

## The Transformation from Modernism to Postmodernism in Samuel Beckett's Drama

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### Abstract

This article attempts to explore modernist and postmodernist literary theories and apply them to Samuel Beckett's plays, *Waiting for Godot* (1954), *Endgame* (1958), and *Not I* (1974). According to the study, many features of Samuel Beckett's drama reflect the views of modernist literary theory and anticipate those of postmodernist theory. Not only does he challenge and undermine most of the standard theatrical conventions of 19<sup>th</sup> century drama like modernist artists try to do, but also shares the postmodernist view that he disbelieves in the system of language and signs. In fact, a legacy of Beckettian style also has become influential in shaping the characteristics of contemporary theatre.

**Keywords :** Samuel Beckett, Drama, Modernism, Postmodernism

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## Introduction

The characteristics of theatre in the last century have been significantly reshaped in their fundamentals by the so-called ‘modernism’ movement. However, with the dramatic change in the world during the modern era, it seems that we are now living in an age beyond modernism; hence the term ‘postmodernism.’ As such, postmodern ideas have significantly influenced various areas of study, including theatre.

Among the heirs of modernist artists, Samuel Beckett is one who played a crucial role in influencing in shaping the characteristics of contemporary theatre. However, it is a controversial issue as to whether his drama should be regarded as “modern” or “postmodern” because many features of his work share the views of both movements. Or do these features reflect the views of modernism and anticipate those of postmodernism?

In view of the above observations, Section One of this essay attempts to explore the theory of modernism and postmodernism. The argumentation in Section Two endeavors to apply both modernist and postmodernist theories to Beckett’s plays, *Waiting for Godot* (1954), *Endgame* (1958), and *Not I* (1974), in order to examine the extent of the influence that both modernism and postmodernism have had on his works.

## A Theory of Modernism and Postmodernism

In order to understand the terms “Modernism” and “Postmodernism,” one has to comprehend first two important related terms : modernity and postmodernity.

Referring to the idea that arts are products of societies and/or cultures, it can be said that a work of art *presents* and *represents* the political ideology of a culture. More precisely, an art not only talks about its culture but also reflects the way its culture is in itself. Hence when cultures change (in both idea and structure), arts change accordingly. The idea above seems to clarify the way in which one could understand the difference between modernity and modernism and postmodernity and postmodernism.



“Modernity” is the idea of ‘social life’ in the modern era of western culture which began to emerge at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Burke 2009). Such an idea is grounded in the European Enlightenment, which believes in ‘order,’ ‘reason,’ ‘science,’ and ‘humanism.’ Additionally, one should note here that “Modernity” is characterized by three major features : the power of reason over ignorance, the power of order over disorder, and the power of science over superstition. These three features were regarded by many as *universal values* (Burke 2009). Therefore, in this sense, it can be implied that modernity is the order that people create out of chaos, so-call *Science*. For illustration, science is knowledge; knowledge has universal value; universal value is truth; truth can explain everything. Moreover, it is important to note that such thoughts of modernity contain the belief in ‘stability’ or ‘totality’ in the universe, which can be explained through the means of “grand narratives” by using language, the mode of expression, which is also assumed to be rational (Klages 2009). All of this points to the conclusion that “Modernity” comprises the ‘modern thought’ describing the values of the modern era.

While modernity, or modern thoughts, refers to social conditions and changes, modernism is associated with aesthetic and intellectual aspects. In other words, modernity stands for the general values and thoughts of society, but modernism is the movement of art and literature (in 20<sup>th</sup> century) based on the idea of modernity. However, based on the perspective of artistic and literary movements, it can also be observed that modernism moves beyond modernity, as seen from those movements that challenged established aesthetic conventions and celebrated new technologies and thought (Coots 2001). That is to say, these modern thoughts or modern society happened before the movement of modernism in the aesthetic aspects of art works (Burke 2009).

By contrast, postmodernity rejected any notion of the modern era, for there were legacies of modernism that were not very pleasant, such as the world of Auschwitz, the possibility of nuclear war, the horrors of Nazism and Stalinism, and neo-colonialism, Eurocentrism, racism, and Third World famine (Burke 2009). Hence,

postmodernity disbelieves in modernism's *grand narrative*, knowledge, and its belief that it could emancipate the world from ignorance, poverty, insecurity and violence. Moreover, postmodernity found that modernity's grand narrative is constructed and narrow because it represented perspectives of merely some groups of people such as whites, males, and heterosexuals. Hence, postmodernism is concerned with questions of the organization of knowledge or grand theories. As such, postmodernity celebrated diverse perspectives and differences.

Like the relationship between modernity and modernism, postmodernity is associated with society's thoughts, whereas postmodernism is associated with aesthetic and intellectual movements. However, in terms of its characteristics, postmodernism is more complicated and difficult to identify, for its style is quite similar to modernism. Postmodernism grew out of modernism and borrowed styles from modernist arts to produce 'humorous mixtures' regardless of meanings, values, or reasons which were usually conveyed through the "grand narrative." On the one hand, they share some similarities, as they follow most of the same ideas — rejecting boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejecting rigid genre distinctions, and emphasizing pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness. On the other hand, there are some differences: postmodern art (and thought) favors reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), no more coherence or unity, ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the destructured, decentered, dehumanized subject.

As Hal Foster remarks, postmodernism transgresses the ideology of the transgressive (modernism) (Foster 1985 : vii). If modernism lamented meaninglessness, postmodernism celebrates meaninglessness (Burke 2009). More precisely, if modernism still tried to seek for meaning that had been lost in most of modern life, postmodernism tries no more but plays with such meaninglessness. While modernism attempted to experiment to portray unconventional ways to signify the portrayal of a nonsensical world, postmodernism uses such unconventional ways without the intention of signifying any meaning of a nonsensical world, except for mocking the meaninglessness.



## Beckettian Dramas : the transition from modernism to postmodernism

With Beckett's plays, it has become controversial for scholars to specify which position in the history of literature suits his works. However, it seems that from *Waiting for Godot*, to *Endgame*, to *Not I*, the plays show the transition from modernism to postmodernism. As in the book *The Painted Word : Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art*, Lois Oppenheim suggests that Beckett's position is neither Modern nor Postmodern but rather something which encompasses both (Coots 2001 : 74).

Although, in terms of temporal history, Samuel Beckett should be regarded as a modernist, it seems that he had explored the forms of his theatre beyond such an art movement; this will be explored later. The significant features that make his works close to postmodernism are the major subjects that he projected — meaninglessness — which corresponds to the theme of postmodern life and works. Therefore, it seems to the postmodernists that Beckett attempted to communicate “something” which means “nothing” to his audience, like John Cage, the American postmodern composer, who coined the concept of postmodern art as ‘purposeful purposelessness’ (Zurbrugg 1991 : 37).

However, according to Fredric Jameson (1985 : 111–125), one of the distinctive features between modern and postmodern art is the *originality* of style and subject. While modernist artists create unique styles, postmodernist ones simply make a copy without an original. As such, it can still be said that Beckett's dramas are original and unique, as they are widely described as having a ‘Beckettian style’ — this idea will also be examined later. Therefore, in terms of originality, it should be noted that Beckett's dramas are modernist.

### Narrative and Essentiality

According to the modernist and postmodernist theories mentioned above, it can be said that modern art forms are still explainable by using reason or knowledge, whereas postmodern ones attempt to present non-explanatory works. In other words,

although the modernist artists often try to subvert the artistic conventions — through fragmentation and disruption — *at the level of form*, they still uphold the idea of the ‘tragic’ (Klages 2009) — something to be lamented as a loss or something that should be recuperated — *at the level of content* (Strickland 2009). On the other hand, because content is an embodiment of “essentiality” and carries the sense of *order* or *reason*, postmodernist artists, in contrast, present the fragmentation in both *form* and *content* in such a way that we can no longer hunt for any meaning from postmodern art. In short, while modern arts still convey ‘essential content’ in their ‘messy forms,’ postmodern arts portray the ‘mess’ by having no regard for its ‘essence’ or content.

Following this theoretical framework, *Waiting for Godot*, therefore, can be considered as a ‘late modern’ and a ‘beginning of postmodern’ play. For illustration, in terms of modernist characteristics, the play challenges and undermines most of the standard theatrical conventions in its absence of a linear storyline, pre-exposition, crisis, or climax. It is obvious that the characters’ actions seem obsessive about small details (i.e. sharing food, pulling on a boot) and are non-motivated. The conversation sounds absurd, with ‘incoherent babblings’ unlike the ‘witty repartee and pointed dialogue’ (Esslin 2001 : 26) of a conventional play. Additionally, in terms of its setting and time element, the play has no reference to a specific time or place in the real world (no time & no space), as opposed to a realistic or logical one.

Although the play undermines most conventional theatrical elements, the audience is able to grasp the essence of the play — human beings do absurd things while they are waiting for someone (or something) who never arrives. Therefore it can be argued that the play still conveys ‘essence.’ In terms of plot and events, even though they apparently perform circular repetitive actions, such repetition is contained in a special form of linear narrative (Essay Bank. Co. Uk 2009). By this, it can be said that seemingly the story is articulated fragmentarily — with small repetitive details, but the plot still moves. The audience is able to assemble the fragmented details and tell the story. Hence it still is a narrative.

Furthermore, another modernist aspect of *Waiting for Godot* is its sense of



the tragic. Due to its essence, though sparse, the play communicates enough story (or series of situations) at an understandable level. The audience is able to feel the sense of the “tragic” as the protagonists are informed that Godot is not coming. Spontaneously with the characters in the play, we are inevitably expecting, suspecting and finally disappointed about the arrival or non-arrival of Godot. In other words, we can make sense of the nonsensical situations and comprehend without rationalizing. As such, without any informational background on their lives, we know that Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for Mr. Godot. Without understanding the purpose of their actions or conversations, we still know that they are killing time while they are waiting. And without comprehending the reasons, we find that Pozzo and Lucky, the two men that come into their lives and associate with them, are helping them to kill time as well. Finally, like Estragon and Vladimir, we are desperate when realize that Mr. Godot is not coming and will never come.

In *Waiting for Godot*, some of the characters’ dialogues still carry the meanings in which they represent the sense of “parody” of the author. We can intellectualize Beckett’s skepticism about religion and God, which prevails throughout the play, as can be seen in the following :

*Estragon : Do you think God sees me?*

*Vladimir : You must close your eyes*

(Beckett 1995 : 76)

or

*Vladimir ...why believe him rather than the others?*

*Estragon Who believes him?*

*Vladimir Everybody. It’s the only version they know.*

*Estragon People are bloody ignorant apes.”*

(Beckett 1995 : 13)

Additionally, we can perceive Beckett’s questions about the meaning of human existence through Estragon’s dialogue, “We always find something, eh Didi, to give us impression

we exist?” (Beckett 1995 : 69), the sense of the futility and uncertainty of human life, “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful.” (Beckett 1995 : 41), and lastly their insecure feelings, “Don’t let’s do anything, it’s safer.” (Beckett 1995 : 18).

At another level, when we try to analyze the play thoughtfully and logically using traditional approaches to drama, we would reach the simple question : if that is so, then so what? For instance, Martin Esslin argues that “Estragon is volatile but Vladimir is persistent” or “the relationship of Lucky and Pozzo is on a more primitive level than Vladimir and Estragon’s” (Esslin 2001 : 48). Beryl Fletcher and her fellows remark that “Vladimir has a more ‘feminine’ personality, while Estragon has the more ‘masculine’ personality” (Fletcher et al. 1978 : 83–107). As such, it seems that these observations can acquire only irrelevant “information” of the characters regardless of any linkage made to the rational sense of the whole story.

In this sense, the play seems to celebrate ‘meaninglessness’ at the superficial level rather than attempts to project the ‘depth’ of metaphors or symbols – which will be explored more in the next section. As Beckett himself always replies, when people ask him about the hidden meaning of the play : “If I had known more, I would have put it in the text” (Gontarski 2009). On the one hand, the play can mean anything as long as one can find his/her own plausible reason to support that meaning. On the other hand, the play does not mean anything, as the author attempts to avoid any meaning.

In *Endgame*, it is more obvious that the style of Beckett’s plays has moved forwards from modernism toward postmodernism. Despite the similarity of its theatrical elements to *Waiting for Godot*, the plot in *Endgame* is sparser, the characters are more unlike the human, the setting is bleaker, the actions are more disconnected, the conversations are more incoherent, and especially the essence, which can be grasped from the play, is ‘less.’ Superficially, *Endgame* seems harsh, but profoundly we feel that almost nothing sensible can be extracted from the play.

While conceiving the sense of ‘hopeless waiting’ in *Godot*, the audience hardly knows what Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell are doing in *Endgame*. Although they look



like human beings, the audience is not certain whether they are alive or dead — it is difficult to discern from their physical and mental conditions. More obvious than in *Godot*, although the characters still have some actions and conversations, they act and converse without interpretable motivation at all. Therefore, it makes the audience come to the question of “why do they exist?” This is the theme that Beckett questions in other human beings and the world as well. Despite the fact that in both plays the characters have no meaning — in their acts, their words, and in themselves — in *Waiting for Godot* we conceive the sense that human beings are born to be waiting for something that never comes. However, in *Endgame*, we do not really know why they were born.

Another aspect of postmodernism is that although the overall expression of the play is harsher than in *Waiting for Godot*, we cannot really feel or perceive any sense of the tragic anymore. This is because the play provides considerably less sensible information to be understood. Unlike in *Waiting for Godot*, the series of images in *Endgame* are too fragmentary to be assembled into a single complete narrative; the plot does not seem to move. In other words, there is no plot. In turn, the play just pays attention to the celebration of small irrational details. As W.B. Worthen (2000 : 753) states, “*Endgame* seems to present a microcosm of postmodern life;” therefore, it can be concluded that the play is crossing the bridge of modernism to postmodernism.

Apart from lacking a sense of the tragic, what the audience can tell about the plot of *Endgame* is just fragmentary details, not a story. For instance, Hamm is a blind old paralyzed man who needs Clov, his menial, for help. Clov wants to leave Hamm but he never does so and still serves him. Nagg and Nell are Hamm’s legless parents, who are living in the ashbins and occasionally emerge from the bins talking. Finally Clov seems to leave Hamm (but does not yet leave) but Hamm wants him to remain.

However, in spite of the fragmentation of the story, the play still conveys its theme (essence). It is quite easy at one level to interpret the story as representing the author’s attitude about human life in the modern world, i.e. everything has already come to an end but it is continuing and we survive against all odds, as can be seen

in the very beginning statements of Clov (Beckett 2000 : 754), “Finished, it’s finished, it must be nearly finished”, or when he sees the world outside, “Zero, water and earth”, “there’s no more nature.” However, even though the outside world seems dead, the world of these characters on stage is, more or less, alive. They are still breathing, moving, and talking. Even Nagg and Nell, whose white faces and legless bodies are very similar to corpses and who are living in the ashbins as if they are their coffins, arise from the bins occasionally in order to talk. Further, they still have some kind of human activity, which perhaps proves that they exist and are alive, as represented in Hamm and Clov’s conversation :

Hamm        *And Nagg? ... What’s he doing?*

Clov         *He’s crying.*

Hamm        *Then he’s living.*

(Beckett 2000 : 768)

In the play, human life and relationships go beyond the dead atmosphere. Clov wonders, “Why this farce, day after day,” and the reply is “Routine” (Beckett 2000 : 757). Moreover, their relationship seems never ending as well even though they always claim to finish it :

Clov         *So you all want me to leave you.*

Hamm        *Naturally.*

Clov         *Then I’ll leave you.*

Hamm        *You can’t leave us.*

Clov         *Then I won’t leave you.*

(Beckett 2000 : 762)

Therefore, as Hamm says : “It’s the end, Clove, we’ve come to the end. I don’t need you anymore,” and Clov himself always mentions leaving, but finally when Clov seems to leave him, Hamm states : “Old stancher! (*Pause*) You...remain.” (Beckett 2000 : 774)



*Not I* is also a good example of postmodern theatre. In the play, there is almost nothing that is meaningful or significant for theatricality. Beckett totally subverts the conventional forms of theatre by removing the constructed ideology of the theatrical elements functions. To illustrate this point, the play no longer employs theatrical elements in conventional ways. All that the play has is simply a *non-plot* recounted by a *non-character*, Mouth, who emerges from a *non-setting*, darkness, and performs a *non-action*, raving.

Apparently, every element in the play is pared down to the bare minimum. The conventional theatrical elements are undermined and torn apart into fragmented elements. The plot is no longer articulated by events and action but by the broken speech of the broken character. Apart from completely lacking a conventional storyline (as in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*), *Not I* has no beginning or ending, as the play starts from ‘unintelligible sounds behind the curtain’ and finishes with ‘continuing unintelligible sounds behind the curtain.’ Besides, the character is also a fragmented one. The character is totally separated from itself : the mouth is separated from the whole body; mentally the character is spilt from her own personality [as she denies acknowledging herself and never says the word “I” : “what?... who?... no!... she!...” (Beckett 1977 : 14)]. The setting is more ‘lost’ than in the two formerly discussed plays, for there is nothing on the stage but darkness. Moreover, in terms of spoken language, the words and sentences are characterized by a lack of continuity and, of course, sense, as it is a ‘stream of consciousness style’ (Coots 2001 : 6). Therefore, it can be said that the play totally loses the entire sense of unity and coherence.

Moreover, it is important to note that while *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* convey the concept of ‘nonsensibility’ through the incoherent and absurd dialogues of the characters, *Not I* utters it directly to the audience. With regard to this point, there is no doubt that the audience has to become the participant of nonsense communication itself. In other words, Beckett may wish to tell that instead of pretending that we are sensible people who are viewing outer insensible things, let us accept that we are parts of such nonsense itself – which should be indeed regarded as a postmodernist

perspective.

In terms of its essence, the play has become very postmodern, as it is very difficult to catch a story and summarize it in a 'sentence' — unlike conventional Aristotelian ideas of themes in drama. All subjects that a reader/viewer is able to grasp from the story are as fragmented as the play itself. As mentioned above, every element in the play is incoherent, and the subjects of the play are also separated from their context. In turn, it could be said that the play has no context, rather an intertext. What Mouth is narrating is too perplexing to call 'a story;' it is like collage art but in a sound version. Moreover, because of the rapid pace at which Mouth speaks, this also makes the speech sound quite unintelligible. However, that is Beckett's intention, as he states on this issue that : "I am not unduly concerned with intelligibility. I hope the piece would work on the necessary emotion of the audience rather appealing to their intellect" (McMillan 1987 : 110). For this reason, it may seem impossible if one attempts to relate the dispersed things in the play according to the logical, conventional approach to theatre in *Not I*.

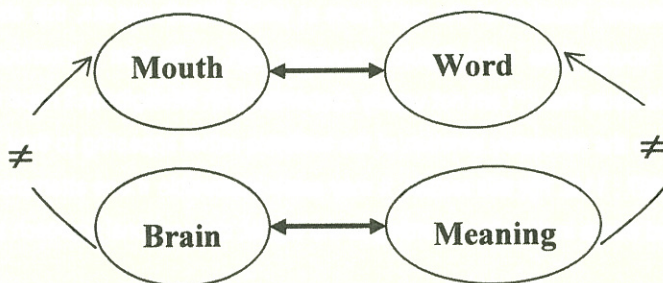
As a result, by disregarding the narrative story that Mouth recounts (as it is not a narrative), and paying attention to the entire structure of the play, I found an interesting point that Beckett tries to project to his audience. Apparently, a mouth is an organ for uttering words that humans use to narrate their ideas (mouths = words), while a brain is an organ for creating ideas/meanings (brain = idea/meaning). Therefore, while a brain produces ideas, a mouth produces words. Hence, when a mouth is separated from a brain, it means that a word is also separated from an idea or its meaning (words ≠ meaning). As a result, it is obvious that what Mouth says has no meaning ["and now this stream...not catching the half of it...not the quarter...no idea...what she was saying...imagine!...no idea what she was saying!" (Beckett 1977 : 16)].

By listening to the way that Mouth speaks, it seems obvious that she is raving without any control of her brain and that she cannot stop it. She also mentions the brain, ["...can't stop the stream...and the whole brain begging... something begging in the brain...begging the mouth to stop" (Beckett 1977 : 17)]. From this, the conclusion could



be drawn that if the brain controls the mouths and the mouth control words, when the brain cannot control the mouth, meaning that the mouth cannot control words. In short, what Beckett attempts to communicate is that words are not only separated from meaning but they are unable to contain any meaning as well. Therefore, it is clear that he shares the idea of postmodernism — that the signifier can no longer signify things.

*Beckett separates mouth from brain and words from meaning.*



### Signs & Symbol : No Symbols Where None Intended

It is clear that Samuel Beckett's perspective about "meaninglessness" directly shares the view of postmodernism. According to Jennifer Martin (2009), Beckett disbelieves in the system of language and signs, whether it can really communicate meaning or not. He believes that there is no inherent meaning in the system of language, words and signs, as he calls his work, a 'literature of unword' (Finney 1994 : 843). As such, Beckett attempts to create theatrical devices in order to illustrate his idea that the world is lacking meaning, not only in language but also in life.

According to Fredric Jameson (1985 : 111–125), the distinguishing feature of postmodern art is its attitude toward history. Jameson coined the term 'pastiche,' illustrating that postmodern artists denature the 'previous' style by removing it from history, and history from it. By this, he means that a postmodernist just utilizes the

former 'dead style' ostensibly and rejects its history — its constructed meanings or function. In Beckett's plays, dialogues and settings are abstract without real meanings or functions. He portrays the lack of social background of characters without the conventional 'analyzable' meaning of human life or personality. He describes the story sketchily without its narrative or order. Finally, he also uses 'pastiche' broadly in terms of signs, symbols, and allusion.

For postmodernism, symbols are drained of meaning (Gromala & Bicket 2009). In Beckett's drama, it seems that that symbols and metaphors that Beckett uses in his works do not contain any specific meaning. While there is very little happening on stage, there are a number of symbols in the plays, and these cannot easily be interpreted. As a result, the popular question from an audience responding to Beckett always is : "What does that mean?" or "What does it stand for?" For example : why are Pozzo and Lucky blind and dumb in Act2? What is the meaning of the rope around Lucky's neck, his suitcase and sand? Why is Hamm blind and why are his parents crippled, when Clov is not? What is the meaning of Clov's telescope and Hamm's toy dog? What is the meaning of the auditor and his 'helpless compassion' in *Not I?* And so on.

In this sense, as these elements seem incoherent, it seems that everything may mean anything or may mean nothing. If it means something which does not really relate to the play, an audience will reach the question : "So what?" For instance, if the name "Hamm" of the character in *Endgame* really parodies the name of Shakespeare's famous protagonist, Hamlet, then so what? In short, Beckett intentionally and playfully juxtaposes most of his signs or symbols without specific meaning.

In order to clarify the point of no specific meaning within his plays, I would compare the 'free interpretation' of Beckett's drama to the 'logical interpretation' of other modernist dramas. For instance, the protagonist, Nora, in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* cannot be interpreted as anything but a doll of her husband. The meaning of the 'glass' that Laura collects in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menageries* seems most likely to symbolize her fragile personality. Additionally, in Ionesco's plays, which are quite close to Beckett's plays as they both are 'absurdist theatre,' Ionesco's play still



requires a definitive interpretation. It is clear that Rhinoceros in *Rhinoceros* symbolizes an inhumane characteristic of human beings that manipulates people in society. In the last scene of *The Lesson*, when the professor rapes (or kills) his student, this action is obviously interpreted as the educational system kills its learner.

As such, I believe that Beckett attempts to challenge the notion that high art theatre should intentionally have subtle symbolization, as prevalently employed in the above-mentioned plays. Beckett mocks this idea at the end of his novel *Watt* : ‘No symbols where none intend.’ (Coots 2001 : 9). By this, I found that he challenges this notion by intentionally utilizing them meaninglessly (by contrast, many critics have found them meaningful). For example, the tree in *Waiting for Godot* can be interpreted in multiple ways. It can be the tree of life [as in biblical terms (Coots 2001 : 8)], the point of life and death (as the characters decide to commit suicide there), or just an ordinary tree itself.

In *Endgame*, at one level the ‘red face’ of Hamm could possibly symbolize ‘a living being,’ while the ‘white faces of Nagg and Nell could symbolize ‘almost dead people.’ At another level, as the sense of life and death in the play is slightly equivalent, being white or red is not important in this context. Beckett solely wants to challenge the constructed ideology of symbolism, for it could not symbolize the ‘truth’ anyway.

In *Not I*, Mouth can be interpreted as a number of things. Physically it can be an eye. Analytically it may be interpreted that the play not only means ‘not I’ (as the character denies saying the word “I”) but also ‘not eye’ [pointedly not visual but audial (McMillan 1987 : 109)]. It could be a vagina in both physical similarity and logical interpretation from the play’s context. As Tia Ballantine remarks : “Mouth spills words in bursts as metaphoric of the ‘little death’ of orgasm.” (Ballantine 2009). However, I myself share the view of Steve Coots, that ‘it is safe to assume that Mouth is a mouth.’ (Coots 2001 : 32)

Hence, when meaning cannot be specified and assembled, it can mean anything or nothing. For example, it is interesting to note that there are tremendous numbers of academic different interpretations of Beckett’s drama. Michael Gurnow

(2009) observes that both of Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* is an allegory of the king Oedipus of Sophocles. Lucky's intellectuality resembles the intelligent Oedipus, who is able to answer the Sphinx's riddle, while the blind-hearted Pozzo symbolizes the blind of self-knowledge of Oedipus. J.A. Tyler (2009) remarks that all of the characters in *Endgame* symbolize the status of literary movements : Nagg and Nell are the embodiment of 'Romanticism,' which is believed to be dying (as they talk about the 'past' and 'happiness'). Hamm is a modernist who believes that the world has come to an end, while Clov is a postmodernist who is still living at the end of the world. Richard Roud (Fletcher et al 1978 : 194) compares the image in *Not I* as a confession of a sinner to a priest.

In short, at this point, it is obvious that Beckett's plays convey the sense of 'plurality' – which is, again, one of the main features of postmodernism.

### Hybridity : The Blurred Genre

According to postmodern theory, art should be a promiscuous genre or hybrid rather than having clear generic boundaries which contain a sense of 'wholeness' (Irvine 2009). Therefore, some characteristics of Beckett's work have changed the shape of drama and it is certainly hybrid. It seems that he not only blurs the genres of drama with tragedy, farce, puppetry, pantomime, or melodrama, and so on, but also mixes them together. Moreover, he also mixes all forms of arts together, which makes his theatre seem like a 'total theatre' rather than any genres of drama plays. In short, he does not just challenge the conventions of theatre, but also creates a new style by mixing conventional styles together.

Apart from mixing all theatrical elements together, every aspect of theatre (stage sets, lighting, action, sound, visual image, etc.) is intentionally used to convey what Beckett wants to say (Coots 2001 : 39). In other words, Beckett makes the structure and form of his play as important as its content. Therefore, an audience cannot ignore anything that happens on stage, as every aspect is important. For example, silence is equivalent to a sound in Beckett's works — which can be seen



prevalently throughout the three plays in the form of a *pause*, or *long pause*. When the characters make the stage silent, such silence conveys meaning, as if it is a ‘word of silence.’ The silent can stimulate any feelings from an audience as the play lead to be. Beckett wants the audience members to hear sounds in their own mind, as he said in a conversation with Harold Pinter : “I was in hospital once. There was a man in another ward, dying of throat cancer. In the silence, I could hear his screams continually. That’s the only kind of form my work has.” (Coots 2001 : 9). Another example is that action is equated with inaction in Beckett’s plays. As seen in the form of still characters, characters with rare movement, yawning, halting, or pausing, these characteristics make the rhythm of the play very inert. Hence, rather than letting characters talk about inert life through spoken language, their inert rhythms themselves contain the meaning of the play.

Regarding theatrical genre, Beckett’s plays can hardly be identified as to which category they belong to. This is because, first, he borrows styles from various literary genres and movements, and merges them together. For example, the concept of ‘tragedy,’ the big questions of human life and existence, appears in his play’s thoughts. ‘Farce/slapstick comedy’ is portrayed as physical comic elements in the *character’s actions*. ‘Comedy’ is communicated using wordplay in the *character’s dialogues*. Besides these characteristics, his plays also contain some elements of a morality play (character = abstract meaning), realistic/naturalistic conditions (very realistic conditions of ‘real’ human, boring life), expressionism (the distorted visual aspects of scene designs and characters’ gestures), surrealism (surreal settings), and symbolism (the number of open-ended symbols).

Second, because Beckett himself has been fascinated with various kinds of arts, such as literature, visual art, music, theatre, and film (Coots 2001 : 16–18), he merges such arts in his theatre. In viewing Beckett’s plays, it is clear that the setting seems very close to an abstract painting rather than a traditional play’s setting. As Steve Coots (2001 : 1) remarks, “Caspar David’s painting *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* is almost a blueprint for the setting of *Godot*.” And ‘Poussin’s painting *The*

*Deposition of Christ* was an influence on the shadow figure giving the gesture of *helpless compassion* in *Not I*.” Moreover, he also ‘composes music by spoken words,’ which sounds very obvious in *Not I*. To be more specific, the way the character, Mouth, raves as though it were the music of a breathless pace in a melodic Irish accent of the actress, Billie Whitelaw. Besides, the movements of his characters seem like pantomime show in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, while mouth’s movements in *Not I* are likely to be a graphic vision of the character. Therefore, it can be said that Beckett’s plays are like a moving version of painting, a sound version of mime and painting, a painting version of drama, and so on. In other words, visual ingredients, sound, and text interplay with one another and are in an equal position in Beckett’s plays. In short, he audio-visualizes text and textualizes the audio-visual.

Moreover, it could be argued that his work is not just an adaptation of various styles of literary genres, but also a hybridity — mixing every style together to become a new genre. As such, the plays should be regarded as postmodern theatre. To be more precise, for example, it cannot be said that *Waiting for Godot* is a tragicomedy — where a serious story ends in happiness — because the play is more complicated than that. The play’s comic elements and sense of the tragic are fully combined rather than loosely linked together as in a tragicomedy. Particularly, the comic elements in the characters’ actions and words are inseparable from the tragic sense of the play — it is incorporated : life is absurdly tragic. Regarding the situations in *Endgame*, while most of the atmosphere is very bleak, sometimes an audience cannot avoid laughing. For example, contradictorily, when Nagg and Nell come out from the bins talking about their *decayed* physiques, the conversation sounds more funny than serious :

Nagg : Can you hear me?

Nell : Yes. And you?

Nagg : Yes. (pause) Our hearing hasn’t failed.

Nell : Our what?

(Worthen 2000 : 757)



As in *Not I*, although Mouth recounts a story of trauma, rape, and birth which seemingly contains a sense of suffering, she shares her painful moments in disguise. An audience cannot totally feel her pain by just unintelligibly hearing the broken speech from Mouth. Further, by seeing the images of Mouth repeatedly moving out of the dark on stage, it seems that the scene is meant to be funny rather than serious. Therefore, the play celebrates gloom with an artistic and deep comic voice and images : it deserves to be laughed at!

In short, Beckett does not only blur the edges of theatrical genres, but he also mixes them by giving the tragic an equal position with the comic, and interchange the functions among text, visual, and sound.

## Conclusion

In postmodernist theory, it is interesting to note that postmodern art is ambivalent, for it conveys two senses of reasoning : on the one hand the work cannot be explained at all; on the other hand it is open to be explained by any possible reasons. Consequently, this is the most crucial problem, in our attempt to differentiate postmodern art from modern art because as long as we still try to explain the ‘hidden meaning’ in it, the work is considered ‘modernist’ and not ‘postmodernist.’ In turn, if a work intentionally conveys meaning, but we are unable to solve the riddle, how can we draw a conclusion that it is ‘postmodern?’

Nevertheless, it seems to me that an author’s perspective is the most important factor to consider. Therefore, from the above examination, it can be concluded that instead of attempting to hunt for the meanings of his (seemingly) enigmatic plays, attention should be paid to Beckett’s intention and how he utilizes the theatrical elements in his work because we know that Beckett himself attempts to avoid total meaning in his play. When asked about the meaning of his plays, Beckett’s reply always is : “I simply don’t know.” (Gontarski 2009). Therefore it seems quite paradoxical that scholars have been attempting to gather supporting reasons to clarify work of non-reason.

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