Suffering and Relationships in *Waiting for Godot*

Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* takes imagination and tragedy to new levels. Seen as a masterpiece of exponential drama, the tragic comedy is renowned for upholding existential literature in the interest of the mainstream audience and as an embodiment of the absurd. Through his text the Irish playwright portrays the bewilderment and abandonment experienced in daily life by the individual. His characters speak of agony and futility, desperately seeking meaning in their life, void of introspect, fulfillment and sensitivity. *Waiting for Godot* (1953) typified as a play of inaction, presents two vagabonds in their futile wait. Vladimir and Estragon, wait for someone or something known as Godot, who will solve their problems and bring fulfillment to their life, they hope. However, they do not know if they are at the location they were to meet at, if they should wait there, or if Godot even exists. They soon meet two passerbies, Lucky, a man pet, and Pozzo, his master. The two couples collectively engage in absurd acts, poetic trances, and suicidal thoughts, which resume in nothingness. As the play concludes, Godot does not show up and they decide to leave.

Overlooking the typical absurdist commentary over the text, *Waiting for Godot* pays homage to a relationship through Samuel Beckett’s eyes. The protagonists are presented as couples, surrounding each other at all times, needing each other to even move. The character’s ritualistic tendencies, incoherent rhetoric, animalistic behavior, and prolonged suffering specifically present themselves when they are with their partners. It is noteworthy to analyze why Beckett chose to portray the need and persistence of the characters to exist in a relationship,
which only creates suffering. This essay will view the implications that choosing to be in a relationship in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* carry on the perpetual physical and psychological suffering of the characters, and will argue that Beckett suggests relationships are intrinsically negative due to their dependent nature. The characters in *Waiting for Godot* exist in two contrasting relationships, Vladimir with Estragon and Lucky with Pozzo. Each relationship is different from the other, however both of their ultimate fates entail suffering. They primarily suffer due to their use of the relationship as a form of existence. They repeat phrases and engage in troubling action or inaction in order for each character to understand what they are, to construct their identity. Secondarily, their existence in a relationship suffers as it causes them to have a complementary interaction based on dependence. This limits them from progressing due to their independent issues. When one character wants to move on the other’s damnations holds him back. Additionally, their existence as a couple is further overwhelmed by suffering due to the character’s belief that they need to be a part of a relationship. Vladimir and Estragon suffer due to their dependence on one another, caring nature, and their psychological/physical issues, while the symbiotic relationship of Pozzo and Lucky suffers due to its narcissistic dependent basis.

Relationships in literature are habitually presented in a romanticized manner. They portray the fulfillment of dreams leading to an undisturbed feeling of happiness by coexisting with a lover. However, it is important to note that many psychological effects are birthed as a cause of erred relationships. Beckett projects the emotions created by the relationships he carried during his life throughout *Waiting for Godot* and the characters actions. The first relationship an individual has is with their mother, such relationship can have an effect on the individual’s future relations. Bulgarian literary expert Julia Kristeva developed a theory all based on the interaction
with the maternal figure. She suggested that this relationship with one’s mother is adverse as it disturbs identity and order in an individual. In *Black Sun* Kristeva writes that for the aforementioned reason “matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non of our individuation” (Wehlinh 76). An individual must eliminate the relationship with his mother to be mentally free, destroy a predisposed identity and build his own.

Samuel Beckett’s literature clearly appropriates Kristevan’s theory, as his characters present the effects of a faulty relationship with his mother, one characterized by dependency and antagonism. Wehlinh-Giorgi notes, “Beckett’s prose writing less frequently feature overtly homicidal desires towards mothers whilst abounding in resentment and contempt towards the maternal figure” (78) showing Beckett’s contempt for his mother, which directly impacts his literature. In following Kristevan’s theory, Beckett’s characters attempt to alienate themselves from their mother and build a particular self-image. However, in doing so Beckett acknowledges an individual’s dependence on others as the only way to construct this identity, due to lack of understanding of the self. Beckett’s issues with his mother caused him to be contemptuous about relationships. He carried a relationship based on dependence, oppression, and fear. John Benville in the article “Review of The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929-1940” comments on the troubled relationship he states, “Beckett's mother, May, was a loving though stern woman, brooding and given to unpredictable fits of anger followed by lengthy bouts of depression...Like so many Irishmen, Beckett was deeply attached to his mother – ‘I am what her savage loving has made me’ – in a classic love-hate relationship that was to endure long after her death; his later decision to settle permanently in France, and to write in French, seemed as much a flight from the mother as from the motherland” (21). Beckett posits, that relationships lead to suffering, as it did in the relationship with his mother.
Beckett’s negative view on relationships is further emphasized by the troubled interactions he carried with his father, and lovers. Although Beckett and his father sustained a healthy relationship, Beckett’s relation with his father ultimately faced negative events, as his death caused Beckett to suffer extensively. He went into a period of depression, secluding himself from society, and attending the Tavistock Clinic to take a course that he hoped would aid his psychotherapy (Kirschen 146). Hereafter, he continued to struggle in with emotional partners. Beckett’s relationships with women were often intricate and unsuccessful. A recurrent pattern was present in which his enchanting personality would eventually be withdrawn once the possibility of an intimate and serious relationship presented itself. Eventually, Beckett married; however, even in his marriage he experienced a troublesome relationship. During the years of 1944-46 the couple was forced to hide from the Nazi army, in the south of France in Roussillon. Perloff notes “Waiting (the original title of Waiting for Godot) became, in any case, the central activity. At first the Becketts lived at the village hotel where bedbugs and mice were everywhere, and where they had to go outdoors, not only for the privy but also for drinking water. The fields where they searched for potatoes were often seas of mud”(81). This particular event in his life faced Becket and his wife with pain and lack of freedom. This time, he suffered in a relationship, enduring prolonged waiting plagued by suffering, due to the condition the couple was encountered with. Such relationship suffering, contrary to the typical aroused by arguments and differences in goals by the relationship members, is emphasized in Waiting for Godot through Vladimir and Estragon’s futile waiting.

Throughout Waiting for Godot the couples engage in actions and conversations to remind themselves of their identity and existence; ultimately, these same actions cause them to suffer. The attempt to reconstruct the identity in Waiting for Godot is carried out through a mutualistic
existence, Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot together, while Lucky and Pozzo are tied to each other and attempt to find a new way of life. This construction of identity can be seen during one of Estragon’s and Vladimir’s exchange in Act 2, “Estragon: We don’t manage too badly, eh Didi, between the two of us? Vladimir: Yes, yes. Come on, we’ll try the left first. Estragon: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist? Vladimir: Yes, yes, we’re magicians” (Beckett 65). In this exchange Vladimir specifically utilizes the phrases “we’re magicians” and “impression”, metaphors for their reality. A magician tries to create an illusion and deceive from reality to something idealistic or extraordinary. Moreover, by using the term “impression” the characters admit that their perception of existence and their identity is created through their own actions. It is also noteworthy that they give each other the “impression” they exist specifically when they are together. This further reaffirms their dependence to construct each other’s identity. Nevertheless, by affirming that their existence is illusionary they assert to living a false truth, a meaning of their existence that is a façade for their purposeless existence. They eventually suffer with their reconstruction of identity and search for meaning and existence through their “impression of existence”, as it is not real. Jon Erickson in “Is Nothing to Be Done?” reiterates the correlation between a search for meaning and suffering when he highlights that “If there is meaning to his plays, it is the fact that human beings cannot live without meaning, ultimate or not, and our suffering is always made worse by life’s apparent meaninglessness. But this, in turn, is made worse by our attempts to give suffering meaning, attempts that always fall short of the suffering itself. The hope for meaning becomes a source of suffering” (265). Through these ironic actions Beckett is satirically commenting on the trouble of human behavior, and their relationships, mirroring human reality, as they attempt to reconstruct their existence.
The characters not only struggle to build a new identity through their false reality, but also are dependent on one another to remind themselves of their existence. They do this through their repetitive actions as can be seen in Act 2 “Estragon: What am I to say? Vladimir: Say, I am happy. Estragon: I am happy. Vladimir: So am I. Estragon: So, am I. Vladimir: We are happy. Estragon: We are happy. What do we do now., now that we are happy?” (Beckett 72). Given that they developed an illusionary identity, they now need a partner to confirm such identity. They mention “We” are happy reiterating the need of another person to confirm their current state of existence. Guo Yuehua in “An Insight into Human Suffering” analyzes the identity issues that Vladimir and Estragon face in the play and states, “It is as if Vladimir is establishing Estragon’s identity by remembering for him. Vice versa, Estragon also serves as a reminder for Vladimir of all the things they have done together. Thus both men serve to remind the other man of his very existence”(73). Not only is their inaptitude to appropriate a self-confirmed identity seen through the repetition of the “We are happy” but also by the question posed by Estragon “What do we do now”. Such actions portray their inability to make their own decisions, which ultimately create who they are. In the contrary, they chose to stay with each other, and can only do things together. They are attached to each other for no coherent reason. Their repetitiveness for identity confirmation purposes leads to suffering as there is no progression for them given they do the same thing everyday. In his analysis Yue Hua notes, “Human suffering is shown through a tormenting cycle of the drudgery of human life that repeats itself again and again” (72). Vladimir and Estragon end up sharing their happiness and suffering, as it is the only way they could confirm their existence. Through their acts Becket portrays that the struggle for human individuality (free will, freedom) leads to co-dependence as a mode of life. Furthermore, he asserts such co-dependence indulges in repetitive acts as the only way to confirm man’s
existence, however such repetitiveness leads to suffering brought about the tiresome stagnation it causes.

Amanda Cagle reiterates the concept of relationships as a form of existence in her article “Looking for Love on Samuel Beckett’s Stage”. Cagle’s analysis on the “male-identity crisis” posits a need for relationships within men to create a sense of existence and belonging, as presented through Waiting for Godot’s protagonists. She states “The Irish male must attempt to confirm his existence and the existence of humanity through the only available option besides isolation, other men” (90). She later comments. “As Beckett’s work shows, the Irish male suffers” (90). Because they have no identity they resort to a relationship as a form of existence. A further cause of their yearns for company and therefore ultimate suffering is the possibility of isolation and struggle to build an identity. They would rather suffer, and upkeep their relationship to remind each other of who they are, than to be helpless with their existence. Furthermore through his depiction of characters that need to be in relationships, Beckett comments that humanity’s absurd and futile existence also requires the need of a relationship to confirm their existence.

Samuel Beckett further emphasizes the suffering in relationships through the characters’ complementary nature; what one character lacks in their personality or psychological/physical characteristics the other has, their polar opposite characteristics however, create distress. Estragon’s bad foot limits them from physically and metaphorically going anywhere in life, while his lack of time notion and memory causes their journey to stagnate, as Vladimir has to try and remind him of everything. Edith Kern in “Drama Stripped For Inaction: Beckett's Godot” further asserts the conflicting complementary nature of the play’s characters and comments “They are inseparable, for the conceited, well-fed, selfish Pozzo has harnessed his servant like a
beast of burden and whips him in to obedience. This master-servant relationships shown, in the play, to bring about an increasing degeneracy in the people involved. Lucky, whose task it had been to amuse his master, becomes progressively more ugly and beast-like”(46). Pozzo’s demanding nature creates self-inflicted psychological suffering while Lucky’s slave condition causes him to become physically disfigured and abused. In the play Lucky is not active; he is waiting passively for Pozzo to solve his problems. This passivity Lucky has chosen to take in his life dehumanizes him as he is becoming dependent on someone directing his life. Yet his passivity is futile as underlined when Vladimir and Estragon ask why Lucky won’t put down his bags, Pozzo answers “He wants to impress me, so that I’ll keep hi…He imagines that when I see him indefatigable I’ll regret my decision. Such his miserable scheme. As though I were short of slaves…The truth is you can’t drive such creatures away. The best you could do is kill them” (Beckett 30-31). The fact that Lucky’s independent quality has been taken away leads him to depend on Pozzo to tell him what to do. He comprehends his role and appropriates such identity to a great extent; to keep Pozzo’s perception of him as a slave Lucky literally won’t do anything without being told. Although Lucky is literally tied, to Pozzo, he is metaphorically disconnected to the world, and relies on Pozzo’s demands. Likewise, Lucky complements Pozzo by reminding him of his greatness. The aforementioned disconnection from others is a core tenant for the master-slave relationship’s success given that the members require someone fully devoting themselves to them. Lucky as a slave can only be subservient to one master, while Pozzo as a master can only fully exert his control over one slave. The rope that holds them together symbolizes their complementary nature and adherence to the other. However, it also means they are forced to deal with each other, Pozzo dehumanizing Lucky and physically disfiguring him, while Lucky refuses to obey him at times. When Lucky exerts his free will and becomes
disobedient of Pozzo’s demands it creates a self-identity crisis for the characters. The existence and confirmation of their identity is disrupted due to the repudiation of their master/slave roles. This self-identity crisis causes them to long once more for their harming relationship, reaffirming their suffering once again. Pozzo is the brain of the relationship, while Lucky is the body that transports them and carries their supplies. Beckett uses Lucky’s futility to mirror that of relationships in the modern world, one leading to a lack of individuality, demonstrating a suffering of the human condition.

The relationship carried by the protagonists also creates suffering due to the fact the characters lose individual qualities and become enslaved due to their complementary relationship. Estragon has no memory and can’t walk long distances, forcing Vladimir to walk to attain certain items of Estragon and be the brain of the relationship. Estragon himself comes to understand their corresponding nature in the beginning of act 1 when he states “Estragon: We're not tied? Vladimir: I don't hear a word you're saying. Estragon: I'm asking you if we're tied. Vladimir: Tied? Estragon: Ti-ed. Vladimir: How do you mean tied? Estragon: Down” (Beckett 45). Here the use of the word “tied” indicates that they are confined by each other. Guo comments on their complementary nature when he comments “The relationship between the two tramps is somewhat that of body and soul, with Vladimir representing the soul and Estragon the body, both of whom cannot exist without the other. Their relationship seems to be based on genuine mutual need and relative equality” (76). Unlike Lucky and Pozzo they don’t have a physical rope uniting them, yet they are still held back by the other’s issues. In this example Estragon is forced to repeat his statement in light of Vladimir’s miscomprehension of the issue being brought up. This further highlights Beckett’s absurdist theme of the slave quality of a relationship, being that these literal or metaphorical chains to the other hold them back. In the
other hand Lucky loses free will, and the ability to speak because Pozzo has taken away those qualities, given that he is his master. Lucky’s inability to speak carries the implication that he cannot communicate with others and therefore cannot carry a fruitful relationship. Beckett aims for Lucky’s lack of speech to resemble the meaningless and nonsensical communications in relationships. It is this nonsensical conversations or lack of conversations that characterizes relationships which leads to loneliness and isolation.

Moreover, the protagonists’ existence in a relationship is the cause of affliction due to their belief that it is a necessity to be with the other. In act 1 Beckett writes, “Estragon: You see, you feel worse when I'm with you. I feel better alone too. Vladimir: (vexed). Then why do you always come crawling back? Estragon: I don't know. Vladimir: No, but I do. It's because you don't know how to defend yourself. I wouldn't have let them beat you” (Beckett 32). When Vladimir or Estragon attempt to leave the other, they return as they yearn for the other’s companion. They are persistent to appropriate the suffering, as long as they can reap the benefits of having the other present, protection, and an acquaintance through life, such as the beatings Estragon receives, a metaphor for life’s consistent hardships. Edith Kern reasserts their necessity to be in a relationship and the corresponding suffering that comes with it, in the article “Drama Stripped for Inaction: Beckett’s Godot” when she notes “Each needs the other as a comrade, a sounding board, an echo of his complaints, his dreams, his thoughts and his fears. And while each finds the other's presence, at times, unbearable, and resents his interference and even his physical closeness, neither can get along for any length of time without the other's tenderness which is alone capable of breaching momentarily the gap of loneliness that separates man from man” (46). Ultimate isolation is always avoided.
Through the events that occurred in his play, Samuel Beckett develops characters that mirror the realities and horrors of relationships in modern human nature. The duality embodied by the characters in *Waiting for Godot* emphasizes the physical/psychological anguish that is typical of relationships. Beckett portrays that relationships are inherently disadvantageous. The dependency emitted by relationships causes a false identity/existence, a complementary interaction, and need for another which only lead to suffering. A relationship as perceived by Samuel Beckett leads to dehumanization. When an individual is dehumanized, he loses aspects of individuality; this carries the implication of having to depend on someone to lead their lives, lacking individuality, personality, and being treated as an object. By being dehumanized an individual loses human connections, an essential part of humanity, which allows individuals to feel companionship and adds meaning to life. By crafting characters that were dehumanized by relationships, Beckett portrays the evident absurdity, futility in actions, and lack of meaning in life, created by the solitude and seclusion caused by the lack of successful relationships.

The actions of these characters emulate those of modern society in which there is no communication present, due to technology. Humans communicate solely through the Internet, not meeting face to face. This further exemplifies how in the modern world man is becoming a machine with no individuality, becoming further dehumanized. The dehumanization and inner-failed human associations in the modern era have created a nonsensical and absurd world. Vladimir and Estragon’s/Pozzo’s and Lucky’s masochism emphasizes the absurdity of individuals, resulting from the nature of modern life and, from the hopelessness of real communication between humans.

Works Cited


