

Time and Narrative in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*

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Abstract

The account of narrative temporality has a propensity to give impetus towards an absurd complexity. Cosmological and phenomenological collision of time gives rise to this absurdity. Philosophical tradition views the cosmological time as a succession of 'nows.' On the other hand, phenomenological time is seen as an embedded structure. The concept of time as succession is rendered inoperable by the knowledge of time as co-existence. This paper intends to examine time and narration in Samuel Beckett's plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* which always play a vital role in the turns and twists of the plot structure, characterization, environment, stage, and, above all, on the audience. The treatment and treatise of time from an ontological and epistemological viewpoint, which is seen through the scope of Narrative Theory, will certainly add more insight to the subject, and hence will explore beyond the mere philosophical/metaphysical boundaries of 'time' to the more practical aspects of it in Beckett's plays.

Keywords: Time, narrative, memory, consciousness, temporal structure

Throughout his writing career of forty-five years, Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) had been concerned with epistemological and ontological implications of time consciousness. Thomas Postlewait asserts that time is the heavy medium through which the body and the mind move. Most of Beckett's characters move through it with difficulty, hence they crawl and their immobility increases (Postlewait). But what is absent in his discussion are the features of time and the narrative process that

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makes the Beckettian characters immobile. Though Postlewait's discussion encompasses the stream of consciousness in the present (tense and moment) as self-descriptive language, it never clarifies the ontological, linguistic, and phenomenological characteristics of time and narrative that drives the narration of Beckett as a dramatist. It is to be noted that, though in his article Postlewait mentioned the narrative techniques of Beckett, a large and vivid discussion on relation to time with the narrative technique remains in the shadow. As we know, narrative development is considered on three axes, viz., form (visual representation), story (emotional involvement), and history (authenticated cultural content). The conceptualization of the form, which contains the visual aspects of a narration, will remain in the dark if the correlation among the abstract contents, such as time, space, and motion, is not clearly discussed. While reading any play by Beckett, the mind of the reader takes Beckett as a narrator who tells the story and describes the play including its settings, the stage, the appearance of the characters, the dialogues, and so on. If we closely examine the narrative features of Beckett, we will find that his form of narration goes from minimum utterances to extended story in time and space. His narration encapsulates shifting tenses in order to exhibit the mind's struggle to determine the location of the matter, manner, means, and function of being. If Beckett's characters are seen through the narrative lens, we find them chained in time and space. Hence, there is enough scope to analyze a play using the Narrative Theory.

The concept of time and its experience plays a significant role in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and *Endgame* (1957). Along with some philosophical interpretations, time has some linguistic features that enable the author to create absence through a withdrawal process. This withdrawal process works through two stages. The first stage makes an environment for the author to create the absence of presence and the second stage results in the presence of absence. This Beckettian imitation of absence is created by the depiction of the contrary witnesses which has been possible for the inherent linguistic and phenomenological features of time. If we take Vladimir's repeated utterance, "Nothing to be done" in *Waiting for Godot*, for example, we will see that the word "nothing" is opposed by the presence of "to be" (Beckett 43). If we want to experience "nothing," the essence of nothingness must be present. It means that the presence of absence must be present to feel the absence. The narration of Beckett develops a spectacular *reduction ad absurdum* of his phenomenological paradigm – because, for Beckett, the chief object existing in consciousness is the lack of object. So when Vladimir says, "Nothing to be done" (43), it concludes that the foremost object of consciousness is nothing. As a result, the consciousness can never be distinguished from a void. This is a narrative style where an evacuation of an object of consciousness from the consciousness occurs. In Beckett's play, the basic metaphors by which we conceptualize time have both immediate and long-term consequences on the

fundamental cognitive domain of experience. Lera Boroditsky rightly said, “How people conceptualize time appears to depend on how the languages they speak tend to talk about time, the current linguistic context and also on the particular metaphors being used in the moment” (333). The notion of measuring time renders us as being measured by time which is clear in Hamm and Clov’s speculation in *Endgame*:

HAMM: (gloomily) Then it’s a day like any other day.

CLOV: As long as it lasts.

(Pause)

All lifelong the same inanities. (Beckett 30)

The conflict between disintegrating body and the questioning mind get caught inexplicably in time while we slowly move toward death. The perception of motion and time entangles and influences the audience and the characters of a play from different aspects of language and cognition. The result of this predicament is the detemporalizing of time, wherein time continues but without the succession of before and after which is its defining property. The outcome of this continuation of time without succession is Haam’s and Clov’s inability to dig out the meaning of “yesterday” in *Endgame*:

HAMM: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!

CLOV: (violently) That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don’t mean anything anymore, teach me others. Or let me be silent. (Beckett 29)

The narrative in Beckett’s play also stands upon the language of the society. Each and every human being in the society is encapsulated with language and the linguistic feature of time which gives him/her the reality of existence as Jeffrey Nealon puts it:

In postmodern society, it is precisely in the social bond of language and language games that we can legitimate our own society....Postmoderns look to themselves and their communicational interaction in society to legitimate their existence. (525)

If we dive deep into the play *Waiting for Godot*, we will discover that Vladimir and Estragon are trapped by their “modernist nostalgia” to legitimize the existence of Godot. Beckett leads us to know that the perceptual dilemma of leaving or “moving on” of the two tramps is not created by any invisible omniscient power, rather it is created by the Derridean inefficiency of meaning in a language.

Moreover, it is interesting to find out that Beckett’s negative emotion toward time, though it directly influences cognitive reflexes, has been exposed by Pozzo’s agonized answer to Vladimir’s question in *Waiting for Godot*:

VLADMIMIR: Dumb! Since when?

POZZO: (suddenly furious) Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! (Beckett 146)

Beckett's characters are thrown out of the stream of successive life events and this occurrence creates a kind of illusion of a flux of time and stops the characters in a single moment, opening up the static and infinite world of absurdity. The characters are enchained to this flux of time. Though Hamm in *Endgame* says, "Enough, it's time it ended, in shelter, too," it really never ends (Beckett 3). It is a cyclical process. Even this cyclical process hinders Hamm to dive back into his memory. He forgets what he has done just five minutes earlier. The structural narration of the play made the characters stop in time and space where time holds them up in an invisible prison. When time loses its only property – the delusion of fluidity, life seems to make no sense at all when Clov asserts, "Then one day suddenly it ends, it changes, I don't understand, it dies, or it's me, I don't understand it either" (Beckett 52). When the remote past of the characters is filled and the immediate past becomes the present, time flows slower and slower. Time breaks into smaller fragments and blocks the sense of perceiving time and makes all characters prisoners of a never-ending path. Hamm's speculation of time proves the enchained experience of the futile waiting of human beings:

HAMM: Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of ...

(...)

... that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life.

(...)

Ah let's get it over!

(...)

What? Neither gone nor dead? (Beckett 45)

Beckett, in his writing, showed us that we are disturbed by awareness of the fluidity of our memory. Our older memory can suddenly rise while the immediate can sink into total oblivion. The self becomes an unstable entity if we become what we remember. It is because the advancement of the sense of time keeps pulling us forward. Memory, which is the absolute creation of time, presents what is physically absent. By representing particular experiences, the Beckettian narrator tries to show us the primary structures or laws of the mind which is manipulated by how a narrator narrates the time.

Another important aspect that must be discussed is whether the playwright's authorial oblivion is not compensated for the macro structure of the plays that leave the position of a unifying authorial or narrative consciousness vacant by the use of time and its conception. By using paradoxes and indeterminacies, the narrative structure of Beckett denies closure in the sense that it structurally vacates the center of the text. Now, an important point comes forth which is related to the denial

of the closure. Richard Walsh says that incompleteness is a problem for fictional/imaginary worlds theory because the text of a fiction/drama cannot be expected to fully specify a world, nor even provide a sufficient basis for a comprehensive inferential process. An obvious thing about a dramatic narrative is that it presents us with a kind of model of time while building a relationship between a text and its reading. The experience of reading accords with a tensed conception of time which is subjective. This tensed conception of time only gives the existence to the present, blocking the view of time in which past and present co-exist simultaneously. For this reason, while reading we experience the past as a quasi-present, and not because there is any ontological difference between fiction and life. Every written text has a dormant future which waits to be actualized by the reading. So we can say that the written text works as a block view of time which is not offered to us in lived experience.

In conclusion, it appears that Beckettian narration dwindles between two poles: the void created from evacuation and the complex subjectivity attributed to that vacated center. This narration is further complicated by another factor – the non-stop effort of vacating consciousness to re-establish contact with its void content. Beckettian narration shows us a struggle between the need to evacuate and need to accumulate, the necessity of awareness and the necessity of oblivion. The narrative mind of Beckett reminds us about the two famous lines of T. S. Eliot from “The Hollow Men”:

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion (Eliot 79)

Thus is the time and its narrative which makes us “paralysed” and our “gestures” are nothing but motionless.

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