

Beckett's Absurd Plays-A Study in Stylistics

Barun kumar Jha

Assistant Professor
CCSIT, TMU, Moradabad

ABSTRACT:

The playwrights of the late 19th century are interested in assuring the reality of the 'ideas as against ideas.' This is the totality of an essence grasped by intuition as against analytic categories. Samuel Beckett has not used conventional language. He employs some unique techniques which become clear through a detailed analysis of the structure of his plays and style. Beckett's verbal language reveals the eleven stylistic features like Repetition, Monologue, Stichomythia, Phatic communication, Word groupings, Intentional dystax, Contradiction, Clichés and Pratfalls, Indelicacies, Structural closure and Absence of language (Silence). Beckett's style can be analyzed on two levels -idiosyncratic level and deeper level. Idiosyncratic analysis clarifies the most obvious features of Beckett's style. On a deeper level, the structural idiosyncrasies leave impact on dramatic situation, idea and characters. Beckett has frequently used these stylistic features to assert his existentialist point of view in most of his plays. The speech patterns of the characters-recurrent vocabulary, pronoun shifts, sound effects, reinforce the major themes of existentialism and absurdum.

Key words: *Monologue, Stichomythia, Phatic communication, Word groupings, Intentional dystax, etc.*

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Discussion: In the avant-garde theatre, the static techniques have become a new convention:

Martin Esslin says:

“The defiant rejection of language as the main vehicle of the dramatic is by no means the equivalent of a total rejection of all meaning...On the contrary; it constitutes an earnest endeavour to penetrate to deeper layers of reality.”

Repetition is one of Beckett’s favorite stylistic devices. The technique of repetitive questioning is Beckett’s favorite language ‘tricks’. The question and answer formula is noticed twelve times in *Waiting for Godot*. The following exchange clarifies this technique:

Vladimir: Is it not?

Estragon: I think it is

Vladimir: I think so too.

Estragon: And we

Vladimir: I beg your pardon?

Estragon: I said, and we?

Vladimir: I don’t understand.

Estragon: Where do we come in?

Vladimir: Come in

Estragon: Take your time

Come in, on our hands and knees.

Estragon: As bad as that?

Vladimir: Your worship wishes to assert his prerogatives?

Estragon: We've no right anymore?

Speech disintegration is the second stylistic feature used by Beckett. It shows the breakdown in communication and the whole process. It is used to emphasize the solitude of each and every character. Hamm and Clov in Endgame mock the inability of language to communicate:

Hamm: We're not beginning to ...to...mean something

Clove: Mean something! You and I mean something!

(Break laugh)

An that's a good one!

Beckett uses faulty communication to create misunderstanding among the characters. Ambiguities, misconstruing a question, confusion of sounds are the examples of it. The play opens on an ambiguous note, "Nothing to be done," that not leads into a dialogue but into two monologues –Estragon discussing his shoes, Vladimir their tedious existence and their inability to alter it. Again, misunderstanding arises from ambiguous syntax when Pozzo asks "Are you friends?" Estragon interprets this to mean "Are you and Vladimir friends?" and Vladimir has to explain that Pozzo is asking whether Vladimir and Estragon are friends of his. Other forms of imprecision also play roles in faulty communication. On one occasion Estragon forces Vladimir to be more explicit:

Vladimir: Then why do you always come crawling back?

Estragon: I don't know.

Vladimir: No. but I do.....

Vladimir: No, I mean before they beat you. I would have stopped you from doing whatever it was you were doing.

Faulty pronominal reference causes a very complex understanding between Estragon and Vladimir. Vladimir without prompting says, "Suppose you try them?" using a specific pronoun "les" without any specified reference. Estragon answers back to this proposal that he has tried

everything. These linguistic accidents are a source of humor in the play, as they would be in any conventional comedy.

The most obvious example of monologue in the play is Lucy's speech. It is entirely special, because it is delivered upon command and is therefore to some extent lose characteristic of the egocentricity. Since it is offered as a diversion, Pozzo's monologue, on the other hand proceeds largely from his egocentricity.

There is a dominant and constant 'female solo' in Happy Days. Winne is the main character who speaks continuously from the beginning to the end of the play. Winne starts her solo in the very first act of the play.

Stichomythia is characterized by the staccato effect of dialogue made up of short, balanced remarks. This type of dramatic dialogue is usually a duet- two voices set the rhythm going and then round it off.

Beckett holds the cadence, but has completely changed the classical stichomythic requirement in which thought progresses accumulatively. Beckett's greatness lies in elevating prose to the level of poetry without glorifying language or constructing beautiful metaphors. The following lines illustrate it:

Vladimir: A running sore.

Estragon: It's the rope

Vladimir: It's the rubbing

Estragon: It's inevitable.

Phatic Communion is a powerful linguistic device frequently used by Beckett in plays to demonstrate the bonds of social communion between individuals. It also functions a perfect anti-plot device in Beckett's plays. Waiting for Godot is often quoted for using this linguistic device. For example, Estragon cries out for words to fill the void. "Let's make a little conversation." But even the proliferation of words cannot guarantee communication. Often the so called

dialogue degenerates into two distinct monologues-what began as inter-personal communication fades into individual logorrhea:

“Vladimir: Say you are (happy) even if it’s not true.

Estragon: What am I to say?

Vladimir: Say, I am happy.

Estragon: I am happy.

Vladimir: So I am.

Estragon: So am I.

Vladimir: We are happy. What do we do now we are happy?”

Beckett’s Phatic communion is also tinged with irony undermining the stability of the world.

Syntax is rooted in Beckettian philosophy. Federman says that “Beckett delights in abusing the vocabulary distorting the syntax, torturing the diction, until linguistic complexities are made to demonstrate the inadequacy of language as a means of communication”.

Beckett’s syntax is often the syntax of nonsense and the grammar of absurdity. Dystax is considered the clearest statement of Beckett’s belief in the uselessness of thought. A segment of Lucky’s fragmented monologue aptly illustrates it.

Lucky: -----Connemara.

Contradiction is another characteristic of Beckett’s prose which functions as an anti-clarity device. In *Waiting for Godot*, there are numerous lines which express what was said in the preceding speech, co- confirms that, “his subject matter begins to drift further and further away from the realms of common “reality” toward nothingness which is ultimate reality. ‘Nothing’ cannot be expressed directly in terms of language – All language is specious.”

Both cliché and pratfall have been united under one section since they often function in close relationship. The pratfall may be designed to express unwarranted or at least unexpected pain. It

is a comic destruction of cliché sentiments. When Estragon asks Vladimir to embrace him, Vladimir obliges but the effect is sentimental, “.... (Estragon recoils.) You stink of garlic.”

Clichés are changed into games or rituals by dividing the lines between Gogo and Didi, by arbitrarily assigning one phrase to each. Thus, we have a sense of their “pairdom” while we are entranced by the rhythm of their dialogue. The final, striking characteristic of Beckett’s style is the absence of language. Susan Sontag says:

In greatest art one is always aware of things that cannot be said, of the contradiction between expression and the presence of the inexpressible. Stylistic devices are also techniques of avoidance. The most potent elements in a work of art are, often, its silence.

The frequent silences which isolate the words in Beckett’s plays serve to isolate the characters from one another and to intimate that the final answer will be silence. Federman distinguishes this desire for silence, for annihilation of one’s being as a form of creative impotence. The hollow sound effects of the play support the themes of horror and conventional emptiness. These hollow sounds and the monologues are in sharp contrast to the periods of silence that recur throughout the play. These silences function on several levels, ranging from the social to the metaphysical.

The tension between sound and silence appears at the beginning of the play and becomes more pronounced by the end. It reflects two basic and paradoxical aspects of man’s metaphysical or essential nature-his compulsion to speak, which is social, and his condemnation to silence, which is a manifestation of his solitude. This paradox is achieved by juxtaposing Lucky’s muteness to the incessant characters of Estragon and Vladimir. It is further demonstrated by Vladimir and Estragon’s periods of alternating silence and conversation. As the dialogue of the play shows, language is a faulty mirror of reality, and furthermore, our use of language reflects egocentricity. Beckett’s reduction of speech to ordinary language allows him to say nothing about the foundation of speech of the natural order of the world. As Stanley Rosen demonstrates, the choice of silence is the choice of the nihilist.

The often-used pauses are significant in *Happy Days*. The frequently- scattered pauses illustrate that language is not enough, and one day words must fail. When silence invades the sphere of

speech, non –being invades the domain of being. In Winnie’s case, pauses are bits of silence which is her biggest fear; the enemy:

I say I used to say, Winnie you are changeless, and there is never any difference between one fraction of a second and the next. (Pause.) Why being that up Again? (Pause.) All one can (Pause.) my neck is heating me (pause.)

Just change I take it, happy chance.’ (Pause.) Oh yes, abounding mercies. (Long Pause.) And now? The pink fizz. (Pause.) The flute glasses. (Pause.)

When we look at Krapp’s mode of speech from his own existential point of view, we come to know that his voices are not connected with any other speaker in an act of communication, but his isolation provides him with a rare monopoly over his tapes and speeches. He is obsolete and sole master for all time. He is his own author, publisher, director, performer and audience. He is free to shape and reshape these fragments of unpublished autobiography, selecting and adding to whatever he chooses.

Conclusion: Thus, it is obvious that Samuel Beckett has aptly used proper linguistic devices to reflect the philosophy of existentialism and its associated theme in his plays.

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