

Ronan McDonald



The Cambridge **Introduction** to
Samuel Beckett

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Samuel Beckett*

This book is an eloquent and accessible introduction to one of the most important writers of the twentieth century. It provides biographical and contextual information, but more fundamentally, it considers how we might think about an enduringly difficult and experimental novelist and playwright who often challenges the very concepts of meaning and interpretation. It deals with Beckett's life, intellectual and cultural background, plays, prose, and critical response and relates his work and vision to the culture and context in which he wrote. McDonald provides a sustained analysis of the major plays, including *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days* and his major prose works including *Murphy*, *Watt* and his famous 'trilogy' of novels (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*). This introduction concludes by mapping the huge terrain of criticism that Beckett's work has prompted, and it explains the turn in recent years to understanding Beckett within his historical context.

RÓNÁN McDONALD is a Lecturer in English at the University of Reading and the Director of the Beckett International Foundation.

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The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett

RÓNÁN McDONALD



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For Sarah Montgomery

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Note on editions

Page numbers are cited parenthetically throughout. They are from the following editions.

Fiction

More Pricks than Kicks (London: John Calder, 1970)

Murphy (London: John Calder, 1963)

Watt (London: John Calder, 1963)

The Beckett Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable (London: Pan, 1979)

How It Is (London: John Calder, 1964)

Drama

Waiting for Godot (London: Faber and Faber, 1965)

Endgame, followed by *Act Without Words* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958)

Happy Days (London: Faber and Faber, 1962)

All other plays from *Collected Shorter Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984)

Criticism and Miscellaneous

Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit (London: John Calder, 1965). Abbreviated P, followed by page number.

Disjecta, Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983). Abbreviated D, followed by page number.

Introduction

‘I’d be quite incapable of writing a critical introduction to my own works.’¹

A generation after his death, Samuel Beckett remains one of the giants of twentieth-century literature and drama. More troubling for his critics, he is also one of the last century’s most potent literary myths. Like other ‘modernists’, he has a reputation for obscurity and difficulty, yet despite this his work permeates our culture in unique ways. The word ‘Beckettian’ resonates even amongst those who know little Beckett. It evokes a bleak vision of life leavened by mordant humour: derelict tramps on a bare stage waiting desperately for nothing, a legless old couple peering out of dustbins, geriatric narrators babbling out their final incoherent mumblings. It evokes sparseness and minimalism and, with them, a forensic, pitiless urge to strip away, to expose, to deal in piths and essences.

Part of the reason that Beckettian images have seeped into popular culture is of course because of his peerless influence on post-war drama. His stage images have a visual and concrete dimension that the modernist poets and novelists arguably lack. One can visualise the spare Beckettian stage more easily than the poetic urban wasteland. Moreover his plays are not perceived as so forbiddingly highbrow that several have not become staples of repertory theatre. The Beckett ‘myth’ or ‘brand’ has been fuelled by two related phenomena: Beckett’s refusal to offer any explication of his own work, his insistence that they simply ‘mean what they say’, coupled with his determined reclusivity (a horror of publicity that led his wife to greet news of his 1969 Nobel Prize for literature with the words ‘Quelle catastrophe!’). If Beckett expected his silence to close down speculations about the ‘man’ behind the work, it was a forlorn hope. Rather it fed the mystery and aura that surrounded him, bolstering his image as the saintly artist, untainted by grubby self-promotion or by the coarse business of self-explication.

Moreover, the lack of specificity of his drama, the deracinated sets and absence of geographical or temporal certainty supported the idea, especially

amongst Beckett's early critics, that his work had a universal import, that it articulated something fundamental and trans-historical about what life and human existence were all about. Where are these plays set? Who are these nameless narrators? The uncertainty of identification was interpreted as a badge of the archetypal or the elemental. His stripped stages or nameless narrators seemed shorthand for everywhere and everyone. 'Existentialist' concerns, so prominent in the fifties, were read into Beckett's work, at least so far as it was seen as a generally bleak and bleakly general view of human existence.

Paradoxically, at the same time as he is vaunted for expressing a 'timeless' human condition, Beckett is celebrated as the truest voice of a ravaged post-war world. The skeletal creatures and pared-down sets of his plays, or the aged, bewildered, agonised narrators of his novels, are regarded as the proper artistic expression of a world bereft of transcendent hope, without God, morality, value or even the solace of a stable selfhood. Notwithstanding Theodor Adorno's declaration on the impossibility of art after Auschwitz, Beckett comes closest to being the laureate of twentieth-century desolation.

Whether of all time or of his own time, Beckett, then, is sometimes given the role of a secular saint. His writings, though often confusing, are always regarded as profound, even visionary. Appropriately, Beckett's own, very striking face has entered modern iconography. Indeed there is no other writer of the post-war period whose face is so well known in comparison with his voice. It is always that of the older Beckett with his instantly recognisable, thin, angular countenance, furrowed with lines, the cropped grey hair, the long beak-like nose and, above all, those penetrating blue ('gull-like') eyes. The willingness to be photographed, coupled with the unwillingness to be interviewed, made him, ironically, one of the world's most recognisable recluses.

There is, then, a unique cult of veneration amongst Beckett's followers, imitators and devotees. Not only has he escaped the slump in popularity that afflicts a lot of writers in the years immediately after their death, but he also seems invulnerable to much of the critical backlash against some of the modernist writers over the past decade. A participant in the French Resistance and an opponent of totalitarianism in all its forms, Beckett was never going to merit the censure directed at some other modernist writers for anti-Semitism or reactionary political views. The Beckett myth, the aura of artistic integrity, elemental truth and existential bravery that surrounds him, is now something of which the vigilant Beckett reader needs to be wary. Reading Beckett, like (for all the differences) reading Shakespeare, means engaging with a complex web of cultural associations and literary prestige.

This book sets out to help the student, the theatre-goer, and the non-specialist general reader to think critically about Beckett and his major works. However, rather than simply providing answers or solving puzzles, this book strives to ask relevant questions. To engage fruitfully with Beckett's plays and novels does not necessarily mean to 'decode' them or to figure out what they really mean underneath the obscurity. One must heed the challenges they pose to the very acts of reading, viewing and interpretation. These are beautiful, crafted but thematically elusive plays and prose works. Readers or spectators are often drawn to Beckett, not because of some perceived idea or vision of life, but because of the compelling and utterly unique voice he has on stage and page. Beckett always put much more emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of his work than the meaning that could be extracted from them, on the shape rather than the sense. He once said, tellingly, 'The key word in my plays is "perhaps"'.² In a very early critical essay on James Joyce he warned that the 'danger is in the neatness of identifications' (D 19). It is a warning which we should still heed.

Throughout the study of individual texts, I will try not just to dispel obscurity or difficulty, but also to ask what it is doing, how it functions aesthetically. While the source of an allusion or the occasional contextual gloss will from time to time be invoked, the primary intention of this book is not to provide annotation or explanation. As this book is intended as an introduction, references to other critics and secondary sources are kept to a minimum, outside the summary of criticism on Beckett provided in Chapter 5.

The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett is intended for people who have seen or read the works that are discussed herein and who want to think more about them. It will be of little use to someone who has not previously read the text under discussion. I have generally avoided providing plot summary or paraphrase of individual texts, not least to discourage students from adopting this approach in their own essays. Though this book can be read straight through, it may also be of use to a student who is doing a course that treats a single Beckett text – *Waiting for Godot* as part of a drama course, for instance – who will be able to consult the relevant section in this book.

Though I provide an overview of all Beckett's life and work in Chapter 1, this Introduction is *not* a comprehensive survey of all Beckett's plays and prose. The extended discussion of the works themselves in Chapters 3 and 4 focuses on the plays most often produced and the prose works most often read and studied, especially at undergraduate level. Unfortunately, this has necessitated omitting extended consideration of the minimalist skullscape and dramaticules of Beckett's later period. These are rich, formally complex and intriguing texts, wholly resistant to summary. Rather than give the later

works cursory or tokenistic treatment, I thought it preferable to omit them altogether from the extended critical readings. For the same reason, I have had to leave out critical consideration of Beckett's poetry, a lamentably neglected part of his oeuvre. This decision was made on the basis that more sustained treatment of individual difficult works would prove more useful to those encountering Beckett for the first time than stretching the space available to cover a sixty-year career more superficially.

Beckett expanded the possibilities of every form or literary mode he wrote in: short story, novel, stage play, radio play, film and television. When he started working in a new form or medium he learned the rules and grammar before fundamentally testing their limits. It is because his works are so inextricably attached to their mode, because the 'what' is so attuned to the 'how', that he was usually reluctant to allow adaptations. To illustrate this mastery, the intense sense that Beckett's work gives of probing the limits and possibilities of a medium, Chapter 3 includes a section on Beckett's radio plays, including an examination of *All That Fall* and *Embers*. *All That Fall* is one of the greatest radio plays ever written, and also, arguably, one of Beckett's most realist and accessible texts.

Finally, why are the plays before the prose, given that most of the novels treated were written before *Waiting for Godot*? There are a number of reasons for this sequence. First, Beckett is probably still better known as a playwright. While as a prose writer he is a key influence on such modern novelists as J. M. Coetzee and John Banville, his impact on post-war drama is unparalleled. The careers of Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard and countless others would be impossible to conceive without Beckett's influence. Many people encounter Beckett in the theatre and move on from his stage plays to read his novels. It is partly with this sequence in mind that the structure of this book is organised.

It is customary to think of 'difficulty' or 'obscurity' as being all about what we do not know. But Beckett proves that the experience of difficulty can come from simplicity as well as from complexity. He thwarts expectations not by bombarding us with new information, but by dispensing with familiarity, shattering assumptions and abandoning theatrical conventions. If the plays are, in general, more accessible than much of the prose, it is not just because of their concrete presence, their stark images that communicate viscerally, before the intellect has time to gauge their significance or meaning. It is also because of this radical and alienating *simplicity*. The difficulty of Beckett's early prose works – sardonic in tone and encrusted with erudition – is very different from that of his later drama, which makes theatre of minimal situations, or his later prose, so often based on repetition and variation of