

## Godot as the Unachieved Desire: A Lacanian Reading of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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### Abstract

*This paper tackles the famous play by the Irish playwright and novelist Samuel Beckett through the lens of Lacanian theory. It is intended in the paper to show that the mysterious off-stage character of Godot is a representation of the unachieved desire according to the French theorist Jaques Lacan. By borrowing the Lacanian theory of desire, this paper sets the goal of proving that the wait for Godot is a manufactured wait for an unobtainable desire.*

*Moreover, the paper analyses how Beckett's portrayal of the characters' perpetual waiting aligns with Lacan's theory of desire as an unsatisfiable force. The paper also discusses the significance of the characters' repetitive actions and conversations, illuminating the futile nature of their pursuit and the cyclical nature of desire.*

*By examining Beckett's play, this paper shows the inherent human condition of yearning for fulfillment in the face of an unattainable desire. It gives a fresh look into the famous play *Waiting for Godot* by looking at it through the lens of Lacanian theory.*

**Keywords:** Lacanian theory Desire, Godot, Signifier, Signified, Unconscious

Lacan's theory posits that the unconscious, which houses our deep desires, is structured like a language. Similar to language, the unconscious is formed by signifiers and signifieds, comprising a system of codes that correlate meaning. Lacan borrows the terms from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. In his theory, Saussure wants to establish that language is, in its essence, arbitrary. It consists of correlating signs (words) that refer to tangible objects. Although, this connection does not constitute a rule by itself. Why the word 'cat' refers to the animal? Why not the word 'tree' or another word? As a result the only justification of meaning "can only be understood as differences from other meanings"(Cameron 1998, 57).

So, according to Saussure's terminology, When I use the word 'cat' in writing, it not only represents the written form 'cat' which is the signifier but also evokes the mental idea or image of the four-legged creature, this mental idea or picture is the signified. While Saussure focuses on the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs and their connection to tangible objects, Lacan extends this understanding to the realm of the unconscious and desires. By applying Saussure's terms, Lacan emphasizes that the unconscious operate in a similar way as language. It also consists of signs. The unconscious consists of signifieds, that is the meaning or mental image, and this meaning or mental image should be associated with signifiers, which are the linguistic representations or symbols.

In this context, one could assert that “desire is a product of dialectic” (Leckie et al. 2010,106). By framing desire within the structure of dialectic, Lacan underscores the inherent tension and conflict within the enigmatic realm of the unconscious. Dialectic, defined as the process of examining and resolving opposing forces or contradictions, illuminates desire as a constantly shifting trap, perpetually influenced by the interplay between conscious and unconscious elements. The interplay between the conscious and unconscious elements shapes the nature of desire, transforming it into a great force within the human psyche.

Since desire, is a signified without a signifier, the vicious cycle begins. As individual seeks to fulfill their desires, they inevitably encounter a fundamental paradox. The object of desire, the signified, remains elusive and unattainable, forever slipping away. Thus, it creates a cycle of correlating signifieds without a signifier. This perpetual deferral from achieving any tangible meaning is the inherent problem of man.

Lacan suggests a solution in which we trick ourselves into believing that satisfying our unattainable desires is possible by redirecting our focus toward attainable objects, that is to manufacture a signifier to the signified. We convince ourselves that acquiring these objects will fulfill our deep desires. However, as soon as one need is satisfied, another need emerges, perpetuating the vicious cycle of desire and demand. This cycle, one might say, is what drives us forward in life.

In Lacanian theory, a notable parallel between the unconscious and language resides in the fact that the desires embedded within the unconscious are signifieds lacking a direct association with tangible signifiers. Consequently, these desires undergo a transition toward a constructed need or signifier. The correspondence between desire and need mirrors the arbitrary nature characteristic of the relationship between the signifier and the signified.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett portrays a bleak and existential reality where the characters are waiting for an unattainable desire, represented by the elusive Godot. The characters' futile attempts to achieve this desire are reflective of Lacan's concept of the never-ending cycle of desire, need, and demand. The play underscores the difficulty of breaking free from the vicious cycle, as the characters continually repeat their actions and behaviors, unable to escape their unattainable desire.

As Estragon and Vladimir wait for Godot in the opening scene, they engage in a circular conversation that epitomizes the futility of their actions. Estragon remarks, "Nothing to be done," to which Vladimir replies, "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 yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle." This exchange exemplifies the characters' resigned acceptance of their situation and their inability to break free from the cycle of waiting and longing, as everyone is in one sense or another enslaved by this cycle, although deep down “one knows very well that "Godot" can never arrive because he is just a name for nothingness”(Zizek 1992,145). This scene illustrates how the characters' situation reflects Lacan's desire, need, and demand theory. Despite recognizing the futility of their actions, the characters continue to engage in them, driven by their unattainable desire for Godot's arrival. Their struggle to escape the cycle of waiting mirrors the human struggle to break free from the cycle of desire, need, and demand, highlighting the universality of Lacan's theory.

The power dynamic between Pozzo and Lucky is also representative of the cycle of desire, need, and demand. Pozzo, the master, demands that Lucky, his slave, perform various tasks for him. As Pozzo remarks, "I am slave myself, I've my man to

attend to me. Why, how do you imagine we manage?" (Act I). Despite his seemingly powerful position, Pozzo is also a victim of his desires, as he constantly searches for something to satisfy him, whether it be food, wine, or entertainment. Meanwhile, Lucky is reduced to a mere tool, fulfilling Pozzo's every demand without question. The relationship between the two characters highlights the inherent inequality that arises within the cycle of desire and demand. One's desires are often satisfied at the expense of one's agency, leaving us all trapped and fooled by our unconscious desires. In this context, we do not have free will to act; instead, we are all trapped, pushed, and fooled by our unconscious desire to try and achieve it, this causes the bondage of oneself, as Lucky, for we are the Lucky to our desire, Pozzo.

In the realm of *Waiting for Godot*, the absent-present character of Godot takes on a significant role in shaping the lives of Estragon and Vladimir. Their existence becomes imbued with meaning as they endure the relentless pursuit of purpose within the confines of waiting for Godot. The desire for Godot's arrival extends beyond mere anticipation of a person's presence; it encompasses a profound yearning for fulfillment and a definitive path in their lives. In this sense, the characters mirror the universal human condition as described by Lacan's theory of desire.

Estragon and Vladimir firmly believe that the arrival of Godot will bring them the contentment they seek, aligning with Lacan's concept of desire that propels individuals towards an elusive fulfillment. However, their expectations are repeatedly dashed, and Godot never materializes, plunging them back into the cycle of longing and waiting. This cyclicity echoes Lacan's notion of desire as an unquenchable force that perpetually eludes satisfaction. Thus, the characters find themselves trapped within an endless loop, perpetually yearning for the unattainable.

In a way "Lacan insists that desire is only a metonymy" (Bloom 1997, 57). Such a statement sheds light on the nature of the Lacanian desire, as metonymy is a figure of speech that substitutes one word or phrase for another based on their association or contiguity, desire operates through a series of substitutions and shifts, constantly seeking satisfaction in different objects or goals but never really obtaining it. To use metonymy means that one associates the thing that one wants to name with the nearest object or something that is related to it. Though, unlike metonymy, the Lacanian desire is "inherently unsatisfied and unsatisfiable because it does not primarily relate to a real object" (Bronfen 1992, 96), so desire is a try to name the non-existent, the fantasy. While metonymy may exchange an existent thing with another related thing, Lacanian desire seeks to name the non-existent, the realm of fantasy, and the unattainable. This fundamental distinction highlights the elusive and unsatisfiable nature of Lacanian desire, as it reaches for something beyond the tangible and real.

The interchange of desire with a need becomes a central aspect of one's life, as it is rooted within a psychological necessity to achieve the desire. The need is a tangible and concrete object\objects that fulfill basic bodily requirements. The mind tricks itself into chasing the need in exchange for the demand.

Thus, the need to wait for a person called Godot surfaces in the minds of Vladimir and Estragon. This wait is the embodiment of the interchange process of the demand\need. As they both enter what is termed "repetition compulsion" and perpetually engage in the repetitive act of waiting for Godot, as one critic declares that "They are still waiting for someone (or something) called 'Godot'" (Pope 1995,137). They are forced to wait, as this waiting is the only act that can give their lives any meaning. The only need that can exchange the demand.

## CONCLUSION

The focus here is on the interplay between desire, fulfillment, and the perpetual cycle of waiting. By examining the characters' yearning for Godot's arrival and their unwavering hope for a meaningful encounter, one can discern the universality of Lacan's theory. The play becomes an allegorical reflection of the human condition, as analyzed by Lacan, highlighting the inherent struggle in navigating desire's ceaseless pursuit and the elusive quest for ultimate fulfillment. By delving into the depths of the characters' experiences and the perpetuity of their waiting, *Waiting for Godot* serves as an evocative portrayal of the existential predicament we all face. It sheds light on the eternal yearning for purpose and the inherent challenges in breaking free from the cyclicity of desire, as postulated by Lacan's theoretical framework. In this scholarly analysis, the profound themes of the play emerge, captivating the reader's understanding of the human psyche and the intricacies of our relentless pursuit of meaning and satisfaction.

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