

## Beckett's Cruel Lover

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### Abstract

Samuel Beckett wrote *Eh Joe* for television production in 1965. He wrote this bleak play, for his friend the actor Jack MacGowran. The first production of the play was in Germany at Suddenscher Rundfunk Stuttgart on 13 April 1966, and was directed by Samuel Beckett. In both his novels and plays, Beckett paid special attention to human relationships. In his major plays cruelty is the pivot theme. In *Eh Joe*, Joe a solitary figure is trying to secure himself in his room in an attempt to run away from Voice who keeps reminding him of his cruelty to the girl who loves him. But the past comes to him in a form of Woman's Voice to remind him of his selfishness and cruelty. Voice focuses on Joe's cruelty in his relationships and continues hammering him till the end of the play. In less than fifteen minutes Beckett successfully portrays Joe's selfishness, indifference and cruelty to women who love him.

**Keywords:** Beckett, Beckettians, cruelty, The Absurd, Voice, love, existence, sex

### 1. Introduction

Samuel Barclay Beckett was born at Cooldrinach in Foxrock, County Dublin, Ireland, on April 13, 1906 in a protestant, middle class home. His father was a quantity surveyor and his mother worked as a nurse. Though quite energetic, he enjoyed, even as a small boy, the quiet of solitude. He often stayed in bed until late in the afternoon and hated long conversations. He studied at Earlsfort House in Dublin, and then at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen (Where Oscar Wild attended). At 17 he attended Trinity College where he studied French and Italian as his subjects. Beckett moved to Paris in 1926 and met James Joyce. He soon appreciated the older writer so much that at the age of twenty three he wrote an essay entitled Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce. In that essay Beckett defended Joyce's magnum opus to the public. In 1927 he won his first literary prize for his poem "Whorescope." in which he concentrated on the philosopher Descartes meditating on the subject of Time and the transiency of human life. Beckett traveled through France, England and Germany before settling down permanently in Paris in 1937. When the war broke out in 1939 and the Germans occupied parts of France, Beckett neither joined Joyce in Switzerland nor did he stay in Ireland where he was at that time. Instead he left Ireland and returned to France. In Beckett's own words "I was in Ireland when the war broke out in 1939 and I then returned to France. I preferred France in war to Ireland in peace." (Gravers & Federman, 1979, p. 147) All of Beckett's major works were written in French. He believed that French forced him to be more disciplined and wiser and to use the language more fluently. Mark Nixon says that "Beckett wrote mostly in French during these years, and then faced the challenge of translating (or rather transmitting) the recalcitrant results into English" (Nixon, 2012, p.10). His last major work in prose is *Stirrings Still*, which he wrote in 1986. In the same year; Beckett began to suffer from emphysema. After his first hospitalization, he wrote in bed his final work the poem *What is the Word*. His French wife Suzanne died on 17 July 1989, and Beckett followed her on 22 December of the same year.

### 2. From Novel to Theater of the Absurd

Samuel Beckett has written in almost all genres: poetry, fiction and drama. He is a critic, an essayist, a short story-writer and also a translator. His fiction did not receive much critical attention till the first stage performance of his play *Waiting for Godot* (5 Jan.1953), Which marks not only the end of Beckett's first phase of novel writing, but also the beginning of the Beckettian drama. Beckett turned to drama as source of relaxation as he comments: "I turned to writing plays to relieve myself of the awful depression the prose led me into...Life at that time was too demanding, too terrible, and I thought theatre would be diversion" (Bair, p. 306).

Beckett's plays posit an absurd world which has been reached through the development of his fictional characters. It appears as if his fictional characters (Watt, Murphy, Molloy) have failed to establish an identity for themselves, diverting their quest to the stage in a hope to accommodate themselves in a world that defies their intelligence. Beckett is a humanist writer, his main concern is Man. All his characters are in physical sense, outsiders, cut off from the world of social activity. Andrew Gibson thinks that Beckett wrote of humanism, "he repeatedly stripped his characters of the attributes held most to distinguish man as a lord of creation. His works resound with indictments of humanist self-aggrandizement. He sees humanism as rooted in a will to be pleased with oneself." (Gibson, 2010, p. 11)

Beckett's dramatic personae take over from their fictional counterparts and the stage is prepared for Estragon, Krapp and Joe. Beckett himself states that: "*Godot's* origins lie in *Murphy*, and the origins of *Not I* are certainly to be found in *The Unnamable*." (Pilling, 1967, p. 68) The Beckettian characters are quiescent people who no longer challenge The Absurd. Their main concern is living a life which is chaotic, absurd and ungoverned by any kind of principle or system. With the exception of Winnie (the main character of *Happy Days*) almost all the Beckettian characters are worn out with age and malaise. They are immobilized and without any dynamic quality or helpful memory. They are waiting for a slow but certain extinction as a means of escape from their worthless present. The physical decaying and suffering force Joe, Krapp, Hamm and others to turn increasingly to their past and to recall their relationships. "Use your head, can't you? Use your head, you are on earth, there's no cure for that". (Beckett, 1986, p. 123) That is Hamm's crushing answer to agony and suffering. Ronan McDonlad thinks that "the physical disabilities and mutilations of the characters mean that they cannot move freely, but the 'something' that is taking its course suggests they are also trapped in deterministic or mechanical system." (McDonlad, 2009, p. 10)

Almost all Beckett's characters are in a physical sense outsiders who are cut off from real social relations. Henry in *Embers* expresses the same theme of isolation by focusing on the increasing limitation of body's mobility and the heart's need to have a sort of relationship:

Stories, stories, years of stories, till the need came on me, for someone, to be with me, anyone, a stranger, to talk to, imagine he hears me, years of that, and then, now, for someone who...knew me, in the old days, any one, to be with me, imagine he hears me, what I am, now. (Beckett, 1986, p. 255)

### 3. *Eh Joe*

*Eh Joe* is Samuel Beckett's first television play which represents his first venture into this medium. It was first published by Faber and Faber in 1966 and televised by the B.B.C in the same year. Joe is the only character visible on the TV screen. His features look like his predecessors Hamm, Krapp and others. He is in his late fifties and he had abandoned all types of human relations. At present he is caught between his miserable present of loneliness and his desire for sexual relations. After the death of the girl who loved him, Joe deserted any relationships with women. Now he is torn between love with commitment or sexual and casual relations.

*Eh Joe* continues in part, the theme of *Play* in which a man deserted a couple of girls who had reposed their faith in his assertion of love. It begins like a silent movie much similar to the last part of Beckett's *Film*. This relentless bleak play, which was written for television production presents Joe as a solitary figure who confined himself in his room. We first watch Joe checking his shabby room to ensure that he is alone; then he sits on his bed listening intently to the disembodied Voice as the camera slowly moves into close-up of the face.

Joe is alone, in decline and has lost all human contact. He uses his loneliness as a cloak for his cowardly retreat from mankind ensuing from his inability to face the consequence of his guilt and neglect. But Joe fails, for his punitive attempts to escape his guilt brings him face to face with his own conscience. Joe like his predecessor Henry of *Embers*, is subject to hectoring voices from inside of his head, voices that admonish and reproach him for his cruelty and callousness towards all those who gave him unstinted love. The play begins with five actions in mime before the first word 'Joe' comes in Woman's Voice:

1. Joe seen from behind sitting on edge of bed, intent pose, getting up going to window, opening window, looking out, closing window, drawing curtain, standing intent.
2. Joe do. (= from behind) going from window to door, opening door, looking out, closing door, locking door, drawing hanging before door, standing intent.
3. Joe do. going from door to cupboard, opening cupboard, looking in, closing cupboard, locking cupboard, drawing hanging before cupboard, standing intent.
4. Jo do. going from cupboard to bed, kneeling down, looking under bed, getting up, sitting down on edge of bed as when discovered, beginning to relax.

5. Jo seen from front sitting on edge of bed, relaxed, eyes closed. Hold, then dolly slowly in to close-up of face. First word of text stops this movement. (Beckett, 1986, p. 361)

Joe moves around his room in an attempt to avoid others or perhaps to convince himself that he is undetected. The Women's Voice addresses Joe ten times with intermittent pauses. Four of these statements refer to Joe's present loneliness, while the other six portray his past involvement with women. The voice of the woman breaks the silence with direct call to Joe and disturbs his attempts to hide in his shelter. He was about to relax after closing everything in the room when the WOMAN'S VOICE disturbs his loneliness:

WOMAN'S VOICE: Joe...

[Eyes open, resumption of intentness]

Joe...

[Full intentness.]

Thought of everything?...Forgotten nothing? You're all right now, eh...No one can see you now...No one can get at you now...Why don't you put out that light? (Beckett, 1986, p. 361)

Voice, of the unseen woman, agitates Joe's withdrawal from humanity and spoils his attempts to take a refuge in his room. Hence, Voice keeps hammering at Joe at crucial moments when he is about to forget his past and withdraw into his own refuge. Voice becomes instrumental to Joe's self reproach imbuing him with a sense of blame and guilt. Voice reminds Joe of one of his irreducible memories, which Joe could neither stifle nor obliterate:

There was love for you...The best's to come, you said...Bundling her into her Avoca sack...Ticket in your pocket for the first morning flight...You've had her, haven't you? Of course he has...She went young...No more old lip from her. (Beckett, 1986, p. 365)

The central event, which Voice revives, is of a lost love. Voice talks of a girl who committed suicide after having lost her head over Joe. Voice tells the story of how a girl he once had loved, after two unsuccessful attempts, killed her in a particular place by the sea:

[Voice drops to whisper, almost inaudible except words in italics.]

All right...You've had the best...Now *imagine*...Before she goes...Face on a stone...Taking Joe with her...Light gone...*'Joe Joe'*...No sound...To the *stones*...Say it you now, no one'll hear you...Say *'Joe'* it parts the *lips*...*Imagine the hands*...The *solitaire*...Against a *stone*...Imagine the *eyes*...Spiritlight...Month of June. (Beckett, 1986, p. 366)

Vivian Mercier blames women who had love affairs with Joe for their uncontrolled emotions. He comments: "The women make the first advances and will, if necessary, initiate sexual relation. Soon, however, she begins to make emotional demands that the man is unable or unwilling to fulfill. If she is lucky, the physical desire that she has deliberately aroused in him will continue, but even this is all too likely to fade and disappear." (Mercier, 1979, p. 188)

Perhaps Joe's withdrawal from women contacts does not render him an exile. It is clear that his withdrawal into solitariness will not solve his predicament with women. Joe tries to shield himself from Voice who keeps hammering him for his cruelty and carelessness. Joe uses his cell as an escape path in which he avoids both his cruelty and his carelessness. He seems unable to face the consequences of his relationships with women. Vivian Mercier thinks that Joe is "the most cruel to his women of all Beckett's dramatic personae. He drives them to suicide, and then by an effort of will that he calls 'mental thuggee' forgets them" (Mercier, 1979, p. 196). The opening address of Voice mocks at Joe for his lack of courage to retire to bed even after his successful efforts to lock himself inside his room. Voice continues its mocking tone through the fourth, sixth and ninth sets of addresses portraying the failure of his state of loneliness. In his attempts to shut himself from the external world he finds himself face to face with his self questioning. In this context, Sidney Homan believes that "Joe is Everyman, seeing and hearing his true self, the very self we would deny in that external world where other objects and other voices can divert us from perception" (Homan, 1984, p. 149). Joe tries to manage unmanageable flee from the outside world of human relationships and cruel actions. He longs for lonely place far removed from his past affairs with women, but he fails when Voice ignites the ashes of his past. Joe seeks inner peace by removing himself away from the society of the normal world of Man-Woman relationship and sealing himself within his room.

Joe continues the themes of other Beckettian personae in plays like *Play*, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Embers*. Nevertheless, Joe is different from Krapp and Henry, who had also given up the woman they had been involved

with. Joe, now old and alone, is engulfed within his own guilty conscience and seeks peace in solitude. Thus, Joe's confinement can be seen as an attempt toward escapism. Joe has no room for the concept of true love which involves mutual response of the two lovers. But he longs for sex without any kind of commitment. In fact, Joe's confinement in his room is combined to several actions to ensure his loneliness "Jo do. going from cupboard bed, kneeling down, looking under bed, getting up, sitting down on the edge of the bed, relaxed, eyes closed." (Beckett, 1986, p. 363) In his late fifties Joe seeks self satisfaction sex. His rituals have been closely related to his need for loneliness.

In Beckett's mind-body synthesis, voice (soul) and figure (body) are one. The voice speaks though a stilled body; after the opening mime the physical activity is no longer frantic or meaningless. More than one actor and spectator has suggested that Joe is masturbating—hence his interest in shutting out our prying eyes. Telling him to "squeeze away" on the bed, the woman taunts him with this expression of physical self-love: "very fair health for a man in your years...Just that lump in your bubo. The suggestion here is that the actor is masturbating off-camera since only his face is shown" (Homan, 1984, p. 149)

Joe's tendency toward masochism is evident in his self-denial of any kind of closeness with other people. His lacking of affection and harshness is a bitter response to human existence that is subject to metaphysical cruelty and arbitrariness. Perhaps Joe is only concerned with his individual pain regarding it as something very secret and personal. Joe remains silent throughout the play and Voice captures these precise moments, which portray Joe's carelessness regarding the girl who committed suicide, and uses it to torture Joe in his room. The agony of escapism, the painful memories of the past and the suffering that entails make his refuge meaningless.

The Voice, obviously from Joe's head, is an echo of the voice of the girl he loved and deserted. Or perhaps it's his inner self, and therefore its stilling is not possible. In fact Joe has told the Woman that though the stilling of memory should be the best offer for him actually "it's the worst".

At certain moments Voice crosses her limits when it hypothesizes about Joe's next life that when he would have attained the "Silence of the grave without maggots" Joe would have confronted his Lord who will start by accusing him of fooling his soul:

...Wait till He starts talking to you...when you're done with yourself...All your dead dead...Sitting there in your foul old wrapper...Just that lump in your bubo...Very fair health for a man of your years...Just lump your bubo...Silence of the grave without the maggots...To crown your labours...Till one night 'Thou fool thy soul'...Put your thugs on that...Eh Joe? Ever think of that? When He starts in on you...When you're done with yourself...If you ever are. (Beckett, 1986, p. 364)

As the play approaches its end, the Woman's Voice returns back to the same theme of suicide and reminds Joe of his neglect of the young girl. However, the Voice level drops to whisper, almost inaudible except words in italics, as stated by Beckett's directions. At this particular stage of the play Joe is seen desperately trying to hear the Woman's Voice. With the Woman's Voice about to die Joe discovers that his attempts to withdraw from love were a total failure. His attempts to shield himself and hide in his room brought him face to face with his self, a self compounded of cruelty, selfishness and callousness that had never responded to love at any time in his life. Woman's Voice bridges the gap between Joe's past and the present and he will be left to discover the full horror of his cruelty and misery. Perhaps Joe's failure in his attempt to find an exile is related to his deep feeling of guilt and shame towards his past.

#### 4. Conclusion

The feeling of guilt and loneliness are problems often repeated in Beckett's works. "To be is to be guilty," says one of Beckett's protagonists in *Texts for Nothing*. But, Beckett's understanding of the absurdity of human life shows that the human existence is choice less and suffering is a fundamental attribute of existence. Man is flung into this world and he has to cope with it: "Use your head, can't you, use your head, you're on earth, there's not cure for that" is Hamm's weapon which he used to face his suffering and agony in *Endgame*. Joe seems to understand the inevitability of suffering and he knows that using his head, as Hamm advises, has taken him to a dead end. Thus, Joe is symbol of Man who tries to hide and shrink when he comes face to face with absurdity of human relations. Joe's problem is Man's problem where human existence is pathetic because it is inseparable from pain and misery and lacking coherence.

Joe's withdrawal looks like Murphy's, Beckett's first length fictional hero, who seeks to escape to what he terms as the big blooming buzzing confusion of the external world and takes refuge in his own room. It seems that both Joe and Murphy are located in the same area. Murphy finds that his freedom is linked to the darkness of his room; "Here he was not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom." (Beckett, *Murphy*, 1983, p. 66) Joe has

understood the negative aspect of human relationships, its commitment, its insipidity, its deadness and boredom. The only way to challenge it is to withdraw from routine monotony of mundane existence and to plunge into loneliness far away from any sort of commitment. Joe remains alone, all the others either dead or have disappeared but he keeps to summon them in his head. They have no other existence. It seems that Joe wants to be alone and unseen in order to have the feeling that he is alive. The flame of love in him is now reduced into embers and he does not have the will to fan it in to a bright and intense conflagration.

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