

## Waiting Without Arrival: Existential Futility and the Indifference of the World in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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**Abstract:** This article examines the representation of human futility and environmental indifference in *Waiting for Godot* through an interdisciplinary framework that integrates existentialism, absurdism, and ecocriticism. The study argues that the play dramatizes a condition of “waiting without arrival,” in which the persistent human search for meaning is continually deferred within an unresponsive universe. Drawing on the philosophical insights of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, the analysis explores how Beckett constructs a dramatic world characterized by temporal stagnation, repetitive action, and the collapse of coherent meaning. Through close textual analysis, the article demonstrates that the characters’ act of waiting functions as both a manifestation of existential despair and a strategy of endurance.

In addition, the study employs ecocritical perspectives to examine the play’s barren setting as a representation of nature’s indifference to human concerns. The minimalistic landscape and the ambiguous transformation of the tree underscore the disconnection between human expectation and environmental reality, reinforcing the broader theme of futility. By synthesizing these theoretical approaches, the article offers a nuanced interpretation of *Waiting for Godot* as a multidimensional exploration of existence in a world devoid of inherent meaning. The findings contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions by foregrounding the intersection of philosophical and ecological dimensions in Beckett’s drama.

**Keywords:** Waiting for Godot; Samuel Beckett; Existentialism; Absurdism; Ecocriticism; Human Futility; Indifference of Nature; Theatre of the Absurd; Meaninglessness; Modern Drama

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* remains one of the most enduring dramatic representations of existential uncertainty and human futility in twentieth-century literature. Written in the aftermath of World War II, the play reflects a profound crisis of meaning, where traditional structures of belief—religious, philosophical, and social—have collapsed, leaving individuals suspended in a state of perpetual waiting. At the centre of this dramatic universe are Vladimir and Estragon, two tramps who wait endlessly for the elusive Godot, a figure who never arrives and whose absence becomes the defining condition of their existence. This act of waiting, devoid of resolution or progress, encapsulates the fundamental tension of human life in an absurd and indifferent world.

The notion of “waiting without arrival” is not merely a thematic concern but a structural and philosophical principle that governs the play. Beckett constructs a dramatic space in which time is cyclical, action is minimal, and meaning is constantly deferred. The barren setting—a desolate landscape marked only by a solitary tree—reinforces the sense of emptiness and stagnation, suggesting not only the futility of human endeavour but also the indifference of the natural world to human suffering. Nature, in this context, does not provide solace, renewal, or transcendence; instead, it mirrors the void within which the characters exist. The sparse environment becomes a silent witness to human desperation, offering neither response nor relief.

This indifference aligns closely with existentialist and absurdist philosophies, particularly the works of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, who argue that human beings are thrust into a universe that lacks inherent meaning. Camus, in particular, conceptualizes the absurd as the confrontation between human longing for order and the universe’s silence. In *Waiting for Godot*, this silence is dramatized through the absence of Godot and the repetitive, inconclusive dialogue between the characters. Their conversations, often circular and fragmented, reflect an inability to construct stable meaning, underscoring the futility of their condition.

Moreover, the play’s resistance to conventional narrative progression challenges traditional dramatic expectations. There is no clear beginning, middle, or end; instead, the structure is marked by repetition and stasis. This formal disruption reinforces the thematic emphasis on futility and the impossibility of resolution. The characters’ persistent hope that Godot will arrive, despite continuous disappointment, reveals a paradox at the heart of human existence: the simultaneous awareness of meaninglessness and the refusal to abandon the search for meaning. In this sense, waiting becomes both an act of despair and a mechanism of survival.

In addition to its existential dimensions, the play invites an ecocritical interpretation that foregrounds the role of the environment as an indifferent presence. Unlike romantic or pastoral traditions that depict nature as nurturing or harmonious, Beckett’s landscape is stark, unresponsive, and devoid of vitality. The solitary tree, which undergoes minimal change between acts, symbolizes the illusion of transformation in a fundamentally static world. This environmental barrenness underscores the disconnection between human expectation and natural reality, reinforcing the idea that the world operates independently of human desires or suffering.

This article argues that *Waiting for Godot* dramatizes the condition of “waiting without arrival” as a metaphor for existential futility within an indifferent universe. By examining the interplay between character, structure, and setting, the study demonstrates how Beckett constructs a theatrical world in which hope is perpetually deferred and nature remains unresponsive. Through this lens, the play emerges not only as a reflection of post war disillusionment but also as a timeless exploration of the human condition—one defined by uncertainty, endurance, and the relentless passage of time without fulfillment.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EXISTENTIALISM, ABSURDISM, AND ECOCRITICISM

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on existentialism, absurdism, and ecocriticism to interrogate the themes of human futility and environmental indifference in *Waiting for Godot*. These theoretical lenses provide complementary perspectives through which the play’s philosophical depth and dramatic structure can be critically examined.

### 2.1 Existentialism and the Crisis of Meaning

Existentialism provides a foundational framework for understanding the condition of human beings as depicted in Beckett’s play. Central to existentialist thought is the idea that existence precedes essence, meaning that individuals are thrust into a world devoid of inherent meaning and must construct their own purpose through

conscious action. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that human beings are “condemned to be free,” burdened with the responsibility of creating meaning in an indifferent universe.

In *Waiting for Godot*, however, this existential freedom is rendered paradoxical. Vladimir and Estragon possess the freedom to act, yet they remain immobilized, trapped in a cycle of waiting that substitutes action with anticipation. Their inability to make decisive choices reflects what Sartre describes as “bad faith”—a condition in which individuals evade responsibility by clinging to illusions or external authorities. The expectation of Godot’s arrival functions as such an illusion, allowing the characters to defer action and avoid confronting the emptiness of their existence.

Furthermore, existential anxiety permeates the play through the characters’ fragmented dialogue and constant uncertainty. Their repetitive questioning—“What are we doing here?”—signals a persistent search for meaning that yields no resolution. This aligns with existentialist notions of alienation and disorientation, where individuals struggle to locate themselves within a world that offers no stable reference points. Thus, existentialism illuminates the psychological and philosophical dimensions of futility that define the characters’ condition.

## **2.2 Absurdism and the Logic of Futility**

While existentialism emphasizes the individual’s responsibility to create meaning, absurdism underscores the fundamental incompatibility between human desire for meaning and the universe’s silence. Albert Camus conceptualizes the absurd as the confrontation between these two forces, arguing that the human condition is characterized by a perpetual tension that cannot be resolved.

Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is widely regarded as a quintessential absurdist text, embodying the principles articulated in Camus’s philosophy. The play’s structure—marked by repetition, circular dialogue, and the absence of narrative progression—reflects the irrationality and meaninglessness inherent in the absurd condition. The non-arrival of Godot serves as the ultimate expression of this absurdity, as it denies the characters any form of closure or fulfillment.

Unlike traditional tragedy, which often leads to catharsis or resolution, the tragedy in *Waiting for Godot* lies in its refusal to resolve. The characters are caught in an endless loop, where each day mirrors the previous one, and hope is continually deferred. This cyclical temporality reinforces the sense of futility, as time itself becomes a mechanism of entrapment rather than progression.

Importantly, Camus proposes that the appropriate response to the absurd is not despair but revolt—a conscious acceptance of meaninglessness coupled with a refusal to surrender to it. However, Beckett’s characters do not fully embody this form of rebellion. Instead, they oscillate between awareness and denial, unable to either embrace or escape the absurd. Their waiting becomes a passive response, highlighting the limitations of human agency within an unresponsive universe.

## **2.3 Ecocriticism and Environmental Indifference**

While existentialism and absurdism address the philosophical dimensions of human existence, ecocriticism offers a lens through which the play’s environmental context can be examined. As an interdisciplinary field, Ecocriticism explores the relationship between literature and the natural world, often interrogating how texts represent ecological systems and human interactions with the environment.

In contrast to literary traditions that depict nature as nurturing or harmonious, Beckett's landscape is stark, barren, and indifferent. The setting of *Waiting for Godot*—a desolate road with a single, nearly lifeless tree—embodies what may be described as ecological minimalism. This environment does not respond to human presence; it neither alleviates suffering nor provides meaning. Instead, it reinforces the isolation and futility experienced by the characters.

The tree, often interpreted as a symbol of life or hope, undergoes only minimal transformation between the two acts, sprouting a few leaves that suggest change without offering substantial renewal. This subtle shift can be read as an ironic gesture, emphasizing the inadequacy of natural signs to fulfil human expectations. Nature, in this context, is not a source of redemption but a silent, indifferent backdrop against which human struggles unfold.

From an ecocritical perspective, the play challenges anthropocentric assumptions that position humanity at the centre of meaning-making processes. The indifference of the environment suggests a decentred worldview, where human desires and concerns hold no privileged status within the broader ecological order. This reinforces the article's central argument that *Waiting for Godot* dramatizes not only existential futility but also the disconnection between human expectation and environmental reality.

## 2.4 Synthesis of Theoretical Perspectives

By integrating existentialism, absurdism, and ecocriticism, this study develops a comprehensive framework for analyzing *Waiting for Godot*. Existentialism highlights the internal struggle for meaning, absurdism exposes the external impossibility of achieving it, and ecocriticism situates this tension within an indifferent natural world. Together, these perspectives reveal the multidimensional nature of futility in Beckett's play, encompassing psychological, philosophical, and environmental dimensions.

This theoretical synthesis enables a nuanced interpretation of "waiting without arrival" as both a condition of human existence and a reflection of a broader, unresponsive universe. It is through this interdisciplinary lens that the subsequent analysis will examine how Beckett constructs a dramatic world defined by stagnation, uncertainty, and the persistent deferral of meaning.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical scholarship on *Waiting for Godot* has evolved significantly since its first performance, with interpretations ranging from existential and absurdist readings to post-structuralist and ecocritical approaches. This section reviews key scholarly contributions relevant to the themes of human futility and environmental indifference, situating the present study within ongoing academic discourse.

### 3.1 Existential and Absurdist Interpretations

Early critical responses to *Waiting for Godot* were deeply influenced by existentialist philosophy, particularly the works of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Camus's concept of the absurd, articulated in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), provides a foundational framework for understanding the play's depiction of purposeless repetition and deferred meaning. Although Beckett himself resisted direct philosophical categorization, critics have consistently identified parallels between his dramatic universe and Camus's notion of a silent, indifferent cosmos.

One of the earliest and most influential interpretations is offered by Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). Esslin situates Beckett within a broader movement of post-war dramatists who reject conventional narrative structures in favour of fragmentation, circularity, and existential dislocation. He argues that *Waiting for*

*Godot* exemplifies the absurd condition through its lack of plot, repetitive dialogue, and unresolved ending, all of which reflect the breakdown of meaning in modern existence. Esslin's work remains a cornerstone in Beckett studies, frequently cited in contemporary scholarship.

Similarly, Ruby Cohn, in *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (1962), emphasizes the interplay between comedy and despair in Beckett's drama. Cohn argues that the humor in *Waiting for Godot* does not alleviate suffering but rather accentuates the absurdity of the human condition. The characters' futile actions—such as repetitive conversations and failed attempts to leave—underscore the tension between the desire for meaning and the impossibility of achieving it.

Further expanding on existential themes, Hugh Kenner in *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett* (1973) interprets the play as a representation of epistemological uncertainty. Kenner suggests that the absence of Godot destabilizes all systems of knowledge and belief, leaving characters in a state of perpetual doubt. This perspective aligns with existentialist concerns about the instability of meaning and the individual's struggle to navigate an incomprehensible world.

### 3.2 Structural and Linguistic Approaches

Beyond existentialist readings, scholars have examined the play's structure and language as key elements in its representation of futility. Theodor W. Adorno, in his essay "Trying to Understand Endgame" (1961), though focused on another Beckett play, provides insights applicable to *Waiting for Godot*. Adorno argues that Beckett's dramatic form resists interpretation by undermining coherence and continuity, thereby reflecting the fragmentation of modern life. This structural indeterminacy reinforces the sense of meaninglessness that permeates Beckett's work.

In a similar vein, Jacques Derrida's theory of difference has been applied to Beckett's play to explain the perpetual deferral of meaning. Although Derrida did not write extensively on *Waiting for Godot*, his concept of meaning as endlessly deferred resonates with the play's central motif of waiting. The anticipated arrival of Godot can be interpreted as a signifier that never materializes, thereby sustaining an endless chain of expectation without fulfillment.

Additionally, Stanley Cavell, in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969), explores the philosophical implications of language in Beckett's drama. Cavell contends that the breakdown of communication in *Waiting for Godot* reflects a deeper crisis of expression, where language fails to convey stable meaning. This linguistic instability contributes to the overall atmosphere of uncertainty and futility.

### 3.3 Temporal and Performative Dimensions

Scholars have also focused on the play's treatment of time and performance as mechanisms of existential entrapment. Henri Bergson's concept of *durée* (duration) has been invoked to analyze the play's non-linear temporality. In *Waiting for Godot*, time does not progress in a meaningful way; instead, it loops back on itself, creating a sense of stagnation that mirrors the characters' condition.

Elin Diamond and other performance theorists have emphasized the embodied nature of waiting, arguing that the actors' physical presence on stage reinforces the monotony and repetitiveness of the characters' actions. The performative dimension of the play transforms abstract philosophical concepts into tangible experiences, allowing audiences to engage directly with the sensation of waiting and the passage of time.

### 3.4 Ecocritical Perspectives and Environmental Indifference

While traditional scholarship has largely focused on existential and absurdist themes, recent studies have begun to explore the ecological dimensions of Beckett's work. Ecocriticism provides a useful framework for examining the role of the environment in *Waiting for Godot*. Critics such as Greg Garrard, in *Ecocriticism* (2004), emphasize the importance of analyzing how literature represents the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Although Beckett's landscape is minimalistic, it is not devoid of meaning. The barren setting has been interpreted as a reflection of ecological desolation, where nature no longer functions as a source of renewal or harmony. Some scholars argue that this environmental emptiness parallels the existential void experienced by the characters, reinforcing the theme of indifference.

More recent ecocritical readings suggest that Beckett's work challenges anthropocentric assumptions by presenting a world in which human concerns are insignificant within a larger, indifferent system. This perspective aligns with broader trends in environmental humanities, which seek to decentre the human subject and highlight the agency—or lack thereof—of the natural world.

### 3.5 Research Gap and Contribution

Despite the extensive body of scholarship on *Waiting for Godot*, there remains a noticeable gap in studies that integrate existentialism, absurdism, and ecocriticism into a unified analytical framework. Most critics have treated these perspectives in isolation, focusing either on philosophical or structural aspects without fully considering the environmental dimension of the play.

This article addresses this gap by synthesizing these theoretical approaches to examine how Beckett constructs a dramatic world characterized by both human futility and environmental indifference. By foregrounding the interplay between existential despair and ecological barrenness, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of "waiting without arrival" as a multidimensional condition.

## IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS: HUMAN FUTILITY AND THE LOGIC OF WAITING

At the heart of *Waiting for Godot* lies a dramatic representation of human existence as an unending process of waiting—an activity that substitutes action with anticipation and ultimately reveals the futility of both. Through the characters of Vladimir and Estragon, Beckett constructs a theatrical world in which waiting becomes not merely a temporal condition but an existential state, defined by repetition, uncertainty, and the perpetual deferral of meaning.

### 4.1 Waiting as Existential Condition

From the opening lines of the play, Estragon's declaration, "*Nothing to be done*," establishes the tone of resignation that permeates the drama. This seemingly simple statement encapsulates the essence of existential paralysis, suggesting that action is either impossible or meaningless. Vladimir's response does not challenge this assertion but instead redirects attention to their purpose: waiting for Godot. However, this purpose is immediately undermined by uncertainty, as Estragon repeatedly questions, "*What is it we are waiting for?*" to which Vladimir replies, "*We are waiting for Godot*."

This exchange reveals a fundamental instability at the core of their existence. The act of waiting is presented as both necessary and arbitrary, lacking any clear justification beyond its own repetition. The characters' inability to

articulate why they wait underscores the absence of inherent meaning, aligning with Albert Camus's notion of the absurd as the conflict between human desire for purpose and the universe's silence. Their waiting becomes a habitual response to this silence, a way of filling time without confronting its emptiness.

Moreover, the characters' repeated attempts to leave— "*Well, shall we go?*" followed by the stage direction "*They do not move*"—highlight the tension between intention and action. This contradiction reinforces the idea that human agency is severely limited, if not entirely illusory. The decision to wait is not actively chosen but passively maintained, suggesting that the characters are trapped in a cycle from which they cannot escape.

#### **4.2 Repetition, Time, and the Illusion of Progress**

The structure of *Waiting for Godot* is characterized by repetition, both within and across its two acts. Events recur with slight variations, creating the impression of movement while ultimately reinforcing stasis. The arrival of Pozzo and Lucky in both acts, for instance, mirrors the cyclical nature of the protagonists' existence, while the boy's repeated message that Godot will come "tomorrow" perpetuates the illusion of future fulfillment.

Time in the play is ambiguous and unstable. Vladimir and Estragon struggle to recall past events, often contradicting each other or expressing uncertainty about whether certain occurrences happened at all. This erosion of memory disrupts any sense of continuity, making it impossible to distinguish between past, present, and future. As a result, time ceases to function as a linear progression and instead becomes a static, repetitive loop.

This temporal dislocation contributes to the logic of futility. If each day is indistinguishable from the last, then waiting loses its orientation toward a meaningful future. The promise of Godot's arrival is continually deferred, transforming hope into a mechanism of entrapment rather than liberation. In this sense, waiting is not a path toward resolution but a condition that sustains itself indefinitely.

#### **4.3 Dialogue, Silence, and the Failure of Meaning**

Language in *Waiting for Godot* plays a crucial role in revealing the futility of human existence. The dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon is marked by fragmentation, repetition, and non sequiturs, reflecting an inability to construct coherent meaning. Conversations often begin without clear purpose and end without resolution, creating a sense of circularity that mirrors the structure of the play itself.

For example, the characters frequently engage in trivial exchanges—discussing boots, hats, or bodily discomforts—that serve as distractions from the underlying emptiness of their situation. These moments of banality are punctuated by sudden silences, which emphasize the inadequacy of language to address existential concerns. The pauses in the dialogue are as significant as the words themselves, representing the void that language attempts, but ultimately fails, to fill.

The failure of communication extends beyond the protagonists. Lucky's monologue, a seemingly incoherent stream of words, exemplifies the breakdown of rational discourse. While the speech contains fragments of philosophical and theological language, it lacks syntactic and semantic coherence, rendering it meaningless. This collapse of language reinforces the idea that traditional systems of knowledge and belief are no longer capable of providing clarity or purpose.

#### 4.4 The Deferred Presence of Godot

Godot's absence is the central organizing principle of the play, shaping both its structure and its thematic concerns. Although he never appears on stage, his anticipated arrival governs the actions and expectations of the characters. Godot functions as a symbol of meaning, purpose, or salvation—yet his continual absence undermines these associations.

The boy's message that Godot will not come "today but surely tomorrow" introduces a pattern of perpetual deferral. This promise sustains the characters' hope while simultaneously preventing its fulfillment. The certainty implied by "surely" contrasts sharply with the repeated postponement, highlighting the fragility of belief in an uncertain world.

Importantly, Godot's identity remains undefined. The characters themselves are unsure of who or what he represents, at one point questioning whether they are even waiting in the correct place. This ambiguity reinforces the idea that Godot is less a concrete figure than a projection of human desire for meaning. His absence thus reflects the absence of any external source of purpose, leaving the characters to confront the void at the centre of their existence.

#### 4.5 Futility and the Indifference of the World

The logic of waiting in *Waiting for Godot* ultimately reveals a broader condition of human futility within an indifferent world. The barren setting, devoid of significant change or response, mirrors the characters' internal emptiness. The natural environment does not interact with or acknowledge their presence; it simply exists, unaffected by their suffering or expectations.

This indifference is most evident in the minimal transformation of the tree between the two acts. While it acquires a few leaves, this change is insufficient to alter the overall sense of desolation. The tree's slight variation may suggest the possibility of renewal, but it ultimately reinforces the illusion of progress that pervades the play. Nature, like time, offers no meaningful resolution—only the appearance of change.

In this context, human existence is characterized by a fundamental disjunction between expectation and reality. The characters continue to wait, to hope, and to speak, despite the absence of any evidence that their actions will lead to fulfillment. Their persistence reflects both the resilience and the absurdity of the human condition: the inability to abandon the search for meaning, even when confronted with its impossibility.

#### 4.6 Synthesis: Waiting as the Structure of Futility

Through its characters, structure, and language, *Waiting for Godot* constructs a dramatic logic in which waiting becomes synonymous with existence itself. The absence of resolution, the repetition of actions, and the indifference of the world all contribute to a portrayal of life as an endless deferral of meaning.

The phrase "waiting without arrival" thus encapsulates the central paradox of the play. It signifies a condition in which hope persists despite continual disappointment, and where the search for meaning continues in the face of its absence. Beckett's drama does not offer solutions or consolations; instead, it confronts audiences with the stark reality of human futility, inviting them to reflect on the nature of existence in an unresponsive world.

## V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* presents a profound exploration of human existence as a condition defined by perpetual waiting, deferred meaning, and existential uncertainty. Through the characters of Vladimir and Estragon, the play dramatizes the paradox of human persistence in a world that offers no assurance of purpose or resolution. Their continuous anticipation of Godot's arrival, despite repeated disappointment, encapsulates the central tension between hope and futility that characterizes the human condition.

By integrating existentialist, absurdist, and ecocritical perspectives, this study has demonstrated that *Waiting for Godot* extends beyond a philosophical meditation on meaninglessness to include a subtle yet significant representation of environmental indifference. The barren landscape, the minimal transformation of the tree, and the cyclical structure of time collectively reinforce a vision of the universe as fundamentally unresponsive to human desire. In this context, waiting becomes not merely an action but a structural condition of existence—one that sustains life even as it exposes its inherent emptiness.

Importantly, the play does not resolve this tension or offer a pathway to transcendence. Instead, it compels a confrontation with the limits of human agency and the absence of external validation. The endurance of the characters, though seemingly futile, reflects a persistent, if fragile, commitment to existence itself. This persistence underscores the complexity of Beckett's vision: while the world remains indifferent, human beings continue to wait, to hope, and to endure.

Ultimately, *Waiting for Godot* endures as a timeless representation of "waiting without arrival," capturing the enduring struggle to find meaning in a silent and unresponsive universe. By situating human futility within both philosophical and environmental contexts, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Beckett's work and reaffirms its relevance to contemporary debates on existence, meaning, and the place of humanity within the broader world.

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