

# Waiting versus Acceptance: Responses to the Absurd in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Stranger*

Arun Katara

Assistant Professor, Department of English, PMCOE, SCA, Govt. PG College, Jhabua, M.P., India

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**Abstract**— This paper explores the philosophical Divergence in existentialist thought through a comparative analysis of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* and Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger*. Both text capture the 20th-century crisis of meaning, illustrating a universe devoid of inherent purpose—a condition defined by Camus as the Absurd. However, they present fundamentally opposing behavioural responses to this condition. Beckett's protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, embody the paralyzing state of "waiting," relying on a passive, hopeful dependence on external salvation to defer the terror of existential vacancy. Conversely, Camus's protagonist, Meursault, transitions from passive alienation to active "acceptance," embracing the indifferent universe without the crutch of hope or metaphysical illusion. By examining these contrasting mechanisms—waiting as a desperate avoidance strategy versus acceptance as a liberating confrontation—this study demonstrates how Beckett dramatizes the tragicomic stagnation of unfulfilled hope, while Camus outlines a blueprint for the Absurd Hero. Ultimately, this paper argues that while waiting shackles the individual to an illusory future, acceptance liberates the self to exist authentically in the absolute present.



**Keywords**— Absurd, existentialist, alienation, transitions metaphysical illusion, confrontation.

## Introduction

The mid-20th century witnessed a profound rupture in Western philosophical tradition, precipitated by the trauma of global warfare and the collapse of grand theological narratives. From this intellectual vacuum emerged the philosophy of the Absurd, a concept most cogently articulated by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Camus posits that the Absurd is not inherent to the universe, nor is it exclusive to the human mind; rather, it is born out of the collision between the human desire for order, meaning, and clarity, and the "unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus, *Myth* 28). Confronted with this fundamental disharmony, humanity is forced to choose a mode of survival.

Two of the most seminal literary works of this era, Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger* (1942), serve as profound narrative laboratories for testing human responses to the Absurd. While both authors diagnose the same existential

ailment—a world stripped of teleological certainty, where time is cyclical and human action appears fundamentally inconsequential—their prescriptions are radically different.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* presents a world defined by stagnation, where the characters Vladimir and Estragon engage in a perpetual state of waiting for a mysterious entity named Godot. This waiting becomes a coping mechanism, a psychological buffer designed to evade the terrifying realization of their own radical freedom and the emptiness of their environment. In contrast, Camus's *The Stranger* traces the psychological trajectory of Meursault, a clerk who refuses to conform to societal games or adopt metaphysical consolations. Meursault's journey culminates not in anticipation, but in a radical, clear-eyed acceptance of the "benign indifference of the universe" (Camus, *Stranger* 122).

This paper will construct a comparative framework to analyze these two divergent responses to the Absurd. It will argue that Beckett's "waiting" represents a tragicomic

failure to transcend existential dread, trapping the individual in a paralyzing reliance on future salvation, whereas Camus's "acceptance" represents the ultimate triumph of the Absurd Hero, who reclaims agency by shedding hope and anchoring the self in the immediate, tangible reality of the present.

### Conceptualizing the Absurd: Beckett's Void and Camus's Silence

To understand the divergence between waiting and acceptance, one must first delineate how the Absurd manifests structurally and textually within both works. In *Waiting for Godot*, the Absurd is dramatized through a total collapse of dramatic structure, language, and setting. The play famously breaks the traditional laws of Aristotelian drama; as the critic Vivian Mercier famously noted, it is a play in which "nothing happens, twice" (Mercier 6). The setting is minimalist and desolate—"A country road. A tree. Evening." (Beckett 11)—symbolizing a metaphysical vacuum stripped of historical or geographical markers.

Time in Beckett's universe is not linear but cyclical and fragmented. Vladimir and Estragon cannot reliably recall yesterday, nor can they certain of tomorrow. Memory fails them, rendering history useless and rendering the future an identical replication of the present. Language, too, loses its communicative efficacy, degenerating into repetitive games, non-sequiturs, and stichomythia. Beckett's characters inhabit a void where words do not construct meaning but merely serve to "hold the chaos at bay" (Esslin 43). The Absurd here is an overwhelming, suffocating presence that paralyzes action and renders all human striving comical yet deeply tragic.

For Camus, the Absurd is less a structural void and more an ontological disconnect. In *The Stranger*, the universe is physically vibrant, filled with the sensory heat of the Algerian sun and the cool relief of the Mediterranean Sea. The Absurd arises because this beautiful, tactile world is entirely indifferent to human morality, grief, or desire for justice. Meursault experiences this silence intuitively long before he understands it intellectually. He does not weep at his mother's funeral, nor does he offer artificial declarations of love to Marie, because he recognizes that the social rituals designed to manufacture meaning are arbitrary fabrications.

Unlike Beckett's characters, who are hyper-conscious of their existential misery and talk incessantly to mask it, Meursault is initially characterized by a quiet, unreflective immersion in the physical present. The Absurd becomes explicit when Meursault's sensory-driven actions—specifically, shooting an Arab on a scorching beach—clash with the judicial system's demand for a rational, moral narrative. The court cannot tolerate a universe where actions

happen without a grand, logical trajectory; they condemn him not just for the murder, but for his refusal to lie about his lack of emotional conformity. Thus, while Beckett's Absurd is a vacuum of external emptiness, Camus's Absurd is an unyielding wall of societal delusion confronting an indifferent material world.

### The Anatomy of Waiting: Stagnation and the Illusion of Godot

In *Waiting for Godot*, the act of waiting is not merely a plot device; it is the ontological state of the characters. Vladimir and Estragon are bound to a specific location by an unverified covenant with Godot, an enigmatic figure who promises to arrive but sends a boy each evening to defer his appearance until "tomorrow." By examining this cycle, it becomes evident that waiting functions as a psychological defence mechanism against the terrifying vacuum of the present moment.

### The Preservation of False Hope

Waiting allows Vladimir and Estragon to cultivate hope, but within the framework of the Absurd, hope is a toxic illusion. It shifts the responsibility of creating meaning from the individual to an external saviour. Vladimir states:

"We're no longer alone, waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for... waiting. All evening we have struggled, unassisted, with now what are the resources at our disposal... But that is now over. It's already tomorrow" (Beckett 71).

The tragedy lies in their reliance on "tomorrow." By convincing themselves that their presence on the country road has a specific, future-oriented purpose—to meet Godot—they successfully evade the burden of their own radical freedom. If Godot comes, they will be "saved" (Beckett 13), meaning they will no longer have to choose, act, or define their own existences. Hope acts as an existential narcotic, numbing the pain of their current aimlessness while simultaneously ensuring their permanent imprisonment.

### Stagnation, Passivity, and the Degradation of the Self

Because their entire identity is anchored to an external entity, Vladimir and Estragon are incapable of meaningful autonomous action. Whenever one suggests leaving, the other invariably responds with the refrain that echoes throughout the play:

*Estragon: Let's go.*

*Vladimir: We can't.*

*Estragon: Why not?*

*Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot. (Beckett 14)*

This brief exchange functions as a linguistic handcuff. The characters are trapped in a feedback loop where the act of waiting justifies their stagnation, and their stagnation

necessitates further waiting. To pass the time, they engage in trivial habits: taking off boots, searching hats, and playing word games. Beckett explicitly highlights the numbing quality of these routines through Vladimir's realization: "Habit is a great deadener" (Beckett 84). Routine replaces authentic existence. When Pozzo and Lucky enter, structural deviations occur, yet Vladimir and Estragon treat this master-slave dynamic primarily as an entertainment to pass the time rather than a warning about the degradation of human relationships under the weight of existential drift. By choosing to wait, the characters abdicate their agency. They become passive spectators of their own erosion, watch their bodies decay and their memories dissolve, unable to break the metaphysical chains of an appointments they cannot even verify they made.

### **The Path to Acceptance: Meursault as the Absurd Hero**

If *Waiting for Godot* demonstrates the paralyzing consequences of waiting for external meaning, Camus's *The Stranger* provides the counter-narrative of an individual who systematically sheds the illusion of hope, culminating in the liberating power of acceptance. Meursault's trajectory represents the evolution of an unconscious actor into an enlightened Absurd Hero.

### **The Rejection of Societal and Metaphysical Illusions**

Throughout the novel, Meursault is a "stranger" to society because he refuses to play the games of emotional and moral hypocrisy required of him. He lives almost exclusively in the sensory present, responding to physical stimuli—the heat of the sun, the taste of food, the comfort of a woman's body—rather than abstract social codes. When his employer offers him a promotion in Paris, Meursault declines, stating that "one life was as good as another and that I wasn't at all dissatisfied with mine here" (Camus, *Stranger* 41). When Marie asks if he wants to marry her, he replies that it "didn't mean anything" but they could if she wanted to (Camus, *Stranger* 41).

Meursault's refusal to manufacture false sentiment or participate in teleological career paths terrifies those around him. This terror peaks during his trial, where the prosecutor transforms Meursault's natural honesty into evidence of a monstrous, soulless character. The judicial system tries desperately to impose a linear narrative of sin, repentance, and divine justice onto an arbitrary, chaotic event. They offer Meursault multiple opportunities to save his life by conforming to their scripts—by weeping for his mother or expressing remorse for the murder. Meursault resolutely refuses, choosing physical death over spiritual inauthenticity.

### **The Prison Cell Confrontation and the Leap into Acceptance**

The climax of Meursault's existential awakening occurs in his prison cell during his explosive confrontation with the chaplain. The chaplain represents the ultimate institutional manifestation of "waiting"—he urges Meursault to look toward a divine afterlife, repent for his sins, and place his hope in God. This is the structural equivalent of urging Meursault to wait for Godot. Meursault rejects this absolute metaphysical framework with violent fury. He grabs the chaplain by the collar and unleashes a torrent of existential truth:

"He seemed so certain about everything, didn't he? And yet none of his certainty was worth one strand of a woman's hair... Living the way he did, he was like a corpse, and he couldn't even be sure he was alive... I might seem to have my hands empty. But I was sure of myself, sure of everything, surer than he was, sure of my life and sure of the death that was coming to me." (Camus, *Stranger* 120)

By violently purging the chaplain from his cell, Meursault eradicates the final, most seductive illusion: the illusion of hope and cosmic justice. He realizes that the certainty of death strips all human hierarchies and moral judgments of their absolute authority. Following the chaplain's departure, a profound calmness washes over Meursault. He looks up at the stars and makes his ultimate existential breakthrough:

"For the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed, so brotherly, I realized that I'd been happy, and that I was still happy." (Camus, *Stranger* 122)

This statement marks the transition from passive alienation to radical acceptance. Meursault does not despair at the universe's indifference; he embraces it. The universe is "brotherly" precisely because it imposes no cosmic demands, no inherent guilt, and no grand destiny. By accepting that his life has no ultimate meaning other than what he experiences in the flesh, Meursault is liberated. He ceases to be a victim of fate or a prisoner waiting for an execution; he becomes the master of his own brief, luminous existence.

### **Comparative Synthesis: Hope as Captivity vs. Acceptance as Liberation**

The thematic juxtaposition of *Waiting for Godot* and *The Stranger* reveals a crucial philosophical paradigm: **hope is an agent of human captivity, whereas acceptance is the catalyst for absolute liberation.**

| Feature               | <i>Waiting for Godot</i><br>(Samuel Beckett)       | <i>The Stranger</i><br>(Albert Camus)                      |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Primary Response      | Waiting (Passive anticipation of external meaning) | Acceptance (Active confrontation with cosmic indifference) |
| Temporal Focus        | The unfulfilled future ("Tomorrow")                | The immediate, tactile present ("Now")                     |
| Psychological State   | Anxiety, fragmentation, and stagnation             | Clarity, sensory immersion, and peace                      |
| Nature of "Salvation" | Deferred to an external entity (Godot)             | Claimed internally through self-sovereignty                |
| Philosophical Outcome | Tragicomic despair and cyclical imprisonment       | Tragic joy and authentic freedom                           |

Beckett's protagonists are permanently trapped precisely because they hope. Their waiting for Godot is an ongoing deferral of life. They cannot enjoy the present moment, nor can they alter their condition, because their eyes are fixed on an imaginary horizon where salvation will arrive from the outside. Beckett brilliantly dramatizes how this psychological framework transforms time into a prison. The characters are frozen in place, terrified of the void, yet unwilling to fill it themselves. Their existence is a prolonged sigh, a monument to the paralyzing power of unfulfilled expectations.

Camus's protagonist, by contrast, demonstrates that true freedom requires the total annihilation of hope. By divesting himself of the expectation that the universe owes him meaning, justice, or immortality, Meursault eliminates the capacity for the world to disappoint or enslave him. His acceptance of death does not plunge him into nihilistic despair; instead, it supercharges the value of his lived experiences. Because there is no afterlife, this life—the smell of the sea, the warmth of the sun, the memory of freedom—becomes infinitely precious. Meursault's acceptance allows him to die with his dignity intact, entirely authentic to his own perceptions, answering only to the physical reality of his existence.

Furthermore, these texts illustrate different dimensions of human solidarity within the Absurd. In *Waiting for Godot*,

companionship is born out of shared terror and co-dependency. Vladimir and Estragon insult each other, threaten to separate, yet remain together because the isolation of the void is too terrible to bear alone. Their bond is a defensive shield against the quiet of the universe.

Meursault, conversely, stands completely alone in his final hours. Yet, in his moment of total acceptance, he feels an ontological connection to the universe itself. His solidarity is not with a social group or a companion, but with the raw, uncaring existence of the cosmos. He steps onto the scaffold not as a defeated criminal, but as an existential conqueror who has looked into the abyss of the Absurd and smiled.

## CONCLUSION

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Albert Camus's *The Stranger* present two of the most enduring responses to the mid-20th-century crisis of meaning. Beckett's work functions as a cautionary tale of existential inertia. Through Vladimir and Estragon, he warns that waiting for external systems, modern deities, or historical inevitabilities to grant meaning to human life results in a tragicomic decay of human potentiality and a lifetime of cyclical stagnation.

Camus, through the radical transformation of Meursault, provides a liberating alternative. By showing the courage required to abandon metaphysical illusions and social pretences, *The Stranger* positions acceptance as the supreme act of human rebellion. To accept the Absurd is to reclaim ownership of one's life, transforming the cold indifference of the cosmos into a blank canvas for individual freedom.

Ultimately, both texts confirm that the universe will remain silent to human pleas for inherent purpose. However, while Beckett's characters choose to spend their lives anxiously filling that silence with the noise of waiting, Camus invites humanity to step fully into the quiet, accept the absolute finality of the present, and discover within that acceptance an unyielding, defiant joy.

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