

ECHOES OF ABSURDITY: WAITING FOR GODOT AND THE QUEST FOR MEANING IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened global existential concerns about meaning and isolation, which are also two of the issues central to Beckett's Waiting for Godot. The play's depiction of endless waiting and futility of quest for meaning offers a profound commentary on human condition, which in a way is reflective of the collective sense of uncertainty and despair that people experienced during the pandemic.

This paper reads Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot in the context of a post-pandemic world, and focuses on how existentialism and absurdism echo the contemporary experiences of uncertainty and isolation today.

Using a qualitative literary analysis, this study applies existentialist philosophy, particularly insights from Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, to draw parallels between the play's themes and the pandemic experience. The analysis incorporates contemporary psychological and philosophical literature on the impact of isolation and existential anxiety with reference to Waiting for Godot. The analysis finds that Waiting for Godot effectively mirrors absurdity, waiting, and meaninglessness that resonate with modern experiences of isolation and uncertainty the world faced due to the pandemic, and that the play continues to provide relevant insights into the human condition in times of global crisis.

Further research should explore how absurdist literature can address contemporary existential issues and mental health challenges, and that works like Waiting for Godot can offer valuable frameworks for understanding and coping with existential anxiety in the 21st Century.

Keywords: Existentialism; Absurdism; Samuel Beckett; *Waiting for Godot*; Post-Pandemic World; Isolation; Uncertainty.

Introduction

The COVID-19 was a significant occurrence in modern day history. It reshaped how people think, live, and relate to the community around them. The pandemic has brought them face to face with some of the bitterest and deepest questions about their life, their connections to others, and ultimately their inevitable death. With the rapid spread of the virus, people across this habitable globe were forced to adopt a new and awkward style of living. Businesses and schools were closed; governments forcefully imposed complete lockdowns; and different precautionary measures like social distancing were observed as standard practice of defense. In order to prevent the virus from proliferation, it was inevitable to take these measures. However, these safety measures spread an extreme sense of uncertainty and isolation among people. The usual routine was disturbed and people were cut off from their families and friends. The secure sense of comfort and normalcy, which had grounded their daily lives for long, was turned upside down. This period was a period of tedious and fearful waiting—for the end of the pandemic, for the invention of a vaccine, and for the restoration of life's normalcy—which gave rise to a universal sense of introspection and anxiety about the fear of the unknown and the unseen virus.

This communal and shared experience of uncertainty and waiting is strikingly analogous to the issues in Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*. Published in 1948, the play gained greater significance among the modern-day literary works. It revolves mainly around two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, both of whom perpetually wait for Godot who never shows up. While waiting for Godot, they engage in meaningless conversations and trivial activities resulting in

nothing. Literary scholars often interpret the play as a portrayal of the absurdity of existence, and humans' futile quest for meaning in the world which essentially offers none. The play's characters are condemned to a perpetual cycle of waiting, hoping, and again waiting, only to be met with uncertainty and disappointment. This echoes the anxiety and uncertainty which people went through during the pandemic.

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the existentialist and absurdist themes have surfaced to the consciousness of the general public. Existentialism is a philosophical movement exploring man's search for meaning, and the nature of existence. Existentialists believe that life in itself is meaningless, and that it is for the individuals to create their meaning and purpose in a world which is both indifferent and chaotic. Absurdism, which is the result of existentialism, explores the concept of man's search for meaning of existence in a totally meaningless universe. The pandemic completely disrupted the routines and normal structures of life. The result is that we see life in quite a different manner than how we did before the pandemic. We confront the ideas of meaning and existence head-on so to speak and face the question of how find some purpose in a life and world which are full of anxiety and uncertainty.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Becket captures the essence of these existential and absurdist themes. The endless waiting of the two tramps Vladimir and Estragon can be interpreted as a metaphor for the human condition where individuals are engaged in a perpetual and hopeless quest for purpose and meaning. The lack of a traditionally coherent plot in the play, and its circular and repetitive structure, echoes how life can have a repetitive and monotonous structure with no significant progress. This reflects humans' experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, where one day flowed into the next, and the future looked blurred and uncertain. The characters in the play engage in nonsensical and trivial conversations. This reflects the futility of man's efforts to make sense of things in an inherently meaningless and chaotic world.

Besides, the pandemic has also brought the fragility of human relations and connections under the spotlight. After the governments worldwide imposed lockdowns and social distancing measures, people faced difficulty maintaining social connections and relationships. These safety measures further aggravated the bitter feelings of loneliness and isolation. In *Waiting for Godot*, the central relationship is the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon. They have interdependency for companionship and support. However, this symbiotic relationship between the two tramps is marked by frustration, anxiety, and tension. Their awkward situation and mutual relationship mirror the hurdles in connecting with the world which is both unpredictable and uncertain. This can be translated as representation of the issues people faced during the pandemic marked by lockdowns, social distancing, and the looming death, where it was almost impossible to maintain all sorts of meaningful connections.

Besides, the pandemic has brought humans face to face with death and mortality which is both terrifying and painful. Millions of lives have fallen to the virus. The ongoing menace of the disease has turned death into an immediate concern and a real possibility. One of the themes central to the existentialist philosophy is individuals' consciousness of their mortality. Life derives its significance and urgency from how it recognizes and sees death as a tangible and inescapable reality. However, this cognizance brings with itself feelings of anxiety and despair while man psychologically wrestles with the idea that life is finite, devoid of meaning and purpose. The characters in *Waiting for Godot*, though always conscious of their mortality, keep waiting hoping that someday some saviour will show up who will liberate them from the curse of constant wait by providing them with some meaning of existence.

This paper examines the comparison between *Waiting for Godot* and the devastating experiences of general masses during the pandemic. The present study probes into themes of absurdism and existentialism in *Waiting for Godot*, and highlights how the play echoes with man's post-pandemic experience. The play's exposition of uncertainty, waiting, and quest for meaning mirrors the miserable human condition, which is specifically appropriate in the backdrop of the ongoing global crisis. The play reminds us of the poignant dilemma of searching for purpose and meaning in an absurd and uncertain world, offering none.

To put it briefly, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced humans into profound introspection and deep reflection on the meaning of existence. People are struggling with the anxiety of isolation and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. Drawing on the themes of existentialism and absurdism, *Waiting for Godot* has gained greater relevance in a world where individuals are grappling with the isolation and uncertainty they have been juxtaposed with by the pandemic. This study explores the parallels between *Waiting for Godot* and the experiences of post-pandemic era, and seeks to highlight the perfect relevance of *Waiting for Godot* as a depiction of human condition. Beckett's play offers valuable probes into the challenges of existence in a world that is both absurd and unpredictable.

Literature Review

Existentialism is a highly influential philosophical movement in modern literature. It discusses existentialist themes of absurdity, isolation, and alienation. With an evolutionary history of more than three centuries, this philosophy exploits the theories of Friedrich Nietzsche, Rene' Descartes, and Soren Kierkegaard. The key issue around which the philosophy of existentialism revolves, is man's search for meaning in existence, a theme keenly explored in the works of Samuel Beckett.

Thinkers like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus developed this philosophy of existentialism. It underscores humans' struggle to dig for meaning in an absurd and often indifferent universe (Sartre, 1943; Camus, 1955). Through the concept of "existence precedes essence," Sartre asserts that humans are cursed with the responsibility of creating meaning in a universe which inherently lacks any purpose, and hence they are condemned to freedom without resources (Sartre, 1943). Likewise, Camus's concept of the absurd, as put forth in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, suggests that life's inherent meaninglessness forces men to either revolt against or accept the absurd (Camus, 1955).

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is frequently referred to as an archetypal work of absurdist theater, echoing existential themes of despair, futility, and the search for meaning in an inherently meaningless universe (Esslin, 1961). According to Martin Esslin (1961), the play's description of two characters waiting for a figure who never arrives exemplifies the absurdity of human existence. Anthony Jenkins (1990) argues, "there can be no answers; Godot may or may not exist and may or may not arrive; we know no more about him than do Vladimir and Estragon" (Jenkins, 1990). Thus, the play has a unique structural arrangement that assures that Godot will never arrive, and that the absurdity and uncertainty must be taken for granted. This sense of uncertainty and waiting strongly reverberates with man's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, when everybody unreasonably hoped that some vaccine will be invented which will bring an end to the pandemic.

The play has received a wide critical commendation, despite its though and ambiguous structure. While reading of the play's text is complex, dense, it is also, at the same time, full of darkness, intrigue, hilarity, and absurdity. Prerna Gupta notes that despite it being a difficult read, the

interested people find Beckett's drama as the best work. The play does not make sense at first, but once the understanding comes, it evokes deeper thoughts in the mind of the reader (Gupta, 2009). However, *Waiting for Godot* requires superior level of understanding and knowledge of dramatic and philosophical concept to be fully appreciated. According Gupta (2009), in order to grasp the essence of Beckett's play one must possess knowledge about fundamentals of absurdism, existentialism as well as absurdist drama (Gupta, 2009).

Similarly, Beckett has a complex writing style in the play *Waiting for Godot*, which often baffles the readers. Atkinson (1956) notes that in *Waiting for Godot*, the reader, by looking at Beckett's point of view and style, finds him exploring the world under the influence of two separate stimuli. Readers find James Joyce in Beckett's style—fabulous and pungent. Likewise, they meet Sartre in his point of view—dark, bleak, and disgusted. Beckett combines the two perspectives, and gives a picture of human condition in the form of an unpleasant rather choking caricature (Atkinson, 1956).

Recent studies have explored the psychological and societal impacts of the pandemic, highlighting the increased prevalence of existential anxiety and a renewed interest in existentialist literature. Critics argue that the pandemic has exacerbated feelings of alienation and absurdity, drawing parallels with the themes explored in Beckett's play. Additionally, the psychological impact of prolonged isolation has been linked to increased existential dread and a questioning of life's meaning.

The post-war period witnessed existentialism's reflection in the arts, with Samuel Beckett's plays embodying the absurdity of human life. Existentialist writers, deviating from contemporary literary trends, focused on the individual's inner life and struggles. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, often regarded as early existentialists, emphasized the individual's role over societal norms (Webber, 2010). Their philosophical inquiries influenced subsequent existential thinkers like Dostoyevsky, Marcel, and Jaspers, who delved into themes of human freedom, societal struggles, and the interplay between empiricism and theology.

Jean-Paul Sartre is particularly notable for popularizing existentialism. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2015), Sartre played a pivotal role in twentieth-century thought by blending philosophical reflection with literary creativity and political activism. His concept of atheistic existentialism diverged from that of his contemporaries like Heidegger and Marcel (Esslin, 1961). Despite facing controversies, Sartre is celebrated as one of France's greatest intellectuals, known for his philosophical synthesis and innovative imagination (Priest, 2001).

Sartre's philosophy underscores the ideas of freedom and responsibility, asserting that humans are "condemned to be free" and must take responsibility for their actions in a world devoid of divine guidance. O'Neill (2010) notes that Sartre viewed freedom as a burdensome responsibility, distinct from traditional Western philosophical thought that links moral responsibility to the existence of a deity. Sartre's rejection of this traditional view emphasizes human freedom and responsibility, independent of divine intervention (O'Neill, 2010).

To grasp Sartre's existentialism, it is crucial to examine his plays, notably *The Flies* (1943) and *No Exit* (1957). Mart (2012) explains how *The Flies* (1943) explores freedom through its protagonist, Orestes, who embodies existentialist principles of creating one's own world. Sartre contrasts Orestes with his sister Electra, who remains ensnared by her past, highlighting the significance of recognizing and exercising freedom. Sartre further differentiates nihilism from dissipation, arguing that nihilism reflects a desire for freedom rather than a rejection of all values.

Alienation, a concept intricately tied to modern existentialism, denotes the sense of isolation individuals experience in contemporary society, particularly in larger urban settings. Darankolaee and Hojjat (2012) describe alienation as a state of estrangement that can manifest in various forms, from psychological withdrawal to legal and social contexts. They note, “The term alienation has its simple meaning—a condition of being estranged from someone or something” (p. 202). They further elaborate that psychological alienation may lead to neurosis and critical social theory may depict it as a separation from one’s self, stemming from work-related fragmentation (p. 202).

Literary explorations of alienation include the works of Kafka, Beckett, and Sam Shepard, with Shepard’s plays *Buried Child* (1997) and *True West* (2018) probing the theme of modern man’s alienation.

Absurdity, another central existential theme, denotes a lack of inherent meaning in human existence. Eugene Ionesco (as cited in Esslin, 1961, p. 4) describes absurdity as “devoid of purpose, cut from all religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, Man is lost” (p. 4), emphasizing the futility of human efforts in the absence of purpose. Albert Camus (1955) offers a more nuanced view, stating that “A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger (p. 6). For Camus, this existential alienation reflects man’s complete split with the environment around him, mirroring the inherent absurdity of life and existence.

The Theatre of the Absurd, a major literary and philosophical movement which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, has this theme of absurdity as its defining feature. Central to this movement were playwrights like Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and literary critics like Albert Camus. In their works, they explored the meaninglessness and irrationality of existence. In his seminal essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955), Albert Camus posits this notion. The essay highlights that “the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need [for reason] and the unreasonable silence of the world” (p. 20). According to Camus (1955), despite its dire need and heartfelt desire for finding purpose and clarity “This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (p. 15). Bloom’s assertion in this regard gains much value when he comments that *Waiting for Godot* reflects the idea that in order to fix and realize the worth of the self, the emotional stability and presence of some purpose is mandatory. Vladimir and Estragon find themselves marooned in a universe which is beyond their control. They cannot escape the constant pricking and chaos caused by their perpetual awareness of lack of purpose in existence and in their own lives (Bloom, 2008).

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2019) notes that existentialists argue that nature lacks inherent design or purpose, further underscoring the absurdity of existence. Heidegger (1962) contends that imposing a framework on nature using limited human understanding leads to a distortion of reality, with scientific achievements failing to provide the ultimate meaning humans seek. The term “absurd” has Latin roots, where it originally meant “inharmonious, out of tune,” highlighting the term’s connotation of irrationality and senselessness. Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* vividly illustrates these notions, presenting characters struggling with a world devoid of logical coherence.

Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is a prime work of absurdism, viewed as an influential and formative work in the Theatre of the Absurd. A unique feature of the play is the absence of a

traditional dramatic structure in it. There is no movement in the story. The plot development is minimal, with a barren setting and two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, stuck in a perpetual and endless state of waiting for the elusive and uncertain character named Godot. The play's structure consists of two acts which are almost identical with only few and negligible differences. This structural monotony reflects the barrenness and repetitiveness of existence as a whole. The odd connections between Vladimir and Estragon, alongside their interactions with Pozzo and Lucky and their futile contemplations and attempt of suicide highlight their overall sense of futility, existential despair, and the world's absurdity.

The absurd connections between the two tramps and the cyclical structure of the plays' two almost similar acts exhibiting minor and probably intentional differences are the core of the play. Vladimir's and Estragon's interactions reveal their character traits and dispositions that are totally different from each other. Vladimir appears more philosophical in comparison with Estragon who shows more indifferent and brutish approach.

VLADIMIR: Sometimes, I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer. ...

(Estragon with a supreme effort succeeds in pulling off his boot. ... Well?

ESTRAGON: Nothing.

(Beckett 3)

Their discussions reveal their existential anxieties stressing their divergent perceptions of purpose and meaning. The mental instability of Estragon in conjunction with Vladimir's sporadic attempts to placate him, mirrors their physical and mental alienation which is too deep-rooted to be ignored. The two tramps' existential predicament is further heightened by their endless waiting for the elusive Godot, mirroring their unsuccessful and futile quest for purpose. Beckett's intention with *Waiting for Godot* is to portray the absurdity of the human condition and the inherent meaninglessness of existence. The play reflects existential alienation and the retreat from meaningful connections. The dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon reveals their resignation to a purposeless existence, encapsulated in their dialogue about waiting for Godot:

ESTRAGON: ... Let's go. VLADIMIR: We can't. ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot. ... ESTRAGON: Until he comes.

(Beckett, 6-7).

This conversation underscores their existential crisis and the futility of their anticipation. Hotaling (2021) supports this interpretation, suggesting that Vladimir and Estragon's lives are consumed by waiting, with the arrival of Godot representing their sole hope for meaning (p. 11-12). Esslin (1961) describes waiting as an illustration of purposelessness and the illusion of change, asserting that "Waiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is in itself an illusion" (p. 52).

The characters' endless waiting reflects their existential despair and alienation, as seen in their trivial exchanges and futile activities. Vladimir's reflection on their condition highlights the awareness of life's meaninglessness:

VLADIMIR: (angrily). No one ever suffers but you. I don't count. I'd like to hear what you'd say if you had what I have. ... ESTRAGON: (pointing). You might button it all the same. VLADIMIR: (stooping). True. (He buttons his fly.) Never neglect the little things of life. ... ESTRAGON: Why don't you help me?

(Beckett, 3).

This existential realization aligns with Sartre's view that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1993, p. 568), emphasizing that meaning is created through individual freedom and action.

Sartre's assertion that "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, 1993, p. 438) reflects the play's exploration of meaning through personal choice.

Kierkegaard's notion of despair in *The Sickness Unto Death* (1941) complements this perspective. Kierkegaard (1941) posits that despair arises from the struggle to reconcile oneself with existence and the absence of inherent meaning. This despair reflects the characters' existential plight, as they grapple with their own lack of purpose and connection.

Thus, the existential themes of alienation and absurdity permeate Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, reflecting broader philosophical inquiries into human existence and meaning. The play's exploration of these themes resonates with Sartre's, Camus's and Kierkegaard's existential philosophies, offering a profound commentary on the human condition and its relevance in the context of contemporary global crises.

This paper builds on existing literature by examining how *Waiting for Godot* serves as a mirror to the existential challenges posed by the pandemic. By connecting Beckett's themes of absurdity and waiting with contemporary experiences of isolation and uncertainty, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the relevance of existentialism in times of global crises.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing literary analysis and existentialist philosophy to explore the themes of absurdity and meaning in *Waiting for Godot*. The analysis is conducted through a close reading of the play, with a focus on key existential motifs such as waiting, inertia, and absurdity. The study also incorporates insights from contemporary philosophical and psychological literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing parallels between the play's depiction of human existence and the experiences of individuals during the pandemic. Scholarly articles, books, and essays on existentialism, absurdism, and Beckett's work are referenced to provide a robust theoretical framework for the analysis.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of *Waiting for Godot* in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals a profound resonance between Beckett's portrayal of existential themes and the lived experiences of individuals during the global crisis. This alignment underscores the play's enduring relevance and provides a rich framework for understanding the psychological and societal impacts of the pandemic.

Absurdity and Existential Despair

In *Waiting for Godot*, the themes of waiting and absurdity offer compelling reflection on existential despair individuals encountered during the global crisis of COVID-19. Beckett masterfully illustrates the societal experience of waiting for the pandemic to end, through his portrayal of the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, who are trapped in an endless wait for Godot, who is an elusive figure, and who never arrives. This awareness of perpetual and ceaseless waiting, featuring lack of clear resolution, uncertainty, and anxiety, is a reflection of the psychological damage the pandemic has inflicted upon individuals.

Beckett's play, Esslin (1961) asserts, is a quintessential specimen of the absurdist theater, which echoes the core of existence in a meaningless and pointless universe. The two tramps' futile and unreasoned expectations of the arrival of Godot is a metaphor for the larger existential predicament encountered by man during the COVID-19 pandemic. This sense of waiting in vain pervaded across the globe with people going through a similar state of lack of purpose, inertia,

and stasis, with the deadly virus upsetting normalcy and daily life routines, worsening the general atmosphere of emptiness, futility and despair. Dealing with the perils of inertia due to lockdowns and social distancing measures, people were faced with “a graceless, inefficient mode of coping with anxiety” (Yalom, 1980, p. 110). American psychotherapist Paddy Farr (2021) notes:

Through traumatic encounter with the invisible and inescapable, the threat posed by COVID-19 brings one face to face with one's deepest existential angst: Yes, you shall die; yes, you are responsible for your actions that brought you here; yes, you must face this alone in the end; and yes, your entire life has no meaning in the face of this threat. (Paddy Farr, 2021)

Struck by the anxiety, the characters have arrived at a mental point where there is no or very little difference between happiness and sorrow, between sanity and insanity. Estragon and Vladimir develop a perverse sense of humour when it comes to their discussion of committing suicide. Ironically, they would feel sexual arousal 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, 10)

With the imposition of social distancing measures and forced lockdowns, the global pandemic of COVID-19 has substantially messed up the daily life of the masses, leading to the breakdown of the traditional codes and structures of meaning. Beckett's depiction of meaningless routines and repetitive actions in *Waiting for Godot*, are in a stark parallel with this disruption inflicted by the pandemic. The characters' monotonous existence, noticeable through their feeble efforts to pass time while waiting endlessly, reflects the miserable human conditions during the pandemic when people were left to grapple with the restrictions of lockdowns, and the resultant monotony of living a purposeless life. Vladimir and Estragon engage in a pointless conversation in an attempt to kill the silence and boredom.

VLADIMIR: I felt lonely. ESTRAGON: I had a dream. VLADIMIR: Don't tell me! ESTRAGON: I dreamt that— VLADIMIR: DON'T TELL ME! (Beckett, 9)

Existential Anxiety and the Search for Meaning

The pandemic has prompted a renewed interest in the philosophy and literature of existentialism by intensifying the feelings of existential anxiety and uncertainty. Camus's concept of the absurd and Sartre's notion of “existence precedes essence” offer deeper perceptions of people's encounters with the odd challenges of COVID-19 pandemic. Sartre (1943) asserts that humans are condemned to freedom, with the odd and absurd responsibility of creating meaning for themselves in a world that is meaningless and purposeless (Sartre, 1943). In *Waiting for Godot*, all the four characters Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, and Lucky deliberate the issues of existence questioning their own existence in an absurd manner. They wait for a mysterious individual named “Godot” at an unfamiliar place. All of them are trapped in a world of isolation, meaninglessness, frustration, and lack of any purpose. The elusive being named Godot never comes, though a messenger boy arrives who tells of Godot not coming that day. These wretched individuals become frustrated of their repeated waiting which “despite their heroic accommodations they cannot escape” (Bloom, 2008). The word ‘waiting’ is universalized in the play, which is an indispensable aspect of all the existential plays. This situation perfectly aligns

with the snags and problems encountered by humans who were condemned to the labour of creating meaning and purpose amidst the uncertainties and anxieties of the deadly pandemic.

In the same manner, Camus's examination of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*—where individuals must confront the essential meaninglessness of existence and decide whether to fight or accept the absurd (Camus, 1955)—mirrors the options encountered by individuals during the sway of the deadly virus. The devastating psychological effect of the questioning of life's meaning elicited by prolonged isolation have driven the people to challenge and doubt their own sense of existence and purpose, reflecting the existential themes explored in *Waiting for Godot*.

Isolation, Alienation, and the Breakdown of Meaning

The minimalistic dialogues and stark setting of *Waiting for Godot* emphasis themes of alienation and isolation, which have been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. The large-scale societal struggle for creating sense of virus's effect on life and human connections finds a compelling reflection in the struggle of the play's characters to find meaning in their miserable condition. The feelings of isolation and alienation which Vladimir and Estragon go through aligns with the general sense of disconnection and isolation encountered by the masses during the reign of the pandemic.

Darankolae and Hojjat (2012) examine this alienation and highlight its multiple exegeses, one of which is the fragmentation of the self and psychological withdrawal from the society through engaging oneself in work. The pandemic has exacerbated these emotional states due to disruption of their routines through prolonged periods of social isolation. This feeling of estrangement and the shattering of personal and social contacts are parallel with the themes of alienation and isolation in *Waiting for Godot*.

Theatre of the Absurd and Contemporary Reflections

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is symbolic of the Theatre of the Absurd, a movement that probes into the meaninglessness, emptiness and irrationality of life and existence in an indifferent and unkind universe. The play's structure featuring lack of a coherent plot, fragmented and repetitive dialogues, and absence of traditional dramatic conflict, mirrors the absurdity of existence and human condition. This consciousness of absurdity has heightened with pandemic. Today, the individuals are more aware of the absurdity of existence because of their first-hand experience with the matchless global crisis that has subverted the traditional concepts of meaning and purpose.

The Theatre of the Absurd explores the existential themes offering deeper probes into the current atmosphere of existential uncertainty and isolation. Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, Albert Camus, and Samuel Beckett have navigated the inherent absurdity of life and man's failed attempts to find and/or create meaning in an indifferent world which is inherently empty. The themes of existential crisis and absurdity portrayed in the Theatre of the Absurd resounds strongly with individuals' encounters with the agonizing predicaments of the pandemic.

Sartre's Existentialism and Beckett's Absurdity

Jean Paul Sartre's existentialist idea that individuals are responsible for creating their own meaning in the existence, and his concept of "existence precedes essence" find their parallel in the existentialist themes of meaninglessness and isolation in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. These philosophic concepts and ideas of Sartre reflect both the freedom as well as responsibility of man to define and create purpose for their own existence (Sartre, 1943). According to Pormouzeh (2019) "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, 2019).

This standpoint is evident in the tramps' unfruitful but hard attempts to find any meaning in their uncertain wait for Godot, although they are not very clear if there will ever be any outcome.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon struggle hard to enforce some purpose on their otherwise purposeless and empty existence. This effort of the two tramps in the play reflects Sartre's ideas that "freedom makes itself an act" (Sartre, 1993, p. 438), and that individuals must create and give meaning to their existence through their deeds. The plays' depiction of the tramps' quest for meaning and their existential struggle amidst absurdity highlights the existentialist philosophy, mirroring the appropriateness of existentialist school of thought in fathoming the experiences of contemporary world.

Camus's Absurd and the Pandemic's Disruptions

Albert Camus's exploration of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* provides a functional definition of absurdity that make parallel with the experiences of individuals during the pandemic. The bitter effects of COVID-19 pandemic on life's normalcy and its daily routine align with Camus's perspective who asserts that world is barren of meaning and illusions, and that a sense of hopelessness and disorientation pervades the universe (Camus, 1955). The onslaught of the deadly virus has uncovered the vulnerability of life and existence. It has exposed the fact that meaning is not a fixed thing; it is elusive, rather nonexistent. Hence the individuals must confront the existential dread by creating their own purpose and meaning in an otherwise meaningless and indifferent world.

According to The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2019), the existentialist thinkers believe that nature is devoid of innate reason or any coherent design. This viewpoint aligns with the perils of anxiety, uncertainty, and existential predicaments, the individuals encounter during the global crisis of COVID-19. The natural world, defined by physical sciences, does not necessarily offer the meaning or value that individuals search for. This disconnect between the search for existential meaning and the scientific understanding reflects the absurdity of existence and makes parallel with Camus's perspective on the absurd and absurdism.

Heidegger's Perspective on Absurdity

The philosophy of Martin Heidegger also adds to the debate of absurdity. He argues that man's effort of implementing a framework on nature while having inadequate knowledge of it is to falsify the reality. This viewpoint lines up with the notion of absurdity because it makes the thus far accepted achievements of natural sciences inadequate rather dubious when it comes to the question of meaning and purpose of existence (Heidegger, 1962). The absurdity of existence lies in the recognition of the emptiness and lack of inherent meaning in the world, reflecting the existential challenges faced during the pandemic.

Esslin's Definition of Absurdity

Esslin's (1961) examination of the term "absurd" focusses on its Latin roots and contemporary usage, stressing upon its association with incongruity and irrationality. This definition connects absurdity to events that diverge from the norms, depicting the feeling of senselessness and irrationality encountered during the pandemic. Beckett's portrayal of absurdity in *Waiting for Godot*—through its inharmonious and out-of-tune representation of human existence—rings with the impact of pandemic on conventional patterns of understanding and traditional structures of meaning.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: A Reflection on Existential Crisis

Waiting for Godot provides an authoritative analysis of the existential crisis the global pandemic brought individuals face to face with. The play explores the phenomena of waiting, search for

meaning in a meaningless word, and the overall absurdity of human condition. This reflects how human society lived through the perils of social and psychological commotions and their proximity with the disturbing uncertainties, during the pandemic. Beckett offers a distressing image of the human condition during the onslaught of the deadly virus. He creates this distressing portrayal by using the technique of minimalism in language, and by representing the characters' pointless struggle to find some meaning and purpose in their useless waiting. While Vladimir and Estragon are waiting, their conversation and their communication clearly reveal the limitations of language and the overall communication.

ESTRAGON: That's the idea, let's make a little conversation. VLADIMIR:
Haven't they? ESTRAGON: What?

(Beckett, 39)

The play navigates the existential themes depicting life as a forced labour in a universe devoid of meaning and purpose. It is perfectly aligned to the modern-day experiences of individuals stuck in a crowded world of isolation. All this gives a permanent relevance to the play in the popular discourse on existentialism and human condition. The present study examines Beckett's play in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic to highlight how vital existentialist thought is to fathom the gravity and to negotiate the challenges of the post-pandemic world.

Conclusion

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* remains a profound exploration of existentialism and absurdism, with its themes of waiting, uncertainty, and the search for meaning resonating strongly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The play's depiction of endless anticipation and existential despair reflects the widespread psychological and societal impacts experienced during the pandemic, underscoring the play's enduring relevance. This study has demonstrated that Beckett's work offers valuable insights into the human condition during global crises, highlighting how existentialist and absurdist literature can illuminate contemporary experiences of isolation and meaninglessness. By connecting Beckett's portrayal of absurdity with the challenges posed by the pandemic, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of existentialism's relevance in modern life.

The findings suggest that absurdist literature, particularly Beckett's work, continues to provide a critical framework for exploring the complexities of human existence in times of crisis. The study not only reaffirms the significance of *Waiting for Godot* but also opens avenues for further research into how existentialist themes can help make sense of ongoing and future global challenges.

Recommendations

Future research could further explore the psychological impact of global crises on existential thought, particularly how literature like *Waiting for Godot* can provide a framework for understanding and coping with existential challenges. Additionally, scholars could investigate the role of absurdist literature in addressing contemporary issues such as mental health and social isolation, offering new perspectives on the relevance of existentialism in the 21st century.

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