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Or, An Undergrad's Attempt to Explain Existentialism

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*Author's Note: This essay evolved from a paper written for Dr. Joe Sharkey's Modern Literature of Western Civilization class, offered in spring quarter. The class focuses on reading and analyzing great works from the 1700s to the present, including those from Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and Samuel Beckett, the authors presented in this essay. In addition to these and several other books assigned in the class, Dr. Sharkey assigns a course pak of additional information to be referred to throughout the quarter, and I draw several references from this document. Although many readers will be familiar with Franz Kafka and Virginia Woolf, few are as familiar with Samuel Beckett's tragicomedy, *Waiting for Godot*. This play is included in the genre of *Theater of the Absurd*. It is not meant to make sense—chronological plot, logical language, and recognizable settings do not apply to this play. The main characters, Didi and Gogo, spend their long, lonely days waiting for Godot. We never find out who or why Godot is, or why Didi and Gogo are so desperate to meet him. In the truest existentialist sense, Beckett gives us no clues with which to solve these mysteries. We must decide for ourselves what is real and what is not.*

"I think I am, therefore I am, I think."

—George Carlin

Dear Humanity,

You're probably wondering what the hell just happened. One minute, you wonder, "Had the alarm clock not gone off?" (Kafka 90). The next, you gaze around, realizing that everything you have ever known is all a sham: "Recognize! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud!" (Beckett 67) you shout. Something quite extraordinary has happened, and I can't keep it secret any longer.

While you were sleeping, I wheeled out the Cannon of Modern Literature, Franz Kafka packed you into it, and Virginia Woolf lit the fuse. At the last minute Samuel Beckett came up with the bright idea of aiming the cannon's muzzle out into space. "It's not fair!" you might say, "I never asked to be shot into space." Well, actually you did. Let me explain it another way.

All the heroes are gone—no more Gilgamesh or Odysseus, not even Hercules. Epic poetry became extinct shortly afterwards. Plot? Fuggeddaboutit. Modernist writing did away with all of that. What's left is existentialism, the idea that your existence is "always particular and individual—always my existence, your existence, his existence" (*Modern Lit Course Pak* 19). It becomes futile to explore the meaning of heroism in *The Odyssey* when you cannot determine with any certainty that Odysseus really was a hero. What I consider heroic might seem cowardly to you. So essentially, you have no literary conventions to hold onto anymore.

It really is like floating in space. You can move around all you want, but no one of you affects the other, unless, of course, you collide. When you do make contact, you just ricochet off of each other in opposite directions. Inside your spacesuit of subjectivity, you can think, speak, even sing, but there's no atmosphere—no one else can hear you. The modernist writers, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and Samuel Beckett, have all joined together to eject you from the conventional planet into the existential otherworld.

In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka packs you into the cannon, condensing the world into ever-decreasing spaces, until you become a prisoner in your own body. Gregor Samsa wakes up hating life, constrained by the debt he feels he owes his family. He thinks, "If I didn't have to hold my hand because of my parents I'd have given notice [at my job] long ago" (Kafka 89). He longs to be free but his self-induced obligations keep his dreams at arm's length. Even if he could emancipate his life, his own body would hinder him, because he's just woken up as a large insect. Just getting out of bed challenges him, not only because of his cumbersome girth, but also because fear immobilizes him: "When he finally got his head free over the edge of the bed he felt too scared to go on advancing He would rather stay in bed" (Kafka 93). Imprisoned in his alien body, Gregor contracts his world even further by forcing himself under the sofa: "The lofty,

empty room in which he had to lie flat on the floor filled him with an apprehension he could not account for,” so “he scuttled under the sofa, where he felt comfortable at once” (Kafka 106-7). Finally, completely abandoned by his family, and cut off from his own humanity, “now unable to stir a limb,” Gregor dies (Kafka 135). Attempting to escape from itself, humanity has crawled under the sofa. Our attempts to communicate sound like the twitters and squeaks that replace Gregor’s voice. Finally, after all of our attempts to make contact are rebuffed, we resign ourselves to isolation. Somewhere along the way, it got comfortable.

Woolf lights the cannon’s fuse, causing the emotional pressure to build up. Whereas Gregor revels in painful isolation, *Mrs. Dalloway* presents a perfectly crisp, smooth British existence. Scrape away the “flattering unction” (*Hamlet* 3.4.166), and you’ll find psychic wounds, where seething emotions ooze and fester. Clarissa Dalloway lives a life of “tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing” (Woolf 10). What she doesn’t want to admit is that a monster stalks, “the depths of that leaf-encumbered forest, the soul; never to be content quite, or quite secure, for at any moment the brute would be stirring, this hatred” (Woolf 12). In *The Metamorphosis*, the stirring brute is a gigantic insect that everyone can see. Repulsed, the family locks him away in his bedroom. Clarissa does not have that luxury—her brute stirs within, and has free reign to run amok. She fights it by pretending that it does not matter—“[decorating] the dungeon with flowers and air-cushions,” so to speak (Woolf 77). Although a giant insect scuttles around the drawing room, she can throw a lacy tablecloth over it and no one will notice.

Clarissa teeters between the carefree girl she once was, and the respectable socialite she has become. Occasionally, the girl resurfaces, allowing Clarissa to rejoice in life. But generally, the self-loathing socialite triumphs, leaving her feeling “suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless... since Lady Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her [to come]” (Woolf 31). Clarissa’s emotions rage, but she denies them, swatting them away like gnats:

Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him— the

young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. . . . He made her feel beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble. (Woolf 186)

Clarissa the girl inwardly rejoices at the freedom that death affords that young man, but Clarissa the socialite ignores the news of death, that party-crasher, and returns to the crowded drawing room. The party awaits, after all.

Gregor's world shrinks from small to infinitesimal as he retreats into his room, under the couch, into his shell. Clarissa's world continues to shrink, with all its inhabitants abandoning communication, lest they actually give voice to their emotions. *Waiting for Godot* is the release from earthly confines into the nothingness of existential space.

Beckett aims the cannon towards the cosmos, where time, space, reason, passion, mean nothing; all that is left is perspective. Ka-boom! Off you go. Don't forget to write. All of humanity screams as it bursts forth from the cannon: "Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!" (Beckett 63).

Didi and Gogo become astronauts, floating in space, and there is:

Didi— "Nothing you can do about it."

Gogo— "No use struggling."

Didi— "One is what one is." (Beckett 17)

Each man is trapped in his own self-contained spacesuit of reality, unable to make contact with the other. Taking off their helmets in an attempt to communicate will only leave them gasping for air. Didi tries to voice outrage at Lucky's cruel condition: "To treat a man... like that... I think that... no... a human being... no ... it's a scandal!" (Beckett 25). But it all comes out as babble; he chokes on the compassion he tries to express. Anyway, no use struggling; everyone ignores him. They have their own problems. Didi soon resigns himself to the futility of trying to help, admitting, "to every man his little cross. Till he dies. And is forgotten" (Beckett 68). We are born alone, and we die alone, the rest is just the struggle from point A to point B. That is, if we're even alive:

Gogo— "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?"

Didi— "Yes yes, we're magicians." (Beckett 77)

Do you exist? If you want to. Does time mean anything? Not really. What matters then? Waiting. What are you waiting for? Godot, dummy. Gogo implores, "Tell me what to do." Didi replies, "There's nothing to do" (Beckett 84).

Absolutely correct.

You can worry about the imminent like Gogo, strive for the transcendent like Didi, dither about officiously like Pozzo, or take it easy like Lucky. The only thing you cannot do is stop. There are sofas to hide under, parties to host, and always another day to spend waiting. Welcome to the modern crisis.

Meanwhile, I stand on earth, waving my hanky and "too-de-looing," wishing you a fond farewell. After all, this is existentialism—your journey, not mine. As a human being in the modern crisis, you are "an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe," one that possesses, "no inherent human truth, value, or meaning" (*Modern Lit Course Pak* 20). There is just you and I, but—heaven forbid!—never us. I can't help you on your journey; I can only tell you how you've gotten this far. Everything was fine until the Enlightenment endowed you with reason, which "alone makes us men and distinguishes us from the beasts" (*Discourse on Method* 2.3). Well, darn it, if you made "no other use than by its assistance to aggravate [your] natural corruptions" (*Gulliver's Travels* 306). In fact, you've managed to misreason yourself out of coexistence with other humans, and into self-imposed isolation. All things considered, that isn't such a bad idea. I knew I was going to have to separate you eventually. Anyway, have fun in existential space, and enjoy the trip.

See you on the other side,
Godot

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