

Shifting trends in Drama : Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame*

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Abstract

The term drama comes from a Greek word meaning "Action", which is derived from the verb "to do". It was developed more than 2,500 years ago, but with time drama has attained many structures like classical drama, commedia dell'arte, symbolism, naturalism, absurdism etc.

The objective of this research paper is to trace the shifts in drama from Greeks to Romans, from Romans to English and the further changes incorporated by dramatists of different time periods in the history of English Literature. Few of those changes are still studied but some have faded away with time. This research paper will look at the evolution of drama from royal patronage to miracle plays, with further inclusion of folk-lore; bringing common man into the audiences. This study also attempts to answer a few questions like, how drama started working as an eye opener to the general public and why there was a shift from the use of divine themes to social causes in drama. Also how Samuel Beckett's post-war plays turned comedy into tragedy articulating minimal stagecraft, characters and communication. The breakdown of language, relations and above all hope significantly shows the tattered condition of common man.

The plays written between 1940 to 1960, came in the movement 'Theatre of the Absurd'. This work of art was different from anything that had been previously staged. Playwrights emphasised on the absurdity of humanity because of the outcome of the world wars. The lack in faith, the collapse of moral and religious dignity, were the major themes used by the then playwrights. Samuel Beckett was the Pioneer of them. His works waiting for Godot and Endgame are the milestones of theatre of the Absurd, which are further analysed in this research paper.

Keywords: Theatre of the Absurd, Samuel Beckett, Waiting For Godot, Endgame, Dramatic Trends, Meaninglessness, Alienation , Experimental Theatre, Absurdity.

Introduction

Samuel Beckett has a special place amongst critics and writers because of his unmatched writing skills and contents. He belongs to the Theatre of the Absurd movement.

Review of Literature

Many authors have produced numerous works , encapsulating his dramatic techniques and writing style. Critic and author Hugh Kenner's book *Samuel Beckett: a critical Study* in 1961 has publicised the popularity of Beckett's plays. The playwright won the Nobel prize for Literature in 1969, with that many critics laid their interests in his works. Journals and magazines were seen with many articles on him. Like " *Beckett: At Another Impasse*" (Journal of European Studies, Dec. 1971) and many more.

Frederick J. Hoffman wrote "*Samuel Beckett: The language of Self*"; which is a splendid and insightful work on Beckett.

Critic and writer Ruby Cohn was an expert on Beckett. Her doctoral dissertation became her first book, "*Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*". Published in 1962. She was so much fascinated by his experimental theatre that she dedicated her life on his works, like '*Casebook on Waiting for Godot*' (1967), '*Back to Beckett*' (1974), '*Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Criticism*' (1975), '*Just Play: Beckett's Theater*' (1980) etc.

Books like “*Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's late style in the theatre*” (1987) a work by Enoch Brater, and “*Samuel Beckett's Abstract Drama works for stage and screen*”(1962,1985) by Erik Tonning highlights the playwright's developing attitude towards the abstract and his minimal scope on expression of language and also the breakdown of subject – object relationship.

Beckett's later plays like ‘*Play*’, ‘*Not I*’, ‘*Breath*’ are based on his ‘Abstract’ dramatic style.

The book “*Beckett writing Beckett: the Author in the Autograph*” by Porter Abbott in 1996, also traces very intricate concepts of his works. His interview ‘*Beckett by the Madeliene*’ by Tom F. Driver also brought the playwright closer to his audiences. Later in the year 2006 Professor John Fletcher's ‘*Critique of Beckett's criticism*’(A Guide to research in English, French and German) also facilitated the knowledge of readers on Beckett. These works have helped in providing deep knowledge of Beckett's philosophy required for this research.

Jennifer M. Jeffers “*Beckett's Masculinity*” (2009) is the first work which interprets sexual and gendered issues in his works.

Writer Anthony Paraskeva's “*Samuel Beckett and Cinema*”(2017) focuses on playwright's contribution in cinema and how big screen productions were different from textual works.

“*New interpretations of Beckett in the 21st century*” an e-book and “*Samuel Beckett and BBC Radio*”(2017) by Palgrave Macmillan, are the collection and analysis of his radio plays. As the playwright has written many works for the broadcast.

“*Journal of Beckett Studies*” by Edinburgh University Press is collecting the research done over 40 years. It is an internationally recognised peer-reviewed journal. Established by Beckett's biographer James Knowlson and well known Beckett's critic John Pilling in 1976.

The playwright has left an unsurpassed legacy to his readers and critics. Though he passed away in 1989, But his works still holds a favourite place amongst his readers and researchers. His works are being decoded with several interpretations and meanings. The plays written during 1950's still have a relevance in the present scenario.

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The mentioned research work has been studied for interpreting various aspects of the research paper.

Shifting Trends in Drama

The word ‘Drama’ is known to be derived from the Greek word “*dran*” which means ‘to do or to perform’: a word similar to another Greek word “*drainein*” which means ‘to be ready, to do and technically it means deed, action on the stage’. In the core sense, Drama is an imitation of life in which dialogues and acting are in full consonance with real life where acting and performance occupy the first place and dance, dialogues and others occupy the second.

Martin Esslin in his famous work ‘*Anatomy of Drama*’ defined it as –

“drama as a Manifestation of the play instinct: as in children who are playing mother and father or cowboys and Indians.”(Esslin 1976; 10)

The importance of drama in social structures can be identified by the impact value it poses in peoples' lives. It not only entertains but also acts as a carrier of ideas and information. Drama is used as one of the most effective tool for mass mobilisation by the governments and private agencies, for example most campaigns against social cause are presented in the form of dramas to educate, enlighten and entertain.

Greek drama is acclaimed to be the earliest recorded form of drama dated back to 5th century B.C. The dramatists of the age had put an insight into the philosophy and religious beliefs of that time. Whereas drama was introduced to England from Europe by the Romans. They constructed many auditoriums for this purpose. Historically, the enactment of dramas fell under royal patronage and was limited to only sacred places almost everywhere around the world, but with the passage of time it moved towards the proscenium stages; run by various theatre groups. Through the medieval period the genre has undergone many changes with the development of street performances based on re-telling of folktales to morality and miracle plays. So, it can be said that every century has witnessed an addition to this art form.

Greeks introduced tragedy which had a far reaching influence on society. Romans were associated with comedies.

English renaissance is considered as the golden age for art, a lot of art forms flourished and blossomed during this age including drama. The dramatists of this time excelled in all the three genres of drama –histories, comedies and tragedies. Discussion of renaissance drama cannot be held without mentioning William Shakespeare. He embraced the renaissance like no one else did and pioneered his contemporaries and the following generations. The 17th and 18th century drama witnessed the Interregnum, the theatrical art was banned for many years. But with the comeback, the theatrical stage was not just kept limited to the serious drama of James Planché and Thomas William Robertson, a new profusion of farces, musical burlesque, extravaganzas and comic operas were introduced on stage. The middle class started to attend and enjoy theatrical performances. Popular conservative theatre was mostly dominated by writers like Noel Coward, William Congreve and Henrik Ibsen.

After the world wars, the conventional taboos were broken and writers emerged with views of realism and myths. Sigmund Freud and his studies of psychoanalysis inspired a few playwrights like John Millington Synge, W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory. They used poetic realism to depict unappealing cruelty. Their themes also included the then taboo topics like incest, lust and homosexuality along with others. Because of this thrust towards realism, playwrights started using contemporary characters and settings.

They moved away from depicting stereotypical characters and laid more emphasis on all genders, classes and races.

Along with the development of drama, this research paper also focuses on the Theatre of the Absurd and the famous playwright Samuel Beckett's use of form and content in his plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. This research is an attempt to explore some of the major themes and techniques in Beckett's said works to analyse the trends and patterns introduced by the playwright himself. It also aims at providing a better understanding of Beckett's philosophy of nothingness.

Samuel Beckett is well known for his plays belonging to 'the theatre of the Absurd'; a new movement in modern drama. The absurd characteristics of the dramas and novels of this genre reflect the attitude, that man is all alone in the universe. They also suggest the view that, human life is meaningless and futile. They portray that such living conditions and in complete isolation man will become absurd himself.

Beckett has reconstructed art; enriched with European philosophies and literary traditions. He shaped his works with the allusions from other writers such as Dante, Rene Descartes, and James Joyce. But he has shown his orientation much more towards the subjective idealistic tradition of the 20th century-philosophy of existentialism. The works of Proust, Kafka, Camus, Sartre inspired the playwright. The one similarity amongst these writers is that they interpret the human situation in relation to the universe and nature, focussing on the predicament of man and the 'alienation of common-man'. Critic and author Fritz Pappenheim has illustrated a book '*The Alienation of Modern Man*' where he questions the philosophers of the absurd condition of the humanity.

Unlike the then philosophy, Beckett moreover paid attention to the inescapable human condition. The self trapped man in his existence and the lack of purposeful action in an absurd world, which he explained through his characters 'Hamm and Clov' in *Endgame* and 'Vladimir and Estragon' in *Waiting for Godot*.

Beckett never related himself as a philosopher. His own assertion regarding himself as an artist is relevant here, which is disclosed in an interview by Tom.F.Driver published as 'Beckett by the Madeleine' in the Columbia University Forum IV in 1961 :

"when Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence, they may be right. I don't know, but their language is too philosophical for me. I am not a philosopher." (Tom Driver 21)

Beckett's work depicts the chaotic situation of human beings in the modern society. Form and chaos are opposites of each other where meaning is concerned. But, Beckett's artistry accommodated the chaos into the form, making it a 'new form' of writing. He developed his innovative theatrical techniques in his plays like *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Happy Days*, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Beckett's characters in his plays represent ordinary people who struggle with

their own chaotic selves in a structured lifestyle. The protagonist Winnie in the play *Happy Days* handles her daily chores while being buried waist-deep and by the end of the play she is seen buried up to her neck and remembering the happy times. On the other hand, *Krapp's Last Tape* is in the form of a monologue; in which the aged Krapp attempts to re-visualise himself and the intensity of his earlier days by listening to the recordings of his own younger self. The playwright chose a variety of absurd themes in ordinary settings which reflect an ordinary life of a modern man.

Through the creation of his plays *Endgame* and *Waiting For Godot*, Beckett has not conformed to most of the dramatic traditions. For instance, the settings of his plays are very simplified and vague. The setting of *Waiting for Godot* can be explained in a few simple lines: "A country road , A tree, Evening" unlike other writers who include great details of their stage directions. And in *Endgame* the setting depicts a prison like room with two windows that show a dead universe and a "dead world".

When we talk about themes in Beckett's plays we find that he has touched upon ordinary and everyday life situations in unusual ways. The theme of *Endgame* is the need of interdependence. Though, the relationship is of hatred, as Clov is with Hamm for the sake of food and shelter while Hamm being blind treats Clov to be his eyes and to move his chair. While *Waiting for Godot* deals with the themes of friendship, uncertainty and time. Vladimir and Estragon deeply care for one another and their relationship brings out the need and importance of friends and their support. Both the plays also convey confinement as a theme. Hamm is paralyzed, Nagg and Nell are in trashcans, Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for the same person Godot in both the acts, in the same setting. Which in turn depict 'no escaping' from certain situations in everyday life.

Theatre critic Martin Esslin finds a resemblance of *Endgame* with the Russian dramatist Nikolai Evreinov's play '*The Theatre of the Soul*'. This one act play is a monodrama that takes place inside a human being and shows the constituent parts of his ego, his emotions, his rational self in conflict with each other. (Martin Esslin 2001 65). Thus, Esslin treats *Endgame* as, a monodrama though with a high degree of reservation, the enclosed space with two small windows through which Clov looks at the outside world, the bins holds the despised parents, their lids Clov presses down by orders from Hamm. Clov functioning as Hamm's senses. It Shows various aspects of a single individual.

Another important trait is Beckett's short sentences differ greatly from the great monologues written by other playwrights. It is very rare that any of his characters speak more than a single line of text, and sentences are normally attached with stage directions in between. Like we see in *Endgame* Clov describes the kitchen as " ten feet by ten feet by ten feet"(Beckett 1981 3). Another example can be quoted from *Waiting for Godot*-

"Vladimir: sometimes I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer.(He takes off his hat, peers

inside it , feels about inside it, shakes it, put it on again). How shall I say? Relieved and at the same time.....(he searches for the word).... APPALLED. (He takes off his hat again, peers inside it)." (Beckett 2011 7)

It is astonishing to see that Beckett, through his artistry is able to portray so many of his complex ideas through such short conversations and PAUSE. For Instance, in *Endgame*, when Nell and Nagg are having a conversation, neither one speaks more than a sentence without the stage direction "PAUSE" between each of their sentences-

"NELL- so much the better, so much the better.

NAGG- Don't say that

(PAUSE)

Our sight has failed.

NELL- Yes

(Pause)

NAGG- Can you hear me?

NELL- Yes. And You?

NAGG- Yes.

(Pause)

Our hearing hasn't failed yet."

Thus, the word 'pause' leaves a symbolic significance in the plays, emphasising more on action and performance than on spoken words.

Beckett's plays are a symbol of constant chaos between life and death. Suicide is a persistent theme in most of his works as Didi and Gogo hover on the edge of suicide; Hamm orders to Clov for terminating the young boy outside (the boy is the symbolic representation of hope just like Godot). In the words of Beckett himself- " if life and death did not both present themselves to us, there would be no inscrutability. If there were only darkness , all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable". (web)

Use of repetition as a technique is another gem in Beckett's unique style of writing. An excellent example of this can be found in *Waiting For Godot*, when Vladimir and Estragon attempt to determine which of three hats are theirs: " Estragon takes Vladimir's hat. Vladimir adjusts Lucky's hat on his head. Estragon puts on Vladimir's hat in place of his own which he hands to Vladimir. Vladimir takes Estragon's hat." This cycle repeats two and a half more times. Whether it is physical repetition or of time or of stage setting, Beckett purposefully uses it throughout his works. The inside message is to portray the mechanical lives in this absurd world.

Another brilliant use of repetition can be observed when both the acts in *Waiting for Godot* end with the same words, but are voiced differently:

ACT 1:

ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go.

ACT II:

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

And the stage directions following these lines are exactly the same in each case: "*They do not move*". Likewise, the Boy Messenger; while

theoretically different; brings the exact same message: "Mr. Godot will not come today, but he will surely come tomorrow."

There is a brief conversation of Didi and Gogo in the play which shows human superiority over dead, but according to Beckett being alive is also as good as being dead, showing no love for life, as the circumstances of human existence in society are not worth living.

"Vladimir. What do they say?

Estragon. They talk about their lives.

Vladimir. To have lived is not enough for them.

Estragon. They have to talk about it.

Vladimir. To be dead it not enough for them.

Estragon. It is no sufficient.

(*Silence*)

Vladimir. They make a noise like feathers.

Estragon. Like leaves.

Vladimir. Like ashes.

Estragon. Like leaves." (Beckett 2011 46-47)

Here Didi and Gogo are treated like dead, and dead are like living.

Failure of Communication; is another major technique with which all Absurd dramatists are concerned, as it is the reason behind the alienation of man. In Edward Albee's plays the communication is limited to their private ego. In Ionesco's plays failed communication leads to drastic results like suicide. In Adamov's plays, the identities cannot be acknowledged, as there is no communication at all. Unlike other playwrights' characters, Beckett's characters are tied together by a fear of being left alone, and they therefore cling to one last hope of establishing some kind of communication, even if it is broken, meaningless or both. The two truants in *Waiting for Godot*, are seen conversing in a repetitive, strangely fragmented atmosphere that possesses an illusive, haunting effect, while waiting for a person who is called Godot; a vague, never- defined being who is believed to bring them 'HOPE'. or

It can be salvation?

It can be Death?

It can be redemption?

To establish some kind of failed communication and fear of loneliness, Beckett groups his characters in pairs. No other playwright before Beckett has used this strategy of grouping the characters into pairs. However, other playwrights like Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet have used this technique in their plays later. For example, we have Vladimir and Estragon, Didi and Gogo, Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* and Hamm and Clov and Nagg and Nell in *Endgame*. Martin Esslin, also suggests that the paired characters are also of opposite temperaments, which is the reason behind their endless conflicts, leading to the suggestion that they should part ways, but also their complementary natures holds them together.

"Estragon is the weaker of the two; he is beaten up by mysterious strangers every night. Vladimir at times acts as his protector, sings him to sleep with a lullaby, and covers him with his coat...

Pozzo is the sadistic master, Lucky the submissive slave..... blind Hamm is the master and Clov follows his orders.”(Esslin 2001 .48)

Critic Lionel Abel in his article *Joyce the Father, Beckett the son*, sees the characters of Hamm and Pozzo as Beckett's literary master James Joyce and Lucky and Clov as Samuel Beckett himself.(The New Leader. 1959, web)

There is even a transition in Beckett's later works, where he majorly experimented with language. He has used minimal language technique in the drama *come and go*, with three female characters and a text comprising of only 121 words. Whereas his play *Breath* is of a duration of only about 35 seconds, consisting of a pile of rubbish, a breath and a cry. *Not I*, a brief, fragmented monologue delivered by an actor of unknown sex of whom only the Mouth is illuminated. The play *Not I* lasts only for fifteen minutes. All these works show Beckett's unquenchable desire to establish a portrayal of absurd human communication and the meaning hidden in its absurdity.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the research paper is to analyse the dramatic techniques used by the Irish Playwright Samuel Beckett in his plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Drama and stage performances have gone through many shifts in their trends, especially twentieth century theatre, which after the wars find man amid a discourse with its surroundings. The plays are enriched with unconventional dramatic techniques like use of barren set pieces denoting a location, devalued language often repetitive and illogical, anti-realistic plots, the characters are out of harmony raising questions over existence. Thus highlighting the shift towards the Theatre of the Absurd.

Conclusion

Focusing on the selected works of Beckett's, the present study followed the evolution of his mental journey through his perception of absurdity in his form and structures. Beckett violated the traditional beginning, middle and end structure of dramatic presentation. He refused to tell a straight forward connected story with a proper plot, using the conventional dramatic techniques. To him the established norms seemed incoherent to the modern existence of man. The stage directions also have overwhelming significance because there is disjunct between the mind and body of the dramatists personae, as they are not thinkers but stasis of a non-ent. The rational system is absent, yet the intellect has a powerful presence. Pauses and Silences are

the supporting elements in the plays. There is no duration of a pause or silence, they are explained as Pause, Maximum pause, Silence and Long Silence to show their never-ending nature. The dialogues are rather few fragments in between these silences. Many critics have named it as 'Silent Dramatugy'. *Waiting For Godot* has a total of 113 stage directions for 'PAUSE'.

Beckett was mostly concerned with the questions over existentialism in modern society which leaves man alienated. In order to construct an irrational impasse on stage he bereft all illusions first. The illusions of Christianity, redemption, saviour. Thus the creativity of the playwright is unique and close to reality. It explains many complex issues persisting in society.

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