

Samuel Beckett's Texts as Dreams: A Study of Trauma Through Literature

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Abstract:

The works of Samuel Beckett have imparted a new identity and significance to drama and fiction, through a series of concrete stage images underlying the theme of endurance and hope. In a way it communicates and offers the author's most intimate vision of the human situation, addressing the mysteries of existence itself. The close analysis of his language and co-text has always been a topic of tremendous scrutiny amongst critics. One of the distinctive attempts to explore his work is the study of his unconscious mind. The notion that human psychology can appreciate and interpret literature at different levels owes a great deal to the Freudian theories. It emphasises the role of unconscious in the creativity of the writer that is crafted out of repressed wishes and fantasies. The paper has attempted to uncover the hidden meanings of a dream by studying the dramas of Samuel Beckett and are considered as his dream work.

Keywords: Trauma and Literature, Interpretation of Dreams, Psychoanalytical Criticism

INTRODUCTION

'Realism' as a literary technique in theatre emerged in the last half of the nineteenth century owing to the political reforms and technological advances during the era. This movement emphasized on presenting the problems of everyday life through realistic settings. Its motto was to display direct human behaviour and their socio-economic conflict. However, in 1961, the publication of Martin Esslin's book 'The Theatre of the Absurd' created an avant-garde genre in the realm of drama which revised all the definitions of a conventional drama. Samuel Beckett's stagecraft is one of the finest examples of minimalism where not only words have shrunk but also the characters have taken up grotesque forms. He has brought revolutionary changes in his subsequent plays employing bare minimum tools for presenting the impressions of torment and chaos. The genre of his work is significantly seen in the backdrop of pain and suffering which he experienced in different phases of his life. Biographical evidences projected him as a sentimental child who later fuelled his writings with gloom and despair. It is evident that his formative periods played a significant role in shaping his persona which influenced his writing. His childhood in war-torn Dublin, his formative in Belfast and Paris during the years of Depression (where many young writers committed suicides), his workplace, Germany entangled in Hitler's brutal policies, his resistance to war and hiding in Rouselleni, all predisposed the themes and images of his plays. In one of the letters to McGreevy he shared that "he had been unhappy before years past, dating this unhappiness from the end of his schooldays, the time he left Portora and went to Trinity." It clarifies that Beckett was an irked soul, difficult to communicate with and refusing compromise and reconciliation. Apparently, his psyche evolved in such a way that his creative output complies with the conflicts and suppressed desires of his

early life.

The ‘Interpretations of Dreams’ in Psychoanalytic Theory

Sigmund Freud started with self-analysis in 1897 and his clinical research led him to write a book on dreams. His study was based on his analysis of his neurotic and hysterical patients whom he encouraged to talk freely. These patients in the process often referred to their dreams which elucidated their childhood and repressed experiences. From this he deduced that even sleeping dreams were synonymous to daydreams intending wish fulfilment. Most importantly these dreams ensure a good uninterrupted sleep and certify the dreamer of his wish fulfilment which otherwise remain repressed. He postulated that dreams are not supernatural revelations but can help us to understand the psychic process of an individual if interpreted unbiased. As a psychoanalyst he was interested in uncovering the hidden meanings of a dream by studying the dream work. According to him, in ‘Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism’ a literary text is similar to dreams, which stores the secret unconscious desires of the writer. Thus, as dreams often contain impressive past experiences, a literary text is also a faithful reproduction of real scenes through modified repetitions. He also added that literary text also contains such puzzled ideas and circumstances which can be studied carefully by examining the words and relating them to a past event. He suggested that the literary text often projects the author’s intentions and feelings in a disguised form which the author in real life does not intend to expose. Also, the author is unaware of these feelings and he unconsciously surfaces the unconscious matter of his mind through his works. It is a critic’s occupation to delve into this unconscious warehouse to introspect the defragmented events without any premeditation or criticism.

Beckett’s Text as ‘Dreams’

Beckett’s life can be traced as a journey that highlighted the unpleasant, painful and disgruntling experiences which helped to develop certain complexes. His vague personality is the outcome of the results of such experiences which kept haunting him throughout his life. His biographical data convey that he was fixed in a restrained environment in every stage of his life struggling hard to escape from it. It also led to neurosis which he tried to cure painstakingly but in vain. In the process which almost took his lifetime he sketched characters similar to him trying to bear “the painful and absurd incomprehensibility of life”. According to Freud such a text is often author’s personal traumatic experience and intimate feelings expressed through his/her theatrical images.

As Beckett was a man suffering from irresolvable conflicts and thus was always vulnerable to mental challenges. His experience of violence in childhood and also of World War gave rise to his irrational behaviour. Consciously, though as an adult he tried to repress these symptoms, they still remained in his unconscious mind. According to Freudian analysis, these suppressed thoughts find a vent through the author’s plays is brought to public light. Thus, like dreams, Beckett’s plays are in a highly veiled form, yet display his fractured journey of life, through repetitive phrases and obscure dialogues. Beckett’s text, like dreams, unconsciously present instances and people who do not directly complain or straight forwardly grumble but indulge in incoherent speeches and are placed in inconceivable settings. Therefore, his plays are absurd as Arnold Hinchliffe explains, “It [absurd drama] challenges the audience to make sense of non-sense, to face the situation consciously rather than feel it vaguely and perceive, with laughter, the fundamental absurdity”.

The Concept of Displacement in Beckett's Plays

Dreams are mainly made up of 'manifest content' where the dreamer often displaces his own image with any other image, to avoid embarrassment. As the dreamer or author in this case, doesn't want to disclose the real people, therefore displaces it with another person or image. Beckett's play 'Rockaby' when analysed as a dream unwraps many possibilities of such a displacement. In the play the protagonist is a woman, 'W' in chair with her recorded voice. Her eyes are constantly searching for 'another like herself' or 'another living soul'. It shows the woman's constant longing for a person like her, who will follow her instructions and who will be obedient to her. Beckett, was undoubtedly talking about his mother, whom he called 'W' in the play. He had not directly used his mother as the protagonist but had 'displaced' it with the figure of a prematurely old woman. His mother was highly demanding in nature and wished Samuel to be like her. Here word 'another' is certainly used for Beckett himself.

Two important connotations used in the play 'That Time' are 'Child' and 'you'. Both of them are displacement of Beckett, and unveil many autobiographical facts in a distorted form. Certainly, in the text he is indirectly referred to as 'Child' and the text also reveals the real-life situations and relationships in Beckett's life. Thus, Beckett as an author never wanted to reveal his past, but he did it unconsciously through his plays. Similarly, the pronoun, 'she' illustrates his estranged wife, Suzanne. During this time their relationship had become superficial, and they disagreed with each other on almost every aspect. Beckett suggested that their courtship was like an 'axel tree' which retained togetherness in spite of disparity. He recalls: "No sight of the face or any other part never turned to her nor she to you always parallel like an axel tree never turned to each other just blurs on the fringes of the field no touching or anything of that nature always space between".

The concept of Condensation Beckett's Dramas

Condensation is the process by which various ideas are condensed and presented through one image. Beckett's play is primarily plays of thoughts and ideas presented in a most concise form. He never explicitly spoke of the incidences and people in his life but displayed through a landscape of ideas and images. Beckett in his play 'That Time' has repeated the word 'ruin', however the meaning of the word does not every time connote the same idea. The word 'ruin' suggests the mental disruption that Beckett suffered as a child. No matter all his life he tried to maintain a genial relationship with his mother, it was however already ruined since his childhood. Her consistent ragging and troublesome nature were the cause of his mental stress which ruined his childhood. Beckett instead of expressing his angst, preferred to repress it with long silences. This also led to Beckett's introvert and ever distressing personality, which damaged his communicative competence. This 'ruin' resurfaced in his play 'That Time' where the protagonist is invariably reminded of its effects.

Another feeling that Beckett shared in 'That Time' was "Eyes closed all still no sign of life" which conveys the death of his father. Biographical references clearly imply that Beckett shared an intense emotional bonding with his father. The death of his father in 1930s left Beckett a disoriented and almost a lifeless soul. Another perception of the idea "Eyes closed all still no sign of life" is of the rejections he received from his publishers. His unconventional works were rudely abandoned by the publishers and for many years Beckett lead a hopeless and helpless life. One more important connotation attached to the same idea is of his experience of war. The World War had killed one of his dearest friends from his Trinity days, Alfred Peron. This friendship began when Peron joined Trinity and lasted until his death in 1945. Beckett had a sentimental setback at the death of his friend and he generously engaged Peron's wife Mania in his

work and included her works in post war 'Transition'. He once again experienced an excruciating pain that amplified his inert personality. The same feeling of loneliness haunted him and he was left with "no sign of life".

Beckett had himself accepted that school days were his last days of happiness. In school he had a very close friendship with a younger boy named 'The Skivvy' and thus the end of this association was the beginning of his feeling of loneliness. The phrase "No sight of man, no sound" is the reminiscence of the termination of this relationship.

Symbolism in Beckett's plays

Freud's theory of dream interpretation states that a dream is basically in its manifest form which is arranged in narrative structure and is represented by symbols. However, one of the methods to convert the manifest content into the latent content is through Symbolism. For example, in 'That Time' Beckett shared memory of a 'dead rat' which keeps bothering and drifting on the body. It says: "Drifting on or caught in the dead rat it looked like came on you from behind and went drifting on till you could see it no more". In dream interpretation a 'dead rat' suggests the uncontrolled emotions of fear in one's life. Biographical details reveal that Beckett, throughout his life, was haunted by the feeling of loneliness and angst which aroused his panic attacks. Thus, trepidation had become his nature that augmented his introvert personality. After his father's death he suffered from insomnia and "almost every night now he woke in fear, his heart pounding at a terrible rate and his panic increasing as he stared into the darkness". Cronin 198. Nevertheless, the symbol of a 'drowned rat' suggests an end of some relationship. 'That Time' came in 1974, and it was the time when the relationship with his wife Suzanne was at stake. He agreed, in spite of their long companionship, their relationship was almost over. Thus, image of a 'drowned rat' signifies the deteriorating relationship between them. He mentioned in 'That Time': "The towpath alone on the towpath with the ghosts of the mules the drowned rat or bird or whatever it was floating off into the sunset". The 'rat' image also signifies sickness, illness and disease, which was an inseparable feature of Beckett's life. His persistent physical ailments annoyed him as he was suffering from "rheumatism, pleurisy, impetigo, hammer toes and septic cysts".

Another interesting symbol used in this play is that of a 'worm'. Beckett's personality was indeed worm-like, as in his youth he was a sluggish person. As his mother disapproved of his idleness and lethargy and he wrote on 21 November to his friend MacGreevy: Nothing more than the fact of my presence is required to exasperate my mother in the end- oh the usual old exasperation- so that she can scarcely keep her hands off me. Because I don't go out for long walks, nor work anymore in the garden nor do odd jobs about the house or earn money nor groom the dogs nor prove myself useful in any of the services that they recognise. But she did not give up and to pull him out of this lassitude she insisted he should engage French classes for neighbouring young ladies, which he refused, instead started doing odd jobs to earn his pocket money. He recollects his image as: 'That time curled up worm in slime when they lugged you out and wiped you off and straightened you up'. An image of 'worm' in a text implies weakness and negativity. It is a sign of inferiority complex and low self-esteem. It is not appalling that Beckett unconsciously used this symbol for himself, as he was inflicted with highly pessimistic attitude towards life. However, 'worm' also stands for sexual desires which one rejects as low and thus suppresses it. It is Interesting to know that Beckett preferred walking in mountains rather than masturbating. Therefore, though Beckett never disclosed his real being; the dream analysis of Freud had indeed exposed the underlying content of his temperament.

Conclusion

It has proved that Beckett's literary text is his unconscious efforts to conceal his repressed thoughts. This text when analysed through the Freud's theory of 'Interpretation of Dreams' have brought the facts back to the level of consciousness. It also confirmed that his childhood conflicts played a major motivating force to express his repressed feelings, though in distorted form. Thus, the latent content of his highly enigmatic works has been successfully revealed through the process of Displacement, Condensation and Symbolism. These processes have artfully brought the forgotten experiences in the light of consciousness, thereby emancipating the author out of dreadful thoughts through the process of catharsis.

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