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Companionship and the Absurd in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*

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ABSTRACT

Following the devastation of World War II, the Theatre of the Absurd emerged, characterised by a sharp shift from logical narratives and coherent arguments to irrationality, fragmented speech, and unconventional conclusions. The term "Theatre of the Absurd" was coined by critic Martin Esslin in his seminal 1960 essay, capturing the essence of this avant-garde movement. This paper promises a comparative analysis of Albert Camus's The Myth of Sisyphus, and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot through the lenses of absurdism and existentialism. Both works, rooted in the philosophy of the absurd, confront the human condition in a universe devoid of inherent meaning. While Camus presents Sisyphus as a metaphor for the human struggle against futility, Beckett's tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, reflect the essence of waiting as an expression of existential defiance. The thematic exploration of time—its stagnation in Waiting for Godot versus its eternal recurrence in The Myth of Sisyphus— is also something that the paper talks about. To offer a fresh perspective, this study presents a nuanced view of absurdism through interpersonal dynamics judging the role of companionship in Beckett's work as a counterpoint to Sisyphus's solitude. In conclusion, this paper seeks to explore the commonalities and distinctions in the existential philosophies of Camus and Beckett, while contributing a fresh interpretation of absurdism that highlights its significance in the context of modern human experience and study how, while Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot and Albert Camus's The Myth of Sisyphus share significant thematic concerns regarding the absurdity of human existence, Beckett's play diverges from Camus's philosophical framework by presenting characters who primarily attempt to evade the absurd through inaction and false hope rather than embracing it through revolt and acceptance.

Keywords - Absurdism, Companionship, Theatre of the Absurd, Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus

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The absurd arises when individuals recognise the inherent conflict between their desire for meaning and the irrationality of the world. It is not a state of being, but a confrontation, a "divorce" between humanity's search for clarity and the world's silence. This experience occurs when one "stands face to face with the irrational," (Camus, 10) realising that the world does not offer the meaning that humans crave. Instead of battling against this fundamental dissonance, the absurd involves embracing this inherent contradiction and living in the tension it creates.

The feeling of absurdity emerges at the point where human's reason and the world's irrationality collide. It is not a question of the world or the individual, but of their coexistence. This is not merely an intellectual realisation, but a profound emotional experience triggered by the collision of our desire for purpose and the world's lack of it. The absurd is not something to be passively accepted; rather, it's a state of constant confrontation. This ongoing tension between the human desire for meaning and the world's inability to provide it is essential to the

experience of the absurd. It requires a constant state of awareness, as the absurd only disappears when one turns away from it. This involves a "lucid" recognition of the absurdity of existence, which liberates one from the belief in another life and allows them to live for the present moment.

Rather than seeking to resolve or escape the absurd, one must learn to live with it (Camus, 17). To deny one of the elements of this relationship, either by finding a false sense of meaning or by succumbing to despair, refutes the purpose of the absurd. The point is not to find a solution but to understand the problem in its full extent. The absurd requires maintaining peace between man's constant struggle to 'know' and the universe's adamant denial of this knowledge. This constant tension and awareness is what gives life meaning in the face of the absurd.

Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, articulates that the absurd emerges from the clash between humanity's quest for meaning and the indifferent silence of the universe. He describes Sisyphus, condemned to an eternal cycle of futility, as a metaphor for the human struggle against meaninglessness. Yet, Camus insists that Sisyphus achieves a form of freedom by embracing his absurd predicament without hope or resignation, which Camus terms a "metaphysical revolt" (Camus, 1942, as cited in Chatterjee, 2013). This rebellion against despair, rather than submission, forms the core of Camus's philosophy of the absurd.
Camus considers whether physical suicide is a logical response to the absurd. However, he strongly refutes and argues it is a form of acceptance, not a revolt. Suicide eliminates the tension linked with the absurd, which he insists should be maintained. This guides us towards the second act of adopting a system of belief or higher power, such as religion, to overcome the absurd by creating false meaning. Camus argues that this approach is an attempt to evade the tension inherent in the absurd by sacrificing intellectual honesty.

According to him, the most authentic response to the absurd is revolt. Revolt entails a constant confrontation between the individual and the obscurity of existence, a conscious rejection of any external source of meaning, and an embrace of the freedom to act within the limits of the human condition. It is a way of existing and enduring fully and consciously in a world without inherent meaning.

The Absurd in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a powerful theatrical representation of the absurd. The play presents a nonsensical world devoid of reason where characters engage in pointless acts, their dialogues are fragmented, and the familiar notion of cause and effect is absent. The play depicts the aimless existence of Vladimir and Estragon as they wait for the enigmatic Godot, engaging in this ridiculous act of waiting every day, highlighting the inherent meaninglessness of their lives. The characters' actions consist of passing time through repetitive habits and futile conversations, sometimes even contemplating death, thereby illustrating the absurdity of human endeavours in a world without purpose.

Contrasting Camus's defiance, Beckett's characters Vladimir and Estragon embody a more passive response to absurdity. In *Waiting for Godot*, the pair waits endlessly for Godot, a figure whose identity and purpose remain ambiguous. Their waiting, characterised by repetitive dialogue and actions, illustrates their unwillingness to confront the absurd condition. As Martin Esslin argues in his analysis of the Theatre of the Absurd, Beckett's play reflects a modern

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disillusionment with established systems of meaning, presenting characters paralysed by their reliance on habit and hope (Esslin, 1961)

Moreover, their contemplation of suicide, an act Camus explicitly rejects as a solution to absurdity, further speaks about their inability to embrace the freedom Camus openly advocates. Instead, they engage in what Camus calls "philosophical suicide," clinging to the illusory promise of Godot as a source of meaning and maybe happiness, while avoiding authentic confrontation with their purposeless existence.

Beckett's use of language serves to further emphasise the absurd. The dialogues are often illogical, repetitive, and fail to convey meaning. This communication breakdown suggests, what the poststructuralists would strongly refute, that language cannot bridge the gap between humans and the absurd reality they are a part of. The act of waiting in *Waiting for Godot* is symbolic of the human condition, where individuals persistently await something—anything—that ultimately never arrives. This constant state of waiting illustrates the futile nature of searching for external meaning. The play defies conventional theatrical norms with its circular plot structure and lack of coherence, further reinforcing the theme of meaninglessness. The setting, characters, and dialogue all reflect a sense of disorientation and alienation from any rational order that one might expect to pertain.

The observation that there is a striking congruence between Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, as Martin Esslin notes, is supported by multiple sources. The two works share thematic concerns about the absurdity of human existence and the search for meaning in a meaningless world, although they differ in their approach.

In *Waiting for Godot*, companionship provides a means of facing the void, but the crucial question remains: does it alleviate the burden or intensify it? The interactions between Vladimir and Estragon, though often strained and repetitive, provide a sense of shared existence and a means to pass time in their meaningless circumstances.

While *The Myth of Sisyphus* explores the absurd with Sisyphus in a perpetual state of solitude, *Waiting for Godot* presents the absurd through the lens of companionship. The characters in Beckett's play, unlike Sisyphus, are not revolting against their fate, but rather are seeking to escape the suffering of being through habit and the hope of an external savior.

While companionship offers a temporary relief from the stark reality of the absurd, it does not ultimately resolve the fundamental issues of meaninglessness and alienation. The play demonstrates that their dependence on each other keeps them trapped in a cycle of waiting and inaction. Their reliance on the idea of Godot and on each other prevents them from taking responsibility for their own lives and finding their own solutions to their absurd condition. They have "bargained away their rights" and depend on some other being. Vladimir and Estragon's relationship becomes a cycle of repetitive actions and futile conversations, highlighting the limitations of human connection in the face of the absurd. Vladimir and Estragon's relationship is complex, marked by both dependence and a degree of tension. While they rely on each other for companionship and to pass the time, there are instances where Vladimir expresses irritation and even disgust towards Estragon. Vladimir often displays impatience with Estragon, particularly when Estragon complains about his physical discomforts. For example, Vladimir

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retorts "No one ever suffers but you" (Beckett, 1952, p. 3). Then, There is also a moment where Vladimir is hurt by Estragon's "Not now, not now," when he suggests an embrace. They bicker and argue, but also express affection. They acknowledge that they "weren't made for the same road", yet they continue to travel it together. Even though Estragon expresses a wish to be alone, he also asks if it wouldn't "be really too bad" to part.

The final lines of the play where they agree to leave but do not move, demonstrates their codependent relationship. They seem to be bound together by habit, fear of loneliness, and perhaps a shared understanding of their absurd reality.

In the play, time becomes a central motif, mirroring the cyclical nature of Sisyphus's task but diverging in its implications. While Camus portrays the repetitive nature of Sisyphus's labor as a source of empowerment, Beckett's treatment of time emphasises stagnation, despair and hopelessness. Vladimir and Estragon's inability to recall past events or discern the exact day of Godot's promised arrival underscores their existential uncertainty (Abdulmehdi, 2023).

According to Abhinaba Chatterjee, this companionship, in the face of Sisyphus's solitary life, offers a counterpoint to the isolation often associated with the absurdist, suggesting that interpersonal dynamics can mitigate the burden of a meaningless existence (Chatterjee, 2013)

Camus begins *The Myth of Sisyphus* with the fundamental question of suicide: "There is one but truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide"(Camus, p. 1). This question, centered on the individual's response to a meaningless world, highlights the intensely personal nature of the absurd. However, the argument rightly points out, this question of suicide seems to lose its immediate, pressing urgency in the presence of companionship. The very act of contemplating the value of existence is altered when one is not entirely alone. This highlights a critical difference between the solitary exploration of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the shared experience of it in *Waiting for Godot.*

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus presents the absurd as an individual's confrontation with a meaningless world. The problem of suicide, therefore, becomes a solitary struggle. The individual, standing alone before the void, must decide whether life is worth living. The weight of this decision falls entirely on their shoulders.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the presence of companionship, represented by the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon, creates a curious paradox. While the characters frequently discuss suicide, they never act upon it. This is not because they find solace in each other's company but rather because their reliance on one another becomes a form of paralysis. They are trapped in a repetitive cycle of waiting and dependence, where the very presence of the other prevents any decisive action. As you've noted, the characters seem "tired of each other" and "especially Vladimir." They are not drawn together by genuine affection but by their shared inertia. Despite their moments of frustration, Vladimir and Estragon are clearly dependent on one another. They acknowledge that they have been together for a long time, possibly fifty years, and seem unable to imagine a life apart. They repeatedly consider separating, but ultimately choose to remain together, even though they admit it may not be the best for either of them. They also suggest that they are "tied" to one another in some way.

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And Camus imagines Sisyphus happy because he accepts his fate and rebels against the meaninglessness of his punishment by finding his own meaning within it. He embraces the absurd through his persistent, solitary labor. His happiness lies in his consciousness of his plight and the defiant manner in which he faces it.

Unlike Sisyphus, Vladimir and Estragon do not achieve any form of defiant self-determination. Their companionship, rather than leading to strength or revolt, instead binds them to a cycle of waiting1117. They never truly challenge their absurd condition or find a way to live authentically within it. They contemplate suicide not as an act of rebellion but as a means of escaping their boredom, yet their dependence on each other and habit prevents them from doing so.

Here, Companionship in the play can be seen as a way to avoid the existential dread that comes with confronting the absurd. Vladimir and Estragon fill their time with repetitive actions and conversations to avoid having to confront their meaningless existence. In this sense, companionship becomes an enabler of "philosophical suicide" where the characters wait for Godot and "put their fate in the hands of a Godot", and by doing so, they avoid having to face the void. It is a way to suppress the consciousness of the absurd, a form of denial that Camus actively rejects (Abdulmehdi, 2023).

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Waiting for Godot*, the characters' indulgence with the absurd differs fundamentally in their reliance on solitude and companionship. Sisyphus, the solitary hero in Camus' work, embodies a personal confrontation with the absurd through his endless task of rolling a boulder uphill, only to watch it roll back down. This futile labor represents the core of his punishment and encapsulates the absurdity of existence. However, Sisyphus is not a passive victim; instead, he achieves a form of triumph through his lucidity. His conscious acknowledgment of the absurdity of his situation transforms his struggle into a personal revolt. By embracing the present moment and accepting the meaningless repetition of his task, Sisyphus finds a kind of joy. His solitude becomes a source of empowerment, allowing him the space for introspection and self-determination, free from the distractions or dependencies of companionship. Camus' assertion that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" gives us the impression of this possibility of finding meaning within the absurd through individual agency. Conversely, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* presents Vladimir and Estragon, two companions who confront the absurd not alone but together. Their experience revolves around their perpetual, aimless waiting for the enigmatic Godot, whose arrival never materialises. Unlike Sisyphus, who actively engages with his fate, Vladimir and Estragon are passive, filling their days with repetitive habits and nonsensical conversations to pass the time. Their companionship provides a temporary escape from the despair of isolation but ultimately traps them in a cycle of dependency and stagnation. While their interactions are sometimes humorous, they frequently express frustration, exhaustion, and even a desire to part ways. Their shared hope for Godot's arrival—a hope that remains unfulfilled—contrasts sharply with Sisyphus's rejection of external meaning. Beckett's characters embody the illusion of hope, avoiding an authentic confrontation with the absurd by waiting for external salvation. In this way, companionship becomes a double-edged sword: while it shields them from loneliness, it also prevents them from embracing the individual responsibility and freedom that characterise Sisyphus's revolt.

The texts differ significantly in their portrayals of the absurd. Sisyphus represents an active rebellion against meaninglessness through his solitary, conscious efforts, while Vladimir and Estragon illustrate the passivity and dependency that can arise from waiting for external purpose. Sisyphus's solitude allows him to achieve freedom, enabling him to define his own terms for engaging with the absurd world. In contrast, Vladimir and Estragon's companionship speaks of their inability to escape the constraints of mutual reliance and inaction. Furthermore, Sisyphus's acceptance of his fate and his ability to find joy in the struggle highlight the strength of embracing the absurd, whereas Vladimir and Estragon's clinging to hope illustrates an evasion of the absurd that leaves them trapped in their labyrinthine existence.

Ultimately, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Waiting for Godot* offer distinct yet complementary explorations of the human condition. Sisyphus's solitary journey showcases the potential for individuals to create meaning through conscious revolt, while Vladimir and Estragon's shared waiting highlights the complexities of human connection in the face of the absurd. Together, these works illuminate different pathways for engaging with the existential challenges of a world devoid of inherent meaning. This strengthens my hypothesis by demonstrating how the very presence of another, while providing a sense of togetherness, can ironically hinder the individual's journey towards a meaningful confrontation with the absurd. The comparison between *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Waiting for Godot* reveals a critical distinction between the solitary embrace of the absurd and the limitations of companionship. While Camus's Sisyphus embodies an individual's revolt against meaninglessness through conscious acceptance, Vladimir and Estragon's relationship talks about the paradox of human connection. Their companionship, while seemingly offering a buffer against the void, in fact becomes a trap, preventing them from actively engaging with or transcending their absurd existence.

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