may not be a savior, and never arrives in the whole play, but man keeps waiting for his possible arrival, that he will come and save them from frustration and tension; but in the play, salvation is just like a fairy tale.

In *Waiting for Godot*, night falls rapidly at the end of both acts, symbolising the darkness of World War II, and in that atmosphere, a confined space where a senseless plot is woven is the image of the plot of life itself, 'a tale told by an idiot'. The darkness of World War II was so deeply embedded in the mind of human beings that they lost recognition of themselves and the world. *Waiting for Godot* conveys the idea of waiting and boredom; waiting is a self-erasing non-activity, so the subject of the play is not "Godot" but "waiting", never-ending waiting. The opening sequence establishes the situation of 'uncertainty' for Vladimir and Estragon; they are waiting both in life and in the drama, as is clearly shown in this speech: "We are no longer alone, waiting for the night; waiting for Godot, waiting for... waiting." Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a synecdoche. The title is a concluding continuation of the play:

*"Let's go.
We can't.
Why not?
We're waiting for Godot."*

The apparent ending of the play is merely a state of incompleteness, a still waiting. At the beginning of the play, the words 'Nothing to be done' confirm the hollowness of its ending. The play is a circular tautology that ends where it begins, with two characters, Didi and Gogo, whose names end where they begin. 'Waiting' suggests the continuation of a verbal action but also implies the absence of the waited-for, who is itself mysteriously absent. Moreover, waiting is a self-erasing non-activity, since it negates the transient activities we engage in while waiting. Gogo and Didi struggle with their boots and their hats and involve themselves in other activities, but they always come to the nullifying words:

*"Let's go.
We can't.
Why not?
We're waiting for Godot."*

In *Waiting for Godot*, the past is no more secure or knowable than the future. The absences and uncertainties of memory on the characters' part would seem to suggest that they live almost entirely in the present. For Gogo and Didi, the present exists merely as an unbearable route to a future in which Godot's arrival will justify their present waiting — if he comes, but he won't. When Beckett begins Act II, he implicitly raises the question of how the past is preserved in the present. *Waiting for Godot*, based on Christian Existentialism, presents, in the first act, the dramatist's idea of the Old Testament God, 'the tyrant divinity', and, in the second act, the New Testament God, 'injured, crucified, helpless'. *Waiting for Godot* is one of the most time-conscious plays ever written.

Endgame (1958), a one-act play, consists of a bare room bathed in grey light, with two small windows set high on the rear wall; one giving out onto the ocean and one onto the land. The time and space of Endgame, as its title announces, are those of an ending; the form and content of the play convey the impression of a world in gradual decline, where everything and everybody are weakening, winding down, running out. Endgame portrays a universe that is nearing its end but seems likely to continue repeating itself, in an increasingly contracted form, forever. This play is also connected to isolation and human existence, in the context of the post-war crisis and

the sense of desolation left by the Second World War. The barren setting and the physical decline of its characters suggest a world in which the old structure of meaning and certainty has collapsed. From an existential perspective, Hamm and Clov are trapped in a repetitive existence, unable to find any definite purpose or escape. Their continuous struggle to live despite the absence of hope reflects the existential condition of human beings confronting isolation, suffering and meaninglessness. Thus, *Endgame* presents human existence as a persistent struggle in a world moving towards inevitable extinction.

All of the characters of *Endgame* suffer, to a greater or lesser degree, physical deterioration: Hamm is blind and cannot use his legs; Clov sees, but his eyes are bad, and he walks with great difficulty and cannot sit; Nell and Nagg have long ago lost their legs, and Nell probably dies during the play. The decor of *Endgame* also contributes to the impression of a world coming to its end. Hamm speaks of his desolate room as a 'shelter' and says, 'Outside of here it's death'; a statement which holds as true for a nuclear survivor as for a chronic sufferer from depression. The grey light of the room denotes barrenness and nothingness. In the play, Hamm, Clov, Nell, and Nagg may be the last survivors of some dreadful catastrophe; even the alarm clock, which Hamm fears, is also nearing its end.

Endgame as a representation of human consciousness: *Endgame*'s universe exists on the stage; outside, all is grey, zero, and death. The four characters might represent diverse elements of a single human personality. Hamm would be the inner "me," irrational and emotional; Clov would be the rational "me" who maintains contact with the external world; Nell and Nagg could simply be memories that are weakening and disappearing. The first impression evokes a suggestive fascination with an alien or exotic world. In a gloomy room suffused with grey light, we meet the two characters: Hamm in his wheelchair and Clov performing a strange pantomime as he tries to climb a ladder to look out the window.

From the very first line of the play, when Clov announces, 'Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished', we hear allusion after allusion to the end of time, of people, of stories, of food, of objects, of nature, of color, of sight, of fleas and rats, of the light of day, of love, of the meaning of words, of the earth and sea, of laughter, of weather, of the sun, of kisses, of clocks, of offspring, of God, of sound, of motion, of song, of beauty, of order, of the game played by Hamm and Clov, of all 'this...this...thing'. *Endgame* comes from the strategy of continual opening through rejection and frustration. *Endgame* has often been read as an illustration of certain extremely popular themes, particularly the 'absurdity' of the cosmos and the

meaninglessness of human existence within it. *Endgame* is a play about bad conscience and about bad faith, almost in the Sartrean sense of the word. *Endgame* is swathed in pain. *Endgame*'s anguish is heartbreakingly human. The play opens with the word "finished" and asymptotically approaches its end, closing with the word 'remain'.

In *All That Fall* (1956), Beckett describes it as 'a mixture of realism and poetry, frustration and farce'. *All That Fall* is, as Beckett said, 'a text written to come out of the dark'. It divides temporally and sonically into three parts:

1. the hustle and bustle of locomotion, breakdown, and reported pain.
2. the confusion of signals and voices at the station.
3. the couple's weary trudge homeward.

All Beckett's characters in *All That Fall* are depressed, not for any reason, but because they are alive, which in turn means that they will eventually die. If the human psyche is regarded as a battleground for a ceaseless struggle between the pleasure principle and the death instinct, in Beckett's work the death instinct wins. Beckett spoke of life as the original sin for which there is no atonement. The blindness of Mrs Maddy Rooney's husband, the train's late arrival, and the death of Minnie, daughter of Mr and Mrs Maddy Rooney, show the grief and depression in the drama as well as in the universe. *All That Fall* touches many of the chords that are sounded in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, but in a somewhat lighter and less searching manner.

The play *All That Fall* (1956) reflects the psychological and spiritual disillusionment that followed the Second World War when traditional beliefs in order, progress and human security had been deeply shaken. Maddy Rooney's journey to the railway station becomes an image of the repetitive and uncertain journey of human life. The characters inhabit a world where suffering appears inevitable, yet no clear explanation or purpose is provided. Beckett combines comic situations with pain, decay and death, creating an absurd vision of existence. The characters' isolation further emphasises their inability to establish meaningful connections with one another. From an existential perspective, they confront freedom, uncertainty, morality, and a universe that offers no predetermined meaning. Thus, *All That Fall* portrays the modern individual's struggle to continue living in a world marked by suffering, uncertainty and existential emptiness.

In the play *Happy Days* (1961), there are only two characters: a middle-aged couple called Winnie and Willie. Winnie is buried in sand and unable to move; Willie does not appear fully until the end. Willie has very little to say, and as a result, Winnie

must hold the audience on her own, by her voice and her facial expressions, in one long, wandering monologue. As the title *Happy Days* suggests the optimistic attitude of life, but the condition of Winnie in Act I is buried alive to the waist in earth, and in Act II buried alive up to the neck, unable to move her head in any condition, shows the pessimistic attitude of human life. The dialogue, 'I can't go on, I must go on, I'll go on', shows the dual condition of the human mind.

In *Happy Days* (1961) Beckett portrays the human condition in the image of a cheerful, plump woman, Winnie, who is slowly sinking into a mound of earth. On one hand, it is tragic that Winnie should be so cheerful in her terrible and hopeless predicament; on the other hand, it is funny. In one sense, her cheerfulness is sheer folly, and the author seems to make a deeply pessimistic comment on human life; in another sense, however, Winnie's cheerfulness in the face of death and nothingness is an expression of man's courage and nobility, and thus the play provides a kind of catharsis. Winnie's life does not consist of happy days because she refuses to be dismayed.

Though the hollowness is apparent throughout the movement, one could also glimpse some positive aspects. The psychic phenomenon is evident in nature, so we could end with the meaning "after the storm comes the calm." So the "waiting" probably also reflects the new awareness which is about to come. This new awareness may lead human beings to recognise the fundamental condition of their existence and to confront the reality of nothingness without fear. Beckett's dramatic world repeatedly presents the individual in a situation where conventional meanings and established values appear to collapse. The resulting sense of emptiness brings the human being face to face with the absurdity of existence. In this sense, nihilism becomes an important dimension of Beckett's vision as the absence of any absolute meaning creates a world of uncertainty and spiritual emptiness. However, Beckett does not simply leave the individual in complete despair. The very act of continuing, waiting, speaking and enduring suggests a persistent human impulse to exist despite the absence of certainty. The absurd, therefore, does not merely signify the failure of meaning; it also exposes the human need to search for it. Beckett's characters consequently represent the modern human condition in which freedom, isolation, suffering, mortality and uncertainty remain unavoidable realities. The recognition of nothingness may therefore become the beginning of the new consciousness rather than a conclusion of existence. In this way, Beckett leaves his audience not with a definite solution but with an open question about the possibility of meaning in an

apparently meaningless world. His dramatic vision ultimately suggests that even when certainty disappears, the human impulse to continue remains.

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