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A Kind of Prayer:
Representations of Faith and
Religion in Samuel Beckett's
Waiting For Godot

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Abstract

Samuel Beckett's two-act play *Waiting For Godot* revolves around the two tramps Vladimir and Estragon, and their waiting for the mysterious character Godot, whom they believe will bring them salvation.

This essay shows that *Waiting for Godot* is an allegory about the faith in and struggle for salvation and meaning. It investigates the representations of faith and religion in the play and its characters. By comparing and contrasting the two main characters, this essay argues that in order to persevere and not perish during the struggle for meaning, one needs faith, and that in *Waiting for Godot* this faith is more strongly represented in the character Vladimir. The essay also examines representations of faith and religion in the play as a whole, and also briefly discusses Samuel Beckett's religious background.

The essay concludes with a confirmation of the thesis statement that Vladimir is the more spiritual character and that the faith within him is what leads these two tramps on their way to potential salvation and meaning.

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Introduction

Samuel Beckett's now legendary play *Waiting for Godot* was originally published in 1952. Made up of two almost identical acts, *Waiting for Godot* revolves around two so-called "tramps": the contemplative, hopeful and leader-like Vladimir and his more earthbound yet despairing and troubled comrade Estragon (occasionally throughout the play nicknamed Didi and Gogo, respectively). They are briefly joined in each act by Pozzo and his servant/slave Lucky, as they wait for the arrival of another character, Godot, who never appears in person or makes himself explicitly known. Neither Vladimir nor Estragon are actually sure that they know Godot or if they have ever met him before, but his arrival would be of utmost importance - that much is clear. So they wait, endlessly, by a desolate road and a barren tree. Vladimir's and Estragon's waiting and struggle goes on seemingly without an end in sight and the play concludes without having actually reached a conclusion.

The plot is arguably quintessentially absurdist. One of the first to label it as such was literary critic and scholar, Martin Esslin. In 1961, he published a groundbreaking book where he analyzed dramatic works such as *Godot*, called *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Thereby he also christened the genre of the same name. It has since become a sort of umbrella term for a certain type of drama under which *Waiting for Godot* definitely fits. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "a collective term for plays (chiefly French) portraying the futility and anguish of man's struggle in a senseless and inexplicable world" ("Theatre of the Absurd"). Esslin himself claims that what these plays have in common is their lack of traditional plots, with neither a real beginning or end. More traditional drama, he argues mirrors the nature and manners of the age, whereas the absurdist drama reflects inner landscapes and nightmares (Esslin 22). According to *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*, the function of this genre is "to give dramatic expression to the philosophical notion of the 'absurd' ("Absurd, Theatre of the.").

The philosophical notion, or idea, of the absurd stems from the loss of faith and religious convictions of the early 20th century (Esslin 23). By then, religious faith had instead been given way to belief in various political doctrines, such as nationalism. However, the World Wars shattered these beliefs (Esslin 23), and man was once again bereft of something

to believe in. One of the first to see this connection between faith and the philosophical idea of the absurd was Albert Camus. In his famous essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the Algerian-French philosopher and novelist claims that “the absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (28). It is this lack of faith, one could argue, this lack of something to believe in, these unsatisfied needs and the divine silence, that turns existence into something absurd and desolate. In a world without God, human life and human suffering have no intrinsic meaning (“Absurdism” 3). This is also what this essay will investigate - the perseverance through hard times and the struggle to maintain one’s faith in a desolate world. There are also explicit and implicit symbols of religion, Christianity and, ultimately, faith, both in the play in general and in the characters - especially the character Vladimir. This makes reading the play as an allegory on the struggle for faith and salvation arguably quite natural. This is the reading I will use for this essay.

One of the definitions of ‘faith’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* reads as follows: “Firm trust or belief in or reliance upon something (e.g. the truth of a statement or doctrine; the ability, goodness, etc., of a person, the efficacy or worth of a thing)”. This type of faith, one might argue, is not necessarily directed at a deity or some divine force. It could very well be a faith in an idea or an undertaking - faith in what one is doing and that it is *worth* doing. This is arguably the type of faith Vladimir and Estragon (mainly the former) have in their struggle for salvation, their perseverance during their hardships. Another definition, also found in the *OED*, goes: “Belief in and acceptance of the doctrines of a religion, typically involving belief in a god or gods and in the authenticity of divine revelation” (“Faith”). This type of faith, however, could be argued to be strictly directed towards deities and divine forces. This type of faith is found in Vladimir’s and Estragon’s relationship with the Godot figure. I will use both of these definitions when examining the play and its characters, as both definitions work well together and complement each other. And both feature heavily in the play.

This essay will show that more than anything *Waiting for Godot* is an allegory about persevering through hard times, about belief in a higher meaning and about the faith in and struggle for salvation and meaning. It will investigate the representations of faith and religion in the play and its characters. By comparing and contrasting these characters, this essay will argue that in order to persevere and not perish during the struggle for meaning, one needs

faith, and that in *Waiting for Godot* this faith is more strongly represented in the character Vladimir.

Immediately after this introductory section I will move on to a short, contextualising chapter called Beckett and Faith, where information about Samuel Beckett and his religious background will be presented, to more firmly place Beckett and the play in a religious context. The first section is dedicated to investigating and analyzing representations of faith and religion in the play as a whole. The purpose of this section is to highlight the religious foundation on which the play stands. I then move on to comparing and contrasting the two protagonists from a religious and faith-based perspective.

Beckett and Faith

Samuel Beckett was born in Foxrock, a suburb of deeply religious Dublin, Ireland, in 1906. He was brought up Protestant in a religious middle-class household (“Samuel Beckett”). Protestantism, represented by the Church of Ireland, was then as it is now a minority religion in Dublin and Ireland in general. In 1911, when Beckett was five years old, a mere 13% of the Dubliners belonged to the Church of Ireland (The National Archives of Ireland).

Deirdre Bair argues in her biography about Beckett that Beckett’s mother, May, despite her religious upbringing of her children, was more concerned with the traditional aspect of the religion and the moral angle to it, rather than a deep-rooted faith in God (18-19). The mandatory churchgoing on Sundays was a mere social affair, Bair claims (19). In the deeply religious middle class Ireland of the early 20th century, one could argue that in order to fit in, one did go to church. Bair goes on to assert that this ambivalence on his mother’s side made Beckett become ambivalent and wary of organised religion (18). In a 1961 interview with American literature professor Tom Driver, Beckett himself, however, claims that his mother actually was genuinely religious (Bair, 241), which of course means that to Beckett himself, his upbringing was deeply religious. In that same interview he also claimed that his first and only personal religious emotion came at his first communion when he was a child (Bryden, 1). However, in 1937, Beckett was asked by a defence counsel during a trial of his uncle’s whether he was a Jew, a Christian, or an Atheist. His reply was “none of the three” (Bryden, 1).

Literary scholar Amy Burnside deals with a similar topic of ambivalence in her 2013 article “He Thinks He's Entangled in a Net': the Web of Continental Associations in *Waiting for Godot*”. In this article she asserts that Beckett exists in a sort of no-man’s land. She says that he is caught between his inherited religious background and the secular world in which he later chose to live (74). “He reflects a dialectical attitude towards faith”, she says, and goes on by arguing that for Beckett the unlikelihood of the existence of God is coupled with an inability to give up the search (74). This of course could be argued to run through the entirety of *Waiting for Godot*, in which the two tramps are unable to shake the notion of a possible God, despite Him being capricious and untrustworthy and His failing to provide hard proof of His own actual existence. Yet, as Bryden, puts it, God and his tortured son Jesus Christ are never definitively discarded (2). The supposed God character is cursed both for his absence and for his “surveillant presence” (Bryden 2). The need for salvation could be argued to be stronger than anything else, so the two tramps put up with the uncertainties and the waiting, because it is only this deity, this Godot character, that can fulfill the need for salvation.

Despite his wariness and ambivalence towards religion and faith, Samuel Beckett was far from oblivious to the influence of faith and religion in his own work, and he was not afraid to draw on it. He once told English literary scholar and Beckett expert Colin Duckworth that “Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar, so naturally I use it” (qtd. in Graver 23). In the next section I will delve further into this by analysing and discussing representations and symbols of faith and religion in *Godot* as a whole.

Faith and Religion in *Waiting for Godot* as a Whole

Lawrence Graver, in his book *Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot*, highlights a theory by literary critic G.S. Fraser (15). According to Graver, Fraser argues that *Waiting For Godot* is a modern morality play on enduring Christian themes. Its two protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, dressed in rags (pieces of clothing in spirit arguably reminiscent of the attire worn by the ascetics and hermits of the early Christian church), with their unhappiness brought on by the absence of Godot and their persistent capacity for reflection, represent the fallen state of man and also the contemplative life (15). Fraser continues by stating that Vladimir’s and especially Estragon’s ambivalent attitude towards Godot - an attitude made up of hope, fear,

despair and expectation (and I would like to add faith to this equation - Vladimir and Estragon's faith in Godot. The on again-off again faith in and longing for salvation that he/she/it might bring) - represents the state of uncertainty and strain in the modern world, under which the average Christian man or woman must live (15). As mentioned in the introduction, by the 20th century, religious faith had to a large extent been traded in for faith in doctrines and political ideologies, and when these mostly had led to wars and destruction, one could argue that people were left feeling disillusioned - that their longing for salvation had been unresolved.

This theme of unresolved longing for salvation is also echoed in Richard Damashek's essay bearing the same name as the play. He claims, however, that the purpose of the references to Christianity is not to argue for belief or faith, but rather to showcase Christianity's diminishing powers in modern society. He notes that "Once Christianity provided Western civilization with a construct of meaning and hope, but now, decimated by the horrors of two world wars and the deconstruction of reality and meaning in modern philosophy, it is no longer credible" (Damashek). In order not to be torn asunder by the weight of the modern world, one might argue human kind (in this case represented by Vladimir and Estragon) must not lose faith. If one does not believe in some sort of salvation or higher purpose (in whatever shape or form), one surely is on the path to completely giving up. To Vladimir and Estragon, it is Godot who will bring this salvation and higher purpose.

The relationship in the play between God and man is by many thought to be represented by Vladimir's and Estragon's waiting for Godot. Obviously the name Godot conjures up an image of God, or *a* god, linguistically, with Vladimir and Estragon representing the faithful herd. Even though Samuel Beckett came from a Protestant background, as mentioned above, he did not openly believe in a theistic God (Bryden, 1). The relationship between the two tramps and Godot is also reminiscent of the relationship between the Jewish people and the Messiah. The idea that the Jewish people saw themselves as a people waiting out centuries of woe in alien lands until the moment of divine redemption ("Judaism") is quite similar to the fate of Vladimir and Estragon, who also, seemingly without an end in sight, wait for their saviour. The dream of the returning Messiah has for centuries provided hope for many Jewish people (Hertzberg). They believe that all wrongs will be set right and that "human life will henceforth be lived in bliss in sight of the Lord" (Hertzberg). The two tramps in *Waiting For Godot* are dead set that their waiting for the Godot fellow will bring them salvation (Beckett,

94) and they must not stray from this waiting. So they keep returning to their posts in the barren and strange environment where the play is set, in what seems like an endless repetition, at the start of each act. Each act ends with one tramp asking the other “Shall we go?”, followed by the stage direction “*They do not move*” (54, 94). However, the concept of time makes this waiting complicated. None of them know what time of day or even season of the year it is, or how long they have waited, or really how long they are *supposed* to wait (15, 36, 85). Nor do they know for certain that they are waiting at the right place or if it is the same place they waited the day before (15). To Vladimir and Estragon, time is a concept that hardly serves its purpose. But just like the Jewish, they are not giving up. Time will pass, Godot will appear. At least that is what they believe.

Furthermore, the Old Testament look of the Judeo-Christian God, wearing white hair and beard, could be argued to be mirrored in the Godot character of the play. The messenger boy that appears towards the end of each act, informing Vladimir and Estragon that “Mr Godot won’t come this evening but surely tomorrow” (Beckett, 50, 91), sheds some light on this subject at the end of the second act:

Vladimir: (*softly*). Has he a beard, Mr. Godot?

Boy: Yes, sir.

Vladimir: Fair or... (*he hesitates*)...or black?

Boy: I think it’s white, sir.

Silence.

Vladimir: Christ have mercy on us!

In the Old Testament, God is described in a similar way: “His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire” (*King James’ Bible*, Rev. 1:14). These godly features are also referenced earlier in the play, during the first act when Pozzo’s slave, Lucky, holds his monologue - a nonsensical barrage of words upon words that do however touch upon God and divine powers, amidst its surreal nonsense:

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqu with *white beard* quaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffers

like the divine Miranda with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment...” (Beckett, 43)

This is a god that despite being apathetic, and despite suffering from aphasia still “loves us dearly”, at least according to Lucky. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, aphasia is a loss of speech, partial or total, or loss of power to understand written or spoken language, as a result of disorder of the cerebral speech centres (Aphasia). However, he, the god, makes exceptions to his love, but how he does that, or for what reason, is not mentioned. He is detached and indifferent, yet is said to be loving and sympathises with those in peril. He suffers from aphasia, so he will not be very talkative or verbal. This paradoxical god leaves his congregation confused and bewildered. He gives no straight answers and there is no telling how he will act, much like the godlike Godot character of the play.

Beckett was once asked about the theme of *Waiting for Godot*, and replied by referencing a passage in the writing of St Augustine: “Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned” (qtd. in Esslin, 53). This is in turn a reference to the two thieves that supposedly were crucified alongside Jesus Christ. The bad thief demands that Jesus should save them, since he is supposedly the son of God. The good thief then berates the bad thief, asking him “Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation”, and then asks Jesus to remember him when he enters his kingdom on the other side, which Jesus agrees to (Luke 23:39-43. King James Version).

One derogatory remark was enough to condemn one of the thieves. The other one was saved thanks to his contradicting that same remark. As stated by Esslin, these roles could easily have been reversed (54). He continues by saying that these comments made by the two thieves in the Bible were not well-considered judgments, but spoken in a moment of pain and despair (54). As touched upon earlier in this essay, Godot also comes across as reasonably capricious. The messenger boy who appears at the end of each act informing Vladimir and Estragon that Godot will not make it until the following day, also minds Godot’s goats. He is treated well and is much loved by Godot. His brother, however, who minds the sheep, is beaten:

Vladimir: You work for Mr. Godot?

Boy: Yes, Sir.

Vladimir: What do you do?

Boy: I mind the goats, Sir.

Vladimir: Is he good to you?

Boy: Yes, Sir.

Vladimir: He doesn't beat you?

Boy: No, Sir, not me.

Vladimir: Whom does he beat?

Boy: He beats my brother, Sir.

Vladimir: Ah, you have a brother?

Boy: Yes, Sir.

Vladimir: What does he do?

Boy: He minds the sheep, Sir. (Beckett 51)

In Matthew 25:31-33 it says that God will separate people from each other, just like a shepherd separates goats from sheep. "And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left" (Matthew 25:31-33. King James Version). Two seemingly equal groups are separated from each other and treated vastly different, both in the Bible and in *Waiting For Godot*: the sheep and the goats and the minder of the sheep and the minder of the goats, respectively.

There is also a certain parallel to Cain and Abel here - another example in the Bible where the capricious god lets his grace fall on one half of a pair instead of both of them (or none). As it reads in Genesis 4:4-5: "And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering. But unto Cain and to his offering he had no respect". Cain, of course, slew Abel in a fit of jealousy, and was cast out. One day, Cain and Abel made animal sacrifices to God. The smoke from Cain's sacrificial fire never reached the sky, which was interpreted as God not being interested in his sacrifices. This infuriated Cain, and driven by his jealousy he killed his brother Abel with a rock to the head (Genesis 4). Abel was a shepherd, Cain farmed the land. Both of them arguably did important work. The two boys, employed by Godot to do roughly the same thing as each other but with different animals, are treated quite differently to each other. One, the keeper of the sheep, is beaten, the other one, the keeper of the goats, is loved and cherished. He is even given the special task of informing Vladimir and Estragon of Godot's coming (or continued absence). In the Bible, however, it is the keeper of the sheep, the righteous Abel, who is loved by God. Yet he is the victim of his brother's jealousy-fueled rage, and is struck down and killed, before the omnipresent, omniscient and autocratic god. In

Waiting for Godot, however, it is not the brothers who are inflicting physical pain onto each other - it is, of course, Godot who does the punishing. A similar capriciousness and arbitrariness is apparent throughout both texts. In both Genesis and *Waiting for Godot* the preference of one child over the other is very openly exhibited and there are no explanations offered.

Another obvious, religious connotation and possible reference in the play is the tree. David Bradby claims in his book *Beckett: Waiting For Godot*, that Beckett in his notebooks drew the tree as a cross (119). The fact that the two tramps throughout the play debate whether or not they should hang themselves from the tree could also be suggested to imply that the tree represents the cross, as is echoed by Mark and Juliette Taylor-Batty (36). Graver, however, suggests that the tree represents the so-called Judas Tree - the tree from which Judas Iscariot hung himself (15). One could also argue that it symbolizes the "Tree of Life". The tree of life is mentioned in Genesis and is said to be standing in the middle of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9. King James Version). In the beginning of the first act of *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon debate over where they were supposed to meet Godot. Vladimir informs his comrade that they are supposed to meet Godot by the tree (14). Apparently this is the only tree around; "do you see any others?", he asks. The emptiness of the barren surroundings gives the atmosphere a very gloomy ambience. What is more is that even the tree itself is barren. It is leafless and fruitless. The place where they are supposed to meet with their "saviour" is the site of the barren tree of life. The connection between the divine and the earthly is lost. Vladimir and Estragon then discuss the possibility of hanging themselves from the tree, but they reach the conclusion that the boughs would not hold, so they abandon the idea. The barren tree of life is not even good for hanging. They decide to wait and see what Godot has to say. Later, when the second act begins, the tree has surprisingly grown four or five leaves without any explanation given:

Vladimir: But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And now it's covered with leaves.

Estragon: Leaves?

Vladimir: In a single night.

Estragon: It must be the Spring.

Vladimir: But in a single night! (66)

They are dumbstruck, yet this sudden turn of events instills hope in the two tramps. The supposed tree of life might still be alive. Hope and faith is still alive, especially in Vladimir.

Faith and Religion in the Character of Vladimir

Some critics consider Vladimir to be the more spiritual and contemplative one of the two protagonists, and the one that harbors the most faith of the two characters; faith in life, faith in struggle, faith in a higher power. Ultimately, he has faith in the waiting for Godot, as he is the one who throughout the play wants them to keep on waiting for Godot. Paul Lawley calls Vladimir “the thinker” (62) and Banerjee refers to him in his article “Stir Within Stasis” as both the intellectual one and the leader, and the one who, despite being equally as downtrodden as Estragon, is still keen on going on with the strife and the struggle. He is more intellectual than Estragon and he is stronger, both physically and mentally. He motivates and encourages both of them, and time and time again tries to lift the ever so despairing Estragon’s spirit. Even his name, *Vladimir*, brings to mind ideas of leadership and greatness. It is Slavic, and derived from the word *volod*, which means ‘rule’, and *meri*, which means ‘great, famous’, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of First Names* (Vladimir). He is described by Lawrence Graver as contemplative, and self-conscious about ideas and issues (33). Graver goes on by accurately describing him as both a sort of exegete (“an interpreter of sacred law, oracles, dreams, etc”, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*) and scholastic philosopher. It is Vladimir who is the most familiar with the Bible. To pass the time, Vladimir tells the story from the Bible about the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus (12), (also discussed in a different context earlier in this essay). He tries to engage Estragon in conversation and debate by declaring that of the four evangelists present at the crucifixion, only one of them, Luke, mentions this conversation between Jesus and the thieves in the Gospels:

VLADIMIR: But all four were there. And only one speaks of a thief being saved.

Why believe him rather than the others?

ESTRAGON: Who believes him?

VLADIMIR: Everybody. It's the only version they know. (13)

The earth-bound and matter-of-fact Estragon quickly kills off the conversation by declaring that “People are bloody ignorant apes” (13). Vladimir’s attempt to (as he sees it) enlighten his friend is once again stifled. Only a moment earlier has he tried to trigger an intellectual con-

versation rooted in the Bible. “Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that?”, Vladimir asks, but Estragon, deeply preoccupied with more earthly woes, painfully struggling with his boots, is not interested in Bible quotes (10). This particular quote is from the Proverbs and goes: “Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life” (Proverbs, 13:12, King James Version). The tree by which they are supposed to meet Godot might be leafless and barren at this particular moment, but Vladimir’s hope is not deferred, nor is his faith in waiting and in the struggle.

In fact, his faith in the struggle is evident in his very first lines of the play. The play opens with Estragon helplessly tugging away at his boot, trying desperately to get it off, but exhausted and stricken with pain comes to the conclusion that there is “nothing to be done” (9). In that moment Vladimir enters:

VLADIMIR: (*advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart*). I’m beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I’ve tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven’t tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (*he broods, musing on the struggle*). (9)

Despite his own awareness of the hardships and the toil, he sees no other option than to go on with the struggle. “What’s the good of losing heart now, that’s what I say” (10), he continues. He gets used to the muck as he goes along, to use his own words (21). One could argue that there are certain parallels here between Vladimir and Job, from the Old Testament’s *Book of Job*. There the character Job is portrayed as an example of faithfulness and perseverance as he loses everything important to him, including his family and his fortunes, yet remains faithful to God. Job endures the trials God puts him through, and is rewarded in the end. Job has since become a symbol of perseverance and endurance, and it could be argued that his spirit is to some extent echoed in Vladimir. Although it is Estragon who is the most vocal of the two regarding personal pain and suffering, Vladimir is in the same boat. He too waits endlessly at this unknown and desolate place, not really *knowing* anything. He too is in pain, as mentioned in the very beginning of the play; “It hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!” (10). In the beginning of the second act he also briefly mentions that he has urination problems, and is quite clearly in pain when he laughs, as witnessed by him stifling his laugh with a contorted face, by pressing his hand to his pubis. Despite all this, the mental and physical pain, he perseveres and endures. He does not comply to leave, despite Estragon’s repeated wishes that

they should, and he does not agree with Estragon that they should hang themselves, and it is all because of his faith in Godot and the fact, as Vladimir sees it, that he will save them once he comes (94).

One could also argue that there are certain parallels between Vladimir and the Parable of the Good Samaritan - the story from Luke 10:25-37 told by Jesus about a man being robbed and physically abused, lying helpless and half dead by the wayside. The only one who stopped and took pity in him was the Good Samaritan. Earlier, both a Levite and a priest had passed by and ignored the man. Vladimir more than once resembles this Samaritan in his relation to his despairing and pained comrade, Estragon. He helps Estragon with his pain-inducing boots (77), feeds him what is left of his carrots (20, 68), and when the half-mad slave Lucky has kicked Estragon on the shins, Vladimir volunteers to carry him should he never be able to walk again (32). He time and time again reminds Estragon and reassures him why they are waiting and for whom, always trying to lift Estragon's dipping spirits. When he is distraught and unable to fall asleep, Vladimir comforts him and sings him to sleep, in what must be considered one of the most touching scenes in the entire play.

VLADIMIR: (*softly*). Bye . . .
 (*Estragon sleeps. Vladimir gets up softly, takes off his coat and lays it across
 Estragon's shoulders, then starts walking up and down, swinging his arms to keep
 himself warm. Estragon wakes with a start, jumps up, casts about wildly.
 Vladimir runs to him, puts his arms around him.*) There . . . there . . . Didi is here . . .
 don't be afraid . . .

ESTRAGON: Ah!

VLADIMIR: There . . . there . . . it's all over.

ESTRAGON: I was falling—

VLADIMIR: It's all over, it's all over. (70)

We are also told of an incident that happened years back, when Estragon tried to drown himself in the Rhône and Vladimir came to his assistance and saved him (53). Yet Vladimir feels that he does not do enough; “Was I sleeping, while the others suffered?”, he asks near the end of the second act (90). He himself is strong in faith and mind, but those around him despair. Thanks to his faith and perseverance he always manages to soldier on, yet somewhere deep inside he wants to do more for his fellow man.

In accordance with his faith and perseverance in the situation, it is also Vladimir who first establishes that they are waiting for Godot (14) and that they must continue waiting, something that is repeated throughout the entire play. Estragon is ready to leave, but Vladimir informs him of the circumstances. “And if he doesn’t come?”, Estragon asks (14). “We’ll come back tomorrow”, Vladimir replies. He is keen on waiting and his faith in the plight is firm. In the beginning of the first act, Estragon suggests that they should hang themselves from the tree that they are waiting by, as I have mentioned earlier in this essay (18). Although both of them come to the conclusion that it would be best not to, it is indeed Vladimir, with his solid faith, who establishes that they should wait and not do anything rash until they have heard what Godot has to say. “Let’s wait till we know exactly how we stand”, he settles. “I’m curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we’ll take it or leave it”, he continues (18). Upon this, Estragon wants to know what they have asked Godot for, and Vladimir informs him that it was not anything very definite. “A kind of prayer?”, Estragon asks. “Precisely”, answers Vladimir. It is not mentioned what this prayer is for, but as it obviously will determine their fate, their outlook on life and how they stand in life, surely one can argue that it must be quite an extraordinary prayer, suitable for a deity. In other words it is a prayer suitable for the Godot.

However, the waiting seems less voluntary when Estragon asks Vladimir if they are tied to Godot.

ESTRAGON: (his mouth full, vacuously). We're not tied?

VLADIMIR: I don't hear a word you're saying.

ESTRAGON: (chews, swallows). I'm asking you if we're tied.

VLADIMIR: Tied?

ESTRAGON: Ti-ed.

VLADIMIR: How do you mean tied?

ESTRAGON: Down.

VLADIMIR: But to whom? By whom?

ESTRAGON: To your man.

VLADIMIR: To Godot? Tied to Godot! What an idea! No question of it. (Pause.) For the moment. (20-21)

They are indeed tied to Godot and to even question it is absurd, judging by Vladimir's retort. However, the bondage *could* be temporary - they are only tied to Godot "for the moment". The bond could very well break. One might wonder if the ties perhaps would break once they have met Godot and gotten to know where he, and subsequently, *they* stand. Would Godot prove to be a disappointment, all faith would most likely be lost, and the string or rope with which they are tied could very well instead be used for hanging, so to speak. Lois Gordon echoes this in her book *Reading Godot*. She argues that the rope in act one represents Vladimir's and Estragon's ambivalent allegiance to Godot (121). She argues that they are tied to him, figuratively, but that the rope could also mean a way out through hanging. But, as mentioned earlier, they ultimately decide against hanging themselves.

To abandon Godot prematurely is out of the question - not just when it comes to suicide. Vladimir even takes certain pride in their steadfastness and faithful waiting, whereas Estragon almost trivialises it. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?, Vladimir asks his friend. Billions, Estragon flatly replies (80). Estragon, immersed in personal despair and suffering, fails to see the purpose of the waiting that Vladimir sees. To Estragon they are not unique simply by just waiting around for something that is very uncertain and vague. A short while later, near the very end of the play, Estragon even goes as far as suggesting that they perhaps should "drop" Godot (93). Vladimir then instantly squashes this idea by saying that if they did "He'd punish us". Vladimir then looks at the tree and says "All's dead but the tree" (93), which in effect means that nothing is really dead, since the tree represents life, hope and faith. So they remain. In a conversation with Walter D. Asmus, Beckett himself said that "Vladimir is light, he is oriented towards the sky. He belongs to the tree." (qtd. in Gontarski 210). This would suggest that Beckett himself looked upon Vladimir as the character more in touch with divinity and faith.

Faith and Religion in the Character Estragon

Just as with Vladimir, as mentioned above, Beckett once commented on Estragon. He said that "Estragon is on the ground, he belongs to the stone" (Gontarski 210). Generally throughout the play, this seems quite fitting. If Vladimir is to be considered learned and spiritual, gravitating towards the sky and divinity, then surely one could argue that Estragon is his

down-to-earth, cynical, counterpart. Even his name suggests this - “Estragon” being the French word for the slightly bitter tasting herb tarragon (“Estragon”) - sprung from the earth, from the ground. This could be argued to a fitting name for an earthbound man such as Estragon, whom to a large extent lacks the spiritual and divine convictions of his friend. Lawrence Graver describes him as “the more dreamy, instinctive man, absorbed by his own bodily functions and likely to respond viscerally to everything going on around him” (33).

The play opens with Estragon tugging away at his boots. They do not fit him and are therefore causing him pain. Exhaustingly he pulls and pulls at them, giving up and starting over again. The first words uttered are Estragon stating that there is “Nothing to be done” (9). This resigned and ultimately faithless attitude permeates Estragon throughout the play. Eugene Webb calls him less susceptible to illusions than Vladimir, who is much more faithful and believes that the waiting will bring them salvation (27). Webb also argues that Estragon subsequently has less of a need for hope and enlightenment than his friend (27). This could be argued to be true. A moment later, Vladimir wants to pass the time by reciting the Bible and tell the story of the two thieves. He asks Estragon if he has ever read the Bible, and Estragon reacts almost oblivious. “The Bible . . .”, Estragon reflects. “I must have taken a look at it” (12). When asked if he remembers the Gospels, Estragon dreamily talks about the Holy Land:

ESTRAGON: I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Coloured they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy (12).

The Holy Land, is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as Western Palestine. Called “the holy land” since “being the scene of the life and death of Jesus Christ, and (with reference to the Crusades) as containing the Holy Sepulchre; sometimes, in later use, as being the scene of the development of the Jewish and Christian religions” (“Holy land”). Estragon’s associations to this very special place are merely to do with his own needs; for quenching his thirst, for his own happiness, aesthetic beauty, and sunshine and swimming. One might suggest that this is a fitting reaction to such images coming from a very physical and down-to-earth type of man. There is no spiritual connection between Estragon and the Holy Land, other than him thinking that it looked “very pretty” in the pictures (12). Bryden echoes this, and

argues that Estragon rather than discounting the Bible instead relates to it in his own way: “A physical being, he appreciates its appearance and physicality” (111). Vladimir then more or less forces Estragon into the discussion, who is having none of it. Vladimir implores him: “Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you, once in a way?”, he pleads. Estragon replies with exaggerated enthusiasm, “I find this really most extraordinarily interesting”. (12-13). Vladimir then goes on with the story of the four Evangelists present at the crucifixion, and how only one of them, Luke, mentions the conversation between Jesus and the thieves later in the Gospels (as mentioned earlier in this essay). Estragon then loses his patience and retorts “Well? They don't agree and that's all there is to it” (13). To this illusionless man there need not be a more intrinsic explanation than this. However, despite his lack of interest in the Bible, near the end of the first act he does admit to having a special relationship with Christ. Estragon abandons his boots, which he finally managed to remove from his sore feet, and this exchange occurs:

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.

VLADIMIR: But you can't go barefoot!

ESTRAGON: Christ did.

VLADIMIR: Christ! What has Christ got to do with it. You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!

ESTRAGON: All my life I've compared myself to him.

David Johnson, in his book *The Popular & the Canonical: Debating Twentieth-century Literature 1940-2000*, argues that Estragon, just like Jesus Christ, can be seen as someone embodying a sort of sympathy for the human condition and for the plights and the sufferings of human kind (242). He states that Estragon's suffering, just like Jesus', is self-conscious. They are both fully aware of their pain and they are both vocal about it. However, Jesus' pain and hardship serves as a symbol for perseverance and hope to mankind, whereas Estragon's pain and suffering largely goes unnoticed. Since his fate is unknown and the world where he lives in is deserted, at this moment there is really no one or nothing to suffer for. This could be argued to be both an origin for Estragon's faithlessness and feelings of hopelessness and a rea-

son for it to persist. He suffers just like his companion Vladimir, but he lacks Vladimir's convictions, which in turn makes his situation even more unbearable.

A lot of the time it seems as if Estragon does not even know what they are doing or whom or what they are waiting for. He has no knowledge of Godot and admits that he would not know him even if he saw him (23). He is led by Vladimir, since he does not have any convictions of his own. Vladimir steers and Estragon reluctantly follows, Vladimir initiates and Estragon responds (Lawley, 62). Estragon is oblivious to his surroundings and whether or not he and Vladimir have been at this waiting place before, nor does he know if they have come at the right time (15). His insecurities regarding this even make Vladimir doubt whether or not they have come to the right place at the right time (15).

He wants to leave almost immediately in the first act (14), but is reminded by Vladimir that they are waiting for Godot. This exact exchange is repeated numerous times throughout the play. Vladimir constantly needs to remind and reassure his faithless and hopeless friend of the importance of the struggle; "[If he comes] we'll be saved", Vladimir says near the very end of the play (94). Estragon's desire to leave comes in other forms as well and they are all symptomatic for his state of resignation and faithlessness. He has no faith in the situation and he wants out, and the ends justify the means. Well-nigh like a narcoleptic he falls asleep time and time again, but unlike a proper narcoleptic he relishes it and tries his best to fall asleep as often as possible. If he sleeps he does not have to face the situation and he is terribly upset when he gets woken up (15, 89) or when he cannot fall asleep in the first place (70). The Proverbs say "When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid" (*Proverbs 3:24*, King James Version), and this is something that Estragon draws on, albeit unconsciously. However, he does suffer from nightmares (16), which means that he cannot be sure that the pains from this waking life of faithlessness and hopelessness will leave him alone even in his sleep.

So if sleeping ultimately does not help, then death might. Suicide is on Estragon's mind all through the play, as mentioned elsewhere in this essay. He suggests it in the beginning of the first act (17), but they both decide against it. Vladimir wants to wait for Godot, and furthermore the bough from which they were to hang themselves is thought to be too frail. Yet they, or particularly Estragon, keep coming back to the idea of suicide and hanging themselves, and Vladimir keeps advising against it. Moreover, they lack the proper rope or cord, anyway (93). In Estragon's own words this existence has plagued him all his life. In a

quite memorable scene in the second act, he spouts: “All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud! /.../ (*Looking wildly about him.*) Look at this muckheap! I've never stirred from it!” (61) Near the very end of the second and final act, Estragon again despairs. “I can't go on like this”, he says, to which Vladimir quickly replies “That's what you think” (94). The only way out of this faithless existence is to keep on waiting and hoping for salvation. So he remains.

Conclusion

With this essay I have investigated and analyzed representations of faith and religion in *Waiting for Godot* and its protagonists. I have treated the play as an allegory about persevering through hard times, about belief in a higher meaning and about the faith in and struggle for salvation and meaning. I have mapped out the religious foundation on which the plot arguably stands and I have compared and contrasted the two protagonists in order to show in which of the two faith is more strongly represented. By doing this, this essay argued that in order to persevere and not perish during the struggle for meaning, one needs faith, and that in *Waiting for Godot* this faith is more strongly represented in the character Vladimir.

The protagonists of the play are quite dissimilar, both in general, and also when it comes to religion and faith, but it could be said that they together make one (conflicting) whole. Vladimir, of course, is the thinker. He is the most scholarly of the two. He is the leader, one could say, and the one with the sharpest intellect. He is concerned with problems of meaning and tends to search for explanations, and he manages to mobilize hope in the most dire of situations (Webb, 27). One could assert that this is all thanks to his faith. His faith in the struggle, in the waiting, and in Godot. This faith helps to make him more positive and more hopeful. Estragon, however, is the cynical one of the pair. He has no illusions and is more earthbound than Vladimir. The cynicism stems from and is synonymous with his lack of faith. It is Vladimir who wants them to wait for Godot. Even though he cannot say exactly what it is that they have asked of Godot, Vladimir confirms that it was a sort of prayer. He also tells us that Godot can both punish and save. Estragon, however, is oblivious to Godot. He would rather kill himself than wait around (17), or at least walk away (14) or go to sleep (15). Had it not been for Vladimir, Estragon would most likely be dead - an assertion that is also strengthened by the fact that Estragon at one point in time was literally saved by Vladi-

mir from drowning. During the length of the play it is Vladimir who steers and Estragon reluctantly follows, Vladimir initiates and Estragon responds. Vladimir is preoccupied with stories from the Bible (10, 11, 12, 13), but Estragon is not interested. His concerns lie mostly with himself - with his own well-being, his needs or his ailments. This is the contrast between the thinking, spiritual man, and the more corporeal, illusionless man (Webb, 27). Like Beckett said: Estragon is on the ground and Vladimir belongs to the tree and is oriented towards the sky. If one is arguing that the tree in the play represents life and hope (as discussed above), and also faith in itself, and if one is of the persuasion that the sky is where the divine powers dwell, which I have been for the duration of this essay, then this makes asserting that Vladimir is the more spiritual character of the two feel even more natural. The faith within Vladimir is what leads these two tramps on their way to potential salvation and meaning.

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