Modern playwrights and Samuel Beckett's Trace of Lost Self in Drama

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Abstract

In a depression after the world wars, Samuel Beckett's plays presented a picture of the world fragmented and disrupted. Among other modern literary works, Beckett's path-breaking innovative literature presented the parodies of pointlessness of human actions and thoughts in the world. This new dramatic style catapulted Beckett to the centre stage of modern drama, though it should be mentioned that he may not have been influenced in this without the prevailing climate of ideas. The prevailing literary attitude of Modernism indicates that the modern world is irrational and incoherent. To elucidate this, there is an attempt to pursue the contemplative notion of play writing in modern period from Ibsen to Beckett. In presenting such a literary trend it also needs to follow Beckett's literary approach to modern drama and to show how the author could create the characters stuck in a lifelong suspicious about the Self.

Keywords: Modern Drama, Absurdity, the Theatre of the Absurd, Existentialism, Self Searching.

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), the most eminent writer of the Theatre of the Absurd, was an Irishman whose plays affected a stunningly new step in the dramatic movement of modern drama. The Theatre of the Absurd perceives and presents the human condition as fundamentally absurd. Writing in the aftermath of two World Wars, Beckett invented a desolate stage in which his aesthetics of negation and metaphysics of nonlocation portrayed the modern man in an alienated world without any guidelines to proceed or any blueprint to go by. His negation refers to man's failure in achieving a true confidence different from all that were tried before. In a depression after world wars, Beckett's plays presented a picture of the world fragmented and disrupted. In this world, the modern man is left with no clue to certify the rationality of what he does and what he achieves. His thought is always occupied with the subjects like alienation, identity, mystery of the self and loneliness.

Among other modern literary works, Beckett's path-breaking innovative literature presented the parodies of pointlessness of human actions and thoughts in the world. This new dramatic style catapulted Beckett to the centre stage of modern drama, though it should be mentioned that he may not have been influenced in this without the prevailing climate of ideas. The prevailing literary attitude of Modernism indicates that the modern world is irrational and incoherent. Consequently, the conventional play imitated reality could have no more value, for 'reality' itself in its conceptual underpinnings was increasingly problematic. To mirror this, a new kind of theatre was needed. Prior to modern period, the focus was mostly confined to professional reviewing of a play in technical matters relating to performance, literary criticism of themes, characters and language, in other words, playwrights and theatre goers were looking at the plays strictly as a genre of literature following Aristotle's conventions of playwriting and its performance. In contrast, along with the fact that Modernism occurred in a restless century, drama has progressively grown dismissive about the old forms of traditional methods. The transition from the traditional method to the modern one happened because the emergence of this century was accompanied by disorder and lack of confidence in life. As an outcome of World War I, every confident
aspect of life was questioned and man has been subjected to look inward for a better understanding. Consequently, by discarding nearly all Aristotelian tradition in drama, modern drama dwelt on the subject of man in his society and man in his private world.

Modern Playwrights

True to the spirit of a restless age, most of the prominent dramatists of the modern era like Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, Chekhov, Pirandello and Beckett have been rebellious artists. Each in his own peculiar way found his way to God, society, life, world and existence itself. One may not find a good story in any of their plays, for the playwrights themselves have little interest in telling such stories. This is not to say that they are not deeply felt, deeply emotional plays, but that this emotion is a response to a condition of human experience, not to the events of the narrative. Their plays are not knit by the allegedly necessary properties of time and space. Beckett's tramps could be anywhere, anytime; however, at the same time, the modern drama is not ignorant of history or tradition. The modern playwrights have a deep familiarity with Christian tradition or of Western philosophy and literature; but these references are a means of expressing a common human suffering, and not for providing a particular historical referent.

Such new art, freed from the old bondage of routine entertainment and old method of presentation, is brought to the world of drama by Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) who is known as 'the father of modern drama'. The most important contribution Ibsen could bring to the history of drama by Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) who is known as 'the father of modern drama'. The most important contribution Ibsen could bring to the history of modern drama, as Kenneth Muir remarks, "was Ibsen's abandonment of verse after Peer Gynt in order to write prose plays about contemporary problems." (Muir 1962: 97) Ibsen's turning away from traditional conventions took him from the social to visionary, from the polemical to the psychological, from the naturalistic to the symbolic, and from the demonstrative to the suggestive. As his other contribution to the modern drama, Ibsen established the foundations of 'realistic' drama, writing in prose and dealing with contemporary social problems, morality, and social institutions. Realistic drama had an attempt to portray real life on stage, a movement away from the conventional melodramas and sentimental comedies of the 1700s. It is expressed on stage through the use of symbolism, character development, stage setting and storyline and is exemplified in Ibsen's plays such as A Doll's House, Ghosts and etc.

Parallel to Ibsen's creation of a drama which narratives and dramatizes the social needs and purpose of time, Chekhov's depiction of the reality of modern life was a crucial step in the evolution of modern drama. Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) was a playwright whose 'psychological realism' brought a new phase to this evolution. He is a master in showing aspects of real life, in showing how gullible people live and behave in everyday life. He aimed to depict 'the real life' in his writings where ordinary people play the real role in an ordinary life; as Elisaveta Fan quotes Chekhov's idea about the play:

A play should be written in which people arrive, go away, have dinner, talk about the weather and play cards. Life must be exactly as it is and people as they are......let's everything on the stage be just as complicated......as simple as it is in life. (Fan 1973: 31)

In each of his plays, the seminal acts of Chekhov's characters are symbolized through some central images in order to represent what is being ravished, stolen, or destroyed. With the possible exception of The Sea Gull, each of Chekhov's plays dramatizes the victory of the forces of darkness over the forces of enlightenment which means the degeneration of culture in modern world. The importance of the comic element in his plays comes from his sense of 'revolt'. Instead of showing sympathy for the victims of the social conflict, he is satirizing them; instead of blackening the character of the despoiler, he appreciates it in the play with a great deal.

Chekhov's mature dramatic practice combines various elements: an attention to the individual's state of mind, the complex and ambiguous tensions between conscious and unconscious complexity; the preoccupation with the subject of existence; small changes of everyday life; the increasing fragmentation of character; the emphasis on the random, the casual, the contingent as the surest way of achieving an authenticity of reality and finally the elimination of unnatural heroics. The Chekhovian mode, distinctive as that of no other dramatist of this age, tends to leave the conventional modes that bothered him in creating his art of drama. Chekhov knew that the mood and the atmosphere of his plays should serve the structural purpose, should provide the cohesive force that holds together the basic dramatic elements like words, silence, movement, gesture, tempo, lighting and all the other non-verbal components that make their eloquent contribution to his drama.

Following Ibsen's 'realistic method' and Chekhov's 'sympathetic' and 'self-expression' drama, August Strindberg (1849-1912) flourished the formative period of the literary modernism with his 'naturalistic' plays. His major plays, to be new in modern period, deal with spiritual issues and revolve around the exposure of evil. In the year 1899, he wrote four historical plays, a genre he was to find curiously amendable to the expression of his new and mystic conception of nature of God and man. His 'naturalistic' plays viz. Crimes and Crimes (1899), Easter (1900) and The Dance of Death (1901) all have their origin in existentialist realism.

Forms of psychological and sexual conflict between man and woman were a thematic concern with Strindberg. To him, man's tragic dilemma lies in the irrationality of his conflicting desires, like his desire for a
member of the opposite sex. According to him, men and women are different and the irrational love, the desire of one for the other makes it impossible for them to have peace among them. Hence, happiness as well as peace must be rejected, not only as a possible but also even as a desirable end.

Like Ibsen, Strindberg had a contribution to make to the form, the tone and the mood of drama. His plays *Countess Julia* and *The Father* are in a naturalistic form, but in his last plays like *To Damascus* and *A Dream Play*, he reached a visionary subjectivism in which human life is criticized for its irrationality. Strindberg’s later plays move away from naturalism and show a tendency toward expressionism and symbolism as both technique and theory of modern drama.

After Strindberg’s naturalism came Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) who had a style of representing the true nature of illusion and reality, sanity and insanity. Possibly taking his cue from Ibsen’s symbolist drama, *The Wild Duck* (1884), Pirandello created plays in which the main character lives comfortably with an illusion for many years until some well meaning friends decide that the truth must be confronted. In his exploration, his character ultimately discovers that ‘reality’ does not result in a beneficial ‘cure’ but a destructive disillusionment.

In his awareness of social disintegration, Pirandello demonstrates that the illusion is not harmful. It is rather a heroic assertion of the individual identity and a means of rebelling against society. In *Six Characters In Search of an Author* (1921), Pirandello goes further on his modern theme and represents that the line between illusion and reality breaks down completely. A group of actors is rehearsing when six characters, unfinished fragments of a playwright’s imagination, burst in and insist upon playing themselves on stage in a ‘real’ production which is itself an illusion to both the actors and the audience in the theatre. At the climax of the play, one character dies by drowning and another from a gunshot wound. The actors cry out: “No, no, it’s only make believe, it’s only pretence!” But the Father protests: “Pretence? Reality, sir, reality!” (*Six Characters In Search of an Author* 18)

**Beckett’s Lost Self**

Subsequent to all prominent playwrights mentioned here, it would not be wrong to take Samuel Beckett as the last modernist when we see *Waiting for Godot* with no plot, no climax, no denouement, no beginning, no middle and no end. If modernism liberated the writer from conventional storytelling and ordinary psychology, Beckett’s play took modernism just as far as it could go. Ibsen and Beckett represent opposite poles of modernism both in time and in spirit. In literary movement of modernism, Beckett is well known for his ‘the Theatre of the Absurd’, a new movement in modern drama which does not open in any satisfactory clue on the part of human life. Following all contributions of modern dramatists, modern drama encounters with Beckettian drama wherein life is simply or merely lived while acknowledging the inherent absurdity of the existence. Beckett’s plays features illogical and purposeless activity in plot, and the endless contradiction of language and action in dialogue on a bare stage. Creating such innovative drama, perfectly different from the conventional drama of representing the characters in defined regulation and frame, Beckett’s purpose was to discover the limits of drama and to challenge audiences to move away from their complacent and comfortable roles of being as spectators in the theatres. Beckett’s dramatic art was designed, wittingly or unwittingly, to give the audience a good shake.

Feeling like an outsider in his own life, Beckett was haunted by a feeling of an absence of identity and the sense of alienation in his own world. He was captivated by the notion of never having been born. Right from the beginning, as evident in his drama, he saw birth and death as parts of a single band, with life as a long day’s dying. “They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it is night once more.” (*Waiting for Godot* 82) Pozzo says near the end of *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir echoes him: “Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps”. (*Waiting for Godot* 83) In such ‘meta-theatrical’ aspect of modernism, Beckett should be pursued in his creation of ‘the aesthetics of silence’. The fragmentary, the inarticulate, and the incoherent and non-verbal aspect in theatrical intercourse are all shown beautifully in his representation of silence. Through both earlier and later plays of Beckett, the characters permanently fall silent, amazed or terrified and their feeling of silence is beautifully conveyed, through the context of play, to the audience. “This is deadly” (*Endgame* 25) Hamm comments to the audience when he has been frustrated by a particularly deadly piece of “time-wasting” (*Endgame* 28) business from Clov. Likewise in *Waiting for Godot*, in the second dialogue about sand, Estragon breaks the silence first and says:

ESTRAGON: In the meantime nothing happens.
POZZO: You find it tedious?
ESTRAGON: Somewhat.
POZZO: (to Vladimir). And you, Sir?
VLADIMIR: I’ve been better entertained. (*Silence*)
(*Waiting for Godot* 46)

The silence that pervades Beckett’s drama distinguished the author’s work from traditional style of playwriting. Traditional plays begin with some actions or events that result in dramatic conflict, an imperative element to Aristotelian dramatic theory. However Beckett’s drama, known as one of the most controversial works of twentieth-century drama, is known for its minimal approach to dramatic form, for its powerful imagery, and for its brief, fragmented, and repetitive dialogue. *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, begins with no
deliberate movement. That is only an abstract struggle involving the passage of time. Vladimir and Estragon, two tramps, wait on a desolate piece of land to keep an appointment with someone called Godot. Likewise, in Endgame two men, Clov and Hamm, are faced with the nothingness of their existence as they attempt to validate their lives. Eventually we see that both of them fall back on their memories to justify their existence.

In his effort to display the chaotic situation of human beings in the modern world, Beckett further developed his innovative theatrical techniques and metaphysical concerns in Krapp's Last Tape (1958) and Happy Days (1961). In Happy Days, the protagonist, Winnie, continues her daily rituals while being buried up to her waist. She seems uncaring to her entombment, and by the second act of the play, she is buried up to her neck. Winnie believes that the earth stabilizes her and keeps her grounded.

Beckett's preoccupation with disembodied heads and faces re-emerges in his later short plays That Time (1976), A Piece of Monologue (1979), Ohio Impromptu (1981), and What Where (1983), all of which feature heads with long white hair and an aged appearance. In Not I (1972), the main character is a disembodied mouth floating high above the stage and seems to be forced into confessing her faults. Beckett used darkness, voice, repetition, and silence to heighten the feeling of damnation, hopelessness, and introspection in much of his work.

During the years of his stay in Paris, Beckett was able to write everything that made him later well known. In such productive period of writing, he realized that his art must be subjective, in a way being derived wholly from his own inner world. It was, in fact, Beckett's turn broadly speaking, these plays deal with memory, or more accurately, those of the roughly contemporary existentialist thinkers, though Beckett himself cannot be categorized as an existentialist. Broadly speaking, these plays deal with the subject of despair and the will to survive in spite of that despair in an uncomprehending and, indeed, incomprehensible world. The words of Nell, one of the two characters in Endgame who are trapped in ashbins, can best summarize the themes of the plays of Beckett's middle period:

Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. ... Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more. (Endgame 20)

Such themes are illustrated in different ways in Beckett's art. Waiting for Godot portrays two tramps in an isolate area, waiting for an unknown figure while doing some works for passing the meaningless moments of their existence. Endgame, a one-act drama of frustration and senility, features blind Hamm and his attendant Clov in a skull-shaped stage. Krapp's Last Tape is in the form of a monologue in which the aged Krapp attempts to recapture the intensity of earlier days by listening to recordings of his own younger self. Happy Days portrays Winnie who is buried to her waist in a mound, but still attached to the carefully itemized contents of her handbag.

The ironically titled Play (1962), for instance, consists of three characters stuck to their necks in large funeral urns, while the 1963 television drama Eh Joe—written for the actor Jack Mac Gowran—is animated by a camera that steadily closes in upon the face of the title character, and the 1972 play Not I consists almost solely of a Mouth in the stage full of darkness. Many of his late plays, taking a cue from Krapp's Last Tape, were concerned to a great extent with memory, or more particularly, with the often forced recollection of haunting past events in a moment of stillness in the present. Moreover, these late plays deal with the theme of despair in self searching and observed as a voice comes from the protagonist's mind, as is evident in A Piece of Monologue.

The minimalist style dominated Beckett's plays during the last period of his writing career. Come and Go, a bleak drama with three female characters and a text of 121 words; the even more minimal Breath (1969), a 30-second play consisting only of a pile of rubbish, a breath, and a cry; and Not I, a brief, fragmented, disembodied monologue delivered by an actor of indeterminate sex of whom only the 'Mouth' is illuminated. Not I lasts only fifteen minutes and all we see is a shadowy auditor and a woman's mouth from which words flow out in a stream.

**CONCLUSION**

Focusing on a few selected works of Beckett's, the present study followed the evolution of his mental journey which, it notes, does not stop at the milestone of the perception of absurdity in the external world. From the first moment of entering into the world, man is entrapped in "the Time Cancer" (Proust 40) and later in its side effects of Habit and Memory. As Alvarez says about Beckett, "Time is the 'poisonous' condition we are born to, constantly changing us without our knowing, finally kills us without our assent." (Alvarez 1973: 21) Each one is doomed to cling with Time because of "the original and eternal sin….of having been born." (Proust46).
Furthermore, the space is fractured in Beckett’s literature because Habit, the meaningless tasks of the others’, is the only means by which the pain of living can be mitigated, as Beckett says:

Habit is a compromise affected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull individuality, the lightning-conductor of his existence. Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is habit. Life is habit. (Proust 37)

In the space which is confined to its primary feature of Time, nothing is predictable. "Habit is an armour‖ avers Alvarez, “protecting us from whatever can be neither predicted nor controlled.” (Alvarez 1973: 21) In fact, from the moment the absurdity of life is perceived in the depth of this space, Time becomes unreal; identity of the Self is not attainable; no course of event can be predicted; anything may happen; no intrinsic relationship between cause and effect; there is no achievement in life; life becomes meaningless and purposeless; everything that occurs is due to chance; the universe becomes a chance universe, and the language that reflects it becomes quite incoherent. Since the reality of the irrational world has to be reflected in language, the structure of the language has to be disintegrated, dislocated and disjoined which means the language needs to be ‘fractured’.

In many of his literary works, Beckett gives such an image of a fractured space from the very beginning of his play: "All alone in that ruinous old house." (All That Fall 7). Being confined in such an image, nothing is deserved to be acted as Beckett opens his masterpiece by this motif: "Nothing to be done." (Waiting for Godot 1) There is nothing new in this space and "I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of all." (Malone Dies 5) In fact, though Beckett could not rid of the features of the fractured space in his early steps, he succeeds in his later attempts, where one sees that the discovery of the Self is the only hope for him. In his attempt to pass into a realm beyond the fractured space, he finds that his real identity is the only truth by which the ambient absurdity is overcome and crossed. The author finds that his inner self is his only sacred space as his literary work depicts stage by stage the author’s contemplative journey toward the Self.

**REFERENCE**


