

G. B. Bernar

BECKETT'S CHARACTERS

With the appearance of "Waiting for Godot", the literary world was shocked by the appearance of new type of drama which created the term 'Theatre of the Absurd', and the whole group of dramas which developed out of this type of theatre is always associated with Samuel Beckett. His contribution to this genre was so great that it allows us to refer to him as the father of the genre. Numerous literary critics focused on S. Beckett's drama and its lingual as well as structural peculiarities. Among them we can single out E. Navratilova [11] and J. Uchman [14] describing the problem of time and its actualization, E. Byczkowska-Page [5] and S. Alvarez [1] analyzing opposition as important structural element, B. Ford [9] and B. Nightingale [12] dwelling upon its language and dialogue, D. Parfitt [13] studying background existential themes and P. Chabert [7] as well as M. Esslin [8] analyzing Beckett's personages. As we can see, little attention is paid to the analysis of S. Beckett's characters. In our article, we are going to analyze personages of Samuel Beckett's works from stylistic and literary points of view taking into consideration main ideas of philosophy of existentialism.

Samuel Beckett is mostly celebrated for reflecting the spirit of his time in his works in terms of the individual's reaction to overwhelming social and political changes of the 20th century. Beckett's works are the productions of an ironic golden age, in which the developing technological and economic power was used as a means of oppression on man, the balance on earth was subverted, two World Wars and many local wars, where all facilities were mobilized for the mass extermination of human beings, took place, religion and philosophy failed to explain the meaning of human life [15, c. 14]. Beckett explores the destructive effects of these circumstances which include the loss of meaning, the feeling of isolation and alienation, the uncertainty of identity and existence. [6]

Throughout his works, Samuel Beckett creates characters that are so similar that it is almost as if they could be interchangeable. In his works "Endgame", "Waiting for Godot", "Krapp's Last Tape" and "Molloy", the characters share many of the same traits. Since Beckett is an author that focuses more on ideas than plot and characters, his characters are often similar and lack specific roles. These predominantly male characters are often unbelievably degenerate in their physicality and overpoweringly pessimistic. Since many of the ideas Beckett conveys in his works are pessimistic, it makes sense that his characters would mirror the feelings he puts in his works. [10, c. 1]

A prominent trait that nearly all of Beckett's main characters possess is that of a poor and degenerate demeanour and lifestyle. In the play "Endgame", both of the two main characters are plagued by some sort of physical suffering. Clov admits his physical condition is diminishing, when Hamm asks, "*How are your eyes?... how are your legs?*", Clov merely replies "*Bad*" [2, c. 116]. Hamm too has a pitifully decrepit appearance, having a horrid

attire of “*a large blood-stained handkerchief over his face ... and a rug over his knees.*” [2, c. 92] In addition to his attire, Hamm spends his days waiting for his daily pain killer unable to get out of his armchair. However, not all characters in Beckett’s works have a degenerate demeanour as a result of physical ailments, but from an undesirable lifestyle. In most productions of “Waiting for Godot”, the two main characters – Vladimir and Estragon – are depicted as impoverished men. In a brief dialogue Estragon admits to Vladimir that he has spent the previous night sleeping in a ditch and that he was beaten by a gang of men the night before [2, c. 4].

Yet another common trait amongst Beckett’s characters is a pessimistic or hopeless outlook on life. This character trait is apparent in the character of Molloy. During his journeying, Molloy often loathes going through the motions of life in his poor and often painful state of health. As a result, Molloy often looks forward to his moment of death, even saying that “*that will be a relief, a welcome relief, when that moment comes*” [3, c. 45]. Characters from other works toy with the hopeless idea of death as well. In “Waiting for Godot”, Vladimir and Estragon try to entertain themselves while they are waiting for Godot, and hanging themselves is one of the first ideas they develop. Indeed, when Vladimir asks what they ought to do, Estragon’s reply is almost immediate: “*What about hanging ourselves... Let’s hang ourselves immediately.*” [2, c. 11] All of these characters that accept death so easily obviously must have a negative outlook on life if they see no reason to keep on living. Some characters, however, express their negative attitude to life in a more direct manner. In “Endgame”, Clov expresses his negative outlook to Hamm after Hamm asks his opinion on what “all” is: “*What all this? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment. Corpsed.*” [2, c. 35] Clov’s vague response to an already vague question would lead audience to believe Clov’s outlook is that all aspects of life are similar to that of a corpse: decaying, decrepit and dead.

According to Descartes, human being is composed of two different substances: body and mind. The body is a part of a mechanical nature, a material substance independent of spirit; and the mind, a pure thinking substance. This distinction of the two qualitative different substances is called subject-object “Cartesian dualism”, and it gave rise to a number of philosophical problems, the essence of which is their mutual connection. Beckett’s characters are such subjective thinking substances surrounded by mechanical material nature; and as the subject-object connection was the most problematic part of Descartes’ concept, it is one of the major motifs Beckett deals with. He uses dramatic symbols to express the barriers and the walls between the worlds “in” and “out” as to demonstrate their incompatibility. His characters are physically isolated from what is happening “outside” and the space they are imprisoned in is their inner subjective world. “A Beckett hero is always in conflict with objects around him... he is divided from the rest of the world, a stranger to his desires and needs. The dichotomy between his own mind and body finds an analogy in the outside world in the dichotomy

between people and objects. ... tension is created between mind and body, on one hand, and people and objects, on the other. ...” [11, c. 20]

Hamm and Clov are closed in a small room separated from the external reality by the walls.

Hamm: Nature has forgotten us.

Clov: There's no more nature. [2, c. 99]

Nell and Nagg, the human fragments, vegetate in two ashbins, their space is reduced ad absurdum, as though they are constantly getting closer to death. In addition, all the characters are immobile. Hamm cannot stand up and walk, and although Clov can, he can even see the world out of the windows, he is unable to escape from the room, unable to open the door and run away. [11, c. 23]

Clov: So you all want me to leave you.

Hamm: Naturally.

Clov: Then I leave you.

Hamm: You can't leave us.

Clov: Then I won't leave you. [2, c.118]

Vladimir and Estragon are in the same situation. They are in an open empty road surrounded by the natural world, but unable to move on.

Estragon: It's not worth while now. [Silence.]

Vladimir: No, it's not worth while now. [Silence.]

Estragon: Well, shall we go?

Vladimir: Yes, let's go. [They do not move.] [2, c. 46-47]

Although they are not limited by any barriers waiting in an open space, surrounded by nature (tree), they are indifferent to this world as it is indifferent to them. Their time passes in a very different way from the world around them [11, c. 24].

Pozzo: What time is it?

Estragon: That depends what time of year it is.

Pozzo: Is it evening? [Silence. Vladimir and Estragon scrutinize the sunset.]

Estragon: It's rising.

Vladimir: Impossible.

Estragon: Perhaps it's the dawn.

Vladimir: Don't be a fool. It's the west over there.

Estragon: How do you know? [2, c. 78]

A similar symbol illustrates the situation of Winnie, who is anchored up to her waist, later up to her neck in the ground in centre of a stage. Though she is not isolated in a small claustrophobic space, as Hamm and Clov are, the physical position to which she is sentenced, forces her into static existence [11, c. 27].

Winnie: I speak of when I was not yet caught – in this way – and had my legs and had the use of my legs, and could seek out a shady place, like you, when I was tired of the sun, or a sunny place, when I was tired of the shade, like you, and they are all empty words. ... [2, c. 291]

The limitation and isolation of man from the world, having its roots in Descartes' dualism, is, at the same time, the foundation of the Sisyphusean feeling of the absurdity as it is described by Camus. Camus sees absurdity in a bilateral relationship between the human being and the world he lives in. Absurdity does not reside in the world itself, or in a human being, but in a tension which is produced by their mutual indifference. Human existence is in its essence completely different from the existence of things outside the human subject. The world of things is impenetrable and because of its impenetrability it is also alien to man [11, c. 30].

One more peculiarity of Beckett's theatre is that most of the plays involve the structure of storytelling. His heroes are storytellers who are most of the time themselves the protagonists, and auditors or listeners who are supposed to consume the tales and animate the dialogues. The agents of the stories always unfold within the context a quest which assumes the shape of journeying; they include either living humans or phantasmagorical figures emerging from the distant world of the dead. The impeding forces in the stories are not necessarily humans; they can be other factors such as old age, physical paralysis, social belonging, mental failure, etc. The destination of the journey is sometimes the remote past, sometimes the underworld of the dead, and sometimes the very depth of the quester's self [4, c. 224].

In "Endgame", for instance, the structure of storytelling controls the whole play. The storyteller is the old paralyzed Hamm. The auditor and interlocutor is his slave/son Clov. The story in "Endgame" revolves around the chronicle of the blind father who is at the same time the protagonist and the commentator. The main instigator or propeller that motivates the act of storytelling is the quest for stability and meaningful existence in a world where values are shaken, human relations loosened and lost, old people abandoned, order metamorphosed into chaos, and people's hearts made sick by routine [4, c. 224]. Hamm says to his attendant: "*Routine one never knows. [Pause.] Last night I saw inside my breast. There was a big sore.*" [2, c. 114] and Clov insists with a remarkable bitterness: "*All life long the same inanities.*" [2, c. 123] In fact, Hamm's obsession with the centre: "*Put me right in the centre!*" [2, c. 110] and Clov's statement: "*I love order. It's my dream*" [2, c. 133] can only signify that the aim of the two characters' journey is the restoration of order and stability by means of a process of storytelling of which both of them are aware.

In "Embers", Henry's stories carry us into the worlds of death and absence. His need to tell stories is as urgent as his need to have someone to listen to him:

Henry: Father! [Pause. Agitated.] Stories, years and years of stories, till the need came on me, for someone to be with me, anyone, stranger, to talk to, imagine he hears me, years of that, and then, now, for someone, who ... knew me, in the old days... [2, c. 200]

The agents in Henry's stories are either wandering old tramps like Bolton and Holloway or relatives to him who have the same nostalgia for the "old

times” and the same passion for storytelling as himself. When Henry asks his wife Ada to keep telling stories she answers by asking him to do the same thing. In fact, the urge to tell and listen to stories seems to inhabit the characters’ psyches and control their minds to a great extent. The obstacles which prevent these agents from pursuing their journeys and fulfilling their quests are generally the loss of the faculty of speech in the case of Ada, the lack of talent or skill in the case of Addie, and old age in the case of Holloway and Bolton [4, c. 226].

To sum up, characters and their behaviour display Beckett’s concern with reflecting the spirit of 20 th century in terms of the anxieties that the men experienced. These anxieties signify the absurdity of life in which an individual feels isolated in an alienated world, uncertain about his existence and meaning of life and hesitates to finish due to the basic human instinct of surviving despite all the pain. Storytelling constitutes the heart of the Beckettian dramatic canon. The stories which usually unfold on the Beckettian stage contain the archetypes, the symbols, the existential ordeals, the psychic troubles, the mental failures, the physical paralyses, and the ritualistic practices which govern the typical Beckettian struggle in general.

References

- 1. Alvarez S. S.** Beckett / Saul Alvarez. – New York : The Viking Press, 2001. – 144 p.
- 2. Beckett S.** Dramatic Works: Volume III / Samuel Beckett. – New York: Grove Press, 2006. – 509 p.
- 3. Beckett S.** Molloy / Samuel Beckett. – New York: Grove Press, 1994 – 256 p.
- 4. Besbes K.** The semiotics of Beckett’s theatre: A semiotic study of the complete dramatic works of Samuel Beckett / Khaled Besbes. – Florida: Universal Publishers, 2007. – 325 p.
- 5. Byczkowska-Page E.** The structure of time-space in Harold Pinter’s drama 1957–1975 / Ewa Byczkowska-Page. – Wrocław : Wyd-wo Uniwersytetu Wroclawskiego, 2003. – 64 p.
- 6. Cavus A. M.** Anxieties of the characters in Samuel Beckett’s “Endgame” from http://onlineessays.com/essays/arts/samuel-becketts-end_game.php.
- 7. Chabert P.** The body in Beckett’s theater / Pierre Chabert // Journal of Beckett Studies. # 8. – Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2002. – P. 23–28.
- 8. Esslin M.** The theatre of the absurd / Martin Esslin. – New York : Anchor Books, 1971. – 344 p.
- 9. Ford B.** The new Pelican guide to English Literature. / Boris Ford. – London : Penguin books, 2005. – V.8. – 620 p.
- 10. Muckley G.** Samuel Beckett. Characters from <http://gmuckley.wordpress.com/characters/>
- 11. Navratilova E.** The absurdity of Samuel Beckett / Eva Navratilova. – Olomouc, Czech Republic : Palacky University, 2005. – 45 p.
- 12. Nightingale B.** A reader’s guide to 50 modern British plays / Benedict Nightingale. – London : Heinemann Educational Books, 2002. – 479 p.
- 13. Parfitt D.** There is no escape from the hours and the days from <http://www.samuel-beckett.net/ParfittGoingsOn.html>
- 14. Uchman J.** The problem of time in the plays of S. Beckett / Jadwiga Uchman. – Lodz :

Wyd-wo Uniwersytetu Lodzkiego, 2007. – 157 p. **15. Yüksel A. Samuel Beckett / A. Yüksel. – Istanbul: Dünya Yayıncılık, 2006. – 131 p.**

Бернар Г. Б. Беккетівські персонажі

У роботі розглянуто тип персонажів, характерний для п'єс та романів Семюеля Беккета. Проаналізовано Беккетівських героїв, враховуючи основні ідеї філософії екзистенціалізму. На прикладі творів досліджено, що персонажам С. Беккета, які є переважно чоловічої статі, притаманні фізичні або розумові вади, песимізм, конфлікт із зовнішнім світом та певне відчуження, ізольованість. Дійова особа є завжди оповідачем. У центрі її оповіді завжди є пошук чогось, зображений у вигляді подорожі. Часто персонажі намагаються відшукати та зрозуміти далеке минуле, світ мерців або зануритись та досягнути своє «я».

Ключові слова: драма абсурду, персонаж, песимізм, конфлікт, оповідач.

Бернар Г. Б. Персонажи С. Беккета

В статье рассматривается тип персонажа, характерный для пьес и романов Сэмюеля Беккета. Проанализировано героев Беккета, принимая во внимание основные идеи философии экзистенциализма. На примере произведений исследовано, что персонажам Беккета, которые, как правило, мужского пола, присущие физические или умственные недостатки, пессимизм, конфликт с внешним миром и некоторое отчуждение, изолированность. Действующее лицо всегда рассказчик. В центре его рассказа всегда есть поиск чего-либо, изображенный в виде путешествия. Часто персонажи пытаются найти и понять далекое прошлое, мир мертвецов либо окунуться и понять свое «я».

Ключевые слова: драма абсурда, персонаж, пессимизм, конфликт, рассказчик.

Bernar G. B. Beckett's Characters

In the article a type of personages typical of plays and novels by Samuel Beckett is examined. Beckett's characters are analyzed referring to main ideas of philosophy of existentialism. On the example of works it is investigated that the author uses mainly male characters with physical or mental disabilities, pessimistic outlook on life, having conflict with the surrounding world and being alienated, isolated. A Beckettian hero is always a storyteller. His story revolves round a quest in the shape of journeying. Often characters try to find and understand the remote past, the underworld of the dead or comprehend their "self".

Key words: Drama of the Absurd, character, pessimism, conflict, storyteller.