

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

Samuel Beckett:

The Process of Impoverishment in his Theatre Plays

Vedoucí diplomové práce / Supervisor:

doc. Ondřej Pilný, PhD

Praha, January 2011

Vypracovala / Author:

Vendula Kmoníčková

Studijní obor / Subjects:

Anglistika a amerikanistika - Sociologie

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

V Praze, dne 18. ledna 2011 / Prague, January 18, 2011

Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter 1: The Theatre of the Absurd	7
1.1 The Theatre of the Absurd in Context	7
1.2 Sources of the Theatre of the Absurd	8
1.3 Theatre of the Absurd as Realism of Our Time.....	10
1.4 Formal Characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd.....	12
Chapter 2: Defining Features of Beckett's Plays	17
Chapter 3: From Absurdism to Minimalism: Development of Specific Aspects	25
3.1 Setting, Props and the Stage	25
3.2 Characters	34
3.3 Plot.....	40
3.4 Dialogue.....	54
Chapter 4: Minimalism	60
Conclusion	64
Abstract	68
Abstract in Czech / Souhrn v českém jazyce	69
Bibliography	70

Introduction

Since the publication of Martin Esslin's work on Absurd drama, the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett has been considered to belong to the tradition of Absurdism. Nevertheless, he has been associated with minimalism, too. The aim of this thesis is to discuss his plays for the stage in connection with both of these styles. The labels of the Theatre of the Absurd and minimalism have up till now been used only separately and as unrelated when discussing different texts by Beckett. However, the fact that they both appear in relation to his work invokes the question of whether there possibly is any relationship between them. Thus, this paper's objective is to examine the development of style in Beckett's theatre plays.

Esslin discusses *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* in his work. The essential characteristic of these plays, according to him, is their "lack of story or plot, development, characterization and motivation, dialogue, theme, suspense, beginning, end, or plain common sense".¹ Nevertheless, the works that followed did not possess these attributes either. Actually, they lacked more and more and moved further away from the hitherto conventional drama. The increasing tendency towards reduction and compactness has led to Beckett's later work being described as minimalist. Minimalism manifested itself in various art forms; literary minimalism in connection to Beckett has been described primarily by Enoch Brater, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit.

Brater discusses *Not I*, *That Time*, *Footfalls*, *A Piece of Monologue*, *Rockaby*, *Ohio Impromptu*, *Catastrophe* and *What Where*. He also includes plays that were written for the screen and television, such as *Film*, *Eh Joe*, *Ghost Trio*, *...but the clouds...*, and *Quad*. Nevertheless, only stage plays will be discussed here. As Brater

1 Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980) xv.

puts it, in these Beckett explores “what remains in the theatre, live and palpable and real, after so much has been taken away; how much doesn’t have to happen onstage for a lyrical dramatic moment to expand and unfold”.² According to Patrice Pavis, minimalist theatre “seek[s] to reduce its effects, representations and actions to a minimum, as if what is essential lay in the unspoken”, and specifically with Beckett, in the “ontologically unsayable”.³ In this spirit, Beckett’s later plays continue in his previous tendencies of impoverishment and fully develop what had commenced with the Theatre of the Absurd.

As a matter of fact we cannot draw a sharp line between the two categories; the transformation is gradual and does not exclude traces of minimalism from the earlier plays and of Absurdism in the later ones. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that on the way from *Godot* to *What Where* a transformation takes place. Absurdist plays lacked story; minimalist plays are intended to lack as much as possible. Bersani and Dutoit describe the development in Beckett’s work as follows: “*Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Happy Days*, and, in his prose fiction, the trilogy [...] are expressive in ways that the later texts are not. It is only around 1960 [...] that Beckett will move from the thematization of unrelatedness to the production of a new type of insignificant text.”⁴ Bersani and Dutoit devote their attention merely to prose texts of *How It Is, Company, Ill Seen Ill Said*, and *Worstward Ho*. However, they provide extremely interesting explication of minimalism and comparison to Beckett’s earlier style.

For the purpose of this paper, let us call the first four stage plays, written in the 1950s – *Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Krapp’s Last Tape*, and *Happy Days* – early plays, and all of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, from *Play* onwards, later plays. All of these

2 Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) ix.

3 Patrice Pavis, “Minimalist theatre,” *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis* (Toronto: University Toronto Press, 1998) 215.

4 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 27.

will be analyzed in terms of setting, plot, characterization and dialogue, and traits of Absurdism and minimalism will be discussed. The first chapter presents an overview of where the Theatre of the Absurd came from, and what its philosophy and formal characteristics are. The second one deals specifically with important features of Beckett's plays. Chapter number three explores development in particular areas: the setting of the plays, characters, plot and the use of dialogue. The fourth chapter gives a general overview of minimalism and answers the question of how it relates specifically to Beckett.

The argument of the thesis is that while impoverishment is a feature of both the styles of Absurdism and minimalism, and while these can appear independently on one another, there is a process of reduction going on in Beckett's drama for stage due to which minimalism in Beckett can be seen as his Absurdism taken even further.

Chapter 1: The Theatre of the Absurd

1.1 The Theatre of the Absurd in Context

The Theatre of the Absurd is an avant-garde style of art that developed in Europe of the 1950s. It was not an organized movement and its representatives would never meet, cooperate, let alone form a manifesto. What would later become known as the Theatre of the Absurd appeared in isolation with writers in various countries. Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Jean Genet were based in France, although the first two were born in Ireland and Romania, respectively. Arthur Adamov was a Russian of Armenian origin. Harold Pinter came from the Great Britain. Other Absurdist playwrights were from Spain, Germany, or Switzerland. Václav Havel represents the Eastern European strand. And in the 1960s, the Theatre of the Absurd found its American version with Edward Albee.

As Esslin says, “Each of the playwrights concerned seeks to express no more and no less than his own personal vision of the world.”⁵ However, even though these authors come from diverse countries and backgrounds, they have an essential defining feature in common – they are part of the same civilization the basis of which was greatly shaken in the first half of the twentieth century. Apart from two World Wars that shook the Western world to an extent unknown before, the whole system of values and beliefs was impaired. Religious faith was replaced by faith in science, which consequently proved unable to provide answers to the questions raised and to have an

5 Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* 7.

unpredictably destructive potential. The idea of eternal progress turned out to be fake and humanity was given no other option instead.

The central theme becomes that of senselessness and alienation. It reflects the situation of the modern Western man, who was deprived of his world visions of both an almighty God as well as all-comprehending science, and was left without any system of values to give his life order. It is a reaction to the Second World War, a picture of the damaged world in the post-war era, a distraught world deprived of illusions. Esslin described the hallmark of the Absurdist attitude as a “sense that certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions.”⁶

1.2 Sources of the Theatre of the Absurd

The sources of the Theatre of the Absurd can be traced in the Existentialist philosophy of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, and from these even back to Friedrich Nietzsche. Existentialism is a philosophy of the absurdity of human existence. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus introduced the idea of the absurd, our desire for meaning within a world that does not offer any. He was interested in how we experience the Absurd and how we live with it. Our life must have meaning for us to value it. However, we know we will die, and therefore there is no point in our endeavours. This idea constitutes the Paradox of the Absurd: our life is important to us, but we know it is meaningless. Nevertheless, Camus rejected nihilism and believed meaning could be created, even though only provisionally and unstably, in our interpretations.

⁶ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* 23.

However, we cannot regard the Theatre of the Absurd as a collective expression of feelings of the society of the time, as it deals with feelings common to members of the society, but these are expressed subjectively and separately by each individual. In these plays there is no effort to express truths generally valid for everyone, but to express the one unique truth of an individual. On the other hand, these truths are strikingly similar for the members of the given society. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the Theatre of the Absurd is distinct from Expressionism not only in the way the representatives express themselves, but also in the fact that they do not attempt to convey any common truth but a personal one, even though at the end the singular subjective testimonies work to a certain extent universally.

It is interesting to trace the Existentialist ideas even further, to the philosophy of nihilism of the German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche, who pointed out the vacuum our society found itself in in the Modern times. The progress of science the society witnessed caused increasing secularization of the society and recession of Christianity together with its system of morality and values that had ruled the society for thousands of years. Hence the famous quote that “God is dead”. The death of God leads to loss of universal perspective on things and objective truth. We are left in confusion with multiple, individual perspectives, which may lead to nihilism, a belief that nothing is of importance and life lacks purpose, meaning, or value. In his essay on Beckett, John P. Harrington has actually called *Waiting for Godot* “an exercise on absolute nihilism”.⁷

Even though Nietzsche talked of nihilism as a feature of modern age, we find its characteristics even accentuated in postmodernism. Jean Baudrillard has called postmodernity a nihilistic epoch. It questions or even denies the grounds on which Western cultures have based their truths: the existence of objective truth, absolute

7 John P. Harrington, “Samuel Beckett and the Countertradition,” *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, ed. Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 171.

knowledge and meaning, and historical progress. Jean-Francois Lyotard saw the main feature of Postmodernism as the end of metanarratives – large, background constructs, quasi-mythological beliefs about human purpose, human reason and human progress. Beckett stands in between these two eras.

1.3 Theatre of the Absurd as Realism of Our Time

Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd share the subject matter: as Esslin put it, the “senselessness of life, inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose”. The difference is that while the Existential philosophers present this in the form of logically constructed reasoning, the Absurdist theatre “strives to express its sense of senselessness and inadequacy of rational approach by open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought”, which is a more adequate expression of the philosophy. We are talking about a disillusioned age, where the world has ceased to make sense; therefore, the plays that do not make sense become the only possibly true expression of the condition. On the contrary, Camus’ and Sartre’s interpretations manage to make some sense of the world, which, in a world without meaning, makes no sense at all.

Esslin points out that in Absurdism this inner contradiction is overcome:

The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images. This is the difference between the approach of the philosopher and that of the poet; [...] the difference between theory and experience.⁸

8 Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* xix-xx.

The Absurdist theatre makes a further step in that it not only deals with the theme of senselessness, but also incorporates the concept in its form. It makes use of the expressive form, which synthesizes the subject matter and the form in which it is expressed. What Beckett wrote about James Joyce's *Work in Progress* can be applied on Beckett's own work too: "Here form *is* content, content *is* form. [...] [W]riting is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*."⁹

Although it is an opposition to realism, Absurdism paradoxically becomes the realism of the modern times. Edward Albee commented on this:

I would submit that The Theatre of the Absurd, in the sense that it is truly the contemporary theater, facing as it does man's condition as it is, is the Realistic theater of our time; and that the supposed Realistic theater, [...] in the sense that it [...] presents a false picture of ourselves to ourselves, is [...] really and truly The Theatre of the Absurd.¹⁰

And Ionesco stated: "To attack absurdity [of the human condition] is a way of stating the possibility of non-absurdity. [...] Every message of despair is the statement of a situation from which everybody must freely try to find a way out."¹¹

On coming home after World War II Beckett experienced a revelation, image of which he later used in *Krapp's Last Tape*. He came to his mother's house and suddenly realized "the darkness of an inner world".¹² In *Krapp* a different setting of a pier at Dún Laoghaire on a wild, stormy night is used to match the emotions of the experience. Harrington describes the nature of the revelation – similarly to the Existentialist approach to the human condition – as concerning "the bankruptcy of most common

9 Samuel Beckett, "Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce," *Our Exagmination Round His Factification For Incamination Of Work In Progress*, Samuel Beckett et al. (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) 14.

10 Edward Albee, "Which Theater Is the Absurd One?" *The New York Times on the Web*, 25 Feb. 1962, The New York Times, 7 Jul. 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/08/15/specials/albee-absurd.html?_r=2>.

11 Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* 138.

12 James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996) 352.

organizing principles of life and of work and, consequently, awareness not of personal potentiality but of impotence, failure and ignorance.” Such a disappointment only naturally influenced Beckett’s style: “Corresponding to this philosophical revelation, in his literary work every artistic or theatrical principle, such as characterization, resolution or specificity of scene, would be broken.”¹³

1.4 Formal Characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd

In the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, the traditional form of drama was a well-made play, which was based on a classical tragedy as described by Aristotle. It was a naturalist, closed structure drama characterized by “perfectly logical arrangement of its action”. The unfolding of motifs of the action was continuous, tight and gradual; suspense had to be maintained without fail, and the story culminated in a central scene.¹⁴ The Theatre of the Absurd provided an alternative to the traditional drama; Harrington has actually given Beckett’s drama the label of a “countertradition”.

Beckett is not recognizably Irish; he never set his work into an exclusively Irish frame of reference. As a matter of fact, he never set it in any specific frame of reference at all. He is vague as regards the setting, or the background and life-stories of his characters as well as their relationships. Harrington comments: “Simplicity of presentation, with a small cast, austere set and minimal distractions was a perfect style for an unflinching study of the possibility that sustaining certitudes may be illusions.”¹⁵ Besides the common theme of the human condition, the Absurdist plays of different writers share the basic characteristics of the form they use to express it. In the new stage

13 Harrington in Richards 168-9.

14 Pavis, “Well-made play” 438-9.

15 Harrington in Richards 171.

convention the plays lack many attributes that used to be taken for granted. Therefore, it is important first to give an account of the formal features of a well-made play.

According to Aristotle, who was the first to formulate dramatic principles in his *Poetics*, a plot of a play should be “complex”, meaning that it includes five parts: a prologue, episodes, reversal of the situation, recognition, and pathos. The last three, being most important, are called “organic parts of the plot”, with recognition at the heart of everything.¹⁶ It is important to notice, that recognition is a “change from ignorance to knowledge”. In order to bring the play to a close, the protagonist has to find out, learn, or understand something. In the Theatre of the Absurd, such an epiphany never happens.

Another version of plot analysis is Gustav Freytag’s pyramid. It is divided in three main parts – rising action, climax, and falling action – which constitute a pyramidal shape with the climax on top. The gradually ascending part before climax is divided into exposition, rising action, and crisis, which is followed by falling action and final denouement (in other sources resolution or catastrophe).¹⁷

Whichever version one decides to follow, the basic principle is the same. At the beginning, an exposition serves as an introduction that provides background information for a better understanding of the situation. In rising action a conflict is introduced, and at a point of crisis it escalates. Falling action contains a reversal and introduces possibilities of resolution, and a denouement brings the state of things to normal and a play to a close. This does not work for Absurdist plays.

Aristotle stated that plot is “the soul of a tragedy”, or the first principle; the second principle is the character. The main character is either good or bad, he or she serves the manifestation of moral purpose. Ideal protagonist is that of a ruler or leader.

16 Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, Intro. by Francis Fergusson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989) 16-19.

17 M. H. Abrams, “Plot,” *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993) 161-2.

These do not appear in the Absurdist plays, let alone assertions of morality. Even though we can hardly compare drama of the twentieth century with classical Greek tragedy, in *Absurd Drama* Esslin presents a comparison of well-made plays and Absurdist ones:

A well-made play is expected to present characters that are well-observed and convincingly motivated: these plays often contain hardly any recognizable human beings and present completely unmotivated actions. A well-made play is expected to entertain by the ding-dong of witty and logically built-up dialogue: in some of these plays dialogue seems to have degenerated into meaningless babble. A well-made play is expected to have a beginning, a middle, and a neatly tied-up ending: these plays often start at an arbitrary point and seem to end just as arbitrarily.¹⁸

Therefore, we can summarize the most prominent features of a well-made play into three points: a plot with development and suspense, characters that are developed and act under some motivation, and dialogue as a means of logical communication among the characters.

The Theatre of the Absurd has none of these. A story or a plot, development, or suspense, is missing. Sometimes nothing takes place. The plays work with absence, emptiness, and nothingness. In *Waiting for Godot*, the main character whose name the play bears never comes. It is often unclear what is going on, or the action is illogical. Frequently, repetitions occur. The plots are cyclical. Characters of the Absurdist plays are not fully developed, often they are stereotypical. They are either wandering, lost in the chaos of meaningless universe, or motionless, stuck in routine or trapped in physically enclosed spaces. Specifically in Pinter, the characters are trapped in enclosed spaces menaced by some force they cannot understand. In Beckett we encounter

¹⁸ Martin Esslin, *Absurd Drama* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965) 7.

interdependent pairs of characters, where one without the other would be no character at all. Rational behaviour and dialogue lose meaning in Absurdist plays, just as discursive thought. They are inadequate in the illogical world.

The theme of incomprehensibility is coupled with the inadequacy of language to form meaningful human connections. The Absurdist tend to completely bemuse their audience with what they do with language. They degrade it, and laugh at the standard approach to it as a means of conveying meaning. They give up the standard use of dialogue, where utterances follow logically and one responds to another, and use only its form with more or less nonsensical content, or use monologue. The words spoken do not correspond – sometimes they even contradict – the actions of the characters. The Theatre of the Absurd gained some of its reputation for its use of nonsense language that creates misunderstanding among the characters. Its routine dialogue is full of clichés and fails to communicate anything. It is elliptical and secondary to the images on the stage. Language frequently gains a certain phonetic, rhythmical, or almost musical quality.

Pavis also talks about the Absurdist theatre in connection with silence. Silence appears in different instances, commonly in all dramas as part of the rhythmical structure of the performance. However, various playwrights started to use silence differently as an element of composition: there is decipherable silence, silence of alienation, metaphysical and talkative silence. Especially in Beckett, protagonists “switch without warning from absolute aphasia to verbal delirium”. The Theatre of the Absurd is characterized by occurrence of metaphysical silence. It is caused by a “congenital inability to communicate, being condemned to playing with words without being able to relate them to things in any way but through play”.¹⁹

¹⁹ Pavis, “Silence” 336-337.

Therefore, these plays are more grounded in image than in text. While traditional plays are meant to tell a story, Absurdist ones convey a picture only, a poetic image. The drama does not originate from dramatic dialogue anymore, but presents a new type of art, a mixture of art forms: Absurdist drama has been compared to poetry, music, or abstract painting. The difference between the traditional and Absurdist convention is well expressed in Esslin's words:

Narrative or discursive thought proceeds in a dialectical manner and must lead to a result or final message; it is therefore dynamic and moves along a definite line of development. Poetry is above all concerned to convey its central idea, or atmosphere, or mode of being; it is essentially static.²⁰

²⁰ Esslin, *Absurd Drama* 11.

Chapter 2: Defining Features of Beckett's Plays

Besides complying with the features of the Theatre of the Absurd, Beckett's drama obviously has also other distinct features, and it develops in time as well. Whereas the next chapter will be devoted entirely to development of specific aspects of the plays, this one will explore those characteristics of the oeuvre, that were not addressed in the previous chapter in relation to Absurdism, as well as the development in general. As the plays do not tell stories but portray poetic images, they are rather short, but with extensive stage directions. Some of them portray the moment just before death, and most of them moments of contemplation on and judgement of life. Thus they can be seen as set in purgatory, outside space and time. To convey this image, they make use of the Greek philosopher Zeno's paradoxes, as will be described below. The poetic image of the human condition is thus that of death nearing yet unapproachable.

As C oil n D. Owens and Joan N. Radner in accordance with Esslin summarize in their overview, "Beckett's drama has several distinct features: limited action, sparse dialogue, reduction of interest in individual human character, the absence of conventional problem and resolution".²¹ These features are typical for both Absurdism and minimalism. The Theatre of the Absurd is described in terms of "lacking" some features that drama previously used to have. Minimalism strives for "lacking as much as possible", for exploring how much can be taken away for a play to still be a play. Therefore, we can see the transition from Absurdism to minimalism as a process of progressive reduction. This is not to say that minimalism stems from Absurdism or is an

21 C oil n D. Owens and Joan N. Radner, eds., *Irish Drama 1900-1980* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1990) 601.

inevitable result of it, but that in Beckett's oeuvre gradual reduction takes place which results in a style that can be classified as minimalism.

The most apparent layer of this process lies on the surface: reduced duration of the plays. *Waiting for Godot* has seventy-eight pages, the latest plays get by with only nine or even four.²² The plays are more and more stripped down, barer and barer. Not only do these plays – besides *Godot* and *Happy Days* – never have more than one act, after *Play* the number of acts is no longer even stated. They often bear the description of simply a “short play”. An extreme example would be the piece *Breath*, which lasts for thirty-five seconds only and has no characters. Jonathan Kalb actually uses the terms of “late” and “short” plays in relation to Beckett as synonyms.²³

Together with the reduced duration goes the change in proportion of stage directions towards the actual text. Whereas in the early plays there is a paragraph of authorial comments at the beginning and then there are shorter directions dispersed in the text, in the later ones whole paragraphs of comments can be found in the text itself and notes on various aspects of the plays are added in supplements. *Play* is the first piece in need of such explanation. We get information on the use of props, light, the way the text has to be uttered and in what terms repetition can, or must not, differ from the first part. *Breath* consists of stage directions only; there is no text at all. All Beckett's subsequent dramatic works contain paragraphs of comments. *Footfalls* contains even a scheme of the main character's pace; *What Where* an illustration of the stage setting. Brater comments on how the notes that surround the actual text become essential for the meaning: “Usually one searches for elements of structure, such as exposition, introduction, rising action, and recognition, in the dialogue rather than in the

22 Numbers of pages are, respectively: plays usually considered Absurdist: *Waiting for Godot* 78, *Endgame* 43, *Krapp's Last Tape* 9, *Happy Days* 31; later plays: *Play* 14, *Breath* 1, *Not I* 9, *That Time* 9, *Footfalls* 5, *A Piece of Monologue* 5, *Rockaby* 10, *Ohio Impromptu* 4, *Catastrophe* 5, *What Where* 8.

23 Jonathan Kalb, *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 48.

stage directions. But in these plays the relationship between the two [...] is the source of the drama and the tension.”²⁴ Some of the most important points to be made by Beckett’s drama do not lie in what is said, but in an image that has to be conveyed to the spectator. And in order to be able to convey the image, the production needs to be given a detailed description of what is – and sometimes even what is not – wanted.

Beckett’s plays are never set in a defined time or space; sense of place and time are done away with. None of the plays is set in a specific country or a period of time. They could take place in the present in any country on any crossroads with a tree, a ground with a mound, or indoors, in a bare room with only a lamp and bed, table and chair, or one rocking chair only. Eoin O’Brien calls the setting of Beckett’s plays a “no man’s land”, even though he has demonstrated many references to real places throughout the oeuvre.²⁵ There are elements of outer reality that will be discussed further in more detail, but they are hidden in the text and inessential to understanding of the work.

A couple of decades before Beckett started writing for the stage, J. M. Synge would bring props over from the Aran Islands to achieve an atmosphere of authenticity and give a very clear idea of his plays’ setting. Beckett does not do any such thing. There are no props on the stage that might suggest any specific country of reference, nor do the characters’ names give any clue as regards nationality or the name’s etymology. Or, they give so many clues it becomes impossible to decide for one as a basis of interpretation. Nevertheless, it is obvious that reduction in terms of other aspects – the shape of characters, action, and dialogue – is more important.

We do not get to know much about the characters in any respect, except for some random comments on their appearance. They are never really developed. They are

24 Brater 111.

25 Eoin O’Brien, *The Beckett Country: Samuel Beckett’s Ireland* (Monkstown and London: Black Cat Press, 1986) xvi.

always somewhat idle, wandering, lost, or motionless – either stuck mentally or trapped physically. The characters appear in pairs, commonly two males but also a male and a female, as in *Happy Days*. These can be equal and interdependent like Vladimir and Estragon, or one character may be dominant and the other submissive like Pozzo and Lucky or Hamm and Clov. Their relationship does not function on the basis of friendship; they often detest each other but they need one another to such an extent that they never part.

These pairs are called “pseudocouples” by C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski: they are tied to each other, because they supposedly are two halves of a single personality.²⁶ Richard N. Coe argues that Beckett’s characters are solitaires but “need each other in order to exist—to *prove* their own identities”²⁷. This ontological problem suggests that only if there is someone else who sees us, we can be sure we are really there. Beckett used the thought of the eighteenth-century Irish philosopher Bishop Berkeley, *Esse est percipi*: To be is to be perceived. That is why Hamm needs Clov and Winnie needs Willie. As Michael Worton put it: “The partners provide proof that they really exist by responding and replying to each other.”²⁸

Nevertheless, in the later plays this function gets more complicated. There are no more real pairs in terms of two characters together on the stage having a conversation. Already in *Krapp* “the other” is Krapp of the past in the form of a tape recorder. Later on, it can be somebody who never replies (*Not I*), or somebody who is never seen (*Footfalls*). It is disputable whether a character with his or her voice apart can be called a couple: that is the case of *Rockaby*. “The other” can also be as complicated as the character’s past divided into three parts, and represented by three voices never seen on

26 C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, eds. “Pseudocouples,” *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 2004) 463-4.

27 Richard N. Coe, *Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1964) 81.

28 Michael Worton, “Waiting for Godot and Endgame: Theatre as Text,” *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 71-2.

stage, as in *That Time*. Nevertheless, towards the end of Beckett's career, he created a character that has no "other" at all, no proof of existence: Speaker in *A Piece of Monologue*.

There are several other devices besides the pseudocouples that Beckett made extensive use of. The "absent characters", first of whom was Godot, play important roles even though they never appear on stage. Another new phenomenon was introduced in *Endgame*: the physically trapped characters. Nagg and Nell are stuck in ashbins. Winnie is stuck up to waist and later up to her head in the ground. The characters in *Play* are affected by the same immobility, being stuck to their necks in funeral urns. However, these still give the impression that part of their body is simply hidden. In *Not I* and *That Time*, this is different. The characters do not possess a whole body but are reduced to elements. The mouth and the head never make any reference to the rest of their bodies as Nagg, Nell, or Winnie sometimes do. Their body is not hidden in any thing, such as a bin, but darkness; it does not exist. Last but not least, the use of recording devices has been already mentioned; in *That Time* and *Footfalls*, unseen characters speak.

What is common for all of the characters is that they are there in the sense that they exist, but they do not know the purpose of their existence. We do not know where the characters come from, what happened to them that brought them where they are now, or anything else about their background. We only get to watch them for a brief period of time, in the middle of their situation, with no prospect for change in any relevant future.

The plot of the plays lacks development and suspense; there is no such thing as a climax. Godot never comes; Clov never leaves. All action lies in going through memories, waiting, and killing time. The linear structure of Aristotle's schema is

replaced by cyclical structure which was described as “a diminishing spiral” by Worton. In this spiral “descending towards a final closure that can never be found in the Beckettian universe, the characters take refuge in repetition, repeating their own actions and words and often those of others – in order to pass the time.”²⁹

Having no understanding of the purpose of life, Beckett’s characters wait for death. However, as Worton points out, “death as a final ending, as a final silence, is absent from the plays”. On the one hand, death as an event is “desired but ultimately impossible”: the characters want their suffering to end but nobody can live through their death, therefore it is impossible to experience it. While they are alive death never comes and when it does they are no longer alive to experience the relief of the ending. Dying as a process is “our only sure reality”. It is an inescapable imperative, waiting for everyone indiscriminately. Nevertheless, in metaphysical terms we can never arrive at our death.³⁰

This paradox mirrors Zeno’s paradox of motion, the story of Achilles and a tortoise: Achilles can never overtake the tortoise because he always has to go half the distance first. Beckett also used the Greek philosopher’s paradox of the part and the whole, the millet-seed paradox.³¹ It deals with the question of at what point do grains added to one primary grain make up a unit called heap. In *Godot* there is a reference to “a little heap of bones”,³² in *Happy Days* there is a growing mound – or a heap – and, most significantly, *Endgame* starts with: “Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there’s a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap.”³³ Beckett is not interested in matter, though, but time. He studies how the separate moments of existence create a

29 Worton in Pilling 69.

30 Ibid. 70.

31 Ackerley and Gontarski, “Zeno” 661-2.

32 Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) 11.

All subsequent quotations of Beckett’s plays will be from this edition.

33 Beckett, *Endgame* 93.

life, and how every day brings us closer to death. As Hamm says: “Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of... that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life.”³⁴

All existence is waiting, waiting for death as the only Godot that can ever come. And after it comes, there is no end anyway. There is even more waiting for the last judgement, in purgatory. But a man judges his life in preparation for death even before it comes. Thus, already life itself is in a way a purgatory, and that is where Beckett’s plays are set. They portray the act of waiting for the purgatory of earth to be transformed into the purgatory of death, with no hope on the horizon. As Coe put it in reference to the trilogy of prose works *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*: “There is no end. There is only waiting [...]. Not a waiting for death, but literally a waiting for Nothing. Beyond death, there is not ‘Nothing’, but simply more waiting. The purgatory of earth is merely transformed into another, of stranger and sadder dimensions.”³⁵

It is only logical that in these plays where movement is not possible action is fundamentally verbal. Moreover, dialogue does not function as a typical means of communication between characters. Normally, interlocutors share the context in order to be able to communicate. In Beckett, the interlocutors’ contexts are alien to each other. Formally, the discourse appears to be a dialogue, but in reality it is rather piling up monologues on top of each other’s. Pavis calls it a false dialogue, “a dialogue of the deaf”.³⁶ Thus, the discourse in the plays would be considered dialogue more on the basis of appearance than function.

Altogether, the plays pose the question of what language can and cannot do.

Worton describes this process of exploration:

34 Beckett, *Endgame* 126.

35 Coe 67-8.

36 Pavis 98.

Language is no longer presented as a vehicle for direct communication. [...] Rather it is used in all its grammatical, syntactic and – especially – intertextual force to make the reader/spectator aware of how much we depend on language and of how much we need to be wary of the codifications that language imposes upon us.³⁷

Thus, the use of language serves the same purpose as the absence of a designation of a specific time and space, the absence of any developed characters, and the absence of a conventional plot. These plays' purpose is not to tell an individual story; it is to present the basic situation of man's existence: a situation of uncertainty of purpose and waiting, waiting between birth and death.

³⁷ Worton in Pilling 68.

Chapter 3: From Absurdism to Minimalism: Development of Specific Aspects

3.1 Setting, Props and the Stage

Katharine Worth has asserted that “All the scenic spaces Beckett creates become cosmic spaces where we find ourselves [...] face to face with ‘the vast unknown that surrounds us’”.³⁸ None of his plays would be set in a specific year or a specific place. He moves from an unspecific outside of a road or a mound, to an unspecific inside of a room, to darkness. Geographical references do appear, but they never serve as an actual setting of a play. Various places are mentioned by the characters in the course of their speeches. These are usually places they have been to in the past, or those whose story the characters tell, but it might not be even that. And, progressively, they disappear. In the minimalist plays, props are also abandoned. Beckett uses abstract setting to create the image of the human condition. As Ruby Cohn remarked, when working on *Happy Days* the author made a note to himself – “vaguen” – thus inventing a verb for the “despecifying process that would become habitual in the composition of his drama”.³⁹

Waiting for Godot's setting is really simple: “A country road. A tree. Evening.” in act one; in act two it is the same place as well as the time of the day, only a day later. We get to learn that there is a bog nearby: “All the same... that tree... that bog.”⁴⁰ Ackerley and Gontarski state the play is set “feelingly among the glens, loughs, and

38 Katharine Worth, *Samuel Beckett's Theatre: Life Journeys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 22.

39 Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 262-3.

40 Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 16.

quags of the Wicklow hills”,⁴¹ but it is hard to say whether the feeling has a real basis other than the knowledge of Beckett’s background. The play contains references to France – concretely the Eiffel Tower, the Rhône, and the Pyrenees – and Connemara;⁴² these appear in Vladimir and Estragon’s memories or future plans and do not have any connection to the play’s actual setting. Nevertheless, it is important to notice these as such particularities would progressively disappear in Beckett’s work.

The situation is that of waiting, waiting for something – not knowing what it is – and, moreover, knowing this something might not come. The dialogue itself serves only to create a poetic image:

You are right, we’re inexhaustible.

It’s so we won’t think.

We have that excuse.

It’s so we won’t hear.

We have our reasons.

All the dead voices.

They make a noise like wings.

Like leaves.

Like sand.

Like leaves.

They all speak together.

Each one to itself.

Rather they whisper.

They rustle.

They murmur.

41 Ackerley and Gontarski, “Ireland” 277.

42 Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 12, 51, 76, and 43, respectively.

They rustle.

What do they say?

They talk about their lives.

To have lived is not enough for them.

They have to talk about it.

To be dead is not enough for them.

It is not sufficient.

They make a noise like feathers.

Like leaves.

Like ashes.

Like leaves.⁴³

The pattern of alternation of words is that of ABCB: A leads to B logically leads to C, but the final element is found incorrect and a return to B occurs. This becomes a powerful illustration of the inconclusiveness of the situation. The characters are “Waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for . . . waiting.”⁴⁴ After all, as Beckett himself told Alan Schneider, waiting is an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition.⁴⁵

In the first part, wings become leaves, then sand, to return to leaves again. We can see that the pattern starts with something alive, which turns into something on the boundary of alive and dead – leaves as alive when hanging on a tree but then inevitably falling to the ground dead – and then to sand, always inanimate. However, we come back to leaves again, and leaves stand for the characters’ position in the world – in between life and death. Moreover, in the passage quoted above the whole pattern

43 Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 58. Stage directions extracted.

44 Ibid. 72.

45 Worton in Pilling 71.

appears three times, and repetition occurs not only within the pattern but also outside of it. The third part resembles the first but there is an important alteration. Wings become feathers: the essence is gone, life is gone. We are left with the inanimate part of wings, with remains of what once used to be alive. Also, sand becomes ashes. A natural material turns into material of things burnt, dead. But still, ashes is not nothing yet. Thus we can see a pattern of movement from life to death, but the journey is never completed, there is always a step back, death is encountered but not yet met.

There are three more passages that employ the same pattern in the play.⁴⁶ The situation is inconclusive, because it is a situation of being in a purgatory. And all ideas are of no avail:

VLADIMIR: Suppose we repented.

ESTRAGON: Repented what?

VLADIMIR: Oh... We wouldn't have to go into details.

ESTRAGON: Our being born?⁴⁷

Here being born is a sin that has to be repented, later on in *A Piece of Monologue* it will even be equated to death. In between these two plays there are many others that explore this situation of being born to no purpose, waiting for an indeterminate something that probably is death and meanwhile trying to come to terms with one's life story.

Endgame is set indoors, in a "bare interior" of a room in a shelter on a cliff. There is an armchair, a picture on the wall, two ashbins and two windows, one looking at the earth, one at the sea. The room is a closed system, outside of which there are only remnants of the world, a grey wasteland. The setting is again a no man's land. There are references to France and Italy: Ardennes and the city of Sedan and Lake Como.⁴⁸ All of these are memories, relating to past only. The setting of the present is unspecified. The

46 Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 16, 34-5, 71.

47 Ibid. 13.

48 Beckett, *Endgame* 100 and 102.

time is not specified either. The room is often taken for a metaphor of a skull and a reference to the game of chess is explored, with the main character of Hamm as the King making senseless moves in a lost game. If one does not want to go into depths with these interpretations, the atmosphere of something like a war shelter before apocalypse might be the most appropriate description of the setting.

We are back to purgatory. Critics have suggested that *Endgame* is far more bitter than the other plays, and closer to hell, though. "Purgatory is the residence of every different manifestation of Beckett's moi: it is the home of Man," says Coe. But in *Endgame*, "Hell seems scarcely an instant away."⁴⁹ Ackerley and Gontarsky also argue that the sense of death is more immediate. There is a conviction that life is a mistake not to be repeated.⁵⁰ All living must be killed, a rat, or a flea: "But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him for the love of God!"⁵¹

"Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap," the play starts.⁵² The poetic image is again that of waiting. It is time zero. They have had enough. Yet, the heap is still not complete. Hamm is waiting for his pain-killer, the only relief that seems to be reachable both in the space of the desolate dwelling and in time, but there is none left. Clov used to be waiting for his seeds to sprout, but he has accepted that it will never happen. Everything is dead, the last couple of souls are waiting for their end: "The whole place stinks of corpses. The whole universe."⁵³

Krapp's Last Tape is also set indoors, in a den with a table with two drawers, on top of which there is a tape recorder and boxes full of tapes. The time is defined as "a

49 Coe 5.

50 Ackerley and Gontarski, "Death" 128-9.

51 Beckett, *Endgame* 108.

52 Ibid. 93.

53 Ibid. 114.

late evening in the future,”⁵⁴ as in the future last judgement will come and everybody will have to contemplate his or her life. A late evening suggests the last part of the day before night, the last moment before death, once again in purgatory. It is time to go through the day again in one’s mind or through one’s whole past on a tape.

As biographers have pointed out, there is a reference to a pier at Dún Laoghaire, Ireland, in the play, but it is not explicit. It is allegedly based on a real event when after the war Beckett came back to Dublin to see his mother, and had a revelation in their house in Cooldrinagh. His own revelation concerned impoverishment: “I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.”⁵⁵ In the fictional account of this experience he stayed true to this approach and omitted any description of what happened. When the recording gets to the point where Krapp talks of the moment of revelation, he switches off and winds forward: “What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely--[KRAPP *switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again*]”.⁵⁶ We never get to know what Krapp’s belief was, and how he lost it. However, we can feel the gloominess in the words that follow the event: “Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited.”⁵⁷ There are several geographical references: Connaught, the Baltic and Croghan, a Wicklow mountain.⁵⁸ Only Croghan refers to a place Krapp has supposedly been to, though. Kedar Street is fictional.

In *Happy Days* there are no place names: for the first time, there is no geographical reference in the play whatsoever. The play is set on a low mound. It is the only play besides *Godot* to have two acts, and, unsurprisingly, in act two the scene is exactly the same as in the first. Moreover, from now on time is also not specified in any

54 Beckett, *Krapp’s Last Tape* 215.

55 Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* 352.

56 Beckett, *Krapp’s Last Tape* 220.

57 Ibid. 221 and 223.

58 Beckett, *Krapp’s Last Tape* 218, 222 and 223.

way. What is still employed in the play is the use of props. Winnie has a handbag full of objects that relate to the world as we know it. This changes with *Play*.

Play can be seen as a turning point in some respects. As regards setting, even such a vague description as a “bare interior” is missing. There is a reference to France, to Spain and England: the Riviera, Grand Canary, and Ash and Snodland, small English towns.⁵⁹ However, these are irrelevant as regards setting. They are only part of the tale as places the characters might go to or places a woman once drove by. There is no actual setting in place or time and no props on the stage but three grey urns that the characters are stuck in. *Play* brings in a new style detached from reality. Already Winnie who was stuck in the mound was certainly surreal, but *Play* also gets rid of props and introduces new ways of use of light which become immensely important in the following plays. A spotlight provokes speech. And the characters are aware of its function: “Is it that I do not tell the truth, is that it, that some day somehow I may tell the truth at last and then no more light at last, for the truth?” a woman asks.⁶⁰ This metatheatrical utterance, besides referring to the light, deals with the need to say something. There is an idea that one has to tell the truth so that he or she can find peace. The must to say something in order to be saved or because of some inner pressure that has to be released will be present in other plays as well. While one of the women deals with the question of what to say and how to reach an end, the other one deals with the ontological question: “Are you listening to me? Is anyone listening to me? Is anyone looking at me? Is anyone bothering about me at all?”⁶¹ and so does the man: “Am I as much as... being seen?”⁶²

59 Beckett, *Play* 310 and 311.

60 Ibid. 313.

61 Beckett, *Play* 314.

62 Ibid. 317.

Breath cannot even be described in terms of setting, plot, characterization or dialogue. These categories, commonly employed when discussing drama, are useless with a play that does not involve any characters, action, or text. In terms of the stage, it can only be noted that it is “littered with miscellaneous rubbish”.⁶³ Besides that, all that is used is light and a recorded cry, as will be discussed below when dealing with plot.

Not I introduces a stage direction that would consequently appear at the beginning of most of Beckett’s plays: “Stage in darkness.” The whole stage is immersed in darkness with only the characters of Mouth and Auditor, positioned above stage level on invisible podia, faintly lit.⁶⁴ The setting of the play is utterly surreal and minimalist. The same applies for *That Time*, the so called “brother to *Not I*”: stage is in darkness and the only character’s, Listener’s, face above stage level is lit. Mouth tells of a woman whose crucial experience – whatever it was – took place one April morning, and she also mentions Croker’s Acres, the fields near Cooldrinagh where Beckett’s family used to live.⁶⁵ The voices in *That Time* refer to the Portrait Gallery, the Post Office, and the Public Library.⁶⁶ These are presumably those of the Irish or the British capital, although it is never stated. However, these are settings of stories that do not belong to anyone; they are never accepted by the characters as their own. Moreover, most of these stories are clouded with confusion of “was that the time or was that another time another place another time”.⁶⁷ The drama itself is set in darkness, outside reality.

With one exception – the Parisian Isle of Swans in *Ohio Impromptu*⁶⁸ – the following plays never go back to any explicit reference as regards setting, not even a vague one such as a country road, or bare interior. However, they do at least use some

63 Beckett, *Breath* 371.

64 Beckett, *Not I* 376.

65 Ibid. 380.

66 Beckett, *That Time* 388, 392, 393, 394.

67 Ibid. 394.

68 Beckett, *Ohio Impromptu* 445.

props that help relate the work to some realistic frame of reference. Generally, there are props that indicate an indoor setting, for the most part a domestic one: a strip on the floor in *Footfalls*, a standard lamp and a pallet bed in *A Piece of Monologue*, a rocking chair in *Rockaby*, a table with chairs and a hat in *Ohio Impromptu*, or an armchair in the theatre setting of *Catastrophe*. In *What Where* there is nothing but a “playing area [...] dimly lit, surrounded by shadow”.⁶⁹ The last play written by Beckett for the stage goes beyond minimalism. It explores metatheatricality to a great extent and plays with manipulation of place and time. The voice is at the same time a character in the play and a director of it. He switches the play on and off, organizes the other four characters and comments upon their performance. He governs the time: “It is spring. [...] It is summer. [...] It is autumn. [...] It is winter.”⁷⁰

From the above account we can trace the transformation Beckett’s plays undergo as regards setting. Definition in terms of time is almost nonexistent, besides a couple of the plays set in “the evening”. All the plays are actually set where *Rockaby* suggests: at a “close of a long day”,⁷¹ or, at the moment of contemplation on life before the close of it. As regards place, there is a certain development. Even if the description is a vague one, the first four plays do have at least some frame of reference. Beginning with *Play*, in *Breath, Not I* and *That Time*, no setting is defined whatsoever. The frame of reference disappears entirely; the whole stage is in darkness with only spots of faint light on the characters. There is nothing to relate to. Nevertheless, after these four – utterly minimalist plays concerning setting and the use of props – the following plays find some compromise in using bare interior spaces stripped down to minimum but holding on to a hint of naturalistic representation.

69 Beckett, *What Where* 470.

70 Ibid. 470-476.

71 Beckett, *Rockaby* 435.

3.2 Characters

Beckettian characters are more like forms only than full personalities. Knowlson put it neatly: it is “characters who have only enough reality to exist”.⁷² Beckett even wrote a play entirely without characters: *Breath*. However, with no characters there truly was little drama left. Thus, there are characters in the subsequent plays again, but they never are those solid, developed characters, that one finds in conventional drama. Worton pointed out the audience needed to “seek not so much identification with the characters as an understanding of what the plays mean”.⁷³ Let us explore the plays individually.

Waiting for Godot involves five characters, four of whom function in pairs: Estragon and Vladimir, Lucky and Pozzo, and a boy. All characters in the play are male. The same applies for the characters’ names as for the place names that might refer to existing countries but they never position the play in a specific setting. Here we have four names that either are typical for some nationality or at least sound so: Vladimir is Russian, Lucky is English, Estragon sounds French, and Pozzo Italian. However, there is no debate over origins or background in the play and having four characters with names evoking four different countries prevents the reader from allocating the story into any one of them. Moreover, later on the characters’ names would bear no such connotations, and eventually the characters would not have names at all.

Whereas the prominent pair of Vladimir and Estragon is interdependent, the other one comprises of one dominant character torturing the passive. Nevertheless, even the relationship between the former two cannot be called friendship; one would not want to be embraced by the other. But neither can they be apart: “Don’t touch me!

⁷² Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* 211.

⁷³ Worton in Pilling 74.

Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!"⁷⁴ They need each other in order to confirm their own identity, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Apart from these tramps or wanderers Beckett introduces a device that is to become immensely important in his work: an absent character, a character that plays an important role in the play but never appears on the stage. That is Godot. There has been a huge debate over who or what Godot is. It might be a diminutive of God, a clown, a boot (French "godillot"), the time (in Russian "god" means a year), a symbol of death, or hope, or simply nothing. Beckett himself claimed he did not know what Godot meant: "If I knew, I would have said so in the play."⁷⁵ If it were possible to find the answer, it would definitely make a good climax of the play in the conventional way. However, whatever critics or the audience decide to argue Godot to be, it is not verifiable, and therefore such a debate is pointless. Godot is a mystery that distinguishes the first of Beckett's plays from the tradition of a well-made play: he is the essence, the climax of the play that truly does not exist.

In *Endgame* there are four characters that form two pairs, and a boy – even though he is not physically present on stage – a repetition of the situation in *Godot*. In the centre of the room there is Hamm, the main character of the play. He is sitting in an armchair, blind and motionless. He is unable to stand. Clov, his servant, on the other hand, is unable to sit. In spite of the master/servant configuration, their relationship is that of interdependency. Dependency, but no affection. Clov stays with Hamm only because there is nowhere else to go. Hamm keeps Clov only because there is no one else. If he left, Clov would not, according to his words, even say good-bye. If he leaves he will set an alarm to give Hamm a sign, rather than giving him farewell.

74 Beckett, "Waiting for Godot" 54.

75 Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* 12.

The other pair is Hamm's parents, with white faces, no pulse and imprisoned in ashbins, Nell and Nagg. They have no legs. Possibly, they are only the parents' ghosts. The tense atmosphere among the characters is reflected in their names. Hamm, beside Hamlet or a ham-actor as critics have suggested, can be seen as a hammer, bearing down on three nails: Clov (Fr. "clou", a nail), Nagg (Germ. "Nagel", another nail), and Nell (yet another nail).⁷⁶ Thus, we see a shift from possibly real names to symbolic ones. The boy plays a part very similar to the boy in *Godot*: he represents hope. He is the closest we get to positive resolution. A boy delivers messages from Godot, or stands for the fact that the outside world is not dead. Nevertheless, the first one does not imply Godot himself would definitely come and the other one might only be an illusion. Thus, the picture Beckett draws is not utterly pessimistic, but the space he devotes to hope is not wide either.

Krapp's Last Tape experiments with an unconventional cast of one character only. Krapp is an old man of neglected appearance, near-sighted and hard of hearing. However, he spends all the time listening to his younger self on a tape recorder and commenting on the recordings, and thus forms a very specific pseudocouple of the Krapp of the present and the Krapp of the past. *Happy Days* portrays two characters, one female and one male, Winnie and Willie. For the first time the central figure is a woman. Winnie is stuck in a low mound, with Willie lying hidden at the back of it. The parents in *Endgame* were the first of a number of Beckettian characters in strange positions – immobile, stuck and partially hidden – in *Happy Days* this involves the main character. Although, contrary to the later plays, Winnie and Willie still have names.

Starting with *Play*, the identity of the characters becomes gradually more and more blurred. Apart from May in *Footfalls*, none of the characters are given proper

⁷⁶ Coe 37-8 and Ackerley and Gontarski, "Endgame" 173-7.

names in the text. They become letters only: W for a woman, M for a man, V for a voice, or A, B, C if there is more than one. Other characters bear names according to their functions: an auditor or a listener, a speaker or a reader. Often, several characters together compose one (the A, B and C voices in *That Time*, Woman and Voice in *Rockaby*). To confuse things even more, some of the characters are speechless bodies, some are bodiless voices, and some possess both a body and a voice but are themselves unaware of whose story they are telling. Or they refuse to admit it is their own. Therefore, even if bits and pieces of a life story can be reconstructed, they do not belong to anyone, and cannot be grasped in totality.

Apart from Erskine, a minor character of a housekeeper, the cast of *Play* is that of three characters that do not have names; in the text they are marked as W1, W2, and M – two women and a man. These are positioned in urns so that the audience sees heads only, that of a man in the middle with one of the women on each side. Throughout the play they never come out of the urns. They are totally immobilised, the only movement being that of the characters' eyes. Their faces are “so lost to age and aspect so to seem almost part of urns”.⁷⁷ The idea of a human face possibly being regarded as a part of a funeral urn is striking and very important indicator of forthcoming minimalism. In *Play* the human body loses its natural functions. It becomes only an envelope for the voice that sprouts out of it. A human being is reduced to its story.

Not I and *That Time* might be considered the height of Beckett's minimalism. *Not I* is a play for two characters, Mouth and Auditor. The main character actually consists of one body part only, a mouth. Whereas in *Play* an impression was created that only the heads are seen because the rests of the bodies are hidden, here a surreal feeling of the mouth not being attached to a real body is created, as it is positioned high above

⁷⁷ Beckett, *Play* 307.

stage level and everything but the mouth is in complete darkness. It hangs up in the air, delivering a story – somebody’s story. The Auditor is of undeterminable sex, “enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba, with hood” and “dead still throughout but for four brief movements”.⁷⁸ He is immersed in the shadow and he never speaks.

That Time casts three voices, A, B, C, and Listener, who is the only person to be seen, even though he never speaks. Actually, what is visible to the audience is his face only, ten feet above stage level. It is an “old white face” with “long flaring white hair as if seen from above outspread”.⁷⁹ The voices are actually one and the same voice recorded on three different tapes, coming from different directions. As regards Listener, only his breath is faintly audible. Thus, throughout the whole play the audience is watching only a head that never speaks, only listens.

Not I and *That Time* are based not on acting out but only telling a story. What is more, one that cannot be ascribed to the protagonist. This concept wipes away almost all that is fundamental in theatre. Also, both the plays employ body parts to take upon major roles, which is a very straightforward sign of minimalism. *That Time* also picks up on the practice introduced in *Krapp* – the use of recordings – which is going to be further explored in most of the subsequent plays.

In the following plays we can see further experiments with characters. *Footfalls* casts two women characters, May and a woman’s voice, that of her mother’s. May is a grey character, with her “dishevelled grey hair, worn grey wrap hiding feet, trailing”. Her mother is another one of Beckettian absent characters that never appear on stage. She never physically appears, but at the same time both characters are duplicates. In the story as told by May, there is a girl Amy and an old Mrs. Winter, who, as the

⁷⁸ Beckett, *Not I* 376.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 388.

resemblance of their stories prompts, are actually her and her mother. Moreover, the names of May and Amy are anagrams. This device of duplicity would be used again in *Ohio Impromptu*.

In *A Piece of Monologue* there is no more than one character with “white hair, white nightgown, white socks”:⁸⁰ the Speaker. The actor stands still throughout the performance, is faintly lit, and hard to hear. This is similar to *Not I*, but there is no longer the other, the proof of existence. In *Rockaby* there is, similarly to *Krapp*, a woman and her recorded voice. The woman is prematurely old, with unkempt grey hair, huge eyes in white expressionless face and white hands holding armrests of the rocking-chair she sits on.⁸¹ The difference rests in the fact that in *Krapp* it was clear where the voice came from and the character reacted to what it said, whereas this woman is detached from what is going on around her. In the style of the naturalistic convention, *Krapp* has recorded a tape he listens to and comments on the recording. It is unclear whose the voice in *Rockaby* is, where it comes from and why – we are probably inside the woman’s head.

Listener and Reader, “as alike in appearance as possible”,⁸² are characters of *Ohio Impromptu*. They have long black coats, long white hair and their faces are hidden. The hesitancy, or rather resistance and inability to name manifests itself again not only as regards the characters’ names but in the text itself as well: “I have been sent by—and here he named the dear name—to comfort you.”⁸³ The play sinks deeper in detachment from the story: it is not told by heart, but read. Also, it is disrupted by knocks that interrupt when something is not pronounced distinctly enough and give the permission to continue. The Listener, “the other”, guides “the self”, and in this instance

80 Beckett, *A Piece of Monologue* 425.

81 Beckett, *Rockaby* 433.

82 Beckett, *Ohio Impromptu* 445.

83 Ibid. 447.

where the two characters look so alike it is clear that in reality there is no “other” at all, only a mirror image of the only person there. Actually, there is only one hat on the table.

Catastrophe is slightly closer to the earlier plays in the respect that it has one character with an actual name, Luke. In the theatre where the play takes place he is in charge of lighting, and although he himself never appears on the stage, there are three more characters: a director, his female assistant, and a protagonist. On all three implies Beckett’s note: “Age and physique unimportant.”⁸⁴ However, there is a shift in terms of the underlying theme of “the other”. Here, the protagonist is not moved by his inner turmoil and his other self; he is manipulated by another live person.

In *What Where* there are four characters of Bam, Bem, Bim, and Bom, and the voice of Bam. The players are, again, supposed to be as alike as possible with the same long grey gown and the same long grey hair. This combination – four characters and a voice that seem to be all parts of one person – is beyond minimalism. Instead of reduction, multiplication takes place. It was foreshadowed already in *Footfalls*, but there the characters doubled only in the story. In *Ohio Impromptu*, they doubled on stage. Here, they multiply.

3.3 Plot

As regards Beckett’s fiction, S. E. Gontarski draws attention to a shift in mid-1960s from stories that feature compulsion to motion toward “closed space” stories that

84 Beckett, *Catastrophe* 457.

feature stillness or some barely perceptible movement.⁸⁵ The same shift takes place in Beckett's dramatic work. His plays are not intended to tell a story but to communicate a pattern of poetic images. Already *Waiting for Godot* is a tragicomedy in two acts, "in which nothing happens, twice" as Vivian Mercier put it.⁸⁶ At their time Beckett's early plays were described as lacking plot; however, at that time nobody knew what would come next. Only the later plays would show how much a play could lack.

In the very first play, on the road by the tree Vladimir and Estragon wait. They wait for Godot, without any apparent reason. Pozzo and Lucky pass by. At the end of the act a boy appears to tell them that Godot would not be coming that evening. The second act repeats the same situation. While waiting, the characters try to kill time. "But the only resolution [...] is that there is no resolution,"⁸⁷ as John P. Harrington puts it.

However, even the non-existence of a resolution carries meaning, as Esslin explains:

A play like *Waiting for Godot* can generate considerable suspense and dramatic tension in spite of being a play in which literally *nothing* happens, a play designed to show that nothing *can* even happen in human life. It is only when the last lines have been spoken and the curtain has fallen that we are in a position to grasp the total pattern of the complex poetic image we have been confronted with. If, in the traditional play, the action goes from A to point B, and we constantly ask, 'What is going to happen next?', here we have an action that consists in the gradual unfolding of a complex pattern, and instead we ask, 'What is it that we are seeing? What will the completed image be when we have grasped the nature of the pattern?'⁸⁸

85 S. E. Gontarski, "Introduction" to *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* by Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1996) vii.

86 Vivian Mercier, "The Uneventful Event," *Irish Times*, 18 Feb 1956: 6.

87 Harrington in Richards 171.

88 Esslin, *Absurd Drama* 11-12.

The poetic image is the same as that which will be portrayed in *Endgame* and *Happy Days*: the protagonists are seemingly the last people left on the surface of earth. Vladimir exclaims:

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! Let us do something, while we have the chance! [...] To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say? [ESTRAGON *says nothing.*]⁸⁹

All mankind is them and a couple of lines later, “Pozzo is all humanity.” They all are all mankind. And none of them capable of change, they waste time in idle discourse.

Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot, but they are also waiting for an end. They are almost there, progressing closer and closer each day, but by smaller and smaller parts of the distance, just like in Zeno’s paradox with the heap of millet, as suggested by Coe.⁹⁰ They are caught up in a heap of time. It flows so slowly it has almost stopped, but not quite. They are completely stuck in the present moment. They decide to leave, but they do not move. This situation is repeated not only at the end of both acts, but in the second one Estragon tries to leave on almost every page of the text. Many times we get his “I’m going.” [*Pause.*] “I’m going,” after which he does not move. Although, it is not only him who is incapable of departure:

ESTRAGON: Then Adieu.

POZZO: Adieu.

VLADIMIR: Adieu.

POZZO: Adieu.

89 Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 74.

90 Coe 89-90.

[*Silence. No one moves.*]

VLADIMIR: Adieu.

POZZO: Adieu.

ESTRAGON: Adieu.

[*Silence.*]⁹¹

Nobody is able to make the move, ever. Estragon only ushers in the series of characters like Clov in *Endgame* or May in *Footfalls* that illustrate Pozzo's furious exclamation: "One day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more."⁹²

In *Endgame* action consists of Clov's pushing Hamm around the room and checking on his parents and the outside. When he looks out of the windows he needs to bring a telescope and a step ladder, but he always forgets one or the other, which leads to a lot of inefficient movement: "CLOV gets down, takes a few steps toward window left, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, turns the telescope on the without, looks at length. He starts, lowers the telescope, examines it, turns it again on the without."⁹³ And inefficient movement is like no movement at all.

Clov wants to leave, but outside there is only death, as there is no one to be Clov's mirror and ascertain his existence. The characters are tied to spot and each other. Everything has run out. They both have had enough, but Hamm hesitates to end. The inability to leave does not concern only Clov and his leaving the house, but also his going to the kitchen, or the parents going back to their bins. Hamm's father refers to the same problem of the need to validate one's existence; he cannot wait for the moment

91 Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* 45.

92 Ibid. 83.

93 Beckett, *Endgame* 106.

when Hamm will need him to listen, which will be his satisfaction for the long time of suffering. Hamm is paralysed more than Clov, being blind and immobile. However, he prophesizes the same fate awaits him: “One day you’ll be blind, like me. You’ll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me. One day you’ll say to yourself, I’m tired, I’ll sit down, and you’ll go and sit down. Then you’ll say, I’m hungry, I’ll get up and get something to eat. But you won’t get up.”⁹⁴

In order to pass time when nothing can be done, Hamm tells stories, subsequently more and more related to the reality of the play. The first one deals with a tailor unable to sew trousers in the promised number of days. The punch line lies in a comparison of the trousers to the world, which was created by God in six days – the tailor takes longer but is supposedly doing a much better job. The second is a story of a madman Hamm used to know in the past, who when looking out of a window was unable to see the landscape; he only saw ashes. Clov sees only ashes too, so maybe the wasteland without need not be real, it might be just his imagination. But he will never find out, as he will never leave.

The last story is that of a man that came crawling to Hamm in the shelter. He asked for a bit of corn for his little boy who was left waiting for him. Hamm leaves the story unfinished: “In the end he asked me would I consent to take in the child as well – if he were still alive. It was the moment I was waiting for.” This is repeated in Hamm’s final soliloquy. He was waiting for this question to be raised in order to put forward his views of the world. “You don’t want to abandon him? You want him to bloom while you are withering? Be there to solace your last million last moments? He doesn’t realize, that all he knows is hunger, and cold, and death to crown it all. But you! You ought to know what the earth is like, nowadays.”⁹⁵

94 Beckett, *Endgame* 109.

95 Ibid. 118 and 133.

The question of whether Hamm would take the child in is left unanswered, but it is clear that if this really happened he either did not take the boy in, or it was Clov. And the boy came to realize that all there is is hunger, cold and death. Therefore, at the end of the play, when another boy appears, he cannot be taken for a symbol of hope, for a new life that will bring about change. He might be Clov's invention. If not, he might not be let in. If he was, it is only to share the misery of everlasting waiting for the millet grains to mount up to a life.

It has mounted up to a life for Krapp. The dialogue in *Krapp's Last Tape* is that of the live Krapp of the present and the past Krapps of the tapes, the "spools". By virtue of this recording device, the play can plunge into its theme of memory and make use of what Coe called "a whole series of degrees of pastness".⁹⁶ Before Krapp even speaks, he enacts a long series of inefficient movements in silence, like Clov wanting to have a look out of a window. He unlocks and searches both drawers in order to find his banana. He eats it ceremoniously and repeats the same action with another banana, which he does not eat but puts into his pocket. He goes backstage, we hear a pop of cork. As he comes back, he listens to spool five. He is now sixty-nine and listens to himself at the age of thirty-nine, commenting on a tape recorded when he was about ten or fifteen years younger. There are three important events he talks about: "mother at rest at last", "the black ball", and "memorable equinox".⁹⁷

Sounds of some words apparently bring Krapp immense pleasure: apart from the often repeated "spool", it is also "viduity", for the meaning of which he has to consult his dictionary. Evidently, the time when he recorded the tape and knew the word is long past. At the end of the play Krapp listens to his younger self, already resigned: "Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want

⁹⁶ Coe 103.

⁹⁷ Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape* 217.

them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back.”⁹⁸ Any chance of happiness is long gone, but Krapp would not want to try again.

Throughout *Happy Days*, Winnie rummages in her bag and Willie crawls in and out of a hole. He reads a newspaper and examines a filthy postcard. She brushes her teeth, polishes spectacles, takes out parasol, applies lipstick, files her nails, and, during all that, talks. She also prays and sings, but mostly she tells stories, or she babbles. The first story is that of her first kiss in a toolshed. Another story is an obscure one of a little girl, Mildred or Milly, and her doll Dolly. While undressing the doll under a table, the girl is attacked by a mouse. She screams; Winnie does too. The most important, however, is a memory of an encounter with “the last of human kind” to stray that way.⁹⁹ It was a Mr Shower or Cooker – derived from German schauen and gucken, to look¹⁰⁰ – and his fiancée. They discuss Winnie as though she could not hear them, and she does not speak back to them. They are simply too distant from each other, Winnie does not belong to the real world anymore. While Vladimir and Estragon were all humankind and Clov and Hamm last people left on Earth, Winnie and Willie are not; the couple who passes them are.

The development of the play consists in the fact that whereas Winnie was stuck to her waist in the first act, she is stuck up to the neck in the second. She cannot move at all except for the rolling of her eyes. Willie cannot speak, does not hear well, and is almost immobile; he crawls. Winnie cannot move. Coe noted that “a little heap of days” that is to be endured is actually present on the stage. Winnie is buried in a heap of time.¹⁰¹ On the stage there is also supposed to be a “backcloth to represent unbroken

98 Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape* 223.

99 Beckett, *Happy Days* 165.

100 Ackerley and Gontarski, “Happy Days” 243-6.

101 Coe 90.

plain and sky receding to meet in far distance”,¹⁰² which must give an impression of infinity. Thus, the play becomes a poetic image of Zeno’s paradox of the part and the whole: not only is Winnie stuck in the heap of millet, but also the background associates infinity which is the principle of the paradox, as the heap can never be completed.

Winnie longs for an end, which will never come. She envies Willie his gift – the fact that he does not care about anything and is able to sleep throughout most of the day. Nevertheless, Winnie has a bell that wakes her up in the morning and tells her when to go to sleep; she cannot imagine living without it. The most disturbing about her is her unawareness – she is desperate about where to find ideas on how to pass time, but still she calls every day a “heavenly day”. According to her, not a day passes by without some blessing. Days are full of great mercies, abounding mercies. It is a happy day if someone answers, or even if only someone hears. “Just to know that in theory you can hear me even though in fact you don’t is all I need,” she tells Willie.¹⁰³ She could never talk to herself, to “do such wilderness”.

Winnie’s identity is, just like anybody else’s, created in confrontation with “the other”. As Paul Lawley puts it, “Willie is vital to Winnie’s self-construction”.¹⁰⁴ She creates her self through words and through the contents of her bag: homely props and a revolver. However, in the second act as she is buried even deeper in the ground the props become unavailable. Only words are left, and it will not be long until there is nobody to listen. There were instances when she was still hoping for things to change: “Stop talking now, Winnie, for a minute, don’t squander all your words for the day, stop talking and do something for a change, will you?”¹⁰⁵ However, there is “nothing to be done” anymore. *Happy Days* is considered the most pessimistic play by some. The false

102 Beckett, *Happy Days* 138.

103 Ibid. 148.

104 Paul Lawley in Pilling 94.

105 Beckett, *Happy Days* 155.

happiness is more frightening than the despair of *Endgame*, and so is Willie's final stare.

In *Play*, for the first time there is no action whatsoever. There is no movement at all, the action residing only in speech. The characters, physically stuck, are unable to move and therefore all one learns about them has to be extracted from the text. The story is that of a man, his wife and a mistress. There are three versions of truth, three different points of view that are strikingly similar regarding fears and efforts of concealing and denying these. As the man starts having an affair, his wife senses it. They fight. She hires a private detective, threatens to kill herself, and confronts the mistress. He is afraid of what she might do, admits and returns to her. She plans a holiday for them together. However, he meets the mistress again and cannot resist her. For a while, he lives with both of them at once. Then he disappears.

All three of them are stunned that peace would not come. They live alone, each of them worried the other two are together and secretly pity him or her. Each claims to pity the other two, but in reality they are afraid and worried their fear might be revealed. The wife is worried of not knowing what to say in order to find peace, the man of not being seen, the mistress of not being heard. It is exceptional with Beckett that the story can be reconstructed from the furious utterances of the characters; however, that works only for the text and not for performance. The speech is rapid; the text is delivered at speed that prevents understanding and absorbing everything. Speech is provoked by light which serves as an inquisitor. This extreme condensation of information alternates with moments of utter silence. For the first time, the spectator can see what Pavis meant by the combination of "absolute aphasia" and "verbal delirium".

Breath, on the other hand, gets by with no text at all. Seemingly, it has no story to tell either. However, this miniature of a play might be regarded as a metaphor for

whole life. It begins with a brief cry which Beckett describes as vagitus: the first cry of a new-born baby. After the life is born, we hear an amplified recording of its breath; first, its inspiration. When the human being has breathed in, it sees the world represented by a “stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish”.¹⁰⁶ Then, expiration follows to conclude again with a cry. The blackout equals death.

As regards *Not I*, the whole text of the play consists of the main character’s monologue. Mouth tells a story of someone, who might but might not be her. It seems it is her own story, but she determinedly rejects it, and all that can be said for sure is that there is a woman speaking of a woman. The story tells of a baby girl born premature, at eight months, with no love surrounding her whatsoever. Now she is in her seventies. She used to be speechless throughout her whole life, since the baby’s first cry until one event on a meadow one April when everything started pouring out.

Mouth talks like that, too: words are streaming out of her. Her speech is rapid and flat, monotonous, with distinct pausing and frequent repetition. This time, the experience of a reader is similar to that of an audience in the theatre – no matter how many times the text is read, it is impossible to extract the story. What we get is only the situation. Whereas in *Play* it was possible to reconstruct the plot line that led to the present moment, *Not I* resists that. Therefore, the audience is not distracted from the focus on the final poetic image by its possible endeavour to reconstruct the original story.

The image presents a human being “begging it all to stop”. She is desperately looking for something that might free her from the compulsive need to speak: “perhaps something she had to . . . had to . . . tell . . . could that be it?”¹⁰⁷ What she has to say in order to move forward is what she is most reluctant to do though: to say the first person

106 Beckett, *Breath* 341.

107 Beckett, *Not I* 381.

pronoun, “I”. She is trapped because she is not willing to admit that what she is telling is her own story. It is as if we could hear another voice suggesting Mouth is the protagonist: “what? . . . who? . . . no! . . . she! . . . SHE! . . .”,¹⁰⁸ but she refuses to admit it. She would not say “I” and would not move anywhere. All movement in the play lies in the Auditor’s “simple sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back, in a gesture of helpless compassion”. Moreover, this movement is supposed to lessen “till scarcely possible”.¹⁰⁹

That Time, too, is structured in a way that the audience cannot follow the narrative. *That Time* has been labelled a brother to *Not I* as they portray a male and a female respectively in a very similar way, using body parts only. Here we have a listener, a head, and three voices telling his story in the second person. The structure of the play is formed by alternative appearance of the three recordings: A, B, C. These employ the same voice, but in three distinct periods of a man’s life: childhood, maturity and old age. Logically, in our culture, one expects things to go from A to B to C. This does not happen in *That Time* as the structure goes like this:

ACB ACB ACB CAB

CBA CBA CBA BCA

BAC BAC BAC BAC¹¹⁰

Even this system at the end arrives at a point when the ABC element should arrive, but it does not. Beckett deprives his readers of any satisfaction. His stories are “repeated, recycled, redistributed, rearranged, recombined, but never synthesized”.¹¹¹ Action has first been reduced to words, a story, and now the story is being reduced to a picture, a poetic image. *That Time* is more of a speaking painting than a play. Brater stresses that

108 Beckett, *Not I*. 382.

109 Ibid. 375.

110 Brater 43.

111 Ibid. 40.

Beckett said these plays “must work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect,”¹¹² and that is why they are delivered in a way that prevents reconstruction of the original, linear story. Even though the audience is used to looking for a narrative and grasping such a play might be more demanding, the resulting picture is clearer than a full story.

Footfalls' image is that of walking: not walking to get to a certain point but aimless and unstoppable walking to and fro. Throughout the play, May keeps pacing back and forth. She always takes nine steps, then turns around. Only for her final monologue she stops and the last part is static. Her steps are rhythmic and audible, but not very distinctly – they are muffled by shuffling of her long clothes. Voices of her and her mother's are low and slow. Beckett called *Footfalls* “a pacing play”; pacing is more important than words. As Brater said, “language in this play is calculated on sound in relation to movement.”¹¹³ May takes care of her seriously ill and immobile mother, and while she is pacing, they chat. Like *Mouth*, she tells a tale of herself in third person. “Will you never have done revolving it all,”¹¹⁴ the mother asks. It is unclear whether this refers to a specific traumatic moment in the past – like that April morning was for *Mouth* – or life in general. However, the first is more probable as there is a moment they get to in their recollection that they cannot resolve. Mother wants to know whether Amy observed “anything strange at Evensong”¹¹⁵; the girl replies she did not as she was not there, and thus perplexes the mother who heard her distinctly say Amen. What she was supposed to observe, or if she means she was not there physically or mentally and where she was instead, we never learn.

Billie Whitelaw, the actress who used to perform May among other Beckettian characters, asked Beckett whether she was dead or alive. He responded she was “not

112 Brater 44.

113 Ibid. 71.

114 Beckett, *Footfalls* 400.

115 Ibid. 403.

quite there”.¹¹⁶ Beckett attended a lecture by the psychoanalyst C. G. Jung on a case of a girl who had “never been mentally born”, which might have been an inspiration. Brater suggested that May, too, has never been born. According to him, “Beckett has finally succeeded in making absence a palpable stage presence: one cannot be more minimalist than that and still write a play.”¹¹⁷

In *A Piece of Monologue* the Speaker tells a story, most probably his own, but once again in third person. He confirms what has been suggested already by *Breath*: birth equals death. Life is a succession of funerals of the loved ones. Pictures that used to hang on the wall are lying on the floor torn. The Speaker stares out of a window and there is nothing in there, as in *Endgame*. At the end, instead of a boy, he sees a coffin. He is waiting for the “rip word”, or maybe for the phrase “rest in peace”. Everybody is dead. To him, there is “Never but one matter. The dead and gone.”¹¹⁸

The voice in *Rockaby* tells us: “in the end / the day came / ... when she said / to herself / ... time she stopped.”¹¹⁹ So she did stop looking out of a window, went down the stairs and sat in the rocking chair, till her end came. She was “dead one night / in the rocker”.¹²⁰ The voice says she is dead but during the play she is still alive: we watch her rocking in her rocker, asking for more. Maybe she is not asking for more rocking, but asking the voice to go on with her story. She cannot die until the story is told. But at the end, the voice dies away, and the chair ceases to rock. This play portrays the end of life.

In *Ohio Impromptu* the Reader reads a story of a person trying to obtain relief from unfamiliarity after being hurt by separation from a close person. It was his fault that caused the current situation and he cannot go back. However, one day another man

116 James and Elizabeth Knowlson, eds. *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett: Uncollected Interviews with Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) 201.

117 Brater 60-64.

118 Beckett, *A Piece of Monologue* 429.

119 Beckett, *Rockaby* 435.

120 *Ibid.* 440.

comes, sent by the dear one, to comfort him, and reads to him. He comes repeatedly, and they “grow to be as one”, until the dear person decides there is “no need to come again”. This causes stillness and paralysis. The story which is read at the same time takes place in front of the audience’s eyes. Reader reads to Listener, and they look so alike they are as one. After the reader closes the book, he, too, will disappear. “Nothing is left to tell.”¹²¹

In *Catastrophe* Director and his Assistant put final touches to the last scene of a dramatic piece. The Protagonist is standing still on the stage. The Assistant arranges him, but the annoyed Director changes his posture and decides to paint him white. The Assistant makes notes of everything. She points out the Protagonist is shivering, but the Director pays no heed. Finally, they rehearse lighting. At the end, after looking down the whole time, the Protagonist looks up with an intense gaze. It is difficult to interpret this gaze. It is supposed to be an act of defiance, but it hardly overshadows the general mood of manipulation.

What Where begins with a voice issuing forth from a megaphone: “We are the last five.”¹²² Four men appear, all identical. They go through their moves in silence, before the voice approves. The drama starts. It consists in Bam questioning Bom as to the results of an interrogation. We do not learn who has been subjected to it, only that he refused to say “it”. The voice is dissatisfied and makes them start again. This time they get further and Bam accuses Bom that the fact the subject did not say it is a lie. He calls Bim to take him away and torture him until he confesses. This whole action is repeated several times. Bim must confess that the subject said it, and what. In the following version he must say where. Bim is accused of lying and taken away by Bem who is taken away by Bam. At the end the voice is alone.

121 Beckett, *Ohio Impromptu* 448.

122 Beckett, *What Where* 470.

3.4 Dialogue

It has already been said that Beckett's consist of verbal action only. As Pavis explores, the relationship between dialogue and action in drama varies widely. In classical tragedy dialogue symbolically sets off the action, in naturalistic drama it is only a secondary part of the action, but dialogue and discourse also can be the only actions in the play: "The act of speaking, of uttering sentences, is what constitutes a performative action."¹²³ This is the case with Beckett.

In addition, not only he relies on verbal action, the nature of his use of dialogue and monologue is specific as well. According to Pavis, the essential criterion of dialogue is the exchange and reversibility of the communication. Lack of verbal exchange is typical for monologue or soliloquy. Monologue is a speech by a character to himself; soliloquy is addressed directly to an interlocutor who does not speak. However, what appears to be a monologue can be the character's dialogue with a part of himself, another (imagined) character, or the world as his witness.¹²⁴

Using this conceptual distinction, let us discuss the individual plays. *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* use dialogue mostly conventionally. They only have one passage of extended monologue each, that of Lucky and Hamm, respectively. However, Niklaus Gessner lists ten modes of disintegration of language observable in *Godot* that can be found in the other plays as well, such as misunderstanding, double-entendre, cliché, repetition, inability to find the right words, telegraphic style (loss of grammatical structure), farrago of nonsense, or dropping of punctuation marks.¹²⁵ As Esslin explains, the dialogue again and again breaks down because no dialectical exchange of thought

123 Pavis, "Dialogue" 96-99.

124 Pavis, "Monologue" 218-220.

125 In Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* 45.

occurs in it. Words lose meaning and the characters are unable to remember what has been said.

In *Krapp's Last Tape*, with one character there is no potential for real dialogue, but the interaction between Krapp and the tape is not a monologue either. The recording itself is a monologue, but the live-Krapp's reactions to it create a specific form of dialogue, dialogue with a tape that cannot answer back. Brater comments upon the nature of dialogue in the play:

In *Krapp's Last Tape* Beckett's language actually comes into its own by the elimination of the second actor. Krapp-on-tape plays "voice" and Krapp-on-stage plays "listener", the special duet for one we associate more typically with Beckett's later works such as *Footfalls*, *That Time*, and *Rockaby*. In an ordinary play, and in some early Beckett (*Godot* and *Endgame*), there are other actors who can feed the appropriate emotional level. But in plays like these it is language itself that must create the conflict. [...] Dialogue is therefore called upon to play a new role.¹²⁶

As regards *Happy Days*, while in the first act Winnie's utterances alternate with Willie's responses, the second act is occupied by Winnie's soliloquy entirely. Her speech is still directed at Willie, but he never responds. Moreover, even in the first act the proportion of Willie's text compared to Winnie's is considerably smaller: he utters twenty sentences in the first act (half of these consist of one word only), and he says one word throughout the whole second act, just about audible, that being a diminutive of Winnie's name: "Win." There are two characters but an incomparable majority of the text is pronounced by only one of them. Growing disproportion between the space the characters are given is also a feature of the later plays. On the other hand, the other character's utterances – when he does reply – are logical responses to what the first one

126 Brater 10.

says. That would not be the case in most of the later works. Pavis's "dialogue of the deaf" starts with *Play*; it is "monologues superimposed on each other".¹²⁷

With *Play* Beckett's work becomes more experimental. Three characters spew out their monologues, in turns or at the same time. Their speech is provoked by spotlight, another technical device besides the tape recorder that gains on importance. The transfer of light is immediate, just as the characters' response to the light is. Voices are for the most part toneless; at the beginning, they start as faint and largely unintelligible and at the repeat they are supposed to have a "breathless quality". Throughout the play they talk in rapid tempo that if not prevents understanding than definitely makes perception really difficult. Rhythm is really important and the author even made a diagram for the chorus showing what words should be uttered together so that the speeches are synchronized.

Not I is Mouth's soliloquy directed at the Auditor. For the first time, there is not a word uttered by anybody else but the main character, or a recorded voice. However, there are several instances where Mouth communicates with someone who is neither visible or audible to the spectator: "what? . . . seventy? . . . good God!" Therefore, the play is in a way a dialogue in disguise. Interestingly, most of the time she agrees with what the secret character says: "what? . . . lying? . . . yes . . .", "what? . . . tongue? . . . yes . . .", "what? . . . the buzzing? . . . yes . . .", apart from one instance when the other seems to have suggested the story Mouth recounts is actually hers.¹²⁸ She is anxious for the world not to think it is her own story but at the same time she feels an incredible compulsion to pronounce it. The play starts with Mouth muttering unintelligibly behind the curtain already before it is up and ends with her still mumbling behind the curtain after it has

127 Pavis, "Dialogue" 96-99.

128 Beckett, *Not I* 376-383.

gone down. Thus the play does not have either a beginning or an end. The emphasis on speech and language is heightened by the focus of light on Mouth only.

That Time surpasses the categories we have established at the beginning. It consists of three interwoven monologues of pre-recorded voices. However, these voices all belong to the same person, who is at the same time their Listener. We do not have any hint that Listener recorded these voices in the past like Krapp did. They are his interior monologue, or rather monologues. In a way *That Time* is very similar to *Play*: both plays use three characters/voices that relate one story – either each of them part of it or each from a different perspective – but with no exchange among themselves. *That Time* has no punctuation at all. It is a turbulent flow of speech of three voices that take turns interrupted only by two ten-second pauses.

Footfalls turns back to dialogue. It is a dialogue of the main character with her mother that is never seen, but successfully plays the role of a partner in communication. However, the text contains monologues, too. At first, the mother speaks of May. In both the monologues pieces of dialogue are inserted, and, interestingly, mother talks of May and “her mother”, not May and herself. May then tells a story of Amy, and reproduces her dialogue with her mother, Mrs. Winter. However, at the end Mrs. Winter asks Amy the same question May’s mother asked her at the beginning of the play, thus suggesting the two pairs of characters are identical. Identity of the characters and their relationship to the stories they tell is even more confused.

The title of *A Piece of Monologue* itself refers to the practice used in the play. On the one hand, similarly to *Not I*, it consists of one speech only, and Speaker refers to the protagonist of his story in third person. On the other hand, there are no directions concerning the speed of speech, so presumably it would be lower and the text more accessible to the audience. Also, in contrast to beginning before the rise of the curtain

and still going on after its fall, there are ten-second pauses at the beginning and the end. Nevertheless, the story itself is just as blurred as if its beginning and end were inaudible. Moreover, there is no auditor, or listener. “The other” is gone, apart from the audience, which would not be acknowledged by Speaker.

Rockaby portrays a Woman and her recorded voice that refers to her in third person. The woman repeats the same word, “more”, four times, prompting the rocking to continue. This can hardly be considered an exchange with the voice, and therefore a dialogue. The voice’s utterances are in the form of a poem, which emphasizes their rhythm. Moreover, speech is connected to movement – the rocking and the voice set off together. This becomes more important than any exchange or communication between the characters. *Ohio Impromptu* is based on the act of Reader reading a book to Listener. Again, the story is about a third person. Reading is another step further in detachment from the story: not only is it not appropriated by the character, he does not even know it by heart. The characters’ relationship to the story is even more indefinite. And, at the end of the play, “Nothing is left to tell.”¹²⁹

In terms of use of language, *Catastrophe* is less complicated and thus closer to the earlier plays. Dialogue between Director and his Assistant is quite ordinary, apart from the fact that they speak in very short sentences. On the contrary, *What Where* is more experimental. It is highly metatheatrical and the recorded voice often exercises performative utterances: “I switch on.”, “I switch off.”, “I start again.”¹³⁰ The recording takes on the biggest part, but as the play progresses, the four characters of Bam, Bem, Bim and Bom get more space.

We have seen that Beckett’s theatre plays are not based on action but on verbal exchange. Actually, progressively less and less of the verbal action is an exchange. The

129 Beckett, *Ohio Impromptu* 448.

130 Beckett, *What Where* 470-476.

disproportion in individual characters' involvement grows; monologue occupies vaster and vaster space. Monologue is usually felt to be static, and therefore antidramatic. Nevertheless, it is an appropriate means for conveying the poetic image. Beckettian language disintegrates and progressively resembles poetry. From the appearance of pauses in *Not I* and loss of punctuation in *That Time*, it gets to *Rockaby* that is actually stylized as a poem. Michael Rudman, who directed *Waiting for Godot* in London, sensed poetry already in the very first play: "It's a dramatic poem much more than it is a poetic drama."¹³¹

131 Knowlson, *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett: Uncollected Interviews with Samuel Beckett* 270.

Chapter 4: Minimalism

Beckett's late plays of the 1960s and the 1970s continue in his previous tendencies. However, the plays are not Absurdist anymore. The increasing tendency towards reduction and compactness has led to Beckett's later work being described as minimalist by critics such as Brater, Duthuit, Bersani, or John Barth. There are many ways in which minimalism can manifest itself, and Beckett complies with a number of them: he is economical with words, his plays portray minimal characters, are event-free and resistant to development.

According to Brater, minimalism is “an abstract and by some measure even a geometric art form, at best aims to do more and more with less and less”.¹³² It is a tendency that manifested itself in various forms of art, especially visual and musical, where the work is stripped down to its most fundamental features. Edward Strickland describes it thus:

Minimalist art is prone to stasis (as expressed in musical drones and silence, immobile or virtually immobile dance, endless freeze-frame in the film, event-free narrative and expressionless lyrics, featureless sculpture, monochromatic canvases) and resistant to development (gridded or otherwise diagrammatic paintings and sculptures, repeated modules and held harmonies in music, simple and reiterated movements in the dance and film, the aborted circular dialogues in the drama and fiction).¹³³

For a better idea of minimalism in practice let us give some examples: John Cage in the field of music (a three-movement composition 4'33'' consists entirely in silence), Marc

132 Brater ix.

133 Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) 7.

Rothko's paintings (his canvases in the Rothko Chapel, Houston, give the impression of being simply covered with two or three different hues of paint), Andy Warhol's film *Empire* (a silent, black and white freeze-frame portraying the Empire State Building for eight hours and five minutes), or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion (an exhibition pavilion that provides a "zone of tranquility" instead of exhibits). Van der Rohe's motto was straightforward: "Less is more".¹³⁴ Besides music, painting, film and architecture minimalism manifested itself in dance, sculpture, fashion, or design as well. Let us explore specifics of literary minimalism.

In his essay "A Few Words about Minimalism" Barth deals with Ernest Hemingway, Jorge Luis Borges, Beckett, and Raymond Carver, among other writers. According to him, fiction can be minimalist in several ways: there is minimalism of unit, form and scale, which is noted for short words, short sentences and paragraphs, or super-short stories; minimalism of style which features stripped-down vocabulary, stripped-down syntax, stripped-down rhetoric, and stripped-down, non-emotive tone; and minimalism of material, characterized by minimal characters, minimal exposition, minimal action, and/or minimal plot. He gives examples of very short work of great rhetorical, emotional and thematic richness by Borges, and of so called long-winded minimalism in Beckett's trilogy.¹³⁵

Beckett's late drama is an even more accomplished example of minimalism, though, as it is not "long-winded" like the trilogy. It combines all the possible types of minimalism described by Barth: that of form, style and material. Also, it agrees with Strickland's definition: it is static (event-free) and resistant to development (although it

134 Paul Goldberger, "Architecture View; His Buildings Have the Simplicity of Poetry," *International Herald Tribune*, 16 Feb. 1986, *The New York Times*, 7 Jan. 2011 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/16/arts/architecture-view-his-buildings-have-the-simplicity-of-poetry.html?scp=9&sq=van%20der%20Rohe%20%22Less%20is%20more.%22&st=cse>>.

135 John Barth, "A Few Words About Minimalism," *The New York Times on the Web*, 28 Dec. 1986, *The New York Times*, 2 Jan. 2011 <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/21/specials/barth-minimalism.html?scp=1&sq=john%20barth%20a%20few%20words%20about%20minimalism&st=cse>>.

prefers monologue to aborted circular dialogues). Even though already the Absurdist plays lacked events in the sense of a denouement, the characters did do things. Vladimir and Estragon waited. Clov looked out of windows. Krapp listened to tapes. Winnie rummaged through her bag. The characters in the subsequent plays only talk. Motionless, the two women and a man talk. Mouth talks. Listener listens to voices. Speaker talks. May walks, but not out of her will. Woman *is being* rocked. Reader reads. Protagonist *is being* positioned; the other two characters act, though. Bam, Bem, Bim and Bom enter and exit. Thus, after *A Piece of Monologue*, the plays begin to take different direction – the characters are forced to action.

Nevertheless, central to the plays is a story not acted out but told. There were stories in the Absurdist plays, too, but there were several distinct stories in each play, not in the form of one life story. Beginning with *Play*, a life story that needs to be told becomes the central issue. However, it can be reconstructed and is appropriated only in the one play. In the subsequent plays that does not work anymore, the story always supposedly belongs to a third, unknown person. In *Catastrophe* and *What Where*, the story is not even told anymore, and we have no information as to what somebody has to confess. Nevertheless, even though lacking, it is still essential.

The point of the story where it culminates would be left out anyway. What happened to Mouth? What was it that happened the time or another time? What is there to revolve? The point would not be found in the stories; the point is that stories are there to be told at all. Minimum of their contents must be revealed so that they do not take attention off the general image. As Kalb puts it, “Beckett’s theatre [...] creates scenes whose subject matter is their duration in present time”,¹³⁶ not an account of the character’s past.

136 Kalb 3.

And the actress Whitelaw said in an interview with Kalb: “the way the thing looks and the way [Beckett] paints with light is just as important as what comes out of my mouth”.¹³⁷

Especially *Play*, *Not I*, *That Time*, and *A Piece of Monologue*, are like still pictures. They are perfect instances of minimalist drama. Set nowhere and outside time, they show immobile characters stuck in the present moment with their past. It is long gone but still cannot be gotten rid of as there is always some bit that would not be confessed and accepted. So they hang on in the darkness, alone, and paralyzed. *Breath* does not even have that character, as the furthest extreme of experiment. The torsos in *Play*, Mouth in *Not I*, and the seemingly severed head of *That Time* with the stories they spew out are on the verge of what can be considered drama and create a very specific and undoubtedly minimalist theatre style. Nevertheless, towards the end of his oeuvre Beckett abandons this rigid style and the plays of *Footfalls*, *Rockaby*, *Ohio Impromptu*, *Catastrophe* and *What Where* work with minimalism on a more humane level. As Brater phrased it, Beckett’s late plays demonstrate “an aesthetic which goes far beyond the limited and often dehumanized sphere we recognize in the chilling reticence of minimalist art”.¹³⁸

137 Kalb 234.
138 Brater ix.

Conclusion

Beckett has been associated with two different traditions, the Theatre of the Absurd and minimalism, without these two ever having been put into perspective. Thus, there was a gap that needed to be filled and the relationship between these two styles questioned. This thesis' aim was to discuss Beckett's plays for the stage in connection with both of these traditions. While it would be unacceptable to see minimalism as an inevitable or the solely possible result of Absurdism, a logical development in Beckett's work where both these styles appear can be explored.

The paper has proved that both the styles share a common feature of reduction. While Absurdism already meant reduction when compared to traditional drama, this feature is even accentuated in minimalism, and thus it is possible to look at the two styles in terms of development within the artist's oeuvre. This paper's aim was to explore this process of development that lies in impoverishment.

As described in chapter one, in the Absurdist plays the set expectations of the naturalistic and narrative convention were challenged and replaced with a completely different style. As the Theatre of the Absurd was a reaction to disillusionment after World War II, it reflected the feelings of senselessness in its abandonment of traditional concepts of characters, plot and dialogue. Beckett abandoned these to the extent that his plays do not present stories anymore, but portray static poetic images instead. As seen in the second chapter, this fact is reflected in reduced duration of the plays as well as expanded space devoted to stage directions. These need to be extensive in order to precisely convey the author's vision.

In the third chapter all of Beckett's theatre plays were analysed individually in terms of the important concepts: the plays' setting, characters, plot and use of dialogue. In all of these the process of impoverishment was traced. The first part dealt mainly with setting. Beckett's plays of the Theatre of the Absurd are set in a no man's land: on a crossroads, or in a bare interior with a few props. Minimalist plays are set in nothing but surreal darkness. An account of geographical references throughout the oeuvre was provided. Even though they never refer directly to the play's actual setting, in the earlier plays some place names appear from time to time. Progressively they disappear completely. The chapter also pointed out the receding use of props as a sign of increasing minimalism.

As regards characters, in the Absurdist plays they lacked depth and motivation; in the minimalist ones we get as far as to a play with no characters at all. If they are there, they are nameless: appellations such as "a woman", "Auditor" or even "A", "B", "C" take over. In Beckett's Absurdism characters functioned in pairs in order to solve their ontological problem and always have somebody who proves their existence. However, these couples underwent a series of changes in different plays as they would be stuck, one of them dumb, or not even present on stage. The device of an absent character took the form of Godot, the boy in *Endgame*, May's mother, or the one in *What Where* who never confesses anything as he is never there in any form. Beckettian characters may be reduced to voices, or body parts such as a torso, a head or a mouth. They are themselves unsure of who they are, what their story is, and most importantly what it is they must do in order to move on.

Their yearning to move elsewhere springs from the fact that they are stuck in purgatory. They have to tell the truth or accept their own destiny in order to change their situation, but they are incapable of that. Thus they are stuck at the end of their lives,

with lives gone but death still out of reach. Therefore, as the third part of the chapter has illustrated, there is no place for stories. What was left of plot in the Absurdist work is utterly gone in the minimalist. Beckettian plays never had a conventional plotline, but still some activity took place on the stage in the earlier plays. In the later ones it is only repetitive and fruitless walking to and fro or rocking, or movement is utterly substituted with speech. The plays evolve into still pictures of human beings stuck in the present moment.

As the act of speaking is the only action in the plays, the fourth part explores the use of dialogue and monologue, or soliloquy. The Absurdist characters led dialogues, even if unbalanced ones or “dialogues of the deaf” in which no dialectical exchange of thought happened. In Beckett’s minimalism they only have the other one to listen, while they revolve their monologue, or not even that. These static monologues are told by characters in the third person and present stories that are not appropriated by them. They talk as if about somebody else or a strange voice talks about them. Also, the tales get so blurred it is no longer possible to decipher the story. The fact that after *Play* the stories lack so much information that it is impossible to reconstruct them in one’s mind strengthens their status as poetic images. The story is repetitive, but never synthesized. With the exception of *Footfalls*, the speech is rapid, almost unintelligible, and monotone. The importance of rhythm is most evident in *Rockaby*, where the text takes the form of a poem. The text becomes poetry and the plays turn into poetic images.

As the last chapter suggests, *Not I* and *That Time* are without doubt excellent examples of minimalism that lack even more than many critics would consider acceptable. These plays deny theatre principles as well as a silent composition, monochromatic painting, a still film, or an empty exhibition pavilion deny those or their respective art forms. *Breath* is a minimalist play at its most extreme. Plays such as

Footfalls, *Rockaby*, or *Ohio Impromptu*, on the other hand, prove that minimalist principles can be employed in drama without it ceasing to portray whole human beings and losing its connection to humanity.

The above analysis of the process of development in Beckett's oeuvre has suggested that his minimalism is an intensification of the feature of impoverishment of his Theatre of the Absurd. Plays become shorter and shorter. The setting of an unspecific exterior or interior turned into utter darkness. Props disappeared. The characters without names or background eventually lost bodies, too. They became unable to move, to do anything else but to tell incomplete stories, incapable of realizing what their point was. Thus, all they have at the end is their monologue to which there is no response. At the beginning, there was "nothing to be done". At the end, after the process of reduction in all possible aspects, there is "nothing left to say".

Abstract

Samuel Beckett's early plays are usually regarded as part of the tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd, while his later plays are largely considered to be minimalist. As there is no direct relationship between these two styles, they have never been put into perspective. Nevertheless, Beckett's drama for the stage tends towards progressive reduction regarding a number of aspects of the plays, due to which minimalism in Beckett is a logical development of Absurdism. The Theatre of the Absurd, such as *Waiting for Godot*, already meant reduction when compared to traditional drama. As Martin Esslin described, it lacked developed characters, plot with development and suspense, and dialogue as a means of dialectic exchange. The works that followed intensify the process of impoverishment, leading to mere static poetic images. Plays like *Not I* and *That Time* are valid examples of literary minimalism as described by Enoch Brater, Ulysse Duthuit, Leo Bersani, or John Barth.

Abstract in Czech / Souhrn v českém jazyce

Zatímco rané hry Samuela Becketta jsou běžně řazeny k Absurdnímu divadlu, jeho pozdní hry bývají označovány jako minimalistické. Vzhledem k tomu, že mezi těmito dvěma směry neexistuje přímý vztah, nebyly ještě zkoumány ve vzájemné perspektivě. Beckettovo divadelní drama se v mnoha aspektech vyznačuje postupnou redukcí, díky čemuž je u Becketta minimalismus logickým vyústěním Absurdismu. V porovnání s tradičním dramatem již Absurdní drama, jako například *Čekání na Godota*, znamenalo redukcí. Jak popisuje Martin Esslin, postrádalo rozvinuté postavy, děj se zápletkou a výměnu názorů ve formě dialogu. Díla, která následovala, prohlubují proces ochuzování, jež ústí v zobrazování statických poetických obrazů. Hry jako *Not I* a *That Time* jsou příklady literárního minimalismu, jak ho popisují Enoch Brater, Ulysse Duthuit, Leo Bersani nebo John Barth.

Bibliography

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993.
- Ackerley, C. J. and S. E. Gontarski, eds. *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett*. New York: Grove Press, 2004.
- Albee, Edward. "Which Theater Is the Absurd One?" *The New York Times on the Web*. 25 Feb. 1962. The New York Times. 7 Jul. 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/08/15/specials/albee-absurd.html?_r=2>.
- Aristotle. *Aristotle's Poetics*. Intro. by Francis Fergusson. New York: Hill and Wang, 1989.
- Bair, Deirdre. *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.
- Barth, John. "A Few Words About Minimalism." *The New York Times on the Web*. 28 Dec. 1986. The New York Times. 2 Jan. 2011. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/06/21/specials/barth-minimalism.html?scp=1&sq=john%20barth%20a%20few%20words%20about%20minimalism&st=cse>>.
- Beckett, Samuel. *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986.
- Beckett, Samuel. "Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce." *Our Exagmination Round His Factification For Incamination Of Work In Progress*. Samuel Beckett et al. London: Faber and Faber, 1972.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho*. New York: Grove Press, 1996.

- Bersani, Leo and Ulysse Dutoit. *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Brater, Enoch. *Beyond Minimalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Coe, Richard N. *Samuel Beckett*. New York: Grove Press, 1964.
- Cohn, Ruby. *A Beckett Canon*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.
- Esslin, Martin. *Absurd Drama*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980.
- Esslin, Martin. *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1987.
- Foster, Hal, ed. *Postmodern Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 1985.
- Goldberger, Paul. "Architecture View; His Buildings Have the Simplicity of Poetry." *International Herald Tribune*. 16 Feb. 1986. The New York Times. 7 Jan. 2011. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/16/arts/architecture-view-his-buildings-have-the-simplicity-of-poetry.html?scp=9&sq=van%20der%20Rohe%20%22Less%20is%20more.%22&st=cse>>.
- Kalb, Jonathan. *Beckett in Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Kenner, Hugh. *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961.
- Knowlson, James and Elizabeth, eds. *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett: Uncollected Interviews with Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury, 2006.
- Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury, 1996.
- Kudělka, Viktor a Jiří Závěš. *Samuel Beckett: Čekání na Godota*. Brno: Městské divadlo Brno a Divadlo Bolka Polívky, 2003.

- Mercier, Vivian. "The Uneventful Event." *Irish Times*. 18 Feb 1956.
- O'Brien, Eoin. *The Beckett Country: Samuel Beckett's Ireland*. Monkstown and London: Black Cat Press, 1986.
- Owens, C  il  n D. and Joan N. Radner, eds. *Irish Drama 1900-1980*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1990.
- Pavis, Patrice. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*. Toronto: University Toronto Press, 1998.
- Pilling, John, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Richards, Shaun, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Strickland, Edward. *Minimalism: Origins*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Ubu Web. 7 Jul. 2010. <<http://www.ubu.com>>
- Worth, Katharine. *Samuel Beckett's Theatre: Life Journeys*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.