

Krapp, the Wearish Post-Modern Man: Beckett's Archetypal Figure of The Theater of the Absurd

- Farideh Pourgiv and
Marjan Shokouhi

Krapp's Last Tape, Beckett's dramatic work of the 1958 is still performed and analyzed today. The last major production of it was performed by Harold Pinter at Royal Court Theater in October 2006. The reason behind its success as a still-performing play besides other major productions of the century is not its having anything new to discuss. In fact, the theme and characterization as well as staging and dialogue are quite Beckettian, that is to say typical. And it also shares affinities with the other major productions of the Theater of the Absurd. Yet, the reason for its dominance over half a century is the same typical qualities which are however highlighted in this play perhaps more significantly than the others, the same qualities which make Krapp the archetypal figure of Beckett's version of the Theater of the Absurd.

An archetypal figure, Krapp serves as a pattern for all major Beckettian characters. "A wearish old man", we read in the first paragraph of the play, "very near-sighted" and "hard of hearing" (*Krapp*, 1989: 55). Therefore he has some physical defects like other characters in Beckett's drama. He also has problem with his constipation as his name implies. Didi has problem with his kidneys and Gogo with his boots. Hamm is blind; Pozzo also becomes blind in a scene. Lucky is numb. Nag and Nell are legless and kept in dustbins. Hamm cannot stand and Clov cannot sit. Pierre Chabert (1982) is right in calling Beckett's theatre "a portrait gallery of cripples" (Paragraph: 5). Krapp walks laboriously and is in the habit of fumbling in his pockets as other characters in Beckett are inured to fumbling down their pockets, hats, boots, etc. He also has an absurd addiction to bananas and alcohol. As an absurd character, this addiction is perhaps what makes Krapp connected with the world of the living. Most of the characters in the Theater of the Absurd, especially in Beckett's, have some kind of addiction or habit which serves as a life force that is nevertheless unpleasant, but keeps them busy and apparently alive.

With the production of *Krapp's Last Tape* which was originally written as a monologue for the actor Patrick Magee who performed a part of *Molloy* on a BBC production, the minimalist drama showed its true face more significantly than before. In most of the other plays of Beckett produced before and after *Krapp* there is a tendency toward minimalism.

As the stage becomes isolated and more vacant than the pompous late nineteenth century drawing room comedies, and the number of the actors minimized, the body is also manifested in fragments. In *Not I*, as an instance, the whole play is around the utterance of an orphic mouth which has gone mad and has apparently no control over its utterances. In *Krapp*, there is an average number of characters: one and one is complete.

While the majority of the plays produced in the Theater of the Absurd are based upon characters whose bodies are “subjugated to psychological factors” and serve as “a means, entirely subordinated to the plot and to psychological description”, in Beckett’s theater, the body is “approached for and in itself” (Chabert 1982). Chabert compares the body in the works of Beckett to the “raw materials of the painter or sculptor”, therefore the possible interaction between “the body and movement, the body and space, the body and light, the body and words” are explored in “minute attention.” The next important feature of Beckettian body is that its movement is never taken for granted. Beckettian body is deprived of moving or at least moving without difficulty, as Chabert asserts:

The bodies of Beckett’s characters always exist in a state of lack or negativity: unable to be seen, or to move, or to see (Hamm is blind, Krapp is nearsighted and has no glasses) or to hear (Krapp is hard of hearing), etc. And yet it is precisely this lack which gives the body its existence, its dramatic force and its reality as a working material for the stage.

Different critics have found affinities between *Krapp* and other plays of Beckett. Paul Lawley (1994) finds resemblances between *Krapp’s Last Tape* and Beckett’s following plays: *Happy Days* and *Play*. The main core of the three plays is built upon monologue; a monologue that is perhaps the antecedent of the “monological dualism” in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Pozzo and Hamm utter long dialogues in which there is an alteration of tone “between ‘lyrical’ and ‘prosaic’” in Pozzo and “between ‘narrative and ‘normal’” in Hamm. The monologue also continues into plays such as *Ohio impromptu* in which the Listener’s last pages direct us back to *Krapp’s Last Tape*, where Beckett for the first time “isolates the ‘dual monologue’ and explores the regulation of utterance which is intrinsic to it” (89).

However, this dualism is not limited to monologues. There is always a set or sets of contrast in Beckett. This dichotomy of light and dark, movement and stillness, past and present, silence and utterance is central to the Manichean doctrine in which the god of creation is presented as struggling in vain with evil forces that rule the universe. Regarding the dualism in *Endgame*, Fletcher et al. (1978) write:

In the published text, Hamm articulate, erudite, ironical, is set off against Clov, whose linguistic and mental range is narrower. Nagg, coarse and earthly, is contrasted with Nell, who has feelings, and memories which she cherishes. The atmosphere between these four is electric and can erupt into angry rage at the slightest provocation.... So they all react peevishly to each other. (86)

The same argument is almost true about *Waiting for Godot* and other plays in a certain way. For example, the contrasting pair in *Krapp's Last Tape* is Krapp's present voice as an old man of sixty-nine and his recorded voice of thirty years ago; so is the contrast made between his memories at any given moment compared with the recorded memory before that time, that is to say his decaying memory during the passage of time and the canned memory on the tape. There is a contrast between light and darkness, between stillness and movement, between a will to die and a will to survive. In fact, the dualism is highlighted more conspicuously in *Krapp* compared with the other plays of Beckett. "The characterization, therefore, like the dialogue and the general construction, is all fully consistent with the static, inconsequential, claustrophobic and potentially explosive nature of the play" (87), write Fletcher et al. (1978) on *Endgame*. Much in the same way the dualism and the contrast in *Krapp* is widespread and structural.

This dualism is not particular to Krapp's occasion; we have Didi and Gogo, Hamm and Clov, Nagg and Nell, the Reader and the Listener, etc. It is the spirit of the age, the post-world war period in which people are isolated within a narrow space. Krapp's 'den' is the microcosm of the same universe we are living in. In their isolation, people are continually challenging their own needs and aspirations as well as those of their companions. The physical and external conflicts are a projection of the individual's inner conflicts. There is a sense of fear and threat; people are continually waiting for something, some person or situation to come and to give it all a shake, no matter for the better or worse. Nothing is guaranteed and nothing promised. According to Esslin (1965), dramatists such as Beckett "are indeed chiefly concerned with expressing a sense of wonder, of incomprehension, and at times of despair, at the lack of cohesion and meaning that they find in the world." But above all is a dominant sense of regret and failure. Beckett himself says: "Whichever decision he [i.e. Krapp] might have taken, he would have failed" (cited in Lawley, 1994: 93). In fact he has tried to write a play as he asserts "about the situation in reverse" in which with or without the girl in the boat Krapp would have failed the same" (Ibid).

The disillusioning experience of two world wars and the fear of the third which most probably is going to be a nuclear one has pierced into drama, the most social of all arts. The same disillusionment, fear, threat,

and regret have made drama at the same time isolated and bitter. Today, people do not go to watch a production of the Theater of the Absurd to laugh or to enjoy. Such dramas might even “appear as a provocation to people who have come into the theatre expecting to find what they would recognize as a well-made play” as Esslin (1965) writes in *Absurd Drama*. Even if they laugh their enjoyment is out of some temporary sense of humor, otherwise it leads to a bitter disillusionment in which they find themselves no longer able of identification or alienation. The character depicted in the Theater of the Absurd is not vile or vicious to alienate from. He is not heroic or appreciating to identify with. Neither could we sympathize with what seems most like a pathetic image of our inner selves reflected upon a rusty mirror.

Krapp's Last Tape is as much a social drama as it is personal and autobiographical. Twice in the play, we hear about Krapp's *opus magnum* and the seventeen copies sold. Much like Beckett himself, who had the experience of writing for almost twenty years without any recognition, Krapp talks of a bitter disillusionment: “Flagging pursuit of happiness, unattainable laxation” (*Krapp*: 58), and what remains out of his *opus magnum*: “seventeen copies sold” (62). Yet, this sense of despair is not limited to his aspirations as a writer. He “sneers at what he calls his youth and thanks to God it's over” (58). On his birthday occasion thirty years ago he talks of “separating the grain from the husk” (57), *if* there is any grain to be separated, and this perhaps makes him doubtful whether to be or not to be. “Memory and imagination blur in the tapes, which thus annually record not a life, not even the ‘grain’ of a life, but the *imagination* of a grain” (Lawley, 1994: 90). He derides his own aspirations of “drinking less” and his “plan for a less... engrossing sexual life” (*Krapp*: 58). In his disillusionment thirty years ago we hear:

Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice!
Jesus! And the aspirations! [Brief laugh in which Krapp
joins]. And the resolutions! [Brief laugh in which Krapp
joins]. To drink less in particular. [Brief laugh in which
Krapp joins]. (*Krapp*: 58)

In *Krapp*, time is manifested in fragments. He talks of *moments* when his mother dies and he gives the black ball to the white dog. Thus runs the recorded memory: “I sat for a few *moments* with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. [Pause.] *Moments*. Her *moments*, my *moments*. [Pause.] The dog's *moments*” [italics mine] (*Krapp*: 60). The three phases of the recorded tape talk of moments of separation: physically from his mother and his beloved, and mentally from his aspirations as a writer and his dreams and needs as a human being. At the heart of separation, Krapp seeks reconciliation. Times and again we have the reconciliation of the opposites in the play, yet what remains is still a deeper sense of exclusion and failure. As an instance, “let me in”

according to Lawley (1994) is a plea to heal separation and exclusion” which is not necessarily sexual. “The moment is, perhaps, less erotic than it is maternal-filial. The ideal which is touched is a complex of the Mother, the Eye, and the reconciliation of opposites. Rather than a memory, it is an imaginative reliving” (93).

In his article about “Allusion to Archetypes” in Beckett, J. E. Dearlove (1983) quoting Jean-Jacque Mayoux writes: “it is [Beckett’s] particular mission to go to the furthest limit of what is human and show us that it still is human.” And that is what Beckett does indeed in *Krapp* and his other works by signifying the importance of free will and choice in the life of humankind. An Agnostic, Beckett believes in no possible salvation, yet the idea of choice in life and destiny is as old as pagans on Mount Olympus. Regardless of his defects and failures in an absurd universe, Krapp is still a human being who is more or less in charge of the situation he is living in. The end is failure, the beginning is also a failing situation, yet what is important is the individual’s choice, no matter wrong or right.

Regarding the importance of choice in the play, we find Krapp as the regulator of his own past, yet a “very fallible [one] in an obviously dualistic situation” (99) as Lawley (1994) believes. Selecting and editing, “Krapp is no passive listener, but his own ‘programmer’ rearranging his minimal autobiography” (Kennedy, 1991: 69). But he cannot be successful for through the continuous process of manipulation, he himself is manipulated by the memory of his recorded past while manipulating the machine to receive the desirable output. Paul Lawley (1994) writes:

However, the dense mediation of the tape recorder ensures that the play is shadowed by a sense that the power to shape is itself a fiction. It can never be grounded because what is being shaped by the process of editing is itself always already shaped, edited. Krapp cannot shape his experience definitively because he has no unmediated access to the past”. (94)

He hesitates to “be again” to see “if a last effort mightn’t-” (*Krapp*: 63), once more to experience what he calls “all that old misery”, and the misery being, perhaps, his failure as a writer or lover, or more generally his failure as a human being in life: the failure to live up to his aspirations. There is a double irony in “Be again” as Kennedy (1991) puts it of “Krapp’s divided feelings and his self- mocking situation” (72). And what is in the only fragment of the tape and most probably of his life that he listens to three times- his memory of a failed relationship after ‘Bianca in Kedar Street’ and the nursemaid and the others? What is it in their last encounter that gives him silence when he “lay[s] down across

her with [his] face in her breast and [his] hand on her” (*Krapp*: 63)? Kennedy (1991) calls the scene in the punt “among the most memorable scenes in Beckett’s theater” (71), the only recorded episode that “speaks of a true encounter, not just glimpses of beautiful object- like women (72). He writes:

Though it is a ‘farewell scene’ in a failed relationship, it is a tender love idyll, presented in simple and direct lyricism, without irony or interruption from Krapp, young or old This is a ‘still point’, a moment held for a lifetime, rather than a ‘crisis in loving’. (71-72)

His chance of happiness and the best years are gone, but he would not want them back. Not with *the fire* in him. The things he records after thirty years are almost the same stuff he recorded thirty years ago and most probably ten or twelve years before that, and on and on into the vicious circle of the past. The whole recording is a repetition of his being grateful that ‘it is over’, ‘the eyes she had’, a memory of his *opus magnum*, the mixture of light and dark, and the ‘seventeen copies sold’, as he sings for the second time ‘now the day is over, night is drawing’ and ‘the old misery’. The whole process is perhaps a death-wish or waiting for death against his four repetition of “be again” (*Krapp*: 63). He is tenacious. John Spurling (1978) calls “Schubert’s ‘Death and Maiden’ the “burden of Krapp’s tape” (89); he elaborates furthermore:

Like the old woman in *All that Fall* in the ‘ruinous house, Krapp sits in his ‘den’ listening to his personal version of ‘Death and the Maiden’ and waiting for death to claim him, though not... with any feeling of resignation. (90)

In his late thirties, Krapp talks about “the vision at last”, what he has to record that evening and “against the day[that is now arrived at his sixty- ninth birthday] when [his] work will be done and perhaps no place left in [his] memory, warm or cold, for the miracle...” (*Krapp*: 58). And what is this vision that Krapp at sixty-nine no longer cares to listen to or evades from? What is “the light of understanding and the fire” he curses and switches the recorder off? Is it the fire of his youth and his understanding of the will to go on against all odds, or perhaps the will to stop and stop living altogether? His life is a succession of failures and of disconnected fragments in time which he calls moments. He sits in his ‘den’, the microcosm of the wearish post-modern man still tackling with his old habits and old memories, performing a ritualistic recording and editing. “The ‘last tape’ of the title also clearly implies that death is lurking somewhere close at hand, a feeling that is echoed... by Krapp’s croaking efforts to sing Sabine Baring Gould’s evening hymn ‘Now the day is over.’” (James Knowlson 1976)

Krapp's Last Tape is the true story of a man who lives in future when people record their memories on tapes. Now the time has come and we have even gone further in technology and advancement, and who dares challenging Beckett's prophecy of the post-modern man who is incapable of living his own life, no matter how hard he tries. Lawley (1994) quoting Ruby Cohn asserts: "unlike other Beckett stage characters, Krapp is rooted in a familiar world whose every detail is realistically plausible" (89). Eva Navratilova (2007) ascribes the limitation and isolation of man from the world to "Descartes' dualism" and "the foundation of the sisyphusean feeling of the absurdity as it is described by Camus." On the whole, the situation of man over two thousand years of civilization is almost as bad as or even worse than before.

Therefore Beckett, the ex-patriot who was highly shocked after the experiences of the two world wars presents "the first embodiment of the isolated person and mind in a new form of monodrama" (67) as Kennedy (1991) puts it. This isolated person has already shown his face in various productions of the Theater of the Absurd as well as other forms of literary and artistic creations, yet *Krapp's Last Tape* is the prototype of the post-modern theater. According to James Knowlson (1976):

The final confrontation between the younger and the older Krapp evokes then, more than mere sadness at the inevitable decline that occurs in man. For Krapp shows us a man who is torn by conflicting forces and whose life has been ruined by this conflict.

Though, the resonance of death echoes all through the play Krapp is made immortal by his tape recorder which has recorded the history of a man deprived of moving and changing his life, a man who is continually manipulated by his own past as well as the conflicting forces in the universe. The post-modern man is lonesome and disillusioned. The more he tries to connect and to reconcile, the more he is left disappointed and isolated. "Now the day is over and night is drawing..." (*Krapp*: 59). The "late evening in future" has arrived (55) and Old Nick is lurking behind each possible corner. Thus sits man in his 'den' seeking the remembrance of things past, and what remains is some isolated fragments, a blurring mixture of slight moments of happiness foreshadowed by suffering. Krapp calls them *moments*, moments eternalized during the ritual of death and rebirth, a ritual which possibly brings no final salvation as Beckett foresees the future.

Works Cited

- Beckett, S. 1989. *Collected Shorter Plays*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Chabert, P. 1982. "The body in Beckett's theatre." In *Journal of Beckett Studies*.
- Autumn 1982: no. 8. Accessed on Jan 20, 2010 at <http://www.english.fsu.edu/jobs/num08/Num8Chabert.htm>.
- Dearlove, J.E. 1983. "Allusion to Archetypes". In *Journal of Beckett Studies*.
- Autumn 1983: no. 10. Accessed Jan 20, 2010 at <http://www.english.fsu.edu/jobs/num10/Num10Dearlove.htm>.
- Esslin, M. 1965. *Introduction to Absurd Drama*. Penguin Books. Accessed on Jan 20, 2010 at <http://www.samuel-beckett.net/AbsurdEsslin.html>.
- Fletcher, B. S. et al. 1978. *A Student's Guide to The Plays of Samuel Beckett*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Fletcher, J. & Spurling, J. 1978. *Beckett: a study of his plays*. London: Eyre Methuen.
- Kennedy, A. K. 1991. *Samuel Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Knowlson, James. 1976. "Krapp's last tape: the evolution of a play, 1958-75". In *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Winter 1976: No 1. Accessed on Jan 20, 2010 at <http://www.english.fsu.edu/jobs/num01/Num1Knowlson2.htm>.
- Lawley, P. 1994. "Stages of identity: from *Krapp's last tape* to *Play*". In Pilling, J. (1994). *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 88-105.
- Navratilova, E. 2007. "Absurdity of Samuel Beckett". Accessed on Jan 20, 2010 at <http://greatliteraryworks.blogspot.com/2007/12/absurdity-of-samuel-beckett.html>.
- Pilling, J. (Ed.) 1994. *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Spurling, J. 1978. "Death and the Maiden: *Krapp's Last Tape*." In Fletcher, J. & Spurling, J. (1978). *Beckett: A Study of His Plays*. London: Eyre Methuen: 88- 94.

Farideh Pourgiv

Associate Prof. of English Literature
Dept. of Foreign Languages & Linguistics
Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran

Majan Shokouhi

PhD Student of English Literature, Sunderland University
United Kingdom