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The comic vision of Samuel Beckett

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THE COMIC VISION OF

SAMUEL BECKETT

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"What matters is to eat and to excrete. Dish and pot, dish and pot, these are the poles,"[1] states the protagonist of Samuel Beckett's novel Malone Dies. The twin poles of eating and excreting which he mentions point up Beckett's preoccupation with the physical over the spiritual, an interest which stands as a clue to the understanding of his comic vision, the one element which remains constant and at the heart of his writing throughout his career. At the center of this interest is a theory of comedy best investigated through his relationship to Henri Bergson, the French philosopher and author of Laughter, a theory of the comic. Though there is no concrete evidence of any direct influence on Beckett from Bergson, the incredible similarities in their thinking indicate that a familiarity with Bergson's principles can provide an understanding of the basis of Beckett's seemingly chaotic works.

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[1]Samuel Beckett, Malone Dies, Three Novels by Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 185. All references to the trilogy (Molly, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable) will be from this Evergreen Black Cat edition.

There has been some previous critical mention of Bergson in connection with Beckett; however, only Ruby Cohn has placed any real emphasis on this concept.[2] In Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut, she uses Bergson's theory as a starting point for her examination of the comic devices in Beckett's very early work, but denies its critical importance after this point. She feels that in Beckett's later productions he no longer displays the same overtly Bergsonian "twists of plot, distortion of character, and tricks of language"[3] as in his earlier works. While Mrs. Cohn has provided a useful guide to the individual comic devices in Beckett, it is her very concentration on cataloging and explaining individual devices which has prevented her from obtaining a wider perspective on Bergson's importance in Beckettian criticism. It is true that separate devices, themes, settings, and stylistic tricks change greatly from work to work in Beckett's canon, but on a deeper level his essential vision remains constantly Bergsonian.

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[2]Other critics mentioning Bergson in connection with Beckett are Jean-Jacques Mayoux in "Samuel Beckett and the Universal Parody" printed in Samuel Beckett, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 84 and David I. Grossvogel in Four Playwrights and a Postscript (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U. Press, 1965), p. 102. Neither one, however, places much emphasis on the connection.

[3]Ruby Cohn, Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers U. Press, 1962), p. 288.

Laughter is predicated on the concept that man, being composed of body and spirit, has a dualistic nature. The spirit, which is "infinitely supple and perpetually in motion,"[4] animates man and ideally should impart its characteristics to him. Therefore, any person should have a certain gracefulness and freedom of movement, thought, and speech. Even the facial expressions and gestures made during speech should be free from rigidity and stereotypes. However, the physical side of man often weighs down the spirit, offsetting its gracefulness, and achieving an effect which is rigid, clumsy, and mechanical. Man is then made to appear in some way as rigid, ungraceful, and predictable as a machine. This effect, which Bergson variously terms "something mechanical encrusted on the living,"[5] "mechanical inelasticity,"[6] "and some rigidity or other applied to the mobility of life,"[7] is the essence of the comic spirit. In Bergson's words: "Where matter thus succeeds in dulling the outward life of the soul, in petrifying its movements and thwarting its

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[4]Henri Bergson, Laughter (New York: Macmillan, 1913), p. 28.

[5]Ibid., p. 37.

[6]Ibid., p. 29.

[7]Ibid., p. 38.

gracefulness, it achieves, at the expense of the body, an effect that is comic."[8]

Bergson points out a great number of examples of comic effects to illustrate his theory; however, the real importance of his work lies in the flexible guidelines he presents. No matter how involved the examples become, only one rule is necessary to understand the comic in most situations: the comic is produced by "something mechanical encrusted on the living,"[9] which in some way reflects the weighing down of the spirit by the body. Speech, for example, is naturally very fluid and unpredictable. When a person encrusts this living entity with mechanical phrases, pet words, or repeated incorrect usage of words, it becomes comic. This is the reason why both a person who stutters and a person who mechanically misuses language such as Mrs. Malaprop can be considered comic in the same sense. Other applications of this principle concern facial expressions and gestures. A "laughable expression of the face . . . is one that will make us think of something rigid . . . in the wonted mobility of the face."[10] A comedian who

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[8] Ibid., p. 29.

[9] Ibid., p. 37.

[10] Ibid., p. 24.

makes "faces" is comic for this reason. Comic gestures are those which call attention to the body as being rigid, mechanical, and less than human, such as when a person imitates a puppet.

There is also in Bergson's theory a very important corollary which is easily derived from his primary rule. It concerns the transformation of a person into a thing. A comic character is one who appears mechanical in his thoughts, words, or actions. He has a rigid, mechanical pattern of gestures or attitudes encrusted on his natural gracefulness. Because of his inflexibility he becomes less than human. He becomes a thing. Thus, laughter may be provoked whenever a person comes momentarily to resemble a thing.[11] One well-known example of this effect is the line of soldiers standing at attention who collapse one after another in perfect rhythm. This produces laughter because the men are momentarily things rather than humans. A multitude of other examples could be cited, but it is really only important to remember that the comic can always be explained by the two phrases "something mechanical encrusted on the living,"[12] and "the momentary transformation of a person into a thing."[13]

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[11] Ibid., p. 57.

[12] Ibid., p. 37.

[13] Ibid., p. 57.

When these two principles are applied to the writings of Samuel Beckett they reveal a comic spirit operating on all levels of his writing from his broadest vision of mankind to the individual comic devices in each work.

Beckett's first point of similarity to Bergson is that his work also proceeds from a dualistic concept of man, a fact which has been duly noted by critics. Yet most of these critics concentrate solely on the spiritual side of man, concerning themselves with Beckett's philosophical inquiries and philosophically-oriented characters (like Murphy, a solipsist who wishes to escape from his body and live entirely in his mind). Meanwhile, they ignore the overwhelming emphasis of his work on the physical. If they do mention the physical it is usually to venture the opinion that Beckett abhors the flesh since he makes his characters so disgusting. This critical concentration is in direct contradiction to the world which Beckett presents in his writings.

There are, however, a few critics who have recognized Beckett's emphasis on thephysical aspects of life. Leonard Pronko, for one, perceptively describes the environment of Waiting For Godot as a "universe without any spiritual values; [in which] man is caught within the physical unable to rise above the numerous bodily functions and needs which, in the

last analysis, are the only sure things we know."[14] Rather than just the setting of one play, Pronko has described the entire literary world of Samuel Beckett. For all Beckett's speculations about the spirit, his characters are dominated completely by the physical. Their constant preoccupation with food, excrement, and sex thematically highlights this fact. The narrator of Malone Dies is a case in point. Confined to a bed, all he can do to pass the time is to tell stories. Interspersed throughout this storytelling is a series of running comments on the dish which is left for him with food in it and the chamberpot which is removed with his excrement (Hence the statement -- "What matters is to eat and to excrete. Dish and pot, dish and pot, those are the poles."[15]) He also goes to great lengths to describe a disgusting sexual affair between an old hag named Moll and a young man named Macmann in an insane asylum. The following sentence is an example of the description of the episode: "The sight of her so diminished did not damp Macmann's desire to take her, all stinking, yellow, bald, and vomiting, in his arms."[16] In addition, he makes repeated references to sexual organs, urine, vomiting, spittle, and masturbation.

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[14]Leonard Pronko, Avant-Garde: The Experimental Theater in France (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U. of California Press, 1966), p. 27.

[15]Beckett, Malone Dies, p. 185.

[16]Ibid., p. 265.

All of these elements combine to anchor Beckett's literary creations in the physical world and to graphically illustrate his preoccupation with it. To a certain extent, all of Beckett's works are filled with such elements.

Another factor which helps to illustrate Beckett's emphasis on the physical is that most of his characters are abnormal in some way which draws attention to the body. For example, Nagg and Nell in Endgame are legless, Hamm in Endgame is confined to a wheelchair, Mahood in The Unnamable has no arms or legs, and Cooper in Murphy is physically unable to sit down. It has been argued by some critics that Beckett's portrayal of paralytics, amputees, and others with physical abnormalities is evidence that he is trying to dispense with the body in his work. Despite their claims, there is no better way to call attention to the body than to mutilate it, and this is exactly what Beckett does.

As inhabitants of a world dominated by the physical, Beckett's characters act as almost perfect examples of Bergson's thesis by displaying the "something mechanical encrusted on the living"[17] and the "momentary transformation of a person into a thing"[18] produced when the physical dominates the

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[17]Bergson, p. 37.

[18]Ibid., p. 57.

spiritual. The most obvious indication of this condition is the "stasis"[19] which affects them all. Some disability restricts their enjoyment of free and easy motion. The narrator of How It Is, for example, can only crawl, Malone is confied to bed, Willie in Happy Days can only crawl on all fours, the characters in Play are entombed in urns up to their necks, and both Molloy and Moran in Molloy walk on crutches and crawl. Movement is possible in some cases, and indeed some of them go on journeys, but this movement is paid for by extreme discomfort and pain as in the case of Moran who begins his journey on foot and ends it crippled.

It should be noted that there is also a psychological stasis affecting some of Beckett's characters which is explained by Bergson's allowance for internal as well as external inelasticity. Similar to physical stasis, it roots characters to one spot, greatly reducing their flexibility. Some examples of this condition include: Vladimir and Estragon who never leave the spot they are in because they are waiting for Godot, Henry of Embers who is unable to leave the sea, and Krapp in Krapp's Last Tape who is tied to his tape recorder. All of them have their mobility and freedom restricted.

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[19] A. J. Leventhal, "The Beckett Hero," Samuel Beckett, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.:Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 38.

The characters' static condition is a mechanical encrustation on their movement which should be graceful and free. In this respect, the characters are comic. This condition can also be seen as comic because it turns them into things. The best example of this effect is the limbless Mahood who is stuck in a jar and used as a menu-holder outside a restaurant. Nagg and Nell, the legless parents in Endgame, also fit this category since they are kept in ashbins, fed, and have their sand changed regularly like household pets.

The fact that Beckett turns many of his characters into things has been noted by several critics including Michael Robinson who sidesteps the pitfalls of emotion and disgust to comment accurately on the humor in "things."[20] In reaction to the Unnamable's statement "I am a big talking ball,"[21] he states, "This last quotation is of the ghastly

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[20]Some of the critics who comment on Beckett's characters as things include: John Fletcher in The Novels of Samuel Beckett (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964), p. 181; David I. Grossvogel in Four Playwrights and a Postscript, p. 151; Jean-Jacques Mayoux in "Samuel Beckett and the Universal Parody," p. 84; and Frederick Lumley in New Trends in Twentieth Century Drama (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1967), p. 200.

[21]Beckett, The Unnamable, p. 305.

humour which characterizes his monologue, ironically reminding one on this occasion of those rubber toys which, when knocked down, immediately bob back up into their old position . . . ."[22] Jean-Jacques Mayoux, however, is the only critic to connect the transformation of a person into a thing directly with Bergson. In his article "Samuel Beckett and the Universal Parody," he states, "Beckett is a philosopher and there is no doubt that he has meditated Bergson's lessons on the comic. Mechanization turns the man-subject, endowed with more or less autonomous consciousness, into an object and a sort of automaton."[23] To my knowledge, Mayoux has not developed this idea further.

In addition to their stasis, Beckett's characters also meet Bergsonian comic standards in their speech which is often mechanical and repetitive. As Bergson states, ". . . thought too is a living thing. And language, the translation of thought, should be just as living."[24] But the speech of Beckett's characters is usually far from a living entity.

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[22]Michael Robinson, The Long Sonata of the Dead: A Study of Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1970), p. 193.

[23]Mayoux, p. 84.

[24]Bergson, p. 119.

More often it is repetitive and tortuously involved. Coming under this heading is Beckett's device of repeating to the point of absurdity a catchphrase such as "That is what I find so wonderful"[25] by Winnie in Happy Days. Another example of the Bergsonian speech of Beckett's characters is this mechanically inane section from How It Is: ". . . similarily number 814326 may know by repute number 814345 number 814344 having spoken of him to number 814343 and this last to number 814342 and this last to number 814341 and so back to number 814326 who in this way may know number 814345 by repute."[26] Though there is not an exact repetition of the same words in this case, there is a rigid and mechanical aspect which is comic. Watt's description of Mr. Knott is another good example of this type of speech:

> For one day Mr. Knott would be tall, fat, pale and dark, and the next thin, small, flushed and fair, and the next sturdy, middlesized, yellow and ginger, and the next small, fat, pale and fair, and the next middlesized, flushed, thin and ginger, and the next tall, yellow, dark and sturdy, and the next fat, middlesized, ginger and pale, and the next tall, thin, dark and flushed, and the next small, fair, sturdy and yellow, and the next tall, ginger, pale and fat,

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[25]Samuel Beckett, Happy Days (New York: Grove Press, 1961), passim.

[26]Samuel Beckett, How It Is (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 120.

> and the next thin, flushed, small and dark,
> and the next fair, sturdy, middlesized
> and yellow, and the next . . . ."[27]

This continues until he covers all the possible permutations of the series, an exercise which illustrates the mechanical aspects of both the speech and thinking of Beckett's characters. In addition, it seems more mechanical and more comic the longer it continues.

Clothing, according to Bergson, can also be comic if it is out of style or ill-fitting. In this way it detracts from the gracefulness of the body. The most famous example of this effect in Beckett is probably that of the boots in Waiting For Godot. Comic effect is derived from the fact that one of them is too large while the other is too small. Sapo in Malone Dies is also comically dressed. He wears an old, ragged greatcoat which is so large that it covers him completely and sweeps along the ground. In contrast to this overly large coat, his hat (which is connected to the top button of his coat by a string) is too small. Many of the other Beckettian characters also dress in ragged, ill-fitting clothes, one of the reasons for their designation as "Beckett's Bums."[28]

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[27]Samuel Beckett, Watt (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 209.

[28]William York Tindall, "Beckett's Bums," Critique, II (Spring-Summer 1958), 15.

To complete the Bergsonian motif, Beckett runs his characters through mechanical and repetitious routines such as the business with the hats in Waiting For Godot, the stage directions for which read in part: "Estragon takes Vladimir's hat. Vladimir adjusts Lucky's hat on his head. Estragon puts on Vladimir's hat in place of his own which he hands to Vladimir. Vladimir takes Estragon's hat. Estragon adjusts Vladimir's hat on his head. Vladimir puts on Estragon's hat in place of Lucky's which he hands to Estragon. Estragon takes Lucky's hat. Vladimir adjusts Estragon's hat on his head. Estragon puts on Lucky's hat in place of Vladimir's which he hands to Vladimir. . . ."[29] In the same play, there is another routine which is repeated several times: Vladimir "takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, puts it on again."[30] An example of this type of comic action from the novels is the famous "stone sucking" routine by Molloy in which he spends over two thousand words working out a system for transferring sixteen stones from one pocket to another while sucking the stones one at a time without sucking the same one twice.

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[29]Samuel Beckett, Waiting For Godot (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 46.

[30]Ibid., p. 8. Almost identical routines also appear on p. 46 and p. 60.

It is obviously comic routines such as the above which help to make more apparent the comic spirit within Beckett's works which is so often overlooked because of his bizarre characters and effects. People seem to feel that there can be nothing comic about the condition of the crippled unfortunates in Beckett's literary world; yet, in reality their condition helps to ensure the presence of the comic. Bergson states that one of the prerequisits of laughter is an "absence of feeling."[31] In other words, the comic character must not elicit pity or sympathy. Accordingly, Beckett makes his characters so absurd and so disgusting that emotional distance is maintained, the characters are regarded entirely with the intellect, and the comic is produced.

It seems evident after the application of Bergson's principles to Beckett's work that his vision is a deeply comic one. Rather than merely employing a few Bergsonian devices as many authors do, Beckett displays the Bergsonian spirit as a central part of his work. His characters, who dominate his works to the near exclusion of other elements such as setting and plot, are totally Bergsonian from their basic human condition as Beckett sees it to the most specific

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[31] Ibid., p. 10.

elements of their dress, thought, speech, and movement. In all facets of their lives, they betray a rigidity and "inelasticity just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being."[32] In like manner, his prose style reflects the condition of his characters. It too is rigid and mechanical. While it may be argued that many serious authors can be termed Bergsonian in part, few if any actually display Beckett's overpowering emphasis on all the main points of Laughter, especially the dualistic concept of man, the physical dominating over the spiritual, and the graphic depiction of the resultant rigidity, inelasticity, and transformation of people into things.

There remain, however, several questions raised by Ruby Cohn concerning a connection between Bergson and Beckett. In explaining why she considers Bergson's importance to Beckettian criticism to be limited, she raises the question of social significance. Bergson's theory views the purpose of the comic as socially-oriented in exposing deviations from behavioral norms and correcting them through laughter. According to Mrs. Cohn, after a certain point early in Beckett's career, there is no recognizable social norm from

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[32]Ibid., p. 10.

which to deviate. In addition, she states that instead of "laughing in a civilized and detached way at comic figures whom we do not resemble, instead of reforming after laughing at our own weaknesses as seen in another, we come, in Beckett's work to doubt ourselves through our laughter. But through the obsessions of Beckett's heroes, we understand our own deepest humanity."[33]

In answer to Mrs. Cohn, Beckett *is* socially-oriented. As many critics have noted, Beckett's characters are Everymen who illustrate his view of the condition of man.[34] The society he depicts is that of all mankind, and the reader is well aware of the norms to which men should conform. It is thus unnecessary for him to create some specific sham society in his works from which to have his characters deviate, as Mrs. Cohn suggests, since the deviations of his characters are measured from that ideal human norm of

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[33]Cohn, pp. 295-96.

[34]This view has been espoused by many critics. Some of those more explicit in their statements include: Leo Bersani in "No Exit for Beckett," *Partisan Review*, XXXIII (Sprin 1966), 262; Edith Kern in "Beckett's Knight of Infinite Resignation," *Yale French Studies*, XXIX (Spring-Summer 1962), 50-51; Northrop Frye in "The Nightmare Life in Death," *Hudson Review*, XIII (Autumn 1960), 444-45; Ruby Cohn in *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 5; David Hayman in "*Molloy* or the Quest for Meaninglessness: A Global Interpretation," printed in *Samuel Beckett Now*, ed. Melvin J. Friedman (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 130; and John Fletcher in *The Novels of Samuel Beckett*, p. 182.

gracefulness and freedom of which all men are aware. In other words, the characters are deviating from our society and not from any order which might be set up in any work they inhabit. In the process, they make us "understand our own deepest humanity"[35] by showing each one of us how in reality we deviate from this norm. The question of whether or not Beckett's laughter is corrective is ultimately tied up with whether or not man ever actually changes through laughter. Insofar as it is possible, Beckett opens the door by providing an explicit vision of the absurdity of man's condition couched most emphatically in comic terms which allow for the "absence of feeling"[36] necessary for intellectual laughter. His intentions in this direction can be seen in this statement in an interview with Tom F. Driver: "The confusion [of the world] is not my invention....It is all around us and our only chance now is to let it in. The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess."[37]

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[35]Cohn, pp. 295-96.

[36]Bergson, p. 4.

[37]As quoted in "Beckett by the Madeleine," Columbia University Forum, IV (Summer 1961), 22-23.

One more question raised by Mrs. Cohn remains to be answered. In her book, she dismisses Bergson's importance with regard to Beckett by the statements: "And we are, of course, worlds away from what Bergson understood by the comic of situation"[38] and "[This is] literalism misplaced beyond what Bergson envisaged."[39] The best answer to Mrs. Cohn's arguments is found in Bergson's own statement that "we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing."[40] This living quality is exactly what Mrs. Cohn fails to perceive. Bergson created a theory of the comic spirit with the flexibility to enable it to be adapted to many situations. It is unimportant whether or not he could have envisioned all the specific comic situations and devices which would be developed through the years following the publication of Laughter. What is important is that Beckett's works display a fundamental vision which is in accord with the spirit of the "living thing"[41] that is Bergson's theory of the comic.

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[38] Cohn, p. 68.

[39] Ibid., p. 85.

[40] Bergson, p. 2.

[41] Idem.

Yet even the realization that Beckett's artistic vision is comic in the Bergsonian sense is, in itself, a somewhat limited insight. It does put into perspective the unusual elements of his literary world, explaining the curious condition and appearance of his characters as well as the presence in his work of the repeated references to disease and excrement. It also explains the unusually mechanical and repetitive thought and speech patterns displayed by some of his characters. Most of all it offers a firm and continuous basis for approaching all of his work. Instead of the overwhelmingly dark, obscure, unintelligible mass of despair which it is often termed, Beckett's work appears as a thematically coherent (if not coherent in terms of conventional plotting, characterization, or literary style) presentation of his personal vision of mankind, an ironic vision which shows the disparity between man's view of himself and reality by cutting through presumptions, assumptions, and "socially accepted generalities, in short, everything that veils reality from us, in order to bring us face to face with reality itself."[42] That vision presents man, stripped of his overblown presumptions to freedom, learning, philosophy, and social distinctions, as a gross, immobilized hulk completely

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[42]Bergson, p. 151.

their possessions, the need of characters such as Malone and the Unnamable to define themselves in the very words of their nonstop monologues, and the rituals and remembrances close to all Beckettian characters are clear illustrations of this fact.

Beckett's characters fail, of course, and were destined to fail before they even started because, as William I. Oliver states, "... the more we strive for definition and permanent distinction, the more absurd we are."[45] Men cannot tie down life and the self, but they try. They erect elaborate systems of time and social structure. They cling to the past. They engross themselves in the static physical world and try to ignore the fluid, spiritual side of their own natures. But instead of obtaining order and permanence, humans encrust themselves with mechanical, repetitious gestures, thoughts, words, attitudes, and postures which turn them into static things. Leonard Pronko's statement that the "tragedy of ... all men in Beckett's view, is not that we become what we were not, but that we are now

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[45]William I. Oliver, "Between Absurdity and the Playwright," Modern Drama: Essays in Criticism, eds. Travis Bogard and William I. Oliver (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1965), p. 4.

and evermore the same..."[46] seems a recognition of just this static tendency.

The static state of being is evident in most of Beckett's creations since almost all of his characters remain the same throughout the works in which they appear. Their situations or physical appearances can change during a work, but they never really grow or develop. Vladimir and Estragon, for example, are exactly the same at the end of Waiting for Godot as they were at the beginning. They go through a series of meaningless actions, but nothing happens to change them. Similarly, Winnie in Happy Days, an example of a character whose situation changes, fails to grow or develop. In the beginning of the play, she is buried to her waist in a mound of dirt. By the end, she is almost completely covered with dirt and close to annihilation, yet she remains the same happy, inane chatterer she has been all along.

Only the trilogy (Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable) seem to deviate from the static pattern. In these works, the characters appear to develop somewhat and even to change identities completely. On closer analysis, however, it becomes clear that the differences between these and Beckett's other works are only superficial. The different

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[46]Pronko, p. 51.

identities assumed by the characters are really only unsuccessful attempts to define themselves in time and space. Even the narrator in The Unnamable, an amorphous character who may or may not be in the grave, shows this propensity as he tries to define himself and his location in relation to the objects and occurrences in his unfamiliar world. The apparent character development, also an illusion, is actually part of a critically acknowledged process of stripping away the layers of conventional illusion and habit which we perceive as daily life to get to the real center of being or self. As the accumulated layers are stripped away, rather than finding a greatly changed character, one finds the same character merely clothed in different circumstances. For example, there may seem to be a great change in Moran as the orderly illusion of his everyday life is stripped away, but actually all along he has been the same physical hulk clinging to memories, possessions, and words to define and pinpoint himself in time and space who is revealed in the end of the novel.

It has been demonstrated how in their need for order and permanence Beckett's characters become pathetically crippled either physically or spiritually. Throughout life they gradually sacrifice more and more of their mobility until none is left. There are some very literal presenta-

tions of this idea such as Krapp's Last Tape in which a man absurdly tries to put order into his life by narrating it into a tape recorder and filing and cross-indexing the tapes. In most of Beckett's works, however, this concept is presented in a more symbolic manner with the physical limitations of the characters taking the place of Krapp's conscious efforts at restriction. Not all humans consciously attempt to make their lives ordered and systematic. Many are pushed into ruts and stereotypes by society and chance. In the same way, Beckett's characters are restricted for different reasons. Some are physically crippled like Hamm, some are trapped in their environment like Winnie who is literally buried in a mound of dirt, and some are spiritually limited like Krapp.

In Embers, one of his last plays, Beckett uses the image of the sea to show the disparity between fluidity and restriction. The sea which is fluid and mobile represents life and the self. It is the continual motion and change of the water which frightens Henry, the protagonist. He wishes to have his concepts of space, time, and self sharply defined like the clashing of two rocks.[47] Instead,

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[47]Samuel Beckett, Embers, Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 112.

they resemble the constant shifting of the sea. Henry's perception of this fluidity in life is pictured throughout the play as a confusion of time and place. At one point he thinks his dead father is with him. At another point he thinks that he hears the hooves of his daughter's horse at her riding lession even though she is far away. He even hears voices from twenty years in the past. These perceptions are frightening. He wants the continual change and motion of the sea to stop, but, of course, it will not. So Henry tries to drown out the sound of the sea by constantly talking. When his own words and sentences fill his ears so that he cannot hear the ocean, he momentarily feels that he has effectively stopped the change and brought order and peace to his life. But his feelings of security are short-lived. Near the end of the play, Henry becomes more and more disorganized as he talks more and more. Finally he realizes that all his attempts have been futile, and he stands mutely at the very edge of the sea.

Another one of Beckett's characters with pretensions to order is Pozzo in Waiting For Godot. First of all, he constructs "primarily out of words ... an elaborate social web ..."[48] in order to provide himself with a well-defined,

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[48]Grossvogel, Four Playwrights and a Postscript, p. 101.

secure place in life. Secondly, he demonstrates the illusion of order created by a system of time by his actions with his watch. Pozzo seemingly has a strict schedule to follow judging from the way he punctuates his actions by consulting his watch. Yet we know his actions are meaningless and haphazard. Even so, when Vladimir tells him that time has stopped, Pozzo replies while cuddling the watch to his ear, "Don't you believe it, Sir, don't you believe it ... Whatever you like but not that."[49] He desperately needs the security which the illusion of orderly passage of time provides. Later in the play, Pozzo is seen with all these pretensions stripped away - a pitiful, blind creature who cannot really understand the space or time in which he lives.

The attempts of these characters are ridiculous, but no more so than other human attempts to mask the infinity and mobility of time, space, and self. Humans try to restrict this fluidity with their own definitions and concepts. They fail, of course, and in the process they transform themselves into grotesque caricatures of what humans should be. These are the characters Beckett presents in his plays and novels.

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[49]Beckett, Waiting For Godot, p. 24.

The restriction of these characters is the source of much of the comic spirit in Beckett's work, but it is a comedy sometimes tempered with tragedy. Beckett himself calls Waiting For Godot a tragicomedy and that is an apt term for most of his work. Springing from the basic irony of the human condition, Beckett's art holds up a sort of reversed fun-house mirror which through its distortions offsets the effect of every-day habit and illusion to present a true picture of man. When man sees such an absurd figure as that presented in the mirror, he laughs, contemplating it with his intellect. But at times, affected perhaps by certain incisive images, the viewer loses his intellectual distance and identifies emotionally with the image. It is then that the darker aspects of Beckett's work emerge, as its seriousness and universality are brought home to him.

There is a complex relationship between the lighter and darker aspects of Beckett's work which can be more easily understood when it is remembered that Beckett's name has often been linked by critics with that of Jonathan Swift. Like Swift, Beckett's comedy is by turns humorous and savage as it springs from an ironic conception of the human condition. For Beckett, this basic irony lies in the fact that men spend their lives trying to escape from their

own nature by formulating theories to "prove" that the body and mind are separate, by yearning to escape into the "pure" realm of the intellect, and by attempting to hide the bodily functions through etiquette and morality, when, in reality, they are completely dominated by their bodies to the point of becoming "things." Beckett shows them in his works: the Murphys who try to escape entirely into the mind, the Watts who attempt to subdue physical reality through their mental processes, and the Morans who teach their children "that most fruitful of all dispositions, horror of the body and its functions."[50] In every case, when Beckett strips away their pretensions, they are reduced to "things" wallowing in the very physical nature they denigrate.

Such a vision of man is necessarily bitter and despairing. Consequently, while Beckett's work is basically comically orientated, it does contain elements of bitterness and despair which at times come to the surface and color its tone. This is especially true in the trilogy in which Beckett attacks the parents who would create more children to endure the human condition and the sexuality which motivates them. At these times the dark elements tend to become

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[50]Beckett, Molloy, p. 118.

dominant in his work until they are checked by a comic effect and Beckett slips back into his familiar, controlled comic method.

In addition, there are elements of pathos and tragedy in the vision of all men doomed from birth to ultimate ignominy, regardless of their struggles, by the "tragic flaw" of the very physicality of their nature. Straddling the line between the comedy, tragedy, and pathos inherent in his vision of man, Beckett's art is sometimes perceived by the audience as any or all of the three, but, as has been demonstrated, it is always presented in clearly Bergsonian terms.

To completely understand the comic terms in which Beckett's work is presented, it is necessary to realize that despite the great diversity and change in his writings through the years, his comic vision remains always constant and central to his work. Though they range from rambling, prolix novels to short, concise plays; from works filled with physically sound characters to those peopled by deformed, decaying hulks; and from those located in a recognizable social structure to those set in what has been called a bizarre "no-man's land ... either barely created, or emerging

from some cataclysmic occurrance,"[51] all of Beckett's creations are informed by this same comic vision. Any problems which might seem inherent in discussing sameness in change are resolved by the unique pattern which Beckett's work follows, a pattern which has been termed "gradual disintegration"[52] and "progressive reduction."[53] In this reduction, the characters, their settings, and Beckett's literary style are stripped of nonessentials in an effort to produce a true picture of life without the interference of habit and the illusion of daily life.[54] Yet even then

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[51]Rosetta Lamont, "Beckett's Metaphysics of Choiceless Awareness," Samuel Beckett Now, ed. Melvin J. Friedman (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 199.

[52]Raymond Federman, Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U. of California Press, 1965), p. 16.

[53]Dieter Wellershoff, "Failure of an Attempt at De-Mythologization: Samuel Beckett's Novels," Samuel Beckett, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 105.

[54]Some of the critics who specifically refer to this reduction include: Raymond Federman in Journey to Chaos, p. 16; John Fletcher in The Novels of Samuel Beckett, p. 196; William York Tindall in "Beckett's Bums," 15; Dieter Wellershoff in "Failure of an Attempt at De-Mythologization: Samuel Beckett's Novels," passim.; and J.D. O'Hara in his introduction to Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 14.

"from one work to the next a conscious effort is made to reduce the fictional elements to a still barer minimum."[55] In the process of this downward spiral, Beckett's characters gradually lose decent clothing, physical health, formal learning, mobility, and at least part of their mental capacities; these being some of the layers of experience which must be stripped away to reach the "ideal core" of Beckett's vision.[56] In addition, as the scene becomes starker so does Beckett's prose. From the learned, ornate style of his early books, his style is constantly simplified until in his final prose work, The Unnamable, he presents a rush of words unimpeded by punctuation of any kind.

A brief consideration of Beckett's works serves to illustrate this concept of reduction. In Murphy, his first novel, the hero lives in the recognizable social settings of London, Cork, and Dublin. He is in good health, in control of his faculties, and in love with a young woman (the last of Beckett's characters to have a normal love affair). Beckett provides the novel with an understandable plot and a complicated style especially noted for its allusions. In

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[55] Federman, p. 16.

[56] O'Hara, p. 14.

the next novel, Watt, great changes are apparent. The hero is an outcast who, after a brief concession to society at a train station, exists in a bewildering, unfamiliar world as a servant to Mr. Knott and a patient at an insane asylum. His physical condition is deteriorated and he is the first of Beckett's major characters to have the peculiar trouble walking which plagues them after this point. Since his mind cannot cope with the absurdities of Mr. Knott's house, he is confined in an asylum where he spends his time muttering gibberish and walking backwards. Stylistically, Watt is much simpler than Murphy, and it possesses a plot which does not proceed chronologically. Instead, it is divided into four sections which are presented in the order: one, two, four, three. It can thus be seen that by Beckett's second novel his "movement away from rationality and realism"[57] has become quite evident.

Beckett's next creation, the trilogy (Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable), displays internally a pattern of reduction and deterioration which parallels that of his work as a whole. When the two sections of Molloy are reversed, as most critics suggest, the novel presents the story of Jacques Moran, a healthy man living a secure, ordered life, who sets out on a journey. During this

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[57]Federman, p. 26.

journey he becomes crippled and returns home on crutches to find his old world destroyed. In the next section, his deterioration is continued by Molloy, a strange cripple who moves about with the aid of crutches and a bicycle. By the end of the work, having lost these aids, he is reduced to crawling along the ground. Minus a plot in the traditional sense, Molloy is filled with a series of strange, seemingly unrelated and meaningless events.

The deterioration continues in Malone Dies as Beckett contemplates his hero confined to a bed and unable to move. Even the absurd action of Molloy is absent from this work, the only action being Malone's story telling. In this work, Beckett's style becomes even simpler as he creates, in effect, nothing more than a long monologue. Regular punctuation is replaced by an interminable series of commas which break the work up into the short phrases.

In The Unnamable, Beckett finally reaches the logical conclusion of his pattern of reduction. Not only is his narrator immobilized, but it is also hinted that he may be in the grave. Still he manages to fill the pages of the novel with his continuous talking, most of which concerns either nothing at all or the few objects and occurrences of the strange world in which he exists. Stylistically, Beckett dispenses with paragraphing and even to a great

extent with periods until the end of the work becomes nothing more than a frenzied, unimpeded flow of words. The Unnamable presents Beckett's vision in the starkest possible form. His works after this point, How It Is and the plays, cannot reduce this vision any more. Instead, they are restatements of the core of Beckett's vision in different literary terms.

It has been shown that Beckett's characters, settings, and prose change greatly from one work to the next; yet, even as the external aspects of his works change, the basic vision of man behind those works remains constant. Only his presentation of that vision changes. Beginning with traditional realism, he gradually peels away layers of experience, habit, and illusion as he aims for the irreducible core of his vision. Each of his works is an exploration of a different step in this process of reduction. Thus, the changes in his writing do not represent alterations of his vision, but only different intermediate steps towards the full realization of that vision in his art. This realization occurs in The Unnamable and the works following it when he reaches the point where his vision can be portrayed in the starkest terms possible - man as a gross, immobilized hulk mired completely in the physical aspects of life and clinging to a few meagre

possessions and comforts as he strives for some illusion of order and security against the fluidity and chaos of the spiritual side of the universe and of his own nature.

The works which will be considered as illustrations have been chosen to represent all phases of Beckett's gradual literary reduction. Watt, from the early part of his career, is an example of one of his novels written in English. It still contains some contact with a recognizable social setting, and it presents one of the clearest examples of Bergsonian verbal devices in the Beckettian canon. Molloy, the first novel of his famous trilogy written in French, is especially important because it has an internal deterioration which mirrors the pattern of his work as a whole. Endgame and Happy Days, two of his plays, represent the irreducible core of Beckett's vision found in the latter part of his work.

It should be noted that there is no attempt in this thesis to claim Beckett's comic vision as a simple key with which to unlock all the mysteries of his art. He is a complex writer who works with many themes including life, death, communication, art, the artist, and the discovery of the self. In addition, he considers the concepts of a bewildering number of philosophers including Descartes, Geulincz, Berkeley, Husserl, Malebranche, and Wittgenstein.

A broad concept such as a vision of man cannot possibly deal with these and many other specifics. However, the understanding of this vision does provide a basic sense of direction and perspective in what can be an appallingly absurd and unintelligible world. From this point, one can proceed to consider the more specific and involved elements of Beckett's art.

Watt is perhaps Beckett's most overtly Bergsonian work. It centers on a protagonist whose thought, speech, movement and clothing reveal an exaggerated "mechanical inelasticity,"[58] a condition caused in Beckett's vision by his sheer humanity and accentuated by his conscious efforts to "define the world about him in satisfactory, rational terms...."[59] Like the rest of Beckett's characters who try to create order and meaning out of the chaos of life, Watt finds neither permanence nor security. Instead, he mechanically encrusts himself to the point of becoming a thing. Also Bergsonian are the stylistic elements of the novel which include a non-chronological plot, excessive verbal repetition and inversion, puns, involved episodes completely unrelated to the plot, and

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[58]Bergson, p. 10.

[59]Robinson, p. 101.

seemingly endless lists, series, permutations, and combinations.[60]

When studying a novel, one generally considers the plot first. The interrelated actions of the characters, the sequence in which they perform them, and the ramifications of these actions usually constitute the greater part of the bulk and meaning of the novel. In Watt, however, there is no plot in any accepted sense of the term. The protagonist is a nondescript man who becomes a servant for a mysterious figure named Mr. Knott. Upset by the irrational aspects of life in Mr. Knott's household, Watt goes to an insane asylum where he tells a friend of his adventures. This is all that passes for a plot in the novel, and Beckett does not even see fit to present this in chronological fashion. Instead, by jumbling the order of events he emphasizes the fact that Watt is really nothing more than a series of disjointed incidents, some of which directly concern the protagonist, some of which remotely concern the protagonist, and some of which have no apparent or real connection with anything in the novel. Confronted with such a series of incidents

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[60]Ruby Cohn in the chapter "Watt Knott" in Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut has listed many of these devices.

interspersed with extraneous material, one can only consider separately the different elements of the novel and then assess the thematic significance of any connections between these elements.

The environment of Watt is the typical Beckettian world in which the physical dominates over the spiritual. Though there is less emphasis on the obscene and disgusting than in other of Beckett's works, there are repeated references in the novel to food, sex, excrement, vomit, and various bodily functions which serve to anchor it firmly in the physical world. Eating and drinking episodes, for example, are scattered throughout the work. Normally such episodes would be merely incidental, but Beckett puts such an exaggerated emphasis in them on the grossness of human preoccupation with food that they acquire a thematic significance. Two characters, Mary and Mr. Knott, particularly stand out as exemplifying Beckett's use of food to emphasize the basic physical side of humanity. Mary is a maid who eats incessantly and keeps her mouth so full that it frequently overflows, leaving traces of her all over the house "in the form of partially masticated morcels [sic] of meat, fruit, bread, vegetables, nuts and

pastry...."[61] It is not unusual for her to consume within a short period of time quantities of "sherrywine, soup, beer, fish, stout, meat, beer, vegetables ... fruits, cheese, stout, anchovy, beer, coffee and benedictine...."(p. 53). Mary's employer, Mr. Knott, is also greatly interested in food. According to his explicit instructions, at the beginning of each week exactly measured portions of thirty different ingredients are mixed in a huge bowl to create his food for the week. This conglomeration is kept in a pot and served to Mr. Knott at exactly twelve noon and seven in the evening every day. At these times, he eats his food cold with a little silver trowel.

There is also in the novel a definite motif of repeated references to excrement and certain connected objects, such as chamberpots, though this is stressed less than in the later works. Watt himself empties slops in the garden, becomes constipated, wishes to be turned into a stone pillar in a field for "men and dogs to make their water against..."(p. 49), wonders whether or not another character has gotten up during the night "to do his number one, or number two, in his great big

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[61] Watt, p. 50. All subsequent references to Watt will be placed in the text. They will continue to refer to the 1959 Grove Press edition.

white chamberpot..."(p. 121), urinates in the garden, is revived by a bucket of slops after being knocked unconscious, and reflects on the fact that he usually urinates every hour on the hour. In addition, the novel contains a constipated gardener named Graves, Mr. Nackybal who is afflicted with a "diffuse ano-scrotal prurit"(p. 182), a minister "shat upon by a dove"(p. 91) immediately after leaving his church, and a man wearing on his head an "inverted chamber pot; yellow with age, to put it politely..."(p. 216).

Each of the above mentioned references to food and excrement is relatively unimportant when considered in isolation. But when they are looked upon as part of a larger motif, it can be seen that they work in conjunction with instances of vomiting, masturbating, spitting, belching, and passing wind to set the work in the physical world and produce comic effects by exaggerating the dominance of the physical over the spiritual in that world.

It may appear overly obvious to note that Beckett's work is set in the physical world, but it is quite important to establish that fact in view of the interpretations which have been applied to Mr. Knott. Several critics assert

that he is a god-figure and that his house is a paradise,[62] assumptions which take Watt out of the realm of the physical. They go to great lengths to explain that Knott really means "not" and that Mr. Knott/not, being a totally negative force, corresponds to the concept of God as absolute nothingness. However, while it is true that Mr. Knott is described in imagery denoting a deity, it does not necessarily follow that he stands for any conventional concept of God. This fact becomes readily apparent when it is remembered that in addition to the mystery and religious imagery connected with Mr. Knott, the novel also contains a great deal of description of his clothes, his food, his way of talking, and even his way of hawking, spitting, and belching. One section even describes the manner in which Mr. Knott puts on his boots. In this section, it is stated that he would sidle up "little by little with an artless air little by little nearer and nearer to where they lay, in the rack, till he was near enough, pouncing, to secure them. And then, while he put

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[62]Critics who have given religious interpretations to Mr. Knott include: Lawrence Harvey, Samuel Beckett; Poet and Critic (Princeton N.J.: U. of Princeton Press, 1970), p. 358, John Fletcher, The Novels of Samuel Beckett, pp. 86-87, and Michael Robinson, The Long Sonata of the Dead, p. 120.

on the one...he held the other tight, lest it should escape, or put it in his pocket, or put his foot upon it, or put it in a drawer, or put it in his mouth, till he might put it on, on the other foot"(p. 213).

It is obvious that the comic figure described above is hardly the picture of any type of spiritual deity. Every piece of information provided places him in the physical world. In fact, Mr. Knott is the paradoxical embodiment of a completely physical God, the perfect touch to a world dominated by the physical; and in good Bergsonian fashion, Beckett derives comic effect from the dominance of the physical in what is supposed to be a spiritual being. One example of this type of effect concerns the imagery surrounding Mr. Knott. As John Fletcher points out, one of the images which fixes Mr. Knott as a god-figure is his identification with the sun.[63] Just as the sun seems to move around the earth, so he makes a complete circuit of his round bed: "Mr. Knott's head, Mr. Knott's feet, in nightly displacements of almost one minute, completed in twelve months the circuit of this solitary couch."(p. 207) Undercutting this heavenly metaphor, however, is the fact that the proof of his movement

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[63]Fletcher, p. 86.

is the trail of stains on his sheets from his "coccyx... and adjacent gear"(p. 207) which also made the trip around the bed.

Another factor which helps to emphasize the physical in the novel is the proliferation of variously crippled, misshapen, and physically restricted characters scattered through the book. In addition to calling attention to the physical aspect of human nature, these characters provide comic effects through their "mechanical inelasticity"[64] and transformation from people into things. The parade of these characters begins in the opening scene of the novel which centers on an old hunchback who walks with a cane and is physically unable to stand still for any length of time. Following the hunchback are: a news agent who limps so badly that when he moves rapidly he seems to be performing a "series of aborted genuflexions"(p. 26); Arsene, who describes a typically Beckettian journey during which he loses the ability to walk and falls by the wayside; a blind piano tuner; a lady who walks with a crutch and a wooden leg; a fish woman with one breast removed; and another of Beckett's characters with a strange gait. This last character's feet, "following each other in rapid and impetuous succession, were flung

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[64]Bergson, p. 10.

the right foot to the right, the left foot to the left, as much outwards as forwards, with the result that for every stride of say three feet in compass, the ground gained did not exceed one"(p. 226).

Standing out from the rest of the physically restricted characters are the members of the Lynch family, a clan whose sage is filled with deformities and physical ills of such incredible proportions that they are comic not only because of the mechanical encrustation and restriction of their physical movement, but also because of the sheer verbal rigidity and repetition involved in the complete cataloguing of their woes. Included in what Beckett balls "this fortunate family" (p. 120) are:

> Tom Lynch, widower, aged eighty-five years, confined to a bed with constant undiagnosed pains in the caecum, and his three surviving boys Joe, aged sixty-five years, a rheumatic cripple, and Jim, aged sixty-four years, a hunchedback inebriate, and Bill, widower, aged sixty-three years, greatly hampered in his movements by the loss of both legs as the result of a slip, followed by a fall, and ... Joe's wife nee Doyly-Byrne, aged sixty-five years, a sufferer of Parkinson's palsy, but otherwise very fit and well..and Bill's boy Sam, aged forty years, paralyzed by a merciful providence from no higher than the knees down and from no lower than the waist up...(p. 101).

The story of the Lynches can be considered relatively unimportant in that it is a brief, funny episode in a book composed of brief, funny episodes; yet, when it is closely examined it can be seen as a microcosm of

his whole body of work. Therefore, in understanding the elements of this brief, self-contained unit, one can gain an insight into the workings and flavor of Beckett's sprawling body of work.

The basic fact about the Lynches is that they are a complete fabrication of Watt's. Like most of Beckett's characters, Watt has a need to feel that the elements of his world make sense because they are part of some order or plan. Therefore, when confronted with inexplicable phenomena, he evolves very complicated stories in explanation because "to explain had always been to exorcise for Watt"(p. 78). Once problems have been exorcised in this manner, he never has to worry about them again. In the case of the Lynches, Watt's problem starts with some leftover food. Mr. Knott commands that if any of his food is left after a meal, it is to be fed to the dog at a specific time. However, Mr. Knott does not have a dog; so Watt is forced to invent a dog to fit the situation. It takes him ten pages of tortuous reasoning to explain how a dog might come to the house at precisely the same time every day in a famished condition to eat the scraps of food which sometimes are there and sometimes are not. His first hypothesis is that a needy man with a famished dog is paid to bring his dog to the house at a set time every

evening, and several other similarly needy men with similarly famished dogs are kept on call in case the first man or his dog should die. Then Watt considers it more likely that a kennel has been established by Mr. Knott to house these men and their dogs to facilitate the eating of the scraps from his table. Finally, however, he comes to the conclusion that a large, needy family, their children, and their children's children, are paid to care for the kennel of famished dogs so that there should never be wanting a famished dog or someone to bring him to eat the scraps. Once this fact is established, Watt goes on to create the entire Lynch family to fill the need for a large, needy family, and with his usual thoroughness he invents not only a family but a unique history for each member. In fact, he is so thorough that the episode about the family consists almost entirely of listing the members of the family, their medical woes, and their backgrounds.

Created in such an absurd manner through such tortured, mechanical reasoning, the Lynches are obviously comic characters, and they accordingly display all the familiar aspects of Beckett's comic vision. For example, they live in a world dominated by the physical, evidenced by the fact that their whole episode consists of a listing of the physical deformities and diseases afflicting the

whole family and some of their sexual exploits (especially those of Sam who commits adultery "on a large scale, moving from place to place in his self-propelling invalid's chair....p.[106]. The Lynches also display Bergsonian encrustation and restriction of their supposed gracefulness and freedom as human beings since most of them are crippled in some way or confined to a bed. Some of the family members are even portrayed as things such as the brothers Pat and Larry: "...little Pat was rickety with little arms and legs like sticks and a big head like a balloon and a big belly like another, and so was little Larry, and the only difference between little Pat and little Larry was...that little Larry's legs were even more like sticks than little Pat's, whereas Little Pat's arms were even more like sticks than little Larry's..."(p. 103).

As with the rest of his characters, Beckett presents the actions of the Lynches as patently absurd and meaningless, a fact which is emphasized when it is realized that the only function served by the family of twenty-eight is caring for the dog which eats the scraps from Mr. Knott's table. Yet despite their complete lack of significance, the Lynches, as humans in Beckett's view, strive for some distinction with which to define themselves and their place in the world. Apparently satirizing the foolishness of human aspiration in general,

Beckett makes their goal as absurd as possible. It is to merely exist until the sum of the ages of all the members of the family equals one thousand years. No explanation is given why or how this particular goal was chosen. It is simply stated that to reach the goal is the one burning desire of all the Lynches. They fail, as all humans fail to achieve permanent distinction, when several family members die. Predictably, since they are treated as things rather than humans throughout the tale, they are mourned not as lost individuals, but only as lost numbers which will retard the family's progress toward the goal of one thousand.

Focusing on the style of the section on the Lynches rather than on the characters, it can be readily perceived that it displays the Bergsonian rigidity and repetition found in all of Beckett's works. Besides the incredible listing of the twenty-eight family members and their respective maladies which takes over one thousand words, this tale contains several other sections related in a rigid, mechanical fashion. One example concerns the death of Liz just after the birth of her twentieth child. After her death, it is remarked that not only had a woman died, but (considering her relations to the rest of the family) also "a wife, a mother, a mother-in-law, an aunt, a sister, a sister-in-law, a

cousin, a niece-in-law, a niece, a daughter-in-law, a grandaughter-in-law and of course a grandmother [had been] snatched from her grandfather-in-law, her father-in-law, her uncles-in-law, her aunt, her aunts-in-law, her cousins, her brothers-in-law, her sisters, her niece, her nephew, her sons-in-law, her daughters, her sons, her husband and of course her four little grandchildren" (p. 105).

It soon becomes apparent that permeating the whole section on the Lynches and indeed Beckett's work as a whole is what John Fletcher calls "a ludicrous and rigid inevitability."[65] This means that there is a comic air cast over the entire proceedings which enhances the comedy produced by the individual Bergsonian devices. The reader comes to expect and even to anticipate the lengths to which the permutations and involved stories will go. No matter how rigid and mechanical the elements of the story become, the reader accepts them as inevitable. This comic air is especially important because it helps the reader to accept and react to the comedy which Beckett fashions from the raw materials of disease, death, and misfortune. The recognition

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[65]Fletcher, p. 70.

that Beckett is actually creating comedy from these materials is the most important lesson that can be learned from the story of the Lynches.

Lawrence Harvey has also commented on the comic element in Watt. After recalling that Beckett himself once called Watt a joke, he states that in the novel the "element of play is uppermost."[66] This is most certainly true. With all the lists, repetitions, extraneous material, and long involved digressions, it is obvious that Beckett is playing with the reader. The serious philosophical considerations which have been examined by critics in such detail are present, but what must be remembered is that above all there is Beckett's comic portrayal of the plight of man.

Beckett's vision of man is embodied in the character of Watt. Existing in a physically dominated world and surrounded by physically restricted characters, Watt displays all the properties of the typical Beckettian comic character. His clothing, for example, is old, ragged, and ill-fitting. He wears very baggy pants in order to "conceal the shapes of his legs..."(p.217). They, in turn, are hidden by his greatcoat

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[66]Harvey, p. 381.

which is so long that it reaches the ground. This coat is a ludicrous sight, being unwashed (for over seventy years), threadbare at the elbows and rear, fitted with nine buttons of different sizes, and highlighted by the remnants of a chrysanthemum in the buttonhole. On his feet, Watt wears one brown boot and one brown shoe. Reminiscent of the problem in Waiting for Godot, Watt's footwear does not fit very well. The boot is one size too big while the shoe is one size too small. Completing his outfit is a very old, faded hat which his father had found on the ground at a race track many years before.

The effect of Watt's outlandish garb is to mask the form and movement of his body and make him resemble a thing, a fact which is reflected in the statements of the characters he meets along the road. Mr. Nixon, for example, says that Watt looks like a "sewer pipe"(p. 18), while Hackett is unsure whether or not he is "a parcel, a carpet for example, or a roll of tarpaulin, wrapped up in dark paper and tied about the middle with a cord" (p. 16).

Watt's strange manner of walking, stiff and mechanical where it should be graceful and free, also aids in his transformation into a thing. When attempting to travel east, he has "to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then

to turn his bust as far as possible towards the south and at the same time to fling out his left leg as far as possible towards the north..."(p. 30). While this is occurring, his knees do not bend, his feet fall perfectly flat with the heel and toe together, his arms dangle at his sides, and his head turns stiffly from side to side.

Dressed in his baggy great coat and proceeding stiffly down the road with his impossibly mechanical stride, Watt presents a ludicrous image which resembles a comical windup toy more than it does a human being. It is this image of Watt which should be kept in mind when examining the novel. All too many critics get bogged down in lengthy discussions of the philosophical aspects of Watt's stay with Mr. Knott and of his peculiar system of thought, completely forgetting that the character whose actions they take so seriously is still the same mechanical man they observed tottering down the road in the early part of the book in such a ridiculous manner. In Watt, the element of play really is uppermost,[67] and the comic picture of Watt's mechanical walking style presented early in the novel is a good indication of this intention on Beckett's part. If this image of Watt as the

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[67] Idem.

ludicrous mechanical man is kept in mind, his later mechanical thought and speech patterns are easily understood as variations of the same Bergsonian motif.

Like most of Beckett's characters, Watt yearns for some sense of order and permanence amidst the chaos of life and responds to this need by constructing rational explanations for all the inexplicable phenomena of life. He is unique, however, in the extremes to which he carries his rationality. Not content with a system of time and society to explain away his fears like Pozzo in Waiting For Godot, Watt must integrate every single element of his environment in an overall plan in order to make himself feel secure.

Several devices are used by Watt to attack the irrational world he inhabits. One of these devices is to simply name things because this defines their nature for him and makes them safe. Until they are named, objects remain mysterious and frightening for Watt, but once he is able to hear a person taking something and "wrapping [it] up safe in words"(p. 83), he is able to deal with it. The "semantic succor"(p. 83) which this device provides is only temporary, however, because in the irrational world of Mr. Knott names begin to lose their power to fix things in time and space and make them safe. This dilemma first

becomes apparent when Watt finds out that a pot in Mr. Knott's kitchen will no longer accept the name of pot. Once he finds that he cannot fix the pot by a name, it becomes a source of anxiety for him and leads to a state of disorientation in which Watt is unable to affirm anything about himself or his environment until it is first named by another person.

Once names lose their power to fix the true nature of objects and events, Watt turns to his other devices. One of these is an absurd over-logicality which examines every possible variation of a phenomenon in an attempt to discern its true nature. With this method, though Watt admits that he cannot exactly pinpoint the true nature of a phenomenon, he can at least be sure of having considered it in one of his long lists of possibilities. This device is especially in evidence when Watt tries to describe the mysterious Mr. Knott who seems to be in a continual state of change. Watt cannot really know anything definite about him, but by going through the combinations of possibilities concerning him, Watt can achieve some limited type of reassurance. For example, unable to know exactly what Mr. Knott wears on his feet, Watt goes through all the possible combinations of shoe, sock, slipper, and boot in order to be reassured that he has at least said the words which fix the nature

of Mr. Knott's footwear even if he is not sure which of the words these are.

Watt also resorts to incorporating the inexplicable elements of his world into long series. In this way, the "terrifying and unknown aspects of phenomena are explained away by assuming that the present is a necessary result of the past."[68] Thus, Watt's presence in Mr. Knott's house is made at least somewhat meaningful by the fact that he is one of a long series of servants who have served Mr. Knott. The fact of being in a series makes the experience a part of some larger order and, therefore, more meaningful. Similarly, the dog which eats the scraps of Mr. Knott's food is explained by the fact that it is one in a series of dogs which have eaten the scraps, and the presence of Graves, the gardener, is explained by the fact that the men of his family have always been gardeners for Mr. Knott.

None of these devices work, however, and the final result of Watt's search for order is that he so rigidifies his mental processes that he transforms himself into a thing, a "thinking machine"[69] to be exact. As a machine,

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[68]Robinson, p. 128.

[69]Federman, p. 115.

he has a mind which automatically "registers, analyzes, computes, calculates, adds, divides, [and] subtracts"[70] the combinations, variations, and permutations inherent in the phenomena he encounters, but he loses the simple human gift of free choice of thought and action. He is no longer able to accept the trivial occurrences of life, but must subject each one to the rigid patterns of analysis with which he has programmed himself. For example, when he sees a picture of a circle and a dot, Watt cannot merely like or dislike the picture; he must explain it completely. He must subject it to his mental processes to consider the possibilities of whether the artist meant to represent "a circle and its centre in search of each other, or a circle and its centre in search of a centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and its centre in search of its centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and its centre in search of its centre and a circle respectively..." (p. 129) and so on until all the possibilities are examined. When this combination is finished he has to wonder how the picture would look on its left side, on its right side, and upside down. Then he must consider whether or

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[70] Idem.

not the picture is a term in a series like the series of Mr. Knott's gardeners, the series of Mr. Knott's servants, or the series of Mr. Knott's dogs. Finally, he has to consider the possible relations between all possible series. Such tortured mental gymnastics are, of course, comic, and a large part of the novel is spent in Watt's considerations of all types of trivial phenomena.

Since these elaborate rationalizations fail, Watt is eventually driven insane by his inability to encrust strict order and meaning on life. But even after he is sent to an asylum, Watt's actions remain rigidly systematic and perversely logical. For some unknown reason he begins to talk backwards. Therefore, he also walks backwards and wears his clothing backwards. Even the way in which he garbles his speech is done systematically. First, he inverts the order of the words in his sentences, then the letters in the words, then the sentences in the paragraphs, and finally different combinations of these three approaches until he tries all the possible ways of inverting his speech.

Watt is a totally Bergsonian character. His clothing, physical appearance, gait, thought, and speech are all rigid and mechanically encrusted, reflecting his physically dominated environment and his desperate attempts to impose order and meaning on life. Much of

the comic spirit of the novel stems from this encrustation and from his subsequent transformation from a human being into a ludicrous mechanical man.

Considered separately from the characters and setting, the style of the novel contains Bergsonian elements of its own. There should be a certain gracefulness and freedom to prose just as there should be to speech; yet, in Watt the prose is tortuously involved, mechanical, and repetitive. Pages and pages are devoted to senseless lists, combinations, series, and permutations.[71] Speech is purposely inverted. In addition, the novel disrupts its flow by the insertion of songs, charts, music, lists, and even blank spaces where there should be words.

While much of the rigid, mechanical speech can be traced to the idiosyncratic behavior of one character, Watt, there is also a great deal of it which is independent of Watt and displayed throughout the entire novel regardless of who is speaking. In other words, the mechanically encrusted speech is a characteristic of the style of the novel in general. One example of verbal rigidity not connected with Watt is the story of Ernest Louit as told by Craves, the gardener. In this story, which has

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[71] John J. Hood in his article "The Personal System" Samuel Beckett's Watt" in PMLA, LXXXVI, 2 (March, 1971), 257, states that fully one third of the novel is taken up by these elements.

absolutely nothing to do with anything else in the novel, there is a section five pages long which tries to calculate the problems caused when five men look at one another. Ordinarily, this might be an easy task, but in Beckett it becomes a problem because "though in theory only twenty looks are necessary, every man looking four times, yet in practice this number is seldom sufficient, on account of the looks that go astray"(p. 175). The story proceeds to list exhaustively many of the looks that can go astray, such as: "Mr. Fitzwein looked at Mr. Magershon, on his right. But Mr. Magershon is not looking at Mr. Fitzwein, on his left, but at Mr. O'Meldon, hon his right. But Mr. O'Meldon is not looking at Mr. Magershon, on his left, but craing forward, at Mr. MacStern..."(p. 175)

Though Watt is a novel without a plot, there are definite thematic patterns running through it which give it coherence. The most evident of these patterns are the emphasis on the physical over the spiritual and the resultant "mechanical inelasticity"[72] of character and style which combine to produce a truly comic novel in the Bergsonian tradition.

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[72]Bergson, p. 10.

Beckett's third novel, Molloy, focuses not on the exaggerated verbal rigidity and rationality of Watt, but rather on the comic spirit inherent in the more basic aspects of man's existence. This is accomplished by examining fully the process of "progressive reduction"[73] with which Beckett peels away the layers of nonessentials to reach his basic vision of man. In the following of this process, as seen in the paralleled deterioration of two characters, the novel achieves a definite sense of continuity despite its somewhat chaotic events.

Never content with being too straightforward in his work, Beckett presents Molloy as two practically unrelated sections concerning two separate characters. The first concerns Molloy, a crippled bum, while the second is about Jacques Moran, a helathy, middle-classed man with a home, a son, and a raft of possessions. Only the flimsy excuse that Moran is searching for Molloy (and never finds him), connects the two sections. However, if the two sections are reversed, as Edith Kern has suggested,[74] the novel becomes an understandable portrayal of two successive phases of Beckett's process of deterioration. It begins with the reputable Moran and follows his

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[73]Hellershoff, p. 105.

[74]Edith Kern, "Moran-Molloy: the Hero as Author," Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, ed. J. D. O'Hara (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 42.

diminishment from a healthy, well-ordered existence to a point where his condition becomes approximately the same as that of Molloy, the decrepit bum, who in turn disintegrates to an even greater extent. As Edith Kern states, "Once the novel's first part is seen...in chronological sequence to the second part, this process of physical and sensorial deterioration, beginning with Moran's departure and increasing rapidly during Molloy's trek until he is reduced almost to bodilessness, begins to stand out as the novel's leitmotif. It must be seen as...a further stripping away of all that is contingent in order to bare that which is essential."[75]

Taking into account the theme of reduction in the novel, several critics have developed ingenious explanations to prove that Moran and Molloy are the same character in different states of deterioration.[76] While this is an interesting proposition, there is really not enough evidence to warrant such a strict

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[75] Idem.

[76] Some of the critics who hold this view include: J. D. O'Hara in his introduction to Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, Ludovic Janvier in "Style in the Trilogy" printed in O'Hara's Twentieth Century Interpretations volume, and John Fletcher in "Interpreting Molloy," Samuel Beckett Now, ed. Melvin J. Friedman (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1970).

interpretation of the two characters. Though there are certain parallels between them in that they both go on journeys, ride bicycles, kill men for no reason, and spend winters alone in the woods, it is not necessarily true that they are the same character. As Michael Robinson points out, not only is the evidence inconclusive, but such an interpretation would limit the meaning of the work because it "would emphasize the series of parallels to the exclusion of the remainder of the novel. . . . The parallels amplify, they do not explain."[77] What these parallels suggest is the more basic concept that the two characters have "a sort of family resemblance"[78] as men and specifically as parts of Becket's "composite portrait of man...[and]...the human condition"[79] which he forms from all of his works. As men, they undergo similar journeys of his life in which the predominance of the physical over the spiritual causes encrustation and restriction.

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[77]Robinson, p. 154.

[78]Eugene Webb, Samuel Beckett: A Study of His Novels (London: Peter Owen, 1970), p.83.

[79]Idem.

Jacques Moran is a typical man living "snug and satisfied among his possessions"[80] in the world of everyday habit and illusion. He has a home which is kept neat and orderly by a maid. He has a son whom he is trying to raise in his own image without much success. He has several pets. He goes to church every Sunday. He prides himself on his "methodical mind"(p. 98) and seems to feel that his life is well-ordered and meaningful. In short, Moran is a character who could be found in practically any traditional novel. However, this image of him soon begins to fade. Moran receives a messenger named Gaber with orders from his superior to the effect that he is to seek out a man named Molloy. No reason is given for the orders, nor is there any explanation provided of what to do when the man is found. With cheerful obedience, however, Moran complies with the orders. From this point on both Moran and the illusion of realism in the novel progressively disintegrate.

Moran is pictured busily preparing for a trip about which he knows neither where he is going, what the weather will be, what clothing to wear, how long it will take, the money it will require, the means to be employed in the work done, or even the very nature of the work to be done(p. 124). He admits that this is a strange state of

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[80]Kern, p. 37.

affairs for a man with his "methodical mind"(p. 98), but this admission does not prevent him from finishing his preparations and beginning the trip with his son in a totally arbitrary direction.

It should be noted that a great deal of the comic effect in this section is derived from the fact that this is supposedly an important mission with some real purpose. In fact, the whole tale is in the form of an official report from Moran to Youdi, his superior. Therefore, Moran's self-important air of detailed thoroughness in preparing the report and the supposed importance of his adventures are played off the complete absurdity and meaninglessness of the events which take place.

Moran and his son stumble along through the woods until one night a "fulgurating pain"(p. 138) shoots through Moran's knee. This restricts his mobility, and he is forced to send his son to a nearby town to buy a bicycle. While his son is gone, Moran meets two unidentified men, the second of which he kills without any apparent motive. After a few days, his son returns with the bicycle, and in a ludicrous scene they begin their journey again with Moran sitting in the bicycle's basket and his son pedalling. A few nights later, Moran's son runs away, leaving him alone and helpless in the woods. He remains there growing "gradually weaker and weaker"(p. 162) until the mysterious

messenger, Gaber, suddenly appears again. Completely ignoring Moran's physical condition, Gaber orders him to return home at once and write his report. He then disappears, leaving Moran alone once again. Moran, of course, obeys. Leaning on his umbrella, he creeps home at the rate of a few paces a day. He turns towards home in August and reaches that goal in Spring. During the whole journey, he remains out of doors and apparently without food except for nuts and berries. Finally, he reaches home in a crippled, delapidated condition to find his house empty and desolate, his maid gone, and his animals dead.

Moran's whole life is changed by his journey. He is stripped of his clothing, his physical health, his mobility, and his worldly possessions. The sense of rational orderliness which once characterized his life is lost. Even his physical appearance changes so much that when he runs his hands over his face he comments that the face his hands feel is no longer his face and the hands his face feels are no longer his hands. Yet despite these changes, Moran feels that he has "a shapper and clearer sense of... [his] ...identity than ever before..." (p. 170). This is because several layers of nonessentials have been stripped away from his person to bring him that much closer to the true center of being in Beckett's vision. While he is being brought closer to this vision Moran

appears to undergo changes, but these are actually only superficial physical and material reductions which do not affect his true self. Underneath he remains the same smug, self-centered character who began the tale.

The reader then encounters Molloy, a character in roughly the same state of deterioration as Moran at the end of his tale. He is also without possessions decent clothing, physical health, or any apparent purpose in life. He is also crippled to the point of being able to move only through the aid of crutches (which he augments with a bicycle). And he is also writing an account of his journey.

Molloy's trip differs in particulars from Moran's, but it corresponds in its general pattern of disintegration and its composition of absurd events. Suddenly deciding to see his mother one day, Molloy sets off in search of the town in the environs of which he has lived his whole life, but the name and location of which momentarily escape him. In fact, at the moment even his own name escapes him, his memory being seriously impaired by his deterioration. He enters a town which may or may not be the correct one and is arrested for not having any papers. After being released, Molloy runs over a dog with his bicycle and has to be saved from an angry mob by the dog's owner who takes him home in place of the dog. Eventually Molloy

escapes from her home in order to continue his trip through some woodland. In the woods, he kills a man for no apparent reason. Finally, after being reduced to a point of deterioration where he can no longer walk even with crutches, but must crawl, Molloy reaches the end of the woods. From here he is taken in some unknown manner to a room in which he writes his tale while in an almost total state of physical decrepitude.

As evidenced by the absurd flow of the plot, Molloy is pervaded by the same "ludicrous and rigid inevitability"[81] which characterizes Watt. It, too, is filled with absurd happenings which cast a comic air over the entire work that enhances the effects of the individual comic devices and makes the reader more willing to accept Beckett's obscene and sometimes cruel comedy on its own terms.

The comedy which Beckett does present in Molloy springs from the same roots as that in Watt. It is set in a world in which the physical is grossly and repeatedly overemphasized, a condition illustrated by the novel's continual references to food, sex, and excrement. In fact, there is more emphasis on excrement in this novel than in any of Beckett's other works. For example, Molloy comments on constipation in dogs, states that the moon is showing her "arse"(p. 39) to the world, and discusses his propensity for flatulence: "I can't help it, gas escapes from my

fundament on the least pretext, it's hard not to mention it now and then, however great my distaste. One day I counted them. Three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, or an average of over sixteen farts an hour. After all it's not excessive"(p. 30). He also speaks of his mother as "incontinent, both of feces and water..."(p. 17), as surrounded by terrible odors which "must have come from her bowels"(p. 19), and especially as the one who brought him "into the world, through the hole in her arse..."(p. 16). Moran, for his part, gives his son an explicitly detailed enema, completely rots his underwear from his incontinences, and lives in a town named Turdy. The most pointed of these references occurs when Molloy states, "We underestimate this little hole, it seems to me, we call it an arsehole and affect to despise it. But is it not the true portal of out being and the celebrated mouth no more than the kitchen-door"(pp. 79-80). This statement points to the heart of Beckett's vision in which man is a creature totally dominated by his gross physical aspect. For all man's pretentious affectation of philosophy and learning, he is still a creature weighed down by the physical, still a creature in whom the "arsehole" is the true iddication of his nature.

Both of the characters who inhabit the novel's physically dominated world are Bergsonian in their clothing which is ragged and ill-fitting in such a way as to

detract from the body's grace. Moran begins his journey in an outfit lacking comic touches except for his boater which is fastened under his chin by an elastic, a detail which links him to other Beckettian characters whose hats are attached to elastics and which foreshadows his later ludicrous dress. However, as his physical condition deteriorates on the trip, so does his state of dress until it comes to resemble that of Beckett's other comic characters. When this occurs he is wearing a pair of baggy knickerbockers let out so that they hang down to the calves, rigid, uncomfortable boots, a ragged shirt, and a tie knotted around his neck without a collar. As an accessory to this outfit, which has been unwashed for a year, he carries an umbrella with only "a few flitters of silk fluttering from the stays..."(p. 171).

Molloy begins his journey already in a state of deterioration. He wears the typical Beckettian greatcoat under which he wraps newspaper around his body to keep himself warm in winter. The other articles of clothing in his outfit are a hat attached to his greatcoat by a long lace, trousers, and decrepit boots which would button if they had buttons. At the end of his tale, however, he lacks even these remnants of clothing since he is naked and confined to bed.

Moran and Molloy are also Bergsonian in their respective states of physical restriction which emphasize the physical orientation of their worlds and at the same

time illustrate the result of life in such worlds. As has been stated, Moran begins his adventures in a mobile condition, but is restricted by "a fulgurating pain"(p. 138) in his knee. His condition, however, is much more serious than a mere painful knee. His legs begin to stiffen and his whole physical condition deteriorates to such a degree that he has to move by "rolling over and over, like a great cylinder"(p. 153). In this obviously Bergsonian image, the result of Moran's physical restriction, his transformation from a person into a thing, can be readily seen.

Molloy begins his adventures with a crippled leg; yet, he is able to ride a bicycle by propping his stiff leg on the projecting front axle and pedalling with the other. During his journey, he loses his bicycle and his good leg stiffens until he is reduced to crawling in order to move: "Flat on my belly, using my crutches like grapnels, I plunged them ahead of me into the undergrowth, and I felt they had a hold, I pulled myself forward..."(p. 90).

Bergsonian rigidity of speech is also present in Molloy though there is much less emphasis on it than in Watt since Beckett directs his focus more on his characters' bodies than on their thoughts and speech. There are some examples of mechanical speech in the novel, such as when Moran describes his method of wearing his shirt in every possible way ("Front to front right side out, front to

front inside out, back to front rightside out, back to front inside out"(p. 171) and Molloy's famous stone sucking routine:

> I had sixteen stones, four in each of my four pockets these being the two pockets of my trousers and the two pockets of my greatcoat. Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, which I replaced by the stone which was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it(p. 69).

However, there are fewer of these logically illogical systems in Molloy. Most of the verbal humor is derived from scattered puns, such as when Molloy is asked for his papers by a policeman and produces bits of toilet paper and his statement, "I was out of sorts. They are deep, my sorts... and I am not often out of them"(p. 19). The style of the novel also adds to the Bergsonian atmosphere since the fluidity of the prose is broken by the continual intrusion of the author into the narrative with statements like "I apologize for these details, in a moment we'll go faster..."(p. 63) and "For I weary of these inventions and others beckon to me. But in order to blacken a few more pages may I say..."(p. 60).

As has been demonstrated, the comic spirit in Molloy is based on the same Bergsonian elements which are present in Watt - mechanically encrusted characters, clothing, and speech in a world in which the physical

completely dominates the spiritual. There is, however, a different tone to the comedy in this novel. Focusing more directly and explicitly on the physical aspects of man and moving closer to the core of Beckett's vision, Molloy partakes of the bitterness and despair which coexist with the comic element at the very center of that vision. From this bitterness and despair come the savage attacks by Molloy on his mother in particular and the sexuality which motivated her in general as agents responsible for placing him in the hopeless situation of being a human. However, despite the somewhat dark aspect of Molloy, it remains true to Beckett's Bergsonian method and, therefore, is essentially a comic novel.

After Molloy Beckett followed his process of reduction through Malone Dies to its logical conclusion in The Unnamable. In this work the protagonist is restricted to a state of complete immobility, and his surroundings are reduced to the point where they become unrecognizable. At this point in his career, Beckett reached an impasse in that there was nothing left to strip away from his characters, settings, or prose. Since he could progress (or regress) no further in the "gradual disintegration"[82] of his work, the only possible solution to his problem (beyond the complete cessation of writing) was to search

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[82]Federman, Journey to Chaos, p. 16.

for new artistic terms with which to restate the irreducible core of his vision. The result of this search was his second play, Endgame, which was "at once a way out of the impasse and an expression of it...."[83]

Endgame is the story of four characters, Hamm, his servant Clov, and his parents Nagg and Nell, who are all stranded in some type of shelter. This shelter is set in what is left of the physical world after Beckett is finished reducing it. There is no light, no rain, no sound, no movement, and, in fact, no life outside the shelter. Even the waves on the sea are leaden and motionless. There is absolutely nothing to distract from the condition of the four characters themselves. However, there can be no forgetting that the play is set in the physical world since Nagg constantly asks for "pap"[84] and a "sugar-plum" (p. 869) and Hamm constantly asks for his pain-killer and needs to "pee"(p. 863). The play's setting in the physical world is also attested to by the emphasis given to the body through the character's various deformities and ailments.

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[83]Bell Gale Chevigny, "Introduction," Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame, ed. Bell Gale Chevigny (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 3.

[84]Samuel Beckett, Endgame, printed in The Modern Theatre, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York: MacMillan, 1968), p. 861. All subsequent references to Endgame will be placed in the text.

Living in a world dominated by the physical (The only section dealing with anything spiritual in the play ends with Hamm's angry assertation about God: "The bastard! He doesn't exist!"(p. 870)), these four characters display physical restriction to an extreme degree. Hamm is blind and crippled. Clov is unable to sit down because of some ailment. He also suffers from pains in his legs which leave him with a "stiff, staggering walk"(p. 859). Nagg and Nell, being legless, are confined in two separate ashbins. At times they try to lean out of the bins to kiss, but they are too restricted to accomplish it. Confined in their little "houses," Nagg and Nell are clear illustrations of the transformation of people into things since they are fed and have their sand changed like household pets.

Bergsonian encrustation also appears in the speech and action of the characters as a group. Their speech is often rigid and ungrammatical, such as Hamm's "Me to play(p. 850), Clov's "You not?"(p. 868), and Nagg's "Me pap"(p. 861). It is also often halting and mechanically broken up by pauses, such as in "All is...all is...all is what?"(p. 865) and "This...this...thing"(p. 868).

The action portrays similar rigidity. One example is Clov's string of movements in the first moments of the work: "He looks up at window left. He turns and looks at window right. He goes and stands under window

right. He looks up at window right. He turns and looks at window left..."(p. 859). For the most part, however, rigidity is approached in a different manner. Instead of long series of motions like Clov's, Beckett makes use of brief movements, words, and rituals which occur and reoccur throughout the play. This is especially apparent in the case of easily memorable sentences, such as Hamm's question, "Is it not time for my pain-killer?"(passim.) and Clov's assertation, "I'll leave you"(passim.). Through the use of these reoccurring elements, repetition builds up slowly and forcefully, becoming more pronounced as the play continues. Despite the characters' disgusting appearance and sad condition, the "constant repetition yields macabre mirth."[85]

The repetition in the play does not arise as an accident. The characters are typically Beckettian in that they desire to find some meaning in their lives. They exist in a dead world in which there is nothing to relate to except themselves; yet, even in such a restricted environment they know that "Something is taking its course"(p. 861) which they cannot fathom. The flow, or

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[85]Ruby Cohn, "Endgame," Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame, ed. Bell Gale Chevigny (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 42.

rather stagnation, of time and the endless string of unconnected events which they experience give them no feeling of continuity or meaning in their lives. Faced with such a situation, the characters develop inane rituals which they repeat endlessly. Since rituals are strictly ordered series of actions and words, the characters hope that by repeating them they will achieve some sense of worder or structure to replace their overpowering sense of emptiness. Examples of the rituals include Hamm's polishing of his glasses even though he cannot see through them, his elaborate folding of his handkerchief, and some of the formulaic verbal exchanges between Clov and himself.

Other devices are also used by the characters in their search for meaningfulness. For example, Nagg and Nell try to return to the past through their stories. The events of the past are necessarily set and ordered. Repeatedly thinking of the past gives them a false sense of some predestined order to the events in their lives. Hamm tries to find order by turning the shelter into his own personal world (when Clov wheels him around the shelter he cries, "Take me for a little turn....Right around the world"[p. 864].). Within this world, he bullies and commands the other characters with the seeming intention that if he can control other people's lives, he can control his

own life. In Clov he finds a willing slave since Hamm's demands give at least some semblance of motivation and meaning to his actions, as well as providing the feeling of being needed.

It is Clov who verbalizes the needs of all the characters when he states, "I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place..."(p. 870). In their own ways, all of the characters in Endgame try "to create a little order" (p. 870) against the flow of time and life which continues even in their restricted world. Predictably, their efforts fail. Instead of achieving any sense of security, the characters encrust themselves to the point of comic absurdity like Clov who becomes Hamm's "shambling automaton attendant."[86] In addition, the lives of all the characters become mechanical repetitions of the same "farce day after day"(p. 865). This impression is strengthened by the fact that the play ends with the same tableau with which it began, indicating that the action will be repeated indefinitely.

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[86]Alan Schneider, "Waiting for Beckett: A Personal Chronicle," Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame, ed. Bell Gale Chevigny (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 16.

Endgame presents Beckett's vision in its starkest possible form. Men are reduced to mere hulks of bodies whose only concerns are their bodily functions and the finding of some meaning in a dead world. Similar to Molloy in its bitter tone, Endgame also repeats Molloy's attacks on those who would continue to produce men to endure such a life. In this connection, Hamm calls his father "Accursed progenitor?"(p. 861) and asks him, "Why did you engender me?"(p. 869). In addition, he and Clov are ready to kill a bug, a rat, or an imaginary boy on the horizon - anything which might be a "potential procreator"(p. 874).

Despite its bitter tone, however, Endgame contains what critics have called "legitimate laughter,"[87] "a strange gaity,"[88] and "macabre mirth."[89] Couched in Bergsonian terms and dealing with the hopelessness of the human condition, it is a strange mixture of comedy, tragedy, and pathos which shows Beckett's vision at its greatest intensity.

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[87]Schneider, p. 20.

[88]Richard M. Goldman, "Endgame and its Scorekeepers," Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame, ed. Bell Gale Chevigny (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall) 1969), p. 39.

[89]Conn, "Endgame," p. 42.

In Happy Days, Beckett presents one of his clearer versions of Bergsonian encrustation. The action focuses on Winnie, a character who is mechanically restricted in her physical condition, her speech and her actions to the point where she becomes a "thing."[90] The other character in the play, her husband Willie, is seen only intermittently, but he reinforces the effect produced by Winnie through his own condition.

Winnie's physical restriction is more literal than that of most Beckettian characters. Unlike the others who only reflect man's encrustation by the physical, she is actually weighed down by the world which she inhabits since she is buried to her waist in the mound of dirt which consititutes the play's only scenery. This confinement, which produces obvious comic effects, is emphasized by her statement that if she were not held in this manner she "would simply float up into the blue."[91] Her husband Willie adds to the motif of limited mobility because he can only move by crawling on all fours.

Winnie's Bergsonian restriction is also apparent

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[90]Grossvogel, Four Playwrights and a Postscript, p. 131.

[91]Samuel Beckett, Happy Days (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 3. All subsequent references to Happy Days will be placed in the text.

in her speech which is mechanical and repetitious. Fragmented by constant pauses into short short phrases, her speech lacks the grace and fluidity which should characterize it. Full sentences of any length are rarely completed without several pauses. The result is a series of short, choppy verbal units which are delivered in an absent-minded manner almost without thought to their meaning: "I used to think - I say I used to think - that all these things - put back into the bag - if too soon - put back too soon - could be taken out again - if necessary - if needed - and so on - indefintely..."(p. 45). In addition, she continually repeats certain pet phrases like "the old style," "That is what I find so wonderful," "This is going to be another happy day," and "What is that wonderful line." These verbal formulas are repeated without any particular regard for the context in which they are used.

The rigid, repetitious aspect of Winnie's speech is echoed by her actions. There are certain rituals - unpacking and packing her bag, combing her hair, trimming her nails, inspecting her possessions, and polishing her glasses - which she performs incessantly. All of these things are done in a mindless, mechanical manner as she keeps up her constant barrage of inane chatter.

Like other Beckettian characters caught in a meaningless empty existence, Winnie tries to fill it up

with the little rituals and words (like Watt she makes a pillow of words for her head[92]). Without these things, her life would be a complete void. With them, her life is no more meaningful, but at least she can get through the day without directly confronting or acknowledging the void. She greatly fears finding herself "left, with hours still to run before the bell for sleep, and nothing more to do"(p. 35). To avoid such a situation, she totally immerses herself in her words, her rituals, and her physical possessions. Through these machinations, Winnie succeeds in avoiding contemplation of the emptiness of her life, but she also succeeds in transforming herself into a mindless automaton spewing words and gestures in assembly line fashion.

Through the meaninglessness of Winnie's existence, Beckett presents a strangely recognizable portrait of man's mundane, everyday life.[93] There is a bell to wake her and a bell to put her to sleep. Between these signals, to which she reacts like some Pavlovian dog, Winnie fills the day with a multitude of absurd motions and words.

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[92]Robinson, The Long Sonata of the Dead, p. 291.

[93]Ibid., p. 292.

In this way, she works continually just to get through each day. The parallels to modern life, as Michael Robinson suggests, are unavoidable.[94]

The emptiness of such a life is emphasized by the play's two act structure. Many of the specific actions and words in the first act are repeated in the second. Winnie sinks all the way up to her neck in the second act, but there is no real change. In fact, in Winnie's words, there is "Never any change" (p. 45). There is neither progression nor regression. There is only the daily ritual.

One important aspect of the play is that Winnie remains constantly happy in spite of her condition. Even when she sinks into the ground up to her neck, she chatters away gaily. This disparity between her condition and her reaction is emphasized by the irony of the play's title and Winnie's exclamations like "That is what I find so wonderful," "I can't complain," and "Oh this is going to be another happy day." Through her, Beckett is obviously making an ironic comment on the obliviousness of men to their real condition on earth. Still, the irony in

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[94] Idem.

this work is different from that in Molloy and Endgame. Happy Days is less bitter and less fierce than those works; however, it is no less typically Beckettian since it concentrates on the Bergsonian principles he utilizes throughout his body of work to "tip the scale on the side of comedy."[95]

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[95]Grossvogel, p. 130.

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Vita

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