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“DUNG? WHAT WOULD WE WANT WITH A DUNG, AT OUR TIME OF LIFE?” LOST SEXUALITY AND THE ISSUE OF PROCREATION IN SAMUEL BECKETT’S PLAYS

Apart from few very rare instances, almost all Beckettian characters are presented at the final stage of their life journeys. The picture of old age does not seem optimistic. Life is depicted as endless suffering and deterioration. The characters perpetually repent for their original “sin of having been born” (“Proust” 67), which is conspicuous in their physical and spiritual misery. Life for Beckett equaled constant and inexorable process of dying. Devoured by the “double-headed monster of damnation and salvation – Time” (“Proust” 1) and trapped in their imperfect bodies, the characters undergo continuous degradation reflected in their illnesses, disability, decay and the loss of carnal vitality. In this essay I will focus exclusively on the problem of sexual impairment, lack of fertility and sexual appeal as well as on the issue of procreation in order to show some distinctive differences in the presentation of male and female characters on the basis of chosen examples from plays of the Irish dramatist.

One of the most striking elements of Beckett’s philosophy is his aversion towards procreation. Perceiving life as constant decline, he dismissed the possibility of having his own children, claiming: “Neither I nor my wife can bear the thought of committing a child to death” (qtd. in Coughlan).

Interestingly, Beckett had also a certain phobia connected with the prenatal situation of a child in their mother’s womb. This obsession often found its reflection in the claustrophobic settings of his plays, which has been noticed by a number of critics. Bell Gale Chevigny, for instance, speaks of a “womb-like room” (3) in *Endgame*, while Leonard Cabell Pronko argues that “the sack [in *Act Without Words II*] symbolizes womb and tomb as much as it does sleep” (qtd. in Uchman 63).¹

¹ L. C. Pronko, *Avant-Garde: The Experimental Theatre in France*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964. 48–49.

In fact, Beckett stated in the interview with John Gruen that he had "a clear memory of [his] own fetal existence. It was an existence where no voice, no possible movement could free me from the agony and darkness [he] was subject to" (qtd. in Worth 243).² The writer evoked the same memories in conversations with his close friend Peggy Guggenheim, who discloses that "Ever since his birth he had retained a terrible memory of life in his mother's womb. He was constantly suffering from this and had awful crises, when he felt he was suffocating" (Gale Chevigny 3).³

This prenatal experience was one of the reasons why Beckett perceived procreating as a sin or a crime, and the echoes of such an attitude can be found in many of his plays. The characters frequently show hatred towards their parents, whom they blame for giving them life understood as continual suffering. Consequently, in *Endgame* Hamm calls Nagg an "accursed progenitor" (E 960). Some of the critics find a similar tension between a parent and a child in *Footfalls*. Walter Asmus stated that "it struck [him] that there is a real hate relationship with the mother" (qtd. in Kalb 181).⁴

Often compared to the girl from Carl Jung's lecture who has never been born and who obstinately rejects her existence,⁵ May shows a desire to uncreate her beingness. A similar situation may be found in *Happy Days* when Winnie despairs: "And should one day the earth cover my breasts, then I shall never have seen my breasts, no one ever seen my breasts" (HD 154), which can be interpreted as an expression of great sorrow for being deprived of her female attributes which will be forgotten and no longer adored but also as an attempt to "uncreate the past and the present" (Uchman 95), as if she wanted to wipe out the fact that she has ever been born.

Life in Samuel Beckett's plays is a painful ordeal both for the male and the female characters. Nevertheless, it is striking that the desire to procreate and the strong emotional relationship with children is only visible among women presented in his plays such as *Footfalls*, *Rockaby* or *Embers*. Yet it is most prominent in *All That Fall* when Mrs Rooney repeatedly bewails the loss of her daughter, Minnie. Furthermore, the inability to give life to a child for the second time fills the woman who suffers from unfulfilled motherly instincts with inconsolable grief.

Even the three women presented in *Come and Go* exhibit longings to some extent similar to those of Mrs Rooney. They dream of having rings on their fingers, which may be interpreted as a wish to get married. The

² Interview with John Gruen, *Vogue* (London), February 1970.

³ *Out of this Century*. New York: The Dial Press, 1946, 205.

⁴ Jonathan Kalb's interview with Walter Asmus on January 7, 1987.

⁵ This idea also brings May close to the Maeterlinckian Mellisande who "could not have lived. ... was born for no reason ... to die; and now she is dying for no reason" ("Pelleas and Mellisande" 113).

traditional character of the symbol of a ring also brings to mind an immediate association with the conventional family model which involves giving life to children.

Most women in Beckett's plays seem to be strongly connected with their children and unable to resist their motherly instincts, while the men represent the opposite approach, as they show no such wishes and, to the contrary, frequently reject the possibility of procreation. Such an attitude lies behind Mr Rooney's actions, as it is highly probable that he was the one who killed the child in the train, which may be deduced from his question posed to Mrs Rooney: "Did you ever wish to kill a child? [*Pause.*] Nip some young doom in the bud" (*ATF* 191) and from the fact that he took the ball of the unfortunate victim.

Male dislike towards their offspring or children in general is also visible in *Embers*. The protagonist of the play, Henry, is totally dominated by his wife – Ada, who has concentrated all her feelings and ambitions on their daughter, Addie. Despite the lack of inclination towards infanticide observable in Mr Rooney, jealous and lonely, Henry deeply regrets having a child, whom he blames for absorbing all Ada's love and attention. He wonders: "What turned her against me do you think, the child I suppose, horrid little creature, wish to God we'd never had her" (*Em* 256).

Due to the fact that women in Beckett's plays are the ones eager to procreate, they are perceived by some male characters almost as temptresses who are both desired and despised, as it is in the case of *Play*. Cohn notices that "the man ... declares that he 'could not live without' the one woman and 'could not go on living without' the other but nevertheless exclaims: 'God that vermin women'" (Cohn 1987, 166).

A similar approach may be found in *Krapp's Last Tape*. According to Knowlson, "Krapp's behaviour has a counterpart in the practice of an early group of Christian heretics, Manicheans, who dedicated themselves to 'the light' – the intellect – and sought to suppress 'the dark' – passion and sensuality. 'Krapp ... has equated women with darkness and the irrational'" (qtd. in Acheson 75).⁶ Nevertheless, it has to be stressed that the rejection of the temptress by the protagonist in order to indulge himself exclusively into work on his artistic vision eventually leads to his life's failure rather than fulfillment.

The contrast between male and female Beckettian characters in some ways seems to correspond to the opinion expressed by Sherry B. Ortner who in her essay *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* claims that from the traditional point of view, "woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life" (75), showing an affinity between women and

⁶ J. Knowlson, "Krapp's Last Tape: The Evolution of a Play, 1958–75." *Journal of Beckett Studies* 1 (Winter 1976). 62.

the life-giving aspect of nature. Male activities, on the contrary, involve "destruction of life (hunting and warfare)" (Ortner 75).

Such a division, however, is oversimplistic in case of Beckett's plays. Cohn argues that according to the Irish dramatist, who presents living as dying, "The women ... are fatal because they live intimately with death—more intimately than his male characters ... [because] birth begins a long process of dying" (Cohn 1987, 162). By giving life, Beckettian women condemn children to death and, more importantly, to protracted and painful decay. Consequently, they reconcile two seemingly opposite roles: the role of life-giving mother and the role of Mother Death or a peculiar type of "femme fatale" (1987, 162), as Cohn calls them.

At the same time, the Irish dramatist does not reject the close association between women and nature. Beckettian female characters and Beckettian scenery reflect each other, as they are both barren and infertile. It is particularly discernible in the soundscape of *All That Fall*. Mrs Rooney has lost her only child Minnie and admits being childless (ATF 174) or "past the age" (ATF 178), which is one of the causes of her misery. When Christy offers her a small load of dung, the woman metaphorically associates the fertilizer with her state, complaining: "Dung? What would we want with a dung, at our time of life?" (ATF 173). The infertility of Mrs Rooney and Mr Tyler's daughter who had "the whole ... bag of tricks removed," which left her father "grandchildless" (ATF 174), is expressionistically projected onto the surrounding nature of Boghill village, permeated with the images of fecundity and decease. As Grant notices, "The surprising abundance of local detail in *All That Fall* fits into a complex cluster of images of sterility, decay, suffering and death: a ruinous old house by a country road; a laburnum which is losing its tassels; an impotent hinny with its cart of dung; a ditch filled with rotting leaves, and the name of the village itself, Boghill."

Beckett presents an analogous landscape of sterility in *Happy Days*. The scorching sun prevents the earth from giving life, which is commented on by Winnie: "What a blessing nothing grows" (HD 152), though the imagery of infertility is slightly disrupted by an emmet with an egg (HD 149–150). Nonetheless, the most prominent symbol of barrenness in *Happy Days* is Winnie herself, sucked up to her waist in the mound. Like a mermaid, she is unable to engage in a sexual intercourse, which may be additionally interpreted as a metaphor of menopause.

Time deprives Beckettian women not only of their fertility but also of their attractiveness and female attributes. Simone de Beauvoir argued that "Whereas man grows old gradually, woman is suddenly deprived of her femininity; she is still relatively young when she loses the erotic appeal and the fertility, which in the view of society and in her own, provide the justification of her existence and her opportunity for happiness" (qtd. in

Perry 201).⁷ Linda Ben-Zvi finds a manifestation of this principle in Samuel Beckett's works, claiming that "Time may affect both sexes, but the pressure on females to retain youth and beauty make their confrontations with the mirror more threatening and more devastating – and Beckett shows this" (x).

This idea is most explicitly shown in *Happy Days*. The situation of Winnie powerfully dramatizes the most negative aspects of aging traditionally perceived as a process of becoming "worn out, secondhand, fading, unattractive, and worthless" (qtd. in Perry 202). To a certain extent, Winnie, who consults the mirror about her physical state, reminds the spectator of the archetype of an aging woman making desperate attempts to preserve her beauty. Some critics oppose this thesis. Benstock states that "Winnie does not consult her mirror for reassurance of her place in the signifying chain or for patriarchal approval," and that "Initially, she uses the mirror to inspect the state of her teeth and gums, in a gesture that suggests the clinical rather than narcissistic" (176). Nevertheless, it may be argued that some of the objects the female protagonist of *Happy Days* keeps in her bag: brush, lipstick, comb and nail-file serve the preservation of physical beauty, which is indeed her ambition. She hopelessly tries to cover the signs of the passage of time and, simultaneously, to save her attractiveness and expose her female attributes by doing her lips and wearing low bodice.

Winnie wants to be adored by her partner, and looks for his approval or at least attention. It seems that she would like him to admire her well-preserved beauty, and for that reason she insists: "Could you see me, Willie do you think, from where you are, if you were to raise your eyes in my direction?" (*HD* 149). Winnie uses all her means to be noticed by Willie. She tries to arouse his jealousy reviving the memories of her encounter with Mr Johnson or Johnston. The female protagonist of *Happy Days* resorts even to cruelty throwing her empty bottle in Willie's direction and hurting his head in an attempt to draw his attention.

Longing for confirmation of her attractiveness is yet most clearly seen, when Winnie asks her partner: "Was I ever lovable? [*Pause.*] Do not misunderstand my question, I'm not asking if you loved me, we know all about that, I am asking if you found me lovable – at one stage" (*HD* 150). Benstock supports this opinion claiming that "This set of questions mimes the patriarchal interrogation (asking for approval, for affirmation of self-worth)" (178).

Mrs Rooney reveals quite a different approach to her physicality. Like Dido and Gogo who put the blame for their afflictions on the external objects such as boots and hats (Cohn 2002, 50), she does not accept the state of her body and seems to distance herself from her "once female

⁷ S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Transl. H. M. Parshley. New York: The Modern Library, 1968. 574.

shape" (ATF 182). Asking Miss Fitt to prop her up "against the wall like a roll of tarpaulin" (ATF 185) shows that Mrs Rooney treats her body as a lifeless and an almost alien object. The same tactics is visible in the way she describes her physicality at the beginning of the play: "Oh let me just flop down flat on the road like a big fat jelly out of a bowl and never move again! A great big slop thick with grit and dust and flies, they would have to scoop me with a shovel" (ATF 174). Vaguely alluding to the naturalistic method used by Baudelaire to describe a decomposed body in *Une charogne*, Mrs Rooney externalizes in a vivid way the disgust towards her own body, which she does not accept in its present state.

No longer attractive, Mrs Rooney still desires a more intimate and tender physical contact with her husband, though she can no longer sensually experience the caresses by virtue of having a body that appears to be deprived by the passing time of its receptive qualities; she claims: "I am tired of light old hands on my shoulders and other senseless places, sick and tired of them" (ATF 175). The woman does not crave for any sensual experience but rather for the confirmation of her husband's love or perhaps, just like Winnie, she wants to feel admired by Mr Rooney, which would give her the sense of self-worth and change her perception of her own body.

Mr Rooney, by contrast, seems very cold, mean and passive in contacts with his wife. Instead of caressing, he offers her only "a peck on the jaw at morning, near the ear, and another in the evening" (ATF 174). He also recollects that it was Mrs Ronney who proposed to him and married him, which is a reversal of the traditional marital relationship. In a sense, this passive approach reminds one of Willie in *Happy Days*, which is highlighted by juxtaposing his behaviour with that of his wife. Although immobilized in the mound, Winnie seems much more active both on the physical and on the verbal level.

It does not mean, however, that all male Beckettian characters are passive and totally unresponsive to female charms. They may reject the idea of stabilization and procreating, but they frequently do not forgo all sexual pleasures. The reason behind this lies not only in the inability to renounce the temptress as it is in the case of Man in *Play*, or sheer desire for bodily pleasures like for Joe from the television play *Eh Joe*, but also in the urge to prove their potency and masculinity which undergoes inevitable deterioration. This may explain why Krapp even in his advanced age is visited a couple of times by Fanny – "Bony ghost of a whore" (KLT 222). The protagonist is hardly able to engage in a sexual intercourse as he admits that he "couldn't do much" (KLT 222), but later he proudly confesses that "the last time wasn't so bad" (KLT 222).

It follows from the above that "as much as [Beckettian characters] exist in the world of shared metaphysical uncertainty, they also exist in an everyday world – *this* world – shaped to a large degree by the societal

constructs of gender that so often mark male and female behaviour and shape personality" (Ben-Zvi x). In many respects, the characters possess the binary characteristics traditionally attributed to man and women. Most Beckettian women are closely bound up with the life-giving forces of nature, though they are also linked with death, for bearing a child equals dooming them to a long and painful process of dying. Female characters respond in an overt and emotional way to their own decay caused by the passage of time and seem more interested in preserving their bodily attributes. Male characters, by contrast, are less passionate and less emotional, which is mostly visible in their approach towards children and reproduction of the human species. Beckett, however, tries to avoid any valuation of these polarities. Although it seems that women in his plays sometimes tend to look for the patriarchal approval and the validation of their self-worth, the power of male rationality is not presented as superior to female emotionality, the best example of it being Krapp who rejected love in favour of the artistic *opus magnum*, which brought him only disappointment and disillusionment in his old age rather than great achievements. Finally, Beckett sometimes seems to consciously play with the traditional male and female roles, thus significantly contributing to the comic effect of the plays.

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„Nawóz? ... Po co nawóz komuś w naszym wieku?” Utrata seksualności oraz zagadnienie prokreacji w sztukach Samuela Becketta

Charakterystyczną cechą twórczości Samuela Becketta jest ukazanie postaci w końcowym etapie ich życia. Pesymistyczna wizja nieuchronnego zbliżania się do śmierci naznaczona jest cierpieniem i fizycznym niszczeniem, które według irlandzkiego pisarza miało stanowić swoistą pokutę ludzkości za grzech narodzin. Czas wywiera zgubny wpływ na jednostki przedstawione w sztukach Becketta. Obarczone niedoskonałą powłoką cielesną, stanowiącą ich doczesne więzienie, starzejące się postaci ulegają stopniowej degradacji, co znajduje swoje wyraźne odzwierciedlenie także w ich cielesności, nękanej chorobami, niesprawnością, powolnym rozkładem i zaturą witalności. Niniejszy artykuł poddaje analizie problem utraty seksualności w całokształcie twórczości dramatycznej Becketta. Przekrojowy charakter pracy ma na celu wykazanie fundamentalnych różnic pomiędzy sposobami ukazania płci w wybranych dziełach Irlandczyka. Są one osadzone w dosyć stereotypowym postrzeganiu kobiet jako jednostek bardziej emocjonalnych oraz bliżej związanych z ideą prokreacji utożsamianą z mitem życiodajnej bogini matki, w przeciwieństwie do bardziej racjonalnych mężczyzn, w wielu przypadkach wyrażających hedonistyczne podejście do czynności seksualnych i wyrażających bardziej lub mniej świadomy lęk przed posiadaniem potomstwa. W artykule przedstawione zostały także konsekwencje wynikające z powyższych, przeciwstawnych koncepcji męskości i kobiecości, znajdujące swoje odzwierciedlenie zarówno w sztukach, jak i w filozofii Becketta.