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Psychoanalytic Feminism in Samuel Barclay Beckett's Drama "Footfalls"

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Barclay Beckett, born near Dublin, took a degree at Trinity College (Dublin's Protestant University), but then went abroad and settled for good in Paris in 1937. He has lived in Paris ever since (Abrams, 1962). He wrote *Footfalls* in 1975. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, no one's critical theory of writing dominated feminist criticism because feminist theory and criticism highlighted the personal allowing for diverse theories and approaches to textual analysis. According to Showalter, American feminism at that time was essentially textual; stressing repression, British feminism was essentially Marxist, stressing oppression; and *French* feminism was essentially *psychoanalytic*; stressing repression. (Bressler, 2007) By taking a biographical approach and analysing his mysterious "Footfalls", the main aim of this study is to provide well supported reasons that Beckett is a real psychoanalyst in Feminism.

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Introduction

Samuel Barclay Beckett is the 20th century novelist and dramatist born near Dublin, took a degree at Trinity College (Dublin's protestant university), but then went abroad and settled for good in Paris in 1937. He has lived in Paris ever since, teaching in France *lycees*, and serving occasionally as Joyce's secretary, translator and critical defender-but mostly writing. (Abrams, 1962) During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, no one critical theory of writing dominated feminist theory and criticism highlighted the personal, allowing the diverse theories and approaches to textual analysis. Historically, geography played a significant role in determining the major interests of the various voices of feminist criticisms, with three somewhat distinct geographical strains of feminism emerging: American, British and French. These geographical divisions no longer serve as distinct theoretical or practical boundaries, but they remain important historical remarks in feminism's development. (Bressler, 2007).

Beckett's move to French was a turning point in his writing. At first, he was busy writing novels, but in 1952 he started writing drama with his first masterpiece "waiting for Godot". He even was the director of his plays. In 1975 he wrote "Footfalls", a time which was the start of female phase; female phase is dated from 1970 to the present. (Bressler, 2007) It is impossible that the last modernist, Samuel Beckett remained untouched with attitudes in that time.

General Background:

"Footfalls" is a play by Samuel Beckett. It was written in English, between 2 March and December 1975 and was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre as part of the Samuel Beckett Festival, on May 20, 1976 directed by Beckett himself. Billie Whitelaw, played May whilst Rose Hill voiced the mother.

The play is in four parts. Each opens with the *sound of a bell*. After this the lights fade up to reveal an illuminated strip along which a woman, May, paces back and forth, nine steps within a one meter stretch. In Beckett's attitude a woman is allowed to and able to walk or better say, act in a limited space. The woman as portrayed in this play is just doing repeated

actions that we can see in this play as just going back and forth. Except for the place May walks, the whole stage is in dark. The stage is the mind of a woman; a vague place in which she just go back and forth. In each part, the light will be somewhat darker than in the preceding one. Therefore it is darkest when the strip is lit up without May at the very end. Correspondingly, the bell gets slightly softer each time. Beckett introduced a "Dim spot on face during halts at R [right] and L [left]" so that May's face would be visible during her monologues (Ackerley and Gontarski, 2006). Everything going to slow down, the sound of the bell, the light, and the movements. The May's face is lite up when she speaks, when she pauses at right and left part of the stage. Beckett wanted to show in this part that a woman is alive when she speaks.

Analysis of the Drama

Beckett puts the emphasis on the sound of the May's foot, the sound of a walking which leads nowhere, a walking in the form of a seeking which has no result. The play has a very musical structure and timing is critical. "The walking should be like a metronome", Beckett instructed, "One length must be measured in exactly nine seconds" (Asmus, 1977): "These 'life-long stretches of walking,' he told his German May, Hildegard Schmahl, are 'the center of the play; everything else is secondary'" (Asmus, 1977).

To ensure that every step could be heard "sandpaper was attached to the soles of [Billie] Whitelaw's soft ballet slippers" (Knowlson, 1996) during the London premiere. Here is just a present person. Is she in fact a present person? Beckett said to Billie Whitelaw during rehearsals for *Footfalls* "Let's just say you're not all there." We should consider the whole stage as not all there. It seems as if that the stage is a mind suffering from a loss, Loss of a defined and definite being.

The matter of fact here is being lonely not alone. May is lonely, abandoned with her lack of a true identity. We should consider that "a goal of feminism is to change this view of woman so that each woman will *realize* that she is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as men. As May covers the nine paces (seven in earlier printed texts) she hugs herself, the arms crossed, with the hands clasping the shoulders

in front. 'When you walk, you slump together, when you speak, you straighten up a bit.' Schmah! asked Beckett if May's posture was supposed to express fear? "No, not fear. It expresses that May is there exclusively for herself. She is isolated" (Asmus, 1977).

Jacques Lacan posits that the human psyche consists of three parts, or what he calls orders: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. Each of these orders interacts with the other (Bressler, 2007). It seems as if that May is stocked in the first and did not have any space to grow to the next parts.

One of a long line of Beckett protagonists whose name begins with an M, May is a woman in her forties (who should however appear "ageless" (Asmus, 1977)). She paces back and forth on a strip of bare landing outside her dying – if not already dead – mother's room (a vertical ray of light not in the printed text suggests a door barely ajar). The door behind the stage which is half open signifies the fact that we entered the mind of May.

The appearance of May is really pitiful. She has a worn out dressing-gown. As if she had been buried by her dress one time before. The woman, clearly a shadow of her former self, wears tattered nightwear and has a ghostly pallor. Beckett said: "One could go very far towards making the costume quite unrealistic, unreal. It could, however, also be an old dressing-gown; worked like a cobweb ... It is the costume of a ghost" (Asmus, 1977). As May paces back and forth on the stage, she hugs herself that apparently shows how lonely she is. "You feel cold. The whole time, in the way you hold your body too. Everything is frost and night" (Asmus, 1977). The adjective 'ghostly' is used frequently – by Beckett himself and others – to describe various aspects of *Footfalls*.

May's mother is only ever heard. We learn that she is apparently ninety years old and in poor health. The more likely truth is that she is a creation of May's mind, especially when one examines Beckett's earlier drafts.

As it was mentioned before the play is made up of four parts. In the first part there is a conversation carried by the mother and May. May and her mother are two women who share their grief and their pitiful situations. Beckett by writing these pitiful conversations and situations arouse the audience's sense of sympathy. The audience for sure understand that May have lost something. She has lost her identity. May and her mother go through the daily routine by rote. Both voices are low and slow throughout. May asks her mother if she requires tending in any way. To each request the mother says: "Yes, but it is too soon." (Beckett, 1984) This sentence is a paradoxical answer, given to May by her mother. The mother is an old woman who needs her girl to nurse her.

May ask her mother what age she is. She's told that she is in her "forties" but only after May has first let her mother know that she is ninety. The mother asks May: "Will you never have done ... revolving it all ... In your poor mind?" (Beckett, 1984) The pacing back and forth is an externalization of this inner unresolved issue. "It All" was a title Beckett was considering before he opted for *Footfalls* though we never discover what "it" might be. May may or may not be a ghost but she is undoubtedly a haunted individual.

"M (May) and V (Voice) create a dialogue which is simultaneously time present and time past, for, although the mother's voice is an echo from the past, May is speaking to her in the endless present dramatized before our eyes. Quite literally in *Footfalls*, the past is in the present" (Brater, 1977). Simply put: they are 'living' in the past.

In the second part the mother start talking to the audiences directly. She talks about her girl. She tell the audiences that her

girl do not go out of the house. The mother's voice addresses the audience directly. She tells us that she too is watching her daughter along with us literally through the corridor wall. We learn that the turning point in May's life, the "it" happened in girlhood: "when other girls her age were out at ... lacrosse" (Beckett, 1998) she had already begun her obsessive pacing. From that time on significantly she has not ventured outside.

The only thing that shows the presence and signifies their being is the sound of the woman's footfall. May wanted to be recognized at least by her footfalls. In the beginning the hall had been carpeted but May had asked her mother to have it taken up. When questioned the child had said because she needed to "hear the feet, however faint they fall"; "the "motion alone is not enough". (Beckett, 1998) The apparition in the story in Part III on the other hand makes "No sound. [Pause] None at least to be heard" (Beckett, 1998).

In an earlier draft, the voice tells the audience: "My voice is in her mind" (Mercier, 1990) suggestive of the fact that the mother actually is only a figment of May's imaginings. This is borne out by the fact that voice tells the story of a girl who "called her mother" (Beckett, 1998), instead of simply talking about a girl who "called me." This is the kind of slip May might make if she was narrating the mother's part herself.

The pitiful situation of the girl and her busy mind donot even let her to sleep. May sleeps "in snatches" with her head bowed against the wall which is reminiscent of Mary in *Watt*. (Beckett, 1998). "Beckett explains [why] the mother interrupts herself in the sentence 'In the old home, the same where she — (pause)' and then continues 'The same where she began. She was going to say: ... the same where she was born. But that is wrong, she hasn't been born. She just began. It began. A life, which didn't begin as a life, but which was just there, as a thing'" (Asmus, 1977).

In the second part the mother speaks of the daughter, in the third part, the daughter of the mother, in a way that is exactly parallel. 'One must sense the similarities of both narratives,' explained Beckett, 'Not so much from the text as from the style, from the way that the text is spoken' (Asmus, 1977).

In a manner similar to Mouth in *Not I*, "the shift into third person narrative and the indefinite pronoun work both to objectify the text, making it into a separate entity that seems disconnected from personal history. In that sense the recitation becomes a verbal structure repeated in consciousness rather than a sequence of memories in spontaneous association." (Lyons, 1983) This part can be subdivided into four fragments.

After each part May stops for a time and then starts pacing again. There are three parts in the play which are when May says "Sequel". In this part which is the most important evidence that May as a woman is searching to find her as a self. This part opens with May uttering the word, "Sequel" twice, which Beckett asked to be pronounced as "Seek well" – pun – since she is seeking for herself (Asmus, 1977).

May begins to tell a story in which an undefined 'she', probably herself, has taken to haunting the local Anglican church, which she enters through a locked door; there 'she' walks 'up and down, up and down, his poor arm'" (Mercier, 1990) "Literally she is walking along the 'arms' of a cross-shaped church" (Brienza, 1987).

Amy and Mrs. Winter come to the play not physically, but in this part May starts to make up a story about a girl, named Amy (an anagram of May) and her mother, named Mrs. Winter. Although Beckett knew a Mrs. Winter in real life the name would have been chosen to reflect the coldness of "his own 'winter's tale', just as he changed the 'south door' of the church

in the manuscript to the 'north door' at a late stage for the same reason" (Knowlson, 1996).

In this part May wants to make up a story in which she wants to make another girl out of herself, but again the new May (Amy) becomes exactly the same as May in the previous parts. The name Amy is another pun: "A me." This means a new "me".

Mrs. Winter has become aware of something strange "at Evensong" and questions her daughter about it while at supper. She asks if Amy had seen anything strange during the service but the daughter insists she did not because she "was not there" a point her mother takes issue with because she is convinced that she heard her distinctly say "Amen." (Beckett, 1984) This is not a dramatization of the event that traumatized May however as that happened in girlhood and Amy is described in the text as "scarcely a girl anymore." (Beckett, 1984)

"The daughter only knows the voice of the mother'. One can recognize the similarity between the two from the sentences in their narratives, from the expression. The strange voice of the daughter comes from the mother. The 'Not enough?' in the mother's story must sound just like the 'Not there?' of Mrs. W in Amy's story, for example. These parallelisms are extremely important for the understanding of the play ... One can suppose that she has written down everything which she has invented up to this, that she will one day find a reader for her story—therefore the address to the reader ... 'Words are as food for this poor girl.' Beckett says. 'They are her best friends.' ... Above all, it is important that the narrative shouldn't be too flowing and matter-of-course. It shouldn't give the impression of something already written down. May is inventing her story while she is speaking. She is creating and seeing it all gradually before her. It is an invention from beginning to end. The picture emerges gradually with hesitation, uncertainty – details are always being added" (Asmus, 1977).

Everything is dead but everything going to die again. From part to part the light becomes slowly and continuously darker, the tone becomes slower and lower, so the walking accompanied by small hesitation. When she begins to walk, there's a small hesitation, as though she were unsure if she should walk or not. "Beckett pointed out that on her last walk along the strip of light, her energy runs out after three paces and she has to wait there until enough vitality returns to drag herself to the end of the light." (Conversation with Samuel Beckett, 2006).

"As the play ends, Mrs. Winter speaks to Amy the very words spoken to May by her mother: 'Will you never have done ... revolving it all?'" (Mercier, 1990) Up until this point May has identified who has been speaking. At the end, when 'Mrs. W' says, "Amy" it is May who answers, "Yes, Mother" – significantly she does not say, "Amy: Yes, Mother."

Can May be the ghost and be 'Amy'? Yes, if each reflects a different aspect of whom she is. In the final section the stage is empty and the only thing to be heard is the sound of the bell. the lights come up and then fade out.

"The final ten seconds with 'No trace of May', is a crucial reminder that May was always 'not there' or only there as a 'trace'. "May, like the Amy of her story, is simply 'not there.' 'Strange or otherwise,' we hear nothing, we see nothing. Absence is the only presence" (Brater, 1977). As Beckett told Billie Whitelaw, when she asked him if May was dead, he replied, "Let's just say you're not all there." (Kalb, 1989) This has been interpreted that May don't consider herself to exist; she is not being regarded when she was alive. But it should be remembered that [a] ghost has a curious relation to finitude, which means it is never entirely unearthly or out of this world.

[G]hosts ... are traditionally tied to places, condemned for a certain time to walk the earth (Connor, 2006).

The aim of the play is to show how a woman is getting lower and lower and not be identified as self but as a thing or better say nothing. In an interview with Jonathan Kalb, Billie Whitelaw describes May's journey: "In *Footfalls* ... [May] gets lower and lower and lower until it's like a little pile of ashes on the floor at the end, and the light comes up and she's gone" (Kalb, 1989).

Both of character and the sound of the mother are haunting ghosts. It seems as if that both ghosts have suffered terrible lives. they sympathize with each other. the James Knowlson and John Pilling in *Frescoes of the Skull* (p.227) come close to summarizing the entire play in a single sentence: "We realize, perhaps only *after* the play has ended, that we may have been watching a ghost telling a tale of a ghost (herself), who fails to be observed by someone else (her fictional *alter ego*) because she in turn is not really there ... even the mother's voice may simply be a voice in the mind of a ghost."

Conclusion:

All of these instances from "Footfalls" attest to Beckett's psychoanalytic Feminism, also exhibited in his more well-known works. The play reflects the after-effects of his living in a society of psychoanalytic feminism attitudes, and, therefore, can be read as a key for better understanding his tendency to show the woman's mind suffrages as a result of being disregarded in the society.

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