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Reading *Waiting for Godot* through the Lens of Christian Existentialism

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter One: The Existential Dilemma .....	16
Chapter Two: The Process of Becoming .....	37
Chapter Three: The Hope .....	60
Conclusion .....	92
Works Cited .....	100

## ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* is commonly interpreted within the context of the Theater of the Absurd, existentialist literature, or Christian allegory. This thesis recognizes the validity of all such readings while attempting to merge these seemingly contradictory perspectives. By reading the play within the context of Christian Existentialism, new insights are uncovered as to what the play may be saying about the existential dilemma.

Søren Kierkegaard, often called the Father of Existentialism, authored multiple works that influenced modern existentialist writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Kierkegaard's writings, however, were Christian in nature rather than atheistic. By applying his philosophical theories to various aspects of *Waiting for Godot*, one can see how several common readings of the play relate. This thesis focuses particularly on the relationships of the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, the servant Lucky's speech, the figure of Godot, and the use of paradox.

## Introduction

The concept of waiting and debating one's decision to wait for an elusive hope that may change one's life appeals to audiences throughout time. In the post-WWII world in which Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* emerged, questions concerning the meaning of human existence, the purpose of the suffering involved, and the value of striving for transcendence of mere survival were prevalent. Despite the ambiguity involved in Beckett's play, audiences were naturally drawn to the provocative questions the play was prone to evoke. Samuel Beckett wrote the original play, *En Attendant Godot*, between 1948 and 1949 and translated it into English himself in the mid-fifties, only then adding the subtitle "a tragicomedy in two acts." This very idea of the amalgamation of the tragic and comic elements of life represents the paradox, the absurdity, and the resiliency of life that emerges within *Waiting for Godot*.

Set in sparse surroundings of a country road and a tree, the play also makes use of sparse language. Few details are given in the dialogue between the main characters Vladimir and Estragon, two long-term companions who apparently return to this site again and again. Vladimir refers to "all these years" that the two have been together (7). However, their confused sense of time (such as Vladimir's estimation of "a million years ago, in the nineties") makes it impossible to determine exactly how long they have continued to encounter one another at this particular spot (7). The ambiguous use of language also serves to make serious subjects understated, such as Estragon being beaten or sleeping in a ditch, and to create comic moments and situations such as when the words and actions of the men do not correspond or they talk past one another as if

engaged in two separate monologues. The actions of the men, however, are overly dramatized and at times ridiculous, again adding to the comic effect as well as offering a visual for the inner emotions the men must feel. This contradictory combination of minimalism and exaggeration corresponds with the paradoxical concept of a “tragicomedy” and sets the tone for the idea of paradox as a thematic element of the play.

The play begins with Estragon struggling with his boot, as he does quite often, indicating his physical ailments centering around his feet. Vladimir has his own condition related to the prostate as well as a fascination with the inside of his hat. The two men have apparently been separated for some amount of time as indicated by Vladimir welcoming Estragon back: “So there you are again... I thought you were gone for ever” (7). Immediately the two launch into what appears to be familiar territory of complaining about life, philosophizing about life, quibbling back and forth, and speaking aloud their own private thoughts with or without a response from the other. After several topics (such as their aches and pains, salvation, and the Bible) have been explored, Estragon decides they should go, and Godot is mentioned for the first time. Vladimir reminds him that they cannot leave this spot because “We’re waiting for Godot” (10). A discussion of Godot ensues, leading to a debate over where they spent yesterday and the day before, and revealing to the audience that the memories of the men are incredibly faulty and time is a difficult and fluctuating concept. They are not even entirely sure that they have returned to the same site and quibble over if they recognize the bog and whether the tree is a “willow” or merely a “bush” or a “shrub,” facts that would apparently reveal if they have gathered at the wrong location (10).

Their friendship is a situation in flux as well. On some occasions, Vladimir rejects

Estragon's affection, while at other times the behaviors are reversed. In Act One Estragon lays his hand on Vladimir's shoulder while Vladimir stiffens, and when Vladimir "softens" and embraces him, Estragon "recoils" and shouts, "You stink of garlic!" (12). Their tenderness toward one another never lasts for long. Some sort of intimacy is clear in their dialogue, however, as few topics seem to be off-limits. The two men discuss salvation, suicide, their physical pain, their previous conversation with Godot, the lives they once led, the meager rations of carrots and turnips they have left to eat, and the attitude they should have toward life. These insights into life most often take the form of cryptic maxims such as "One is what one is" and "The essential doesn't change" (14).

Their musings and arguments are interrupted by the arrival of Pozzo, a vicious and arrogant master who loves to demonstrate the authority he has over his feeble slave, ironically named Lucky, by cracking his whip at him, calling him "pig," and commanding him to perform ceaseless trivial movements (16). Vladimir and Estragon are initially much more interested in Lucky and his condition of suffering. They "circle about Lucky, inspecting him up and down," question Pozzo about why he looks so tired and why he will not put down his bags, and comment on the sores on his neck, his slobber, and his "[g]ogging" eyes (17). However, after Lucky lashes out at Estragon as he attempts to wipe the tears from Lucky's eyes, the men pursue a conversation with the officious Pozzo, who offers his own views on life. In the midst of sharing the travails of his life with Lucky, Pozzo commands Lucky to dance for the men and then to think aloud. Lucky breaks forth with a lengthy tirade about God and the suffering of mankind intermingled with philosophical jargon, which sends the three men into convulsions until

they stop him. Shortly after Pozzo leaves, supposedly to sell Lucky at a market, a young boy enters with a message from Godot that “he won’t come this evening but surely tomorrow” (33). After further considerations of either leaving the site or committing suicide, the first act ends with the men sitting motionless, still waiting.

The second act is quite similar to the first. As for the setting, the only difference is that the tree has sprouted a few leaves, a change that the men notice midway through the scene. Vladimir and Estragon both enter from offstage, indicating that they did both decide to leave at some point between the end of Act One and the beginning of Act Two and – like the appearance of the leaves – this makes the length of time that has spanned still more indefinite. They enter into the same type of quarreling, expressions of mixed emotion, and speaking in contradictions as they did in Act One. More discussions of their suffering, Godot, their relationship with one another, and their past ensue. They try yoga stretches and exercising and insult each other for the sheer amusement of using words. Vladimir attempts to convince Estragon that they encountered Pozzo and Lucky just the day before, pointing out Estragon’s wounded leg from Lucky’s kick and reminding him of details of their conversation.

Once again, as Pozzo enters he is mistaken for Godot, but this time he is in need of assistance. He has gone blind and Lucky has gone completely mute. The haziness of time is made explicit in their conversations as they discuss what happened “yesterday,” yet it is so distant in their memories they cannot agree on details, and Pozzo reveals his exasperation at attempting to understand their “accursed time” (39, 57). The fixation on suffering within their conversation is also prominent as they draw attention to their various disorders. The two topics are linked in Pozzo’s commentary on the brevity of life



in which all are bound to suffer, eloquently summed up with: “They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more” (57). As before, once Pozzo and Lucky have exited together the young messenger boy enters, claiming to have come for the first time. After his exit, Vladimir and Estragon debate their same options of leaving or suicide and once again opt for remaining simply by doing nothing else.

Estragon sums up their relationship well at one point when he says, “Yes, now I remember, yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That’s been going on now for half a century” (42). Yet, for years, scholars have debated over the meaning of this seemingly pointless blathering. Much of the debate surrounding Beckett’s play is connected to discerning which philosophical stance the play most closely represents, or if it can be said to contain any particular meaning at all. Without a doubt, it is difficult to read *Godot* without sensing philosophical undertones, even if there is debate about which philosophies they might be. It is not uncommon for commentaries on the play to reference philosophical works that could shed light on the concepts explored in the play, though many leave the specific connections to be made by the reader. In the MLA’s compilation of strategies for teaching *Godot*, some of the many sources recommended for study are Martin Esslin’s *Theatre of the Absurd*, Camus’s *Myth of Sisyphus*, Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* and *Philosophy of Existentialism*, and various works by Descartes, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Tillich, Dante, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Mauthner, Wittgenstein, Lacan, Derrida, Barthes, and Foucault, to name just a few (4, 10). The “philosophical parable” Beckett has created apparently echoes nearly every school of thought since Plato (Schlueter 55). If any theme can be said to emerge within the works of this extensive list, it is possibly the relationship between

the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions within human existence along with the question of what intrinsic purpose or meaning may be associated with this existence.

Many scholars immediately leap to an association with existentialism, a fitting philosophy in its preoccupation with the meaning of existence as well as the leading philosophy of the time when *Godot* was written. In Chapter Two I will discuss the numerous interpretations that note the similarities between the existentialist works of Camus and Sartre and *Waiting for Godot*. Martin Esslin, a key figure in the debates surrounding the play, notes the “truly astonishing parallel between the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and the creative intuition of Beckett,” focusing on such facets as “nothingness, liberty, and the need of constantly creating ourselves in a succession of choices” that are found in the work of both (Bloom 39). Richard Gilman points out that “Beckett’s dramas have always been closer to Camus’s meaning in his description of the absurd as ‘that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints’” (70).

Along with the popular view of the play as a bleak existentialist diatribe on life, reading the play as a biblical allegory has also been quite common in the past. Few scholars are content in oversimplifying the text to a symbolic Christian story, however. Many scholars have also made attempts to show where each of these interpretations has fallen short and to offer a fusing of readings. Lawrence Harvey states that “the opposed views of *Godot* that emerge from the two analyses [suggest] that some more comprehensive approach may be needed to account for the complexity of Beckett’s work” (146). Often in the process of determining how the seemingly contradictory aspects of the play work together, critics come to argue that the uncertainty of the play

makes it impossible to prove any interpretation at all and makes it likely that it is devoid of any real meaning at all. In the MLA's guide to teaching the play, Williams suggests that the play can be said to "dramatize elemental human experience, to embody fundamental truths of the human condition," yet he refrains from venturing a guess as to what those truths may be (31). Even if they explore some of these same influences and similarities in thought as mentioned above, ultimately the conclusion of many critics is that this is simply an absurdist play that cannot offer a consistent perspective of the world. Also in Bloom's book, John Fletcher states, "Even the many Christian echoes in the plays must now be seen to add up not to any coherent religious statement, but rather to a meditation upon a world governed by no other divinity than some sort of malignant fate; a world in which man waits and hopes for something to give value to his life and distract him from the absurdity of his death" (21). Esslin offers a similar conclusion when he says, "We must not go too far in trying to identify Beckett's vision with any school of philosophy. It is the peculiar richness of a play like *Waiting for Godot* that it opens vistas on so many different perspectives. It is open to philosophical, religious, and psychological interpretations, yet above all it is a poem on time, evanescence, and the mysteriousness of existence, the paradox of change and stability, necessity and absurdity" (30).

I would agree that the play contains philosophical, religious, and psychological components that make it difficult to associate it with any one school of philosophy. The strict views of the play as either existential or Christian both fall short in illuminating the paradoxes and mysteriousness contained within the play. Yet within the philosophy of the world known today as "Christian existentialism," a unified representation of a

metaphysical theory of the world that unites all these conflicting characteristics can be found. The comprehensive approach Harvey recommends, as well as the openness to the richness of the play that Esslin asks for, is possible when reading the play through the lens of Christian existentialism as originally proposed by Søren Kierkegaard. Many critics have attempted to discern which system of beliefs Beckett would have logically intended to propose. He read the philosophy of Schopenhauer, his work as a whole seems to represent existentialism, the human relationships in this play resemble archetypes describes in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Mind*, and so on (Cohn 41). Beckett may never have touched a work of Kierkegaard's, or he may have read every word written by the philosopher, but either way the play itself has much in common with these works. Furthermore, whether or not Beckett *intended* Godot as a symbol for God – perhaps the second largest debate associated with the play – he works perfectly as one.

Martin Esslin comments on this idea of the author's intention, suggesting that by choosing to focus on such we can "see, if not the *answers* to his questions, at least what the *questions* are that he is asking" (27). I would propose that it was certainly Beckett's intention to raise questions about the nature of man's existence, and that we as readers can also find answers within the text whether or not Beckett intended for them to emerge. Beckett's intention alone obviously does not provide adequate evidence for forming a cohesive reading of the play. John Fletcher states that "[t]hose who are perplexed by the play's 'meaning' may draw at least some comfort from the author's reassurance that it means what it says, neither more or less.... Beckett is no didactic writer concerned to put across a 'message' in dramatic form (Bloom 21)." Beckett's intended meaning or lack of meaning is irrelevant in our interpretation of the work, however.

Stanely Cavell, a postmodern philosopher, has written essays both on Kierkegaard and Beckett, as well as writing extensively on the act of interpretation itself, beginning the “ordinary language” movement that remains popular. As for intention, Cavell does not discount the importance of the author’s deliberate act of writing but also states that “human actions typically have consequences that may outrun the agent’s initial foresight” (17). He takes into consideration the unforeseen results stemming from the initial intention of an author. He also invites readers to take ownership over their reading of a text not due to knowledge of meaning but as an example of the effect of the text over them as readers:

The reader does not interpret, but rather is interpreted by, the (author of the) text... the text invites transferences from its reader, projections of unconscious thoughts, fears, and desires, with the ultimate aim of responding to that onslaught in ways that disrupt its mechanical, fixated effects on the reader’s interpretation of her own existence and world... Its end-point cannot therefore be a new fixation on the text; the text must conclude its seduction by repelling its reader from any such concrete identification. (18)

Cavell has been said “to attribute a certain autonomy to the life of the words,” quite a different approach than asking oneself – or the author himself – what was intended in the creation of the text (Mulhall 16).

Cavell believed that the act of interpretation can be done by anyone with knowledge of “ordinary language” and without possessing any special knowledge such as the history of literature or the Greek origins of words. For instance, in his essay on

Beckett's *Endgame*, Cavell draws special attention to the ordinary elements of the play, despite its very obvious and unusual aspects. He views the scenario as a representation of an ordinary family interacting, and though the dialogue is not realistic in the sense that an Ibsen play portrays realistic dialogue, it does capture the feel of the ordinary with its "abrupt shifts," "shades of memory [and] regret," and "opacity to the outsider" (97). He speaks of the "hidden literality" of the words in the sense that at the first encounter an audience or reader takes notice of the wordplay or humor involved, but by pausing to consider the meaning of the dialogue, the characters often speak with surprising literalness. For example, he quotes the dialogue between Clov and Hamm in *Endgame*:

Clov: Do you believe in the life to come?

Hamm: Mine was always that.

Cavell notes that the play captures the idea that "the life of waiting for life to come is all the life ever to come" just as this simple exchange states (98-99). In the spirit of the "tragicomic," Beckett achieves the dual effect of comic exchanges mixed with meaningful expressions of attitudes toward life. Though Cavell has not written a piece focusing exclusively on *Waiting for Godot*, one could imagine his interpretation of the dialogue between the two men as a kind of ordinary interaction between friends. Rather than dismissing the references to biblical scenarios as part of a culture in which the men are speaking, as many critics have done, he would see the logic in imagining what would be meant by such words exchanged in ordinary conversation between two ordinary persons.

Some scholars have already taken notice of the correlations between Beckett and Kierkegaard, focusing more on correlations between writing styles and implied

philosophy than authorial intention. Notably Edith Kern, in her "Beckett's Knight of Infinite Resignation" and *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Beckett*, draws such parallels. She focuses predominantly, however, on how the similarities among the writing techniques of these authors lead their audience toward acceptance of existential viewpoints. She writes that there are "Kierkegaardian echoes in Beckett's very assertion that he is not a philosopher and can speak only of what is in front of him" (170). Just as Beckett rejects the notion of deliberately working to convey an ideology through his writing, Kierkegaard was adamantly opposed to promoting acceptance of a structured system of thought. Kierkegaard hoped to simply portray the world – particularly the aspects of the world that illuminated his existential concerns – with the firm belief that his audience would recognize certain truths through their own subjective experience and independent thought. The two authors also share a fascination with truth found in paradox and dialectic. These qualities of Kierkegaard's writing enable an application to be made to *Waiting for Godot* without fear of, as Kern describes it, "wringing the neck of a certain system in order to stuff it into a contemporary pigeonhole" (170).

Although Kierkegaard *is* supporting a distinct worldview in his writings - unlike Beckett - he values the flexibility of such a viewpoint. Like Beckett, he cannot propose a final "meaning" but must leave room for fluidity and movement. As is common in philosophical writings, it is useful to understand the prevailing ideas that the philosopher is arguing *against* before attempting to understand what positive arguments are being set forth. Kierkegaard is a counter-Enlightenment writer. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, followers of the Enlightenment combined prevailing concepts of God, nature,

and knowledge and used reason in order to understand life. Kierkegaard believed strongly that reason alone could never lead one to an understanding of God but that the subjectivity of personal experience was the only means to this unattainable end. His writings contain many diatribes about the ease of paying lip service to concepts without truly living them and the exhortation that true passion – or sincerity of belief – will lead to a discovery of truth; in Kierkegaardian terms, what clergymen speak in general terms, we express “existentially.” His focus on lived experience above intellectual reasoning explains his preoccupation with subjectivity and also creates a link between him and Beckett, whose main concern seems to be portraying that lived experience on stage.

Though Kierkegaard saw exact knowledge of God as impossible, he still recommended the constant pursuit of this enlightenment throughout one's lifetime that would only then be fulfilled through death. He was also preoccupied with the anguish and anxiety that accompanied the anticipation of death and feelings of insignificance common to mankind. He believed anguish also stemmed from the state of indecision as an individual faces the responsibility of free will and the choice to commit to God in faith, a choice that must be made – whether right or wrong – in order to truly live. This living, or existence, consists of the aesthetic, ethic, and religious correlating with concern for the physical, the social, and the metaphysical. His works can be seen as those that are aesthetic such as *Either/Or*, psychological such as the *Concept of Anxiety*, and the religious such as *Training in Christianity* or *Edifying Discourses* written under his own name. I will offer an analysis of how each of these types of works can apply to *Waiting for Godot*.

In Chapter One I will demonstrate how Kierkegaard's use of the categories of the



aesthetic, ethical, and religious as he outlines in *Either/Or* illuminate the spiritual states of Vladimir and Estragon throughout the play. Just as Kierkegaard did not believe that one can exist firmly within one of these categories, Vladimir and Estragon reveal attitudes common to all three. In Chapter Two I explore Kierkegaard's original version of existentialism as expressed primarily in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Concept of Anxiety* (often referred to as *Concept of Dread*). In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* he explores the concepts of subjective truth, individuality, faith versus reason, paradoxes, and the difficulties of Christianity. In *Concept of Anxiety* he explores the ideas of freedom and salvation and proposes that a man's choices define his actions and life. I would like to first examine the influences of contemporary existentialist thought on Beckett's famous play, and after demonstrating how they fail to offer a *complete* explanation (though they do help to illuminate many aspects of the play's meaning), then propose this lesser known philosophy as found in these works of Kierkegaard as better illuminating the lives of Vladimir and Estragon. In the third chapter, I focus more so on Kierkegaard's overtly Christian works, and his explanation of the paradox and absurdity of faith.

Among the many topics with which Kierkegaard was preoccupied, becoming a Christian took preeminence. In a society in which nearly all members were labeled as "Christian" or took the title upon themselves, the philosopher was most concerned with how a "nominal Christian" could become a true believer more so than those opposed to the faith altogether. In some respects all his works could be seen as a series of instructions on how a nominal Christian could recognize his true spiritual position and move toward this goal of authentic faith. It is a bit problematic to even label such a thing

as a “goal,” considering Kierkegaard’s aversion to viewing any stage in life as an endpoint. Nonetheless, he offers the following “steps” that will lead one toward the Christian faith:

1. Reject the pursuit of faith by means of logic, rational inquiry alone, or the following of any philosophical system.

2. See the need for making decisions pertaining to the aesthetic, ethical, and religious realms of one’s life.

3. Recognize the inauthenticity of one’s own identity (as a Christian in name alone), experience the despair associated with this state, and face the choice between continuing an inauthentic aesthetic existence or choosing the Christian faith

4. Continue choosing this faith in individual moments throughout one’s lifetime as one lives paradoxically within the present moment and the infinite existence.

Vladimir and Estragon may not be role models for the Christian faith or men anyone would normally admire. The play clearly has Christian elements, but it is a far cry from a morality play or *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Though references to Christ abound and the character of Lucky reminds one of the suffering of the Messiah, no Christ figure emerges because no character is quite worthy of that term. Yet the main characters of *Waiting for Godot* do display the living out of these principles above that Kierkegaard expounds upon in his writings. It is only when applying the absurd faith and paradoxical religion as Kierkegaard describes it that we can see how this play could be both questioning and recommending the hope of faith in God. The mysteriousness and vagueness of *Waiting for Godot* function as literary tools that aid in communicating these ideas.

Through an examination of the characterization, dialogue, symbolism, and

language in *Waiting for Godot*, I hope to demonstrate how these elements of the play work together to create the proposition of questions concerning man's existence and relation to the outside world and then provide an answer that correlates with the basic principles of Christian existentialism. This existential (in the sense of a preoccupation with human existence) philosophy, drastically different than that proposed by such philosophers as Nietzsche or Sartre who removed God from the equation, provides a reading that can account for all the facets of the play: the concern with the physical, the social relationships, and the faith in the outside unknown being, Godot.

## Chapter One: The Existential Dilemma

As noted by such authors as Edith Kern, the most prominent similarity between the works of Søren Kierkegaard and Samuel Beckett is their writing technique. They are both known for defying the conventions of their trade. The philosopher tried to avoid firm assertions, while the playwright toyed with the concept of plot within his dramas. Both leave their audiences with an ambiguous impression of a worldview that appears to contradict itself at times and evades definite conclusions. In his early work *Either/Or*, rather than arguing that a life focused on ethics is desirable, Kierkegaard instead demonstrates what life would be like according to the aesthetic philosophy, with the intention of leading the reader to desire something more. Beckett's intent may not have been to persuade his audiences toward any specific ideology, but, nonetheless, his play does produce similar effects. Like many works of literature, "the metaphysical vision is encapsulated in the artistic vision. Whatever Beckett's aim is, it is certainly not to make claims and to justify them with tightly constructed arguments. Instead, he is presenting the human condition as he sees it in a concrete situation; he displays and exhibits, where the philosopher asserts" (Cormier 118). Obviously Kierkegaard is no such philosopher, but instead attempts to display and exhibit the human condition as well. However different the personal views and modes of representations of these two authors may have been, they have produced strikingly similar visions of humanity.

Kierkegaard felt strongly about promoting independence of thought rather than an established truth. Many view *Either/Or* as predominantly an attack on Hegel, who claimed to have developed a system of living that could be used to answer any problem

one could encounter (with perhaps just a few addendum by his followers). In addition to a contradiction of specific notions maintained by Hegel, the last sentence of Kierkegaard's short work "The Rotation Method: An Essay in the Theory of Social Prudence" hints at his distaste for unyielding systems of ideas: "It is impossible here to go into detail, for no theory can adequately embrace the concrete. Even the most completely developed theory is poverty-stricken compared with the fullness which the man of genius easily discovers in his ubiquity" (qtd. in Bretall 33). This freedom of thought may seem contradictory to the Christian ideology that Kierkegaard ultimately proposes. He is not claiming, however, that there is no objective truth or that God is not defined in absolutes, only that the pursuit of spiritual truths is pointless if one is not coming to one's own conclusions about the matters. Christianity must be freely chosen and the other options must be fully considered. Much of this line of thought may have come from Kierkegaard's distaste for the official Lutheran church of Denmark, which he wrote against in later years and which defined the beliefs of many unquestioning citizens. As Michael Watts explains in his summary of Kierkegaard's works, he believed that "when a person has first seen through the emptiness of all other ways of living" he will then recognize that Christianity is the only "valid choice" (62). If one has not considered the alternatives to the Christian faith, one has not made a choice at all.

Kierkegaard's ultimate goal was to challenge people's way of living or thinking, not only because he desired for people to choose the Christian faith, but because he found the empty ways of life and lack of personal responsibility surrounding him to be disturbing. Aware that any direct accusations would tend to be dismissed or met with defensiveness, he used the devices of irony, humor, pseudonyms, parody, and parables to

enable him to write from what Watts terms an “insider position” that would draw readers in and make them more likely to apply his teachings to themselves (64). He believed that “the human situation can be portrayed with such poignancy and such magnitude that the reader or spectator will react more strongly than he would when confronted with philosophical texts. As a result, he will be more inclined to act, to change, to be more or less tolerant as the case may be” (Cormier 119). It was this experience of applying truth to oneself rather than contemplating it as an abstract concept that he often referred to as “subjective” truth. It was his belief that a person must *become* what he understands, or he does not actually understand at all. Unlike the various connotations associated with existentialism today, this “existential truth” of which Kierkegaard spoke was simply “truth that potentially can transform a person’s outlook and manner of living” (Watts 65).

This reliance on depicting and appealing to the experience of life more so than asserting truths makes Kierkegaard’s writing seem more literary than philosophical. Just as Kierkegaard’s audience was led to a critique of their own lives through his style of literature, Beckett’s philosophical dramas tend to have the same effect. By experiencing the lives of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, audiences are impelled to ask questions regarding the meaning of existence in general and in turn in the subjective sense that Kierkegaard valued. Again, regardless of Beckett’s intention, it is common practice to apply works of literature to one’s own life. Many would claim that the ability to make these meaningful applications is what separates works of “Literature” from the multitude of mundane writing that disappears into history. It is not difficult to associate with the characters within *Godot*, especially considering the focus on the personal experiences of these characters undisturbed by an eventful plotline, a detailed setting, or

poetic language. In addition, Vladimir and Estragon work incredibly well as allegorical representations of mankind. Cormier believes that “the play’s four characters,” when taken together, “portray universal man as he confronts the world we live in” (5). Like the pseudonymous writers of Kierkegaard’s works or the identities of those used within his examples and parables, “[t]hese characters are not abstractions but, rather, the embodiments of abstract principles” (5). Others view Vladimir and Estragon alone as the “Everymen” or “archetypes of all humanity” (Gordon 61, 67). Cormier and Pallister claim that the two men act as one composite man, with Vladimir representing the mental and Estragon the physical aspects of man. Within the play itself, Vladimir refers to the two of them as “all mankind” (51).

What Kierkegaard refers to as the “stages on life’s way” – from the aesthetic sphere to the ethical to the religious – determine the worldview of each individual. These stages are in turn “responsible for the values, ideals, motivations and behavior of that mode of existence” (Watts 189). Even if Beckett has successfully concealed his own particular point of view, the characters within his play can still be read as influenced by a certain perspective of the world. If we are to regard these characters as we would any other personalities within literature, we can attribute to them motivations, values, and ideals to account for their actions. Even if the two men can be viewed as one composite character representing humanity, the two conflicting sides of one personality are demonstrated. Cormier and Pallister refer to this as “the mind/body duality” that accentuates the thematic paradoxes found throughout (6). Beckett himself once said, “If you want to find the origins of *En attendant Godot*, look at *Murphy*” (Cohn, Casebook 89). Colin Duckworth points out that the “most significant connection between the two

books... can be discerned in the description of Murphy as ‘split in two, a body and a mind’ (89-90). Vladimir and Estragon can easily be viewed as one man “split in two.”

This connection between the two characters can be seen in any production of the play. In most productions, the two men wear nearly identical outfits consisting of old dress pants, baggy jackets, scuffed shoes, and bowler hats. The “mind/body duality” is emphasized not only by the “bodily afflictions” common to both men but by the disparity between Vladimir as “an intellectual who operates primarily in terms of the past and the future, whereas Estragon is more concerned with creature comforts” (Cormier 6). Vladimir seems to reside more in the ethical sphere of consciousness while Estragon remains in the aesthetic. This distinction is the main concern of Kiekegaard’s *Either/Or* in which he presents two alternatives: “the life of calculated enjoyment and the life of self-realization through moral decision” (qtd. in Bretall 19). Cormier acknowledges that, “moral issues do not interest Estragon, who seeks materialistic gains or sensual gratification in practically everything” (7). Vladimir reveals his concern with ethics in their interactions with the passers-by, Pozzo and his servant Lucky. While Estragon is longing for the chicken bones Pozzo is discarding, Vladimir is overwhelmed with outrage at Pozzo’s treatment of Lucky. His outburst that “It’s a scandal!” seems almost involuntary, and his subsequent speech is said to be “stutteringly resolute” (18). His indignation overcomes his reluctance to reproach a stranger and he exclaims, far from eloquently but more sincerely than anywhere else in the play, “To treat a man... like that... I think that... no... a human being... no... it’s a scandal!” (18). Additionally, Estragon is the more violent of the two, resorting to shaking the young messenger boy



when he comes in place of Godot, while Vladimir carries on the majority of the actual conversation, being more able to use his mind and transcend the desires of his body.

Vladimir clearly emerges as the leader of the pair, confirming Kierkegaard's preference of the ethical sphere over the aesthetic. When Estragon acknowledges that he was beaten the night before, Vladimir comments that "all these years... but for me... where would you be" to which Estragon replies, "And what of it?" as a seemingly bitter agreement to the sentiment (8). Vladimir is also the more contemplative of the pair, the one to have insights into their situation. Estragon is too concerned with the physical to have any epiphanies. While Vladimir ponders, he sleeps. While Vladimir looks into his hat, Estragon searches inside his boot. Vladimir gives the impression of restlessness while Estragon seems also to desire to sleep. In the 2006 Huntington University production, in fact, Estragon is lying immobile with his head on a rocky ledge as the audience files in before the play begins, while Vladimir is reading a book and pacing on and off the stage.

The two men demonstrate the extreme boredom that Kierkegaard satirically claims plagues mankind while they are concerned with the aesthetic realm. He writes:

Boredom is the root of all evil. Strange that boredom, in itself so staid and solid, should have such power to set in motion. The influence it exerts is altogether magical, except that it is not the influence of attraction, but of repulsion... Idleness is not an evil, indeed one may say that every human being who lacks a sense for idleness proves that his consciousness has not yet been elevated to the level of the humane. There is a restless activity which excludes a man from the world of the spirit, setting him in a class

with the brutes, whose instincts impel them always to be on the move. (22, 24)

His observations are in actuality directed toward the inconsequential actions of those whose sole desire is simply to fill their lives with some sort of actions, though they have no ultimate purpose for which they are living. These two perspectives – the implicit view of Kierkegaard and the mocked attitude of the pseudonymous writer – are represented by the two vagabonds of *Waiting for Godot*:

Estragon: That's enough. I'm tired.

Vladimir: You'd rather be stuck doing nothing?

Estragon: Yes... Can you not stay still? (45)

After a brief attempt at doing exercises with Vladimir, Estragon declares, "That's enough. I'm tired" and again to Vladimir's recommendation of doing deep breathing: "I'm tired breathing" (49). The impression given is not that Estragon is tired of doing deep breathing exercises but is tired of being alive. His outlook on life confirms Kierkegaard's belief that the "aesthete is amoral and nihilistic, unwilling to recognize value or purpose in life" as he is plagued with "nihilistic indifference" (Carlisle 59). One would think that the life of the aesthete, resembling almost a hedonistic existence, would be marked by an ignorant bliss rather than this sort of despondency, but if one's singular aim is to pursue happiness, and the world has little happiness to offer (as both Kierkegaard and Beckett would argue), the impending result is despair. Some of Estragon's comments to his former life intimate this unsuccessful pursuit of happiness, such as when he comments about the maps of Holy Land that "I used to say, that's where

we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy" (8). The honeymoon and the happiness evidently did not occur.

Kierkegaard has sardonic comments toward this quest as well. He writes, "I assume that it is the end and aim of every man to enjoy himself," as though this is a perfectly acceptable purpose in life (qtd. in Bretall 25). Taking his entire works into account, however, we realize that Kierkegaard values sacrifice much more than personal satisfaction. Nearly half of *Either/Or* consists of the coded story of Kierkegaard's own sacrifice of a marriage in order to insure the happiness of his bride-to-be rather than his own. He continues with his mockery of what is "natural": "Now since boredom, as shown above, is the root of evil, what can be natural than the effort to overcome it?.. The more you limit yourself, the more fertile you become in invention" (25). He goes on to describe a prisoner in solitary confinement for life who has managed to amuse himself by watching a spider, or schoolboys who find entertainment in the dripping of water during a teacher's lengthy lesson. This paring down of outside stimulation is reminiscent of the setting of *Godot*. Though the world represented in the play works as a simplified version of the world, it is also in a sense an environment chosen by the two characters. They have apparently traveled the world and have come to stay at this site with only a rock and a tree to provide diversions. The following conversation is just one of the many possible illustrations of the effort they subsequently put forth in order to entertain themselves.

Vladimir: This is becoming really insignificant.

Estragon: Not enough.

*Silence.*

Vladimir: What about trying them.

Estragon: I've tried everything.

Vladimir: No, I mean the boots.

Estragon: Would that be a good thing?

Vladimir: It'd pass the time. (*Estragon hesitates.*) I assure you, it'd be an occupation.

Estragon: A relaxation.

Vladimir: A recreation.

Estragon: A relaxation... We don't manage too badly, eh Didi, between the two of us?... We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist? (44)

This focus on relaxation and recreation reiterates the points Kierkegaard makes about the aesthetic lifestyle. In order to follow this way of life, he commands that "One must never enter into the relation of marriage... [or] undertake any *business*... Even if one does engage in business, one ought not to be inactive, but should pursue such occupations as are compatible with a sort of leisure, one should engage in all sorts of breadless arts" (Bretall 29, 31). In other words, all actions should be frivolous rather than serious.

While the dialogue between the two men is often quite serious, they perfectly embody the frivolous lifestyle with their exaggerated comic actions. All considerable exertion from either character is directed toward a flippant action, while their discussions of important topics elicit no physical action whatsoever.

Though both men are concerned with occupying their time, their two personalities and outlooks on life differ drastically, with one being more frivolous than the other.

Vladimir is consistently more hopeful than his counterpart – if barely – and seems to be

the one who knows more about Godot and possibly even initiated their wait for him. Even this vague hope gives him more purpose to his existence than that of Estragon; he has a set goal in mind, while Estragon often forgets why he is even present at this particular time and place. The first mention of Godot comes from Vladimir, who tells Estragon that “He said [to wait] by the tree” as though his friend had not been there to hear this same instruction (10). Later we learn that Estragon was most likely there, though nothing is certain as such facts are only asked as questions and answered vaguely. When Vladimir asks Estragon if he was there when they first met Godot, Estragon responds with, “I can’t have been listening” (13). This lack of knowledge regarding the mysterious man for whom they wait is evident again and again as Estragon asks Vladimir about what day Godot was to come and what they asked him for originally. Also when Vladimir simply refers to “he,” Estragon must always be reminded that this reference is to Godot. Vladimir reminds Estragon as well that Godot “didn’t say for sure he’d come” when his friend is angry that Godot has not yet shown (10). Estragon refers to him as “your man” and while Vladimir calls him “kind of an acquaintance,” Estragon states that “we hardly know him... Personally I wouldn’t even know him if I saw him” (14, 16). Whereas Vladimir has a purpose in his waiting, his friend is only biding his time and following the lead of his other half. His actions are, in a sense, completely arbitrary from moment to moment since they lack a unifying purpose.

The arbitrariness of Estragon’s decisions in comparison to Vladimir’s correlates with the thoughts in the “Diapsalmata” portion of *Either/Or* regarding existence:

My life is absolutely meaningless. When I consider the different periods into which it falls, it seems like the word *Schnur* in the dictionary, which

means in the first place a string, in the second, a daughter-in-law. The only thing lacking is that the word *Schnur* should mean in the third place a camel, in the fourth, a dust-brush. (qtd. in Bretall 34)

As Kierkegaard discusses his aesthetic lifestyle, he compares this existence to a word with multiple unrelated meanings, tacking on additional arbitrary definitions to further demonstrate the random nature of connecting words with definitions. He is drawn to the multiplicity found within the apparent unity of the self and the capriciousness of life. Estragon exemplifies this lack of a unifying factor and has given up searching for meaning within his life. The play begins with his oft-repeated line, “Nothing to be done,” to which Vladimir replies, “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” (7). On occasion Vladimir will repeat this line but only in the midst of his own musings, never in response to a difficulty of life. He leaves the impression of simply considering the idea that there is nothing left to be done about their situation, while always retaining a glimmer of hope. Estragon’s life contains much more passive involvement than does Vladimir’s, who does truly seem to be engaging in a “struggle.” He has not yet stopped fighting, engaging in the active wrestling of the mind with the mysteries of life. Shortly after this he continues “[c]heerfully” with “On the other hand what’s the good of losing heart now, that’s what I say” (7). Estragon, on the other hand, actually declares at one point that there is “No use struggling... No use wriggling” (14). Perhaps the most telling sign of the distinction between the two is that Estragon often says that they must simply “wait” while Vladimir is concerned with what they will be doing “while waiting” (12).

When asked in an interview how he could be so preoccupied with salvation though he does not believe in it, Beckett replied, “I am interested in the shape of ideas, even if I do not believe in them” (Gordon 112). It is the “shape” of the idea of salvation that Beckett explores extensively in this play. Within this examination of the concept, it is irrelevant which character has more of a desire for or understanding of the idea; what matters more is that the idea is given shape through their dialogue. Beckett continues on, revealing the source for the dialogue concerning the thieves: “There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine... ‘Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.’ That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters” (112). In Gordon’s novel, *The Shape of Paradox*, he investigates how Beckett has used Vladimir and Estragon together to demonstrate this particular paradox. In order to do so, one of the men must be more despondent while the other is more presumptuous.

Whatever Estragon happens to be doing, it leads to no greater end. His mode of existence compared to Vladimir’s depends entirely on their attitudes toward Godot, who is always associated with the spiritual and metaphysical. As Kierkegaard established in his later works, he regarded not just the ethical sphere as superior to the aesthetic but the religious to be the supreme of all. The attitudes of the two tramps toward spiritual matters are consistently opposite. Vladimir is always the one to raise the issue, first referring to a proverb, if in ignorance, then the repentant thief of the gospels, after which he asks Estragon what he thinks of the possibility of them repenting. Bert States goes so far as to suggest that Vladimir was named for the repentant thief of whom he speaks. He claims that the nicknames the two men use for one another in their dialogue, Didi and Gogo, may be derived from the apocryphal “Acts of Pilate” in which the two thieves

were given names, Dymas (the repentant thief) and Gestas (17). Whether or not this claim is true, States implies that Vladimir, or Didi, can be connected to the thief who repents, which would leave Estragon as the one condemned. To Estragon, the question of repentance holds not the connotation of regret over past sin but instead regret over “being born” (8). In the same way, at Vladimir’s mention of the Bible, Estragon can only recall the pretty colored maps of the Holy Land. When Vladimir mentions “Our Saviour,” Estragon replies with “Our what?” implying more than just his lack of interest but his lack of belief in a savior as well (9). When Vladimir states that one thief was saved from going to Hell, Estragon responds with “I’m going” (9). Though this could be read as just another of their claims to be leaving this, the timing of the line could very well insinuate the recognition by Estragon that he is destined for Hell. The story of the two thieves crucified with Jesus, the most common reference to Christianity in the play, deals directly with the issue of salvation. “One of the thieves was saved,” Vladimir notes, “It’s a reasonable percentage” (8). Estragon echoes this sentiment in relation to their discussion of hanging themselves and who is heavier when he says, “There’s an even chance. Or nearly” of Vladimir being heavier (12). As usual he thinks in terms of the physical in comparison to Vladimir’s focus on the spiritual.

Finally, at the end of Act One, Estragon comments that “We weren’t made for the same road,” bringing to mind the biblical wide and narrow roads to Heaven and Hell (35). Vladimir’s only response is that this is “not certain” but he does not deny the possibility that they are indeed headed toward two separate destinations (35). This dichotomy is most clear in Act Two. As Estragon imagines he hears someone coming, he cries out “I’m accursed!” and “I’m in hell!” and “recoils in horror,” whereas Vladimir



calls out “triumphantly,” “It’s Godot! At last!.. It’s Godot! We’re saved! Let’s go and meet him!” (47).

Similar dual meanings within Estragon’s dialogue always point to a more sinister possibility. For example, when the two men discuss the leafless weeping willow by which they stand and to Vladimir’s statement that “It must be dead,” Estragon sardonically comments, “No more weeping” (10). While this could be read as a playful way to comment on the lack of leaves, it could also reflect Estragon’s view that to die is better than to continue suffering and “weeping” on earth. Estragon’s distaste for life is obvious considering his preoccupation with his dreams and sleeping away the time he has been allotted on earth. When Vladimir shouts at him to not share his dreams, Estragon “gestures toward the universe” and asks “This one is enough for you?” (11). Though it seems that Vladimir is the one looking for life beyond the visible existence they are living, he is also the one who has hope that meaning will be found while still within their lifetime, whereas Estragon has given up hope and references the meaninglessness of life only as justification for his misery. It is Estragon’s recommendation that they hang themselves, and he returns to this thought after each time that Godot fails to come. Apparently he has attempted suicide before as he alludes to the time “I threw myself into the Rhone” and Vladimir rescued him (35). He tells Vladimir in Act Two that “The best thing would be to kill me” (40).

Further evidence of Estragon’s containment in the aesthetic mode of consciousness is his attitude toward pain. While Kierkegaard would suggest benefits of pain, the man seeking happiness as the greatest good is filled with self-pity and despair after any incident of suffering. Estragon’s intolerance of pain is clear. The simple act of

removing his boot calls for his complete attention as he is overwhelmed by the pain involved. Vladimir, on the other hand, reminds him, “Boots must be taken off every day... No one ever suffers but you” (7). As for Estragon’s constant complaint of his shoes, Vladimir admonishes that it is ridiculous for one to be “blaming on his boots the faults of his feet” (8). This reminder of personal responsibility and free will contradicts Estragon’s fatalistic attitude. Though the men refer to times spent in Paris, standing at the top of the Eiffel Tower and harvesting grapes by the Rhone, Estragon declares that “All my lousy life I’ve crawled about in the mud! And you talk about the scenery!.. Look at this muckheap! I’ve never stirred from it!” (39). He is clearly not simply referring to their present physical surroundings but to his life in general. His simple statement “Everything oozes” sums up his outlook on life (39).

Despite the amount of evidence that points to Estragon as being the more pessimistic and less spiritual of the two men, Beckett’s suggestion that perhaps these two men are simply two sides of the same coin forces us to merge the two identities together to some extent. One incident in particular stands out as an indication of their interdependence. As Pozzo and Lucky approach for the first time, Vladimir and Estragon suspect that one of the men may be Godot. The first instinct of *both* men is fear. Estragon grabs his only material possessions (a boot and a carrot), revealing his more materialistic nature, and Vladimir leaves everything to run, demonstrating his fear. Vladimir takes a step toward the men while Estragon tries to hold him back, this time revealing Estragon’s fear. Though the men have slightly different initial responses, they share in their overall feelings about situation. When the strangers have stopped before them, the men are “half wishing, half fearing to go to his assistance” (15). This incident demonstrates both their

unity and their duality. Their reactions are primarily the same, but the material and spiritual halves are shown to differ. One is reminded of an individual's conflicting emotional responses by the stage directions that explain that both men are torn between fear and desire. Here we have the most telling sign that these two men could be representing one composite man. Kierkegaard would find no logical inconsistency in this seemingly contradictory existence of the physical and mental, or, in his terms, the aesthetic and religious, coinciding within one person. He writes that though an individual obviously cannot be in two places at one time, "[w]hen he is *nearest* to being in two places at the same time, he is in passion...and passion is also the highest expression of subjectivity" (qtd. in Bretall 211, italics mine). These "places" to which he refers are the abstract realms of existence that Vladimir and Estragon can be seen as representing at various times throughout the play. Their shared experience of life offers a glimpse of the "passion" and realization of subjective truth of which Kierkegaard writes.

Additionally, Kierkegaard wrote about the synthesis of "the psychical and the physical" within each individual (qtd. in Hong 149). He writes that this "synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third. This third is spirit... it is in a sense a hostile power, for it constantly disturbs the relationship between soul and body" (140). If we view the more intellectual Vladimir and the more physically-oriented Estragon as representing one composite man, their spiritual battle is evident as they bicker, debate, and at times treat one another with hostility. States remarks that *Godot* allows "the Idea," in the sense of whatever philosophical concept one finds in the play, "to be seen" (24); here that "Idea" is the interplay of physical, mental, and spiritual facets of mankind.

Such interplay is what leads an individual down the path of self-realization. This “inwardness,” as Kierkegaard terms it, is at least somewhat dependent on remembering the events of one’s life, an ability that Estragon especially seems to lack. Vladimir can come to conclusions about himself and his situation at times as he pieces together lessons he has learned over time, but even he falters in his recollections frequently. Estragon seems to possess no capability whatsoever in terms of memory. He can never learn if he cannot remember. He can never discover his true self if he cannot recall how he has acted in the past. In suggesting that forgetting is necessary for happiness, Kierkegaard is ironically critiquing man’s desire to forget and forfeit important self-discovery:

To forget – all men wish to forget, and when something unpleasant happens, they always say: Oh, that one might forget! But forgetting is an art that must be practiced beforehand. The ability to forget is conditioned upon the mode of experiencing. Whoever plunges into his experiences with the momentum of hope will remember so that he cannot forget... No moment must be permitted a greater significance than that it can be forgotten when convenient. (qtd. in Bretall 26)

All four men in this play demonstrate the inability to progress as they cannot hold a single event in their memory for long, and the time they are so concerned with passes by unaccounted for.

Ultimately, the greatest cause of the despair of the two tramps, according to Kierkegaardian thought, would be their vacillation between the aesthetic and ethical, or physical and metaphysical, aspects of life. He admits that one could live simultaneously within the aesthetic and ethical spheres, terming this the “both-and” approach to life in a

reference to Hegel's attempts to compromise various philosophical positions. However, he also refers to this approach to life as "the way to hell" (19). Of course, living in solely the aesthetic realm also offers such a destiny. What Kierkegaard demonstrates in his prose is more of the hell-on-earth misery that one experiences while wavering between the two options. Perhaps this indecision, which could simply be relieved by making a choice, is what causes the most anguish within Vladimir and Estragon.

In "Equilibrium: Between the Aesthetical and the Ethical in the Composition of Personality," Kierkegaard tells the story of a young man seeking wisdom from an older man assumed to possess answers to the mysteries of life. He addresses this older man who has a "distrust for life," "ambiguous wisdom," and is proud of and content in his cynicism, and asks him what advice he would give to the young man about life (102). He paints a scenario in which the older man would "feel that there was something beautiful in being young" and his "good nature... [and] sympathy, would be set in motion [and] in that spirit [he] would talk to him; [he] would fortify his soul, confirm him in the confidence he has in the world... assure him that there is a power in a man which is able to defy the whole world... insist that he take to heart the importance of employing time well" (101). Consequently, if the older man were to encounter the younger man years later and detect "doubt in his soul," he would feel sorrow for the young man.

Kierkegaard points out that this reveals that the "whole nature" of the older man "contradicts itself" (102). He scorns the idea that one can consider oneself to be correct about one's view of life, yet feel sympathy if others must endure living with that same viewpoint. He encourages the older man, and in turn the reader, that this indicates that the wrong choice has been made in life, if one feels this way. He continues imploring the

reader that “you can win what is the chief thing in life – win yourself, acquire your own self” only if a choice is made (102). This contradiction within oneself is disparaged by Kierkegaard as unwillingness to make a choice. Though most of his comments seem more directed at the philosophers (as with his scathing remark that “if to deliberate were the proper task for a human life, you would be pretty close to perfection”) who valued objective theories over the subjective truth that would actually affect their lives rather than just their minds, he calls for every person in his audience to seek that subjective truth in this more direct piece of writing (104):

The choice itself is decisive for the content of the personality, through the choice the personality immerses itself in the thing chosen, and when it does not choose it withers away in consumption... the longer he postpones the choice the easier it is for him to alter its character, notwithstanding that he is constantly deliberating and deliberating and believes that thereby he is holding the alternatives distinctly apart... there comes at last an instant when there no longer is any question of a either/or, not because he has chosen but because he has neglected to choose, which is equivalent to saying, because others have chosen for him, because he has lost his self... When a man deliberates aesthetically upon a multitude of life's problems... he does not easily get one either/or, but a whole multiplicity, because the determining factor in the choice is not accentuated, and because when one does not choose absolutely one chooses only for the moment, and therefore can choose something different the next moment. (102-105)

It could be that the ultimate suffering of the two men comes not because they are waiting for Godot, but because they have not given themselves fully to waiting for him.

“The aesthete is unwilling to choose or commit to anything... For Judge Williams [the pseudonym used with the above passage] exercising choices is the most essential aspect of ethical life, for it is this that makes the person responsible for herself” (Carlisle 57).

Possessing infinite choices does not imply freedom in Kierkegaard’s mind, but rather a lack of freedom, because this means one has not yet committed oneself fully to one way of life. Kierkegaard views this commitment as the first step to discovering one’s selfhood which is the ultimate form of freedom. Therefore, Vladimir and Estragon’s continual decision-making (even about the most mundane tasks) indicates a lack of identity and lack of freedom.

Kierkegaard’s use of irony to convey these notions within *Either/Or* was more than a writing technique. In his university thesis, “The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates,” he discusses the ironical approach to life. Living ironically, he believed, led to being a true individual entity with a complete inner detachment from the rest of the world. Though the individual participates in life, he does not take it seriously “for he sees that in comparison with the ‘big picture’ – infinity – all human endeavors are insignificant and ultimately meaningless” (Watts 67). This enables him also to objectively evaluate his own life, to rise above society, and to not be fanatical and dogmatic yet still live according to one’s beliefs. These two characters lack this ability to detach themselves from their surroundings. The play itself, however, is written with this sense of the ironic. Beckett seems to share this same approach in his detachment from firm beliefs and in the use of humor in regard to serious matters. Edith Kern quotes

Sartre in her book *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique* as saying, “A fictional technique always relates back to the novelist’s metaphysics. The critic’s task is to define the latter before evaluating the former” (Reed 255). Kierkegaard differentiates between different types of irony when it comes to writing technique. In the most simplistic instances, the ironic statement means the exact opposite of what has been said (as in “lovely weather” when one really means it is lousy). His form of writing is slightly more complicated in that the statements take slightly more decoding than this, but there is still an intended meaning. Beckett may fall into the third category of statements: those that have no intent and a variety of possible meanings. This form of writing requires no commitment to any beliefs and frees the author from responsibility for whatever interpretation an audience may deduce. In terms of irony as a mode of existence, however, Kierkegaard unites the uses of humor and irony in that they are “[b]oth states of consciousness [that] see that emptiness of worldly values and practices that are traditionally valued as meaningful” (Watts 72). Kierkegaard believes that one can survive the despair associated with this realization only if one also realizes one’s own insignificance. The manner in which both of these works is written reveals an attitude toward life held by the author. Additionally, both works call for a similar response from their audiences. It is not the responsibility of the characters but of the audience to view their lives appropriately from the ironic standpoint and to make a choice about their way of life.



## Chapter Two: The Process of Becoming

Early in Kierkegaard's lifetime, science and rationalism were gaining popularity in Denmark. At the heart of Kierkegaard's writings in response to this trend is the belief that a study of human existence cannot be treated as a science. He believed that humans are not primarily reasoning beings but are more influenced in their decisions and actions by the emotional aspect of their being, the side that cares and desires and feels. Though Kierkegaard – like most philosophers – did not see himself as conceiving an entirely new philosophy, he is universally accredited with founding existentialism and being the first to examine the idea of “existence” in such a way. Many of the basic premises of Kierkegaard's ideology have remained intact in contemporary forms of existentialism. In this chapter I will examine his foundational beliefs of the subjective nature of discovering truth, the process of creating identity through moment-by-moment choices, the absurdity of life, and an objective absolute deity upon which all truth relies. Versions of these principles are found in the philosophy of Sartre, the figurehead for modern-day existentialism. The major differences lie in his definition of “absurdity” and his idea of the “Absolute.” Similarly, Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger*, also commonly regarded as existential, offers variations on these two premises. Though many critics have labeled *Waiting for Godot* as existential in the more contemporary vein of Sartre and Camus, through a thorough comparison of these works *Godot* could just as easily be read as supporting a Kierkegaardian existentialism.

Martin Esslin, most famous for his often-cited article “The Theatre of the Absurd” (which is referenced not only in other critical interpretations but in many introductions to

the text itself), draws a parallel between *Waiting for Godot* and the writing of Jean-Paul Sartre. In a lesser-known essay, "The Search for the Self," Esslin identifies the root of the "human condition" as demonstrated by the play as "nothingness, liberty, and the need of constantly creating ourselves in a succession of choices" (Bloom 9). This same summation of beliefs is often used in relation to existentialism. Leslie Stevenson, in her guide to understanding the *Seven Theories of Human Nature*, states the three major concerns in existentialism as being with "the *individual* human being" and "his uniqueness," the "meaning or purpose of human lives" as expressed through "subjective experience" as opposed to objective metaphysical truths, and the freedom of individuals as expressed through the "ever-present necessity for individual choice" (89, 92). Though often atheistic in nature today, these major themes have remained the same since Kierkegaard's writings. This absence of faith is primarily what differentiates the original Kierkegaardian views of existence from what Sartre established.

Esslin, remaining loyal to Sartre's version of existentialism, recognizes the Christian elements within *Godot* but chooses to dismiss them. To explain the irrelevance of the spiritual emphases throughout the play, Esslin chalks up the hopes for *Godot's* coming and salvation to the "bad faith" that Sartre condemns. He states that the "hope of salvation may be merely an evasion of the suffering and anguish that spring from facing the reality of the human condition" and quotes Sartre in stating that "[t]he first act of bad faith consists in evading what one cannot evade, in evading what one *is*" (39). In Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* he defines this concept further in a passage not quoted by Esslin: "Bad faith is the attempt to escape anguish by pretending to ourselves that we are not free. We try to convince ourselves that our attitudes and actions are determined by our

character, our situation, our role in life, or anything other than ourselves” (96). To view Godot as an example of “bad faith” is to assume that the men view Godot as controlling their present situation. This perception of their situation is faulty, however. Though they *are* hopeful that he will change their lives in some unknown way once he comes, they are also aware that they can choose *not* to wait.

To view these elements in such a way is to condemn Vladimir and Estragon for their decision to continue waiting. Furthermore, we must discount the proclamations of the messenger boy and read a moral into the ending of the play: Give up on false hopes (or hopes that have not yet been fulfilled) and learn to live life as it currently is. Esslin, among others, however, considers the play as merely a representation of life, not a recommendation or critique of methodologies of approaching life. To label Godot as “an image of ... ‘bad faith’” is to read a judgment into the actions of the protagonists (39). In “The Theatre of the Absurd” Esslin acknowledges that Godot could be read as a symbol of God, but also introduces the possibility that he “merely represent[s] the ever elusive tomorrow, man’s hope that one day something will happen that will render his existence meaningful” (14). In this essay he concludes that the “force and poetic power of the play lie precisely in the impossibility of ever reaching a conclusive answer to this question” of Godot’s significance, whereas in “The Search for the Self” he has labeled the hope for Godot, whether representing God or that mysterious “something” else, as “bad faith” (14). These inconsistencies prove problematic when reading the play as existential, but when viewed through the lens of Christian existentialism, it becomes possible to read the play in a more optimistic way, to see how hope can coexist with existential theory.

Similar to Sartre, who sought to discover some form of meaning within existence, Kierkegaard places his first hope in the possibility of discovering truth. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard concerns himself with disproving Hegelian reasoning that led to attempts to fit existence into an overarching system of thought. He argues instead for the importance of recognizing and understanding individuality and subjectivity in one's pursuit of truth. This search for truth emerges quickly as he asks, "On which side is the truth now to be found?" (211). In response to Hegel, he responds sarcastically with:

Ah, may we not here resort to a mediation, and say: It is on neither side, but in the mediation of both. Excellently well said, provided we might have it explained how an existing individual manages to be in a state of mediation. (211)

For Kierkegaard this idea of "mediation" is simply a form of compromise. He has already argued against the idea that one can choose a medium between two extremes of truth in the aptly titled *Either/Or* in which he stressed that each individual must make a choice as to what he believes and how he shall live. This choosing will be repeated continually throughout one's lifetime because, as he explains in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, "to be in a state of mediation is to be finished, while to exist is to become" (qtd. in Bretall 211). For Kierkegaard this search for truth is directly related to the Christian faith:

Here is such a definition of truth: *An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual.* But the above definition

of truth is an equivalent expression for faith. Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. (214-15)

By admiring risk, Kierkegaard in a sense regards the choosing of a falsity above the attempt to sit the fence, so to speak. He is very clear about this preference later in the essay as he writes, "The ethical principle in question is quite simply this, that if a mistake has to be made, it is worse to become a fickle-minded waverer than resolutely to carry out what has been decided upon; for a habit of vacillation is the absolute ruin of every spiritual relationship" (250). He does believe that there is an objective truth that exists, but that it is only knowable by God himself. Therefore, until the moment of our death when we may have the opportunity to discover the secrets of the spiritual realm and all the mysteries of the universe, we are incomplete beings creating truth for ourselves daily as we strive to move closer to that source of truth through faith. In the meantime, he views identity as continually in flux, whether guided by faith or not. The belief in absolute truth found in an ultimate being does not equate finality of *experience*. He believed that logical arguments *are*, while existence is about the process of becoming.

Though he did not trust in an objective truth existing in the mind of a deity, Sartre had equal disdain for attempts by people to skirt the issue of choice. In a rather extreme example he argues that by not choosing, an individual has in fact chosen.

Thus there are no *accidents* in a life; a community event which suddenly burst forth and involves me in it does not come from the outside. If I am

mobilized in a war, this war is my war; it is my image and I deserve it. I deserve it first because I could always get out of it by suicide or by desertion... For lack of getting out of it, I have *chosen* it. (232)

Thus, for Sartre “bad faith” would be the denial of this choice and the shifting of responsibility to a source outside oneself. It is no wonder that Sartre felt that one was “condemned to be free” if such responsibility was involved in having freedom of choice. Applying his theories to himself, he stated, “I must be without remorse or regrets as I am without excuse; for from the instant of my upsurge into being, I carry the weight of the world by myself alone without anything or any person being able to lighten it... I am responsible for everything, in fact, except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being” (233). He even insists that “in a certain sense I *choose* being born” by not choosing to commit suicide (233).

Sartre’s conclusion that man is “condemned to be free” is derived from Kierkegaard’s *Concept of Anxiety*. Kierkegaard defines anxiety as the “dizziness of freedom” and the awareness of the “possibility of being able” (qtd in Hong 139). The sensation in his definition is more similar to melancholy than to fear, and it is marked by ambivalence, as can be seen in Vladimir and Estragon’s statements that they are going when in fact they do not move. The “possibility of possibility” can create a paralyzing anxiety, yet Kierkegaard views such anxiety in an entirely positive light (139). He may describe its short-term effects as undesirable, but accredits such unease as the only means to true faith. He states that “only such anxiety is through faith absolutely educative, because it consumes all finite ends and discovers all their deceptiveness” (153).

Vladimir and Estragon enter into a dialogue regarding their own freedom not far into the play. From the start it is clear that they have “chosen” Godot in many senses. In their references to previous encounters with him they mention the “kind of prayer” that they asked of him (14). He did not demand anything of them, not even that they wait; he only replied that he “couldn’t promise anything” at that time (14). Thus, Vladimir and Estragon are waiting on their own accord to see what they may receive from Godot. Estragon then wonders about their freedom, asking Vladimir “We’ve lost our rights?” to which his more knowledgeable companion replies, “We got rid of them” (14). Again, this is referenced as a choice made out of freedom. Estragon continues prodding about the issue, apparently realizing that he could leave at any moment, which leads him to ask several times about whether or not they are “tied” to Godot (15). Vladimir, a bit comically, replies, “To Godot? Tied to Godot! What an idea! No question of it. (*Pause.*) For the moment” (15). This apparent lack of freedom in being constrained by their relationship to Godot is not necessarily the same as “bad faith,” however, if the two men recognize their freedom to give up this pursuit.

The characters within Sartre’s play *No Exit* are a more accurate example of “bad faith.” Garcin, Inez, and Estelle are locked together in one room, left to torment one another by their own company for all of eternity. Throughout the course of the one act, all of the characters confesses to their atrocious deeds during their lifetime that has led to this fate. They seem to view not only their current situation but all of their earthly lives as literally fated in many ways. For instance, Estelle speaks of meeting “the man I was fated to love” (16). Currently the characters are no longer making choices but are instead being acted upon by the vague “they” who have planned their new existence in Hell.

Each of them comments on this determinism at different points: Inez states that, “they’ve thought it all out. Down to the last detail. Nothing was left to chance” and that they have “foreknown every word you say”; Estelle comments that their situation is “not mere chance”; Garcin agrees that “everything’s been thought out beforehand” (15, 31, 46). Their perception does not fit with the reality of their situation, however. At one point the door, which had been locked previously, flies open and Inez reminds Garcin that he is “free to go,” but, rather than leaving, Garcin “meditatively” wonders why the door opened and decides not to go after all (43).

Stevenson states as the third tenet of existentialism: “the concern is with the *freedom* of individuals as their most important and distinctively human property. So existentialists believe in the ability of every person to choose for himself his attitudes, purposes, values, and way of life. And they are concerned not just to maintain this as a truth, but to persuade everyone to act on it” (89). The characters speak as though they have not known that freedom. Sartre has developed characters who speak against the very foundations of his ideology. They can only be representations of that “bad faith” that is convinced that one’s life is determined by outside forces.

Sartre begins his famous *Being and Nothingness* with the premise that “an action is on principle *intentional*” (Cottingham 229). Therefore Garcin’s action of not leaving the room was a choice he made sealing his “fate” in Hell. Secondly, “an act is a projection of the for-itself toward what is not, and what is can in no way determine by itself what is not” (230). In other words, each individual being must make decisions based on internal processes rather than being led to certain actions simply due to



externalities. These circumstances of life, no matter how monumental they seem, can affect the individual only if he allows them to.

Sartre also addresses the issue of existence as the three characters are forced to confront their newfound identities after death. Garcin, like Vladimir, is concerned with obtaining salvation, suggesting to the group: “we’ll work out our salvation. Looking into ourselves, never raising our heads” (18). Estelle relies much more on the physical to ensure herself of her existing, admitting that “[w]hen I can’t see myself I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist. I pat myself just to make sure, but it doesn’t help much” (19). Inez later uses this confession to torment her: “Suppose the mirror started telling lies? Or suppose I covered my eyes – as he is doing – and refused to look at you, all that loveliness of yours would be wasted on the desert air” (21). Inez is personally more dependent on her cognitive processes to remind herself of her existence, stating that “I’m always conscious of myself – in my mind” (19).

Sartre’s very notion of Hell reveals some of his ideology in that the most severe form of torture does not involve physical pain but is rather “agony of mind” and “life without a break,” whether from solitude, sleep, or even blinking (42, 5). In *Godot*, Vladimir notes this same agony in a dialogue with Estragon in which the two seem to be speaking past one another. Vladimir in some senses carries on a conversation with himself, debating the worst part of their suffering. The stage directions say he begins “in anguish” as he asks Estragon to speak in order to avoid silent waiting, and then he proceeds with: “When you seek you hear... That prevents you from thinking... Thinking is not the worst... What is terrible is to *have* thought... We must have thought a little... Oh, it’s not the worst, I know... To have thought... But we could have done without it”

(41-2). Though Vladimir appears to be contradicting himself as he continues on, the idea he raises is that the most terrible type of suffering is not the actual process of thinking, but the very fact that one possesses the ability to think at all. In the original French edition of the play, Vladimir's statement of "What is terrible is to *have* thought," appears as "Ce qui est terrible, c'est d'avoir pense" (74). "D'avoir" is translated as "to have got possessions," rather than as a helping verb representing past tense as it may be read in the English. His comment is quite existentialist. Stevenson draws a direct correlation between Kierkegaard and Sartre in their use of "the term 'anguish' to describe this consciousness of one's own freedom. Anguish is not fear of an external object, but the awareness of the ultimate unpredictability of one's own behavior" (94). While the two men are clearly suffering physical pain at different points during the performance, their mental anguish is far worse. The suffering inflicted by thought is demonstrated even more clearly in the reactions of the men to Lucky's thinking aloud and the physical exhaustion he experiences after his thought process. According to existentialist thought, the anguish of thought is due to the fact that Vladimir and Estragon are facing their responsibility of being free.

Sartre includes dialogue that reveals the same focus on human freedom and choice in his play:

Garcin: When I chose the hardest path, I made my choice deliberately. A man is what he wills himself to be.

Inez: ... It's what one does, and nothing else, that shows the stuff one's made of.

Garcin: I died too soon. I wasn't allowed time to – to do my deeds.

Inez: One always dies too soon – or too late. And yet one’s whole life is complete at the moment, with a line drawn neatly under it, ready for the summing up. You are – your life, and nothing else. (45)

According to Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, after the “sudden upsurge of anguish before freedom,” each individual is led to take actions to become something more than he presently is. He writes:

...freedom in its foundation coincides with the nothingness which is at the heart of man. Human-reality is free because it *is not enough*... Freedom is precisely the nothingness which *is made-to-be* at the heart of man and which forces human-reality to *make itself* instead of to *be*. As we have seen, for human reality, to be is to *choose oneself*; nothing comes from the outside or from within which it can receive or accept. (230)

Though Sartre gives no credence to the hope found in Christianity, he does assume that hope guides the human heart. Hell for these characters lies in the fact that they are done reinventing themselves and must remain as they are forever, waiting for the unknown. In another dialogue resembling the vagueness and flippancy within *Godot*, Garcin and Inez discuss this loss of hope:

Inez: ...There was some point in being afraid *before*; while one still had hope.

Garcin: ...There’s no more hope – but it’s still “before.” We haven’t yet begun to suffer.

Inez: That’s so. [*A short silence.*] Well? What’s going to happen?

Garcin: I don’t know. I’m waiting. (10)

Whereas these characters are merely waiting for more suffering, Vladimir and Estragon hold on to at least a weak hope of Godot offering to them more than they have seen in their lifetimes. These characters would agree with Sartre's assertion that "human-reality is free because it is *not enough*" and that nothingness is at the heart of existence, but the next conclusion that is repeatedly drawn is that they must therefore wait for Godot. This difference between the realizations the characters come to in *No Exit* as opposed to *Waiting for Godot* correlates with the differences between Sartre and Kierkegaard. The latter philosopher was the first to insist that human beings must consistently reinvent themselves through the choices they made, but those choices were to be made with attention to God and ethics. In a lengthy parable of a man making a recreational visit to an apparently well-known site in Denmark named Deer Park, he states

Because it is ethically permissible to take an outing to Deer Park it does not follow that it is religiously permissible... Nowadays... the religious address observes the most rigid monastic abstinence, and keeps itself at a distance from reality quite as much as the cloister, thereby adequately revealing in an indirect way that everyday life is really carried on in connection with all the most petty trifles or that the religious does not assimilate the daily life at all. ( 238-239)

For Kierkegaard every decision in life intended to lead to subjective truth for an individual had to also relate directly to the absolute truth of God. The "nothingness" of life was due to the exclusion of God, or as he puts it: "when the clergyman says that a man can do absolutely nothing [without God], we all understand it with such fearful

ease” (234). For Vladimir and Estragon their lives are only meaningless if Godot never comes and never gives validity to their choices.

Many critics argue that *Waiting for Godot* demonstrates life defined by the modern-day version of existentialism, the atheistic version espoused by Sartre. This philosophy, however, negates all need for ethical guidelines, the very issue that Kierkegaard found with the Hegelian system. Without a belief in the higher wisdom of God, Sartre’s existentialism leads to the idea that “everything is permitted,” in the words of Dostoyevsky. Whereas Kierkegaard recognizes an absurdity in life that can be remedied by faith, Sartre defines this absurdity as the absence of any ultimate meaning or purpose, which in turn leads to “no external or objective justification for the values anyone chooses to adopt” (93). Sartre, like all modern existentialists, recommends no specific way of life. This ambivalence toward ethics is not altogether shared by Vladimir and Estragon, however. Vladimir’s recognition of the ability to repent of his past actions reveals an acknowledgment that he may have committed wrongdoings, and the men’s disgust at how Pozzo treats Lucky likely stems from a belief that actions towards others can be immoral.

Beckett is also regularly compared with French author Albert Camus in both style of writing and representation of the world. English Showalter in *The Stranger: Humanity and the Absurd*, his analysis of Camus’s novel, explains that though “Camus belongs to a tradition that includes existentialists... he wanted to mark his distance from them”(5). The term “existentialist” was not welcomed by Camus, among other philosophers and authors, due to its negative connotation throughout the early twentieth century and the constrictiveness of falling into a category of thought. Camus intentionally refutes some

existentialist beliefs within his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus,” but the majority of his works greatly resemble the view of the world presented by Sartre and other existentialists.

Mersault, the protagonist of *The Stranger*, is the epitome of the existentialist belief that man acts on feeling more than reasoning. He is first seen attending his mother’s funeral, at which he heeds none of the social conventions one would be expected to follow and instead succumbs to whatever physical need he encounters, whether it is the sleepiness overcoming him from the train ride there or his nicotine addiction leading him to smoke during the funeral procession. Mersault happens to meet a woman to whom he is physically attracted upon returning from the funeral and sees no reason why it would be inappropriate to take her on a date at that point in time.

Showalter points out that his “actions follow so close on the sensual impulse that his motives are literally indescribable” (17). Using a very existentialist expression derived straight from Kierkegaard, Showalter comments on the “pure subjectivity” of Mersault’s reasoning processes (17).

Mersault’s choices are certainly not based on ethical reasoning either. He has no qualms about helping his neighbor Raymond lure an ex-girlfriend back to be beaten, and his lack of grief over his mother’s death indicates a similar lack of moral character. As the novel continues, Mersault inadvertently becomes involved in a feud between his neighbor and Raymond’s ex-girlfriend’s brother. After a brief incident between the brother and one of his friends, Mersault is handed a gun by Raymond and ultimately shoots one of the men. Even Mersault’s action of murdering the brother is not judged in moral terms by the narration, and the actual court system’s judgment is shown to be made

without fully understanding the character of Mersault. He does whatever comes most naturally. Even in the case of shooting a man, his explanation was that the sun was hot and the bright lights made him confused. As Showalter describes it: “His freedom serves no purpose, however, because he has no purpose himself. All his actions seem to him to well up spontaneously from nature... for this is how Mersault lived his life, acting by reflex rather than by reflection...[he is] impulsive, instinctive, unconscious” (41-42). In *Waiting for Godot* this view of humanity is portrayed, but ultimately rejected. If Godot were simply a figment of the men’s imaginations, a false hope that the audience recognizes as harmful, then it would seem that the men should learn to accept life as Mersault has. The confirmation of Godot by the messenger boy makes him more credible than a mere wish. Whether or not he will ever come to meet Vladimir and Estragon is debatable, but his existence is quite plausible.

Showalter notes that the setting of *The Stranger*, like that of *Waiting for Godot*, is “almost incidental” and “allegorical” (2). The title of the novel, literally translated from the French as “alien” or “foreigner,” implies that the relation of the protagonist to his surroundings is more important than the surroundings themselves (22). The sparse settings of Beckett’s plays encourage the same type of focus on the characters themselves and on the characters as allegory. In both works, the events that occur around the characters are a bit arbitrary, while the reactions of the characters are of utmost importance. Vladimir and Estragon are unconcerned about the meetings with Pozzo and Lucky and maintain their self-focus throughout both encounters. In the same way, Mersault is unconcerned with the circumstances of his own life and learns to be content, whether enjoying the beach with his beautiful fiancée or while imprisoned for murder.

As Showalter describes it, “everything just happens” to Mersault, and we are led to believe that “everything just happens” to everyone; they simply do not acknowledge that this is the case (29).

Showalter continues his analysis: “Mersault experiences his life as a series of essentially unconnected and therefore meaningless events ... Through apathy he has wandered into a career without ambition, into an engagement without love, into a friendship without affection, and into a quarrel without anger” (61, 94). According to Sartre, he has chosen each incident that has occurred in his life, even if it may not initially seem so. Also like Sartre, Camus does not attempt to offer meaning or hope in relation to the life of Mersault, but simply the experience of a life lived according to existentialist principles, without hope, without “bad faith,” and with the freedom that leads to a lack of concern for the future. “Hope obsesses and deludes; it obliterates the present life, the only one Mersault or anyone else possesses, in the name of some vague and illusionary future” (106). By rejecting this hope, Mersault may not have given meaning to his life, but he has given himself the ability “to live for the present” (107). Camus calls Mersault “the only Christ we deserve,” an indication not only that Camus rejects any hope of a spiritual Savior, but also that he sees humans as incapable of “deserving” anything, whether good or bad, since their actions cannot be deemed moral or immoral (14). Camus portrays the most stark vision of meaninglessness imaginable.

The same simply cannot be said for *Waiting for Godot*. Not only is there hope implicit in the play, there is a concern for ethics that is not present in *The Stranger*. Vladimir and Estragon are far from exemplars of morality, but they at least think in those terms, unlike Mersault. When Pozzo returns blind in Act Two and pleads for their help,



they at first debate what they can gain from helping him. They deliberate so long, in fact, that Pozzo has to cry out several times for assistance. In the midst of these antics, Vladimir makes a lengthy and memorable speech. In contrast to the snippets of dialogue exchanged throughout the play, this monologue stands out as especially significant:

Let us do something while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! (51)

Again, Vladimir and Estragon are far from saints, as Vladimir himself admits after this speech, but they do make moral judgments that do not appear in the works of Camus or Sartre. They are ashamed of the lack of compassion they see in the rest of humanity, and even within themselves as they do nothing, and know that they could rise above this and be worthier people in some way.

Kierkegaard viewed himself as far from a saint as well. Perhaps as a rhetorical strategy or perhaps with great sincerity, he drew great attention to his own flaws and moral delinquencies, and his narrator Johannes Climacus even admits to not being a Christian at all. Kierkegaard's concern was with each individual remaining in the struggle to evaluate his life and actions. Regarding ethics, he writes:

The ethical proposes to do away with the disinterestedness of the possible by making existence the infinite interest. It therefore opposes every

confusing attempt, like that of proposing ethically to *contemplate* humanity and the world. Such ethical contemplation is impossible since there is only one kind of ethical contemplation, namely, self-contemplation... The ethical requirement is imposed on each individual, and when it judges, it judges each individual by himself. (qtd. in Bretall 226)

A world in which the actions of an individual can be judged is a world that contains some sort of meaning. Though Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus all refer to the absurdity and meaninglessness of life, these terms referred to very different perspectives of the world. By “absurd” Camus meant the meaninglessness of existence. Showalter comments that he “tried to remain true to this vision of the absurd to the very end, and not to use it as the pretext for a leap of faith” (5). By demonstrating a manner of living in which one comes to terms with this absurdity, he offers an “antidote to nihilism and despair” though not an antidote to the meaninglessness of life (10). As Sartre comments in his analysis of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “the absurd man will not commit suicide; he wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusion, and without resignation either” (11). Camus writes in his Preface to this work: “Although ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ poses mortal problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert” (MS v).

Many theorists have attempted to deduce how this absurdity of life relates to the characters within *Waiting for Godot*. Martin Esslin’s “Theater of the Absurd” is often cited within discussions of the play. He groups Beckett with other authors such as Adamov and Ionesco in an examination of the type of modern drama that defies

convention in the theater and is characterized by a “barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on... beyond rational motivation, happening at random or through the demented caprice of an unaccountable idiot fate” (Esslin 3). He argues that the purpose of this type of theater is not to represent a specific ideology or make a statement of social protest or any of the sort, but rather it is to conjure up a reaction from the audience, whether of laughter or gloom, despite the lack of connection of these feelings with any plot or characterization that would typically be occurring within a play. In fact, its purpose is to call into question the very theater itself as a meaningful activity. In a sense, as Bradbury states in his own account of the theater of Beckett, “mere existence” is being portrayed on stage, nothing less and nothing more (25). Despite this lack of statement being made, however, Esslin does see content and meaning within these plays and believes that they are an attempt to “give expression to some of the basic issues and problems of our age” (4). Though he does not expound on which issues these are, these absurdist playwrights are expressing the same doubt and questioning about the suffering and pain experienced throughout the world that was common of that age and beyond.

Esslin links the playwrights he discusses by the element of the absurd that characterizes their works. Quoting Ionesco, he defines the absurd as “that which has no purpose, or goal, or objective,” but distinguishes between the types of absurdity appearing in each writer’s work, describing Beckett’s as “melancholic, colored by a feeling of futility born from the disillusionment of old age and chronic hopelessness” (4). In general he sees *The Theatre of the Absurd* as showing the world as “an incomprehensible place” (5). Esslin argues that by witnessing the absurdity of the action on stage, by extension the audience can conclude that life itself is absurd. In a statement

reminiscent of Kierkegaard's disdain for Hegelian logic and order, Esslin states that this type of theater is meant to "reveal the irrationality of the human condition and the illusion of what we thought was its apparent logical structure" (5). Esslin sees these plays as expressing the loss of a moral order within our culture as well as the realization that we do not "possess any genuine initiative or power to decide our own destiny," a view that differs from the existentialist mindset (6). It seems that he may mean this in the sense of a decline of humanism and faith in our ability as a race to shape our world, however, than as an implication of determinism. Much of his focus on absurdity is centered on the portrayal of the world at large rather than on individual existence. He describes this world as "without faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will" and continues with a depiction of what the human race has seen happen to the world: "The decline of religious faith, the destruction of the belief in automatic social and biological progress, the discovery of vast areas of irrational and unconscious forces within the human psyche, the loss of a sense of control over rational human development in an age of totalitarianism and weapons of mass destruction" (6). In a post-WWII, post-modern world, playwrights can be expected to concern themselves with the feelings of dismay within their audiences.

Esslin also explores the attitude toward language common in the Theatre of the Absurd. He uses Lucky's speech among other examples to demonstrate the emptiness of language: "Lucky's much vaunted philosophical wisdom is revealed to be a flood of completely meaningless gibberish that vaguely resembles the language of philosophical argument" (11). Again Esslin is careful to not be mistaken as asserting that there is no meaning to be found within the play, though he views the dialogue as more of a demonstration of the break-up of language "devoid of conceptual meaning and merely

emotive” (12). He claims that this absence of significance within the dialogue simply pushed the audience to search for underlying meaning that is more complicated than that which language can convey. While language attempts to be direct and straightforward, reality is much more complex and multi-dimensional. As Esslin states, “Reality can only be conveyed by being *acted out* in all its complexity” (13). Esslin uses the word “reality,” and in other instances “human condition,” in much the same way that the term “existence” is used by Kierkegaard, Sartre, and other existentialists. He presents a view of the world as “complex, harsh,” characterized by “hopelessness, death, and absurdity” and “devoid of a clear-cut purpose or design” (13). Therefore, mankind’s only option is to recognize its helplessness and the inanity of attempting to comprehend the world (also possibly equivalent to “existence”) and the “absurdity of most of our objectives” (13).

Though Esslin concludes that none of these authors would consider themselves to be endorsing any particular ideology through their works, his examination of their approach to portraying the world and reality through theater implies an approach to viewing existence that somewhat supports a philosophical stance. On the one hand, Esslin’s claim that there are “an infinite number of possible interpretations” that could be made by the audiences in relation to what these plays say about reality – all of which he seems to suggest would be valid – would suggest that no theoretical perspective can be supported through evidence from the plays. However, at the same time, Esslin makes claims about the lack of free will, the absence of objective truths or purposes worth pursuing, and obviously the absurdity of life revealed in these plays, which would require that the plays be representing, at least to some extent, a philosophical stance. Esslin concludes that the plays within this genre are designed to encourage audiences to “be

stimulated by it to think for themselves,” and that they “will always confront the spectator with a genuine intellectual problem, a philosophical paradox, which he will have to try to solve even if he knows that it is most probably insoluble,” much like the writings of Kierkegaard (14). Like Kierkegaard, however, I also believe that though Esslin sees the “riddle of existence” being “complex, unfathomable, and paradoxical” within the Theater of the Absurd, these very qualities substantiate certain worldviews above others.

In his article “A Beckettian Counterfoil to Kierkegaardian Existentialism,” Sharma argues that the portrayal of the absurd existence in *Waiting for Godot* resembles the definition of absurd put forth by Kierkegaard more so than Sartre. While Sartre viewed the absurd as “that which is totally meaningless and irrational,” Kierkegaard viewed it as “that which cannot be reduced to rule” (275). Sharma believes that Kierkegaard was using the definition of “absurd” as it is derived from the mathematical term “surd” which refers to that which cannot be fitted into a neat and tidy pattern. Based on Sartre’s definition, Sharma argues, the play would be revealing the absurdity of hope and reason. Sharma rejects this interpretation, later claiming that “the Kierkegaardian subjective thinker in the personae of Vladimir and Estragon has not lost all hope” (278). As I will argue further in the next chapter, the absurdity portrayed within *Godot* does not necessarily imply hopelessness.

Richard Gilman, in his essay “The Waiting Since,” equates the representation of absurdity found in *Godot* with the definition of Camus of the absurd as “that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints” (Bloom 70). Gilman continues on to discuss the play as being a demonstration of that gap between desire and

reality, a play of absence. Gilman claims that Godot's "very nature is that he doesn't come," but he then adds shortly after: "the meaning, the validation the tramps seek for their lives is never forthcoming; there is no transcendent being, or realm from which human justification proceeds, or rather – and this is the crucial difference between *Waiting for Godot* and so many modern works of despair – *we cannot be sure whether there is or not*" (Bloom 70, italics mine). In *No Exit* the very title suggests that the characters will never escape their torment, and in *The Stranger* there is no cause worth dying for and no hope for redemption for Mersault, but in *Godot* there *may be* all of these. Gilman is right that this is what separates *Godot* from the rest of the works of despair. As he says, Godot is the "sought-for transcendency, that which is desired beyond our physical lives, so that these may have meaning," and if he comes then there is meaning within life after all (70).

### Chapter Three: The Hope

Unlike the philosophers who view life as absurd because it is meaningless, Kierkegaard used the term “absurd” because he found meaning first and foremost in the eternal and then, paradoxically, found meaning in the opposite of this, the temporal life of man. Kierkegaard writes in his journal, “Therefore faith hopes also in this life, but... by virtue of the absurd, not virtue of the human understanding” (qtd. in Bretall 116). He expounds on this idea in *Fear and Trembling*, arguing that one does everything “by virtue of the absurd,” which he defines as “that which runs counter to human experience and human understanding... the ‘absurdity’ of living simultaneously in the infinite and finite” (120-21). He identifies the last stage of the progression toward faith – requiring “strength, energy, and freedom of spirit” – as that of “infinite resignation,” the commitment to live in the present while maintaining hope for eternal future as the foundation for living (126). These ideas seem to be conveyed in the original French version of the title *While Waiting for Godot*, especially if one interprets the title as actually referring to what the characters are doing “*while* waiting for *God*.” Thus, Kierkegaard combines the view of life as absurd with an optimistic outlook.

In the introduction to Harold Bloom’s collection of critical essays, he states that “[h]ope is alien to Beckett’s mature fiction” and continues on to associate Beckett’s fiction in novel form with his plays (4). The opinion that *Waiting for Godot* possesses no hopeful elements is an accepted critical consensus. When applying Kierkegaardian theory to the play, however, it is possible to surmise that though *Godot* certainly illustrates the absurdity of life, this does not imply that there is no hope. The question of



hopefulness within the play relies on one's conclusion as to who or what Godot is and what the motivation of Vladimir and Estragon is in continuing to wait for him.

The quest over discovering the significance of Godot has led to a myriad of conclusions, though the possibility that Godot might represent God is usually at least acknowledged in whatever interpretation is being offered. Reviewers and authors over the last fifty years have suggested that Godot is “happiness, eternal life, the unattainable quest of all men... God, a diminutive god, Love, Death, Silence, Hope, De Gaulle, Pozzo, a Balzac character, a bicycle racer, Time, Future, a Paris street for call girls” and much more (Cohn 45). In reference to a performance of the play at the San Quentin penitentiary, a San Francisco Chronicle reporter stated that Godot is “an expression, symbolic in order to avoid all personal error, by an author who expected each member of his audience to draw his own conclusions.” Some of the prisoners who were members of that audience explained that to them Godot was “society” or “the outside” (Esslin 24). Esslin himself believes that “throughout our lives we always wait for something, and Godot simply represents the objective of our waiting – an event, a thing, a person, death” (Esslin 31). Some have sought the answer to the mystery in the author himself, or equated Godot with the author, but Beckett has offered a variety of responses as well. Beckett told Roger Blin that the name Godot derived from French slang words for “boot” (Cohn 45). When Alan Schneider, who was to direct the first American production of *Waiting for Godot*, asked Beckett who or what was meant by Godot, he received the answer, “If I knew, I would have said so in the play” (Esslin 26). It is not clear whether we should take these answers as sincere or pithy. Concerning his response to Schneider, one must wonder: what author explicitly declares the meaning of a symbol within his work? Even

if Beckett did have an intended correlation in mind between Godot and another entity or idea, in the end, authorial intent does not equal meaning.

In our attempt to explore various meanings within the figure of Godot, we must first identify his role within the play. Little information is given about Godot himself, but his relationship to the world-in-miniature of the play is demonstrated throughout. Ernest Gans claims that “God or not, Godot plays a transcendental role with respect to” the world onstage and that each scene contains “clear parallels to sacred phenomena” (Bloom 99). He sees Godot as a “God” in the sense that without him the actions of the characters are meaningless; without him these actions, the very scenario, the play itself, would not exist. He continues that “belief in his presence offstage allows for worldly activity to go on while waiting for his return” (99). Certainly these elements of creation, sovereignty, and the origin of absolute meaning and purpose correlate to a deity. Quite simply, Godot possesses all the attributes of God through the power he exerts over the lives of the characters.

In accordance with Gans, Stephani Pofahl Smith states, “There is an ever-present void, ever accompanied by an imperative need to fill it. In this sense Godot symbolizes God, but one might also say that God symbolizes Godot...Godot is analogous to God on a higher level of abstraction because God is a word with a defining tradition behind it, a blank which has been inadequately filled in, while Godot is just a name, any name, a blank illustrated by an ‘X’” (892). With this reading of the play we accept the inadequacy of the explanation of God’s being, because Vladimir and Estragon are simply attempting to fill in those details, though they are ignorant, Vladimir having only once long ago known Godot and Estragon not having much of a recollection of him at all.

These ruminations by the men resemble the philosophizing of mankind throughout the ages as they attempt to define the elusive deity. The vague and even contradictory notions of Godot that surface in the dialogue of the men do not make a reading of Godot as God problematic, but in fact aids in this interpretation. Smith goes on to say, “Godot is clearly related to God by his ‘divine’ attributes. He resembles God more significantly, however, in that all that is known about him comes from secondary sources, is uncertain and contradictory, while he himself remains absent and silent” (893). Even Vladimir’s recollections of their long ago meeting with Godot leaves doubt that they have really had direct contact with him. Estragon calls their ambiguous request of Godot a “kind of prayer” and a “vague supplication” and they are unclear about what his response precisely was (13). In addition, Vladimir later asks the boy what Godot looks like, as if he has never actually seen him physically. Smith writes that “Godot represents all of the necessarily inaccurate efforts to imagine the form of that which is by nature formless” and in Vladimir’s mind, or at least his faulty memory, Godot comes to be formless (893). These interactions lead one to believe that Godot is not simply an ordinary human being, but that he is also more than an abstraction such as Death, Love, or Time. Certainly the fact that they have had some sort of communication with him makes the possibility that his name stands for a boot or any other physical object problematic.

Some have suggested that Godot is simply an idea that may or may not ever come to fruition, or that even if he is Hope of God, that he may not exist. The issue of whether or not Godot will indeed come in Vladimir and Estragon’s lifetimes is admittedly debatable, but it is difficult to argue that Godot simply does not exist. Smith writes on the subject, “Godot is an absence, but an absence implies a presence...Existence is a

wait, by nature incomplete, a continuously unsatisfied curiosity to know if there is anything beyond itself” (893). The hope the messenger boy brings both days, the hope that keeps the men waiting, is the evidence that there *is* something beyond the life they know. However flimsy or unclear this evidence may be, it is undoubtedly confirmed each day.

In addition to analyzing the identity of Godot himself, we must examine the context in which he is introduced, discussed, and gains significance. The role Godot plays is noteworthy, but even weightier is the amount of Christian allusions within the rest of the play. Many scholars view the play as completely and utterly Christian, simplistically allegorical, and consistently scriptural. Daniel Stempel sees Estragon as representing “the Jew who waits for the Messiah as Vladimir represents the Christian who waits for the Messiah,” making Godot a figure for the Messiah either way (267). Stempel’s conclusion that Vladimir is more concerned with waiting for the Messiah is clearly substantiated, though there is nothing about the character of Estragon to lead one to believe he partakes in any form of Judaism. Perhaps this observation could be seen in relation to the possible differences in the perspectives of Estragon and Vladimir concerning the aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres. Both are anticipating a meaning outside themselves, but Estragon’s is more temporarily related (as the Jews hoping for an earthly Messiah to literally rule over their nation) while Vladimir’s hope resides entirely in the otherworldly. In any matter, Stempel offers pages of parallels between the play and Christianity that are quite compelling. Likewise, Dan O. Via, Jr. explains nearly every incident in the play by correlating it with Scripture, concluding that the entire play is an acting out of the Parable of the Talents in which the two men will need to give an

account to Godot, the master and God, of what they did with their lives while waiting for his return.

Per Nykrog, in his analysis of the play, “In the Ruins of the Past: Reading Beckett Intertextually,” agrees with the common view on *Godot* to which Bloom alludes.

Although he sees *Waiting for Godot* as the least dismal of the apparent series that led to *Endgame* and *Krapp’s Last Tape*, he refers to the “unsurpassed negativity” and “bleak outlook” within *all* of Beckett’s plays (289). This conclusion does not prevent him from recognizing the Christian elements or the relation between Godot and God, however. He simply sees the play as a warped version of Christianity that demonstrates the belief system without offering the same hope that is integral to the true practice of the religion.

Nykrog speaks of the “frequent allusions to Christ and to the Passion and an unmistakable preoccupation with salvation... there for all to see on the surface of the dialogue” that makes the Christian correlation “obvious” (289). He holds to the very traditional belief that the name “Godot” is an indication of his identity, stating that “It is strongly confirmed by the syllable ‘god’ in the name of the mysterious offstage character whose presence (or absence) is the key to the entire situation presented” (291). Even if Beckett claims that the name refers to a military boot (a “godillot”) and Eric Bentley began the trend of accepting the name as a literary allusion to the character Godeau in a Balzac comedy, Nykrog maintains that the association with the word “god” is most pertinent. Whatever one’s conclusion is regarding the origin or meaning of the name, it is difficult to dismiss the choice as simply arbitrary given the attention drawn to it within the play. The characters themselves draw attention to the name as Vladimir repeatedly reminds Estragon of the name and at one point Estragon responds, after asking his friend

to confirm the name once again, with “Fancy that” as if a coincidence or particular importance were clear (14).

Nykrog draws numerous parallels between the play and chapters 24 and 25 in the gospel of Matthew. In these two chapters, Jesus refers to the “abomination of desolation,” which perfectly describes the setting of the play; warns the disciples about false prophets (a possible parallel with Pozzo being falsely mistaken for Godot on both occasions of his appearance); and tells the parables of the fig tree (relating to their wilting then blooming tree) and of the ten virgins (correlating with Vladimir and Estragon’s own suspense as to when Godot will come) (293). Additionally, in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, the God figure is referred to as “a hard man, harvesting where [he has] not sown and gathering where [he has] not scattered seed,” which fits the description of Godot given by the young messenger boy and the insinuations the two tramps make about his character either from what they know or what they have imagined about him. Jesus also warns his disciples that “[t]wo men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left,” reminiscent of the “reasonable percentage” of which Vladimir speaks. Finally, it is in this section of the Bible that Jesus discusses the separation of the sheep and the goats, which brings us again to the words of the messenger boy about his relationship to Godot (293).

Kristin Morrison, in her article “Biblical Allusions in *Waiting for Godot*,” ironically deemphasizes those allusions. She claims that these references should rather be viewed as traces of the cultural world in which Beckett lived. If one were to associate Godot with the author himself and read the play as a piece of metafiction – a piece of writing *about* writing – these parallels could be viewed as simply vestiges of the culture.

The sparse environment in which the play is set strips away such traces of a cultural world, however, and the surfacing questions of the meaning of human existence and suffering seem to transcend the confines of the play. On occasion a specific location or philosopher is referenced, but the world in which the characters exist cannot be associated with any particular cultural period and location, and it is the characters who discuss biblical topics, not Godot. Whether offering a favorable or disparaging view of Christianity, the biblical motif appears to be of great importance.

The Christian allusions abound to an even greater degree than is usually discussed in a single commentary on the play. As the two main characters speak over one another repeatedly, it is as though Vladimir is carrying on an intermittent conversation about salvation throughout the play. He is at times taken off-track by Estragon, and certainly by Lucky and Pozzo for large quantities of time, but returns consistently to his topic of greatest interest. Early on in the play, he is musing on the idea of the “last moment” mentioned by Estragon and quotes, “Hope deferreth makes the something sick, who said that?” (8). His sloppy quotation of Proverbs 13:12 is still recognizably biblical with the King James verb form and the sense is given here that Vladimir has been immersed in a Christian culture, but is perhaps not actively pursuing greater knowledge, as would be fitting of Morrison’s conclusion. His consideration of more proactively seeking Christianity is evident, however. Again deep in thought a few moments later he states that “One of the thieves was saved” and suggests to his friend that they could repent, with the implication being that they too could be saved as was the thief who repented (8). Perhaps this suggestion could be seen as witty banter; yet topics as weighty as salvation and suicide that appear continuously suggest preoccupations worth considering. Vladimir’s

persistence with this line of thought gives it more importance than the insults or jokes the men engage in as they try to amuse themselves. Vladimir continues on in the same vein asking Estragon if he has read the Bible and if he remembers the Gospels. He then decides to tell Estragon the story of the two thieves, “crucified at the same time as our Saviour,” one of whom was saved (9).

It is interesting to note that Vladimir’s commentary on the inclusion of this story in the gospels is in fact incorrect. His references here to the thieves are just as faulty as his reference to the proverb. He states that

of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there – or thereabouts – and only one speaks of a thief being saved... Of the other three two don’t mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him... [b]ecause he wouldn’t save them. (9)

According to the four gospel accounts Vladimir is referencing, only John was at the site of the crucifixion while Matthew was most likely “thereabouts,” as Vladimir says, after having deserted him. The other two “Evangelists” to which he refers, Mark and Luke, however, wrote their accounts based on the testimony of Peter and other eyewitnesses. Luke explains this in the second verse of his gospel and the same conclusion can be made about Mark, considering he is first referenced as becoming part of the Christian faith in the book of Acts, which takes place approximately two months *after* the crucifixion. In addition, the thieves did not abuse Jesus because he would not save them; they were not initially seeking salvation from him at all. It was in fact the opposite situation; they began mocking him along with the rest of the crowd for what they believed was his delusional



belief of being the Messiah. It was only after several hours of witnessing the crucifixion alongside themselves that the one thief came to change his mind about this conclusion, as did a centurion in charge of the spectacle as well. As for not mentioning the thieves, Matthew and Mark do speak of two criminals even if they do not specifically call them thieves, a detail that does not quite constitute a contradiction in accounts. Finally, John – the author referenced as never mentioning the thieves – focuses his account entirely on his own interactions with Jesus, considering he was actually standing at the site. After relaying several moments of brief dialogue, he transitions with the word “later” before skipping ahead to the actual death, implying that he knowingly omitted much information. In the last sentence of his gospel he offers his justification for this – among other omissions – as he explains that if every act of Jesus were written down “the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (NIV, John 21:25).

What conclusion can we draw from this erroneous account given by Vladimir of the four gospels within the Bible? If the mistake is Beckett’s, Estragon’s comment that “People are bloody ignorant apes” for believing Luke’s account of the thief being saved takes on an ironic twist in that Beckett himself was ignorant of the matter, offering further evidence that his intention alone cannot take precedence within the act of interpretation. Disregarding the author’s error and taking the account at face value, Vladimir poses a problem that could diminish one’s faith greatly. Yet Vladimir continues his pursuit of salvation and his wait for Godot despite the apparent contradictions, which speaks volumes of the hope he must possess. Finally, the error itself brings us once again to the thoughts of Kierkegaard on the pursuit of truth. Truth for him was found through subjectivity, but he believed ultimate truth stemmed from God alone. Through faith and

“inwardness” one could progress closer and closer to that truth. He writes, “The maximum of attainment within the sphere of faith is to become infinitely interested in the reality of the teacher” (qtd. in Bretall 231). This teacher is God who “does not think, He creates... does not exist, He is eternal” (231). God has no need to ponder or question and has never had to undergo the process of becoming because he has always been. Man, on the other hand, “thinks and exists, and existence separates thought and being, holding them apart from one another in succession” (231). Holding to this view, the most man can hope for is the truth and reality found in subjectivity and the realization that some mysteries cannot be fathomed by the human mind. Whatever Vladimir is troubled by in the accounts of the gospels, his primary concern remains linked to Christ, salvation, and God and his experience of the religious realm.

In many other ways, Vladimir resembles the “nominal Christians” Kierkegaard derides for their faulty knowledge of their own supposed sacred texts. Kierkegaard, like Beckett, critiques Christianity in many ways. He does not, however, reject true Christianity, but rather the cultural version of Christianity that surrounded him. These were two entirely different constructions in his mind. What Beckett may be critiquing, in *Godot* and his other works, would be labeled as nominal Christianity by Kierkegaard: a title procured by the majority of society without true knowledge of what it represents. This true knowledge cannot be found by Vladimir and Estragon in their present situations; it is found only in *Godot*.

Whatever the case in regards to the errors made by Vladimir, attention is drawn to the dilemma of determining how God confers grace and punishment to mankind. In the scenario illustrated by Vladimir, Jesus appears arbitrary in his reward system. This

question of God's justice is revisited throughout the play. Though, in the case of the thieves, Vladimir brings into question God's justice in deciding the eternal destination of each person, many of the episodes following deal with God's justice in human suffering while on earth. When Pozzo returns blind and then comments on "Blind Fortune," he draws a parallel between physical suffering and providence. Other instances could be read in multiple ways, such as when Estragon attempts to guess Pozzo's and Lucky's names and calls out for Abel and then Cain. Pozzo answers to both as he is crying out for help and Estragon concludes, "He's all humanity" (54). The immediate humor of the situation is that Pozzo is answering to both names of men who are known as forming the base of humanity. In a more tragic light, Pozzo represents all of humanity because he is suffering. *Godot* is labeled as a "tragicomedy" not because it has both comic and tragic scenes but because every scene possesses elements of both.

This scene, in combination with the many complaints of physical suffering from both men, and Estragon's complaint that though he "wasn't doing anything" the men still beat him, leads to bewilderment over the cause of the suffering in the world (38). That God is called into question as the culprit, as well as the only one who could give any answers to the dilemma, is confirmed once again at the end of the play as the young boy explains his and his brother's relationships with Godot. He offers the information to the men that he minds the goats and is treated well by "Mr. Godot," while his brother who minds the sheep is beaten (33). In a strange twist on the theme of sheep representing the saved and goats the condemned, the boy demonstrates equal ignorance and confusion as to why he is saved from punishment, possibly both temporal and eternal in this case, while his brother is not.

Related to Vladimir's preoccupation with salvation is a fixation on the part of both main characters with crucifixion and the Christ. Estragon titles Lucky's dance "The Scapegoat's Agony," drawing a correlation between him and Christ, and in a more blatant example, Vladimir says to Pozzo concerning his mistreatment of Lucky, "How dare you!... Crucify him like that!" (27, 23). Given the numerous options available in describing mistreatment, "crucify" stands out as a noteworthy choice. In relation to suffering, the men accept that life gives "[t]o every man his little cross" (40). As they're doing the exercise Vladimir calls "the tree" (attempting to balance on one leg), visual parallels with the crucifixion can be drawn. Alleviating any doubt of a spiritual undertone, Estragon asks, "Do you think God sees me?" and after following Vladimir's advice of closing his eyes and thus staggering about even more, he cries out, "God have pity on me!" (49). Estragon finds no shame in comparing himself to Christ. It is unclear whose suffering is worse of the two tramps, but Estragon clearly claims his as the greater suffering and perpetuates the doubts about God's goodness in relation to this unexplained torment he must endure. Estragon goes so far as to suggest that his pain is worse than that which Christ himself bore:

Vladimir: But you can't go barefoot!

Estragon: Christ did.

Vladimir: Christ! What has Christ got to do with it? You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!

Estragon: All my life I've compared myself to him.

Vladimir: But where he lived it was warm, it was dry!

Estragon: Yes. And they crucified quick. (34)

The misconception that Christ's crucifixion was "quick" aside, the perception that God may be unfair is illustrated once again. Finally, to leave no doubt of the men's fears as to the character of God, as they discuss the possibility of neglecting to wait for Godot, one asks what would happen "If we dropped him?" to which the other replies, "He'd punish us" (59).

This issue of theodicy – the dilemma of how a God perfect in wisdom, power, and goodness can allow suffering in his creation – is precisely the theme of Lucky's speech further into the first act. Norman Mailer refers to Lucky's speech as "the one strangled cry of active meaning in the whole play," and it is easy to see why (Schlueter 32). In a play consisting of quick retorts and flippant dialogue, an extended monologue stands out as potentially more meaningful. Pozzo builds up Lucky's reputation for his ability to think, and though this ability is clearly fading in line with his physical abilities, the remnants of his thoughts still seem to carry some weight. The very word "think" attached to his speaking implies a source of intellect, especially when compared to the many ridiculous physical antics performed by the rest of the characters. Finally, in contrast to his silence, his speech takes on a deeper significance. Just as if the silent and absent Godot were to make a brief appearance and each of his few words would be carefully analyzed, Lucky's brief departure from silent martyrdom requires a close look.

Per Nykrog compares the beginning of Lucky's speech to the posing of the problem of suffering allowed by God in *Theodicy* by Leibniz and the irrational ending that seems to be saying that God "must have created the world for the rocks, not for human beings" to Camus's concept of the Absurd. Nykrog compares the views of the two writers, distinguishing between them in that "Leibniz found that what we perceive as

evil are the relatively minor side effects of causes that, on the whole, generate more good than evil; Camus stated that the presence of man in the world constitutes a situation of absurdity” (296). In other words, Nykrog views Lucky’s speech as the posing of the problem of theodicy with the only possible answer being that life is absurd. In order to make sense of Lucky’s rant, he identifies the “rudimentary logical backbone” of Lucky’s speech as: “Given the existence... of a personal God... who from the heights of divine apathia... loves us dearly... considering... that man [in spite of progress] is shrinking and at the same time is growing smaller... And considering... that in the plains in the mountains by the seas... the air is the same and... the earth...” at which point the logic of the speech breaks down (296). This brief outline, while helpful in identifying a train of thought, does not quite do justice, to the complexity of Lucky’s thoughts.

In “Lucky’s Speech in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*: A Punctuated Sense-Line Arrangement,” Anselm Atkins offers a slightly more complicated dissection of the discourse. He focuses entirely on Lucky’s speech and how it is representational of the play as a whole. Though it is debatable whether this play is about God or not, Lucky’s speech certainly is, which is a significant point in need of negotiation by any reader. Atkins claims that the speech is “as carefully constructed as the play itself, and its meanings reinforce the themes of the play” and, like Nykrog, that the speech not only is absurd, it *argues for absurdity* (426). It offers a view of God, and perhaps therefore the only description of the unseen Godot.

Anselm Atkins dissects Lucky’s speech in much the same way as Nykrog. He weeds out the nonsense and the poetic flares in order to identify his own view of the backbone of the monologue. In addition, he divides the speech into three main sections,

the first addressing questions concerning the existence and qualities of God, the second concerning the plight of mankind, and the third with the disintegration of the world. His paring down of the speech correlates closely with Nykrog's with just a few important distinctions. First, in Part I (as labeled by Atkins), he includes the pieced-together thought: "and suffers...with those who...are plunged in torment, plunged in fire, whose fire flames...will fire the firmament" (428). This portion of the thought process is important in that it depicts a different view of God than his aforementioned qualities of "divine apathia, divine athambia, divine aphasia," of which Nykrog only includes "apathia" and Atkins in fact includes none in his summary of the central syntax, though he does discuss the meaning of each of these given attributes (428). Apathia may come from the Greek word *apátheia*, meaning "insensitivity to suffering," or *apathe*, meaning "unfeeling." Atkins refers to this as "impassibility," and for "athambia" he offers the definition of "unsurprisability" (430). Aphasia is a documented condition characterized by "impairment or loss of the faculty of using or understanding spoken or written language," or in the Greek is defined as "speechlessness." Ascribing these qualities to God fits well with the image of him as an old man with a white beard, a distant and disinterested, maybe even senile, being. Equally fitting is the philosophical and scholastic jargon Lucky uses (or misuses) in order to communicate these thoughts. The phrase included by Atkins that depicts God as suffering with those who are in torment contradicts this view entirely. Does this contradiction qualify Lucky's speech as nonsense or simply capture the process of "thinking" that Lucky is attempting to perform for the men? His musings, though garbled, are not far from the common debates about the characteristics of God. Is he a silent Creator who has left the world to fend for itself,

or is he a compassionate Father who cares for those who are suffering? A small portion discarded as superfluous by both authors that states that God “suffers like the divine Miranda with those who... are plunged in torment” may offer some enlightenment on this question. If “Miranda” is an allusion to the famous literary Miranda from *The Tempest*, an association can be made between the qualities of this character and God. God, as the divine version of Miranda, may be viewed as possessing the same compassion and gentleness of this woman, but perhaps also the same passive spirit that caused her to, for the most part, just allow events to happen around her. This reference would support a view of God as good but not all-powerful.

Atkins also offers an elongated version of what Nykrog notes for the summary of Part II. Adding in punctuation, he considers the beginning of the next segment to be “But not so fast!” (428). Lucky has already outlined the enigma of deity, but he lets his audience know that there are more pieces of the dilemma. He continues, in Atkins’s pared-down version, “and considering, what is more, that, as a result of the labors left unfinished... of Testew and Cunard, it is established beyond all doubt (all other doubt than that which clings to the labors of men)...that man...in spite of the strides of alimention and defecation, wastes and pines, wastes and pines, and...in spite of the strides of physical culture...fades away” (428). Following these conclusions about the futility of human progress, he correlates these ideas with the literal diminishment of man with “the dead loss per head...to the tune of one inch-four ounce per head” (428). Finally, in the third part, as Lucky addresses the disintegration of mankind and the world, his very capacity for speech diminishes as well. What Atkins notes here are the words and phrases that are repeated from the first and second parts that function as adding



emphasis to the previous ideas. He notes in particular: “much more grave,” “in the great cold, the great dark,” “abode of stones,” “alas, alas,” “the skull” and “fading” (429).

Taken together, these phrases leave an impression of the death of mankind. One phrase he fails to note, though it is repeated in full four times and in part once more, is “in spite of the tennis.” This phrase captures the sentiment of Part II that human progress is useless. Atkins does offer some insight on the choice of tennis, as opposed to the other sports, in that it is “a game of back-and-forth, repetitious, and hence resembling cyclical events” such as the play itself and Vladimir and Estragon’s dialogue (431). These two things taken together constitute their very lives and in turn the depiction of existence offered by Beckett.

Lucky’s speech may not offer the most flattering view of God, but it does tend toward confirming the existence of God. Just as God is difficult to define but still exists, so the same can be said for Godot. The parallels between Lucky’s portrayal of God is made clear in the conversation Vladimir has with the messenger boy about Godot at the end of Act Two:

Vladimir: What does he do, Mr. Godot?

... Boy: He does nothing, Sir.

... V: Has he a beard, Mr. Godot?... Fair or ... (he hesitates)... black?

Boy: I think it’s white, Sir.

...Vladimir: Christ have mercy on us! (59)

Vladimir, who has held on to the hope of salvation given by a gracious God, has now been given reason to doubt. If Godot is the same white-bearded man of Lucky’s speech, then he also may be as unfeeling and silent.

If *Godot* is a play about existence, then it seems to be raising questions about why suffering is a part of existence. Like much post-WWII literature, this play leaves its audience with the feeling that the world is a painful place to reside and leaves ambiguous the reasons for this. Published two years later in 1956, Archibald MacLeish's Pulitzer Prize winning play *J.B.* examines the same theological dilemmas. Though MacLeish chose the format of the retelling of a biblical tale whereas Beckett conveyed his sense of the world using the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd, both reveal an attitude toward the world shared by many of that time period that Esslin describes as "deep disillusionment, even despair, over the collapse of so many certainties about the world" (MLA 43). In fact, MacLeish explains that the "idea of the play came to him amid bomb-ruins during World War II and grew out of the whole burden of horror and guilt in our violent age" (Sickels 211). In this time of questioning, MacLeish revisits the classic tale of questioning God.

This play takes the Old Testament story of Job and places it first in the context of a circus act in the time period of the mid-1950's. Already comparisons between *J.B.* and *Waiting for Godot* can be made as they both attempt to blend elements of the tragic with the comic in a demonstration of the inanity of life. Estragon twice compares their evening encounter with Pozzo and Lucky as a circus, and the scene with the passing of the hats in *Godot* is straight out of a Vaudevillian comic routine (23). *J.B.* simply makes the intention of the setting and the dramatically comic elements more apparent. By viewing *J.B.* as an unaware actor in a play, the role of God as the mastermind behind human lives emerges more clearly. *J.B.* takes on the identity of a pawn in a game of chess or a marionette with God pulling the strings. This view of the relationship between God and

man is even more cynical than that of the silent God in *Waiting for Godot*, but both share the negative attitude toward the ignorance and helplessness of mankind in God's plans for the world.

The play begins with the Prologue in which Mr. Zuss and Nickles discuss the situation of Job and his family. The abandoned circus tent is scattered with "[c]lothes that have the look of vestments of many churches and times," adding an allegorical feeling to the scenario (2). Zuss dons a mask in order to play God, and Nickles likewise wears a Satan-mask to play his opposite. Much of the dialogue and many of the details come directly from the biblical text, but the most notable deviations occur when the issue of suffering arises, particularly the grief experienced by Job and his wife over the deaths of their children. Unlike the original account, in which all the children die at once in the collapse of a home, in the play *J.B.* each child dies a very modern death. After witnessing J.B. and Sarah enjoying Thanksgiving dinner with their beautiful and happy family of five blonde children, the progression of tragedies begins. David becomes a casualty of World War II, Mary and Jonathan are killed by a drunk driver, Rebecca is found in a lumber truck after having been raped and murdered, and Ruth is killed in some kind of explosion that also destroyed the bank at which J.B. works. These deaths are clearly representative of the type of suffering those throughout the world in the 1950s are undergoing.

Zuss and Nickles indicate that rather than being the almost superhumanly righteous man that Job is in the Bible, J.B. is an everyman. Zuss remarks that "there's always / Someone playing Job" and Nickles adds: "Millions and millions of mankind / Burned, crushed, broken, mutilated, / Slaughtered, and for what? For thinking!" (12). He

specifically mentions London, Dresden, and Hiroshima – obviously all examples from the WWII era of sites of unaccountable suffering. As the conversation concerning J.B.’s suffering continues, they move from their point that every human being has the potential to suffer as Job does to the same kind of questioning of God’s justice that is found in the book of Job as well as *Waiting for Godot*:

Job is everywhere we go,  
His children dead, his work for nothing,  
Counting his losses, scraping his boils,  
Discussing himself with his friends and physicians,  
Questioning everything – the times, the stars,  
His own soul, God’s providence. (13)

On the matter of God’s providence and justice, the two narrators have much to say. They compare justice to “a face...[l]ike blinded eyes” and “skies... [o]f stone” (17). The imagery recalls to mind both Lucky’s speech and the “blind fortune” of *Godot*. Nickles refers to God’s face on Zuss’s mask as having a look of “cold complacency” and he remarks about humanity that, “Every human creature born / Is born into the bright delusion / Beauty and loving-kindness care for him” (20, 49). Nickles is clearly the more cynical of the two, but this attitude could be the result of his playing the role of Satan. Just as Lucky’s personal stance on the question of theodicy is unclear, as he seems to be more likely simply demonstrating the questions with which mankind wrestles, Nickles expresses those same kind of doubts. Quoting an unknown source, he articulates these doubts using someone else’s words:

‘If God is God He is not good,

If God is good He is not God;  
Take the even, take the odd,  
I would not sleep here if I could  
Except for the little green leaves in the wood...' (11)

He succeeds in these few lines in summing up the overall dilemma J.B. – and thus, all of humanity – faces, as well as offering the same conclusion that J.B. and Sarah draw at the end of the play.

As the suffering increases with the addition of physical pain, J.B. finally reaches his breaking point. In two different conversations with his wife he reveals his desire to die and his doubts about God's justice:

J.B.: (a whisper) God, let me die!

...Sarah: (her voice dead) You think He'd help you / Even to that?

...J.B.: What I can't bear is the blindness –

Meaninglessness – the numb blow

Fallen in the stumbling night.

...Sarah: Has death no meaning? Pain no meaning? (101, 108)

Remaining true to the original story of Job, J.B.'s wife leaves him, his "comforters" who offer no real comfort or answers come, they encounter God, and Job repents of his doubts about the authority of God. MacLeish's distaste for this conclusion is evident, however, as the two narrators discuss the events. Zuss and Nickles are disgusted by the outcome of the "play" they are witnessing, Zuss because God's authority is still being undermined and Nickles because he has not accepted God's enigmatic answers:

Zuss: As though Job's suffering were justified

Not by the Will of God but Job's

Acceptance of God's Will

...Is God to be *forgiven*?

Nickles: (violently) Job won't take it! Job's won't touch it!

Job will fling is in God's face

With half his guts to make it spatter! He'd rather suffocate in dung –

(139, 147)

The switch from discussing “J.B.” to “Job” in this particular conversation reveals an aversion to the biblical account itself. Zuss and Nickles voice both sides of the argument against accepting God's speech. On the one hand, if God has supreme authority and is perfect in every way, why does his response need to be accepted by humans? On the other hand, if humans are the ones enduring the suffering God allows, should they not be given a more thorough explanation?

Though J.B. does utter the same words of repentance as Job, MacLeish has managed to alter the ultimate reaction we see from this character. He and his wife share the same perspective as they discuss their lives after she returns to him. Sarah finds a blooming forsythia “growing in the ashes / Gold as though it did not know” which symbolizes the vitality of the human race that continues on despite the “ashes” of the world in which they live (150). As for God's response, Sarah remarks, “You wanted justice, didn't you? / There isn't any. There's the world... You wanted justice and there was none – Only love” (151). J.B., apparently in agreement, states about God that “He does not love. He / Is (152). Sarah responds with, “But we do. That's the wonder” (152). In this short exchange they have both revealed that they do not accept God's answer that

his omniscience insures justice and that he works out of love. They have placed the worth of humans above that of God. Continuing with this humanistic perspective, they have one final interchange regarding their desire to persist in life:

Sarah: Blow on the coal of the heart.

The candles in churches are out.

The lights have gone out in the sky.

Blow on the coal of my heart.

And we'll see by and by.

*J.B. has joined her, lifting and straightening the chairs.*

We'll see where we are.

The wit won't burn and the wet soul smoulders.

Blow on the coal of my heart and we'll know...

We'll know...

*The light increases, plain white daylight from the door, as they work.*

(153)

J.B. has clearly not drawn the same conclusion about God's sovereignty as Job once did. Echoing Sarah's sentiments that there is no hope offered by the church or the metaphoric "lights...in the sky" referring to a deity above, J.B. adds that the intellectual (in a play on words between "wit" and "wick") and spiritual sides of humanity will not redeem them either. Only the human heart can contribute to the light that symbolizes understanding and the flame that symbolizes sustained life.

Eleanor Sickels writes that J.B. comes to the realization at the end of the play that “he cannot depend on God or the Cosmos for justice, but must depend instead upon his human integrity to face whatever comes, and that he must find his values not in material prosperity but in love” (210). God, in the form of the “Distant Voice” that has also been filling in lines for Zuss and Nickles, has answered J.B. with words “of beauty and power, but scarcely of justice and love” (212). Finally, Sickels notes that although J.B. does repent as Job did, he does not come to worship God like Job did.

The play recommends humanism, not existentialism, and surprisingly not Christianity or religion of any kind. Mary Frances Thelen quotes MacLeish as saying that “the play has no message. I hope and believe that” (202). He claims, much like Beckett and Camus, to have simply created, as Thelen phrases it, “a study of human experience, an exploration of how a man of our time might react to the extremes of misfortune and pain” (202). Both Beckett and MacLeish claim to have no intended meaning or proposed worldview, yet their protagonists’ responses to the issue of theodicy imply particular perspectives on life. After presenting the same dilemma in each play, especially through the speech of Lucky and the dialogue of Zuss and Nickles, the separate pairs have found remarkably different means of reacting to the problem of pain and existence.

While the famously bleak *Waiting for Godot* offers an answer based in theology to this question, the biblically-based *J.B.* offers an ironically humanistic answer that obliterates God from the picture and persuades the audience to find meaning in loving relationships with other human beings. Contrasting *J.B.* with *Waiting for Godot* offers an example of what the latter play would have done if it were in fact supporting an



existentialist or humanistic ideology. *Waiting for Godot* portrays the final scene with J.B. and Sarah throughout its duration. Two lives have been reduced to nothing in each; two people face the severity of life together. Yet the deduction reached by Vladimir and Estragon is not that they can only depend upon their own love and determination or any other quality already found in their own lives, but that they *must* wait for Godot.

The interpretation of the play as either dismal or optimistic is often revealed through its performance as the directors take liberties. For whatever reason, the San Quentin inmates found renewed hope through the performance of *Godot* that they witnessed. Likewise, a production at Huntington University offered an interesting enactment of the first and final moments of *Godot* that bespoke a certain tone. In the first scene the two men are sitting upon a rock very close to one another and immediately begin conversing once the play begins. In the final scene, however, they stand at opposite ends of the stage staring off into space in different directions. This scene offers the visual representation of this particular director's conclusion that these men did not decide that clinging to one another is one's only hope. While *J.B.* offers the stamina of the human heart as the only cause for the perseverance of the human race, *Waiting for Godot* has already revealed many times that the only reason for Vladimir and Estragon not to hang themselves is that Godot may come. Even in Vladimir's comment early in the play that "hope deferreth make something sick," he has alluded to the sickness of their hearts as we supply the forgotten word (Beckett 8).

Nykrog writes that "Beckett leaves no doubt that these two simple-minded gamblers will be left there alone for all eternity, holding the bag after a cruel but sustained hoax closely resembling the one perpetrated by means of the Gospels. They

may not, indeed, have lost much... for their existence before they took up their painful waiting does not seem to have been very rewarding” (Nykrog 294). It is this conclusion that ironically demonstrates that life, if Godot never comes, is meaningless, if the only two options are a life of suffering or a life of delusion. Nykrog draws the conclusion that Christianity must be a hoax if the two men continue to be offered only traces of Godot rather than the being himself, yet that exact situation that they are in is what Kierkegaard recommends all men to come to in his Christian existentialist belief system.

Kierkegaard recognizes the problem of suffering as well, including it in the existential dilemma. He writes that it “may seem impossible to bring into connection with the thought of God, all this earthly distress, all the confusion in which he may be involved” and he even includes in this list of incomprehensible elements “the necessity of diversion, of rest, as well as of the night’s sleep” (qtd in Bretall 245). When considering the association of man with God, physical suffering, as well as ordinary limitations, appears nonsensical. Kierkegaard’s response to this dilemma is that “the movement... to Christianity is the movement of the one who recognizes that humanly speaking he has exhausted his possibilities and who knows that if further possibilities...are to be reestablished, it must be through God himself” (34). Suffering and limitations bring mankind to such realizations. The two men have discovered that whatever life they have experienced thus far is meaningless, but this has only pushed them more toward the hope of Godot’s return. Kierkegaard continues his discussion of searching for knowledge of God through subjectivity, explaining that “God is a subject, and therefore exists only for subjectivity in inwardness... every moment is wasted in which [man] does not have God” (qtd. in Bretall 211). Clarifying his comment on these “wasted” moments, he adds that

“the only way in which an existing individual comes into relation with God is when the dialectical contradiction brings passion to the point of despair, and helps him to embrace God with the ‘category of despair’” (211). This struggle with despair and realization of meaninglessness in life is, according to Kierkegaard, the only true way to come to attain faith.

Kierkegaard even recommends solitude as a means to finding inwardness, a situation that Vladimir and Estragon represent. Kierkegaard criticizes the approach to life that many take in which, after sensing this necessary despair, an individual “by diversions, or in other ways, e.g. by work and busy occupations as means of distraction, he seeks by his own effort to preserve an obscurity about his condition” of despair whether consciously or subconsciously (350). Vladimir and Estragon oscillate between this type of diversion-seeking and the true confrontation of the self through inwardness that Kierkegaard recommends. They are a representation of the typical prototypical struggle Kierkegaard describes himself as undergoing throughout his lifetime. Strangely enough, even their bouts with suicidal thoughts demonstrate a progression toward faith, according to Kierkegaard. He remarks that “a man in committing suicide, the more intense is his despair, in comparison with that of the man whose soul, compared with his, is in a confused and obscure condition” (351). Though not advocating suicide, Kierkegaard does applaud those who achieve the “heightening of the consciousness” that accompanies certain contemplations of suicide, such as Vladimir and Estragon’s (351). Denouncing the “majority of men” who “never really manage in their whole life to be more than they were in childhood and youth, namely, immediacy with the addition of a little dose of self-reflection,” he praises those who enter into the battle with existential

despair (357). Each man must come to the point in which his despair reaches “the metamorphosis in which the consciousness of the eternal in the self breaks through, so that the battle might begin which either potentiates despair to a higher level, or leads to faith” (359). As Vladimir and Estragon reject suicide twice in preference of continuing to wait for Godot, they have demonstrated that metamorphosis that leads to faith.

Vladimir and Estragon are attaining that faith as they are living in the absurd as defined by Kierkegaard – living simultaneously in the finite and infinite. Perhaps this is why the concept of time has no meaning to the men. Regarding time, Kierkegaard writes:

For a finite being immersed in time and becoming, the eternal may be construed as a possible future...freedom in actuality [is experienced] in relation to possibility, not only in the temporal future but in the subjective anticipation of ‘the eternal’ as an unknown future...In a religious mode of being, it is the subjective passionate anticipation of a future eternity that establishes the eternal validity of subjective existence... Existence involves a repetitious movement toward the realization of an ideal possibility that entails transitions from possibility to actuality in time. (73-74)

Faith by definition involves “possibility” rather than actuality. Faith is timeless in the sense that the realization of what one hopes for has no relation to the time it requires to achieve it. Nykrog draws parallels between *Godot* and two chapters in the gospel of Matthew, but perhaps the second letter written by Peter may better describe the Christian perspective revealed within the play. In 2 Peter 3:4-5, he writes

you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation. (NIV)

Explaining God’s sense of time, he adds further on in verse eight, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.” Only in this verse in the entire Bible is God’s timelessness referenced, and in very few places is his declaration of a future return considered a “promise.” More often in the Bible the Lord’s coming is phrased as a warning. Even in the remainder of this chapter of the book of Peter, the destruction of the earth is mentioned several times and the word “fire” is used three times to describe this event. Lucky’s own thrice-mentioned fire from his speech carries the same apocalyptic feeling though lacking the same hopefulness. What could be seen as a contradiction within the play – the two men’s hope mingled with fear – is perfectly represented in these passages. What Nykrog refers to as a “cruel caricature of the Christian illusion,” Kierkegaard would refer to as the paradox of faith (299).

In fact, Nykrog admits that even if the option of Christianity does not appear overwhelmingly appealing, it is far more attractive than the alternatives touched on in the play. He contrasts the existences of Vladimir and Estragon with that of Pozzo and Lucky. For him, the two main characters represent those hanging on to the out-of-date perspective of religion indicated by their refusal to move down the road of progress in which they sit. On the other hand, Pozzo and Lucky, who cannot seem to stop for long on the road as they are headed toward new destinations, are more like those embracing

the journey on which science and technology is leading. After comparing these two ways of life, Nykrog concludes, “In Didi and Gogo, Beckett gives a cruel caricature of the Christian illusion, but it is nowhere near as cruel as the caricature he gives in Pozzo and Lucky of what had once been secular humanism. Juxtaposed as it is here to the rotting cadaver of what was once progressivism, the bleached bones of the long-lost Christian hope come to appear almost attractive” (299). If this is the conclusion drawn when one does not believe in the existence of a Christian God, the play surely represents an optimistic faith if one does read Godot as a symbol for an existing God.

In his final chapter of the work, “Anxiety as Saving through Faith,” Kierkegaard writes, “Therefore he who in relation to guilt is educated by anxiety will rest only in the Atonement” (qtd. in Hong 138). While many may view the existence of Vladimir and Estragon with a shudder, Kierkegaard found great educative and redemptive value in such suffering. In the original French version, a line is included that suggests that the two men concluded that the rest they may find in Godot would be worth their struggle of waiting. Nykrog translates this line “Ce soir on couchera peut-être chez lui, au chaud, au sec, le ventre plein, sur la paille. Ça vaut la peine qu’on attende. Non?” as: “Perhaps this evening one will lay down at his place, with the heat, dryness, the full belly, on the straw. It is worth the sorrow until one waits, is it not?”(309). The play leads the audience to not only ask “What are they waiting for?” but also “What is *worth* waiting for?” The two tramps could have had love, marriage, friendships, money, health, adventures, possibly success and happiness galore, but they have consciously chosen, and continue to choose moment by moment, to trade this all in for one hope. Their actions revolve around their hope for Godot, never acting as a substitute for this hope. Though Pozzo continues down

the road of human progress – only to be reduced to less than Vladimir and Estragon in a possible statement about progress similar to that of Lucky’s speech – Vladimir and Estragon have rejected this path of life and chosen, as Kierkegaard terms it, “infinite resignation.” In other words, they *almost* have the faith that could lead to the salvation they desire.

Nykrog writes that Beckett has been called “the Job of our time, a Job who has never reached a reconciliation with the world” (310). Likewise, Harold Bloom, in a book about geniuses in literary history, comments on Beckett’s lack of faith. In a section in which Bloom includes both Kierkegaard and Beckett as the geniuses who exemplify the quality of breaking through apparent limits of consciousness to find further illumination, he distinguishes Beckett from Kierkegaard by his lack of faith: “Beckett’s Protestantism was, for him, a dead mythology, but his sensibility remained darkly Protestant. If there was a core to the eddy, it was a Protestantism emptied out of all faith and all hope, but not of *caritas*” (220). Perhaps the author could not find it within himself to believe in the ideology, but still represented the hope of God as the only hope worth living for. Beckett most likely did reach the conclusion in his lifetime that the Christian faith is merely a hoax, but *Waiting for Godot* does not proclaim that message. *Waiting for Godot* may not have been written in order to recommend faith, but it does illustrate it well. It is left to the audience to decide if Godot – or God – is worth the wait.

## Conclusion

In Sprintzen's analysis of the existential dimension of *The Stranger*, he notes that "Camus explores five sources of existential dislocation: society, time, nature, others, and death" (53). Each of these concepts is addressed in some way in *Waiting for Godot* as well, as I have shown through an examination of Vladimir's speech below. Though Mersault remains stable in his mentality, Vladimir and Estragon struggle with the disorientation they experience in pursuit of an understanding of life. Vladimir's longest speech, made after Pozzo and Lucky have departed for the second time and immediately before the messenger boy comes again, captures this struggle. His comments here most clearly demonstrate the passion and inwardness that accompany the process of becoming as Kierkegaard describes it, as well as the paradoxical nature of life in general and personal existence that both Kierkegaard and Beckett explore.

### Society and Others:

Vladimir: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now?  
To-morrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of to-day?  
[recites the basic events of the day] But in all that what truth will there  
be? (58)

As seen in the characters of Mersault in *The Stranger* and Garcin in *No Exit*, the existential standpoint affects an individual's relationships with others. In the case of Mersault, Camus demonstrates not what believing in existentialist leads one to do, but what the recognition of the truth about the world – as expressed in existentialist thought – leads one to do. Mersault is shown as someone who sees through falsities of society and leads a life unaffected by such illusions as social conventions and emotional ties.



Vladimir and Estragon are more tentative in their attempts to determine how to relate to the outside world. Vladimir acknowledges his desire for “truth” in the passage above and wonders how the mundane events of his life, including his interactions with the passersby, relate to such truth. He wonders at his own ignorance and his culpability in allowing others to suffer while he is unaware.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard also addresses the complexity of the responsibility and relationship of each individual to mankind as a whole. Referring to ethics as “the universal,” he explains that any ethical principle should be able to be universalized to all mankind in all situations and still remain ethical (qtd. in Hong 99). This viewpoint is found within the works of many philosophers, with Kant perhaps making the principle most clear in his “categorical imperative.” Kierkegaard, as usual, searches for the paradoxical element of this imperative when combined with faith. Using Abraham’s decision to sacrifice his son Isaac as an example, he states that “the single individual is higher than the universal” but, paradoxically, must be “reconciled... with the universal” (99). By faith, Abraham transgressed the ethical universal because his actions could not be universalized, and yet attained salvation nonetheless. If Abraham is a righteous man, then we “stand before a paradox that is higher than all mediations” because it contains a “teleological suspension of the ethical” (99). To remain loyal to the Christian faith requires an unwavering devotion to ethics, yet the faith itself may also require one to defy those ethics.

Vladimir’s and Estragon’s ethics are difficult to determine. They demonstrate a conscience and show periodic kindness to one another, yet do little to help Lucky or Pozzo. It is their isolation from society that serves as the arena for Kierkegaard’s

paradox, however. This isolation allows them to move toward existential truth and faith, and thus is an example of the importance of the individual above the universal. Yet the men are faced with the dilemma of reconciling their lifestyles with the demands of the ethical when brought into contact with others. As often seems the case with the paradoxes presented by both Kierkegaard and Beckett, this prioritizing of the ethical and religious may best be illustrated as a continuum with pure religious devotion possible only in isolation on the one end and self-sacrificing altruism on the other.

#### Nature and Time:

[about Estragon] He'll know nothing. He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot. (Pause.) Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (He listens.) (58)

The concept of time as seen in *Godot* aligns more closely with that seen in other absurdist theater than modern existential fiction. In explanation of the usage of time within this type of theater, Esslin quotes a poem by a French author recommending that the dramatist use his creative liberties to “use/All the illusions at his disposal” including the privilege of “no longer ha[ving] to reckon / With time and space” (8). This disregard for temporal constraints is evident throughout the play, but a debate over how one is to view time also emerges. In the above passage, Vladimir reiterates Pozzo’s sentiment regarding the brevity of life. Pozzo claimed that the human race “give[s] birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more” (57). Yet Vladimir appears to disagree with Pozzo’s conclusion that life passes by in “one second” (57). Vladimir associates

birth with death, but adds that the birth is “difficult,” the delivery is done “lingeringly,” and that everyone has “time to grow old” (58). A dialectical conception of time is set up through these commentaries on life.

Kierkegaard writes in *Concept of Anxiety*, “It is only with Christianity that sensuousness, temporality, and the moment can be properly understood [by contrast with eternity], because only with Christianity does eternity become essential” (qtd. in Hong 149). If these aspects of time become clearer as one comes to a greater understanding of faith, then Vladimir displays this acquisition of insight. Pozzo’s bitter thoughts toward temporality and the moment were in direct relation to the suffering involved within them. If this life is all we are given, and it is filled with processes leading to the deterioration of our bodies, our joy – life that *feels* like life – becomes all the more fleeting. For Vladimir, possibly thinking in accordance with Kierkegaardian thought, temporal life becomes a “lingering” part of the eternal life as well as a birth process that only truly ends in death. As Kierkegaard phrases it, “time is, then, infinite succession,” and, thus, each moment does not equal an “atom of time” but an “atom of eternity” (150-51).

If Vladimir understands these ideas, he may perhaps be a representation of the knight of infinite resignation found in *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard defines the “knight of infinite resignation” as he who has “resigned everything infinitely, and then grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd” (97). He is able to live both in the present and the eternal, whereas the knights of faith are described as wavering when they land once again on earth. Vladimir, however, may possess the “paradoxical and humble courage” that is required in order “to grasp the whole temporal realm now by virtue of the absurd,” which Kierkegaard equates with “the courage of faith”(98).

Finally, idea of suffering links the attempt to understand time with an individual's relation to Nature. In Vladimir's estimation of Estragon, his friend will be most concerned with the suffering he has undergone and the food he will eat, and in this limited perspective can be said to "know nothing." Earlier, Estragon suggested that the solution to their hollow existence was to "turn resolutely towards Nature," to which Vladimir replied that "We've tried that" (41). Unlike in Mersault's example of a life in which actions are determined entirely by Nature, Vladimir shares the Christian existentialist perspective that there is a truth beyond one's own natural impulses and sensations.

Death:

But habit is a great deadener. [looking at E.] At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (Pause.) I can't go on! (Pause) What have I said? (58)

Vladimir has just finished speaking of the brevity of life and the cries of mankind due to suffering when, after pausing, he concludes, "But habit is a great deadener." If he is contrasting the type of existence he has just described with one that is characterized by deadness, it seems that his conclusion must be that through suffering, one experiences life.

This deduction fits perfectly with Kierkegaard's conclusions that anxiety and passion result in determining the essential truths necessary for authentic existence. He writes in *Concept of Anxiety*, "At its highest, inwardness in an existing subject is passion; truth as a paradox corresponds to passion, and that truth becomes a paradox is grounded precisely in its relation to an existing subject" (qtd. in Hong 205). An idea in and of itself cannot be said to be paradoxical; the self-contradiction relies on the presence of a self.

For example, the classic biblical paradox, that when one is weak then one is strong, must be applied to an individual in order to become not just a contradiction in terms but a paradoxical truth. Beckett's shape of ideas that he is attempting to convey through this play must be taken to a subjective level in order to move from contradictory ideas to existential truth. According to Kierkegaard, eternal essential truth, found only in God, is not a paradox; it becomes one only after being related to an existing person. Moreover, "each time existing is accentuated the paradox becomes clearer" (210). Experiencing the suffering involved in life leads to this accentuation of existence through subjective experiences.

Vladimir appears to be experiencing the passion of which Kierkegaard speaks as he wrestles with the desire to end his life ("I can't go on") and then berates himself for the thought ("What have I said?"). According to Kierkegaard, this battle will continue until death itself, as it is only in death that one finds finality of existence. Up until this point one is continually becoming, but in death this process is complete because it is unable to continue.

In addition to the five areas of existential dislocation that Vladimir experiences, he also references one more component found in Kierkegaardian rather than modern existentialism. The vague mention that "someone else" is watching him and drawing conclusions about his awareness of truth suggests the belief in a deity figure. As seen throughout the play, the consideration of Godot affects Vladimir and Estragon's perspective on life, decisions, and actions. Viewing Godot as a God-figure, we can see how much faith affects their existential "process of becoming."

Among the many paradoxes explored in the works of Kierkegaard, faith is his primary fixation. Even the vagueness of the character of Godot fits precisely with Kierkegaard's explanation of the following paradox: "If I am able to comprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith" (207). It is the absence of Godot, the lack of tangibles available to the men, that calls forth hope in the same way that the indiscernible nature of God necessitates faith.

Beckett has an equal obsession with paradox, as he discusses in regards to his interest in the St. Augustine quote pertaining to the two thieves. Bert States contends that this quote to which Beckett often refers has never been found, but that it agrees with documented statements by Augustine about God's inscrutable will to give grace. States quotes Augustine as coming "closest to paradox" when he wrote, "Let the good man fear lest he perish through pride; let the evil man not despair of his many wicked acts" (3). Illustrating this as a continuum with despair and equilibrium on either ends, States places hope as the equilibrium. Gordon also quotes Augustine's thoughts on hope: "God by deferring our hope, stretches our desire; by the desiring, stretches the mind; by stretching makes it more capacious... Let us therefore desire, for we shall be filled" (124). He views the tree on the second day with its new leaves as "an emblem of the promise of Godot and the spirit of human endurance, of the careful balance between hope maintained and hope deferred" (124). Vladimir's muddled quotation of the proverb "Hope deferred makes a heart sick" is called to mind. The concept of hope is undoubtedly a concern within the play as the hope of Godot's arrival affects every aspect of the men's existences. Perhaps within the lives of Vladimir and Estragon the balance between a sickened weary heart and a confirmation of objective truth is shown. They represent the

merging to the contradictory, the two opposite ends of the spectrum, that when brought together produce a paradoxical truth.

Because of the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of the text, many scholars conclude that there is no meaning to be found. Yet a paradox by definition is a statement of truth, however perplexing or complicated. States quotes Niels Bohr as saying, “The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth” (113). Within *Waiting for Godot* are found many such profound truths.

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