

Absurdism in “Waiting for Godot” and “The Room”:
Why One is Widely Regarded as a Masterpiece and the Other is Not

by

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Introduction

I remember being shown one of Yves Klein's monochrome works for the first time. Klein had drenched a canvas in his patented International Klein Blue and named it IKB 81. Apparently, there were 81 others like it and dozens more afterwards. My friend, who first introduced me to Klein had a large smile on his face and remarked, "This is considered a masterpiece". I could not help but laugh at the seemingly insignificant work. It seemed ridiculous at the time that a monochrome painting could express anything beyond an artist's obsession with the color blue. I had a very similar reaction when introduced to Tommy Wiseau's feature film, *The Room*. Not that in that moment anyone had argued for the film's position as a masterful work of art but that I laughed hysterically during the entire viewing.

In coming years, I would rewatch *The Room*, showing it to friends and relatives who had not seen it before, each time excited to watch it again with them. I laughed every time Johnny would say his famous one-liners like, "Do you understand life?", "What a story Mark!", and "Anyway, how's your sex life?". With each subsequent viewing, I would find myself laughing at new aspects of the film, most of which my friends pointed out. These previously unnoticed things included how Johnny awkwardly had sex with what appeared to be Lisa's bellybutton or how Johnny pays the flower shop woman before he asks her how much the bouquet costs. It was during this time that I was introduced to the world of art and literature at the American University of Armenia. Indeed, it was during this time that I was forced to revisit Klein, which would go on to form the very question I am observing here today.

Oddly enough, I began to appreciate Klein's work after having studied him and his intentions. His reasoning behind using the color blue and his dedication to developing a paint color and texture that was uniquely his own became inspiring. I learned of Klein's

“infinite void” and how he took from the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard who claimed that; “First there is nothing, then there is deep nothing, then there is a blue depth”. Klein went even as far as to say that while Malevich, who Klein was often compared to, observed the infinite while painting the *Black Square* Klein actually lived in the infinite.

This idea of the infinite really brought Klein’s work to a new level since he believed that in the future all paintings would simply be monochromes, expressing in them all that was, is, or could be. How different really is Klein’s work from some other masterpiece that was once criticized and laughed at? Take for instance the works by the German Expressionist Edvard Munch whose works were widely criticized and ridiculed during his lifetime. Munch’s *Self-Portrait with Cigarette* lacks any real environment or setting and the silhouetted glows around his figure seem amateur and sloppy. However, Munch has intentionally composed his work as such in order to show a man drowning in haze, drawing the viewer's gaze entirely on him, clearly experiencing some sort of existential crisis.

It could be argued that Klein has simply reduced Munch’s entire body of work into a single color. In fact, Klein has done so with all the artworks of all artists before him. This was Klein’s intention, the portrayal of the infinite and the finite in one, a true masterpiece, regardless of public perception. Now whether or not this is true is completely irrelevant to the question at hand. What became a matter of personal confusion was how could I have laughed at both Klein and *The Room* only to respect and appreciate the former in later years? Could *The Room* be perceived as a masterpiece in its own right?

In order to understand this we need to set this artwork into perspective, which can only be accomplished by way of comparison and through the lens of a common ideological feature that bridges both works. It occurs to me that *The Room*, at least on paper, exhibits all aspects of an Absurdist work, a concept established by Albert Camus.

What better absurdist masterpiece as a frame for comparison than Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*. As it occurs, these two works are actually connected in a number of other ways. Both the play and the film are performed in English, a non-native language for the creators. The works also receive a similar spectrum of audience reactions years after their initial release dates.

In understanding why Beckett's work is widely regarded as a masterpiece, it will become clear why Wiseau's film cannot be considered one. This hypothesis will be supported through the analysis of similarities as seen in audience reactions and the portrayal of themes from the framework of absurdist theater. Ultimately, the difference in authorial-intent will likely be the defining reason as to why *The Room* is clearly not a masterpiece, despite the very fact that this analysis has juxtaposed it with a universally coveted play.

The Audience and Medium

There is an apparent drawback whenever two different art forms are put into comparison. The obvious issue is that all the layers by which one can be interpreted don't always apply directly to the other. A painter for instance is expected to draw from the works of the past before coming into his or her own, whereas musicians should come into the world with something altogether new and innovative. It appears, therefore, that looking into a play and a film is a rather difficult task even with the many similarities of the two mediums.

Fortunately, the two works being compared are more similar than one would think. Both the play and the film are shaped into consciousness by the interpretations or better yet, the reactions of the audience. This is not new information in the case of *Waiting for Godot* as viewers both past and present have been at the core of the play. The very nature of the absurd is one that evaluates the human condition and while the so-

called “fourth wall” is not necessarily breached, there are a number of telling moments during the play’s performance in any era including how vastly different people react to certain aspects of the play. This was evident in both the historical data available on the play as well as current performances being staged.

At times one part of the crowd will find themselves bored while the other half on the edge of their seats. It is not uncommon for a singular bursting laugh to come out during a scene otherwise thought of as mundane or even dramatic. Personally, I found Estragon’s helpless character rather funny but I was at a loss for words when Lucky gave his long nonsensical speech. Contrarily, in a number of viewings I heard a few giggles after Lucky resumed his slave-like state. This could have been because being present at a live performance created a more spontaneous reaction; nonetheless, people reacted differently as is expected with plays specifically in the absurdist theater.

Historically, *Waiting for Godot* has also received a wide range of reactions as revealed in the British Library's archives, originally from the office of Lord Chamberlain. The play is described fairly angrily as an “ugly little jet of marsh-gas [from] the late James Joyce’s secretary” something that would be quickly forgotten by the masses. Still, the same letters go over how younger audience members “seemed to enjoy” the play. These consistently varied reactions over a span of almost seven decades go to show how the absurdist genre brings out a number of unexpected responses and they highlight the importance of a play being formed by not one viewer but an entire audience.

Herein lies the significance of *The Room*. The film is almost always viewed by more than one person, in fact since its release, almost two decades ago, the movie is still screened in select theaters around the world where it continues to draw large crowds. You would never find yourself sitting silently in a room alone watching *The Room* with great intent, similar to how you would not go to an empty play, or at least stay till the end.

More often than not people who watch the film gather their friends and watch it again and again, effectively spreading the work's reach into more homes.

Ironically, Wiseau had originally intended the film to be a play, one that would have been performed on Broadway, which means, at least as far as the writing goes, the audience is again a large aspect of the viewing experience. This starts to make sense especially since the reactions towards *The Room* are always unexpected and unlike any other film experience. There is a reason why this movie has accumulated such a cult following even when there are a number of other awful works including those by Neil Breen, like *Double Down*. While a Breen film may also get laughs, you will not have that same varied reaction, as you would expect with *The Room*. People almost rewatch the film with friends just to see how they would react and perhaps uncover new aspects of the film previously unnoticed.

This begs the question; how similar are the works of Wiseau and Beckett? Clearly, the reactions of the audiences are identical in their... well, variations. So how do these similarities transition to the absurdist theater and themes within each work as well as the impact of the author's unique writing styles due to their lingual biases? It is perhaps the authorial intent that really separates these two seemingly mirrored works. Therein-likely lies the answer to why one is a masterpiece and the other simply cannot be one.

Literature Review

The literature on the subject is vast, and a proper examination of the existing written sources would warrant a book that would draw on the theories of authorial intent and absurdism. Given the fact that here I cannot elaborate on the rather detailed nature of literature, it is good to divide the literature in two parts: the literature which deals with

authorial intent both theoretically and with regards to the works discussed in the present paper, and the literature, which discusses the theory of absurdism again on a general and specific level as far as the scope of the present project is concerned.

While the broad dichotomy proposed in the preceding paragraph will pose difficulties, because largely there are materials that fall beyond the aforementioned division, it is necessary since otherwise it would be hard to impose order on the vast body of literature that will be referenced throughout the essay. The materials, alluded to in the preceding sentence, include books that deal with the biographies of the authors, or intermediary books, which only indirectly deal with the core question of this project, which, however, are important for the advancement and the treatment of the subject at hand.

The Theory of Authorial Intent

It is hard for the researcher to understand where to begin the inquiry of the literature on authorial intent, since both chronology and embedded differences in the approaches do not allow conflating and summarizing the ideas with precision. Having said this, it is important to start somewhere, and perhaps the discussion will unfold itself without the need for the author to intervene any further in its design.

Roland Barthes' short essay, entitled *The Death of the Author*, posits the idea, quite literally, that the fact that the reader exists should be ransomed by the idea that the author can and must die or give way, since it is the reader that dictates the future of the work. This view found its reflection in the works of many literary critics, who argued for the fact that the author is non-essential for the understanding or the interpretation of the work of art.

This approach, propagated by Barthes and the followers of New Criticism, is of relevance to my paper, since it supports the idea that an artwork, such as *The Room*, can

exist even without its author, because even if there was any intention behind this work, this did not come to fruition because the audience, or the reader, attached its own intent to the work, which is prevalent to this day and which is not rejected by the author. This of course is in stark contrast with Beckett's approach to this work, who defined very neatly the ways in which his work should be staged and interpreted.

The main issue addressed here is the one that the artwork does not depend on the intent of the author, which will be elaborated on in the essay. Another important essay on authorial intent, which this time deals with the specific case of Tommy Wiseau is the article, *Sincerely Celebrating Failure: Tommy Wiseau's The Room and the Search for Sincerity*, by Dimitrios Pavlounis. Pavlounis asserts that part of Wiseau's rise to fame and the cult-devotion towards his film was because the director took everything seriously and attempted/intended to actually make a lasting film. The paper also addresses the issue of the audience, which attached to the film its own interpretation valid to this day, which touches upon the more general theory of the artwork and its audience. This is going to be the defining trait, as far as I can tell from the research I have done thus far, that will classify a literary and artistic masterpiece and allow me to answer the research question in full, with the supporting topics summoned up to form a cohesive and understandable argument.

In a similar fashion, Brater talks about intention in his analysis of Beckett's play. This article is particularly useful as it develops into Beckett's use of the metaphysical and his illustrious incorporation of various symbols and metaphors as seen in how he constructs a scene and dialogue between characters. This is important because the same could be said for *The Room* but the dynamic between intention and outcome is going to be what helps form the answer to my main research paper.

The Theory of Absurdism

Having already touched upon the theory of the authorial intent, it is perhaps congruent to note here how complicated sometimes an author's work can be, since they need to define the frameworks, in which their work is to evolve, time and again having to work in a reverse order. With this said, it is time to turn to the literature on absurdism, to complete the premises on which the ensuing essay will be founded.

The first key point of focus the secondary research emphasized was the play and film as they are; a play and a film. This is a central aspect of the capstone because both bodies of work are very similar to a great extent. Doing so, I can also form a deeper understanding of the men behind the works. Which brings me to the second point of focus, the artists Samuel Beckett and Tommy Wiseau. These two will be grouped together because while they allow for a deeper understanding of what is at hand, they are not very central to the overall research question.

Following those, I will then focus on the theme of meaning. This is probably going to be the most significant portion of my capstone. Meaning of existence and the ever presence of an existential crisis is a common motive and underlying narrative for both *The Room* and *Waiting For Godot* with the latter taking a more direct and intentional view of meaning. Meaning will be portrayed only through the lens of absurdism.

I may use notes from transcendental, Stoic, or nihilist works but only to further the case of the absurd. Some of the authors and scholarly articles I have chosen to research and analyze make great efforts to establish accurately the philosophy of the absurd and how this plays into art, particularly the work by Beckett. In doing so these articles may also reference other writers and literary works, while I may use certain aspects of the individual arguments to further my own line of thinking, the focus of the capstone will be on the two previously selected bodies of work.

It will be important to get a better understanding of meaning and its relation to the ideology of the absurd as well as the play and film. Defining a line between the absurd and absurdity. This is going to be a significant transition from a framework of life's meaning to a honest approach to answer the research question and the supporting topics at hand. After I go through Camus's Absurdism, I will transition into the theater of the absurd which when observed in the play makes complete sense. That couples with the none-intentional alienation of the audience will allow me to draw a direct comparison with the interpretation of *The Room* which will then allow me to make a significant realization towards absurdity. So, the gradual changes towards absurdity from the absurd will be the defining markers to understand and answer the main research question.

A work that should be addressed here is Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of Absurd*. The work is of importance to the present research for the simple fact that it outlines the theoretical foundations, on which *Waiting for Godot* is based. By the same measure, *The Room*, as Wiseman once confessed during an interview, originally should have been a play performed on Broadway, and it was only later that he had the idea of making a film based on his script. If we consider this fact then it will be easier to evaluate both works on a definition suggested by Esslin on why the absurdist works of theatre enjoy mass appeal. Here it is important to notice that Esslin's outline sets apart these two works, in that it clearly states that the absurd works, even when extremely unconventional as they were and now are, had something important to say. Could it be that the work by Wiseman was just devoid of that message, which was present in all absurd works? If so then here's a possible area for exploration when it comes to substantiating the reason why one work is a masterpiece and the other is not. This problem will be addressed in more detail in the latter paragraphs of the essay.

The Authors and their Lives

I have already briefly outlined the notion that part of the literature, which is essential for this work's completion, does not belong to the either group discussed previously. Hence, it is important now to look at the sources, which will guide my narration as far as the factual, or rather the non-theoretical, aspect of my essay is concerned: How the author and the artworks became what they did. Some of the works discussed in these last two parts have also been discussed in the paragraphs above, however here a different aspect of the articles/books will be observed.

An indispensable work in this regard is Stern's biography of Beckett. In Stern's *Salmagundi* he gives a detailed account of Beckett's life. This biography is very important for me to be able to form an idea about the author and what pushed him to write his absurdist play. The work is particularly important as a point of reference because it describes in great detail the creation of the author's major works including *Waiting For Godot*. One drawback of the paper is that Stern does not focus on Beckett's genre of writing or the theater of the absurd. However, this shortcoming can also be seen as a plus because the author focuses heavily on Beckett's writing style which will allow me to understand what pushes audience members and readers to react unpredictably.

Moreover, Stern goes into great detail on Beckett's lyric voice and his eccentric behavior. This detailed account of the author's personal life will actually allow me to draw parallels to Tommy Wiseau's own behavior as observed in various interviews and a documentary-style film made about him. I have included those videos in my references as well but they will not be used as prominent points of interests. They merely serve to confirm an already established direction or argument. This is one major drawback of my research question and topic, a bulk of the information regarding *The Room* and the director are anecdotal. While they serve a small purpose and role, they aren't as convincing as the scholarly articles I will be using. That being said, Dieperink's paper

actually offers some insight into the life of the film director and allows for comparisons between his Wiseau's behavior and the scenes within the movie.

Once more, an important part of *The Room*'s success is the audience and how this relationship between the audience and the work has formed. This is where Pavlounis comes in again: Another sub-theme that is important towards the understanding of my main question is how and why the audience reacts in the way that they do. For *The Room* Pavlounis's paper will be of great help. This article goes into the cult sensation that has developed around the film. It gives deep insight into the failure of *The Room* and why it has garnered a loving fan base as well as strong critics. A significant aspect of this paper is its development into the audience. Pavlounis offers that the open viewing experience makes audience members feel free in how they choose to react to the film. This form of expression is liberating and a true phenomenon, something only achieved by great writers, something that Wiseau is unequivocally not.

Take-Away

The bulk of the capstone is going to examine absurdism and the elements as they are displayed in the play and film. This section will have heavy use of symbolism and metaphors found throughout the two bodies of work. Most of my references are actually going to examine Camus's ideology with regards to *Waiting For Godot* and in part to *The Room*. Duran is especially significant because he compares Camus and Sartre which offers another dimension of analysis from which to draw explanations. Similarly, Esslin looks into the use of absurdism in a few plays.

The final aspect of my capstone is going to dive into the main research topic. The work I will have done up to this point will actually be precedent on which I can form a logical and believable conclusion. In fact, the bulk of my work will examine this precedent in as much detail as possible, not because the research question itself is limited,

quite the contrary, it requires a larger depth of analysis before a definitive answer or conclusion can be given.

The research question deals with the extent of one work being a masterpiece and the other not within the realm of, how people react to the works, the evolution of the artist, the use of the absurd, and of course meaning. In order to understand the topic, the creative process of the genres as well as the philosophical approach are what I need to examine the most. The difficulty will be establishing why *The Room* is not a masterpiece. This of course is a given, something I will assume as I write the capstone but I will have to prove this in order to answer the main research question. Ironically, the two works are so similar both in how they are perceived and their use of the absurd that this will be a difficult task.

In all the research I have done up to this point is solid grounds for me to create an overall framework for how the capstone can be organized. The main areas of focus are going to be the audience and the relationship the bodies of work have with perception, as well as the use of the absurd, and the intentionality of the creators in how they perceive their works to be.

Research Question and Methodology

The question being researched is rather subjective since it observes the nature of a masterpiece. However, the analysis has no intention of defining what a masterpiece is. It is simply accepted that Becket's play is one and Wiseau's film is not. In fact, this principle allows for the analysis to take place since first the two works are compared and shown to be similar but through this comparison a strong draw is established between the two. The key aspect of the research will focus on the precondition of the audience and most importantly authorial intent. Doing so will also allow me to contradict my findings and leave room for further research and investigation. Thus my research question

becomes why is *The Room* not a masterpiece like *Waiting for Godot* when both works appear to be thematically very similar and have identical audience reactions?

The means I have used to analyze this topic include first hand viewings and readings of *The Room* and *Waiting for Godot* respectively as well as commentary about both works by various authors and figures, not to mention first and secondary data collection regarding audience perception. Finally, there is a substantial amount of secondary research in the form of academic scholarly work as well as historical background in order to support ideological content.

Research Findings and Analysis

In the aftermath of WW2 Albert Camus, disturbed and burdened by the horrors of war, defined a number of criteria for which one can respond to a meaningless world. In his struggle to overcome the Nazi regime as one of the resistance movement members in France, Camus became increasingly more aware of how man aims to find meaning in a meaningless world. In doing so, Camus established the following options for people to find meaning in an absurd reality. The actions go as follows; commit suicide, distract yourself, deny the absurd realities of life, be an actor, be some other kind of artist, become political, or simply accept life as it is.

Camus preferred the seventh reaction to life, in that individuals can only find true meaning and happiness if they accept the meaningless nature of life and continue to struggle through an absurd world. He argues this in his analysis of the character Sisyphus claiming that the hero can only be truly happy if after pushing the boulder up the hill and watching it slide down, he goes down the mountain with a smile on his face. This in a way, Camus argues, is a sort of rebellion against life and a way to truly become enlightened (1955).

Camus and Becket were rather close as both were part of the resistance movement, so it comes at no surprise that Becket's *Waiting for Godot* is an absurdist work that examines all seven motives outlined by Camus. Surprisingly; however, *The Room*, scripted and filmed decades after the play, also portrays all aspects of absurdity and what defines an absurdist character. Let us look at how all themes are displayed in both works at what this says about how both entail elements of the absurdist genre.

Distraction and denial are both major concepts in the play. Created as a purely absurdist work, Vladimir and Estragon have nothing to do but to distract themselves because Godot never comes. Of course, they do not know this; still it does not hurt to keep yourself occupied. The daily distractions in the wait for Godot are metaphors for larger distractions in life that seemingly give meaning to each day. These include humor as well as sexual, relational, and even food-based distractions that aim to please momentarily.

While Vladimir almost seems afraid to distract himself, Estragon is much more prolific in this manner. He often jokes inappropriately about brothels and women and urges Vladimir to join in who wants nothing to do with the discussions. Vladimir is also seen giving Estragon turnips and carrots to pass the time and quench the desires and hungers of his friend Estragon. Sexual desire is much more apparent in *The Room* as there are three sex scenes within the first 30 minutes of the film.

Oftentimes the scenes are shown in great detail and with all participants enjoying the process. However, what follows is always a one-sided regret and hate for the act or the relationship. For instance, after sleeping with Johnny, Lisa complains to her mother that she does not love Johnny anymore as the momentary sexual distraction wears off or how Mark questions his loyalty towards Johnny after having slept with Lisa. Similar to the turnips and carrots in *Waiting for Godot* we see Lisa's friends indulging in chocolate as an "afrodiziak" before performing oral sex on one another.

Denial is much less apparent in both works. Camus defines denial in a number of ways, which are important to understand so as not to confuse with acceptance. While the two are antonyms, only the result is different, whereas the process is alike. Denial results in people going about their lives in an absurd world without coming to terms with reality, whereas with acceptance it is your acceptance of the day to day meaninglessness that leads to true happiness. Camus establishes a number of things that can contribute to denial including religion and the belief in a higher power. This is not to knock any faith or belief system but more of an assertion that finding solace in God or a higher power is in itself denying the harsh reality that there is no meaning, which is different than saying there is no God altogether.

In the play, the two characters are always around a tree. In fact, this tree is consistent in all renditions of the work and for good reason. The setting is almost dystopian but there is no society, there are no buildings, and of course no Godot. There is one consistent figure which is a tree that appears dead and has no leaves. This tree is often depicted as a cross, a symbol of denial as far as Camus's definitions go.

Moreover, the very name Godot includes the word God. In fact, in French the last letter of a word is almost never pronounced so Godot is really performed as Godo, God-o, God... o. As if that were not enough, Estragon compares himself to Christ responding to Vladimir's disbelief, "Christ! What has Christ got to do with it. You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!" to which Estragon replies, "All my life I've compared myself to him." Even the conversation that follows, one that has nothing to do with religion, only serves to distract them as they inevitably wait for Godot in a state of denial.

Similarly, *The Room* makes no specific gesture at denial; however, it is clear that Johnny refuses to acknowledge the affair his wife is having with his best friend. In fact, Johnny, being fully aware near the end of the film, seems to be having a pleasant time at his surprise birthday party. He smiles at Lisa as everyone in the room sings Happy

Birthday and he joyfully accepts a drink from Mark, it isn't until later that Johnny confronts Mark and Lisa and fights with both leading to his suicide. Oddly enough, this is the only instance where Johnny's behavior isn't completely absurd and the film shows a glimmer of reality. In a social setting, no one expects Johnny to immediately attack or confront anyone in the scene; however, his eventual burst of anger is then justified and expected as audience members eagerly wait to see what the protagonist does.

Interestingly enough, it is these weird conversations that characters have in *The Room* that lend it to be potentially observed as an absurdist work. Almost all interactions seem poorly positioned and out of context, moreover, the dialogues fail to be reactive, instead facts previously not introduced are discussed briefly and then later ignored as the characters exist in denial of these facts. Take for instance Lisa's mother Claudette and her breast cancer story. In one interaction Claudette says, "Everything goes wrong all at once. Nobody wants to help me. And I'm dying.", to which Lisa replies, "You're not dying, mom.". Already, Lisa is exhibiting denial of the harsh facts; however, even after Claudette confirms "I got the results of the test back - I definitely have breast cancer." Lisa simply replies that she is sure everything will be fine. That is where Wiseau leaves it, there is no further exploration of the topic or inquiry regarding Claudette's health.

This is proof that *The Room* can be analyzed as an absurdist work by viewers. Unlike a play, which may only be proofread by the author and memorized by actors and scene setters, a film script undergoes editing by producers, directors, and script writers. Unfortunately, in this case Wiseau has taken up all those roles; however, as is now clear from *The Disaster Artist*, a book, and now film, written by Wiseau's friend and co-star Greg Sestero, a number of people read the script beforehand and were confused about the breast cancer scene.

When asked about its one-time appearance Wiseau replies that this is a serious movie and that the cancer is a conflict, which adds to the legitimacy of the intended

drama. So despite the proofreading, comments from Greg and the actress, and the post-production, the breast cancer scene remained in the film. It could therefore be inferred that it is central to the plot that characters exhibit elements of denial, establishing the work as an absurdist drama.

This is not the only instance of blatant character denial and weird absurdist interactions. The infamous line “Anyways, how’s your sex life” comes after Mark presses Johnny about his work to which Johnny replies that it is confidential. This entire scene exhibits multiple stages of denial starting from the fact that Mark has slept with Lisa and is just having a regular conversation with his best friend. Here, Mark denies his feelings for Lisa and his betrayal towards Johnny. Then Johnny attempts to diverge the subject since he cannot discuss his work even with his close friend, by asking Mark about his sex life. The question is odd and out of place especially in the middle of the day at a coffee shop. Finally, the question itself brings up the Mark’s denial around his sex life once again.

Such conversations occur in *Waiting for Godot* as well; however, there seems to be more intent behind the subject matter. The setting itself looks dystopian and the environment is bleak and lifeless. Even the tree, which is the only symbol of the setting, is lifeless, apart from a few leaves in some renditions of the play. Like *The Room*, the topics of discussion are never revisited with memories of the discussion in the past. In fact, apart from Vladimir, no one really remembers the actions or dialogues from Act I in the second part of the play. More than that, the responses are as bleak and emotionless in the play as they are in the film.

For instance, near the end of the play Pozzo has fallen on the ground and is asking for help since he is blind. A number of times he calls for “Help!” but Estragon and Vladimir make no immediate action to interfere. In fact, the characters begin to discuss the prospects of getting paid and the importance of the task at hand. Vladimir considers

their wait for Godot a much more worthy endeavor and asks, “How many people can boast as much?” to which Estragon replies “Billions”. The conversation then continues until Pozzo exclaims that he will pay them but when asked how much he replies, “One hundred francs!” a number that does not satisfy Vladimir who now discusses its worth helping Pozzo for that amount. These conversations not only serve as momentary lapses of distraction but are also facilitated by the denial of the fact that there is anything of importance besides Godot not even the prospect of helping a blind man, a harsh fact they are in denial of as well.

The theme of suicide is also extremely prevalent in *Waiting for Godot*. Once a day at least Estragon and Vladimir discuss the prospect of killing themselves during this never-ending and often obscure wait for Godot. Estragon exclaims, “Let’s hang ourselves, immediately!” and later asks, “Why don’t we hang ourselves” which is followed by a, “You haven’t got a bit of rope?” to which Vladimir always replies with an answer that shuts down the prospect of suicide. Either Vladimir has no rope or he doubts the tree, a central symbol of the play and a recurring object in every scene, will hold.

Both characters seem almost lax about the prospect of both death and life. This of course is a defining trait of the absurdist world, one in which man is inadequate to an extent that his or her life does not matter enough to fully explore the idea of suicide. Moreover, the modern individual is incapable of killing him or herself. To this extent, *The Room* goes a step further in that Johnny, played by Wiseau, actually shoots himself at the end of the film, of course not before all other aspects of the absurd are displayed.

Camus offers that people can also become actors or some other kind of artist. Camus’s separation of actors from all other art forms and artists is purposeful and it hints to the fact that *Waiting for Godot* is not an epic poem or a novel, it is a play, one that relies so heavily on the interpretation and reaction of the audience. *The Room* is a film that by all measures has almost all the traits of a play. In fact, Wiseau originally

intended the script to be a play, being an avid Shakespeare fan and a student of the theater. The abstract to the script starts with the line, “This play can be played without any age restriction. It will work if the chemistry between all the characters makes sense.” Both Wiseman and Becket have displayed the actor as an absurdist hero since both works Metatextually have actors and actresses. As for becoming an artist, Vladimir is seen singing about a dog being beaten to death and characters in the room often play sports like football and baseball.

For the political motive in *Waiting for Godot*, we are introduced to the characters of Pozzo and Lucky. The audience really knows nothing about any of these characters, no back stories or motives, all we know is who they are in that moment, on that day, in a specific scene. Pozzo is a rather large man with a slave named Lucky. This is a clear display of power one man has over another. In Wiseman’s film, this theme is less apparent but can still be drawn out, at least the idea of having power over others. Johnny is quite wealthy and affords to take care of Danny paying both for his education and apartment. Practically speaking, when Johnny dies, although not expressly shown, Danny is pretty much left hopeless. So while Johnny never purposefully enforced his power over Danny like Pozzo does against Lucky, his death indirectly changes Danny’s life.

This brings us to acceptance, Camus’s preferred method to deal with life. In Becket’s play, the only character who truly accepts his condition is the slave Lucky. He does as he is told and after receiving what seems like a glimpse of freedom, he finishes his two sentence long speech and returns to his hunched and submissive position with Pozzo’s bags on his back. Lucky is like Becket’s idea of how Sisyphus must be, smiling in the face of a meaningless, harsh, and absurd world, making Lucky the only true absurdist hero in the play. As it relates to the film, the only character that could be considered an absurdist is Lisa.

While she does not love Johnny, she performs sexual acts in an effort to get through the day and she does so with a smile on her face. Knowing in her heart she feels nothing for Johnny, or for Mark who she also sleeps with and regrets at the end of the film, Lisa continues on with her life, she parties, drinks, and is mostly happy. Her shortcoming is that she does not accept her state and while the distractions keep her satisfied momentarily, she is left empty and regretful later on.

In this way, the two works are also mirrored in that the perceived protagonists are actually not true absurdist heroes. Johnny is highly emotional and experiences both denial and the none-expressed role of a caregiver. His final action, which is to simply kill himself, is by no means, in line with what an absurdist hero should do (Hecht, 2013). Similarly, neither Vladimir nor Estragon fit these criteria. Vladimir is the likely protagonist of the story, likely due to his more vivid knowledge of the passage of time and events that take place in both Act I and II. Still, he is always willing to keep Estragon distracted and more importantly he is far more concerned in this never ending denial-like state of a wait; a wait for Godot, than Estragon, who himself is also no absurdist hero.

Of course, it could be argued that these similarities are inconsequential, that despite the fact that both works, whether purposefully or not, display all aspects of Camus's absurdist genre, the two works are not as similar after all. However, these arguments fail to consider the many other subtle similarities that can be drawn between the two works. It's important to note that Wiseau is likely not copying *Waiting For Godot* and it wouldn't be farfetched to assume that *The Room* isn't necessarily inspired by the play either as we have no reason to believe as such. Therefore, these similarities do not aim to establish a premise of comparison but only to serve as proof that two works can have similar styles, be viewed through the same ideological lens, display identical symbols and metaphors, and yet one is openly mocked while the other praised both during its own time and contemporarily.

That being said, there are a number of other similarities between the works from character interactions, to development, use of time, and scene transitions. Chief among these similarities is the overall dialogue between the characters. In *Waiting for Godot* Vladimir and Estragon are always talking about nonsensical topics that have no clear purpose or direction. For instance, when Vladimir tries to give Estragon a radish, he notes that he only likes the “Pink ones”, to which Vladimir replies “Then give it back to me!”. Estragon then asserts that he will go get one but he doesn’t stand up and Vladimir says, “This is becoming really insignificant.” as the conversation goes on:

ESTRAGON: Not enough.

VLADIMIR: What about trying them.

ESTRAGON: I've tried everything.

VLADIMIR: No, I mean the boots.

ESTRAGON: Would that be a good thing?

VLADIMIR: It'd pass the time. I assure you, it'd be an occupation.

ESTRAGON: A relaxation.

VLADIMIR: A recreation.

ESTRAGON: A relaxation.

Sure there are some obscure references to symbols like the boot and passing the time but nothing of substance is being said, just an absurdist conversation. These last lines remind of when Mark tells Johnny about how a young girl he knew was beaten by her boyfriend because she slept with 11 other men on “Guerrero Street” to which Johnny smiles, laughs and replies “What a story Mark!”

These similarities go even further beyond these obscure and selected sections from each work. Some scenes and ideas are explored almost identically! Throughout the play, Vladimir is concerned with the health and wellbeing of Estragon and at the start of both acts he asks about how Estragon spent his night and whether he was beaten. No mention is ever made of who these people are that always seem to beat Estragon. There is no reasoning or context behind the conflict and no resolution. Similarly, in *The Room* Denny is confronted by the gangster Chris R who proceeds to assault and threaten the young boy with a gun over some money, which according to Denny is “coming in five minutes”. Again, there is no reference as to who Chris R is in relation to the plot or other characters or why Denny owes him money other than the flimsy excuse of “drugs” which is equivalent to the “they” in *Godot*.

The conversations between the two play characters are also contradictory and flow improperly. There is no clear character development since their disposition and attitude towards one another is constantly shifting, even within the same sentence. At the beginning of Act II when Vladimir sees Estragon and exclaims, “You again!” and approaches him for an embrace, Estragon replies, “Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!”. Again, there is no explanation for his outburst other than that he was beaten by the infamous “they” and yet within the same sentence Estragon wishes to be left alone and in the company of Vladimir. Similarly, with *The Room* Lisa's and Mark's characters are entirely inconsistent. Within the context of a few scenes, Lisa manages to complain about the boring love life she has with Johnny to her mother and then proceeds to sleep with him after which she continues to berate Johnny to his friend Mark.

Which brings us to the writing style and the similarities of the authors themselves. Both authors write in their non-native English. This makes it difficult for Wiseau to construct a coherent script but it helps both him and the playwright to create simple

dialogues that are to the point and clear, apart from Lucky's boggling speech. Becket's use of language is highly purposeful as he is a self-proclaimed minimalist. During his lifetime Becket worked for James Joyce, someone he and others considered a maximalist. Since Becket believed that Joyce had said it all it was his duty to express his message minimally.

He said his own prose "came out of the dark. I never know where it's going." The plays were different. "They're all up there in the light." Which I suppose is why they had to be measured with such precision. I suppose coming out of the long dark and silence of the ten years he'd spent writing the trilogy and the early plays in French ("the siege in the room," he'd called it) had been the great resolution of the internal war between energy and order, fury and farce. His later work carried his early solutions to finer and funnier extremes of silence and small motion. (Stern, 1991, p.182).

Herein lies the answer to our question, why *The Room* is not a masterpiece and *Waiting for Godot* is one. Despite the fact that viewers can compare the two works with the same ideological lens as well as find parallels between the script, themes, characters, actions, and style of writing one of these works was intentional in its approach and the other not. It is often said that you must know the rules to break them and while *Waiting for Godot* does not follow many of the traditional forms of storytelling nor literary technique, Becket has broken the rules intentionally. We know this from his own accounts of both his writing style and his relationship with Camus, which has formed this absurdist masterpiece, as referenced previously. So while Wiseau has also broken all the rules of a conventional story, drafted similar nonsensical dialogues to the play and portrayed all aspects of an absurdist work he has done so accidentally and without intention.

The Modern Masterpiece: Audience vs. Authorial Intent

It is now rather apparent that the modern works of art are never complete without the audience. The presence of the audience has always been an important premise for the existence and propagation of art; this was true even in the case of Yves Klein. However, what changes when we approach modern art is that in this case the audience is not only a mere premise, but actually the core from which the modern work of art derives its meaning.

If viewed against this background it becomes clear that *The Room* is a modern work of art in the manner of many other contemporary artworks, that were *sublated* (*Aufheben*) towards their true nature through the interpretation, or rather the re-interpretation of the audience. Initially planned to be a drama, after its premier screening it became known as a comedy, or black comedy, and is to this day seen as such by the creator Tommy Wiseau, who believes that the work can become anything the audience wants it to become, as long as the viewer finds something meaningful in the film.

Wiseau's comments betray the work's rather uncanny resemblance to other contemporary artworks, in that he consciously admits that the work gains its meaning through the audience, and that it can be interpreted differently by different people and this won't take away from the general idea that the author wanted to communicate. So *The Room* reaches a state of completeness not on its own but through the very fact that it is experienced by others: only in the mind of the viewer is the work complete.

It can be argued from this perspective that *The Room* is not merely a failed attempt at creating art but an artwork in and of its own, albeit differing from the initial intentions and executions that the author had in mind. This brings us to our second point, namely that a work of art does not necessarily imply conscious decision making which yields a planned outcome. Moreover, even if a work of art is so well and consciously planned as Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, it will inevitably lead to an interpretation that does not directly deal with

the nature of the source, for instance Joseph Campbell's and Henry Morton Robinson's rather subjective treatment of the novel in their *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* (1944).

On the other hand we have those artworks, which are spontaneous, which cannot be outlined or planned and which come into existence only through many incidental choices made by the author, who in their own words do not know what is to come of the work they are creating. A notable example is Lord Byron's *Don Juan*, where the author admits that he does not know where his work is leading him, rejecting the idea of conscious planning completely. It can be argued that *The Room* belongs to this second type of artwork, where the incidental choices of the author made the work a thing of its own, something entirely unintended by the author.

Drawing on the ideas narrated above, it is perhaps time to address the question, which divides the two artworks in question. That the role of the audience is necessary for each artwork's success, so why is *Waiting for Godot* generally considered to be a masterpiece while the film by Wiseman only a cult classic?

The difference between the two is only subtle, and can only be seen if one looks closely. It is namely, that *The Room* needs the audience to become complete and to come to its own, whereas *Waiting for Godot* does not depend on the audience to complete its meaning. In other words, while one cannot exist without the constant interpretation or evaluation of the audience, the other does not need the audience to find its true nature. The audience in case of Beckett's work plays a passive role; it is merely a spectator before the eyes of which *Waiting for Godot* finds its execution or performance but not its completion.

This of course leads us back to the idea of authorial intent as a defining feature for a masterpiece, where one can clearly see that the intentions predetermined by Beckett strongly impose on the audience the author's view, whereas Wiseman, whose only intent was to make something lasting like *Citizen Kane* (Sestero, 2017), created an artwork that submits to the intent of the audience. To use the terminology developed by Roland Barthes,

one might go even as far as to suggest that in Wisreau's work the reader's presence is "ransomed by the death of the author" (Barthes, 1967), whereas in Beckett's case, he imposes his intentions on the reader, effectively trapping them within a defined framework. So in Beckett's case the author is very much a part of the work and its interpretation, therefore his intent is central to understanding the work. This very presence of the author and his successful execution of central themes and the ideological lens of absurdism, is what defines the work as a masterpiece in the eyes of viewers. Therefore, in Wisreau's case it is the former's disappearance that makes the audience see *The Room* as nothing but a failed, though highly entertaining, project.

Ironically, this same framework of author centrality to the work could be used to make a case for *The Room* as a masterpiece. If *Waiting for Godot* requires the omnipresence of the author and his intentions to appear authoritative and compelling to the reader, *The Room* can be watched and rewatched even when the audience is completely ignorant of its creator. According to Barthes: "To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing" (Barthes, 1967, p. 5). This goes back to the original assumption that a modern work of art needs no interference from the creator or author, it is entirely up to the viewer to judge the work for its merit, regardless also of any preexisting rules.

The Room is on par with other works of art, which are read, interpreted, and praised without the need or knowledge of the author, the likes of which include, *Hamlet*, the *Holy Bible* and *Don Quixote*. In other words, Wisreau's ideas and intentions about the film do not need to be taken into account by the audience, they can be entirely disregarded and the work still holds weight. This line of reasoning offers interesting avenues of thought and is perhaps an important realm for future research to concentrate on these subtle differences and possibilities, which both artworks offer, for explaining their respective successes or failures.

The discussion then brings us to the original question raised. Perhaps an effective way to view the argument is to analyze one other aspect of a masterpiece which is the allegorical nature of the work. In other, regardless of audience interpretation, authorial intent or presence, there has to be a meaningful contribution and central message expressed throughout the work. In his work on the theatre of absurd, Martin Esslin clearly demonstrates that the absurd plays, in this case *Waiting for Godot*, are not only absurd they also say something often unsettling about the age we are in and the ways of life which we pursue: “The reception of *Waiting for Godot*... and the wide acclaim plays by Ionesco, Adamov, Pinter and others have received, testify that these plays, which are often superciliously dismissed as nonsense or mystification, have something to say and can be understood” (1961, p. xvii).

This is at the core of what is being observed here. Despite the fact that the dialogues in the play seem to be going nowhere and that, the characters are clearly in a meaningless pursuit, in the words of Esslin it still has “something to say”. *Waiting for Godot* is an allegorical tale. The most common interpretation of the allegory is that the main characters are waiting for God, and there is no end to their wait because the apparent message is that God is not coming. So Beckett is following the grand narrative, first recognized by Nietzsche (Kaufmann, 1975) towards the end of the 19th century, that the modern individual cannot depend on God, simply because he is not there anymore.

This absence of God is what initiates the gist of Beckett’s play: What to do now, when God is not coming, continue to wait? So, the play poses a question to the audience. In words of Richard Durán:

“It soon becomes clear that Vladimir and Estragon live in a world wholly devoid of reason. The characters engage in pointless acts, the dialogue abounds in non-sequiturs and contradictions, and memories are short, characters often forget whom

they know or what they know. In Beckett's play, things happen not according to any logic or order, but as a result of sheer fortuity.” (2009, p. 983)

It will be hard to say the same about Wisreau's work, whose only clear message is that Johnny is a nice guy, abused by everyone. In other words, Johnny's quest does not coincide with that of the modern man, it is not part of that grand narrative of humankind, hence it cannot speak and demand attention in the same manner as Beckett's play does. So it's not that Wisreau has deliberately created an absurdist work but that the absence of a clear plot, character development, interactions, and most importantly “something to say” (Esslin, 1961) leaves this a non-allegorical work which, despite being entertaining, is only accidentally absurd and therefore not a masterpiece.

That being said, there is still an argument to be made from a modernist perspective that the audience and his or her interpretation is at the core of a work's worth. So while the film is not an absurdist work it may be viewed by some other ideological lens. One such case could be if the audience viewed *The Room* as a prime example of theatre of cruelty, a concept developed by Antonin Artaud. The ending scene where Johnny starts to destroy his surrounding before committing suicide, speaks to his disgust with life and those elements or people that make up the now evident tragedy. Therefore, Johnny displays the elements of Artaud's theater of cruelty as he shatters the false reality surrounding himself (Artaud, 1958, p. 84-89).

For Artaud, theater is not only the staging of a play in front of the beholder but also an active process aimed at awakening the audience. Moreover, Artaud believed that texts are not important and what matters are the actions of the heroes, incidentally Wisreau's *The Room* has little text and most of the time the actors establish their relationships in actions. Thus, the ending scene where Johnny smashes everything in the room, which he and Lisa shared, comes to represent a certain part of theater of cruelty, namely that in which the

hero's actions go beyond the fake reality that he and the others around him built. It could further be argued that authorial intent is not necessarily realized to its full extent and perhaps it is not needed since the audience can interpret the work as they see fit.

This finally, is the last point that must be disproved. If *The Room* can be interpreted as an absurdist work or a work from the theater of cruelty then how many other frames of reference can be applied? Are Klein's paintings in fact red or green or perhaps they depict a portrait? If left to the audience an infinite number of interpretations can be made. This is proved by this very analysis, which has found more than a questionable amount of similarities between the two works and made a case for *The Room* as an absurdist work. Again, this is simply not the case. There must be an objective structure by which a work can be analyzed and appreciated and this is undoubtedly authorial intent.

It is the intent of Klein that his IKB monochromes portray the sky and the infinite void and it is the intent of Beckett to structure a play for the theater of the absurd. Through this, defined and successfully executed intentions be further analyzed and interpreted. Whereas, a failed execution, one that does not follow the will or intention of the author both in execution and in interpretation is not a masterful work of art. Therefore, whether or not I or some other viewer laughs at Klein or Beckett, these works stand the test of time and after understanding authorial intent, they reveal themselves great and profound works. Whereas, *The Room* is simply not a masterpiece due to its spectacular and entertaining shortcomings, which were by all measures, not deliberate or intentional.

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