

Jack Trego

Dr. Harman

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Threads of Existentialism in the Oeuvre of Samuel Beckett

Existentialism as a contained philosophical movement emerged in the years following World War II. Jean-Paul Sartre and his fellow left-bank intellectuals are credited with the creation of this field of philosophy and its propagation into a major movement (McBride, 415). Its basic tenets include the meaninglessness and absurdity of the world, and *mauvaise foi* (bad faith). After its emergence, existentialism quickly found itself in the realm of pop culture and seeped into various art forms, specifically literature where it was easily applicable. In *Molloy* and *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett expresses several threads of existential thought through the intentional actions, diction, and syntax of characters.

A fundamental aspect of existentialism is man's acceptance that the world is meaningless (Beck, 127). Sartre used the term 'nausea' to describe this, which encompasses the "absurdity born of the consciousness of one's own pattern as it is woven in the tapestry of things" (Ridge, 435). He stated that nausea is the default condition of man. From there, anguish is the realization of this state of nausea and it pushes man to act true to himself. In an inherently meaningless world, man attempts to create meaning for himself, which his nausea and anguish push him to do (Koepsell, 243). In addition, Sartre's central principle was that "existence precedes essence" (McBride, 425). Man must face his meaningless existence and create an essence, or meaning, out of it. Beckett exemplifies this tenet of existentialism in both *Waiting for Godot* and *Molloy*. In

the former, the pair's endless – and ultimately fruitless – wait for Godot and their inability to act demonstrate the meaninglessness of their world. Through the title of the play and the dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon, it is clear they have one shared goal: to wait for Godot (though it's never revealed what they intend to do when Godot arrives). Multiple times Vladimir has to remind Estragon of their duty, and the exchange is always the same (Beckett, 310).

ESTRAGON: Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.

In the end Godot does not arrive, though the pair do not seem too bothered by it. Several times they have forgotten their goal, or forgotten who Godot is, or denied their connection to Godot, or even mistaken someone else for Godot. One of Sartre's key ideas concerned the "irrevocable fixedness of the past together with the uncertain character of its meaning" (McBride, 417). Vladimir and Estragon's past surely reveals their connection to Godot, but the audience does not know it – and neither does the pair, it seems. Since their past brings no sense of meaning to their lives, "no codes or figures to represent or emulate," they lean heavily on their wait for Godot to do that (Gordon, 57). However, there is this constant tension between the meaning Godot provides to their lives, and the purposelessness they experience when they forget their goal, or forget who Godot is, mistake someone else for him, or his non-appearance. They constantly pass between these two positions of knowing and not knowing Godot, sometimes even in the same line of thought (Beckett, 317). Thus, their goal provides meaning, but their goal itself appears ultimately empty. Their anguish does not push them towards their goal and act true to themselves, for they do not know their true selves. Vladimir plays the "rational, philosophical

role” and Estragon assumes the “emotional, instinctual” role, so together they form somewhat of an “egalitarian stability” (Gordon, 59). Despite these general characteristics, though, neither protagonist can be said to have a definite character, a definitive ‘true self,’ which they can return to and act in accordance with when faced with this nausea. Sometimes they even switch roles and dialogue. As such, they are stuck in their state of nausea, unable to move.

Molloy likewise contains multiple examples of the meaninglessness of the world.

Molloy’s search for his mother constitutes his fundamental drive to move, yet he has forgotten her name and rebukes her throughout the narrative (Beckett, 189). He states his goal directly, saying “And if ever I’m reduced to looking for a meaning to my life... it’s in that old mess I’ll stick my nose to begin with, the mess of that poor old uniparous whore” (Beckett, 201). Even when he’s explaining his search for her he calls her a ‘whore’ and a “deaf blind impotent mad old woman” (Beckett, 201). Similar to Vladimir and Estragon, Molloy’s goal is to reach someone who is absent. As Godot never comes, Molloy never finds his mother. This raises the question, do these characters exist? In any case, Molloy uses his search to create meaning by which to live by. His unending dialogue – which Beckett took beyond stream-of-consciousness to another level of endlessness, sans paragraphs and most punctuation – demonstrates his constant attempts to derive meaning from his experiences. For instance, in his insistence on calling his bicycle a ‘bicycle,’ and not a ‘bike.’ Both words convey nearly the same meaning or object, but Molloy brings up the subject multiple times to emphasize it as if it was supremely important that he called his bicycle a ‘bicycle’ and not a ‘bike.’ His insistence on this subject, in addition to his lengthy and long-winded description of his stone-sucking – which in itself was an attempt to ensure that “identity is secured ideally” to provide meaning – are examples of his

attempts to create meaning out of his meaningless world (Miskinis, 1056). Another example of the meaninglessness in *Molloy* is the protagonist's issue with names. He cannot remember his own name until it suddenly springs upon him in police custody, he believes Dan is his father's name (though he's not sure), and the other main character in the novel is known collectively as Mrs. Loy / Lousse / Sophie, for he cannot recall her true name (Beckett, 204, 199, 215). Names are directly connected to identity, so without a name people's identities became blended, the differences between people disappear, and thus there is no meaning to any single person. Molloy appear to confront this meaninglessness himself when he states, "there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names" (Beckett, 213).

The absurdity of the world, as explained by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, is more of a peripheral aspect of existentialism, though it is still connected to the philosophy's core via Sartre's idea of 'nausea,' as well as Heidegger's conception of *Dasein* and Sartre's translation of that idea as 'human reality' (Ridge, 435; McBride, 423). As Camus describes it, there exists an "ineliminable disconnection between the rational pretensions of the human intellect and a nonrational universe" (McBride, 422). This is a logical progression from the meaninglessness of the world which existentialism holds true. In the face of the absurd world, man must act accordingly. As Sisyphus is happy each time the rock rolls back down the hill for him to push it back up again, man must 'be-in-the-world,' as Heidegger says, and experience it fully (McBride, 417). However, Camus' conception of absurdity clashes with Heidegger's *Dasein* slightly, as the latter does not accept that the world is absurd whereas that is the foundation of Camus' thinking. Camus is closer to Sartre's conception of 'nausea,' though takes

it in a different route: he states that Sisyphus, living an absurd life, is happy, whereas Sartre states that “anguish is the realization” and logical next step from nausea (Ridge, 441).

Waiting for Godot contains several instances which demonstrate the absurdity of their world. At the end of each act, the same sequence occurs: one of Vladimir or Estragon asks if they should leave, the other says yes, but the stage directions indicate neither move. In both acts Vladimir and Estragon are seen to be trying to create meaning for themselves by which to live. Despite their attempts, at the end of each act they are shown stuck in the ‘nausea’ stage: they decide to perform an action but do not – or cannot – perform it. They have not yet obtained the anguish which, according to Sartre, would push them to act true to themselves in their meaningless world. Thus, they are left living in constant nausea with no way to escape it. Further demonstrating this fact is that the sequence changes from Act I to Act II: in the former, Estragon asks “Well, shall we go?” and Vladimir responds “Yes, let’s go,” while in the latter Vladimir asks “Well, shall we go?” and Estragon responds “Yes, let’s go” (Beckett, 348, 387). The interchangeability of the two protagonists shows that neither character has felt their anguish push them to act true to themselves, and so are stuck in their absurd world with no way to create meaning for themselves. In addition, the repetition in *Waiting for Godot* indicates the absurdity of their world. Vivian Mercier famously said that this play is one in which “nothing happens twice” (Mercier, 6). In both acts, there are many shared events: the appearance of Pozzo and Lucky; Estragon being hurt by his boot, taking it off, and putting it back on; their contemplation of suicide by hanging on the tree; Vladimir’s inspection of his hat; the repeated sequence of questioning on their reason for being there, and the reaffirmation that they are ‘waiting for Godot’; and the appearance of the Boy. There are, however, slight, nuanced differences between

the shared events of the two acts: for instance, in Act II Pozzo is now blind and Vladimir now recognizes the Boy. These differences and the pair of protagonists' different reactions demonstrate their attempts to create meaning from the same event. Although forgetful, they grasp at the similarities of these repeated scenes in order to create meaning out of the space, or difference, between them.

In *Molloy*, there are many examples of the absurdity of the world he lives in. One example is Molloy's brush with the police for sitting on his bike in a lewd position. Molloy recounts how the police require cyclists to dismount upon leaving the town (Beckett, 201). Due to Molloy's hurt leg, he cannot do such easily and so must rest. A policeman approaches him and asks him what he's doing, to which Molloy responds "Resting" (Beckett, 202). After a brief discussion, Molloy learns that his "way of resting... astride my bicycle... was a violation of I don't know what, public order, public decency" (Beckett, 202). The rule is a part of the "nonrational universe" which Molloy lives in, since he is not aware of it and despite rationally explaining his reason for resting on his bicycle in such a way – "his infirmity" – he is interrogated and jailed for a short time (Beckett, 202). Despite his momentary rationality, he is fully seduced by the absurdity of his world, confessing that there are "not two laws, one for the healthy, one for the sick" (Beckett, 202). In this remark, Molloy is shown to be encapsulated by the absurdity of his world, unable to part with it. Another instance of absurdity in *Molloy* is Molloy's overly detailed description of his stone sucking ritual. First, he explains how he calls them stones instead of pebbles, then outlines the various possible techniques to ensure that he sucks on each stone and does not repeat them. It is a "practical goal," for it ensures that each stone is represented and "in this way identity is secured ideally" and thus meaning is secured

(Miskinis, 1056). Yet at the end he declares that “deep down it was all the same to me whether I sucked a different stone each time or always the same stone” (Beckett, 255). He then even admits that he doesn’t “give a fiddler’s curse about being without them” (Beckett, 255). In the end, they carry no meaning and instead are simply something with which to pass the time. This scene is absurd in that the ordering of the stones is “nonrational” because they all appear the same, while Molloy tries to rationally order them: in the end, he gives up and admits their sameness.

Mauvaise foi is the “conscious lying to oneself,” so one acts in bad faith when one lies to oneself and acts against what one believes and therefore acts in pretense (McBride, 417). This concept was created by Sartre, and is his warning for all men. One instance of clear mauvaise foi in *Waiting for Godot* is in the reaction of Vladimir to Pozzo and Lucky. At first, Vladimir admonishes Pozzo for keeping Lucky in servitude for 60 years, but then Pozzo complains that Lucky mistreats him, so Vladimir turns swiftly and starts chastising Lucky. The character and personality of Vladimir is composed of his words: his nickname, Didi, is reminiscent of the French verb ‘dire,’ which means ‘to say.’ Indeed, he does most of the talking and is more eloquent in his speech than Estragon. Since Vladimir’s character is understood through his words and his words in this scene switch so quickly and maintain the same fierceness, it is clear that he is acting in bad faith either towards Pozzo or towards Lucky. However, his true opinion of their relationship is not clear, so the reader is left questioning.

In *Molloy*, Molloy’s character and motivations are ambiguous, similar to Vladimir. He contradicts himself constantly, acts freely and sometimes grotesquely, and his continuous speech allows no time to reflect on his true character. Throughout the novel, Molloy is shown to be sexually promiscuous and active (Beckett, 238). When an old man desires him, he rejects him

and vehemently beats him. However, just before this incident he states, “I never really had much love to spare, but all the same I had my little quota, when I was small, and it went to the old men, when it could” (Beckett, 264). Following the beating, he defends himself – not the morality of beating the old man, but rather as a way to show that he can stand up for himself, since he remarks that “People imagine, because you are old, poor, crippled, terrified, that you can’t stand up for yourself” (Beckett, 265). His entire explanation is to show that despite his physical state he can stand up for himself. However, his beating of the old man goes directly against his earlier statement, meaning he acted in bad faith by acting for others and not for his true beliefs. Sartre called this ‘being-for-others’ (être-pour-autrui). This state works against Sartre’s concept of ‘being-for-itself,’ which is man’s consciousness and freedom. ‘Being-for-others’ is the idea that man relinquishes his ‘for-itself’ and instead views himself as how someone else views him through the prism of a relationship. Therefore, he is acting in bad faith because he is not acting how he should act, but instead he is acting out the simulacrum of himself from another’s perspective, which is necessarily hollow and false (Koepsell, 244). Thus, when Molloy beats the old man, despite his earlier profession of love for old men, to show those ‘people’ who believe he’s weak and defenseless that he is indeed the opposite, he is exemplifying Sartre’s key idea of *mauvaise foi* through the conflict between his ‘for-itself’ and ‘for-others.’

Samuel Beckett’s works *Molloy* and *Waiting for Godot* express multiple ideas of existentialism. Both works demonstrate the concepts of the meaningless of the world, the absurdity of the world, and of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith) via the protagonists and their words, actions, and sometimes the lack of either or both. Whether Beckett applied these concepts directly when writing these two works is doubtful, though it is known that he was in Paris at the

same time that these ideas were being circulated. Much like other authors of the time period, then, these ideas probably seeped into him via daily consumption and emerged in *Molloy* and *Waiting for Godot*, where they are evident in everything from Molloy's search for his mother and Vladimir and Estragon's wait for Godot, to Molloy's overly-detailed description of his stone-sucking ritual to Vladimir and Estragon's repetitive dialogue.

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