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Beckett's Background Brought Forward

an exploration of Samuel Beckett's self-criticism and its value to humour

A man stands motionless in his living room. To his left: an old couch, the faded brown fabric sagging in the middle. Beyond that, on a dull green wall, hangs a painting of an unidentified boat. He leans against the matching wall to his right, careful not to shift his weight too far. Behind him a tall wall, the colour he once called "sand blue," hosts a door he's never walked through. The ceiling fades into darkness. In front of him, the house lights shine so bright that he cannot make out a single face in the crowd.

A woman sits at the edge of her seat, entrenched in the family affair before her. The home she sees plants its familiarity, its history, into her mind. The wife, an old friend, scolds her son. She raptly recalls how much the boy has grown. The husband stands aside, drawing cautiously from his empty pipe. It's an unhealthy habit, but she finds it hard to imagine him without it in his hand. The son, building up his courage, replies with wit and the woman finds herself applauding.

In any play, the actors find themselves surrounded on three sides by walls, or at least their facades. The audience finds themselves likewise encompassed in three walls, curving their attention to the stage. Just as the walls of a theatre confine the audience and show in the same space, juxtaposed opposite each other, a reader focuses on a story contained within the confines of a book. One wall separates the two, audience from actor, reality from fantasy: the fourth wall.

The fourth wall does not restrain as the other walls do. Its function is to allow the audience, or the reader, to traverse into the world which the playwright or author has created. Occasionally, the actors can “break the wall” by referring to the world that exists outside their confines, giving the audience a new perspective on the piece. On even fewer occasions, the playwright can dismantle the fourth wall entirely, allowing for the audience to explore not only the performance, but the act of performance itself. Samuel Beckett is one such playwright. However, Beckett also performs this feat within his prose works, inviting the reader to investigate the act of writing in addition to the written piece.

The action known as “breaking the fourth wall” has found new footing in movies, television shows, and books, but its origin stems from “[t]he theatrical device... wherein on-stage actors acknowledge the presence of the audience,” typically with verbal interaction (Davies 86). The phenomenon has been studied by playwright Bertolt Brecht and theoretician of theatrical socialist realism Konstantin Stanislavski, among others. For Brecht, engaging the separation between scene and audience helps to preserve the distinction between the reality of the audience and the fantasy of the actors. “Brecht’s use of the device is intended to interrupt the cathartic, emphatic response of the audience when confronted with emotional intrigue, in order to restore a critical, distanced form of observation” (Davies 87). Brecht’s fourth wall preserves the sanctity of the performance as a performance, and reinforces the audience’s interpretation of the events both within and outside of the contexts of the provided setting. The fourth wall is meant to provide a window for the audience to experience the performance while separating the audience physically and metaphysically so they do not become engrossed in the world performed. The break then reminds the audience of the wall’s existence.

Stanislavski's fourth wall functions in the reverse direction. "Stanislavski wants to protect the actors from the disturbing presence of the audience's reality--to protect the fragile reality of the stage which the actors inhabit. Brecht, on the other hand, wants to protect the audience from having their own reality superseded by the fantasised reality of the stage" (Davies 90). Here, the wall protects the audience from accepting the reality presented in the performance into their own reality instead of, as Brecht suggests, imposing the reality of the audience onto the stage.

Samuel Beckett is not unfamiliar with the concept of the fourth wall; his "plays feature numerous instances of the fourth-wall break... This is due to the lack of a static conception of the fourth wall in Beckett's works, and to the unconventional ways in which he uses the fourth-wall break" (Davies 90). The trope of the fourth wall break arose when actors on stage made reference to or interacted with members of the audience. Beckett takes the trope further by allowing his actors to interact with the act of playwriting itself, "explor[ing] the metaphysical space of the stage without making a direct connection with the reality of the audience" (Davies 101). Beckett contrasts the frameworks set up by Brecht and Stanislavski by forgoing the audience in favour of the author. "Beckett systematically cancels out the social, political, and philosophical significance that became attached to the device in Brecht's theatrical aesthetics" (Davies 96). Here, we have to separate the fourth wall break from the performance proper in order to see how they work in tandem. Beckett reinforces the social, political, and philosophical significance of his work, by allowing the audience to engage with the space between and around the stage and the audience instead of simply the two poles.

Nathaniel Davies uses a number of Beckett's plays, some officially performed, others concealed for a time. "The humor of these lines [from Beckett's *Human Wishes*] can be

compared to the several "narratological jokes"--ironic comments on the narrator's fabrication of the story he is presenting as truth--that Beckett would include in prose works" (Davies 91).

Human Wishes can serve as an example of Beckett interacting with the space between and around the stage and the audience with his actors, namely the author and his text. Beckett understands, just as Brecht and Stanislavski understand, that the reality presented on the stage is a reality, regardless of its miscibility with the reality of the audience. Beckett seeks to subvert this distinction, not through a physical barrier, the spacial interaction between actor and audience, but through a metaphysical barrier between creator and creation: playwright and play.

This subversion of the audience serves to further separate their perceived realities from the realities of the performance. "The audience who really believes they are watching a series of intimate exchanges should wait until they've left the theater to applaud" or make their criticisms (Davies 89). Beckett constantly reinforces this disjunction, allowing the audience to engage with the performance as it unfolds. Davies notes how the prevalence of Beckett's practice grows over time, with a particular shift in *Waiting for Godot*, in his plays as well as his prose. Beckett uses the same methodology, varied for the medium, to remind the reader of the fabrication of the story presented in his prose.

When presented with a written work, just as when presented with a performance, the reader opts to suspend a certain level of disbelief in order to participate in the realities of the story. Just as the edge of the stage acts as a barrier between worlds in theatre, the physical page holds the reader from fully immersing in the world presented in the text: try as they might, readers cannot force their physical bodies through the printed page. However, much like the fourth wall on a stage, the page can be transcended from the inside. Beckett, through his

descriptors, through his constant re-articulation of the abnormality of his world, forces himself through the page as an author, reminding the readers to maintain the separation between their reality and the one Beckett has crafted. Beckett breaks the fourth wall in the way that Brecht and Stanislavski both describe: in order to remind the audience of their separation from the events of the story and in order to protect the world of the audience from the world the author has created. Beckett as created this avenue for discourse with his impeccable self awareness, which is extremely prevalent in his novels.

Davies provides an in-depth analysis of Beckett's plays, touching briefly on his prose works. Barbara Hardy delves more into the prose works of Beckett, particularly his self-awareness, which is what breaks through the pages' "wall" and allows for the discourse Beckett creates in his plays, with his novels. "The self-analysis makes a seemingly random survey of the main narrative elements of symbol, surface, particularity and themes" (Hardy 225). The survey that Beckett weaves into his narrative allows the reader to critically engage with the text without the temporal separation that Brecht refers to with the audience's applause (Davies 89). It prevents the reader from losing a sense of their own reality by always keeping the reality of the text at a distance, quelling the fear Stanislavski holds. "Beckett is interested in inspecting the world. He's self-consciousness about the literary forms that tradition has set up, codified, and analysed extends also to the way language works" (Hardy 229). Not only does Beckett explore the world he's created but, as he does in his plays, he explores the format of writing. "[Beckett] constantly interrupts his sentences, to comment and criticise, looking hard at words, phrases, clichés, metaphors, even punctuation marks" (Hardy 229). While Beckett provides a framework for the critical interpretation of his work, he does not sacrifice story-telling in the process.

Beckett's strength comes from merging story with critique, all while subverting expectations of format. "Beckett's most conspicuous interest in the narrative form. He manages to toss about agonisedly and alertly, running through all the possible reasons for writing stories" (Hardy 229). Beckett's writing, prose and theatre, seems haphazard at first, often not following chronology or common tropes of the medium. In fact, Beckett's works reflexively function in the same pattern as understanding Beckett's work. It's both itself and a criticism of itself, and can only function as both by interweaving the critique with the narrative. "[Beckett] constantly interrupts his sentences, to comment and criticise, looking hard at words, phrases, clichés, metaphors, even punctuation marks" (Hardy 229). Just as the pages of a heavily studied text are rendered illegible due to annotation, Beckett's narratives are nearly incomprehensible for the same reason. Beckett simultaneously acts as author, critic, and scholar of each of his works.

In a way, reaches through the fourth wall of his books, instead of merely breaking it with a reference toward the reader, and supplants the reader with himself. This act is reciprocated, in a practical sense, in Beckett's *Eleutheria*. In the third act, the ending of *Eleutheria*, a spectator climbs onto the stage. "The glazier accepts this break in the fourth wall without much shock or surprise" (Davies 91) alluding to the idea that this traversal between realms typically separated by a fourth wall is a normal activity for Beckett. Beckett has placed himself, as playwright, in the position of the audience, through his scripted character of the Spectator. Beckett simultaneously placed himself in the Glazier as an actor, acting on the events of the play, and as a critic, questioning the Spectator. *Eleutheria*'s placement in Davies's chronology would imply Beckett's practices are well established early in his writing career. This placement of Beckett in each position of the text is actually what lead to his signature writing style in both prose and theatre.

However, despite his renowned uniqueness, “Beckett is not doing anything new, but writing in the old tradition of literary self-consciousness, shared by Shakespeare... [who] broke both comic and tragic tension by dispelling his own figments” (Hardy 231). Many authors have referenced their self or their work within the contexts of their own work: Beckett wasn’t the first to place himself both in and around his work, and he won’t be the last. But, few have pushed the boundaries as thoroughly as Beckett. In addition to breaking the fourth wall, Beckett can be said to have broken the first three walls, exposing the structure in which he places his stories. Without that containing support, Beckett’s prose is free to roam wildly around, unrestrained, as is his theatre.

In his effort to uncover the inner workings of his writings, Beckett has uncovered something else entirely, advertently or otherwise: humour. That’s not to say that humour doesn’t exist within Beckett’s works: the perception of humour is a personal one. “The meaning of a text is not built in modular fashion from each word as a building block. So changing even a single word will have multiple effects on the meaning of a text” (Samson et al 168). Beckett, as critic and author, chooses his words very carefully, to deign a very specific meaning. In reference to his work, *Murphy*, he pays special attention to dressing each scene. When introducing a scene in film or television, an establishing shot gives a general overview of the setting; on stage, an audience is introduced to the entirety of a scene as the lights rise. In prose, descriptors of the current setting often precede the unfolding action. Beckett, in order to introduce a scene, goes into excruciating detail over a small object or idea. His focus on the background is what brings the humour forward. This is by no means specific to Beckett: Andrea C. Samson and Christian F Hempelmann conducted a study toward this effect in 2011. Samson and Hempelmann studied the

perception of humour in the background. While Beckett's characters exhibit incongruity within the reality of the reader, it's Beckett's attention to minute detail that provides what Samson and Hempelmann call "backgrounded incongruity".

Their study involved taking cartoons and jokes, both of which are easy to consume quickly for testing purposes, and "showed that humorous stimuli... are processed faster and considered funnier when the backgrounded incongruity is not removed" (Samson, et al 174). When the backgrounded incongruity is present, the whole source is considered funnier. This can be applied to *Murphy* because the Beckett goes to lengths to make the backgrounded incongruity more present within the text. In his act of exploring the format of the text, while simultaneously presenting the text as it is and as the constituent of its parts, Beckett sets a scene to be more humorous than what comes from the actions of the characters.

According to Samson's and Hempelmann's study, "[t]he availability of the backgrounded incongruity has no influence on the mentioning of the foregrounded incongruity" (Samson, et al 174), meaning that the situational incongruity present in *Murphy*, the dynamic between disjointed characters, &c. functions independently of the backgrounded incongruity. Similarly, Beckett's stage works can be enjoyed as a performance and as a critique independent of each other and as a sum. In typical prose, the narrative can stand on its own. Any additional interpretations and criticisms of that narrative function as an enhancement to the original narrative. Samson's and Hempelmann's study utilised cartoons which tend to fall into the category of "typical" prose. The study's results said that with the addition of backgrounded incongruity, "much more information can be provided and processed that contributes to

contextual information that lead to enrichment of the punch line” (Samson et al 175); making it an enhancing feature of the narrative.

Beckett doesn't consider his emphasis on the background an enhancing extra to, so much as a necessary piece of the narrative. This is why the narrative and the description of process are inextricably linked in Beckett's works. This attitude also finds reassurance in Samson's and Hempelmann's 2011 study which “revealed further that humorous stimuli with removed backgrounded incongruity are less appreciated, as they are perceived to be less funny and create higher aversion ratings” (Samson et al 181). According to Samson and Hempelmann, as well as Beckett, the presence of background incongruity is indispensable, perhaps not to the completeness of the narrative, but to the completeness of the *experience* of the narrative. Obviously, placement in the background can easily avoid detection, except for those that look for it. In writing, however anything of value in the background must be brought forward in order to exist. For Beckett's writing, the structure of the writing is just as visceral as the narrative, so Beckett must bring it to the front.

By exploring the format of what Beckett presents, readers and audience can then reinterpret themselves. The format of a writing offers assumptions of the content. Samuel Beckett seeks to not only expose these assumptions, but subvert them in order to increase the demonstrable variability of language and its products. In addition to critiquing his own work with this methodology, Samuel Beckett also enhances the humour of his pieces. Many factors play into this product, and it builds a tenuous relationship between text, author, content, reader, and of course humour. But whether Samuel Beckett purposefully deconstructs his own creations for the sake of humour, or whether it is simply a side affect of self-exploration remains to be

known. If we isolate the self-consciousness from Beckett's work, aside from losing its intrinsic value as a unique literature piece, would the piece also lose its humour? Probably not, considering Beckett's humorous narratives, despite excessive self-awareness and lack of backgrounded incongruity. Samson and Hempelmann prove that Beckett's methods of providing perhaps more context than can fit in a narrative, he also brings a greater sense of humour to his own writing.

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