



Beckett's Paradox: Exploring the Abyss of Human Existence

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how do themes of suffering, despair, and insignificance find in Samuel Beckett's works. Employing a perspective of reader response theory, a thorough analysis of Beckett's prominent works traces the nihilistic view of human existence within Beckett's narrative. It reveals that Beckett's well-crafted characters are trapped in a futile world and it hardly allows them to be free. It concludes with the assertion that Beckett's works as a poignant reflection on the human condition, depicting struggles and disillusionment by individuals in a world devoid of inherent purpose. As it also deals with Beckett's lesser-known works, it expands the horizon of Beckett scholarship by enhancing our understanding of Beckett's profound contributions to the literary canon.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, Samuel Beckett has emerged as a sort of "scholarly nirvana" (Singer, 2005) owing to the unprecedented quality of questions he raises against closed systems of religious and social constructs. In addition, he pioneered the tradition of revolting against received literary conventions by exploding the traditional concepts of fiction writing. Thus, his unconventional oeuvre, coupled with its textual obscurity, renders him a complex writer. This aspect of his writing, according to P.J. Murphy and others, places him at a peculiar crossroads (Murphy, Loerch, McClure, & Solomon, 1994).

Beckett scholarship reflects this intricate phenomenon by studying how Beckett shows doubts about firm beliefs in any position, continually puzzling academics through the cultivation of paradoxes and contradictions. Implicitly, Beckett places the onus on the scholars to perceive him through diverse angles and provide ample interpretation. Accordingly, each new generation of scholars approaches Beckett's works with afresh insight, broadening the vistas of Beckett scholarship.

The rapid rise in the Beckett critical industry originates from the huge success of *Waiting for Godot*, which resulted in an increased interest of critics in his other works. Literary critics often argue that Beckett has carved out a unique place in the critical landscape of literature as a result of his deep exploration of the complex association between struggling humanity and the world.

Regarding this, Baldwin (1981) affirms that, while Beckett has never been associated with any particular political group or literary movement, his works express nothing but the sufferings of humanity (p. 2). Similarly, David Hesla remarks that despite its dialectical wisdom, reasonable grace and painful self-consciousness, Beckett's art overwhelmingly and predominantly speaks of humanity as quoted in (Cohn, 1972). Hesla claims that the characters in Beckett's works are at odds with his mastery of art, depicting humanity as an intensely insignificant, miserable, frantic, and inconsistent creation within the universe. These characters are part of the universe, but they are portrayed as alienated and constantly facing the threat of imminent collapse.

There are the following objectives of the present study;

- To explore the paradoxical elements of Beckett's works, explicitly focusing on the connection between the unrivalled brilliance of Beckett's art and its portrayal of human nothingness.
- To reveal how Beckett's meticulously crafted characters wrestle with feelings of desolation, impotence, and irrationality to allow the readers to conceive the depth of Beckett's portrayal of a bleak and purposeless human life.
- To employ a perspective of reader response theory to analyse prominent features of Beckett's work to accentuate these thematic concerns.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brilliance and Darkness: Art and Humanity

Beckett's works vibrantly capture the severely bitter and utterly dark aspects of the human experience. As a writer, none surpasses the unparalleled brilliance and identical virtuosity of Beckett's art. Likewise, no other writer creates characters which plummet to depths lower than those in Beckett's world. Thus, a paradox emerges between the creator and the created. By virtue of this, readers are caught in a tug-of-war between the symmetrical spirit of Beckett's work and crumbled representation of the humanity projected within it. Beckett's writing projects those characters that mostly raise questions about existence, and their gloomy circumstances probably serve as answers. This results in generating an overwhelming sense of negativity, hopelessness, and regret. Thus, they feel that they are trapped in an inescapable web of anguish, yearning for refuge in "the end," namely death. This idea is explicitly depicted in *Stirring Still*, "No matter how and no matter where. Time and grief and self-so-called. Oh all to end" (Beckett & Gontarski, 1995) (p. 265). Interestingly, the notion of 'end' is arbitrary as it signifies death, which persists in Beckett's world, yet characters hardly actually die. Instead, they persist while enduring consistent pain and suffering. This prevailing sense of entropy characterizes the most soul-crushing aspect of Beckett's works.

Within the overwhelming theme of human suffering and tragedy, Beckett vibrantly portrays the gradual decline and looming destruction of this world, which gives rise to numerous challenges for humanity. Through his ingenious works, he constantly depicts creates characters who endure harsh and hellish days in a world where life is reduced to an unwanted, unsolicited and mischievous gift devoid of positive meaning, posing the dilemma of not being able to cherish or discard it. This concept is poignantly projected in *The Unnamable*, in which the protagonist promulgates, 'I was given a penum, at birth perhaps, as a punishment for having been born perhaps, or for no particular reason' (Beckett, 1976) (p.304). By the end of this novel, he finds himself trapped in a predetermined fate. He professes that he cannot go but will go on as he is devoid of choice. Through this character, Beckett effectively projects the notion that human beings lack the necessary tools and agency to navigate the complexities of this universe. This incongruity permits Beckett to portray life as nothing more than an unremitting punishment and the world as something reduced to "void".

The profoundly appalling, hopeless, and scary image of humanity permeates almost all of Beckett's works with increased force and intensity. Beckett, in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, further emphasizes this bleak perspective, stating, "No more sky or earth. Finished high and low. Nothing but black and white. [...] But black. Void. [...]. Home at last (Beckett, 1989, p. 75). This portrayal of destruction and helplessness intensely projects the misery and desolation that Beckett links with humanity.

Beckett's depiction of the universe, especially after the post-world War era, stimulates debates among critics, who label him either existentialist through tracings the signs of rootless, detached and ineffectual humanity or a nihilist who sees humanity as deprived, depressed, desolate, and perverse (Valentine, 2009). The impact of the post-war era is apparent in his exploration of human despair and the absence of meaning, capturing the prevailing disillusionment of that time. Ihab Hassan Beckett argues that he presents nothing but a 'nihilistic view of the world' (Hassan, 1967). (p. 19).

Beckett's characters who pursue to attach meaning to their life, but only to be with failure and futility. For instance, Beckett's Krapp struggles hard to make sense of his life, which leads him to a catastrophe. Beckett skillfully constructs a fragmented and redundant existence for

Krapp and this leads him to forget the idea of what he was to achieve. It fills him with anger and frustration, he feels cursed all around. Thus, he views his life as pointless and worthless, stating '[...] hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that's all done with anyway' (Beckett, 2006, p. 222). Despite this, he is condemned to continue living life, which has not ended at all. Stripped of the ability to recognize and remember significant events and signs, he explores his papers and fails to connect striking symbols, "Mother at rest at last.... Hm.... The black ball.... [...].... Memorable.... what?" (Beckett, 2006).(p. 217).

Beckett's characters, like Krapp, consistently confront emptiness and meaninglessness. For instance, Krapp's inner curiosity to search and know yields noting but bleakness, and more confusion. Forgetting his mother's death or her grave, might be an insignificant for readers/audience, but holds very substantial significance for Krapp. However, he identifies that he does not know what he thinks, he knows; or at least, he has known. Here, it comes when life becomes no more than a meaningless circle of days. It reveals that Beckett's characters like Krapp are to face misery, which destroys the sense of living. They are not convicted criminals with a limited sphere of activities, yet they experience a loss of keenness for life due to the constant pain and certainty of imminent death. Thus, Beckett's world becomes the world of a thrown human being who finds such a room to exist where he must face unearned anguishes as well. He is trapped in a web, there is no escape for him; if he wants to run from life, he cannot. Examining through this angle, Alain Badiou has labelled Beckett, "A writer of the absurd, of despair, of empty skies, of incommunicability and of eternal solitude — in sum, an existentialist" (Badiou, 2003)(p. 38).

3. Methodology: Reading as a Phenomenon

The overall aim of this paper is to supplement Beckett scholarship by bringing in a new angle of intercultural literary reception. Rather than relying on established scholarship, this paper involves an aesthetic reading of Beckett's work to identify how he portrays human issues. Recognizing social constructivists' ideas that interaction among human beings constructs knowledge and leads to human development, I have adopted Wolfgang Iser's reader-response approach as one that allows maximum freedom to the process of reading. As a result, this paper falls into the phenomenological qualitative methodology.

Phenomenology of reading theorized by Iser and Jauss, views reading as a phenomenon, which suggests that reading brings a literary text to life. Otherwise, it is just printed material. In other words, a reader's consciousness, reflections, and personal experiences affect the understanding of a text. This ideology moves away from other reader-response critics who allow a minimal or maximum role to the reader. For example, Rosenblatt's focus is more on the text than the reader and Stanley Fish sees every interpretation of the reader as correct. Phenomenology, according to (Bressler, 2011), prefers the perceiver to the text. Bressler argues that "objects exist if, and only if, we register them in our own consciousness. [...] The true poem can exist only in the reader's consciousness, not on the printed page" (p. 77). Iser (1978) also differentiates the theory of aesthetics of reception from the theory of aesthetic response, proposing that his work should 'be regarded as a theory of aesthetic response (*Wirkungstheorie*) and not as theory of aesthetics of reception (*Rezeptionstheorie*)' (p. x). Sketching the differences more clearly, he argues:

A theory of reception [. . .] always deals with existing readers, whose reaction testify to certain historically conditioned experience of literature. A theory of response has its roots in the text; a theory of reception arises from a history of readers' judgements (Iser, 1978) (p. x)

In simple terms, Iser views meaning in the combined relationship between the text and the reader's consciousness. Iser's interest in securing response at the micro-level raises the value of a reader. This aspect, in particular, supports this research to measure the aesthetic responses 'in terms of the dialectic relationship' between the Beckettian oeuvre and readers.

Literature is an imaginative human product that encourages the reader to reflect in order to link literary objects with reality. Iser argues that 'in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text.' (Iser, 1978) (p. 274). Remarkably, it reveals that importance should be given to the reading experience.

Iser posits that "the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader" (Iser, 1978) (p. 21). It suggests that the reading process develops a dynamic relationship between the readers and the text. Text in itself projects the reader's role through creating a space, which evokes 'indeterminacies.' On a micro level, the indeterminacy can be within words, repetition of words, sentence or phrase level. On the macro level, it can take various roles through the structure of narrative or other forms. It evokes the readers to raise questions, and the text does not answer these questions. As a result, the reader brings his own answers to the equation.

By adopting this perspective for this paper, I have identified the interplay between the text and readers during the process of meaning-making while reading. As a result, it enables the paper to expand the existing Beckett scholarship.

4. Data Analysis

Beckett's characters often find themselves trapped in a condemned life lacking of profound freedom. This anarchic perspective of life also runs in *Molloy*, where Molloy, the titular character, perceives himself as half-dead, already having a partial life. He reflects on his life, a paradox of completion and continuation, challenging temporal norms: "My life [...] now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?" (Beckett, 1958, p. 31). This aspect of Krapp's contradictory life, defying traditional temporal categories, exemplifies the paradoxical nature of humans in Beckett's world.

Molloy's views on existence raise many questions about the ambiguous mystery of life. The view of life, though seemingly over, remains an elusive symbolic death that produces a sense of ambiguity. The effort to frame this experience within the available structure of time and language proves to be increasingly problematic. Ironically, the language fails to capture this essence. Bataille (2000) considers Molloy as a universal character grappling with the limitations of language which fails in describing the essence of his being. Bataille argues that "we cannot give a name" to this aspect of life" as it is indistinct, essential, and "elusive, quite simply, it is *silence* (Bataille, 2000) (p. 87). Therefore, every new word heralds the death of the previous one, that is to say, a new word finds its life after the demise of the previous one. Amidst this, silence occupies a crucial role. This silence is death; it is not physical death; it is the death of expression as it is unable to transport the agony of characters. For such a condition, Bataille (2000) aptly asserts that '*literature necessarily gnaws away at existence and the world, reducing to nothing* (but this nothing is horror)' (p. 92). This inescapable horror consistently weakens the worth of life, making it an indefinable and unsettling perception.

Taken as a whole, the picture suggests that Beckett is interested in the contemporary condition of man as full of suffering for making meanings out of this contemporary tragic situation. His body of work deals with the transient nature of life, highlighting the process of "*swelling, passing, dying*" rather than the simplistic view of "*from naught come, to naught gone*" (Beckett, 1976) (p. 247). Richard Harries thinks that Beckett dominantly characterizes an agonizing view of life, which echoes the prayer recited at the graveyard, "Man that is born of woman has but a short time to live, and is full of misery" (Harries, 2018, p. 84). Both birth and death are the red lines, leaving a small gap in between, where neither wishes nor prayers are offered. Thus, this intervening period is fraught with calamity; when one approaches death but has not yet died; the misery of life becomes visibly intense. Vladimir encapsulates this situation, remarking, "The air is full of our cries" (Beckett, 2006) (p. 84). This concept is epitomized in *A Piece of Monologue*, when Beckett expresses, "Birth was the death of him. Ghastly grinning ever since. Up at the lid to come. In cradle and crib" (Beckett, 2006) (p. 425). In the addenda of *Watt*, Beckett precisely seizes the whole process:

dead calm, then a murmur, a name, a murmured name, in doubt, in fear, in love, in fear, in doubt, [...], swelling, passing, dying, from naught come, to naught gone (Beckett, 1976) (p. 247).

In the background of Beckett's investigation of human conditions, the play *Breath* serves as a vivid outlet for the temporary space between birth and death. Lasting almost 35 seconds, *Breath* encapsulates the essence of the transitional state between birth and death.

- Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish. Hold about five seconds.
- Faint brief cry and immediately inspiration and slow increase of light together reaching maximum together in about ten seconds. Silence and hold about five seconds.
- Expiration and slow decrease of light together reaching minimum together (light as in 1) in about ten seconds and immediately cry as before. Silence and hold about five seconds. (Beckett, 2006)(p. 371)

Through this theatrical expression, Beckett succeeds in projecting the fleeting and mysterious nature of human life in a mere 35 seconds. The portrayal of life and its associated rudiments in Beckett's works depicts inexplicable and ridiculous aspects of humanity. For instance, *Waiting for Godot* frequently indicates that characters strive to define life within the short span of time between *from naught come, to naught gone* (Beckett, 1976) (p. 248). Also, Beckett allows them to try to recognise the meaning of life in this universe — what is it between cradle and crib? Vladimir advocates, "Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand" (Beckett, 2006) (p. 19). Vladimir depicts that he wants to wait to know more about life and to solve its mystery. In contrast, Estragon dismisses this suggestion and instead believes that "it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes" (Beckett, 2006)(p. 19). Here, iron possibly stands for the human body and Estragon wants it to utilise this period according to his own wishes before it gets cold [dies out]. Estragon embodies a rebellious character and is more interested in taking action. He proposes to accept the freedom that life permits and does not want to be bothered about the issues of damnation and salvation. He is concerned to know what life is. He also strives to convey a message to humanity to see in life, accept its freedom and not see what is around or what is afterwards.

While Vladimir works as a cultural force, a more contemplative character, and remains committed to waiting as he is interested in knowing what Godot would offer, then they both will decide either take it or leave it (Beckett, 2006) (p. 19). However, Pozzo, later on, punctures this ideology of Vladimir. He declares there is nothing beneficial in waiting, claiming that everything is fated and inevitable. To support this, he announces, "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (Beckett, 2006)(p. 83). This perspective is contradictory to his optimism in Act 1 when all was well for Pozzo. Now blind, Pozzo sees life as another name for death and it signifies nothing.

In this manner, *Waiting for Godot* portrays each moment of fleeting life leads to disappointment. Irrespective of one's positive actions, the results prove to be futile. Therefore, the span between birth and death only reinforces the sense of disillusionment.

In *Act without Words*, Beckett describes this theme differently. Here, the protagonist's consistent series of failures lead him to disappointment, which frames his destiny. G. C. Barnard thinks of him as a person who has accepted his defeat. According to him, lying in "the empty desert" shows that he has opted out of his struggle (Barnard & Beckett, 1970) (p. 109). His idea suggests that an external force has defeated him, but he draws himself back from the struggle, which is significant. He looks like a rebellious character but not a heroic rebel. S. E. Gontarski asserts that the man "is a not-so-banal dramatic image of rebellion, of artistic rebellion, of Sartre's man freeing himself from outside forces that may be a god, instinct, tradition, mythology, human nature" (Gontarski, 1976)(37). This view is literally enclosed in the text, "He remains lying on his side, his face towards the auditorium, staring before him" (Beckett, 2006)(p. 206).

However, the concluding text offers another way of observing this phenomenon. The alluring objects, he wishes to reappear but this time, the protagonist does not respond to them, in spite of a strong longing for them. The text portrays that "He does not move. The tree is pulled up and disappears in flies. He looks at his hands (Beckett, 2006) (p. 206). The protagonist rejects to pursue them now. Rejecting this, he rejects the external; it is a supreme denial of external help, the denial of the force that has put him on the stage. The protagonist appears to be a different man, he just has realised that sufferings are within and also beyond, no need to go for external solutions, but rather to accept the limitations and endure the consequences of being.

Beckett's projection of a bleak and nihilistic view of life, characterized by the denial of the inherent purpose of humanity and continuous aimless circular movements of his characters, offers us a perspective through which we view Beckett's oeuvre as existentialism or mimetic nihilism. Throughout his works, the presence of nothingness and horror is prevalent; with human reference serving to intensify the void. Beckett's exploration of existence discovers that life, in reality, is a nightmare. In an interview, Beckett announces that "I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past" (Mercier, 1977)(p. 8). His idea reflects in Beckett's works which represent the barrenness of the world full of ignorance, inhibition, and despair. It is a world in which humans' desires and struggles always confront with the irrationality of existence, discovering a sense of impotence which is total and complete. Ironically, despite the enormous trauma experienced by his characters, Beckett faces an inherent difficulty in expressing and explaining this anguish, as is exemplified in *Watt*:

who may tell the tale
[...]
nothingness
in words enclose? (Beckett, 1976)(p. 247).

Most of the times, Beckett's exploration of 'nothing and 'impotence' yields noteworthy insights for critics. The spectacle of possible implications hidden within the concept of 'nothing' generates challenge in accepting Shakespeare's famous saying 'nothing will come of nothing' (Shakespeare, 2001)(i.1). Tracing the causes of the human predicament in Beckett's works, Albert Camus finds that the absurdity knocks down the rationality because "it is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints" and this conflict continues in as "the contradiction that binds them together" (Camus, 2000)(p. 498). Camus argues that the universe has lost its binding association with God, or perhaps there is no God to resolve the problems of the world. As a result, humanity is predestined to endure suffering.

Similarly, Dermot and Christopher (2006) argues that Beckett effectively establishes the failure of the idea of the human world where humanity endures suffering, but its Creator does not. He records that Beckett's work exudes an atmosphere of existential angst, hopelessness and human abandonment"; on the other hand, the characters in Beckett's world "portray a rootless, homeless, alienated humanity" (Moran, 2006, p. 93). Obviously, this is the trademark or motif of Beckett with rare exceptions. His oeuvre establishes that human dilemma stems from within the humans as they have enslaved them with an external force that has already divorced them, leaving them isolated. Consequently, Beckett moves beyond merely asserting that, "Nature has forgotten us" and eagerly to announce that, "There's no more nature" (Beckett, 2006)(p. 97).

Observing this concept, numerous textual references in Beckett's works validate it. For instance, Mr. Knott never bothers to see Watt, the long-awaited Godot never turns up, the 'dreadful privation' deprives tramps of laughing wholeheartedly, Clov finds significance in nothingness, Hamm undergoes everlasting suffering, the death hovers over the dustbin-fated Nell and Nagg, and Winnie has nothing to palliate her ceaseless agony except the banalities of her chitchat.

This is Beckett's unceasing pattern through which he exposes the shortcomings and limitations of human beings. Therefore, his work dwells on the unending tragedy of humanity and its association with an uncaring, indifferent and inconsiderate external force. More often than not, Beckett's theme of despair is linked with suffering, barrenness and irrationality and the Beckettian oeuvre depicts the world where life exists uneasily, and religious belief does not tone down the shocks. This is what Beckett projects in his often-quoted line, the organized profession of religious belief is annoying one (Bair, 1990)(p. 18).

5. Conclusion

Drawing upon the close reader response theory, this paper concludes with the assertion that Beckett's work primarily addresses the pathetic situation of humanity in the world. This discussion suggests that Beckett challenges the traditional notion of the creation of humans with a purpose and benevolent effect of the external force. Rather, his characters have been put at the mercy of the universe that is either inhospitable to exist in or beyond their capabilities to cope successfully with its challenges. Through this examination, the paper reveals that Beckett prompts the readers to think whether it is the failure of humanity itself or the cruelty of the

Creator responsible for such conditions. The depiction of his characters, burdened by an allusive and overwhelming exterior power suggests they are crafted from substandard and dismal material. Deirdre Bair recounts, "His nights were spent walking and talking with Geoffrey Thompson, to whom he bitterly complained about the so-called God who would permit such suffering" (Bair, 1990, p. 405). It is interesting to explore how Beckett exploits human suffering to exemplify his idea that either human creation is useless or the belief in a promising future is devoid of worth. It can be suggested that Beckett's works provoke philosophical inquiry, encourage a deeper understanding, and foster introspection of the complexities of humanity.

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