

**Self-Disintegration and Loss of Identity
in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*
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Abstract

Although reading or watching the theater of Absurd is usually difficult and confusing, it has created a revolution in the world of theater and profoundly affected most writers of the modern era. The Theatre of the Absurd stresses the idea of man's alienation and seclusion from society. It ignores the traditional plot, evolution of characters and action to attack its audience with a distorted experience. Samuel Beckett (1909-1989) and others adopted this theatrical style in the belief that it represented a more honest response to the post-World War II world than traditional beliefs in a rational, orderly universe. The present study sheds light on fragmented-self and loss of identity in Modern Age which are very significant themes in Samuel Beckett absurd plays in general and *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) in particular. Krapp, the protagonist, suffers from clinging to the past, lack of initiative, anxiety and confusion in his psychological structure. Therefore, he is forced to live in solitude and dead ends, from which he concludes that there are no inherent values or an essential meaning for this meaningless, complex existence.

Keywords: Absurd theater, Self-disintegration, identity, Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*.

الملخص

على الرغم من أن قراءة أو مشاهدة مسرح العبث عادةً ما تكون صعبة ومربكة ، إلا أنه أحدث ثورة في عالم المسرح وأثر بعمق على معظم كتاب العصر الحديث. يؤكد مسرح العبث فكرة اغتراب الإنسان وانعزاله عن المجتمع. يتجاهل الحكمة التقليدية وتطور الشخصيات والحدث لمهاجمة جمهوره بتجربة مشوهة. تبني صامويل بيكيت (1909-1989) وآخرون هذا الأسلوب المسرحي لاعتقادهم أنه يمثل استجابة أكثر صدقاً لعالم ما بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية من المعتقدات التقليدية في عالم منطقي ومنظم. تلقي الدراسة الحالية الضوء على الذات المفككة وفقدان الهوية في العصر الحديث وهما موضوعان مهمان للغاية في مسرحيات صموئيل بيكيت العبثية عموماً وبالأخص مسرحيته (*شريط كراب الأخير*) 1958. إن كراب ، الشخصية الرئيسية، كراب ، يعاني من التعلق بالماضي، و انعدام المبادرة لديه والقلق و اضطراب تركيبته النفسية. لذلك فهو يجبر على العيش بين عزلة و طريق مسدود ، والتي يستنتج منهما عدم وجود قيم متأصلة أو معنى أساسي لهذا الوجود المعقد الذي لا معنى له.

الكلمات الدالة: مسرح العبث، تفكك الذات، الهوية، بكت، (*شريط كراب الأخير*).

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Scientific development is a prominent feature of modern Western civilization. However, a civilization that is immersed in science and depends on technological development is undoubtedly a civilization that results in many negative aspects, especially in regard to human daily life, social relations, culture and understanding of the world. The increasing physical mastery of man is coupled with a never-before-seen moral, religious, and spiritual decline. Scientific principles have taken the place of spiritual principles that placed a heavy focus on man's spiritual activities that "based on facts and experience, . . . [and] developed by rigidly scientific methods of thought" (Hoffman 283) which are indifferent to man's spiritual side and emotions. As a result, the contemporary man becomes both an industrial behemoth and an

emotional midget. Nietzsche says that modern men are “the children of a fragmented, pluralistic, sick weird period” (Bradbury, 7). It is a period of forfeiting, consternation, economic disasters and conflicts.

The two world wars create turmoil, anxiety and fear in the soul of the Western individual. Paul Valery thinks that going from war to peace is riskier than going from peace to war. Valery discusses the situation that followed the First World War in a presentation at Zurich. He defines it in terms that also apply to the circumstances following World War II. In his opinion, despite the passing of the war's storm, people are still anxious and practically all of their issues are still shrouded in dreadful doubts, as if the storm were ready to break. They are unable to foresee the future because their brains are still preoccupied with what has vanished. (Kohn 63).

Undoubtedly, social, spiritual and psychological values are among the most important factors that govern the behavior of the individual and determine his identity and personality. The importance of mentioned values, especially the spiritual ones, lies in the fact that they remain and do not pass away, in contrast to all other privileges and wealth, which are all subject to perishability.

However, it is not easy for a person to acquire values and adhere to them and to believe in their content and application. Rather, it is one of the most difficult issues and goals facing a person as he strives to reach them, and this cannot be achieved without the availability of important conditions like the social environment, the society's culture, and the psychological structure of the individual. When the individual does not possess moral, spiritual and social values, as is the case with Krapp in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, he will undoubtedly suffer anxiety of self-disintegration and the loss of personal identity. Consequently, it will affect his psychological stability and his life will be permeated with difficult existential complications that affect his behavior.

1.2. Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*

The play can be classified as an absurd play which is concerned with basic truths of the human experience, the few comparatively significant principal issues of “life and death, isolation and communication” (Esslin, *The theatre of Absurd* 392). The one-act play analyzes the life of the aging sixty-nine-year old man has unshaven white face, “purple nose, disordered grey hair”; he is distinguished by “hard of hearing”, “cracked voice”, “distinctive intonation” and “laborious walk” (Beckett 55). Moreover, his old age folds his memory into a sea of oblivion and makes his life devoid of meaning. The play begins with the weary Krapp making strange movements, “heaves a great sigh, looks at his watch, fumbles in his pockets, gets up and moves to side of table” (ibid) that show how anxious and lonely he is while listening to a tape of his past life. Esslin asserts that the play examines the passage of time and the ebb and flow of “the Self” (51). Krapp wears “rusty black narrow trousers too short for him. Rusty black sleeveless waistcoat, four capacious pockets. Heavy silver watch and chain. Grimy white shirt opens at neck, no collar. Surprising pair of dirty white boots, size ten at least, very narrow and pointed” (Beckett 55). Therefore, Beckett's usually are suitable inhabitants for the world he presents and

sometimes the outward appearance and the objects surround the protagonist and his possessions reflect his inner self. Moreover, man, as seen by Beckett, is the very antithesis of royal figures who present themselves as heroes in classical tragedies.

Although Krapp is distinguished by intelligence, acumen and strong emotional motivations, he does not enjoy psychological stability, fixed personal identity and peace of mind due to his lack of spiritual and worldly values and ideals. Krapp does not derive from his parents, with whom he is linked by mutual affection, any spiritual, cultural or social values, or even building a stable and sustainable family. Therefore, their death for him is nothing but a memory of a meaningless life.

The title of the play is very suggestive; while 'Krapp' is derived from things that have no value, the 'Last Tape' is a reference to the existence of previous recordings, which in turn confirms that he has previous multi-selves which make the structure of his personality not only ambiguous, but dual as well. Moreover, "Last" could, of course, refer, as Ruby Cohn believes, to "Krapp at his death" (66). However, according to Esslin, the playwright intends to intrigue the audience by possessing their interests as long as possible (*An Anatomy* 43). This means that Beckett wants his readers to be aware of Krapp's different selves and loss of identity that he suffers and the growing physical and moral troubles that are grave and cannot be resolved. Therefore, Krapp is destined not only to suffer the hardships of his old age of sixty-nine, but also to go through the hardships of his former selves to find them "utterly strange" (Esslin, *An Anatomy* 79). Krapp's physical and moral isolation leads him to realization "that he is about to die without having ever really lived" (Webb 66). Ironically, the imminent death, which might put an end to his complex sufferings and rid him of the solitude of living in fragmented selves, never comes. Therefore, he waits patiently for it just as Vladimir and Estragon's *Waiting for Godot* (1952).

Taking a spool out of a box, Krapp intends to listen to a "[strong voice, rather pompous, clearly Krapp's at a much earlier time]" Thirty-nine" (Beckett 57) who comments on his past sterile life of much younger Krapp, twenty-nine. Confined and miserable with his flashbacks, he reminisces his constant failure and self-fragmentation through his tape of past life. Therefore, "Krapp has become increasingly mechanized, and as such has become increasingly isolated" (Weiss 36).

It seems that part of the failure that dominates his life is that Krapp is unable to keep the promises and decisions he makes to organize his life, especially to "drink less" (Beckett 57). Therefore, he mocks himself for not implementing his decisions "The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.) And the resolution! (Brief laugh in which Krapp joins) (Beckett 58). Moreover, he constantly denies the emotional aspect of his life which he replaces with exile and self-imposed asceticism. Among the folds of loneliness that dominate his life appears the image of his beloved Bianca, whom he regards a desperate figure. Krapp's self-imposed seclusion and despair show clearly almost no essential change taking place in his life in spite of his sense of consistency being lost "among his successive selves" (Webb 70). Listing to his tape, he hardly believes that he was that bad person, but he thanks "God that's all done with away" (Beckett 62). Such despair and frustration is due to

his anxious psychological structure and the constant contradiction between his words and actions throughout his current life, which is surrounded by confusion and great deal of perplexity. Consequently, his self-fragmentation is fed by "habit and ...a thread of memory" (Webb 68) whose dimensions and concepts are turned upside down.

Krapp's attempts to revive himself through being creative, and resorting to religion or romantic relationships are unsuccessful because he always finds himself getting short, fleeting moments of relaxation in the rituals of literation of listening to recordings of his past life, swallowing bananas, and obsessing over fondant vocabulary. Moreover, Krapp does not have the nostalgia to return to his youth because there are no useful rational aspirations that would better make him have a real will to direct the energy of his youth that leads him to create a specific identity and an influential figure in society. He asserts this fact as he says "Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back (Beckett 63)

Krapp is distinguished by his difference from other literary protagonists such as Shakespeare and Marlowe's dramatic figures, like Macbeth and Dr. Faustus, who realize their mistake despite their tragic flaw and fall into tragedy or their belief despite all challenges and difficulties. Krapp, whose life is characterized by absurdity, also differs from literary characters who achieve their goals in life by making important personal achievements, and they are eagerly awaiting their inevitable end. Like the central figures of Beckett's absurd plays, who represent pictures of anti-hero, Trap lacks the sense of having a fulcrum through which he can organize his frivolous and meaningless life to put an end to his fragmented-self and lost identity.

The play reflects the roots of the continuous miserable loneliness of Krapp, who is trampled on by an absurd, lost age. Surrounded by these stifling existential circumstances, Krapp confesses to being a writer crushed by old age to face the challenges of lost life and the endless bumps of absurd life.

Although the play takes place in the present, it penetrates from time to time through Krapp's tape into his past life, which is supposed to be devoted to thought and art. The play depicts the modern life of the individual, where emotional and spiritual disintegration occurs when the mind is separated from the body so that the person loses his balance and psychological and personal stability to live a meaningless life and the loss of identity in a vast world full of doubt, uncertainty, confusion and delusion.

Like the rest of Beckett's protagonists, Krapp searches for his self and identity in a meaningless world and in a repetitive time that is almost adversary of him. Therefore, Krapp's tape of recordings, which contains his logical and illogical aspects of his life, represent both an incentive as well as a counterincentive to his desirable and undesirable memories. However, reaching Krapp's essence self or understanding his innermost being, which the figure itself seeks as well as the audience/reader respectively is almost impossible because Krapp's language in this play is not

different from the language of Beckett's immature and futile characters in his other absurd plays, which are usually incoherent, disjointed and almost meaningless.

According to Krapp's distorted psychological structure, he chooses past events from his tape recordings that he feels bring him joy and pleasure, and at the same time he excludes unwanted past ones. However, this does not prevent his distorted memory from imposing itself on his choices and forcing it to recall the absurd and negative aspects of his life through which he may degrade himself. Therefore, whether living in the present or through the past events of his tape recordings, Krapp tries to deceive himself that he does not control the events and memories that flow and revolve around him. Thus, by being under the influence of choosing the desirable events and excluding the undesirable ones through self-delusion, he restrains his memory, which may leak out the bitter events of his miserable life. It seems the tape of his past life is overcrowded with many existential complexities and life irreconcilabilities.

In the tape that chronicles Krapp's life shortly before he reached the age of thirty, which represents the pinnacle of his youth, Krapp ridicules what he believes an awkward period of his life and is even relieved as it is gone forever. Then, he moves through the tape of his past life to the period shortly before forty to see another side of his miserable and absurd life, which he sharply criticizes and can hardly believe that he is that miserable "stupid bastard" and "young whelp" as he devalues himself. (quote)

Krapp reviews a large, mysterious part of his past life through a huge collection of tape recordings covering a period of 45 years of loss, self-deception and meaninglessness. The memory interacts with the tape of his past life to review aspects of his career, his emotional relationships, his sensual tendencies, and the various types of losses experiences, to finally realize "as the day over" and "night is drawing nigh" (Beckett 62) that he is sixty-nine years old man who is overwhelmed by senility and futile life.

Reminding the audience of the homeless Vladimir and Estragon and their meaninglessness of their search for meaning in the absurdity of their lives in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Krapp is characterized by the trivial behaviors which are well-known in Beckett's absurd characters. Consequently, such factors indicate the absurdity and insignificance of his life through the way he moves, the curses he utters, the sighs and moans he releases and through his search of meaning in what he believes a meaningless universe.

Krapp's absurd life, which is stripped of the natural values and ideals known to humankind, makes him take a routine and accurate approach for himself as an alternative to those values. Therefore, he derives his pleasures from eating, drinking or reading, taking precise calculated steps (four or five) when he moves from one place to another, and even adopting the position of the listener with precision and care when he plays the tape recordings of his past life. Contrary to almost all Beckett's absurd characters, Krapp has gone through a sexual experience with Bianca. Describing his sexual experience with her, he mentions that "I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without

moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side” (Beckett 61). However, as a result of his fragmented-self which is surrounded by despair and loss, he does not long even for his passionate happy moments as he asserts “I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now” (Beckett 61).

It is worth noting that what makes Krapp somewhat different from the characters in Beckett's other plays is his lack of companionship (such as that of Vladimir and Estragon) that could ease the pain of loneliness and isolation or that would enable him to forget thinking about his vain, miserable life, laden with regret, loss and aimlessness. Perhaps, it is this loneliness that leads Krapp to a painstaking, futile preoccupation with the search for his fragmented-self and lost identity. Thus, Krapp's selective, continuous listening to tapes of his past life exemplifies the helplessness, emptiness, and self-revolving procession that are the dominant distinct stigma of Beckett's characters in his absurd plays.

The most severe things Krapp suffers at the age of sixty-nine are his strenuous existence, troubles of senility, and his inability to admit his failure on the emotional level, personal relationships, and even in the field of creating artistic creativity. Krapp's repudiation of love which he calls "hopeless and no good" (Beckett 63) vehemently confirms the decline and deterioration of his psychological state. Therefore, his words describing his life as “the sour cud and the iron stool” (Beckett 62) are but an accurate reflection and depiction of a vile, vain, sterile, blocked life that cannot be fixed even by hidden miracles that usually turn intractable issues upside down.

Conclusion

Krapp's clinging to past forces him to live among its folds and even leads him to dead ends, from which he concludes that there are no inherent values or an essential meaning for this meaningless, complex existence. Storing the details of his life with all its negatives and positives on the deaf tape recorder, he suffers from the sterility of artistic creativity. Krapp's multiple selves are surrounded by doubt, confusion, despair and the extent of his deteriorating mental state. Thus, Beckett does not present a resourceful virile human being, but, instead, he portrays a psychologically deformed and crippled character.

What makes Krapp unique of Beckett's characters is that he is a shuttled figure who has sexual desires despite his intellectual decline. At the prime of his youth, he experiences what he believes an intellectual life with a special vision that contributes to solving the existential complexities that he suffers in his futile life, such as self-disintegration, weakness, meaninglessness and loss of identity. However, such an approach is neither able to achieve tangible success, nor the reassurance he searches for so long.

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