The Themes of Revolt and Exile in Samuel Beckett's play Play

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett is probably the most well known of the absurdist playwrights because of his work Waiting for Godot. Beckett's plays seem to focus on the themes of the uselessness of human action, and the failure of the human race to communicate. His postwar era fame only came about in the 1950's when he published three novels and his famous play, Waiting for Godot. Play is one act play which was written in 1962-1963; translated into French as Comedie by Beckett. This paper focuses on the themes of rebel and exile in this play.

Samuel Beckett's works evoke a grotesque vision compounded of the metaphysical fear of an annihilating force, the horror of loneliness and the sense of alienation from the inexorable working of the universe.
Both in his fiction and his drama, Beckett incorporates the theme of a hostile mechanism reducing human existence to nothing and presenting a frightening perception of the ceaseless manner in which life continues through the vicious cycle. To Beckett, human existence is pathetic because it is inseparable from pain and misery and is lacking in coherence.

Hence with an almost missionary zeal, Beckett claims for the artist the responsibility of finding a suitable form to express human misery in its entirety. His plays belonging to the post World War II period and written in the wake of an age of fear, uncertainty and nihilism. They are concerned with Man and his response to the absurdity of existence. He presents a picture of men and women dominated and frustrated by the Absurd and their varying response to it.

Almost uniformly, their reactions are in the nature of protest against the arbitrariness and unjustness of the metaphysical world order, which exists beyond intelligibility and therefore beyond human rectification. His characters who present a composite picture of the suffering Man have no other means to express their indignation except through protest and revolt. Thus rebellion is seen as an essential attribute of mankind. However, viewed in the context of absurdity, even this rebellion turns out to be futile and meaningless, though Man continues to rebel as he suffers pain and anguish of an unendurable degree. The Beckettians are all ruined pieces of nature. They are old, decrepit, moribund beings, at the nether end of their lives, hopefully awaiting a merciful release from the misery and agony of existence. They are at the point of extinction and Beckett captures that precise moment when they still retain their conscious perception without the consoling guarantee of an end to their misery.

Given this fact of existence, of an obligation to be born and therefore, to suffer, there is nothing that remains in the Absurdist's view to seek an explanation for man's destiny. Hence the emphasis
shifts from questioning the absurdity of existence to exploring the response to it. Beckett's enquiry also concerns itself with Man's attitude to the Absurd in his ceaseless confrontation with it.

Samuel Beckett wrote his play *Play* in 1963 when he was in Paris. The first performance in Britain was by the National Theatre Company at Old Vic Theatre, London on 7 April 1964. It took about ten minutes on the stage. In this short play Beckett immersed a man and two women up to their necks in tall urns, with their faces made up to resemble the material of the jars in which they are confined to. Beckett gave them no names; they are 'Man', 'Woman1' and 'Woman2'. None of the three knows that the others are present; each speak only when the light is directed upon him and stops when the light either goes out or moves on to another. The three voices emanating from the three torsos less heads speak about their unhappy experience in the past and then proceed on to a consideration of their present state, at the end of which the whole text is repeated verbatim.

Three voices are prompted by a swiveling beam that flashs on them from a spot placed at the centre of the footlights. Each one of them speaks a monologue without an awareness of the presence of the other two. Though nowhere explicitly stated, all three seem to be reliving an emotional crisis that had happened to them in the past. The sight of the urns seems to suggest that the trio is dead and their obligation to recount their past implies their being in purgatory, reliving their miserable experience as part of the process of expiation and purification. Rosemary Fountney says "Beckett seems to share Yeats purgatorial concept that human spirit after death dreams back through its life."1 Yeats was of the view that if there was an unresolved knot in life, the spirit was stay put at that pint till the knot was unwound to allow the process of purification.

But in the light of Beckett's writings and his constant deliberations over the circular motion of human existence and its consequent absurdity (for circularity of existence cannot
accommodate any meaningful progression), it sounds untenable to suggest Beckett's interest in human spirit after death. For this in its turn would imply a belief in the linear concept of existence, of progression towards a purposeful and meaningful end. In this context it is also worth recalling Beckett's earlier plays, where there is no single instance of a character dying on stage. Even Nell in End Game seems dead. Almost all characters are shown to be on the twilight period of their life, with "shadows stealing over them" and chewing the cut of bygone days while awaiting death. It is here that the Beckettians and exile meet."

The Beckettians rebel protests against the absurdity of life live hitherto and seek refuge in solitariness, away from the madding crowd. But when confronted with this voluntary exile meet, he or she retracts and returns to the vicious circle of existence.”

Krapp, Henry, Maddy and Clov are failed exiles turned rebels who do not have the courage to face up to a regression into solitariness. It is as difficult for them to continue in their state of exile as it is to accept life with its monotony and absurdity.

Play presents three week characters in their uncomfortable state of self –imposed solitariness as a result of their failure to cope with the pressures of life. They cannot but go through their unhappy past as the only option open to them. It is an option they would love to do away with, though they have no alternative but to have recourse to it. So they speak and live their past, even when they are disinclined to do so. Beckett has concretized on stage what Vladimir and Estragon had earlier expressed rather cryptically:

Vladimir: What do they say?
Estragon: They talk about their lives?
Vladimir: To have lived it is not enough for them.
Estragon: They have to talk about it.
These three unfortunate people have the obligation to say what they wish to erase from their memory. They are goaded into expression by the spot light that flashes arbitrarily from one to the other. Though it is difficult to explain the spot light in any specific term, its rapid movement from one face to another could be viewed as the flashes of consciousness that rake up old memories in these faces so lost to age and aspect as to seen almost part of urns. If Beckett's early works are pointer, it would be worth recalling Krapp's use of his tape-recorded and Henry, Hamm and Winnie's third person narration, to move backwards in time. Even Vladimir and Estragon gave fleeting glimpses of memory ("Do you remember the day I threw myself into the Rhone...There is no good harking back on that.") to remind themselves of the futility of suicide and of the need to go on with hope, however untenable it might be. This plunge into the past is often the outcome of inability to face the present state of sequestration whether it is a voluntary or forced one. So it is with these voices whose harking back into their emotional crisis is preceded by oppressive pressure exerted on them by light. The light provokes them to speak and exist. The only reprieve they get it when it momentarily leaves them, and abandons them to temporary silence and darkness. Their dependence on the light which constantly focus on them and constrains them to regress into their past misery, make them weary of its presence. All three are painfully conscious of its power that compels them to speak. They are at loss to know what they have to say other than repeat their monologues, for the light to leave them in peace. W1 in total exasperation asks "Is it that I do not tell the truth, is that it, that someday I may tell the truth at last and then no more light at last, for the truth?" (p.9) W2 desires unhinging to escape the pressure of the light, while M, true to his pretentious nature, wishes an obliteration of the past, as though it had never been, so that he could assume peace.
Hence the opening chorus emphasizes their common yearning for peace and darkness that would spare them the agony of re-enacting their triangular love conflict. The beam flash on them seems to play a game of hide and seek with them. Every time they get into their hide-outs, into darkness and silence, they are sought out and forced to exist backwards in time and once more experience their frustration and pain. The trio protest against the arbitrariness of this game, especially because of their dependence on it to gain brief respite. The light is enemy and their hostility is unmistakable, though of a feeble kind. Thus caught in the vicious circle of an emotional crisis, they eddy back and forth, from past to present. They yearn for a future that would release them from this ceaseless whir. They rebel against their present state of servility to a power that mocks them. What is more absurd is that this power is within them, it is their own consciousness that drives them to seek refuge in the past. None of them has the Sisyphean strength to face up to this absurd plight and their weak protest and cries for mercy are of no avail. Ironically enough, they are in exile yet not exiles. Their unsuccessful love entanglement has resulted in mutual estrangement and each one lives within him, enclosed and buried under the oppressive weight of his consciousness. This is reflected in their repeated references to the love affair in the midst of their agonizing present. Of the three W1 is foolish and hysterical, W2 is intelligent and self-possessed and M is vacillating and false. Their individual reactions both to the light and to their frustrated love entanglement are in line with their characters. Unable to bear the demands made by the light, W1 vehemently importunes the light to "Get off me". (p.15) She has said all she can and she wonders if she is expected to do something "other than utter? Weep?"(pp.17-18) plaintively she regrets her inability to think: "If only I could think. There is no sense in this…either, non what so ever. I can't". (p.18) This is soon followed by her relapsing into thoughts about her man and her rival. Unintelligent and coarse, she has none of the refinements of a graceful woman. She is full of envy and hatred
for the second woman in her husband's life. Hence her frustration in her married life turns to sour and bitter criticism of W2. She forgets her miserable loneliness and lashes at the other woman, saying "she lived like pig". (p.19) It is her own sense of inadequacy that prompts her to relapse into thoughts of M and W2. In contrast to her, W2 is calmed rational and confident of her superiority. Looking at W1 for the first time, W2 assesses her lack of poise and crudeness. "Seeing her now for the first time full length in the flesh I understand why he preferred me". (p.10) She wonders if M lives with his wife only for her money. Unlike her rival who calls her a "a common tart" with" pudding face, puffy, spots, blubber mouth, Jowls, no neck..."(p.13 ) W2 is composed and tells M that " whatever I might feel , I had no silly threats to offer but not much stomach for her leavings either". (p.13 ) But it is her perception and awareness of her superiority vis-à-vis W1 and M, that makes her anticipate M's abandonment of her. "When she stopped coming, I was prepared. More or less...I made a bundle of his things and burnt them. It was November and the bonfire was going. All night I smelt them smoldering". (Pp.14-15) She has nothing but pity for the other two, "kissing their sour kisses". "They might even feel sorry for me", she says, "But never as sorry as I for them". (p.18) She desires an obliteration of this affair, just as she had made a bonfire of all his things. She understands the emptiness of her situation, when she implores the light "to blaze me clean out of my wits". (p.16 ) It is her mind that will not allow her to forget the past, and the irony of it is that she is aware of the futility of her request to the light. With anguish she cries "Are you listening to me? Is anyone listening to me? Is anyone looking at me at all".(p.17 )To her the effort to get the words is a painful as Sisyphus," dragging a great roller, on a scorching day. The strain...to get it moving, momentum coming...kill it and strain again". (P.19 ) She fancies being unhinged already, only to doubt it soon after. Her sense of being mentally all right sets her
thoughts in motion backwards and she is once again caught in the emotional swirl of lost love.

M is cowardly, hypocritical and therefore false. He has no concern for either of the two women in his life and he plays the dandy to both of them. He seems more effeminate than either of the two women. For he succumbs to the money power and sensuality of W1 and dithers before the strength and will power of W2. The result is he runs away from both saying, "Finally it was all too much. I simply could no longer…."(p.14) He never says what he could do no longer, but one can infer from the words of his two woman that he could no longer bear the dichotomy of his situation and preferred a cowardly reclusion, to a sexually satisfying life with his wife and his mistress. He welcomes this change initially and his address to the light, soon after the second blackout in the course of the play, he says with relief: "when first this change I actually thanked God. I thought it is done, it is said, and now all is going out". (p.15) But the last word is never to be uttered by him. The light is there to goad him to repeat the story and there can be no peace for him. Just as he had played a mocking game with W1 and W2 , he wishes that the light was also playing with him and would cease doing so in due course of time. "I know now", he says referring to his relationships with his wife and his mistress; "all that was just play. And all this …All this, when will all this have been …just play?"(p.15-16) But then the fact remains that neither the light ceases to play with him nor can he obliterate the memory of his previous involvements. His falsity smites him and he tells the light that it is" looking for something. In my face. Some truth. In my eyes", (p.21) and he questions the light, " Am I as much as…being seen?"(p.22) He goes back into fantasies about the two women and like Krapp(the solo character of Krapp's Last Tape) playing the recorder at the same point about his love on the lake, he pictures in his an imaginary dinghy and his being with the two women, who had never come together in life. He knows that it is all pure fantasy, but he has lived all his life in a make-believe world and
has no feeling of compassion for the two women he had detached. With the cry for peace, he starts reviewing the triangular love affair. His hiccoughs are indicative of his lack of confidence in himself and his "Pardon" meant for W1 and W2 sound as hollow and feeble as he himself is.

*Play* demonstrates Beckett's view of the vicious circle of existence both in its form and content. The repeat of the text and the blackout soon after the beginning of the second repeat suggest circular line of existence, where no segment of the cycle is once for all traversed and done with. The movement along the circular line thus becomes repetitious and the trio in this play starts all over again their grievances, complaints, accusations and frustrations, soon after they are through with them once. Hence the torment they are subjected to is double –edged. It is the light that determines both their eloquence and their silence, but either way they are losers. The compulsive narration of their sad tale of frustration in love drains them as much as their momentary withdrawal into silence, for the latter withholds sense of their identity in existence that the former gives them. Beckett stretches the Cartesian conclusion, "I think, and therefore I am" to accommodate its logical reverse: "I am, and therefore I think." Existence accounts for consciousness as much as consciousness determines existence. The two are mutual and herein lays the basic absurdity of human condition. The trio gets an evidence of existence only when it speaks, the alternative to which is to cease to exist and thereby remain silent, neither of the propositions being in anyway consoling and comforting. The last words of the play, as uttered by M, "Am I as much as…being seen? Express his misgiving whether his existence is nothing more than an appalling joke. He and his two parents – in – anguish need an external factor to identity them and give meaning to their absurd activity. So they could never struggle to be free and they contains with their game of protest, plaintive cries and their pornographic tale. They prefer to remain alone, but continue their protestations, though with no sincere effort
to succeed in either of their ventures. If Krapp, Henry or Maddy (the main characters of All That Fall) had earlier failed in their rebellion, it was only after a brave effort to resist the absurdity of their existence. But the trio in Play merely succumbs to the pressure on them with feeble protests and pathetic cries for mercy that make a mockery of all their efforts. Their half-hearted attempts to get out of the influence of the light and their constant thoughts switching back to their love affair expose their pusillanimity and cowardly preference for failure than for success. Viewed in total perspective, of Beckett's plays, it would be evident that this is neither of Hamm-Winnie (the main characters of Happy Days) kind, who are alive to the absurd and display a daring attitude to it, nor of Krapp-Henry kind, who recognize the Absurd without the adequate strength to face up to it.

The Man and his mistress, on the contrary, belong to the group of weak protestors of the Estragon (one of the characters of Waiting for Godot) kind, whose protest against the light are feeble and negative in the absence of a genuine desire to get rid of it. They need the light as much as they resent it. Their protests are naïve and personalized, for each one of them is incapable of getting out of his or her individual self and recognize the oneness of their common suffering. There are in isolation, negative in their reaction to each other and to the light that prompts them to speak and relive their past. Their protests are cries of despair, lacking in genuineness and intensity to put a stop to their monologues. Like Estragon's love-hate attitude to Vladimir whom he need and despises all at once, the trio seeks an extinction of the light of consciousness, but dares not lose it for fear of losing their specious identity.
End Notes


3. Samuel Beckett, Play (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p.9. All subsequent references to this text will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses.

4. Waiting for Godot, p.63


Bibliography


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ملخص البحث

يعتبر صموئيل بكت من أشهر كتاب مسرح الفارع ولاعقول وترجع شهرته إلى مسرحيته في
انتظار كودو. ويركز بكت في مسرحياته على فكره فشل الإنسان في مخاطبة أخيه الإنسان أضافه
إلى عينية الوجود الإنساني. وأصبح بكت مشهورا بعد نشره رواياته و مسرحية في انتظار كودو في
خمسينيات القرن الماضي. ومسرحية بلي هي مسرحية من فصل واحد كتبها بكت عامي 1963-1963 وترجمها بكت إلى الفرنسية بعنوان "Comedie". هذا البحث يستعرض فكرته الثورة
والاعتراب في هذه المسرحية.