

**Between Absurdity and Anxiety:
Psychoanalysis of Defence in Waiting for Godot**

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Article Received: 13/08/2025

Article Accepted: 15/09/2025

Published Online: 15/09/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.09.238

Abstract:

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is often read as a paradigmatic text of existential uncertainty and absurdist theatre, but it also offers fertile ground for psychoanalytic interpretation. This paper examines the play through the lens of defence mechanisms as theorized in Freudian. Through this psychoanalytic framework, the paper argues that *Waiting for Godot* stages not only the philosophy of the absurd but also the fragile psychic mechanisms through which individuals defend against the unbearable truth of existence.

Key Words: Defence Mechanism, Theatre of Absurd, Waiting.

Introduction:

The works of Samuel Beckett have imparted a new identity and significance to drama and fiction, through a series of concrete stage images underlying the theme of endurance and hope. In a way it communicates and offers the author's most intimate vision of the human situation, addressing the mysteries of existence itself. I.K Masih in

Being a modernist and a votary of both Marcel Proust and James Joyce, in the years before and after the Second World War, Beckett's literary journey began with his tryst with inner self and its existential predicament. His inner calling found expression in his initial literary output which he continued to mould industriously and without compromise till his end. Vivaciousness and candidness associated with the stage tremendously appealed to Beckett more than any other literary form, so he turned to drama after his few attempts in fiction. Samuel Beckett as a teenager was fascinated by the cultural ambience of Dublin, which was then a city of music with an exuberantly flourishing Musical Society. His association with Prof. Walter Starkie's lecture series on Pirandello made a profound influence on Beckett and thus he got engrossed in '*Continental Theatre*'. His biographical essentials unravel the importance of impromptu dramatic and musical presentations, the entertainments at home and the artistic society of Foxrock. This world mesmerised young Beckett more than the Sunday tea and tennis parties. He also adored Irish realism and

technique conveyed in Sean O'Casey's night performances but for theme and form European experimentalism was his source of inspiration.

Beckett's masterpiece 'Waiting for Godot' –is a study of two old tramps waiting in a barren landscape for Mr. Godot who never comes. This play shows his crucial influence of 'Music Hall' and 'Silent Comedy' and his affection for eminent comedy stars Laurel and Hardy and Charlie Chaplin. Consequently, three basic forms of action: circus clownery, cross-talk and dramatic mime, all are found in Beckett's theatre, and serve to enrich it. Therefore, Beckett's heroes are seen engaged in clowning acts and indulging in amusing gestures in order to while away the existential existence. Yet we find the narrators of his fiction and the protagonists of most of his plays as incurable soliloquists battling with their inner thoughts.

Beckett's plays have something in common with other contemporary dramatists, so he got labelled along with 'The Theatre of Absurd'. Beckett's theatre is a far cry from the 'Epic theatre' where the character is situated in a historical or social context and is influenced and formatted by the milieu he lives in. On the other hand, Beckett's characters are not tossing about in the mundane and ordinary life events. Beckett chose the ideas of Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' to stage his characters that are isolated, static and motionless. Critics have affirmed the view that the world has been waiting for a play like this, to rudely awaken the social consciousness of the post-World War II psyche. "*All Theatre Is Waiting – Samuel Beckett's Waiting For Godot-We were waiting for this play of our time, with its new tone, its simple and modest language, and its closed circular plot...this new and yet instantly familiar dialogue forms part of our lives within a few hours, staying with us...it is our story.*"[2]

At the same time the, Beckett's setting and stage is fantastical and alien one and is apropos to his premise of minimalism in his plays. Minimalism is just a symbolic representation of the inner psyche of the characters and their confrontations with the circumambient universe.

Ego - Defence Mechanisms of the Characters

Freud in his 'Psychoanalytic theory' postulated that the conscious part of the mind 'Ego' finds difficulty in satisfying both 'Id' and 'Superego'. He had also affirmed that the 'Ego' is the conscious part of our mind which mediates between 'Id' (unconscious) and 'Superego' (guiding spirit from the sub conscious) and battles against their unreasonable demands. He added that 'Ego' uses some tools in order to create balance between these two uncontrollable forces. These tools are called as 'Ego Defence Mechanisms' which empower the Ego and function at the unconscious spheres. Beckett's plays convey his attempts to re-establish a harmonious relationship between his characters by uncovering and resolving repressed conflicts in the unconscious recesses. The characters are constantly striving to form a balance between their 'Id' and 'Superego' by employing these defence mechanisms. Freud has enlisted a number of defence mechanisms which are discussed one by one.

Regression

According to Freud, '*Regression*' is a defence mechanism where one abandons adult coping strategies in favour of earlier, more child-like patterns of behaviour. A person starts throwing a tantrum or crying, when faced with difficult and anxiety provoking situations. The trauma of the immediate aftermath of war in Europe influenced Beckett's narrative, which illustrated a kind psychological regression in his plays. The characters are in awe of life and so run from their present and future by regressing to the pre trauma levels. Their silly baby acts, dependency tactics to disown responsibility and hope for the hopeless miracle to happen are their obvious existential survival gambits.

Vladimir: Sometimes I Feel It Coming All The Same. Then I Go All Queer. (He Takes Off His Hat, Peers Inside It, Feels About Inside It, Shakes It, Puts It On Again.) How Shall I Say? Relieved And At The Same Time . . . (He Searches For The Word) . . . Appalled. (With Emphasis.) Ap-Palled. (He Takes Off His Hat Again, Peers Inside It.) Funny. (He Knocks On The Crown As Though To Dislodge A Foreign Body, Peers Into It Again, Puts It On Again.) Nothing To Be Done. (Estragon With A Supreme Effort Succeeds In Pulling Off His Boot. He Peers Inside It, Feels About Inside It, Turns It Upside Down, Shakes It, Looks On The Ground To See If Anything Has Fallen Out, Finds Nothing, Feels Inside It Again, Staring Sightlessly Before Him.) Well?

Estragon: Nothing

Vladimir: Show Me.

Estragon: There's Nothing To Show

Vladimir: Try and put it on again

Vladimir's actions like taking off his hat again and again, peering inside it repeatedly, and Estragon's amusement with his boots, highlight their predicament. They are full of anxiety and their movements and gestures aim at expressing what language is incapable of putting into words. Thus '*regression*' is very obvious in the acts of Vladimir and Estragon as they feel alienated, and are stuck between the predicament of their birth and the inevitability of their death. While waiting for Godot, Vladimir hears a voice and get scared like an infant. His huddling action displays the childlike behaviour, as he is under stress.

VLADIMIR: *Listen!*

ESTRAGON: I hear nothing.

VLADIMIR: Hsst! (They listen. Estragon loses his balance, almost falls. He clutches the arm of Vladimir, who totters. They listen, huddled together.) Nor I. Sighs of relief. They relax and separate. The action of huddling each other, rejoining every time they hear a voice, suggest tells their incapability of combating problems. They unconsciously display such naive gestures, which propose their behaviour as abnormal.

VLADIMIR: The essential doesn't change.

ESTRAGON: Nothing to be done. (He proffers the remains of the carrot to Vladimir.) Like to finish it? A terrible cry, close at hand. Estragon drops the carrot. They remain motionless, and then together make a sudden rush towards the wings. Estragon stops halfway, runs back, picks up the carrot, stuffs it in his pocket, runs to rejoin Vladimir who is waiting for him,

stops again, runs back, picks up his boot, runs to rejoin Vladimir. Huddled together, shoulders hunched, cringing away from the menace, they wait.

Displacement

According to Freud, ‘displacement’ is a defence mechanism in which a person shifts his/her impulses from an unacceptable target to a more acceptable or less threatening target. It means, if a person is stressed, he/she shouts, get angry and misbehaves with a weaker personality rather than a strong minded one. One of the finest examples of ‘displacement’ is the master –servant pair ‘Pozzo and Lucky’ in ‘Waiting for Godot’. For example, Estragon connotes Lucky as a Mister and offers him some bones. Pozzo gets annoyed with Estragon for calling Lucky as ‘Mister’ and yells at Lucky. Here Pozzo expresses his anger on the safer target; Lucky, who is a submissive being. **ESTRAGON:** Mister . . . excuse me, Mister . . .

POZZO: You're being spoken to, pig! Reply! (To Estragon.) Try him again. **ESTRAGON:** Excuse me, Mister, the bones, you won't be wanting the bones? Lucky looks long at Estragon.

POZZO: (in raptures). Mister! (Lucky bows his head.) Reply! Do you want them or don't you? (Silence of Lucky. To Estragon.) They're yours. (Estragon makes a dart at the bones, picks them up and begins to gnaw them.) I don't like it. I've never known him to refuse a bone before. (He looks anxiously at Lucky.) Nice business it'd be if he fell sick on me! He puffs at his pipe. There are more instances where Vladimir and Estragon can be seen as the targets of displaced anger. It shows they are constantly involved in taking out their frustrations, feelings and impulses on each other. They consider themselves superior than the other and keep on fighting and bullying each other.

VLADIMIR: Boots must be taken off every day, I'm tired telling you that. Why don't you listen to me?

ESTRAGON: (feebly). Help me!

VLADIMIR: It hurts?

ESTRAGON: (angrily). Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!

VLADIMIR: (angrily). No one ever suffers but you. I don't count. I'd like to hear what you'd say if you had what I have.

A similar displacement syndrome is evident in his next play ‘Endgame’, where the master ‘Hamm’ is dramatized in the same manner. In this play, Hamm being physically disabled is totally dependent on his servant Clov. He thus relieves and displaces his physical paralysis and his dependency on his servant through verbal assaults. His corporeal incapability accentuates his mental suffering and he retaliates to more acceptable targets- his parents. His parents Nag and Nell have a feeble existence in the play and are often the target of Hamm’s antagonism. For example, Hamm is agitated with Clov’s indifferent attitude, when he says, “I’ll leave you, I have things to do”. But, instead of yelling at Clov, Hamm’s reroutes his anger towards his father by calling him such ‘an ancestor’.

NAGG: Me pap!

HAMM: Accursed progenitor!

NAGG: Me pap!

HAMM: The old folks at home! No decency left! Guzzle, guzzle, that's all they thinof. (He whistles. Enter Clov. He halts beside the chair.) Well! I thought you were leaving me
Rationalisation

Freud proposed 'Rationalisation' as one of the 'defence *mechanisms*' which is commonly referred to as '*making excuses*'. In psychology and logic, '*rationalisation*' is a process where controversial behaviours are logically justified and explained in a rational manner to avoid any true explanation. These clarifications are made consciously tolerable or even admirable and superior by plausible means. For example, an anxiety ridden 'Estragon' at one moment suggests 'Vladimir' to hang themselves to get rid of their tiresome waiting. Vladimir initially accepts the idea but after a long argument they decide to discard the idea and continue to wait for Godot. They are unable to execute the task and try to justify why they cannot hang themselves in spite of the nothingness in their lives.

VLADIMIR: *But am I heavier than you?*

ESTRAGON: *So you tell me. I don't know. There's an even chance. Or nearly.*

VLADIMIR: *Well? What do we do?*

ESTRAGON: *Don't let's do anything. It's safer.*

VLADIMIR: *Let's wait and see what he says.*

The play shows mutual dependence between Pozzo and Lucky and it keeps them cosy within the sphere of bondage. In reality Pozzo wants Lucky to continue as a slave but he lies that it is Lucky who doesn't want to continue. He further reasons that Lucky is holding the heavy bags for him owing to his own intensions of staying. He says "*He wants to impress me so that I'll keep him' (Act 1, page 31). He wants to mollify me, so that I'll give up the idea of parting with him...' (Act 1, page 31).* On the other hand, the reality seems to be conflicting as one can observe Lucky being forced to carry such tasks by his ever-bullying master Pozzo. In a way Pozzo is trying to put a logical justification for his seemingly illogical or unacceptable feelings or behaviour. This defensive manoeuvre is generally used to avoid feelings of intense guilt. Also, according to Psychoanalysis, '*rationalisation*' is used to impress others, reaffirm our moral integrity and protect self-worth. In case of Pozzo, it seems that he is trying to rationalise the question asked by Vladimir:

VLADIMIR:

You want to get rid of him?

POZZO: I do. But instead of driving him away as I might have done, I mean instead of simply kicking him out on his arse, in the goodness of my heart I am bringing him to the fair, where I hope to get a good price for him. The truth is you can't drive such creatures away. The best thing would be to kill them. Lucky weeps.

Pozzo is likely to kill Lucky, but spares him and reduces his punishment by showing a rational attitude towards him. However, one instance shows that Pozzo is repeatedly trying to avoid the question asked by the two tramps:

VLADIMIR: Why he doesn't put down his bags. **And the conversation goes on....**

VLADIMIR: Why he—

POZZO: (angrily). Don't interrupt me! (Pause. Calmer.) If we all speak at once we'll never get anywhere. (Pause.) What was I saying? (Pause. Louder.) What was I saying?

Repression

Thus like all forms of literary criticism, psychoanalytic criticism can also yield useful clues to the sometime baffling symbols, actions, and settings in a literary work. The characters' behavioural patterns also give important clues to investigate the underlying meaning of the work. In the case of Beckett, it is observed that his characters are incapable of dealing with the emotional uncertainty and instability which, according to Freud, results from pushing back painful or stressful ideas into the subconscious. Freud further adds that these memories don't just disappear; they continue to influence one's conduct.

Beckett's characters appear to be ridiculous, phony and immature but seen through the psychoanalytic lens; they it reveals depths of character, the inconsequential reveal that they are dealing with the unresolved effects of trauma. '*Repression*' is generally considered the primary '*defence mechanism*' of the human mind which protects your ego from the various assaults of the world. It is a process, where the concealed emotions and urges eventually explode through outbursts of anger and irrational demeanour. For example, at one instance, Estragon admits to having been beaten by ten men. Whenever these forbidden drives or impulses enter his conscious mind, his behavioral patterns trigger anxiety and explicit neurotic symptoms.

VLADIMIR: Do you want me to go away? (Pause.) Gogo! (Pause. Vladimir observes him attentively.) Did they beat you? (Pause.) Gogo! (Estragon remains silent, head bowed.) Where did you spend the night?

ESTRAGON: *Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!*

According to Freud, repression is created when feelings of anxiety lead to illogical, self-destructive internalised, or anti-social behaviour. The most turmoil-ridden soul in the drama is 'Lucky'—who is constantly under physical and mental threat from his master Pozzo. Their entry itself elucidates the personality differences, clashes and mutual dependency of the pair.

Enter Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo drives Lucky by means of a rope passed round his neck, so that Lucky is the first to enter, followed by the rope which is long enough to let him reach the middle of the stage before Pozzo appears. Lucky carries a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket and a greatcoat, Pozzo a whip.

Pozzo's uses connotations like a pig and hog and verbal assaults for Lucky are all different facets of defence mechanism employed for survival and to overcome traumatic situations life. They are entrenched deeply into his unconscious mind and trigger his anxiety further causing 'repression'. **POZZO:**

with magnanimous gesture). Let's say no more about it. (He jerks the rope.) Up pig! (Pause.) Every time he drops, he falls asleep. (Jerks the rope.) Up hog! (Noise of Lucky getting up and picking up his baggage. Pozzo jerks the rope.) Back! (Enter Lucky backwards.) Stop! (Lucky stops.) Turn! (Lucky turns. To Vladimir and Estragon, affably.

These instances in Lucky's life frighteningly frustrating and acting "*regressed*" is a very normal response to it. However, these memories don't just disappear; they continue to influence the behaviour of Lucky. In the later part of the first act, Lucky's famous long extraneous speech is an illustration of this regress-manifestation. His mental condition is incapable of dealing with the emotional uncertainty and instability those memories had

produced. His outburst full of meaningless words and his gibberish act which is punctuation-less depict his state of mind which is being ravaged by the chastising actions of his master Pozzo. Lucky's speech comprises of words like quaquaquaquacacacademy, Anthropopopometry, Essy-in-Possy, conating, camogie, Feckham, Peckham Fulham, Clapham stockinged, which are meaningless and pointless and can be considered as slips of the tongue. Lucky employs a version of the '*Freudian slip*', also called 'parapraxis': "an error in speech, memory, or physical action that is interpreted as occurring due to the interference of some unconscious subdued wish, or conflict"[3]. Freud believed that there is no such thing as an accident and slips directly reflect deeply repressed issues and emotions. Thus, appreciation of Beckett's works via psychoanalysis strengthens the viewpoint of Freud "that human body which in Greek times was merely neo-platonical, is filled with secrets drawers only to be opened through psychoanalysis" [4].

Psychoanalysts have also asserted that '*forgetting*' also is often associated with events that have disagreeable or stressful connotations. Freud postulated a selective process by which people reject, or suppress certain memories associated with past traumas that would be uncomfortable or unbearable to remember. Thus, forgetting and distorting reality may also be caused by '*repression*'. For example: A couple of instances can prove that the persona in '*Waiting for Godot*' are the victims of motivated forgetting. Estragon's question is left unanswered by Vladimir as if this question confronts him pain or anxiety of reality.

ESTRAGON: I'm unhappy.

VLADIMIR: Not really! Since when?

ESTRAGON: I'd forgotten.

VLADIMIR: Extraordinary the tricks that memory plays! (Estragon tries to speak, renounces, limps to his place, sits down and begins to take off his boots. To Boy.) Well? On the other hand, the characters can commit to memory the good old things which have once given them comfort and peace of mind. The world of Estragon and Vladimir is submerged with vague recollections of culture and the past. Estragon remembers the Bible with uncertainty. "I remember the maps with of the Holy Land. Coloured they were." Beckett's another play 'Endgame' is a play of family involving love/hate relationships in which emotion of anger predominates the play. The unsolved conflicts give rise to repressed emotions, to addictions feelings of distrust among the members. Conversations like the following indicate that there was love once but now it has eroded.

HAMM: *You don't love me.*

CLOV: *No.*

HAMM: *You loved me once*

CLOV: *Once!*

Projection

The devastation of the World War II has left people bewildered which raised the question of their existence, whereas at one time they needed support of people around them, at other times they wanted to be left alone. They also capitulated to social norms which dictate that people should all like each other and get along. Amidst such an environment they wished to survive with this perplexity and were inclined to carry on with the insecurity's life had to offer them. Unquestionably due to this their rational condition was at stake.

'Endgame' by Beckett perfectly exemplifies such a subverted human dilemma with its characters constantly projecting their enslavement and yet at the same time rejecting it. The servant, Clov recurrently admonishes to leave the master, by saying, "*I'll leave you!*" At the same time confesses that he is completely dependent on Hamm and he has nowhere else to go. Thus, here the characters are expelling their feelings and wishes which they find wholly unacceptable – too shameful, too obscene, too dangerous – by attributing them to others. This phenomenon is occasionally referred to as "*Freudian projection*" in reference to Dr. Freud's non sheets as clinical. Other forms of Projection are jealousy and resentment of others good fortune, in this case, blind and paralytic Hamm is envious of his servant Clov. Evidently Hamm's very long speech expresses his exasperation towards Clov. He curses Clov to be blind and disabled like him, and his speech ends with:

Yes, one day you'll know what it is, you'll be like me, except that you won't have anyone with you, because you won't have had pity on anyone and because there won't be anyone left to have pity on you. (Pause).

And this uncertainty creates fear, anxiety, and stress which become a primary part of a person's survival instinct system. The unpredictable nature of Clov has triggered an attitude of hyper vigilance in Hamm's mind and he starts anticipating dangerous situations. For instance, Hamm orders Clov that they should leave this place and go to South anticipating that he will be all alone there. And the next instance is full of imaginative thoughts of Hamm about the situations which may not even materialize in future.

Waiting for Godot is no exception where projection syndrome is employed. Estragon, one of the two tramps intermittently reminds the reader that he is not keen in staying with Vladimir. Yet it is observed that he does not leave the stage, and is there till the end.

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go. *They do not move*

Reaction Formation

Other interpretations of Beckett's inhospitable and hopeless milieu in the creative world is also a recreation of the post atomic wasteland and a manifestation of nihilism. This is special to World War II, the topsy turvy world which became a relentless source for his plays. Beckett has interestingly displayed the physical and mental traumas of the soldiers at war through his characters. Though he avoided simple parallels, the correlation between war time Europe and the bleak plays he wrote in its aftermath seems obvious. His prevailing themes such as shell

shockedness stress and ennui have evidently come from the real –life sufferings of the soldiers of '*Trench War*'.

As in *Waiting for Godot*, the protagonists, Estragon and Vladimir seem to rely on each other for company and on Godot for providing life's meaning. Ironically, they argue all the time to suppress their mutual desire and dependency. This is an interesting case of '*Reaction formation*', which involves projection of paradoxical ideas with the goal of suppressing real feelings. In the play, both the characters are trying to conceal their internal self by applying the masks of independent, self-relying attitude. They argue and wonder

why they are together, when they can survive independently, and thus are not interested in carrying the burden of being together any longer. Their constant half-wish to split appears from their confrontations:

ESTRAGON: Wait! (He moves away from Vladimir.) I sometimes wonder if we wouldn't have been better off alone, each one for himself. (He crosses the stage and sits down on the mound.) We weren't made for the same road.

VLADIMIR: We can still part, if you think it would be better. Their conflict continues in the Act II....

ESTRAGON: If we parted? That might be better for us.

But the pleadings of Estragon resurface his real intension, when he utters these words to Vladimir, "*Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!*" They profess it separate but in reality, are inseparable. Another similar pair, Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, is in similar kind of quandary, where they are unable to confess their feebleness. While avoiding exhibiting their frailty, they try to act exactly opposite. Though Clov's perpetuating statements intend that he wants to leave Hamm, in reality it contradicts with the reality.

Beckett through his characters has created an image of the appalled, motionless world of catatonia. Perhaps this is the reason why his plays have exerted such a powerful grip on the imagination of large audiences. It has proved that the underlined thoughts can be unravelled through psychoanalytical theories of Freud. The psychoanalytical insight also shows that the whole of his writing career seems to have been a search for an adequate artistic expression for his depression and his distaste for art. Indeed, his works expose the latent, underlying content of his lifetime experiences.

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