

Beckett's Optimistic Heroine

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Abstract

Happy Days was written in English in 1960 and translated into French by Beckett as *Oh les beaux*. This play has been regarded as being savagely ironic and the irony which was classified as metaphysical or cosmic in its presentation of the loneliness of Man in the face of indifferent universe. *Happy Days* is considered a milestone in Beckett's writings because it is for the first time a well preserved blonde woman in her fifties is the main character of the play. Winnie is unlike Hamm, the main character in *Endgame*, she blinks at suffering with rare mixture of cheer and indifference. This paper is an attempt to investigate Winnie's reaction against The Absurd as an optimistic heroine in the Beckettian Drama.

Keywords: Beckett, The Beckettians, The Absurd, optimistic, suffering, cheer, joy, wonderful

1. Introduction

The title, *Happy Days*, is incongruous in the light of Beckett's obsession with Man's sad plight in an absurd existence. Many critics have regarded the play as being savagely ironic that was classified as metaphysical in its presentation of the helplessness of Man in the face of loneliness and indifferent universe. Some considered *Happy Days* as a feminist play. In her review of the play Susannah Clapp says "You would have to go a long way to find a more intensely feminist play than *Happy Days* ...it makes woman the centre of a play that talks of human condition." (Clapp, 2014, p. 41) The title of the play took some time from Beckett to decide on because he was torn between *Many Mercies* or *Tender Mercies*. Finally Beckett changed the title to *Happy Days*. Bianchini says that "Beckett's letters to Schneider first mention *Happy Days* on August 4, 1960. At that point, Beckett envisioned a male protagonist and wanted to find out what he had in his pockets. Subsequently, the protagonist became Winnie, her pockets replaced by a handbag." (Bianchini, 2015, p. 62) For the first time, the lead character in *Happy Days* is a plump woman in her fifties embedded up to her waist in an exact centre of mound and a bell rings six times either to wake Winnie up or to prevent her from falling asleep. Weiss thinks that the play can be read in terms of Beckett's experience of working with the Red Cross in the sixties of the twentieth century. "The image of Winnie in *Happy Days*, for Phyllis Gaffney, whose father was a pathologist with the Irish Red Cross during the reconstruction of in Saint-Lo, echoes the real experience of a Saint-Lo citizen who was found by rescue-workers standing upright, unable to move, stuck in the ruins of his house." (Weiss, 2010, p. 42) Winnie is really a new kind of character in the Beckettian Drama. With her, Beckett departs from the long line of decayed, intellectual and broken tramps. She pays a lot of attention to her appearance on the stage. "Winnie brushes her teeth and hair and resort to eleven banal objects in her hand bag: her lipstick, a hairbrush a toothbrush, spectacles a nail file, a mirror, a hat with a feather, a magnifying glass, a revolver, a musical box and a bottle of elixir." (Maude, 2011, p. 817)

Winnie is Beckett's first successful optimistic heroine, a worthy successor of Hamm and Pozo. But where Hamm displays wanton cruelty while Winnie sports a cheerful countenance and displays a willing suspension of belief in the absurdity of existence. The other Beckettian who shares similar predicament like Winnie and Hamm is the old woman in *Not I*. The old woman is terrified to acknowledge that there is no release for her from this metaphysical checkmate and so she tries to displace her pain by narrating her story in the third person. She who had been more or less in silence all these years except on "rare occasions...one or twice a year always winter some strange reason..." (Beckett, 1986, p. 379) suddenly finds words issuing forth in torrential outpour from her mouth. She has no idea of what she is saying, nor she could catch half the stream of words flowing out of her. The only possible conclusion she could arrive at is that "can't stop the stream...and the whole brain begging...something begging in the brain...begging for the mouth to stop..." (Beckett, 1986, p. 380) And that

she would be forgiven, purged of her sins that still remain a puzzle to her. Thought there is nothing she could think nor tell, she could not stop speaking or “the buzzing” a term which has been used more than a dozen time in *Not I*. Mouth’s repeating of the words “the buzzing” are the only possible means for registering her anguish and she lets them out without an awareness of their futility. But Winnie shows a high degree of resilience and nerves in the face of mounting pressure on her in the process of her total entombment. Winnie is one of those optimistic characters who shows heroic acceptance of the unbearable. In her monologue, she shows happiness and acceptance to life’s little mercies. She has the eyes for things that are bright and beautiful despite her understanding that everything will not changed. Thus she should dismiss her own immobility because it is of no significance as it does not cause her any hurt or pain. She is grateful because she is not worse than before, “no better, no worse-(lays down mirror)-no change-(wipes finger on grass)-no pain-(looks for toothbrush)-hardly any-(takes up toothbrush)-great thing that- examine handle of brush)-nothing like it” (Beckett, 1986, p. 141) and few minutes later she repeats her words “Ah well no worse. (Head up, cheerfully) No better, no worse, no change. (Pause. Do.) No pain” (Beckett, 1986, p. 141)

Since the opening of the play, Winnie has been buried up to her waist to the end when she is sunk to her neck, maintaining herself with remarkable dignity and cheer. She has in her a rare degree of optimism to cull some meaning through an open confrontation with The Absurd. Her optimism is an affirmation of human courage and dignity, sustained by faith in the meaning that arises out of Winnie’s confrontation with The Absurd. This is what Albert Camus would describe as metaphysical honor in enduring world’s absurdity. It is unfair to interpret her cheer as one of foolishness or of stoic endurance as a result of her inability to face her predicament. Far from either, her endearing brightness is in her courageous response to her situation. She is sensitive to her entrapment that has rendered her immobile, partially in Act I and fully in Act II. Though she is aware of her hopeless imprisonment, she has accepted it as inevitable without a trace of bitterness, anger, despair and self-pity. In order to prove that, she continues fighting it through cheerful indifference. Unlike Hamm, whose confrontation with The Absurd takes the form of an equally absurd revolt marked by savage indignation and ruthlessness, Winnie accepts suffering with hope in the future.

2. Another Heavenly Day

Winnie has none of Hamm’s mocking tone or Maddy’s self -pity, and on the contrary, her cheer is spontaneous and therefore genuine. When she exclaims, “O Heavenly day” or “Another happy day”, there is no ring of insincerity about it. She is one of those rare optimistic Beckettians who portray optimistic and heroic acceptance of the unendurable existence. She facilitated the grim reality by a cheerful and grateful acknowledgement of life’s little mercies. Eastman thinks that “Winnie is really a new kind of person for Beckett. In her he departs from the long line of decayed intellectuals and broken vagabond which people the other plays.” (Estman, 1963, p. 423) Winnie has the eyes for things that are bright and beautiful despite her understanding that everything “will perhaps melt in the end, or burn... or little by little charred into black cinder” (Beckett, p. 154) Unlike her predecessors, she seems to have no need for a menial to lord over and vent her anger upon. In this respect, she seems to have moved a step ahead of them in her renouncement of human bondage at every stage of her life. McDonald thinks that her:

need to be cheerful does not make her plight easier or more uplifting, it actually makes it worse. Hamm can at least rail against his father or his God; Krapp can scornfully cackle at his younger self, but poor Winnie does not have the inverted consolation that disillusionment or cynicism can offer. She has to maintain her ever-more fragile cheeriness no matter how awful the circumstances. (Macdonald, 2006, p. 67)

Winnie has moved along way from the earlier Beckettians. She has gained confidence, maturity and ripeness and she is ready to all the possibilities. She shows herself to be a courageous who could face The Absurd in all its awesomeness. Her long monologue portrays her great boldness against The Absurd, undaunted by her own predicament “no better no worse-(lays down mirror)-no change-(wipes fingers on grass) -no pain-(looks for toothbrush)- hardly any- (takes up toothbrush)-great thing that-(examines handle of brush)-nothing like it” (Beckett, 1986, p. 140) Few minutes later she repeats her words “Ah well, no worse. (Head up, cheerfully) No better, no worse, no change. (Pause. Do.) No pain”, (Beckett, 1986, p. 141) to bolster herself from sinking into despair as she is sucked downwards. Even old age with all its concomitant debility holds no threat to her optimistic attitude. When she finds it difficult to decipher the words in the toothbrush, she coolly accepts her myopia as a further decline towards blindness:

Blind next-(takes off spectacles)- ah well- (lays down spectacles)-seen enough- I suppose—(takes out a folded handkerchief)- by now—(shakes out handkerchief)- what are those wonderful lines-(wipes one eye)—woe woe is me-(wipes the other)- to see what I see- (looks for spectacles)- wouldn’t miss it- (starts

polishing polishing spectacles , breathing on lenses)- or would I? (Beckett, 1986, pp. 139-140)

She notices that everything is running out with the advancement of time—her toothpaste, lipstick, medicine (that is supposed to infuse spirits in declining age) and her own self. And yet she steels herself not to complain:

No, no- mustn't complain- so much to be thankful for -no pain-hardly any- wonderful thing that- nothing like it- slight headache sometimes-...ah yes- occasional mild migraine- it comes- then goes-ah yes- many mercies- great mercies- prayers perhaps not for naught- first thing- last thing-...Old things (Pause.) Old eyes (Long pause.) On, Winnie. (Beckett, 1986, p. 140)

Throughout the play, it is this call to her will that will brace her to withstand her slow disintegration. With a resolute "Begin, Winnie, Begin your day, Winnie" (Beckett, 1986, p. 138) She endeavors to make light of her physical discomfiture and seek the heavenly day in the mid of hellish light and heat. Winnie portrays a cheerful countenance in the face of the mound of suffering she experiences. The scorching sun, the mounting pressure of sand and her gradual decline towards total immobility do not hold any threat to her mind.

3. Wonderful Things

Winnie's constant switching on and off her smile is a further pointer to the struggle within her between the awareness of the grim reality of her situation and her resistance to give into despair over it. Her brave challenge against The Absurd entails an optimistic attitude towards life through an absorption in the flashes and brightness held out to her now and then. She renews herself with hope that not a day passes by without great mercies. This is what she finds "wonderful"-an adjective she uses at least dozen times in the play. She finds it "wonderful" that Willie is there at her side listening to her prattle, even if it is only in theory he can hear her, though in fact he doesn't. "Have you gone deaf, Willie? [Pause.] Oh I know you were never one to talk, I worship you Winnie be mine and then nothing from that day forth only tidbits from *Reynolds News*." (Beckett, 1986, p. 167) Charles R. Lyons thinks that "Winnie is most extended dramatic image of character. She maintains a veritable monologue for two complete acts, interrupted only briefly by the few terse comments of Willie." (Lyons, 1983, p. 128) If Willie were to die, or if words were to fail her, then she has the recourse to her bag with all its contents.

I take up the little glass, I shiver it on a stone-(does so)- I throw it a way- (does so far behind her)- it will be in the bag again tomorrow, without a scratch, to help me though the day (Pause.) No, one can do nothing. (Pause.) This is what I find so wonderful, the way things...(voice breaks, head down)...things...so wonderful. (Beckett, 1986, p. 154)

In Act II, when Winnie realizes her gradual sinking into earth, she seeks comfort in her rituals which she keeps doing them throughout the play. Perhaps these rituals help her to face her suffering, and to accept her condition with all its agony and struggle. As she feels happy when she can maintains these rituals. She feels that everything is running out with advancement of time- her toothpaste, lipstick and medicine. But she is grateful since she is not worse than before:

there is always remains something. (Pause.) Of every thing. (Pause.) Of every -thing (Pause.) some remains. (Pause.) If the mind were to go. (Pause.) It won't go of course. (Pause.) Not quite. (Pause.) Not mine. (Smile.) Not now. (Smile broaden.) No. no. (Smile off...Long pause.)... Oh, yes great mercies, great mercies. (Pause.)... The bag of course... a little blurred perhaps...but the bag. The earth of course and shy. The sunshade you gave me. (Beckett, 1986, p. 146)

Winnie might fade away, but things in the bag and outside the bag will have their life. There is also a possibility of embellishing one's knowledge by trying to understand words like "hog's setae" (Beckett, 1986, p. 159) or the use of a correct pronoun when speaking of "hair" (Beckett, 1986, p. 146) since these are the ways to occupy oneself from the time the bell rings for her to wake up to the time it rings again for her to go to sleep. Other ways are to use the things in the bag, brush and comb her hair, trim her nails. "Brush and comb the hair, if it has not been done, or if there is some doubt, trim the nails if they are in need of trimming, these thing tide one over." (Beckett, 1986, p. 147) If everything fails, she has her story and thus she does not allow herself to be bogged down by the external pressure. She diverts herself increasingly to her own resources, however trifle they are. It is essential to bear in mind that Winnie does not lose sight of her plight and her powerlessness to combat her suffering except by an effort to divert her mind to things other than her misery. At times, she seeks refuge in old classics quoting lines from them to sustain her through her dreary days. "She misremembers and misquotes her classics: Shakespeare, Thomas Gray, Omar Khayyam, Robert Browning, Milton, Keats, Charles Wolfe, Yeats, & Herrick." (Maude, 2011, p. 817) In her cultural debris she looks like Lucky who once had been the repository of all beautiful Knowledge and grace. In *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo groans in cowardly tones: "I can't bear it...any longer...the way he goes on...you've no idea...it's terrible...he must go...I'm going mad...I can't bear it...any

longer.” (Beckett, 1986, p. 32) Despite a falling memory, a consequence of old age, she has the compulsive urge to renew herself with lines such as “fleeting joys...and lasting woe” (Beckett, 1986, p. 141) so as not to buckle under the pressure of lingering dissolution she is subject to. Winnie has a clear perception of “the still, sad music of humanity”- the sadness after song, as she phrases it, the sadness that transcends every other human experience of intensity.

Simply cannot sing. (Pause.) Not a note. (Pause.) No? (Pause.) Sadness after intimate sexual intercourse one is familiar with of course. (Pause.) You would concur with Aristotle there, Willie, I fancy. (Pause.) Yes, that one knows and is prepared to face. (Pause.) But after song...(Pause.) It does not last of course. (Pause.) That is what I find so wonderful. (Pause.) It wears away. (Pause.) What are those exquisite lines? (Pause.) Go forget me why should something o’er that something shadow fling... go forget me...why should sorrow...brightly smile...go forget me...never her me...sweetly smile...brightly sing...(Pause. With a sigh.) One loses one’s classic’s. (Pause.) Oh! not all. (Pause.) A part. (Pause.) A part remains. (Pause.) That is what I find so wonderful, a part remains, of one’s classics to help one through the day. (Pause.) Oh! yes, many mercies, many mercies. (Beckett, 1986, p. 164)

Her cheer is self-generated. Throughout the play, she displays alternate feelings of sadness and cheer, where sadness is often catalytical in generating cheer. The only way to counteract the basic sadness of mankind is to accept it and live with it. Winnie does not negate life; rather she endures it with its inherent contradictions and seeks to transcend life basic irony with a will to be happy and cheerful. Her stance towards existence shows her similar to Camus’s Rieux in *The Plague*. Rieux fights the plague, knowing well that it is a never-ending fight and a never ending defeat for him. But this fact does not deter him from continuing his struggle against the plague. Rieux says:

The essential thing was to save the greatest possible number of persons from dying and being doomed to unending separation. And to do this there is only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical (Camus, 1957, p. 122).

4. Winnie and Time

Winnie does not aspire to be god-like Hamm, nor does she give up her struggle like Krapp, Henry or Vladimir. She is primarily concerned with herself as a woman, a human being and therefore a realist with no illusion about the absurdity of existence. This means fulsome participation in life, with its inscrutable happenings. She tries to create a meaning out of the meaningless Absurd in order to sustain herself. She has in her a rare degree of optimism to cull some meaning through an open confrontation with the Absurd. Her stance is an affirmation of human courage and dignity, sustained by the faith (in the meaning) that arises out of her confrontation with the Absurd. Hence, her appreciation of all things around her is within the dialogue with the Absurd.

She admires and envies Willie for his marvelous ability to sleep without compulsive urge to wake up when the bell goes for the first time. Winnie wistfully acknowledges her own slavish obedience to time when time has ceased to have any significance. Whenever she speaks of “time” or “day” she remembers that she is talking in “The day is now well advanced [Smile] To speak in the old style” (Beckett, 1986, p. 151) when day and night were systematically classified to purport to life. Winnie lives “in time” only in the sense of waking up to the ringing of the bell and going to sleep at its second sounding. While in Act I, she keeps waiting for the bell to ring to signal the end of one another long, weary day, in Act II the bell goads her to keep awake without letting her close her eyes. The bell’s instance on her keeping her eyes open makes it impossible for her to utter her prayer as she had done earlier in Act I. It only serves to establish her further decline, for the only possible movements left to her- of her eyes and lips—are also being gradually arrested. Winnie had earlier wished for such a possibility when she could “ignore the bell, pay no heed, just sleep and wake, sleep and wake, as you please, open and close the eyes, as you please, or in the way you find it most helpful” (Pause.) (Beckett, 1986, pp. 162-163) But even that wish is denied her, for she cannot keep her eyes close any longer. Still she does not despair, there is her story about Mildred, which she can relate to keep her going till the burial of her head is complete, with no eyes to see, no mouth to talk and no one to talk to. At least now there is Willie to talk to, to give him her instructions and also to give her identity. There is no cause for her to feel sorry for her crippled condition and she ends her long monologue with a song. Beckett consulted his friend Schneider about Winnie’s song. Beckett was torn between “When Irish Eyes are Smiling” or “The Merry widow Waltz.” Schneider ultimately picked the latter, sensing that its pathos best matched Winnie’s mental state. (Bianchini, 2015, p. 63)

Oh this *is* a happy day; this will have been another happy day (Pause.) After all. (Pause.) So far. (Pause.) She hums tentatively the beginning of song, then sings softly, musical-box tune.) Though I say not What I may not Let you hear, Yet the swaying Dance is saying, Love me dear. Every touch of fingers Tell me what

I know, Says for you, It's true, it's true You love me so. (Beckett, 1986, p. 168)

5. Conclusion

Winnie's happy days will continue till the bell ceases to sound for her when she can keep her eyes closed forever. In one of the German production of the play, "Samuel Beckett explained to the actress that she should regard the bell as her enemy and the bag as her friend." (Cohn, 1978, pp. 189-190) Meanwhile the bell rings, Winnie's struggle to make a happy day of her conscious hours will continue. However, it is a long, protracted struggle for her and often she yearns for a release from this shifting, space-bound, and time-bound existence. As the earth's gravity is pulling her downwards, she returns to the old style "The old style. [Simile off.] Yes those are happy days. When there are sounds. [Pause.] When I hear sounds." (Beckett, p. 162) The alternative choice is to await the time when she could ignore the bell and keep her eyes closed forever. Winnie is not impatient as she comforts herself that it will not be long for the bell to sound the final ring for her to sleep.

Meantime Willie is slowly getting ready for his turn as Winnie prepares herself for "What she finds comforting", (Beckett, p. 144) Willie has to gear himself to start his day in a world without end. He has to begin where Winnie has left. Winnie had already summoned him to come over to the front to feast his old eyes on her remains, if there are any, "Are you thinking of coming to live this side now...for a bit may be?" (Beckett, p. 167) She had earlier remarked how she used to be mobile a long time back, like Willie:

When I was not yet caught—in this way—and had my legs and had the use of my legs, and could seek out a shady place, like you, when I was tired of the sun or a sunny place, like you, when I was tired of the sun, or a sunny place when I was tired of the shade, like you, and they are all empty words. (Beckett, 1986, p. 154)

But Winnie has come a long distance from that time. She has understood that all such mobility is a curse for it leads human race only toward extinction. But the paradox of life is that before the end, mankind seeks to procreate and perpetuate the absurd world. Winnie and Willie have a hearty laugh at the sight of an emmet, with its egg, "like a little white ball in its arms". (Beckett, p. 149) reminding them of the efforts of all created things on earth at miming and re-creating their absurd reality that is theirs. Winnie says "How can one better magnify the Almighty than by sniggering with him at his little jokes, particularly the poorer ones?" (Beckett, 1986, p. 150) She has clear vision of the farce that is creation, and therefore, its imitation by mankind, as doubly absurd and ridiculous.

Willie, despite his awareness of the absurd, avoids coming to terms with it. In the beginning of the play, he is seen crawling into his hole; away from the blazing hellish sun with its light and heat. Winnie's injunction to him to crawl backwards, with "not head first" (Beckett, 1986, p. 147) is evocative of Beckettian desire to get back into the foetal position, head down the womb and escape the sin of being born. Willie moves out of the hole towards the end of the play and slowly crawls up to the mound, coincident with Winnie's gradual sinking down into it. But unlike Winnie, he looks pathetic and harried. Winnie, noticing his appalled expression, tries to "put a bit of fizz into him" to cheer him up and prepare him for a similar confinement within the mound like hers. Willie has to go a long way before mustering enough strength to struggle against the Absurd. His attempts to escape the boredom, monotony and suffering of existence by a reverse crawl into foetal position show that he is like Estragon, cowardly and impotent. His attitude to the Absurd is negative, lacking both courage and awareness of rebellion. If Winnie's "happy days" could infuse a certain degree of hope and cheer in the audience who witness her marathon performance on stage, one can anticipate a brighter prospect for Willie than what he has already demonstrated till then.

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