

Kathryn White

Beckett and Decay



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Beckett and Decay

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For Mum and Dad – with love

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Finally, I am most grateful for the encouragement of my family, friends and colleagues, without which this book may not have been realized.

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Introduction

*who may tell the tale
of the old man?
weigh absence in a scale?
mete want with a span?
the sum assess
of the world's woes?
nothingness
in words enclose?*

Tailpiece

The subject of decay is paramount in Beckett's work, and it manifests itself in various ways through theme and artistic form. The word *decay* is often used by critics in general reference to Beckett's thematic emphasis and philosophical outlook. However, this subject has not been widely explored from the premise that it is the fundamental core of Beckett's work, dominating the work thematically, linguistically and artistically. Of course, it must be noted that this exploration of the theme of decay in Beckett's work is by no means a study in negativity in relation to Beckett's prose or drama. This study is not a prejudicial examination of the Beckett canon, as the theme of decay, paradoxically, facilitates an investigation into the richness of Beckett's artistic and linguistic style.

Often people, who are not completely understanding of Beckett's oeuvre, work from the presupposition that he is a depressing writer, whose bleak outlook on the world offers audiences and readers a negativity which holds little appeal in some (literary) circles. It is true that Beckett is not a writer who celebrates life and language. He is, however, a writer who confronts the realities of existence through a language that he himself deems to be ultimately ineffectual. And, as will be illustrated throughout this study, Beckett's language is, in fact, a language of poetic beauty and linguistic innovation. Hence, the theme of decay is illustrated through a language that is aesthetically beautiful; and it is here that the paradox lies.

Beckett's world of desolation and despair can be difficult to confront because it does encapsulate 'how it is' to be alive. However, to describe his work as depressing is to fail to appreciate the truthfulness of his message, the moving quality of his words and, of course, the comic element in his work, which is found in both the drama and fiction. Beckett confronts the futility of existence and the tragedy of the human condition, areas which have received much critical attention; however, his corpus of work must surely be seen as a manual for coping with life, as we come to acknowledge the reality of the words from *Endgame* that 'The end is in the beginning and yet you go on' (Beckett 1990: 126). As Knowlson says, Beckett conveys 'a view of life which sees birth as intimately connected with suffering and death and which sees life as a painful road to be trod' (1997: 2). And Beckett illustrates the strength of 'spirit' which keeps us treading that painful road. Therefore, despite the degeneration which dominates the Beckettian world, the characters continue onwards because they have no alternative but to go on.

Everything in Beckett's world appears to be in decline and this erosion affects the characters physically and emotionally. Hence, we see characters in dustbins and urns; images of torsos; heads and mouths trapped in environments which are, similarly, subject to sterility and deterioration. However, this study also investigates Beckett's representation of the mind, and how it functions in a world that is subject to decay, trapped within a body that is essentially perishing. And finally, it explores Beckett's use of language and his ability to represent degeneration through words, which are themselves flawed.

Beckett illustrates the chaos of existence and so he had to adopt a style of writing which would adequately convey the shapelessness of life. Hence, he had to give 'form' to formlessness through a language which, itself, appeared to have no form, but which was meticulously crafted. Speaking with Tom F. Driver, Beckett 'said':

What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates. To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now. (Driver (1961) quoted here from Graver and Federman (1979: 219))¹

The artist creates 'form' where none exists, as art is the only consolation achievable from an otherwise derelict world. The chaos and mess, to which Beckett refers, are the terms used to describe the absurdity of existence and the failure of man. Beckett was well aware of the realities of life, that in life there exists only death, and from the moment of birth we are essentially 'Dying

on' (Beckett 1990: 426). Knowlson speaks of Beckett's 'early fascination with the mineral, with things dying and decaying, with petrification' (1997: 29). He states that Beckett 'linked this interest with Sigmund Freud's view that human beings have a prebirth nostalgia to return to the mineral state' (Knowlson 1997: 29).

This obsession with decay, which manifested itself in Beckett's early life, would stay with him, dominating his work from the beginning until the end, and prompting him to find a form that would 'accommodate the mess'. This study therefore explores the importance of both theme and form in Beckett's work, and it shall be considered whether Beckett will, in future generations, be remembered for his representation of existence or his innovations in language.

The study is divided into three Parts. Part I explores Beckett's representation of physical decay, Part II examines mental erosion and spiritual attrition, and finally Part III investigates linguistic and artistic contraction. This three-part structure allows intensive examination of the major components in Beckett's work, from the premise that they are linked and dominated by the theme of decay. Both the drama and the prose work are examined in each chapter (with the exception of 10 and 11) in order to ascertain a clear indication of how Beckett incorporates similar themes in both mediums. The examination of both prose and drama facilitates a more comprehensive study of the theme of decay, and allows a clear interpretation of Beckett's writing within the confines of each chapter heading.

Part I, entitled *Physical Decay*, focuses primarily on the human condition, examining how the body is pre-disposed to failure from the moment of birth. Beckett presents the body as a hindrance, an inadequate machine which will ultimately break down. To be physical is to suffer, and Beckett illustrates the pain of existence, denying us the possibility that death may provide a release. This part also explores how Beckett's landscapes exemplify the degeneration of his characters.

Chapter 1 introduces Beckett's preoccupation with the failings of the physical body, and examines how Beckett's characters are limited because they are physical beings. Perfection does not exist in the Beckettian world and, hence, we acknowledge how each of the characters suffers because of the inadequacy of the human body. This chapter examines how Beckett presents the body as being subject to degeneration, and how from the moment of birth we, essentially, begin to decline. We are all *de facto* handicapped, it is a universal truth, and Beckett illustrates the imperfections of the human body and its limitations, and portrays his wonderment at the human capacity for going on, despite the great physical adversity that we face. Molloy says that, 'To decompose is to live too' (Beckett 1994: 25), and Beckett illustrates this decomposition, portraying the body as physical wreckage.

Beckett's representation of the aged is a horrific study of the implications of growing old, as he presents the gradual atrophy of the body caused by the

passing of time. Hence the second chapter investigates Beckett's representation of the aged from a corporeal perspective, examining how Beckett illustrates the ageing body, and investigating how the characters deal with the condition of being old; characters such as Maddy Rooney, whose advance in years and lack of physical strength prompt her to declare – 'Oh let me just flop down flat on the road like a big fat jelly out of a bowl and never move again!' (Beckett 1990: 174). Beckett presents the twilight years as horrific, as the diminution of the life force is coupled with isolation and past regrets. We witness how the body and mind are often at odds, as the body is failing but the mind is still active, very much aware of the physical changes that are taking place, and unable to prevent degeneration.

Chapter 3 turns away from Beckett's depiction of the body, and investigates his landscapes as a reflection of our corporeal disintegration. The landscapes may be described as apocalyptic, as the natural world is presented in a state of degeneration and corrosion takes precedence over vitality. This part engages with issues such as Beckett's preoccupation with monochromatic scenes, the lack of colour, which dominates his world, and the sterility, and fragility of the environment. It examines why everything in the Beckettian world appears subject to decline, and illustrates how the environment provides confirmation of the degeneration of the characters, with the external erosion emulating their inner decay. Beckett's characters appear to linger somewhere between life and death, illustrating the fragility of life, and conveying the reality that we are all scarcely alive. Chapter 4 investigates Beckett's representation of death, and questions whether death provides termination. Life appears temporary, but death is not always a fleeting experience, and so Beckett forces us to re-conceptualize death, suggesting that even though the body may die, we cannot be sure if the consciousness discontinues. This chapter examines Beckett's depiction of death as a process, and illustrates how, and why, Beckett conveys death as a physical and mental experience, with bodily death and mental death not necessarily being simultaneous. It, therefore, serves as a bridging chapter, as it engages with mental processes, raising questions that are investigated further in the following part.

Part II, *Mental Decline and Spiritual Attrition*, explores Beckett's representation of the mind and how, similar to the body, it too is prone to deterioration. Beckett illustrates the Cartesian dualism of body and mind throughout his work, and hence this part focuses fundamentally on the workings of the mind, investigating the implications of memory, for example. Here we investigate mental weariness, examining how the inability to comprehend life often results in tiredness of mind. Insanity is also explored, illustrating how Beckett re-conceptualizes mental disorders. Part II also investigates 'the ebbing spirit', examining the 'spiritual' element of existence, as opposed to the physical and mental components.

In Beckett's work memory appears to serve as a negative influence, as the characters cannot escape the past, nor alleviate the pain associated with it.

Characters often idealize memories and, at times, feel compelled to invent memories in an attempt, perhaps, to eradicate the pain of past experience, and thus reduce the suffering of present existence. Chapter 5 explores the concept of voluntary and involuntary memory, examining why Beckett refrains from idealizing memory, forcing one to conceive of it as being a negative influence within the mind, as it is connected to suffering and psychological anguish.

The sixth chapter is an examination of mental weariness. It investigates how the effects of time on the mind, coupled with the harshness of existence, produces mental fatigue in characters who are plagued with isolation and cannot prevent rumination. Beckett illustrates that old age is, perhaps, not defined by the number of years lived, but is, instead, determined by one's mental condition. The inability to stop thinking ultimately results in the mental weariness that is experienced by many of the characters. This chapter explores how tiredness of mind can produce a negative impact on the body, causing premature ageing and feelings of dejection which may ultimately facilitate mental breakdown. Hence Chapter 7 engages with the issues of insanity and mental disorders which are prevalent in Beckett's work. Conventional definitions of insanity no longer apply, as Beckett offers an inversion of the general perception of madness, illustrating that sanity and insanity are not polar opposites and that madness is not, necessarily, a negative state of mind.

Chapter 8 moves away from the mind and looks closely at spiritual attrition and decline. Beckett's characters possess an inner strength which keeps them continuing in spite of the arduousness of the journey. This chapter investigates how the weariness of living eventually erodes the spirit, examining how the characters function once the will to live has left them. The futility of existence and a lack of hope forces the spirit to decline gradually, until the disillusionment with life eventually causes the spirit to die and one collapses under the monotony of living. This chapter also engages with the possibility that bodily death and mental death must be joined with spiritual death if one is to achieve complete termination, assuming that complete termination can, indeed, be achieved.

Part III, entitled *Death of the Word*, examines Beckett's form and style of writing, and explores the idea that 'decay' is to be found in the language itself, as we recognize that words are pre-disposed to failure. It appears that Beckett endeavours to write language out of existence in an attempt to locate silence. This part focuses on Beckett's shorter works, examining how he endeavoured to find a 'form' for formlessness. We witness how Beckett takes language to its extremes, forcing it to acknowledge its own futility. And we see how he, with the use of neologisms and linguistic inventiveness, succeeds in creating new genres, which attempt to express silence. This final part examines the poetic beauty of Beckett's 'dying' words.

Chapter 9 looks at Beckett's desire to write words out of existence, as he recognized the impossibility of successful artistic expression, as words, similar to

everything in life, are prone to failure. It is used to establish theories and pose questions on the subject of linguistic and artistic contraction, theories that are investigated further in the following chapters, and aims to identify the concept of the 'decay of language'.

Chapter 10 builds on the previous chapter, examining how form is as fundamental as content. This chapter is structured differently from earlier chapters, as it focuses solely on the shorter drama, investigating how the involvement of non-linguistic elements, such as music, serves to challenge language, forcing it to acknowledge its own ineptitude. Beckett's 'dramaticules' convey a linguistic crisis, as they illustrate the difficulty of expression and the degenerative nature of the word. We witness how everything becomes pared down, as Beckett endeavours to create new forms of drama that are essentially meta-linguistic and illustrate the arduousness of the creative process. And the following chapter examines the linguistic and artistic contraction found in the shorter prose fiction, investigating how conventional narrative is discarded in favour of a new style of writing, which Beckett describes as the 'literature of the unword' (Beckett 1983: 173). These are experimental fictions designed to capture the formlessness of experience and in these shorter texts we witness an increasing poeticization of the language which appears to be a direct result of the reductionism. The shorter prose fictions illustrate the degenerative nature of language, as with 'worsening words' (Beckett 1999a: 29), Beckett endeavours to write words out of existence. The final chapter looks at Beckett's preoccupation with voices, ghosts and silence. It examines the themes of isolation and loss, investigating the probability that we are all in fact alone, and explores Beckett's determination to depict the void and attain silence. This world of 'shades' illustrates Beckett's increasing resolve to escape the burden of language, as everything appears subject to decay and we witness the tragedy and death of language itself. We witness how Beckett captures the evanescence of life and language, and consider whether the supreme aesthetic moment is attained in the expression of 'nothing'.

As this study engages with issues such as Beckett's depiction of the physical, his approach to mental conditions, and his innovations in language and form, which are all dominated by the theme of decay, we recognize the aspiration of the writer who attempted to 'fail better' by illustrating the degenerative nature of life and language simultaneously.

Part I

Physical Decay