

**Samuel Beckett's  
Sramatic Method:  
The Example of  
Not I**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the dramatic devices used in Samuel Beckett's stage play *Not I* (1972) and the logic that lies behind their adoption in the play. Traditional dramatic devices are deliberately avoided because the play deals with the presentation of an abstract idea of a fragmented self on stage. The study shows how Beckett's *Not I* could be a fine dramatic example of a complete fusion of form and content and how it achieves the most powerful moving effects through the highly untraditional method of extreme simplicity and economy of language.

### **ملخص**

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إلقاء الضوء على الأساليب الدرامية والغاية منها في مسرحية صموئيل بيكت (*Not I* (لست أنا)) فمضمون المسرحية غير تقليدي ولذلك فإن الأساليب الدرامية التقليدية غير مستخدمة على الإطلاق. فأحداث المسرحية تدور حول تجسيد فكرة الذات على خشبة المسرح. وتتلخص الدراسة إلى أن المسرحية يمكن أن تكون مثالا رائعا للبناء الدرامي المتكامل الذي يتحد فيه الشكل مع المضمون بحيث يستحيل الفصل بينهما.

## **Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Method: The Example of Not I**

During, and just after the Second World War, the feeling that life is Absurd and meaningless had a tremendous effect on the mind of artists like Samuel Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, Genet, Pinter and others. And with the appearance of the Absurd Theater in the literary scenario, such ideas were presented, in art form, as a concrete subject matter. Otherwise, the feeling of the Absurd is momentary and has a flashing existence in the life of mankind. It is never a permanent state of affairs. Therefore, writers may or may not be conscious of the Absurd in their life or in their writings. Perhaps this explains the venture of some critics to point out the elements of the Absurd even in the great tragedies of Shakespeare (Brown 9).

Questions like how to communicate the Absurd or why to communicate at all given that life is irrational, or, if there is a need for communication, how it takes place, are highly important and at the same time extremely difficult to answer. Beckett's attempt to provide an answer to the question why to communicate the absurd turns out to be a kind of an insolvable riddle. He believes that communication or "expression," as he calls it, is an irresistible "obligation": though deep down in his heart the artist knows that there is "nothing to express" and

“nothing with which to express” yet the urge or the “obligation” to express remains (17).

For such an unusual task in the history of literature, convincing forms and devices were invented to communicate what seems to be incommunicable or to rationalize the so called irrational. Like Mardowe’s Doctor Faustus, the Absurd dramatists, used logic in order to refute logic, with a difference in their aims. Faustus did it in order to become more, if not better, than he is in real life. While the absurd dramatists did it for the sake of presenting man as less, if not worse, than he is in real life. Mrlowe’s Faustus rejects human limitation and all existing branches of knowledge and turns to necromancy in order to become more than a man: “Yet are thou still but Faustus, and a man” (1.1.23). But Faustus ultimately suffers, perhaps more than he deserves, before he accepts human knowledge and human limitations. Towards the end of the play he says. “What are thou Faustus but a man condemned to die” (4.5.41). Needless to say, the situation of the ‘absurd hero’ who sinks below humanity is even worse.

Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is a fruitful exercise in futility. The two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, live in a perpetual state of waiting. Hamm, the central figure in *Endgame*. Lives in an endless state of ending. In *Happy Days*.

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Winnie, who is buried up to her neck in the sand, considers herself happy in spite of her tragic plight. Krapp, a solitary old man, sits by the tape-recorder and listens to his voice(s), absurd 'ambitions' and 'resolutions' recorded on tapes on different mile-stones in his life.

In the following discussion my intention is to map out how *Not I* (1972) explores in an original form another aspect of the absurd which in earlier plays is either dramatized as futile and endless waiting like in *Waiting for Godot*; or as harsh and endless ending like in *Endgame*; or as absurd ambitions and resolutions recorded on tapes as in *Krapp's Last Tape*. In *Not I*, however, the inational shapes itself as an "existence by proxy" or as a fragmented self, in the play 'characters', or even puppets, are not at all employed. Instead, a lit Mouth elevated 8feet above stage level is seen on stage. It does all the talking in the play. But it seems that Mouth's seemingly 'monologue' comes as a response to an unheard voice of an Auditor who stands downstage. The voice of the disjointed Mouth belongs to a female who refuses to accept the story she is telling as her own. It is an absurd situation in which humanity is reduced to its talking part. Lines of change and continuity in man's life can never be tradced. He passes through different stages the last in which be becomes no more than a talking mouth and that too in

fragments. In such an aborted existence, is it possible for man to accept such an end as a continuation of a previous stage? And, with such different milestones in his life is it proper to say 'I', or even 'we'? (to use Pirandello's words on the multiplicity of the self). Since Man lives in a state of constant change, and each stage is so different from the other that at times one fails to recognize himself at a particular stage, is it not more appropriate to reject the self altogether and say that is not me, or to be more precise, not I? Again, the feeling that mind, (mouth included), and body are not in harmony with each other makes the urge even stronger. Beckett's attempt at evading the self in dramatic terms is unparalleled in the world of drama. Of course, Beckett was working in a systematic way to dramatize his vision of the Absurd. He was very careful not to repeat himself in his plays. Therefore, *Not I* culminates Beckett's art. It is the natural continuation of Beckett's dramatization of the absurd. Having debunked the concept of time and place in *Waiting for Godot*, his characters find themselves at 'a dark interior' in an endless state of ending in *Endgame*. In *Happy Days*, the concept of happiness is spiritual; otherwise it is dramatically devoided of its meaning. Time, with its traditional divisions of past present and future, and the changing self are subjects for ridicule in *Krapp's Last Tape*.

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With Play Beckett goes even further to tell us that man lives in an Absurd universe in which even death brings no respite. What remains for him is to dramatically demolish the concept of the self whether unified or otherwise. That paves the ground to debunk life as a whole in *Breath* which lasts for 35 seconds and only a breath in and a breath out are heard on stage. Such is life in Beckett's view: while breathing we grow old and die.

The title itself is highly suggestive. It has been repeated, indirectly though, four times in the course of the play. It is *Not I*, which suggests that someone else is living on one's own behalf. It has been pointed out that Beckett's *Not I* or 'Mouth' has "her genesis in Dante's Mouth who was doomed to an endless concealment of identity through logorrhoeic speech" (Elam 153). However, ignorance of such allusions hardly affects understanding the play.

In the play, the curtain rises on an empty and dark stage where Mouth is raised "about 8 feet above stage level" (p 216). Down stage on the left side of the audience appears standing a tall figure whose "sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba with hood", and shown "to be facing diagonally across stage intent on Mouth" (p. 216). Except for four brief moments, the figure remains silent and motionless throughout.

On stage Mouth indulges in a non-stop monologue interrupted four times by a silent Auditor. A plot in the traditional sense of the term is non-existent in this play; therefore, there is no 'story' in the Aristotelian sense of beginning, middle and end. Nevertheless, the play has its own design or structure. Mouth's monologue is concerned with pits and parts of a lady's life but Mouth refuses to accept that the 'story' she is telling is her own story. The crux of the play is quite simple, yet it demonstrates, in an innovative way, a complex abstract idea about human existence that could be summed up as existence by proxy. No one can deny the fact that at times one fails to recognize one's own self.

The central thoughts of the play as well as its form are so original and astonishing. Not even a whole face, only a mouth, is seen pouring out words-words and nothing but word. The play is not divided into acts or scenes but like many of Beckett's plays, the stage is. Not I is also divided into two domains, one of light and another of darkness. In Krapp's Last Tape, for instance, the stage is divided into two areas and Krapp is given enough freedom to move about from one domain into another. Play is another such example in which the stage is divided into two areas; one is illuminated and the other is dark. Spotlight in Play or Krapp in Krapp's Last Tape, Mouth in Not I

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is physically restricted to one place and the Spotlight is immobile. As the curtain rises, the audience sees a "faintly lit" Mouth, not even the whole face, while the rest of the stage is darkened, which is a good dramatic device to separate Mouth from its body. The play offers us a visual stage image of the theme. The haunting image of mouth raises questions central to the theme of the play: whose mouth is this? Is it hers? But the voice denies it and says "what?.. who?.. no!.. she !". This reminds as of the title Not I. Back, to the play proper, the disembodied organ begins to tell a story which turns out to be the story of life. From the voice we learn that it is a female, and like a good 'narrator' the orifice begins the story from the very beginning (birth):

MOUTH ... out ... into this world ... this world ... tiny little  
thing... before is time... in a godfor-...what?... girl?..

yes ... tiny little girl ... into this ... out into this ...  
before her time ... godforsaken hole called ... called ...  
no matter ... parents unknown ... unheard of ... he  
having vanished ... thin air ... no sooner buttoned up his  
breeches ... she similar ... eight months later ...  
to the tic ... so no love ... spared that ... no love such as  
normally vented on the ... speechless infant ... in the  
home ... no ... nor indeed for that matter any of any kind  
... no love of any kind ... at any subsequent stage ... so



typical affair

Mouth gives us a brief account of a mechanical life in which nothing important happens. The nonchalant attitude of Mouth is clear enough, for Mouth, a loveless life in which parents are “unknown” or are “unheard of” is a “typical affair”. The above quoted lines demonstrate Beckett’s great mastery not only over language in general but also over the language of the theater. It clearly shows his ability to make so much of so little. Not I is a very short play and is essentially monological, but Beckett is able to provide it with dialogical content through the use of a silent Auditor whose appearance is theatrically effective. In fact, it is because of the theatrical presentation of Auditor that the presence of a second person is very much felt throughout the play:

Mouth: ... in a godfor- ... what? girl? ..

Yes tiny little girl ... (p.216)

And:

... so typical affair ... nothing of any note till

coming up to sixty when ... what? .. seventy? .. good God! (p.216)

Again:

... and she found herself in the- ... what?

Who? ... no! .. she! (p.217)

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Conflict is an essential ingredient in drama. In fact without conflict there would be no drama. In *Not I*, Beckett not only provides dialogical flavor to the seemingly monological play, but also creates an internal as well as an external conflict. The internal conflict is within Mouth herself who is unwilling to accept the first person pronoun. The external conflict is between Mouth and Auditor. The whole monologue of Mouth seems to be directed and controlled by the silent Auditor. In fact one feels that Mouth responds to an inaudible voice. The sheer presence of the Auditor converts what seems to be a monologue into dialogue and prepares the ground for the conflict between the two of them. Paul Lawely talks yet of another type of external conflict, a conflict between "stage and text":

**The counterpoint between stage and text enacts the play's fundamental Conflict between the need to deny the imperfect self and to maintain, Even in agony, a fictional other and the wish for an oblivion which Would come with acknowledgment of the fragmented self. (409)**

The Auditor's presence shows Beckett's craftsmanship in dramatizing a silent presence. Auditor is not only used as a dramatic device to transform the monologue into dialogue, but he is an integral part of the theme of the play. There are twenty-three "what(s)" directed to Auditor- an indication that Mouth is not speaking in vacuum. It enquires and responds to something 'she' hears and understands. For five times Mouth refuses to

acknowledge the first person pronoun by saying “what?.. who?.. no!.. she!” To each refusal Auditor responds in a gesture of “helpless compassion”. He too interacts with the voice of Mouth. He forces her to speak. At times he interrupts, approves or disapprove of what she says. A close reading of the play would reveal that Auditor subjects Mouth to a corrective process:

**Mouth ... another few- ... what?.. not that?.. nothing to do with that?**

**Nothing she could tell?.. all right ... nothing she could tell  
... try something else ... think of something else ... oh  
long after ... sudden flash ... not that either ... all right ...  
some thing else again ... so on ... hit on it in the end ...  
think everything keep on long enough ... then forgiven...  
back in the- ... what? .. not that either?.. nothing to do  
with that either? .. nothing she could think? .. all right...  
nothing she could tell ... nothing she could think ...  
nothing she- ... what? .. who? .. no! .. she! (p.222)**

On certain occasions Auditor not only corrects or interrupts Mouth but also stops her in the middle of a word:

Mouth ... when suddenly ... gradually ... she realiz- .. what?..

The buzzing?.. yes .. (p.218)

As Zeifman rightly points out:

Mouth accepts every correction except one: the ultimate correction, the one truth she is unable to face – that the story she is telling is in fact her own story, that the “she” constantly referred to should really be “I” (41).

In order to dramatize an abstract idea of a fragmented self, Beckett had to make a separation between Mouth and body. That is why the play is not about the concept of Not I but the dramatization of the idea itself. In Beckett's plays, technique and theme are one. It is almost impossible to dissociate one from the other, exactly like dance in which the dance and the dancer are one. It is rather difficult to understand and appreciate a Beckettian play without having the action performed on the stage of one's own mind. If, at any moment, one forgets the setting of the action, the whole play will collapse. The dramatist undoubtedly violates all the Aristotelian rules but that does not mean that the play follows no rules at all. It has its own design with a beginning, a middle and an end. Not I is based on a one act circular structure. The play begins with “Mouth's voice unintelligible behind curtain” and ends with the same unintelligible voice. The play reaches climax with Mouth's fifth refusal of the first person pronoun.

In an article on Krapp's Last Tape and Not I, Jeanette R. Malkin wrote that “these related plays both attempt to objectify

memory within highly visual – and very different – organs of remembrance “(25). If this statement shows anything, it points to the impossibility to pin down a Beckettian play to one single interpretation. Is *Not I* really nothing but a theatricalised memory? Or is it the dramatization of the fragmented self itself? Does *Mouth* stand for eye? Does the play dramatize the conflict between *Mind* and *Body*? Or is it the dramatization of one of Dante’s damned souls? A Beckettian play. Like any other great play, is open for all kinds of interpretations. But one thing that cannot be overlooked in Beckett’s theater is the stage that always reflects the vision of the dramatist. Therefore, his art is not about something but that thing itself. That is why *body* and *mouth* are separated from each other.

One of the striking dramatic features of Beckett’s *Not I* is the haunting visual image of *Mouth* presented on stage. The first impression of the audience would probably be an extreme shock. The action seems to be twice removed from reality, but as the play proceeds the action gradually unfolds and works on the nerves of the audience like magic spells. In his *The Angels of Darkness*, Colin Duckworth states that one of the effective techniques employed by Beckett to communicate his vision of the absurd is the “isolation of what is represented on the stage from the spectator’s world” (109). This is applicable to *Not I*

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where the setting seems to be that of a dream in which anything may happen. In this case, it is only Mouth who is raised about 8 feet above stage level, ("the body is like gone") and indulges in a non-stop 'monologue'. But a careful analysis of Beckett's theme and technique would reveal that Beckett's art is presentational and not representational. Therefore, it is almost impossible to dissociate form from content. Thus "the atmospheric isolation of the action" becomes a thematic as well as an artistic necessity, which forces the dramatist to situate only Mouth on stage. That amounts to saying that "the atmospheric isolation of the action" is not only a dramatic device but a theme as well.

Almost all of Beckett's plays have the element of story telling. It is used as part of the game to while away the eerie silence of the universe. Endgame, for instance, is full of extended speeches and stories. Hamm, the central figure of the play, is a good storyteller. One of his stories is about a man who took a painful journey to beg a piece of bread from the narrator to his dying son. Nagg, Hamm's father, gets enough time, in the course of the play, to narrate a story about a tailor who took months to make a pair of trousers while God took only six days to create the universe. Likewise, *Waiting for Godot*, lacks extended speeches but provides us with enough

hints for a number of stories, like the story of the Savior and the two thieves who were crucified along with him. Young Krapp has gone to the extent of recording his story “farewell to- (he turns page.)- love” (p.57) on one of his tapes. In *Happy Days*, Winnie too indulges herself in storytelling; she tells a story about a girl named Mildred. *Not I* is no exception; it has its share of stories but with a difference. In earlier plays stories are told voluntarily but in *Not I* Mouth is forced to tell her story under the pressure of Spotlight and Auditor. As usual in Beckett’s plays, the story begins with a “sudden flash” in the mind:

Mouth: ... sudden flash ... very foolish really but so like her ... in a way ... that she might do well to ... groan ... on and off ... write she could not ... as if in actual agony ... but could not ... could not bring her-self ... some flaw in her make-up ... incapable of deceit ... or the machine ... more likely the machine ... so dis-connected ... never got the message ... or powerless to respond ... like numbed ... couldn't make the sound ... not any sound ... no sound of any kind ... no screaming for help for example ... should she feel so inclined ... scream ... (Screams.) ... then listen ... (Silence.) ... scream again ... (Screams again.) ... then listen again ... (Silence.) ... no ... spared that ... all silent as the grave ... no part ... what? ... the buzzing? .. yes. (p.218)

Here the audience / readers would not fail to notice the natural affinities between the ‘narrator’ and the ‘character’ of

the story. Perhaps the story told by Mouth is non-other than her own story. The quoted lines show clearly how Mouth identifies herself with the character of her story. Mouth screams twice in the course of the story:

... no screaming  
for help for example ... should she feel so inclined...  
scream ... (Screams.) ... then listen ... (Silence.)  
... scream again ... (Screams again.) then listen again ...  
(Silence.) ... (p.218)

Beckett's attack on religious beliefs is typical. Because only God can give meaning to this life, in Beckett's art God is either absent or nonexistent. Beckett is relentless when it comes to religious beliefs, for an Absurd universe is basically a Godless universe. That is why Beckett spares no occasion to dramatically debunk the concept of God. Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* believes that his plight is more difficult than that of the Savior. According to him, the place where the Savior was crucified was warm and the crucifixion was quick. Hamm goes to the extent of abusing God directly in *Endgame*. Winnie in *Happy Days* laughs at what she considers God's poor joke when she sees an emit holding an egg. Krapp too vehemently attacks religious beliefs on every occasion. God and his mercies are up there for ridicule in Beckett's art. In *Not I*, God is



hedged between two laughs: one is brief and the other is a good laugh.

Mouth ...brought up, as she had been to believe ...

with other waifs ... in a mencilful ... (Brief laugh.)...

God ... (Good laugh.)... (p.217)

The play creates a powerful vision of the fragmented self. It deals with the complex issues of human identity, and the search for meaning where there is none. By the end of the play we are almost persuaded to let go of our own fixed identities as Mouth says "what?.. who?.. no!... she" or (he). The play forces us to ask ourselves questions like: Do we really know who we are? Is the self unified and continuous? Is it not made of bits and parts and hence a unified and continuous concept of the self does not exist? If this is the case is it possible for Mouth to accept the story she is telling as her own?

Thus we find that *Not I* is a skillfully constructed play, terse and compact with ideas. All ideas are interwoven with the texture of the play and unfold gradually. Beckett's concept of human predicament.

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