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LOOKING FOR LOVE ON SAMUEL BECKETT'S STAGE: HOMOEROTICISM, STERILITY AND THE POSTCOLONIAL CONDITION

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While Samuel Beckett's work obviously fits into postmodern classification, *Waiting For Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* are not only postmodern but also postcolonial dramas. Beckett's political agenda in *Waiting For Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* dismantles the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that create unequal relations of power by exploring the sexual role of the Irish male in colonized Ireland. According to Simon Slemon, postcolonial literature functions as a "form of cultural criticism and cultural critique: a mode of disidentifying whole societies from the sovereign codes of cultural organisation, and an inherently dialectical intervention in the hegemonic production of cultural meaning" (14). Samuel Beckett succeeds in removing his characters and settings from those prevalent in colonized Ireland. In fact, as Yuan Yuan asserts, Beckett's drama, specifically *Waiting For Godot*, functions as a postcolonial text because it is "structured and dominated by absence. The play neither designates any particular location nor does it indicate a specific time in history, and the central character is absent from the scene" (5). By removing his setting and characters from the realistic situation of colonized Ireland, Beckett contributes to the destabilization of the cultural and political authority of imperialism.

In Beckett's plays, the new society created is not one of hope and rebuilding. Instead, his dramas identify the Irish people, males in particular, as a people cut off from their pasts, cultures, and identities. Beckett's work reflects the profound anguish, despair and isolation felt as a result of the decay of western civilization. The characters in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* illustrate the absurdity of man's condition and the futility and helplessness of a humanity removed from itself. After events like the

Holocaust and Hiroshima, the ease with which an imperial power could commit genocide either through systematic killing or, as is the case with Ireland, through systematic eradication of culture became apparent. These factors led Beckett to emphasize “the search for man’s own identity—not the *finding* of the true nature of the self” (Esslin 138). As a means of raising “the problem of identity itself, the confrontation of the audience with the existence of its own problematical and mysterious condition” becomes the fundamental channel through which Beckett attempts to destabilize the influence of the coloniser (Esslin 138).

The problem of identity for the colonized Irish male begins when the English king ascends to the throne and marries the land. The Irish people identify their island as a woman. Therefore, when the king marries the land, he marries Ireland and her women. As Beckett’s work shows, the Irish male suffers because he becomes unidentifiable. The English take on the role of the colonizer, the males, the husbands of the land. The women become the colonized, the submissive wives of the colonizer. But the Irish men play no role in their society. Their women are submissive to the colonizer instead of to them. Irish women, Irish pasts, and Ireland itself remain dead to Irish males. Therefore, the Irish male must attempt to confirm his existence and the existence of humanity through the only available option besides isolation, other men.

In Beckett’s plays, many of the male characters are interdependent. They rely on other characters for needs including emotional and sexual desires. Although the Irish in the 1950s did not recognize homosexuality as an acceptable practice, Beckett uses muted homoerotic desire in his plays to demonstrate the state of the Irish male as man cut off from nature and reproduction because of the influence of an imperial power. According to Eibhear Walshe:

Post-colonial countries like Ireland have particular difficulty with the real presence of the homoerotic. Colonialism itself generates a gendered power relationship and, inevitably, casts the colonizing power as masculine and dominant and the colonized as feminine and passive. One of the consequences of this resistance to the imperial was an increased unease with the shifting and ‘unstable’ nature of sexual difference, and so a narrowing of gender hierarchies ensues. (5)

In *Waiting For Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp’s Last Tape* the absence of women serves as a metaphor for the presence of a colonizer. Although Irish males wait for sexual reinforcements and sometimes fantasize about the women formerly present in their lives, the reality that Irish women are submissive to the English, as the colonized is

submissive to the colonizer, leaves nothing for Irish males to hope for in the future. Reproduction becomes an impossibility, and sexuality becomes limited to homosexuality. Therefore, in Beckett's works, the characters obsess about the world being an uninhabited place. For Beckett, hegemonic boundaries lead to isolation and apocalyptic visions.

The relationships between the characters in *Waiting For Godot* exemplify the relationship between the Irish and the English. The bond of Pozzo and Lucky mirrors that of the colonizer and the colonized. Pozzo embodies the character of imperialism. He is a sadistic master who uses power to control Lucky. Lucky, on the other hand, can be viewed as the submissive Irish woman. Although Lucky is cast as a male, Vladimir calls Lucky "effeminate" (Beckett, *Waiting For Godot* 17b). He also insists that Lucky is not bad looking. Nevertheless, the relationship between Lucky and Pozzo illustrates the struggle between the Irish and the English. A rope that not only serves as a material tie but also a psychological tie connects the two. When Vladimir and Estragon ask why Lucky remains submissive, Pozzo has a difficult time explaining the phenomena of colonization:

POZZO: He wants to impress me, so that I'll keep him.

ESTRAGON: What?

POZZO: Perhaps I haven't got it quite right. He wants to mollify me, so that I'll give up the idea of parting with him. No, that's not exactly it either.

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?

POZZO: He wants to cod me, but he won't. (21a)

Unable to explain why he controls Lucky and forces him to submit, Pozzo says, "Remark that I might just as well have been in his shoes and he in mine. If chance had not willed otherwise. To each one his due" (21b). Pozzo fails to explain his authority over Lucky just as the English fail to explain their authority over the Irish.

While Pozzo and Lucky represent the role of the colonized and the colonizer, Vladimir and Estragon symbolize displaced Irish males. They wait by a tree for a man called Godot. Although the identity of Godot will remain a mystery indefinitely, Vladimir and Estragon have specific ideas about what they expect from Godot. When Pozzo and Lucky fall in front of Estragon and Vladimir, Estragon asks, "Is it Godot?" (48b). Vladimir replies, "At last! (*He goes towards the heap.*) Reinforcements at last!" (48b). Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for sexual reinforcements. Although homoerotic desire exists between Vladimir and Estragon, they are not blatant homosexuals. At times, they even attempt to become aroused by thoughts of women.

However, desire for women subsides because of the role of the English. By making women unavailable to Vladimir and Estragon and by forcing them to express their sexual desires through homoeroticism, Beckett demonstrates the inevitable breakdown of Irish culture and lineage as a direct result of the oppressor's force. The bodies of Irish women are no longer available for reproduction because they are marked for consumption within imperialism's particular brand of patriarchy.

Vladimir and Estragon recognize that their homosexual desires will be unable to save humanity. Vladimir and Estragon struggle not only with the absence of women, but also with their inability to take an active role in the continuation of Irish lineage:

VLADIMIR: Suppose we repented.

ESTRAGO: Repented what?

VLADIMIR: Oh ... (*He reflects*). We wouldn't have to go into the details.

ESTRAGON: Our being born?

Vladimir breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles, his hand pressed to his pubis, his face contorted.

VLADIMIR: One daren't even laugh any more.

ESTRAGON: Dreadful privation. (8b)

When Vladimir presses his hand to his pubis and contorts his face, he symbolically acknowledges the desperate state of the colonized male. Because the Irish are no longer able to function as a distinct cultural group, not only their lineage but also their financial value to the English decreases because reproduction of people and inevitably goods will cease. The colonizer, the play seems to suggest, must eventually face the consequences of what Césaire calls the 'boomerang' effect of colonization: its decivilising of both oppressor and oppressed (26).

While waiting for a change in their situation, Vladimir and Estragon contemplate their abilities to produce. Like Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, Vladimir and Estragon are so desperate that they would be satisfied with the production of vegetation:

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR: Hmm. It'd give us an erection.

ESTRAGO: (*highly excited*.) An erection!

VLADIMIR: With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow. That's why they shriek when you pull them up. Did you not know that?

ESTRAGON: Let's hang ourselves immediately! (12a)

Although Irish males are unable to reproduce alone, the logic of Foucault's repressive hypothesis—what is prohibited returns in new and resignifying forms—becomes important. Vladimir and Estragon relocate their desires onto each other and onto alternative forms of sexual satisfaction in order to deal with their repression under British rule.

According to Walshe, “the post-colonial struggle to escape the influence of the colonizing power became a struggle to escape the gendered relation of male colonizer to female colonized” (5). When Estragon tells Vladimir the story of an Englishman who visits a brothel, Vladimir yells, “STOP IT!” before running off of the stage and attempting to masturbate (11b). Estragon stays on the stage and cheers for Vladimir, but Vladimir fails to ejaculate because women no longer play a sexual role in the life of the Irish male, Once Vladimir returns to the stage:

He brushes past Estragon, crosses the stage with bowed head. Estragon takes a step towards him, halts.

ESTRAGON: (*gently.*) You wanted to speak to me?

(Silence. Estragon takes a step forward.) You had something to say to me? *(Silence. Another step forward.)* Didi ...

VLADIMIR: (*without turning*) I've nothing to say to you.

ESTRAGON: (*step forward*). You're angry? *(Silence. Step forward.)*

Forgive me. *(Silence. Step forward. Estragon lays his hand on Vladimir's shoulder.)* Come, Didi. *(Silence.)* Give me your hand. *(Vladimir half turns.)* Embrace me! *(Vladimir stiffens.)* Don't be stubborn! *(Vladimir softens. They embrace. Estragon recoils.)*
(11b-12a)

The desire for women is replaced by desire for men. Whereas Vladimir fails in his attempt to become aroused by the thought of a woman, he succeeds in being emotionally and physically comforted by Estragon.

The interdependence of Vladimir and Estragon appears throughout the play. When they are reunited after a night apart, Vladimir says, “Together again at last! We'll have to celebrate this. But how? (*He reflects.*) Get up till I embrace you” (7a). The two spend every day together and share a few vague memories that seem to refer to a time when their homosexual tendencies did not threaten the survival of the Irish lineage as it does during the play. While reminiscing, Vladimir asks Estragon to recall the time they were “hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were respectable in those days. Now it's too late” (7b). According to Stephen Watt, “memory inevitably signals diminished stature or even personal

losses" (77). Vladimir and Estragon must come to terms with nothing less than the loss of their identities. While the English become the husbands of the land and the Irish women necessarily submit to the colonizer, the Irish males lose all sense of productiveness. Hence, Vladimir and Estragon cling to one another. The relationship between Vladimir and Estragon stretches back for as long as they can remember. Neither recalls a day when the other was not around, therefore, the romantic insinuations made by both characters suggest their desire for one another.

The emphasis on each of the distinct and complementary characteristics of both Vladimir and Estragon supports the idea that the men are inseparable. Vladimir assumes the identity of a man of intellect. He possesses romantic notions and always has trouble with his hat; Estragon always has trouble with his shoes and seems to be a man of factual and rational thought. Vladimir has bad breath; Estragon has stinky feet. They complement each other and rely on one another for intellectual, emotional and sexual fulfillment. In the following scene, the reliance of each character on the other leads to intense physical contact:

VLADIMIR: Did I ever leave you?

ESTRAGON: You let me go.

VLADIMIR: Look at me. (*Estragon does not raise his head. Violently.*)

Will you look at me! Estragon raises his head. They look long at each other, then suddenly embrace, clapping each other on the back. End of the embrace. Estragon, no longer supported, almost falls. (38a)

This complementary relationship also exists between the main characters in *Endgame*. Hamm relies on Clov for movement, and Clov relies on Hamm for food. Stephen Watt notes that Hamm's actions are "complicit with biology in producing desire in Clov, vowing to maintain it at a constant pitch" (81). Hamm gives Clov only enough food to allow him to survive, thereby forcing him to remain dependent on and desirous of Hamm's attention and care.

The most fundamental element linking *Waiting For Godot* with *Endgame* lies in the characters' realization that chances for survival are bleak. Nature does not aid the characters in *Endgame*. Hamm tells Clov, "It'd need to rain," and Clov answers, "It won't rain" (457). Both Hamm and Clov wish for and fear the return of natural reproduction. However, both Hamm and Clov realize that nature, as they previously knew it, has vanished. Like the colonized Irish male, Hamm and Clov understand that natural reproduction and autonomy are hindered by the constant presence of the colonizer, who leaves them

struggling to survive in what they consider to be an aberrant state.

Unlike Clov, Hamm believes that “nature has forgotten us” (459). According to Hamm, nature has forgotten to endow men with the ability to create life. Since heterosexual relationships are no longer available, standard rules of lineage cannot be applied. Throughout the play, Hamm speaks of his role as a father to Clov even though he is not biologically the father. However, Clov, unlike Hamm, rejects the existence of nature all together. He states, “There’s no more nature” (459).

Without women available to repopulate the earth, man will die. Like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting For Godot*, Hamm and Clov search for alternative means of reproduction. Vladimir and Estragon plan to get erections by hanging themselves. They expect mandrakes will grow, but their plans never materialize. Hamm and Clov apparently planned a similar situation in which Clov would ejaculate in hopes of producing some sort of edible vegetation because of the limited supplies of food available. But the plan fails to produce results:

HAMM: Did your seeds come up?

CLOV: No.

HAMM: Did you scratch around to see if they had sprouted?

CLOV: They haven’t sprouted.

HAMM: Perhaps it’s still too early.

CLOV: If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted. (*Violently.*) They’ll never sprout! (459).

Both Hamm and Clov believe that they are among the last inhabitants. Hamm realizes, “There’s no one else,” and Clov replies, “There’s nowhere else” (458). Unlike Hamm, Clov understands that their homosexual and experimental procreation techniques will not work. Creation has come to a standstill as shown by the state of Hamm’s dog, who like the Irish male, exists without a sex. Hamm complains, “You’ve forgotten the sex.” Clov replies, “(*vexed*) but he isn’t finished. The sex goes at the end” (467). Clov still hopes that natural reproduction will become an option again. However, because of colonization a new risk has arrived. For Hamm and Clov, the existence of others would bring quicker deaths for the two of them because they have only a small quantity of food and supplies. When a flea is found, Hamm reacts angrily:

HAMM (*very perturbed*): But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him for the love of God!

CLOV: I’ll go get the powder.

(Exit Clov.)

HAMM: A flea! This is awful! What a day!

(Enter CLOV with a sprinkling-tin.)

CLOV: I'm back again, with the insecticide.

HAMM: Let him have it!

(CLOV loosens the top of his trousers, pulls it forward and shakes powder into the aperture. He stoops, looks, waits, starts, frenziedly shakes more powder, stoops, looks, waits.)

CLOV: The bastard!

Although Hamm and Clov must now resist the existence of other creatures during the play, at one time, Clov felt differently. He believed that Hamm could have filled Mother Pegg's empty womb and accuses Hamm of failing to impregnate her:

CLOV (*harshly*): When old Mother Pegg asked you for oil for her lamp and you told her to get out to hell, you knew what was happening then, no?

(Pause.)

You know what she died of, Mother Pegg? Of darkness. (478)

In *Endgame*, unlike in *Waiting For Godot*, a woman was at one time available. Mother Pegg, who symbolically represents Ireland, dies because her womb remains empty. The light has gone out on the country because of the presence of a dominating colonizer and the inability of the Irish male to recognize his own virility in the face of oppression.

A major difference between *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame* lies in the role of women in the play. During the action of the play, women are once again unavailable. While heterosexual desire exists, it subsists only in the memory. Nell and Nagg remember their engagement, but the existence of sexuality during that time has been ensnared by colonization. Nell and Nagg are no longer capable of physically expressing their desires towards one another because their bodies are contained in barrels. In the following scene, Beckett demonstrates the inability of the Irish male to connect to the Irish woman because she has been cut off from him by her subservience to the colonizer.

NAGG: Were you asleep?

NELL: Oh, no!

NAGG: Kiss me.

NELL: We can't.

NAGG: Try.

(Their heads strain toward each other, fail to meet, fall apart again.)

NELL: Why this farce day after day? (450)

Sexual connection is an impossibility in the plays of Samuel Beckett. Heterosexual relationships cannot exist when the colonizer is male and the colonized is female. In order to establish a sexual outlet, Hamm and Clov turn to each other and express their homoerotic desires. Hamm asks Clov, "Kiss me. (*Pause.*) Will you not kiss me?" (475). When Clov refuses, Hamm becomes more insistent, "On the forehead ...Give me your hand at least ... Will you not give me your hand" (475). Clov refuses because he realizes that homosexual encounters will not help the situation. In a description of his anatomy, Clov says, "I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and between my legs a little of black dust. I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit" (480). Although Clov realizes that his sexual organs are no longer useful, Hamm still relies on him for sexual and emotional fulfillment. When Clov threatens to leave, Hamm becomes sensitive:

HAMM: You're leaving me all the same.

CLOV: I'm trying.

HAMM: You don't love me.

CLOV: No.

HAMM: You loved me once.

CLOV: Once! (458)

Although Clov threatens to leave, he is incapable of surviving without Hamm. The two men rely on each other for continued existence. As in *Waiting For Godot* the characters in *Endgame* are inextricably linked due to the loss of identity they suffer as a result of imperialism. The absence of women forces them to pursue their homosexual behavior and therefore implement a form of anti-procreation in order to break the generation of colonized Irishmen.

Krapp's Last Tape, like *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame*, explores the life of a man cut off from heterosexual relationships due to the colonizer's view of the woman's body and Ireland as territory. *Krapp's Last Tape* begins with Krapp choosing a key. He then takes a "large banana ...strokes banana, peels it, drops skin at his feet, put end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him" (Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape* 312). After pacing and eating the banana, Krapp takes a second large banana and handles it just like the first banana. However, with the second banana, Krapp "puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him. Finally he has an idea, puts banana in his waistcoat pocket, the end emerging, and goes with all the speed he

can muster backstage into darkness” (312). Krapp’s handling of the banana is sexually suggestive. The key and banana, both phallic symbols, are representations of Krapp’s homoerotic desire. After handling the banana, Krapp runs off stage and a loud cork pops, suggesting ejaculation.

Krapp differs significantly from the characters in *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame*. He has had heterosexual experiences with women, but gave them up when he realized it “was hopeless and no good going on” (316). Krapp, like many of Beckett’s other characters, wonders if “the earth might be uninhabited” (316). Irish men often struggled with their identities because the role of the colonizer as the male in society left no place for Irish men. Like the characters in *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame*, Krapp decides to give up women all together. They no longer exist except on his tapes. According to Katherine Worth, the women in Krapp’s life are “all ghosts, really, dependant for their existence on Krapp’s bitter-sweet recording of them. The only female life in the play comes to us only by courtesy of a man’s memory or imagining” (236).

Beckett breaks down the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that create unequal relations of power by writing plays that explore the desperation of Irish men. With their women and their land subservient to the English, Irish men were forced to find fulfillment in other areas. Krapp masturbates and molests phallic objects in order to be sexually fulfilled, and he relies on art and his tapes as a means of intellectual and emotional fulfillment.

When Krapp plays his first tape, he begins to realize the amount of suffering he has undergone as a result of colonization. Krapp reads “Farewell to—[he turns the page]—love” (313). Krapp has lost the ability to feel sexual desire towards another person. While characters in *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame* resort to homosexuality, Krapp “limits his sexual life to masturbation” (Acheson 74).

By listening to Krapp’s tapes, it becomes apparent that he has struggled with his sexuality for many years. He refers to Bianca as “hopeless business” (314). He combines subjects that seem irrational. When speaking of his plans for the upcoming year, Krapp at 39 says, “plans for a less ... [hesitates] ... engrossing sexual life. Last illness of his father. Flagging pursuit of happiness. Unattainable laxation” (314). Krapp does not differentiate intercourse from other functions of the body.

On tape, Krapp narrates an excellent example of the role of the colonizer on the relationships of Irish males with women:

TAPE: One dark beauty I recollect particularly, all white and starch, incomparable bosom, with a big black hooded perambulator, most funereal thing. Whenever I looked in her direction she had her eyes on me. And yet when I was bold enough to speak to her—not having been introduced—she threatened to call a policeman. As if I had designs on her virtue! (315)

By threatening to call the police, the woman reminds Krapp of the role of the British in Ireland and in his relationship with women. Although that affair did not materialize, Krapp at 39 speaks with eloquence about the woman in the boat. Strangely though, when Krapp asks her to open her eyes, he says, “the eyes, just slits” (316). Krapp has already come to the realization that there is no use continuing their relationship because of the gender hierarchy in a colonized land. Upon this realization, sex disappears, and she becomes an object rather than a person.

Although women are no longer available to Irish males, Krapp still desires women. He dreams of Effie and refers to a “ghost of a whore” (317). However, none of these women exist. Krapp is alone and must redefine himself and his sexuality in accordance with the terms of the colonizer.

Although Beckett’s work does not appear frequently in the canon of postcolonial literature, many of his works are political. *In Waiting For Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp’s Last Tape* Beckett attempts to break down hegemonic boundaries by exploring the sexual role of the Irish male in colonized Ireland. His dramas explore the consumption of Irish women under imperialism’s patriarchy and the desperate and sometimes absurd actions Irish men must take in order to redirect their sexual and authoritarian roles. Colonization causes Irish men to lose their sense of self and forces them to create new identities as the gender stuck in between the male colonizer and the female colonized. Beckett explores the sexual outlets available to the members of the somewhat androgynous Irish male and the problems he encounters when hopes of continued lineage or even existence appear bleak and unfeasible.

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