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## Myth, Absurdity, and Human Conditioning in Beckett's Act Without Words

In *Act Without Words* (1956), Samuel Beckett strips the human condition to its barest level of existence, the “last extremity of meat – or bones” (Connor 181). The play is no longer than four pages, but, in those few pages, Beckett confronts humanity’s unceasing struggle with its disturbingly absurd, thrown condition. It mimes the thwarted attempts of a nameless character, an everyman, hurled onto the stage, the desert, to obtain a carafe of water, hovering just out of reach. Tools and objects descend to help his objective, each one confiscated once he figures out their more beneficial use: suicide. Ultimately, the failed efforts result in his refusal to participate or respond to the world; the useless passion of all human endeavors.

Beckett’s short piece may appear simplistic, and perhaps a bit understated, however, every line and its corresponding action requires a significant amount of “unpacking.” He creates a complex weave of allusions, drawing from numerous sources, from the Greek myths of Tantalus and Sisyphus to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Beckett was a defining member in the Theatre of the Absurd, giving an artistic dimension to the attitudes of the French Existentialists, especially Albert Camus. The Existentialist movement, itself, has its roots in Martin Heidegger’s highly influential *Being and Time* (1927), thus it also finds its way into Beckett’s work. With impeccable philosophical and empirical observation, *Act Without Words* places a “dazzling light” on the human condition – its conditioning – bringing forth a contemporary, mythological piece on the futility and crushing anguish of human activity in an absurd wasteland, out of our control.

The opening lines of the play deliver the nameless character over to the desert; he is “flung backwards on stage from right wing” (Beckett 87). For Heidegger, man is the being thrown into the world as a null basis of a nullity, “Dasein’s [man’s] being means, as a thrown projection, being-the-basis of a nullity (and this being-the-basis is itself null) (331). Beckett’s nameless character suffers the thrown-ness of existence, thrust into the unknown with nothing. After getting up and dusting himself off, a sharp whistle comes from the right then left wing. He follows the whistles off stage and each time the result is the same, there is no escape: “Immediately flung back on stage he falls, gets up immediately, dusts himself, turns aside, reflects” (87).

The ambiguous whistle signals his doom, his pain; he is nothing more than a dog. It resembles Descartes’ evil genius (what was thought irrational becomes the reality) purposefully deceitful and merciless, teasing and confusing humanity; instead of angels for messengers, there are

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flies. The first object the flies deliver is a little tree, sitting “three yards from the ground and at its summit a meager tuft of palms casting at its foot a circle of shadow” (87). The tree alludes to the Tree of Life from the Book of Genesis. God planted the tree, whose fruit when eaten gave immortality, in Eden, along with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The palms of the little tree suddenly close like a parasol getting rid of the shadow, leaving the nameless character in the scorching sun of the desert. It mirrors the exile of Adam and Eve from the garden, forced to toil for disobeying god’s command. What is the character’s great transgression against god? Through the caricature, Beckett is saying god punished humanity for the absurd crime of existing; comparable to the “ultimatum” from the concluding sermon in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* (1843), whose major refrain is “Before God you are always wrong” (335).

Besides the scissors, used to trim his nails, the next object the flies bring is a carafe filled with water. The character hears the whistle from above and sees the carafe. He gets up “goes and stands under it, tries in vain to reach it, renounces, turns aside, reflects” (Beckett 88). Three whistles, a big cube, a small cube, and a smaller cube, eventually all descend from the flies. His attempts in reaching the carafe using the big cube and the small cube, even stacking them, ends in failure; “tries in vain to reach carafe , renounces, gets down...reflects. ...the cubes collapse, he falls...reflects” (88). The third, smaller cube would give him enough height to reach the carafe, but right when he puts the thought together the “cube is pulled up and disappears in flies” (89). A rope with knots then descends from the flies next to the carafe. The whistle from above calls him. He climbs up the rope, and when he about reaches the carafe it lets out. He again falls to the ground. The nameless character’s peril compares to the absurd, repeatable tasks of certain characters from Greek mythology. Two great allusions are Tantalus and Sisyphus, occupants of Erebus, the realm of the dead.

The temptation and repetition without any satisfaction in Beckett’s “myth” parallels Tantalus’ punishment for committing human sacrifice. He must stand in a pool of water beneath a tree’s fruit-filled branches. Whenever Tantalus would reach for a drink, the waters would recede. When he reached for a piece of fruit, the branch would move just out of his grasp. In Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), Satan and his fellow demons go through an equivalent punishment for tempting Eve:

For one forbidden tress a multitude

Now ris’n, to work them further woe or shame;

Yet parched with scalding thirst and hunger fierce,

Though to delude them sent, could not abstain,

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...they fondly thinking to allay

Their appetite with gust, instead of fruit

Chewed bitter ashes (10. 554-57, 464-66).

Tantalus' punishment and Satan's occur in the realm of the dead, though in different traditions. Is Beckett saying humanity is in a hell, condemned to a world of ceaseless temptation, laborious repetition, without any satisfaction? Yes, Beckett seems to think just that. Humanity is in Erebus, in an ever-growing wasteland. The myth of Sisyphus completes the mythological imagery of Beckett's underworld reality of existence.

Fourteen years before Beckett's short play, Camus wrote his existential essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) commenting on, among many other things, humanity's "logic" for suicide in the face of the Absurd. By the essay's end, Camus proclaims Sisyphus as the absurd hero, the "futile laborer of the Underworld" (119). The gods reprimanded Sisyphus by forcing him to roll a stone up a hill, but when it nears the top, it rolls down again, and he must start all over again; "They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor" (119). Beckett seems highly influenced by Camus, continuing the task of searching for the absurd in the past, as "the primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia" (14). He would agree with Camus: in man's relationship to both the world and the absurd, there is "a total absence of hope...a continual rejection...and a conscious dissatisfaction" (31).

Beckett's writing reflects the absence of hope, the dissatisfaction, and the repetition of the absurd heroes above. In *Endgame* (1957), Nell and Clov ask rather straightforwardly, "Why this farce, day after day" (14, 32), the only answer Hamm gives is "Routine. One never knows" (32). Camus wrote, "You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit" (5), which Beckett takes as a founding principle, an axiom. *Act Without Words* fills no more than four pages, and most of the writing and action is repetition. The pattern is so strong it develops into an experiment of classical/fear conditioning; this is Beckett's twist on existentialism, reaching into behaviorism. The ambiguous whistle is the neutral or conditioned stimulus. The nameless character follows the whistle, which can have the averse/unconditioned stimulus of being thrown or just receiving/seeing a tool or object, a neutral stimulus. The flies taking back or moving the objects is another key averse/unconditioned stimulus. Beckett brings to life a behavioral nightmare perhaps even the French Existentialists were to afraid to stare in the face.

The entire play is a controlled experiment trying to initialize fear, the conditioned response. In the mythological and religious traditions, the gods are the scientists and humanity is the

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salivating dogs, the guinea pigs for methods of discipline and control – the same could be said for the disciplining effects of society on the individual. It is controlled to the point of not being able to choose your own death. When the nameless character attempts suicide, the flies steal the rope he tried to use as a noose, and when he feels his neck, ready to slit his throat, the flies steal the scissors. The final pairings of the neutral/conditioned stimulus and the aversive/unconditioned stimulus occur when a whistle comes from the right wing, which he follows with the usual response, and when the flies steal the big cube right from under him. Afterwards, Beckett has the flies place the carafe near the character's lying body; he does not move. A whistle comes from above, he does not move.

The carafe dangles lower near his face, he does not move. The conditioned and unconditioned stimuli have overlapped creating the desired conditioned response: paralyzing fear. The branch returns to its original position and the palms open, followed by a whistle. The initial, neutral stimulus returns, testing to see if the conditioned response is permanent and reliable. Has the subject learned? He does not move, and the tree disappears. The human "spirit" is broken, revealing man as just another animal, subject to the same methods and conditioned responses as the "lower" species. Beckett's portrayal in *Act Without Words* is the twisted desire of every utopian dream, from every society: instilling absolute fear and complete control; leaving the individual to face an absurd fate of mindless routine and habit.

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