

**ESSENCE OR EXISTENCE? EXISTENTIALIST READING OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S  
WAITING FOR GODOT**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Samul Beckett's play waiting for Godot has received different contradictory criticisms. Some critics categorized it as existential, absurd and Christian existentialism, while this study has provided textual indications and discussions to dissociate it from existentialist philosophy of Sartre and Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism. To this end, both attitudes were examined through traits and characteristics of the two main characters of Vladimir and Estragon whether to perceive them as existentialist or essentialist. Characters were studied using philosophical approaches of Kierkegaard and Sartre's existentialism. Discussions revealed that due to the characters' inability to accept their responsibility of life and aimless wasting of waiting for a savior, their essence precedes their existence but endless waiting does not actualize the priority of essence. It puts Waiting for Godot beyond modern existentialist analysis and associates it with the impotent human and God in leading human destiny resulting in the characters' frustration in an infinite purgatory world.*

**KEY TERMS:** existentialism, *waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett, Sartre, Kierkegaard.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Samul Beckett's mysterious play *Waiting for Godot* has been apt to different readings philosophically. Such literary critics as Harold Bloom, Jeffrey Fisher and James Roberts, associated this play with existentialism by reference to characters' lack of rational understanding of the world and the absurdity within the play (Harold Bloom, 2008; Jeffrey Fisher and James Roberts, 1980). In her doctoral dissertation (2007) Amanda Kelsch tried to justify Christian existentialism relying on Kierkegaard's initial ideas of existentialism and Christianity. Though the present study does not reject some relevancies of the previous readings of the play, it tries to emphasize on repetitive statements in the play by characters of Estragon and Vladimir and the latent determinism they are engaged in when they cannot undergo the responsibility of their entire life and being and cannot escape from promised deterministic objective truth of their savior. This idea has some proponents (Paul Lawley and Michael Bennett) among recent studies of *Waiting for Godot* in pinpointing the deterministic statements and allegorical references to Old Testament. They claim that Beckett's characters are proper examples of the idea of 'essence precedes existence' while previous studies prioritized the 'existence' in their justifications by incorporating the philosophical ideas of Hegel and Sartre to existentialist philosophy. To differentiate between

the two above mentioned ideas and pitfalls each group of critics might be engaged, and differences between characteristics of Vladimir and Estragon as well as the way each of them reaches prioritizing essence over existence, are elaborated in detail.

## DISCUSSION

The Oxford dictionary of philosophy has defined existentialism as “the individual, the experience of choice and the absence of rational understanding of the universe with a consequence dread or sense of absurdity in human life” (129). Søren Kierkegaard is a prominent figure known as the father of existentialism who initiated the triggers of modern existentialism which culminated in works of Sartre and Camus among others. Kierkegaard refuted objectivity of truth and suggested the subjective truth, but he remained uncourteously skeptic and still clinging with Christian existentialism which entails objective truth at its heart. The concept of existentialism was developed by Sartre as the main figure of modern existentialism. He definitely established the ideas of existence prior to essence and believed that human being is condemned to be free and discussed human’s free will and responsibility about himself/herself and all men. He used the concept “existence precedes essence” for his justification of the theory. This term in Simon Blackburn’s understanding of Sartre’s expression means that “a person has no predetermined nature or range of choices, but always free to choose a fresh and thereby reconstitute himself or herself as a different person” (129). The idea of “existence precedes essence” is the reversal of Aristotelian philosophy in considering the essence and nature as predetermined necessity. This paradigm change of prioritizing existence over essence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was suggested by Kierkegaard in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* by introducing subjectivity of truth and disproving long dominated objective truth.

Though the ideas were revolutionary, Kierkegaard argued that in the doctrine of Christianity “it is not impossible that the individual who is infinitely interested in his own eternal happiness can someday become eternally happy; on the other hand, it is certainly impossible that the person who has lost a sense for it can become eternally happy” (13). The statement implies that happiness and salvation is possible within the discourse of Christianity and this still approves objective truth, while by such statements he means the opposite side of the claim. Now that eternal happiness is not impossible, is mundane happiness possible? Due to strict Christian legal system in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and before, skepticism and paradoxical statements about the idea of human’s freedom, free will and existence entered the study of other modern existentialists. Accordingly, Klesch explains that Kierkegaard “felt strongly about promoting independence of thought rather than an established truth” (14). It is the starting point of further secular understanding of existentialism that in Kierkegaard has taken the term Christian existentialism which still asserts that there is an objective truth and, on the other hand, as Kelsch maintains the revolutionary side is in that “the pursuit of spiritual truth is pointless if one is not coming to one’s own conclusion about the matters” (17). It seems that in Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy there is not a strong pushover Christianity as yet, while in Hegel’s philosophy existentialism is distanced from religion and termed as ‘freedom of thought.’ This notion contributed to modern understanding of existentialism especially in Sartre and Mairé’s *Existentialism and Humanism* (1960).

Sartre’s existentialist idea of ‘existence precedes essence’ is applicable to human, while objects’ essence precedes their existence, because their nature was incarnated before their creation.

Accordingly, Lawrence Cohoone indicated that “Sartre endorsed the absolute freedom and responsibility of the individual subject to create itself in a world without guidance from God or nature” (2003, 259). Therefore, in Sartre’s view Man’s “free will” and choices are the bases of existentialism which causes pain, due to centrality of human being and his responsibility about self and society, holding all these responsibilities requires intelligence, tolerance and activity that means total transition of responsibility from God to Man.

In *Waiting for Godot* there is an aimless hope for a savior who is promised to come, but never comes. The question is whether after a long time of waiting for Godot (savior) it is possible to exist and lead the life without waiting for salvation by an objective truth? According to Sartre’s theory of existentialism “Man is free and responsible for all men”, while in *Waiting for Godot* neither Vladimir nor Estragon is after his “free will.” They do not feel responsibility for people and even for their own fate. The theme of Sartre’s existentialism theory implies that human being should take control over his/her life and avoid dependency and waiting for celestial and miraculous hands, while Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for celestial power and savior. The two paradoxical themes dissociate *Waiting for Godot* from existentialist reading. However, there are instances of inviting human being to lead an existential life (conversations about happiness, eating, sleeping, etc.) in the play, however, such existential deeds are followed by statements like ‘what to do then’ that contradicts dynamicity of existential philosophy. Therefore, the existentialist reading of the text is refutable.

The two main characters’ perception of life and understanding about waiting is different. At first, Vladimir and Estragon seem to be representative of the two different philosophies but at the end of the play when they decide ‘to go’, yet they do not move, the circular and repetitive form of the play is revealed. Using repetitive dialogues while waiting for Godot becomes a parrot-like conversation. The following conversation between Vladimir and Estragon was repeated six times in the play similarly in pages 10, 45, 67, 74, 80 and 89 as follows:

**[ESTRAGON.** Let’s go.

**VLADIMIR.** We can’t.

**ESTRAGON.** Why not?

**VLADIMIR.** We’re waiting for Godot.

**ESTRAGON.** Ah! ] (*Waiting for Godot*).

In this repetitive conversation Estragon asks Vladimir ‘let’s go’. This expression means going to lead an existential life. ‘Going’ equals ‘becoming’ as opposed to ‘waiting’ equipollent to ‘being’. ‘Being and becoming’ in modern philosophy was promoted by Nietzsche accentuating becoming over being after Heraclitus’s famous aphorism “No man ever steps in the same river twice” (*Cratylus* 402). Vladimir is identified with ‘tree’, a symbol of change, that is becoming over time; however, not to a totally new and unforeseen thing. It represents circulation process and changing to another known substance and essence and highlights the idea of determinism. On the other hand, Estragon is unified with mount, bone and boot, recognized as inanimate substances made of pure essence attributed to being and waiting. Estragon and Vladimir embody the philosophy of being and becoming in a state of predestination which characterizes Beckett’s ideal for challenging human being’s free will. Here Beckett is Nietzschean since “a constant theme in Nietzsche’s writing, from its earliest period, is his rejection of the freedom of the will and endorsement of a

fatalist view of becoming” (*Routledge History of Philosophy Volume VII* 160). In response to Estragon’s request “let’s go”, Vladimir says ‘we can’t’, using the plural pronoun (a sense of priority and leadership) of ‘we’ shows the condition of all men and their constructing material or essence. They can’t give up waiting and at the same time they can’t go to lead their existential life.

Estragon is passive and inert and has no precise understanding of time and place which embodies the doctrine of ‘block universe’ a theory that “encouraged many physicists and philosophers to think that time does not flow (there is no becoming), indicating that the time dimension from past to future is already there in some sense” (*Metaphysics* 22). Estragon has no understanding about the purpose of waiting and forgets about the passage of time and what they are waiting for. To this account when Estragon asks ‘why not?’ it shows that he forgets repetitively about what he is doing there; he is not conscious and he has a momentary memory (like a stone’s essence). Vladimir’s response as “We are waiting for Godot” represents their purpose, and Estragon’s response ‘Ah!’ that arises from his unconscious mind represents his sensation of a repetitive sensual understanding of wasting than conscious understanding of waiting. The last dialogue of the same conversation is significantly different. In the near end of the second section, the dialogue goes on as follows:

[ **ESTRAGON.** Oh yes, Let’s go far away from here.

**VLADIMIR.** We can’t.

**ESTRAGON.** Why not?

**VLADIMIR.** We have to come back tomorrow.

**ESTRAGON.** What for?

**VLADIMIR.** To wait for Godot.

**ESTRAGON.** Ah! ] (*Waiting* 89)

It is clear that Estragon is tired and suffers from this condition, unconsciously struggling with the ‘present’ time momentarily. It is for the reason of forgetting the ‘past’ and ‘future’ that each time he forgets about what he is waiting for. He does not think about time metaphysically, but he feels those events (bone, kicking) attributed to the past time by their association with his physical body. In other words, he feels whatever happens to him physically, not metaphysically.

On the other hand, Vladimir has a clear sense of time: ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’. He is a dynamic and thinking person with a conscious mind. He thinks that all dead voices need something more than life and death.

[**VLADIMIR.** To have lived is not enough for them (the dead).

....

**VLADIMIR.** To be dead is not enough for them.] (*Waiting* 58)

Existence and mundane life, even death and returning to the essence condition is not satisfactory for Vladimir and believes that there is a wide gap in his understanding of life, and finds no meaning in life except waiting for Godot to save them. For several times Estragon wonders if they could be parted and finally at the end of the play Estragon angrily demands to be parted because their philosophy of life is contradictory:

[**ESTRAGON.** I can’t go on like this.

**VLADIMIR.** That’s what you think.

**ESTRAGON.** If we parted? That might be better for us.

**VLADIMIR.** We’ll hang ourselves tomorrow. (*Pause.*) Unless Godot comes.

**ESTRAGON.** And if he comes?

**VLADIMIR.** We will be saved.] (*Waiting* 91)

The above conversation implies the existentialist movement and secularist attempts of dividing religion and church from scientific discourse and is representative of philosophers' skepticism about existence of God as the objective truth. Estragon, the sign of essence and being requests to be parted from Vladimir, the sign of becoming and change, who is seeking unity by meeting Godot. If the essence is parted from existence or being is parted from becoming, there would be no becoming, since essence in its nature contains matter and energy or materials for movement and change. Vladimir and Estragon's connection resembles dependency of existence on essence. Science can explain the process of change as a result of cause and effect and laws, while religion is not as smart as science, since it jumps to conclusion without examining premises Vladimir's paradox of energy for changing and waiting at the same time in "Yes, let's go. [they do not move]" (*Waiting* 91) implies inability of science to be independent and religion's incapacity to explain every phenomenon; therefore, Godot (savior) is required to bring them together or unify them, but there is no evidence that Godot exists or comes. Accordingly Godot or the objective truth would not possibly come true and it paves the ground for skepticism, indicating that Vladimir persists on fatalism in the image of the savior.

When Estragon says "that's the way I am" reveals in him the element of essence, not existence, because he is not active and responsible about himself and all men; therefore, according to Sartre's definition of existentialism as "a doctrine that does render human life possible...which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity" (*Existentialism and humanism* 24), Estragon is not a Sartrean existentialist.

Also, there is a duality in Vladimir's character, both in his speaking and actions. In the first statement Vladimir speaks "I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle." (5) This statement shows that Vladimir passes a circular way to resume to the essence that Estragon believes in without attempt. Vladimir's behavior represents him as an active and responsible character which has a proper sense of time and place (that are elements of existential philosophy), but all in vain, as his return to essence despaired with existence is due to his waiting for Godot, a supreme power of essence. Hence, Vladimir's submission to savior distances him from Sartre's free will philosophy and characterizes him partially with Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism.

Some scholars (Harold Bloom 2008, Tarek Baziz 2013) of Beckett's plays tried to justify the existential elements in *Waiting for Godot* and others like Kelsch associated the play with Christian existentialism indicating that "Godot could just as easily be read as supporting a Kierkegaardian existentialism" (Kelsch 37). Sartre condemns "Bad Faith" or self-deception as "pretending to ourselves that we are not free (*Being and Nothingness* 96) which can be perceived in Vladimir and Estragon's dialogues while they pretend there is no way to live except waiting for salvation. But Kelsch's argument can be endorsed who believed that in Kierkegaard's ideology "there is an objective truth that exists, but that it is only knowable by God himself" (Kelsch 41). Therefore,

Bloom's justification of Sartre existentialist philosophy, and Fisher and Roberts's emphasizing on priority of existence over essence is enfeebled.

From these studies, Bennett's article is noteworthy in which he tries to prove the idea of 'essence precedes experience' by referring to such statements as "the essential doesn't change" and "one is what one is" (Bennett 18) provided by Vladimir about human temperament and relating the essence to four unchanging humors. He dissociates *Waiting for Godot* from existentialism and identifies it with the statement of the Old Testament "I am what I am", which prioritizes essence over existence and connects this subject to Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" (Bennett 18)

Bennett is right in this view that in the statement "I am what I am" there is determinism of essence, while in Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" one is invited to doubt about essence. In the two statements the premises are different but the conclusions are the same. Vladimir thinks (doubts), therefore he exists, and Estragon feels (through senses), therefore he exists. Feeling refers to human's senses -- physical senses -- and thinking is performed by the faculty of mind that is an entity. Estragon from the beginning believes that "nothing can be done" (*Waiting* 5) and accepts "essence precedes existence", while Vladimir dares to 'test' by not being submitted to believing in priority of essence easily. Nevertheless, he falls within the realm of "essence precedes existence" through consciously waiting for the objective Truth.

Lawley's analysis of Vladimir and Estragon's character shows Estragon's 'low mound' which he sits on frequently represents his earthly and material position, and Vladimir's tree figure, hat and his looks toward sky are the signs of ecclesiastical beliefs. Briefly, Lawley indicates that "Estragon is mineral, Vladimir vegetable" (Lawley 63). The above statement shows that whether being stone (mineral) or vegetable (potent for activity and growth) the construction of both is their essence; however, no matter which way is taken, since they return to the starting point (essence) by refuting to take control over their existence, responsibility and construction of their world.

To have elements of Christian existentialism the play was expected to have a transparent resolution and conclusion, as well as meeting with Godot to achieve the purpose of waiting, but the encounter never occurs. Therefore, the objective truth is not actualized while still essence precedes existence due to endless waiting and their inability to leave the place. Positing such a gap in *Waiting for Godot* is a philosophical challenge to question human's indecision and irresolution as well as divine's incapacitation to take control over human's fate.

## CONCLUSION

The initiating ideas toward existentialism by Kierkegaard were primitive and bound with Christianity, later they were modified by Sartre and existentialism was dissociated with religion to celebrate existentialism as free will, subjective truth and 'existence precedes essence'. Previous studies on *Waiting for Godot* associated the play with Sartre's existentialism, while textual analysis of the play in line with Kelsch's study of the two main characters partially associated the play with Christian existentialism discussed by Kierkegaard, but endless waiting and incomplete resolution of the play distances it from Christian existentialism. The present study indicated Estragon as a passive, forgetful, and inert type of character about whom stone metaphor was suggested by Paul Lawley. Stone is an object which according to Sartre its essence precedes its existence, while

Vladimir's active, thinking and conscious character's metaphor was tree. Estragon was identified with substance and essence as being philosophy, but Vladimir entails existence features and movement that can be taken as becoming philosophy. However, the ingredients of tree are particles (object), and though its life and growth is purposeful, it is still an object with its deterministic essence. At the end of the play they decide to go (to lead their existential life), but they don't move. This frustration and insufficiency of life and even death for the characters represents their inner tendency to return to their essence. Accordingly, characters of the study are not indications of the existentialism that Sartre has declared. Nor can they be referred to as Christian existentialist since the play reaches no transcendental and metaphysical conclusion, but a futile and absurd circumstance within their life. However, it is the art of Beckett in producing dilemmas and a type of play with characteristics of absurdity and at the same time refuting its existentialism. This paradoxical nature of *Waiting for Godot* and human being's frustration in taking control of life on one hand, and inability to regain with the entire objective truth, on the other hand, represents human being in a predestination condition of which neither man nor God is potent to take control. In other words, it seems that Beckett's God has left man in an infinite purgatory of the world.

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