

The Collapse of the Human Mind in Selected Plays of Samuel Beckett

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انهيار العقل البشري في مسرحيات مختارة لصاموئيل بيكت

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Abstract

The Plays Of Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) Reflect The Anxiety, Alienation, And Absurdity That Man Feels In This Age. His World Is Emptied Of Feelings, Liveliness, And Natural Beauty. His Characters Are Toiled With A Sense Of Loss And Uncertainty. A Wasteland Is A Good Description Of The World Of His Plays. This Paper Focuses On The Intellectual Wasteland In Selected Early And Later Plays Of Beckett. The Dramatist Manifests The Characters Of These Plays In Their Intellectual Wastelands Without A Solution Or Even A Clear End.

Key words: wasteland, intellectual, imprisonment, fragments, mind.

The human thought has been deteriorated and regressed as a response to the radical modern cultural and industrial changes. Principles of a pure productive mind have been affected and deformed in these conditions. The intellectual wasteland is exposed in Beckett's plays by treating the human mind as a failure. This type of the wasteland can be treated by inspecting the thought of Beckett's characters in his later plays: *Endgame* (1958), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Happy Days* (1961), and *Play* (1963), especially the writers (Krapp and Hamm), the good reader of literature (Winnie), and the intellectuals (Vladimir and Lucky).

Krapp's creativity as a writer is a failure and very few copies of his book have been sold:

Krapp: ... ! Happiest moment of the past half million.

(*Pause.*) Seventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas. Getting known. (*Pause.*)

One pound six and something, eight I have little doubt.

(Beckett 18)

Books have stopped being a source of attention; in other words, intellect is nil in this universe. Hamm has a sluggish creativity and a drained mind. His brain is spoiled by the drugs (the pain-killer) which, naturally, make his mind more paralyzed and distinguished to be productive. Furthermore, he has neither ability nor inspiration to continue and finish the chronicle he composes; he retells the same passage believing that he is getting on but in fact he is not:

Hamm: (*He sighs.*) There are days like that, one isn't Inspired. (*Pause.*)

Nothing you can do about it, just Just wait for it to come. (*Pause.*) No forcing, no Forcing, it's fatal. (*Pause.*) I've got on with it [the Chronicle] a little all the same. (*Pause.*) Technique, you know. (*Pause. Irritably.*) I say I've got on with it a little all the same. (Beckett 40)

Hamm's thought is limited to a narrow spot: "[s]ometimes dripping in my head, even since the fontanelles. (*stifled hilarity of Nagg.*) Splash, splash, always on the same spot" (Beckett 35). This is the border of Beckett's characters mind: merely a spot.

The imprisonment of the mind is represented physically in *Play* by the three characters being confined in the urns, and it is represented equally in *Happy Days* by Winnie's burial in the sand. This imprisonment stands, again, for the limited human mind (or the intellectual's mind in particular). Winnie exercises her intellect by reading the words on the handle of her toothbrush "guaranteed ... genuine... pure" (Beckett 12), learning the meaning of the word "hog" (Beckett 35), or reading the label of a medicine. The classical literary allusions that cover Winnie's speech are negatively employed by her; she considers these creative products a way (an old style) of expressing and lamenting her dilemma. Classics, instead of being the resources of enriching her knowledge and deepening her thought, becomes a part of the habits resumed daily by her and a means which is exploited to pass the time. It helps Winnie through her day:

Winnie: One loses one's classics (*Pause.*) Oh not all (*Pause.*) A part. (*Pause.*) A part remains. (*Pause.*) That is what I find so wonderful, a part remains, of one's classics, to help one through the day. (*Pause.*). (Beckett 43)

This passage shows that Winnie used to read classics and has learned and the part that remains is wonderfully seized to enable her to talk and waste her time.

Actually, the crumbled supposed model of the Beckettian intellectuality appears widely and acutely in his first dramatic writings, in *Waiting for Godot* (1954). As suggested by Ruby Cohn, Vladimir and Lucky represent intellect (5). Thought, besides being mechanical, as mentioned before, and is represented by the hat or

the fragmented programmed monologue of Lucky, is something that irks Vladimir. what he always does with his hat is: "[h]e takes off his hat ..., peers inside it... puts it on again" (Beckett 10). Thinking is a state that he fears; this is why he avoids silence. Whenever there is silence, he says to Estragon in a panic way "what do we do now?" (Beckett 17); and when he uses his intellect, the outcome is darkness. Estragon asks Vladimir to think about hanging himself from the tree first and he after him: "Estragon: use your intelligence, can't you? (*Vladimir uses his intelligence*) Vladimir: (*finally*). I remain in the dark" (Beckett 17).

Intellect here appears to be passive and negative rather than creative.

Thought becomes a physical task. Lucky after his long speech, he falls like wreckage. He is a decayed scholar, a degraded man of reason, and the senile professor (as described in the notes of the play). His speech is a slipped sudden intellect that has been repressed and ended by Pozzo's whip; he is despised by Pozzo and addressed as a "pig" and "hog." An intellect like Lucky becomes a slave to the intellectual bankruptcy of a cruel man like Pozzo who learns philosophy from Lucky himself.

Lucky represents the declined intellectual whose name ironically describes his status. Beckett has referred to the name "Lucky" in a conversation with Professor Duckworth that he is lucky "to have no more expectations" (Fletcher et. al. 57). His baggage of intellect holds only sand within it. The modern intellectual becomes the organized scapegoat or becomes like a man trapped terribly in a net (the scapegoat's agony and the net are the names of Lucky's dances in the play). The modern intellectual's eloquence is as incoherent as Lucky's. The latter himself is described as the caricature of intellect (Garver and Federman 112). Thought has been reduced by Beckett to be a clownish act and a mechanical process.

Beckett presents his thoughtful people as old, exhausted, and deteriorated ones. The idea behind this is that Beckett wants to show that the creative mind of

those old exhausted intellectuals, in turn, is collapsed and deflated and to give a more smashed and duller image of intellectuality. All his intellectuals are aged; they lack strength and activity to be productive; his intellectuals are merely clowns and tramps who have waved rights and principles of thought and scholarship; and they simply substitute talk for thought.

Beckett dramatizes the end of intellect that reaches the stage of non- revival. He shows the human mind as a mind that contains but a bundle of broken ideas and has a stagnant ability of creation. Beckett counts that behind this mental nullity is the many questions that overwhelm mysteriously the human existence and that preoccupy the human mind and tire it without persuasive warranted answers. Attempting to think, a human mind opens up the world of absurdity, loneliness, waiting, and morbidity: "[b]eginning to think is beginning to be undermined" as Albert Camus (1913-1960) states (qtd. in Navratilova), and this is what Beckett comprehends. His intellectuals are exhausted because they are aware of the nature of their existence. They think about the truth, cause, and purpose behind their ambiguous life of suffering, and this thinking leads them to anguish and weariness. They cease to be creative besides resorting to isolation. Their intellect is not appreciated nor apprehended by people, and it proves, amidst this fast industrial development and in the age of money and material advantages, its failure as "[their knowledge] brings no solutions to the existential problem" (Sohn) that submerges their minds.

One pivot of Beckett's intellectual wasteland is the shrunk setting of the later plays and its enclosed space which signify the enclosed planes of a skull and the limitation of thought (qtd. in Rosen 133). The other pivots include the weak disintegrated and the deterioration of art. These pivots are exhibited in *Not I* (1973), *That Time* (1976), *Ohio Impromptu* (1981), *Catastrophe* (1982), and *Quad* (1982).

The limitation of thought is brought out in *Quad*. The mechanism of this mime suggests the human adoption of a deterministic rational model represented by the square. The mysterious center that the players avoid is also created by the supposed rational movements. This draws the attention to the confinement of the rational knowledge (Carey 146), for the robed players do not know why they avoid the center and why it is dangerous zone. The confinement of the human thought dramatized here and entails the human ignorance of the truth of things and the purposes of life and existence. Man is supposed to be blind; he moves in his world without guidance even though his movement is rationally directed as those players.

In *Not I*, Beckett presents a mouth that speaks quickly confused and detached words; one cannot forget that this organ of speech is controlled by the mind, and hence, that the latter is equally confused and its ideas and the process inside it are fragmentary and irrational as well. These ideas and this process that take place in the protagonists' mind are represented by a buzzing that irritates the speaker and finally her words flow very quickly, too quickly for anything approaching recognition in the eighteen minutes that Beckett specifies for the whole play. He comments on this point saying: "I am not unduly concerned with intelligibility ... I hope the piece may work on nerves of the audience, not its intellect" (qtd. in Brater 110). This means that Beckett's end here is not intellect but the nerves, to evoke and irritate the audience's nerves to make it see and feel this state of human tiredness in this world. Intellect is not addressed anymore, as any artist or author usually does, for it loses its essence and value in the modern age where it is replaced by an abstract materialistic mentality. This is what Beckett tries to prove; he reflects reality but in his way as an absurdist.

He shows also in *Not I* the collapse of the mind, and how it is weakened by long suffering and condensed sadness that make the mind regressed, deteriorated,

and defective. Beckett weakens the ability of the mind to perceive and respond to the words that revolve within it. This is obvious also in *That Time* where the protagonist is unable to comprehend and respond to what he listens to about his previous life. In *That Time* as well as in *Catastrophe*, Beckett comments on art and knowledge. He speaks about public places such as the library, the gallery, and the theater.

The gallery and the library, which are mentioned in *That Time*, involve no significance in the prospect that one seeks learning. The protagonist seeks them to avoid the rain. He peers, in the gallery, at vast "oil" (Beckett 24) of a famous man or woman in their time; this painting is blacked with age and dirt and it appears behind glass (Beckett 24-25). What attracts his attention is the dates of death fixed on the frames of the pictures not the products and the "antiquity" (Beckett 26) of the artists. Beckett wants to say that whatever man does throughout his life and tries to be creative, he finally dies and what remains of his labor is the date of his death on his product. Beckett clearly emphasizes here the absurdity of man's creativity and labor and in turn his life itself.

In the library, the protagonist does not bother himself to look at the books or read one even as a means of waiting till the rain stops. This gives the impression that people do not anymore care about reading and tasting art; these do not have any impact or influence on them. The protagonist of *That Time* is not acquainted with those places; he feels there as a stranger. In fact, the needs that these places satisfy, in the play, are superfluous ones (a refuge to be sought in the rainy weather) not the needs of enriching one's knowledge and thought.

In *Catastrophe*, on the other hand, Beckett composes a satire on the theater. The theater, in this play, appears to be a place of torture and dictatorial authority, and the theatrical process, similarly, appears to be a means of deformation and compulsory obedience. In the name of artistic production or achievement, a

catastrophe is accomplished. Beckett gives us here a negative image of the theater and the work of drama.

He comments similarly on art and intellect in *Ohio Impromptu*. The very title of the play announces itself as a play about artistic practice. But because the play denies the impromptu through the interference of L, the artistic process appears engaged and intellectuality appears dull with timid ability to produce a pure impromptu piece of art that is put by an intellectual author.

In this play, Beckett mentions the thoughts that are "[b]uried in who knows what profounds of mind. Of mindlessness. Whither no light can reach. No sound" (Beckett 32). Beckett here presents a dark mind with vague ideas that cannot be mindful and which the light of intellect can hardly illuminate; this mind is buried in its grave like the dead.

Actually, intellect and thought are seen useless by Beckett; they, he says, "[c]an reveal nothing to us in the final analysis. All ultimate truth is forever beyond the compass of the human mind, and therefore, truth does not, in fact, exist" (qtd. in Wellwarth 45). Thought is revealed by Beckett as powerless, he shows how the "head dried up" (Beckett 27) as it is demonstrated in *That Time*. He provides and imprints the form of a disintegrating intellect and a "hopeless mind." This is conveyed through Mouth's monologue in *Not I* which is like the syntax of the ex-intellectual Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*. The overall shape of their disjointed fragments conveys, in the case of Lucky's speech, the shape of a mind that shrinks, pines, and dies as a result of the failure of the world as perceived to meet the demands of the enquiring mind. In the case of *Not I*, the monologue is one of a constant attempt to avoid the phrase "not I;" the breaking off on this phrase suggests the failure of the mind to evade the responsibility that is the original motive behind the woman's speech.

As in the early plays, Beckett progressively exposes man with null perception and pictures the strains and the wreckage of the human mind. He displays a wasted intellect and proves the failure of art and theatrical practice. The artistic work halts productivity and the human mind ceases to be gifted to yield a real piece of art. The wasteland theme is suitable to Beckett's plays. They cannot be irrelevant or beyond the wasteland theme and the implications and the significance that this theme reflects and represents. After all, Beckett's characters, whether in the early or the later dramas, are all imprisoned in their wastelands and encircled in Lucky's net and the dark world is always around them. Instead of the normal structure or plot of the conventional plays, Beckett depends on the effect on the nerves and the tension to stimulate us to see how man is drifting in uncertainty burning with desire to find a solid ground and ultimate concrete foundation but he reaches nothing.

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ملخص البحث

تعكس مسرحيات الكاتب المسرحي صاموئيل بيكت (1906-1989) مشاعر القلق والغربة والعبثية. عالم مسرح بيكت هو عالم خالي من المشاعر والحيوية وجمال الطبيعة تتعذب فيه الشخصيات من حالة الضياع والريبة. ارض اليباب هي الوصف المناسب لعالم مسرحياته. يتناول البحث الحالي موضوع الارض اليباب الفكرية في مسرحيات مختارة مبكرة ولاحقة لبيكت. يعرض الكاتب شخصيات مسرحياته وهم يهيمنون في ارضهم اليباب الفكرية من دون أمل او حتى نهاية واضحة. الكلمات المفتاحية: الارض اليباب، المفكر، المقيد، المبعثر، العقل

