

# Truth: The God within Godot in ‘Waiting for Godot’ by Samuel Beckett

Raisun Mathew

Assistant Professor

Department of English, RU College of Management & Technology

Affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala

Email – raisunmathew@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *The concept of truth for one person might not be the same for the other. It varies according to the person and his influencing surroundings. There exists no absolute truth in the world which can overwrite the different meanings subjected to the many truths formed. Godot is referred to in this research paper to be the absolute truth for which Vladimir and Estragon wait. Estragon’s boots have the significance of being the symbolic representation to the different forms of truths found by humanity that alters according to the change in their perspectives which is controlled by their collective memory and surroundings. This paper reads Samuel Beckett’s ‘Waiting for Godot’ in the light of truth that is framed out from the word origin and the object ‘boot’. Nietzsche’s idea of ‘perspectivism’ has been symbolically represented in the play via the concept of never appearing ‘Godot’.*

**Key Words:** *Post-truth, Absurd, Theatre of Absurd, Godillot, Ideological State Apparatus.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Friedrich Nietzsche in his ‘*Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*’, published in 1878 writes that ‘There are no eternal facts, as there are no absolute truths’. Truth is explained into three meanings by the Oxford Dictionaries as 1) the true facts about something rather than the things that you have been invented or guessed 2) the quality or state of being based on fact 3) the fact that is believed by most people to be true. These three explanations for the word truth converge to an objective and subjective conclusion about truth. The objective truth stays away from the influence of a person or a group whereas the subjective truth is immersed in the fact that is supported by the majority. The world consists of people with entirely different collective memories that frame different perspectives of truth from their angles. One person’s truth might not match with the truth analysed by the other. So there belongs no one single truth of an eternal quality, but only different forms of the same truth. Language systems control in making perspectives that alter truth from one to the other. To Jacques Derrida, language is a self-enclosed system that signifies objects only within the system of that particular language and not the other. Extra-linguistic signification does not get much prominence in the theory of Derrida. The symbols, signifiers, relative concepts are closed within the boundaries of a language which in other has a different signification and meaning. Truth does not stand unchanged with language systems. The absolute centre is questioned in the theory of deconstruction by Derrida. The notions of decentring and polysemy are supported in his seminal work, ‘*Structure, sign and Play in the discourse of Human Sciences*’.

Samuel Beckett, who is well known for his Absurd plays, draws certain conclusions to the concept of absolute truth in his most discussed play that comes under the Theatre of Absurd. ‘*Et attendant Godot*’, the French original version was first performed in Theatre de Babylon in Paris in 1953. ‘*Waiting for Godot*’ is a later English version performed in London in 1955. Though the play has given thought-provoking subjects, its reception in the initial period was disappointing as the contents of the play could not be digested by the audience of that time. Alison Flood writes in the article ‘*Angry boredom: early responses to Waiting for Godot showcased online*’:

Once the play was shown, correspondence digitised by the British Library shows how Lady Howitt called for the play to be banned over its “lavatory references”. It was subsequently viewed by examiner CW Heriot, who in his report to the Lord Chamberlain said that he had “endured two hours of angry boredom” for “a piece quite without drama and with very little meaning” (*The Guardian*)

Martin Esslin in the initial paragraph of his essay ‘*The Theatre of Absurd*’ states that the later reception of the absurdist plays in countries like France, Germany, Scandinavia and the English-speaking countries were puzzling as the audience amused and applauded these plays being aware that nothing could be understood from it and the author’s intention on it.

'*Waiting for Godot*' has an interesting debate on the unseen and unknown character Godot. As the play is entirely subjected on waiting for the reveal of Godot, it is a validating enquiry. There are debates on interpretation of Godot as God by some critics and the others have objected it. Samuel Beckett himself has told that if his character Godot had been God, he would have called it God and not Godot.

When Sir. Ralph Richardson, the British star, asked him if Godot represented God, Beckett had replied, "If by Godot I had meant God, I would have said God, Not Godot" (Karthikeyan, 49).

If not God what does Godot signify? What significance does the play has in the twenty-first century? There exists no certainty to any aspect of the play, even with the names or individuality that they prefer to have. When asked about the meaning of Godot, Beckett threw one enquirer off the track by saying that it had to do with 'Godillot', a military boot (Karthikeyan, 56). French word 'Godillot' supposes to be the origin of Godot which interprets to be the ultimate saviour at times of chaos. Behalf of the World War II experiences of Beckett, it can have a better identity in his play than of the other. In search of something special and significant in everyone's life that can save them from the present confusion and uncertainty of leading a false living. The existential crisis faced through meaningless situations in life is plotted through the play. Being in an unsteady situation where the idea of absolute truth about life is distant, the search for an ultimate truth begins. Beckett has pictured a world of insignificance in the play which doubts about the meaning of human existence. The meaninglessness in existence makes Vladimir and Estragon wait for their meaning of life, the truth behind their existence. Godot, here in the play can be interpreted as the ultimate truth for which humanity represented by Vladimir and Estragon waits which they believe can save them from the absurd situation of uncertainty. In the post-truth world of biased truth, the significance of *Waiting for Godot* through the eye of truth is high. Nietzsche comments that once we realize the idea of absolute truth, objective truth is a philosophical hoax, the only alternative is a position called "perspectivism" – the idea in which there is no one objective way the world is, only perspectives on what the world is like (Nietzsche). He also points that an individual tries to 'create' truth or truths wherein truth exists in an individual's perspective only. An individual's perspective depends upon his/her personal and subjective experiences. Emotional facts and personal believes are more welcomed than the objective facts in a post-truth world. Recent trends have proved that truth in the current world does not exist but is made according to the needs. Over explosion of knowledge via media and other sources have created confusions similar to that of the existential crisis faced by the characters. Truth for each character in the play did not match exactly to the truth found by the other.

In the beginning, Estragon says "Nothing to be done" while struggling to pull his boot off. The boot can signify the form of truth that is concluded by Estragon which can be different from the ultimate truth represented by Godot. Estragon doubts the existence of truth that he found to be the ultimate truth by the conceptions that he had through his gathered collective memory that controls his perspectives which is different from the other. The dialogue, "Nothing to be done" signifies his helpless situation of not being out of his perspectival approach designed by his collective memory. It sticks on to him as of his alone and not any one's else. Vladimir replies to his statement as: "All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle" (Beckett). Later in the section, Vladimir advises Estragon that he has to take off his boots every day. Interpreting in the concept of truth, Vladimir can be analysed as a person who continuously rechecks his idea of perception of truth whereas Estragon needs the help of Vladimir to change his convention of truth. Estragon later tries to change his boot to make Godot happy.

VLADIMIR: Your boots, what are you doing with your boots?

ESTRAGON: (turning to look at the boots). I'm leaving them there. (*Pause*) Another will come, just as . . . as . . . as me, but with smaller feet, and they'll make him happy. (Beckett)

With time, he recognizes that his truth might not fit perfect with that of the absolute. So he is willing to change his to satisfy the needs of the ultimate truth. The attitude of human mind to change them to adapt with situations is seen here. His form of truth changes itself with the changing requirements of his surroundings that influence him. His knowledge about the truth has gone further forward than before that makes him advance his concept of truth to be better than before which may fit to the like of Godot.

Estragon with a supreme effort succeeds in pulling off his boot. He peers inside it, feels about inside it, turns it upside down, shakes it, looks on the ground to see if anything has fallen out, finds nothing, feels inside it again, staring sightlessly before him.

While searching for absolute truth, there is no point in checking the validity of the truth found by oneself as it is the subjective form of truth of that person alone and not objective which I valid to be generally true for all. Estragon finds nothing valid in his form of truth while rechecking them for the absolute truth.

In Act II, when Vladimir checks Estragon's boots, he halts before it, picks one up, examines it, sniffs it, manifests disgust, puts it back carefully. Vladimir does not find the truth of Estragon perfect to the idea of truth that he has in his mind. When Vladimir asks Estragon about his boots he replies that he threw it away though he does not know where it was thrown. While searching for the boots Estragon finds it brown. Vladimir asks whether it's black for sure. He replies it to be grey. Later they find it is green in colour. The change in perspectives even in the boots represents the change in perspective of truth. Truth for them has changed its forms from one to the other. These truths represent their infinite number of truths that they find out with influences of many factors that control their perspectives. Such truths rule the world which is entirely different from the absolute one which is just a hypothetical one.

The world which is divided into different communities with an entirely different way of living always finds truths of their own to make their existence alive. As the Cultural relativism explains, it is the principle that a person's beliefs, values, customs, and world view do not possess absolute or universal validity but are shaped by her particular cultural circumstances (Cuddon, 177). One which is considered to be true and valid in one culture may not fit perfectly to the other in the same manner. Truth varies accordingly.

ESTRAGON: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?

VLADIMIR: (impatiently). Yes yes, we're magicians. But let us persevere in what we have resolved, before we forget. (He picks up a boot.) Come on, give me your foot. (Estragon raises his foot.) The other, hog! (Estragon raises the other foot.) Higher! (Wreathed together they stagger about the stage. Vladimir succeeds finally in getting on the boot.) Try and walk. (Beckett)

Estragon states that their truth makes them an impression that they exist among others. Vladimir, hearing it fits the boot of Estragon onto his legs perfectly denoting that the truth that is found by Estragon, by himself is made perfectly fit to his idea of truth. His boot cannot fit into that of Vladimir as same as their perspective about their truths may vary. Later when Estragon licks Lucky, he hurts his boot and tries to take it off. There are several more instances where Estragon finds his boot unfit to when something encounters him. These disturbances can be ideas that counter the truth that is found by Estragon at those moments. He takes off his boots whenever he is opposed with disturbances, thus he does not wear it and takes them in both his hands to place it down centre front.

*Waiting for Godot* is gradually revealed to have the meaning of waiting for truth while reading it with a symbolic representation of the material object 'boot' in relation to Estragon and the literal meaning of the word Godillot. The situation where truth varies is represented by Vladimir quoting the incident of two thieves on either side of the Christ on the cross. He says that out of the four Evangelists only Luke says in detail that the one thief among the two was saved.

VLADIMIR: And yet . . . (pause) . . . how is it —this is not boring you I hope— how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there —or thereabouts— and only one speaks of a thief being saved.

VLADIMIR: One out of four. Of the other three two don't mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him. (Beckett)

Vladimir tries to say that the perspective angle for one among the four similar gospel writers was different that made him go in deep to state the salvation of the one thief. The Truth was altered and hidden by the other three which is their version of the truth. As to Vladimir, an ultimate truth does not happen to be written in the Bible about the incident.

The characters of Pozzo and Lucky also denote the altering character of truth. While in the first act when they approach, Pozzo is asked whether he is Godot. Pozzo is represented as a master figure who rules over his slave, Lucky. Truth is mostly misinterpreted to be that of which is said by dominating groups that impose their power over others. Their ideology is imposed to be the ultimate truth which has to be respected by others. Usually, the state with powers imposes their ideology through the Ideological State Apparatus using repressive measures. Such truths are often

misrepresented as absolute truth for the entire humanity. Later in the second act, Pozzo is depicted as blind. Here, the form of truth changes suddenly from that of the first scene. The dominating truth lessens its power with time and changes to be blind by itself.

## 2. CONCLUSION:

Vladimir's and Estragon's waiting for Godot does not end even at the conclusion of the second repetitive day. Godot, which is represented to be the ultimate truth supposed to appear to save them from their mismatching number of truths, is not found. They believe that the absolute truth, Godot could save them from their existential crisis of having many truths in life when they meet him the next day. In the play 'Waiting for Godot', Samuel Beckett does not end with the appearance of the long-awaited Godot. It gives the hint that Godot is always expected to appear to save but does not actually exist in reality to resolve the problem with existence encountered by the two characters. They are still in search of the absolute truth without knowing that one such hypothetical concept does not appear to produce meaning to their existence. Their existence is modulated by their own findings of truth as suggested by Estragon to Vladimir. As stated in 'The Gay Science', in the circumstances of polytheism, it says:

“In polytheism man's free-thinking and many-sided thinking had a prototype set up: the power to create for himself new and individual eyes, always newer and more individualised: so that it is for man alone, of all animals, that there are no eternal horizons and perspectives” (Nietzsche, 128)

Truth, as signifiers do not exist beyond a confined limit to which it is controlled by surrounding factors. Truth exists as truths with several perspectival meanings of its own which on exploration might get more perfect as Estragon felt his boot to be fit for him at some point of time. It changes with time and new meanings to encroach into the existing to replace them.

As said by Mahatma Gandhi, “No God is higher than Truth” finds its relevance in this play in which more than Godot being God, it is the truth that Godot bears in him, unseen and unknown. Commenting about the Absurd plays and truth, in reality, it is true what Albert Camus said in *The Myth of Sisyphus* in 1942, that ‘The absurd is the essential concept and the first truth’.

## REFERENCES:

### Books:

1. Beckett, S. (1954). *Waiting for Godot: Tragicomedy in 2 acts*. New York: Grove Press.
2. Camus, A. (1965). *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*. London: H. Hamilton.
3. Cuddon J. A (2013). *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. West Sussex. UK. Wiley-Blackwell Publication.
4. Derrida, J. (1978). *Writing and Difference*. Chicago. The University of Chicago Press
5. Esslin, M. (2004). *The Theatre of the absurd*. New York: Vintage Books.
6. Nietzsche, F.W. (1974). *The Gay Science*. New York : Vintage Books.
7. Nietzsche, F. W., & Hollingdale, R. J. (1986). *Human, all too human: A book for free spirits*. Cambridge Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press.
8. Simpson, J. A., Weiner, E. S. C., & Oxford University Press. (1989). *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

### Thesis:

9. Karthikeyan, C K. (2003). *Search for meaning in Samuel Becketts plays waiting for godot endgame and krapps last tape*, doctoral diss., Bharathiar University, Tamil Nadu, India.

### Web References:

10. Flood, A. (2017). The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/11/early-responses-to-waiting-for-godot-showcased-online-samuel-beckett>.