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Is Samuel Beckett's presentation of female characters problematic for feminists?

Hannah Reeves

“Invisible, foreign, secret, hidden, mysterious, black, forbidden.”¹ Who is this Other who encroaches so insidiously upon the consciousness of Beckett's audience? Who is this Other whose presence, or absence, stands to affirm or threaten the identity of Beckett's male leads? Can the very Otherness which defines her ever be disrupted? The Woman is granted varying degrees of presence throughout Beckett's body of work. This ranges from complete omission, through being present purely to witness male characters, to taking centre stage. There is, no doubt, an intent behind the presence or absence of the Woman, something that must be assessed when attempting to read Beckett from a feminist perspective. In this essay I will examine the significance of the placement of the Woman in Beckett's work. I will assess how the Woman is portrayed by Beckett and whether his treatment of her is misogynistic. With these issues in mind, I will attempt to draw conclusions as to whether Beckett's presentation of female characters is problematic for feminists.

Some of Beckett's early works of fiction, for example *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934), promote a negative collective characterization of the Woman, a characterization that is challenging to read in any way other than as consolidating a negative stereotype. In her essay *Clods, Whores and Bitches*, Susan Brienza notes:

For Beckett's early fiction (though the image shifts in the plays and late fiction), if women are ugly they are shunned and ridiculed; if they are attractive they are dreaded and feared – and therefore ridiculed.²

While Brienza highlights this damning treatment of the Woman in early Beckett, she also emphasizes the importance that it is the narrator that degrades the Woman, and not necessarily Beckett himself.³ Whether we come to consider the narrator's views as reflective of Beckett's own comes down to the importance we assign to the author himself. Roland Barthes has argued that the author's own intention should be disregarded while interpreting works, an

1 Cixous, H. 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays.' from Cixous, H. and Clément, C. (1986) (tr.) Wing, B. *The Newly Born Woman* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press) p. 69

2 Brienza, S. 'Clods, Whores and Bitches' from (ed.) Ben-Zvi, L. (1990) *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Illinois: Illini Books 1992 ed.) p. 92

3 Brienza, S. 'Clods, Whores and Bitches' from (ed.) Ben-Zvi, L. (1990) *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Illinois: Illini Books 1992 ed.) p. 92

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argument surmised by the phrase, “the death of the Author”.⁴ If we are to follow Barthes in this viewpoint, then we must conclude that the content of Beckett's work is, in no way, a sufficient criterion by which to brand him a misogynist. We must, therefore, consider that determining how problematic Beckett's work is, from a feminist perspective, must be a process of analysing the patterns that emerge throughout his work, rather than any investigation into Beckett's personal opinions. As Charles Lyons remarks: “We should not create an image of the writer that functions as a *character* whose identity is developed by the words he writes.”⁵

One element of Beckett's character that should not be disregarded in this investigation, however, is the simple fact that he is male. Hence, we should consider his maleness in its relationship to the patriarchal grand narrative which has governed humanity since Genesis. We should, therefore, consider that, by default, the unidentified narrator in Beckett's fiction is a male voice. While we can identify the “Beckettian voice”⁶ as a male voice in Beckett's fiction, the voice takes a more ambiguous form when it becomes an implied voice in his drama. This voice is a fractured one, speaking in numerous tongues. Beckett's fiction is typically narrated without the use of first person pronoun. However, the narrator often seems bound to the protagonist by incorporating elements of the protagonist's stream of consciousness into the story, such as in *Watt* (1953). The narrative voice in his fiction is not that of Beckett himself, it is the indirect voice or voices of his characters.

In Beckett's drama we are stripped of this narrative voice, but the appearance of recurring themes throughout his body of work means a certain implied voice can be recognised. This implied Beckettian voice constantly serves to highlight the futility of existence. While his narrators and characters frequently degrade the Woman, we can consider that the Beckettian voice is critiquing rather than promoting this degradation. A male voice, that unless it makes a conscious decision against it, will always regard the Woman in opposition to itself, always alienating the Woman as an Other. As Brienza has pointed out, in Beckett's early fiction this alienation takes the form of ridicule. This suggests an underlying hostility towards the Woman on the part of the narrator. The early fiction objectifies the Woman by treating her not as a mind but as a body, easily reduced to the categories of attractive or unattractive. As Brienza notes, sex work seems to be a common female

4 Barthes, R. (1967) *'The Death of the Author'* from (ed. & tr.) Heath, S. (1977) *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press) p. 148

5 Lyons, C. R. *'Male or Female Voice: The Significance of the Gender of the Speaker in Beckett's Late Fiction and Drama'* from (ed.) Ben-Zvi, L. (1990) *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press) p. 153

6 Lyons, C. R. *'Male or Female Voice'* from (ed.) Ben-Zvi, L. (1990) *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Illinois: Illini Books, 1992 ed.) p. 153

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occupation in the early fiction: “they earn their livelihood not with their minds but with their bodies.”⁷ Beckett's early narrators take misogyny a step further by even, on occasion, referring to female characters using the definite article. Here the narrator takes objectification a step further by literally referring to the Woman in the same way one would refer to an object. Rubin Rabinovitz points out: “The corrosiveness in some of these descriptions, along with methods like using of definite articles before characters' names, seems to dehumanize Beckett's writing.”⁸

As we move from Beckett's fiction through to his drama, the Woman becomes situated in a different way. *Waiting for Godot* (1953), Beckett's first published play, is significant in that it omits the Woman entirely. Not only are there no female characters, the Woman scarcely merits a passing mention in the male characters' dialogue. But we must consider that she has not been obliterated entirely. Indeed, the passivity of waiting that defines the male characters' existences is a trait we might associate with the Woman. Certainly, under the grand narrative of patriarchy, the Woman is the passive Other to the assertive male. We might consider, therefore, that the male characters in *Waiting for Godot* embody both masculine and feminine traits, serving to portray a *human* condition rather than an exclusively male one.

So what are the tangible effects of the absence of the Woman on *Waiting for Godot*'s male characters? Certain critics, such as Linda Cagle, have pointed out a prevailing homoeroticism in the absence of women. As Cagle remarks, “The desire for women is replaced by a desire for men.”⁹ It could even be said that the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon somewhat resembles a marriage. Certainly, throughout the play, Vladimir and Estragon seek both emotional and physical comfort from one another, a need that would typically be primarily met by a romantic partner. Another reference to the idea of marriage can be found in the fact that Vladimir and Estragon spend every waking moment together, having done so for an indeterminable amount of time, and seemingly continue to do so for eternity. Unlike a marriage, however, the fact that both halves of the union are male removes the possibility of reproduction. Thus, if we are to consider that man's innate purpose is to ensure the continuation of the human race, we can consider that the absence of the Woman in fact constitutes the very essence of the play in that her absence has facilitated the futility of the characters' existence. In this sense, through deliberately making the Woman absent, Beckett has consolidated the pervasiveness of her real-world presence.

In the later dramas, the image of the Woman shifts again. *Happy Days* (1961), *Not I* (1972), *Rockaby* (1976) and *Footfalls* (1981) thrust the Woman, who had previously often been sidelined, into centre stage. As Rina Kim

7 Brienza, S. 'Clods, Whores and Bitches: Misogyny in Beckett's Early Fiction' from (ed.) Ben-Zvi, L. (1990) *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press) p. 93

8 Rabinovitz, R. 'Stereoscopic or Sterotypic: Characterization in Beckett's Fiction' from (ed.) Ben-Zvi, L. (1990) *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press) p. 107

9 Cagle, A. 'Looking for Love on Samuel Beckett's Stage: Homoeroticism, Sterility and the Postcolonial Condition' from *Atenea* (Vol. 23, No. 1) p. 87

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remarks, in *Happy Days*: “Beckett recuperates the female who was formerly silenced, ridiculed and abjected.”¹⁰ This sudden attention to the previously neglected Other can, perhaps, be read as an attempt by Beckett to rectify the phallogocentrism that had characterised his fiction and early drama. In any case, the centrality of the Woman to the aforementioned plays raises a whole host of new problematics. It could be said that these plays perpetuate a stereotype of the Woman as hysterical, defined by her inability to govern her emotions. Conversely, Beckett's presentation of the Woman in this way could be seen to critique this very stereotype.

In *Happy Days*, Winnie's incessant talking can be seen as a symptom of mania. Indeed, her mental illness is explicitly referred to when she reads from the bottle of pills: “Loss of spirits... lack of keenness...want of appetite...”¹¹ These are, of course, symptoms of depression, symptoms which have apparently been eliminated in Winnie through her consumption of these pills. Beckett's presentation of Winnie as mentally ill could be said to perpetuate the stereotype of the Woman who lacks the strength to overcome her emotions. On the other hand, the way Beckett portrays Winnie can be seen as sympathetic: despite her innate brokenness, she is seemingly able to remain optimistic, demonstrating strength rather than weakness. Rina Kim has pointed out that, in the female characters of Beckett's later drama, their apparent hysteria can be attributed to the fact that these characters are in mourning.¹² The mourning we witness is a result of the fact these women have experienced loss, whether it be loss of a loved one or loss of a former self. Beckett's male characters, by contrast, respond differently to loss. Instead of grieving openly and expressing their emotions freely, they “cast a 'cold eye' on their memories of the lost loved one and repress their emotion, showing symptoms of melancholia.”¹³ It is worth noting, therefore, that while Beckett's female leads perpetuate a stereotype, so do the male leads. Nonetheless, the way in which female emotions are presented on the Beckettian stage is much more extreme and abrasive than the quiet melancholia of the male characters.

While some of Beckett's plays seek to portray a *human* rather than female or male condition, rendering gender somewhat obsolete, this can certainly not be said of *Happy Days*. Winnie and Willie's genders are pivotal to the essence of the play. Winnie's femininity is consolidated in this instance by the male opposition provided by Willie. However, *Happy Days* can, in some ways, be read as subverting the typical gender roles in a relationship between a man and a woman. Shari Benstock has highlighted this, pointing out that “Willie takes up the position the female has traditionally played in Western society – hidden, silent, called upon to attend.”¹⁴ Willie's embodiment of the passivity that has

10 Kim, R. (2010) *Women and Ireland as Beckett's Lost Others* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) p. 120

11 Beckett, S. (1961) 'Happy Days' from *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986) p. 141

12 Kim, R. (2010) *Women and Ireland as Beckett's Lost Others* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) pp. 77-78

13 Kim, R. (2010) *Women and Ireland as Beckett's Lost Others* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) p. 77

14 Benstock, S. 'The Transformational Grammar of Gender in Beckett's Dramas' from (ed.) Ben-Zvi, L. (1990) *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press) p. 180

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subordinated the Woman under patriarchy can even be read as a feminist statement by Beckett. By subordinating Willie, Beckett critiques the notion that it is the Woman who should be subordinated by man. Even the characters' names serve to highlight the importance of gender in *Happy Days*: 'Willie' holds connotations of a phallus, while 'Winnie' asserts the status of the Woman in that she emerges as the *winner* of the play.

Rina Kim draws a comparison between the relationship between Winnie and Willie and the relationships that we witness in Beckett's early fiction: in both cases, the female is linked to the idea of home.¹⁵ We can approach this female association with the idea of home in opposing ways. The idea of home can signify comfort, emotional support, love and security, thus forging a positive connotation with the idea of the Woman. Conversely, Beckett's male characters often seem to demonstrate a yearning to break free from the home, always hoping to preserve a degree of emotional distance from the Woman. In this sense, the Woman is associated with restricting the male characters, binding them to a place that does not allow the male to reach his full potential. In *Happy Days*, the notion that the Woman represents home is exemplified by Winnie's immersion in mud. The fact that she is bound reduces her someone who cannot act, she can only think and speak. Winnie is bound not only to a place but to the past: unable to act, she does not have a future. As long as Willie stays by Winnie's side, the same is true for him. Thus, we can consider that Beckett is making reference to the restrictive nature of domestic life, for which the Woman is held responsible. On the other hand, Winnie's burial can serve to critique patriarchy in that it highlights the fact that Western tradition designates the Woman to the home: it is external forces that have situated her there, and she cannot escape.

Overall, it seems that in *Happy Days*, Beckett deliberately brings issues of gender politics to the forefront of the consciousness of the audience. Hence, we must ask ourselves: are the issues he raises one-dimensional in that Beckett simply portrays the world in the way in which he sees it? Or is Beckett attempting to critique gender disparity under patriarchy? Of course, there is no way of knowing for certain what Beckett's intention was. However, the level of attention to detail we witness in the presentation of the gendered idiosyncrasies of the Woman suggests to me that, by the time of writing *Happy Days*, the Beckettian voice no longer neglects or ridicules the Woman. Rather, it treats her with a level of empathy and sensitivity that was absent in Beckett's fiction and early drama.

The level of hysteria that emanates from the female voice of Winnie in *Happy Days* is further amplified in *Not I's Mouth*, in whom hysteria becomes psychosis. While the mouth, as Mary Bryden notes, is not an gendered organ in itself,¹⁶ the voice of Mouth is undoubtedly female. In performances such as Billie Whitelaw's of 1973, the association of the Mouth with female sexuality becomes particularly evident. The isolated, alienated Mouth's lips can be likened to the

15 Kim, R. (2010) *Women and Ireland as Beckett's Lost Others* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) p. 117

16 Bryden, M. (1993) *Women in Samuel Beckett's Prose and Drama* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press) p. 120

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labia of a vagina. This vagina, with its relentlessly chattering teeth, threatens “the image of castration”¹⁷. Once again, the Woman in Beckett's work has become an image to be feared. The male audience fears Mouth because it confronts them with the absence of a phallus, the absence of that which situates them as the dominant members of society. The disembodiment of Mouth serves to highlight the Otherness of the Woman, as does the repeated and singular use of the feminine third person pronoun. This can be read as damning treatment of the Woman by Beckett: as an Other she will never achieve equal status with the male. It can also be read, of course, as critique of the Woman's status as an Other within patriarchal society. Given the conclusions drawn through analysing *Happy Days*, it seems likely that *Not I* follows the pattern of critique rather than making a simple statement.

Looking across Beckett's body of work in a broader sense, the Woman is often neglected due to the male characters' lack of desire for her. As Martin Esslin notes, “Always it is the man who rejects the love of woman, woman who yearns for the love of man.”¹⁸ Notable in Beckett's work is his narrators' frequent disregard for love, instead we often find references to bodily orifices or mechanical functions. Beckett's male characters do not pursue love, they seek only to satisfy their most basic desires. Perhaps this recurring character trait is indicative of a desire to be rid of the needs that would be traditionally met by the Woman. To many of Beckett's male leads, sexual desire merely presents as an inconvenience that must be dealt with. Watt would rather masturbate, Krapp prefers intermittent visits by prostitutes. The characters' disregard for romantic love seems not to be gender-specific, his female characters appear as disinterested as their male counterparts. Some of his female characters do, however, yearn for a different kind of love. Mouth in *Not I* seeks the love of God, W in *Rockaby* laments the loss of a mother's love. Perhaps Beckett's damaged female leads crave a kind of nurturing that cannot be met by romantic love.

Another point worth noting is that when we seek to criticise Beckett for his negative presentation of female characters, we should consider how the male characters are portrayed comparatively. Many of Beckett's male leads, for instance in *Waiting for Godot*, *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Endgame* (1957), are far from held up as an ideal. They do not embody the values traditionally assigned to the male in patriarchal society. Far from being portrayed as rational,

17 Wilson, A. “Her Lips Moving”: *The Castrated Voice of Not I* from (ed.) Ben-Zvi, L. (1990) *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Illinois: Illinois Books, 1992 ed.) p. 198

18 Esslin, M. 'Patterns of Rejection: Sex and Love in Beckett's Universe' from (ed.) Ben-Zvi, L. (1990) *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press) p. 61

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logical beings, Beckett's characters revel in the absurd. This failure to establish a meaningful existence seems not to be dependent on gender in Beckett, it is an affliction that manifests indiscriminately in the human condition. It is not just the Woman who is presented as damaged; Beckett's male characters are flawed individuals, psychologically and often physically. Perhaps if we are to argue that Beckett is a misogynist it is only fitting to also brand him a misanthrope. However, it would be presumptuous to make such assumptions about an author's personal outlook based on how they present their characters. Overall, it seems fitting to conclude that while Beckett's fiction may be problematic for feminists in that it shamelessly propagates negative stereotypes, as his work progresses it becomes less so. While the dramas certainly could be said to also portray the Woman according to the expectations of patriarchal society, they treat the Woman with a certain sensitivity that could not be detected in Beckett's fiction. The dramas also serve to bring gender issues to the attention of the audience, although this is without a definitive political intent. Indeed, if "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author"¹⁹, then determining how problematic Beckett's work is from a feminist perspective should be a subjective experience. The Woman in Beckett's audience must choose to relate to the Woman on Beckett's stage however she sees fit.

19 Barthes, R. (1967) *'The Death of the Author'* from (ed. & tr.) Heath, S. (1977) *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press) p. 148

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