An Existential reading of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.

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Abstract

The play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett has for a long time been considered one of his best works. Grasping the significance of key factors such as modernity, modernism and historical background is of great importance to situate and contextualise the play. As Beckett’s play belongs to the “Theatre of the Absurd”, the complicated aspects of where the play belongs has given opportunities for questioning. The intricate layers of the play have opened several doors for interpretation which has allowed diverse conclusions from various researchers. For that reason, further investigation on that matter may perhaps add another viewpoint which can be considered important to fully understand the potential of this piece. This essay examines Samuel Beckett’s famous play *Waiting for Godot* through the complex lens of Soren Aabay Kierkegaard’s and Jean-Paul Sartre’s perspectives within the existentialist philosophy. Certain features of each perspectives within the philosophy such as the *for-itself, in-itself* and the three stages consciousness facilitate the linkage needed between the play and the theory. By using these two perspectives, this essay analyses how the elements of nothingness, purpose and meaning are apparent throughout the play. The analysis of the essay was done to: firstly, attempt to discover new possible meanings and secondly, to deepen and widen my understanding of the Beckett’s play. This essay argues that these elements provide evidence that the play contains components of both Sartre’s and Kierkegaard’s perspective of existentialism.
Table of contents

1.0 Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 4
  1.1 Historical Background ................................................................................................. 5
  1.2 Modernity and Modernism ......................................................................................... 6
  1.3 Theatre of the Absurd ............................................................................................... 7

2.0 Samuel Beckett and Waiting for Godot ................................................................. 8

3.0 Theoretical Framework: Existentialist philosophy from Sartre &
Kierkegaard. ......................................................................................................................... 10
  3.1 Previous Research on Waiting for Godot ................................................................. 15

4.0 The analysis of Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett ........................................ 22
  4.1 Setting and context of the play .................................................................................. 22
  4.2 Existence, Value and Uncertainty ............................................................................. 23
  4.3 Meaning, consciousness and truth ............................................................................. 26

5.0 Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 29

6.0 Work Cited ...................................................................................................................... 31
1.0 Introduction:

The aim of this essay is to use Søren Kierkegaard’s and Jean-Paul Sartre’s perspectives in the existentialist philosophy to read and analyse Samuel Beckett’s masterpiece, Waiting for Godot. The play revolves around six characters, Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, Lucky, A boy and Godot, however, only five of them are ever seen. As the title suggests “waiting” is the central issue of the play. All the “waiting” done throughout the play is for a man named Godot. Godot is never seen; however, he is constantly talked about, which keeps the characters optimistic that he may eventually come. There are other intricate aspects of the play that open doors for questioning, the reason that, for an extended period of time, the play has been a subject of discussion among critics. The reasons for choosing the existentialist philosophy as the framework for analysing the play are many.

Firstly, the idea of existentialism advocated by Kierkegaard is mostly concerned with leading back Christians to Christianity. Namely, he believed that faith should not be taught through literature rather experienced individually. The notion of subjectivity plays an extensive role in his perspective of existentialism. Asides from this, Kierkegaard developed another idea called the three stages of consciousness that includes the aesthetical stage of consciousness, the ethical stage of consciousness and the religious stage of consciousness. These three stages, according to him, were fundamental to live a fulfilling life. The consciousness stages are present throughout the play. For instance, there is a scene where the main characters (Vladimir and Estragon) discuss the meaninglessness of their lives. Secondly, Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophy of existentialism can also be seen in the play because of the fact that Vladimir and Estragon also freely decide to wait for Godot without ever being certain that he will show up. This act of purposeful and inactive resignation to waiting resonates with the notion of the for-itself and the in-itself. Finally, the elements of meaning, uncertainty, existence and consciousness will be analysed to support the claim that the play contains existentialist elements from both (Kierkegaard and Sartre) perspectives.

The essay is structured as follow: Firstly, the introduction which includes the historical background and the concepts of modernity and modernism. Then, the introduction, a brief discussion of the author Samuel Beckett and a summary of the play of Waiting for Godot. Thereafter, the theoretical framework dealing with two perspectives within existentialism will be thoroughly explained and used to analyse the play. Previous research on the play will be presented, and finally, the analysis of the play will be conducted before the conclusion of the essay.
This essay examines Samuel Beckett’s play Waiting for Godot through the lens of Soren Aabaye Kierkegaard’s and Jean-Paul Sartre’s perspectives within the existentialist philosophy. Using elements present in the play, parallels have been made to connect them to the philosophical perspectives. The essay argues that these elements provide evidence that the play contains components of both Sartre’s and Kierkegaard’s perspectives of existentialism. It is important to note that while both philosophers are fundamentally different approaches on existentialism, that both perspectives are prevalent in seeing a relation between the play and existentialism. Regarding both perspectives as equally important will allow an intersectional perspective on the play.

1.1 Historical Background

Many may agree that the historical twentieth century began with the First World War in 1914 and ended seven decades later with the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989 (Norton 3-9). The brutalities and fascist horrors forced upon the different people of the world during the First World War and Second World War led to an understandable emotional hopelessness in different societies. Other events such as The Great Depression, the rise of Hitler (particularly invading over Europe), and the German invasion of France affected the literature of the time in different respects (Norton 9). Pessimism had become an extensive part of the everyday life of the people. This pessimism was apparent in works of literature and in the society. As a result of prior events, post-war characters in literature were faced with the dilemma of not knowing what the future held and if there was a future to expect. This led to the doubting and questioning of their ever-changing environment. Essentially, this fear and uncertainty contributed to a crisis of ideas and thoughts which later instilled a sort of uncertainty among writers to situate themselves in the world they had trouble understanding. Thankfully, various forms of art, such as poetry helped writers to process the self-evaluation journey they were on (Norton 9, 10).

During the First World War, the war to end all wars, a large portion of the world was under the British rule. Furthermore, countries such as Canada, New Zealand who were previously granted a status of authority were later to be recognized as the British Commonwealth. The independence of these countries allowed literary voices to rise and develop autonomously (Norton 8). With regard to literature, the growth of these independent literary voices meant a new level of retrospection and/or re-examination for the composer of poetry (Norton 16). On the other hand, the Second World War accommodated an abundance
of problem of its own. Moreover, the arrangement made by Adolf Hitler to the Soviet Union shocked many of the writer and composers of the time as it de-oriented them even more (Norton 10). Through the Second World War, the world’s largest Empire lost its power and its reputation. The Empire which Great Britain had built to control and govern a considerable portion of the world had come to destruction (Norton 10). The post second world war resulted in a reorganization of Europe and Germany, this geographic shift in Europe had a lasting effect on the literature (Norton, 10). Encouraged by the end of the war, writers filled the world of arts with new perceptions and ways to provoke literary compositions that clearly departs from the previous methods.

1.2 Modernity and Modernism

The late nineteenth century can be considered the period when modern literature flourished and/or where its stem began. The movement of aestheticism was drifting away from the built-up assumptions that circulated around the Victorian notions of the artist’s moral and educational duties (Norton 3). Modernism, which refers to the early twentieth century arts that consciously disconnected itself from tradition by using new experimental ways of expression, was the contemporary way of articulating thoughts and feelings. Modernism had begun to establish its place in a way where it rapidly challenged several aspects of society. The aspects of culture that were disputed were later on reflected in the arts, the culture and in the cultural values of society (Norton 5). Moreover, it was a way for writers of this time to adopt classical literature and myths to then form literature about the present, thereby incorporating and developing new writing techniques to capture new ways of interpreting and perceiving events occasioned by new technological development. Modernism was also a direct result of modernity aside from being a pessimistic response to modernity (Norton 4-6).

Modernist artists and authors between the years 1900 and 1918 (early modernism) celebrated modernity and the age of destruction and machines. However, the literature between the years of 1918 and 1939 (high modernism) would express scepticism about progress and art’s claim to agency. Both the early modernism and the high modernism periods shared a distinctly modern sensibility. The arts had to be expressed or portrayed in a different manner considering the new urban masses. The role of the individual had changed and improved, lastly that the new modern art had to acquire social purposes. In the process, the concept of Modernity had multiple meanings interacting while taking its place in society.
Modernist writers more or less caused a change in language that acted as a mirror towards society. Moreover, aspects such as the writings of Freud, *the interpretation of Dreams* (Freud), and movements in arts, *Cubism*, changed modernity’s faith in rationality and progress (Norton 5). Ultimately, writers explored new realities; they perceived irrationality as a source of creativity and knowledge. Moreover, in the aftermaths of World War One writers adapted their ways of comprehending destruction through themes of loss. Moreover, the techniques they used to express senses of social instability, uncertainty and weakness progressed to conform to the change in their environment (Norton 4-6).

Issues like the rejection of objective reality that attracts the reader to a subjective experience and depicting reality solely as the author and character interprets it were raised. In spite of the abovementioned possibly being valid points, one cannot overlook the fact that the art was created by the modernists who wanted to freely design art that correlated with the new world they were living in and how individuality played a significant role. I will now go on to discuss one of the major movements in drama thrown up by this chaotic and irrational modernist form of art.

1.3 Theatre of The Absurd

“Theatre of the Absurd” has since the late 1950s been the category in which European playwrights placed *Waiting for Godot* (1953) as belonging into. The term ‘*Theatre of The Absurd’* was first introduced by the dramatist Martin Esslin through his book with the same title. Published in 1961, the book was to outline the “… unconventional theatrical style and standards in the plays…” for some (Sadeghi 87). Martin Esslin had categorised the works of writers like Samuel Beckett and Arthur Adamov as belonging to ‘Theatre of The Absurd’. The characteristics listed in Esslin’s book concerning the matter are several. The common traits are multiple. Firstly, Esslin states that characters often never have a sense of individuality. The incomprehensibility the characters expose in the plays is a sign of resisting rationality.

In the case of *Waiting for Godot* the more intricate a character is the more one can see the incomprehensibility of the world surrounding them. As Esslin puts it, “…it is often unclear whether the action is meant to represent a dream world of nightmares or real happenings” (Esslin 3). Secondly, in plays of the Absurd lack of coherence within the conversations and dialogues of the characters is also a feature (Esslin 3). Esslin continues by explaining that even though there are variations in style most Absurd plays share common thematic elements. These plays generally include
traces of existentialism, the idea that human existence has no meaning and therefore communication falls apart. Thirdly, the question of rationality is also a point that is apparent in plays of the Absurd. For instance, all meanings of rationality disappear as seen in *Waiting for Godot*. These common features and attributes are, according to Esslin, the fundamental characteristics of the “Theatre of the Absurd” (Esslin 4).

The movement of absurdism and the absurdist drama are often connected to the aftermath of The Second World War since the movement portrayed the human life condition. The contemporary lives of post-war citizens were being robbed of the conventional artforms and the effect religion used to have (Mir 2). Essentially, mankind was left to access life in an unfamiliar way without being equipped for the adjustment. This, understandably, elucidates the connection between the ‘Theatre of the absurd’ and the outcome of The Second World War. To deal with this new reality, absurdist writers often tackled issues surrounding identity, order, rank and the notion of universally valid system of belief (Mir 5). Those issues are then revealed and reflected in the plays of the absurd without explicitly and verbally being said. Moreover, there are common traits in absurdist plays such as the lack of purpose that is apparent in the plot of Beckett’s play. Also, the absurdity in the play is experienced through the dialogues between the spectator and the stage (Mir 6). All in all, the implications the ‘Theatre of the absurd’ is definitely nearly connected to one’s perspective on life and one’s position in existence. The search of self with regard to the universe is an extensive part of it (Mir 6).

The next section will discuss the absurdist writer Samuel Beckett and one of his most famous plays, *Waiting for Godot*.

2.0 Samuel Beckett and *Waiting for Godot*

Samuel Beckett was born outside Dublin in 1906. He spent most of his childhood and early adulthood in Ireland. Raised in an Anglo-Irish Protestant family he followed his university studies in France where he taught English (Norton 749). Beckett then permanently moved to France (Paris) in 1937. While there Samuel took part in an association against the German invasion when World War Two started. The writer is in today’s society praised for several literary works such as the novel *Murphy*. Published in 1938, *Watt* published in 1953 and was written when Beckett took refuge from the German occupation in France during the Second World War in 1940, and *The Unnameable* published in 1958 (Norton 749,750). Nonetheless, the literary piece Beckett is most acknowledged for is *Waiting for Godot*, which was published 1952 and translated in English 1954. The works of
Samuel Beckett often offered and displayed a harsh and tragicomic perspective on human existence which often incorporated humour and tragedy (Norton 749, 750).

The play *Waiting for Godot* is a perfect illustration of the abovementioned. The play, which is divided into two acts, mostly revolves around two main characters named Vladimir and Estragon who refer to one another as Gogo and Didi. Vladimir and Estragon encounter each other by a tree and a series of unnecessary comments and discussions erupt solely to conclude that they are both waiting for someone or something called Godot. Subsequently, two other characters are introduced, a slave called Lucky and his owner Pozzo who do not particularly do anything with other characters aside from conversing and making the slave entertain them for a while. Thereafter, a character named A Boy enters the play as the messenger of the unspecified Godot with information to Vladimir and Estragon who wait for Godot. The meeting with A Boy awakens questions from Vladimir about Godot that are never explicitly answered and departs. Act one ends with a dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon of an arrangement to meet again by the same tree the following day to await Godot.

Act two which is very similar to Act one, begins with the gathering of Estragon and Vladimir by the tree as they discussed the day prior. The slave and his owner enter the play once again. Unpredictably, this time Pozzo is blind and Lucky dumb and claim to never have met Vladimir and Estragon before. Thereafter, a boy re-enters to inform the duo that Godot would not come today. In addition, similarly to Lucky and Pozzo, A Boy claims that he has never spoken to Estragon nor Vladimir the day before and leaves. The curtains descend on Act Two when Estragon and Vladimir decide themselves to leave.

One can perceive the repetitive plot in the summary above as somewhat pointless. However, Graver views the summary of the play as possessing the fundamentals to comprehend the work of Beckett as “symbolic” (Graver 19). This would imply that, as Sadeghi (88) puts it, plays like *Waiting for Godot* often show instead of telling the listener what wants to be said and understood. This is noticeable in the absurd characters of Beckett’s play. The language used to communicate is often understood but lacks meaning. To clarify, one can understand what is said, however, the underlying meaning may cause confusion to the audience or reader. The absence of meaning while communicating is possible because the absurd characters are not able to “…recognize and understand themselves due to their lost wit” which leads to confusion for the individuals of the society (Mir 6).

Next, I will discuss the theories that will be used for the analysis as they intertwine with the concept of the ‘Theatre of the absurd’ and the play, *Waiting for Godot*. 
3.0 Theoretical Framework: Existentialist philosophy from Sartre and Kierkegaard

The existentialist term and movement surfaced in the mid 19th century in Europe, the movement rose to its prominence during the mid to late 20th century. The traits of existentialism are intra related to human conditions and it discusses the fundamental characteristics that are considered to be the essence of human existence. The prominent ideology behind the existentialist philosophy is based on the thought that meaning in life is something that is defined by humans.

The philosophy of existentialism does not believe in God’s existence, nothing is in control of the universe. The belief centers around attempting to make rational decisions while living in an irrational world. The movement in philosophy and literature focuses highly on individual freedom, choice and existence. The purpose of human existence is questioned. Primarily existentialism emphasizes that every individual that is put on this earth is on the quest of finding meaning in its life. Existentialism holds an eerie feel to it as it also often proposes that there is no purpose nor explanation at the core or existence (denying God) (Larsson 128).

There are many existentialist philosophers with contrasting perspectives within the movement, the founding fathers of existentialism Soren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre being a concrete example. Whilst Kierkegaard integrates religion with his ideas on the three different stages of consciousness, Sartre distances his ideas from religion (Larson 128). Larson describes the key differences between Sartre and Kierkegaard as “...contradictory presupposition and yet have a large part of their respective writings express similar points of view” when it comes to existentialism (Larson 128). A consistent theme within existentialism is differences in the foundation in which ideas grow from yet both authors in this context have rational grounds to base their work.

Soren Aabye Kierkegaard was a 19th century Danish philosopher, theologian, a literary critic and the youngest of seven children. Kierkegaard became one of the most influential existentialists after his death in 1855. Sometimes referred to as “the father of existentialism”, most of his works are a compilation of distaste against the state church of Denmark. The various discourses Kierkegaard tackled as a social critique led him to choosing to renew Christian faith within Christianity. To do so, he sometimes created vivid representations of biblical figures to lift up their modern relevance, i.e. renew Christian faith within Christianity. To get a better understanding of Kierkegaard's philosophy and writings, one must take into consideration the people and the environment in which he was brought up.
into. Kierkegaard’s biography is the core of many of his oeuvres, especially the relation to his father and the relation between him and his fiancé (McDonald 1).

Kierkegaard’s father had a major influence on the works he created over his lifetime. Kierkegaard is said to have “...inherited his father’s melancholy, his sense of guilt and anxiety...”, but most importantly, “...his emphasis on the dour aspects of the Christian faith” (McDonald 1). To clarify, Kierkegaard’s father’s sense of guilt towards God was a great voice of concern. This was due to his father believing that his children would inherit his sins, i.e. getting Kierkegaard’s mother pregnant without being married to her (McDonald 1). This according to his father would inevitably anger God which then would lead to repercussions. Those repercussions would be that God would penalise this wrongdoing by taking the lives of all the seven children by the age of 34 (the age of Jesus Christ at his crucifixion) (McDonald 1). In regard to Kierkegaard’s fiancé, the engagement was eventually broken. Even though his fiancé was a source of infatuation in the production of his poetry, it ultimately changed when Kierkegaard broke the engagement, it helped him devote himself to live under religious vows and to build his outsider status (McDonald 1). This in its turn relieved him from the conventional duties expected from a man which further lead him to idealise women (McDonald 1).

Kierkegaard’s rhetoric and focal point focuses on the problematic around becoming a Christian in Christianity (McDonald 1). This was a difficult task since Denmark had transitioned from its “medieval” way of life into a capitalist society. In the social context this made it difficult to grasp the sense of who you are which led to social identities being extensively fluid. Given this problematic, Kierkegaard had to come up with a rhetoric that would lead people to become their true self beyond the constructs of social identities that was imposed on them by the capitalist society (McDonald 1). Kierkegaard’s main rhetoric was without concern of social roles and gender, he believed that everyone was equal before God (McDonald 1). In his writing Kierkegaard was inspired by the figure of Socrates, therefore, to exercise his own belief he took several approaches that were similar to Socrates such as irony and humour. With his published literary work, Kierkegaard often distanced himself from his own work. He often used pseudonyms instead of his own name to let the reader have his/her own assessment without being affected by the social status of the writer affecting/influencing the readers experience of the book/s (McDonald 1). Regarding the Christian faith, Kierkegaard wanted to put an emphasis on the inverted dialectics of it. To further clarify, he wanted his audience to view spirituality as a strength rather a weakness. He believed that Christianity was not something to be taught but rather experienced through life (McDonald 1).
As a part of Kierkegaard’s philosophy, the concept of the three existential stages (also known as the three stages of consciousness), is the foundation to become one’s true self which he repeatedly advocates for in his literature. These stages are categorised as the following: the aesthetic stage of existence, the ethical stage of existence and the religious stage of existence. The first stage of life’s existence (the aesthetic stage of consciousness) has to do with several factors, mainly the sense of pleasure and imagination (McDonald 1). To further explain, the goal for an individual who lives an aesthetic life is to immerse and gratify the sensuous experience, to enhance the concept of possibility over actuality and to avoid boredom (McDonald 1). The aesthetic person is often consumed with their urges to nourish their sense of pleasure and imagination without taking another’s feeling into account. The second stage of life’s existence (the ethical stage of consciousness), is a bit difficult to exactly pinpoint as it has a variety of meanings in Kierkegaard’s work. However, it is fundamentally concerned with the common prevailing of social norms. These norms are according to McDonalds, “reasons to make sense of, or justify, an action within a community” (McDonald 1). Essentially, the ethical lifestyle is superior to the aesthetic one because the individual moves away from the ego-driven lifestyle to a more selfless way of life. The ethical individual is concerned with the effects of their actions on others (McDonald 1). The last stage of life’s existence (the religious stage of consciousness), is according to Kierkegaard the highest level of existence. As mentioned above, the Christian faith for Kierkegaard was to be experienced and not taught. He believed that the Christian faith was subjective rather than objective (McDonald 1). What Kierkegaard meant was that the relation between God and oneself was utterly what one wanted it to be, therefore, what was taught in church was not of relevance to become a good Christian in Christianity. To conclude Kierkegaard’s philosophy on the three stages of consciousness, all of the stages of life’s existence are to be part of a person’s life, and then this is to be purposeful and to attempt true freedom (McDonald 1).

The three stages of consciousness are best explained and put into action in one of Kierkegaard’s book titled Either/or written in 1843. The book is divided into two sections where both parts are written under pseudonyms. The pseudonyms “A” and “Johannes Climacus” were used to write the first part. As for the second part of the book, the pseudonyms “B” and “The Judge” were used, however, B and The Judge eventually become one persona and takes form as a letter to A (McDonald 1). The book revolves around A being convinced that imagination and pleasure are the best tools to acquire aesthetic pleasure. Namely, Johannes is fuelled by the thought of the possibility of seduction without any regards to anyone but him. The Judge disputes A’s aesthetic lifestyle and rather argues that living an
ethical life is better than living an aesthetic one (McDonald 1). He attempts to persuade A of
that by using marriage as tool and incorporating aesthetic touches to it. The last part of part
two ends with a moral speech that The Judge receives. This speech refutes both the ethical
and aesthetic lifestyle and suggests that the right way of living is to accept God (McDonald
1). The book was written in a manner where “the message” Kierkegaard is trying to convey is
not directly said but rather found “in between” the lines which is similar to the message in
*Waiting for Godot*. This way, the reader can make his/her own assessment and conclusion,
hence subjectivity as it would be based/influenced by personal opinions. In accordance with
Kierkegaard the intent of the book was to carefully persuade the readers to distance
themselves from social norms, and to develop their own identities (Mackey 53).

There is another perspective within the philosophy of existentialism that Jean-
Paul Sartre writes about. Sartre's perspective on existentialism is different to Kierkegaard.
Jean-Paul Sartre is one of the best-known philosophers of twentieth century France. Similar to
Kierkegaard, he is also considered the founder of existentialist philosophy (Flynn 1-10). It is
important to establish the differences between the perspectives within existentialism as it will
help separate and situate both philosophies.

The philosophy of existentialism, through Jean-Paul Sartre’s perspective
revolves around the conception of self, ethics and (un) consciousness. This in turn would
mean that the purpose of the existential philosophy is to comprehend “…human existence
rather than the world as such” (Onof 1). For example, Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1969),
explores the concept of existentialism. In the book, Sartre begins by introducing the reader to
his rejection of the concept of *noumenon* which implies the belief of not having a way of
perceiving the external world and that all access we have as human is the idea of the world
through our senses. Sartre suggests that the world can be seen through an incalculable series
of way (Onof 1). Next, Sartre discusses the difference between the *unconscious being* and the
*conscious being*. It seems that for Sartre, the uncertain, undefined facet of *self* is what outlines
man. He notes, “…the object of consciousness exist as *in-itself*, that is, in an independent and
non-relational way…. consciousness is always consciousness of something…is defined in
relation to something else… it exists as *for itself*.” (Onof 1).

In the introduction of the book, Sartre makes a differentiation between two types
of the phenomena of being, the transcendence of being and that of consciousness (Onof 1).
The term consciousness can be defined as “…always 'of something', and therefore defined in
relation to something else. It has no nature beyond this and is thus completely translucent. …
as the for-itself always transcends the particular conscious experience (because of the
spontaneity of consciousness), any attempt to grasp it within a conscious experience is doomed to failure.” (Onof 1). To clarify, this implies that there is consciousness itself and the being of the object of consciousness. This in turn classifies two separate beings, the in-itself and the for-itself that are autonomous entities because of the concept of nothingness. Sartre presents the two types of being as the in-itself existing freely from the for-itself, its existence is not able to be explained by reason (Onof 1). Its existence is defined by the conscious experience. As for the for-itself, however, its existence is mostly defined by its absence of identity with itself (Onof 1). Sartre points out that one of the features of consciousness is negativity which is experienced through nothingness. This is also accurate when it comes to self, where it conceives a deep-seated deficiency of self-identity (Onof 1). Subsequently, the boundless and unclear essence is what defines man. This lack of essence in for-itself forces itself to create itself from nothing, hence, nothingness. The aspects of for-itself are characterized by nothingness (Onof 1). Additionally, Sartre (1943) clarifies that to enable one to ground itself as a conscious being, self needs consciousness.

As a conscious being itself, becomes what it is (a nothingness) free to create its being. The consciousness, in its turn, is a “… spontaneous original choice that depends on the individual's freedom.” (Onof 1). Substantially, the for-itself is in itself a lack as the for-itself becomes a being through the nothingness of the world (Onof 1). Another way to articulate Sartre’s book of Being and Nothingness (1969) is to view it as an examination of what it implies to be human where ontology (the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being) is used to outline and pilot the investigation. Sartre views nothingness in his ontology as in the one hand consciousness, which he refers to as the for-itself (the source of all meaning) and on the other hand the in-itself which has no particular characteristics attached to it (Onof 1).

To summarize, according to Sartre, the world attains meaning to individuals simply because the for-itself gives meaning to the in-itself. The for-itself uses the world to attempt to give itself some sort of definition, however, simultaneously the for-itself is utter nothingness. In other words, it is the origin of meanings without any meaning to it. He believes that whatever we see ourselves as being is so free that we constantly have the ability to re-define whatever we are. Namely, we are a sort of nullity as noting could ever become a necessity for us and no commitment could ever be eternal. However, the need of content/meaning remains, we need to become in-itself for itself. That is, the need of consciousness and the consciousness of attaining some meaning. In the real world, Sartre views systematically implies that all our actions are way of masking the nothingness in our
lives and misleading ourselves into believing that we have an identity or some kind of meaning in our lives. Considering that we do not have it, Sartre explains that we are freedom and nothingness. He suggests that one cannot simultaneously have both necessity and freedom or temporal and eternal. Moreover, Sartre says that the self needs an identity, needs to have its own being but it simply cannot do it. He calls into question the whole perception of meaning, according to him it is something you project in order to cover up the fact that there is not really meaning (Onof 1).

These two perspectives within existentialism, I believe, will assist me in analysing the play *Waiting for Godot*. The existentialist philosophy and the two perspectives within it were chosen because of their close link to modernity and modernism. As I mentioned earlier, modernist writers were slowly changing their narratives. They tended to write their stories about the various developments at the time which they considered traits of their era. The existentialist believed that humans learned best about themselves through the examination of the most extreme forms of human experiences. Invariably, this philosophy works very well with Beckett’s play as it puts its characters through one of the most extreme forms of human experiences: uncertainty. It is also important to mention that even today, existentialism, is widespread throughout the world. These perspectives are relevant specially these days, with the increasing “doubtfulness” where the existence of God is questions, and human beings are looked upon to take responsibility for all their action and consequences. Thus, one of the most significant movements in the history of modern western secularism is presently more influential than it has ever been.

The next section will outline several literary works/studies that have been previously conducted on the play of *Waiting for Godot*. I will examine work related to the existentialist and nihilistic aspects of the play.

### 3.1 Previous Research on Waiting for Godot

This review will consist of four studies conducted on the play, one using nihilism, one using existentialist philosophy as a theory to analyse Samuel Beckett’s play. The third study focuses on the different facets of what meaning is and the final study deals with the aftermath of the modern world and how man is drawn to absurdity. All of the studies that will be presented are connected to my early discourse on the play and theories.

The first study titled *Essence or Existence: Existentialist Reading of Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot* by Aliakbar Pormouzeh. The paper is concerned with the
disassociation of existentialist philosophy of Sartre and Kierkegaard’s Christian existentialism. However, both philosophies were used as a tool by the authors to examine the two main characters of the play, Vladimir and Estragon, to establish if one ought to perceive them as existentialist or essentialist (Pormouzeh 24). In the introduction, the author discusses the background of the play of Beckett. It positions *Waiting for Godot* as an existentialist play because of the character’s lack of rational insight of the world and the absurdity within the play. He continues by mentioning previous critics such as Amanda Kelsch who justifies Christian existentialism relying on Kierkegaard’s original ideas on Christianity and existentialism (Pormouzeh 24). Thereafter, it is mentioned that the present study does not entirely deny the relevance of previous interpretation of the play. However, it attempts to emphasize on the recurring statements of the characters of the play and the hidden determinism they are engaged in (Pormouzeh 24).

The author references that this idea is retrieved from Paul Lawley and Michael Bennet where the focus is on the deterministic statements and allegorical reference to the Old Testament (Pormouzeh 24). In the next section of the paper the author discusses the play. This section starts by defining the term existentialism from the Oxford dictionary of philosophy. Then, the concept of existentialism by Soren Kierkegaard is explained and the relationship between the initial idea of Kierkegaard and Sartre’s improved version of existentialism is established. For instance, according to Pormouzeh, Kierkegaard discredits objectivity of truth but alternatively, recognises subjective truth. As mentioned above, Sartre has helped existentialism to grow; he settled the idea of existence prior to essence. Moreover, Sartre believed that humans were condemned to be free “…a person has no predetermined nature or range of choices, but always free to choose a fresh and thereby reconstitute himself/herself as a different person…” (Pormouzeh 25). In reference to the doctrine of Christianity, Kierkegaard argues that individuals that are in search of eternal happiness may eventually achieve eternal happiness. However, he stresses that it is impossible for a person who has lost the sense of happiness to become eternally happy (Pormouzeh 25). This indicates that, within the Christian discourse, salvation and happiness favours the objective truth even though his statement contradicts itself.

The author proceeds by considering that the authoritarian Christian legal system of the nineteenth century may have contributed to the statement of Kierkegaard that “…he felt strongly about promoting independence of thought rather than an established truth.” (Pormouzeh 25). This belief contributes to the understanding of Sartre’s notion of existentialism (Pormouzeh 26). Sartre’s idea behind existentialism views the free will of man
as the basis of the philosophy. Before entering the analysis section of the paper, Pormouzeh concisely demonstrate why an existential reading of the play may be refutable. The author mention that he is on a quest of finding out if it is possible to exist and live a life without the want of an objective truth. He does so by comparing Sartre’s theory of existentialism “… man is free and responsible for all man…” to the play of Beckett where neither of the characters are after free will (Pormouzeh 26). The contradictory dynamic of existential philosophy here leads the author to contemplate that the play Waiting for Godot may not be appropriate for such a reading. The author enters the final phases of the paper where the analysis takes place. His analysis focuses on the main characters of the play, namely, Vladimir and Estragon. The investigation is done by extracting lines from the play to then interpret using, among other things, the correlation between what is said and what it would suggest applying existentialism as a lens. The paper concluded that Vladimir and Estragon are partially associated with the Christian existentialism as explained by Kierkegaard. However, the constant waiting and incomplete resolution of the play dissociates it from Christian existentialism (Pormouzeh 29). He continues by affirming that “…the insufficiency of life… for the characters represents their inner tendency to return to their essence.” (Pormouzeh 30). This essentially means that the characters are not an indication of the existentialism Sartre declares in his work of Free Will (Pormouzeh 30). Interestingly, the characters are not an indication of Christian existentialism since the play does not stretch to transcendality nor the metaphysical conclusion. That is to say that in Beckett´s play God has “…left man in an infinite purgatory of the world.” (Pormouzeh 30).

The second study, titled Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot: A Postmodernist Study by Pouria Torkamaneh and Noorbakhsh Hooti also deals with the play using a different frame of reference. The paper starts by introducing postmodernism where the author positions modernism and postmodernism into the philosophy of history. Moreover, it explains the international movement of post-modernism is an aftermath of the Two World Wars which led to the questioning of rationality and validity (Torkamaneh and Hooti 40). Next, the difference between modernism and post-modernism is clarified. Post-modernism deals with the total disbelief towards metanarrative, which bloomed/grew post-World War two. Metanarrative proposes “…working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done” (Torkamaneh and Hooti 40). This is evident in Samuel Beckett’s work. According to post-modernism, in relation to literature, the order of things in life are random and life itself can be presumed random. To elaborate, the movement of post-modernism cannot find the affirmation of certainties since it ceases to be. It disapproves of the concept of reality and
doubtful of the notion of human progress (Torkamaneh and Hooti 41). The authors then mention that the term post-modernism may slightly differ in meaning depending on different criteria. They specify that post-modernism cannot be put in a single category as the beliefs around it are beyond any particular establishment (Torkamaneh and Hooti 41).

The introduction of the paper ends with a paragraph describing the connection between post-modernism and literature. Torkamaneh and Hooti briefly go through the features that are common among post-modern literature. Those features include ambiguity, fragmentation in dialogue, irony and many more. It is noteworthy to mention that the authors express, by the end of the introduction, an emphasis on post-literature not being nihilistic but rather attacks injustices. While the claim is arguable, I will, however, not attempt to contradict it. The title of the paper, as the previous one did, covers the summary of Beckett’s play. This part of the paper consists of several sub-heading where Torkamaneh and Hooti lift different elements they found in the play and justifies how/why the elements are there. The content of these sub-headings includes lines taken from the play and an analysis of the extracted lines. To exemplify, under the sub-heading 2.5 called nihilism, the description of the term is clarified for the reader “Nihilism is a radical philosophy of meaninglessness…the world and people in it exist without meaning, purpose, truth and value.” (Torkamaneh and Hooti 45). They continue by asserting that any system of belief that denies meaning or purpose can be categorised as nihilistic. Further down as quoted in their paper, nihilism is viewed as transparency, namely, a source of indifference. The next passage re-introduces post-modernism; however, it speaks on the matter as a “state of thought” where the nihilism is wrongfully paired. Conclusively, nihilism is represented in the paper as a “radical repudiation of values” and is often associated with despair of randomness, destructiveness and longing for nothingness which is detectable in Waiting for Godot (Torkamaneh and Hooti 46).

The analysis that follows is of a dialogue of Estragon and Vladimir (the main characters of the play) where the authors examine the lines where suicide is suggested and contemplated by Estragon. Torkamaneh and Hooti acknowledge that nihilism is present because as Nietzsche said: “suicide is the deed of nihilism”, essentially, there is indeed a connection between Waiting for Godot and nihilism. The conclusion of the study suggests that the “stream of consciousness” the play has leads to display that nothing defines or determines the faith of Vladimir and Estragon. Rather, their own freedom of choice and ability do decide upon their actions are the essential to their existence. Moreover, even though the play exudes signs of repetition, absurdity and time never moving forward in a meaningful way, one can interpret the play how one chooses to (Torkamaneh and Hooti 48).
This third paper is titled *Waiting for Godot: A disparate text* by Javed Akhter. The study revolves around the different facets and meanings in Samuel Beckett’s play. It focuses on the multiple occurrences of conflicting and contradictory meanings within the text. Similar to my approach, Akhter discusses the existence of modernism; however, he focuses on the late modernist bourgeois ideology. Unlike my theoretical framework, however, the author makes use of the post-structuralist Marxist theorists Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey to analyse the play. The facet Akhter chooses to focus on is the post-structuralist Marxist theory of decentred or disparate text. The aim of his paper is to find out how the significant gaps, silences, absences and “non-said” of the play reflect the presence of the late modernist bourgeois ideology (Akhter 3). Next, he explains that to turn vocal the “non-said” of Beckett’s play, Akhter will examine the text with the use of the post-structuralist Althusserian theory. Akhter then introduces the post-structuralist Althusser by, firstly, introducing the reader to the philosophers Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey. He proceeds by naming some works of Louis Althusser that differ from the classical Marxist literary theorists. For Althusser, “…great literary works do not express any ideology and they do not provide a conceptual understanding of reality” (Akhter 4).

The other philosopher, Pierre Macherey, helped develop Althusser’s theory of literature in detail and advanced a theory of decentred/disparate text (Akhter 4). He continues by describing that the view Macherey has on literary texts is a bit different from Althusser’s. Namely, he views the text by virtue of its form. According to him, the non-said “…not only conceals but also exposes ideological contradictions.” (Akhter 4). In other words, the non-said of the text are categorised as being suppressions. Moreover, for Macherey a literary text is always incomplete or disparate for several reasons. One of the reasons is that the text is ideologically banned from saying certain things in attempting to tell the truth. So, the limits of the ideology that the author is enforced to expose in which he writes to expose silences, non-said and what is not possible to articulate (Akhter 4). Pierre Macherey expresses his theory of decentred literary text by explaining that a text has no central essence to it, rather, “…just a continuous conflict and disparity of meaning…” (Akhter 4). After some explanatory text about what the post-structuralist Althusserian hermeneutics means from both philosophers, the author gives an overview of Beckett’s play. The overview of the play is tied to the concept of bourgeois ideology of late modernism. Next, a literature review is presented.

The literature review covers several works from different authors, works from Martin Esslin, Abhinaba Chatterje and Darsha Jani (Akhter 6). The author briefly discusses how their work were made and how their analysis differed from one another. Then, the author
introduces us to the existentialist themes in *Waiting for Godot*. He notes that absurdity, which is a theme in the play, is also a theme of existentialism. This part of Akhter’s is relevant to mine as I plan to use existentialism to analyse the text. Moreover, because *Waiting for Godot* belongs to works associated with the movement of ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, absurdity is the main theme. He continues by establishing that the word Absurd is an existentialist term, that it, in fact, describes a world without inherent meaning (Akhter 7). Next, he conducts his analysis. He does his analysis by taking lines from the play and attempting to connect them to different themes. This method is one of which I will apply to my analysis. The themes are then explained and linked to both philosophers and their theories. For example, the author retracted a couple of lines from the play and connected them to the late bourgeois ideology because the segment that he chose to analyse shattered the religious beliefs of modern man (Akhter 12). The paper ends with the conclusion that Samuel Beckett’s play has a complex relationship to the late modernist bourgeois ideology. However, the text’s conflict and disparity of meaning discloses the unspoken facet of the late modernist bourgeois ideology has supressed (Akhter 13).

The final paper of this literature review is titled *Futility, Hopelessness and Meaninglessness: Central Forces leading towards Absurdity in Beckett’s Waiting for Godot* (2013) by Darsha Jani. The paper focuses on the alarming situation of the postmodern world where man has lost fundamental values, such as compassion and tenderness which in turn leads to mechanical and pessimistic life seen in the play (Jani 96). The author starts with introducing background on Samuel Beckett’s life. Then, he gives an introduction to the movement of ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ of which the play of Beckett’s belongs to. The author then explains that Samuel Beckett was fascinated by the new innovative design employed in drama as reflected in *Waiting for Godot*. According to Jani Beckett illustrated in his play the external world as threatening and unknown. Therefore, as the world got more frightening Beckett established that man’s inhabitation in such a world becomes purposeless (Jana 97). The author continues by making an interesting statement, the purpose of the play is not necessarily found within it. She continues by stating, the purpose is to make the spectators identify themselves with the dramatized experience of the play (Jana 97). This statement opens up a platform for discussion. Namely, the setting observation from the outside may be of relevance to my analysis because the theories involved do have to do with perspective.

Next, the plot of *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is discussed and analysed. The analysis of the play consists of extracting lines and scenarios to then put emphasis on the theme of hopelessness, futility and meaninglessness. For example, Jana extracts one of the
scenarios from the play where Vladimir and Estragon awaits Godot. From that scenario, she comes to the conclusion that Estragon and Vladimir continuously wait for Godot because they assume that Godot may be able to give them something that will in some ways enhance or better their lives (Jana 98). She continues by saying that the role of the characters in this scenario suggests that the mental state of human beings continuously is in search of hope and fulfilment in the near future. Apart from the analysis of Vladimir and Estragon, the author analyses Pozzo and Lucky’s relationship. I find this interesting as the previous works focused mainly on the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon. According to Jani (2013), the relationship between the two (Lucky and Pozzo) suggest the incarnate Time’s twin of change and changelessness (Jani 103). She notes that these are the only characters that ever change between the two acts other than Pozzo becomes blind and Lucky becomes dumb. She suggests that these changes are a reflection of time moving unceasingly towards loss and death which is interesting because even though it leads to a pessimistic end the characters still choose to live (Jani 104).

Jani concludes that Beckett’s play is an essential characteristic of human conditions. She continues by making a parallel from the play to the modern world of today. Namely, that it is similar to a man vainly waiting for a job or a letter. Even if one waits without certainty, as shown in the play, it represents a common trait that millions of people have “… The play in this sense gathers universal validity as it touches the chord of every heart of modern man.” (Jani 105).

The next section will consist of my own analysis of Beckett’s play Waiting for Godot.

4.0 The analysis of Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett

The masterpiece Waiting for Godot has long been categorised as one of Samuel Beckett’s best works. However, the play has grown to be a subject of discussion among critics stretching over decades since it was published. Before entering the analysis phase, I will first identify the different themes apparent in the play, then, divide the play in sub-categories. Accordingly, those sub-categories will be labelled as the themes found in the play of Waiting for Godot. Every theme will then be analysed using Kierkegaard and Sartre as reference points.

In general, the idea behind the play revolves around endless waiting and meaningless utterances. The play consists of two acts that are greatly similar to one another,
yet minor details splits them apart. Estragon and Vladimir are the main characters; there are additional characters such as Lucky (slave), Pozzo (slave owner) and A boy who occasionally appear. The play takes place along a country road by a tree, supposedly, on a Saturday. There are many facets of the play projected onto the reader that are found thought-provoking. In *Waiting for Godot*, elements such as existence, meaning, consciousness, value, truth, and uncertainty are prevalent throughout the play.

4.1 Setting and context:

There are many questions to be raised and answered when it comes to the setting; however, one must also take into account the context of the play. The significance of the minimalistic aspect of the play, that was non-conventional at the time, may explain why the setting was the way it was. *Waiting for Godot* belongs to the movement of ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, and this new way of writing was a way to express the society’s new reality (Norton 5). The aftermath of the First and Second World Wars was a time of change where writers adapted new techniques of writing and new ways to perceive events. The modernist writer Samuel Beckett probably composed the way he did to explore or perhaps shock his audience (Jani 97). Hence, the choice of a static setting for the play. The setting is certainly minimal. In the opening scene of Act one, the audience is introduced to three elements: A country road. A tree. An evening. The reasoning behind this minimal landscape can retrospectively be connected to the early post-war atmosphere. That is, the way the scenery where the play took place looked at this particular time, hence mirroring society as it was. Moreover, perhaps Beckett may have been projecting a part of his own life onto the setting of the play. To explain, Beckett worked for the French against the Germans during the war until he had to eventually move. This may have been a reality for him, as being displaced and wandering around the streets post-war probably would have looked like the setting of his own play.

There is another aspect of the “fixed” setting where Vladimir and Estragon seem to be characters of their own play. To explain, the other characters (Pozzo, Lucky, the Boy) enter and exit throughout the play; however, Vladimir and Estragon are the only ones that stay in the same place. This static setting makes it look like the other character’s comings and goings is like them spectating Vladimir’s and Estragon’s own reality that may not be so real.

The road can universally be symbolised as a place where journeys takes place. However, even though Estragon and Vladimir are aware that the road is free and that they may head somewhere else the choose to stay. In other words, Vladimir and Estragon are so
afraid to take hold of their own lives and progress that they rather wait for a person that never comes. On the other hand, the road could be seen as hopelessness for the characters. The thought of the unknown and of what may be at the end of that road may be frightening.

When it comes to the tree, it is described as looking very dull and perhaps dying. The only change the tree undergoes is the sprouting of a couple of leaves by the second act. As we established above, the road may have given Estragon and Vladimir a sense of hope. The tree, on the other hand, gives power to the Estragon and Vladimir. That is to say the notion of suicide is open for exploration and therefore gives them an option to either continue living or end their lives. Even though the notion of suicide is only discussed throughout the play, Estragon and Vladimir have a twisted sense of humour regarding the thought of dying. Namely, they would get sexual pleasure from the act of killing themselves.

**Estragon:** What about hanging ourselves?
**Vladimir:** Hmm. It'd give us an erection.
**Estragon:** *(highly excited).* An erection!

(Beckett 757)

### 4.2 Existence, Value and Uncertainty:

Existence, value and uncertainty are closely associated as for instance, in both Acts, there are segments where suicide is contemplated.

**Vladimir:** *(Silence. Estragon looks attentively at the tree.)* What do we do now?
**Estragon:** Wait.
**Vladimir:** Yes, but while waiting?
**Estragon:** What about hanging ourselves?
**Vladimir:** Hmm. It’d give us an erection.
**Estragon:** *(highly exited).* An erection!
**Estragon:** Let’s hang ourselves immediately!
**Vladimir:** From a bough? I wouldn’t trust it.
**Estragon:** We can always try.

(Beckett 757)

Interestingly, every time suicide is discussed during the play it comes up either because of boredom or when Vladimir and Estragon suddenly decide that their lives are unworthy of living. Essentially, value and lack of purpose are simultaneously removed from their lives by Vladimir and Estragon which, therefore, leads them to contemplate suicide without ever committing it. What seem to happen during this conversation puts emphasis on the belief that they, themselves, remove value and purpose. On the other hand, Kierkegaard’s
aesthetic stage of consciousness, in *Either/or*, can be used to read and interpret the suicide scenario of Vladimir and Estragon as having value. Similarly to Johannes Climacus, one of the characters in Kierkegaard’s book, the plotting and anticipation of what may come or happen is when value is renewed. Namely, Estragon and Vladimir may be restoring value by, alike Johannes Climacus, the sense of imagination.

Curiously enough, uncertainty now comes into play. The lack of certainty is of importance in the play and the decision making of, in this case, suicide. To summarize, as Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for the unknown Godot suicide is on their mind, however, they never go through with the deed. The reason behind the postponement of the suicide is simply Godot, even if he never is present throughout the play. On the other hand, the “will” of wanting not to die or postponing the eventual suicide is also an idea that can be connected to Sartre in his version of the philosophy of existentialism. As mentioned previously, the general idea behind the existentialist philosophy is based on the thought that meaning in life is a concept that is defined by humans. Through this philosophy, Vladimir’s and Estragon’s postponing of the suicide is essentially linked to the agony, despair and freewill as humans are “condemned to be free”.

Vladimir: Let’s wait and see what he says.
Estragon: Who?
Vladimir: Godot.
Estragon: Good idea.

(Beckett 757)

One may connect Godot to God, but the evidence may say otherwise. Namely, God and religion is a subject discussed during the play, however, Godot is never explicitly associated with God. The existence of God in the play is never particularly questioned, however, Godot’s is in both Acts.

Estragon: He should be here.
Vladimir: He didn’t say for sure he’d come.
Estragon: And if he doesn’t come?
Vladimir: We’ll come back tomorrow.
Estragon: And then the day after tomorrow.

(Beckett 755)

Godot is talked about as a mysterious man of his own and God is mentioned when Vladimir and Estragon reminisce about their old lives; therefore, I believe that even if there are references to biblical writings the two are separately discussed. Note that it is
evident that Godot holds some authority in the play, yet, calling him God in this context may not be suitable.

There is a sense of confusion because the characters (Vladimir and Estragon) contradict themselves a bit as they de-value their lives contemplating suicide, yet, reinstate value when they decide not to because of Godot. Nonetheless, the de-valuing and reinstating of value aligns with Sartre’s perspective of existentialism. For Sartre, the concept of uncertainty is a fundamental part of being human (Onof 1). In this context the future feels uncertain for the characters (Vladimir and Estragon) and Sartre suggests that even though they can determine to leave or stay put, humans are condemned to be free. The freedom humans are condemned to automatically gives insight to responsibility. Responsibility, in its turn, can lead to anxiety which, in this case, is triggered by the uncertainty Vladimir and Estragon project. Estragon and Vladimir are actively responding to anxiety by taking responsibility. To explain, they knowingly choose not to act upon the uncertainty and by choosing not acting upon it, they are now making a new choice which is to react by not reacting.

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, looking at this scenario from Kierkegaard’s concept of the religious stage of consciousness (the third stage of existence) would give a different outcome. Namely, through Kierkegaard’s third stage of consciousness, the indecisiveness/uncertainty of Estragon and Vladimir to wait for Godot could equally be viewed as a God-like relationship he advocates. To explain, Kierkegaard supports the idea that faith is a vital part of life, however, he indicates that faith should be subjective rather than objective (McDonalds 1). Similarly, the relationship the characters (Vladimir and Estragon) seem to have with Godot is something the spectator may not understand, hence subjectivity, but still valid even if not understood.

4.3 Meaning, consciousness and truth:

Meaning, consciousness and truth are a big part of Beckett’s play. To begin with, the concept of consciousness is questioned throughout the play. The whole notion of waiting causes the characters to subconsciously doubt their state of life. Vladimir and Estragon constantly remind themselves that they have to be occupied to pass the time while waiting for Godot. This essentially means that they are aware that if they do not keep themselves preoccupied; they either remain clueless as to what to do with themselves or turn to other activities that possibly may end their lives. For instance, in act two, Vladimir and
Estragon enters a discussion where they attempt to fill their boredom with anything but silence.

**Vladimir:** Say something!
**Estragon:** I’m trying. (Long silence.)
**Vladimir:** (In anguish.) Say anything at all!
**Estragon:** What do we do now?
**Vladimir:** Wait for Godot.
**Estragon:** Ah! (Silence.)
**Vladimir:** This is awful!
**Estragon:** Sing something.
**Vladimir:** No no! (He reflects.) We could start all over again perhaps.

(Beckett 785, 786)

As mentioned above, to Kierkegaard’s idea behind consciousness is divided into three stages (McDonalds 1.). The aesthetic stage of consciousness, the ethical stage of consciousness and the religious stage of consciousness. For Kierkegaard, each of the stages are of some importance and ideally to reach the highest level of consciousness all of the stages should be incorporated in one’s life. Moreover, he further suggests that all of the stages depend on each other. Namely, an aesthetic life on its own is not enough, therefore, adding ethics may balance it to some extent. Nevertheless, adding the religious stage of consciousness is mandatory to fulfil true state of consciousness. A parallel can be made between Kierkegaard’s viewpoint on the co-dependence the three stages have, and the dependency Vladimir and Estragon have on each other. In fact, there are instances in the play where Estragon threatens to leave but never does as Vladimir convinces him not to.

**Estragon:** I’m going.
**Vladimir:** So am I.
**Estragon:** Was I long asleep?
**Vladimir:** I don’t know. (Silence.)
**Estragon:** Where shall we go?
**Vladimir:** Not far.
**Estragon:** Oh yes, let’s go far away from here.
**Vladimir:** We can’t
**Estragon:** Why not?
**Vladimir:** We have to come back tomorrow.
**Estragon:** What for?
**Vladimir:** To wait for Godot.
**Estragon:** Ah! (Silence.) He didn’t come?

(Beckett 805, 806)

Estragon and Vladimir never suffer real physical harm. However, their minds are the ones that are tormented because nothing is certain and there is nothing for them to do to prevent that. According to Sartre, consciousness is viewed as not being an entity of its own,
rather, an entity “of something” which he classifies as the for-itself. He continues by clarifying that the concepts of consciousness (the for-itself) is defined by the nothingness, hence, the for-itself is created from nothingness (Onof 1). That is to say that Vladimir and Estragon are acting on their conscience (the for-itself) because of the fact that if they do not entertain themselves at all times, their consciousness loses meaning. In other words, Sartre implies that all we do, all our actions, is a way of disguising the nothingness of our lives.

The difficult ways in which meaning is thematised in Waiting for Godot is significant simply because it is difficult to isolate and situate it. However, instances such as when Vladimir and Estragon have conversations that are confusing and on the verge of incomprehensible help to associate those instances to the problem of meaning. The meaningless conversations and its incomprehensible tendencies link the play to the theatre of the absurd (Esslin 3). Meaningless conversations held by these two characters can partially be happening because they feel like they are leading meaningless lives. Nevertheless, there are moments in the play where utterances indicate otherwise.

Vladimir: We wait. We are bored. (He throws up his hand.) No, don’t protest, we are bored to death, there’s no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let’s get to work! (He advances towards the heap, stops in his stride) In an instant all will vanish and we’ll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness! (He broods)

(Beckett 797)

This utterance, unpredictably made by Vladimir, takes place during a scenario where Estragon and Vladimir are debating on whether they should help Pozzo (slave owner) rise up from a little fall. Vladimir’s declaration in these statements opens doors for interpretation of the perspective he has on life. The sense of not being in “control” of the events around him gives a hint that a mundane or even a significant life is a desire of his. The characters in the play seem to be aware of their meaningless lives. However, the quest for meaning is still there for some of the characters. For Sartre, the concept of meaning is slightly different. In his book Being and Nothingness (1969) the concept of meaning is presented as such: “existence precedes essence” (Sartre 568). This means that one is able to give meaning to one’s life by simply existing and acting a certain way. According to Sartre, “Freedom makes itself an act, and we ordinarily attain it across the act which it organizes with the causes, motives, and ends which the act implies” (Sartre 438). It is clear that Vladimir understands the meaninglessness of his life, however, he is still installing meaning into it by being aware of that meaninglessness.
The theme of truth for the existentialist is fundamental. For instance, Kierkegaard wrote his first book, *Either/or* (1843), under pseudonyms because he considered that by doing so he would encourage the reader to make their own perceptions/interpretations of the works he published. That is, to avoid being an indirect source of authority that would jeopardize the subjectivity he advocated, Kierkegaard would rather not “communicate” the truth to them directly. Eventually, one could say that, for Kierkegaard, truth is utterly subjective. This is also apparent in his belief around faith being subjective. On the other hand, for Sartre, truth is something that is man-made because humans are condemned to be free. To elaborate, through Sartre’s perspective truth is linked to freedom. He argues that humans are not created by other humans. This leads to us being born without consent. This then would mean that the fact that we were forcefully put on earth leads us to be free and act freely. Because, truth is created by humans (human reality), and therefore for Sartre this human reality is connected to freedom and truth. For Sartre, “… truth is not encountered by chance; it does not belong to a domain where one must seek…”; this would mean that truth is what one makes it to be (Sartre 569).

The play definitely has an aspect of truth; however, those facets are hidden behind dialogues between the characters. The whole concept behind the play *Waiting for Godot* revolves around waiting for a man that is never seen. While waiting, there are exchanges between the characters which clearly show the limitations of communication.

**Estragon:** In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.

**Vladimir:** You’re right, we’re inexhaustible.

**Estragon:** It’s so we won’t think.

**Vladimir:** We have that excuse.

**Estragon:** It’s so we won’t hear.

**Vladimir:** We have our reasons.

**Estragon:** All the dead voices.

**Vladimir:** They make a noise like wings.

**Estragon:** Like leaves.

(Beckett 785)

This exchange between Vladimir and Estragon is one of many where nothing is communicated. Here, nothing is explicitly said or done; rather, I think the characters are wandering away from a stable conversation to stay away from the truth. The truth in this scenario would expose the meaninglessness of waiting and of their lives. In other words, this dialogue is maintained to hide behind rather than to reveal the truth. For instance, here the
truth is connected to meaning and in such context; this would align nicely with Sartre´s perspective of truth. While Sartre believes that we are “forced” to be free and act freely, the empty conversations between the two of them become their human reality.

5.0 Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to use Soren Aabaye Kierkegaard´s and Jean-Paul Sartre´s perspectives on existentialism to read and analyse Samuel Beckett´s play *Waiting for Godot*. As previously mentioned, the theory of existentialism and these two perspectives were chosen as theoretical frameworks due to a couple of features being apparent throughout the play.

Firstly, the idea of the three stages of life´s existence that Kierkegaard advocates has been able to be used to draw parallels between the play and his idea, specially, the aesthetic and ethical stages of consciousness. Namely, there are instances in the play where suicide is contemplated but never committed; here Kierkegaard´s idea of the aesthetic way of life is nicely identified in that scenario. This was done by taking use of the character (Johannes Climacus) in Soren´s book *Either/or* to lift the aesthetic stage of consciousness in that specific part of the play.

Secondly, Jean-Paul Sartre´s perspective within the movement of existentialism can also be found within the play where nothing is ever certain. Uncertainty, for Sartre, is a central component of being human and it is, interestingly enough, present in Beckett´s play too. As discussed above, uncertainty often leads to anxiety and the anxiety leads to responsibility. That is to say that, the sequence of events where Vladimir and Estragon project a sense of confusion and uncertainty were linked to Sartre´s idea of uncertainty by connecting it to responsibility and anxiety.

These intricate aspects of the play have opened doors for questioning; these have therefore, for an extended period of time been a subject of discussion among critics such as Martin Esslin and Lawrence Graver. In the play, the notion of “waiting” is the central aspect, however, even if nothing major ever happens exploring and breaking down layers within the play uncovers otherwise.

The previous research section of my essay has played an important role to establish a general idea of what type of works has been done on the play. It opened doors for potential future investigation. Namely, I believe that with the help of papers/studies that were
already conducted, further investigation on the matter could open doors to uncover new hidden meanings. With the help of the historical background of the time, in which the play was written, especially the perspective of the ‘Theatre of the absurd’, and the concept of modernity and modernism I have been able to contextualise and situate Beckett’s play. These terms were then associated to both the play and the elements of meaning, uncertainty, existence and consciousness.

The analysis conducted in my paper discussed the elements of setting, context, meaning, uncertainty, existence and consciousness in relation to Soren Kierkegaard and Jean-Pierre Sartre’s philosophies. It mostly focused on the analysis of the two main characters of the play Vladimir and Estragon. However, during the analysis I have come to the conclusion that both philosophies are apparent throughout the play. Several points that have come from these philosophes, such as the concept of for-itself, in-itself and uncertainty, have supported the claim that the play indeed contains both perspectives of the existentialist philosophy by Kierkegaard and Sartre.
6.0 Bibliography


Jani, Darsha. "Futility, Hopelessness and Meaninglessness: Central Forces leading towards Absurdity in Beckett’s Waiting for Godot."


