

TIME IN BECKETT'S THEATRE

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The article deals with the notion of time and its actualization in plays by Samuel Beckett. It focuses on the distinction between subjective, or psychological, time and objective, or physical, time. Subjective time is the time which is felt and experienced by the characters while objective time is the concrete linear time which brings development of the situation.

Key words: psychological time, physical time, ever repeating circle, repetition, habit, temporal vacuum.

One of the inconsistencies in Beckett's drama which becomes quite simple and clear when his outlook is taken into consideration is the problem of time. In his world there are things which, depending on the angle one is observing them from, are rather "long" or "short". That is why when one critic assumes that Beckett's plays are about the passing of time [5] and another argues that they present the refusal of time to pass [3; 4] both the views are correct. The same can be said about the three contradictory complaints about Beckett's work: that time does not pass at all but stays around us like a continuum; that it passes too slowly and that too much of it passes [9, pp. 8-9].

As time in Beckett's plays has a very special status, takes broad philosophical dimensions and is a part of dramatic subjects the playwright is taking up, our task is to study the notion of time, its nature and actualization in plays by S. Beckett.

In Beckett's plays time cannot be relied on. Conventional measurements of time - years, days, hours are no longer valid or meaningful. The concrete, linear physical time, bringing forth development and change, even though still existent in

Beckett's drama, is foreshadowed by subjective, psychological time, the kind of time which is felt and experienced by the characters. What we face in Beckett's drama is a situation rather than development, some decisive action having possibly taken place earlier. The fact of imminent and ever approaching, even though slowly, death, undermines the meaningfulness of here and now, the present situation, which is one of stasis, immobility and limbo. S. Beckett has reduced the reader's or spectator's confidence in his perception of reality, including time. The plays stress this reduction creating a world of stasis where tiny changes serve only to tantalize the characters, imprisoned in an ever repeating circle. Such a vicious circle, repeated at length, turns exertion into stasis, human existence into an inconsequential nightmare, the passage of time into the effect of timelessness. Time, whose measure is movement and change, has almost come to a stop. But not quite; there is still some rudimentary activity and consequence. This is clearly seen in the structure of the plays where the second act, either present as in "Waiting for Godot", or implied, as in "Endgame", is an intensified repetition of the first. It could be said that the plays illustrate the circular development, in which repetition is the basic factor [9, pp. 8-9]. Sometimes a whole scene is repeated, as in the case of Hamm's move round the room in his wheelchair, where the fact that the movement is called "a round" implies its circular quality. Sometimes a part of the dialogue is repeated:

Hamm: Forgive me. [Pause. Louder.] I said, Forgive me. // Clov: I heard you.
[1, pp. 96, 100]

The dialogue of the characters also stresses the notion of the repetitive quality of the situation as, for instance, when Nell complains: "*why this farce, day after day?*" [1, p. 101], a remark which is later repeated by Clov [1, p. 114], or when Hamm says "*It's the end of the day like any other day, isn't it Clov?*" [1, p. 100] Again, exactly the same phrase "*Then it's a day like any other day*" [1, p.130] is repeated on other occasion. In such a way the repetitive quality of their existence is underlined by the exact sameness of repeated comments about it.

S. Beckett writes: "There is no escape from hours and days. Neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday. There is no escape from yesterday because

yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us. The mood is of no importance. Deformation has taken place. Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediately part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday.” The playwright believes that people are driven along through time on a current of habit-energy, an energy, which, because habitual, is mostly automatic. [9, pp. 10-11].

It must be noticed, however, that even though the basic impression is that of endless recurrence, there is also another kind of movement discernible. In Beckett's world, where all days seem to be one, there is still some progress but a specific one, of steady loss and degradation [9, p. 9].

Beckett's characters are expelled from the stream of successive life events which create the illusion of a flux of time, and stop in one single moment which opens up the static, unceasing, absurd world of absurdity. They stop in time and space, in fact they are deprived of these categories, and stand face to face with their true existence in a world of which the real essence is its infinity. Time takes hold of them and becomes the worst enemy, time which actually does not exist, but crushes through memories and a nonsensical hopeful vision of tomorrow. In these moments time loses its only quality: the delusion of fluency seeming to be the natural life process makes no sense anymore [7, pp. 19-20].

The remote past of the characters has been filled up quickly, but the nearer time comes to the present, the slower and slower it passes. It shatters into smaller and smaller periods, in fact, it is stopping all the time, and the closer it is to the end, to death, the more unattainable it is. Since time is stopping, all the characters are sentenced to never-ending waiting [7, p. 20].

The act of waiting is an essential and characteristic aspect of human existence in Beckett's plays. It is while waiting that we experience the flow of time in its purest, most evident form. The time the heroes feel and experience is the subjective, psychological time. In order not to feel the burden of psychological time, the characters play games, talk, tell stories etc. The characters' confrontation

with awareness of time takes place only when there is a stop in their activities and they realize they are waiting for something.

In his most well known piece of drama, “Waiting for Godot”, Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for something to happen (for the elusive Godot to appear) which does not happen (he never appears). They are trapped in a painful, void-like existence in which suffering is commonplace and death an impossibility [8, p.3]:

Estragon: Why don't we hang ourselves? // Vladimir: With what? // Estragon: You haven't got a bit of rope? // Vladimir: No. // Estragon” then we can't [1, p. 85-86]

The characters live in the world where physical time has lost its meaning and has been replaced by its psychological realization, its impact on the characters. What time it is has significance only when it may be time for something. Recurrently, Hamm asks Clov whether it is time (for his pain-killer, or his story), but it is time no clock can tell. What is alarming is just time itself – that there is always time, that it is never time. Besides, the questions about whether it is time come always when Hamm cannot find anything to occupy himself with, so they are similar to Estragon’s sentence: “*Let's go*” – suddenly when there is nothing left to be done, those characters realize the pressure of psychological time and hope that a lot of physical time has passed [9, pp. 44-45]. They live in a kind of temporal vacuum; between the past and the future, between the past life and the future death. Towards the end of the plays Beckett focuses on endless ending; he uses deceleration - time moves more and more slowly each moment towards an end.

In Beckett’s theatre both perceptual time and verbal time are equally significant. As regards perceptual time, one can easily remark that most of the author’s plays tend to rely in the first place on lighting and on the characters’ appearances to produce the time framework intended. The shift from day time to night time in “Waiting for Godot”, for example, is signaled to the reader through the play on light and darkness: “*The light suddenly fails. In a moment it is night. The moon rises at back, mounts in the sky, stands still, shedding a pale light on the scene.*”[1,

p. 45]

Likewise, in “Happy Days” the “*blazing light*” suggests that the events of the play are occurring in day time. Indeed, Winnie confirms this from the very opening of her verbal recitation: “*Another heavenly day...Begin, Winnie. [Pause.] Begin your day, Winnie*” [1, p.275-276] Obviously, apart from “Waiting for Godot” and “Happy Days” where most of the action takes place in day light, the majority of the other plays’ events occur either in the late evening or at night. Thus, the stage directions to these plays frequently read as follows: “*A late evening in the future*” (“Krapp’s Last Tape”), “*bright night sky. Moon invisible*” (Rough for Theatre II), “*Evening light*” (“Nacht und Trauma”), “*Faint diffuse light*” (A Piece of Monologue), “*Light on table mid-stage*” and “*Rest of stage in darkness*” (“Ohio Impromptu”), etc.

Whereas the perceptual time that concerns the stage events is generally communicated to the reader through spatial signs (lighting and decoration), the perceptual time that concerns the characters is often communicated through their appearances (costume, hairstyle and make-up). Most frequently, in Beckett’s plays the impact of time or aging on the characters is immediately recognizable through their appearances. “*The disordered grey hair*” of Krapp, the “*disheveled grey hair*” of May, the “*white hair*” of Joe, and the old faces of the figures of “Play” that are “*so lost to age and respect*” are all indexical signs pointing to the kind of decay or displacement in time Beckett’s characters are often subjected to as a result of an inexplicable change in their social statuses. They are typically presented as melancholy relics who are brought from a distant past just to suffer the dreadful alienation of the present moment.

This in-between situation constitutes the very essence of the Beckettian character’s ontological predicament and therefore remarkably situates the question of time in its most generic philosophical context. Verbal time in this sense is considered more polysemic and multi-dimensional than perceptual time, which tends to be static and univocal. What perhaps increases the dramatic tension that verbal time creates is the fact that it operates at once and the same time as a dynamic framing device for the characters’ narratives and as a subject of

ontological inquiry whose bewildering and mystical impact is strongly felt on the characters as well as the audience. The dissolution of the traditional metaphysical boundaries that separate the past, the present and the future also serves to intensify the effect of alienation that the displacement in time produces [2, pp. 191-192].

In other instances in Beckett's plays, the notions of past, present and future are preserved; yet it is their usual juxtaposition or opposition that creates the tension and accentuates the characters' existential plights. In the article "Happy Days and Dramatic Convention", R. Lyons comments on the discrepancy between the past and the present in "Happy Days": "Beckett's dramatic scenes usually mark a discrepancy between the past and the present, and we perceive these sites as the manifestation of loss because the characters speak of them in these terms. They lament the depletion of expandable substances, and they describe themselves as vulnerable to the same kind of progressive deterioration as the places they inhabit. The historical placement of then and now is irrelevant; the focus of the representation is on the character's perception of the present as the manifestation of difference from a past that is inaccessible." [6, pp. 86-87]

If the present is simply "the manifestation of difference" from the past, then the situation should not be regarded as problematic, for anyone or anything is likely to undergo change in the course of time. But what makes Winnie's situation dramatic is the fact that the discrepancy between the past and the present leads her to a schizophrenic state, or rather a state of mental disintegration in which she finds it hard to conceptualize her own presence or existence within these temporal coordinates. She is unable to come to terms with her identity as either belonging to the past or to the present:

Winnie: Then... What difficulties here for the mind. [Pause.] To have been always what I am... and so changed from what I was. [Pause.] I am the one, I say the one, then the other. [Pause.] Now the one, then the other. [1, p.300]

Winnie's crisis of identity is a crisis of consciousness of the present moment. She is unable to reconcile the "now" of her present situation with what she thinks herself "is" or "was": she typifies that Sartrean consciousness which can never be conscious of its presentness. As we examine Winnie's comments on time, we

realize her special admiration for the past, an admiration that is combined with much regret for the present and hope for the future. Throughout the play she keeps referring to the “*old things*”, the “*old eyes*” [1, p.278], the “*old style*” [1, p. 278], “*the happy memories*” [1, p. 279], the “*old joke*” [1, p. 282], the “*sweet old style*” [1, p. 283] and the “*old blue eyes*” [1, p. 286]. These are references to the present that are often articulated through the deictic “now”. The past is a mental residue, and it is this residue that Winnie uses and clings to in order to make sense of her being [2, p. 193-195].

In fact, by making the past incomprehensible and mutilated Beckett emphasizes that epistemological gap of consciousness which separates the experience and the perception of the experience [6, p. 99]

Thus, Samuel Beckett’s numerous works are marked by the artist’s specific vision of the world. Two different aspects of time, namely psychological and physical time, can be perceived in Beckett’s works. On the one hand, Beckett’s characters are the victims of the circular quality of subjective, psychological time perceived as stasis, sameness – their lives seem to be an extremely long period of suffering of being, punishment for the eternal sin of being born and damnation. On the other hand, however, time brings also the notion of salvation, objective, physical time moves forward, extremely slowly, as it often seems to the characters, but there is always, however distant, the hope of final rescue, the eagerly awaited conclusion, end of their tortures.

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Ключові слова: психологічний час, фізичний час, постійно повторюване коло, повтор, звичка, темпоральний вакуум.