

Research Article

## Rhizomatic Complexity in the Narrative of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyse rhizomatic complexity in the narrative of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, an absurd play. It exposes how structuralist and post-structuralist approaches reveal existential absurdism through the play's narrative. The structuralist approach examines how meaning is produced through the analysis of binary opposition and focuses on 'underlying structures' to analyse the repetitive patterns of action and dialogue, mirroring the existential condition of waiting without resolution. This structuralist cyclical pattern allows the play to develop without any plot. In contrast, the constant slippages of meaning, visible through the lens of deconstruction, allow the play to grow into rhizomatic complexity. Act II mirrors Act I, and the refrain "nothing happens twice" emphasizes repetition over progression. The Rhizomatic narrative traps the plot in a loop, lacking specificity, which makes the meaning fluid, unreliable, and infinite. Language, as well as memory, fails to depict the existential crisis, whereas the nihilistic act of waiting leaves the narrative paralyzed yet simultaneously proliferating.

**Keywords:** Rhizomatic complexity, structuralism, post-structuralism, existential absurdism, binary opposites, cyclical pattern, deconstruction

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**Introduction**

The word 'rhizome' is associated with postmodern theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who use the term in *A Thousand Plateaus* to indicate the proliferation of meaning. They have derived this idea by taking the model of the 'tree' as a paradigm for knowledge, with no strong trunk to support numerous branches, but rather nodes from which to grow in all directions. The term 'rhizome' has been used by them particularly in a philosophical context, describing a non-hierarchical, multi-directional, and non-linear system of interconnected points, in contrast to the "arborescent" or tree-like model that emphasizes a single origin, linear growth, and central authority. It is a metaphor for networks that allows any point to connect to any other point, forming spontaneous, dynamic, and unpredictable structures without a fixed beginning or an end: "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (Deleuze and Guattari 7). This paper is an attempt to provide a sequential guide to synthesizing findings on the rhizomatic narrative style and the thematic concerns of the absurd play *Waiting for Godot*.

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyse the text, using structuralist, deconstructionist, and existential tools to achieve its purpose. The paper examines various scholarly articles on *Waiting for Godot* to explore how this text offers rhizomatic interpretations that open new vistas for understanding modern life, literature, and philosophy. Harnessing this qualitative method, this study aims to show that the play's meaning lies not only in the words but also in its narrative style, which plays a significant role in the meaning-making process through repetitions, slippages, and other devices, all without any resolution. The theme emerges not from the plot but from the open-ended, rhizomatic traces, the audience's wider perspective, and their ability to understand slippages rather than fixity. Meaning would not have been so powerful in the 'presence of Godot' (presence of meaning) as the play brings through 'Godot's absence' (mere 'traces').

Analysing rhizomatic narrative in an absurd play is complex and enigmatic, as it deals with meaninglessness to indicate layers of meaning. *Waiting for Godot* doesn't present absurdity; rather, it is being lived by the characters, indicating a meaningless void superficially but complex from within. Here, the complexity doesn't start from anywhere; rather, it is everywhere, reflecting the complex society and life. Samuel Beckett, an Irish playwright, novelist, short story writer, and theatre director, is popular for his nonsense. His play *Waiting for Godot* was first written in French in 1949, translated into English in 1955, and in 1998, the British Royal National Theatre considered it the most significant English-language play of the 20th century.

With a few unidentifiable paired characters like Vladimir-Estragon, Lucky-Pozzo, the Messenger boy-the absent Godot, the play captures the life of all mankind. This minimalist, non-hierarchical, and nonlinear structure of the play spreads in multiple directions without a clear beginning or end, prompting us to view it through the lens of rhizomatic complexity. Its narrative resists any close reading, inviting readers to actively construct meaning. Like rhizome, it is self-renewing and open-

ended, making each performance and each reading a unique configuration. Breaking away from the traditional Aristotelian storytelling, which used to have a systematic relevance of plot, character, and dialogues, this play highlights the meaninglessness of life with the absent Godot symbolising the elusive meaning or purpose of modern life. The play lends itself to a wide range of critical approaches, especially when examined in terms of its narrative technique. Resisting the traditional plot progression, the play seems to form a loop-like structure, returning to the starting point again and again without reaching anywhere, leading to a nihilistic journey and developing a structuralist and post-structuralist stance at the same time.

The play thus creates meaning through Saussure's structuralist form and pattern, as Act I and Act II mirror each other, creating a cyclical narrative that seems to "go nowhere". The two acts share the same waiting and the same dialogues, with small variations that highlight a "non-progressive" narrative structure in which words don't lead to action but only to more words. Incoherent language does not traditionally provide any meaning; rather, a vague, ungraspable perception, not of a story but of traces, is created through a pattern of signs and repetitions, using deconstructionist tools. The play also explores the meaning which is woven into binary opposites: Waiting vs. Acting; Presence vs. Absence (Godot never arrives); Memory vs. Forgetting (characters disagree about the past, days, and even time); Master vs. Slave (Pozzo/Lucky) and Comedy vs. Tragedy (superficial humour vs. underlying despair).

The narrative of the play thus leads towards an unending existential crisis, as it opens with an abrupt, open-ended, bare setting of a tree and a country road. It emphasizes the philosophical idea of Albert Camus's 'Absurdism' and Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Existentialism': "A country road. A tree, Evening" (Act-I 1), creating an atmosphere of uncertainty through a minimalist setting and hence leaving ample room for interpretation. This minimum setting reflects a void of meaning and simultaneously sets the tone for the rest of the play.

The very opening dialogue of Estragon: "Estragon: [Giving up again] Nothing to be done." (Act I, pg. 1), represents the key idea of the clash between human desire for meaning and the universe's silence to deny the same. Estragon and Vladimir, the two tramps return again and again to this clash establishing the hopeless nature of life, simultaneously laying a background to an endless wait for Godot, where the action of waiting, to give meaning to their existence, indicate towards nihilism: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" (Act -1, pg. 34). Each act repeats the same pattern: waiting, talking, quarrelling, reconciling, considering suicide, but never acting decisively. This nihilistic, endless cycle resembles Camus' Sisyphus pushing his rock up the hill, highlighting the absurd human condition. Vladimir and Estragon are free to leave, to stop waiting, or to act, but they never do so. Their inability to make choices illustrates Sartre's concept of "bad faith," and thus they wait for the absent Godot to give meaning to their existence; in fact, there is no other option. Their fragile companionship is the only thing preventing complete despair, and they went on to seek meaning with blurred hope. The play's biggest existential crisis thus emerges in the

characters, who are free to act but cannot, as they seem tied to Godot, who never comes, and nothing happens twice.

This repetitive plot, the unidentifiable, puppet-like characters, and the meaningless babbling as dialogue make it a nonsensical play. However, the rhizomatic theory of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari enables us to view the play spreading horizontally and vertically, from anywhere unpredictably, without a central stem or trunk; hence, meaning is interrelated, dynamic, and in flux. This ginger-like growth resists any fixed order or authority.

Considering the repetitive plot structure, the two Acts in the play are deliberately similar, highlighting the monotonous, repeated, circular, and meaningless nature of time and action, resisting any progression. The basic plot of the Acts mirrors each other. Both Acts happen in the same barren setting where Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot, but he never comes. The two tramps talk in fragments and further plan to leave, but they don't (or they can't), and the same narrative repeats in Act II.

“Estragon: I'm going. [He does not move].” (Act I, pg.4)

and the last lines of both Act -I and Act -II are the same:

“VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, Let's go.

[They do not move.]” (Act-I, pg. 47; Act-II, pg. 87)

Thus, both Estragon and Vladimir mention leaving on numerous occasions but fail to do so, rendering their words meaningless as their action. Thus, even the language in *Waiting for Godot* reveals some interesting rhizomatic network. To avoid a clear plot, Beckett has used a centreless language that does not reach a single theme or conclusion; rather, the dialogues escape conclusion and contradict themselves, moving back into a loop. Characters repeat words or phrases, and the meaning often defers, leading to fragmentation. Instead of advancing meaning, words only reinforce stasis and stagnation, emphasizing language's inability to capture the reality of human experience and the characters' helplessness. The characters argue about leaving the stage, with deliberate sparseness, but they do not move; they forget what they have just said. For example, Vladimir and Estragon often question the reliability of their own words: “VLADIMIR: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today?” (Act II, pg. 83)

Besides this, there is the unreliability of memory:

ESTRAGON: What did we do yesterday?

VLADIMIR: What did we do yesterday?

ESTRAGON: Yes.

VLADIMIR: Why . . . [Angrily.] Nothing is certain when you're about.

ESTRAGON: In my opinion, we were here.

VLADIMIR: [looking round] You recognize the place?

ESTRAGON: I didn't say that.

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VLADIMIR: Well?

ESTRAGON: That makes no difference. (Act -I, pg. 7)

Another similar idea of memory lapse intensifies that language does not promise any truth or memory: "ESTRAGON: [very insidious.] But what Saturday/ And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? [Pause.] Or Monday? [Pause.] Or Friday?" (Act I, pg. 7)

This vague memory highlights a rhizomatic refusal of a single fixed point; rather, there are proliferations through interconnected dialogues, and hence several meanings run together, with none of them ending anywhere, but sprouting from everywhere.

With much of the dialogue echoing and repeating itself, the visible changes are only a few leaves on the tree; Pozzo becomes blind and Lucky mute. Thus, as in other Beckett narratives, here too the situation gets worse, and the Acts end without any positive outcome for waiting, indicating waiting as an endless cycle of life with hope and then disappointment. Time passes without any essential change and without fulfilling promises. Men are thus trapped in a loop of aimless actions and meaningless dialogue.

Even silences play a significant role in maintaining this interconnected network, shaping how words and silences resonate with an endless wait in the background, which intensifies this proliferation without any closure. Besides, Philosophical questions and unfinished thoughts also lead to multiple rhizome-like interpretations:

LUCKY: 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... (Act -I, pg.36)

These lines are the opening of Lucky's speech in Act One, emphasizing Lucky's incoherent jumbling of philosophy, religion and science in the form of babbling to present how academic jargon, though used in order to make a philosophical point, often emerges as a parody of rational discourse. This speech shows how even high philosophy and science can fail to explain the human condition, allowing Beckett to illustrate humankind's futile struggle to identify and interpret meaning in a meaningless world.

The characters are also not identifiable; rather, each reflects the other in a pair. This shifting dynamic amongst the sets of characters can be seen in all of them – say, Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, Godot and the Messenger boy. They are interdependent, and hence Beckett has built them as pairs. They depend on each other for their emotional, physical, and existential survival. Taking into account the characters of Vladimir and Estragon, it is to be noticed that they can also be seen as 'mind' and 'body'. While Vladimir seems intellectual, reflective, and concerned with salvation and Godot, Estragon is more physical, earthy, preoccupied with boots, food, sleep, and other meaner or shallower acts. While discussing the uncertainty of God's justice, Vladimir asks about the Gospels:

VLADIMIR: Do you remember the Gospels?

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 very happy.

VLADIMIR: You should have been a poet. (Act – I, pg. 4)

They are incomplete without each other, with the gaps filled by jokes, puns, humour, paradoxes, etc. They are, throughout, depicted with each other, or they are compelled to be with each other to execute the task of passing time. What is common to this pair of characters is that they share the same aim: to pass the time. Apart from this, Vladimir and Estragon struggle with 'memory', 'forgetfulness' and 'trust'. When one sleeps, the other watches; when one falls, the other lifts. Thus, they keep each other standing:

ESTRAGON: [Restored to the horror of his situation.] I was asleep!  
[Despairingly] Why will you never let me sleep?

VLADIMIR: I felt lonely.

ESTRAGON: I had a dream.

VLADIMIR: DON'T TELL ME!

ESTRAGON: [Gesture towards the universe.] Is this one enough for you?  
[Silence.] It's not nice of you, Didi. Who am I to tell my private nightmares to if I can't tell them to you?

VLADIMIR: Let them remain private. You know I can't bear that.

ESTRAGON: [Coldly.] There are times when I wonder if it wouldn't be better for us to part.

VLADIMIR: You wouldn't go far. (Act-I, pg. 8)

Even they need to share to complete a dialogue. Without the other, their words collapse, and even their key act of waiting is a shared task. Thus, the two characters reflect a broader human relationship that is burdensome yet sustaining. To indicate this, the two tramps seem to make sense together, even in stillness.

The relationship between Pozzo and Lucky is one of interdependence; however, it is not one of companionship, as in the case of the former pair. Pozzo projects power and control over Lucky, seemingly embodying absolute authority. In contrast, Lucky is merely an obedient beast of burden and entertainer, bound by a rope of submission and surrender to allow Pozzo to exercise his authority. However, this domination gradually seems unstable and claims ownership and dependence upon Lucky. Initially, this relationship appears to be a master-slave bond, where one is ready to command, and the other is to accept or follow; however, this power dynamic is inverted in Act II, when Pozzo becomes blind and Lucky mute, making Pozzo dependent on Lucky to light and guide him. Both become helpless in their role of commanding and executing the task,

reflecting that their relationship seems more of mutual entrapment. Besides this, their relationship also symbolises shifting power dynamics, highlighting life's unpredictable moves without any order of justice in this world, which lacks Godot. The bond of Pozzo and Lucky is less practical but more existential, and perhaps this togetherness gives at least some meaning to their existence. Their relationship can be seen as a distorted form of Vladimir and Estragon's bond; however, it is still a bond.

Another pair is 'absent Godot' and 'the Messenger boy'. Viewing their relationship through the lens of Derrida's deconstruction, we find that the entire play revolves significantly around the absent Godot. In contrast, the presence of the Messenger boy is quite subservient, thereby questioning the traditional Western 'metaphysics of presence'. Throughout the play, a void created by Godot's character is rarely filled by the flickering presence of the Messenger boy; thus, the two symbolise the Derridean concept of 'trace', where meaning flickers (the Messenger boy) but is never fully graspable (Godot). This further directs us towards Samuel Beckett's narrative technique, which overturns the hierarchy, destabilizes the binary opposition, and, hence, in the absence of Godot, about whom we know nothing, emerges as the primary character, with the rest as secondary. Godot is also beyond the category of flat or round character, yet the title holder of the play as well as the leading protagonist, controlling and commanding the theme, plot, as well as the characters of the play:

VLADIMIR: He didn't say for sure he'd come.

ESTRAGON: And if he doesn't come?

VLADIMIR: We'll come back tomorrow.

ESTRAGON: And then the day after tomorrow.

VLADIMIR: Possibly.

ESTRAGON: And so on.

VLADIMIR: The point is –

ESTRAGON: Until he comes. (Act-I, pg.6)

Godot's absence invites varied speculations about him, with him interpreted as God, happiness, career, success, freedom, salvation, death, or anything else. The Messenger boy is the medium who keeps Godot alive with his messages. Thus, the theme of interdependence again gets reflected in this set of pairs: "BOY: [In a rush.] Mr Godot told me to tell you he will not come this evening but surely tomorrow." (Act-I, pg. 44) This boy's authenticity flickers because of his inconsistent, vague statements, and that simultaneously amplifies the rhizomaticism of the narrative like a 'trace' of Derrida. Besides, Godot's arrival also 'defers' perpetually, and the boy, at each visit, promises to give meaning through Godot's arrival. However, the play ends with infinite interpretive spaces or nodes to grow, and not any 'transcendental signified'.

The political and the social interpretation of the play allow the readers to read Godot as 'power' and the Messenger boy as 'a medium to execute power'. Hence, the former is an unachievable centre, executing his power play through the channel of the

Messenger boy, who resembles a biblical messenger (like an angel). However, instead of divine clarity, he brings only postponement. Godot's unseen presence or power can be visualized through the actions of Vladimir and Estragon:

ESTRAGON: [Chews, swallows.] I am asking you if we're tied.

VLADIMIR: Tied?

ESTRAGON: Tied.

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. (Act- I, pg. 13)

Thus, the two tramps stay, wait and shape their lives around the hope of Godot's arrival. However, this abstract figure never arrives, leaving the tramps in a dilemma. They wait for power and justice, but are neither free to leave nor to live. This power dynamic also mirrors the structure of bureaucracy, where the leader (Godot) does not engage directly with the subject (Vladimir and Estragon), and the Messenger boy, though personally powerless, plays a vital role in legitimising or regulating the absent authority. This entire idea reflects that the authority is not inclined towards action but perpetual suspension. The rhizomatic growth of the play also steers towards a religious interpretation, in which Godot can be read as the symbol of 'God' who would bring salvation, but his absence throughout calls God's existence into question and thus indicates a nihilistic world where human beings wait endlessly for guidance. With this nihilism, the play also focuses on inconsistencies in the gospels regarding Christ and the two thieves, where there is a disparity over how many of the thieves received salvation. This disparity is introduced in the play to mock the uncertain nature of religious narratives and to question their ability to provide justice to human beings.

VLADIMIR: It'll pass the time. [Pause.] Two thieves were crucified at the same time as our Saviour. One –

ESTRAGON: Our What?

VLADIMIR: Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other... [He searches for the contrary of saved] ...damned.

ESTRAGON: Saved from what?

VLADIMIR: Hell.

ESTRAGON: I'm going.

[He does not move.]

VLADIMIR: And yet...[Pause.] ... how is it – this is not boring you, I hope – how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved?

The four of them were there – or thereabouts – and only one speaks of a thief being saved. [Pause.] (Act-I, pg.4-5)

Such uncertainty highlights the theme of existential doubt regarding human fate. The play highlights that the whole system seems to collapse and fails to provide a healthy atmosphere for mankind. Men are just thrown into this world without any meaning, purpose, or value.

This narrative also points towards the Israelite's waiting for the 'promised land' and the Christians for 'the second coming'. But the wait is endless, without any sabbath or rest, and thus the play also questions the biblical Sabbath. Beckett has also presented a distorted version of the 'tree of knowledge' from the 'garden of Eden'. Here, the garden is barren, and the tree is leafless, symbolising spiritual desolation in the modern world. 'The tree' frequently resembles the cross on which Christ was crucified. Hence, the tramps try to hang themselves on the tree many a time throughout the course of the play, perhaps in search of redemption, but even redemption or salvation is not possible in the modern age. The absence of a female character can also be seen as deliberate on Beckett's part, emphasizing sterility and infertility without the possibility of new life or new beginnings, but rather endless waiting. Besides this, the lack of women makes the play even more reductionist, shedding any semblance of social balance in favor of mere characters representing universal humanity—without any family structures, generational ties, or traditional roles—only existence. This also reflects a war-like barren space with men struggling in the post-war situation. And perhaps, there is no woman to poke men into action, which can also be seen on a lighter note.

This way, it is apt to describe the narrative of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as rhizomatic because it resists any linear progression; rather, it wanders and digresses to present a rhizomatic structure with no central theme, but only the proliferation of several ideas. Many ideas are proliferating from each node or pore that sprouts absurdly to disintegrate, and each narrative collapses back into waiting. Thus, the cycle of the play is destined to repeat indefinitely, and the closure is impossible. Therefore, the promises to provide meaning are eternally deferred. This rhizomatic style is deceptively simple yet endlessly generative, emerging from the post-apocalyptic existential terrain of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

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