



Suffering And The Body: The Philosophical Despair Of Samuel Beckett And His Characters

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Abstract:

The Psychoanalytical study of Beckett's dramatic endeavors revealed that his plays are predominantly plays about bringing sense to the apparently senseless; investing multiple meanings in stammering, speechlessness and even silence. The research has unraveled the mysteries of Samuel Beckett's dramas which were similar to his own chaotic and even apocalyptic state of mind. The study also asserts Samuel Beckett more as an Existentialist than as an Absurdist. His creativity is a beacon of hope and optimism against the darkest and the most morbid shades of lived and projected life experiences. It is inferred that Beckett's conscious and unconscious fashioning of his works has undoubtedly predisposed particular aspects of his writings and also his creativity.

Keywords: Psychoanalytical Criticism, Existentialism, Repression.

I. INTRODUCTION

Beckett chose Absurdism to Naturalism for his musings and recast absurdism in Existentialism altered the course of traditional theatre. He started his career with poems and short stories to long epic novels, which were inspired by his literary guru, James Joyce. However, his novels were intellectually dense, which made them incomprehensible. They were most experimental, depicting the philosophy of 'Existentialism'. One of the finest examples of his audacious approach is evident from the final words of his novel 'Unnamable'; "You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on". A similar thought is presented in his later fiction 'Worstward Ho', where he wrote, "Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Ironically, a time came when he had to follow his own maxims. As he terribly failed to publish his thematically avant-garde novels, he again tried to re-establish his literary career by writing plays. This proved to be a turning point in his career; acknowledging his decision to get over the creative impasse, he confessed that:

"I turned to writing plays to relieve myself of the awful depression the prose led me into, life at that time was too demanding, too terrible and I thought theatre would be a diversion." [1]

It was rewarding to discover the deeper meanings in his works through Freudian and Jungian Theories of Psychoanalysis. The analysis has established a dominant association between his personality and his oeuvre. Freud postulated that the study of "the author's own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, and fixations and most importantly reveal what the author never intended." [2]. Thus, this critical insight has traced a parallel between the author's personal history and the nature of his plays. The Psychoanalysis of Beckett's biographical details, such as his upbringing by a manic –depressive mother, his psychosomatic illness, death of his genial father and, at last, his untapped and unrecognized talent, has unlocked the hidden sources of his unusual behavior. His biographical details to a large extent decoded his eccentric and incomprehensible works. His physical and psychological disorders were the fountain of inspiration for his avant-garde works.

The vulnerability and dependency of his characters have been etched from his own muffled life. He perceived his life as a kind of punishment and:

“Insisted that all of life was a disease, with babyhood at its beginning. Man, to him, was the prime example of the mortally ill, for man began as a helpless infant, unable to attend to himself, and most of the time ended in the same manner. In man’s beginning and end there was immobility, and each man was thus at the mercy of all others”. [3]

Freud’s Model of Tripartite Selves in Beckett’s Dramatic Universe

It is primarily an interesting task of categorizing Beckett’s characters through Freud’s tripartite model of mind which imparted new identities to them. So as to claim that Estragon, Vladimir and Godot can be categorized respectively as the Id, Ego and Superego-dominated personalities. Similarly, it has been deduced that Beckett was undoubtedly an ‘Ego’ dominated character who was guided by the ‘Reality Principle’, and is pragmatic in nature. He was conscious of the grim realities and accepted it without any grievances. From the beginning, the relationship between Beckett’s parents was ambiguous, and he grew up in a superficially serene but tension -fraught atmosphere. As a child he was sentient of the cause of his unhappiness but his ‘adult self’ never allowed him to reveal it. Gainsay, he posed his parents as ideal caretakers and pleaded for their accountability of his upbringing. He was like a character of instincts, and did not prefer any feelings of pride, shame, and guilt. He perfectly balanced his ‘Id’, which demanded love and affection from his parents.

You might say I had a happy childhood... although I had little talent for happiness; my parents did everything that could make a child happy. [4].

He never blamed his parents for his despondency and never showed any semblance of vengeance towards them. In spite of all his sufferings, his relationship with his parents never strained, and he never lived without hope and joy in life. His optimistic approach is synonymous with his character portraits, which encapsulate his design of living. For example, ‘Hamm’ remarks in ‘Endgame’ substantiate Beckett’s own perpetuating resilience,

Hamm remarks: Enough, it's time it ended, in the shelter, too.

(Pause.)

And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to... to end. Yes, there it is, it's time it ended and yet I hesitate to— (He yawns.) —to end.

The essential quality of ‘Ego’ is to stay on and avoid displeasure and pain. This quality is prominently evident in Beckett’s personality, as he has endured with what life has offered him. He has established this ego figure by controlling his impulses and stoically accepting emotional challenges. He triumphed over his traumatic childhood, indigent youth, isolated, depraved adulthood, the challenging old age with dignity and prudence. His struggle as a writer did not demoralize him as he continued experimenting in different genres with the same zeal. Facts reveal that he gave up a comfortable life in Ireland to choose a writing career in Paris. Unfortunately, in Paris he could not register legitimately in any hotel, nor did he have money to leave the country voluntarily. Yet he continued to spend several nights hiding out and sleeping on the studio floor. At the age of twenty-six he had published two slim books which failed to bring any significant income or recognition, and this phase destined the character of ‘Krapp’. Beckett, similar to ‘Krapp’, wore clothes which were falling apart, lived in a shabby furnished room and could neverly provide hospitality to others. Through Freudian analysis, it is evidenced that it was his ‘ego’ strength that helped him prevail over such impediments with calmness and maturity. Beckett’s biographer, Deirdre Bair, also presents him as a strong ego personality.

“Turbulent within, to the world he presented an exterior so calm and composed that most people were in awe at the strength of character he exhibited” [5].

He is outlawed as a mute challenger and a mute sufferer who has accepted the suffering and lived with it. Beckett himself experienced the spirit of existentialism - that man has to live in order to suffer and suffer in order to live. The study of his characters revealed that, like him, they posed challenges to their predicaments through their strong power of endurance. For example, the half-hearted attempts of suicide by ‘Vladimir’ and ‘Estragon’ underscore their frightening perception of reality. Biographical facts portray Beckett as a sad-sack, unrelenting and finding expedients to resolve the tension between existence and non-action. His financial dependency on his mother was a kind of emotional bondage to him, preventing him from pulling himself out of this partnership. In a way, his mother symbolizes ‘Estragon’, who takes out his frustration on ‘Vladimir’ (Beckett). His mother, like ‘Estragon’, kept constantly nagging and fighting with him on silly issues. ‘Estragon’s’ regression echoes his mother’s moaning: “I’m going”, “I can’t go on like this “, “I ‘m unhappy”. She miserably failed in identifying her pain with that of Beckett, who was also waiting and suffering. Beckett

was conscious that he would never be able to fulfil his mother's demands and expectations, yet, did not accuse or carry any guilt, or take a moralistic stand.

Beckett's agony, anger and uncertainty of his existence accentuated his boredom and loneliness. He shared his agitation only with his friend McGreevy through letters. Beckett's other remedy to cope with his solitude was spending most of his time walking or sitting in one pub after another. He did not aim at either seeking pleasure or avoiding pain; he simply found ways of tackling them. Acceptance is one of the superior qualities of an 'ego' personality which Beckett espoused very well. Later, he returned to Paris, which then, was a different city never to be resurrected, but he accepted it without much stagger and carried on with life. Deirdre Bair commented:

"He no longer waited for something that would never come; he had accepted its loss with equanimity and moved on" [06].

Similarly, the Stoic nature of Beckett is a blatant example of his 'Ego' personality, who reacted to contradictory emotions with equal ease. The dramatist skillfully managed the refusals he received for the publication of his dramas by stating that "it didn't really matter at this point – one refusal was as good as another." [07]. Beckett gave the same impervious reaction when he succeeded in getting his first publication. Basically, Stoic in nature; he was unresponsive, dazed, immobile and emotionless for his whole life.

According to Freudian analysis, the Ego has a difficult time satisfying both the Id and the Superego, and needs help to do so. Therefore, to form a balance, it unconsciously employs one or more defenses, thereby avoiding emotional stress. Though Beckett scarcely used these mechanisms directly in his real life, he has shown his characters using it unremittingly. Thus, he has expressed his anger, regression, repression, reasoning, and excuses through his characters rather than directly himself. In spite of this, some instances revealed that Beckett in his conversations with Thompson had unleashed torrents of anger and venom towards his mother, his situation within the family and within Ireland. But all his psychoneurotic behavior was soon treated by Dr. Wilfred Bion who was his analyst for more than two years. Beckett even admitted that he:

"Found all this amusing and boasted to McGreevy that the analysis had helped him enormously to deal with situations like this" [08].

Thus, this therapy proved to be his successful attempt to attain a balance between his Id and Superego and most importantly made him realize that behaviors have consequences and one must abide by social rules in order to live with other people. He further acknowledged that:

"He was delighted to see that he could maintain the necessary distance from the situation to be able to find amusement in his mother's behavior without being drawn into any overt display of petulant behaviour of his own" [09].

He was ceaselessly struggling to make a mark as a successful writer, but his personal predicaments always seemed to hinder his creativity. Indeed, the archetypal picture of a Beckett drama which seemed to be of futile and meaningless existence was the story of his life. Thus, we come across a number of psychoanalytical motifs resurfacing in his later works too. Therefore, it can be asserted that Beckett's writings were the expression of his own psychic conflicts and their coping mechanisms. His plays are the creative outputs of his experiences of existence as he himself stumbled through his routine life from one city to another.

One can identify Beckett's characters as instruments of his emotional vent which, in real life, his submissive being, never allowed him to express. He seldom spoke, but his character seemed to have implied all that he could ever say. Beckett has communicated his emotions like denial, rationalization, projection, repression, regression and, of course, his fantasies through them. For example, Estragon, Pozzo and Hamm represent the assertive Beckett. On the other hand, Vladimir, Lucky and Clov symbolize Beckett, who is submissive. His Stoic nature forbade him to cry, fear, or behave child-like, so he found an outlet in Vladimir, Lucky and Clov, who could candidly pronounce their unfeigned states of mind. It is not just Hamm who says "I have no father, no home" but Beckett himself, who, in real life, never accepted the fact that he missed his father, who bolstered him throughout his life.

A discreet study of his works describes Beckett as a repressed soul which influenced his art of dramatization. Freud in his theories has also mentioned that repression leads to abnormal behavior. Moreover, he emphasized the unconscious or uncontrollable forces of sexual origin which, according to him, are developed through stages based upon a particular erogenous zone. His theory accentuated that sexuality starts from a very young age and develops through various fixations. It means a child is fixated if any conflict arises in that particular erogenous zone. He has categorized the stages as 'Oral', 'Anal', 'Phallic', 'Latency' and 'Genital', in which excessive or a reduced amount of gratification causes fixation. When he talks about the 'Oral stage', he says the child in this stage is focused on oral pleasures (sucking) and if it is not fulfilled, it results in oral fixation. This personality type may indulge in excessive smoking and drinking habits. They also show dependency on others and may develop pessimism and aggression towards them.

Oral Stage

One can indisputably identify Beckett as having oral fixation and his smoking and drinking habits are very well recognized in literary circles. His biography marks many instances of his addiction from a young age and which wearied his mother from time to time. Anthony Cronin points out:

“Sam was drinking quite heavily, borrowing money from Frank to do so, going out almost every evening and driving back to Foxrock drunk after a heavy session with the sort of people Foxrock did not know but whom she imagined to be in one way or another disputable.[10]

He was dependent on his family for finances and increased his depression; a state where people stop socializing. Anthony Cronin tells us:

“In his depressed state he thought of the money he was receiving from home every month as charity rather than something that he was entitled to and though he saw few people he found his aversion to human beings increasing every time he went out and met any. ‘I shall never learn what to do with me tether of life,’ he remarked gloomily. And to Mary Manning he said that the physical mess was nothing compared to the mental.[11].

Beckett has unconsciously sketched his characters as images of his own. ‘Krapp’ in ‘Krapp’s Last Tape’ is found indulging in drinking thrice in the play, as if he is habituated to it. The details show that a weary old man is a heavy drinker who intermittently goes backstage into the darkness to refill himself. He, while going through the tape, is reminded of the failed resolution:

Krapp: Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.) And the resolutions! (Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.) To drink less, in particular.

Anal Stage

Similarly, Beckett’s disorganized and messy character can be traced in the fixations of his ‘Anal stage’. Freud, while briefing about this stage, explains that at this stage (from 18 months to three years) a child finds pleasure and displeasure through exerting his self-control and control over his parents. Biographical instances show Young Beckett as an unkempt person as he wore his usual gray clothes with plentiful traces of food, drink and other matter. To make matters worse, his trench coat and shoes were too permanently dirty and in need of repair. In the case of Beckett, he was in constant displeasure with his mother’s mercurial swings of temperament. Deirdre Bair discloses a very important fact about Beckett’s life:

When they were little more than babies, they were expected to perform all the social amenities before guests, with handshakes, bows, genteel replies to questions about their age and general state of being....but Sam was often taciturn and sullen, his responses governed by his mood of the moment. He received many severe beatings from his mortified mother for his refusal to bow politely to visiting dowagers”.[12].

These instances of May (his mother) beating him when he was less than three years old ingrained in him a vague personality. He therefore refused to exhibit emotional behavior normal for boys of his age. In the later stage of his life, these fixations resulted in his tardiness as he often found solace in sleep. Anthony Cronin also brings us what Beckett confessed to his friend McGreevy: ‘Confronted with these disappointments, like many others, he took to sleeping through the forenoon, “perfecting my methodology of sleep” as he put it to MacGreevy.[13].

His dislike for social gatherings, reckless driving, increasing moodiness, aloof and reserved personality, ingratitude and desertion towards family and friends, all hint to the mental barriers which etched his abstracted personality. The analysis validated that his personality had a major impact on his creativity and his character. Akin to him, all his characters are either weird or lost in their own world searching a purpose of their existence. They in their vagueness display incoherent speeches, disordered attires, apprehensive personalities and bizarre actions which substantiate their behavior to some distorted past.

Genital Stage

According to Freud, the last ‘Genital stage’ is centered upon the genitalia. In this stage, the person is concerned about gratifying his desires through friendships, love relationships and adult responsibilities. Most importantly, if fixation occurs at this stage, it results in frigidity, impotence and unsatisfactory relationships. He also asserted that, if a person’s previous stages (oral, anal and phallic) are fixated, he is stuck in this stage too. The observation is found in the case of Beckett, as he always seemed to be unsatisfied and unconvinced of sexual intimacy. The theory helps to deduce that, because he was fixated at the oral stage, he gained sexual pleasure primarily from kissing and oral sex, rather than sexual intercourse. Beckett, in his biographies, is shown as a man who was for the most part fascinated by the face of his beloved rather than her body. For him, the genitals were the secondary source of pleasure, if at all they were. Anthony Cronin reinforces this actuality by commenting:

In Beckett’s case the body of the beloved herself was not desired, or even found attractive. He was haunted by her face, no more and no less and he sometimes conjured it up when masturbating.[14].

Philosophical dilemmas of Beckett and his characters

Jungian analysis of Beckett's dramas suggests that his plays were primarily intended and also succeeded in telling the stories of tormented souls. His theories in particular imparted an interesting interpretation of his characters. While Winnie was identified as an Extrovert and an Anima possessed woman, Krapp was recognized as an Introvert. The analysis also involved the study of symbols and images in Beckett's works through Jung's renowned Theory of Archetypes. It revealed that Beckett's 'awareness of human suffering and fearful uncertainty' [15] addressed his view of the reality of life in the broken and bewildered world. Also, his traumatic experience of World War II often constitutes the themes of his plays.

A noteworthy outcome of this study is the observation that Beckett shared some of his ailments and symptoms both imaginary and real with his characters. His own physical ailments, which manifested in coughs, boils and hallucinations brought on by sleeplessness and also his own foot problems and his reoccurring struggles with psychosomatic illness all are mirrored in his characters. The study also found his characters, like Beckett, are engaged in difficult quests which signify the journey of self-discovery. Even the real conversations in his life take a stand in his plays. Beckett once admitted in a New York Post interview by Jerry Tallmer that the dialogue between the two tramps in 'Waiting for Godot' was based on conversations between Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil and himself in Roussillon. It seems Beckett never forgot his 'lived' life but only tried to conceal it in his unconscious mind. However, his past resurfaced in his plays in distorted forms. Freud asserted that one never forgets his/her experiences and, at some point in time of life, is recollected in a manifest form. Freud postulated 'Dreams' revealing this past and so can a 'Literary Text'. An interesting interpretation of Beckett's Text as Dreams reveals Beckett's obsession with silence and darkness were the reflections of his growing pessimistic vision which he acquired during his childhood and World War II.

However, it revealed that his pessimism was inborn. Beckett has indirectly mentioned the memory of being in his mother's womb. He recalled 'I remember feeling 'trapped' by being imprisoned and unable to escape, crying to be let out' but no one could hear, no one was listening.[16]. In an interview he also said:

Even before the foetus can draw breath it is in a state of barrenness and of pain. I have a clear memory of my own foetal existence. It was an existence where no voice, no possible movement could free me from the agony and darkness I was subjected to.[17]

One can deduce that his own world had become the world of his characters, and like him, they were also trapped in unpleasant places waiting and hoping to come out of it someday. For him, his waiting in his mother's womb was a long period of suffering, which still kept him breathing and going on like his protagonists. In the womb, time stood still and there was lack of development in action, giving rise to a situation where nothing could be done. Years later, in 1951, Beckett recalled the same situation in his most celebrated play, 'Waiting for Godot'. The characters were seen completely worn out, and they had nothing to do. The beginning of the play illustrates them as purposeless human beings:

ESTRAGON:

(giving up again). Nothing to be done.

VLADIMIR:

(advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart). I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon.) So there you are again.

Different manifestations of his mother's womb find a place in the majority of his plays where the characters are detained forever. Be it a bare street in 'Waiting for Godot', or the room and trash bins in 'Endgame' or the famous giant urns in 'Play'. All the characters are physically ensnared in them, which ultimately shows the helpless trappings of human beings. One of the most important facts from his childhood also helps us to disclose the secret source of his trapped characters. One of his childhood experiences was embedded in his subconscious mind. Cronin exposes one such memory: "many a time the children (Sam and his brother) hid in their rooms trembling from their mother's latest onslaught, which came without warning as her mood changed suddenly for no apparent reason. [18].

This Psychoanalytical study projected Beckett's life as an absurdist drama wherein there were abstract and symbolic spaces as opposed to a realistic drama. His plays were seen as mirrors of the society of individuals alienated from their circumstances. Time and relevance were no different from those individuals, who were also those alienated from their own selves and the world. The characters of his plays were identified as the caricatures of his family members or acquaintances he met during the crucial stages of his life. The Psychoanalytical insight into his dramatic vision projected multidimensional pictures which revealed the author's individual feelings and, at the same time, a remarkable intimate communicative relationship between the author and creativity.

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