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Man's Post-Tragic Position in Beckettian Drama

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Beckett's drama, like Shakespeare's, is an enquiry towards discovering man's place and function on the earth. Man is considered to be the indispensable element that has enriched the texture of the "earth" with the concept of "world" –the social aspect of life on the earth. And that is why Shakespeare and Beckett implicitly ask the question that holds the eternal paradox concerning man's existence: "If man is indispensable for the 'world', how come he is a 'mortal' and he has to die?"

Shakespeare points to man's paradoxical position most explicitly in a speech by Hamlet, where he glorifies man as a great "piece of work", "the beauty of the world", "noble in reason", "infinite in faculty", "express and admirable in form and moving", "like an angel" "in action" and godlike "in apprehension". Yet, at the end of this speech, Hamlet dismisses man as "quintessence of dust" -a creature destined to turn to dust when he dies- whose mortality makes all his heavenly virtues meaningless (*Hamlet* II. ii. 259-76).

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In his analysis of the Oedipus myth, the celebrated French social anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss also comes up with the conclusion that pinpoints mortality as man's most deeply rooted concern.

As we also know, the genre of tragedy is mainly a lament on man's mortality. The tragic hero, who, no matter how virtuous, is a mortal and liable to error, makes a critical choice at a crucial point in his life and then undertakes the responsibility of his choice by paying the price through his encounter with catastrophe. In ancient Greek tragedy the catastrophe does not always come through death. In Shakespearean tragedy, on the other hand, the catastrophe is always death. The Shakespearean tragic hero has to die.

In both ancient Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, however, there comes a moment when the tragic hero is led to cast off his stately position in society –as we see most clearly in the process that follows the 'storm scene' in *King Lear* (III.ii.1-96,1-180)- and is reduced to the bare humanbeing who faces the limitations of mortality like one of us. That is the point where the tragic hero, no longer a great "individual", assumes the characteristics of "universal man". That is exactly the point where the spectator -the representative of "ordinary man"- identifies with the "tragic character of high esteem", as they are now on equal grounds.

This phase in the process of tragedy marks the beginning of the scene of suffering. In ancient Greek tragedy, the scene of suffering comes after the point of catastrophe, when the hero does not meet death within the body of the play. The greatest example for this is the last part of *King Oedipus* and the whole of *Oedipus at Colonus*, the first two plays of the Oedipus Trilogy. Oedipus' scene of suffering begins after he has blinded himself and goes on through the end of the play, and stretches over the years that finally bring him to the gates of the city of Colonus and is concluded at the end of the second play, when he finally disappears mysteriously –like a god- under the fog that spreads over the hill where –not accepted within the city walls- he had been having a rest. The great amount of suffering he has gone through for years has won Oedipus a status above that of other mortals. Sophocles raises him to the rank of almost a god.

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In Shakespearean tragedy, on the other hand, the scene of suffering comes before the scene of catastrophe, just before the tragic hero meets his death. Macbeth's speech, in which he gets reconciled to the fact that man's life is meaningless is the most significant of Shakespeare's scenes of suffering:

Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (*Macbeth* IV.iv.24-8)

Sophocles and Shakespeare were two poets, who lived in two significant eras of humanistic thought and who both glorified man and lamented for him through the "tragic form". Beckett was born in 1906 and lived long enough to serve as a witness to almost all that happened during the twentieth century. What he mainly observed in that vast era was man's desolation in a world transformed into a waste land by the very technology that had marked a new phase in Western civilization in the previous century. Besides, the two world wars had done away with all the nicely formulated humanistic definitions man could pride in.

Beckett was in possession of a long heritage of the genre of tragedy and very well aware of the fact that, before anything, tragedy involved man's quest for a proper definition of himself. This definition would to some extent make up for man's essential depravity –his mortality. Sophocles had focused on man's use of his free choice, covertly going against the generally accepted concept of existence governed by deities and foreshadowed by oracles. Shakespeare had liberated man from the grip of fate-shaping powers and made him take the full responsibility of structuring his own fate by his own free will. Both Sophocles and Shakespeare had put man through a test of promoting himself from the position of being earthbound to that of becoming godlike.

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Samuel Beckett, on the other hand, lived in an age, when – unlike Sophocles or Shakespeare- the playwright would not be able to complete the full cycle of tragedy proper. The conventions of tragedy proper would no longer serve in the quest for a correct definition of man. In short, man could no longer be glorified through tragedy proper; man could only be lamented for. For, in Beckett's century man had betrayed man. Man had deprived man of his sense of honour, his self-esteem, his sense of integrity, his hopes and aspirations by exposing millions of people to all sorts of humiliation, physical torture and violent death. In short, man had lost all his sense of identity that had guaranteed a meaningful existence. Man's position in this world was tragic because his existence was not meaningful.

For Beckett striving towards making one's existence meaningful was a useless effort. In writing for the theatre, he devised his own way of treating man's tragedy. He focused upon the post-tragic position of man. That is why the element of catastrophe, which is a structural component of tragedy proper, does not take place within the body of Beckett's plays.

Beckett, paved the way -along with other playwrights- towards what Martin Esslin formulated as "the theatre of the absurd". Within this medium, all sorts of tragic patterning that clarifies the conditions and past events that have led the hero to his final "critical position" have been omitted. Unlike Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, in which the neatly structured narration of past action, along with the revelations of messengers carrying with them the secrets of the past, serve to set the background for the action of the play, is absent from Beckettian drama. While in Ancient Greek or Shakespearean tragedy the past experience of a character is made explicit through neatly arranged dialogues or the action that takes place on the stage, Beckett's drama avoids such clarity. The most critical point in the hero's life that foreshadows his fall in Sophoclean or Shakespearean tragedy is in Beckettian drama a past event, which remains vague throughout the play just as the reasons for the protagonist's conduct are not fully accounted for.

In short, Beckett has formulated the expression of his tragic vision of man within only one coordinate of tragedy proper –simply “the scene of suffering”. At the time *Waiting for Godot* (1953) was produced, Europe had lost belief not only in man, but also the idea of a benevolent God that watched over mankind. For Beckett, man was born into this world for no good reason at all, and his efforts to improve his position would end in failure; in any case, the moment man was born, he was beginning to move towards his grave. Beckett’s protagonists, thus being far removed from the clear conception of a tragic character like Oedipus, end up as mere *victims of irony* in one sense or another. It follows that within Beckett’s tragic vision, man’s experience could only be expressed in scenes of suffering. In other words, in mid-twentieth century Beckett takes up the Oedipus story from the point where the hero went into perpetual exile and his long wanderings took him to the gates of the city of Colonus. In 1603, Shakespeare pointed to this kind of exile stamped by man’s endless suffering, through Hamlet’s remark to Ophelia about the pitiful position of man eternally stuck in his lifetime between his godly and beastly aspects: “What should such fellows as I / do crawling between earth and heaven?” (*Hamlet* III.i.126-7). Four centuries later, Beckett showed man literally stuck between the earth and heaven in *Waiting for Godot*. The position of Vladimir and Estragon, who are stationed forever on one side of a “country road” so as to wait for Godot, would make up the main line of action.

Beckett’s dramatic writing can be formulated as one that focuses on the scenes of suffering in the aftermath of some sort of catastrophe. Introduced only to the post-tragic position of the characters, we are not informed about what kind of catastrophe has taken place before the action of the plays begin. The most dramatic catastrophe may be found in *Endgame*, as Hamm and Clove may be guessed to be the survivors of a nuclear explosion; yet, we can never tell. Perhaps the catastrophe in Winnie’s life in *Happy Days* was her loss of youth and beauty. In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, the point of catastrophe seems to be the wrong choices made in youthful years. In the play called *Play*, the catastrophe appears to be the tension experienced in the relationship

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concerning a male and two females that got tangled in a love triangle. From these examples it is easy to see that in Beckett's drama, the idea of catastrophe may be associated with ordinary experiences. In *Not I* Beckett moves one step further. The catastrophic event for the daughter who has been spending her life by taking care of her mother seems to be the moment she was born. This brings us near the core of Beckett's tragic vision concerning man. Through immense suffering, man has merely been paying the price of having been born. This fact has been explicitly stated in *Waiting for Godot*, when Estragon makes a reference to Calderon, the celebrated Spanish playwright, who, in his play titled *Life is a Dream* says, "Man's greatest sin is to have been born". In *Waiting for Godot* the dialogue runs as follows:

Vladimir: Suppose we repented.

Estragon: Repented what?

[...]

Estragon: Our being born? (I. 11)

This statement inevitably calls to mind the idea of the Original Sin, but can also be understood as the lament for man, who has to go through extreme suffering not because he has made a tragic choice, but simply because he was born.

Unlike ancient Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, in which the "cause" is as important as the "effect", the emphasis of Beckettian drama is on the "effect", no matter what the cause may have been. Moreover, unlike Sophoclean or Shakespearean treatment of character, Beckett works his way through representative characters –like those in morality plays- that no longer hold on to geographical space and historical time in a society. They are the universal men, past all illusion and energy for action, who wander aimlessly like blind Oedipus in exile or are tied up to a single spot, like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. For Beckett this is the only truth about man's life on the earth; for, as man approaches old age, he gets distanced from the

illusions (concerning social status) he once cherished like the heroes of Sophocles or Shakespeare. What is left to him now is a tedious process of waiting till he fills up his time on the earth. The process of waiting is accompanied by trivial games that give one the impression that he is capable of holding on to life, as seen most pathetically in the case of Winnie in *Happy Days*. This kind of game playing adds further pathos to the loosely structured Beckettian drama, in which plot and character no longer serve a proper function.

One of the most significant departures of Beckettian drama from Ancient Greek and Shakespearean tragedy is the function of memory. The Sophoclean or Shakespearean character (in other words, the social-historical-geographical man) is endowed with a very good memory as “tragic method” wholly depends on the clarity of what happened in the past through the revelation of the well remembered truth.

Beckett’s characters, on the other hand, are deprived of a good memory. As they remember things only in bits and pieces, they are incapable of reconstructing their past. For Beckett, if you have lived long enough, all memories fade and the truth of an individual’s experience can no longer be separated from that of others. In Beckett’s later work, where the character disintegrates into sounds and visual images, the power that conducts the memory is either an impersonal tape recorder as in *Krapp’s Last Tape* or an impersonal spotlight that dictates the bodiless human faces to remember and narrate in the play titled *Play*. In Beckettian drama, truth that is no longer remembered is no longer truth. The more one forgets, the further he approaches the core of the truth concerning man’s place and function in the universe –simply that, man was born to die. In *Breath*, the shortest play ever written for the stage, which lasts about 30 seconds, the “visual and auidial components that make up the genre of drama are minimized as ‘light versus darkness’ and ‘sound versus silence’”. First the sound of breathing is heard in the darkness; then the stage becomes light as the crying voice of a baby takes over. In a few seconds, the sound of breathing is heard again and when it stops the stage is once more darkened. Man is born and then he dies. Some years earlier, Pozzo had already explained the meaning of this bit of drama in *Waiting for*

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Godot: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, and it's night once more." (Act 2).

Unlike the heroes in Sophoclean and Shakespearean tragedy, Beckettian characters remain inarticulate throughout. They talk in fragments and hardly worry about establishing communication. None of the topics introduced is properly treated as the characters talk to themselves rather than to each other. The dialogues, if any, are usually interrupted by silences and pauses and when one particular train of thought is lost, it only comes back in the form of mechanical repetition that permeates the whole play like the refrain of a tedious song as that found in *Waiting for Godot*:

Estragon: Let's go.

Vladimir: We can't.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot.

Estragon: Ah! (I. 15)

All the same they keep on talking. They have to talk, to avoid the voices of the dead people that keep on whispering to them in various forms:

Estragon: [...]let us to converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.

Vladimir: You're right, we're inexhaustable.

Estragon: It's so we won't think.

[...]

Estragon. It's so we won't hear.

[...]

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir. They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

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Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Silence.

Vladimir: They all speak at once.

Estragon: Each one to itself.

Silence.

Vladimir: Rather they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

[...]

Vladimir: What do they say?

Estragon: They talk about their lives.

Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.

Estragon: They have to talk about it.

Vladimir: To be dead is not enough for them.

Estragon: It is not sufficient.

Silence.

Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like ashes. (II. 58)

This passage completes the cycle of our discussion concerning the post-tragic aspect of Beckettian drama. Man's protest against his mortality continues even after death and attains a mythical quality that represents a unanimous lament of man. In his dramatic writing Samuel Beckett has contributed to the myths of the oral tradition that have been whispering to the generations of the future, man's most deeply rooted concern, his mortality. Beckett lay no claim to tragedy proper; but has surely done his share of representing man in a tragic light in his particular kind of dramatic writing.

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