

The Motif of Time in the Plays of Beckett

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Chapter Four

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In chapter three Beckett's plots and characters have been examined. His non-adherence to conventional well-knit plots and unusual delineation of characters have been highlighted. He has broken through the crust of stage conventions to the shifting core of psychological reality present in human hopes, fears and dreams. Moreover the themes of his plays have been evaluated against the backdrop of the Bible. Now we may examine Beckett's views on Time and how the motif of Time is developed in his plays.

The motif of Time recurs in his plays. Ihab Hassan says that "Like Proust, Beckett is haunted by Time" (Hassan 121). Its flow causes suffering and tragic endurance for Beckett's characters. His characters are torn out of their natural finite world and deprived of Parmenides' delusions. Parmenides, 5th century BC. Greek philosopher is of the view that knowledge acquired through the sense organs is an illusion and an error. Zeno, the Greek Philosopher of the

6th century BC tried to prove that movement or any activity does not exist. The only thing that remains unchanged and constant is Being and the essence of reality is infinity. The movements and thoughts of a finite being in space and time are incompatible with the reality of the Universe. Therefore, the finite world demarcated by time is the ostensible and the illusory world of human being. It only creates the delusion of flowing, change and movement, and the world is separated from the real and only true world of the infinite Universe as the Being of a unity. It is, therefore, seen that Beckett's characters fall into timelessness and immobility. Though they are situated in the only real infinite Parmenides' world, they still stay human beings with human mind and feelings. This is the tragedy of Beckett's man and the absurdity of his world. In other words, his predicament lies in a situation where he cannot face the world deprived of delusions. He is entrapped in the impossibility of integrating a finite and limited human life with the infinity of the Universe where he lives. Therefore, the inconsistency now consists in different beings in time or rather different time categories as finite and infinite. That Beckett's characters are expelled from the stream of events, creates the illusion

of a flux of time. In the words of Esslin, “To one who felt that habit and routine was the cancer of time, social intercourse a mere illusion” (Esslin 33). His characters stop in time and space and stand face to face with their true existence in a world of which the real essence is its infinity. Time takes hold of them and becomes their enemy. It crushes through memories and a nonsensical hopeful vision of tomorrow. In these moments time loses its only quality i.e. the delusion of fluency appearing to be the natural life process. Blaise Pascal (1623 – 62) is of the view:

‘We sail within a vast sphere, ever drifting in uncertainty, driven from end to end. When we think to attach ourselves to any point and fasten to it, it wavers and leaves us; and if we follow it, it eludes our grasp, slips past us and vanishes for ever. Nothing stays for us. This is our natural condition and yet most contrary to our inclination; we burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation where on to build a tower reaching to the infinite. But our whole ground work cracks and the earth open to abyss’. (qtd. in Hesla 129)

Beckett airs the view of Zeno (6th cent. BC Greek philosopher) with regard to the passage of time, as is when Hamm speaks in Endgame: “Moment upon moment, pattering down like the millet grains of ... (he hesitates) ... that old Greek and all life long you wait for that to mount up to life” (45). Zeno’s parable of the heap of millets points out that in a finite universe, the heap can never be completed but be possible only in an infinite universe. In the quote, the heap of Millet is replaced by the heap of days.

Hamm, Clov and Hamm’s parents represent three generations and also three periods. Clov as the son of Hamm stands for Hamm’s past. He was like Clov who is now capable of moving and using the legs. Nell and Nagg represent Hamm’s future. They are old and closer to death. Hamm, the main character represents the present or continuity of time. Moreover, we can notice that there are two time levels operating simultaneously in the play. One is the linear scheme of time appearing through the age of all the characters and their relationships. On the other, there is a vertical line representing Zeno’s time succession, the eternal slowing down and tending to infinity. This line is represented mostly by Hamm. Beckett projects this infinite

present right on the stage through the character of Hamm and his spasmodic sticking to the central position in the middle of the stage:

HAMM. I am more or less in the centre?

CLOV. I'd say so.

HAMM. You'd say so! Put me right in the centre.

(Endgame 24)

Hamm wants Clov to place him at the centre of the stage as if he would like to be as deep as possible in the moment of the present in order to reach the long desired end.

Linear time is primarily concerned with change while the vertical Zeno's time succession implies sameness. When Hamm speaks: "But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideas!" (16), it is the linear time that is indicated. On another occasion, when Hamm begs for his painkiller, Clov repeats that he is leaving. Through repetition static time is expressed. The conversation between Hamm and Clov given below shows that time has stopped:

HAMM. What time is it?

CLOV. The same as usual.

HAMM. (Gesture towards window right) Have
you looked?

CLOV. Yes.

HAMM. Well?

CLOV. Zero. (13)

Static time is expressed through the motif of a circle which appears in different forms. Clov is seen pushing Hamm in the chair along the walls around the room as “right round the world” (23). He comes back to the same place as if nothing has happened. Static time is expressed in the quality of repetition represented by the rotation of the “bicycle wheels” (15) at the beginning of the play. The repetitive dialogue also expresses the Static time:

CLOV. (Looking) Grey. (Lowering the telescope,
turning towards Hamm, louder) Grey!
(pause. Still louder) Grey! (Pause. He gets
down, approaches Hamm from behind,
whispers in his ear).

HAMM. (Starting.) Grey! Did I hear you say Grey? (26)

When Hamm asks for oil can to oil the castors, Clov replies that he oiled them 'yesterday'.

HAMM. Yesterday! What does that mean?
Yesterday!

CLOV. (Violently) That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this awful day. I used the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything anymore teach me others or let me be silent. (32)

We find that Beckett's characters are deeper and deeper in the moment of timelessness. The words showing time in the quote express a different time quality when the actual words lose their meaning.

In Happy Days we have Winnie, a character embedded in mound that stands for heap of time that always promises but never grants her wish. When she is grounded in the mound, she is grounded in the present as well. When Winnie is stimulated into wakefulness by

a bell, she mentions it as bell for sleep. Here, as Francis Doherty remarks, "... time is abolished and has been replaced by an unchanging light, an empty landscape and arbitrary division into wakefulness and sleep to replace day and night". (Doherty 116). When the night falls her sufferings will come to an end. She envies the brute beast because of its fast and painless death: "That is what I find so comforting when I lose heart and envy the brute beast ..." (16). On another occasion when Winnie tends to move towards the future her time passes slowly: "Sometime all is over, for the day all done, all said, already for the night and the day not over, far from over, the night not ready, far, far from ready" (34).

At another point, she realises that she is in moment of continuity of time when she utters: "... it's not hotter today than yesterday, it will be no better tomorrow than today, how could it, and so on back into the far past, forward into the far future ..." (29). Winnie is quite aware what kind of future lies before her when she says: "... cast your mind forward, Winnie, to the time when words must fail" (25). In the second Act of the play, Winnie is almost completely buried in the mound. She will not die soon as her time will

slow down infinitely. Since time does not pass in linear fluency it disintegrates into separate fragments. Winnie separates one second from the other and a particular moment appears to be an infinite moment:

WINNIE. I used to think ... (pause) ... I say I used to think there was no difference between one fraction of a second and the next, (Pause). I used to say ... (pause) ... I say I used to say, Winnie you are changeless, there is never any difference between one traction and the next. Why bring that up again?. (44)

In Krapp's Last Tape, the motif of Time is presented through the confrontation of an individual and his past. Krapp occupies himself with listening to the old tapes he recorded many years ago. Searching for his identity, he does not identify with the one on the tape as his character has changed. Krapp states: "Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever bad as that" (17). He views his past as a time contingency but at the same time, he is aware of his identity that he remains the same Krapp.

His tragedy consists in refusing his past and in his changeless existence as Krapp. He through saving his voice and his impressions of past events, tries to preserve his true self. Thirty years ago, he believed that there was something durable in his personality, a durable core which was the true self of his identity.

KRAPP. The grain, now what I wonder do I mean by that, I mean ... (hesitates) ... I suppose I mean those things worth having when all the dust has – when all my dust has settled. (12)

It appears that Krapp also is approaching an end. As the title indicates, it is Krapp's last tape that he listens. He sings a song about the day reaching the end as if it is his own end.

KRAPP. Now the day is over
 Night is drawing nigh-igh
 Shadows – (Coughing, then almost
 inaudible) of the evening.
 Steal across the sky. (19)

Krapp's life is noted for misery and has nothing to wait for but death. His only joy in the last "past half million" (18) moments is the only thing – the word "Spool" (10). Krapp's movement towards death is represented by the tape and its cyclical shape showing recurrence and sameness. Beckett keeps the tape running on to imply that there is still an infinite space of time till Krapp's actual death.

Time is usually thought of rather as a play's environment or framework. It is a structural element, not a thematic one. The theatre is not the vehicle for dealing directly with time. But this is not so in the case of Beckett. Certain ideas central to understanding the basic features of Beckett's plays are put by him in his essay on Proust:

'There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us or been deformed by us. The mood is of no importance. Deformation has taken place. Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed but a daystone on the beaten track of the years and irremediably part of us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday. The good or evil

disposition of the object has neither reality nor significance. The immediate joys and sorrows of the body and the intelligence are so many superfetations. Such as it was, it has assimilated to the only world that has reality and significance, the world of our own latest consciousness and its cosmography has suffered a dislocation so that we are rather in the position of Tantalus, with this difference that we allow ourselves to be tantalised. And possibly the 'pereptumm mobile' of our disillusion is subject to more variety. The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday's ego, not for today's. We are disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment. But what is attainment? The identification of the subject with the object of his desire. The subject has died – and perhaps many times on the way. For subject B to be disappointed by the banality of an object chosen by subject A is as illogical as to expect one's hunger to be dissipated by the spectacle of uncle eating his dinner'. (qtd. in Hayman 16)

When one day is that not enough for you,
one day like any other day, one day he went
dumb, one day I went blind, one day we will
go deaf, one day we were born, one day we
shall die, the same day, the same second, is
that enough for you? They give birth astride
of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it
is night once more. (89)

In Waiting for Godot, Pozzo states, “Have not done tormenting me with your accursed time”? (89). The very same sentiment can be expressed by any of the other characters in the play. Time is their common enemy. To Pozzo, it brings only privation and decay. To Lucky, it brings no relief from his slavery. In the second Act, he seems to have lost the power to speak.

Beckett’s characters are very much conscious about time. Time does not pass at all. It stays around us as in Waiting for Godot. His characters have become so decrepit, lost so many limbs and faculties because so much of time has gone by for them. Even when time passes, it passes slowly. Hayman states

Molloy and Moran both go on deteriorating rapidly in the course of the novel and Malone is often uncertain about whether he is dead already, an uncertainty that he shares with the nameless, perhaps bodiless narrative voices in Texts Pour Rien and The Unnamable (1953). Born in How It Is (1964) and the characters in Play are all situated somewhere outside temporal existence. (Hayman 19)

When Vladimir and Estragon say that time has stopped, this does not just mean that it is passing slowly. There is a sense in which it does stop during the play. We see Pozzo consult his watch four times during his scene and at the end of the scene he tries hard to find it fumbling in his pockets and searching on the ground, all in vain. He decides finally that he must have left it back at the manor. But in Act II, we find his indifference to time. We may attribute this to the influence of Vladimir and Estragon or the loss of his watch or the loss of his sight. In any case both losses are symbolic of entering a world in which time and space do not have their normal significance.

Between the decisions and the actions of the Beckettian characters, there is a time-lapse. In Waiting for Godot, Pozzo

thrashing about on the ground, is unable to get up. At this juncture, Vladimir and Estragon still take time for a discussion about whether or not, they should help him. At the end of the play, they say: "Let's go" and stay exactly where they are. The intention to move does not necessarily correspond with the initiation of appropriate action in the appropriate limbs. Exactly the same thing happens in Endgame. Hamm asks Clov to move. Clov, instead of moving, heaves a great groaning sigh. When Hamm remonstrates: "I thought I told you to be off", the answer is, "I am trying" (14). It is the same with the parents of Hamm. When Nell wants to go back into the dustbin, she does not go back and she does not know why she doesn't. At the end of the play, Clov has finally decided to leave Hamm. He packs and stands there ready to go but never gets himself to the point of going.

In All That Fall we have Maddy Rooney moving with so much difficulty. "How can I go on, I cannot. Oh let me just flop down flat on the road like a big fat jelly out of a bowl and never move again!" (9). Tired of her body, tired of moving and tired of her life, her one wish is for dissolution. Her blind husband has much the same antipathy towards movement. He hates children and often has the will to kill the

little boy who acts as his guide. He stresses on physical deterioration. As for Dan, the worse he gets, the better he seems to feel. The loss of his sight is a fillip to him. He wishes that he could go deaf and dumb too. Both Maddy and Dan hate movement and most of the things that make up the substance of living. Beckettian characters do not have any possibility of grace, no escape from the deadening awareness of the meaningless passage of time. For Krapp, who is a writer, the only reality is word. His own past self is only real for him in the form of words on a tape and the pleasure he enjoys most in the present is the pleasure of words. Within the first minute of the action, we see him relishing the word 'spool'. The tape on Krapp's machine is an image of the mind, coiling backwards and forwards in time. Krapp prefers solitude to sex and sociability. Henry in Embers is depicted as a mad person. He gives himself orders as if his mind and the body were independent organs. With Henry, we are not allowed to stand back and look at the madness from a distance. We are forced inside it.

To Estragon and Vladimir, it brings only frustration and occasionally a brief interlude in their otherwise tedious waiting for the promised one. The two purpose various stratagems for passing time.

They try to converse calmly but the conversation declines into an intolerable silence. It is intolerable because it leaves each alone with his thoughts and to think is misery. But even here, time is against them because Vladimir observes: "What is terrible is to have thought" (76). The present is strewn with the corpses of dead ideas. It is a charnel-house where the fleshless bones of past thoughts are immured. And to make matters worse, we cannot help looking at these skeletons. Estragon says that he is tired of breathing. The business of living for Vladimir and Estragon is a matter of filling up the gaping holes in Time. It does not matter whether or not to fill up the gaping holes in Time, so long as it is filled, so long as it is got rid of, so long as it is passed into the past where it can be ignored and forgotten:

ESTRAGON. I tell you we were not here yesterday.

Another of your nightmares.

VLADIMIR. And where were we yesterday evening,
according to you?

ESTRAGON. How would I know? In another
compartment. There is no lack of void. (66)

Time and space are void and any particular time (yesterday evening) or particular space (here) is just one of several compartments in the void. The now is empty, though it is exactly the emptiness of the now which the two men cannot abide and which, therefore, they do their best to fill with whatever comes to hand. In the midst of one of their little canters, Gogo or Didi will suddenly realise the futility and meaninglessness of it all. Gogo at the end of the exercise roars, "God have pity on me!" More pitiful is Didi's announcement: "Time has stopped" (77). For Didi, time has quit moving. The present is the fullness of its nothingness that has encompassed him. Shortly thereafter he suggests that they leave the place. It would seem to be an effort to escape time by changing place. It is a foolish and impossible idea, of course. Both Didi and Gogo seem to realise it. Although each proposes to the other that they go away, they never act on the proposal. They seem to realise that to exist is to exist in time. And to exist in time one must be able to tolerate the guilt of the past, the meaninglessness of the present and the death which lies in the future.

Didi and Gogo are largely spared the burden of the past because their memories are so defective that little of earlier time remains to them. They remember something about picking grapes and Gogo's attempted suicide very vaguely. Otherwise, Gogo can hardly remember what happened the preceding day. Since time is void, it is difficult to distinguish between one absence and another. Didi points to the tree as palpable evidence of the fact that it is "here" where they found themselves yesterday. The present and the future present serious threats to Didi and Gogo. The character of the future determines the character of the present and it makes existence in the now of time so difficult to sustain because the future is ambiguous and vague. It holds both threat and promise. The pair wait for Godot and their lives depend upon the decision of Godot. They have made Godot, "a kind of prayer" and "A vague supplication" (18), and they wait now for his answer. Until Godot comes, they can plan nothing, do nothing, but pass or fill time or improvise. Like their speech, their existence is extemporaneous, out of time where time is conceived as the ambience of purposive, teleological action. For they have no goal and can have none until Godot appears to tell them of his decision. Their existence

is absolutely contingent upon the event, the arrival of Godot. The play presents to us the image of that kind of existence that is dependent upon time future. For existence, human being in time has its value or worthwhileness corroborated only by events which are yet to appear. The significance of the present can be apprehended only when present events are translated into the past. Only then can one say whether such a decision was right or wrong for these later events have shown it to be so.

We can identify Godot in same special way by saying that Godot is simply 'Time Future'. He is arriving at every instant of time but as soon as he passes the barrier between Time Future and Time Present, he is no longer Godot but someone or something else. The boy speaks about Godot: "Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow" (50). Godot will not come this evening because this evening is now. He will come tomorrow and will all future tomorrows because tomorrow is Time Future. Since Godot is Time Future he cannot be Time Present. So while he is always on the way he can never arrive.

In Endgame also we do not know very much about the character's past. We can only speculate on what their future will be. All we have is a present, that is more or less, intelligible. All the four characters tell jokes and stories. Towards the end we learn that Nell, one of the characters has probably died. Of the future, we know almost nothing. There are fragments obscure but visible of Time Past. Of Time Future, there is nothing to be perceived except a void. There are two versions of Time Past in this play. For Nell, it is something to be sighted over. "Ah yesterday" - yesterday is when one went rowing on Lake Como and the bottom of the lake, like time itself, was white and clear. By the end of the play, she is dead. So perish all sentimentalists. For Clov, yesterday is "that bloody awful day long ago before this bloody awful day" (32). He continues to the end of the play, spiritually exhausted. Of time future also, there are two versions: One is that there isn't any. The second is that if there is any, there will be sharks or in other words it will be perilous.

HAMM. Let's go from here, the two of us! South!

You can make a raft and the currents will

carry us away for away to other ...
mammals!

CLOV. I will start straight away.

HAMM. Wait! (Clov halts) will there be sharks, do
you think?

CLOV. Sharks? I do not know, if there are, there
will be. (28)

We can therefore say that most of his plays are about the passage of time or about the refusal of time to pass.

If we examine the beginning of Time in the Biblical context, what may first come to our mind is the first verse in Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Gen 1: 1) which indicates that ‘Time’ began with the process of creating the heaven and the earth. The division of the light from the darkness that was upon the deep resulted in the making of day and night that composed the first day. The process of creation continued for days. The Time was associated with activities and it was measured in terms of days, months and years. It thus became linear time. God is said to be the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He is the past, the

present and the future as revealed in the verse: “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is and which was and which is to come, the Almighty” (Rev 1:8). Therefore the Infinite represents timelessness. It is, in other words, eternity of creation or activity in love that is associated with the Infinite. To quote Jesus’ words from the Bible, “My father worketh hitherto, and I work” (John 5:17). On the other hand, influenced by Existentialist thought, Beckettian characters seem to prefer ‘to exist’ rather than ‘to be human beings’. Their indecision and division between ‘habit’ and ‘anguish’ or self and responsibility for the Other, render them to suffer existentialist consequences like boredom, despair, finite time, meaninglessness and even suicide.