

**Preoccupation with Death Wish in Samuel Beckett's Plays
Waiting for Godot and Endgame : A Psychobiography**

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ABSTRAK

Waiting for Godot and *Engame* karya Samuel Beckett adalah dua drama absurd paling terkenal di abad 20. Beberapa analisa sebelumnya telah banyak membahas tentang filosofi absurd dan kritik sosial-ekonomi dalam karya. Artikel ini mencoba untuk memberikan sebuah pandangan baru yang ditelisik dari sudut pandang psikologi si penulis melalui teori Psikoanalisis dari Sigmund Freud. Konsep-konsep yang digunakan seperti pendeteksian Freudian Slip, serta simbol-simbol dan asosiasi bebas. Artikel ini akan mengeksplorasi seberapa erat hubungan antara masa lalu si pengarang terhadap karyanya dan bagaimana cara-cara si penulis merefleksikan keinginannya yang terpendam kedalam karyanya. Sehingga pada kesimpulan nanti ditemukan benang merah antara kejadian-kejadian di masa lalu sang penulis yang berkontribusi terhadap perkembangan gangguan kejiwaan si penulis yang tercermin dalam karya-karyanya.

Kata Kunci: Freud, Beckett, thanatos, psikobiografi

ABSTRACT

Waiting for Godot and *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett are two of the most famous absurd plays of the 20th century. Some previous analyses have been dealing a great deal with the philosophy of the absurd and the socio-economic critique in the works. This article tries to give a new view examined from the standpoint of the psychology of the author and through the theory of psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud. Concepts that are used are Freudian slips, as well as symbols and free associations. This article will explore the relationship between the author's past with his works and the ways in which the author reflects his latent desires into his work. In can be concluded that there is a common thread between the events in the author's past, and that they contribute to the author's psychological disorders that are expressed in the two works.

Keywords: Freud, Beckett, thanatos, psychobiography

1. Introduction

World War II is definitely one of the most horrible episodes in human history. It had created a very big change of human life at that time, including literature. Post-War literature especially Theater of the Absurd comes about as the reaction to World War II. No need to say, this genre of theatre took some interest because it used techniques that looked to be illogical to the stage. The plots often revolved from the more traditional episodic structure, and seem to move in a circle, ending the same way it began. The staging was often unrecognizable, and to make matters worse, the dialogue never seemed to make any purpose. Mainly, described about human suffering and loss of meaning in their life. One of the most prominent playwrights in this genre is Samuel Beckett. He had won Noble Literature in 1969 however later he refused it.

The researcher's aim in this chapter is to trace the ways by which Beckett has used his work as reflection of his Death Complex. In order to reach Beckett's aim, the researcher seeks to discuss Beckett's use of characters, dialogue, plot, setting and symbols, by using Freudian Psychoanalytic criticism. These issues will be discussed in details in the following sections.

An Overview to Freud's Theory of Thanatos

Thanatos was the idea coined by the famous psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud. Freud uses the pair of concepts "Eros" and "Thanatos" in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In this book, Freud defines Thanatos as 'an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things' (36). Freud considers the death instinct impulses people to death so that they can have real peace, and only death can free them from unbearable sufferings.

According to Freud's concept of Thanatos, Death instinct exists collective together with Life instinct in human unconscious. It is an irresistible instinctive power in human beings' consciousness. These two instincts always dispute each other to reach the balance. Normally, human has strong Life instinct that promotes unity and desire. But, in extreme pain and pressure, Death Instinct can overcome Life instinct.

People becomes loss their affection and desire to life and eagerly meet with the death to resolve it. The transformation, when people feel the extreme joy, they want to die and hope time will stop at that moment, which is also the evidence of death instinct, is the transformation of life instinct into death instinct. Death instinct is often reflected in attacks and destruction. Outwardly it is expressed in injuring other persons, the top level is war; inwardly it is expressed in self-destruction and death.

The Cause of Beckett's Thanatos

The atmosphere of death and loss of life can be found in every piece of Beckett's plays. Like a shadow that haunted Beckett endlessly. Does it come from his real life

experience? In this chapter, the researcher tries to seek the background of Samuel Beckett and the relation with his Thanatos.

Beckett's Thanatos is closely related to his childhood experiences. First, Beckett comes from Protestant family. Ireland, at that time is dominated by Catholics and the conflict between these two religions became critical and caused young Beckett isolated and love to solitude. The second cause is his unpleasant upbringing from his mother. His mother is too domineering and strict to him. In later life, Beckett said "her savage loving" was an ultimate reason to him to flight from Ireland (Knowlson 180). One time, Beckett called his childhood 'Uneventful and very ordinary. You might say I had a happy childhood . . . although I had little talent for happiness. My parents did everything that they could to make a child happy. But I was often lonely' (Bair 14). His difficult personality and melancholy were admitted by his schoolmaster often labeled him as moody and withdrawn. Unsurprisingly, loneliness, alienation, solitude would become dominated themes in his works.

Young Beckett also near and friendly with pain and suffering. During his final session at Trinity, Beckett met Alfred Péron, a student who had once shared a study with Jean-Paul Sartre at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, in Paris. The two quickly became friends, Péron much helping Beckett in speaking and writing French. He also suggested Beckett to study about philosophy, especially Existentialism: his roommates at that time recall an evening in which Beckett returned to the apartment "with an aluminium strip from one of the printing machines which used to grace the platforms of railway stations, on which he had inscribed the words 'PAIN PAIN PAIN' and which he affixed to the wall" (Knowlson 35). His philosophical point of view also participates to transplant the suffering and pain to Beckett's unconscious.

Another cause of Beckett's suffering and pain is his confrontation with his family. His parents expect him to continue his career in academic sphere, but Beckett sign out from Trinity College in 1931 and joins with artistic career in French. His parents feel betrayed and this caused expectable guilty and anguish for Beckett.

The family tragedy is another factor that causes Beckett's death instinct. In 1933, his father and his lovely cousin died, which caused his first mental breakdown. The death of the members of his family injured him seriously. In great agony, he suffered several mental breakdowns, and claimed mourning and melancholia. Beckett leads for London in later 1933 where he goes psychotherapy with Wilfred Bion in the Tavistock Clinic. He conducts the therapy about 6 months.

Another pain and traumatical experience about death comes in 1938, when an anonymous pimp stabbed Beckett in Montparnasse. The knife penetrated very near into his heart. It creates one more horror moments in his unconsciousness.

The world war also brought his great trauma. In 1942, his resistance group was betrayed by Catholic's Priest and its member sent to death camp. Beckett and Suzanne escape and committed a dangerous journey to unoccupied zone in south French. He hide in the ditch, ate bones and crumbs. This miserable situation more and more made him close to the death.

2. Analysis

Beckett's Thanatos as Reflected in his plays

'In short, every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written large in his works (Woolf 189-190).

Waiting for Godot and Endgame are the masterpiece of Beckett. His experience of life and soul spill in these two works. Most of its, as the researcher infers is his Thanatos domination as the effect of his extreme pain and suffering in whole of his life. His strong desire to death is recorded implicitly in several elements of his plays.

In the first play, *Waiting for Godot*, the researcher examines one by one element of the play: character, dialogue, plot, setting and symbols as Beckett's sublimation of his strong desire to death. In characterization, Beckett's used two pairs; Didi and Gogo – Pozzo and Lucky, as the messenger of his pretention. First one is Didi and Gogo. Beckett's Thanatos can be detected from their action like their contemplation about life "nothing to done" (Godot 1) and repent "our being born" (4). They always confuse about the world that they deal and repent their existence anymore. Their boredom about life finally lead them into "hanging ourselves" (10) that metaphorically give them an "erection". At last, in the second act, they resume their confusion into "we've nothing more to do here, nor anywhere else" (40).

The second pair is Pozzo and Lucky. Beckett transfers his aggression to these characters through their barbaric manners. Pozzo describes as the master slave that conducts Lucky similar with dog. In contrary, Lucky accepts this action as his obedience to Pozzo.

POZZO: (off). On! (Crack of whip. Pozzo appears. They cross the stage. Lucky passes before Vladimir and Estragon and exit. Pozzo at the sight of Vladimir and Estragon stops short. The rope tautens. Pozzo jerks at it violently.) Back! Noise of Lucky falling with all his baggage. Vladimir and Estragon turn towards him, half wishing half fearing to go to his assistance. Vladimir takes a step towards Lucky, Estragon holds him back by the sleeve (Beckett 16).

These sadomasochism actions are such sublimation of Beckett to disguise his superego.

The second element is dialogue. Beckett's Thanatos can be detected into two ways. First is Freudian slip. Freud states that person doing Freudian Slip for three reasons: he is tired, excited or occupied with the other thing (Freud 57). Officially, Freud accuses the person whose doing Freudian Slip says exactly the opposite of what he intended to say (Freud 59). In *Waiting for Godot*, several slip of tongue can be included into list: "Nothing to be done" (1), "I thought you were gone forever" (2), "in a ditch" (2) ... You always wait for "the last moment" (3) "Our being born" (4) "Imbecile. From death" (5) "what about hanging ourselves" (10) "I remain the dark" (11) "by all means, nothing simpler. It's the natural order." (33).

NOTHING-TO BE-DONE-GONE FOREVER-DEATH-LAST MOMENT-OUR BEING BORN-HANGING OURSELVES-THE DARK is clearly can be recognized as the repetition compulsion of the idea of death. The association of these

words crossed the desire of Samuel Beckett to die or back to earlier stage of human being. Several words like NATURAL ORDER figuratively explain the aim of human being to reach the death. DITCH associates with the dark-narrow hole could be identified as a grave.

The second method is offensive speech. Since Thanatos works for disuniting biological, psychological and social unities, offensive speech can be categorized as psychological disuniting to external.

VLADIMIR: When I think of it . . . all these years . . . but for me . . . where would you be . . . (Decisively.) You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it. (Waiting for Godot 2)

VLADIMIR: Imbecile! From death. (5)

ESTRAGON: People are bloody ignorant apes (6)

VLADIMIR: You're merciless. (7)

ESTRAGON: I had a dream.

VLADIMIR: Don't tell me!

ESTRAGON: I dreamt that—

VLADIMIR: DON'T TELL ME! (9)

ESTRAGON: This is how it is. (He reflects.) The bough . . . the bough . . . (Angrily.) Use your head, can't you? (11)

VLADIMIR: (to Lucky). How dare you! It's abominable! Such a good master! Crucify him like that! After so many years! Really! (28)

ESTRAGON: (violently). Will you approach! (The Boy advances timidly.) What kept you so late? (43)

ESTRAGON: (violently). You let me alone. (Advancing, to the Boy.) Do you know what time it is? (43)

ESTRAGON: That's all a pack of lies. (Shaking the Boy by the arm.) Tell us the truth! (44)

The huge numbers of offensive speech above, undeniably come from the domination of Beckett's Thanatos in his unconscious and being transferred into the dialogue of the play.

The plot of this play also gives any clues. Needless to say, Beckett's play reject traditional plot as Plato proposed before. Beckett created his plot like a circular and repetitive action. Like occurs in the last line of the play:

VLADIMIR:

Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON:

Yes, let's go.

They do not move (95)

The sameness of the starting point of this story with the end, metaphorically symbolizes Beckett's desire to back to "an earlier stage of thing".

The next element is the setting. The play sets up in "a country road. A tree" (1). No advance explanation about the setting in this play. Beckett crafts a unrecognizable world, without explanation why, and posits human as confused with their existence. The rejection of the beauty of the world unquestionably is the reflection of Beckett's Thanatos that stimulates him into creative mentality.

The last is about symbols. In Rycroft definition, “Symbolization is a general capacity of mind, based on perception and can be used by primary or secondary process, neurotically or realistically, for defense or self-expression” (142-3). In this circumstance, the writer finds several symbols as the self-expression of Beckett’s Thanatos in *Waiting for Godot*. The symbol is derived by certain “conventional meaning” that emerges similarly and could be associated with Beckett’s Thanatos.

A tree, in Bible stated: 'Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life' (Proverb 13: 112). Beckett alludes the “tree” as desire of a hope. In this play, the hope that was symbolized by Godot’s arrival, never comes, so the tree is changing into a tree of death. Beckett’s used the tree as the pole for hanging the bums. Metaphorically could say, the crucifixion process.

A mound is reminded us about the pile of human’s body during the Nazi’s regime and World War II. It’s simply related to Beckett’s sublimation about his desire to death. The nightfall is also an image of death. The dark and fall, solitude and lonely, are the basic mood of death belonging.

The second play that very similar with the first one entitled *Endgame*. It is written a year after his brother and mother died together. Unsurprisingly, this works full of guilt and sense of loss. The researcher examines this play alike the first play to prove Beckett’s Thanatos in his works.

Firstly is about the characters. The characters in this play seem like imperfect creature, mentally or physically. Nagg and Nell are legless.

NAGG:

Do you remember---

NELL:

No.

NAGG:

When we crashed on our tandem and lost our shanks (Endgame 12).

Hamm is blind and unable to stand. Clov can’t sit and has disabilities to be independent.

CLOV:

I can't sit.

HAMM:

True. And I can't stand (8).

Beckett metaphorically is breaking the Eros. He separated human being from their happiness with their lack and powerless. This is definitely is one of the effect of Thanatos in his unconscious.

Another proof comes from the dialogue. Clov speech is the opening of the story, but he said “finished” four times. Metaphorically, Beckett apparently kills his play from first line. He attempts to emphasize the story’s aim. Beckett is stressing any words: GRAIN-upon-GRAIN-ONE-by-ONE and A HEAP-LITTLE HEAP-IMPOSSIBLE HEAP. It’s look like a puzzle about human life cycle. Experimentally, the writer associates this puzzle like this: start with the GRAIN means “small pieces”, ONE-by-ONE is the process of human individuation, HEAP means “mass”, LITTLE HEAP means “community and civilization” and IMPOSSIBLE HEAP means

“nothingness”. The word-puzzle is Beckett’s allegory about his dissatisfaction about human civilization.

Again, Beckett plays the clue about the setting of the play. Beckett gives the detail of the setting of this play thru the dialogue. Paradoxically, it’s still hard to identify where the exactly it is and when the time. In the dialogue between Hamm and Clov, when Clov saw the outside of the hall from the windows:

CLOV: Nor I. (He gets up on ladder, turns the telescope on the without.) Let's see. (He looks, moving the telescope.) Zero... (He looks)...zero... (He looks)...and zero.

HAMM: Nothing stirs. All is---

CLOV: Zer---

HAMM (violently): Wait till you're spoken to! (Normal voice.) All is... all is... all is what? (Violently.) All is what?

CLOV: What all is? In a word? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment.(He turns the telescope, turns towards Hamm.) Corpsed. (21-22)

Clov describes the setting about nothing and just corpses everywhere. It clearly reflects the death idea of Samuel Beckett. His death-wishing is disguised with the zero setting with corpses around there. Similar with the statement above, death wishes is one of the expressions of the internally directed death drive.

The symbols are the last proof of Beckett’s Thanatos. Since “only what is repressed is symbolized, only what is repressed needs to be symbolized” (Jones 116). It means, all of the repressed in human unconsciousness, finally express through unfamiliar way, in this case, symbolization. The repressed-impulse of Beckett’s death wish appears in several symbols in Endgame’s story.

In one conversation, Hamm commands Clov to see what happen out of their area. Then Clov takes the ladder, and observes with microscope.

CLOV: Let's see. (He looks, moving the telescope.) Zero...(he looks)...zero... (he looks)...and zero.

HAMM: Nothing stirs. All is---

CLOV: Zer---

HAMM (violently): Wait till you're spoken to!

(Normal voice.) All is... all is... all is what? (Violently.) All is what?

CLOV: What all is? In a word? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment. (He turns the telescope on the without, looks, lowers the telescope, turns towards Hamm.) Corpsed.

Beckett uses the zero-word for expressed his idea of death. Zero is clearly symbolize the meaningless of human condition, and in the end of conversation, Clov says “corpsed” that means the dead body.

Sharon Heller in her book A-Z Freud, concluded that the repetition compulsion contradicts the pleasure principle because the repetitive attempts are not at wishful gratifications but to master an anxiety-laden experience (43). The repetition of zero-word can be referred to Beckett’s anxiety-laden experience. Relates to his biography, it is allude to Beckett experience in Nazi’s holocaust. In addition to, Adorno is reading Beckett text as symptomatic of a doomed capitalist culture—a culture inevitably culminating in Auschwitz and the atomic bomb. The horror-

experienced in the past, repressed into Beckett's memory, and emerge thru his repetition in his works.

The next symbol is Desert. It's the last word from Hamm's mother, Nell, before she died in ashbin.

HAMM: What? What's she blathering about?

(Clov stoops, takes Nell's hand, feels her pulse.)

NELL (to Clov): Desert!

(Clov lets go her hand, pushes her back in the bin, closes the lid.)

CLOV (returning to his place beside the chair): She has no pulse.

HAMM: What was she drivelling about?

CLOV: She told me to go away, into the desert.

HAMM: Damn busybody! Is that all? (17)

Desert can be defined as the quiet and peace place. The features like lonesome and silent bring our understanding to tendency of death belonging, very similar with Nirvana-principle in Buddhism. In addition to, Death instinct as homeostasis is a biological urge toward internal harmony, Freud thought it evidenced an inherent instinct for self-annihilation (Brown 87). So, Desert in this respect, is the symbolism of internal harmony from Beckett. His wishes of silent and calm manifest and came thru this symbolism.

3. Conclusion

Beckett's unique techniques in building his works can be suspected as his sublimation over his Death complex to disguise superego. The domination of his Thanatos created a significant changing of his style after the War. His desire to death is stronger and finally dominated his unconsciousness into the level of creative writing. Several elements of his play point out his emphasize and his aim to disuniting and rejecting civilization as the practical of Eros. With his skill, he redefines his Thanatos into an acceptable wish in the society without disturb by superego.

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