

*Marta Rosińska*

**THE GROTESQUE IN *HAPPY DAYS*  
BY SAMUEL BECKETT**

The older I grow the more one word comes  
to dominate my thinking – grotesque<sup>1</sup>

Christian Morgenstern

1

Literature and other creative media (film, music, theatre) have frequently made use of the ideas of the deformed, macabre and grotesque. Modern drama, in particular, abounds with playwrights for whom such ways of artistic expression are indispensable. A considerable number of contemporary dramas are replete with grotesque features, and certain schools advocate the style in their manifestos. The Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt even regards the grotesque as “the only legitimate genre”<sup>2</sup>. Grotesque visions of human life can also be detected in the plays of Samuel Beckett, whose drama *Happy Days* will be discussed here. However, before any endeavour to analyse the use of the grotesque in Beckett’s play can be undertaken, it seems vital to devote some time to the history and development of the notion *grotesque*.

It is generally acknowledged that the word grotesque originated as a term describing the fanciful murals discovered on the walls of Roman Chamber, in which human, animal and vegetable elements were combined. The original forms of the word, thus, come from the Italian *la grottesca* (noun) and *grottesco* (adj.). As the style had arrived in Rome with the first

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<sup>1</sup> W. Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Indianapolis 1963, Indiana University Press, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

Christians, it is believed that the Greek *grotta* (a vault) was the ultimate source of the word<sup>3</sup>.

Initially the excavated murals did not hold much value for the 16<sup>th</sup> century artists who condemned "this barbarian manner" for its rejection of natural motifs as well as for its oddity and abnormality<sup>4</sup>. In the process of time, however, more and more Renaissance artists took an interest in this new style of ornamentation (architecture, engravings, tools, jewellery and book decorations). The word began to characterise the art in which the natural conditions of organization were abandoned. Later in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the term also applied to all sorts of artistic creations that might originate in the artist's exuberant imagination and dreams<sup>5</sup>.

Soon, the new mode reached other parts of Europe where it developed the two novel painting techniques: the arabesque and the moresque. Besides, around 1600 in Germany the so-called Knorpel-Ornamentik came into being, followed shortly by the Schweifgroteske<sup>6</sup>. In this light one may notice that by the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the grotesque style had been mostly associated with visual art. It was not until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century that the word *grotesque* acquired a new figurative meaning and began to apply to literature<sup>7</sup>.

Additionally, it was used to describe people and their actions. Jacques Callot's illustrations of the *commedia dell'arte* present grotesque images of distorted physical reality as they show ghoulish creatures with disproportional, ugly bodies and faces<sup>8</sup>. As much entertaining as it was for the public, this form of theatre was not welcomed favourably by either Baroque and later Enlightenment artists.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17. The term can also be found in French manuscripts, as early as 1532 with the two possible spelling: crotisque and grotesque. In English, the form occurred nearly a century later, in 1640 and adopted the Italian version with the initial 'g'.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25. Kayser quotes Vitruvius who criticised the style for its rejection of "reasonable and natural motifs".

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38. The idea was expressed best by Albert Dürer who said: "If a person wants to create the stuff that dreams are made of, let him freely, mix all sorts of creatures".

<sup>6</sup> A. Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, London 1965, Clarendon Press, p. 42. The arabesque employed intricate, mostly floral patterns on a flat surface and involved the use of perspective. The moresque in contrast used only two - dimensional ornaments painted usually on a black and white background. The Knorpel-Ornamentik and the Schweifgroteske were similar and both used fantastically distorted animals and monsters, often in mask - like stylization. The acanthus motif and Chinese designs were added.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41. French, 17<sup>th</sup> century dictionaries interpret it as meaning ridicule, bizarre, extravagant and capricious. The grotesque was considered to be part of lower art and appropriate only in comic genres.

<sup>8</sup> W. Kayser, *op. cit.*, p. 45. *Commedia dell'arte* initiated the trend to refer to people, their actions and looks as 'grotesque'. This Italian form of popular theatre entertained people with its spontaneous pantomimes and humour and definitely helped the grotesque to flourish.

The word *grotesque* was further extended to mean *caricature* or *satire* and thus the grotesque served for the purposes of ridicule and social criticism<sup>9</sup>. This state of affairs survived until the Sturm und Drang Periode in Germany when the grotesque was prescribed a more sophisticated treatment.

The Age of Romanticism in Europe brought about significant changes in the understanding and usage of the term. First of all, the word acquired "revolutionary overtones" as it was associated with the freedom of creation. As a result of their inclination towards fantasy and supernatural phenomena, Romantic writers turned to the grotesque which for them contained the element of the unknown and passionate. The grotesque seemed to erode the border between reality and fantasy enabling the artist to go beyond mundane problems.

Romantic creators, as pioneers, gave the grotesque an aesthetic value, the importance of which was further emphasized by the post Romantic theoreticians – John Ruskin and George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. The first believed that the grotesque allowed for greater artistic autonomy since all, even the most clashing ideas can be combined; the latter insisted that "all grotesque art is product of a specially strong urge to play, invent, manipulate – to experiment"<sup>10</sup>. Hegel also searched for some hidden meaning of the word and maintained that the grotesque expressed physical and psychological sufferings of man.

The grotesque flourished and gained on popularity in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It came to signify the confusion of reality and illusion, and as such was exploited by the creators of the *teatro del grottesco*. The Italian artists claimed, influenced by Freudian and Nitzchean theories, that the guiding principle of the grotesque was the detachment of human life from reality. In the *teatro del grottesco* playwrights also frequently mixed tragedy and comedy adding to their works the qualities of black humour and farce<sup>11</sup>.

A new dimension was added to the understanding of the word grotesque with the emergence of the so-called terror tales represented best by the works of Franz Kafka. Kafka contributed to the development of the verbal

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 49. It was primarily due to Diderot's writing. Those times also witnessed the development of the burlesque, in which grotesque elements dominated.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 70. Hegel gave the grotesque a symbolic meaning. According to his theory of "Fantastic Symbolism", the grotesque can be manifested in three ways: – when two different realms of being are fused, – when excessive distortion is present, – when identical elements are multiplied in an unnatural manner. Hegel also believed that artists should use the grotesque in a conscious process of writing to show the world in symbols.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75. The Italian group implemented the grotesque successfully on the theatrical stage. They manifested that: "In real life, the most tragic scenes exist side by side with the wildest grotesques".

grotesque – the language that breaks down and ceases to convey logical messages, consequently blocking communication between people. Kafka used the grotesque as a medium of expressing the irrational and illogical. Similarly to Kafka, the surrealists rejected rationalism and emphasised the importance of the subconscious in their search for a new reality. They amalgamated two realms: the real one with the dream one and it was the grotesque that allowed them to fuse the two worlds. Surrealist artists rediscovered the power of the grotesque and the emotions it can create. With its help they revealed to the people the world of dreams, imagination, hidden desires – the unknown<sup>12</sup>. The surrealist movement greatly contributed to the development of the grotesque and confirmed the vital part it has since played in modern literature and theatre.

One of the most influential theories of the grotesque was delivered in 1957 by the German scholar Wolfgang Kayser. He attempted to define the nature of the grotesque which can be summed up as follows:

1. The grotesque generates the atmosphere of alienation.
2. The grotesque is brought into existence by an impersonal force similar to the Freudian "id".
3. Grotesque creations form games one plays with the absurd.
4. The grotesque helps to get rid of our hidden fears by exposing them.

Kayser's beliefs were noticeably rooted in the Freudian theory of the subconscious. With its help the German theoretician accounted for the grotesque in terms of a psychological phenomenon<sup>13</sup>.

Kayser's conception of the grotesque was further explored by the American academic Lee Byron Jennings. The scholar was interested in how grotesque creations originated. To disentangle bizarre forms of grotesque art, Jennings took advantage of various dream theories and analyses of mental patients' behaviour and also looked for some reasons in the art of mythology of primitive tribes. This led him to the assumption that the grotesque could have originated as a result of primeval belief in the duality of the human nature. Therefore, he concluded that the grotesque is a peculiar kind of the synthesis of the fearsome and the ludicrous (terror and laughter coexist). The "demonic threat" present in the grotesque can be neutralized by comic elements which function like a defensive system

<sup>12</sup> Surrealism dedicated itself to the subconscious as the essential source of all art in order to bring out a complete revision of values. Their art was supposed to shock and, at the same time, liberate man from his restraints.

<sup>13</sup> A. Clayborough, *op. cit.*, p. 120. Kayser also stressed the fearsome nature of the grotesque and its unpredictability. He indicated that grotesque creations are a conscious equivalent of the devilish powers present in the subconscious. Thus, one may presume the grotesque had a cathartic and therapeutic power.

within the human mind. It plays the role of what Jennings called "the disarming mechanism of the grotesque"<sup>14</sup>.

Approximately at the same time when L. B. Jennings worked on his theory of the grotesque, a French writer and critic, Jean Onimus developed his own idea of this aesthetic category. He divided grotesque creation into three groups, according to an artist's intentions: the primitive and religious grotesques, intended to exorcise demonic powers and suppress supernatural forces, and the existential grotesque in which the artist's intention is to unveil the truths about the world. He claimed that the grotesque makes us reflect upon the human existence. However, the more questions are asked and the more attempts to understand the reality are made the more pain and confusion is caused. The grotesque could be here paralleled with a labyrinth out of which there is no exit. What Kayser and Jennings treated as a psychological phenomenon, Onimus approached in terms of a philosophical issue. The grotesque became a medium through which artists could express their concerns and doubts about the 20<sup>th</sup> century reality<sup>15</sup>.

A different approach, which may be called a religious one, was adopted by Aron Y. Guryewich. The Russian historian, who specialised in the medieval culture, maintained that grotesque art is "an off – spring of Christian religion"<sup>16</sup>. Christian faith, in his view, assumes the dual nature of the world and juxtaposes the body with the soul, life on Earth with life in Heaven. Guryewich discussed the form of the miracle which possessed certain grotesque qualities. Miracles combined two realms: the earthly one and the metaphysical one and that is why characters could shift freely from one reality to the other as in dreams. The theoretician also noted that miracles allowed mixing of comic and tragic elements as well as beautiful and ugly ones.

One may have noticed that the presented theories chiefly concern the creative process during which the grotesque is produced and psychological effects it arouses. Therefore, I find it worthwhile to mention Ludmila Foster's concept of the grotesque in terms of a literary structure.

<sup>14</sup> L. B. Jennings, „The Ludicrous Demon. Aspects of the grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose, Chpt: The Term "Grotesque" *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1979, R. LXX, z. 4, pp. 281–318.

<sup>15</sup> J. Onimus, „Groteskowość a doświadczenie świadomości”, *ibidem*, pp. 319–327.

<sup>16</sup> A. Y. Guryewich, „Z historii groteski”, *ibidem*, pp. 329–338. Guryewich based his analysis of the grotesque on two earlier works: Olga Frajdenberg's "The Origin of Parody" and Michail Bachtin's „Twórczość Franciszka Rabelais'go a kultura ludowa średniowiecza i renesansu". Frajdenberg wrote about a close relationship between parody and religion (profanum and sacrum) while Bachtin stressed the importance of folklore in the development of the grotesque.

In her two articles Foster discussed three categories of the grotesque: thematic, textual and structural<sup>17</sup>. The thematic grotesque occurs when the presented image, or the main theme, is distorted or based on an absurdity. The textual grotesque may affect a work's grammatical, synthetic and rhetorical elements. This type makes it possible to play with words, syllables and letters as well as to create various sentence combinations. And lastly, the structure of a work can also be made grotesque when 1. there is a difference between the story and the tone in which it is told, 2. there are two unconnected plot lines that obstruct the logical flow of the story and 3. a grotesque motif is a structural principle.

Foster also subdivided the grotesque into four other kinds: the realistic grotesque, the fantastic grotesque, the comic/non-comic grotesques and the morbid grotesque. This division is based according to which element prevails in a literary work, for example in the realistic grotesque logic dominates over chaos<sup>18</sup>. The writer also enumerated the main themes of the grotesque and thus the main interests concentrate around the themes of man's relationship to God and life, to his own identity and to others (human alienation, lack of communication).

Ludmila Foster approached the grotesque as a separate literary style that resorts to its specific devices to elicit specific effects. I have found her profound and interesting analysis valuable and necessary for my discussion of the grotesque. To define the grotesque for the purposes of this study has proven to be a demanding, but also challenging, task. The following definition will encompass all the aspects of the grotesque which I regard as the most characteristic and, therefore, important:

1. The grotesque carries in itself a significant element of chaos. The grotesque world lacks a harmonious and logical framework and instead consists of incompatible and, often, fragmented structures. One may say that the grotesque emerges when logic ceases to function and we are forced to accept the unreal as the real. In this way the grotesque is closely related to the absurd.

2. A distinguishing feature of the grotesque is its ambivalence. It combines the opposites: good and evil, comic and tragic, laughter and fear,

<sup>17</sup> L. Foster, *The Grotesque: "A Method of Analysis"*, in: *Zagadnienia rodzajów literackich*, t. 9, z. 1, pp. 75-81 and *"A Configuration of the Non-Absolute"*, *ibidem*, pp. 82-88. The category of the thematic grotesque also embraces the grotesqueness of characters whose actions and number can be significantly reduced. Heroes' characterization as well as their motivations can be also be made grotesque.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 80. In the realistic grotesque verisimilitude and logic prevail while in the fantastic grotesque the predominant element is "whimsical imagination". In the comic version there is a strong element of humour which is absent from its non-comic equivalent. In the last type, the morbid grotesque "a problem of human conflict is shown out of focus".

sublime and ugly. In effect, a grotesque work generates a confusion of emotions (we are amused and/or frightened).

3. As the result of 1. and 2. the grotesque can be treated as a method of constructing the presented world of a literary work, which in turn may reflect the artist's vision of the world or his/her philosophy of life.

On the basis of these assumptions I can begin the detailed analysis of the selected play, which will certainly support my views and shed more light to the nature of the grotesque in drama and theatre.

Nothing is funnier than unhappiness<sup>19</sup>.

2

*Happy Days*, one of the playwright's last full-length dramas, was written in 1961 and first performed in the same year at the Cherry Lane Theatre in the New York<sup>20</sup>. The following will attempt at interpreting *Happy Days* as a grotesque image of human life. I will endeavour to analyse the elements which have been affected by Beckett's implementation of the grotesque in the play. Therefore, I will focus on such aspects as:

- the stage-imagery of *Happy Days*
- the characters (their lives and relationship) as well as
- the language of the play.

1. The stage-imagery of *Happy Days* as a grotesque theatrical image. When the play begins one is immediately drawn into an unlike-life, abstract reality. The stage-set cannot be associated with any familiar real-life situation, thus creating the atmosphere of alienation and eeriness. What captures one's first attention is a desolate stage covered only with mounds of sand and illuminated by, what looks like, dazzling sunlight. This desert-like world has been described by Beckett in the stage directions:

Expanse of scorched grass rising to low mound. Gentle slopes down to front and either side of stage. Back an abrupt fall to stage level. Maximum of simplicity and symmetry. Blazing light. Very pompier trompe-l'oeil backcloth to represent unbroken plain and sky receding to meet in far distance<sup>21</sup>. (Act One, p. 138)

<sup>19</sup> S. Beckett, *Endgame* in: *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London 1986, Faber and Faber Limited.

<sup>20</sup> D. Bair, S. Beckett, *A Biography*, Vintage 1990, p. 572.

<sup>21</sup> S. Beckett, *Happy Days* in: *The Complete Dramatic*, Act One, p. 138. All the references in the text will be to this edition.

The audience is filled with more dismay when it is revealed that two centrally-situated heaps of sand provide homes for the two characters of the play: Winnie and Willie. The couple exists and performs their daily activities in two separate molehills. Winnie is buried up to her waist in the earth while Willy, hardly visible, is lying behind his mound. The characters' movements are significantly reduced; in fact, they remain immobilised nearly throughout the whole play. In Act One, Winnie can, at least, move her arms and twist her head. Her, already miserable, condition is made worse in Act Two as "embedded up to neck ... she can no longer turn, nor bow, nor raise her head" (Act Two, p. 160). Despite their hopeless situation, the characters are seen carry on their everyday occupations: he reads his favourite newspaper and occasionally responds to his wife's questions; she engages herself in trivial feminine tasks and [...] talks endlessly. Time has been virtually abolished and "now is replaced by an unchanging light, an empty landscape and an arbitrary division into wakefulness and sleep to replace day and night"<sup>22</sup>. They wake up with the piercing sound of a bell to start their day; to fall asleep they wait for the imaginary bell to ring which the audience cannot hear it.

The presented situation suggests that the two acts of the play present scenes from the infinite series of endless, slightly variable days of the couple's life. Typically of Beckett's characterisation little is known about the heroes' background and no explanation is given to why Winnie and her husband are engulfed in their mould.

The stage-image as pictured in *Happy Days* also seems to resemble a surrealist painting which makes it possible to confuse the real with the unreal, the possible with the impossible. The audience/reader, already puzzled by this vision, is further baffled by the fact that Winnie behaves as if her situation was perfectly normal. How else can one interpret Winnie's opening line: "Another heavenly day. For Jesus Christ sake Amen". (Act One, p. 138) than to treat the circumstances as, possibly, an actual occurrence? This subsequent clash naturally leads to the breakdown of the logical patterns we are familiar with, producing upon us grotesque effects. These effects are additionally amplified by Winnie's constant cheerfulness. The stage image, moreover, serves Beckett as a metaphor for human existence. The playwright shows us the daily activities as experienced by Winnie and her husband and, at the same time, he reveals the philosophical truth about life and death. Every day, as time passes by, we approach death closer and closer. The inevitable process of ageing affects our appearance as well as our frame of mind (ability to analyse the world, memory, imagination). Winnie's gradual burial can be, therefore, treated as

<sup>22</sup> R. Hayman, *Samuel Beckett*, London 1968, Heinemann, p. 58.

a symbolic image of dying. The grotesque clash occurs between Winnie's optimistic account of her situation and the audience's/reader's reaction towards it. One finds incongruity in the fact that Winnie seems not to be affected by her predicament; she acts as if she led an ordinary life of a happy, married woman. Ironically enough, Beckett titled his image *Happy Days* which inevitably ends in a grotesque conflict between what we see and what we hear.

The antithesis of the logically possible with the logically impossible gives Beckett's work its grotesque nature. In his book on Beckett, Richard N. Coe expressed the idea that "the playwright's art is precisely that of the impossible"<sup>23</sup>. I would modify Coe's concept by saying that Beckett's theatre is that of the impossible made possible, which is best exemplified by the image evoked in *Happy Days*.

2. Winnie and Willie as examples of grotesque characters. By placing the two characters of *Happy Days* in absurd surroundings, Beckett straightforwardly manages to generate the atmosphere of grotesqueness on the stage. He renders the situation even more implausible when he lets Winnie and Willie act.

First of all, I shall devote my attention to Winnie since she emerges to be the central figure of the play. Bearing in mind that this fifty-year-old woman is imprisoned in an expanse of sand, she still looks "well-preserved" and astonishingly hopeful. Beckett's sketchy description tells us that Winnie is a bosomy, blonde-haired and quite elegant woman (she is wearing a pearl necklace). Unaware of her daunting predicament, Winnie engrosses herself in her womanly activities. Her trivial actions are carefully marked in the stage directions: "She turns to bag, rummages in it, [...] brings out toothbrush, rummages again, brings out flat tube of toothpaste [...] holds the tube in one hand and brushes teeth with the other. Rummages again, brings out small mirror [...] inspects teeth in mirror testing upper front teeth with thumb, indistinctly, pulling back upper lip to inspect gums". (Act One, p. 138) Having examined her teeth, the woman continues with more unimportant, meaningless actions which include, for example: cleaning her spectacles, fixing the sun parasol, putting on more make-up and her "brimless hat with crumpled feather", combing and brushing her hair, filing her nails, singing love songs and listening to her musical-box. Winnie also enjoys reading labels on things she pulls out of her spacious bag, especially the one on the toothbrush-handle: "Fully guaranteed [...] genuine pure [...] fully guaranteed [...] genuine pure [...]" (Act One, p. 143). Throughout the first act she continuously brings out often unidentifiable odds and ends, stuffs them back, fumbles deeper, brings them out and puts them back.

<sup>23</sup> R. N. Coe, *Samuel Beckett*, London 1979, p. 47.

Winnie's incessant and petty actions grotesquely clash with the situation in which she exists. As Ronald Hayman noticed "most of her actions are actions which are part of anyone's daily routine, but because of her situation, they appear utterly incongruous and pointless"<sup>24</sup>. The incompatibility of her behaviour and her fate, unavoidably, leads to a grotesque sequel.

Apart from the handbag that treasures her little valuables, Winnie also possesses an outstanding ability to talk. Speech, like her possessions, enables her to fill the time and to keep herself entertained. She talks inexhaustibly throughout the whole play, which, in fact, reduces *Happy Days* to one piece of an extended monologue.

For the audience, she may sound extremely boring as most of what she says does not make much sense; for her, however, words provide enjoyment and security. She talks for talking's sake as she fears that she could find herself in the vacuum when "when words fail" (Act One, p. 148). She talks about insignificant things or occasionally creates her semi-philosophies. In both cases, one is confronted with an incongruous situation. In the first case, one finds Winnie's trivial talk incompatible with her fate. In the second case, one realizes that her 'philosophies' do not fit with her generally trivial thinking, like when she comments upon some sounds she can pick up from outside her mould:

Sounds. Like little ... sounderings, little falls ... apart. (Pause. Low)  
It's things, Willie. In the bag. Outside the bag. Ah yes, things  
have their life, that is what I always say, things have a life.  
Take my looking-glass, it doesn't need me. (Act One, p. 162)

Now and again Willie's wife spends some time reflecting upon their past and their relationship. Her memories, however fragmented, suggest that once her life could have looked different. She reminisces about her first ball and first kiss with "A Mr Johnson, or Johnston, or perhaps ... Johnstone. Very bushy moustache, very tawny. Almost ginger! Within a toolshed, though whose I cannot conceive". (Act One, p. 142).

In Act Two, the stage image is further grotesquely estranged. Winnie's condition has deteriorated as she is now buried up to her neck. She does not seem to have noticed any changes in her situation. She has been immobilized even more and she has also been deprived of the contact with her little treasures (she cannot rummage in her bag any longer – nor can she play her favourite tunes). Paradoxically, she still appears happy and entertains herself by retelling stories from her past. The audience learns about a girl called Millie and the mouse running up her thigh, which in spite of her screams for help, caused her death. In this and other stories, Winnie greatly relies on her imagination and often confuses fact with

<sup>24</sup> R. Hayman, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

fiction. Trapped in the sand and imprisoned by time that "refuses to pass"<sup>25</sup>, Winnie may only invent her stories to feel amused.

One may notice that whatever Winnie does, proves inappropriate to her miserable situation. It should be emphasized that although she is given speech, Winnie never cries out for help. Nor does she even complain about her lamentable life, which any reasonable person would do in her place. She keeps telling herself:

... ah well, can't complain, no, no, mustn't complain, so  
much to be thankful for, no pain, hardly any ... slight  
headache sometimes ..., occasional mild migraine ...,  
many mercies, great mercies. (Act One, p. 140).

Her reasoning is, obviously, affected to the point of absurdity. One finds Winnie's behaviour grotesque. The woman who is approaching her death, seems to make nothing of her imminent fate. It makes one laugh at Winnie's silliness and unawareness, but it can equally frighten one to think that a human being could ever exist in such deplorable conditions and act if he did not realize it.

In between her memories and her songs, there is also some time left to be nostalgic about her husband. Winnie's fading memory does not allow her to recall if Willie has ever found her loveable "Was I loveable once, Willie?, Was I ever loveable?" (Act One, p. 162). She can, however, recollect the day Willie "came whining for her hand" (Act One, p. 166), brought her flowers and smiled. She does not explain what happened next, but she gives one to understand that their relationship hardly exists. However, she needs to be listened to and for that matter she depends on Willie – the only listener available. Willie's function in the action is to provide his wife with a theoretical possibility that she is listened to. Beckett makes his heroine appear as an especially preposterous character when he lets her get ecstatic whenever Winnie utters, or I should say, murmurs a word. Every time he does so, Winnie euphorically exclaims: "Another happy day!". As Richard N. Coe rightly observed "Winnie's strangest characteristic is her happiness"<sup>26</sup>. Beckett shows us all the time how misplaced her optimism is and how ironical her faith in God's mercies appears to be (she begins her day with a thanksgiving prayer). On the one side, the playwright makes us laugh at her being joyful and sanguine in the circumstances that would cause acute distress to anybody else. On the other side, we may find her ignorance tragic.

Now that I have analysed Winnie's status quo in the play, I shall focus on the male protagonist of *Happy Days*, Willie. His figure has often been

<sup>25</sup> F. Doherty, *Samuel Beckett*, London 1971, Hutchinson University Library, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> R. N. Coe, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

overlooked by Beckett's critics as, generally speaking, his role in the play is to listen, not to talk, neither to act. Nevertheless, Willie does exist and it is him who brings the drama to a grotesque, but poignant climax.

Willie, as I believe, belongs to the world of the grotesque as does Winnie. In fact, they could be both classified as parodies of dramatic characters. Willie, certainly, personifies one of the least visible, audible and articulate characters of the dramatist's full-length plays. He remains out of sight almost all the time, hardly ever using his voice, and when he does speak he repeats the same words. His actions are also limited and inconsequential. He spreads his handkerchief on his skull and covers it with a boater and a club ribbon, he also looks at his pornographic cards and, most of all, either reads "Reynolds' News" or sleeps. Willie can hardly manage on all fours and his movements remind one of a creeping creature. Often unable, or perhaps unwilling, to move Willie falls flat on the ground. Despite his immobility and pitiful situation, Willie does not appear as a tragic character. It may be hard to keep one's face straight when Willie collapses another time behind his mound and is unable to return to his hole. His wife's voice is heard:

Go back into your hole now, Willie, you've exposed yourself enough ... Do as I say, Willie, don't lie sprawling there in this hellish scene ... [She follows his progress with her eyes]. Not head first, stupid, how are you going to turn? ... how ... back in. Oh I know it is not easy, dear, crawling backwards, but it is rewarding in the end. (Act Two, p. 165)

Also, both visually and verbally, this image brings to our mind the idea of tragicomedy which, by combining the tragic with the comic, is grotesque. In his presentation of Willie's behaviour, Beckett constrains his audience to experience confused emotions: on the one hand, pity for Winnie's misery, on the other, laughter at his clumsiness and comic actions. A similar response is provoked when the play reaches its grotesque climax. Although suspense is virtually excluded in the play, the final scene generates a lot of tension.

In the last scene, one can see Willie fully for the first time. His dress suggests his wedding day ("top hat, morning coat, striped trousers, white gloves in hand", Act Two, p. 166). In this smart outfit, Willie pulls all his strength to crawl up to reach his wife. Despite his desperate efforts and Winnie's encouragement, the man fails to get hold of his wife. He falls again and remains on the ground with his eyes fixed on Winnie until the curtain descends.

Winnie, electrified by her husband's spontaneous and heart-rending act, begins to sing her love song. The happy expression on her face, soon, disappears, and the play concludes with the two characters staring at each other.

However emotional the characters' final performance may appear, it is absurdly unequal to the presented stage situation. Any pathos that this scene may evoke is demeaned by their preposterous behaviour. Neither Winnie nor Willie's demeanour accords with our logical thinking, thus, revealing the grotesque nature of Beckett's protagonists.

The grotesque quality of *Happy Days*, achieved due to the grotesque presentation of Winnie and Willie, their milieu and actions, is also reflected in the characters' language with which I will deal in the following subchapter.

3. The language of the play as an example of the verbal grotesque. Beckett's later dramatic works have frequently been designated as "a theatre of the mind"<sup>27</sup>. This term, in my view, can be justifiably applied to *Happy Days* in two ways. Firstly, Beckett puts an emphasis on the characters' inner life by making them practically immobilised. Secondly, as a result of their inability to act, the characters can only rely on their minds to let them exist. At the same time, to manifest their existence, they have only one instrument available to resort to, the speech. In other words, existence means ability to talk, even if the talking does not make much sense. One may anticipate that the language employed in the drama is likely to reflect, and to resemble, the grotesque world of the heroes.

As I have noted before, *Happy Days* registers a lengthy, tedious and fatuous monologue uttered by Winnie, and occasionally discontinued by Willie's remarks. Her monologue sounds utterly incoherent and, to a great extent, is built up of free associations and randomly chosen words. The following example will support my observation:

...The bag of course ... a little blurred perhaps ... but the bag.  
 [Eyes front. Offhand.] The earth of course and sky. The  
 sunshade you gave me ... that day ... that day ... the lake ... the  
 reeds. [Eyes front. Pause] What day? What reeds? ...  
 Brownie of course. You remember Brownie, Willie, I can see  
 him ... Genuine ... Fully guaranteed ... Brownie is there,  
 Willie, beside me ...  
 (Act Two, p. 159).

These words are combined without any logical interrelation, which indicates the lack of cogent thinking in Winnie's mind. Such absence of coherence also shows when the woman jumbles up pieces of information from two different, unconnected stories, as in the following monologue:

I call to the eye of the mind ... Mr Shower – or Cooker. [She  
 closes her eyes. Bell rings loudly. She opens her eyes.  
 Pause]. Hand in hand, in the other hands bags. Getting on ...  
 in life [Pause]. No longer young, not yet old. Standing

<sup>27</sup> Ch. Inns, *Modern British Drama 1890–1990*, Cambridge 1992, Cambridge University Press, p. 428.

there gaping at me ... Can't have been a bad bosom, he says, in my time. ... Is there any life in her legs? ... I watch them recede. Hand in hand – and the bags. Last human kind – to stray this way. [Pause] And now? Help. Help, Willie. No? [Long pause. Narrative] Suddenly a mouse ... Suddenly a mouse ran up her little thigh and Mildred, dropping Dolly in her fright, began to scream ... (Act Two, p. 158).

The two above-quoted extracts show that Winnie's speech is reduced to a series of chaotic and meaningless utterances. Such abstracted speech possesses, what Ludmila Foster calls the "grotesque sentence structure"<sup>28</sup>.

Moreover, one may observe that Winnie's talk is completely detached from reality; what she says is contradictory to her situation. This sharp contrast only further emphasizes the heroine's absurd predicament. Besides, the ideas Winnie expresses make her sound idiotic, which in turn evokes laughter among the audience. The most ridiculous phrases open the play's two acts. In the first one Winnie, embedded in the sand and facing the hellish sunlight, exclaims that this is "another heavenly day". In the second one, being in even more miserable state, the woman uses the Miltonian expression:

Hail, holy light and adds: "Someone is looking at me still. caring for me ... This is what is find so wonderful". (Act Two, p. 160).

Willie's wife can find more things that she considers "so wonderful" or treats like "great mercies". 'Wonderful' is to find out what a hog is and to notice that she perspires less. Ironically, she finds wonderful "the way man adapts himself – [Pause] To changing conditions" (Act Two, p. 163). Beckett's deep irony is also felt when his heroine exclaims: "this is going to be another happy day" whenever Willie opens his mouth.

The grotesque comes into force when Winnie gets ecstatic after her husband, silent so far, utters a one-syllable word – "it" (In this way Willie responds to her question whether "hair" is a singular or plural noun). She becomes even more thrilled after Willie has, just audibly, pronounced her name: [Happy expression appears, grows]. Win! Oh this is a happy day, this will have been another happy day. [Pause]. After all. [Pause] So far". (Act Two, p. 168). Irony in *Happy Days* often amounts to the playwright's cruelty in the treatment of the characters. One could consider it to be a heartless joke to bury a woman in a pile of sand and still let her exhibit a great deal of optimism. In my opinion, such black humour, among other features, characterizes grotesque works.

<sup>28</sup> L. Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

Another aspect of the verbal grotesque is the importance of silence in *Happy Days*. In his article "Język i absurd"<sup>29</sup>, Stephen M. Halloran tackled the problem of silence versus talkativeness in the Theatre of the Absurd. When speaking about Beckett's play, Halloran noted that "in the drama Winnie's speech is subdued to the visual and grotesque metaphor of her gradual burial"<sup>30</sup>.

In fact, the deeper she immerses, the more chaotic and hesitant her speech becomes. Despite the difficulties, however, she talks continuously, verbalizing every single thought that crosses her mind.

As Willie remains taciturn, the unnaturalness and emptiness of Winnie's speech appears visible. The juxtaposition of one character's impenetrable silence with the other character's persistent talkativeness can, as Halloran suggests, lead to a grotesque perception of the play (The situation between the characters – one talks, the other one does not respond – is presented by Beckett out of focus. The characters are made to appear absurd).

In conclusion, one should stress that the verbal grotesque constitutes a vital part of the play. To accomplish such [grotesque] linguistic effects, Beckett has made the language of *Happy Days* incoherent and meaningless. He has also employed irony and black humour as tools to achieve, and to highlight, the absurdity of the characters' situation. Finally, the playwright showed how inadequate Winnie's talkativeness appears in contrast to her dreadful condition.

\* \* \*

The purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate that the grotesque can appear in a variety of forms (visual, verbal) and that it can exercise diverse functions in modern drama.

The grotesque can be employed to present us with a surreal, gloomy but equally funny vision of human existence. In *Happy Days* the audience is confronted with an absurd situation in which two people live their lives normally despite unrealistic, irrational and inhuman conditions. The reactions towards such an image can be twofold. Winnie's optimism and Willie's stoicism, first surprise and horrify us only to make us laugh in the end at the 'anomaly' of their existence. What they perceive as 'reality', looks utterly unrecognizable to us and incomprehensible to our logic. The integration of the real with the unreal leads, to the emergence of the grotesque.

Besides, one can also speak of the tragicomic character of Beckett's drama, which is typical of the grotesque. Characteristically for the grotesque,

<sup>29</sup> S. M. Halloran, „Język i absurd”, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1979, R. LXX, z. 4, p. 333.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

the play generates as much pathos as bathos. Initially, it is possible to approach Winnie and Willie as tragic characters whose situation reflects their suffering and unhappiness. However, because of their unawareness and idiotic behaviour they impersonate comic figures. In particular, it is Winnie who acts like an automaton repeating the same actions, or words, until they lose any significance. Willie, who bears resemblance to a Chaplin – like figure because of his clumsiness, cannot be treated seriously either. What appears to us a miserable and tragic situation is rendered absurd and pointless.

Above all, however, *Happy Days* can be viewed as an allegorical, symbolic and poetic image of human existence, juxtaposed with the concept of man's gradual dying. A pessimist may perceive the image in terms of a subhuman, illogical, and therefore gloomy portrait of human life which is reduced to an empty, aimless appearance. For an optimist, on the other hand, *Happy Days* would prove that despite the suffering and misery people still courageously face their fate and can always find signs of happiness (like Winnie does). Personally, I believe that Beckett's play integrates the two approaches and shows that the world is composed of happiness and sadness, comedy as well as tragedy. As a result, one should stoically accept the world with all its absurdities.

The grotesque style has helped the playwright to reconcile the incompatibles (the real and the unreal, the comic and the tragic). It has also allowed Beckett to present his symbolic vision in a dramatic way. As Hegel remarked: "Artists should use the grotesque in a conscious process of writing to show the world in symbols"<sup>31</sup>.

Marta Rosińska

#### ELEMENTY GROTESKOWE W SZTUCE *HAPPY DAYS* SAMUELA BECKETTA

*Happy Days* to jedna z ostatnich pełnowymiarowych sztuk Becketta. Widz ma tu do czynienia z absurdalną sytuacją, w której para bohaterów prowadzi naturalne, codzienne życie w nierealnych, irracjonalnych i nieludzkich warunkach. Artykuł jest analizą elementów groteskowych użytych przez autora, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem scenografii sugerowanej w didaskaliach, charakterystyki postaci oraz języka używanego w przedstawieniu.

<sup>31</sup> W. Kayser, *op. cit.*, p. 102.