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**THE RHETORIC OF BECKETT'S PLAYS**

Diplomski rad iz engleske književnosti i kulture

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## 1. Introduction

The perplexity which has arisen from the first performance of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is still very much present among the public. The rest of his plays succeeded to produce the same bafflement over the years and nothing concrete seems to have been concluded regarding their meaning. A statement which has, by now, been thoroughly ingrained in people's minds concerning the plays, is the fact that they avoid meaning. However, if they do avoid meaning and are truly devoid of it, then what is the purpose of their existence in the first place? This is a question which seems to be, oddly enough, the answer to all our dilemmas. It is the ultimate question of all of Beckett's stage presences and the plays themselves. It is both the problem and the solution, thoroughly self-enclosed and self-referential, whose echo reverberates through the void of each performance. Behind the banal and pointless actions of the characters, we sense a deep feeling of emptiness and the pain of the awareness of it, that sneaks up on us from inside the mundane repetitiveness of life. This paper is primarily interested in the mechanism behind these manifestations and in the ways in which Beckett manages to create drama that concerns people across the board, but is, simultaneously, extremely private. For these purposes, I will be looking for examples from his most famous tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot*, along with *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, and *Not I*. One of the most important aspects of Beckett's plays is their self-referentiality, so this will be given special emphasis. But apart from this, the most striking aspect of the plays is the way in which they manage to say so much without really saying anything. In other words, the rhetorical feats the characters engage in and the skill with which they employ speech is remarkable in the sense that it gives them life, but, in the process, it constantly keeps reaffirming the nullity of their existence.

## 2. Self-referential drama

Trying to extract from a Beckett play some sort of meaning pertaining to social problems and upheavals or trying to take away from it some philosophical truth or religious preference, always proves to be an impossible and utterly futile task. The characters seem to go to great lengths to know, to conclude with certainty, to complete and to adjust. They fail every time. The only thing that they themselves are sure of is their presence on stage and throughout the performance they constantly affirm and reaffirm that truth and only that. As conscious thought of the spectator tries to pick up on some sort of message that the seemingly allegorical performance exhorts, it is led to a dead-end road that points back to the performance itself. Taking from Cartesian thought the inability to express or reflect on anything other than our own current state, Beckett conveys this state through itself and not by way of some other experience. That way the referential link of meaning-making is thoroughly self-enclosed and self-referential. The meaning and purpose of the characters, therefore, cannot be affirmed by anything or any one outside their current state of being. This representation of solipsism reaffirming the impossibility of meaning or knowing can only reinforce that same impossibility. As Hassan says: "Language has become void; therefore words can only demonstrate their emptiness. Certainty in knowledge is no longer possible; therefore epistemology must become parody." (30). It is the idea of universal epistemological uncertainty that Beckett was trying to highlight. However, the task was not to be executed by means of a character referring explicitly to the idea, nor by metaphorical insinuations or hidden meaning. Rather than trying to convey or interpret the idea, Beckett has incarnated it on stage. The theatrical techniques that he employs are not meant to point the meaning of the components of the play in the direction of reality. Actually, they deny the existence of that reality and, consequently, any meaning that could come from it, giving the very performance a solely solipsistic perspective. Therefore, as Levy points out, the plays "are not "about something" – they are that something itself. Because they are their own subject matter the plays turn the means of their expressiveness into the very content of expression." (25). Stressing the theatricality of the theatrical performance, Beckett avoids *telling* and goes straight to *showing*, so that a certain play is the very process of the play. Because no meaning or purpose can be recognized in existence, the only thing the "I" can confirm and forever keep confirming is its state of being here and now. The self-reference of the "I" has no further agenda than to embody the futility of trying to express and the inability to confirm one's own existence. This relentless but pointless act of self-consciousness is, primarily, staged in the

author, so it must be seen in the characters as well, because they are the carriers of this experience, and in the shape of the play. Furthermore, the observer must also be made to experience this, because he cannot find meaning in a play that has none, but experience the structure of it by using his own inner faculties to feel the same futility and lack of purpose of his own consciousness. The observer is made to observe the very thing that he is doing at the moment, not to give meaning to what he is observing on stage. The plays are structured in a way that they, paradoxically, develop through entropy. Also, we see the characters acting as self-referential elements as they constantly comment on the performance itself. For example, in Act I of *Waiting for Godot*, right after Pozzo apologizes for his sudden and desperate fit, Gogo and Didi stand together next to the rock and whisper comments about the act itself. They reflect upon the strange and tiresome evening they are having and how it has only just started. The implications of the comment seem to extend farther from the fictitious character of the situation on stage. It sounds like something someone from the audience might have said or thought at that moment, and then we inevitably do think that because of the way the idea was presented and handed to us. The effect that is achieved is heightened awareness of the very act of observing a theatrical performance. Another example of this technique can be seen in Lucky's behaviour. He performs innumerable pointless actions, busy even when standing still. Gogo and Didi are puzzled as to why Lucky does not put down his bags even when his services are not needed. But Lucky is the embodiment of the idea of his character – he is primarily a slave, a thing, and he is showing us explicitly what a thing like him does, and he does this only and exclusively because he is what he is. His actions are redundant and purely theatrical. He sets the chair for Pozzo, and when he is commanded to readjust it, he does not move it but picks it up and puts it right back where it was, which seems to please Pozzo. Every action he takes is further enhanced by itself because it is the epitome of a slave, just like Pozzo is the archetypal cruel master. Lucky does not think but is commanded to think, he does not move unless he is told to move, and the observer is made to be highly aware of this. Pozzo must first verbally direct Lucky's every step and then, in the same way, order him to stop when he has removed himself far enough for Pozzo's liking. If he were not commanded to stop, he would probably just walk off stage. Using these mechanisms, Beckett makes us highly aware of the expressiveness of an act which can then, in turn, be only truly experienced through our own "I". The enclosed character of the plays, with its complete attention turned to itself, is actually reinforcing the experience to be felt in the observer's own "I", rather than pushing him away. It is the only way that a performance can be truly internalized – if we are transparently shown the process of the performance:

The indubitability of the *Cogito*, the "I express" (for Beckett is an artist, not a philosopher ) is due to the thought act each man has to "perform himself" after having witnessed such an act being *performed* by an actor. (Levy, 17).

Beckett's characters are always aware of their situation, namely, that they are actors on stage and have a task to perform. This is the reason why, although they do have certain moments of what looks like desperation, they do not pity themselves or go into sentimental, melancholic rants about their situation. They accept it and they know that as long as they are in existence it is and can only be on the stage. Therefore, any self-reflective utterance that seems to come from a deep place of knowing one's own existence and strongly affirming it is, as we come to realize, just good acting. It is not, as Shimon Levy explains, proof of existence, but of the awareness of its performatory character:

Thus, Beckett's implied or explicit self-reflective sentences (emotionally charged self-reflective utterances such as I cry, I suffer, etc. – ergo I am; or medium-aware utterances such as I speak on radio – ergo I am; or I mime - ergo I am) are also of performatory quality rather than proofs, or inferences, of existence. They are merely attempts at *showing* the nonsensicality of the very attempt at proving existence. (Levy, 17).

Self-referential qualities appear on every level of Beckett's plays. Being that the characters exclude the possibility of an existence outside the play, they demand attention from one another to reassure themselves they are there. In *Waiting for Godot* Gogo and Didi depend on each other just as much as Lucky and Pozzo do. When Didi goes to urinate, Gogo compensates for his absence and theatrically mimics the act of urination. Toward the end of Act II, Gogo stands up and groans because his feet hurt. But when Didi does not respond, he repeats the groan emphatically to make sure he was heard. In *Happy Days*, Winnie also always needs Willie to justify her act of speech. As soon as she jolts out of him the slightest word of recognition with her occasional questions and remarks, she is safe and reassured to go on. The whole play is set in this self-referential mode as Winnie, at the beginning, must verbally push herself: "Begin, Winnie. (*Pause.*) Begin your day, Winnie." (10). If Gogo and Didi separate only for a few seconds, they come back running into each other's arms and hold on tight. We see that they have a self only through the other. This self-reference works primarily thanks to the other of the actor: "Only if the actors refer their Beckettian texts to themselves, and not only to their roles, does the play really "work", at least as far as the self-

referential aspects are concerned." (Levy, 62). The characters, therefore, must show that they are in an artificial situation and the actors, paradoxically, reaffirm the truth of the artificiality of the performance. In *Endgame* we see an example of the actor playing Clov seemingly stepping out of character, which focuses our attention on the artificial existence of Clov, on his being through the other. Levy explains that his

costume change refers directly to his role as actor. It is as though Clov had finished his role and returned as the actor playing Clov, reading to leave the theatre but politely waiting for the actor playing Hamm to finish his role. (52).

Beckett also uses light in a way that it refers back to itself. It draws attention to itself because it does not merely serve the purpose of lighting up the stage, but is used to enhance the situation that is already playing out, to focus the attention of the audience if necessary, and it also, as Levy says, "is either darker or brighter than one finds in conventional theatre." (40). In *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, light is scarce and dim, creating a gloomy atmosphere that reinforces the feeling of the pain that comes with endless waiting and being. In contrast, *Happy Days* is a play meant to have violent, scorching light, but the effect of the affliction of endurance is the same. The use of light is particularly interesting in *Not I*. The single beam of light furthers the point that the only speaking character on the stage is not a woman but a mouth. It also makes the performance more intense and adds to the tempo of the speech. The observer is forced to focus only on the mouth and its unrelenting rhetorical attack, and this is so because of the single fact that he cannot see anything else. If theatre is to be self-referential, it must over-emphasize its basic elements. This is exactly what is achieved in the case of Beckett. Theatrical elements are blown out of proportion to the point of either being comical or concealing a tragic fate. But no true meaning lies behind these oversized gestures. They make their own point. It is also the case with movement. As has already been mentioned, Lucky is made to repeat endless adjustments and readjustments to the props he is carrying, even though his efforts do not make any difference. Anything that Gogo and Didi do to pass the time, they do with absolute physical and mental dedication in a slapstick-like manner. Winnie's lower body is buried in the ground, but she still repeatedly makes use of all of her props, utilizing fully every body part she can. As Alec Reid points out, "Movement as much as speech is one of the essentials of drama, and so Beckett keeps his people busy." (24).

## 2.1. Paradox

In the sense of the contradictions of Beckett's plays such as attempting to express – not being able to express – performing the very inability to express, Shimon Levy points out two interlinked paradoxes that function as self-negating, but at the same time act as a dominant theme:

(1) the paradox of expression ("there is nothing to express"), and (2) the very attempt at expressing paradox. Beckett's self-consciousness uses both, and does so not only in order to prove two members of a contradiction to be mutually exclusive and logically incongruous, but also in order to indicate that the very *use* of a self-reflective paradox is in itself paradoxical and reflexive. (21).

It is a theatrical performance talking about and reflecting on that very same theatrical performance, which stresses its fictional character thereby "denunciated through its own means, but finally, and paradoxically, becomes real through the process of the audience's active participation." (21). In other words, we have no choice but to internalize it and realize the emptiness of our own self, by mirroring the unavoidable emptiness and nothingness of the performance. We are being pushed to hold in our own awareness the awareness of the play of its own paradoxical nature. Finally, it is the paradox of the whole situation that is being conveyed and translated into us. The paradox also shows up through the comical element. In their stalemate position, Didi and Gogo talk about hanging themselves as if it was the most normal topic of conversation two people might have. They eventually give it up and decide to keep on waiting. Their situation could not be more vague or uncertain, and when Didi says "Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand." (18), we sense that the prospect of that happening is very unlikely. Didi stresses the word 'exactly', while they perform a sort of slapstick routine, marching hand in hand, as if towards a brighter future. But there is nothing exact about it, and we find them sad and amusing at the same time. They are totally involved in anything they are doing, and absolutely dedicated, which seems ridiculous because their actions are absurd and pointless. The tramps are doing as instructed and are made to make that point clear. Their own will is irrelevant and their only task is to perform. "The sheer energy which the tramps invest in constructing a context is one of the factors which prevents them from looking within, from "having thought", from becoming themselves." (Kiberd, 543). Gogo watches with great excitement and wonder as Didi reaches in his jacket pocket for a carrot. Neither of them comment on the fact that the carrot is the size of a sewing needle with



disproportionately large leaves. Gogo starts munching on it, taking very small bites. The comical element is backed up by their brief exchange:

VLADIMIR: How's the carrot?

ESTRAGON: It's a carrot. (20).

In *Happy Days* the fact that Winnie is buried to her waist acts as a contradiction to her friskiness and energy. She does not dig herself out because she cannot, she keeps talking because she must and she must because she is an actress on a stage. She has agreed to play the role and in that case she has no choice but to do as instructed. Winnie, as most of the other characters, makes her awareness of this quite clear. The people on stage usually refer to the *condition* they are in, the *circumstances* of here and now, and the exclusiveness of their reality as they are living it in order for the performance to be in existence. The tramps never question the inevitability of them being on stage. Although they do, at one point, discuss the possibility of them leaving this whole business of waiting, they know they cannot and never will, even when flirting with the idea. Didi seems sure in what the outcome would be if they stopped waiting:

ESTRAGON: And if we dropped him? (*Pause.*) If we dropped him.

VLADIMIR: He'd punish us. (93)

## **2.2. Circularity and repetition**

Because Beckett's stage contains a limited number of props, they can be used repeatedly in the same way so that the audience can recognize a certain gesture when it happens again. That way a general sense of circular movement is achieved and we recognize it as a common thread running through the whole play. Repetition also helps to build up the intensity of the recurring elements, in order to attract attention to themselves and, consequently, point right back at the fact that nothing changes and that the tone of the play's ending is the same as that of the start or the middle. As David Bradby points out, "Repetition emphasizes sameness, and the monotonous quality of the play is an important part of its effect." (37). At the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*, just after he tries to take off his shoe and fails, Gogo lifts his arms and then lowers them slowly, gesturing with his hands the shape of a circle. This first demonstration of the impossibility to act, paired with the circularity of referring back at the attempt to act and not being able to, is rounded off in a sentence:

"Nothing to be done." (9). We recognize the moment again, just before Pozzo and Lucky show up in Act I, when Gogo makes the same gesture. The tramps complement each other:

ESTRAGON: No use struggling.

VLADIMIR: One is what one is.

ESTRAGON: No use wriggling.

VLADIMIR: The essential doesn't change.

ESTRAGON: Nothing to be done. (21).

Levy emphasizes that the use of the props also tells us more about the relationships between the characters. For example, the rope in *Waiting for Godot* is "the rope that ties them together, figuratively and literally. Pozzo and Lucky lead each other with the rope; Vladimir and Estragon are tied by a common pact to hang themselves together." (46). Also, in "Act II, Pozzo uses Lucky as a blindman's dog, and the same rope becomes a sign of his dependency rather than his dominance." (46). A sense of a distortion of time is achieved. They can never agree on what day it is, nor what season. They use every hour they have in a relatively ingenious and playful way, but every time one activity loses its momentum, the question of what to do now arises once again. The nature of their existence seems to have attributions of dreams or unconscious thought, and the written text appears as an act of automatic writing. The conversations the characters engage in have no semantic connection to the ones that precede or succeed them and they alternate at a quick pace because of the short attention span of the characters. Lois Gordon tells us: "Freud asserted that unconscious and dream thoughts contain a unique grammar and language dominated by condensation, displacement, paradox and distortions of time and space." (73). We can see all these characteristics as inherent to every level of the plays, especially condensation or reduction that is explicit in the use of language regarding its meaning. Every activity the characters undertake is, in its banality and superfluity, the same as the previous and the next. Despite their attempt to change or shake things up a bit, they keep moving around in circles. What is the use of putting your time to good use when the time you have is unending? The opposing, contradictory forces underline the paradox in time itself:

One plays out one's life against a complex counterpoint of mechanical time (in which one ages and moves to death and obliteration), and cosmic time (in which one's acts have no function whatsoever. (Gordon, 67).

Because the same themes reappear, the same props are used again and again, they tie into a more general associative line of circularity and repetitiveness in movement and gesture, the difference between the context of day and night, oscillation of moods and topics of conversation, etc. When night turns to day, we get the sense that night might have actually lasted for several nights, a month or a season. When the tree sprouts new leaves it also seems to be over night, but we cannot be sure, and neither can Didi or Gogo. Beckett's people are always there, in a stable and incurable position, if the play is to keep unfolding.

The phenomenon of the sense of infinitude was studied by Freud under the term *repetition*: it has no boundaries (or is purely repetitive), moving nowhere. [...] 'It's the shape that matters', said Beckett, who compensates artistically for the shapelessness of the universe, in order to preserve his sense of existence. (Duckworth, 62).

*Waiting for Godot* begins as it ends and ends as it begins. It is purely repetitive throughout, and each element of itself is made to emphasize this. In the same way, *Endgame* leaps toward the end at the very beginning, as Clov's starts off with "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished." (12), and Hamm begins the same way he ends – with his old stancher.

### 3. An attempt to exist

Looking more closely into how is the sense of circularity and repetition achieved in the plays through how and when something is said or used brings us closer to both contradictions and unifying elements that tie the characters together and it also tells us about the *condition* they are in. When we examine their surroundings, we usually find an arid landscape on a grand scale, and although they are physically a part of it, they seem to be enclosed in the mind. This is explicitly addressed in *Endgame*, where the characters' sanctuary has also the function of a prison of the mind. The vast void that stretches infinitely in all directions is contrasted with a small, restricted area inside which they are allowed to move, or, in the case of Nagg, Nell and Hamm, not even that. The idea behind it is to focus our attention on what is happening to the mind, how logic fails, and social niceties and moral issues become devoid of meaning in a different context. *Happy Days* and *Not I* are even more extreme – taking even a single step is out of the question, so we have no choice but to listen to the mind play both with and against itself. This is the conflict of the self in a futile rhetorical outburst, trying to persuade itself it exists, but incapable of validating anything. It is the essential condition we are born to, that, as Lois Gordon says, "necessitates inevitable loneliness and anxiety." (3). Comparing Beckett to existentialist thought, Gordon explains:

The absence of a verifiable order or Orderer – with language, intellect, and reason incapable of validating reality – impels a psychic dislocation as much as an intellectual bewilderment. In Beckett's terms, one feels one can't go on, yet one must go on. One requires purpose in a purposeless universe, identity in an estranged mind / body coupling. Of this, as well as of the intricate conflicts with the self, Beckett writes in *Waiting for Godot*, " 'Let's go.' (*They do not move.*). (3).

The characters' "longing for release from consciousness is given dramatic expression." (Duckworth, 39). Their only existence is taking place on stage. It is the prison of being aware of one's own condition and knowing there is no way out. Gogo and Didi bluntly acknowledge this. Their own will is irrelevant. They exhibit an awareness that refers to their condition as actors that have agreed to embody presences on stage. Therefore, there is no force that has acted against them. They are the ones that have given up their rights:

VLADIMIR: You'd make me laugh, if it wasn't prohibited.

ESTRAGON: We've lost our rights?

VLADIMIR: We waived them. (19).

They constantly oscillate between great interest in and fascination with a particular situation and pensive moods with occasional outbursts of desperation. They remember the emptiness, the eternity, the uselessness of it all, but then they distract themselves, use their bodies and voices, and persuade themselves they exist: "We always find something, eh, Didi, to give us the impression that we exist?" (69). When Pozzo and Lucky come back in Act II, they are lying on the floor, and Gogo and Didi start a discussion on whether they should help them or not. Didi then points to the importance of taking advantage of the diversion they have been offered:

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (*Pause. Vehemently.*) Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. (79).

In other words, their only purpose is merely being present on stage. It is a fact from which there is no escape, except in the focusing of their attention on a distraction that might make them forget and make the hours a bit more bearable.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, in his essay "Samuel Beckett, or "Presence" in the theatre", writes:

The condition of man, says Heidegger, is to be *there*. The theatre probably reproduces this situation more naturally than any of the other ways of representing reality. The essential thing about a character in a play is that he is "on the scene" : *there*. (108).

That way the dramatic character confirms his existence through the actor, by "not deceiving us, by appearing, by *being there*." (Duckworth, 47). However, the existence of the characters is inevitably linked to annihilation. Life is inescapably two things: life and death, a fact which certainly brings no resolution to the mind that is stuck somewhere in between. "Heidegger stated the theme clearly: 'As soon as a man is born, he is old enough to die.'" (75). From this perspective nothing is worth while, so the tramps do their best to forget and to replace the thought of eternal void by engaging in activities which give them a sense of purpose. They know they are condemned to eternal boredom, a thought that Didi, resolutely and consciously, wants to misplace:

We wait. We are bored. (*He throws up his hand.*) No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let's get to work! (81).

The doubt and suspicion directed toward the existence of a benign deity provides further cause for anxiety and inconclusiveness. In this case the relationships between the characters represent this uncertainty as they cling to each other like small children to their parents. But their fragile state inevitably gives rise to more ambivalence. They torment and insult each other, only to be able to reconcile again. It is just another game for them, and it is intentionally presented as artificial and insincere. After they have finished offending each other, they enact a scene of reconciliation where they mechanically embrace and then immediately separate. Didi concludes: "How time flies when one has fun!" (76). This behaviour mirrors the paradoxical nature of the dramatic situation. As much as each individual character wants to proclaim his or her independence as a system that is self-sufficient and real, he or she, at the same time, can never part from the presence of the other on stage in order for the system to function. The "I" of the character must split in order to exist. This is the same sort of relationship that is established between the play and the audience. Levy explains that such a development in modern theatre suggests the following:

Leave me alone. I (the particular character or an entire play) am perfectly self-contained. Yet it is doing it *in public*, and hence, by its very mode of existence, implies: "I need you, the other, the audience," in order to assert, as Gadamer says, the self-consciousness of the self through the self-consciousness of the other. (23).

They must keep reaffirming their own existence with the help of the other. In *Happy Days*, Winnie seems to be totally self-consumed and focused on all her tasks, but she does, as John Pilling says, "realize that Willie is the precondition for her speaking, and it is increasingly obvious that *she* only has an existence for herself in so far as she continues speaking." (86). Her rhetoric is then, as is with all the others, of a life-giving and life-affirming kind, as much as it, simultaneously, itself the proof of its own futility:

All Beckett's characters are engaged in the awareness of the creative process, especially in words, so much so that talking for them becomes a metaphor for living, a substitute for living, and a mode of living in the Cartesian sense of "I utter, ergo I am." They are aware of their verbal existence and they crave silence

so as to stop it all. But, and dialectically so, as long as they *talk* about wanting silence (death) they keep on living. (Levy, 135).

They create the very process of the play by speaking and interacting, and this is where their perseverance comes to the foreground as a mechanism of doing rather than contemplating, of acting out as opposed to surrendering to self-pity. In that sense, Beckett's people represent all of humanity, determined to keep the illusion of being purposeful alive. The only thing that Gogo and Didi ever know for sure is that they must wait. Didi says in Act II: "We're no longer alone, waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for ... waiting." (77). Everything else is either forgotten, or misplaced, or misunderstood. Their stage presence and the act of waiting is all they have and all there is. The plays as part of the Theatre of Absurd boldly point to the lack of meaning of anything a human hand or mind might reach for. The insignificance of any act is even more strongly emphasized through the comical elements of movement and speech the tramps engage in. Gogo and Didi, as already mentioned, deliberately abuse each other, but only to create some sort of illusion of contrast to the planned reconciliation that comes after cruelty. The tramps recognize their pitiful condition. However, they cannot hang themselves even if they had the proper props for it, so we see them as tragic. They prance around in their restricted area, they exercise or 'do the tree' and they are comical. The result is, as Hassan says, "often a tragi-comedy of metaphysical errors and sprats, a crazy, shifting pattern of meaning disguised in nonsense, a quizzical statement on the absurd persistence of man." (175). The state they are in is teeming with endless epistemological uncertainty that makes the inner workings of the mind the focal point of everyone's attention, both on stage and off. The only thing they are not lacking are the questions. "There's no lack of void" (66), says Gogo. The act of asking a question is, simultaneously, one's birth, and life, and death, but no knowing ever comes from it.

Cartesian certainties, which depend on the uniformity of the mental process and of mathematical analysis, now yield to universal doubts. And as metaphysical once yielded to the scientific method, so the latter must give way, Beckett believes, to epistemological enigmas. The starting point of meditation is no longer the Cartesian "Je pense, donc je suis," but rather, "Je me doute"; and the point is quickly reached where the facts of inquiry dissolve into the reality of the inquirer, casting further doubt on both. (Hassan, 127).

Because of this, the characters are always mutually dependent. It seems as though the mind would collapse into itself in loneliness. It needs the reassurance of the other to keep functioning. From a dramatic standpoint, this is how the characters justify their existence. As previously mentioned, the actors fulfil their role just by being *there*, but it is the interplay of more than one consciousness that can truly translate the point to the observer and make him realize the dependence of interlocking minds through which he exists. Colin Duckworth explains that out of all the art forms, "the theatre is the only one able to *show* us (not tell us) the essential part social role-playing has in acquiring and maintaining a sense of reality, through the establishment of relationships." (58). This "*sense of reality*" is the focal point in Beckett, and it is not meant to be the mimetic presentation of the self, but the inability of presentation of the self. The relationships we observe on stage are failed attempts at creating meaning because they are trying to be established through a medium that is meaningless. We are made to see that language has no substance and that that which is outside of it is equally indefinable, so a subject attains temporary meaning in relation to another, but even that is illusory. As Lawrence Harvey explains: "Two, in a sense, cancel each other out and enable reality to disengage itself from language. " (147).



#### 4. Emphasizing emptiness

From *Waiting for Godot* on, Beckett's plays have exhibited a progressive annihilation of what is presented on stage. The stage was being deliberately stripped of props and the characters, the less they had, the more they clung to what they did have. The concept of the void was ever greater and threatened to engulf all of existence. However, this technique was also serving the purpose of narrowing our attention to emptiness itself and the barren stage made the desired effect of the feeling of emptiness more pronounced.

Richard Coe has pointed out<sup>78</sup> that Beckett and Ionesco have in common the fundamental proposition that at the root of consciousness and of all Being there is a Void – but a *positive* Void which is the starting-point for a new lucidity and awareness of meaninglessness. [...] It is achieved by the *isolation* of what is represented on the stage from the spectator's world. (Duckworth, 109).

Since language was deemed incapable of contributing any meaning to existence, more emphasis was given to the way something is said or presented. Beckett attempted to create a sense of a stage that is all of time and place, all that there is in existence. Any superfluous props would distract the attention of the observer, and any statement or sentence left uncontradicted might lead us to a conclusion when there should be none. The danger lies in allowing us to define and specify that which is represented and so the opportunity to do so is eradicated. The result of an "almost methodical lack of method" (Levy, 17), is what Alec Reid called "the drama of the non-specific" (34). Beckett's use of symmetry allowed him to stretch the sense of repetition outside the stage itself and enhance the feeling of emptiness. He divides *Waiting for Godot* in Act I and II, but he does not do so in order to accentuate their difference, but to bring them closer together as segments that are equally redundant. The feeling of repetition and circularity is achieved, as previously mentioned, through the use of props and recurring themes, but, on a larger scale, Act II is also a mere extension of the redundancy of the first, an additional amplification of the lack of meaning. Therefore, as Francis Doherty points out, "the second act shows a rapidity of deterioration already demonstrated as a fact in the first." (91). It is a paradoxical balance between the two, in the sense that the more material we are presented with, the less we can conclude, until we are finally left with nothing. There may have been endless acts before the two, and endless after them. "The two acts, as Beckett knew, are enough to represent a sequence stretching to infinity." (Hassan, 176). Avoiding meaning can also be found in the use of pantomime. The

observer finds himself on an even less stable ground and is forced to turn inward in an attempt to fill the gap, because, as Levy says, "the pantomimes deprive us of the relative security of words." (36). Reducing the use of light and props inevitably reduces the stage space and creates a sense of the offstage becoming more and invading the stage. It also makes us more aware of the offstage itself and how it interacts with what is on stage, so that the characters' consciousness seems to be more acutely tuned to non-being rather than being and presence.

Since theatre deals with "presences" in time, in space and in actual three-dimensional human beings who are really there, the feeling for the *not there, not now*, and *not I* has always been very strong. The shadowy *Doppelgänger* of the theatre, offstage, has developed side by side with drama and theatre alike. (Levy, 54).

Beckett has succeeded in creating a strong sense of dominance of the offstage over the stage, simply by emphasizing the non-presence of it. Didi and Gogo rely on the instructions that are to come from off the stage, but the non-presence and the non-being cannot, by its very nature, offer any resolution. The boy that appears in *Waiting for Godot* seems to come as a messenger that could shed some light on the situation, but he only manages to bring the darkness of the offstage with him. His purpose is to further the condition of the tramps, not to bring any resolution to it. He comes from a world he does not know how to explain. He cannot say why he does not get beaten and why his brother does, he informs the tramps that Godot does nothing, and, when he comes back in the second act, he has no memory of yesterday. The awareness of the offstage that the boy brings with his very presence reinforces the nullity of the stage. Didi is very concerned with his own existence, but is not reassured and starts to doubt. He insists on the message being delivered properly: "Tell him... (*he hesitates*)... tell him you saw me and that... (*he hesitates*) that you saw me." (92). He is very eager to get some sort of confirmation from the boy, he encourages him: "You're sure you saw me, eh, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me before?" (92), but there is only silence. The fact that Godot never comes is exactly why Gogo and Didi stay put. They are disciplined by what is not there, confirming its non-being through the simple fact of them being on stage.

Godot, by dramatic character and theatrical definition, is offstage. Not only does he exist there – he is the personification *of* offstage, rather than just being off this stage or another. (Levy, 117).

But through the invasion of this anti-space, the central theme of presence is even more strongly emphasized. The observer becomes acutely aware of the kind of heightened presence on stage, a dense and concentrated sort of being that demands to be looked at. In landscapes that have a post-apocalyptic feel to them, the characters seem to be the last people on earth. Their existence seems meaningless and spent and their actions useless and pathetic. However, they are also lively creatures that make an effort to entertain and be entertained, to insist on pretending that the choices they make are theirs. They are the epitome of all human kind, the best and the worst, the cruel and the compassionate, all specimens piled up together and all equal, sentenced to life.

Because life inevitably means death and void, and brings with it the absence of meaning and purpose, the people on stage snigger at it and even fear it. Life is only further procreation of emptiness and can only bring more pain. In *Endgame*, a flea is all it takes to cause anxiety in Hamm, and Clov takes the necessary measures to make sure it is eradicated:

HAMM: [*very perturbed*] But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him,  
for the love of God!

CLOV: I'll go and get the powder. (27).

In *Happy Days*, Winnie is excited to see an emmet: "Looks like life of some kind" (23). But excitement about life turns into mocking it and laughing at its absurdity. A misunderstanding arises. 'Formication' immediately brings 'fornication' to mind, but their giggling is really addressed at life itself. Life is God's cruel joke precisely because it is exclusively self-referential, and its purpose is just *being*. Winnie concludes: "How can one better magnify the Almighty than by sniggering with him at his little jokes, particularly the poorer ones?" (24). Winnie is actually happy to see everything just the way it is. She is surrounded with a barren wasteland that guarantees the inability of any new life showing up: "What a blessing nothing grows, imagine if all this stuff were to start growing." (27). The threat of life, as an expression of the expansion of nothingness, increases through our attention to it. The kind of secondary existence that comes with the use of language and with trivial distractions finds ease in movement, however illusory, as opposed to silent contemplation of the suffering of being. Therefore, the very ability we have of being able to think, to contemplate our own condition, is the ultimate punishment. "What is terrible is to have thought." (W, 64). Winnie makes a similar observation while holding up her parasol: "Holding up wearies the arm. (*Pause.*) Not if one is going along. (*Pause.*) Only if one is at rest. (*Pause.*) That is a curious observation."

(28). In other words, the only way in which the characters can ease their condition is by diving into superficial thoughts and preoccupations in order to divert their attention. Unfortunately, the only way they can do that is by using the same faculties, that of the mind, which are responsible for their condition in the first place. Their attempt to exist in a meaningful way unavoidably comes hand in hand with the awareness that cannot they have meaning at all, and becomes part of the same impulse to crave death and destruction. These opposing forces create contradictions on all levels and keep the characters in an endless and closed loop. In *Endgame*, the possibility of meaning is laughable:

CLOV: [*Impatiently*] What is it?

HAMM: We're not beginning to ... to ... mean something?

CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! [*Brief laugh.*] Ah that's a good one! (27).

Jean-Jacques Mayoux tells us that, for Beckett, "language was the symbol of all impositions of the social over the individual" (34), and we can see how this idea is utilized, for example, in Lucky's speech in order to dispense with the idea of meaning in language. Lucky's thinking turns into a parody of thought that emphasizes the emptiness of language used in intellectual circles by playing with its terms which, then, become empty words flung out of their usual context, distorted and forced into a proclamation of meaninglessness. Harvey explains:

Lucky, when he begins to "think", not only deflates the intellectual but at the same time satirizes into non-existence our many specialized professional and avocational categories. The dignified anthropology becomes the comical anthropometrics and is further ridiculed by the stuttering repetition of the central syllable, Anthropopometry. In a more general way, the modern institution of the Academy that awards prizes for excellence in the various fields becomes the Acacacademy, which by implication dispenses *caca* (excrement in child language) for unfinished research .... " (145-146).

## 5. Silence and sound

Beckett uses symmetry and repetition in order to put emphasis on the contrast that arises from the effect. However, the result of the contrasting is not to be the usual more pronounced understanding of a certain subject when it is placed alongside its opposite. What is achieved is a counter effect, meaning that both sides contributing to the contrast are presented as equally precarious and together they confirm each others inconclusiveness. The inability of language to communicate anything to anyone turns it into a joke, a game that confirms its own redundancy. Objects, just like words, are empty and remain silent.

Beckett considers language a dead habit; his rhetoric cunningly demonstrates the point. Sentences end by denying the assertions with which they began. Questions receive further questions for an answer. Misunderstandings, contradictions, repetitions, and tautologies abound. The syntax is often the syntax of nonsense, the grammar of absurdity. And silence, literal silence, invades the interchanges between human beings. Beckett's style approaches the semantic neutrality of number. Ceaselessly, it performs combinations and permutations upon itself; ceaselessly, it attempts to purify itself from all reference. (Hassan, 206).

As the characters try to confirm existence using rhetorical means, they find it to be equally silent as silence itself. There is nothing in existence that can be said to mean something, there is nothing to say or do, nothing to be silent about, nothing to be expressed without it being redundant. Beckett used these techniques by denying their purpose and meaning through themselves, to reach for a stillness and silence behind all these illusions, a silence that speaks using rhythm and emotion.

*Not I*, for example, shocks us with a torrent of words that come gushing out of Mouth. But beyond the meaning of the text or individual words, we notice the repetition of elements, the rhythmical use of sounds and pauses, sudden arrests followed by sequences again building up momentum. These are the qualities of a composition that bring out the essentially theatrical component of Beckett's plays which must be seen and heard in order to be experienced. They also must be looked at as a whole because they are a structure that is more than the sum of its parts. Alec Reid points out: "Beckett will speak of leading up to a pause and going away from it as others might of a rhetorical climax or even a physical action." (29).

The pauses and silences in Beckett's plays are as important as the sounds. For example, the meaninglessness of a phrase or a conversation might be amplified by a pause, and its absurdity prolonged by the silence that surrounds it. The coupling of silence and sound is another indication of the oscillations in consciousness that Beckett wanted to achieve. Silence is a representation of lack in general. It stresses the nothingness of existence and is used to magnify the feeling of it. It becomes a way of showing us what is not there, as well as augmenting the very fact that it is not. It is a mechanism of showing us the lack of meaning and the superfluity of language. In *Waiting for Godot*, Gogo and Didi demonstrate the fact that their existence depends on them using language, and that as long as they are on stage they must keep talking. In Act II, Gogo suggests that they "try and converse calmly, since we're incapable of keeping silent." (62). They start talking about the dead voices and the sounds they emit. It comes across as an act of reciting a poem, and they alternate, each one having been assigned a line. After a while, they finish off with a long silence which upsets them, as if they could both disappear if they do not follow up with something new to say:

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like ashes.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

*Long silence.*

VLADIMIR: (*in anguish*). Say anything at all! (63).

The performance of *Not I* as a whole is a great example of the interplay between silence and sound. It is a demonstration of the persistence of the rhetoric of the mind that gushes language incapable of having meaning or purpose. The brain forces the mouth to spew words in an attempt to keep a strong hold on existence, a self-referential act in the fullest sense. In the rest of the plays we have looked at, the characters must reinforce their presence through speech, being that they have no other excuse to be there. In the case of *Mouth*, the impetus to speak is even greater in that sense. One of the most important aspects and roles of any mouth is to speak, so Beckett makes *Mouth* fulfil this role completely. The moments of silence *Mouth* is allowed are, therefore, much shorter. In duration, they are the equivalent of a breath, just enough to keep the actress from suffocating on her own words. The stage elements being cut down to an absolute minimum, and the unconventional use of light as a single focused beam, force the observer to have a strong emotional reaction to the intensity and the tempo in which

this drama is played out in front of him. Once again, the process of the play itself is what we are made to observe. The birth of Mouth is her stage presence, and she, much like Winnie, pushes herself to the task: "out ... into this world ... this world ... tiny little thing" (405). The whole of the performance emits a sensation of the buzzing that Mouth keeps referring to, and is the manifestation of the brain struggling with itself. Our awareness of the beam of light is enhanced through reference: "and all the time this ray or beam ... like moonbeam ... but probably not ... always the same spot" (407). Mouth also comments on the scream before she executes it, marking the silence of the act of listening in the same way, and the following lines also seem to describe the exactness of the situation, regarding not only the stage, but the condition of the audience as well – complete silence of the inability of the audience or the Auditor to help her: "no screaming for help for example ... should she feel so inclined ... scream ... [*screams*] ... then listen ... [*silence*] ... scream again ... [*screams again*] ... then listen again ... [*silence*] ... no ... spared that ... all silent as the grave ... no part – what? ... the buzzing ... yes ... all silent but the buzzing" (408). The words that come out of Mouth are "now this stream ... steady stream" (408), and she recites all of the components that make it possible: "the lips ... the cheeks ... the jaws ... the whole face ... all those – what? ... the tongue? ... yes ... the tongue in the mouth ... all those contortions without which ... no speech possible" (404). Her existence is currently only the mouth, no body, and she vocalizes that as well, along with the fact that she has "no idea what she's saying ... imagine! ... no idea what she's saying!... and can't stop ... no stopping it" (410). The examples go on, and it would be easier just to re-type the whole speech to get the point across. It makes one realize the reality of the difficulty Beckett had when asked about what do his plays mean. The steady stream of sounds that are coming out of Mouth are, simultaneously, the justification of her existence and the impossibility of them having any meaning whatsoever. Mouth is in the middle of *telling*, not *re-telling*. It is the ultimate realisation of a theatrical performance in the purest sense.

Next to the rhythm accomplished through the contrast of sound and silence, there is a certain hollowness pertaining to the structure of the plays which is their underpinning. It is a silence buried deep in each living thing, an acute awareness of the presence of an absolute absence of the creator that torments every being of Beckett's stage. In his speech, Lucky appropriately calls it the "divine aphasia" of a God that "loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown" (42). The condition of man is, therefore, to be condemned to the speechlessness of his own maker, to the intrinsic silence of his existence. The question of the existence of God becomes laughable, as in *Not I*, and life itself, as in *Happy Days*, a poor

joke. When Hamm insists that they pray in silence, silence is exactly what they get. From it, Hamm infers: "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" (38). The presences on stage are, therefore, deprived of any substance, and behind them we sense the presence of the author declaring his own emptiness in the awareness that creation is inherently silent.



## 6. Time, habit and memory

For Beckett, time is the epitome of Tantalus's punishment, the ceaseless temptation without satisfaction, unleashed upon us through habit and memory. In *Proust* he calls it the "double-headed monster of damnation and salvation" (1), and declares Proust's creatures to be the victims and prisoners of time. Much like for his own, there is no escape from the past nor the future. Beckett is greatly preoccupied with time in his plays and the passage of time is portrayed as both illusive and ominous, an unavoidable threat that is always present but is never realised. Time is looked upon as something that needs to be spent, the very act of its passing forgotten and, therefore, quickened. At the same time it is something that is in endless supply and, because of these traits, a source of great contradiction. Ultimately, of course, the problems arise out of the way in which we perceive time and the relationship we attain with the many versions of ourselves that have come about through the course of time. Because time never acts directly on the subject, but constantly modifies his personality, "whose permanent reality, if any, can only be apprehended as a retrospective hypothesis" (P, 4), the mechanism of time eludes the subject and, paradoxically, it simultaneously keeps the subject in captivity. But it is our personalized outlook on what has transpired until now that keeps us from reality, because yesterday was assimilated into "the only world that has reality and significance, the world of our own latent consciousness, and its cosmography has suffered a dislocation." (3). Looking at the world through our self-afflicted prism, we devise and project habitual patterns of behaviour that keep us safe from reality, tucked away in a familiar place where we maintain the illusion of having control over the future. However, as Didi says, "habit is a great deadener" (91). Beckett calls it "the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit." (P, 8), and we see the functioning of its destructive routine in many little obsessions that the characters hold on to. In *Endgame*, as Hamm is being pushed closer to the window, he remembers the excitement of the moments "in the beginning", but then he lapses back to the drudgery that is the present: "Do you remember, in the beginning, when you took me for a turn? You used to hold the chair too high. At every step you nearly tipped me out. [*With senile quaver.*] Ah, great fun, we had, the two of us, great fun! [*Gloomily.*] And then we got into the way of it." (42).

Beckett's plays are infused with these questions and are an attempt at impersonating the way in which the sense of the passage of time operates inside consciousness. The abundant rhetorical contradictions we find in the dialogues and speeches of the characters, as well as the recursiveness of certain gestures or statements, exemplify the paradoxical influence of

time itself. Nothing truly exists but the present moment, but its existence is an abstraction of the mind and it cannot be tamed. Yesterday is, as Beckett states, a calamitous yesterday, but not in content (3). It is, rather, dangerous in the sense that it provides us with the opportunity to remember the subject that we were, but are not any more. Therefore it robs us of the attainment of the object of our desire, because the subject of today does not desire that which the subject of yesterday has, and we are "disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment." (3). It is then a disconcerting existence, a "World without end" (H, 10), in which we experience either the boredom of living or the suffering of being, an existence in which we can never be up to speed with our desire:

HAMM: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!

CLOV: [*Violently.*] That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. (32).

In that sense, progress and attainment are impossible, and there is nothing else to be done but to keep one self occupied with the banalities of the currently available that water down, even if it is just for a brief moment, the horror of perpetuity.

Even though they are aware of their condition of being trapped on stage, Beckett's characters have an obsession with resolution and ending. Their consciousness is tortured by eternity, so they crave for their awareness to be exempt from it. But the pain never stops. In *Endgame*, Hamm bids Clov to tell him whether it is time for his pain-killer five times. Clov responds with a 'yes' only the fifth but, alas, "there's no more pain-killer." (46). It is never *time* for the pain-killer. The pain of the passing of time cannot be soothed. The ringing of the alarm clock mimics the continuity and consistency of the bleak, flat line of an unchanging existence. They listen attentively, and Clov's reaction is symptomatic of his desire: "The end is terrific!" (34). Clov dreams of a world where everything would be, finally and completely, finished. The inconceivable notion of a life progressing in an everlasting standstill amplifies in him the feeling of anxiety. Hamm dispenses with this ludicrous idea of order, but for Clov it seems soothing and peaceful. "I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust." (39). The on-stage existence of the characters transpires through their constant questioning of the matter at hand, namely, the fact that they were assigned to each other, just like Hamm's "Accursed progenitor" (15) was to him, and they always come to the same conclusion:

CLOV: So you all want me to leave you.

HAMM: Naturally.

CLOV: Then I'll leave you.

HAMM: You can't leave us.

CLOV: Then I shan't leave you. (29).

The paradoxical reasoning is recurrent and distinctive of the condition of the characters. Just like in *Happy Days* or *Waiting for Godot*, in *Endgame* we witness Beckett's people as being both agreeable and abusive. They care for each other and sometimes exhibit true affection, but despite their absolute interdependence, they do not recoil to batter and bully each other. They could commit the most unfathomable atrocities or show to be capable of the most beautiful acts of kindness. It would not make any difference to their condition of living in the sin of birth. In *Proust*, Beckett explains clearly the nature of this affliction of life that stands outside any assumed boundaries a human mind could conceive:

Tragedy is not concerned with human justice. Tragedy is the statement of expiation, but not the miserable expiation of a codified breach of a local arrangement, organised by the knaves for the tools. The tragic figure represents the expiation of original sin, of the original and eternal sin of him and all his 'soci malorum', the sin of having been born. (49).

The circularity of existence guarantees its own consistency through its inescapable and irrefutable, utterly paradoxical logic. As Hamm concludes: "The end is the beginning and yet you go on." (45).

In *Happy Days*, Winnie stumbles upon the same problem – the inability to act. She puts it down to the human condition. It is "Human nature" (18) and "Human weakness" (19) which is natural. Winnie's thought process and, by extension, her existence, is restricted to operate in between two soundings of the bell. She has no will of her own, just as Vladimir knows that "One isn't master of one's moods." (59), and she can do only as instructed. She pleads Willie to bid her put the parasol down and promises to obey. She incorporates in her character the subject of the actress aware of her theatrical performance and knows that this performance must always reveal itself just as it is. It must always be the same as the ones before and the ones after, perfectly consistent and unaltering, and every yesterday the same as today. Language is incapable of expressing the truth of a condition, and as is always the case with Beckett's plays, the words that she utters can only be useful as a mere running commentary or a side effect of an on-stage presence:

I speak of temperate times and torrid times, they are empty words. (*Pause.*) I speak of when I was not yet caught – in this way – and had my legs and had the use of my legs, and could seek out a shady place, like you, when I was tired of the sun, or a sunny place when I was tired of the shade, like you, and they are all empty words. (*Pause.*) It is no hotter today than yesterday, it will be no hotter tomorrow than today, how could it, and so on back into the far past, forward into the far future. (*Pause.*) And should one day the earth cover my breasts, then I shall never have seen my breasts, no one ever seen my breasts. (29-30).

No past or future reference can be made to aid the setup of the now. The moment we try to address the present moment, it morphs into a fallacy of our subjective thought. Nothing can be said to be real. It can only be experienced once, and the truth of it can never be spoken of again. Change is impossible and each and every fleeting moment can only underline the previous. Alec Reid points out that Beckett's "people"

exist and can exist only for as long as the play lasts, indeed only for as long as they are before our eyes. Beckett gives us no hint as to how they have come to the situation in which we find them. They have no past except for what they may tell us, and no future. (33).

The sensation of progress and change is, therefore, illusory. Winnie's awkward physical position is there to underline that idea. The play keeps unravelling, objects are used, lips move and sounds come out – "something seems to have occurred, something has seemed to occur, and nothing has occurred, nothing at all" (30). The "something seems to have occurred – nothing has occurred" effect of *Happy Days* might be considered analogous to Clov's statement "Something is taking its course". But nothing has happened except for the truth and the fact of the actors presence on stage. A true theatrical experience is revealed in front of the viewer when Hamm, asked about what is the matter with him today, rightfully announces: "I'm taking my course." (31).

The rhetorical means which Beckett's people use to desperately implore the attention of the other are characterized by the same uncertainty and, at the same time, the frustration with which they approach the validity of their maker. Since they have no way of affirming their own existence, they turn to their fellow stage-dwellers to justify their presence. This brings us to the similarity between the yearning for the other and the yearning for the full integration of one's personality at any point in time. However, the other can never offer

enough attention for the thirst to be quenched, nor can the subject integrate its many versions created through the passing of time into a complete and absolute being attuned with all of the objects desired up to the present. Paradoxically, and ironically, the subject pushes the object away by virtue of his desire. Beckett sees this process occurring as a result of infectious mobility:

Exemption from intrinsic flux in a given object does not change the fact that it is the correlative of a subject that does not enjoy such immunity. The observer infects the observed with his own mobility. Moreover, when it is a case of human intercourse, we are faced by the problem of an object whose mobility is not merely function of the subject's, but independent and personal : two separate and immanent dynamisms related by no system of synchronisation. So that whatever the object, our thirst for possession is, by definition, insatiable. (P, 6-7).

Perhaps, then, it is not coincidental that, as she attempts to navigate Willie towards his hole, Winnie exclaims: "What a curse, mobility!" (35). At that moment Willie is the embodiment of her desire moving out of her sight. The mobility of the object is propelled by her own mobility as subject, as she vocalizes her desire but immediately disavows its possibility: "Or just now and then, come round this side just every now and then and let me feast on you. (*Back front.*) But you can't, I know. (*Head down.*) I know." (35).

The difficulty of remembering is a trait inherent in all of Beckett's characters. It is an attribute that sometimes causes in them a great deal of frustration and a feeling that their mind is slowly dwindling. When speaking of the erosive power of art, Lawrence E. Harvey says that the "frequent memory failures of the various characters break the continuity of linear time, to which modern Western society is so accustomed." (145). In that sense, stepping out of the conventional perception of linear time can be threatening. However, not being able to remember seems to be a kind of protective mechanism that encourages their focus toward the future, in order to keep their sanity to a certain degree, or keeps the focus in the present, in which case it is soothing for them, as long as they are preoccupied. The world of Beckett's plays is a true realisation of a quantum universe of infinite possibilities in store for any particular subject or object. The prerequisite for this is that future events must not be strictly defined nor sealed. Beckett explains that the "future event cannot be focussed, its implication cannot be seized, until it is definitely situated and a date assigned to it." (P, 6). Any temporal specification of a particular future event tears down the security that we had in our ignorance

and we begin to perceive the future as threatening. The plays, therefore, maintain a very general, nebulous idea of both the past and the future. This provides for action without purpose, a mindless perseverance in pushing forward. No day is different from any other, but the will to keep on going is strong in Beckett's people, and it can be expressed, as Jean-Jacques Mayoux points out, in a single word: " 'On!', surely, thus situated, the most dramatic word in the play, and which sums up the heroic absurdity of mankind." (31).

## 7. Caught off guard

Finally, it is important to say something about the dramatic effect that is achieved through the subtle and unconscious dynamic between the plays and the audience. As much as Beckett's people are turned inward and seem completely private and closed off for anything that is not their familiar realm, they are also strongly connected to the audience, as should be the case with any true drama. However, in Beckett's case we do not necessarily pick up on that connection right away. We feel, rather, like something has slipped through the back door of our mind, an idea that starts growing and a feeling that builds up as the play progresses. Nevertheless, a kind of dialogue is established and it leaves a potent and deep impression on the viewer. We are persuaded to feel more strongly the condition we see on stage, and we can do that only by accessing it in ourselves. However, the dialogues and the events that take place in front of us do not make much sense. Words are empty, phrases are turned on their head, and each sentence contradicts the previous one. Everything is made empty and hollow. Yet we feel we are engaged and mesmerized by the performance. The result of the plays is a rhetorical feat of persuasion, an extremely communicative and outgoing system that makes us aware of that deep place of emptiness and silence in ourselves, where there is no meaning and logic and there is no lack of void. But, in order to mimic that sense through a theatrical performance, Beckett had to take drastically anti-rhetorical measures, in the sense that he stripped meaning in language down to its bare minimum and included endless digressions, contradictions and misunderstandings to demonstrate the inability to express the inexpressible. John Pilling makes an interesting point on this subject:

The most obvious reason why Beckett reverted to English in 1956, and has continued, with very few exceptions, to write his drama in English first, is that he found himself, in *Fin de partie*, composing a French whose richness ran counter to his real interest in the poverty of language as a medium of communication. (69).

As language is unable to express, but still used, it must be reduced and self-referential, rather than symbolic. This draws the consciousness of the observer closer to the events on stage, narrows the view and concentrates the experience.

By an apparently wanton sacrifice of colour, movement and change – three of the dramatist's major assets – Beckett achieves a fantastic degree of concentration

inducing a heightened awareness – the very essence of the dramatic experience.  
(Reid, 37).

The self-reference of the play points directly to the author, and as the audience unconsciously senses this, a connection is established that is analogous to the one between the presences on stage. As Shimon Levy explains, "The play and the actors mediate between the self-consciousness of the playwright and the "other" self-consciousness of and in his audience." (133). It is a subtle but constant change of pace that keeps recurring throughout the plays. The characters invariably transition from one mode of thought or consciousness to the next and back again. They seem to lapse into a speculative mode of being which is immediately replaced by the inherently trivial and every-day issues of living. We find them consistent in inconsistency and, inevitably, emotionally concentrate on this variation, while another dynamism plays out on a more deeper level of our understanding. As observers, we seem to be addressed by statements which involve the very process of our observation. Winnie, for example says: "Someone is looking at me still" (37), and Didi, much in the same way, concludes: "At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on." (91). We pick up on these statements as meaningful mostly because they "involve *our* sense of being" (Duckworth, 69). We have no choice but to internalize the process we are observing, but we need not be aware of this infiltration. Actually, we should not be, if the process is to fulfil itself in the first place. As the people on stage are concerned with creating endless distractions for themselves, we as spectators are the ones who, unconsciously, also replicate a kind of distraction in ourselves. Duckworth explains this in terms of Freud's emphasis on the nuance of the process:

Freud has postulated that for the spectator to feel that he is the victim of the same conflict as the hero, the neurotic impulse must be so indefinite that 'the process of reaching consciousness goes on in turn within the spectator while his attention is distracted and he is in the grip of his emotions, rather than capable of rational judgment'. (69).

Therefore, the only drama that can take place is not actualized on stage, but within us. We are the ones that ascribe our personal understanding to the matter at hand and can access the void in us, through the observation of the relentless insistence of void on stage. Beckett intentionally makes an extremely general and senseless drama, a pointless and absurd gesture that is really the only kind that could create an opposite effect in the spectator just through the



inherent functioning of his consciousness. In other words, we are presented with a blank canvas, but not necessarily with the purpose of filling it in, but recognizing the same inner area of blankness in us. All of the problems and turmoil of the stage are of our own making, and we are invited to fill in these gaps because of the way in which the plays are structured – as areas of nothingness that threaten to stretch their influence, but can do that only through the mechanism of implosion on private levels of existence of the author, of the character, and finally, of the observer. This effect that the plays achieve is also the reason why we tend to feel as if we have established some kind of deeper connection with the author or the characters. But it is not something we establish with the medium or some other consciousness. It is solely the connection we establish with ourselves. If we give into the blunder of allegorical or symbolical interpretation, we forget that we are observing drama that is completely without meaning, that rejects to be assigned meaning at every step of the way. Therefore it causes us to see more clearly our own meaninglessness. As Reid says: "The author is presenting an experience not an argument, truth not statement, and we must respond each in our own terms." (30).

## 8. Conclusion

I have come to know from personal experience that most people, when faced with the question of what they think about Beckett's plays, usually feel discomfort at the memory or thought of witnessing such an experience. However, those who have found the patience for a performance may have found themselves entranced by its melodious flow of thought that comes with the breaking loose from convention and logic. By repeating and exaggerating on stage all of the 'great deadeners' out of which man makes his ball and chain, Beckett seems to shake us into realizing the effects of these punishments which we have created in our own lives. His persuasive rhetoric is, then, focused upon letting us know this through experience and not through words. He makes the light on stage point to itself, the characters to talk about themselves, the props on stage to be exactly what they are, he erases all reference but self-reference, and we find ourselves in a position in which we inevitably must point to ourselves as well. The awareness of the emptiness in front of us becomes the awareness of the emptiness in us, but this void that fills the experience proves to be extremely liberating as we come to realize the nullity of the countless intricacies of our engagements, regulations, commitments and entanglements that make up the gruelling social niceties of our day to day existence. Beckett's plays always present us with the truth because they are created through the very process of the play unravelling before us. Lois Gordon makes an interesting observation regarding this subject. She compares Beckett's plays to the paintings of the French Impressionists because of the way in which we can see the process of making the painting just by observing the painting itself: "Fixing and stabilizing the image was impossible because only process could be captured." (115). This is what Beckett's characters show us – the inability of fixing in our minds the image of ourselves, the impossibility of attainment and the unavoidable and perpetual epistemological uncertainty that comes with it. Beckett makes us realize we are all equal in the face of life, and, as we see from Sastre's interesting insight, the performance, in a way, places a mirror in front of us:

He destroys their external differences. He rubs out the huge eyebrow. Takes off the big nose. Erases the bright colors. Washes off the make-up, so that the true sunken eyes appear. He throws the pair into the circus ring. They are flung down. They wait. They get bored. They play. We laugh, but our laughter rings hollow. What has happened? We have recognized ourselves. (103).

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