

To Those Who I Love  
Especially  
My Dear Parents  
And  
Two Brothers

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IN THE NAME OF GOD

**PIONEERING POSTMODERNISM: A STUDY  
OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S DRAMATIC WORKS**

BY

**LALEH ESHAGHZADEH**

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EVALUATED AND APPROVED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE AS:  
EXCELLENT

.....*A. Abjadian*.....

**A. ABJADIAN, Ph.D., PROFESSOR OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE (CHAIRMAN)**

.....*F. Pourgiv*.....

**F. POURGIV, Ph.D., ASSOCIATE  
PROF. OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.**

.....*P. Ghazemi*.....

**P. GHASEMI, Ph.D., ASSISTANT  
PROF. OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.**

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**ABSTRACT**

**PIONEERING POSTMODERNISM:  
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Laleh Eshaghzadeh

This study examines Samuel Beckett's major dramatic works in the light of Postmodernism. The main concern of the discussion concentrates on those aspects and characteristics in Beckett's dramatic works that break from or transcend the traditional norms, conventions and expectations, and lead us toward the Postmodernism's counter-conventional tendencies.

This thesis investigates the role of parody and language in forming a postmodernist atmosphere in Beckett's major plays. Through the use of parody, Beckett creates some self-conscious metatheatrical plays that comment on, challenge, and subvert the very conventionalized doctrines of the theatre. Parody is a destructive instrument in Beckett's hand that provides a proper condition to attack every traditional concept, convention, and boundary from within.

This study also explores the postmodernist function of language in Beckett's dramatic works. The linguistic analysis of Beckett's works proves that Beckett's linguistic techniques are similar, in many respects, to the

typical and remarkable strategies of Postmodernism. Beckett employs some artistic meta-linguistic techniques in order to delogocentre and problematize the reliability and validity of the linguistic system.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### A. Background of Study

Samuel Beckett (1906-89), the prominent composer of the new anti-formal and anti-literary theatre, is the most controversial playwright of the twentieth-century. Beckett turns his back on the classical and modern traditions of drama, but he establishes no tradition acceptable to later dramatists. His non-realistic and non-traditional drama is considered to extend or even break, in many respects, with the modernist techniques and conventions and shows the tendency towards the chaotic region of Postmodernism.

Samuel Beckett is not a typical postmodernist; he is a pioneer. His unique dramatic works bring about a radical change in the orthodox theatrical elements and consequently provide a confusing and unavoidable challenge among the critics in an impossible quest for interpretation. In fact, Beckett occupies a curiously ambiguous position in the analysis of his work among different critics, in a way that one interpretation of his plays opens the way for different interpretations that sometime contradict and sometime justify each other. Much of these ambiguities and difficulties are due to his innovations that embrace all the elements of conventional art. Therefore, many critics reach the conclusion that any claim for interpretation of

Beckett's plays will be an oversimplification of their meanings that disqualify one of Beckett's main premises; that is, since no human activity has any meaning of its own, it is useless to put any human achievement into a system of significance. When Alan-Schneider, one of the American directors of *Waiting for Godot*, asked Beckett what he meant by "Godot", Beckett answered: "If I knew I would have said so in the play." It seems that his answer is a clear warning to those who want to find an exact and definite interpretation for Beckett's plays (Esslin, 1964, 32).

Beckett's delicate drama of man's alienation opens a wide range of interpretations satisfying every one's taste based on his own system of observation of truth. This quality in Beckett's theatre shows the subjective essence of interpretation. Interpretation is not an absolute value, as Susan Sontag declares, it must be evaluated itself, "within a historical view of human consciousness" (50).

As Kennedy (1991) asserts, Beckett has no system of belief, and his novels and plays are all written against any system (10). His complicated theatre is a scene of competition among different genres. Beckett blurs the distinction between literary genres and, as Innes suggests, some of his plays rarely belong to the theatre at all (428) and, as George Wellwarth believes, none of Beckett's works conforms to the orthodox literary form of its genre. That is why they are not easy to understand (37). He is a skillful subverter of convention; subversion is rooted in the depth of his skepticism, in the sense of art and life. Throughout his plays, we can find evidence of his deep conviction in paradoxical concepts and principles that run parallel to each other. All these technical strategies are designed to demonstrate Beckett's idea of literature not as an expression of the higher aspects of the human



existence but as an exploration of man's "impotence and ignorance" in recognition of the "whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artist as something unusable" (Guest 3). Therefore, the comic potentiality of Beckett's work, reflected in the loose structure and the grotesque tone of his plays, springs from his playful criticism of those who believe in grand art and literature.

In contempt of the traditional art and seriousness, Beckett leaves his audience in an obscure fictional and self-conscious world of paradox and uncertainty, in an eternal wandering among man's fundamental and unanswerable questions. His plays introduce to the post-war theatre a philosophical dimension that intrigues and bemuses their audience. Beckett's complication of style and obscurity of philosophy mostly come from the confusion and obscurity of life itself. Most of the time we ask ourselves, what is the meaning of Beckett's theatre? In which genres his plays should be classified: should they be classified as comedy or tragedy? We ignore the fact what Beckett is saying; his theatre can be both. How can we distinguish tragedy from comedy, while both coexist in our life and complete each other? In the *Endgame*, Beckett, through one of his character, cries: "nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (101). At first glance, this paradoxical expression, uttered in a comic and casual tone, seems ridiculous and absurd, but it leads us to a deeper awareness of our environment that sometimes what seems tragic for one person is comic to another.

Beckett's theatre of paradox and irony provides us with what postmodernism identifies as the universal relativism of the system of values, or what Alan Wilde calls "the silent realm of dreadful uncertainty" (17). Consequently, anxiety is exactly what we expect in the dreadful silent

atmosphere of Beckett's theatre. Beckettian characters tolerate this anxiety in the search for an impossible hope for salvation through some endless incommunicable conversation among themselves. However, as Gillman says, it is a usual event in Beckett's theatre that sometimes a single voice, babbling in some confusing, repetitive monologue, tells the chaotic and meaningless story of an alien self to a reluctant listener (236). Talking loses its meaning in Beckett's visionary world, if it has any meaning at all, and becomes a mere mechanical vehicle for filling the unbearable silence of man's consciousness. In such a condition, as Irving Howe argues, "there is no longer a society to write about." People no longer have any opinion, and the teasing confusion of their mind brings about a "genuine problem" (26). What we should do with the incommunicable soundless voice of our inside world, or rather our inside void? This is the question that Beckett never answers.

In all respects, Beckett proves to be ahead of his time. In his skeptical way, he deals with the generally accepted system of thought. He gives a new function to the dramatic concepts and goes beyond the forbidden boundary of different literary genres. In Samuel Beckett's theatre, content and form are no longer separated; each one of these polyphonic elements is formed to compose the idiosyncratic symphony of his philosophy of art and life. Jeffrey Nealon points out that Beckett's stage most sharply separates (if we accept the term "separate") the postmodern from modern. Nealon considers those unique aspects of Beckett's theatre that bring into being an achievement that surpasses the dramatic work of modern playwright and most of the symbolic, expressionist, and in general avant-garde plays of the first half of the twentieth century (526).

## **B. Review of Literature**

There are so many controversial debates among critics over the beginning of postmodernism and the movements and figures that are regarded as pioneers of this multiple huge phenomena. Ihab Hassan in his essay, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism", tries to rediscover the ancestors of postmodernism in order to create in his mind a model of postmodernism. He has proceeded to reveal "the affinities of various authors and different moments with that model" (150). Hassan (1993) concludes: "We have . . . reinvented our ancestors—and always shall. Consequently, 'older' authors can be postmodern, Kafka, Beckett, Borges, Nabokov—while 'younger' authors need not to be so . . ." (150).

Brian Finney (1994) also believes that Beckett shares with Borges the distinction of inaugurating in literature what has come to be called postmodernism. Therefore, regarding Beckett as one of the beginners of postmodernism, we should find those features and characteristics in Beckett's works that move him away from modernism in direction to postmodernism. One element that brings Beckett beyond the restricted territory of modernist literature is the way he uses and, at the same time, subverts the previous models of literature. Anthony Brennan believes that Beckett's use of great literature is as self-consciously deliberate and as ironical as T. S. Eliot's, but it is not shaped by "nostalgia" nor directed by a "conservative temper." Eliot wishes to remind us of the way we have fallen away from the standards of the earlier "aristocratic cultures" of the Western literature. T. S. Eliot offers literary allusions and parodies as touchstones by which we may recognize the "hideous" common place of modern world and

thereby return to the higher spiritual values. Beckett's purpose, Brennan continues, is entirely opposite, because he harshlessly asserts that we can never return to a time in which tragedy and epic flourished, where man, "ennobled by suffering or transfigured by passion," could achieve self-knowledge and a dignity that could awe the audience (224). However, every scene in Beckett evokes a large number of literary associations, although in aim and usage they are quite different from T. S. Eliot's purpose. Brennan says:

In language and tone we are so often reminded of Swift, in landscape and character we uncover echoes of Synge and Yeats, in the juxtaposition of modes we recognize a facility akin to that of Shakespeare, in the atmosphere we are obliged to recall Dante, Milton's Hell, and King Lear. Above all, of course, we are aware of the harshless parodic references to the Bible. (150)

All these references do not lead us, as in Eliot, to a nostalgia for higher spiritual values of the past; rather, a certain amount of playfulness is at work here to create senses of uncertainty and confusion without suggesting any serious meaning and purposes. For example, in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's device of the second visit of the Boy as a messenger that can be signified by the audience as a symbolic reference to Christ's Second Coming, produces only a sort of indeterminacy in the audience as the result of the Boy's claim to be another person. Therefore, as Styan explains, *Waiting for Godot*, "stimulates in its negation of our illusions and in its affirmation of our confident denials" (222). In fact, as Michael Worton believes, Beckett is suspicious of all authority, especially of the authority of the Western tradition. Beckett decorates his works with references to these

very texts in order to make his reader think and speculate, to make them participate in his anxious sway between certainty and uncertainty. Worton concludes: "this abdication of authorial power and this appeal to the creative interaction of readers mark Beckett out as one of the major witness to, our postmodern condition" (15).

Brandbury and Mc Farlane argue that Beckett's art of chance or minimalisation, which later is called "Literature of Silence," has in itself some unique stylistic devices and conceptual system, such as "the idea of absurd creation, random method, parody or self-exhausting fictionality," which later on are more consciously employed as the most significant characteristics of postmodernism (34). Ihab Hassan (1993) also assumes some qualities and tendencies in Beckett's Literature of Silence, among other heterogeneous forces and attitudes that "serve to adumbrate postmodernism, or at least suggest its range of assumptions" (147). Hassan (1993) explains that impulse of annihilation of self, which is part of Beckett's literary tradition of silence, provides the way for apprehension of a sense of indeterminacy that becomes one aspect of the postmodern world. Patricia Waugh (1993) also considers this process of self- unmaking or self-annihilation in Beckett's fictions and plays as the postmodern tendency to open a "gap between the linguistic self and the existential self" (65).

Beckett's characters recognize that there is not something as the real or existential self. Since this artificial agent realizes that it can come into being only in relation to others and in the condition of writing, thus after babbling some irrational and fragmentary words that are enforced to it, this invented voice penetrates into the silent world of nothingness. In Beckett's plays, characters talk, tell stories, and think loudly but all of a sudden,

silence occupies everywhere. Nothing can be heard and the heavy burden of this silence creates a genuine tension. Conversation for Beckett's characters is an imposed activity that works to hide their lack of identity or the sense of nothingness. In fact, this sense of nothingness is the only thing about which Beckett's heroes are certain. Therefore, Cathrine Hughes is right when she says: "Among all the million of words that has been written about Samuel Beckett, I suspect none comes closer to describing his themes and his preoccupation than one of his favorite quotations: 'Nothing is more real than nothing,' words of the Greek philosopher Domocritus" (26).

Michael Worton considers Beckett as one of the "founding fathers of postmodernism" that begins a radical change in the modern tradition and helps the emergence of a new phase in literature. Worton states:

In the context of twentieth-century theatre, Beckett's first plays mark the transition from modernism, with its preoccupation with self-reflection, to postmodernism with its insistence on pastiche, parody and fragmentation. Instead of following the tradition, which demands that a play have an exposition, a climax and a denouement, Beckett's plays have a cyclical structure . . . (2)

William Spanos, a postmodern critic, classifies Samuel Beckett's name, among other names such as Ionesco, Genet, Pinter, Pynchon, and others under a title which he calls "the postmodern absurdists" (79). Spanos remarks that Beckett, among other figures of this group, shakes and subverts the modern firm perception of the universe as a well-made fiction by using an anti-formal and anti-artistic technique and style. He declares that "the postmodern anti-literature of the absurd exists to strip its audience of positivized fugitives of their protective garments of rational explanation

and leave them standing naked and unaccommodated—poor, bare, forked animals—before the encroaching Nothingness” (32).

Martin Esslin (1964) asserts that the *Theatre of the Absurd* is part of the “anti-literary” movements. For instance, this movement tends toward a “radical devaluation” of language, toward a “poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself.” The element of language still in Beckett’s theatre plays an important part in this conception, but what “happens” on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the character (18). Spanos regards some of Beckett’s plays; such as *Play*, *Not I*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp’s Last Tape*, as some absurd postmodern plays that by their “decomposed forms and structures” violate the rigidly causal plot of the well-made work of the humanistic tradition (80). Beckett shows that the impression of continuity and causal sequence of events in every work of art is actually an illusion. Events in Beckett’s theatre never move in a straight line from point to point; instead, they draw a circular plot in some continuous and eternal repetition. Esslin (1968) explains that if conventional, well-made play unrolls before our eyes like “a comic strip” in which the action moves from point A to point B. In Beckett’s poetic-form drama we are witnessing the “unfolding of a static pattern as that of a flower which gradually opens and reveals a structure that has been present from the beginning.” These two kinds of drama have a completely different kind of suspense. In the conventional play we ask: “what is going to happen next? How is it going to end?” In Beckett’s theatre, rather, we ask: “what is happening? What is the nature of the pattern that is unfolding” (61).