



Beckett's Distinguished Style Of Fiction Among Contemporary Writers

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Abstract

The profound growth of shift in writing style of a literary piece was not exclusive to drama in contemporary era. Fiction also faced with an evolutionary notion of writing in modern period. The modernist writer in a revolution against nineteenth-century style and content found its landmark of struggle from Joyce's realistic tales and in an evolutionary trend reached to Samuel Beckett's absurd fiction. At present study we aim at exploring such notion and the way Beckett chronologically inherited his style from earlier authors. Hence it would be helpful if we initiate from the tendency of a shift from romanticism and natural style of fiction writing and conclude in Beckett's particular style of writing.

Keywords: Fiction, Absurdity, Realist, Symbolist Novel, Self

Introduction

In the historical evolution of modern fiction, the romantic, realistic and naturalistic movements of nineteenth century made a path for the self-analytical presentation. Hence the modern practitioners felt their need to a new style of writing after the First World War. The new style gradually found its place by a radical shift in aesthetic and cultural characteristics in the creative fiction. The new fiction grew with its own tactics of structure and design; it became markedly more 'poetic', in the sense that it became more concerned with the texture and form.

The practitioners of fiction found that the ordered, stable and inherently meaningful world view of the nineteenth century could not accord with the futility and anarchy of the contemporary history. The tendency in the nineteenth century fiction of defining characters by means of historical and social contexts, then, was no longer valid. In contrast, subtler techniques had to be developed to capture the irrational, unpredictable, and darker side of human nature. Such technique was the 'stream of consciousness' device in which a character's thoughts are shown as they presumably occur, not in full sentences or in any logical sequence, but according to an associative process of the conscious or unconscious of the individual's mind. This device was used extensively by such authors as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce in England, and by William Faulkner in America.

Traditionally, the novel had always its leanings toward realism, empirical detailing, and the elements of form involved in the realistic illusion. The writer of such fiction was supposed to be completely self-aware and familiar enough to all details of his heroes' adventures



presenting in a sequential mode. In the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, the novelist was allowed to have his tyranny over a reader, to dictate what a reader should grasp from his writing. Instead, in modern creative fiction, if the author is creator of his work and if he can draw attention to a specific fictional nature in his fiction, it is only through the evolution of adequate tactics for facing the problems. Instead of creating some characters from the mind of the narrator, the modern author prefers to involve the reader in the process of finding the character within the narration. One of the greatest themes of the modernist novel is thus the theme of the art of the novel itself: a theme which, by forcing the reader to pass beyond the reported contents of the novel, has its focus mostly to create a dominantly symbolist character.

Anti-Traditional Approach in Contemporary Fiction Practitioners

Along with an attempt to pursue the modern themes in fiction, the conventional way of telling a story from beginning to end is realised to be an unnecessary and sometimes disturbing element coming from the traditional notions of plot and time. Nineteenth century saw time as comprising three distinct stages - past, present and future - through which an orderly progression of events evolves. Such a view of time produced a literature that focused on the major events in the life of a character and showed a rational, cause-effect relationship between those events and the character's development. Departing from such traditional assumptions and conventional formulations, modern authors produced an entirely different type of literature. For a modern novelist, theoretically, starting a story at the beginning became irrelevant, even misleading, because, in a sense, there was no real beginning. Freed from the tyranny of time, modern writers felt justified in dislocating normal narrative chronology through flashbacks, repetitions, or even by omitting transitions entirely. This dislocation could reflect the reality more truly than does an Aristotelian narrative which is based on an artificial structure of beginning, middle, and end.

Among different practitioners of the new style, the most well-known starting point of modern fiction is Henry James (1843-1916). One of his contributions to modern fiction was the creation of imaginative and imaginary worlds in which one could feel the relationship between the author and the character through the action. In his novel, it sometimes seems that the characters have read the novel in which they exist. In his preface to *The Awkward Age* (1899), Henry James remarks: "we are shut up wholly to cross-relations all within the action itself, no part of which is related to anything but some other part- save of course by the relation of the total to life." (James 1899: 397) Unlike the traditional way of creating the heroes, James' characters belong less to a world of imitation than to a process of acting their own creation. They are part of technical plot; and as in many modern novels, they seem to assert against their author. They have their own right of freedom in action to a profound psychological depth.



James is a master of character portrayal and his style of 'stream of consciousness' method is known well in his fictional writing. The subject of his novels deals mostly with the inner thoughts and emotions of the character rather than any external events. This method is remarkably tangible in his *The Portrait of A Lady* (1881) wherein Isabel must consider her choices in the famous fireside scene.

Following James, modern fiction experienced a new phase by Joseph Conrad (1857-1924). Conrad is the other novelists of modernism who is recognized as a master prose stylist in modern fiction. His narrative style, his anti-heroic characters, the complex structure of his novels and the difficult themes he chose to weave his narratives around mark him out as a benchmark in the evolution of modern drama. Conrad's novels and short stories reflect aspects of a world-wide empire while plumbing the depths of the human soul.

As a modern novelist, he took the novel as an art-form. In his complex and obscure novels such as *Lord Jim* (1900) and *The Secrete Agent* (1907), he assumes that his reader will be sophisticated enough to take them for granted. He believes that the reader expects the hard labour of the artist, to have an admiration of a creator's fiction. *Under Western Eyes* (1911), for example, has an extremely twisted narratorial procedure. The material of this novel embodies a kind of struggle in logic while the book is narrated from two quite different points of view. By various material of narration in this novel, Conrad increases the complexity, irrationality and mystery of the problem. In some other novels like *Heart of the Darkness* (1902), his narrative pattern dramatizes the difficulty of establishing the material and ordering its significance. For instance, in this novel the author develops his modern themes of personal power, individual responsibility, and social justice. His book has all the conventions of an adventure task - mystery, exotic setting, escape, suspense and unexpected attack- in Conrad's style. In its development, the modern fiction passed through Conrad's pursuit of 'difficult subject' and his considerable skill of narration which draws the reader's attention remarkably.

After Conrad, modern fiction found a different style by James Joyce's contribution of symbolist novel. Joyce (1882-1941) made one of the most influential contributions among the modern novelists. His *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1920) are at the centre of artist's symbolist experience in modern fiction. The theme of a portrayed artist is a recurrent theme in the modernist novel. This method is one of the means by which the aesthetic self-consciousness of the artist develops through the great classics of modernism. Joyce's art is to create a work which possesses a shape of a spirit. The artist is like a voyager into an unknown art, with full of difficulties in the form and complexities in the perspectives of the writing itself. These modern characteristics of writing are all pursuable in Joyce's *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*. The idea of reincarnating the Wily Odysseus and of telescoping the hero's ten year wonderings into the twenty hours of Dublin summer day is characteristic of the ironic literary self-consciousness of modernism. *Ulysses* is a novel that has aspiration



toward an unknown art and by destructing the art as well as creating it. This novel invokes a world of lost or broken form. Parody and pastiche, the use of plurality of language, demonstrates the lack of plot and discourse in the contemporary world of modernism.

In evolutionary trend of modern fiction, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is also a modern novelist who uses themes that connect reality with the spiritual realm. Her contribution is to demonstrate a theme of exploring what belongs out of the material world. Woolf's main concern in the novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1923) seems to be the inner workings of Mrs. Dalloway, her thought processes, and how she engages with her surroundings. In a truly modern style of going against the conventional fiction of plot deriving, Woolf's art in her fiction is to create a work that absorbs the reader's attention without utilizing a central plot. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf chooses to explore the narrative possibilities of bringing several characters through one single day in time. This narrative technique is applied well in a text that mainly focuses on a solitary character's world view. Its organizational structure challenges Woolf to create some characters that are deep enough to be realistic while dealing with only one day of their lives. Woolf is also recognized as an author who utilizes the profound images in her modern novels, the images that challenges the reader to explore the possibilities of what lies beyond the material. The imagery of death is quite widespread in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and these images are mainly viewed through Clarissa, as she makes sense of her life. The image of the spiritual transcending death through the means of ghosts is another powerful image within the text, and interlocks with the image of death.

Samuel Beckett's Notion of Absurd

In the profound and peculiar style of modern novelists like James, Conrad, Joyce and Woolf, Samuel Beckett's fiction refers to, in a parallel way to his drama, the absurd situation of human beings in the world. Beckett was among many of the writers of Post-World War II and experienced the chaotic situation of Modernism. For Beckett, Modernism was a means with a power to intensify the chaos of human situation, to deepen the alienation of man and the concealment of his real identity. In an attempt to display the chaotic satiation of man in his alienation, his fiction deals with a way to express the reality of his situation in modernism and an inability to attain his identity. It is about both the writing of the novel and the search of a character wherein by the end of the novel we still do not know what has happened. Like a mystery story, Beckett's novel is a demonstration of a search for the self, for truth, for a modern idiom, but unfortunately without arriving there. His serious concern with language introduces new elements into the novel such as the detective story and the self-reflexive narrative .

In a way to accomplish his fiction, distinguished from other authors, Beckett attempts to introduce his literature of disappointments. Rather than plot, there is storytelling without progression; instead of characterization, there is lack of character depth; there is no specific time or place. We often wonder where we are, whether months or days or hours have passed.



Instead of a linear narrative, or progression from birth to death, there is a narrative that always diverts and digresses. Instead of a strong literary language, there is a bare language in the sentences.

Since Beckett's work seeks a different location for the human psyche than that of the realist fictions of Austen, Balzac, George Eliot and Tolstoy, he tried to find his way in literary life away from the realist writing. He was always pursuing a way to protest against the prescriptive and limiting nature of 'realistic' conventions in his fiction. The major change he could bring in the tradition of prose fiction was to break down the reliable notions of character, location, culture and narrative convention. As a result of this change, Beckett could achieve the feat of composing novels which disintegrate into silence as they unfold.

Beckett's main concerns as a writer are involved with the futility of expression, the problems of writing itself, the power of language and the death of the author. The novel *Molloy* (1951) is the result of all Beckett's anxiety to write a novel. It is also a parody of the novel itself. The style of it itself suggests all that. The novel is a promise of what literature could be in chaos. To demonstrate his literature in such chaos, he extends his works to drama and fiction with having an acute awareness of the absurdity of human existence –man's desperate search for meaning, his individual isolation, the gulf between one's desires and the language in which such desires find expression.

An Art of Impoverishment

As an art of failure, his works refer to the author's lifelong suspicious about the Self. According to this view, Beckett's thought, as portrayed in his works, is characterized by a continual idea of mortality and Self losing, as he asserts: "we change, we lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!" (*Endgame* 16) He believes that man's existence in this world has no meaning. Both limitations and compulsions of birth and death involved in human life and the universe which imposes such limitations is absurd and meaningless in the extreme.

In his way of creating an art distinguished from traditional writing, Beckett faces with the basic notions of Existentialism such as the anguish of 'being' and the anguish of human condition in its particularity. These notions give rise to a lamentation for man who "wastes and pines." (*Waiting for Godot* 43) Man's existence is an inexplicable and irrational surd which reduces the human condition to a permanent state of absolute helplessness. The limitations of the human condition make the human aspirations impossible of getting fulfilled. In the light of this concept of 'impossibility' one can understand most of Beckett's concepts like meaninglessness of man's existence, the despair, the failure of language and communication, the failure of human understanding to know the ultimate truths, the failure of love, the failure to discover one's own identity of the present self with that of the past in the flux of time, the failure to solve the problem of death and perishing. The search for man's own identity- the finding of the true nature of the self and the raising of the problem of identity, and finally the



confrontation of the audiences with the existence of their own problematical and mysterious condition are well known as the theme of Beckett's plays, novels, prose sketches, and poems.

Beckett's works also explore and probe the notions of alienation and freedom, a clearing away of excrescences to make a placeless place where increasingly primal uncertainties may be known. He finds himself facing with some questions like: Why is there all imperfection in life and why is man always stuck in his miserable condition? The frequent impossibility of Self-discovery in searching leads him to a profound rejection of whatever the world presents in life. In part owing to these qualities, his work appears to stay on the Absurdist movements with which he was associated.

Beckett was the first author of the Absurd to win an international fame. His works have been translated into over twenty languages. In 1969 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and he continued to write until his death in 1989, but the task grew more and more difficult with each work until, in the end, he said that each word seemed to him an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness. His career as a writer can be roughly divided into three periods: his early works, up until the end of World War II in 1945; his middle period, stretching from 1945 until the early 1960s, during the period which he wrote what are probably his most well-known works; and his late period, from the early 1960s until his death in 1989, during which his works tended to become shorter and shorter and his style more and more minimalist.

In 1929, Beckett published his first work, a critical essay entitled *Dante...Bruno. Vico. Joyce*. The essay defends Joyce's work and method. It was also during this period that his first short story, *Assumption*, was published. The next year he won a small literary prize with his hastily composed poem *Whoroscope*, which draws from a biography of René Descartes. In 1932, he wrote his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, but after many rejections from publishers he decided to abandon it. Despite his inability to get it published, however, the novel did serve as a source for many of his early poems, as well as for his first full-length book, the 1933 short-story collection *More Pricks than Kicks*. Beckett also published a number of essays and reviews, including "Recent Irish Poetry" (in *The Bookman*, August 1934) and "Humanistic Quietism", a review of his friend Thomas MacGreevy's *Poems* (in *The Dublin Magazine*, July–September 1934). These two reviews focused on the work of MacGreevy, Brian Coffey, Denis Devlin and Blanaid Salkeld. In 1935—the year that Beckett successfully published a book of his poetry, *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates*—he was also working on his novel *Murphy*.

Beckett's earliest works are generally considered to have been strongly under the influence of the work of his friend James Joyce. As a result of following his friend's works, his writings in this period, in places, are quite obscure. The opening phrases of the short-story collection *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934) can serve as an example of this style:



It was morning and Belacqua was stuck in the first of the canti in the moon. He was so bogged that he could move neither backward nor forward. Blissful Beatrice was there, Dante also, and she explained the spots on the moon to him. She showed him in the first place where he was at fault, then she put up her own explanation. She had it from God, therefore he could rely on its being accurate in every particular.

(*More Pricks than Kicks* 9)

The passage is also widespread with references to Dante, which can confuse those readers who are not familiar with the work. At the same time the seeds of Beckett's later work can be seen here: the physical inactivity of the character Belacqua; the character's engagement in his own head and thoughts; the somewhat irreverent comedy of the final sentence. Similar elements are present in his first published novel, *Murphy* (1938), which also rather explores the themes of insanity in the irrational world, which would be recurrent elements in his later works. The opening sentence of the novel also hints at the pessimistic undertones and black humour that animate many of his works: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new". (*Murphy* 5) After being educated in Ireland Beckett settled in Paris and produced his fiction and drama in English and French, translating himself out of the language in which he first wrote each text. Having begun literary life as a modernist and supporter of the reputations of Proust and Joyce, he found his own voice later and continued to develop this voice until his death.

Beckett's next novel, *Watt* (1945), which was written during World War II, has also the common theme of his earlier works. This novel, at certain points, explores human movement as if it were a mathematical variation, signifies his later preoccupation in both his novels and dramatic works. It was also during this early period that he first began to write creatively in the French language. In the late 1930s, he wrote a number of short poems in that language. In contrast to the density of his English poems of the same period, collected in *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates*, Beckett, seemingly, was in the process of simplifying his style somewhat. Such a change of style is also evidenced in *Watt*.

Beckett's early period of writing is mostly known as a period of writing some fictions like *More Pricks than Kicks*, *Murphy* and *Watt*, each one sets out a new rule as it goes along. Far from the influence of Joyce, each of his fictions has a peculiar subject and form in itself. Each fiction, with a narrating voice, creates a world out of language, a world with full of silence before, between and after the mass of words.

In a world deprived of meaning Beckett was a linguistic artist, a wordsmith who struggled to express this meaninglessness with words. Throughout his long writing life he conducted a



war on words and this struggle led him to innovations in form and language. He went on with his attempt but nothing satisfied him for long. His fictions are the progressive record of his fight to control language for representing the silence.

Silence features large in his earliest fiction: *Assumption*, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, *More Pricks than Kicks*, and *A Case in a Thousand*. In *Assumption* the male protagonist is locked in a self-imposed silence. After he has met a woman who seduces him, a lifetime's suppressed scream imprisons her aside and leads finally to his death. The language Beckett employs in these early fictions is characterized to serve no fictional function. He attempts to destabilize the representational nature of words by the use of figurative language. He also strove to break through the illusion of order, of correspondence between signifier and signified that linguistic expressions are made up of. *Murphy* offers a vision of creation as a huge verbal joke. Its hero, Murphy, reverses all traditional uses of language: "In the beginning was the pun" (*Murphy* 12), he utters. Beckett employs puns, paradox, allusion, repetition and inversion, all in an attempt to disorder the predictable semantic effects of language. Instead of reproducing conceivable verbal exchanges, much of the dialogue in his novels show the negating patterns of words as Murphy's exchange with Celia, the heroine-prostitute, illustrate this fact:

"How can I care what you do?"

"I am what I do," said Celia.

"No," said Murphy. "You do what you are..."

(*Murphy* 60)

In the same way in *Watt*, words turn out to be delusory semantic succour for the hero who "had turned, little by little, a disturbance into words, he had made a pillow of old words, for his head." (*Watt* 51) Even in *More Pricks than Kicks* language appears to have the upper hand in Beckett's fight to undermine its semantic properties.

Subsequent to the stories (*More Pricks than Kicks*), poems (*Echo's Bones*), and two novels (*Murphy* and *Watt*), Beckett gradually entered in the second period of his writing by getting free of his linguistic richness. After World War II, when he turned to the French language for his writing, the chaotic situation of the post-war brought a literally limited setting to his works. In such a situation he preferred to make his art about "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express." (Beckett 1965: 5)

Conclusion



In this period Beckett's outstanding achievements show up in the form of three novels *Molloy* (1951), *Malone meurt* (1951; *Malone Dies*) and *L'innommable* (1953; *The Unnamable*). In these novels, which are known as a 'trilogy', the reader can trace the development of Beckett's mature style and themes. The novels become more and more stripped down. *Molloy*, for instance, retains many of the characteristics of a conventional novel like time, place, movement and plot. In *Malone Dies*, however, movement and plot are given up, though there is still some indication of place and the passage of time. Finally, in *The Unnamable*, all sense of place and time is ignored, and the essential theme seems to be the conflict between the forces of the voice to continue speaking that is as a sign to continue existing. In the last novel of the trilogy, there is a strong urge to find silence. Despite the apparently pessimistic view prevailed in his trilogy, the will to survive for the sake of a sacred goal seems to win out in the end. The famous final phrase of *The Unnamable* is most immediate witness for us here: "I can't go on, I'll go on". (*The Unnamable* 179)

Seen thematically, each successive novel appears to repeat the pattern established in its former work. There is an apparent progression from the physical journeys in *Molloy*, to *Malone's* written account of the wanderings of fictional substitutes, to the *Unnamable's* wholly verbal twisty where to 'go on' means to go on voicing his mental search for an escape from his world of words. Subsequent to his trilogy, Beckett struggled for many years to produce a sustained work of prose, a struggle evidenced by the brief 'stories' later collected as *Texts for Nothing*. In the late 1950s, however, he managed to create one of his most radical prose works, *Comment c'est* (1961; *How It Is*). This work relates the adventures of an unnamed narrator crawling through the mud whilst dragging a sack of canned food. Since the trilogy his prose work is marked by the omission of various elements of conventional sentence structure, including conjunctions and punctuation. What remains is only an accumulation of verbal fragments. The most important instance of this tendency is *How It Is*, in which he abandons all punctuation and shows us the linearity of language and its semantic content. Written in French in 1960, this work reflects his conviction at this time that the modern artist could no longer try to reduce the chaos of existence. Instead he looked for a new form by accepting the chaos, while remaining separate from it.

In *How It Is* Beckett offers us a savage image of what he sees as the hellish life on earth and his use of a three-part structure, as in the trilogy, reflects the repetitive circularity of human life. Following this work, it would be almost another decade before he produced a work of non-dramatic prose, and indeed *How It Is* is generally considered to mark the end of his middle period as a writer.

Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, Beckett's works exhibited an increasing tendency towards compactness which sometimes is described as minimalist. The extreme example of this, among his dramatic works, is the 1969 piece *Breath*, which lasts for only 35



seconds and has no characters. In the dramas of the late period, his characters—already few in number in the earlier plays—are shaped down to essential elements.

After a long layoff, Beckett's works experienced a revival during this period some as short as six words long. He tried to translate his work from its original into the other languages in this period. After two decades during which his fictional and dramatic works had become progressively more minimalist, he surprised everyone with a renewed burst of creativity, publishing three short novella length texts in the early 1980s. These three works of fiction written in his late seventies constitute a second trilogy. The first of these, *Company*, was written in English between 1977 and 1979, later translated into French, and then published in English in 1980 after Beckett revised it in the light of the French text.

The second part of the trilogy *Ill Seen Ill Said* was first written in French as *Mal vu mal dit*. Both French and English editions were first published in 1981. *Worstward Ho*, the last novella of trilogy, was first written in English and published in 1983. These three powerful and highly concentrated texts pursue Beckett's lifelong fight with language to new and quite extraordinary lengths. Whereas the first trilogy was more closely integrated with its references back to characters and events in the earlier two parts, these three texts are connected by their progressive reduction of the components that constitute a normal sentence. In *Company* a "voice comes to one in the dark." (*Company* 7) In *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the voice is "Ill said." (*Ill Seen Ill Said* 4) By *Worstward Ho* the voice is "missaid." (*Worstward Ho* 2) One only has to pay attention to the titles of these three texts to see the progressive decline that each of them describes.

In *Company* Beckett's principal concern is with the enigma of the first person pronoun. *Ill Seen Ill Said* is a work of imagination in which imagination is seen constantly at work. What we witness in the second trilogy is the gradual replacement of indirect rendering of speech by direct act of narration. The images that provide the subject of narration in these texts are most prolific in *Company*.

The absence of a named speaker in *Worstward Ho* naturally directs the reader's attention to the role of language in this text. It incorporates the paradoxical nature of Beckett's last major attempt to force language to express the inexpressible, non linguistic void. His objective is to use language to negate its signifying properties; something that he knows is ultimately unattainable. Beckett's final work, the 1988 poem *What is the Word*, was written in bed in the nursing home where he spent the last days of his life.



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