The Elusive Self in Monstrous Time: Samuel Beckett’s
*Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp’s Last Tape*

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My first affair with Samuel Beckett’s work was in the fall of 2011 when I took a course on the dissection of the self in twentieth-century philosophy and literature, taught by my advisor, Laura Quinney. We read Krapp’s Last Tape, and, having been somewhat of a skeptic of minimalism, I admit not liking the play at first. I read it in about half an hour, nine pages of an old man listening to a recorded tape. Nothing happens. In class, however, Professor Quinney launched a discussion on his desires and issues of memory. She screened Atom Egoyan’s film adaptation for us in the class, which stretched the thirty minutes I took to read the text to an hour-long performance by John Hurt, forcing me to endure every “[Pause.]” and “[Silence.].” There I met for the first time this man who had lost himself, who had for so long lived in the perpetual past of his memories that he had become utterly oblivious to his present reality. I wrote my final paper for the class on the play feeling like I ‘got’ it.

Having completed this undergraduate study, however, I feel at once closer to and further from Beckett’s works. I have gained a greater appreciation for him and the genius of his minimalism, that is for certain, but the research dug me deeper into the Beckettian world, exposing me to a multitude of its dilemmas and observations which I had not the time to address. This study was one of the hardest projects I have endeavored thus far in my life, and I empathized with Krapp’s struggle to understand and to write. In a sense, I had a “vision” of my own when I set out on this study, but it is easy to claim or ‘feel’ you understand something because visions befall us—they are something we supposedly perceive automatically. It is an entirely different matter, however, when it comes time to prove your understanding and the blank document on the screen or the rolling tape-recorder demands that you articulate exactly what this
vision is—to translate feelings into words. It is a grueling process which left me agonizing and biting my knuckles on days where I spend all of my time by my desk trying to write and produce nothing by the end of the day. Similarly to Krapp, I began to have reservations about the progress of my work and at times doubted myself as a writer and thinker.

And there in my midst of my exasperation, Beckett would have probably cracked an ironic joke. Part of why I like Beckett so much is that he was a walking paradox. He was a man obsessed with failure yet with a great sense of humor. This is evident enough in *Waiting for Godot* but is still present in his other works. He understood that the most bearable way to come to terms with the despair underlining humanity was to laugh at it—to see it as the absurd and not merely the tragic. He humbly shares this message with the rest of us by way of his literature, and for that, I am grateful.

But it took me a while to realize Beckett’s sentiment. Back to the screening of *Krapp’s Last Tape* in class, Professor Quinney laughed when John Hurt yelled, “Balls!” as an explicative. Her laugh caught me off guard, for all I could see was a man in desperation. And now, upon this study’s completion, I realize I repeated my mistake by not nearly laughing as much as I should have in order to counteract the frustration I was experiencing. I have grown as a writer and thinker from this process, but I am also thankful for not being one of Beckett’s characters in his eschatological world and being able to reach the *end* of this project.

Here is to not forgetting to laugh the next time around.
Introduction

The acclaimed critic, Vivian Mercier, wrote of Samuel Beckett in *The Irish Times* in 1956 that he had “achieved a theoretical impossibility—a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats” (Mercier *Irish Times*). The comment was directed at Beckett’s most notable play, *Waiting for Godot* (1952), but can be applied to most of his works. The explanation behind this paradox is that Beckett had an aptitude for saying so much with so little. And what do these audiences see when they look on his stage? Jane Hale gives the literal response: “Actors, or parts of them. Sets, occasionally. Action, less and less often” (Hale 19). His strange reality is filled with neurotic characters who engage in minimalist exchanges, monologues, and nonactions. His absurd theater leaves us so dumbfounded that we are not quite sure where to begin our dissection of it. But contrarily it is not the stage—the actors and setting we perceive before us—that ‘speaks’ on behalf of Beckett, but the world he creates, so simplistic in appearance, that houses the many elucidations on humanity which captivate us. In order for us to experience them, Beckett thrusts us into a world which has been stripped of understanding.

The truth of the matter is that the Beckettian world is one other than objective reality. It is a projection of discord which the tormented individual has vomited. His upset emerges from the pit in his stomach, which has augmented from the contention between his moralizing mind and demanding body, and from a broken heart, which covets a desire so great but whose object lays cruelly and perpetually out of reach. This, Samuel Beckett noted, is most devastating to the individual, because the individual cannot comprehend the ailment from which he suffers and so cannot seek the appropriate remedy. Left untreated, it begins to fester inside until it reaches
culmination, causing the individual to expel the fragments of his psyche into the room before him, and it is in this room where Beckett’s works reflect its aftermath.

The individual’s mental anxiety is thus cast in space which then becomes subject to the will of time, and it is Beckett’s monstrous Time that governs the world of his works. Monstrous Time, to be sure, is distinct from objective time, which can never be experienced by his characters because indeterminacy impedes the individual’s perception of it. It thwarts the conventional rules of objective time, obliterating the margins which guide the flow of time and thus robbing the Beckettian individual of a coherent world. And so, perceived time is grossly distorted. This monstrous Time, so fiendish and relentless, has been studied by Beckett scholars many times over. This study makes no exception, but it seeks to examine time specifically as engendered from the internal anxiety described earlier—that, the chaos exhibited in reality is only a transfiguration of the disturbance in the mind. The individual sees his anxiety extended before his very eyes. Furthermore, he may perceive the fragments of his psyche as having manifested in the form of many selves, and, bombarded by strangers, he does not know how to host so many egos. It is not long before he feels suffocated. Soon he reaches the destructive point where he renders himself unable to focus on his mental indigestion because his claustrophobia is a persuasive diversion. But monstrous Time, which batters the individual and his collective selves, proves the most potent distraction of all.

In having to cope with the external world, the Beckettian individual adopts habit, which is every bit his protector as it is his prisoner. As his protector, Beckett in his essay *Proust*, describes habit as “[a]n automatic adjustment of the human organism to the conditions of its existence” (*Proust* 9). The individual must find a way to associate part of his identity with his body, which he sees only as a foreign extension into external reality and which thus affixes him
in the Beckettian world. He subconsciously resorts to habit, which instills ‘personality,’ informing the individual of his being and protects him from the doubts of his existence. On the other hand, the innate tragedy of his habit is that it dooms him to the Beckettian world. There is no hope in him ever finding that which he seeks which would vindicate him from monstrous Time because that and habit thwart his will power to elicit change and autonomy. Beckett’s characters are neurotic. Vladimir and Estragon in Waiting for Godot play at their hats and feet. Krapp in Krapp’s Last Tape fidgets with his tape-recorder. They are always in motion, yet initiating no real action. It is a strange paradox but one which accurately reflects the tendency of man. Beckett characterizes creatures of habit—creatures who delude themselves of freedom and higher awareness, but who in actuality are shackled in the most common and natural form of slavery—namely the slavery of compulsion. Too often the Beckettian individual forgets that, as a human being, he is a natural prisoner of automaticity, and that it is his responsibility to free himself. He is caught in the commonplaceness of his day to day life, prone to gradually slipping into a poisonous consciousness that is nothing more than immediacy and automated thought. The permanent state of this form of passivity is the death of the individual. He struggles to surface his consciousness so that it may remain conscious. Freedom of the will is not something one gains in an instance. Contrary to intuition, the difficulty of freedom is not attaining, but maintaining it. Freedom requires upkeep.

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The aim of this study is to examine the plight of the Beckettian individual outlined above in two of Beckett’s plays: Waiting for Godot (1952) and Krapp’s Last Tape (1958). These two plays have been selected because they both illustrate the unfolding of this plight but are different—almost opposite—in their method of demonstration. Waiting for Godot follows the
outline more closely in that the anxiety of Vladimir, the dominant intelligence, is more apparently projected before him, and he engages with the chaos in his surroundings. In terms of the plot, he and his friend Estragon meet by a tree, and it is revealed that they are waiting for a man named Godot on who is given very little information. They try to pass the time with conversation and games. Eventually, Pozzo enters the scene driving his slave Lucky by rope and entertains them for a while before leaving. At night, a boy who claims to be Godot’s messenger appears and tells Vladimir that Godot will not be coming that night “but surely tomorrow.” The same happens in the second act, only Pozzo reenters blind and Lucky mute. The plot is more metaphysical than that of Krapp’s Last Tape, seeing that Vladimir notices various impossibilities in his environment, such as the mysterious Godot who never appears, the implausible short-term memory of the other characters, and the tree which somehow sprouts leaves overnight. Furthermore, he recognizes that the unlikelihood of these events is due to issues in time. And so, he tries obsessively to find a plausible explanation for every mystery, thereby free his world of chaos. Vladimir, in fact, knows very little of himself, and so he looks to the absurdities of the other characters and addresses the issues in time to attempt to piece together his identity. His efforts, however, are in vain, because the Beckettian individual is never successful. In other words, he gives into the ‘distraction’ of the external world mentioned earlier and—in this sense—looks beyond himself for the source of his upset. Waiting for Godot, in short, maps out the psyche, emphasizing the extension of identity, or, looking to “Others.”

Krapp’s Last Tape, on the other hand, focuses on self-examination. The play is not an interactive world in the same sense as Waiting for Godot. The play consists of only one character, and that is Krapp himself. For the duration of the play, the sixty-nine-year-old man sits by his desk in the den, which is in complete darkness except for the lighted area over his
desk and immediate area. He listens to a recording of his voice from his late thirties, rewinding and forwarding through the tape as he likes. In isolating himself, he rejects others and does not look to them for identity and meaning. This notion is enforced by the restricted stage setting—a bounded room—which is further reduced by the confines of the lighted area allotted by his overhead. While the setting for *Waiting for Godot* is also simple, it allows characters to come and go. The tight space in Krapp’s den, however, is only enough for him, and the clutter around his desk is enough to induce claustrophobia, a similar uneasiness from which Vladimir suffers in his crowded reality. Guarded by obsession and narcissism (which is evident in his self-hatred), Krapp acquires tunnel vision with which he looks through one end and sees only himself at the other end. The voice on the recorded tape is his own from thirty years ago, and it alludes to even younger versions of himself. Each ‘self’ has its distinct personality, and so they appear as “Others.” In other words, the ‘other characters’ in the play are mirror reflections of himself at which Krapp mocks, chastises, and envies. And so, the play deviates from the outline described at the beginning. His selves function as the manifestations of Krapp’s anxiety as the other characters in *Waiting for Godot* function for Vladimir. Moreover, Krapp’s use of the tape-recorder gives a certain command over time that is not accessible in *Waiting for Godot*, giving way to a unique form of distorted time.

The offset between *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp’s Last Tape*, thus, provides a useful contrast in the portrayal of the extension of the individual’s anxiety which is then wielded by monstrous Time. Beckett essentially emphasizes the mind over the body in *Krapp’s Last Tape*. The play focuses on Krapp’s struggle to organize and make sense of his memories. This narcissistic search of inwardness for meaning and definition isolates the mind from the body, rejecting one side of the relation for the other. *Waiting for Godot*, on the other hand, gives
greater representation of the body first and foremost in the multiple characters in the play as opposed to Krapp’s singularity. Vladimir seeks confirmation of his existence from the other characters instead of himself as Krapp does. The absurdity of Waiting for Godot is efficacious in making more evident observations on the Beckettian individual and humanity by extension. So, too, is the drama of Krapp’s Last Tape, but, seeing that it takes a more concentrated lens on one afflicted man, Krapp’s past identity becomes more of interest. In other words, Vladimir is suggestive of Western man, whereas Krapp depicts a unique interior monologue. It must also be noted that the voice on the tape narrates a life much like that of Beckett himself. Out of his works, Krapp’s Last Tape most closely resembles an autobiography. For example, Krapp’s unsuccessful book of which only “[s]eventeen copies sold” alludes to Beckett’s first novel Murphy (1938), and Krapp’s description of waiting outside his dying mother’s window is pulled directly from Beckett’s own experience. Of course, the play has its own useful observations to make in regards to humanity, but one cannot resist drawing comparisons with Beckett’s life. Vladimir, in short, lives in the perpetual present in which nothing happens, and so his elusive identity is helpful in drawing some sort of detached template for the Beckettian individual. In contrast, the voice on the tape puts Krapp in the perpetual past, where he made real choices and was self-assured. Krapp’s Last Tape therefore does not fall perfectly within the template described earlier, but is rather its own interpretation of the plighted individual doomed to the impossibility of attaining the object of his desire in his reality.

The first chapter of this study looks at the relation between elusive identity and the distortion of time in Waiting for Godot. It gives into Vladimir’s temptation of addressing the transparent external confusion first: dysfunctional time. It explores how the staging and structure of the play enforces the notion on infinity and simultaneity, ultimately creating the distortion and
inconsistency of time. From there, the chapter shifts to the topic of elusive identity, which is the aggravator of distorted time. It identifies various outward, or, surface-level portrayals of elusiveness, such as in Godot’s mysterious character and Vladimir and Estragon’s wavering identity as gentlemen and tramps. The chapter than delves into the internal causes of elusive identity, namely, Descartes’ *Cogito* and Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. And finally, it discusses the erosion of the will and the adoption of habit—insidious characteristics that foster elusive identity—in relation to Cartesian dualism.

The second chapter on *Krapp’s Last Tape* explores the intersectionality of time and the enigma behind Krapp’s “vision.” Because the play is autobiographical in nature, the chapter is more discursive than the preceding chapter to allow flexibility for frequent connections to Beckett’s life as Krapp is being compared to the plight of the Beckettian individual. Like the first chapter, it begins with issues of time, only placing particular emphasis on Kantian time. The second half of the chapter deviates to the cause of distorted time, that being Krapp’s obsession over his artistic fulfillment, or, the vision. In this section, it is argued that the vision is transcendent—that, it is a thing-in-itself, and Krapp can therefore never perceive it. However, much like a comment made on the function of Godot’s character, the vision in *Krapp’s Last Tape* is like a “living Rorschach [ink-blot] test,” and it is proposed here that the equinox that Krapp sees one night is suggested to be the more perceptible vision for Krapp (Mercier vii). The equinox, when day and night are of equal length, signifies a balance between dichotomies with which Krapp struggles.
Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It’s abominable! When! When!

(WFG 333)

The exclamation above, spoken by Pozzo, demonstrates the maddening effect time has on the pliable mind. This phenomenon is one of the many issues of time in Waiting for Godot and begins with Vladimir and Estragon, our two tramps, playing the game of waiting. It is a simple plot-driven detail which prompts what little action there is in the play, yet the act itself entraps them in a cycle of futility. The meaning of Godot’s character, having been painstakingly dissected and analyzed in Beckett scholarship, turns out not to be so essential to the play. Vladimir and Estragon’s uneasiness in waiting instead comes from dread and boredom, just as it does in all of us. What, then, is the root of this maddening quality in waiting? We all know too well how easily action or inaction affects time. Think, for instance, of the leap forward in time we perceive when we are in the company of a good friend in comparison to when we are fully conscious of the dragging minute-hand on the clock during a slow work day. Vladimir and Estragon experience dread and boredom in waiting (for Godot) just as we do in waiting (for the end of a work day).

However, Beckett depicts a greater, unfamiliar anxiety that remains unaddressed in the two tramps. It stems from elusive identity, for they know little of their past and current state, and they do not recognize their own purpose or design; they know not who Godot is, why they must meet him, or how long their wait will continue (i.e. if it will ever end). Furthermore, this apprehension contorts, obstructs, extends, and contracts time with an unfathomably greater
magnitude then the apprehension we experience on a daily basis. We find it at the very least tolerable because of the assurance of our work day ending at 5:00 PM. Clarity and definition, then, provide a coherent sense of time, and the reverse of this is also true: elusiveness (especially of identity) distorts time. However, the mysteriousness of Godot only provides the superficial explanation of this elusiveness. A deeper understanding of it suggests a separation of mind and body. Recall that the waiting game begins with dread and boredom—both cerebral anxieties. In a hasty attempt to eradicate them, we think: how can we keep ourselves entertained? In other words, how can we occupy our minds? We fail to realize, however, that anxiety affects both mind and body. The latter component is often neglected in this regard. Mental anxiety inhabits the body through neurotic anxiety. Nervous ticks, compulsive behavior, and habit all result from and are all residues of insidious unrest which festers in the mind.

The elusiveness of identity is evident in the play but difficult to pinpoint in definition. By “elusiveness,” it is not meant that identity is sporadic or evasive, being wholly present one moment and gone the next. It alludes rather to the individual’s unique perspective of its own identity, which is difficult for the individual to grasp and so it appears fluctuates between clarity and ambiguity. In staging this elusiveness, Vladimir struggles to achieve and maintain a definite sense of his identity. On the surface level, the elusiveness begins with the temporality of his narrative past, i.e. his earlier years, as well as his current disposition (for what and why he waits) and indeterminate future. But this forthright type of elusiveness, although critical in its own right, ultimately provides the lens to an elusiveness which penetrates his very core: his identity as an existent. In other words, can he even be sure of his own existence? Because of the many additives which augment the elusiveness of identity, they cannot be summed in a single form in the play. The depiction of elusive identity varies from the concurrence of the contrasting
gentleman and tramp personas, to the projection of his counterpart in Estragon, and to the contradicting nature of his memory and existence. In short, its portrayal is chaotic and will call for an individual examination of each form of elusiveness.

The elusiveness of identity is rooted in Descartes’ *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), which, “has led Western man to equate identity with his mind,” separating his mind from the body and thus being given “the futile task of controlling it” (Fritj of Capra, qtd. in Davies 45). The bodily component of dualism materializes its neurotic anxiety in the form of habit, attributing idiosyncrasy and identity to the body, consequently instilling “personality” within it, and affirming its existence within its environment, i.e. reality. The body, subject to the will of time, ages at a speed more rapid than does the mind, until one day, Western man finds that his body has suffered the flow of time while his mind has lost all sense of it. Vladimir, the most affected character in *Waiting for Godot*, struggles to find unity within the dualistic nature of his identity, which similarly fluctuates between the cerebral mind and the instinctual body. As a result, time is maddeningly warped, for his body experiences chronological time while the cyclical nature of his thoughts perceives a timeless existence. The distortion of time in *Waiting for Godot* will be explained in light of Vladimir’s elusive identity in particular regard to the mind-body problem that dualism presents. Furthermore, the other characters in the play, while more fragmented in portrayal, will be shown to mirror Vladimir’s sentiments in order to reinforce the play’s notion of time.

But first, let us address the lingering question the audience has as the play concludes with Vladimir and Estragon announcing their plans to come to the same place the next day to continue their wait: who is this accursed character Godot, and why does he never appear? The novice Beckett audience is anxious to extract information about this mysterious character. Vladimir and
Estragon wait impatiently in both acts only to be denied twice, and so it is natural for the audience to seek plot resolution. The more experienced Beckett audience, however, understands that Godot holds more significance than a character within a story. This audience thinks, Ah, *what does Godot symbolize? Death? God? Happiness?* Although with good intuition, this audience is somewhat mislead—but Beckett is partly to blame, since the title and the text of the play seem to place much emphasis on Godot. The play requires much reflection to attain a deeper understanding of it. Or rather, in the case of trying to decipher Godot’s meaning, we may be overshadowing a more pressing theme.

Worton’s own theory in terms of the widely debated meaning of Godot is that “he is simultaneously whatever we think he is and not what we think he is: he is an *absence*…Godot has a *function* rather than a *meaning*” (Worton 70-1). As akin to the theater of the absurd, Godot does not need to “make sense,” nor does the information given on his character (i.e. by Vladimir and Estragon) need to be consistent because his primary design is to keep the two tramps waiting. This purpose is fulfilled regardless of who or what Godot is in the play. Beckett himself became irritated whenever he was pestered with questions about the meaning of Godot. It seemed that they had mistaken the nonexistent character to be a highly cryptic allegory.

Beckett felt the more demanding issue was the burden of waiting and suspected the title of the play might influence whether this issue is accentuated. Worton reports:

Beckett originally thought of calling his play *En attendant* (without *Godot*) in order to deflect the attention of readers and spectators away from this ‘non-character’ onto the act of waiting. Similarly, he firmly deleted the word “Wir” from the German translation of the title *Wir warten auf Godot* (*We’re Waiting for Godot*), so that audiences would not focus too much upon the individuality.

(Worton 71)
Judging by the reception of the play, perhaps Beckett should have followed his intuition and removed “Godot” from the title of the play. Godot is simply the thing-for-which-man-waits, and this cannot be specified in the text for every individual. Beckett knew that while this “something important” varies among people, the thing-for-which-we-wait universally shackles our existence to its purpose, and he felt this idea carried much more weight than what any single abstraction the character Godot could “mean.” Godot’s character, let it be known, first and foremost enables the endless wait, engendering the distortion of time which consumes the play.

Beckett wrote in his essay, *Proust*, that time is a “double-headed monster of damnation and salvation” (P 1). Throughout his life, he was both fascinated and tormented by issues of time. He felt that the act of waiting would effectively demonstrate the submission of one’s life to the will of monstrous Time and implemented this notion in *Waiting for Godot*. He applied the mathematical notion of infinity to the number of acts in the play, thereby alluding to the idea of an endless wait. Michael Worton explains:

> Beckett originally intended to make Godot a three-act play, but finally decided that two acts were enough...Beckett was fascinated by mathematics...and especially by the paradoxes that can be made by (mis-)using mathematic principles. He knew that in mathematical theory the passage from 0 to 1 makes a major and real change of state, and that the passage from 1 to 2 implies the possibility of infinity, so two acts were enough to suggest that Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky and the boy, will go on meeting in increasingly reduced physical and mental circumstances but will never not meet again. (Worton 70)

Writing a one-act play signifies this “passage” from 0 to 1 and is enough to bring a world into existence. This “real change of state” that Worton refers to is simply the transition from
nonexistence to existence. On the other hand, a two-act play introduces the notion of adding 1 ad infinitum, and so, the introduced world not only is, but continues. Furthermore, at the start of the first act, Estragon claims, “We came here yesterday,” alluding to the past where he and Vladimir had apparently waited for Godot. At the end of the second act, Vladimir and Estragon agree that their plan for the following day is to “come back tomorrow” and wait for Godot. In this sense, Beckett creates a “third act,” with the implication that there could be a fourth act, a fifth act, and so on. Thus, Waiting for Godot becomes an infinite play.

The mise-en-scène provides the perfect backdrop for the unraveling of time’s distortion. The scenery is minimal, with only a “country road,” (WFG 7) a “low mound” on which Estragon occasionally sits, and a bare tree (WFG 9). Productions consistently depict a barren scene, typically a blank, white or landfill-esque set. The scene of Michael Lindsay-Hogg’s 2001 film adaptation is mounds of flat, smooth rocks, forming a limitless sea of grey. The road and ground are packed and grey, telling of infertile land. A closer look reveals tiny—next to negligible—sparsely scattered green shrubs, but life stands no chance against the heap of stones suffocating them. There seems to be no other life or civilization other than our two protagonists. The effect is apocalyptic but also carries ambiguity in time: does the scene depict a post-apocalyptic world, the beginning of a new age, or no world at all but instead a strange, alternate reality? The stage, stripped down to the bare necessities and coupled with the vague language of the characters, provides little contextual indicators of the setting of the play. Interestingly, the most difficult aspect of Godot’s first production was setting the stage (Bair 422). Beckett and Roger Blin, his trusted friend and director of the production, had a meager budget—practically nothing with which to work. Sergio Gerstein, another of Beckett’s friends, agreed to design the
stage, but he was forced to forage for materials and steal what he could not find (Bair 422). The final product was a sight to behold:

[T]he entire backdrop was hand-sewn from left-over scraps of material…The tree consisted of long coat-hanger wires covered with dark crepe paper; in the second act, bits of bright green paper were added to represent the leaves. The base was hidden in a discarded piece of foam rubber someone found on the street. With three large oil cans with light bulbs inside, hand “projectors” were created: two for the back of the theater and one at the rear of the stage to give the effect of the sun and the moon…They had to recruit three people to move the cans manually, and though the movements were often jerky, at least they made the projection consistent in size. (Bair 422-3)

Ironically, the three friends—Beckett, Blin, and Gerstein—somewhat became tramps themselves in scrounging for materials. And the set, although entirely makeshift, seemed to suit the play’s desolate landscape.

Beckett, having been accustomed to writing novels, had difficulty adapting his style for the theater in order to depict the distortion of time. David H. Hesla explains that “the novel time is manipulable: three spaced periods catapult the reader over hours, days, years, as easily to land him in the future as to land him in the past” (Hesla 130). Chapters provide even greater mobility over time, and one must not forget the power of text itself; simply stating that a certain period of time passed adequately did the job. Beckett, of course, rarely wrote so explicitly, for that would negate ambiguity. He was particularly fond of creating sub-sections under his chapters with a skipped line between paragraphs (e.g. in Murphy). In doing so, he incepted lapses of time within larger divisions, which are themselves shifts in time.
Hesla further notes that the dramatist, in contrast to the novelist, “has no such command over time” (Hesla 130). He may control time between scenes and acts and has the greatest authority over time possibly during the intermission, but manipulating time is not so feasible within a scene. Hesla demonstrates this with King Lear’s line, “What! Fifty of my followers at a clap? / Within a fortnight?” (qtd. Hesla 130). Here, time “does not sit well, for [it] has been impossibly telescoped…within a single scene” (Hesla 130). Accommodating the stage presented even greater difficulty. In the text of the play, the stage direction can at least provide the setting (i.e. the time and place of the circumstances). Portraying it on stage, however, is an entirely different matter:

It is very difficult for the playwright to “stop” time and present on stage an event which both chronically and causally precedes “Stage Present.” It would seem, indeed, to be almost axiomatic that in the theater, the place is “here,” the time “now”…Time on stage is regular, rigid. Its tempo for any whole scene is sixty seconds to the minute. (Hesla 130)

This required innovation on Beckett’s part, and the tree is especially noteworthy of his ingenuity of exemplifying the distortion of time on stage. The bare tree from the act one “has four or five leaves” in act two. The stage direction reads “Next day. Same time,” but the audience of course is not aware of this specificity (WFG 189). The additional leaves are subtle but substantial enough for the audience to believe that a significant amount of time has passed. Vladimir, however, confirms our instinct to assume that the second act picks off where the first act leaves off—with the next day. And Vladimir, too, notices the strange scenic change. He says inquisitively, “Things have changed here since yesterday” (WFG 203). But the ambiguity of time is not quite cleared; “today” is not simply yesterday’s tomorrow. The following
exchange between Vladimir and Estragon commenting on the leafy tree demonstrates their confusion:

Vladimir: But 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.
Vladimir: But in a single night!
Estragon: I tell you we weren’t here yesterday. (WFG 229)

Vladimir claims they were “here” yesterday, but Estragon contradicts him. We empathize with Vladimir because we trust that everything which happened in the first act has indeed occurred. But at the same time, Estragon staunchly denies “yesterday’s” events. We begin to doubt the chronology of the play, for how could Estragon really forget what happened only yesterday? Suddenly, the audience begins to experience Vladimir’s distortion of time. Hesla proposes a different interpretation of the green leaves: he suggests that they represent “life and rebirth and a ‘comic’ view” (Hesla 145). However, this proposal may be misguided. Vladimir indeed notes that “Everything’s dead but the tree,” which would indicate at least the slightest sense of hope, but instead it represents a dark and twisted sense of salvation (WFG 349). They silently move towards the tree, as if being drawn by a force, and “stand motionless before it.” Estragon proceeds to ask “Why don’t we hang ourselves?” (WFG 351). Here lies the optimism in the green leaves. Vladimir and Estragon are presented with an opportune moment to find salvation in death and thus emancipation from time. Hesla’s reasoning of course seems logical, as sprouting green leaves inevitably leads us to infer vitality, but to make an argument for it would be to place too much emotional weight and overshadow Beckett’s motif of the distortion of time.
The indicators are right there in front of us: the leaves do seem to have grown overnight, and Vladimir does point out the lapse in time.

A similar instance is the revealing of Lucky’s hair. Vladimir and Estragon, upon inspecting his face, decides, “[h]e’s not bad looking”—“[a] trifle effeminate,” even (WFG 79, 81). Such observations carry implications of youth, or, we at least would not expect a face ridden with wrinkles. Such a shock it is to see when “long white hair falls about his face” upon Pozzo’s order to remove his hat (WFG 105). Something does not add up. Lucky’s hair shows a different age than does his face, as if the two features belonged to two different people or to Lucky from different periods of his life. Most productions and adaptations of the play feature a young actor as Lucky and certainly not an elderly man. Jean Martin was only thirty at the time he played Lucky for Godot’s first production, the casting in which Beckett was heavily involved. The disparity in the age represented in Lucky’s hair and face seems purposeful. Returning to the text, Pozzo removes his own hat to compare with Lucky, revealing his “completely bald” head (WFG 105). He explains: “compared to him I look like a young man, no?” (WFG 105). Lindsay-Hogg, however, gives Pozzo a full head of short dark hair to give sharper contrast to Lucky. And certainly, Pozzo’s logic makes sense. Lucky’s long white hair is the greater indicator of age, since the lack of pigmentation suggests old age, while the length suggests the continual advancement in the aging process and thus an encroachment of death. In light of Proust, George Poulet explains the duality in age and appearance in relation to an otherness we encounter after an ailment or in death. Once does not simply become “nothing” in death; to be dead “is to be another being. Such is a man who after an illness is shocked to see that his hair has turned white” (Poulet 295). Lucky, having submitted himself into servitude, suffers a sort of ailment, and its effects are evident. The years have been kind to his “not bad looking” face, but
his hair, cascading long and white from his head, suggests otherwise; his mind has matured from a weary life. Proust elaborates in his account:

I ought to have been more astounded than a person who, looking at his reflexion in the glass, after months of travel, or of sickness discovers that he has white hair and a different face, that of a middle aged or an old man. This appalls us because its message is: “the man that I was, the fair young man, no longer exists, I am another person.” And yet, was not the impression that I now felt, the proof of as profound a change, as total a death of my former self and of the no less complete substitution of a new self for that former self, as is proved by the sight of a wrinkled face capped with a snowy poll instead of the face of long ago? (Proust, qtd. in Poulet 295)

Proust underlines the sudden change we undergo when an ailment uproots and restructures our mental and physical identity. Pozzo’s blindness and Lucky’s dumbness change their beings in the second act. Pozzo loses, even, his perception of time, for “[t]he blind have no notion of [it]. The things of time are hidden from them too” (WFG 321). Objects and events are removed from their disposal, and experiences of the past are soon forgotten. Thus, the Pozzo we get in the second act has a different memory (one which is lacking) than the previous Pozzo. Lucky, however, is unique. His white hair indicates he has experienced a great change even before his inability to speak in the second act. Proust accurately narrates the moment we discover time and age his seized us, but his correspondence with Lucky is limited. The dual nature of his appearance depicts a transformation in which his previous self is not yet wholly replaced. Lucky is two beings or two identities in one—the young and old, the before and after. This, first and foremost, highlights simultaneity of time, two different time periods occupying one body.
Still, this instance with Lucky is not to simply conclude that the distortion of time lies in simultaneity in *Waiting for Godot*. Endlessness is the form of time in which Vladimir and Estragon are most evidently caught and is arguably the most maddening to endure. It is different from simultaneity in that time does not coincide, but *loops*, eradicating any notion of beginning or end. A useful image in particular to discuss is Vladimir and Estragon’s “hat trick,” a motif which contributes to the themes of cycle and endlessness. Vladimir tries on Lucky’s abandoned, handing his own to Estragon to hold, who subsequently tries on Vladimir’s hat. They then take turns trying on each of the three hats, passing them in succession. Lindsay-Hogg depicts the two to begin the rotation slowly, both intently adjusting the hats on their heads. The rotation then gains momentum, hats flying on and off their heads and being passed with quick movements of their hands. Vladimir’s eventual mindless gaze and Estragon’s childish delight indicate that their *intent* has dissipated. The action loses purpose, but despite the futility, the audience does find the absurd routine to be humorous. Its vaudevillian effect mimics acts performed by clowns and jugglers. This comedic scene is especially handy, since it buffers the more despairing undertone of endlessness that will be discussed next.

Vladimir and Estragon’s waiting game mirrors the cyclical action of Sisyphus, who is punished by the Greek gods to “ceaselessly [roll] a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight” (Camus). Godot’s failure to show up forces Vladimir and Estragon to continuously return and wait for him, and although this theological interpretation will not be investigated here, Vladimir’s damnation to an endless existence equates Western man’s punishment for his sins. The point here, however, is that the real punishment lies in being aware and constantly reminded of the futility in one’s life. Albert Camus presses, “[i]f this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious.” He waits all day for the appearance of Godot, but
by nightfall in the second act, he comes to a poignant understanding that he will wait endlessly.

Upon seeing the boy, Vladimir anticipates the message delivered to him from act one:

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. (WFG 341)

Vladimir is able to answer his own questions, because he knows his own fate. His conscious demeanor here contrasts his inexperience in the previous act. He acknowledges the despondent state of his life somewhat matter-of-factly. The boy merely confirms him, and, with that, Vladimir’s boulder of Sisyphus rolls back downhill. “Off we go again,” he states (WFG 339). Most, if not all, of his actions enacted to pass the time during his waiting game, in fact, emanate the cyclical nature of futility. His habits—from the neurotic inspection of the inside of his hat to the redundant exchanges with Estragon (We could do our exercises. Our movements. Our elevations. Our relaxations. Our elongations.)—are feeble attempts at escaping the banality of his existence. They merely temporarily alleviate his anxiety with falsified purpose, and it is not long before he once again sees that there is “nothing to be done.” If Vladimir’s “punishment” is as effective as that of Sisyphus—and we suspect it is—death is enviable.

And so, Vladimir and Estragon’s response to the weight of existence is to simply wish for nonexistence in death. Although they incessantly seek affirmation of their existence (e.g. the clumsily explicit line “We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?”), the toilsome task of convincing themselves and others of their existence time and again exceeds the assumed misfortune of nonexistence (WFG 245). Moreover, existence condemns them to
the act of waiting, causing them further apprehension. They wait in “despair” for Godot. Or, rather, it is the dread of waiting to an undefined time. They are not certain if there is real purpose in waiting or if Godot will ever arrive. It is the dread of an endless wait. Of course, one might say that it is better to live a hard (or anxious) life than to not live at all. But one must speculate the total loss of one’s control and the height of madness which make life unbearable, rendering death as the only relief and thus the preferable option. Here, the play lives up to the tragedy in its tragicomedy classification. On the other end, its comedic element makes light of the situation. Vladimir and Estragon contemplate hanging themselves at numerous instances, but discuss this with each other in casual conversation.

Vladimir: What do we do now?  
Estragon: Wait.  
Vladimir: Yes, but while waiting.  
Estragon: What about hanging ourselves? (WFG 43)

The humor lies in Estragon’s absurd suggestion that they hang themselves for a bit of amusement; to pass the time by hanging oneself is to end time. At another instance toward the end of the play, Estragon suggests using his belt to hang the two of them. He removes it from his trousers, which are much too big for him, and so they fall to his ankles, presumably bearing his undergarment. This act mimics a typical comedic routine by clowns. We momentarily forget the alarming aspect of it: these clowns intend to use a prop from their routine to kill themselves! How can this humor in suicide be justified? We can, after all, come to terms with a distraught figure wishing for death, but Vladimir and Estragon’s nonchalant tone in hanging themselves is unfamiliar and bizarre to us. Vladimir plainly says of their ultimatum: “We’ll hang ourselves
tomorrow. [*Pause.*] Unless Godot comes” (*WFG* 355). Not only does the idea of suicide not take the conventional dark understanding, their apathy of it is especially foreign.

John McTaggart’s use of the A-series and B-series of time may shed light on Vladimir’s and Estragon’s lack of fear of death. McTaggart’s theory goes that there are two fundamental modes which can temporally order all events. The A-series is the familiar mode of time which allows us to experience the change among the past, present, and future. In other words, we eventually experience anticipated events as the present and later on as the past. This is the flow of time and explains how we experience time passing. In contrast, the B-series consists of two components, known simply as the before and after. This theory reduces events as being either antecedent or subsequent and does not change as time progresses. Vladimir and Estragon find themselves fixed in the B-series of time. For example, they understand that the event of them agreeing to meet with Godot precedes the event of them waiting for Godot. This “x, then y” relation does not change over time as an event shifting from the future, to the present, to the past. The sentence, “They agree to meet with Godot, and then they wait for Godot” is tenseless (its truthhood does not change over time, because it is inarguable that one does not precede the other), while the statement “They *agreed* to meet with Godot” depends on it happening in the past. Vladimir and Estragon struggle to achieve this coherent sense of the A-series of time. When needed to place the previous events in the context of past/present/future in the following dialogue, they become utterly confused:

Estragon: You’re sure it was this evening?
Vladimir: What?
Estragon: That we were to wait.
Vladimir: He said Saturday. [*Pause.*] I think.
…
Estragon: \textit{very insidious}  But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? \textit{[Pause.]}  Or Monday? \textit{[Pause.]}  Or Friday? \textit{(WFG 35)}

Clearly, they have no notion of time, and the days of the week are nothing more than empty words. Estragon’s line “what Saturday” further notes that even if it is Saturday, they cannot be certain whether it is ‘last,’ ‘this,’ or ‘next’ Saturday.

It may be beneficial to pause and consider the seemingly obvious—namely, why do we fear death? Surely it is because death terminates our existence. But if it is nonexistence that we fear, why do we not fear prenatal nonexistence? After all, both conditions deprive us of life and all good things associated with it. This form of spatialized time defines nonexistence as simply not occupying space. It separates existence and nonexistence into an oversimplified dichotomy. The dead and the unborn, both not occupying space, \footnote{To be certain, the dead indeed do not occupy space and do not exist. It must not be argued, as many do, that the dead, having recently died, are newly formed corpses, which surely occupy space and therefore must exist. When Socrates died, for example, he did not simply \textit{become} a corpse, for “being a corpse” is not of his essence. Socrates is such the person he was during his lifetime, and is not continually defined postmortem. The dead ceases to exist (although this is not to say they are not nothing), and this assertion is a premise for my argument here. See Palle Yourgrau’s “The Dead” for a more in-depth discussion on the nature of nonexistence.} are lumped together, and so, the dichotomy fails to consider the essential properties of prenatal nonexistence as “never having come into existence” and postnatal nonexistence as “having lived.” There are also other obvious differences between prenatal and postnatal nonexistence. For one, we, living in the A-series, do not mourn the unborn as we do the dead. The A-series tells us that untimely death is tragic, \footnote{I specify “untimely” to differentiate the greater tragedy in the death of an eighteen-year-old rather than in the death of an ailing eighty-nine-year-old.} while “never to have been born is better described as unfortunate” (i.e. it is a shame that possible people aren’t able to come into existence, but we do not dwell on it) \textit{(Yourgrau 96)}. 


Again: why do we fear death? Now, more specifically, how do we fear postnatal nonexistence and not prenatal nonexistence? Yourgrau’s answer is that it has futurity. He explains:

We live in the “direction” of the future, and we attach different values to events, positive and negative, according to their position in our pasts or futures. Each of us knows, for example, the different attitude we would take if told we had had a terrifying toothache as a child, as opposed to being told that such a pain awaits us in ten minutes...It is thus precisely the futurity of death that renders it a more fearful evil than prenatal nonexistence. (Yourgrau 100)

Of course, we do not require this explanation to convince us to not fear prenatal nonexistence. We already do not fear it. We know it is absurd to fear prenatal nonexistence even if we are not conscious of the reasoning behind it. It is simply the way of the A-series. Remember that Vladimir and Estragon do not live in the A-series. They are trapped in the spatialized B-series, which, being tenseless, cannot provide us with the answer of death’s futurity. It does not recognize the temporal difference between prenatal and postnatal nonexistence but rather sees them jointly as the nonexistent. Vladimir and Estragon rightly do not fear prenatal nonexistence, but, having no understanding of the future and being unable to distinguish between prenatal and postnatal nonexistence, they also do not fear death. If they can find relief from the burden of existence in prenatal nonexistence, they can most certainly find it in death as well. One is not to be feared and not the other. Thus, they discuss hanging themselves (the bringing about of death) as they do any other topic, and we now understand why Beckett places comedic emphasis on it. Vladimir and Estragon’s perception of death seems distorted and utterly misconstrued, but Beckett’s tongue-in-cheek humor smartly challenges our fear of nonexistence. More
importantly, his characters view nonexistence as the emancipation of time, which so cruelly chains them to this “muck-heap” of a world (WFG 207). Time, as Beckett puts it in *Proust*, has a twofold power in which it is both “a condition of resurrection” and “an instrument of death” (P 22). To seek order in distorted time is to seek renewed life just as much as to seek permanent relief from distorted time is to seek death.

One thing is made clear from this wavering discussion on time, and that is: time is not a fixed idea in the play; it is not rigid. In order to justly represent the multifaceted monster called Time, Beckett begins with a blank canvas—both in the simplistic language of the text and on the minimalist stage—where it is not confined by the laws of realism. We see the madness of time unfold: leaves grow overnight; characters forget things instantly. We experience lapses in time, different periods impossibly occurring simultaneously, and events and actions happening in a loop. Time is an untamable beast of such a tortuous nature that it is inevitably distorted when perceived by the vulnerable human mind.

***

Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? … [I]n all that what truth will there be…At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on…I can’t go on!”

(WFG 339)

Vladimir’s poignant reflection near the end of the play displays a rare moment where one of Beckett’s characters decisively doubts reality in a single, sudden, epiphanic moment. His articulation—in contrast to his previous, impulsive utterances of skepticism—indicates an acute understanding of the elusiveness of his identity and, thus, his inability to trust his memory. As
he watches Estragon doze off, he anticipates that his friend will have forgotten everything that has happened to him in the second act, as he has forgotten in the first act. He will forget having met Pozzo and Lucky and that, upon waking, he must still wait for Godot. Essentially, he will forget his identity. Vladimir notes that the act of sleeping and dreaming stimulates us to imagine impossible things, and he wonders whether the strange events he has experienced in waiting for Godot is a result of his dreaming. Beckett draws forth this notion from Descartes’ dream argument, which considers the possibility of a constant dream, for “there are no conclusive indications by which waking life can be distinguished from sleep that [we are] quite astonished, and [our] bewilderment is such that it is almost able to convince [us] that [we] are sleeping” (Descartes 77). After all, when we observe someone stirring in their sleep, how is it that we know someone is not watching us while we ourselves stir?

Vladimir’s reflection also marks the point of no return in his ontology where he can no longer continue living without doubting his perceptions. He comes to a distressing realization that he cannot be certain of anything which he had previously presumed to be a part of his character. However, despite his elusive identity, what cannot be lost is his essence, which is that he is a being which doubts. Descartes’ theory of a thinking being argues that “[t]hought is an attribute that belongs to [it],” and thought alone is “inseparable from [its] nature.” Furthermore, the thinking being “is a being which doubts, which understands, which conceives, which affirms, which denies, which wills, which rejects, which imagines also, and which perceives” (Descartes 84). Thus, Vladimir, constantly perceiving and questioning, will always continue to doubt reality. But the criticalness of his realization is not the liberation it suggests, but a disquietude which renders him at a loss. Descartes found himself utterly shaken coming to the same conclusion. He records the feeling in his Meditations: “I feel as though I were suddenly thrown
into deep water, being so disconcerted that I can neither plant my feet on the bottom nor swim to the surface” (Descartes 81). Similarly, Vladimir feels as though he is submerged, having no foundation on which to ground his beliefs while not being able to reach any higher truth.

Vladimir manifests this anxiety in the form of distortion of time previously discussed in this chapter as well as the obscurity of Godot’s character. Both lack the clarity and coherence he sought to attain in his questioning. The absurdity of the play depicts nothing more than a chaotic map of his psyche; a perturbed mind perceives a distorted reality. In relation to time, Beckett’s Monstrous Time is a subjective creature. Consider Vladimir and Estragon’s brief exchange following Pozzo and Lucky’s exit in the first act in which they speculate about objective and subjective time:

Vladimir: That passed the time.
Estragon: It would have passed in any case.
Vladimir: Yes, but not so rapidly. (WFG 157)

The tramps observe the objective Kantian time which “would have passed” regardless of whether Pozzo and Lucky’s entertaining company came about. Vladimir, however, notes that Beckett’s Monstrous Time has moved “rapidly” and is perceived in place of objective time. Kantian time, in fact, cannot be perceived by the human mind at all, since it is a thing-in-itself and exists independently of experience. Estragon notes this in his remark, and Vladimir agrees, but he also points out that Kantian time is not the relevant matter. Between the two, Monstrous Time affects the mind. Time in Waiting for Godot is not a perplexing distortion of which Vladimir tries to make sense, but rather a reflection of his internal anxiety that is displayed in front of the audience.
Similarly, Godot’s character is fragmented because Vladimir’s own identity is elusive. Vladimir waits obsessively each night for Godot in hopes that the mysterious character will be able to enlighten him on his identity. Godot, of course, never comes, and so for the time being, waiting for Godot becomes Vladimir’s superficial purpose in attempt to fill a void in his identity. Georges Poulet’s articulation on the Proustian being is useful for this discussion:

The human being…is a being who tries to find justification for his existence. Not knowing who he is, either he is like someone stricken with amnesia who goes from door to door asking people to tell him his name, or he feels himself to be what things indifferently become in him; a bundle of anonymous images that obliterate themselves and reform…this being who is nothing finds himself thrown into a moment lost in the midst of others…a moment which resembles nothing and rests on nothing. (Poulet 295)

What little Vladimir knows of himself is projected into what little he knows of Godot. He “invents” Godot as another person on whose door to knock and ask for his name. Both Vladimir and Estragon’s endless questions about who Godot is, what he does, or what he looks like confirms that they know nothing of him. Yet, they fabricate facts about Godot and stand their ground as if sculpting an identity for him out of thin air. They allude to Godot’s home and family and even his “bank account” and “horse” (WFG 51, 57). In doing so, they subconsciously attempt to convince themselves that there is an existing person to rescue them from their miserable waiting game, as though they refuse to believe the reality that they may be waiting for no one, seeking identity in a placebo. Vladimir, who is noticeably more adamant about waiting for Godot, envisions Godot as an overseer who will instill an identity in him. But, ironically, the manifestation of this fleeting noncharacter ends up reinforcing Vladimir’s fractured identity, and the fruitless wait for him only adds further chaos.
The distortion of time and the enigmatic character of Godot, then, in all their complexities, are better understood as outward projections—actualized in reality—of Vladimir’s internal anxiety caused by the elusiveness of his identity. Vivian Mercier’s famous remark on the play—that “nothing happens, twice”—certainly refers to the consistency of inaction in the play, but the comment is not wholly true (Mercier xii). Vladimir expresses greater panic in the second act when he fully acknowledges that something critical about time and identity is amiss. This panic in turn elicits more action as he frantically tries to establish sense and order. For example, after seeing the leaves on the tree which have presumably grown overnight, Vladimir engages Estragon in a series of questions to confirm that only a night has passed and not a season. Vladimir then has Estragon try on his boots he left overnight and check for the bruise Lucky gave him. These actions, however mundane they seem, are introduced, i.e. new, to the second act and carry more urgency than the absurd cyclical actions in the first act (although this is not to say they are eliminated in the second act). In terms of Godot’s elusiveness, Vladimir becomes impatient and aggressive with the boy when he delivers the fated news once more about Godot’s cancellation. Vladimir demands, “You won’t come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me!” and “makes a sudden spring forward” at the boy—an aggressive and atypical move for the usually moralizing Vladimir. However, Vladimir’s anxiety is evident from the beginning of the play. In other words, it does not suddenly appear in the second act. He and Estragon, after all, contemplate ending their anxiety by suicide from act one, and as the anxiety heightens, the distortion of time and Godot’s character becomes increasingly obscured. Vladimir attempts to materialize his anxiety into something more concrete and tangible, thinking he would be better able to manage an externalized situation rather than one concealed in his mind and body.
One need not look as far as Godot to see evidence of elusive identity in Vladimir. Perhaps the most obvious clue is that Vladimir does not have a firm understanding of his past. Vivian Mercier noted how quick and steadfast he was to attach the “tramp,” or, “bum” persona to the two main characters, and we, seeing only their nomadic lifestyle, also follow this lead. Roger Blin, too, envisioned Vladimir and Estragon as bumbling and bickering clowns and wanted to set the first production as a circus. Their occasional acts of sophistication, however, tend to be overlooked. At times, they recite poetic lines, reference the bible, and demonstrate high-class etiquette. These instances almost always hint at the past, suggesting a former life of education and prosperity. Mercier discusses this dichotomy which he calls “Gentleman/Tramp” in his acclaimed study Beckett/Beckett. He examines the teetering balance between Vladimir and Estragon’s seemingly double-sided identity and distinguishes them apart from men who were “born tramps” (Mercier 46). He makes the assertion that they are rather among men who “achieve tramp-hood or have it thrust upon them” (Mercier 46). In the latter claim, Vladimir and Estragon hold a more distinct past—a previous identity radically different from their current state of being. But the point Mercier wanted to make was that the characters are not wholly one or the other. He corrects his original assumption that they are interchangeable with tramps, because they embody aristocrats at many instances which should not be disregarded. It is also evident that Vladimir and Estragon are aware of their ambiguous identity, for they feel “it’s too late” from those “respectable” days (WFG 13), yet they also pride themselves on not being “beggars” (WFG 127). Their attire is the first indicator of this wavering association. “A stage direction mentions Estragon’s ‘rags,’” for instance, but on stage for the first Paris production which Beckett closely monitored, “Vladimir and Estragon are more shabby-genteel than ragged” (Mercier 47). They are consistently depicted in suits, though unkempt and ill-fitting—that of
Vladimir too short and that of Estragon too large, which suggests it has been a long way from
their days of tailored suits. Their unscathed bowler hats, however, bring them closer to gentility.

Vladimir and Estragon’s aesthetic resembles Charlie Chaplin, the most iconic tramp to
date. Chaplin’s own bowler hat and dark jacket suggest “similar aspirations” to gentility, “but
the ill-fitting trousers and boots give the show away” (Mercier 47). Indeed, his shoes are grossly
oversized and clown-like (which may have played a part in Blin’s vision of Vladimir and
Estragon as clowns). Mercier makes another useful connection: “We never discover…whether
Charlie has come down in the world or is merely trying to rise in it: like all the great clown
figures, he has no past and his future is an illusion; he exists in a perpetual present” (Mercier 47).
Chaplin’s pantomime slapstick comedy is nonreferential and therefore effectively appeals to a
broad audience. He is furthermore a “great clown figure,” because his humble background,
carefree nature, and humorously excessive politeness make him a likeable character. Vladimir
and Estragon’s elusive past mirrors Chaplin’s “perpetual present,” and their vaudevillian routine
and antics complete the Chaplinesque picture. But despite the elusiveness of Vladimir and
Estragon’s past, the audience does have a clearer understanding of it than they do of Chaplin’s
past. “[A] million years ago, in the nineties,” for example, we know Vladimir and Estragon lived
an affluent enough life to have been one of the first to be “[h]and in hand from the top of the
Eiffel Tower” (WFG 13). We also know that Estragon has tried to drown himself in the Rhone
River, and that the two used to harvest grapes (WFG 13, 183).

Mercier points out, however, that “the chief argument in favor of their having had a
comfortable upbringing is…the way [Vladimir and Estragon] speak” (Mercier 48). Vladimir
seems to have studied the bible extensively, recounting its stories and referencing the four
Evangelists. Estragon, the earthier of the two, also cannot be simplified as “nature’s gentleman”
(Mercier 49). He, too, remembers the images from his copy of the bible. Furthermore, he alludes to his past as a poet and is able to recite some modified lines from Shelley’s “To the Moon:” “Pale for weariness…Of climbing heaven and gazing on the likes of us” (WFG 179). Estragon’s eloquent invitation for Pozzo to sit (Come come, take a seat I beseech you) suggests that he was either trained for formal hospitality or learned it from the receiving end. And finally, his etiquette when asking Pozzo and Lucky for the chicken bones (Excuse me, Mister, the bones, you won’t be wanting the bones?) effectively demonstrates Mercier’s prevalent gentleman/tramp dichotomy; the tramp begs for scraps, while the gentleman minds his manners. The coexisting gentleman and tramp personas tangle identity in a knot, making it appear elusive and irregular. Their current state of scrounging for food, wearing shabby attire, and sleeping in ditches so greatly contrast their extravagant past that they are left utterly befuddled. They perceive their compounded identity as a lack of identity—as sporadic episodes of the past and an unfamiliar juncture in the present. Had they been born into tramp-hood or continued to live as aristocrats, they would have possessed a consistent and defined identity. However, Vladimir and Estragon’s evolving identity is neither the isolated gentleman nor the isolated tramp. In Mercier’s words, they are simultaneously the comic and the philosopher (72).

Because Vladimir is able to acquire fragments of his past despite his intermittent memory, it lends us the possibility that he did indeed at some point meet with Godot and that their agreements were merely “[n]othing very definite,” further suggesting that his haziness of Godot is simply because he has forgotten most of the details of their encounter (WFG 49). Memory, of course, provides the foundation for identity, because it allows us to record past experiences which have led to our current sense of self. In Krapp’s Last Tape, for example, Krapp is literally able to record his experiences with his tape-recorder. The tape reveals a
personality very distinct from Krapp’s present disposition, giving him a sense of who he has been in the past despite the changes he’s undergone since then. His recorded memories give him a rich identity that penetrates deeper than the emptiness of the isolated present. Vladimir’s internal memory device, however, is defective because he, the doubting being, has rejected the blind acceptance of the perceptions which make up his memories. This rejection proves fatal to his sense of identity:

The sleeper awakes from sleep more naked than a cave man. His nakedness is the nakedness of a lack of knowledge. If he is reduced to the state in which he is, that is because he does not know who he is. And he does not know who he is because he does not know who he has been. He knows no longer. He is a being who has lost his being because memory and the past have been lost. (Poulet 291)

In doubting his perceptions, Vladimir forfeits his memory, the necessary tool for piecing together identity. Like the sleeper who wakens, he is stripped naked of his experiences, and without experiences, he cannot have a past, disallowing identity to persist.

It should be clear by now that doubting the world and the beings which inhabit it (including one’s own body), is not to simply be absolved of them. They become “enemies thronging round”—enemies who contradict us, torment our souls, and mock our existence (Proust qtd in Poulet 294). Moreover, they are our enemies because they have betrayed us. Poulet explains that “the anguish of solitude is not only that of being detached from things and beings…it is to feel oneself betrayed, without any help from them” (Poulet 294). Because our senses still affect us despite our doubting them, we cannot help but to engage with others which we perceive and seek understanding from. In short, they pose both hope and threat. Estragon
offers companionship, Pozzo and Lucky offer entertainment, and Godot and the boy are presumed to offer answers, but each also menace Vladimir in one way or another. He consequently questions the validity of them, but, as they can also stand to represent different elements of his individual, he simultaneously seeks affirmation of his existence from them.

One scene in the second act helps to illustrate this inseparability among the characters. So little happens in *Waiting for Godot* that when we are given such a strange and striking image as the characters falling atop each other onto a heap, it captures our attention and leaves us in awe and bewilderment. Vladimir, in trying to help the fallen Pozzo off of Lucky, ends up falling himself. Estragon attempts to separate his friend from the bodily mass, but falls onto the heap as well. The result is the four characters protruding from one another like limbs of a larger entity or the four characters caught in a web. At an earlier instance in the play, Pozzo commands Lucky to perform a dance, which Lucky calls “The Net,” but it is this image here that is the epitome of the living net in which they are entangled. It begins with one character falling and ends with the rest of them falling along. Comparably, Lucky is only able to rise in the first act at the hands of Vladimir and Estragon, and Estragon staggers after losing the support of Vladimir’s shoulders. The characters repeatedly rise and fall according to the will of others, asserting interdependence among them. Each of them is a component of a synergy, for every individual is merely “a succession of individuals” (*Proust* 8).

Recall that Vladimir’s elusive identity is manifested in Godot’s own elusive character in his attempt to invent a type of overseer to impart identity. Although the other characters in the play are not as seemingly figmental, they also provide a means from which to extract understanding, but unlike Godot, they are corporeal bodies with which he can interact and from which he can demand attention. Godot’s arrival is out of control, but Vladimir is able to directly
question the other characters. He insists to Estragon, “Try and remember,” and earlier, “Now what did we do yesterday evening?” (WFG 231). To Pozzo in the second act: “Do you not recognize us? (WFG 311). And to the boy: “You did see us, didn’t you?” (WFG 177). But such questions are intended to reassure himself of his own existence. It is fruitless to confirm whether one’s body is attached to its environment using only one’s mind, for the body itself is a possession of the reality in question. He concludes that the other characters who seem to suffer from the same mind-body complex and seem to be able to perceive his body are the only effectual authority on his existence in the world, and so he seeks their confirmation. Poulet’s quote from earlier on the human being trying to find justification for his existence—going “from door to door asking people to tell him his name”—pointedly describes Vladimir’s circumstance for he literally knows not even his own name (or at least he is confused). Others happily assign him one, and he begins to acquire multiple names. He mentions his name “Vladimir” at the start of the play, Estragon nicknames him “Didi,” and the boy asks of his name is “Mister Albert…?” In desperation for answers, Vladimir assumes any name simply because another being has deemed it to be as such. He gratefully accepts the boy’s offer of identity: “Yes” (WFG 163). Elusiveness in name extends to the other characters as well. Vladimir addresses Estragon by “Gogo,” who tells Pozzo his name is Adam. Estragon also mistakes Pozzo to be Godot, and during his “name game” he guesses Pozzo’s name to be Abel and Lucky’s name to be Cain—both names to which Pozzo responds. Estrago claims in exasperation, “He’s all humanity,” but the notion of simultaneous uniqueness of the individual and conformity of humanity is paradoxical (WFG 307). Is Pozzo simply himself, or is he Godot, Abel and Cain as well? If identity partly begins in our name—what we and others call ourselves—and the characters constantly exchange and assign names, identity is chaotic.
It is no wonder, then, why Vladimir tries to achieve some clarity. Perceptions are challenged. Friends and acquaintances seem deceptive. Reality is uprooted. How can one focus on the inward task of addressing the elusiveness of one’s own identity when the chaos of the external world torments one? It is like when a child, having not yet learned how to tune out the noises in his home, tries to focus on his reading while his younger brother cries, his father prepares dinner, and the dog barks in the other room. These distractions pull him away from his meditative studies. Similarly, Vladimir is fixated with the grotesque commotion surrounding him and scrutinizes it. Consider the following quotation from Jane Hale who examines the effect of time on the individual’s will to make sense of its broken identity:

[T]ime’s movement, from which there is no escape, thwarts the self’s desire to perceive its own identity as a changeless essence, to add up the unconnected seconds of its days to make a life it can call its own, to salvage the fragments of its existence and integrate them into a comprehensible whole. (Hale 21)

The notion alone of volition that this quotation carries will be addressed later on at greater length, but for now, volition will be discussed specifically in relation to Vladimir’s identity. Hale comment is directed at the individual’s complete submission to the will of time, its identity subjected to be manipulated and entirely forgotten of its essence. However, Vladimir, whose identity is unmistakably fragmented, puts up a fight for his “desire to perceive [his] identity as a changeless essence.” His incessant questioning of the inconsistency of the other characters is evidence of that. Vladimir still maintains the perseverance of the inquiring mind to strive for a “comprehensible whole.” The importance of Hale’s comment is that it poses the danger that lies ahead should he imprison himself to time. Although Beckett depicts the disintegration of time,
identity, and order, he does not give away the end. And so, Vladimir struggles for comprehension, he has not lost total command.

Ironically, the more Vladimir questions the validity of the characters, the more he uproots his reality. Attempting to make sense of the seemingly impossible changes, he tries to either understand how they came to be or if they are at all true. Pozzo, for example, claims to be blind in the second act, which, to Vladimir, seems to have happened suddenly overnight. Pozzo implies that because “[t]he blind have no notion of time” and one can only perceive what is perceptible to time, he is unable to shed any light on Vladimir’s questions (WFG 321). But this is not enough for the skeptical Vladimir. Considering the unlikely odds, he asks Pozzo: the blindness “came on you all of a sudden?” And, after Pozzo’s exit in the second act, Vladimir says to Estragon, “I wonder is he really blind” (WFG 319, 335). Vladimir could have simply accepted Pozzo’s claim, assuming he had sight one day and lost it the next, and incorporated it as part of Pozzo’s identity. Pozzo tells him, “I woke up one fine day as blind as Fortune”—who is to say that day is not today? Pozzo’s identity can still be accessible with the addition of his news, but it does, however, contribute to the distortion of time. Unwilling to trade comprehension of time for consistency in identity, Vladimir pushes for an explanation behind Pozzo’s sudden blindness: “And when was that…no later than yesterday—“ (WFG 320-1).

The saying “I remember as if it was yesterday” does not hold for anyone in Waiting for Godot. Each character’s memory is impaired. Estragon says, “Either I forget immediately or I never forget” (WFG 205). Pozzo says, “You see my memory is defective” (WFG 125). And the boy can never remember having met Vladimir and Estragon. Clearly, they are of no help in confirming anything, for their own memory mocks that of Vladimir. In fact, they cause him harm by denying yesterday. When Vladimir alludes to the previous day, Estragon refutes, “I tell
you we weren’t here yesterday. Another of your nightmares” (WFG 229). Pozzo’s blindness cannot recognize Vladimir and Estragon to confirm their likes, and the boy denies him outright:

Vladimir: Do you not recognize me?
Boy: No Sir.
Vladimir: It wasn’t you came yesterday.
Boy: No Sir.
Vladimir: This is your first time.
Boy: Yes Sir. (WFG 340-1)

By extension, Estragon, Pozzo, and the boy deny him his existence. But still, Vladimir attempts to fill the void of identity by piecing together the contradictory clues. He rationalizes: “Perhaps it was [the boy’s brother] came yesterday” (WFG 343). The other characters’ denial threatens the reality around him, including his own body which exists beyond the confines of the thinking mind. Their denial of yesterday’s events eradicates the building blocks of identity which Vladimir has worked hard to build. Just as he obsesses over the construction of Godot’s identity, he tries to reconstruct those of Pozzo, Estragon, and the boy by trying to resurrect their past—but to no avail. He is certain that definition and consistency of the identity of the other characters will provide clarity on his own elusive identity, but, as Poulet mentions, “in order to impose our certainties upon the world, we must first find them in ourselves” (Poulet 293).

Beckett explores the relationship between different self-consciousness in the famous Hegelian dialectic of the master and slave (or lordship and bondage), for, even if the Beckettian individual were to look inwards to seek certainty in itself by Poulet’s direction, it would find multiple consciousnesses to address. It must also be noted that the dialect directly contrasts with the Cartesian cogito, for it seeks affirmation in others as opposed to the self—the I Think. The dialect describes the struggle for recognition in the process of a self-conscious being “faced by
another self-conscious” which “has come out of itself” (Hegel 65). It is “of the essence of consciousness that it be consciousness of something; that is, that it have an object,” and “the ‘object’ of self-consciousness is consciousness itself” (Atkins 61). In other words, the self-consciousness creates an Other from itself as an object to be experienced, and, in perceiving the Other as itself, it achieves self-recognition, i.e. consciousness of being self-conscious. But the Other becomes its own self-consciousness, and consequently “[e]ach sees the other as a kind of object (an “Other”) in the external world. Since both self-consciousnesses think they are the “pure” self-conscious, the relation of the two “is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle” (Hegel 67).

Aside from the Hamm and Clove pair from Endgame, Pozzo and Lucky is Beckett’s only evident master-slave couple. Pozzo begins as the master, who exists for himself, driving his slave Lucky with a whip. Below demonstrates Pozzo’s successful use—and Lucky’s perfect obedience—of his slave as an objective recognition. As Pozzo prepares to talk, he demands everyone’s full attention:

Is everybody ready? Is everybody looking at me? [He looks at Lucky, jerks the rope. Lucky raises his head.] Will you look at me, pig! [Lucky looks at him.] Good…I am ready. Is everybody listening? Is everybody ready? [He looks at them all in turn, jerks the rope.] Hog! [Lucky raises his head.] I don’t like talking in a vacuum. (WFG 95)

Here, the master commands his object to recognize him, confirming that he does indeed exist and that he is not merely “talking in a vacuum.” Lucky raises his head to acknowledge his master, but out of fatigue and possibly with a hint of defiance, he lowers his gaze after some time, which prompts Pozzo to seize his attention once more. Furthermore, Vladimir speaks shortly afterward,
but Pozzo, immediately monopolizes the conversation: “[angrily] Don’t interrupt me! [Pause. Calmer.] If we all speak at once we’ll never get anywhere” (WFG 97). Pozzo’s fixation on everyone’s undivided attention on him goes beyond pompousness. It is rooted in his determination to remain the dominate consciousness—to win the life-and-death struggle of the master-slave dialectic. Pozzo almost comes out the loser when Lucky is ordered to think. The slave begins his train of thought as a form of entertainment, starting off slowly, stuttering on his syllables (quaquaquaqua), but eventually picking up fluency. Lucky’s lyricism alludes to Hegel’s notion that the “slave…has the higher realization of self-consciousness…since…the slave, having the master as his object, has the superior truth” (Atkins 62). But Lucky’s triumph is short-lived, since Pozzo takes action when his authority is threatened by Lucky’s flourishing consciousness. There is a literal struggle when he throws himself onto Lucky to get him to stop thinking, but Lucky resists and shouts his text in trying to assert his own consciousness. Lucky’s rebellion is put to an end, however, when Pozzo has his hat removed and trampled on. Emerging victorious, Pozzo shouts, “There’s an end to his thinking!” (WFG 145).

But, by the second act, the codependence between them becomes clearer. Pozzo is now blind, and the rope tethered around Lucky’s neck is much shorter so that Pozzo may be more easily guided. Throughout the play, the rope is the literal bondage between master and slave. In the first act, it serves as a harness, a master walking his dog. Conversely, in the second act, the guide dog leads the master. Pozzo can no longer sell his slave at “the fair,” for he *needs* Lucky, without whom he would be stranded and left to die. But this is not to wholly place him in Lucky’s jurisdiction: to counteract Pozzo’s blindness, Lucky is mute, suggesting his rebellion from the first act will not be repeated.
And what of the Vladimir and Estragon pair? Does it, too, fall under the master-slave dialectic? To an extent. Vladimir and Estragon carry the Hegelian necessity for the Other, but there is less emphasis on the struggle between the master and slave. Vladimir, after all, is the more compassionate and inquisitive version of Pozzo, and Estragon is the more demanding version of Lucky—a significant change from the high contrast of the domineering Pozzo and submissive-turned-rebellious Lucky. But in terms of their Hegelian traits, Vladimir is the master, the dominant self-consciousness, and Estragon is the earthy slave. They need each other for self-recognition (So there you are again / Am I?), and they show moments of anger and frustration (Ceremonious ape! / Punctilious pig!)—with Vladimir’s language frequently mirroring that of the master Pozzo. But the significant difference between the Pozzo-Lucky and Vladimir-Estragon pairs is summed by Lance St. John Butler’s distinction between the “the agony of being with another” and “the agony of being alone” (Butler 143). Pozzo cries out in a desperate plea to free himself of Lucky, the master’s burden: [sobbing] He used to be so kind…so helpful…and entertaining…my good angel…and now…he’s killing me” (WFG 109). Vladimir, however, shows an attachment towards Estragon, waking him from his sleep because he felt “lonely” (WFG 37). The two of them dare not hang themselves out of fear that one may be left to bear the burden of existence without recognition alone. Furthermore, Pozzo’s cruel treatment of Lucky is in contrast with Vladimir’s tender draping of his coat over the sleeping Estragon and consoling him after waking from a nightmare. Their constant embraces depict a compassionate relationship as opposed to Pozzo’s demands for Lucky to step “further!” away from him (WFG 77). The master-slave relationship embodied in the Vladimir and Estragon couple emphasizes the fear of existing alone, whereas the Pozzo and Lucky couple emphasizes the struggle between different self-consciousnesses. Vladimir and Estragon are grateful for each
other in acknowledgment of the necessity of their bondage. Pozzo and Lucky are the epitome of the master-slave dialectic, but their situation is predominately interesting for the philosopher. It is as if the philosopher, in staging the existential relationship for a less familiar audience, gives birth to the Pozzo and Lucky pair. And so, the template that explains the ridged structure which disguises many variants of the dialectic is given to the audience for the sake of understanding the master-slave dialectic without having to read Hegel’s *Phenomenology* in an armchair. The Vladimir and Estragon pair, however, is the real focus. Pozzo and Lucky only prepares us for understanding this more dynamic couple. Vladimir does not wholly embody the slave-driver, whip in hand, nor does Estragon wholly embody the slave, complete with a rope around his neck. The two are friends who try each other’s patience, who console each other in times of sadness and exasperation, who contradict and then embrace each other, and who exist *necessarily* depending on each other. This is the master-slave relationship that is depicted through the scope of humanity as we understand it. And what is realized in light of Vladimir and Estragon is that the counterpart is not with which to struggle, but with which to engage.

Let us return to the notion of volition aforementioned. Volition, or, will, gives the individual autonomy, the freedom to make decisions, and the ability to seek order when chaos ensues, and it is precisely this type of cognitive process that the characters struggle to maintain throughout the play. Recall Hale’s comment from earlier—that time “thwarts the self’s desire to perceive its own identity as a changeless essence.” Time admonishes desire because we succumb to our distorted perception of it, allowing it to trump our consciousness and distract us from the more taxing undertaking of piecing together the shards of our shattered identity. We let this distortion of time act upon us in an insidious and unconscious way as it shifts us through its endless contractions and extensions. Moreover, by addressing a *desire* being thwarted, Hale
implies that the individual has (or at least had at some point) the choice to perceive its identity as a changeless essence and that this choice has been abandoned. Vladimir wittily corrects Etragon’s question, “We’ve lost our rights?” as “We got rid of them” (WFG 55). It is humorous that they should think they have rid themselves of their rights, but it is also informative of the active role present in eroding one’s will power. Vladimir and Estragon’s postures after discussing the loss of their rights are described as “motionless, arms dangling, heads sunk, sagging at the knees” (WFG 55). The physical humor borders a caricature of dejection, and the humor continues in the irony of this dejection that results after having “cleverly” eluded the burden of possessing rights.

Without volition, we are forced to adopt whatever state time thrusts upon us since it allows us to build and shape identity as we like, keeping it consistent and defined. The fluctuating authority between time and volition impresses our identity, working interchangeably so that the more we imprison ourselves with passivity, the more time is distorted, and, conversely, as we persist to perceive an incoherent sense of time, our volition becomes increasingly numb. Eventually, we place ourselves in a position of hopelessness. Lucky’s rhythmic sagging reinforces this insidious cycle. Carrying Pozzo’s luggage throughout his servitude has caused him to hunch over, a physical debilitation which mirrors the limiting effect of abandoning one’s rights. He “sags slowly, until bag and basket touch the ground, then straightens up with a start and beings to sag again. Rhythm of one sleeping on his feet” (WFG 77). Lucky has forfeited his volition long ago but now has even little will power to continue in servitude. His fatigue shows that servitude is not an intelligible trade-off for alleviating the burden of thought and decision-making. But not only has this submission cost him his autonomy, it has uprooted his identity as a dancer and poet. Lucky “used to dance the farandole,
the fling, the brawl, the jig, the fandango and even the hornpipe” and “taught [Pozzo] all these beautiful” lyricisms (WFG 131, 105). And now, Lucky can only perform “The Net”—hardly a dance at all, for he merely struggles to straighten himself, arms stretched out, and stumbles. In juxtaposition to his sagging posture, he puts down the bags and stands tall when he reclaims his “right” to think and delivers his famous speech. The irony in passivity is that it begins with action. Lucky apparently “wants to impress [Pozzo], so that [he]’ll keep him,” implying that he had expressed initial interest in entering servitude (WFG 97). He is Pozzo’s slave, not because he has been thrown into servitude, but because he has willed it. But that may very well be the last thing that he wills. From his “dance” and smothered attempt to think, it is clear that Lucky does not possess the capacity to reestablish any part of his identity, and to claim his servitude as his identity would be ill reasoning for it merely defines his function (which is not to be mistaken with his personal identity). Lucky’s “actions” are only carried out because Pozzo had them. It was Pozzo (in addition to Vladimir and Estragon’s badgering) that willed Lucky’s actions. Lucky’s servitude is in fact a lack of identity. Estragon similarly expresses Lucky’s initial desire for servitude when he implicitly offers Pozzo to take Lucky’s place. He asks “You’ve had enough of him?” and presses to Vladimir, “Does he want someone to take his place or not?” (WFG 99, 109). We know all too well from Lucky, however, what fate should await him. The physical representation of the characters in the play therefore lays ground to their withering will power. Lucky’s hunched posture and dumbness in the second act make it clear that he is unable to return to the dancer and poet he once was. He makes feeble attempts to act according to his own will, but his volition has been too long out of exercise to elicit any change. His willingness to carry the very whip which beats him is evident that he has wholly surrendered himself to servitude. Volition, which provides basis for thought and decision, allows us to sculpt or recover

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3 As depicted in the 2001 Lindsay-Hogg rendition.
our identity, and to forfeit it is to also place ourselves in our own form of servitude, an imprisonment so total that we would not be able to free ourselves even if we so desired.

As made clear by Lucky, defining identity is intimately related to pursuing goals and satisfying desires, which are impossible to achieve without volition. Vladimir, although showing signs of eroding volition, contrasts with Lucky’s caricatural submission. Vladimir wants desperately to rise from the heap of the fallen Pozzo and Lucky. When his initial attempt fails, he calls out to Estragon in a terrified plea and later curses him out when he refuses to come to his aid. The desire is strong. His body lies limp and helpless, until he suddenly rises on his own without difficulty. Brushing himself off, he says “Simple question of will-power” (WFG 309). This instance not only points out the seemingly obvious fact that it simply is a matter of will power (that Vladimir need not Estragon’s help, bribery, or a nap to get up), but also highlights the necessitude of volition for even the most trivial of acts. Lucky, on the other hand, cannot even nourish himself. Upon Estragon’s request for the chicken bones, Lucky “looks long” at him, clearly desiring them for himself, but he can only look away with sad eyes. Estragon reaps the benefits of Lucky’s passivity and is able to win the bones simply by asking for them. Volition prompts action which seeks to satisfy everything from the mundane bodily cravings to the individual’s deep desire for fulfillment. The forfeiting of “rights” embodies us as entities or objects acted upon by the external forces of reality rather than as autonomous actors which move about with conviction.

But by this Beckett does not wish to compare humanity with the total imprisonment portrayed by Lucky. For him, volition is that which allows us to manipulate time, instead of time distorting our perception. We may slow down time with meditation or catapult forward in it by watching our favorite film. Conversely, without volition, without action to keep time in check,
we are at its mercy. *Waiting for Godot* features a variety of characters, each battling that monster called Time, some faring better than others. Beckett focuses on the erosion of will rather than its plenitude, because contrary to our intuition, its *deterioration* conveys its importance more powerfully than if the characters were thriving with self-assurance. And so, the play renders a world where volition hangs by a thread. The effect leaves us feeling like we are encountering volition for the first time. We do not realize its ubiquitousness until we see Lucky unable to claim his chicken bones, Pozzo unable to rise after falling, and Vladimir and Estragon unable to leave. That is, we do not realize that volition lies from the root of our survival to the stalk of our aspirations. We eventually become so accustomed the absence of will in the play that Lucky’s struggle with the other characters—a seizure of determination and reclaiming—comes as a shock. As the characters slip into a state of passivity, we are reminded the importance of acting with purpose. And by this, Beckett takes not a didactic tone but rather notes that those able to claim ownership of their volition are able to define their identity through what it affords—namely, their thoughts and actions.

Much talk of prompting action in the play has been discussed by means of volition, but it is not *action*, really, that we see, but *habit*, which is as much “a minister of dulness” as it is “an agent of security” (*Proust* 10). The characters’ various habits—such as Pozzo’s obsessive checking of his watch and Vladimir and Estragon’s circular language—bores them to tears because habit does not pass time, as would substantial action, but rather *loops* it. On the other hand, habit also furnishes idiosyncrasy and therefore attributes of our identity. Vladimir and Estragon inherit boredom in waiting for Godot, and so one of their objectives becomes to pass the time until his arrival. But it was established earlier that their eroding will power prevents them from fulfilling their goals. They are unable to pass the time with even the most elementary
forms of entertainment—conversation. A typical exchange is filled with reiterative phrases that go nowhere or, in the following case, never take root:

*Long silence.*
Vladimir: Say something!
Estragon: I’m trying.
*Long silence.*

The underlying dilemma is that the more their volition erodes, the more tethered they are to their habits, and conversely, as they refrain from ever rising above the unconscious, the more their volition rusts from its unusage. Eventually, it is as Estragon puts it: “[n]othing to be done” *(WFG 9).*

Yet time persists under a stationary condition, and something *must* be done to propel it. Vladimir and Estragon attempt to play games to pass the time, but it elicits nothing more than petty frustration, for habit has left them in a state of stagnation. Gunther Anders explains why they are unable to break free from this stagnation: “[t]o mobilize an action is so difficult, because to do something solely in order to make the time pass requires precisely that kind of freedom which Estragon and Vladimir, paralyzed by the passivity of their life, have already forfeited” *(Anders 148).* For example, they partake in their exercises for only a few “hops from one foot to the other” before Estragon concedes, “That’s enough. I’m tired” *(WFG 273).* Other “games” include their hat trick, “play[ing] at Pozzo and Lucky,” and contradicting, or, “abusing” each other and then making up. Such games are inconsequential because they have no structure, no rules, and no quantifiable outcome with which to determine the *end* of the game. The closest they come to a sustainable game is trying to guess Pozzo’s name, for “[i]t’d pass the time. And [they’d] be bound to hit on the right one sooner or later” *(WFG 305).* Here our characters are
finally about to give pinpoint an objective of a game, and indeed it passes the time, only not for long since Pozzo responds to Estragon’s first guess. Johnny Murphy, in Lindsay-Hogg’s film rendition portrays Estragon a bit let-down with his line “Got it in one” (WFG 307). He had hope that the game would have passed more time than it did. His reward for winning the game is yet more waiting.

Because habit is the concentration of our neurotic anxiety manifested in an accumulation of repetitive and idiosyncratic acts, it reflects our psyche, illuminating fragments of our identity. And from where precisely does habit stem? The Cartesian man finds himself disoriented when he is suddenly thrown into reality, and for the first time, his mind must accommodate his body. Habit is the neurotic purging of the mind’s anxiety from compromising the individual with its environment. Habit, Beckett concludes, “is the generic term for the countless treaties that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects” (Proust 8). In other words, it stems from the dualistic mind’s need to come to terms with its body. And because habit is compulsive, “[o]f all human plants,” it “requires the least fostering, and is the first to appear on the seeming desolation of the most barren rock” (Proust, qtd. in Beckett’s Proust). Thus, like a weed, habit is difficult to rid oneself of and metastasizes over volition so that we are unable to endeavor any purpose beyond accommodating the body. It is, as Vladimir notes, “a great deadener” (WFG 339).

And yet, habit is also like the roots to which we can always return for traces of our identity, if even the most inexplicable. Habit provides a bridge over which snapshots of our psyche can travel and materialize in reality for us to perceive. Vladimir ritualistically “takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, [and] puts it on again,” because his subconscious reflects a cerebral man. Estragon’s earthiness, on the other hand, seeks to satisfy
his more instinctual desires. This is evident in his habits revolving around his feet rather than his head. He habitually removes his boot and puts it back on, constantly complaining of the pain in his feet. Proust explains the promise of habit: “There is no great difference...between the memory of a dream and the memory of reality. When the sleeper awakes, this emissary of his habit assures him that his ‘personality’ has not disappeared with his fatigue” (Proust, qtd. in Beckett 20). Too true, when Estragon awakes from his slumber, the pain in his feet awaits him.

In regards to one’s pastime, Valerie Topsfield argues that they “not only pass the time, they also give a sense of identity” (Topsfield 97). If this is the case, Vladimir and Estragon’s identities are empty ones—or, at least they are elusive. Their pastimes do not perform their function—namely, to pass the time. As a result, their games fail to surpass mere habit, involuntary patterns of behavior which are not conscious enough to wield the flow of time. Habit insures the continuation of our identity to some capacity, but, when its cyclical behavior engulfs us, what it reveals is sometimes dismal.

By now the theme of erosion should be clear. Identity, time, memory, volition—Waiting for Godot decomposes every component of the individual’s make-up. It is appropriate now to address the loss of control of the remainder: our bodies themselves. We all know too well of the ailment of our bodies when in a time of extreme distress. The body is not merely the machine which does the bidding of the mind but rather the physical element of our identity, neither more nor less effectual than the brain. And how has the body been portrayed thus far in our discussion? There is Lucky’s back, hunched and crippled. Estragon’s feet, sweating and sore. The body, rotting. Mikhail Bakhtin, in Rabelais and His World, describes the grotesque tradition that we see rendered in the play. He explains the grotesque as exaggerating “the negative, the inappropriate...to monstrous dimensions” using satire (Bakhtin 306). The characters’ lack of
control over their bowel and phallic movements indicate the characters’ inability to restrain the subconscious which includes habit and the bodily desires. Estragon’s spit and bleeding wound, Lucky’s “running sore” and tears, Pozzo’s fart, and Vladimir’s urine, reeking breath, and allusion to semen with mention of mandrakes all signify the collapse of the human body in its surroundings (Maude 108). Beckett’s *Play* (1963) also follows the theme of this collapse, only the imagery much more striking:

> [A]s Beckett’s stage directions have it, ‘*faces so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of urns*’. As Billie Whitelaw has said, discussing her experience of performing in the National Theatre production of *Play*, Beckett ‘wanted the effect of the face disintegrating like the urns’. She adds that the stage make-up was ‘a mixture of porridge oats, cruder oats, oatmeal, mixed with liquefied jelly and surgical glue…As this stuff dried, it stuck to your face like a crazy face pack and as you spoke, bits of it flicked off our faces. As the play went on we saw that bits of us were falling off.’ (Maude 108-9)

This underlines the body’s natural cycle of decomposing and returning to the earth. While it partly represents the transference of the erosion of the will to the body, it is not merely the body’s loss of control; it also gains autonomy by merging with the strength of the earth. Emissions results from the body internalizing the world and then extricating it, thereby surfacing that part of our identity which belongs to nature. Additionally, the play presents elements of protrusion, such as Vladimir’s nose as he smells Estragon’s boot, Lucky’s eyes—“*g*ogling out of his head”—and Vladimir’s reference to erections (*WFG* 81, 43). Bakhtin argues that such instances of the grotesque “[seek] to go out beyond the body’s confines” (Bakhtin 316). Furthermore, “the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body”
(Bakhtin 317). It thus becomes a new being, the idea that the grotesque features can detach themselves and “hid the rest of the body…as something secondary” (Bakhtin 317). The grotesque fades the line between the body and the world, and the former gains with the latter an affinity which the mind fails to attain. The body thrives, because it “oozes,” and, when our body thrives, it lays claim to the world (WFG 203). The purity of the mind, untouched by the earth, is unfamiliar with the grotesqueness of the world. The body, on the other hand, gives the individual a different type of authority over a realm which the mind can assess but with which cannot interact, and so, the mind is able to prosper in its reality by means of the body.

Here we come round to Cartesian dualism introduced at the outset on identity. We see, from instances such as Pozzo writhing on the ground, clutching his head in agony while Lucky stands tall in composure delivering his long speech, that there is an evident tension between the mind and body. Although there is most certainly some coherence between the two components, it should be reminded that Beckett was more interested in the decompartmentalization of identity, shifting from the physical contrast to the existential questioning. And so, instead of seeing a wholly representation of the individual as typical in the novel, we see the staging of a most fearsome and alien struggle between mind and body. The grotesque, as just learned, pertains to the body. Now recall Descartes’ thinking being. To review, its reasoning follows that because we can be easily misled by the senses, which are received through the body, and there is no infallible way to distinguish deception from truth, we must not completely trust all knowledge we receive from the bodily senses. Therefore, the body, the thinking being concludes, must not be of its essence. It continues: however, that we are thinking—this cannot be denied. We can be certain of our existence for however long we are thinking, and so Present Thought is the only sure attribute of our essence. Waiting for Godot makes many similar
conclusions to Descartes’ *Cogito ergo sum*—I think therefore I am. In one example, Vladimir and Estragon comment on the tree and guesses it is a willow. Vladimir, noting the bare branches, says, “It must be dead,” to which Estragon responds, “No more weeping” (*WFG* 31). If a weeping willow which does not weep is dead, then the reverse must be true: if it weeps, it must be alive (exist). Although the body flourishes in the play, as made evident by Vladimir and Estragon’s clownish physical exaggerations as well as the grotesque, the play in many ways highlights the *Cogito*, which prioritizes the mind and neglects the body, separating the former from the latter. Furthermore, not only does the *Cogito* condemn the body as being unreliable and noncerebral, it isolates the mind as a brain in a vat. This inherently leads to a separation of the mind and body.

This dualism can be partly explained in light of the Freudian id, ego, and superego. To refresh our memory, the id comprises the instinctual drives of the body, while the superego—its counterpart—is the mind’s moralizer. The ego seeks to mediate between the id and the superego in order to accommodate the mind’s higher understanding of right and wrong with the demands of the self-gratifying body in its environment. Estragon leans toward the id, Vladimir toward the superego. To be sure, Beckett was not one of simple dichotomies, and both characters make an effort to see to the other side of the functional psyche, but it cannot be denied that Vladimir is the more cerebral and Estragon is the earthier. The contrast in Vladimir and Estragon’s preoccupations are evident: “Vladimir deep in thought, Estragon pulling at his toes” (*WFG* 17).

As for the ego, it is most closely embodied in Vladimir, for he struggles to satisfy his desires within a moral code. At times he succumbs to the impulses of the id, and at others, he chastises other characters for their own self-gratifying behavior. He alludes to this wavering tendency himself, stating “[o]ne is not master of his moods” (*WFG* 197). In juxtaposition to Estragon,
however, Vladimir is generally optimistic. This is suggests a more seasoned perspective, considering they in fact have very little in their possession. As Estragon nibbles on a feeble carrot, he surlily comments “the more you eat the worse it gets”—to which Vladimir responds “With me it’s just the opposite…I get used to the muck as I go along” (WFG 63). Here, he demonstrates the ego’s pragmatism. His adaptability lends him to find nourishment in the real world (i.e. a world with a meager food source). The need for mediation between the id and superego gives way to the mind and body tension in the play.

Dualism causes Western man to suffer from two distinct problems—the doubting mind and the oozing body. However, Western man fails to recognize the strength of the body and attempts to remedy only the mind. And so he meditates in vain, for he finds that his ailment persists since the mind and body cannot be quelled with the same antidote. The thinking being is doomed to doubt the reality around it, and therefore, the mind and body complex becomes of its essence as well; Western man, a thinking being himself, inherits dualism upon his coming into being, but, as he has been accustomed to attach his identity solely to his mind, this notion is foreign to him. He is rendered helpless when he is thrust into reality and encounters his body for the first time, for this essential component of his identity appears unfamiliar and grotesque. He is repulsed. Furthermore, he is menaced by those subjects in reality—other thinking beings that doubt and contradict his own existence, and this chaos is exponentially distorted by its envelopment in monstrous Time. He engages with it in battle. His sword is volition. The prize is his identity.
Searching for the Vision: Obsession in *Krapp’s Last Tape*

Beckett’s application of time in *Krapp’s Last Tape* is unique in that it focuses on the disordering impact from timelessness in the confines of one man’s mind. *Waiting for Godot* is a play about existence and extends to humanity as a whole. Philosophers (in and out of academia) have been interested in *Waiting for Godot* since its publication in 1952 and premiere in 1953 because it deals with philosophical problems such as time, meaning, existence, and will. *Krapp’s Last Tape*, on the other hand, is much more focused and concentrated although it deals with similar topics. For Beckett, the play became a way to not only immortalize defining moments of his life, but also to make sense of his past. And so, *Krapp’s Last Tape* takes the abstract of humanity and narrows into one man’s mind: Krapp—and, by extension, Beckett himself. It is a monologue that sets aside dilemmas of humanity and instead explores in depth the desires, mistakes, and weaknesses unique to one man.

The overlap of time in Beckett’s other works and in *Krapp’s Last Tape* includes the chaos resulting from a lack of, or, disorder in, time. The difference in *Krapp*, to reiterate, is that it is depicted in one character rather than many. But what has brought about this disorder in time? Gunther Anders posits that “life is temporal only because needs are either *not yet* satisfied, goals have *already* been reached, or objectives reached are *still* at one’s disposal” (Anders 146). If that is the case, one of these three causes has either malfunctioned or has failed to be fulfilled and therefore causes life to lose its temporality. Krapp’s apparent anxiety confirms that his objectives have not been reached, eliminating the latter two possible causes. The remainder is Krapp’s source of disorder. His reason for wrestling with his thoughts and listening to his tape

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4 For this chapter, my use of “objective” refers to this quotation’s meaning of the word—needs that must be addressed for temporality.
with such attention, as if trying to understand something convoluted, is a lack of reason. Krapp’s “objective” is difficult to meet simply because he has lost sight of it. This raises a problem because the individual’s sense of time is lost or obscured when he does not have a purpose or cannot seem to progress any closer to it. Hours, days, years speed by, yet he himself feels stationary. The voice on the tape reveals thirty-nine-year-old Krapp sitting in his den recording his monologue, having just listened to an earlier tape. He is doing the same thirty years later, and so the sameness of routine drags out time. The voice on the tape is “strong...rather pompous,” and that of Krapp is raspy and “cracked” (KLT 4-5). The juxtaposition exaggerates the difference in age and demeanor and reminds both Krapp and the audience that thirty years has flown by. Krapp’s perception of time does not match time itself as an independent entity, and he therefore is unable to make sense of the world around him, stranding him in temporal disorder. This notion is reinforced with Krapp’s boxes of recorded tapes. Krapp keeps an archive where his spools of tape are ordered in numbered boxes, and detailed descriptions of each tape are listed in his ledger. It is clear that Krapp has a sophisticated organizational system, although it seems he has difficulty maintaining it. When Krapp searches for his desired tape at the opening of the play, he looks for “Box…three…spool five” (KLT 4). He counts aloud as he skims over the boxes: “Box…three…three…four…two… [with surprise] nine! good God!...seven...ah! the little rascal! [He takes up box, peers at it.] Box three” (KLT 4). We already see disorder in the nonconsecutive boxes four and two, but it is somewhat forgivable given the small difference. However, box nine is substantially out of place, which Krapp notes with surprise. This subtle, but significant detail establishes the chaos in time for the remainder of the play, since temporal sense is necessary for coherent thought.
The discontinuity in Krapp’s thought also reflects disorder. This is made evident in both his thought process as well as his speech. He contemplatively strokes, peels, and eats bananas to propel ideas; he consumes as many bananas as needed for a viable thought. The opening scene shows Krapp reaching for two bananas before he finally gets an idea. In addition to this compulsion, he has a frustrated demeanor. In between bananas, Krapp paces, “sits down, remains a moment motionless, [and] heaves a great sigh” (KLT 4). At times, the halt in cognitive progression literally paralyzes him, leaving him immobile, and his heavy sigh admits defeat. Krapp also vocalizes his frustration—at least to his best ability, as his mental stagnation has affected his lyricism. His once poetic articulation is corroded with unsophisticated language, for example, muttering “muckball” to describe the world (KLT 10). He is, to be clear, aware of his intellectual degradation. He admits shamefully, “Pah!...Nothing to say, not a squeak,” and escalates angrily, “Ah finish your booze now and get to your bed. Go on with this drivel in the morning. Or leave it at that. [Pause.] Leave it at that” (KLT 11).

Beckett claimed he did not “read the philosophers,” and did not “understand what they [wrote],” although his own ideas were related to the Kantian theorem which dictates that time and space are necessary forms of cognition (Fletcher 43). This is to say that both space and time are “a priori,” or, “pure intuitions,” meaning they are “necessary representation[s]...that [are] the ground[s] of all outer intuitions” (Kant B39). They exist as things-in-themselves, independent of other properties for existence, and therefore are not “empirical concept[s] that [are] somehow drawn from an experience” (Kant B46). Time can exist without thought, but the reverse—thought existing without time—cannot. If we speculate how Kant would understand time in the

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5 This is a huge improvement from the same habit thirty years ago. The voice on the tape reports it has just eaten “three bananas and only with difficulty refrained from a fourth” (KLT 5). Here is a rare suggestion of Krapp having improved his cognitive process, having cut down his banana-eating compulsion by nearly half. Perhaps this alludes to his thoughts approaching closer to the “vision.” See light and dark discussion for a further discussion on this “vision,” or, “equinox,” the harmony between light and dark (beginning page 73).
play, he would most likely assert, according to his theorem, that Krapp’s anxiety results from his misunderstanding of time in-and-of-itself. In other words, Krapp’s perception of time is disordered or obscured and not time itself.

Upon reflection, we would agree that Kant’s “statement” is intuitive. Even in the constraints of a play, we would not wish to conclude that one man’s experiences determine time itself—that would be argumentative of egocentrism; we would assure ourselves that it is the unique mind that perceives a distorted version of time. Beckett, however, does not emphasize this one-way interaction of time on thought in the play. He depicts a more interchangeable relationship in which temporal disorder causes Krapp’s disrupted thoughts, and, conversely, his disrupted thoughts affect his perception of time. The correlation between disorder in time and thought is commutable, each one dependent on the other. Perhaps here is an example of Beckett’s skepticism for philosophers. He said in a French interview: “their language is too philosophical for me. I am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that is simply a mess.” It seems that, although Beckett was well versed in philosophy and even “borrowed…eclectically from the writings of many philosophers,” he was skeptical about the convoluted language and thought process which spoke of philosophical topics of such great density that they lost face value and vanished in abstraction (Fletcher 43). Beckett wished to keep his topics of interest—which were very much philosophical dilemmas—as unaffected as possible. This is to say he did not restrict himself to the definitive laws of the Kantian theorem. Beckett, for instance, places far more emphasis on time than on space in his work, for he was very much interested in the issues that time brought up in existence and human nature. In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, specifically, he noticed and thus explored the interrelationship of time and thought—the idea that anxiety could very well impact time, making it seem distorted. This
distortion of time is furthermore not received as Krapp’s isolated perception; we get a sense of this distortion ourselves. In this sense, Beckett refutes the notion that time does not arise from empirical concepts. We therefore get a complex depiction of time. The play lays out chaos, and it isn’t clear whether time or anxiety has dominance over the other.

Still, Beckett pays tribute to the significance of Kantian time and space through the dramatic setting of *Krapp’s Last Tape*. He uses Krapp’s “heavy silver watch and chain” as a motif for time (*KLT* 3). At many instances, Krapp looks closely at his watch, often peering at it, as portrayed by various renditions, because of his near-sightedness. Krapp inspects his watch in a quizzical manner, as if in disbelief of the time that has passed—or hasn’t. On the other hand, space is emphasized with the Krapp’s den, which is his personal solitary space. The remainder of the stage is in “darkness,” and is referred to as so when Krapp should happen to move away from his desk. The extent of his den is also reinforced with Krapp pacing from one end of the light to the other, literally tracing the perimeters. We are, furthermore, not given any information on space other than his den, drawing attention only to the workspace need for his thought. These two subtle motifs cause us to subconsciously associate the stage setting with the necessity of time and space for cognition.

Krapp’s “vision” may shed some light on the goal or objective that can potentially restore temporal order. He seems to have a different understanding of what his vision is from the audience. He lists several specific “resolutions” that he set for himself thirty years prior: “To drink less, in particular” and “Plans for a less…engrossing sexual life” (*KLT* 6). These are more trivial matters, however, compared to the vision for which he has been waiting all his life. The “vision” of which the tape speaks to great length refers to the creative inspiration that will launch his writing career—a creative inspiration that he believes is only able to be cultivated while
isolated in the darkness of his den. But it is clear to the audience that the vision he claims to see is false. Perhaps when Krapp was in a relationship at age thirty-nine, he consistently found himself unable to satisfy his artistic cravings. Pushed to what he felt was mental sloth—which made time excruciatingly slow—he swore off love in order to pursue his intellectual endeavors. He claims that the vision he saw one night spoke to this pursuit, but Krapp’s dwindled condition in the present says otherwise. Another issue than the one seen by Krapp is, in fact, at hand. His heart was never in his relationship with Bianca which he ended at age thirty-nine, and so he had been long overdue for true love. Although he did not necessarily need to completely abandon his writing, he did need to satisfy all his desires, which included his desire for love. This is the underlying dilemma that Krapp did not see until at least thirty years later, because he was quenching neither his thirst for love nor his thirst for artistic fulfillment (for he never becomes a successful writer).

After Krapp’s initial rejection of love, he began to see a prostitute named Fanny, who he describes with disdain as a “[b]ony old ghost of a whore,” for sexual relief (KLT 11). After some time with her, sex became at best a hasty remedy for his sexual urges. This left a persisting dissatisfaction which is evident in one of his exchanges with her: “How do you manage it, she said, at your age? I told her I’d been saving up for her all my life” (KLT 11). This sarcasm is an example of Krapp’s biting humor. His tone reflects antipathy—with a hint of irritation—for Fanny as well as utter contempt for the circumstances of his life. His lust may be temporarily satisfied with sex, but his passions require love, which Krapp regrettably eludes by abandoning his relationship with Bianca. Or—it should be said specifically—Krapp abandons all hope for love. He admits to her that “it was hopeless and no good going on” (KLT 9). The lack of this critical component to long-term sexual satisfaction left him with much sexual repression over the
years. We see suggestions of this in his mannerisms. The first example is with Krapp’s compulsion of eating bananas to propel ideas. It is a bizarre alternative to one’s way of pacing in order to induce one’s thought process. Beckett describes a scene of the peculiar ritual:

[Krapp] takes out a large banana, peers at it...He turns, advances to edge of stage, halts, strokes banana, peels it, drops skin at his feet, puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him. Finally he bites off the end, turns aside and begins pacing...meditatively eating banana...[He] finishes banana, returns to table, sits down, remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh...takes out a second large banana, peers at it...advances to edge of stage, halts, strokes banana, peels it, tosses skin into pit, puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him. Finally he has an idea, puts banana in his waistcoat pocket, the end emerging (KLT 3-4)

The imagery is a vulgar representation of oral sex and masturbation. Krapp attempts to perform oral sex by lingering with the tip of the banana in his mouth before resuming eating it. His oral fixation is his attempt to masturbate by “performing” oral sex on himself. This idea is also reinforced by his habit of stroking the banana before peeling it. And finally, Krapp completes the imagery by putting the banana in his waistcoat pocket, next to his groin, with the tip emerging. He subliminally tries to relieve his sexual urges through his suggestive ritual.

In Atom Egoyan’s 2000 film adaptation, he noted Krapp’s sexual repression and depicted it partly through a Freudian slip. Krapp becomes frustrated listening to the voice on the tape ramble about his “vision” and, at one point, “curses,” winds the tape forward, and, when he finds the voice still rambling, he “courses louder” (KLT 9). Egoyan interprets Krapp to shout “balls” as his expletive. Freud’s own term for the so-called Freudian slip is “word-presentation,” which can otherwise be known as “residues of memories,” since “they were at one time perceptions,
and like all mnemic residues they can become conscious again” (Freud 201). The dense psychological language explains the process in which subdued memories, desires, or contentions are surfaced through an error or “slip” in speech or physical action. As a result, they are made conscious again. Shouting “balls” is his subconscious rising to his consciousness as a new perception which Krapp hears himself explicitly allude to his genitals.

To return to Krapp’s banana-eating compulsion, in addition to its sexual suggestions, the cyclical nature of his ritual gives a distinct disordering quality in time, specifically encasing time in a loop. The repetition of the same act emits the broken record effect, where an action seems to come to an end and suddenly finds itself at the beginning again. Although Krapp believes the bananas to be a harmless way to stimulate his thoughts, he is not prepared for the frustration they entail when he finishes one banana, finds it has not “worked,” and is forced to repeat the cycle with another banana. It begins with boredom from unproductivity and escalates to distress from entrapment. The madness induced is analogous to the Chinese water torture, a process in which drops of water are slowly dispensed one by one on the forehead of a restrained victim, driving him or her to insanity. There are no thoughts, but feelings of anxiousness, attempting to form a thought but being impeded by the fixation of the same event beginning and ending and beginning yet again. And so, the victim of the torture can only anticipate when the next cold drop of water falls gently yet with such precise impact in-between the eyes. Similarly, after some time, Krapp no longer thinks of his writing or work, but instead of how many bananas he has just eaten. The voice on the tape reveals Krapp cataloging this detail: “Have just eaten I regret to say three bananas and only with difficulty refrained from a fourth” (KLT 5). Amid such a process, one fears that the cycle will not end and pleads for something to intervene and disrupt the endless repetition. It is the fear of timelessness. And so, when an intervention does arrive, one feels an
overwhelming sense of relief. Just after Krapp gets an idea at the beginning of the play, he “goes with all the speed he can muster backstage into darkness” (KLT 4). The progression of time brings about a new event—that is, an idea—which in turn brings excitement to Krapp. He celebrates with a drink in the darkness, and “brings [his hands] smartly together and rubs them,” followed by a brisk “Ah!” (KLT 4). Beckett details a simple event of a man overcoming a writer’s block-related ordeal, a familiar feat every writer occasionally or frequently experiences, yet the emotions involved are layered. First and foremost, as stated earlier, Krapp feels relief, since the hiatus in time has ceased and it continues to move forward. Underneath that is a sense of pride for having overcome a difficulty, almost for having outsmarted time and forcing it, on the account of his idea, to advance. And finally, there is a sense of excitement and satisfaction that follows from the collective. Temporal order is restored, and Krapp regains autonomy.

Recall Gunther Ander’s summation on temporality’s dependency on objectives and how Krapp deems his objective to be his writing. Ander’s objectives refer to one’s needs, taking repressed desires into account, and not merely to what one claims his or her objectives to be, for they may be false or not wholly true. Krapp’s devotion to his writing targets only a fraction of his desires, and so it is an ill mistake when he pursues his intellectual endeavors at the expense of his desire for companionship. Krapp’s objective is then actually counterproductive, and it becomes not an objective but an indulgence. Pursuing his writing career requires Krapp to isolate himself in his den. Over a number of years, Krapp’s solitude leads to solipsism, and this notion is emphasized by his rejection of the audience in addition to his lovers in the play. Krapp learns from slipping on the peel of the first banana to more suitably dispose the peel of the second banana. The stage directions read: he “tosses skin in pit” (KLT 4). He essentially uses the audience pit as a trash disposal. The light is where Krapp works, the dark is his escape, and
the audience pit is garbage—we are insignificant. Indeed, the tossing of the banana peel into the audience pit is a peculiar instance. It is the only moment in the play where Krapp breaks the fourth wall, and we are caught off guard when Beckett includes the audience as part of the stage setting. It engages us, but also belittles us by throwing garbage by our feet, almost as if denying our existence. But, clearly, we do exist, for we see the banana peel by our feet, and Krapp must have intended to throw it somewhere. One thing, however, is certain from this metaphysical dilemma: whether or not we as the audience exist, Krapp is detached. Of course, it is absurd to argue that Krapp is wary of the audience’s presence or that Beckett intended it to be an immediate part of Krapp’s world, but Krapp’s tossing of the banana peel into the audience pit mirrors his rejection of human interaction from his earlier years. It is also his obliviousness to resources in his possession which may appease his objectives or needs, and so it results in his rejection of them. Krapp’s abandonment of his relationship with Bianca despite his need for love is the obvious example. His “rejection” of the audience despite his need for public recognition is the subtler case. Krapp spends his life trying to launch his writing career and “[get] known” (KLT 10). Ironically, Krapp has the audience he has been striving to acquire, but neglects that as well.

Krapp’s indulgences also include alcohol and promiscuous sex in addition to his blinding devotion to intellectual endeavors. Collectively, they have taken a toll on him, which is made evident from his distressed physicality even for a sixty-nine-year-old. He looks unkempt: his hair is disheveled, and his clothes are shabby and unclean. His face is weary and anemic; his walk, “laborious” (KLT 3). His voice is replaced with a cracked utterance. It is clear from this description that Krapp has lost his vigor and fails to gain control of his life. Indeed, Krapp’s life is a story of failure. James Knowlson and John Pilling elaborate:
The harsh sounding name of ‘Krapp’ with unpleasant excremental associations that lead its owner and the watching audience back to a decaying, disgusting, yet still demanding body with which Krapp has tried in vain to come to terms all his life. (Knowlson and Pilling 81, qtd. in Kim)

Krapp’s failure is also underlined by his oral fixation, which he assuages with sucking on bananas. This stimulation, however, is best understood through the lens of Freud’s theory of sexuality. Krapp’s decaying mental capacity shows a regression from his senior years to those of an infant. Therefore, Freud’s infant stage of sexuality is most applicable. In this stage, the infant shifts from oral fixation (sucking) to a fixation on controlling bowel movements. Beckett’s reference to the anal stage, i.e. defecation, is clear enough: Krapp’s name alludes to defecation itself. This stage marks the age in which the being attempts to gain control over his compulsory actions, but the fact that Krapp is unable to refrain from drinking and wallowing in his dreams suggests that he fails to master control. The insidiousness puts him in a self-feeding loop in which Krapp fails to achieve temperance, which, in turn, erodes his will power over time, leading him to fall deeper in the depths of his indulgences.

Time is warped as a result of his decaying, depicting three primary perceptions of time in the play. The first is coherent temporal order, where time proceeds at normal progression. The second is suspension, where cyclical events cause time to be lost. The third is simultaneity, in which successive events seem to be occurring at the same time. Additionally, these three perceptions of time are closely related to Kant’s three “modi” of time. These modi are part of Kant’s Analogies of Experience, which functions to explain the transcendental theory of experience and how it is dictated by time. They attempt to answer the question: “how is it
possible for us to represent objects as being in time, in a sense which transcends to temporality of our representation?” (Gardner 171). It will be advantageous to examine the basic comparison between Beckett and Kant’s philosophy on experience and time.

The first perception is the familiar flow of time—that is, time moving forward. Krapp’s struggle to maintain the fluidity of time compels him to find other means of forcing the continuation of time or other means of overlooking the seemingly halted progression of time. Kant’s Principle of Succession, which rests on the notion of the flow of time, dictates that “all alterations occur in accordance with the law of the connection of cause and effect” (Kant B233). Simply, one event brings about a new event, which itself brings about another successive event. Causality allows change in the objective world as opposed to merely in Krapp’s perception of it. His experience is thus able to change and progress. This perception of time is necessary for temporal order, and it is precisely a lack of this perception that prevents Krapp from making coherent sense of his life. The effect of causality in cognition allows one thought to follow another, thus, a thought process. The fact that Krapp is unable to record anymore tapes and thus continue his memory archive prevents the flow of time simply because there is not substantial cause by which to bring about an effect. Krapp, having always struggled to maintain temporal order, finds that he is able to force a progression of time with a drink. These are the only instances where Beckett quantifies time. One such example is Krapp’s first drink of the play: “Ten seconds. Loud pop of cork. Fifteen seconds” (KLT 4). Here, Krapp finds a logical sequence of events in which he prepares and enjoys a drink. This relief from temporal disorder is short-lived, of course, for the real stressor of this disorder requires relief potent enough to settle his anxiety.
Beckett’s interpretation of Kant’s Principle of Persistence as suspended time is presented as a maddening quality rather than a proposition for stability. Kant’s analogy for persistence states that “Experience is possible only through the representation of a necessary connection of perceptions” (Kant B219). Kant’s argument, in brief terms, follows that the permanence in a substance is “fixed and unchanging, and since [one does] not perceive time itself, [one] need[s] to conceive of something permanent in appearances” (Gardner 173). *Krapp’s Last Tape* follows a similar principle of persistence, although it alludes not to the persisting subject of an appearance but to a singular persisting event which cycles rather than ends. Kant presents his argument as a necessary characteristic in time—that in order for there to be a subject for us to perceive, that subject must be fixed and permanent. Kant’s principle of persistence therefore gives regularity to our perceptions and a lasting quality in memories. Beckett, on the other hand, presents this principle as a type of persistence which prevents new events, i.e. the future, from occurring. He characterizes anticlimactic moments in which events seem to draw to an end but then cycle back to its beginning. For example, when Krapp finishes his first banana, he returns to his desk, expecting another event to follow—namely, getting an idea—but then it fails to come into being. Thus, the same event persists, and “heav[ing] a great sigh,” Krapp reaches for another banana (*KLT* 4). Krapp’s cyclical behavior reinforces the thread of stagnation in his life. The repetition of event prevents any productivity or progression, and so Krapp is essentially doing nothing all the time. As a result, Krapp is “active without [himself] deciding on the objective of [his] action, without even being able to discern the nature of that objective.” He feels like the one “acted upon” rather than the actor and therefore loses autonomy, forfeiting his will power (Anders 142-3).
The third perception of time is simultaneity. Krapp’s multifold selves are manifested through the recording of the tapes so that they exist in concurrence, bringing along with them their separate desires. Kant’s principle of simultaneity follows that: “All substances, insofar as they can be perceived in space as simultaneous, are in thoroughgoing interaction” (Kant B257). This simply means that “if time is to be determined as unitary…it must be determinable that two things” exist at the same time. Otherwise, “each object has…its own time stream” (Gardner 176). While one event is happening, it must be that there are other events simultaneously occurring. A simple example of concurring events is Krapp standing at the edge of the stage during the exposition while leaving the tip of a banana in his mouth and staring vacuously before him at the same time. The more convoluted example is embodiments of differently aged versions of Krapp over the tapes. The present, sixty-nine-year-old Krapp plays the voice of his thirty-nine-year-old self, which, having listened to an earlier tape, alludes to his twenty-something-year-old self. As the segments of the tape play out, there seems to be three versions of Krapp existing at the same time. There is a fourth Krapp when taken the allusion to his boyhood into consideration. Kathryn White explores this notion of simultaneity in Krapp’s relishing of the word “spool:”

As Krapp makes his selection of box three, spool five, he relishes the word “Spooool!…”…, repeating it many times with a child-like tonality. Here Beckett… [demonstrates] that the old individual often reverts back to childish tendencies. The mind and the body are therefore at odds, as the mind may adopt a youthful approach, while the body perhaps declines to function with youthful vigor. (White 24)

White’s analysis suggests Krapp’s boyhood and senescence to be occurring at the same time. She differentiates between the time stream of the mind and the time stream of the body. While
Krapp’s body experiences the standard progression or flow of time into old age, his mind reverts back to “childish tendencies. The play therefore presents a series of selves which reflect different and often contradicting desires and dispositions. Beckett writes in his reflections in *Proust* that the “aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday’s ego, not for to-day’s” (*Proust* 3). The concurrence of the desires of “yesterday” and “to-day’s” ego, then, presents a major dilemma. Krapp tries to address his present desires but finds that the desires from his earlier years persist. The human mind is prone to the menace of time’s simultaneity and cannot administer the demands of many egos, displacing the object of its “present” ego’s desires out of reach as a result.

Beckett proposes a fourth perception of time—its ability to move backwards—since the individual’s perception does not abide by the rules of objective time. His subtle indication of this fourth perception is the inception of Krapp’s many identities on the tapes. Beckett first introduces the present day Krapp and proceeds to introduce increasingly younger versions of him. The result is a reverse aging process, which brings him much aggravation to encounter the “stupid bastard[s] [he] took [him]self for” (*KLT* 10). Reversible time forces the present self to reconcile with past selves, disallowing the individual to leave behind and forget memories that are “better off” erased. Krapp’s case takes reversible time to a quite literal extent where he relives his experiences by listening to his tape. But the individual need not a recording device to address his past selves, for recounting experiences is enough to catapult him back in the past. Such instances where the present suddenly reverts to the past give the individual a distorted perception of time. The individual experiences not the flow of time, but the regression of time. However, as much as Krapp’s tape-recorder can be injurious to his perception, it gives him a great sense of command, for it further “creates the illusion that time is reversible, that we can go
back as well as forward” (Kim 24). Thus, the illusion extends to Krapp’s control over time, having the power to navigate in either direction on a horizontal temporal line at his fingertips.

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The vision at last…What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life… (KLT 8)

The vision is one of the central notions around which Krapp’s Last Tape revolves. Similarly to Godot, it serves as a function rather than a determined meaning. The vision is a transcendent goal which gives the Beckettian individual desire. Krapp invents the vision to cater toward his artistic endeavor, but it is safe to call the vision as the thing for which the individual years and which break the individual’s heart, for it is unattainable. It becomes the most insidious objective, then, when Krapp blindly obsesses over it to the point where the actions he takes to work towards it are no longer conscious but merely impulsive behavior. The equinox, however, which he observes during the same night he claims to see the vision, is suggested to be the more feasible objective. The equilibrium of night and day signifies a harmony between Krapp’s romantic relationship and writing career. And so it seems that the vision is only a red herring for the much need ‘equinox’ he needs to attain.

Krapp obsesses over his proclaimed vision, but it is never explicitly articulated. It is a heavily discussed topic in the play—theories proposed vary from a pseudo vision which deludes Krapp to a ‘real’ vision he has yet to see, along with notions of love, artistic fulfillment, and happiness. Evidently, it is difficult to pinpoint. Here, the vision will be argued to be a balance between multiple dichotomies which Krapp—and through his autobiographer, Beckett—never
finds. These dichotomies are represented in the play as a tension between light and dark through dramatic setting, thematic elements, and recurring imagery. In one dichotomy, light symbolizes Krapp’s desire for the public to recognize the importance of his work. He desired, essentially, to be known and for success in the public eye. This desire is coupled with Krapp’s desire for love—one that goes beyond sex, that carries meaning, an emotional and intellectual connection. He desired a partner that sympathized with his burden of and devotion to the life of a writer. The darkness, on the other hand, symbolizes his desire for quiet, for relief from the chaos of fame. This side of Krapp longs to write and articulate his artistic intentions in solitude. His instinct to feed this desire causes him to isolate himself in his den—instincts which he overindulges. This leads to the other dichotomy in which the light symbolizes self-awareness. The light, as interpreted under this dichotomy, signifies a prolonged state of consciousness that allows for self-confrontation, that is, when Krapp faces himself. The dark, then, signifies the solipsistic indulgence previously described. This indulgence permits him to escape the reality of his life and avoid self-awareness. In these instances, he halts reflection and literally steps into the darkness. The notion of escaping oneself is reinforced with Krapp’s alcohol consumption which also takes place in the darkness on stage.

In short, the ‘real’ vision which Krapp sees but does not absorb is the “memorable equinox” (KLT 5). The significance of this image will be elaborated at a later point, but the equinox—a moment of equal day and night (light and dark) represents in essence the balance between the two dichotomies described. Krapp, however, takes the vision which he sees one late night in March to be explicitly of “the day when [his] work will be done,” referring to the moment when he will be finally able to cultivate his artistic intention in his magnum opus (KLT 8). The disparity in understandings of the vision is due to the innate ambiguity in its
Krapp winds the tape forward whenever its voice is about to specify exactly what the vision is. There is the first instance, “What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely—[Krapp switches off impatiently, winds tape forward],” and the second instance, “the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most—[Krapp curses, switches off, winds tape forward]” (KLT 8-9). The vision is therefore an enigmatic motif, and it is questionable whether it can be defined. In this sense, the vision is a thing-in-itself, something unknowable to both Krapp and the audience. It is a truth, a phenomenon that exists beyond any experience one has or can ever have. It is also likely then that Beckett himself had difficulty pinpointing the vision, making especial use of its censorship. This is not be the only time Beckett focuses a play around a complex idea on which he did not have clarity. He was asked repeatedly who or what the mysterious Godot represented in Waiting for Godot. Godot was taken to symbolize “God,…Christianity, rebirth, redemption, hope and despair. It has been construed as an allegory of French resistance to the Germans and of Ireland to the English, of the relationship of Beckett to Joyce, and of so many more things” (Bair 382). Of course, Beckett was asked directly in many interviews, in which cases he would respond, with annoyance, “‘If I knew who Godot was, I would have said so in the play,’ or, ‘If Godot were God, I would have called him that.’” (Bair 382-3). The vision in Krapp takes on a similar mystery. Despite the argument for the vision as the equinox, the balance of multiple facets in Krapp’s life, it is, in the grand scheme, something far greater than its portrayal in the text.

Beckett was never so much interested in morality as he was in confrontation of the self, and so the tension between light and dark in Krapp’s Last Tape therefore has little to do with ethical issues and more with Krapp’s self-awareness. The setting is purposely simple to draw attention to the latter. The “strong white light” from the overhead above his desk contrasts with
the darkness of the rest of his den. Krapp himself says: “the new light above my table is a great improvement…I love to get up and move about in it, then back to…me…Krapp” (KLT 5). The light creates an isolated world with Krapp as its only inhabitant, as well as visible objects such as his recorder, boxes of tape, and his ledger. Because these collectively organize his memories, the lighted area encompasses Krapp and tools for reflection. It scenically maps out his mental workings and progression of his confrontation of self. Conversely, if he steps into the darkness, away from the lighted area, he lacks self-awareness. His actions, such as the popping of a cork, are audible, but he is completely out of the audience’s sight. There is a pronounced visual difference in Krapp’s mental battle in the light and his alcohol indulgence in the dark. The two sides of Krapp’s disposition become opposing realms, one struggling to take precedent over the other.

*Krapp’s Last Tape* is notably one of his most autobiographical writings, and so, its production was very much like Beckett’s own means for achieving self-awareness. Beckett learned that he was most productive late at night, and, as his body grew acclimated to his abnormal sleep schedule, he became a creature of the night. The majority of his works—which brought him eventual fame and success even during his lifetime—were written at night in isolation.⁶ Beckett’s usage of darkness therefore seems to represent self-confrontation much more than light. Why is it, then, that light signifies self-awareness in the play and darkness for the reverse? The answer lays partly in dramatic effect as well an allusion to Kantian space. The extent of the light creates the illusion of physical space suspended against the darkness. Everything within the light’s reach exists and everything else in the darkness is nonexistent. Krapp’s pacing from one end to the other validates the space allotted. Once he leaves the lighted

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⁶ The biographical information is drawn from Bair’s *Samuel Beckett: a biography.*
area, he seems to vanish as his body disappears from view. Furthermore, the Kantian notion that all cognition can be pinpointed in one spatiotemporal location, i.e. that both space and time are necessary for all cognition, is reinforced with Krapp’s workspace directly under the impact of his overhead light.

Krapp expresses reservation about the effectiveness of the light quelling his loneliness. He makes a curious comment: “With all this darkness round me I feel less alone. [Pause.] In a way” (KLT 5). Indeed the light above his desk helps him to focus on his work—on him—because it creates a world in which distractions are eliminated and only he and his mnemonic devices exist. It also lessens the emptiness of the whole of his den to just his desk and immediate surrounding area, where the latter is cluttered. To that effect, he feels less alone. However, we know well from the play that he gave up love thirty years ago, and that he is alone. He is allowed to pace in the adjacent area of his desk granted by the light, but, as he reaches the edge of one lighted area and turns to pace in the opposite direction, he is reminded that he is the only one occupying the space and thus is indeed alone. The darkness, on the other hand, is his escape—not in a paradisiacal sense—but from the acknowledgement of his isolation. It allows him to momentarily leave his state of morbid self-realization and retract his being—quite literally so, for he disappears backstage. Krapp is then left with conflicting feelings—one where light relieves him from the measureless extension of his empty den and another where he seems to exist only in the realm of his mind and it therefore fortifies his sense of loneliness.

Krapp walks in and out of the light with a deceptively mindless demeanor. He is well aware that there exists a struggle for an unknown vision, though his understanding of it is obscured. The tape documents the moment he felt it all became clear to him—the long-awaited relief from despair and uncertainty:
Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indigence until that memorable night in March, at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision at last. This I fancy is what I have chiefly to record this evening, against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold, for the miracle that...[hesitates]...for the fire that set it alight. What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely...clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most—(KLP 8-9).

The tape is cut off by the impatient Krapp, but the voice speaks with conviction of a false realization that all this time he should have been fostering the “fire” behind his writing. This disposition of course, is the source of his anxiety for years to come. He refers explicitly to the fire as “the dark [he has] always struggled to keep under.” At some point he understood that his solipsistic nights in isolation were degenerative to his mental health and thus future productivity. This brief period of clear-headedness was probably in his late twenties, the same time he had admirable aspirations which the egocentric thirty-nine-year-old Krapp mocks on the tape. It seems that since his twenties, his understanding of a much needed realization has become increasingly misconstrued and obscure. By age thirty-nine, he has succumbed to the fallacy that the innate darkness of his work ought to take precedence; his desire for absolute solitude is not oppressive but in fact an opportune moment to create his opus magnum. So it seems.

The much needed realization to which has been referred is complex. We, in addition to Krapp, would be mistaken to think the light is to be wholly adopted and the dark to be wholly suppressed. As the audience, we anticipate for Krapp to emerge from the darkness whenever he goes backstage, i.e. that his disappearance is temporary. Similarly, Krapp’s mistake lies in attempting to entirely “keep under” either the light or dark. Both the Krapp that we see on stage
and the voice that we hear on tape struggle with the light—to achieve self-awareness, which is why it is easy to assume that he must reject the dark entirely. There must, however, be a balance between light and dark. Indeed the play depicts the dark largely as an embodiment of nonexistence and indulgence, but there’s also an indication of privacy crucial to his wellbeing. This indication is masked by his alcohol indulgence that we quickly determine as a deterioration of will power. We are accustomed to seeing Krapp on display, and disappearing backstage is a means to find literal relief from the public eye. Beckett himself sought this when fame accompanied the critical acclaim he received for his work. *Waiting for Godot* brought him instant fame. Armand Salacrou said of the play: “We were waiting for this play of our time” (Bair 429). French, German, Irish, and English productions of the play were in high demand, and Beckett established quite the fan base. The dramatic shift in the recognition he received was so sudden that it gave him little to no time to adjust to the invasive press. Frankly, Beckett found it “frightening” (Bair 430). However, prior to *Godot*, Beckett faced “humiliating sales” (Bair 360) of *Murphy* and wanted desperately for the public to “recognize the importance of his fiction” (Bair 383). He struggled to find a balance between the comforts of privacy in his writing and wide public recognition. Krapp struggles to find a similar balance. It is not a matter of choosing between love and working in his den, i.e. extending his world beyond himself. This is the vision he needs to see—in other words, the balance between light and dark he needs to strike.

The notion of relief should be emphasized in Krapp’s compulsion to slip into the darkness. This notion converses with the notion of *dread* in self-confrontation in the light. Compare his attitude toward recording his thoughts to getting a drink. He “remains…motionless” and “heaves a great sigh” as he sits by his desk under the overhead (KLT 3). In contrast, when he grants himself a drink, he “goes with all the speed he can muster
backstage into darkness” despite being a weary old man (KLT 4). Krapp has something far worse than writer’s block; it is much more than petty frustration and feeling stupid. It is a period of great anxiety and purposelessness. Krapp’s lasting state of it elicits hatred for his being and risks his sanity. He does not move in his chair yet he is exhausted, and he is exhausted, simply because self-reflection is arduous business. It is no wonder, then, why Krapp eagerly goes backstage to escape it. This idea goes deeper than satisfying alcoholism; it provides substantial relief from mental taxation. However, most people intuit that reflection does indeed carry more value than self-gratification, and following this instinct is more often reliable than not. So where does this equivocation leave Krapp? There is a prominent side to Krapp that craves indulgence and that dreads the labor in reflection, but also a repressed side that yearns for meditation—one that runs far deeper than instantaneous thought or observation. This hunger for deeper reflection is rarely confronted because the dread he feels, and this eats away at him in a very subtle manner.

What is most puzzling is that, although his writing is assumed to take place in the light (Krapp is never shown actually contributing to his literature), his work does not necessarily translate to self-awareness. Moving beyond the context of the play and having an understanding of Beckett’s life informs this statement. Since Watt, Beckett wrote “from within himself” (Bair 351). He decided that his characters would confront “his memories and dreams, no matter how ugly or painful” (Bair 351). His writing inevitably surfaced a dark side of himself, one that he was perhaps not conscious of. This revelation was terrifying to him, and it became somewhat known that drunkenness was his only “refuge from the reality of his writing” (Bair 351). But although the experience terrified him, Beckett knew that he was working hard to confront himself. It was fulfilling, but in a complex and saddening way. In addition, because privacy was an increasingly delicate possession, writing in isolation became therapeutic for him. His work
seems to be the ideal approach to confronting the self, to achieving total self-awareness, since he was digging up all his memories (those that were recent or fresh as well as those that were buried and forgotten), trying to find the light of understanding, and articulating this light in strange fiction, which told his story not through narration, but speech—and that was all that was needed (Bair 352). But from the terror that Beckett felt, he witnessed a most insidious quality in the exasperating art of “writing from within.” He expresses this quality in Krapp’s Last Tape, and so the eponymous character obsesses over his memories, allowing him to see nothing more than copies of himself. The argument that writing is equivalent to self-awareness simply because it requires self-awareness—although logical—is a fallacy nonetheless.

In moments of deafening silence, Krapp plays the tape-recorder for the majority of the play in order to fill the void. Beckett captures the human tendency to eliminate the quiet and the calm and substitute them with noise, and, this tendency has only exacerbated since Beckett’s time. In contemporary society, we feel this constant need to have noise in the background. We leave the news on the television while we get ready in the morning, we listen to the radio in the car on our way to work, and we play music when we jog or run errands. We do so, because silence induces boredom and frustration, which results in a loss of sense of time. We are a society obsessed with productivity, and prolonged silence makes us anxious because nothing happens. Our subconscious attempt to avoid this is to schedule every hour of the day and, additionally, we overlap this with noise to truly maximize our time. And so, we can listen to the news in addition to getting ready for the day. We never leave any room for quiet, which is essential for self-reflection, because we are fixated on efficiency and immediate gratification. Silence is discomforting precisely because, in it, our monologue finally plays out. We are suddenly confronted with ourselves and our thoughts, and this is an unnerving experience for
most people simply because the digitized society has encouraged us to plug into a stimulated world and tune out. Krapp is no different. The voices from his tapes are his radio and television which fill every gap of silence. They were once noise emitting from a tape-recorder, but have now become the stimulated world which he plugs into. He becomes so immersed that he is no longer able to switch off the tape-recorder and allow his present monologue to emanate.

Johnathan Kalb compares Krapp’s self-obsession to that of Narcissus (Kalb 90). Krapp looks to himself and only versions of himself—record tapes of his younger years—for the “vision” that he seeks (KLT 8). He does not consider that value and meaning can be extracted from other people. Krapp searches for identity by looking at fragments of himself that have been organized in boxes of recorded tapes and archived in his ledger. His action is intuitive, but his past selves instead “function only as self-mocking mirrors, never as independent entities or images capable of providing parameters for the self’s definition” (Kalab qtd. in Kim 90-1). As we listen along to the tape with Krapp, we suspect that the voice offers little to assist his self’s definition. If it does, Krapp does not, or, is not willing to, absorb it. He listens, though much in disdain, and expresses criticism for his past selves. The voice on the tape reports that he had been listening to an earlier tape, a recording of his twenty-something-year-old self, and cannot “believe [he] was ever that young whelp” (KLT 6). He laughs at the aspirations he set at that age. But in turn, the present Krapp criticizes the thirty-nine-year-old version of himself, who expresses disdain for his even younger self. He says, “Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that” (KLT 10). This is Kalb’s system of “self-mocking mirrors” in which Krapp is continuously condemning former versions of himself. This analysis seems contrary to narcissism, as Krapp appears to be self-loathing, but it is the method alone in which he seeks meaning in life that is intimately related to
Narcissus. Narcissism is inherent in self-hatred, because, truth be told, Narcissists do not love every facet of themselves (Campbell et. al). They may have positive perceptions of themselves in terms of status, such as intelligence or beauty, but they do not associate positive communal adjectives, such as kindness or friendliness with themselves. Narcissists are not socially oriented, because they are self-absorbed. They generally hold negative views on how they interact with others, and they self-loathe in this respect. Krapp would most likely acknowledge his weaker skills in social bonding, but his self-criticism targets deeper insecurities, such as his creative abilities being artificial. Narcissists are arrogant and self-loving in many ways, but they are also envious of those that excel in areas in which they themselves do not. Krapp’s criticism of his thirty-nine-year-old self is, in part, in envy of his lyricism and self-assurance. And respectively, his thirty-nine-year-old self is half-critical, half-envious of his twenty-nine-year-old self’s optimism and ambitiousness. But again, the identities which Krapp envies are of himself. Despite decades of hopelessly looking to himself for answers, he is convinced that no matter how softly the “fire” is burning, it remains only in himself. As a result, he is imprisoned within his own vanity, in a cycle of self-inflicted criticism and hatred that can only further wears the self, until it is left with little to defend itself from poisonous habits. And while Narcissus down in a fountain while gazing at his reflection, Krapp down in his “drink and dreams” (Lloyd Thomas, Kim 91). This is the trap into which Krapp falls. The capacity for self-awareness in Krapp’s “homework” is illusory. Krapp looks obsessively at the same tape as if he is missing something or is looking for direction, comfort, or an answer embedded somewhere in the tape, and so he plays the same segment repeatedly. This habit persists for more than thirty years, but it is clear that its method is futile. Thus, ironically, Krapp’s elusive vision of inwardness is to project outwardness, one that extends his world beyond himself and to others. Textual evidence
includes “seeing” the vision at night “at the end of the jetty in the howling wind.” Krapp sensed something significant happening around him, and rightly so, for he was encompassed by powerful elements. However, the imagery is ominous. Krapp stands alone at the end of a jetty, having reached his limit of walkable ground. The biting wind howls. Darkness surrounds him. It is in this scene that Krapp has his vision that would command the remainder of his life. Furthermore, he anticipates that, after his vision, there will be “no place left in [his] memory.” Interestingly, Krapp knew since that moment that it would consume his mind, but he did not know how detrimental to his mental health it would be. That “memorable,” but foreboding night in March would play an active role in corrode his ability to confront his self.

The dichotomy of light and dark creates an apparent tension that is reflected in the memories regurgitated from Krapp’s tape. Its motif is reflected in the “black plumage” of the vidua-bird, a “dark young beauty…all white and starch…with a big black hooded perambulator”, and a little black ball which he gives to a white dog (KLT 7-8). More pressing imagery includes the lowering of his mother’s window blinds, alluding to her death. The shadows from the drawn blinds not only contribute to the dark imagery but carries bleak overtones. Beckett drew directly from his own experience with waiting by his mother’s bedside just before her death. He agonized, waiting for the moment to come:

[Beckett’s] days passed in an exhausting, crushing depression brought on by long hours at [his mother’s] bedside. His nights were spent walking and talking with Geoffrey Thompson, to whom he complained bitterly of the so-called God who would permit such suffering. In the little free time remaining to him, he worked, in an effort to shut out the circumstances of his mother’s imminent death…All day long Beckett had sat beside her bed, watching her labored breathing, until he could stand it no more. Then he went for a walk along the Grand Canal, and when he returned to the nursing home, sat outside for a while on a bench, shivering in the
Beckett’s depression was not entirely brought on by grief over his mother’s impending death. His agony stemmed from the dread of returning to Dublin, contempt for the unending hopelessness, and entrapment under the conditions. The “suffering” caused by “the so-called God” was for his own concern and had less to do with sympathy for his mother. The long hours dragged on, his mother’s life hanging by a thread yet would not end. The wait was excruciating, and Beckett found the need to remove himself from the room. He took walks despite the cold weather in a desperate attempt to pass time, yet he could find little time for his work. Time was disorienting in that it seemed suspended and extended at the same time. He thought his mother’s death could not come sooner to end his internal turmoil. Compare Beckett’s impatience and Krapp’s relief at his own mother’s death:

…the house on the canal where mother lay a-dying, in the late autumn, after her long viduity [Krapp gives a start] and the…[Krapp switches off…His lips move in the syllables of “viduity.”] No sound. He gets up, goes backstage into darkness, comes back with an enormous dictionary…and looks up the word…Pause. He closes dictionary, switches on, resumes listening posture.]—bench by the weir from where I could see her window. There I sat, in the biting wind, wishing she were gone…Hardly a soul, just a few regulars, nursemaids… (KLT 7-8)

Krapp then digresses about a “dark beauty” that he suddenly remembers. He goes on for a substantial length about his encounter with her at the hospital before trailing off and returning to the topic of his dying mother. Prior to that, the word “viduity” catches his attention, and Krapp proceeds to relish in its definition and deviate from the subject of his mother. Her death ought to
have marked a poignant moment in his life in the typical way one would experience the grieving loss of a mother, yet what is captured on tape is instead the agonizing period of waiting. On the tape, the voice digresses, and in the present, Krapp disregards. He allows himself to become distracted because he does not wish to relive the experience. And so, he avoids the matter on the tape as well as when he listens to it thirty years later. He continues after his diversion: “I was there when…the blind went down…I happened to look up and there it was. All over and done with, at last” (KLT 8). Krapp’s relief mirrors that of Beckett. The drawn blinds actualize the final separation between them and their mothers. Beckett was eager to take it further by erasing what remained of her. Her house was demolished and her estate was sold. Beckett “had disposed of all his effects the year before, and he wanted nothing of his mother’s…With this rejection of [his mother’s] effects, he had finally, symbolically, managed to kill her” (Bair 406). Keeping her belongings would preserve her memory, which he most certainly did not wish to do. Her preservation would in a sense continue her existence, though an evanescent one, much like her feeble life before her death. Still, the idea of “killing” his mother is a gruesome one, but more than anything, it was Beckett’s way of erasing his past. Much like Krapp, Beckett had an insidious habit of loathing his past self, or, selves. His mother and home in Ireland embodied his past and everything he detested, and so, the death of his mother gave him his long-awaited permission to leave Ireland and his past for good. And for Krapp, it was “all over and done with, at last.”

There is also a notable tension between light and dark when he lay with Bianca in the punt, which informs his relationship with her and perspective on love at the age of thirty-nine. He recounts in the tape:
She lay stretched out on the floorboards with her hands under her head and her eyes closed. Sun blazing down, bit of a breeze, water nice and lively...I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on and she agreed, without opening her eyes. [Pause.] I asked her to look at me and after a few moments—[pause]—after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. [Pause. Low.] Let me in. [Pause.] We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down, sighing, before the stem! [Pause.] I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side. (KLT 9)

Here the element of light is powerful, literally blinding, as Bianca struggles to move beyond anything but a squint. It is not only until Krapp draws a shadow over her when she is able to look at him. He represses his love for her, and his plain language when describing their break-up and love-making is his attempt to feign apathy. He further trivializes their passionate act as being motionless. This marks a significant moment where Krapp rejects his final chance for love and embraces his artistic endeavors, beginning with his eloquent articulation of the poetry of the “lively” water and “sighing” stems. It is this that elicits passion from him, its exclamatory punctuation giving a clear indication. He says that they lay there motionless, and it is life around them, beyond their relationship, that has autonomy, actively swaying their passive bodies.

Despite the tension between light and dark—assuming each side provides equal force—it is important to note that the voice on the tape mentions more dark than light imagery: the drawn blinds, the “dark beauty,” the black perambulator, the black rubber ball, the memorable night in March, and the shadows in the sun. Krapp had at that point accepted the darkness as his reality, and so it is fitting that it became a prominent motif. Furthermore, the voice’s note of a “memorable equinox” is curious (KLT 5). Although it is never heard of in the actual recording, Krapp reads the phrase from its citation in the ledger, and so it is implied that the voice discusses
the equinox at some point (perhaps during a moment Krapp fast-forwards). Nevertheless, it is a critical moment of light and dark, where day and night are of equal length and therefore in harmony (Lyons 100). This suggests the balance that Krapp ought to strike in his struggle with the tension of light and dark. It is the “vision” or the realization that he needs to see.

Although the voice notes the equinox is certainly “memorable,” it is not so clear to what depth he understands it, or to what extent—if at all—he has a moment of realization. Fast-forward to the present, sixty-nine-year-old Krapp and his disposition is still uncertain for the majority of the play. He does, however, put up more of a struggle between light and dark, rather than completely succumbing to the darkness. This is evident with his attempt at self-awareness with his tapes, which takes place in the light. By the end of the play, there is a sudden shift in tone or his demeanor. He disregards his need to archive every detail of his life. Indeed, he does the opposite. After recording his last tape, Krapp “suddenly bends over the machine, switches [it] off, wrenches [the tape] off, [and] throws it away” (KLT 11). He finally breaks away from the tunneled vision of his own thoughts and memories, free from a self-mirroring effect that allows him to see nothing beyond himself. His impulsive wrenching of the tape, however, is out of frustration and frantic desperation to listen once again to the recorded memory of Bianca, and so, he is not wholly aware of his atypical behavior and, moreover, its significance. Finally, when the tape plays into silence, the audience faces a circumstance that is especially rare in Beckettian plays. Beckett’s plays are eschatological in nature. It is typically the case that either the audience witnesses or the characters experience the ending rather than the end of something. Beckett seems to only offer penultimate events, which is precisely why the audience subconsciously experiences a moment of uncertainty and, possibly, anxiety when the tape, which Krapp had been rewinding and fast-forwarding an isolated segment, finally plays out to the end.
At this moment, Krapp sits “motionless staring before him” in the light and arguably comes to a realization (*KLT* 12). If that is too generous a conclusion, it is certainly a *now what?* moment. The ending of the play—Krapp wrenching the tape and Krapp staring off into the distance—does not signify a complete change in disposition. It instead suggests the beginning of a greater awareness to come, a realization as opposed to a revelation. Krapp, having listened to the tape numerous times, finally achieves a deeper understanding of it, one that brings him closer to the equinox.
Conclusion

Such a funny notion it would be should Sisyphus laugh as the boulder makes its way downhill. Now, if one could bracket the frivolousness of the notion for a moment, it would be revealed that the burden of Sisyphus’ existence would in fact be lifted. After all, his eternal punishment would only be effective if he chose only to see the futility of his life, and not the absurdity which would grant him a laugh.

Beckett’s humor seeks to make us laugh as our boulder rolls downhill. David H. Hesla describes his works as part of his “mission as prophet.” This is not to attach religion or morality, but rather to highlight “images of human existence which will not yield to our habitual patterns” (Hesla 165). Humor empowers us to laugh even in the face of humanity’s suffering. True, Beckett paints dismal worlds for us in his literature, but it is because he attempts to “awaken man to the grim facts about his life” (Hesla 165). For Beckett, the tragedy of humanity was not dreamt for romantic fiction. He felt it was very much our reality, and it was furthermore important that we rose to the level of consciousness where we came to its realization.

Beckett’s dark humor poses: “If existence is utter torment, who would not look forward to its end?” (Helsa 161). By this, his characters certainly wish for death, since it would terminate their existence and torture—Vladimir and Estragon, for example, try hard to hang themselves. But Beckett is not the cruel creator of his worlds; he is, conversely, merciful by making his worlds apocalyptic. The truth of the matter is that “[t]ime in Beckett’s universe is running short. His titles say as much: *Endgame; Krapp’s Last Tape; Embers.* From Malone onward his characters are mostly senile, decrepit, dying.” At last, here are worlds in which the characters are soon to be put out of their misery. As learned in the first chapter, Vladimir and
Estragon are doomed to wait for Godot forever, for they cannot hang themselves. But fear not, for they will die soon anyway. Beckett’s characters can therefore look forward to their impending death.

And to endure the time until their death, Beckett says to laugh. He ironically demonstrates through the passivity of his characters that we in fact have the freedom to decide how we wish to carry on. As Vladimir explains:

[A]ll mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! ... It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species… What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. (WFG 289)

Vladimir acknowledges the tragic fate of mankind but is grateful for having awareness which allows him to act upon this consciousness, rather than cautiously comparing “the pros and cons” (and concluding the cons to be the weightier). Enlightened, Vladimir enthusiastically encourages Estragon to take action, to “make the most of it” while they can. Waiting for Godot is a ‘tragicomedy’ because it jokes on the trials we inherit as human beings. Humor endows us with higher tolerance for pain—which is why, even for an inexperienced Beckett spectator, he is able to enjoy a play in which nothing happens because it is so funny. Waiting for Godot consists of one joke after the other, from the comic physical display of the characters to the absurdity of their exchanges, making the realization of futility, doom, and death easier to digest.

Even Krapp’s Last Tape, a drama in which an old man with neither lover nor career wallows in regret, is not void of humor. The successive selves laugh at the previous self: “Hard
to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! [Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.] And the resolutions! [Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.] To drink less, in particular. [Brief laugh of Krapp alone.] (KLT 6). Krapp recognizes, even if in disdain, the humor in each of his selves failing to meet the goals of the previous self. Furthermore, an instance of dark humor brings us to Krapp’s numerous visits with a prostitute: “How do you manage it, she said, at your age? I told her I’d been saving up for her all my life” (KLT 11). His biting sarcasm counteracts his last resort with a prostitute, who he now visits regularly. Krapp, no doubt, is a bitter man, who, in his old age, has had time to come to many morbid realizations of his life as well as humanity as a whole. Yet, even he continues to mock and laugh at hopeless business.

The best way to bear any burden, therefore, is to laugh at it, since humor effectively alleviates it by creating an escape. The relief that humor offers can be temporary—a chuckle at the punch line of a joke—or it can find permanence in morphing pain into optimism. Those who commit suicide do so because they have lost all hope; they have accepted the tragedy of humanity all too well and can no longer laugh. It would be as if Vladimir and Estragon came to the full acknowledgement that Godot will never come and decided to hang themselves. But, Beckett presses, we ought not to take life so seriously, for humanity is a joke anyway. And so, Vladimir and Estragon will wait with the unending hope that Godot just may come the next night. Beckett also noted that nothing brings humanity closer than pain and suffering—Vladimir and Estragon’s unbreakable bond is evident of this. And nothing allows humanity to thrive in misery better than laughter. In trying times, we can only laugh, and so we do.
Works Cited


