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Angélica Alves de Lima

The blank canvas of despair:
emptiness, absurdity, and horror in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Angélica Alves de Lima

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Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Beatriz Kopschitz Xavier Bastos

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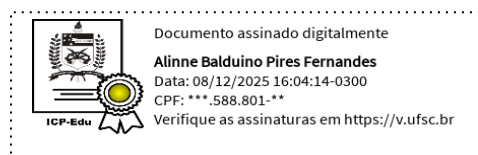
The blank canvas of despair: emptiness, absurdity, and horror in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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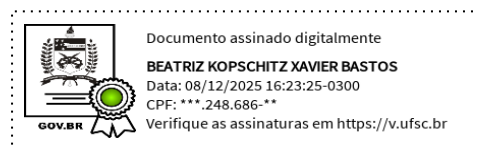
Prof. José Roberto Basto O'Shea, Dr.
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina – UFSC

Profa. Moonyoung Hong, Dra.
The University of Hong Kong

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Coordenação do Programa de Pós-Graduação



Profa. Beatriz Kopschitz Xavier Bastos, Dra.
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*To my parents and Rafael,
for teaching me that love is the light that outshines every darkness.*

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RESUMO

Esta dissertação propõe uma reinterpretação de *Esperando Godot* (1954) de Samuel Beckett, buscando ir além de sua leitura associada ao Teatro do Absurdo, como desenvolvida por Martin Esslin (1961), a fim de analisá-la como uma obra de horror existencial. Integrando os conceitos do “branco” de Le Breton (2018) e o *horror metaphysicus* de Kolakowski (1988), este estudo examina a peça irlandesa como uma exploração da dissolução identitária e de uma realidade indiferente. A análise foca na encenação minimalista e narrativa cíclica apresentada por Beckett. Este estudo desafia leituras tradicionais do Teatro do Absurdo ao incorporar perspectivas contemporâneas como as de Bennett (2011), McMullan (2021) e Cohn (1967). Ao apresentar a metáfora de *theatrum mundi*, esta dissertação traz à luz a cumplicidade do leitor/espectador com os personagens da obra de Beckett. Conclui-se que *Esperando Godot* transcende o absurdo ao encenar um horror arraigado na fragilidade humana, em que a espera reflete a condição existencial: incerteza, abandono e apagamento progressivo do eu.

Palavras-chave: Samuel Beckett; o branco; horror existencial.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation proposes a reinterpretation of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954), seeking to go beyond its reading associated with the Theatre of the Absurd as developed by Martin Esslin (1961), in order to analyse it as a work of existential horror. Integrating Le Breton's (2018) concepts of *the blank* and Kolakowski's (1988) *horror metaphysicus*, this study examines the Irish play as an exploration of identity dissolution and an indifferent reality. The analysis focuses on Beckett's minimalist staging and cyclical narrative. This study challenges traditional readings of the Theatre of the Absurd by incorporating contemporary perspectives such as Bennett's (2011), McMullan's (2021) and Cohn's (1967). By presenting the metaphor of *theatrum mundi*, this dissertation brings to light the complicity of the reader /spectator with the characters in Beckett's work. It concludes that *Waiting for Godot* transcends the absurd by staging a horror rooted in human fragility, in which waiting reflects the existential condition: uncertainty, abandonment and the progressive erasure of oneself.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett; the blank; existential horror.

RESUMO EXPANDIDO

Introdução

Samuel Barclay Beckett (1906–1989), com seu jeito peculiar de escrita desafiou as normas do teatro tradicional com seus personagens confinados em um mundo pós-apocalíptico, repleto de absurdo. Em *Esperando Godot* (1954) não é diferente, a escrita minimalista de Beckett está presente, levando a muitas leituras sob as lentes do absurdismo e/ou niilismo. Entretanto, essa dissertação propõe que a verdadeira força e impacto da peça não reside somente no mundo absurdo e sim no horror existencial que a peça evoca em seu leitor/espectador, todavia não como o horror tradicional, mas como uma resposta existencial ao vazio. Por meio de teorias como o *branco* de David Le Breton (2015), que exalta o autoapagamento do indivíduo ao confrontar a rotina e o vazio da vida, como também o *horror metaphysicus* de Leszek Kolakowski (1988), que enquadra o medo como uma reação à indiferença cósmica, essa dissertação propõe que a tragicomédia de Beckett nos exemplifica uma visão singularmente aterradora da fragilidade humana. *Esperando Godot* é uma peça dividida em dois atos que, apesar dessa divisão, apresentam a mesma cadência e sequência, alterando um ou outro detalhe em si. A peça nos apresenta um palco minimalista, em que se observa somente uma estrada deserta e uma árvore solitária. Este é o local em que Vladimir e Estragon decidem esperar por alguém chamado Godot. Mesmo até o final da peça, não é revelado quem ou o que poderia ser Godot, porém os personagens, apesar do livre arbítrio de escolher ir embora, decidem esperar. A fim de fazer o tempo passar, Vladimir e Estragon engajam em conversas desconexas, atos absurdos (como considerar uma força em um dos galhos da árvore), e ações repetitivas como tirar e colocar suas botas, checar o chapéu, e comer alguns legumes. Nada do que os personagens fazem parece apresentar sentido ou até mesmo significado. Em meio a muitas falas como “Nothing to be done” (Beckett, 2010), se destaca o desespero existencial dos personagens. Cada um, a sua maneira, busca o sentido da vida e do estar vivo, com a ideia de “nada a fazer” ecoando persistentemente, o que acentua a desesperança dos personagens assim como do medo da ausência de um propósito ou justificativa para a sua existência além da espera por Godot. Nesta dissertação, explora-se como a peça *Esperando Godot* suscita uma forma de horror existencial que transcende as interpretações convencionais do absurdo. No centro desta análise está o conceito de horror metafísico (*horror metaphysicus*) de Leszek Kolakowski — o medo que surge do confronto da humanidade com um universo indiferente e incompreensível. A estrutura de Kolakowski revela como a peça de Beckett elimina o conforto metafísico, deixando as personagens (e o público) à deriva em um mundo desprovido de ordem ou racionalidade. No entanto, para compreender plenamente o impacto visceral desse horror, essa dissertação recorreu à noção de *le blanc* (“o branco”) de David Le Breton, que teoriza o prazer próprio como uma resposta à saturação existencial.

O conceito de Le Breton, enraizado na antropologia do desaparecimento, lança luz sobre a dissolução gradual da identidade em *Esperando Godot*. As rotinas repetitivas de Vladimir e Estragon, as suas memórias vacilantes e a sua dependência de rituais performáticos (chapéus, botas, conversas vazias) exemplificam o que Le Breton descreve como um recuo para a impessoalidade — uma defesa contra o peso insuportável da falta de sentido. O palco esparso, quase vazio, torna-se uma manifestação física desse branco, amplificando a inquietação das personagens (e do leitor/espectador). Ao unir o horror metafísico de Kolakowski com “o branco” de Le Breton, esta dissertação defende que a tragicomédia de Samuel Beckett não reside

na ausência de Godot, mas na compreensão de que a própria espera é um ato de desaparecimento.

Objetivos

Objetivo geral:

- Investigar como o *horror metaphysicus*, tal como definido por Leszek Kolakowski, é evocado em *Esperando Godot*, de Samuel Beckett, por meio do conceito de *o branco* (*le blanc*) de David Le Breton, baseado em uma ideia absurda de vazio.

Objetivos específicos:

- selecionar e analisar a bibliografia relacionada com Samuel Beckett e suas obras;
- analisar a peça por meio de uma visão filosófica absurdista;
- discutir o autoapagamento das personagens em *Esperando Godot* através das lentes do conceito de *o branco*; explorar como a teoria do vazio de Le Breton pode levar a uma reconsideração da teoria do absurdo de Martin Esslin;
- identificar possíveis elementos de horror invocados na narrativa de Beckett por meio do conceito de *o branco* de Le Breton.

As perguntas de investigação desta pesquisa foram:

- Por que Samuel Beckett cria personagens em suas peças que continuamente apagam as suas próprias identidades?
- Por que o ato de autoapagamento de alguém em *Esperando Godot* evoca uma sensação de horror?
- Como a teoria de Le Breton sobre *o branco* pode levar a uma reavaliação da teoria do teatro do absurdo de Martin Esslin?

Metodologia

Esta dissertação caracteriza-se como pesquisa qualitativa, pois aplica teorias filosóficas e literárias a fim de compreender como *o branco* de David Le Breton (2015), baseado na ideia de vazio existencial, é capaz de gerar um entendimento sobre o efeito de horror em *Esperando Godot*, de Samuel Beckett. A primeira etapa da pesquisa selecionou e analisou uma bibliografia relacionada à vida de Beckett e suas obras. A segunda etapa analisou a peça a partir de uma perspectiva filosófica absurdista. Em seguida, discutiu-se como os personagens beckettianos são apagados gradativamente nas obras do autor. Para passar por essas etapas, seguiu-se a ordem cronológica dos livros, traçando a trajetória desde a escrita evasiva de Beckett em sua peça lançada em 1952, à publicação do livro de Esslin e a sua análise do Teatro do Absurdo (1961), incluindo as influências niilistas sobre ele. Considerou-se também as teorias da estética do vazio e os estudos sobre o teatro de Beckett, bem como a sua biografia. Por fim, a inclusão do conceito de *o branco* de Le Breton e como ele abrange todas as leituras feitas até agora. Dessa forma, foi possível determinar como o horror metafísico, conforme definido por Kolakowski (2001), pode ser evocado em *Esperando Godot*.

Resultados e Discussão

Este estudo reexaminou a peça *Esperando Godot*, de Samuel Beckett, indo além da estrutura fundamental do Teatro do Absurdo de Martin Esslin. Esta dissertação argumentou que a peça de Beckett não era apenas um retrato da falta de sentido existencial, mas uma experiência ativa e horripilante da dissolução do eu. A análise

foi estruturada em torno de quatro objetivos, sintetizando obras teóricas fundamentais como Michael Y. Bennet (2011), Ruby Cohn (1967), Martin Esslin (1961), James Knowlson (1996), Leszek Kolakowski (2001), David Le Breton (2015), Anna McMullan (2021), Peggy Phelan (1996), Elisabeth Bregman Segrè (1977), Marcin Tereszewski (2013), Shane Weller (2005), Pim Verhulst (2019). Primeiro, estabeleceu-se uma bibliografia crítica, usando Esslin e Camus como ponto de partida, mas centralizando o conceito de *o branco* de David Le Breton e o *horror metafísico* de Leszek Kolakowski. Essas lentes mudaram o foco do absurdo intelectual para o horror visceral e existencial. Em segundo lugar, analisando a peça através de uma lente absurdista e metafísica, postulou que a inovação de Beckett foi a encenação ativa do vazio. O diálogo repetitivo, o cenário inerte e a espera estática manifestavam o absurdo, mas Vladimir e Estragon carece até mesmo do triunfo fugaz de Sísifo, prendendo o público em seu ciclo fútil. Em terceiro lugar, aplicando *o branco* de Le Breton, argumentou-se que o minimalismo de Beckett tem origem existencial. As memórias fragmentadas dos personagens, a decadência física e o diálogo intercambiável sinalizam um recuo para a impessoalidade. O palco esparsa reflete seu apagamento interior, transformando o teatro em um laboratório para o desaparecimento. Em quarto lugar, foram identificados elementos de horror na peça ao se combinar os conceitos de *o branco* (Le Breton, 2015) com o *horror metaphysicus* (Kolakowski, 2001). Assim, foi analisado como o terror na obra reside nos silêncios, nas repetições e nas deteriorações repentinas. O público, implicado por meio da metáfora do *theatrum mundi* (McMullan, 2021), torna-se cúmplice desse medo crescente. O estudo concluiu que Vladimir e Estragon apagam continuamente suas identidades como resposta à saturação existencial. Vladimir encarna o horror do rompimento existencial, enquanto Estragon representa o abandono físico. Esse apagamento força os personagens e o público a confrontar o eu frágil e a linguagem fragmentada em um universo sem sentido. Por fim, a dissertação recontextualizou o trabalho de Esslin, mostrando o absurdo não como um destino passivo, mas como um processo de desaparecimento que evoca a sensação de horror. Portanto, *Esperando Godot* transcende o Teatro do Absurdo para se tornar, também, um teatro de horror existencial.

Considerações Finais

Com base na análise realizada, essa dissertação propôs uma nova perspectiva crítica sobre a peça *Esperando Godot*, de Samuel Beckett, indo além de suas tradicionais interpretações de absurdismo e niilismo, a fim de posicioná-la também como uma obra que evoca o horror existencial. Por meio da interação entre o conceito de *o branco* de David Le Breton e o *horror metafísico* de Leszek Kolakowski, esta nova perspectiva considerou não apenas a ausência de significado ou um mundo desarmônico, mas também o desmoronamento ativo do sujeito no meio de um universo de repetições e autoapagamento contínuo. A dramaturgia peculiar de Samuel Beckett traz o vazio como uma força opressiva, transformando o teatro num laboratório de desespero absurdo. O conceito de Le Breton forneceu o mecanismo estrutural para analisar e compreender a evocação desse horror: o ciclo repetitivo de Vladimir e Estragon são performances de autoapagamento, dissolvendo gradualmente suas identidades sob o peso da saturação de um mundo desprovido de sentido. O cenário minimalista atuou como catalisador para esse desaparecimento, refletindo o branco do vazio existencial de cada personagem de volta ao ambiente em que residem, transmitindo ao leitor/espectador o desconforto vivenciado pelas personagens. Esse vazio revela-se contagiante; à medida que as personagens mergulham na impessoalidade, o leitor/espectador torna-se cúmplice do seu desaparecimento, preso no mesmo ciclo

fútil de observação e falsas expectativas. O horror metafísico de Kolakowski emerge desse vazio. O horror reside não apenas na ausência de Godot, mas na constatação de que a espera é a única certeza, ou seja, uma vida sem narrativa, governada por um guião sem resolução. Ao combinar o vazio de Le Breton com o horror metafísico de Kolakowski em uma análise de *Esperando Godot*, esta dissertação introduz uma nova dimensão à obra de Beckett, que se torna uma peça de horror por direito próprio. Ao contrário do horror tradicional, que precisa chocar por meio de sua estética, *Esperando Godot* choca ao transformar o impensável num espetáculo: o lento apagamento de si mesmo. A força da peça em dois atos de Beckett vem de sua recusa em oferecer respostas e até mesmo consolo para o desespero; é uma performance de desaparecimento em que a única certeza é a espera insuportável pelo desconhecido.

Palavras-chave: Samuel Beckett; o branco; horror existencial.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Samuel Barclay Beckett (1906–1989) shattered modern theatre with his distinctive writing style and characters confined in a post-apocalyptic world of despair in *Waiting for Godot*, his most famous play. While this play is often read through the prism of absurdity or nihilism, this dissertation posits that its true power lies in its invocation of horror – not as genre tropes, but as an existential response to the void. Drawing on David Le Breton's *Disparaître de Soi* (2015), which theorises self-erasure (*the blank*) as a contemporary malaise, and Leszek Kolakowski's *Metaphysical Horror* (1988), which frames dread as a reaction to cosmic indifference, I argue that Beckett's play stages a uniquely terrifying vision of human fragility. Unlike Martin Esslin's absurdism, in the well-known book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, which emphasises meaninglessness as intellectual paradox, this study uncovers horror in the visceral experience of waiting: the gradual effacement of identity, the audience's complicity in the characters' despair, and the set's minimalist void as a mirror of metaphysical nothingness. This dissertation not only aims to reinterpret *Waiting for Godot*, but it also to give a new perspective to the Theatre of the Absurd as a theatre of existential horror.

Waiting for Godot is a play divided into two acts, which represent the idea of a cycle that repeats itself. Beckett originally wrote the play in French, as *En Attendant Godot*, between 1948 and 1949, but only published it in 1952. From 1953 to 1954, Beckett himself translated the play into English. The first French production took place on January 5, 1953, at the Théâtre de Babylone, in Paris, and was directed by Roger Blin; the first English production took place two years later, on August 3, 1955, at the Arts Theatre Club in London, and was directed by Peter Hall. *Waiting for Godot* changed everything for Beckett, as we learn from one of his biographers, James Knowlson: "It marked both the end of his anonymity and the beginning of his theatrical and financial success. [...] But, above all, *Waiting for Godot* forced people, as Kenneth Tynan put it later, to 're-examine the rules which have hitherto governed the drama'" (Knowlson, 1996, p. 350).

Waiting for Godot presents a minimalist stage, with only a seemingly rural road and a solitary tree, under which the characters choose to wait. They have no hope for the future; their past is just a jar of disrupted memories. Beckett abstains from classical theatrical elements such as elaborate sets, contextual and in-depth characterisations,

and conclusive endings in his plays. The emptiness of the stage can be seen in the stage directions of the play at the beginning of Act I, which reads: “A country road. A tree. Evening” (Beckett, 2010, p. 7). From the beginning of the play, the form of communication between Vladimir and Estragon is marked by the lack of genuine connection, as if communication between them served only to throw words into the wind and not as true conversation between friends. This can be observed in the following excerpt, when Vladimir and Estragon meet Pozzo and his servant Lucky:

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?
 POZZO: He wants to cod me, but he won't.
 VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?
 POZZO: He imagines that when I see how well he carries I'll be tempted to keep him on in that capacity.
 ESTRAGON: You've had enough of him?
 POZZO: In reality he carries like a pig. It's not his job.
 VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?
 POZZO: He imagines that when I see him indefatigable I'll regret my decision. Such is his miserable scheme. As though I were short of slaves! *[All three look at Lucky.]* Atlas, son of Jupiter! *[Silence.]* Well, that's that I think. Anything else?
Vaporizer.
 VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?
 POZZO: Remark that I might just as well have been in his shoes and he in mine. If chance had not willed otherwise. To each one his due.
 VLADIMIR: You waagerrim?
 (Beckett, 2010, pp. 97–99)

The last line emphasises the absurdity of repetition in Beckett's play. In this passage alone, Vladimir repeats the same phrase “You want to get rid of him?” five times, and, in the last line, the absurdity of repetition becomes so intense that Vladimir compresses his sentence to just two words, losing the meaning of the speech. This passage, as many others which are analysed in this study, reflects the monotony of the characters' dialogues, as well as the lack of significant action throughout *Waiting for Godot*. The recurring phrase “Nothing to be done” (Beckett, 2010), used heavily in the play, highlights the existential despair of the characters. Each one, in their own way, seeks the meaning of life and of being alive, with the idea of nothing to be done echoing persistently, which accentuates the characters' hopelessness and their fear of not finding a purpose or justification for their existence or anything that goes beyond waiting for Godot. In certain parts of the text throughout the play, the characters demonstrate a desire to move forward, to walk and abandon waiting, but they end up remaining in their position:

ESTRAGON: Charming spot. [*He turns, advances to front, halts facing auditorium.*] Inspiring prospects. [*He turns to Vladimir.*] Let's go.
 VLADIMIR: We can't.
 ESTRAGON: Why not?
 VLADIMIR: We are waiting for Godot.
 ESTRAGON: [*despairingly*] Ah!
 (Beckett, 2010, p. 29)

Paradoxically, Vladimir and Estragon have the freedom not to wait, but they choose to remain in their current state of inertia. The reason for their waiting and the identity of the mysterious being called Godot are never revealed to the reader/spectator; mystery, in a way, is the great conductor of the play. Beckett often creates characters who erase their identities throughout the narrative of his plays, which is particularly poignant in *Waiting for Godot*. I argue here that this erasure of the self develops a sense of existential horror by plunging both characters and audience into an empty stage, which itself reflects the despair contained in the idea of emptiness represented by Godot's non-presence. Therefore, this encompassing notion of self-erasure in Beckett's work highlights the fear of alienation and isolation experienced by Vladimir and Estragon, showing how the absurdist themes of futility and meaninglessness can also generate sense of horror.

In this dissertation, I explore how *Waiting for Godot* elicits a form of existential horror that transcends conventional interpretations of the absurd. Central to this analysis is Leszek Kolakowski's concept of metaphysical horror – the dread that arises from humanity's confrontation with an indifferent and incomprehensible universe. Kolakowski's structure reveals how Beckett's play eliminates metaphysical comfort, leaving the characters (and the audience) adrift in a world devoid of divine or rational order. However, to fully understand the visceral impact of this horror, I turn to David Le Breton's notion of *le blanc* (the blank), which theorises self-pleasure as a response to existential saturation.

Le Breton's concept, rooted in the anthropology of disappearance, sheds light on the gradual dissolution of identity in *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir and Estragon's repetitive routines, their faltering memories and their dependence on performative rituals (hats, boots, empty conversations) exemplify what Le Breton describes as a retreat into impersonality – a defence against the unbearable weight of meaninglessness. The play's sparse, almost empty stage, becomes a physical

manifestation of this emptiness, amplifying the restlessness of the characters (and the reader/spectator). By synthesising Kolakowski's metaphysical horror with Le Breton's *blankness*, I argue that Beckett's tragedy lies not in the absence of Godot, but in the realisation that waiting itself is an act of disappearance.

This approach diverges from Martin Esslin's seminal reading of the play as a purely absurd work. While Esslin emphasises the intellectual paradox of meaninglessness, Kolakowski and Le Breton expose its affective dimension: the raw and disturbing horror of being trapped in a cycle in which time, language and individuality disintegrate. In doing so, this study reframes *Waiting for Godot* not just as a meditation on futility, but as a theatrical experiment in existential terror – one that forces audiences to confront the fragility of their own narratives in the face of emptiness.

1.1 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* was first published in 1961. In this work, the author explores the emergence and evolution of texts with traces of absurdism in theatre in mid-twentieth century. The term *theatre of the absurd* was coined by Esslin with the aim of categorising several dramatic texts under the same concept, an absurdist philosophical notion. These works share illogical elements and unusual realities to demonstrate that humanity was, in some way, doomed to an absurdly inhuman condition. Esslin brings in his book several references to other twentieth-century thinkers, such as Albert Camus. In his analysis, Esslin investigates various dramatic texts, observing themes, characters, and dramatic techniques which deviate from the common theatrical standard, such as minimalist sets, repetitive dialogues and monologues, and the use of silence. These techniques, according to Esslin, encourage the reader/spectator to question established norms and confront the uncertainties of human existence.

In 1942, Albert Camus published his philosophical book *The Myth of Sisyphus* to explore humanity's fundamental tension in the search for meaning in life. The central allegory in Camus' essay is the story of Sisyphus, a figure from Greek mythology who is condemned by the gods to roll a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll right back down again. This requires him to repeat this futile task for eternity. Camus sees Sisyphus as

the epitome of the absurd hero, someone who recognises the meaninglessness of his task but continues to embrace it, finding purpose and fulfilment in the act of defiance against the absurd. Just as Sisyphus was doomed to push the stone every day and see it return to square one, so are Vladimir and Estragon also doomed to eternally waiting for Godot, without ever knowing why or when Godot will come, or if Godot will come at all. They are both trapped in the eternal absurdity of life, in inhuman circumstances.

In his book *Disparaître de Soi: Une Tentation Contemporaine*¹ (The Fading of Oneself: A Contemporary Temptation), published in 2015, David Le Breton presents the concept of *the blank*. Originally written in French, the book has not been translated into English to date, only into Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, Italian, Arabic, and Romanian. In his book, Le Breton uses two words to describe *the blank*: *blanc* and *blancheur*. Both words have their etymological origin in the Early Medieval Latin *blancus*, meaning white. Although blank and white have the same etymology, the meanings presented by each word can be different. White can mean *colourless* or *pale* and is often associated with skin colour in racial matters. Unlike white, *blank* expresses the sense of emptiness and void, and due to its meaning, which distances itself from the association with colours or racial issues, I use it here *blank* to translate *blanc*, and *blankness* to translate *blancheur*. According to Le Breton, *the blank* is an intermediate territory between social ties and conventions as well as the notion of nothingness, and, when applied to an existential crisis, the blank represents disconnection from everything, the slow erasure of oneself, until the personal becomes impersonal. The development of the concept and its applications are presented in the first chapter of this dissertation.

Leszek Kolakowski's *Metaphysical Horror* (1988) presents the concept of *horror metaphysicus*, which emerges from the fragility of human existence. Kolakowski argues that humanity is constantly confronted with the fragility of its own existence, when faced with uncertainties that leave one confused and disoriented, as well as with fear of total dependence on others. When becoming aware of this fragility, one is overcome by a feeling of vulnerability and helplessness in the face of the inevitable

¹ All citations were taken from the Brazilian Portuguese translation of the work, which was the one consulted for this research: LE BRETON, David. *Desaparecer de Si: uma tentação contemporânea*. Translated by Francisco Morás. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2018.

forces that shape one's life. The concept of *horror metaphysicus* simply means the existential fear that arises from the struggle with reality and existence, as well as their meaning. In the following chapters, the concept established by Kolakowski is developed and applied to the text of *Waiting for Godot* to analyse the possibility that the emptiness and human fragility of the characters can invoke horror in Beckett's play.

In *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* (2005), Shane Weller ponders the intrinsic relationship between Beckett and the philosophical concept of nihilism. By examining characters, narrative construction, and repetitive dialogue, Weller reveals the ways through which Beckett deals with the absence of meaning in human life. Weller proposes that Godot can be interpreted as a symbol for nothingness, contradicting studies that regard Godot as a Christian analogy of salvation, or a sense of purpose. In analysing one of the central themes of the play, the tragicomedy, Weller highlights laughter as a reflection of the profound unhappiness experienced by Vladimir and Estragon. This observation aligns with Salisbury's (2012) analysis of comedy in *Waiting for Godot*, highlighting the complex interplay of humour and sadness in Beckett's work. By focusing on the way Beckett presents the human condition in *Waiting for Godot*, Weller offers a different perspective on the playwright's engagement with nihilism.

In *The Aesthetics of Failure: Inexpressibility in Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (2013), Marcin Tereszewski explores how the playwright is often associated with modernism and postmodernism, characterising Beckett as "the poet of existential humanism and also the deconstructionist par excellence" (Tereszewski, 2013, p. 1). Tereszewski analyses Beckett's experimentation in his works, how his writing style varies from text to text, sometimes in an existentialist view, sometimes in a critique of human subjectivity. The author mentions Beckett's use of silence and repetition, making them key elements in the transmission of the absurd in his theatrical world, as well as highlighting the minimalist or practically non-existent sets in the plays, determining how "the void was understood as a necessary place for atoms to exist and be in motion, and thus the void, no longer conceptualized as nothingness, began to function as space; that is, as a constitutive condition for being to exist" (Tereszewski, 2013, p. 13). The insights provided by Tereszewski are relevant to understand the development of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* and to establish the ideas of absence that I develop in this dissertation.

The Void on Stage – Shaping Emptiness: Designing for Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot (2014) examines the theme of nothingness and emptiness in Samuel Beckett’s tragicomedy from the perspective of stage and costume design. Iuliana Gherghescu argues that emptiness is the focus of the play, as it is conveyed through the play’s minimalist and abstract design. The paper explores the artistic challenges and opportunities presented by a play in which the absence of detail, action, and dialogue commands the performance. Gherghescu emphasises that the disconcerting presence of emptiness in *Waiting for Godot* reflects anguish and despair, subtly aligning itself with nihilistic principles. For Gherghescu, the use of an open stage allows the audience to make the most of their imagination from the beginning to the end of the performance. Through analysis of the setting, once considering that the void is present in the play not only as a mere scene description but as a catalytic agent, it is possible to develop the hypothesis regarding the invocation of the sense of horror in *Waiting for Godot*.

In her book titled *Beckett’s Intermedial Ecosystems* (2021), Anna McMullan brings two important perspectives to analyse Samuel Beckett’s works: the *theatrum mundi* metaphor and the microcosm concept. In short, *theatrum mundi* is a “theatre within a theatre” (McMullan, 2021) in which external forces – be it divine or human – impacts directly on the final message delivered to its audience. The reader/spectator is not only an observer of the performance but also an accomplice. The concept of microcosm is the equivalent of a creation of worlds within the play. Each microcosm has its own mechanics and rules, not limited to the fictional environment invoked by the author, but just as well to the possibilities or impossibilities of the literary world itself (McMullan, 2021, p. 7). Through this, it is possible to analyse *Waiting for Godot* and its minimalist space so as to understand the search for meaning in life, an existential goal, in the midst of an absurd and empty reality.

In his seminal essay *Das Unheimliche*,² from 1919, Sigmund Freud examines the unsettling sensation that arises when the familiar becomes strangely unfamiliar – a paradox encapsulated in the duality of the German term (*heimlich* means *homely*, but is transformed into its opposite, *unheimlich*, *not homely*). Freud argues that the uncanny is not merely the grotesque or the supernatural, but the return of repressed

² The book used for consultation was the English translation: FREUD, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2003.

psychic material – childhood complexes, animistic beliefs or involuntary repetitions – that breaks the illusion of rational mastery. The phenomenon manifests itself when repressed fears (for example, doppelgängers and animacy in inanimate objects) resurface in adulthood, provoking a visceral dread rooted in recognition rather than novelty (Freud, 1919). This structure is invaluable for analysing Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which the apparently mundane – a barren tree, cyclical dialogue, fragmented bodies – becomes frighteningly destabilising. The repetitive actions of the tramps (Let's go. / They do not move.) exemplify Freud's *compulsion to repeat*, a mechanism of the unconscious that transforms habit into horror. Similarly, the elusive Godot, at once absent and perpetually expected, mirrors the central tension of the uncanny: the terror of an unresolved presence-in-absence. By applying Freud's *unheimliche* (unhomely), we can reframe Beckett's tragicomedy perspective as a performative disquiet – one that involves the audience in its disquiet.

This review of literature highlights literary sources that analyse *Waiting for Godot* in relation to the so-called Theatre of the Absurd, as well as the emptiness present in performances and text, and the nihilistic influences on the play. However, there is no investigation of the aspect of horror the play may invoke in its reader/spectator. Therefore, in this dissertation, using available literary means, I deepen the studies on Beckett to identify the possible presence of horror in *Waiting for Godot*.

1.2 UPCOMING CHAPTERS

Having established the analysis proposal, objectives, research questions, hypothesis, and the literature review of this dissertation, the subsequent chapters constitute the critical basis for the analysis of *Waiting for Godot*. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I present the theoretical framework used, divided into three subsections. In the first one, I explore Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* and Albert Camus' influences on Esslin's theory. This includes the definition of the concept of absurdity according to Esslin, as well as the author's perspective on Beckett's works, especially *Waiting for Godot*, and the relevance of the play to the Theatre of the Absurd. In this subsection, I also present a brief analysis of Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, highlighting the importance of this work for the development of Esslin's

concept of the absurd, thus generating the characteristics that define the Theatre of the Absurd. To understand how the Theatre of the Absurd is viewed today, I also use Michael Y. Bennett's contemporary view of Esslin's studies and how revisiting the work some fifty years after its release can lead to a different understanding of what the Theatre of the Absurd really addresses. In the second subsection, I introduce anthropologist David Le Breton's concept of *the blank*, explaining its relation to the notion of emptiness and human experiences of social self-erasure, as well as how this blankness can be found in the repetitive and meaningless actions in *Waiting for Godot*. I introduce Leszek Kolakowski's concept of *horror metaphysicus* in the third subsection, exploring his philosophical perspective on existential horror. I demonstrate how this concept sheds light on the idea of horror in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* through the blank canvas of despair present in the play.

In the second chapter, I examine how Beckett's radical minimalism transforms the theatrical space of *Waiting for Godot* into an existential landscape that reflects and amplifies the metaphysical horror at the centre of the play. The desolate road and the solitary tree that make up the entire set are not passive backdrops, but active participants in the drama, moulding the characters' actions and the audience's perception. By reducing the stage to its simplest elements, Beckett creates a visual poetics of absence that challenges traditional theatre semiotics. While conventional drama relies on symbolic settings to anchor meaning, Beckett's sterile landscape refuses these comforts, making emptiness itself the play's central protagonist.

The spatial dynamics of *Waiting for Godot* operate on two interconnected levels, which this chapter explores. Firstly, through the lens of the *theatrum mundi* tradition, the play exposes the fundamental artifice of human existence. Based on McMullan's analysis (2021), the stage becomes a self-conscious laboratory in which the futile waiting of the characters reflects the audience's own existential situation. The sparse setting – with its missing contextual clues and undefined geography – transforms the theatre into what Ruby Cohn (1967) identifies as a “metaphysical proving ground”, in which the very conventions of the theatrical space are used as weapons to destabilise rather than reassure. When Vladimir and Estragon look out towards the audience, they collapse the distinction between performance and reality, involving the spectators in their endless cycle of expectation and disappointment.

Secondly, the spatial organisation of the piece represents what David Le Breton describes as the “gradual erasure of the self in empty, undifferentiated environments” (2018). The road that leads nowhere and the tree that oscillates between death and false renewal materialise the psychological disintegration of the characters. In the first act, the tree’s barrenness reflects Vladimir and Estragon’s spiritual exhaustion; its inexplicable foliage in the second act becomes not a sign of hope, but a cruel parody of transformation. This spatial ambiguity reflects Kolakowski’s metaphysical horror – the terror of confronting a universe that offers no answers, only the relentless repetition of the same. The characters’ circular movements around the stage, their compulsive returns to the tree and their failed attempts to leave dramatise the human condition as a perpetual confinement in an indifferent cosmos.

By analysing these spatial strategies, this chapter demonstrates how Beckett’s staging transcends mere aesthetic minimalism to become a philosophical statement. The emptiness of the set is not an absence, but a presence – an active force that moulds the characters’ consciousness and involves the audience in their existential dilemma. In *Waiting for Godot*, the space itself is the drama: the inflexible road, the ambiguous tree and the oppressive silence between them make up a theatre of metaphysical horror, where the only certainty is the unbearable weight of waiting.

In the third chapter, I argue that Beckett’s manipulation of repetitive action and cyclical time in *Waiting for Godot* does more than exemplify the Theatre of the Absurd – it constructs a distinct form of existential horror. The play’s relentless patterns – the endless adjustment of hats, the ritualistic inspection of boots, the circular dialogues that lead nowhere – transcend mere demonstrations of absurdity to become performative acts of self-pleasure. Each repeated gesture functions as what Le Breton might call a “ritual of disappearance” (2018), methodically stripping Vladimir and Estragon of their individuality until they become interchangeable spectres in a meaningless landscape. Their compulsive repetitions mirror the modern condition that Michael Y. Bennett identifies in post-war absurdism not just the lack of meaning, but the active unravelling of the very possibility of meaning (2011).

This analysis develops through three interconnected structures. Firstly, the chapter examines how Beckett’s repetitive structures literalise the absurd critique of intentional action, transforming mundane activities into terrifying demonstrations of human futility. When Estragon repeatedly struggles with his boots or Vladimir

compulsively checks his hat, these are not just comic routines, but horrifying in their revelation: without narrative progression, the action becomes its own absurd punishment. The characters' inability to remember their own routines from one day to the next – exemplified by their shock at the minimal change in the tree between acts – demonstrates the collapse of memory under the weight of the eternal return. Secondly, based on Le Breton's concept of "the blank space", the discussion reveals how these repetitions promote a gradual dissolution of the self. The characters' dialogue, with its constant false starts and recursive logic ("Let's go" / "We can't" / "Why not?" / "We're waiting for Godot"), performs what Le Breton describes as the "slow evaporation of personality" in the face of existential saturation (2018). His linguistic patterns – the way Vladimir's speeches become increasingly fragmented, the way Estragon's protests lose even the energy of provocation – trace a terrifying descent into what might be called communicative entropy.

Finally, the third chapter employs Kolakowski's metaphysical horror to expose how Beckett transforms theatrical repetition into metaphysical horror. The play's circular structure (the almost identical second act) and the characters' Sisyphean routines generate what Kolakowski identifies as the fundamental dread of the absurd – not just the fact that life is meaningless, but the fact that this meaninglessness is inescapable (1988). The real horror emerges in the moments when the characters briefly glimpse their condition, such as when Vladimir asks: "Was I asleep while the others suffered?", only to immediately return to the comfort of routine. These flashes of awareness, combined with the play's incessant cycle of returning to the same gestures, create what can be called "the terror of recognition" – the unbearable realisation that not even awareness can break the cycle.

By synthesising these perspectives, the chapter demonstrates how the play redefines the horror mode. Beckett's tragedy lies not in supernatural threats or physical violence, but in the gradual and inexorable erosion of individuality through the mechanism of repetition. The audience's discomfort – that nervous laughter at the performances – stems from the fact that they are witnessing not only the absurd, but the active unravelling of the human being under the weight of time's endless return. In this light, Bennett's re-evaluation of the Theatre of the Absurd proves crucial: what appears to be comic futility is a new mode of philosophical horror, which makes visible the silent scream at the heart of modern existence. The chapter ultimately positions

Waiting for Godot not only as a cornerstone of absurdist drama, but as a seminal work of existential horror; one that makes palpable the horror of being trapped in a universe where even the absence of divine figure is just another line in a script that repeats itself endlessly.

This dissertation concludes by summarising its central argument: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* transcends its traditional classification as an absurdist work to emerge as a seminal text of existential horror. Through the interaction between Le Breton's *the blank*, Kolakowski's *horror metaphysicus* and Beckett's radical dramaturgy, the play stages not only the absence of meaning, but the active unravelling of the human subject in a universe of relentless repetition and erasure. The analysis demonstrated how Beckett's minimalist stage – its barren road and ambiguous tree – materialises emptiness as an oppressive presence; how Vladimir and Estragon's cyclical routines perform the dissolution of identity; and how the audience, involved through direct speech and unresolved tension, becomes complicit in this theatre of disappearance. The implications of this study go beyond *Waiting for Godot* and reshape our understanding of the Theatre of the Absurd. While Martin Esslin framed the absurd as an intellectual confrontation with meaninglessness, this research reveals its affective dimension: the visceral horror of being trapped in a script with no author or way out. Michael Y. Bennett's reassessment of the absurd as an ethical parable finds its counterpoint here – not as a guide to the creation of meaning, but as an exposé of the mechanisms that make such endeavours futile. The laughter that the play provokes is not cathartic, but diagnostic, a nervous recognition of the emptiness that underlies the performative rituals of everyday existence.

Future studies can build on this foundation in various directions. Beckett's later works, especially those that literalise bodily disintegration (*Happy Days*, *Not I*), could be examined through the lens of corporeal horror, in which "emptiness" manifests itself as physical imprisonment or vocal fragmentation. Moreover, performance-based research could investigate how audiences emotionally and psychologically process the existential dread of the play, testing whether *the blank* provokes paralysis, resistance or unexpected forms of solidarity. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that *Waiting for Godot* achieves what traditional horror may cannot: it renders the unthinkable – the total erosion of self and purpose – not as a spectacle, but as a mundane inevitability. The play's power lies in its refusal to offer even the consolation of despair. In the end,

we are left not with answers, but with the reverberations of Vladimir's unanswered question: *Was I asleep while others suffered?* – a question that involves us all in an endless wait for a meaning that never comes.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ABSURD, BLANKNESS, AND HORROR IN BECKETT

2.1 OUT OF HARMONY: MARTIN ESSLIN AND THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

According to Martin Esslin, after the Second World War, there was a decline in religious faith, which led to numerous instances of false nationalism and totalitarianism. In Esslin's view, many people in the West found themselves lost amidst the absurdity of life, devoid of any meaning after two great wars. Absurd in its essence means being out of harmony, in a musical context; however, within the concept of the Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin defines it as an object that captures and conveys the meaning of the human condition in its essence of irrationality:

This is an inner contradiction that the dramatists of the Absurd are trying, by instinct and intuition rather than by conscious effort, to overcome and resolve. The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images.
(Esslin, 2004, loc. 244–254)

Esslin's well-known book *The Theatre of the Absurd* not just presents plays that challenge traditional theatre, instead, it presents a raw rationality to show the absurdity of life witnessed by humanity, especially after the horror experienced by wars. For Esslin, the plays reflect the existential crisis faced by individuals in the modern world. The plays that *The Theatre of the Absurd* encompasses, such as Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) and *The Chairs* (*Les Chaises*, 1952), Jean Genet's *The Maids* (1947), Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957), Arthur Adamov's *Ping-Pong* (*Le Ping-Pong*, 1955), are characterised by repetitive texts, disjointed sentences and scenic elements capable of exposing absurdism, whether in the characters' costume or the empty, dystopian settings. At its core, the Theatre of the Absurd is about conveying the sense of meaninglessness of the human condition and the despair that inhabits it, by openly abandoning traditional instruments and discursive thoughts.

The first chapter of the book is entirely dedicated to Samuel Beckett and his works.³ Esslin examines in detail the plays that emphasise the characteristics of the Absurd. Initially, Esslin suggests that the recurring theme of “Who am I? Who are we?” in Beckett’s works is a possible influence of the playwright himself, as he is overcome by the anguish caused by existential crises.⁴ *Waiting for Godot* does not follow a traditional theatre plot; rather, it explores a stagnant setting and characters with even more static events. As stated in the sentences “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful” (Beckett, 2010, p. 137),

Beckett’s plays lack plot even more completely than other works of the Theatre of the Absurd. Instead of a linear development, they present their author’s intuition of the human condition by a method that is essentially polyphonic. (Esslin, 2004, loc. 560)

Esslin asserts that, by presenting human fragility through a polyphonic⁵ method, Beckett’s plays eschew a linear progression of events or narrative. Instead, they explore the human condition through multiple voices, perspectives, and interconnected elements. This polyphony, in which different themes and voices intertwine to create a multifaceted experience, sparks various ideas, leaving it to the emotion and imagination of each reader or viewer to convey the author’s vision of the human condition. One can observe the polyphony of *Waiting for Godot* reverberating through the characters’ worldviews, concerns, and problems, thus contributing to the complexity of the play.

Waiting for Godot has multiple layers, meanings and interpretations, such as, for example, Godot being a Christian metaphor for God, the characters being dead and trapped in purgatory from a Dantean perspective. For each type of analysis employed,

³ The works used by Martin Esslin for writing *The Theatre of the Absurd* are only those released up to mid-1961, the year Esslin’s book was released.

⁴ As Esslin states “It has been suggested that Beckett’s preoccupation with the problem of being and the identity of the self might have sprung from the Anglo-Irishman’s inevitable and perpetual concern with finding his own answer to the question ‘Who am I?’, but while there may well be a grain of truth in this, it is surely far from providing a complete explanation for the deep existential anguish that is the keynote of Beckett’s work and that clearly originates in levels of his personality far deeper than its social surface.” (Esslin, 2004, loc 328)

⁵ Polyphony, according to Mikhail Bakhtin (1934), is a characteristic of a narrative that includes a diversity of points of view and voices. According to the article “*A Bakhtinian interpretation of Beckett: ‘Waiting for Godot’*”, by Sobia Ilyas and Muhammad Shaban Rafi (2016), *Waiting for Godot* does not have the characteristics of a novel or even the traditional structure of a theatrical play, yet it is rich in symbolism, and characters that have polyphonic voices. In the following chapters, in which I analyse the characters, this article is duly presented and analysed.

the elements, themes, and images must be taken altogether into account in the process of the meaning-making in the play. However, this does not mean that one cannot examine the pieces closely, isolating the elements to discern their underlying structure (Esslin, 2004). Esslin's approach demonstrates that the idea of an author's *intention* is complex and flawed, focusing instead on what the literary text allows the reader to see, if not the answers to the author's questions, at least what those questions are. I argue here that rather than establishing Beckett's "intention" in generating horror in *Waiting for Godot*, I analyse the effect of horror that his play creates through the emptiness of the setting and the fragility of the characters, that is, the philosophical and metaphysical vision of the void in the play.

According to W. K. Wimsatt Jr and M. C. Beardsley (1946), "[i]ntention corresponds to what *he intended* in a formula which more or less explicitly has had wide acceptance. [...] Intention is design or plan in the author's mind" (1946, pp. 468–69, author emphasis). Wimsatt and Beardsley give the example of an author's intention for the poem he or she has written and raise several points to discuss intention, including that the writing comes from the author's mind, "not out of a hat". The intention exists only in the author's mind, at the moment of creation. Once an intention is transformed into words and shared with the world, it can be interpreted in many ways by readers, resulting in personal meanings that can vary from person to person. Even if it is possible to try to understand the author's original intention, it is likely that each reader will interpret the work in a unique and personal way.

Wimsatt and Beardsley also comment that "[i]f there is any sense in which an author, by revision, has better achieved his original intention, it is only the very abstract, tautological, sense that he intended to write a better work and now has done it. (In this sense every author's intention is the same)" (1946, p. 470). Ultimately, for Wimsatt and Beardsley, the intention of every author remains the same: to improve their writing through constant revision, without altering the author's vision of creating something meaningful and well-crafted. In other words, the way an idea is presented in art contributes directly to its meaning. The arrangement of the elements, the styles, and even the humorous tone used are essential parts of the work's message. To try to split these aspects from the conceptual content would be to ignore the intrinsic nature of the work of art and its ability to communicate its meaning through multiple layers and dimensions.

When citing one of the greatest examples of the Theatre of the Absurd, *Waiting for Godot*, Esslin recounts the staging of the play that took place in San Quentin State Prison. Samuel Beckett's iconic play was performed on November 19, 1957, eliciting significant emotion from its audience. Esslin reports that "A teacher at the prison was quoted as saying, 'They know what is meant by waiting... and they knew if Godot finally came, he would only be a disappointment.' The leading article of the prison paper showed how clearly the writers had understood the meaning of the play" (Esslin, 2004, loc. 177–186). One particularly emotional response that the play evoked was noted: a genuine human response when confronted with waiting and time, and how terrifying that can be. Esslin proceeds to ask the question, "Why can a play without a plot and surprising twists impact an audience of prisoners so strongly?" which he responds by raising a criticism of society:

Because it confronted them with a situation in some ways analogous to their own? Perhaps. Or perhaps because they were unsophisticated enough to come to the theatre without any preconceived notion and ready-made expectations, so that they avoided the mistake that trapped so many established critics who condemned the play for its lack of plot, development, characterization, suspense, or plain common sense.
(Esslin, 2004, loc. 190)

Esslin writes that the reception and understanding of a play with components of the Absurd can be better observed in an audience free from the influence of standards or analytical criteria. If this does not occur, unfortunately, the play is misinterpreted as outrageous. One can observe that in the production of *Waiting for Godot* in London in the 1950s, when theatre in general was censored in the United Kingdom – this information, moreover, came as a considerable surprise to Beckett. Despite this, and after some modifications to the text, the production ultimately took place on August 3 at the Arts Theatre Club. According to James Knowlson's biography, *Damned to Fame* (1996), the actor who played the role of Pozzo recounts the audience's reaction that night:

Waves of hostility came whirling over the footlights, and the mass exodus, which was to form such a feature of the run of the piece, started quite soon after the curtain had risen. The audible groans were also fairly disconcerting... The curtain fell to mild applause, we took a scant three calls and a depression and sense of anti-climax descended on us all.
(Knowlson, 1996, p. 373)

When analysing the two productions and the reaction of each audience, it is possible to conclude that Esslin's thinking about the structure of the play and its impact was correct, as he explains:

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end.
(Esslin, 2004, loc. 203)

What I am arguing here is that, according to Esslin's perspective about play structures and its viewers, if an audience brings their preconceived notions with them to watch a play, they will not appreciate the performance but will instead negatively question every and all experiences and meanings during the play. However, by presenting something disjointed to an audience without any preconceived notions, the idea behind the text and characterisations will be better appreciated, allowing room for individual interpretation.

Fifty years after the release of Esslin's book, Michael Y. Bennett's *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd* (2011) offers several intriguing and insightful readings of absurdist plays, shedding light on Esslin's perspective on absurdity. Bennett presents the entire introduction of Esslin's book, in which the author defines absurdity in its original context as being out of harmony, but not applicable to the Theatre of the Absurd. Esslin's definition of absurdity is presented as the "purposelessness and senselessness of life", directly derived from the themes of the plays in the Theatre of the Absurd, which convey "their sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition" (Bennett, 2011, p. 5).

Bennett argues that Esslin misunderstood Camus' perspective. The absurd for Camus, according to Bennett, was a situation, perhaps a part of someone's life, and not a life sentence or a destiny as Esslin determined in his theory. In Bennett's words, "the absurd is just a given and that human reason is necessary to make sense of this world" (2011, p. 8). Having said that, I agree with Bennett, not in the sense that Esslin was wrong about the 'absence of a goal' in most of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, but instead, that Esslin simply focuses on one of the many perspectives that

can be drawn from reading Camus' text. While existentialists argue that life lacks inherent purpose but can become meaningful by means of experiences and actions that affirm individual existence, Camus contends that life is not made significant by what we do or engage in, but rather by rational thought to justify existence and find meaning in life. Camus was inspired by Descartes's rationalist thinking to formulate his ideas about rebellion and ethical revolt. The phrase *I rebel, therefore we exist* foregrounds the notion that the ability to rebel, in other words, to leave one's comfort zone, is one of the essences of existence and of seeking meaning in life. In a broader sense, suffering and the ability to resist it are indicative of Camus' search for meaning.

Bennett argues that both the philosophy and the aesthetics of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd not only explore themes of absurdism but also incorporate the absurdist essence in their structure (emptiness and minimalism) and in their plot (repetitions, vague and disconnected monologues). For Esslin, the Theatre of the Absurd is defined strictly by this minimalist aesthetic combined with philosophy. Bennett, in disagreeing with Esslin, offers a new perspective to Esslin's book and analysis:

and has not had any outright challenges, there are some recent scholars who have, either directly or indirectly, begun to see the Absurd playwrights, at least, engaging with the question of meaning, as opposed to dismissing the possibility of having meaning in this world outright. I suggest that meaning-making, not meaninglessness, is integral to the plays characterized as absurd. Because of the plays' parabolic nature – metaphor, paradox, and a move to disorder – the reader or audience member is forced to confront his or her own worldview in order to create order out of the chaos presented in the plays. (Bennett, 2011, p. 8)

In its early days, the Theatre of the Absurd was often interpreted as an expression of meaninglessness and the absurdity of human existence, reflecting an existentialist view of a world devoid of meaning. However, contemporary academics such as Bennett have begun to re-analyse and bring new interpretations to playwrights such as Samuel Beckett. Bennett argues that *Waiting for Godot* does not completely reject the idea of meaning or is a play devoid of meaning, much less one with a poorly structured plot; on the contrary, he sees the play as a stimulus for reflection on the meaning of life, something that challenges its audience/reader to search for meaning in the midst of apparent chaos and irrationality. By challenging the reader/spectator in

this way, *Waiting for Godot* can evoke a sense of discomfort or unease in those who are more used to traditional theatre.

The character of Godot, for example, yields this sense of unease. The play is not about who or what this mysterious character is, merely about waiting for this character. Esslin contends that Beckett emphasises the activity of waiting and that this inaction serves as a contrast to the moments when a person is active; it represents a phase where the passage of time is disregarded, and time is simply spent. Esslin explains the existential nature of time as follows: “[t]he flow of time confronts us with the basic problem of being – the problem of the nature of the self, which, subject to constant changes over time, is in constant flux and therefore always beyond our grasp” (Esslin, 2004, loc. 644). Since time always alters, the identity is never stable. Esslin suggests that this instability is amplified for Vladimir and Estragon because their subjective desire – Godot’s arrival – is never fulfilled. In this dissertation, this perspective can be interpreted as an instigator for negative emotions, for just as the characters are beyond reach when faced with the passage of time, so does Godot seem to be naturally unattainable, which can demonstrate the unreachable divine and the horror represented by it. In addition to this inert waiting, Godot also becomes a false representation of salvation for Didi and Gogo, giving them a false feeling of hope and relief from the suffering in their lives.

Bennett highlights an alternative approach to Beckett’s tragicomedy, diverging from the conventional interpretation associated with the Theatre of the Absurd and explaining that

Waiting for Godot provides, as I argue, not only meaning, but a simple roadmap to making meaning in life. If *Waiting for Godot* is understood in this light, then human action and the human condition are not absurd but sensical, and these plays, instead of offering up confusion, suggest how humans are supposed to act. In other words, the Theatre of the Absurd is not absurd. (Bennett, 2011, p. 29)

This approach presented by Bennet – that the play offers a pathway to find meaning in life through reflection on the human condition and the passage of time – underscores the diversity of possible interpretations of Beckett’s work and underscores the importance of context and perspective in understanding his plays. By claiming this, Bennett states that it may confront audiences with profound existential questions,

which in my analysis involves the possibility of evoking a sense of horror about the purpose of life and the nature of existence. This feeling of horror may, in turn, serve as a stimulus for personal development and deeper exploration of the fundamental questions of human existence.

Furthermore, regarding the religious reading of *Godot* as a representation of God, Bennett argues from a socio-historical perspective, claiming that the presence of a deity or saviour in the play challenges the notion that life lacks meaning, contrary to the representation of the human condition as absurd in the Theatre of the Absurd. Instead, Bennett suggests that the play not only gives meaning but also offers a clear path to creating meaning in life. Rather than inducing confusion, these plays indicate instances of human behaviour, challenging the perception of the Theatre of the Absurd as merely an expression of existential meaninglessness. This interpretation posits that these works can provide meaningful guidance for multiple understandings of existence.

Regarding the issue of existential crisis, Esslin brings forth Albert Camus' perspective in his book, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Camus explores the absurdity of existence through the myth of Sisyphus, a treacherous king who unleashed the wrath of the gods because of his hubris. His punishment was to eternally roll a marble boulder to the peak of a mountain; every time the boulder reached the peak; it would roll down and Sisyphus would start the process all over again. According to Camus, this Greek myth reflects the futility of human efforts and the struggle against obstacles. Camus also sees Sisyphus as the epitome of the absurd hero, who recognises the meaninglessness of his task, yet embraces it, thus finding purpose in his life in defiance of the absurdity proposed.

There are two feasible responses to absurdity, according to Camus: philosophical suicide or acceptance. Philosophical suicide implies escaping the absurd by embracing religiosity or a philosophical bias that provides comforting illusions of meaning and purpose. However, Camus rejects this option, arguing that it is an intellectually dishonest way of denying the fundamental absurdity of existence. Instead, acceptance of the absurd is the best response. Camus claims that recognising the absurd does not lead to despair, but rather to a liberated form of consciousness. By embracing the absurd, the individual is freed from the burden of searching for unattainable values and meaning and is empowered to create their own in a world

devoid of meaning. Furthermore, Camus emphasises the importance of rebellion in the face of the absurd in the following passage:

The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten. This must be clung to because the whole consequence of a life can depend on it. The irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter – these are the three characters in the drama that must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable.
(Camus, 1991, p. 30)

The absurd is the result of the confrontation between the search for values and meaning and the indifference present in the universe. Camus thus proposes that this collision gives rise to the absurd condition that permeates our existence, in which the search so longed for comes up against an irrational void. The philosopher also emphasises that this confrontation should not be dismissed rather acknowledged and accepted, highlighting the existential importance of dealing with its implications. Despite the indifference of the universe, humanity possesses the capacity for defiance and resistance, after all, in a world where meaning is subjective and contingent, one must navigate one's own existential journey amidst the expectations and norms imposed by society. For the context of this research, the idea of blankness can also be a part of this argument, in the sense of negotiating one's position in society, and therefore, finding meaning in one's existence, even if that meaning is a negative one.

In his article titled *A Thing I Carry About with Me* (2019), Pim Verhulst presents an intriguing detail regarding Camus' influence on Beckett's writing:

The manuscript of *En attendant Godot*, which Beckett wrote after *Malone Meurt* and before *L'Innommable*, contains a long drawn-out scene in which Vladimir and Estragon together attempt to enunciate slowly the question "Est-ce que c'est la peine?" (Is it worthwhile?). Given that Didi and Gogo previously contemplated suicide by hanging themselves from the tree, the question whether it is all still 'worth' the trouble invokes the opening of Camus's *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: "Il n'y a qu'un problème philosophique: c'est le suicide. Juger que la vie vaut ou ne vaut pas la peine d'être vécue, c'est répondre à la question fondamentale de la philosophie" (There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy).
(Verhulst, 2019, pp. 119–20)

The question "Is it worthwhile?" makes *Waiting for Godot* raise issues about the possibility of finding meaning in the midst of an empty world. The omission of the scene

in which the characters' answer with an emphatic "NO!" suggests that Beckett, in one of his many intentions, wanted to leave the ambiguity and meaning of the answer to this question to the audience's imagination. As such, the play not only deals with the wait for Godot, but also with questions about the purpose of existence and the search for meaning, as Bennett suggests in his reassessment of the Theatre of the Absurd.

When analysing Beckett's play in light of Camus' theory of Absurdism – after understanding what Bennett did by reassessing Esslin's work and coming with a new perspective – notable elements emerge. In *Waiting for Godot*, the characters are doomed to wait, thus leading them to their aimless and eternal task. Despite all of this and the repetitive nature of their actions, the characters continue their quest, reflecting the resilience and journey of the absurdist hero that Camus cites in his text. Both Camus' hero and Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon emphasise the human struggle to find meaning and purpose in an indifferent universe, an illustration for the existential and philosophical themes present in Absurdism. David Le Breton's concept of *the blank* refers to the empty spaces in life, and the undefined experiences that generally accompany the course of living. When connected to Camus' theory of the absurd, particularly to the idea of embracing the absurd, Le Breton's concept becomes a symbol of the inherent meaning in the apparent meaninglessness of existence. Just as Camus defends the acceptance of the absurd and the search for meaning, Le Breton's *the blank* highlights the existential void and the challenge of facing these indefinite moments, accepting ambiguity and thus, creating one's own meaning in the void one faces in life. In this sense, the effect of horror that I investigate here involves the intersection of confronting indefiniteness and ambiguity, recognition of the reality of the void and *the blank*.

In conclusion, the evolution of scholarly interpretations regarding the Theatre of the Absurd, particularly exemplified in Esslin's seminal work and Bennett's subsequent reassessment, backgrounds a development in the understanding of existential meaning within absurdist plays. While Esslin initially characterised these works as emblematic of life's inherent absurdity and meaninglessness, Bennett offers alternative perspectives. Bennett's revaluation suggests that rather than embracing a "devoid of a goal" outlook, absurdist plays prompt audiences to confront existential questions and seek meaning amidst chaos. In this sense, Bennett exemplifies this position by saying that the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd are ethical parables, in which

[...] the plot first orients the audience and then disorients it. The job of reorientation, is left up to the audience. [...] as the audience feels comfortable with the characters, but once the performance is revealed, and the events of the play unfold, the audience is left to grapple with the social construction of race and how the audience member, himself or herself, plays a part in it. (Bennett, 2011, pp. 22–23)

I agree that by challenging traditional interpretations and proposing that these works offer pathways to meaning-making, Bennett invites a reconsideration of the purpose and significance of absurdist theatre. Bennett states that the more up to date the reading of Camus is, the more it becomes clear that the Theatre of the Absurd does not just present the world as absurd. Instead, it suggests that by contemplating the contradictions in the plays and in one's own life, the reader/spectator will understand how to make the plot meaningful and not be lost amid absurdist chaos.

2.2 ECHOES OF EXISTENCE: LE BRETON AND THE ERASURE OF PERSONHOOD

The concept developed by the anthropologist David Le Breton in his book *Disparaître de Soi: Une Tentation Contemporaine* (The Fading of Oneself: A Contemporary Temptation), published in 2015, corresponds to a feeling of saturation experienced by the individual. This is not just limited to the body and mind but also related to the world. *the blank* exists between the social bond and nothingness, an intermediate territory, in other words, a breakdown or shutdown, such as burnout, collapse, and depression, among others. It is a slow search for impersonality, to discreetly erase oneself. Le Breton describes how it is possible to disappear little by little through “high-concentration activities [that] are for their followers a source of self-dissolution, a cleavage that allows them to abandon any other engagement” (2018, p.78, my translation).⁶ Waiting is the activity that consumes Estragon and Vladimir in the play. In addition, Le Breton notes that everyone gradually dissolves across Beckett's tragicomedy, being aeriform, longing for freedom, and dreaming of going

⁶ “atividades de alta concentração são para seus adeptos uma fonte de dissolução de si, uma clivagem que lhes permite abandonar qualquer outro engajamento”.

away from their tired bodies; for example, in *Waiting for Godot*, Le Breton highlights that the Beckettian *clochards* are homeless and without place, and also notes that

Beckett's entire oeuvre is under the aegis of disappearance, his characters dissolve little by little over time, eroded by their history; without highlights, they would like to be airborne, freed from their weariness of life and the obstacles that hold them back in the world, but a remnant of their body still holds them to their human condition. Their words are scarce, their means of expression are exhausted, so that language or voice are no more than rags of existence still imprisoned by fragments of the body. Space is common to them, but time is infinitely divided, each one errs within their own portion.
(Le Breton, 2018, p. 49, my translation)⁷

Following Le Breton's perspective, it is possible to determinate that Beckettian characters are, in their essence, representations of an idea of emptiness. They are always floating between reality and their own world, drifting back and forth between being and not being, always feeling a certain detachment from society, and perhaps, life. This sort of analysis complements, in a sense, the studies on the influence of nihilism and Absurdism in *Waiting for Godot*, such as Martin Esslin's distinctive studies on Beckett's works, offering a slightly different viewpoint employing Le Breton's concept of *the blank*. Furthermore, *the blank* provides a means to understand self-erasure as a form of horror, the fear of one's own tiring existence in a world of meaningless repetition.

One of the main characteristics of *the blank* is the feeling of emptiness and disenchantment that accompanies the individual in this state. This feeling does not have a precise definition, but manifests itself as a wait for the unknown, be it an upcoming message, the news of someone who has passed away, or even death itself and the end of everything. This emptiness can lead individuals to an absurd degree of distress and self-thought, which can even culminate in the disappearance of their identities. Therefore, *the blank* can be understood as a state of absence of self, in which the individual seeks to distance themselves from their identity due to a feeling of saturation and exhaustion. Le Breton defines this sensation as a

⁷ "Toda a obra de Beckett está sob a égide do desaparecimento, seus personagens se dissolvem aos poucos ao longo do tempo, erodidos por sua história; sem destaques, gostariam de ser aéreos, libertados de seu cansaço de viver e dos entraves que os detêm no mundo, mas um resto de corpo ainda os prende à sua condição de humanos. Suas palavras rareiam, os meios de expressão se esgotam, de tal modo que a linguagem ou a voz já não são mais do que farrapos de existência ainda prisioneiros de fragmentos de corpo. O espaço lhes é comum, mas o tempo está infinitamente dividido, cada um erra dentro de sua parcela".

[...] state of more or less pronounced absence of oneself, this fact of giving up oneself in one way or another because of the difficulty or painful nature of being oneself. [...] The blank responds to the feeling of saturation, of excess experienced by the individual.
(2018, p. 14, my translation)⁸

In this sense, I discuss here that *Waiting for Godot* fits into this concept, with elusive characters and an extremely minimalist setting, in which the environment of the play reinforces the idea of emptiness. The main subject of the play is Vladimir and Estragon expecting someone or something called Godot. Eventually, the play presents three more characters: Lucky, Pozzo, and a Messenger Boy. Of these extra characters, the first two represent servant and master, with Pozzo giving orders and Lucky obeying without hesitation. The Messenger Boy occupies the position of Godot's messenger, who just announces that Godot will not come today, but maybe tomorrow. There are no surprises or unexpected events in the play, which is instead deliberately slow and contains plenty of monologues from the characters. The ambiguous and open-ended style of *Waiting for Godot* gives the characters a feeling of exhaustion throughout the play, which is observed through the repetitions of lines, and memory lapses – including Vladimir and Estragon forgetting who they are or why they are waiting. In this sense, Beckett's characters in *Waiting for Godot* are repeatedly faced with a saturated feeling of permanence, grinding out their individuality.

Beckett's evasive way of writing, and the minimal stage setting, are features present in other of his works, as for example, *Ping*. Among Beckett's works, this short story is perhaps the one which best relates to *Waiting for Godot*, considering the themes of emptiness, self-erasure, and blankness. *Ping*⁹ – originally written in French (*Bing*) in 1966 and translated into English by the author in 1967 – is also imbued with repetition and lapses, characteristics of the playwright. In the story, the protagonist, who is referred to as Ping, is portrayed as a severely limited being. He is confined to a small space and can only move within this limited area – suggesting that the

⁸ “[...] estado de ausência de si mais ou menos pronunciada, esse fato de abdicar de si de um modo ou de outro por causa da dificuldade ou do caráter penoso de ser si mesmo. [...] O branco responde ao sentimento de saturação, de excesso vivido pelo indivíduo”.

⁹ In order to understand the linguistic style employed by Beckett in *Ping*, I draw upon two articles that analysed Beckett's short story: Gülşen Torusdağ's article entitled *Linguistic Style in Ping/Bing by Beckett* (2019), and *Style and Structure in Beckett's "Ping": That Something Itself* (1977) by Elisabeth Bregman Segrè.

environment that surrounds the character could be a hospital or a similarly limiting place. The story explores Ping's attempts to find the meaning of his existence, his efforts to communicate, and his interactions with an unseen entity. Ping experiences the struggle for meaning in a seemingly incomprehensible world. The play is permeated by a haunting sense of repetition, reflecting the circular, monotonous nature of Ping's existence. Each moment resonates with the one before, accentuating the hopelessness of altering or advancing the situation. This recurring pattern intensifies all-encompassing emptiness that shrouds Ping's reality. The narrative in *Ping* stresses whiteness as a colour (in the English translation and in the original French, *blanc*) and the fading of all colours, which becomes a keyword that captures the feeling of nothingness in Beckett's writing, as evidenced in the excerpt below:

Bare white body fixed one yard ping fixed elsewhere white on white invisible
heart breath no sound. Only the eyes given blue light blue almost white fixed
front only colour alone unover.
(Beckett, 1995, p.233)

In *Ping*, the setting of the short story contributes to conveying emptiness. The character dwells in a desolate landscape, mirroring his internal void. The absence of meaningful surroundings underscores his existential isolation and the sensation of drifting into an indifferent universe. Torusdağ offers an interesting metaphor when discussing *Ping*, comparing the short story to an abstract painting, which, despite its various integrated elements and often seemingly disjointed nature, ultimately forms a peculiar beauty. "Ping, it is noteworthy that a reader can have the feeling of reading the same words repeatedly, but in different combinations. Juxtaposed words that resemble a painter's brush strokes give readers the feeling that they are in front of a painting" (Torusdağ, 2019, p. 163). *Ping*, despite its difficulty, and even a certain exhaustion due to repetition, draws attention and gains deserved attention precisely because of its syntactical and lexical features (Torusdağ, 2019). Elsewhere in his article, Torusdağ refers to Segrè's article *Style and Structure in Beckett's "Ping": That Something Itself* (1977). In her text, Segrè conducts a thorough analysis of *Ping* and its unique structure, noting that "[Ping] is an intriguing riddle. On a first reading, one comprehends next to nothing; yet on a first listening (Beckett's texts must primarily be heard), one feels something intensely, something ineffable and far more musical than verbal in quality" (1977, p. 127). For Segrè, Beckett's short story should not be read to

be fully understood, but rather, like a musical score, it should be played to grasp its meaning. Both authors – Torusdağ and Segrè – affirm that in order to experience the short story, it needs to be read aloud, thus evoking the claustrophobia and emptiness present in the text. Segrè also highlights the text's paratactic constructions, which create a feeling of disconnected and isolated words, lacking traditional referential weight:

Unlike words in more conventional texts, words which have more or less stable and specific denotations, these words in *Ping* have, at best, ambivalent, often fragile, associations. Through vagueness, homonymy, polysemy, synonymy, juxtaposition of registers, and syntactic ambivalence, Beckett presents cryptic meanings, enigmas, fluid connotations. Meanings are present and yet absent simultaneously. This suggestive quality both disconcerts and attracts. Yet this very flexibility of words becomes their strength; the limited denotative value of words proves lesser than their connotative powers. (Segrè, 1977, p. 133)

This absence of specific connotations and clear contexts allows multiple simultaneous interpretations, with the reader's associations shaping the work's meaning. The title word 'ping' itself – evoking a faint sonic pulse, a glimmer of light, or a mechanical echo in void – resists fixed definition, yet despite its diverse and contradictory verbal connections, it lingers as a minimal sign of existence: a flicker of consciousness, a failed signal, or the ghost of communication. This ambiguity raises suggestions of longing and vitality intertwined with elements of hope and silence. The variations in repetition contribute to the text's overall structure, embodying the protagonist's evolving (or dissolving) experiences and states of being.

While culturally the colour white typically connotes purity and innocence in Western societies, in *Ping* it symbolises a featureless expanse, reflecting the character's despair. It encapsulates isolation and the absence of significant experiences or interactions, which is more in line with Le Breton's concept of *the blank*. Additionally, this whiteness – which is actually blankness – can also evoke a sense of sterility, emphasising the clinical, lifeless nature of the character's surroundings, as seen in the following passage:

All known all white bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn. Light heat white floor one square yard never seen. White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen. Bare white body fixed only the eyes only just. Traces blurs light grey almost white on white. Hands hanging palms front white feet heels together right angle. Light heat white planes shining

white bare white body fixed ping fixed elsewhere. Traces blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white. Bare white body fixed white on white invisible.
(Beckett, 1995, p.232)

The word white (in the original *blanc*, which can also be translated as blank) is repeated sixteen times in only in this initial passage of *Ping*. Torusdağ highlights Beckett's continuous use of *white* or *whiteness* in *Ping*. The repetition of these words ultimately creates an oppressive atmosphere, evoking a sense of horror through loneliness and confinement, as can be seen in the excerpt below:

The setting is a space of one square yard where everything is white or almost white. Planes, walls, ceiling, and floor are white. Traces, blurs, and signs are light grey, almost white. The eyes of the story person are light blue, almost white. His body, feet, mouth, hair, and scars are white. This abundance of whiteness (repeated 88 times) and the word group 'heart breath no sound' and almost (repeated 37 times) with its combinations 'almost white, almost never' evoke the death, despair, and loneliness at the same time indicate the oppressive and gloomy atmosphere of the prison. (Torusdağ, 2019, p.165)

It appears more often than any other word in the text, underscoring its significance. The harsh and sharp phonetic quality of the English word white is emphasised, suggesting an intentional choice by Beckett to amplify the roughness and poignancy associated with this colour. Each repetition serves as an objective correlating the emotional, perceptual, and physical state of the narrator(s). These repetitions represent distinct, crucial moments in the protagonist's existence, collectively shaping a subtle and irreversible pattern of his deteriorating progress. Although other colours are mentioned, they are described as faint, with blue eyes gradually transitioning to an almost white hue and the colour pink barely visible, eventually fading into white. This emphasis on white and the gradual disappearance of other colours symbolises a transformation and dissolution of elements within the text, reflecting the protagonist's journey and the overarching themes of the work.

I argue here that one of the interpretations of the use of the *white/blank* employed by Beckett is connected to Le Breton's concept, reinforcing the presence of self-erasure in Beckett's oeuvre. As Segrè states in her text:

This whiteness dominates the novel, for besides being evoked at least eighty times, the majority of subjects is described repeatedly as being exclusively white. These include the "bare body," walls, planes, ceiling, floor, feet, hair,

nose, ears, and mouth. Colors appear also, but they are immediately qualified as being only faint colors. The eyes are blue ("given blue") in four instances, but the majority of the time they are "light blue almost white." Toward the end of the work, this blue disappears altogether, leaving the eyes an eerie white. (Segrè, 1977, p.135)

The gradual fading of the colours can be read as a metaphor, the idea of slowly erasing the colours in such a way as to achieve the erasure of oneself. The blankness or whiteness present in *Ping* contributes to the overall atmosphere of desolation and emptiness, through a character inhabiting a featureless landscape dominated by an ever-present whitening, representing the existential void pervading the short story. As Segrè comments in her article, Beckett reinforces this by writing phrases such as *bare body*, throwing his character into a space dominated by emptiness – struggling to find meaning while simultaneously erasing the last traces of individuality also as observed by Le Breton (2018). In this way, Beckett not only describes the character's despair but constructs it grammatically, mirroring the thematic dissolution through language itself.

Within this cycle of repetition and void, Beckett vividly captures stagnation, in which time remains motionless, and all endeavours and words fade into emptiness, which highlights the eerie presence of purposelessness and desolation. The relationship between emptiness and blankness, as outlined by Le Breton, can be observed in both of Beckett's works, encapsulating existential despair and the absence of meaning. Similarly, in *Waiting for Godot*, the abandoned road and the leafless tree in an environment dominated by white tones contribute to create emptiness and despair, generating a horror effect. These settings function as mirrors of the characters' inner emptiness, reflecting the absence of purpose and meaning in their lives. Amid the embrace of the blank, characters find solace in the stillness it offers, a reflection of their inner void, as Le Breton defines it:

Blankness is this desire to slow down or stop the flow of thought, to finally put an end to the social need to always compose a character according to the interlocutors present. Blank is a search for impersonality, a desire to only be considered neutrally. Sometimes it becomes a habitual way of living. It is the result of the transformation of the individual's social bond into a desert to behave as an indifferent, unreachable spectator. Blank is a closure to the situation, a slowing down of the energy that encourages us to live minimally,

and even an interruption, or a kind of Zen posture aiming at total disconnection.
(Le Breton, 2018, pp. 22–23, my translation)¹⁰

The blank functions as a desire to interrupt meaningful thoughts, a search for anonymity, and occasionally evolving into an impersonal *modus operandi*. This condition arises from the transformation of a social connection into a barren landscape, wherein individuals adopt the role of spectators. This concept indicates the dissolution of socially constituted identities, wherein individuals search for freedom and a reconnection with themselves in a state of tranquillity and impersonality. In other words, *the blank* is a form of a resistance against societal pressures and a search for emancipation. The author further complements this statement by saying that the blank “[...] slides from the person to the persona, that is, according to Latin etymology, to the mask, without anyone to embody it and give it a face. Behind it there is nothing else. There is no one else” (2018, p.22, my translation).¹¹ Le Breton makes it clear the idea of impersonality of blank characters, which after a certain level of exhaustion by trying to fill the empty canvas of life and giving it meaning, slide from the position of the person to persona, becoming just another body in the mass of society. Hence, my argument of horror using Le Breton’s concept lies in the apprehensive state of resisting *the blank*, the moment of existential conflict before accepting the mask of the persona.

When examining the impact of *the blank* on the characters’ perception of their identity and its influence on their relationship with the world around them, it becomes evident that the concept embodies a sensation of detachment. Le Breton’s notion of *the blankness* resonates with the existential themes present in the works of Samuel Beckett, particularly *Waiting for Godot*, by exploring a state of selflessness, the gradual dissolution brought about by the overwhelming difficulty of being oneself. Throughout the play, the characters face a generalised feeling of boredom and disconnection from

¹⁰ “O branco é essa vontade de desacelerar ou de deter o fluxo do pensamento, de finalmente acabar com a necessidade social de sempre compor um personagem de acordo com os interlocutores presentes. O branco é uma busca de impessoalidade, uma vontade de tão somente ser considerado de forma neutra. Às vezes ele se transforma em um modo habitual de viver. É fruto da transformação do vínculo social do indivíduo em deserto a fim de comportar-se apenas como um espectador indiferente, inalcançável. O branco é um fechamento à situação, uma desaceleração da energia que impele a viver minimamente, e até mesmo uma interrupção, ou uma espécie de postura zen visando a um desligamento total”.

¹¹ “Ele desliza da pessoa para a persona, isto é, segundo a etimologia latina, para a máscara, sem ninguém para encarná-la e dar-lhe um rosto. Atrás dela não há mais nada. Não existe mais ninguém”.

their environment. The repetition, memory lapses, and ambiguous dialogue reflect a struggle to maintain a coherent sense of self in a world that seems devoid of meaning. The minimalist settings, dominated by white tones of the scenario, serve as visual representations of this existential void, mirroring the characters' internal struggles with identity and purpose. The characters' interaction with their environment is marked by a sense of futility and stagnation. They are trapped in cycles of waiting and repeating, unable to free themselves from the inertia that defines their existence. Furthermore, Le Breton's description of *the blankness* as a desire for impersonality and distance from social expectations resonates with the characters' attempts to escape the burden of their own identities. This search for neutrality and detachment reflects a deeper existential yearning for freedom from the constraints of individuality, as Le Breton's explains:

The individual no longer realises their place. Although they have often felt on the sidelines and tried to accommodate themselves, this time they no longer have the strength, or perhaps they never had it. The world escapes them. So they abandon their professional or domestic world, disappear, leave the house less often, no longer care about their loved ones or their private matters. They simply give up on the world around them. [...] The undertaking is that of a "debirth", of stripping oneself of the layers of identity to reduce them to a minimum, not to start living again, to be reborn, but to erase oneself with discretion.

(Le Breton, 2018, p. 20, my translation)¹²

The feeling of no longer finding your place in the world, that the thinker describes echoes the essence of many Beckettian characters, who are constantly on the margins of society or in situations of extreme isolation, such as the inability to keep up with the pace of the world. Beckett's characters frequently feel inadequate or powerless in the face of society's demands and expectations, leading them to withdraw more and more. The *debirth* that Le Breton mentions also reflects the idea of disintegration and dispossession that permeates Beckett's writing, wherein characters often face a kind of dismantling of their identities and realities, as they are confronted with the futility of their actions and aspirations. Instead of seeking new life or meaning, they choose to

¹² "O indivíduo não percebe mais seu lugar. Embora muitas vezes ele tenha se sentido à margem e tentado acomodar-se, desta vez ele não tem mais força, ou talvez nunca a tenha tido. O mundo lhe foge. Então ele abandona seu universo profissional ou doméstico, apaga – se, sai sempre menos de casa, não se preocupa mais com seus próximos nem com seus assuntos particulares. Simplesmente desiste do mundo que o cerca. [...] A empreitada é a de um "desnascimento", a de despojar-se das camadas de identidade para reduzi-las a mínima, não para recomeçar a viver, renascer, mas para apagar-se com discrição".

silently withdraw from existence, gradually disappearing from the world's consciousness. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that there is no escape for the characters; they remain stagnant, immobilised by anticipation. The emptiness depicted not only elicits despair and desolation but also evokes a unique form of existential dread. The barren settings devoid of colour and life signify absence of meaning, plunging the characters into a realm of uncertainty, anxiety, and disconnection. This sense of hopelessness and emptiness can incite anguish, as it exposes the lack of inherent order or purpose in the depicted universe, thence presenting a unique effect of horror.

The characters in *Waiting for Godot* fit into this concept presented by Le Breton, due to their almost ghostly presence on stage. There are no expressions of future action, just the inert and vicious cycle of being absent from society. Although the play features other characters such as Lucky, Pozzo and the Messenger Boy, Vladimir and Estragon remain isolated in their social bubble. According to Le Breton's concept, the characters are not lost amid chaos, but in search of their social freedom through radical expression. The argument I am making here, reinforced by Camus' theory of the absurd hero, is that Didi and Gogo (the characters' nicknames in the play) embody their search for freedom in the play in a slow and confusing way, thus portraying the journey of an individual amidst the demands of a society. As Le Breton puts it, "the blank is a numbness, a 'letting go' born of the difficulty of transforming things. In this universe of supremacy that is imposed in the ambience of our neoliberal societies, the blank is a paradoxical will to powerlessness; to cease wanting to control one's own existence and to let oneself be carried away" (Le Breton, 2018, p. 15–16).¹³ The horror of Didi and Gogo's experience exists as much in their gradual disappearance as it does in the weight of social expectations of clear – cut identities and individualities.

Moreover, the absolute emptiness portrayed in Beckett's works can instil a chilling sense of existential horror as the characters confront the insignificance of their existence and the inevitability of mortality in an also meaningless society. Trapped in eternal waiting, Didi and Gogo gradually retreat from social anxieties, forgetting both others and themselves, succumbing to silence and loneliness instead of engaging with

¹³ "O branco é um entorpecimento, um "deixar para lá" nascido da dificuldade de transformar as coisas. Neste universo da supremacia que se impõe na ambiência de nossas sociedades neoliberais, o branco é uma paradoxal vontade de impotência; cessar de querer controlar a própria existência e deixar-se levar".

society. From an Absurdist perspective, this gradual coming to terms with the dissolution of self and the fragile nature of human existence can possibly evoke a sense of horror, as illustrated in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

2.3 *HORROR METAPHYSICUS* AND THE FRAGILITY OF EXISTENCE IN BECKETT

Horror is often associated with negative sensations such as fear, anxiety, or panic. In its Latin origins *horror* means dread, fear or terror; nowadays, horror is a literary and film genre, and by being attractive and chilling at the same time, it forms a peculiar aesthetic, captivating many. In *Metaphysical Horror* (1988), Leszek Kolakowski presents a new concept of horror called *horror metaphysicus*. The author attributes different meanings to his concept in his book, but among them is the meaning that leads to the concept's title, the metaphysical. When confronted with countless theoretical conflicts, an individual can be permeated by a sense of horror. In this sense, *Waiting for Godot* is analysed as to whether the play can generate an experience of horror. By developing a perception of the limits and uncertainties associated with human existence, a new form of fear is unleashed in individuals. As an illustration, when understanding a person's mortality, when realising that life is finite and doomed to an inevitable end, a haunting feeling runs through the mind. It is not just about the fear of death, but rather about the uncertainty that surrounds destiny, of what the unsettling future holds. On this basis, Kolakowski goes further in his book into the metaphysical horror present in everyday life.

By analysing Beckett's tragicomedy in the light of Kolakowski's concept of *horror metaphysicus*, some elements that resonate horror in the characters' lives emerge. Beckett portrays Vladimir and Estragon in a meaningless situation filled with absurdity, such as the empty road; apart from the characters of Lucky, Pozzo and the messenger boy, Didi and Gogo are alone in the world, waiting for Godot. The fragility of the characters becomes evident, and, by imagining their fragility, it is feasible to understand the feeling of horror that permeates their minds. The waiting for Godot is beyond Didi and Gogo's control, even though they have the choice to leave. The lack of control over their lives echoes Kolakowski's concept of the uncertainty that lies in destiny. The characters in *Waiting for Godot* have no understanding of their temporal

nature. The play may be about the afterlife, purgatory where souls await a chance of salvation or just the end of the world, and there is no one left, among many other readings as discussed before. They are faced with a metaphysical horror about the uncertainty of everything. Didi and Gogo are trapped in a state of *non-time*, overloaded with monotony and inconclusiveness; their conversations make no sense, their speeches are disjointed, and their futures are completely uncertain.

This perception of the finitude of time, as investigated by Kolakowski, consequently, leads to an awareness of human fragility. This awareness generates a sense of anguish and impotence in the face of precarious events in an individual's life. As mentioned earlier, Kolakowski calls this stage *non-time*, where monotony and lack of purpose reign, as one can see in the excerpt below:

Mankind, in all the variety of its civilizations, has never been, and probably will never be, able to escape from its desire to escape from time. If the cultural expression of this craving is stripped of mythological symbols and is supposed to have achieved an abstract exactness, a literal perfection, it collapses into paralysing muteness. This is not to say that the desire is not genuine or that the desperate attempts to give it an articulated shape in terms of this horror have to be dismissed. It is perhaps better for us to totter insecurely on the edge of an unknown abyss than simply to deny its presence by closing our eyes.

(Kolakowski, 2011, p. 54)

Once the perception of time is like a vicious cycle of self-annihilation, it jeopardises stability and can lead to an abrupt collapse. The concept of the Absolute¹⁴ emerges as a potential solution to this cycle, offering stability and preservation against the ravages of advancing time. However, at its core, the Absolute is self-contained and indivisible, making it often incomprehensible. Consequently, like time, the Absolute ends up being labelled "Nothing", becoming a great paradox: nothingness redeems its own emptiness. Kolakowski defines metaphysical horror in this way, citing the existential dread of facing daily reality and the essence of an individual's existence. Just like the characters in *Waiting for Godot*, its readers face the apparent meaninglessness of the play together with the anxiety brought on by the unknown and unpredictable Godot. The readers/spectators ultimately obtain a certain satisfaction by

¹⁴ For Kolakowski, the Absolute often refers to an ultimate, transcendent and immutable reality, which is beyond the empirical world and the limitations of human experience. This concept can be associated with the idea of God in theological contexts, or with the idea of a fundamental principle or utmost reality in philosophy.

means of the intellectual and emotional challenges experienced by the play. The point I am arguing here is that the play not only instigates the imagination of viewers/readers through a disjointed plot and repetitive dialogue but also compels them to fight against the desperation of the characters, offering intellectual or emotional gratification. Through this perspective, Beckett's tragicomedy transcends a mere depiction of despair, transforming into a profound exploration of the human psyche. It challenges readers to confront the very fears defining the human condition.

In his article called *Metaphysical Horror in Samuel Beckett* (2023), Christopher Conti analyses the possible connection between the metaphysical horror defined by Kolakowski and Samuel Beckett's literary world. Conti states that both Kolakowski and Beckett have the same sceptical attitude towards the world or absolute truth, with which I disagree with the author. I do not believe that Beckett, among the many works he wrote during his life, had a sceptical view of the world. Beckett, under the lens I am analysing, had a realistic and perhaps cold view of the world, which may have been caused by multiple events during his life. Conti states that both Kolakowski and Beckett recognise the fragility of absolute statements while examining the assumption that scepticism inherently embodies greater rationality. Conti observes in his analysis of the apparent lack of meaning in Beckett's works, that this is not only a reflection of the proposed existential emptiness, but paradoxically, an intellectual command. In other words, by developing an environment in which meaning is constantly questioned and subverted, the Beckettian world becomes a construction that challenges theatrical norms and, above all, the expectations of its readers/spectators.

The author also points out to details about Lucky's speech, in which he comments that it serves as an illustration of the metaphysical dread that permeates the entire atmosphere of the play. According to Conti, the progression of Lucky's speech from an incarnation of a divine entity to an abject condition of humanity symbolises disconnection. In addition, this rupture of connection mirrors the melancholy that encompasses the Beckettian characters, reflecting the melancholy of a society. As a result, the discourse is primarily marked by nonsensical content rather than logical coherence, as exemplified in the following quote:

LUCKY: [*Vladimir and Estragon all attention, Pozzo dejected and disgusted*]
Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and
Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaquaa with white beard quaquaquaquaa

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 plunged in fire whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it will fire the firmament that is to say blast hell to heaven [...] (Beckett, 2010, p. 141)

Lucky's monologue becomes a rapid and chaotic succession of words and ideas, without any kind of logical structure. Amidst the torrent of illogical words that Lucky utters, the speech reveals a message: the recognition of a personal god who exists beyond the limits of time, who apparently loves humanity deeply and understands the suffering of experiencing torment. This message also brings to light an affirmation: humanity, for unrevealed reasons, abandons its endeavours, leaving itself adrift in life. In other words, despite the presence of a being who represents personal salvation, there is still a sense of abandonment and impotence in relation to existence. Throughout his speech, Lucky goes through a spectrum of themes, including the existence of God, divine indifference, human suffering and the passage of time. Nevertheless, his words are so distorted and contradictory that extracting a clear meaning becomes an arduous task. Lucky's discourse in *Waiting for Godot* encapsulates this existential horror in multiple facets. Firstly, the lack of coherence and ambiguity in Lucky's words reflects the inherent uncertainty inherent in the quest for meaning in human existence. Secondly, the chaotic and surrealist style of the discourse engenders a sense of disorientation and confusion, mirroring the absurd nature of human life. Lastly, the repetitions and contradictions within Lucky's discourse underscore the futility of seeking meaning in a universe that remains indifferent.

Initially, Didi and Gogo's relationship appears symbiotic, characterised by mutual dependence and interconnectedness. They lean on each other for companionship, comfort, and distraction from their bleak reality. Throughout the play, their interactions range from playful banter to moments of genuine camaraderie, underscoring the depth of their connection. However, beneath this surface camaraderie lies a complex dynamic of reliance and vulnerability. Famously, trapped in an absurd world devoid of meaning, purpose, or resolution, Didi and Gogo find themselves endlessly waiting for an elusive figure or event. In this context, their reliance on each other becomes both a source of solace and a burden. They cling to each other as a means of navigating the vast emptiness of their existence, yet this very dependency threatens to engulf them. The dynamics between Didi and Gogo fluctuate

between intimacy and estrangement, mirroring the inherent unpredictability of human connections within an absurd universe. They traverse moments of camaraderie, humour, and shared reminiscences, alongside bouts of frustration, bitterness, and existential anguish, including jests about suicide. Their interdependence acts as both a source of strength and vulnerability, very similarly to Hamm and Clov, in *Endgame*, and other characters in Beckett's work.

This dependence is echoed throughout *Waiting for Godot*, as seen in the dialogue where they contemplate parting ways and yet remain bound together by the hope of Godot's arrival:

ESTRAGON: If we parted? That might be better for us.
 VLADIMIR: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. *[Pause.]* Unless Godot comes.
 ESTRAGON: And if he comes?
 VLADIMIR: We'll be saved. *[Vladimir takes off his hat (Lucky's), peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, knocks on the crown, puts it on again.] [...]*
 VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?
 ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go. *[They do not move. Curtain.]*
 (Beckett, 2010, pp. 255–256)

Estragon's line about the possible separation reflects a feeling of weariness and disillusionment. The suggestion that the separation "might be better for us" indicates the need that they both perhaps feel to separate in the hope of find their way, to seek their own personal meaning in their journey. However, Vladimir's response, "We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. Unless Godot comes" indicates a glimmer of hope in Vladimir's heart, amidst his thoughts of self-annihilation and hopelessness. Suicide here would not only be a way to escape the vicious and absurd cycle of their daily lives, but rather a liberation from their already tired persona. When Estragon asks what would happen if Godot really came, Vladimir states that they would both be saved, highlighting his eagerness to free himself from his existential despair and the absurdity that surrounds them. The final line, "Well? Shall we go? ... Yes, let's go." emphasises the weight of the characters' indecision and inaction. Although they both agree to leave and move on, their physical inertia highlights to the reader/viewer their existential imprisonment. The curtain then closes like a metaphorical veil, enveloping them in their unresolved existential dilemmas and leaving the reader/viewer distressed about why nothing happens, and Didi and Gogo's ending remains stagnant. Both Estragon and Vladimir reflect Kolakowski's concept of *horror metaphysicus* by means of their recognition of the meaninglessness of existence, and the absurdities that surround them; that despite

their quest for salvation by way of Godot, life itself is futile and meaningless. Despite their interactions, the characters depend on each other far more than they genuinely connect, forming bonds. The elements mentioned evoke a sense of existential discomfort and introspection, inciting the reader/viewer to confront their own dilemmas, reflected through the characters.

In conclusion, Kolakowski's analysis of metaphysical horror sheds light on an individual's confrontation with mortality, the uncertainties present in life, and the fleeting nature of everyday life. The reality presented throughout *Waiting for Godot*, characters trapped in absurd and meaningless situations, reflect a sense of vulnerability and helplessness in the face of existential crises. Through the characters Vladimir and Estragon, Beckett introduces his readers/viewers to life in an absurd world and the individual's search for meaning in their lives. Conti's insights, although somewhat contradictory, into the scepticism shared by Kolakowski and Beckett, illuminate the nature of absolute truth. By analysing Beckett's tragicomedy through a lens of metaphysical horror, readers and viewers are led to confront the enigmas and limitations of human understanding, thus challenging traditional theatre.

3 ECHOS OF EMPTINESS: ANALYSING SET DESIGN AND CHARACTERS IN *WAITING FOR GODOT*

The *theatrum mundi* metaphor portrays life as a dynamic drama in which individuals take on different roles. At one level, this metaphor suggests that life and reality can be understood as one big theatre performance, where everything beyond our immediate perception – such as the direction and stage equipment – exists only in the context of that performance. At another level, it implies that there is something deeper, or even meaningful, underlying these performances. At the same time, this metaphor evokes a sense of stability, proposing that the actions of individuals are guided by a divine plan with eternally fixed instructions. This way, the *theatrum mundi* invites reflection on the meaning of human life, whether through the comedies and tragedies that mould it, or through the fragility of human existence in the face of eternal temporality.

In her 1967 work “*Theatrum Mundi* and Contemporary Theatre”, Ruby Cohn explores the idea of the world as a stage, a concept captured in William Shakespeare’s line from *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 682). Cohn describes humanity as playing roles under the direction of gods or a higher power, a vision that closely aligns with *Waiting for Godot*. In Beckett’s play, the characters’ actions and destinies seem to be governed by external forces, like actors directed by an invisible hand. The structure of the play echoes the essence of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor, especially in the way it engages the audience to reflect on the nature of life, control, and free will. This is evident in the following passage:

VLADIMIR: We wait. We are bored. [*He throws up his hand.*] No, don’t protest, we are bored to death, there’s no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let’s get to work. [*He advances towards the heap, stops in his stride.*] In an instant all will vanish and we’ll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness! [*He broods.*]
(Beckett, 2010, p. 293)

Although Vladimir and Estragon have the free will to leave and pursue their own desires, they remain trapped in a state of inertia, apparently under the influence of an external force. This dynamic reflects the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*, as the characters’ lives resemble a performance orchestrated by an invisible director. As

Cohn explains, the *theatrum mundi* differs from the *scena vitae* in that it includes an audience. While both concepts employ the image of the world as a stage and man as an actor, the *theatrum mundi* goes further, embracing an extra – worldly audience – be it Plato’s gods, for whom humanity is a plaything, or John of Salisbury’s God, who “looks down from eternity on the tragicomic business of the world’s stage” (Cohn, 1967, p. 28).

Beckett’s tragicomedy engages with the *theatrum mundi* metaphor in a manner that recalls its origins. The concept has deep philosophical and theological roots, symbolising the world as a stage where humans play out their lives, watched over by a supreme or divine being. According to Björn Quiring (*apud* McMullan, 2021), this idea of *theatrum mundi* was prevalent in sixteenth and seventeenth-century European theatre, especially in works such as those by William Shakespeare. Quiring explains that the metaphor includes both a divine interpretation, in which life is governed by a higher power, and a secular view that places human actions at the centre of the social order. These dual interpretations – divine and secular – highlight the flexibility of the metaphor, allowing it to portray life as contingent and unstable or as part of a grand preordained design.

On the one hand, the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* can portray life as a constant flow of roles, actors and plots, emphasising its contingent, fragile and deceptive nature. On the other hand, it can confer stability on life by suggesting that each actor’s destiny derives from the power of a transcendent director and follows eternally prescribed instructions. The metaphor can either denigrate or exalt the world, depending on whether the resulting “cosmic spectacle” is seen as meaningful or absurd. As Quiring observes, the decisive question is whether the theatre of the world is limitless: is there only the stage, the director and the stage equipment, or is there something beyond that, beyond our comprehension? (Quiring *apud* McMullan, 2021, p. 10).

Based on this analysis, Anna McMullan (2021) traces the evolution of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor, revealing how its meaning has changed over time. This analogy, therefore, can either diminish or exalt the real world, depending on how one perceives this universal *spectacle*. The crucial question raised by Quiring and McMullan is whether the theatre of the world is infinite or limited: whether there is only the stage, the director and the scenic equipment, or if there is something beyond,

above our comprehension. Over the years, and with the advance of science and technology, the divine aspect associated with the concept has gradually lost ground to a more secular, laboratory-like perspective: the *theatrum mundi* has become a space where humans are observed by other humans, rather than by a divine being.

McMullan focuses on the post-war shift from divine control to human observation in the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*, arguing that it has evolved from a cohesive allegory of divine action to a “mixed allegory of observation, a laboratory of epistemological concerns” (Haverkamp *apud* McMullan, 2021, p. 10). She interprets the *theatrum mundi* as a framework in which humans are no longer guided by a higher power but are observed and studied in a post-war context, in other words, by humans, as can be seen in the quote below:

[I]f the Christian concept of the *theatrum mundi* rescued appearances by making of the visible an index of the transcendent, Beckett simultaneously debunks the notion of divine spectatorship and the notion of the wholeness of the world that it guarantees.
(McMullan, 2021, p. 12)

This change reflects a broader cultural and philosophical transformation in which humanity, disillusioned by the horrors of war, and lost in a desolated world, began to lose faith in the divine order and place themselves at the centre of analysis. As McMullan notes, “The concern to present on stage a restricted environment in which humans and sometimes other species are regulated and observed as in the trope of the *theatrum mundi* can be traced across Beckett’s early plays and recurs in many of the later ones” (2021, p.14).

However, I argue that Beckett’s stage in *Waiting for Godot* goes beyond this dichotomy between divine control and human observation. The space in the play is not merely a laboratory for human observation; it is an arid desert where both divine and secular powers seem absent. The characters are abandoned not only by a higher power but by the very possibility of meaning. Vladimir and Estragon are trapped in a confined environment, observed by an outside force or by the audience, but there is no clear intervention – divine or otherwise – to provide direction or purpose, only the audience voyeur. As McMullan states:

Beckett’s dramatic works therefore invite the spectators to reflect on their role as both external observers activating the mechanisms which regulate the

onstage bodies, and as subjects of those mechanisms and the behavioural, perceptual and sensory conditions of the drama's ecosystem.
(McMullan, 2021, p. 19)

This absence amplifies the existential emptiness at the centre of the play, reflecting a world in which traditional structures of meaning have collapsed – a post-war reality in which humanity struggles with the loss of faith and the erosion of purpose. The *theatrum mundi* in *Waiting for Godot* is no longer a stage of divine order or human dominion, but one of existential uncertainty, where the characters' futile struggles reflect the wider human condition in a world devoid of redemption. Here, the role of the audience becomes crucial: by witnessing Didi and Gogo's cyclical suffering, they sustain the very mechanisms of the play, their attention fuelling the characters' illusory hope, just as social or existential forces perpetuate human illusions of meaning. However, the spectators are not passive observers – they too are trapped in the same absurd cycle, waiting, interpreting and facing the void along with the characters. In this way, theatre becomes a closed system, a microcosm of existence in which observation involves the spectator, linking them to the cruel ecosystem of drama. In this way, Beckett involves both stage and audience in a shared performance of conditioned futility, in which the act of watching mirrors the human struggle for meaning in a world that offers none.

That said, I postulate that *Waiting for Godot* creates a microcosm that allows for two main interpretive possibilities: the divine and the laboratory. The divine interpretation suggests that Vladimir and Estragon are creations of a higher power, placed in their dystopian environment and manipulated by external forces to reveal deeper meanings beneath their seemingly meaningless dialogue. In this vision, their waiting and interactions can be seen as part of a grand design, although obscure, orchestrated by an invisible director. Alternatively, the laboratory interpretation frames the characters – especially Didi and Gogo – as trapped in a controlled stage environment, observed and judged by an audience. Here, the play becomes a metaphorical experiment, in which the characters' actions and reactions are minutely analysed, reflecting broader existential questions about human behaviour and the search for meaning.

This chapter focuses mainly on the interpretation of the laboratory-like perspective, examining how the characters' actions are influenced by the audience's

reactions and how these interactions shape the play's exploration of the meaning of life. Each laugh, giggle, or reaction from the audience conditions the characters to act in a certain way, subtly altering the dynamics of the performance and impacting the central message conveyed by the play. This game between the stage and the audience raises profound questions about the meaning of life. By involving the audience in this way, Beckett transforms the theatrical experience into a collaborative exploration of existential uncertainty, where the boundaries between performance and reality blur.

In *Waiting for Godot*, this connection between the performance and the audience is made explicit. At various moments, especially in the stage directions, Didi and Gogo look at the audience and contemplate their presence. This direct engagement reinforces the performative nature of their existence and invites its audience to reflect on their own role in the unfolding drama. By breaking the fourth wall, Beckett not only emphasises the theatricality of the characters' lives but also blurs the line between performance and reality, leading the audience to consider their own participation in the *theatrum mundi* of existence.

In the context of the relationship between theatre and the gods, the audience takes on a vital role, immersing themselves in the theatrical experience and, in doing so, actively shaping their own reality. This dynamic is exemplified by the reaction of the San Quentin prisoners who saw *Waiting for Godot*. Many of them identified deeply with the characters, seeing themselves reflected in the struggles of Vladimir and Estragon. For some, Godot became a symbol of society in general, personifying the deep disappointment that would accompany his eventual arrival. This response emphasises the critical role of the audience in constructing the meaning and impact of the play. Far from being passive observers, spectators actively participate in the 'conclusion' of the work, imbuing it with personal and collective meanings.

The interaction between the performance and its spectators is in line with the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*, which transforms the audience as an integral part of the theatre experience. In *Waiting for Godot*, the audience's interpretation of Godot as a symbol of social failure illustrates how the play promotes a dynamic relationship between the stage and the spectators. This relationship is further emphasised by modern theories of performativity, such as those articulated by Peggy Phelan (1996), who argues that the audience plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning. Phelan's ideas emphasise the collaborative nature of performance, where the

boundaries between actors and spectators dissolve, and the act of watching becomes an active and partaking process.

In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1996), Peggy Phelan offers an in-depth exploration of the relationship between performance, identity, and representation. At the heart of her work, Phelan challenges traditional notions of visibility and the construction of meaning, arguing that the most powerful aspects of performance often lie in what remains unspoken, unseen, or unrepresented. She criticises the reliance on visual and material evidence to construct meaning, advocating instead an understanding of performance as an ephemeral act that resists fixed interpretations. Phelan's stress on the role of the audience in completing the meaning of a performance aligns closely with the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*, which positions spectators as active participants in the theatrical experience. This perspective provides a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamic relationship between Beckett's tragicomedy and its audience and readers. Phelan's emphasis on disappearance in performance resonates with broader philosophical perspectives on withdrawal and invisibility, a notion further developed in David Le Breton's concept of *disappearing self*, which explores how individuals retreat in the face of the pressures of visibility in modern existence.

While Le Breton examines how individuals seek to escape the demands of modern existence by withdrawing from visibility, Phelan argues that the potency of performance lies in its ephemerality – its resistance to being fully documented or preserved. Together, these perspectives illuminate how Beckett's play questions the valorisation of the visible and the material in contemporary culture. In *Waiting for Godot*, the inertia of the characters and the minimalist set design reflect a deliberate rejection of visual and material excess. The desolate setting, marked only by a solitary tree and an empty road, becomes a space where meaning is perpetually deferred rather than fixed. This aligns with Phelan's assertion that the most impactful aspects of performance often lie in what remains unsaid or unseen. Similarly, Vladimir and Estragon's existential stasis can be interpreted, through Le Breton's lens, as a form of "disappearing from themselves". By refraining from purposeful action, they resist social expectations to perform and be seen, embodying a mode of existential resistance. The role of the audience in *Waiting for Godot* further highlights the interaction between disappearance and ephemerality. As Phelan argues, watching is an active and

partaking process that dissolves the boundaries between performers and spectators. In Beckett's play, the audience's responses – whether laughter, discomfort, or silence – actively shape the performance, creating a dynamic tension between visibility and invisibility. This resonates with Le Breton's notion that disappearance can constitute a form of engagement, as the audience "disappears" into the performance, becoming co-creators of its meaning.

By synthesising the ideas of Le Breton and Phelan, we can more fully appreciate how *Waiting for Godot* criticises the over-reliance on visual and material evidence, inviting reflection on the limitations of representation and the importance of what remains invisible. This way, Beckett's play emerges not only as a critique of modern society's obsession with visibility but also as a profound meditation on the human impulse to escape, resist and redefine oneself. Through its exploration of absence, inaction and ephemerality, *Waiting for Godot* challenges conventional modes of constructing meaning, offering a reimagining of performance and existence. This tension between visibility and disappearance is not only represented by the inaction of the characters but is also embodied in Beckett's bleak scenography. The empty stage, marked only by a tree and a desolate road, embodies the very absence and ephemerality that Phelan describes. Just as the audience must actively construct the meaning of the performance, they must also project meaning onto the barren landscape. Beckett's use of minimalism, similarly to performance art's resistance to reproduction, forces spectators to take an active role as co-creators of meaning, rather than mere passive observers.

In her book, Phelan (1996) argues that performance derives its power from its disappearance – its inability to be completely captured or preserved. This concept resonates once more with the existential themes of *Waiting for Godot*, where the actions of the characters and the meaning of the play are constantly postponed, leaving the audience to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty. As Phelan writes:

In performance art spectatorship there is an element of consumption: there are no left-overs, the gazing spectator must try to take everything in. Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility – in a maniacally charged present – and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control.
(Phelan, 1996, p. 148).

As in Phelan's description of performance, Beckett's play demands the audience's total engagement since there are no leftovers or definitive answers to revisit. The characters' waiting and the play's unresolved questions create a "maniacally charged present" (Phelan, 1996) that remains in the spectator's memory, resisting regulation and control. By embracing the ephemeral and participatory nature of performance, *Waiting for Godot* invites the audience to reflect on their own role in the wider drama of existence. Phelan's emphasis on the audience's role in completing the meaning of performance highlights how Beckett's play transforms spectators into co-creators of the theatrical experience.

The arid setting and repetitive dialogue invite the audience to fill in the gaps in the play, creating their own interpretations. The audience's laughter, discomfort, and silence shape the characters' actions and responses, reinforcing the notion that life, like theatre, is a performance directed by invisible forces – including the audience's own expectations and interpretations. This interaction between the audience and the characters amplifies the theme of performance and control, adding depth to Beckett's minimalist scenario. This idea is in line with McMullan's (2021) observation that theatre functions as a didactic allegory: theatre is theatre and should be seen as a parable. McMullan observes that Beckett's first dramatic works flirt with the *theatrum mundi*, using satire to criticise social structures before adopting the more introspective tone seen in *Waiting for Godot*. This shift brings the social behaviour of the characters to the fore, highlighting their struggles within a performative structure that reflects the wider human condition.

The concept of *theatrum mundi*, in which life is portrayed as a stage under external control, is deeply rooted in Beckett's tragicomedy. This is evident in a German production of the play directed by Samuel Beckett himself. According to Lawrence Graver's student guide to *Waiting for Godot* (2004), Beckett initially described the dynamic of the play as a *caged dynamic*, representing the characters' sense of imprisonment and symbolising their lack of control over their own destiny. One can observe this in the excerpt below:

Directing his renowned production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Schiller Theater in Berlin in 1975, Beckett noted that the tempo he wished to achieve at the outset was of 'a caged dynamic', an oxymoronic phrase that handsomely catches the clashing elements in the emerging rhythm of the play. The concept has a quite literal but also a larger metaphorical dimension.

Concretely, it refers to the way the restless Vladimir and the sluggish Estragon move on stage, perpetually separating and coming back together, in meticulously choreographed sequences that give the play much of its balletic quality. But Vladimir and Estragon, like all human beings, exist in other sets of circles: living organisms subject to the cycles of time, on a round planet, orbiting the sun. Within the cage of that circle their possibilities are limited. They have been born, they will live for a term and then die; but at the same time that they acknowledge these facts they resist them by recreating and asserting meaning in the face of the fundamental negative constraints that define their condition.
(Graver, 2004, pp. 24, 25)

This decision of using a “dynamic cage” reflects Beckett’s subtle approach to illustrating the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* – in which the characters’ limitations and existential imprisonment are suggested rather than explicitly shown. The 1975 German production, *Warten auf Godot*, had a set that strongly proposed that it was not an interior space, but a *scenic cosmos*, with its own rules, including a mechanical moon, i.e., its own microcosm.

Disparaître de Soi: une tentation contemporaine (2015) by David Le Breton, offers a convincing framework for understanding the existential struggles of the characters in this theatrical universe. Le Breton explores how individuals seek to disappear from the pressures of modern life, often through withdrawal or inaction. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon’s endless waiting and repetitive actions imply a form of existential disappearance. They are trapped in a cycle, unable to move forward or find meaning in their existence. This mirrors Le Breton’s observation that modern individuals often withdraw from life as a way of coping with its absurdity and demands. Having introduced this concept, I will be using it to explore the play’s setting, moving on to the analysis itself.

At various points in the play, Didi and Gogo refer directly to the sparse elements of the stage, especially its overwhelming emptiness. The stage directions specify a barren setting: a single tree, a country road and nighttime. One of the most notable changes between the two acts is the transformation of the tree. In Act I, the tree is leafless, leading Vladimir to suggest that it may be dead or out of season, as seen in the following moment:

VLADIMIR: We’re waiting for Godot.
ESTRAGON: [*despairingly*] Ah! [*Pause.*] You’re sure it was here?
VLADIMIR: What?
ESTRAGON: That we were to wait.
VLADIMIR: He said by the tree. [*They look at the tree.*] Do you see any others?

ESTRAGON: What is it?
 VLADIMIR: I don't know. A willow.
 ESTRAGON: Where are the leaves?
 VLADIMIR: It must be dead.
 ESTRAGON: No more weeping.
 VLADIMIR: Or perhaps it's not the season.
 (Beckett, 2010, p. 29 – 31)

Like many trees, the willow loses its leaves in winter and regains them in spring. In Act II, the tree is lush and full of leaves, under which Didi and Gogo once again contemplate hanging themselves – a sombre but moving attempt to feel something, even a physical response, like an erection. Although the passage of time is not explicitly indicated in the text, the subtle change in the tree's appearance marks a notable difference between the acts, suggesting a long passage of time on stage. This transformation is observed by Vladimir in Act II, when he comments on the tree's new foliage:

VLADIMIR: Wait... we embraced... we were happy... happy... what do we do now that we're happy... go on waiting... waiting... let me think... it's coming... go on waiting... now that we're happy... let me see... ah! The tree!
 ESTRAGON: The tree?
 VLADIMIR: Do you not remember?
 ESTRAGON: I'm tired.
 VLADIMIR: Look at it.
They look at the tree.
 ESTRAGON: I see nothing.
 VLADIMIR: 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!
 (Beckett, 2010, p. 227 – 229)

The subtle change of the tree contrasts with the stasis experienced by the characters, who remain stuck in the same cyclical routine. The second act, with its indistinct changes in setting, introduces what I perceive as a distinct microcosm, a space that both reflects and intensifies the characters' existential struggle. In contrast, my interpretation of Beckett's use of space emphasises the existential emptiness and paralysis that the setting represents. The barren, sparse setting – dominated by a single tree – mirrors the characters' lack of agency and the futility of their actions. Whereas McMullan (2021) sees the space as a laboratory of observation, I see it more as a physical manifestation of existential inertia, where the characters are not just being observed but are actively trapped in a meaningless void. In this second microcosm,

we can observe at least seven major differences: the willow tree now has leaves, Pozzo has become blind and dependent on others, Lucky has descended further into degradation, and Didi and Gogo's memories have deteriorated, as they cannot recall the events of Act I. Didi demonstrates a growing existential despair, with his speeches becoming more introspective and reflective about their situation. Finally, there is the boy who once again brings a message from Godot. These changes, though almost imperceptible, are significant for understanding how time passes in the play. Furthermore, while McMullan focuses on how the *theatrum mundi* positions the characters in a microcosm of observation, I see the play's use of time and space – specifically the small changes between Acts I and II, such as the emergence of leaves on the tree – as reinforcing the cyclical and futile nature of existence. Time passes, but space and the characters' internal states remain trapped, suggesting a deeper existential paralysis rather than a purely observational framework.

The passage of time intensifies their existential angst as they continue to forget about each other and their mutual dependence on survival. As Le Breton states,

[...] because of this habitual difficulty in finding one's place in the world, the individual abandons the struggle and, to a greater or lesser extent, allows oneself to be carried away by circumstances. The individual doesn't know they have the power to change things. It's a no-win situation. Withdrawing is the last chance to avoid being crushed or suffocated by its weight.
(Le Breton, 2018, p. 21-22, my translation)¹⁵

This notion of abandoning the struggle resonates with Didi and Gogo's condition. Rather than confronting the uncertainties that surround them or attempting to escape their endless waiting, they allow themselves to be drawn into the repetitive cycle in which they live, unable to recognise their own power to act. By abandoning the struggle, Didi and Gogo are not merely abandoning their immediate situation; they are abandoning their search for identity, individuality, and freedom. Their abandonment of the search for meaning highlights one of the central tensions of *Waiting for Godot*: the conflict between agency – the ability to act or make meaningful choices – and the overwhelming futility of existence. Although small changes do occur, such as the

¹⁵ “[...] ou às vezes por sua costumeira dificuldade de encontrar seu lugar no mundo, o indivíduo abandona a luta e com maior ou menor intensidade se deixa levar pelas circunstâncias. Às vezes é dessa forma que ele encontra o tão desejado sossego. Ele sabe não dispor de poder para mudar as coisas. Qualquer discussão fracassaria. É uma situação sem saída. Retirar-se é a última possibilidade de evitar ser esmagado ou ser sufocado por seu peso”.

sprouting of leaves on the willow tree and small alterations in their circumstances, Vladimir and Estragon remain passive, trapped in a cycle of waiting and inaction. The world around them may evolve, but an existential inertia paralyses them. Beckett's sparse setting amplifies this paralysis. The minimalist set design of the tragicomedy play is not an isolated choice but can be understood in the broader context of the theatre of absurd and minimalist art. This approach reflects a minimalist philosophy in which space itself becomes a tool for expressing absence, futility, and stasis.

Beckett's use of emptiness echoes the work of other Absurdist, such as Ionesco, whose arid settings also emphasised existential isolation. However, Beckett takes this aesthetic further by using space not just as a backdrop but as a character in itself – one that stresses the sense of paralysis that grips Vladimir and Estragon. Similarly, in Minimalist art, figures such as Donald Judd and Carl Andre focus on space and emptiness to provoke reflection and introspection, encouraging viewers to engage with what is not there as much as what is. In this sense, Beckett's stage design aligns with Minimalist movements in art and architecture, where emptiness is not an absence of meaning but a space in which meaning must be constructed by the audience. This intertextual approach deepens our understanding of the setting not only as a reflection of the existential state of the characters, but also as a commentary on modern artistic movements that explore the limits of form, space, and meaning.

According to Lawrence Graver *Waiting for Godot* students guide, the tree has different meaning in numerous cultures, and it can change depending on where production takes place, after all,

For many audiences, the spare tree alone on stage is likely to suggest different trees in mythical literature that symbolize hope, divine life, and immortality. For some, it is likely to be reminiscent of the cross, and it might also echo the allusion in Act I to the tree of life mentioned in the Book of Proverbs (although it has been associated by some with the tree on which Judas hanged himself). Others have connected it to Dante's tree at the gate of hell, to the Buddhist Bo tree, to Pascal's 'thinking reed', and to Yggdrasil, the tree that spread over the world in Norse mythology.
(Graver, 2014, p. 60)

The tree on stage acts as a symbolic mirror, reflecting the beliefs, myths and concerns of those who observe it. Its ambiguity is its strength, allowing for multiple readings that enrich the artistic experience. In this context, the willow represents both the transience of life, the possibility of renewal, divine life or even immortality. However, rather than

seeing this as a sign of hope, the Vladimir and Estragon contemplate using the tree for suicide, highlighting their existential despair. Thus, the tree becomes an emblem of their desire to end the suffering of a meaningless existence rather than a symbol of resilience.

This thematic barrenness extends to the characters themselves, whose identities seem as unstable as their perceptions of time. Didi and Gogo's frequent memory lapses and confusion about past events heighten their disorientation, leaving them in a perpetual present. Their repetitive dialogue and actions reinforce a cyclical structure that mirrors their existential stagnation. Without a coherent sense of identity, they depend on each other – and the elusive Godot – for validation. Without clear memories or a future to anchor them, they exist in a fragile state of self, struggling with the meaning of their existence. The play reflects on the fragility (and blankness) of human identity and the lack of purpose in an indifferent universe, highlighting the passivity of the characters and the minimalist setting that symbolises a world without meaning. Beckett's minimalist setting reinforces this uncertainty, with its stark emptiness symbolising a world devoid of direction or meaning. Vladimir and Estragon are left to navigate this void, confronting their own insignificance and the futility of their actions.

As such, the barren stage of *Waiting for Godot* becomes a visual metaphor for the characters' existential dilemma, while their repetitive actions express the play's themes of stagnation and futility. Beckett's exploration of the *theatrum mundi* – life as a stage governed by external forces – deepens the sense of imprisonment and helplessness, raising questions about identity, agency, and the search for meaning in a world that offers no easy answers.

In her dissertation, Iuliana Gherghescu mentions a theatrical presentation of *Waiting for Godot*. In chapter two, where she notes that she begins to plan how the play's set would be assembled, Gherghescu comments: "In my opinion, Beckett's protagonists are in a similar impasse; they are not physically trapped, but mentally, spiritually and psychologically, and they are waiting for a resolution" (2014, p. 16). She comments that what she wanted most was to have an impact similar to that which the prisoners at San Quentin had when they watched *Waiting for Godot*, to create "a strange and claustrophobic feeling" (Gherghescu, 2014). She also cites the importance of Camus to the development of her creation and how repetition is present in our lives

and can eventually even become an automated way of living. Gherghescu states that “We talk every day about boredom, about doing the same thing over and over again, so many times that it reaches a point where it lacks purpose and meaning, hence the absurdity of modern existence” (2014, p. 20). When setting up the stage for the play, Gherghescu states that the most important process was to follow Beckett’s guidelines about the country road and the solitary tree, in addition to other elements she used herself. The purpose, according to her, is that “everything is open to interpretation according to each person’s understanding and feelings” (2014, p. 24). In her final remarks, Gherghescu comments on how she felt when setting up the design of the play, revealing how *Waiting for Godot* is extremely relevant today. She states that

From the very first moment, I felt that the play is an expression of the current situation of Western man dealing with this confusing new century. Many argue that the play is old and not suitable for contemporary audiences. In my personal opinion, for this society overwhelmed by new media technologies, where human relationships change extremely quickly, the theme of the play still seems appropriate for the world of modern theatre. (Gherghescu, 2014, p. 48).

In many ways, the thoughts expressed by Gherghescu are similar to what I have expressed in this dissertation: Beckett’s play is composed of disconnected conversations, reflecting the existential emptiness of each of us and, in many situations, triggering the horror of what is yet to come.

I argue here that this lack of control over their own lives is not unique to *Waiting for Godot* or its characters such as Vladimir and Estragon; however it is echoed in other characters created by Beckett, who also struggle with a lack of identity or even the inability to act meaningfully. A good example is the two – act play *Happy Days* (1961), that the character Winnie is buried up to her waist (and later up to her neck) in a mound of earth, unable to move or escape her condition. Despite her extreme physical situation, Winnie insists on maintaining an upbeat attitude, repeating phrases such as “Another happy day!” (Beckett, 2006, p. 146). However, her upbeat speech is contrasted with her physical immobility, highlighting the disconnect between her mind and her body. Winnie has no agency; she is trapped in a cycle of repetition and waiting, much like Vladimir and Estragon. Her identity is also fragmented, as she clings to everyday objects – a toothbrush, a mirror – as if they could define who she is. However, these objects are as ephemeral and meaningless as her own words.

Winnie, like Vladimir and Estragon, is a prisoner of her own circumstance, unable to escape or find meaning. These characters exist in a limbo where action is futile, and identity is illusory. The barren stage of *Waiting for Godot*, with its solitary tree and road that leads nowhere, reflects this condition. Vladimir and Estragon repeat gestures and dialogue, waiting for Godot, but their waiting is as meaningless as Winnie's speech. They have no agency; their actions are mechanical, driven by an external force they neither understand nor control.

The identities of these characters are also constantly questioned. Vladimir and Estragon forget who they are and what they did in the past, just as Winnie clings to objects to remind herself of herself. Likewise, the protagonist of Beckett's novel *The Unnamable* (1953) struggles to define his own existence in a disjointed monologue. This lack of identity is linked to a lack of agency: without a clear sense of who they are, the characters cannot act authentically or meaningfully. They are trapped in a cycle of repetition, in which the past is forgotten, the present is empty, and the future is uncertain.

Thus, Beckett's minimalist stage is not just a setting, but an extension of his characters' existential condition. The tree, the road, and the empty sky are symbols of their lack of agency and identity, while the repetition of their actions and words reinforces the futility of their existence. Through the *theatrum mundi*, Beckett shows us that in a universe governed by external forces, life is a performance without a script, where the characters – and, by extension, we – are actors with no control over our own destiny.

In short, while McMullan's interpretation of Beckett's use of space as a laboratory for human observation offers a compelling lens, my reading focuses on the stage as a visual representation of the characters' existential emptiness. Where McMullan sees an audience observing a theatrical experiment, I see Beckett using the barren space to emphasise the futility and stasis that define the human condition in a world of blankness, devoid of meaning. This meaninglessness is reflected not only in Vladimir and Estragon but also in other Beckett characters, such as Winnie from *Happy Days*, who is buried in a mound of earth, repeats optimistic gestures and phrases, while her physical immobility condemns her to passivity. Much like Vladimir and Estragon, Winnie is unable to escape or find any meaning in an absurdist world.

The barren stage serves not only as a physical backdrop but also as a metaphorical space where the characters' lack of agency and existential crises are fully realised. The sparse environment restricts Vladimir and Estragon's movements and options, confining them to a desolate setting that offers no stimulation, meaning, or variety. The lack of props and the emphasis on emptiness heighten the importance of their interactions. Devoid of external distractions, the audience's attention is directed entirely to the dialogue and physicality of Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, and Lucky, placing their fragmented conversations and repetitive actions under scrutiny. The absurdity and futility of their behaviour are amplified as Beckett's minimalist setting removes any external elements that might obscure the play's existential themes. The arid space forces both the characters and the audience to confront the void and the blank directly.

Moreover, the play's use of repetition, both in dialogue and action, underlines the characters' inability to escape their existential dilemma. Each conversation between Didi and Gogo echoes previous exchanges, suggesting that they are trapped in an endless loop, reenacting the same moments with slight variations. This repetition mirrors the play's cyclical structure, which begins and ends in nearly identical circumstances. Beckett's decision to confine the action to a single location reinforces the notion that the characters are going nowhere, both literally and metaphorically. Their repeated attempts to leave, followed by inevitable failures, further underscore their imprisonment in both the physical space of the play and the existential space of their lives. This spatial and temporal limitation also serves as a metaphor for the human condition explored in existentialist thought. Vladimir and Estragon's inability to escape or find meaning in their surroundings reflects the existentialist view that individuals are condemned to create meaning in a universe that offers none. The sparse setting serves as a blank canvas onto which the characters project their fears, hopes, and frustrations. However, without any guiding narrative or framework, they are left to struggle in a world that offers no clear answers or direction. Their interactions with Pozzo and Lucky, as well as their repetitive dialogue, lead nowhere, reflecting the dynamics of power and dependency that shape human relationships. Ultimately, these interactions only serve to stress the characters' isolation and the futility of their search for meaning, leading to their fading.

The minimalist set in *Waiting for Godot* is thus much more than a mere backdrop – the emptiness of the stage mirrors the characters’ inner emptiness, while the few props, such as the tree, take on symbolic meanings that challenge conventional interpretations of life, growth, and renewal. By employing minimalist design, Beckett amplifies the sense of stasis and futility that defines the characters’ existence. The audience, as well as the characters, are forced to confront the stark realities of a world devoid of inherent meaning. Furthermore, Beckett’s tragicomedy on the light of the *theatrum mundi* deepens this sense of entrapment, positioning the characters as performers on a stage controlled by unseen forces. Yet, despite these constraints, the characters remain responsible for making sense of their lives within the indifference of the universe.

The minimalist stage becomes a metaphor for Vladimir and Estragon lives – empty, directionless, and devoid of meaning. The characters’ interactions and all their futile attempts to find purpose are amplified by the austerity of their surroundings. The audience is forced to confront the same emptiness, the same questions, and the same lack of answers that haunt Didi and Gogo. The tree, as the only significant prop on stage, assumes a multifaceted role. In Act I, it stands barren, a symbol of death or dormancy. Vladimir’s speculation that it may be “out of season” suggests a cyclical nature, a glimmer of hope that change is possible. In Act II, the tree sprouts leaves, a possible sign of life and renewal. However, this change is met with indifference by the characters. The tree’s transformation, rather than offering hope, only highlights the stasis in their lives. As time passes, the natural world evolves, but Didi and Gogo remain trapped in their cycle of waiting and inaction.

At one point, overwhelmed by the boredom of their existence, Didi and Gogo look at the tree. Then, filled with energy, they decide to “do the tree” to move their bodies and perhaps bring meaning to their lives. The scene takes place as described in the extract below:

ESTRAGON: I’m tired breathing.
 VLADIMIR: You’re right. *[Pause.]* Let’s just do the tree, for the balance.
 ESTRAGON: The tree?
 Vladimir does the tree, staggering about on one leg.
 VLADIMIR: *[stopping]* Your turn.
Estragon does the tree, staggers.
 ESTRAGON: Do you think God sees me?
 VLADIMIR: You must close your eyes.
Estragon closes his eyes, staggers worse.

ESTRAGON: *[stopping, brandishing his fists, at the top of his voice.]* God have pity on me!
(Beckett, 2010, p. 275)

When analysing Beckett's tragicomedy, Graver – quoting Ruby Cohn – makes an observation about Estragon and Vladimir's attempt to reproduce the tree. According to him, the seemingly absurd staging synthesises the characters' daily repetition and search for meaning, even if it is through simple chaotic imitation. As Graver and Ruby Cohn have observed,

[I]t is no small wonder that Vladimir and Estragon stagger when they 'do' the tree. Yet 'doing the tree' is one of the most telling of Beckett's mimes, not only because of symbolic reverberations, but because the scene expresses so much of what has been happening up till now in the dramatic movement of the entire play. Here, Didi and Gogo again find a consummate style for their despair, blending all of their characteristic tones. Vladimir's suggestion that they do the tree 'for the balance' reveals something of the speculative man's desire to move the earlier set of mundane exercises to some loftier level of poise and harmony.
(Graver, 2004, p.61)

Graver states that the scene in which Vladimir and Estragon try to *make the tree* in *Waiting for Godot*, emphasising its significance within the play. The seemingly absurd act synthesises themes such as repetition, the characters' search for meaning in their chaotic microcosm. Vladimir's suggestion that they do this "for balance" reflects a failed attempt to impose order on a chaotic world. The gesture, at once physical and symbolic, reveals the human contradiction of persisting in empty rituals, even in the face of a lack of answers. The scene shows how Beckett uses minimal actions to expose the existential condition of the characters, turning the play into an allegory of how humans insist on creating meaning even when none exists – and perhaps never will.

The road, another key element of the setting, symbolises the possibility of movement, of change. Yet it is a road that leads nowhere. The characters often discuss leaving but never do. Their inability to move on, to act, reflects their existential paralysis. The road becomes a cruel joke, a reminder of their imprisonment. It is a path that promises escape but offers only the same emptiness. The audience, as well as the characters, are faced with questions such as where this road might lead, if there is a destination, or if it is all just a trick of the mind.

The interplay between the characters and the set design is crucial to understanding the play's themes. Vladimir and Estragon's interactions with the tree and the road reveal their inner turmoil. They are not just waiting for Godot; they are waiting for meaning, for purpose, for something to fill the blank. The set, with its austere simplicity, amplifies their struggle. The emptiness of the stage becomes a character in its own right, a silent presence that looms over the characters, reminding them of their insignificance. The audience is also drawn into this emptiness, forced to grapple with the same existential dilemmas that haunt Didi and Gogo. The play forces the audience to confront the fundamental uncertainties of human existence: the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe, the possibility of purpose in a life defined by waiting, and the tension between hope and futility that defines the human condition. Like the characters, the audience is left to navigate these questions, finding no easy answers but rather a mirror for their own struggles with meaning and existence, which creates a self-feeding effect of horror.

Beckett's use of repetition further reinforces the sense of existential horror. The characters' dialogue is full of echoes, with phrases and ideas that reappear throughout the play. This repetition creates a sense of *déjà vu* as if the characters are stuck in a loop, reliving the same moments repeatedly. The cyclical structure of the play mirrors this repetition. Act II is almost a mirror image of Act I, with slight variations. The tree grows leaves, Pozzo goes blind, and Lucky is further degraded, but the essential dynamics remain the same. The characters are no closer to finding meaning or escaping their dilemma. This repetition echoes the play's central theme: the futility of existing in a universe that offers no answers.

The role of the audience in this dynamic cannot be ignored. Beckett's decision to break the fourth wall, having the characters address the audience directly, blurs the line between performance and reality. The audience becomes a participant in the play, a co-creator of its meaning. Laughter, silence, discomfort – all these reactions shape the performance, adding another layer to the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*. The audience, like the characters, is caught in the same existential dilemma and dread. We are all waiting for something, searching for meaning in a world that often seems empty and indifferent.

Waiting, the central theme of the play transcends the simple expectation of Godot's arrival. It becomes a metaphor for the human condition, encapsulating

uncertainty, passivity, and the endless search for meaning that may never be revealed. Vladimir and Estragon are not just waiting for Godot; they are waiting for something that can justify their existence, something that gives meaning to the time they spend together, repeating gestures and words that have already lost their meaning. This endless waiting reflects the very nature of human existence, where the future is always uncertain, and the present is an eternal “meanwhile”.

A symbolic passage that illustrates this idea occurs when Vladimir asks, “What are we doing here?” and Estragon replies, “We are waiting for Godot.” (Beckett, 2010, p. 15). This seemingly simple dialogue reveals the essence of the play: waiting is both an action and an inaction. They are doing something – waiting – but at the same time, they are doing nothing that will change their condition. This duality is central to understanding the existential paralysis and dread that the characters face. Waiting, then, is not just an act of patience, but a manifestation of one’s impotence in the face of a consuming disappearance of the self.

The relationship between Vladimir and Estragon also reinforces this idea. They depend on each other to maintain the illusion that their waiting has a purpose. When Estragon suggests that they could separate, Vladimir responds: “We can’t. We are waiting for Godot”. (Beckett, 2010, p. 45). This mutual dependence is both a source of comfort and frustration. They support each other, but they also limit each other, trapped in a cycle of repetition that leads nowhere. Their relationship is a microcosm of human relationships, where the need for connection coexists with the inability to transcend one’s own condition.

The arrival of Pozzo and Lucky in both acts also serves to highlight repetition and futility. In Act I, Pozzo is a powerful, controlling man, and Lucky is his submissive servant. In Act II, Pozzo is blind and dependent, while Lucky is mute. This reversal of roles might propose change, but it only underlines the sense that nothing changes. Pozzo and Lucky, like Vladimir and Estragon, are trapped in their own cycles of domination and submission, unable to escape their dysfunctional dynamics.

The play also challenges the audience to reflect on their own condition. By breaking the fourth wall and directly engaging the audience, Beckett invites us to see ourselves reflected in Vladimir and Estragon. Their waiting is our waiting; their doubts are our doubts. When Vladimir looks out at the audience and asks, “What are we doing here?” he is not just talking to himself or to Estragon – he is talking to us. This direct

interaction transforms the theatre into a mirror, where the audience is forced to confront their own waiting and uncertainty in the development of the play, and in dealing with the stasis of the modern world.

Ultimately, *Waiting for Godot* offers not answers, but questions. The play does not tell us why we wait or what we should wait for; instead, it makes us question why we continue to wait, despite the seeming futility of the situation at hand. Like Vladimir and Estragon, we all search for meaning in a world that often seems indifferent. And like them, we often find ourselves trapped in cycles of repetition, waiting for something that may never come. Beckett's genius lies in showing us that perhaps the waiting itself is the meaning – or the lack thereof.

The appearances of Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* are crucial moments that interrupt the monotony of Vladimir and Estragon's waiting, but they also serve to reinforce the stasis and futility that permeate the play. In Act I, Pozzo and Lucky are introduced as almost caricatured figures: Pozzo, the authoritarian and pompous master, and Lucky, his submissive and mistreated servant. Their dynamic is marked by a relationship of explicit domination, where Pozzo controls Lucky with a rope and treats him as an object, while Lucky, despite his degraded condition, bears the physical and symbolic burden of his submission.

The scene in which Lucky is forced to think under Pozzo's orders is one of the most absurd and disturbing moments in the play. When Pozzo shouts "Think, dog!" (Beckett, 2010, p. 40), Lucky unleashes a chaotic and nearly incomprehensible monologue, filled with fragments of philosophy, theology, and science. This speech, though seemingly meaningless, offers a critique of empty intellectualization and the inability of language to convey real meaning. Lucky, in his condition as a slave, is forced to perform thought, but his speech is as fragmented as his very existence. He is a symbol of dehumanization and exploitation, but also of silent resistance, as his very presence challenges Pozzo's authority.

In Act II, however, the dynamic between Pozzo and Lucky changes dramatically. Pozzo, who was once the dominant one, is now as powerless as Lucky. He can no longer see the world around him, and his arrogance has been replaced by a pathetic vulnerability. Lucky, on the other hand, has lost his voice – literally and metaphorically – and has become even more of a puppet, dragging Pozzo along with him as he wanders. This transformation is emblematic of the cyclical and dreadful nature of

existence portrayed in the play. In Act I, Pozzo and Lucky represent an explicit power relationship, where domination and submission are clearly defined. In Act II, this relationship dissolves into a chaotic interdependence, where both are equally lost. Yet, despite this apparent shift, the essence of their dynamic remains the same: they are also trapped in a cycle of exploitation and suffering, unable to escape their roles.

Vladimir and Estragon's reactions to Pozzo and Lucky also reveal much about their own condition. In Act I, they seem both fascinated and disturbed by the relationship between the two. Vladimir tries to intervene, questioning Pozzo about his treatment of Lucky, but it never goes beyond superficial curiosity. Estragon, on the other hand, seems more interested in taking advantage of the situation, attempting to steal the bones that Pozzo throws at Lucky. This passivity in the face of Pozzo's cruelty reflects Vladimir and Estragon's own inertia. They recognise the injustice but do nothing to change it, just as they do nothing to change their own situation.

In Act II, when Pozzo and Lucky return, Vladimir and Estragon barely recognise them. Pozzo, now blind, insists that he has never seen them before, and Vladimir and Estragon are confused, wondering whether they are in the same place or whether time has passed differently for each of them. This confusion exemplifies the theme of faulty memory and distorted perception of time that permeates the play. Vladimir and Estragon's inability to recognise Pozzo and Lucky – or to be recognised by them – suggests that in a universe without meaning, even human relationships become ephemeral and meaningless.

The scene in which Lucky falls and cannot get up on his own is particularly emblematic. Vladimir and Estragon try to help him, but their assistance is ineffective and almost comical, as one can observe in the excerpt below:

VLADIMIR: But will he be able to walk?
 POZZO: Walk or crawl! *[He kicks Lucky.]* Up pig!
 ESTRAGON: Perhaps he's dead.
 VLADIMIR: You'll kill him.
 POZZO: Up scum! *[He jerks the rope.]* Help me!
 VLADIMIR: How?
 POZZO: Raise him up!
Vladimir and Estragon hoist Lucky to his feet, support him and instant, them let him go. He falls.
 ESTRAGON: He's doing on purpose!
 POZZO: You must hold him. *[Pause.]* Come on, come on, raise him up.
 ESTRAGON: To hell with him!
 VLADIMIR: Come on, once more.
 ESTRAGON: What does he take us for?

They raise Lucky, hold him up.

POZZO: Don't let him go" [*Vladimir and Estragon totter.*] Don't move! [*Pozzo fetches bag and basket and bring them towards Lucky.*] Hold him tight! [*He puts the bag in Lucky's hand. Lucky drops immediately.*] Don't let him go! [*He puts back the bag in Lucky's hand. Gradually, at the feel of the bag, Lucky recover his senses and his fingers finally close round the handle.*] Hold him tight! [*As before with basket.*] Now! You can let him go. [*Vladimir and Estragon move away from Lucky who totters, reels, sags, but succeeds in remain on his feet, bag and basket in his hands. Pozzo steps back, cracks his whip.*]
(Beckett, 2010, pp. 145–149)

Lucky cries for help, but his fall seems more like a metaphor for the human condition than an actual event. He has fallen, just as all the characters have – physically, emotionally, and existentially. Vladimir and Estragon's inability to help him in any meaningful way reflects their own helplessness in the face of the absurdity of existence. Ultimately, the interactions between Pozzo and Lucky serve to emphasise the cyclical and futile nature of life portrayed in *Waiting for Godot*. In the first act, they represent an explicit relationship of power, but one already marked by degradation and dehumanisation. In Act II, this relationship dissolves into a chaotic interdependence, where domination and submission are confused, but the essence of futility remains the same. Pozzo and Lucky, like Vladimir and Estragon, are trapped in their own cycles of waiting and suffering, unable to escape or find meaning. Their appearances interrupt the monotony of waiting, but only to reinforce that, in the end, nothing really changes. This feeling of futility and imprisonment is not limited to the characters on stage; it extends to the audience, who are drawn into the same existential dilemma through the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*.

The *theatrum mundi*, as already mentioned, places the audience in a central position, not just as observers, but as active participants in the drama unfolding on stage. In *Waiting for Godot*, this dynamic is amplified by the play's minimalist set and cyclical structure, which reflect the characters' existential paralysis. However, this connection between stage and audience goes beyond mere observation or speculation about the characters' thoughts; it evokes a sense of metaphysical horror, as proposed by Leszek, by confronting spectators with the same uncertainty and meaninglessness that haunts Vladimir and Estragon. The audience, like the characters, is left struggling with the unsettling realisation that life can be as aimless as the interminable wait played out on stage.

Kolakowski defines *horror metaphysicus* as the anguish generated by the realisation of the fragility of human existence and the inevitability of finitude. In *Waiting for Godot*, this anguish is materialised in the desolate scenery and the endless repetition of the characters' actions, which seem trapped in an endless cycle. Watching and reading the play, the audience is invited to reflect on their own existential condition, confronted with the possibility that life, like the play, can be just as empty and purposeless. The emptiness of the stage, marked by the road that leads nowhere and the tree that oscillates between death and renewal, becomes a mirror for the inner emptiness of the spectators, who are forced to question the meaning of their own lives and their position in the world.

The metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* reinforces this connection by suggesting that life is a stage where everyone plays predetermined roles, with no control over the plot or the outcome. In this tragicomedy, the characters are actors in a drama whose director (Godot) never appears, leaving them adrift in a meaningless environment. Likewise, the audience is placed in an analogous position, questioning whether their own lives are governed by external forces or are merely a series of purposeless actions. As can be seen in the following moment:

VLADIMIR: *[triumphantly]* It's Godot! At last! Gogo! It's Godot! We're saved! Let's go and meet him! *[He drags Estragon towards the wings. Estragon resists, pulls himself free, exit right.]* Gogo! Come back! *[Vladimir runs to extreme left, scans the horizon. Enter Estragon right, he hastens towards Vladimir, falls into his arms.]* There you are again!
 ESTRAGON: I'm in hell!
 VLADIMIR: Where were you?
 ESTRAGON: They're coming there too!
 VLADIMIR: We're surrounded! *[Estragon makes a rush towards back.]* Imbecile! There's no way out there. *[He takes Estragon by the arm and drags him towards front. Gesture towards front.]* There! Not a soul in sight! Off you go! Quick! *[He pushes Estragon towards auditorium. Estragon recoils in horror.]* You won't? *[He contemplates auditorium.]* Well I can understand that. Wait till I see. *[He reflects.]* You only hope left is to disappear.
 (Beckett, 2010, pp. 261, 263)

This moment in the play makes Vladimir and Estragon's interaction with the audience explicit. They both glance towards the audience multiple times, but they only see a void, even though the audience is closely following the conflict of both characters. At the end of his speech, Vladimir makes it clear that the only hope is still to disappear, for they are exhausted by the never – ending waiting, and thus dream of fading away to escape this Sisyphean existence. This notion of disappearing ties closely to Le

Breton's concept of blankness, specifically in the sense of the fading of oneself in the face of an unbearable reality (Le Breton, 2018).

This reflection generates a shared sense of horror, in which the despair of the characters resonates with the viewers' own doubts and fears. By being questioned by the characters, the spectators are forced to recognise that they are not mere observers, but active participants in the drama. This direct interaction dissolves the barrier between stage and audience, creating a disturbing sense of intimacy, where the emptiness and despair of the characters becomes palpable for the spectators. At this point, Kolakowski's metaphysical horror is fully manifested, as the audience is confronted with the fragility of their own existence and the possibility that, like Vladimir and Estragon, they too are waiting for a meaning that may never come.

Therefore, the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* in the play not only reflects the existential condition of the characters but also invites the audience to participate actively in the drama, confronting the same questions of meaning and purpose. By exploiting the emptiness of the set and the cyclical structure of the play, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* creates a theatrical experience that transcends the stage, generating a sense of shared metaphysical horror between characters and spectators. In this way, *Waiting for Godot* is not only a play about waiting for a meaning that may never come; it is also a mirror for the unconscious desire for disappearance in a world that feels static, where emptiness and despair seem to be universal human experiences. Through the lenses of the *theatrum mundi* and *horror metaphysicus*, Beckett's tragicomedy challenges spectators to reflect on the meaning of their own lives amid the blank stage of modernity, creating a work that remains relevant and disturbing decades after its creation. We are all Vladimir and Estragon in the great theatre of life, waiting for a Godot who may never appear.

4 AMID NOTHINGNESS: REPETITION, ERASURE, AND HORROR IN THE ABSURD MICROCOSM OF *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Once it has been shown that Beckett's tragicomedy has its own microcosm and that the audience exerts a certain influence on the characters' actions provoking anguish, it is possible to better understand how horror can be evoked in this minimalist play. Regardless of the emptiness surrounding the play, the character's actions and reactions are most intrinsically linked to the effect of horror. In Act I, there is an anxiety in Vladimir's character about acting and doing something and not just being stuck with the long waiting for Godot:

VLADIMIR: Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! [*Pause. Vehemently.*] Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed.[...] But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! (Beckett, 2010, p. 289)

Vladimir's intonation of "before it is too late" can be interpreted in several ways, but one of the most important meanings could be that death is lurking. As previously mentioned, one of the possible readings of *Waiting for Godot* is that the characters Vladimir and Estragon are dead and trapped in purgatory, a somewhat Dantean vision of life. However, the analysis that I propose is a laboratorial one, as McMullan states "the nature of who or what regulates the environment that Beckett's creatures inhabit most often remains unclear or beyond cognition, though ultimately the works reflect on their own increasingly depleted conditions of creation or imagining". (McMullan, 2021, p.7). In other words, Beckett's characters are being observed by a divine/supernatural being, similarly to mice in laboratories, in addition to the voyeur spectator/reader. In this case, interpretation can be understood as disappearing from the microcosm, being left aside, or even abandoning the stage, thus ceasing to exist in that universe, which brings us directly to Le Breton's concept of the fading of oneself.

In *Disparaître de Soi* (2018), David Le Breton introduces the concept of *the blank* (*le blanc*), which describes an individual's desire to escape or even erase their own identity in response to the pressures of modern life. By making the individual retreat from individuality – whether by physical or psychological means – *the blank* represents a way of seeking relief from existential burdens. Nevertheless, this

unconscious act of escape does not lead the subject to liberation; on the contrary, it traps them in a disconnection from reality and a persistent sense of emptiness.

In Beckett's tragicomedy, *the blank* manifests itself not only psychologically but also through the play's very structure. Having said that, I explore how the physical emptiness of the stage reinforces the characters' existential erasure. In the biography by James Knowlson (1996), the author stresses that Beckett's final intention was to leave the set as minimalistic as possible, to go perhaps against the theatre traditions of his time. Although it is not feasible to determine the playwright's real intention (Wimsatt, Beardlesy, 1946), it is possible to leverage one aspect of his minimalistic decision: to cause strangeness to the spectator/reader, and in a way, to reflect the emptiness that Didi and Gogo feel. The tree, as previously mentioned, becomes a symbol of distorted hope, of escape by introducing the possibility of suicide. Breton (2018) tells us that one of the forms of disappearance is death, putting an end not only to life but also to all the burdens it may represent. This thought is also in line with what Leszek Kolakowski (1988) says about the weight of one's own existence, whether it is the fear of there being no possible salvation or even the simple fact of not knowing or understanding what might happen after life, causing the effect of *horror metaphysicus* on the subject.

This symbolism of the road is further emphasised by its emptiness: it is deserted, with no indication of where it comes from or where it will go. The absence of clear direction parallels Kolakowski's idea of existential disorientation – the human struggle to find purpose in an indifferent universe. Even when other areas of the stage are mentioned, such as the edge or the vague references to places like Vaucluse (in the French version) or Mâcon (in the English version), there is no true sense of location. These shifting, ambiguous settings indicate the play's engagement with Kolakowski's ideas, in which the unknown – whether metaphysical or physical – becomes a source of unease. The road, then, is not just a setting but a manifestation of the characters' (and by extension, humanity's) unresolved confrontation with the void.

In Act II, when Estragon and Vladimir are together again, they both talk about the place they are in and how similar it is to Vaucluse (in the French version) and Mâcon (in the English version), as the extract below shows:

ESTRAGON: And here where we are now?

VLADIMIR: Where else do you think? Do you not recognize the place?

ESTRAGON: *[suddenly furious]* Recognize! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery! *[Looking wildly about him.]* Look at this muck – heap! I've never stirred from it!

VLADIMIR: Calm yourself, calm yourself.

ESTRAGON: You and your landscapes! Tell me about the worms!

VLADIMIR: All the same, you can't tell me that this *[gesture]* bears any resemblance to... *[he hesitates]* ... to the Mâcon country for example. You can't deny there's a big difference.

ESTRAGON: The Mâcon country! Who's talking about the Mâcon country?

VLADIMIR: But you were there yourself, in the Mâcon country.

ESTRAGON: No, I was never in the Mâcon country! I've puked my puke of a life away here, I tell you! Here! In the Cackon country!

VLADIMIR: But we were there together, I could swear it! Picking grapes for a man called ... *[he snaps his fingers]* ... can't think of the name of the man, at the place called... *[snaps his fingers]* ... can't think of the name of the place, do you not remember?

ESTRAGON: *[a little calmer]* It's possible. I didn't notice anything.

VLADIMIR: But down there everything is red!

ESTRAGON: *[exasperated]* I didn't notice anything, I tell you!

(Beckett, 2010, pp. 207–209)

However, in the French version, Estragon mentions two different cities: “*Mais non, je n'ai jamais été dans le Vaucluse! J'ai coulé toute ma chaude – pisse d'existence ici, je te dis! Dans la Merdecluse!*” (Beckett, 2010, p. 208), while the English version gives us Mâcon and Cackon. At first glance, it seems that Beckett wrote the first version using everyday French, which sounds lighter and more informal, making the dialogue between Didi and Gogo sound more natural. However, when translating it into English the language of the text changed, due to some problems of censorship brought about by the Lord Chamberlain, as Knowlson reports in his book in a letter that Beckett exchanged with the publisher and his friend Barney Rosset:

We were all set for a London West End performance until the Lord Chamberlain got going. His incriminations are so preposterous that I'm afraid the whole thing is off. He listed 12 passages for omission! The thing I had expected and which I was half prepared to amend (reluctantly), but also passages that are vital to the play (first 15 lines of Lucky's tirade and the passage [at the] end of Act II from “But you can't go barefoot” to “And they crucified quick”) and impossible either to alter or suppress. However Albery (the theatre director) is trying to arrange things in London. I am to see him this week – end and all is not yet definitely lost.

(Knowlson, 1996, p. 371)

In the French version of *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon's crude joke – contrasting the idyllic Vaucluse with the scatological “Merdecluse” – exemplifies Beckett's use of colloquial humour. However, when translating the play into English, Beckett faced stringent censorship from Britain's Lord Chamberlain's Office, which demanded cuts

to 12 passages deemed blasphemous or obscene. In her article entitled *Crossing the Borders of Language and Culture: Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot"* (2012), Jadwiga Uchman analyses the differences between the French and English versions written and translated by Samuel Beckett. The author states that despite Beckett's efforts to maintain similarity and essence in both texts, during the translation from French to English, the playwright faced, beside the cultural differences, a period of censorship stipulated by Lord Chamberlain. According to Uchman, although some terms caused a certain amount of commotion in France (2012, p. 49), the problems faced with Lord Chamberlain were worse, as can be seen in the excerpt below:

[He] took offense at much of the language and insisted on significant changes before he would approve it. Beckett agreed to make some changes — "Fartov" became "Popov" and Mrs Gozzo had "warts" instead of "clap" —but there were several deletions, especially of the hanging erection and the dropped pants, which were quite unacceptable to him.
(Uchman, 2012, p. 49)

Among these, as Uchman analyses, are Lucky's existential tirade (including the line "personal God... with white beard"), Estragon's exclamation "Christ!", and even Pozzo's whip – cracking, all of which are seen as morally transgressive. The Lord Chamberlain's excisions – whether of "Merdecluse/Vaucluse" or Lucky's tirade – did not merely sanitize the text; they enacted a parallel erasure. Just as the characters' identities fray under the weight of *the blank* Beckett's language is forcibly hollowed, rendering the play itself a site of contested disappearance. While the Lord Chamberlain censored the text of *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's staging subverted these restrictions through a minimalist visual language. The bare scenery (the tree, the empty road) and the cyclical actions of the characters (Estragon and his boots, Vladimir and his hat) materialise the existential emptiness without relying on cut dialogue. Even the silences – loaded with glances and unfinished movements – denounced loneliness more poignantly than any censored speech. In this way, Beckett transformed scenic abstraction into a weapon against institutional control.

This duality underscores Beckett's strategic flexibility: he adapted his language to suit British sensibilities – making the dialogue more fluid for English audiences – while preserving the play's raw edge where possible, as in Ireland. Archival records further show that the Lord Chamberlain's objections extended beyond language to

themes of suffering and divine absence, particularly targeting the crucifixion reference at the play's climax ("They crucified quick"). The tension between suppression and creative defiance mirrors Godot's own themes of futility and authoritarian absurdity while emphasising Beckett's ingenuity in subverting censorship without fully surrendering his vision. The isolated road, much like Beckett's dual – language text, embodies fragmentation: both languages used in both versions, leading to different cultures and different interpretations – seeing the omissions and differences between the versions – and it can also reflect Didi and Gogo's life dilemma. There is no information about where the characters came from; they only need to be there at that exact meeting point, next to a tree. At many moments, the characters themselves aren't sure whether they should be waiting near this willow or somewhere else. And just like Didi and Gogo, the viewer/reader doesn't know where the characters are going, what the future holds. For them, there is only the now, even if it is filled with inertia, inexactness, and emptiness.

Beckettian minimalism transcends aesthetics; it is a theatrical apparatus for existential unmasking. The stage, stripped to its barest elements, becomes what Le Breton terms *the blank* – a liminal zone where identity is not merely obscured but performatively dismantled. Each repetition of action (the hat, the boots) is a ritual of self-erasure, mirroring modernity's demand to 'disappear' from the burdens of meaning. In *Waiting for Godot*, the empty stage, the lifeless tree and the road with no destination materialise precisely this 'the blank': a non-place that progressively consumes the substance of the characters. Didi and Gogo not only inhabit this emptiness but are inhabited by it – their circular dialogues, tattered clothes and repetitive gestures are marks of an identity in the process of being erased, like chalk writings that the stage itself erases.

In Act I, Lucky arrives as a body already almost completely inscribed in the regime of erasure: the rope around his neck is not just a symbol of submission, but the sign that he is being pulled out of the human world – his fragmented monologue is the last desperate attempt at linguistic inscription before the definitive silence of Act II. Pozzo, for his part, initially seems to resist *the blank* through his authoritarian performativity (the whip, the orders), but in Act II he is already another ghost: blind, stumbling, unable even to remember his previous encounter with Didi and Gogo. His

physical degradation is the final proof that Beckett's stage is a space where even pain and memory are erased.

It is at this point that stage minimalism achieves its most radical effect, generating what Kolakowski would define as *horror metaphysicus* – that primordial terror in the face of the Void as the ultimate condition of existence. Beckett works with this effect in *Waiting for Godot* by making us witness this process in real time: every pause, every repetition, every fractured gesture is a stage in this existential erosion. The real horror of the play lies not in what is shown, but in what insists on not appearing.

When Le Breton speaks of his concept as “the place where the body gives up on itself”, he could have been describing precisely the stage in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckettian minimalism operates in this realm: it's not a question of representing absence, but of creating the conditions for the spectator to experience the process of erasure in the flesh. Metaphysical horror then appears as a side effect – if Kolakowski saw it as the tragic recognition of the absence of ultimate answers, Beckett goes further: his stage is the answer, in the form of a materialised question. If Le Breton's *blank space* is the endpoint of erasure, then Freud's concept of strangeness (the unhomely) is possibly the process: the strange slippage of individuality that precedes dissolution.

Kolakowski's metaphysical horror – the intellectual terror of the void – gains more force when fused with Freud's idea of the uncanny. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett uses repetition as a tool not only to evoke existential dread but to make the banal grotesque. The uncanny, defined by Sigmund Freud in 1919 – in this dissertation translated as *unhomely*, a calque of German *unheimlich* – to describe when something or a place that is familiar becomes unfamiliar, or the homely becomes unhomely. This unhomely sense arises when Beckett transforms everyday gestures – like adjusting his hat or chewing carrots – into empty rituals. The audience recognises their own habits, but in a disturbing light: the familiar becomes strange (unhomely), revealing the absurd as a broken mirror of everyday life. Vladimir and Estragon's ritual are everyday gestures made unhomely: familiar in form, but strange in essence. The audience's discomfort arises when they recognise their own habits in these emptied acts, as if Beckett were offering a mirror that reflects but does not welcome. The unhomely here

is the rupture between the gesture and its meaning – the horror of seeing one's own body and routine as alien territory.

Lucky's monologue embodies Freud's unhomely not just in its fragmentation but in its parody of coherence:

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaquaqu with white beard quaquaquaquaqu 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 plunged in fire whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it will fire the firmament that is to say blast hell to heaven so blue still and calm so calm with a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing but not so fast and considering what is more that as a result of the labors left unfinished crowned by the Acacacademy of Anthropopometry of Essy – in – Possy of Testew and Cunard it is established beyond all doubt all other doubt than that which clings to the labors of men that as a result of the labors unfinished of Testew and Cunard it is established as hereinafter but not so fast for reasons unknown that as a result of the public works of Puncher and Wattmann it is established beyond all doubt that in view of the labors of Fartov and Belcher left unfinished for reasons unknown of Testew and Cunard left unfinished it is established what many deny that man in Possy of Testew and Cunard that man in Essy that man in short that man in brief in spite of the strides of alimentation and defecation wastes [...] in the light the light the light of the labors lost of Steinweg and Peterman that in the plains in the mountains by the seas by the rivers running water running fire the air is the same and then the earth namely the air and then the earth in the great cold the great dark the air and the earth abode of stones in the great cold alas alas in the year of their Lord six hundred and something the air the earth the sea the earth abode of stones in the great deeps the great cold on sea on land and in the air I resume for reasons unknown in spite of the tennis the facts are there but time will tell I resume alas alas on on in short in fine on on abode of stones who can doubt it I resume but not so fast I resume the skull fading fading fading and concurrently simultaneously what is more for reasons unknown in spite of the tennis on on the beard the flames the tears the stones so blue so calm alas alas on on the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the labors abandoned left unfinished graver still abode of stones in a word for reasons unknown no matter I resume I resume the skull alas the stones Cunard... tennis... the stones... so calm... Cunard... unfinished...
(Beckett, 2010, Act II, pp. 141–145)

Beckett made it clear that Lucky's speech form – chaotic, recursive, and fragmented delivery – transcended any coherent message. The monologue's spiralling syntax and abrupt disintegration embody the collapse of rational discourse, mirroring the play's broader critique of Western rationalism. In Beckett's hands, language becomes a site of disorder, where meaning is perpetually deferred, and communication dissolves into absurdity. The monologue functions almost as a parody of scholarly and philosophical rhetoric. Beckett's correspondence reveals his intent to rail against the

pretensions of intellectualism, with Lucky's references to the "Acacacademy of Anthropopometry" and disjointed allusions to theology, science, and sports exposing the hollowness of systems that claim authority. The speech's parody of academic jargon – its "quaquaquaqua" and laboured syntax – reduces high – minded discourse to farce, suggesting that even the most elaborate intellectual frameworks lead only to epistemological dead ends.

Lucky's tirade is also a visceral manifestation of trauma. Beckett described it as thinking violently extracted under Pozzo's tyranny, a performance contingent on the hat that symbolises his enslaved intellect. When the hat is removed, Lucky's voice is severed, rendering him mute. This dynamic underscores the monologue's brutality: it is not a voluntary expression but a forced eruption of a fractured mind, laying bare the agony of a consciousness trapped in servitude. The speech's deterioration into gibberish – "the skull the skull the skull in Connemara" – reflects the play's overarching theme of futility, as even language succumbs to the void. Simultaneously, the fragmented imagery that this disjunct speech brings is one interspersed with subtle elements of horror, through the repeating words and phrases such as *fire*, *flame*, *fade*, *fading*, *dead*, *loss*, *reasons unknown*, *great cold*, *labors*, and the final repetition of *skull*. These words, though easy to be missed amid the non-stopping monologue, punctuate the fall into *the blank*, disappearance by means of immolation, freezing, exhaustion, and finally death.

Beckett himself termed the monologue a *failed speech*, a deliberate artistic implosion. Quoting the speech to analyse it here already presents this implosion, as omitting any part of the speech necessarily implicates into the need to cut it at random explosive moments, considering the speech's lack of punctuation. Paradoxically, its abrupt conclusion ("the earth abode of stones") signals a return to inert matter, a nihilistic coda that negates the preceding chaos, implosion becoming stasis. This collapse mirrors the disorder of the play's universe, where actions, like words, are stripped of purpose. At various points, whether in plays or short stories, Beckett changes his writing style. In *The Aesthetics of Failure* (2013), Marcin Tereszewski analyses this stylistic fluidity, noting how Beckett's work resists categorization as purely modernist or postmodernist. While Tereszewski does not explicitly analyse *Waiting for Godot*, his observations illuminate the play's techniques: the text becomes "not a vehicle for any coherent meaning or story as such, but the object of interrogation"

(Tereszewski, 2013, p. 2). This is evident in Lucky's monologue – where language implodes under the weight of repetition – and in Vladimir and Estragon's circular dialogues. Tereszewski identifies Beckett's repetitions as "reflections and echoes [that] serve as a technique that rids language of substance and consciousness of subjectivity" (p. 27). In *Godot*, this erosion manifests as both a linguistic and existential horror: words lose their meaning just as the characters fade into the void of *the blank*. The monologue thus stands as a microcosm of Godot's existential vision: a world where meaning is perpetually promised yet eternally absent, and where the only certainty is the absurdity of the wait.

Lucky's tirade mashes theology, science, and gibberish into a "double" of rational discourse, exposing language itself as a precarious scaffold over the void. Lucky's physical degradation – his bent posture, the rope around his neck, the weight of his suitcase – is as essential to his fragmented speech as the hat that "switches him on" and "switches him off". His body is not a vehicle for language, but his prison: every word ripped out by Pozzo (the "master" who also degenerates into blindness) echoes the violence of trying to signify something in a world where even the body loses its materiality. Estragon, with his boots that never fit, and Vladimir, with his sick bladder, share this condition. Their bodies – just like language – are defective objects, incapable of fulfilling their function. The recurring joke about the boots ("Why don't you take them off?" / "I took them off yesterday") reveals the absurdity of a body that doesn't adapt to the world, just as speech doesn't adapt to thought. The horror here is not in the physical suffering, but in the realisation that even pain is an empty ritual, repeated without purpose. This body – language relationship culminates in Lucky's silence in Act II. His muteness is not a liberation, but the consummation of Le Breton's *blank*: the body, exhausted, gives up on meaning. The same happens with Pozzo, who, when he loses his sight, also loses his narrative of power ("I don't remember anything!"). *Waiting for Godot* shows us that when language collapses, the body is no refuge – it is just another eroding landscape.

Just like Estragon's physical body decays, Lucky's mental capacity is repressed. Pozzo's blindness in Act II amplifies this unhomely sensation: his muttered "I don't remember" (Beckett, 2010, p. 302) strips away the illusion of narrative continuity, leaving only the unhomely residue of a self-erased individual. The play's true horror lies in this reflective unhomeliness. The audience, like Vladimir, peers into the void and

sees their own face. When the boy repeats Godot's empty promise, the joke is on us: our laughter sticks in the throat as we grasp that we, too, are waiting – for meaning, for endings, for a salvation that may not exist. A horror that leaves the stage and strolls through real life. The laboratory's fourth wall crumbles; the spectator becomes both scientist and dissected specimen. In this way, Godot transcends theatre to become an existential séance, conjuring the very disappearance it depicts. What remains, in the end, is not even despair, but an almost invisible trace – like the tree that can barely be distinguished from the empty background, or like the characters who no longer even know they are disappearing.

If Lucky's monologue exposes language as a collapsing scaffold over the void, Vladimir's song in Act II reveals what happens when the void begins to sing – when meaninglessness takes on a rhythm, a cycle, a perverse kind of liturgy. Where Lucky's breakdown tears apart rational discourse, Vladimir's folk tune distils the absurd into a nursery rhyme, its jaunty cadence belying the horror of its content. The song, like Lucky's tirade, functions as a *mise en abyme* of the play's central paradox: the human compulsion to narrate, memorialise, and repeat, even when the narrative leads only to violence, the memorial is a warning without purpose, and the repetition is infinite. Beckett's genius lies in how he makes the audience complicit in this cycle – just as we strain to parse meaning from Lucky's gibberish, we find ourselves humming along to Vladimir's grotesque lullaby, its recursive structure mirroring our own futile search for resolution.

Early on in Act II, Vladimir sings a song that, at first glance, seems like absurd nonsense – but which, in fact, condenses all the perverse logic of the Beckettian universe. It's an old folk song about a dog that steals a loaf of bread, is beaten to death and then has its gravestone turned into a warning to the other dogs, starting the cycle all over again. Sung by Vladimir with almost mechanical precision, this obscure melody triggers metaphysical disquiet in the spectator/reader. Its structure – crime, punishment, memory ritual and infinite repetition – works like a distorted mirror of Didi and Gogo's own existence. The song, therefore, is not just an interlude, but a metaphor for the absurdity that defines their lives: a fate with no escape, where even death becomes another meaningless gesture – as one can see in the following passage:

Enter Vladimir agitatedly. He halts and looks long at the tree, then suddenly begins to move feverishly about the stage. He halts before the boots, picks

one up, examines it, sniffs it, manifests disgust, puts it back carefully. Comes and goes. Halts extreme right and gazes into distance off, shadowing his eyes with his hand. Comes and goes. Halts extreme left, as before. Comes and goes. Halts suddenly and begins to sing loudly.

VLADIMIR: A dog came in –

Having begun to high he stops, clears his throat, resumes:

A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread,
Then cook up with a ladle
And beat him till he was dead.

Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb –

He stops, broods, resumes:

Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb
And wrote upon the tombstone
For the eyes of dogs to me:

A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread,
Then cook up with a ladle
And beat him till he was dead.

Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb –

He stops, broods, resumes.

Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb –

He stops, broods. Softly.

And dug the dog a tomb...
(Beckett, 2010, Act II, pp. 191, 193)

The melody sung by Vladimir acts as a mirror of the absurd and cyclical reality experienced by him and Estragon. Just as the dog in the song is punished brutally and randomly for a trivial act, the characters are trapped in a stage where suffering and waiting have no justification or end. The endless repetition of the story of the dog – who dies, is buried and has his death eternalised in an epitaph – reflects Didi and Gogo's own condition, condemned to repeat empty gestures while waiting for a Godot who never arrives. The metaphysical horror manifests itself precisely in this realisation that, no matter how much they try to fill time with actions, words, songs or even silence,

it all comes down to a meaningless loop, where even death (like the dog in the song) brings no relief, just another empty cycle.

The music, therefore, is not just a distraction, but a comment on the characters' existence: violent, repetitive and devoid of any transcendence. Each verse echoes their own impotence in the face of emptiness, turning the song into an involuntary hymn to the absurd – a reminder that, like the dog buried by his peers, they too are trapped in a cycle of useless gestures, waiting for a meaning that will never come. The horror is not in what exists, but in the fact that nothing beyond that exists. Kolakowski posits that this is the most terrifying truth: the silence of the cosmos in the face of the human cry for meaning. And *Waiting for Godot* portrays this clearly.

The metaphysical anguish (*horror metaphysicus*) described by Kolakowski (1996) as the primordial terror in the face of existential emptiness finds a perfect stage expression in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's play not only illustrates this anguish but materialises it on stage through repetition, absence and spatial disorientation. Kolakowski argues that human beings, when confronted with the indifference of the universe and the lack of ultimate answers, experience a deep despair – a feeling that Vladimir and Estragon embody with every gesture and every truncated dialogue. The empty road, the dying tree and the endless wait for Godot are visceral metaphors for this emptiness, where the absence of meaning is not only thematised, but performed.

The cyclical repetition of actions – Estragon's putting on and taking off boots, the adjusting of Vladimir's hat, the failed attempts to leave – echoes Kolakowski's idea of the absurdity of existence as a labyrinth with no way out. In *Metaphysical Horror* (1988), he describes how human consciousness, when searching for meaning in a silent universe, encounters the horror of nothingness. Vladimir, with his anxious reflections, personifies this frustrated search: he is the intellectual who clamours for meaning, while Estragon, in his nihilistic passivity, accepts emptiness as an inevitable condition. Together, they represent the two sides of the same existential coin: resistance and resignation in the face of metaphysical horror.

The structure of the play – with its mirrored acts and dialogues that fall apart – reinforces the idea that the characters' identities are constantly eroding. Kolakowski suggests that without a metaphysical framework to justify existence, the individual dissolves into fragments of unfinished memories and purposeless actions. This manifests itself in Vladimir and Estragon's inability to remember details of the past

(such as the supposed visit to the country of Mâcon/Vaucluse) and in their mutual dependence, which keeps them trapped in an eternally repetitive present. The mysterious “they” that haunts those who “beat” Estragon – can be read as the embodiment of the oppressive forces of the absurd, an echo of the metaphysical horror that Kolakowski describes as the “threat of the unknown”.

The censorship faced by Beckett – and his linguistic adaptations – also reflects this play between presence and absence. The alternating versions of Vaucluse/Merdecluse and Fartov/Popov, as well as the omissions imposed by the Lord Chamberlain, become part of the play’s very theme: language, like identity, is eroded by external forces, leaving only traces of meaning. Kolakowski emphasises that metaphysical horror arises precisely when the structures that sustain reality – language, memory, faith – prove to be fragile or illusory. In *Godot*, the characters’ speech is a last refuge against silence, but even it fails, revealing the emptiness behind the words.

The end of the play, in which Vladimir and Estragon remain motionless after declaring “Let’s go”, summarises the Kolakowskian paradox: awareness of the absurd does not liberate but paralyses. The curtain that falls over them is not a closure but an invitation to the spectator to confront their own metaphysical horror – the fear that, like Didi and Gogo, we are all waiting for a Godot that will never come. This existential vanishing is embodied most vividly in Estragon and Vladimir. In Beckett’s tragicomedy, *the blank* manifests not as abstraction but as visceral reality: their fragile identities fray with each repetitive gesture, each forgotten conversation. The void no longer lurks in the margins – it takes the stage, and the characters, adrift in absurdity, become ghosts of their former selves long before they physically depart.

This erosion of identity in Beckett’s work cannot be divorced from its post – war context – a period in which, as Martin Esslin argues, the collapse of religious and ideological certainties left humanity adrift in a universe stripped of inherent meaning. In the *Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin says that after the Second World War, there was a great decline in religious faith, which left many people lost and helpless. For the writer, the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd represented nothing more than the raw rationality of an absurd life witnessed by humanity, especially after a period of war. Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* stages identity not as a fixed essence but as a performance in decay. The characters’ relentless self-erasure – through forgotten pasts, fragmented

dialogue, and physical disintegration – reflects Beckett’s broader interrogation of post – war subjectivity.

Vladimir and Estragon embody a kind of rupture: their repetitive gestures – checking hats, tugging boots – are rituals of self-verification in a world where identity is perpetually unstable. As Le Breton notes, “The desire to disappear sometimes corresponds to the desire to distance oneself from a network of sociability to restart one’s own existence in another way” (Le Breton, 2018, p. 181).¹⁶ Beckett’s characters enact this refusal to restart themselves, not through active rebellion but through passive unravelling. The very structure of *Waiting for Godot* mirrors this existential disintegration. The play’s cyclical nature – where each day repeats itself without progression – echoes the futility of seeking meaning in a universe that offers none. The tree, a recurring symbol, remains barren in the first act and inexplicably sprouts leaves in the second. Yet, this minimal change brings no comfort or clarity to Vladimir and Estragon. Instead, it underscores the absurdity of their hope, a hope that persists despite its own absurdity. As Esslin observes, “The Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of recognition” (1961, p. 24). This laughter, however, is not cathartic; it is a grim acknowledgment of the human condition, where identity is not a stable core but a series of performed gestures, endlessly repeated and just as endlessly forgotten.

The disintegration of language in Beckett’s work further destabilizes the notion of a coherent self. Dialogue in *Waiting for Godot* is marked by non – sequiturs, silences, and repetitions, suggesting that communication itself is a futile attempt to bridge the void between individuals. When Vladimir and Estragon speak, their words often circle back to nothingness, as in their famous exchange:

VLADIMIR: Let’s go.
 ESTRAGON: We can’t.
 VLADIMIR: Why not?
 ESTRAGON: We’re waiting for Godot.
 (Beckett, 2010, Act I, p. 29)

This circularity reflects the characters’ entrapment in a performative existence where action and meaning are perpetually deferred. Language, once a tool for

¹⁶ “O desejo de desaparecer às vezes corresponde ao desejo de afastar – se de uma rede de sociabilidade para reiniciar de outra forma a própria existência”.

constructing identity, becomes a means of its erosion. In this sense, Beckett anticipates post-structuralist thought, where the self is seen as a linguistic construct, fragile and contingent. The physical decay of the characters also mirrors their existential crisis. Estragon's painful boots, Vladimir's urinary troubles, and Lucky's near muteness all point to bodies that are failing, just as their minds struggle to maintain coherence. Beckett's theatre is one of exhaustion – not just physical, but metaphysical. The characters are exhausted by the very act of being, by the relentless need to perform an identity that no longer holds meaning. This aligns with Le Breton's assertion that disappearance is a form of resistance, a refusal to participate in the fiction of a stable self (2018). Vladimir and Estragon's existence is one of perpetual vanishing, where each moment erases the one before it, leaving no trace of a continuous identity.

Even the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky, who seem at first to bring some semblance of narrative progression, only deepens the play's absurdity. Pozzo's sudden blindness in the second act and Lucky's silence suggest that power and servitude are equally meaningless in this world. Their master – slave dynamic collapses, just as all hierarchies of meaning collapse in Beckett's universe. The instability of their roles reinforces the idea that identity is not inherent but imposed, a performance that can be discarded as easily as a hat or a pair of boots.

Ultimately, *Waiting for Godot* stages the self as a series of absences – of memory, of purpose, of definitive action. The characters are not tragic heroes but clowns in a cosmic farce, trapped in a routine they neither understand nor can escape. As Esslin notes, the Theatre of the Absurd does not offer solutions but holds up a mirror to the disintegration of meaning in the modern world (1961). Beckett's genius lies in his ability to make this disintegration palpable, to render the void not as an abstract concept but as a lived experience. In this context, the figure of Godot – never arriving, never defined – becomes the perfect metaphor for the absent centre of identity. Just as the characters wait for a salvation that never comes, so too does the modern individual wait for a self that never coheres. The play's final line is "Let's go." / "They do not move" – epitomise this paralysis. The characters remain suspended, caught between the desire to exist and the impossibility of truly being.

Beckett's work, then, is not just a reflection of post-war disillusionment but a radical rethinking of what it means to be human in a world devoid of intrinsic meaning. The Theatre of the Absurd, as exemplified by *Waiting for Godot*, does not mourn the

loss of identity but exposes it as an illusion, inviting the audience to confront the absurdity of their own performed selves. If Esslin locates Beckett's absurdity in historical disillusionment, Le Breton's *blank* reveals the bodily toll of this crisis: the characters' physical decay (Lucky's rope, Estragon's boots) literalizes their existential disintegration. Beckett's stage, then, is not merely a reflection of post-war angst but a machine for its enactment – where identity is not lost but actively unmade.

Whilst Vladimir is gripped by countless debates with his anxious, circular thoughts, Estragon embodies a total, constricting hopelessness, reflecting his resistance to the futility of their situation. The dynamics of the characters, acting synchronously, synthesise the tension between the desire to escape and the eternal incapacitating inertia. This tension is further amplified by the presence of an ambiguous *they* – a recurring reference to unseen others who haunt the edges of Didi and Gogo's world. At several points in the play, the word *they* emerges, referring to mysterious figures who never appear or are never fully explained. For instance, in the opening lines, Estragon mentions sleeping in a ditch, hinting at an encounter with these elusive others. Yet, their absence leaves the characters – and the audience – in a state of uncertainty, mirroring the broader existential void that defines their existence.

The ambiguity of *they* is particularly evident in an early exchange between Vladimir and Estragon, where the latter recounts his experience of sleeping in a ditch. Vladimir's tone shifts from mockery to curiosity as he probes Estragon about the night's events:

VLADIMIR: [*hurt, coldly*] May one inquire where His Highness spent the night?
 ESTRAGON: In a ditch.
 VLADIMIR: [*admiringly*] A ditch! Where?
 ESTRAGON: [*without gesture*] Over there.
 VLADIMIR: And they didn't beat you?
 ESTRAGON: Beat me? Certainly they beat me.
 VLADIMIR: The same lot as usual?
 ESTRAGON: The same? I don't know.
 (Beckett, 2010, pp. 11 – 12)

This *they* can symbolise, in a *theatrum mundi* reading, the absurdity of existence itself. In the universe of *Waiting for Godot*, *they* represent the external forces that control Didi and Gogo's stage, embodying the unpredictable and often oppressive nature of their world. At the same time, the ambiguity of *they* underscores one of Estragon's deepest fears: being alone in a desolate and absurd reality. This fear is mirrored in the

characters' mutual dependence, which becomes a defence mechanism against the emptiness that surrounds them. Whether through meaningless banter or shared silence, Vladimir and Estragon cling to each other as a means of survival in a world devoid of meaning.

At first glance, their interactions – ranging from playful banter to moments of genuine camaraderie – suggest a deep connection. Yet beneath this surface lies a more complex dynamic of reliance and vulnerability. Trapped in an absurd world devoid of resolution, their dependence becomes both a source of solace and a burden. While they cling to each other to navigate the vast emptiness of their existence, this dependency also threatens to consume them. Their relationship fluctuates between intimacy and estrangement, mirroring the unpredictability of human connections in an absurd universe. Moments of camaraderie and humour are interspersed with frustration, bitterness, and even jests about suicide, as seen in their contemplation of parting ways:

ESTRAGON: If we parted? That might be better for us.
 VLADIMIR: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. *[Pause.]* Unless Godot comes.
 ESTRAGON: And if he comes?
 VLADIMIR: We'll be saved. *[Vladimir takes off his hat (Lucky's), peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, knocks on the crown, puts it on again.] [...]*
 VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?
 ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go. *[They do not move. Curtain.]*
 (Beckett, 2010, pp. 255 – 256)

Estragon's suggestion of separation reflects a shared weariness and disillusionment, hinting at their mutual frustration and the desire to break free from stagnation. However, Vladimir's response reveals their existential entrapment: while contemplating death as an escape, he clings to the hope of salvation through Godot. This fragile hope keeps them tethered, even as their situation remains unchanged. The final exchange – “Well? Shall we go?” / “Yes, let's go” – underscores their paralysis. Despite verbally agreeing to move, they remain inert, symbolising their deeper existential entrapment. The closing curtain acts as a metaphorical veil, concealing their unresolved dilemmas and reinforcing the futility of their actions. This scene shows the core of their relationship: despite their frustrations and thoughts of parting, Didi and Gogo need each other to survive. Their reliance is not based on strong emotions but on necessity, keeping them together as they wait for Godot, who never comes. Kolakowski's idea of *horror metaphysicus* fits here, as both characters face the

pointlessness and absurdity of life. Their bond helps them survive, while it does not give them real emotional or existential satisfaction. Instead, it creates unease, forcing the audience to face the same harsh truths through Didi and Gogo's unresolved struggle.

This reflects the heart of the absurd, much like the myth of Sisyphus – a key influence on Martin Esslin's view of the Theatre of the Absurd. Just as Sisyphus is doomed to push a boulder uphill only for it to roll back down, Vladimir and Estragon are stuck in an endless cycle of waiting for Godot, who never arrives. The comparison is clear: both stories show a useless task forced by an uncaring world, where repetition is the only meaning. In Beckett's play, Godot is the boulder – an empty promise that keeps them going but offers no resolution. The horror of their existence is not that Godot never comes nor that they cannot stop waiting, making them broken versions of Sisyphus. Their struggle mirrors Sisyphus's curse, but with a crucial distinction: where he at least witnesses the boulder's momentary summit, Didi and Gogo lack even that fleeting climax. Their comedy lies in the void between expectation and reality: this void distinguishes Beckett's absurd from Camus'. Where Camus' Sisyphus transforms his punishment into a victory through consciousness, Vladimir and Estragon's awareness only deepens their paralysis. Their comedy is not liberating, but claustrophobic – a laughter that chokes when it realises it is the butt of the joke.

While Camus' Sisyphus embodies a defiant heroism – finding meaning in the struggle itself – Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon embody a resignation that strips even rebellion of its catharsis. Camus concludes *The Myth of Sisyphus* with the famous line: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1942). This "happiness" arises from Sisyphus's conscious rebellion against his fate, a triumph of lucidity over despair. In contrast, Beckett's characters lack such agency. Their waiting is not a chosen struggle but a passive submission to an unseen authority (Godot), and their fleeting attempts at action – like Vladimir's cry, "Let us do something, while we have the chance!" – collapse into inertia. The difference is stark: Camus' absurd hero creates meaning through resistance, while Beckett's characters dissolve into the meaninglessness they lament.

Vladimir's intellectual anguish mirrors Camus' "absurd man", yet his rebellion is aborted by hope. He oscillates between moments of clarity ("Was I sleeping while the others suffered?") and delusion ("Tomorrow everything will be better"). His insistence

on waiting for Godot – despite the boy’s identical messages – reveals a tragicomic denial of futility. Unlike Sisyphus, who embraces his futile task, Vladimir clings to the illusion that his suffering might one day be justified. Beckett underscores this with Vladimir’s self-interruptions (“Let’s go.” / They do not move), parodying Camus’ call to action. The stage direction “They do not move” is Beckett’s rebuttal to Camus: in a universe devoid of meaning, even rebellion is performative.

So, every day, Didi and Gogo wake up, have disconnected and empty conversations, absurd actions, meet and forget other characters along the way, and wait. Still, they receive a message that Godot won’t be coming today, but maybe the next day. The boy’s recurring appearances epitomize Beckett’s subversion of Camus. Each act ends with the same promise (“Godot will come tomorrow”), parodying Sisyphus’ momentary summit. Yet where Sisyphus’s boulder rolls down with tragic regularity, Beckett’s characters never even glimpse the “height” of Godot’s arrival. The boy’s interchangeable identity (“I don’t know, Sir”) underscores the absence of progress, rendering time itself into a cruel joke. Camus’ cyclical time is a canvas for human will; Beckett’s is a blank where hope is the ultimate absurdity.

Although the play doesn’t introduce us to an exact timeline, we get a sense of the passage of time with the leafless tree gaining leaves and the errand boy supposedly sent by Godot appearing at the end of the day, as we can see in the following moment:

BOY: Mr. Godot –
 VLADIMIR: I’ve seen you before, haven’t I?
 BOY: I don’t know, Sir.
 VLADIMIR: You don’t know me?
 BOY: No Sir.
 VLADIMIR: It wasn’t you came yesterday?
 BOY: No Sir.
 VLADIMIR: This is your first time?
 BOY: Yes Sir.
Silence.
 VLADIMIR: Words words. *[Pause.]* Speak.
 BOY: *[in a rush]* Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won’t come this evening but surely tomorrow.
 (Beckett, 2010, Act I, pp. 169, 171)

A similar conversation takes place in Act II, just after Pozzo and Lucky leave the stage. Again, the boy calls Vladimir “Mr Albert” and Vladimir responds as if he were himself. Vladimir’s response of calling the boy “Mr Albert” can be interpreted as an

attempt to establish an ironic formality or a passive acceptance of the messenger's uncertain identity, demonstrating the ambiguity and lack of communication that permeate the wait for Godot. However, instead of the Boy announcing that Godot won't come, Vladimir himself announces it, realising his disappointment.

VLADIMIR: You have a message from Mr. Godot.
 BOY: Yes Sir.
 VLADIMIR: He won't come this evening.
 BOY: No Sir.
 VLADIMIR: But he'll come tomorrow.
 BOY: Yes Sir.
 VLADIMIR: Without fail.
 BOY: Yes Sir.
Silence.
 (Beckett, 2010, Act II, p. 341)

Camus' rebellion presupposes a universe where defiance has aesthetic and moral value. Beckett's world denies even those. The tree's inexplicable sprouting of leaves in Act II mocks the idea of renewal, and Pozzo's blindness in Act II ("I woke up one day as blind as Fortune") negates the possibility of enlightenment. Beckett's characters are not heroes of the absurd but its prisoners, their routines (hats, boots, carrots) rituals of survival devoid of Camus' happiness. Vladimir is the one who seems to understand and absorb the disappointment with Godot the most. He longs for his wait, but at the same time introduces an awareness of despair. Vladimir is the thinker of the duo, the one who suffers from realising the futility of waiting, but also the one who clings most to the illusion that Godot might arrive. This contradiction – between the lucidity of the absurd and the need to wait – makes him the character most disappointed and frightened by the human condition portrayed in the play.

Estragon refrain, "Nothing to be done", rejects struggle altogether. Where Sisyphus finds purpose in pushing the boulder, Estragon's exhaustion mirrors Le Breton's "blank" – a surrender to erasure. His bodily decay (the painful boots, the forgotten beatings) literalizes Beckett's rejection of Camus' physical triumph. When Estragon says, "Don't speak to me! Stay with me!", he captures the paradox of their existence: dependence without transcendence, a far cry from Sisyphus' solitary defiance.

Deep down, Didi and Gogo form a duality that supports them amid their existential helplessness. On the one hand, Vladimir is clamouring for meaning, fighting

against the absurd; Estragon, on the other hand, is clamouring for relief, accepting his absurdist fate. Didi is the voice that questions why we wait, and Gogo is the voice that tells us that there is nothing more to be done. Godot will never come, but while waiting, Godot exists. Here, Beckett diverges radically from Camus. For Camus, the absurd arises from the conflict between human desire for meaning and the universe's silence; for Beckett, the absurd is the silence. Godot's absence is not a problem to be solved, but the only reality to be endured. Waiting, then, is not a rebellion but a surrender to the *blank* – a performance where the actors forget their lines but must keep speaking. Moreover, Beckett captures the tragedy and comedy of being alive in this period: between the fading day and the ever – falling night.

Thus, Didi and Gogo become Beckett's Sisyphean duo, trapped in an eternal loop of hope and disillusionment. Their waiting isn't just pointless – it's all they have left in a world without meaning. Like Sisyphus, they repeat the same actions, but unlike him, Didi and Gogo lack even the fleeting satisfaction of a boulder reaching the summit. Their routine – empty talk, phantom messengers, and broken promises – reflects the absurdity of life: a continuous performance without an audience or applause. They don't overcome their fate; they simply live with it. Beckett's tragicomedy lies in this duality: the very act of waiting, however futile, becomes the only proof of existence. Like Sisyphus's rock, Godot is neither salvation nor punishment – merely the weight that makes the characters feel alive as they vanish.

Where Camus' absurd ends in a call to "live without appeal", Beckett's ends in a whisper. Didi and Gogo's final immobility ("Let's go" / "They do not move") is not a failure of will, but instead an acknowledgment that even rebellion is another script in the endless rehearsal of the absurd. In this way, Beckett's legacy is darker than Camus': he strips the absurd of its heroism, leaving only the unbearable lightness of waiting. And while Beckett refuses even rebellion as a possibility of transcendence, it is only because his work exposes the horror inherent in the trivial. In *Waiting for Godot*, there is no need for supernatural artifice: the stage void, the tree, the ill-fitting boots and Godot's repeated promise reveal what Kolakowski identified as the core of metaphysical horror – the realisation that the universe offers no answers, only the weight of its own indifference.

In Beckett's play, silence operates as a visceral manifestation of *horror metaphysicus*, amplifying the existential dread that permeates the characters' cyclical

wait. Unlike traditional horror, which relies on overt shocks, Beckett weaponizes silence to unmask the absurdity of human existence – where meaning collapses into voids between words. This is evident in the play's structure: pauses punctuate dialogues like existential gasps, as when Vladimir's frantic plea to "do something" dissolves into silence, underscoring the futility of action. These silences are not mere absences but active forces, mirroring Le Breton's *blank* (2018) – a psychological erosion where identity unravels in the face of nothingness. The horror of silence is most acute in Lucky's monologue (Beckett, 2010, p. 141-145), where language disintegrates into gibberish before ceasing entirely. His eventual muteness in Act II literalises the play's central terror: the failure of communication as a bulwark against the void. Pozzo's blindness and amnesia ("I don't remember!") further exemplify this, as silence replaces his earlier tyranny, rendering him a hollow echo of his former self. Beckett's stage directions – "*Silence*" – are thus performative, forcing the audience to confront the unspoken horror of their own existential inertia.

Silence also subverts the censored text's erasures. When the Lord Chamberlain excised Lucky's tirade, Beckett's staging retaliated with visual silence: Pozzo's mute whip, the rope around Lucky's neck, and the tree's skeletal presence. These silent symbols materialize the metaphysical horror Kolakowski describes – the "terror of nothingness" (1988) – more potently than any banned dialogue. The boy's monosyllabic exchanges with Vladimir heighten this effect, his vacant repetitions underscoring the absurdity of hope. Each silence becomes a site of contested disappearance, where language and identity are hollowed out. The play's final silence – "*They do not move*" – epitomizes this horror. Unlike Camus' Sisyphus, whose struggle is vocalized, Vladimir and Estragon's paralysis is wordless, a surrender to the void. Here, silence is not respite but consummation, the characters' identities erased by the very emptiness they sought to fill with chatter. For the audience, this silence is the ultimate *unhomely* (Freud, 1919): a mirror of their own futile waiting, in which the horror lies not in the unknown but in the certainty of its silence.

The horror that is evoked in *Waiting for Godot* is not hidden in shadows or gothic castles, or in ghosts or monsters, but in the unmasking of existence itself. The stage created by Beckett – an almost empty landscape where we see time fade away and where language and identities dissolve – becomes a laboratory for metaphysical dread. Unlike traditional horror, which shocks its reader/spectator with the grotesque

or the supernatural, Beckett's horror lies in the ordinary: a tree that represents hope or escape, a boot that will never fit – and if it does, it will ache for a long time – or a promise that repeats itself in a vicious cycle, almost like a broken record. This horror of *Waiting for Godot* then brings into focus the metaphysical horror imagined by Kolakowski: the paralysing realisation that the universe offers no answers, only the weight of its existence and silence.

Le Breton's blankness materialises in the gestures of the characters in the play, whether in Vladimir's urgent search for meaning or even in Estragon's obliteration through numb surrender. His routine speech and mannerisms – fixing his hat, eating some vegetables and repeating "Let's go", over and over again, without leaving his spot – become a ritual of self-erasure, in order to avoid the blank and what may dwell in it. Even the eternal and empty promise that Godot will still come intensifies the horror, reducing the hope of both characters every day. After all, the real horror is not whether Godot will come, but that he represents everything the characters still have. Like Vladimir and Estragon, the spectator/reader, through the lives of the characters, clings to the illusion that in the next act, in the next line, there will be an answer, a sense of purpose. However, the cyclical structure of the play and the phrase "They do not move", ensures that the audience is also caught up in the everyday absurdity of Didi and Gogo. The nervous laughter evoked many times throughout the play turns into recognition: we are all waiting for a Godot, and the only thing more terrifying than his absence is the possibility that he never existed.

In the last analysis, Beckett's horror lies not in the unseen, but in the unbearable landscape – the reflection of our own disappearance in the *void* of life's stage. *Waiting for Godot* does not haunt us with ghost stories; it haunts us with the realisation that we are already ghosts, playing out our lives on a stage where the curtain never falls.

5 FINAL REMARKS

This dissertation examines Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* through four interrelated objectives, each contributing to a reinterpretation of the play centered on existential horror, moving beyond, though still considering the merits of, the Theatre of the Absurd and nihilism.

The first objective – to select and analyse the critical bibliography on Beckett and his works – establishes the basis for this study, involving texts essential to understanding the play's distinctive style. Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) frames the play as a paradigmatic example of absurd drama, while *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) by Albert Camus offers a philosophical framework of rebellion and futility that resonates in Beckett's cyclical narrative. Complementing these works, David Le Breton's *Disparaître de Soi* (2015) and Leszek Kolakowski's *Metaphysical Horror* (1988) provide the theoretical framework for the subsequent argument, introducing the concepts of *the blank* and *horror metaphysicus* as lenses through which to reinterpret Beckett's minimalism in *Waiting for Godot*. Secondary studies, including Michael Y. Bennett's thorough reassessment and re-investigation of the absurd developed by Esslin to analyse *Waiting for Godot*, also provide a theoretical framework for understanding Beckett's iconic play. Anna McMullan's, in her turn, revisits the concept of *theatrum mundi* and notes that *Waiting for Godot* has its own rules, its own essence and meaning, deepening the analysis and revealing that Beckett's work transcends the original structure that Esslin believed the two-act play represented: the breaking away from traditional theatre. *Godot* not only breaks with tradition but also creates its own microcosm (McMullan, 2021).

The second objective seeks to analyse the play through an absurd and metaphysical philosophical lens, examining how Beckett's dramaturgy subverts traditional theatrical expectations. While Esslin emphasised absurdity as a reflection of the meaninglessness of life, this study shows that Beckett's innovation lies in his staging of meaninglessness – not as a passive condition, but as an active, almost aggressive void. The repetitive dialogue of the play “Nothing to be done”, its inert setting (the barren road and the tree) and its unresolved waiting exemplify what Camus called the struggle of the *absurd hero*. Yet Vladimir and Estragon do not even have the fleeting triumph of Sisyphus; sadly, they both remain static in their cycle. Their inertia

in waiting – despite having the option of freedom to leave and never choosing it – becomes a theatrical manifestation of the absurd, which envelops the audience in its futility, making them question whether it is possible to leave or make choices.

Further on, the third objective explores the characters' self-forgiveness through Le Breton's concept of *the blank*, arguing that Beckett's minimalism is not merely aesthetic, but existential. Le Breton's theory – which describes the gradual dissolution of identity under the weight of existential saturation – frames Esslin's absurdity, shifting the focus from intellectual paradox to visceral experience. The fragmented memories of Vladimir and Estragon, their interchangeable dialogue and their physical decay – Estragon's boots, Vladimir's pain, his suicidal thoughts – signal a retreat of the personality into what Le Breton calls "the impersonal" (2018). The sparse stage, dominated by emptiness, reflects the inner emptiness of the characters, turning the theatre into a laboratory for disappearance. On the one hand, this analysis recontextualised Esslin's statements; on the other, it revealed how Beckett's characters embody a uniquely modern form of horror: the erosion of individuality under the gaze of an indifferent universe, thus creating a new perspective for investigation.

At last, the fourth objective identifies the elements of horror invoked in Beckett's narrative, mixing Le Breton's *the blank* with Kolakowski's *horror metaphysicus*. In here, this dissertation has withdrawn from traditional readings of the play as merely dark, comic or absurd, revealing instead a latent horror in its silences and repetitions. Kolakowski's notion of *horror methaphysicus* – the fear of facing a universe devoid of answers – manifested itself in Lucky's fragmented monologue, Pozzo's sudden blindness and the boy's empty promises, as well as Estragon terrible dreams. The audience, forced to witness this unfolding, becomes an accomplice to the horror and the questions evoked by the play, since the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* breaks down the boundary between the reader/spectator and the characters. By synthesising these structures, the study has shown that *Waiting for Godot* not only portrays the absurd, but transforms it into an imprisoning experience, trapping the reader/spectator in the same existential limbo as its characters.

Going back to the question of how Beckett creates characters who continually erase their identities (Le Breton) through the repetition of actions, my investigation demonstrates that the almost empty minimalist setting, the failure of memory, and the codependency of Vladimir and Estragon all lead to the idea of fading away. By applying

the theoretical concepts of Le Breton's *the blank* and Kolakowski's *horror metaphysicus*, this dissertation demonstrates that Beckett created characters who, through repetitive and fragmented actions, slowly erase themselves over the course of the play as a means of escaping the absurdity of their existence. Trapped in an undetermined location, surrounded only by a road that hardly anyone passes, and a solitary tree, Vladimir and Estragon have little choice but to "chat away" into a whitening horizon. In these conversations between the characters, we discover that Vladimir and Estragon depend on each other in an equivalent way; despite moments when one, or both, feel the urge to leave, to cease the waiting, they remain static, even in silence. The two characters complement each other. Vladimir remembers, Estragon forgets; Vladimir reaffirms that they need to wait for Godot, while Estragon longs to leave and find meaning beyond waiting. Vladimir embodies Le Breton's *the blank*, as one side of a coin, when he tries to remember the events and people he knows, when he tries to accommodate himself to that environment; while Estragon is the other side of the coin of *the blank*, he represents the one who abandons his strength once and for all and abandons everything completely. Vladimir embodies Beckett's introspective horror – the more a character thinks, the more their identity fractures. Estragon, meanwhile, suffers in the body but avoids the existential anguish that consumes Vladimir.

Once it is established that Beckett's characters continually erase themselves, embodying Le Breton's idea of *the blank* at every moment of their existence, it becomes necessary to explore how and why this erasure evokes a sense of horror within the play. In other texts by Beckett, such as *Ping*, it is evident that with each repetition of words or phrases, meaning gradually dissolves, speech becomes distorted, pale and nearly disappears amidst the characters' efforts to navigate the absurdity in which they live. Trapped in an absurdist world devoid of meaning, Vladimir and Estragon try to overcome the weight of their purposeless existence, becoming themselves a response to saturation, to the excess experienced in their cyclical days (Le Breton, 2018). Even their feeble attempt at maintaining conversation and exchanging jokes is a form of resistance to the reality that surrounds them: the uncertainty of what tomorrow will bring, or if there is indeed a tomorrow in a timeless existence.

Although Didi and Gogo repeatedly try to rationalise that their wait for Godot is in vain, they remain static, almost paralysed by the horror of not knowing if he is coming

or, worse, if he really exists. Like Sisyphus, who carried his boulder up the mountain every day, they both search for meaning in their miserable lives day after day, with their constant grumbles and complaints. By witnessing the suffering and questioning of the characters, the reader/spectator becomes immersed in their lives, gradually resembling Didi and Gogo, asking themselves if Godot will really come and if he will offer any redemption or even answers for the events that never in fact unfold. This breaking of the fourth wall with the reader/spectator is one of the countless interpretations offered by the text; after all, each reader can get a different perspective on the work. For me, *Waiting for Godot* causes a purposeful discomfort in the reader, making them wonder if life is not just a laboratory, and we are the ones being observed and analysed by the play.

Revisiting the concept of *theatrum mundi*, McMullan comments that Beckett's microcosms "[...] are not slices of the living world, but models of alternative worlds in which the *anthropos* is placed under observation" (2021, p. 4). In other words, Beckett develops small environments provided for human observation. In *Waiting for Godot*, particularly, the emotional drive for seeking meaning in the midst of an apocalyptic scenario, where speech, and even human connection, proves insufficient to overcome the horror caused by existential emptiness. Beckett's two-act play does not evoke classic horror but rather provokes human thought through existential emptiness by means of fragmented dialogues and minimalist scenarios. Thus, the erasure of personhood in *Waiting for Godot* evokes horror because it forces both the characters and the audience to confront the uncomfortable in modern reality: the self as a fragile construction and language as an inadequate tool, thus dissolving into a universe that offers no basis for meaning or identity.

Returning to Martin Esslin's perspective on *Waiting for Godot* and its relevance to the Theatre of the Absurd, I deduce that the author emphasises the lack of meaning intrinsic to the human condition imposed on Vladimir and Estragon, which leads to the interpretation that absurdity is life "out of harmony". However, what this dissertation concludes is that Esslin overlooks the existential dimension of the absurd, which is a response to the characters' experience of emptiness. Michael Y. Bennett, when reassessing Esslin's book, disagrees with the author's nihilistic view, mentioning that by challenging the reader/spectator, the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd do more than just demonstrate the absurdity of everyday life. Bennett also states that Esslin

misunderstood Camus' perspective, since absurdity was not a sentence or destiny, but rather a situation to be confronted by human beings (Bennett, 2011). Considering that interpretations of a work can change over the years, just as Bennett re-evaluated Esslin's concepts, this dissertation brings a new perspective by emphasising that the absurdity and emptiness present in *Waiting for Godot* evoke existential horror by questioning the reader/spectator with the lines and mannerisms of Vladimir and Estragon.

When analysing the play from the perspective of Le Breton's *the blank*, I investigate that the absurdity is not only the disjointed dialogue or cyclical actions, but rather the emphasis on the gradual dissolution of Didi and Gogo's identities under existential saturation. For Le Breton, *the blank* is the intermediate state between an everyday situation and nothingness, in which the individual gradually fades away until they no longer exist (2018). By analysing the actions of the characters in *Waiting for Godot* through this lens of *the blank*, it is possible to determine the horror experienced by Didi and Gogo, and by the readers/spectators, who become accomplices in Beckett's microcosm.

Thus, Le Breton's concept, along with Kolakowski's *horror metaphysicus*, proposes a reassessment of the absurdity originally analysed by Martin Esslin. While Esslin frames absurdity primarily as an intellectual confrontation with the absence of meaning, Le Breton's *the blank* exposes its psychological and existential cost – the affective horror of being lost in an indifferent void. Applying Le Breton's concept, this dissertation re-evaluates Esslin's theory by demonstrating that absurdity in Beckett's play is not merely an intellectual condition, but a gradual process of disappearance. While Esslin saw absurdity as a destiny, Le Breton and Kolakowski's concepts reveal a core of horror in the absurd: the slow erasure of the self in the face of emptiness, and the characters' recognition of it. The reader/spectator not only observes the characters, but also experiences this fading away, feeling the horror conveyed by the play in their core, becoming a new character within Beckett's metaphysical microcosm. Thus, *Waiting for Godot* emerges not as a *theatre of the absurd*, but as a *theatre of existential horror*.

This dissertation proposes a new critical perspective on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, moving beyond its traditional absurdist interpretation to position it as a work that evokes existential horror. Through the interaction between David Le

Breton's *the blank* and Leszek Kolakowski's *metaphysicus horror*, this new perspective considers not only with the absence of meaning or a world out of harmony, but also the active unravelling of the subject in the midst of a universe of repetition and continuous self-erasure. Beckett's peculiar dramaturgy brings emptiness as an oppressive force, transforming the theatre into a laboratory of absurd despair. Le Breton's concept of *the blank* provided me the structural mechanism to analyse the evocation of this horror: Vladimir and Estragon's repetitive cycle are performances of self-erasure, causing their identities to gradually dissolve under the weight of the saturation exerted on the environment. The minimalist setting acts as a catalyst and mirror for this *disappearance of oneself*, reflecting the emptiness of each character back into the environment in which they live, conveying to the reader/spectator the discomfort experienced by Vladimir and Estragon. This emptiness proves to be partaking; as the characters plunge into impersonality, the reader/spectator becomes complicit in their disappearance, trapped in the same futile cycle of observation and false expectation. Kolakowski's metaphysical horror emerges from this void. The horror lies not only in Godot's absence, but in the realisation that waiting is the only certainty, that is, a life without narrative governed by a script without resolution. Small moments of awareness, especially on Vladimir's part, punctuate the characters' routines, offering glimpses of the abyss of absurdity in their world. The reader/spectator, like Didi and Gogo, join them in this liminal space and together confront the fragility of their identities and life purposes.

By combining Le Breton's *the blank* with Kolakowski's *metaphysicus horror* in an analysis of *Waiting for Godot*, this dissertation introduces a new dimension to Beckett's: it becomes a horror play in its own right. Unlike traditional horror, which needs to shock through aesthetics, *Waiting for Godot* shocks by turning the unthinkable into a spectacle: the slow erasure of oneself. The strength of Beckett's two-act play comes from his refusal to offer answers and even consolation for despair; it is a performance of disappearance in which the only certainty is the unbearable wait for the unknown.

Ultimately, this dissertation hopes to inspire further research on horror in Beckett's work, offering new perspectives to interpret his writing. Importantly, the horror here is not about ghosts or gore – it is about the quiet, everyday kind: the slow unease

of existence itself. The true horror of *Waiting for Godot* lies in seeing yourself fading away without being able to do anything about it, to blank out.

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