

# Seeking Meaning in the Nihilism and Absurdity: The Exploration of Existentialism in *Hamlet* and *Waiting for Godot*

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**Abstract:** William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, though created in different eras, share a common theme of existentialism in their own unique ways. This paper analyses both works that depict the inner struggle of human being and their questioning of existence when confronting the absurdity of the world and the nihilism of life.

**Keywords:** existentialism, *Hamlet*, *Waiting for the Godot*, absurdity, nihilism

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## 1. Introduction

*Hamlet*, created at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is one of William Shakespeare's most famous plays, in which *Hamlet's* candor in the face of absurdity, courageous commitment, and actively free choices all reflect the true nature of existentialism. While Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, known as the "quintessence of existentialism", is written in the aftermath of the Second World War and focuses on Vladimir and Estragon's endless *waiting for Godot* in a desolate landscape, trapped in existential anguish and unanswered questions. This paper will combine the two scripts and carry out three aspects: the protagonists' facing up to the nihilism and absurdity, self-selection in dilemma and seeking meaning with responsibility. Thus, it could, to some extent, add more references to the study of existentialism in drama by illustrating their eternal pursuit of meaning of life.

## 2. Facing up to the Nihilism and Absurdity

Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the most famous existentialists around the world, once announced that the world was absurd and life was painful. And evidently, both plays show that the protagonists confront the absurdity and nihilism of the world via the plot and setting.

In *Hamlet*, *Hamlet* was a noble Danish prince and received a favorable education at the University of Wittenberg in Germany, the center of the new culture at that time. Therefore, he was deeply inspired by humanism and held bright ideals for mankind. However, everything changed as he overheard the news of his father's unexpected death. When he returned home to attend his father's funeral, he was overwhelmed by the coronation of his uncle Claudius as a new king following with the wedding of Claudius to his own mother (the former queen Gertrude) which was regarded as an incestuous affair. Worse still, the country was in trouble internally and externally with a treacherous court and an army of Norwegians watching intently. Later, the fate of his friend's betrayal, his lover Ophelia's self-murder and his mother's death by drinking poisoned wine accidentally made his existence more restricted, all of which displayed the absurdity *Hamlet* faced.

What's more, the plot and setting of *Waiting for Godot* also embody a sense of absurdity and nihilism. To begin with, the whole scenic setting is "A country road. A tree. Evening" which provided an empty space. The tree, is not so much a symbol of spring as a metaphor for the wasteland [1] that was neither historically conditioned nor socially appropriated. So is the case at the beginning of Act II: "Next day. Same time. Same place". Actually, the scene was minimally bear with almost nothing. The main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, were *waiting for Godot*, during which they sat around by varied sorts of meaningless tricks like arguing, planning to hang themselves, gnawing on carrots and so on. For example, when Estragon fell asleep, Vladimir waked him up and said "I felt lonely".

In addition, the play describes that Pozzo and his servant Lucky, after only one night, one of them was blind and the other was mute, showing a totally alienated world and seemingly suggesting a society that were falling apart.

## 3. Self-selecting Amidst the Dilemma

Another interpretation that existentialism can make of *Hamlet* and *Waiting for Godot* is the self-selection that the protagonists made amidst the dilemma. In existentialism, self-choice is seen as central to the rights of the individual and an essential part of human life, though it is often accompanied by difficulties and anxieties.

When Prince *Hamlet* discovered that it was his uncle Claudius who killed his father, and that his mother had been having an adulterous affair with his uncle, *Hamlet* was caught up in an anguishing struggle and complex thinking. At that time, he was full of doubts about life, feeling that there's no point in living and suicide could be a better choice. But at the same time, he hesitated, he held a fear of death and was afraid to go to hell. Therefore, the most popular monologue appeared:

"To be, or not to be, that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take arms against a sea of troubles." [2]

He could choose to surrender to the present reality — accepting his mother's persuasion and bowing down to his uncle; or he could choose to fight against it — reclaiming the throne and restoring the heyday. In other words, caught in a moral and emotional conflict, *Hamlet* must choose whether to tolerate the injustice and betrayal of the world or to retaliate against Claudius. Furthermore, *Hamlet's* indecision and procrastination in the play can be interpreted as the anxiety of self-selection in existentialism. Eventually, the reverence for freedom and reason in his character made him choose to avenge. The dilemma highlights the significance of self-selection in existentialism, in which *Hamlet* was no longer shackled by fate, but became the creator of his own destiny through autonomous decisions. [3]

In *Waiting for Godot*, to begin with, Vladimir and Estragon were trapped in an inhospitable setting waiting for the arrival of Godot. However, Godot never appeared, and they are plunged into doubt and despair about their existence. In my view, the state of waiting can be seen as a symbol of the dilemma of self-selection in existentialism. Beckett neither expresses pessimism nor hope but rather than an ambiguous and suspend view. [4] Even in the absence of purpose, Vladimir and Estragon must still decide how to confront and deal with the absurdity. For example, there was a conversation between Vladimir and Estragon, in which they discussed how to hang themselves and who should go first. Though the dialogues seemed to be messy ones, these could also be regarded as a specific situation where they planned to choose and the inner struggles that no one was willing to die first. Actually, they had three choices before them: giving up waiting, suicide and keeping waiting, after various attempts, they chose to wait which is affirmed in existentialism because it displays great courage and freedom to choose like Sisyphus. They waited for Godot, as if waiting for some kind of hope to come.

#### 4. Seeking Meaning with Responsibility

"Existence precedes essence" is a core concept in existentialist philosophy, which argues that we humans do not have a fixed essence or purpose; instead, we should create our essence through choices and actions, underscoring human freedom to take responsibility to create our own meaning.

As the ghost of his father told the truth about the death of himself, *Hamlet* became realize the enormity and multiplicity of his responsibility. Then, he just took on the heavy responsibility of not only avenging his father's death, but also liberating the Denmark. Though at first, when facing the existence of absurd, *Hamlet* was hesitant to take action immediately, the reality that his enemy's repeated murderous attempts sharpened his determination to take revenge and he eventually got rid of his melancholy and worries, killing Claudius in a sword fight.

As for Vladimir and Estragon, despite their seemingly pointless existence, they maintained the ability to act autonomously to bring their choices to fruition. While they were in absolute boredom of the despondent life, they were making efforts to be happy. When Vladimir and Estragon tend to be inactive in front of Pozzo's crying for help to get up from the ground, Vladimir burst into an eloquent speech: "Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! Let us do something, while we have the chance!" Clearly, Vladimir was well conscious of their problems and willing to change. During the waiting, they also took on the responsibility associated with their relationship and interactions with each other just like this kind of dialogue:

"Estragon: Let's go

Vladimir: No, we can't

Estragon: Why?

Vladimir: We are *waiting for Godot*

Estragon: Ah (desperately)" [5]

To some extent, they depended on each other to face adversity, which emphasizes the responsibility between individuals in existentialism. Thus, waiting becomes the real process as well as the real meaning of their existence. [6]

#### 5. Philosophy in the Eternal Struggle

In the works "*Hamlet*" and "*Waiting for Godot*," we glimpse a profound and layered exploration of existentialism, portraying the eternal struggle of humanity to find meaning in the nihilism and absurdity.

In "*Hamlet*," the prince of Denmark was engulfed in torment under the ghost of his father and the burden of vengeance.

His famous soliloquy, “To be, or not to be,” is a philosophical inquiry pondering the value of life and the sense of death. *Hamlet*’s wanderings in pain and perplexity are not just a reflection on his own fate but a deep dive into the human soul. His choices, hesitations, and agonies resonate as an existentialist revelation of the nature and human free will.

“*Waiting for Godot*,” on the other hand, presents a different philosophical vista. Behind the phenomenon world, there is no such thing as the essential world.[7]Vladimir and Estragon spent their days in endless waiting, their cyclical and absurd dialogues reflecting the aimlessness of human existence. And the perpetual absence of Godot seemed to underscore the futility of seeking life’s meaning. Yet, it’s in this waiting that Beckett subtly explores the absurdity and loneliness of human existence, and the longing to find meaning in seemingly meaningless cycles.

They both reflect the deepest confusions and inquiries of the human heart, guiding us on a voyage through the ocean of philosophy in search of the answer that truly endows life with meaning.

## 6. Conclusion

Both *Hamlet* and *Waiting for Godot* , with their unique artistic allure, illustrate that in the face of the absurdity and nihilism of the world, individuals actively take responsibility through self-choice, seeking and gradually developing their own existence and meaning. As facing up to the absurdity and nihilism could be an agonizing process, most people are more inclined to give up while the spiritual core of existentialism is to face them bravely and then seek for one’s own life value.

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