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‘whitewashed in advance’:
Samuel Beckett’s Children on Stage and Page

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, the children that appear in Samuel Beckett's works have been ignored or interpreted by many scholars as a simple and innocent character that has no specific meaning. This child character gains more relevance in the works from the middle period of the writer. I have selected eight works from the 1940s and 1950s to illustrate the different links that can be established between these child figures and the procreative aspect of sexuality. I will also analyze the ties between the prevalent dislike of children on the part of Beckett's adult characters and their misogyny. With this approach, I will try to prove that the child character is one of the main elements to understand not only the adult Beckettian characters but the works themselves.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, children, misopedia, misogyny, hatred, sexual activity.

A lo largo de los años, los niños que aparecen en las obras de Samuel Beckett han sido ignorados o interpretados por muchos estudiosos como un personaje simple e inocente carente de significado. Este personaje infantil cobra más importancia en las obras pertenecientes a su segundo periodo como escritor, del cual he seleccionado ocho textos. Con su análisis, quiero mostrar los lazos que existen entre estos personajes infantiles y la actividad sexual con fines reproductivos, además de aquellos que ligan la aversión hacia los niños que sienten los personajes adultos de Beckett con su misoginia. Con este enfoque, trataré de demostrar que el personaje infantil es uno de los elementos principales para entender no solo al resto de personajes de Beckett sino a las obras en sí mismas.

Palabras Clave: Samuel Beckett, niños, misopedia, misoginia, odio, actividad sexual.

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Introduction

Born and educated in Dublin, Ireland, Samuel Beckett lived most of his life in France. He earned his Bachelor's degree in French and Italian from Trinity College Dublin in 1927. Then he moved to Paris, where he worked as *lecteur* at the École Normale Supérieure, and where he met James Joyce, who was going to be a big influence in his early literary career.

Just like Joyce and many other writers of his circle, Samuel Beckett started his career as a modernist, a writer of the avant-garde whose main pillars were the originality, the experimentation, and innovation. The avant-garde was an artistic, social and political movement that tried to break the boundaries of what was accepted as the norm. The way in which the conventions and models were broken was to create new perspectives about the world, once considered to be perfect, but now transformed into a nightmare due to disasters like the 20th century wars. For avant-garde literary writers, the world has no meaning, or better still, the world has multiple meanings, for it is fragmented and it is on the reader where the responsibility to find that meaning lies. All of these fragments are reflected on the different perspectives that a literary work can have depending on the person who interprets it. Samuel Beckett, in the works of his first period, uses the unconventional perspective, the unexpected point of view of the story to break the above mentioned boundaries.

The outbreak of the Second World War had a huge impact on the author's work, as well as on his personal life. During the German occupation of France, Beckett acted as a courier for the French Resistance. After the War, he started to write his works in French. During this second period of his career, we can see a change in his writing style and in his global outlook. He moved on from being an avant-garde writer to writing unlike any other writer in any language. Samuel Beckett's originality was slow to reach the general public, but the international success of *Waiting for Godot* in 1953 ensured for him a permanent place in any history of world literature.

It is from this period that I have selected a number of pieces for study in this BA Thesis. Some of these four plays and four short novels from the 1940s-1950s rank among those that have received the closest scholarly attention, but with Beckett there is always room for further study. The topic I have chosen, for instance, has not been

discussed in the comprehensive form in which I will approach it here. In this BA Thesis, I intend to approach the child figure in Samuel Beckett's works as a presence on stage and on the written pages of Beckett's short novels that deserves further attention than it has so far received.

A surprisingly small number of scholars have paid some attention to the presence of children in Samuel Beckett's works. One of the earliest to do so is Terence Brown in his article "Some Young Doom: Beckett and the Child" (1986), where he focuses on Beckett's play *All that Fall* (written in 1956). Brown's article opens with the statement that "[t]he Beckett universe is a curiously childless one" (56) and briefly outlines the distaste of Beckett's adults towards their children in *Malone Dies*, *Watt*, etc. before concentrating on the two protagonists of *All that Fall*. In "'It's not my Fault Sir': The Child, Presence and Stage Space in Beckett's Theatre" (2005), Stephen Thomson argues that the figure of the child is considered to be a simple, transparent, and self-evident element in Beckett's works—which accounts for their critical oblivion. Paul Lawley, in "The Excluded Child: Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* and Beckett's *Endgame*" (2009), makes a comparative study of these two plays in terms of the figure of the excluded child as a metaphor for creativity, fertility, and parental rejection. Seán Kennedy's approach in "First Love: Abortion and Infanticide in Beckett and Yeats" (2010) is also a comparative one where the two writers are read in terms of their respective antinatalist and pronatalist ideologies. The most recent—and by far the most important work for the development of this BA Thesis—is Paul Stewart's book *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Work* (2011). There, Stewart claims that the reproductive sexual component in Beckett's literary works is essential to understand not only the meaning of Beckett's children, but also that of his other characters. Given their relevance to this Thesis, I will discuss Stewart's ideas in more detail in the following pages.

The contribution that this BA Thesis will make to this topic can be summarized in the two main objectives that it pursues. The first global objective is to put the focus on a figure that has been ignored by the majority of scholars due to its presumed irrelevance and lack of meaning. Next, I seek to establish three different categories in the presence of children in Samuel Beckett's works on the basis of the similarities that I can discern between different groups of texts.

These general objectives find a reflection in the organization of this BA Thesis into four chapters, the first one—called “Reproductive Sexuality in Samuel Beckett’s Works”—being a presentation of the relevant points in Paul Stewart’s *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett’s Work*, which will establish the framework for the critical analyses that follow. The title of the second chapter, “Children from the Unexplored”, hints at the unexpected presences of children in *Waiting for Godot* (1949), *The Calmative* (1946), and *Endgame* (1957)—the dates provided here and elsewhere being those of composition in the original language, not those of publication. I will show how the children in these works, having apparently no relation with the adult protagonists, end up being a key presence in the story. The next chapter, “Reliving the Pain”, deals with children as the main fear of parents who see them as representing the continuities of life and, therefore, as prolonging the suffering that is living. The texts involved are *The Expelled* (1946), *All That Fall* (1956), and *The End* (1946). The last chapter in this Thesis, “Unwanted Births”, takes the unborn child as the focal point of the solipsism of the protagonist in *First Love* (1946). With a brief comparison between this novella and the posthumous play *Eleutheria* (1946)—that turns out to have more things in common with the other texts than we might expect in such a little-studied text—I will round up my study of this selected corpus of stories and plays.

The groupings of texts result from the main traits identified in each of the child characters, individually studied in a first stage through the lens provided by the concepts of ‘misogyny’ and ‘misopedia’ as presented by Paul Stewart in *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett’s Work*. The common aspects and the differences between texts will be emphasized and will allow me to reach a number of conclusions.

Reproductive Sexuality in Samuel Beckett's Works

The publication in 2011 of Paul Stewart's *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Work* put the spotlight on a feature in Beckett's works that many other scholars had touched, but none had tackled as fully. Stewart claims that in Beckett's literary works, there is a sexual component that is very important to understand not only the works themselves, but also the inner world of the characters and Beckett's own. In this BA Thesis, this sexual component is going to be the starting point in my presentation of the role played by the presence and the absence of the child character in Beckett's works.

As a point of departure, Paul Stewart makes a clear distinction between sexual expression and sexual activity. The former is related to the expression of sexuality in art, independent of the physical and actual sexual acts. The latter is the actual manifestation of sex, the way in which humans reproduce.

The sexual activity can be considered more than just a physical act; it can also be considered a way of expressing feelings such as desire, love, and instincts. According to Stewart, two different types of sexual activity can be distinguished in Beckett's works. One of these is the sexual activity in a non-reproductive form. The second one, and the focus of this BA Thesis, is the sexual activity in a reproductive form. This second type is clearly rejected by Beckett in his works in many different ways. This sexual activity involving a reproductive form causes in the male adult characters of Beckett's works, at the same time, the rejection of different elements such as the idea of paternity and the paternal feeling, and the desire for women.

The rejections of women and of paternity are closely related in Beckett's texts. Through the sexual activity, women can get pregnant and men become fathers. It can be argued that the main cause of the rejection and even hate of women in Beckett's works results from the sexual activity. At the same time, many of the other hatreds and rejections that appear in Beckett's works have this misogyny as their starting point. A clear case in point is the aversion of children that results from the hate and rejection of women in most of the literary pieces that I am going to study in this Thesis.

Before I tackle that issue, I want to point out another aspect of the duality between the female and the male components in Beckett's works as a whole. The male

element represents the mind, the intellectual part, the non-reproductive purpose, what can be considered the pure mind. In contrast to the male, the female is considered to be the physical part of sexuality, the body, the reproductive purpose. This duality brings us to a dichotomy and a confrontation between the male intellect and the female emotion which will be particularly evident in the short novel *First Love*—the first work in the last chapter of this dissertation.

The aversion towards children in Samuel Beckett's works

In Beckett's works, misogyny is somewhat different and special: Beckett's male characters do not reject women as a gender; what they actually reject is the woman who is able to bear children, or the one who is already pregnant. The hatred of women generated by the capacity of women to get pregnant is what brings forth in Beckett's characters another loathing: the 'misopedia', or the aversion of children. The hatred of women, which is not always self-evident, starts the moment in which the sexual desire and instinct appear between a man and a woman, and it is the key starting point to discuss the role and meaning of the child in Samuel Beckett's work.

For many years, the character of the child in the works of Samuel Beckett has not been taken into account. According to Stephen Thomson, in his article "‘It's not my Fault Sir’: The Child, Presence and Stage Space in Beckett's Theatre", "the figure of the child, just because it stands for simplicity, transparency, self-evidence, is often read as being itself transparent and self-evident" (261). Children in Beckett's works, as in real life, would not have a second meaning or interpretation; they mean what they represent. But their presence is actually much more sophisticated, as we aim to show with this Thesis.

Not everything is hatred and fear, however. In *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, John Calder—a defender of Beckett from the charge of misopedia—argued that, in his texts, "[a]ttitude towards children in general was always ambiguous" (130). Calder also argued that "the boy is nearly always the young Samuel Beckett himself, either as he remembered himself, or symbolically" (130-31). It is true that in some of his works the reality that the writer depicts shares some aspects with his real life, but there is something else attached to these child characters.

That something else is much in keeping with Beckett's pervasive view on life as an endless stretch of suffering. The innocent child has been "whitewashed in advance" (39), as the protagonist of *The Expelled* puts it, from a very specific sin: the sin of having been born. For Beckett, "the true sense of tragedy is the deeper insight that what the hero atones for is not his particular sins, but original sin, in other words, the guilt of existence itself" (Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, qtd. in Stewart 5).

This means, in fact, that the child in Beckett's works can be considered as a constant reminder of the absurdity of the human condition: we find ourselves condemned to play a little role on a stage where there is only pain and meaninglessness. As Paul Stewart argues,

What is a crucial theme in Beckett's misopedia, and misogyny for that matter, is precisely the child's role as guarantor of future suffering and, ultimately, death, as if the child, however unwittingly, is both the sign and principle of regrettable generation. (81)

Although scholars are well-aware of this tragic view of life in Beckett's works, most of the times they have interpreted the figure of the child in those same works as the innocent component, as if it were an almost invisible element, without any further meaning attached. However, I will show that in Beckett's writings this infantile element is present in many different ways. Some of the ways in which this child component appears in Beckett's works are going to be discussed in this BA Thesis under three general groupings that respond to the general themes of 'the mysterious presence of the child', 'traumatic parent-child relations', and 'proclamations in favor of abortion'.

Children from the Unexplored

The Beckettian child, as I have mentioned before, can be considered as having no specific meaning, as a pure and transparent human being, undeserving of critical commentary (cf. Thomson 261-62). But in this Thesis we are going to make an interpretation of these child characters. And we start with some of Samuel Beckett's best-known works, where we can observe that there are some child characters that are unrelated to any other character in the text. These children appear sometimes to bring a message to the protagonists, or they are just an unexpected and unexplained presence in the work. The works by Beckett that have been used in this analysis are the following: *Waiting for Godot* (1949), *The Calmative* (1946), and *Endgame* (1956). These works have been grouped together because in all of them we find a child who is not related to the others and seems to turn out of the blue.

‘What am I to tell Mr. Godot, sir?': *Waiting for Godot* (1949)

I would like to start my analysis with the first work mentioned above. This work is a play written in French between 1948 and 1949. Although the plot of *Waiting for Godot* is well-known, a brief summary of the play will help us contextualize the role of the child appearing at the end of the two Acts into which the play is divided.

Vladimir and Estragon, two old bums, are waiting for someone they call Godot—the character who never appears and who is the focal point of the play—on a road, near a tree, while they talk about many random topics. A rich man who brings his slave with him appears twice and is their only company. At the end of both Acts, a child appears to bring the two main characters the same message from Godot. I quote from the first Act: “BOY:(*in a rush*). Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow.” (50).

The two Acts are so similar that the play is often described as one in which ‘nothing happens, twice’. Indeed, it can be argued that the organization of this play is

circular: the actions, the conversations between characters are repeated, and we find ourselves at the end of the play exactly where we were at the beginning.

Beckett's landmark play has received many different interpretations, one of the simplest being that Godot stands for God—although the author often denied the validity of this reading. If we persist in our reading of Godot as the representation of God, then the child would carry more weight in the interpretation of the play: he would be the one that carries the (delusive) message of hope and salvation to people like Vladimir and Estragon who need that push to go on with their lives.

Leaving the religious interpretation aside, we can say that the child certainly represents that *something* that everybody needs to have faith and to believe in. Indeed, the child can be seen as the element that gives sense to the play, because he is the only one on stage who knows what is happening with Godot, and the only one who knows him. Therefore, there is something else beyond his apparent simplicity. He is the only manifestation of Godot on the stage, and he is the reason why Vladimir and Estragon come back every day to the same point on the same road. He is their breath of hope.

Even though the child has been considered as a character with no special meaning attached, he is the link between the two main characters on stage and the absent Godot. The child can be considered as the clue for the existence of Vladimir and Estragon: they keep returning and repeating their daily routines simply because the child, coming 'from the unexplored', keeps bringing a message from Godot.

'his hand brushed mine': *The Calmative* (1946)

A boy who makes a similar brief appearance in the life of an adult protagonist is that of *The Calmative* (1946). Many literary critics have said that this is one of Samuel Beckett's most difficult works to interpret. The protagonist of this short novel is a man who is dead, and who cannot find calm in his grave. He is also the narrator of this oneiric episode where he sees himself setting out from his shelter to go on a nighttime trek of the town and surroundings. As we will see in *Endgame* (1956), the world in which the character of *The Calmative* is placed is completely dehumanized. The town streets are deserted, but still the unnamed protagonist meets some people. There are,

however, only two characters in the story that actually address our narrator: a man and a child. This child appears almost at the end of the story and, although I have mentioned before that the setting of the story is dehumanized, the brief contact between this child and the man turns out to be strikingly human.

Holding his little goat, the child approaches the (dead) wanderer while he rests in the harbour. There is a moment of silence between them, as if the child wanted the man to speak first—or so our main character says. Although the man wants to talk to the boy and tries to emit some words, he is unable to do it:

So I marshalled the words and opened my mouth, thinking I would hear them. But all I heard was a kind of rattle, unintelligible even to me who knew what was intended. But it was nothing, mere speechlessness due to long silence (56)

It is quite significant that he is unable to produce any understandable word with the first person that seems to be real. The little boy gives the man a sweet. Only when he is leaving with his nanny goat is the protagonist able to speak and ask him where he is going.

The child in the scene I have just described provides *The Calmative* with the same touch of innocent humanity that the boy in *Waiting for Godot* does. Despite the completely dehumanized environment that is presented in *The Calmative*, the boy manages to transmit a sense of humanity and tenderness that stands in stark contrast with the bleak environment. On a first reading, the child could be considered as the innocent and transparent character that is not conscious of what surrounds him. This fleeting presence acts as a momentary calmative for the much distressed wanderer who does not remain untouched by the boy's offering him a sweet: "I hadn't been offered a sweet for eighty years at least" (56), or by his fragile physical presence: "And the hand, so fresh and keen, I would not forget in a hurry either" (57).

But let us not be mistaken: the (dead) protagonist cannot but pity the child's young age—"a little unfortunate at the mouth of life" (57)—which dooms him (the child) to go on living. He goes so far as to envisage the child as an old man recalling, perhaps with a touch "of envy" (57), his having met this old man. This afterthought on the protagonist's part, once the boy has left, successfully assuages the sensation of calmness and tranquility that the candid presence of the child has managed to convey.

‘If he exists he’ll die there or he’ll come here’: *Endgame* (1957)

The bleak tone that we have spotted at the end of the scene with the child in *The Calmative* is the one that prevails in the 1957 play *Endgame*. This play epitomizes the important role that the mysterious presences of children in Samuel Beckett’s works can play. The children characters that we have studied so far have some positive connotations; but the child character in Samuel Beckett cannot always be interpreted in a positive light. The setting of *Endgame* is a “bare interior” (11), as the stage directions indicate, with four characters who are members of a family: Hamm sits in a wheelchair at the centre of the room; Nell and Nagg (Hamm’s parents) ‘live’ inside two dustbins, normally only speaking to each other, and to demand food; and Clov, Hamm’s servant, moves around the place, waiting on the others. The play is set after a sort of apocalyptic disaster, and around the house in which they live there is nothing:

HAMM: Nature has forgotten us.

CLOV: There’s no more nature.

HAMM: No more nature! You exaggerate.

CLOV: In the vicinity. (16)

Hamm, an old man who is blind and who plays the role of a tyrant, is the central point of the play; he controls the other characters, especially Clov. Hamm is unable to stand and Clov is unable to sit. Although both characters depend on each other, the relationship between them is not very good. Hamm is very bad-tempered, and Clov is very tired of him.

The child character in this play appears when Hamm decides to tell Clov a story, something they do every day. The story that Hamm tells is autobiographical: a man crawls towards him asking for some bread to feed his little boy, claiming that everybody is dead where they live but his young son; Hamm gets angry at his request, but he offers the man a job; the man begs to have his son with him. Hamm’s story stops at this point, only after he has scorned the man’s illusive desire to grow old next to his son: “You ought to know what the earth is like, nowadays” (52).

Two different interpretations of this story can be made. The first one refers to the search for life and hope: man is alone in the world and he needs help to survive—

although being alive is not presented as the best option. The second one enhances the autobiographical component (on Hamm's part), suggesting that the little boy of the story might be Clov. The relationship between Hamm and Clov certainly resembles the one we find between a father and his son, but in some episodes the roles change. Indeed, when Hamm tells his story, he compares himself to that child who is solitary and excluded—"Then babble, babble, words, like a solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark" (45). Like a child, Hamm is being taken care of; he needs help to survive. All in all, Hamm's helplessness and that of the child in the story underscore the obscure image of the world and of life that pervades the play: there is no hope for anyone, because living means suffering.

There is an even more important child character in this play that appears towards the end. This other child is spotted by Clov from the window as he approaches the house, coming out of nowhere:

CLOV (*Dismayed*): Looks like a small boy!

HAMM (*Sarcastic*): A small... boy!

CLOV: I'll go and see. (*He gets down, drops the telescope, goes towards door, turns.*)

I'll take the gaff. (*He looks for the gaff, sees it, picks it up, hastens towards door.*)

HAMM: No! (*Clov halts*)

CLOV: No? A potential procreator?

HAMM: If he exists he'll die there or he'll come here. And if he doesn't... (*Pause*)

CLOV: You don't believe me? You think I'm inventing? (*Pause*)

HAMM: It's the end, Clov, we've come to the end. I don't need you any more. (*Pause*)

(49-50)

This mysterious child can be seen as a representation of cyclical history, of the constant repetition of horror; he is a 'potential procreator' and, therefore, the one that may make the continuity of life possible. That is why he is an 'excluded' child—to use Paul Lawley's terminology in his article "The Excluded Child: Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* and Beckett's *Endgame*" (2009)—and may well remain so, for the play ends soon after his sighting. Lawley argues that he shares this 'excluded' status with the poor child in Hamm's story: "[t]he 'small boy' [...] appears both outside the 'refuge' [...] and inside Hamm's chronicle, as the 'little one' left behind by the pleading father [...]. In each

case, both inside the chronicle and outside, [...] the question is whether or not Hamm will bring the child inside and save its life, as ‘outside of here it’s death’” (159).

The sad predicament of both children in *Endgame* remains unresolved at the end of the play. In contrast with *Waiting for Godot*, and even with the bleaker *The Calmative*, in this play the child is not the representation of hope, or of life. The image that Samuel Beckett gives here is more negative; the boy stands for hunger, loneliness and death.

*

As we have seen in this chapter, with the analysis of these three works, the role of children in Beckett’s works may have many different interpretations. In *Waiting for Godot* we find a child who is the key in the (non-)development of the play, and who is represented in some way as a positive figure. In *The Calmative*, the child can also be seen as the breath of hope given to the other characters; but the main protagonist’s feeling of pity towards this doomed existence clearly anticipates the tone attached to the child figure in *Endgame*. There, the child represents the circularity of history and, therefore, the endless suffering of the characters in the play.

3

Reliving the Pain

Samuel Beckett's children share, throughout his entire oeuvre, a number of traits that make them fit in the Beckettian landscape with ease. Other traits are peculiar to just a few of those children. It is on the basis of the latter that we can group the texts in which those children appear into three different chapters, each adopting a very different starting point. The children that I am going to study in this chapter are involved in a painful child-parent relationship. The texts I have selected to illustrate this are: the radio play *All That Fall* (1956), and the two novellas *The Expelled* (1946) and *The End* (1946).

'they are whitewashed in advance': *The Expelled* (1946)

A man has been thrown out from the house he considered his home. While he lies on the ground, he recollects his childhood years. "When I was younger I thought life would be good" (36-37), he reflects. Now he finds himself wandering in search of a shelter.

The analysis of the child character in this short novel can be approached taking into account two different stages. The first one is that of the protagonist himself recalling his childhood at the beginning of the story, with the relationship he had with his father during those same years very much in the foreground. The second one is the relationship he has with children now that he is an adult. His behavior with children in his adulthood, we will see, is clearly related to the relationship he had with his father and the way in which he lived his childhood.

To introduce the first element to be analyzed, I would like to mention the words the nameless protagonist uses when he starts describing his early years: "Memories are killing" (33). These words give us a clue to better understand the way in which our character describes his past. His childhood was an unhappy period in which one decision taken by his father unilaterally would mark his way of relating with his peers: his father bought him a hat. "I personally had no say in the matter, [says the narrator] nor had the hatter" (34-35). He was forced to wear it at all times, with the result that

boys his age would scorn him—whether they were doing that to avoid laughing at his other defects, he never knew. As we keep reading the novel, we learn about the childhood habit that has permanently affected his way of walking: he used to piss or shit in his trousers as a child, never changed, and started to walk with legs stiff, feet wide apart, and a jolting pelvis.

Given all these precedents, it is not surprising that the claims: “I became sour and mistrustful, a little before my time, in love with hiding and the prone position. Poor juvenile solutions, explaining nothing.” (38). The consequences of all this are enduring and best symbolized by the hat that the protagonist has worn ever since.

Analyzing these elements, we can say that the character’s childhood and the relationship he had with his father have marked his adulthood and are going to make him behave the way he does towards children. The violence and cruelty that he displays as an adult can only be explained in the light of the negative influence that his father had on him. His rejection of children is extreme, and can be defined as a combination of a kind of fear with a desire of killing them. This is best illustrated when he is walking down the street and a policeman urges him to walk on the sidewalk; the anonymous protagonist has to fling himself to the ground to avoid crushing a child, and he goes on to remark:

I would have crushed him gladly, I loathe children and it would have been doing him a service, [...]. They never lynch children, babies, no matter what they do, they are whitewashed in advance. I personally would lynch them with the utmost pleasure, I don't say I'd lend a hand, no, I am not a violent man, but I'd encourage the others and stand them drinks when it was done. (38-39)

Although he does not want to get involved, he expresses a desire to hurt and kill children. ‘I loathe children, and it would have been doing him service’, claims the angered protagonist. The view of infancy as the beginning of a torment is omnipresent in Beckett’s works, no matter where we look. Despite the bleakness of this view of life, we cannot help but smile at the protagonist’s irritation with all the ‘equipment’ that the ordinary child carries: “their prams, hoops, sweets, scooters, skates, grandpas, grandmas, nannies, balloons and balls, all their foul little happiness in a word” (38-39).

In stark contrast with all this noise, the protagonist-narrator expresses his preference for hiding in the cab into which he has settled snugly and which moves him around the city aimlessly. The description of the cab is clearly reminiscent of a womb: “It was a big black box, rocking and swaying on its springs, [...] you curl up in a corner, it smells musty” (40). In this place there is calm; it is in fact the same place that the protagonist of *First Love* will try to reproduce in his lodgings, as we will see in the next chapter of this Thesis. The pre-birth stage comes across as the ideal state for the protagonists of Beckett’s novellas, but it is also an issue in the radio play *All that Fall* that I am going to discuss next; there a ‘mind doctor’ is said to have given up the case of an unhappy little girl, only to realize after her death that “[t]he trouble with her was she had never really been born!” (36).

‘Did you ever wish to kill a child?’: *All that Fall* (1956)

This rejection, and even hatred, of children can be seen also in Beckett’s radio play *All that Fall* (1956). In this play, Mrs. Rooney is going to the train station to meet her blind husband, who returns home after work. On her way to the train station, she encounters many troubles. She arrives late, but her husband’s train is even later.

The couple is childless and, according to Terence Brown, the play is dominated by “sterility, childlessness and death” (59). Because the two children that feature in the play do not appear as real characters on stage—the unknown child that has been run over by the train, and the couple’s dead daughter—, we have to analyze our two main characters, Mrs. and Mr. Rooney in order to discuss the role played by both infants.

On the one hand, Mrs. Rooney grieves the death of her child Minnie. Due to this loss, she reflects on the brevity of life, and on the role that people play in the world. On her way to the train station, and while she is waiting for the train to arrive, she tries to talk with different people. If we analyze her behavior and the conversations she has, it can be argued that she is obsessed with sex, the type of sex that we described in the first chapter of the Thesis as peculiar to women: an action with a reproductive goal.

Mrs. Rooney’s obsession with sex could be produced by the necessity she has of being a mother after the loss of her daughter. Terence Brown in his article says that this

woman “has endured deep sexual frustration, [...] in this loveless environment of loveless selfhood” (62); that is, in her Protestant environment. From my point of view, the trauma and the frustration are not sexual; what she suffers from is a trauma caused by lovelessness and emotional emptiness. By looking at her behavior, I can argue that the way she has to fill this void is through sex. Although the loss of her daughter has a negative effect on her, the interpretation we make of Mrs. Rooney as readers of the play is not a negative one. The child girl seen through Mrs. Rooney’s eyes is love, happiness, and completeness.

On the other hand, her husband, Dan Rooney—a blind man who is normally bad-humored—is described by Brown as a “child-hating misanthrope” (59), and the next quotation from the play supports this view: “Did you ever wish to kill a child? (*Pause*) [...] many a time at night, in winter, on the black road home, I nearly attacked a boy” (31). When he arrives at the train station, he is surprised that his wife is waiting for him, even knowing that it is his birthday. He refuses to talk about the reason why the train has arrived late. This refusal makes his wife persist in asking him, but he does his best to avoid answering. At the end, he states that he has no clue why the train was late. Because he is blind, he thought that the train had simply stopped at a station. The truth is that the train had stopped because it had run over a child. The possibility that Dan Rooney might have been involved lurks in the background.

My reading of this character, Mr. Rooney, is double-fold: his relationship with his dead daughter must be taken into account, but also the role of the child killed by the train. Firstly, the loss of his daughter can be interpreted as a kind of liberation, instead of being something traumatic. Even if he seems to be a rude and strong character, I think that he suffers, as well as his wife, a kind of frustration, but in a different way. In the case of the man, the frustration does not come from the loss; it is rather a consequence of his wife’s sexual obsession. I can argue that this obsession has provoked the hatred his husband has towards children: “And the brats, the happy little healthy neighbors’ brats.” (34). As for the child that has been run over by the train, I can make two different interpretations. The first one deals with the meaning of this child’s unexpected death, which can be understood as the point in the play that marks the presence of an actual death in the characters’ lives and, therefore, the end of their frustration. The second interpretation is related to the possible murder of the child. If we

think that Mr. Rooney's trauma is caused by his wife's obsession with sex and parenthood, the murdered child can be interpreted as a physical manifestation of his rejection towards children and parenthood.

To conclude with this reading, I have to say that the fact that in this play the children have a negative interpretation and provoke negative consequences on the main characters can be caused by the combination of disasters they have lived before their meeting at the station. By looking at the relationship the couple has, I presume that the death of the daughter is the key fact that creates a buckle of rejection and frustration in Mr. and Mrs. Rooney, respectively.

‘One day I caught sight of my son’: *The End* (1946)

The protagonist of this novella is an old and feeble man who has spent some time in a charitable hospital or a mental institution, and is thrown out from it at the outset of the story with just a little bit of money and some clothes. The story tells us about his wanderings through the streets of the city.

In this novella we have probably the strongest instance of misopedia in our corpus of selected works, because the characters that reveal this hatred are real parents (not just any adult) being hostile towards their own offspring. In this novella, our protagonist exhibits this feeling towards his own grown-up child, and is also confronted with other children.

This is how he narrates his spotting his own son while he wanders in search of accommodation:

One day I caught sight of my son. He was striding along with a briefcase under his arm. He took off his hat and bowed and I saw he was as bald as a coot. I was almost certain it was he. I turned round to gaze after him. He went bustling along on his duck feet, bowing and scraping and flourishing his hat left and right. The insufferable son of a bitch. (80)

First of all, after reading this scene, we can establish a kind of parallelism between *The Expelled* and this story. The description of our protagonist's son coincides with that of

the protagonist of *The Expelled*: both are defined by the hat they wear and by their peculiar way of walking. We can presume that the story could be the same one, but told from two different perspectives: *The Expelled* is told by the child who recalls his father, and *The End* adopts the perspective of the father. A second important feature in the depiction of this encounter is the strong language used by our main protagonist to express his rejection towards his own son. We will see the vulgar language become the element that connects him to the other adult misopedic characters we will discuss in this chapter.

I will leave aside the other brief appearances of children throughout the story—the girl who comes to his lodgings every now and then, the second girl (perhaps the same) who sings a lullaby that succeeds in sending him to sleep every evening, the newspaper boys that disturb him exceedingly with their daily noise—none of whom will elicit a negative reaction from our main character. By far the most relevant and striking presence of a child in this novella is that in the protagonist's meeting with a mother and her son as he leaves the institution from which he is being thrown out:

There was that strange light which follows a day of persistent rain, when the sun comes out and the sky clears too late to be of any use. The earth makes a sound as of sighs and the last drops fall from the emptied cloudless sky. A small boy, stretching out his hands and looking up at the blue sky, asked his mother how such a thing was possible. Fuck off, she said. (74)

The fact that it is a mother who rejects her son and the use of such vulgar language are striking. The use of this vulgar language connects the two parents in this short story—the unnamed protagonist and the unknown woman—but it is going to link these scenes with similar passages in other novels by the same writer.

Mercier and Camier (1946), for instance, written right after *The End* (and just before *The Expelled*). On a rainy day, Mercier meets his own children, and here is his reaction:

Papa! they said, with one voice or nearly.

Good evening, my children, said Mercier, get along with you now.

But they did not get along with them, no, but stood their ground, [...] Finally the little girl [...] advanced towards him they had addressed as papa. She stretched out her little

arms towards him, as if to invite a kiss, or at least a caress. The little boy followed suit [...] Mercier raised his foot and dashed it against the pavement. Be off with you! he cried. [...] Fuck off out of here! screamed Mercier. He flew at them in a fury and they took to their heels. (31)

In *Company*, a short novel written in 1979, a series of realistic vignettes are interpolated with the descriptions of a voice speaking to ‘one on his back’. One of those vignettes is strikingly similar to the one we are analyzing in *The End*:

A small boy you come out of Connolly’s Stores holding your mother by the hand. [...] Looking up at the blue sky and then at your mother’s face you break the silence asking her if it is not in reality much more distant than it appears. [...] Receiving no answer you mentally reframe your question and some hundred paces later look up at her face again and ask her if it does not appear much less distant than in reality it is. For some reason you could never fathom this question must have angered her exceedingly. For she shook off your little hand and made you a cutting retort you have never forgotten.

(6)

Having read *The End*, we can now guess what the ‘cutting retort’ was like. The repetition of this type of scene in very different works emphasizes the omnipresent fear in Beckett’s works of adults towards children—in these particular cases, parents towards their own offspring—as representing life’s continuities, i.e. prolonging one’s life and creating new lives.

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As we have seen in this chapter, the pain that is relived in these works is related not only to the recollection of one’s childhood, as is the case with *The Expelled*, but also to the recurring presence of episodes of suffering and hatred, as in *All that Fall* and *The End*. The return to these problematic episodes always seems to have the child figure at its centre. But we have to mention that this pain is caused not only by this return: a common point with the texts discussed in the previous chapter is the children being envisaged as figures prolonging and capable of creating life and, consequently, the suffering, horror and pain attached to it.

Unwanted Births

Sometimes, in Samuel Beckett's works, the child character does not appear as an actual character on stage or page but as the unborn child inside a pregnant woman, and/or as the target of a number of passionate appeals for abortion. These presences of sorts can receive many different interpretations. In this BA Thesis, they can be clearly related to the issue of the sexual act with reproductive purposes as discussed in our first chapter. In that respect, the unborn child is the starting point of all the hatreds and frustrations of the male protagonist. In this section, therefore, I will analyze these presences and the reaction of Beckett's men and women when the possibility of having a child comes up. I will focus on two works this time, with some minor appeals to other texts for the purposes of comparison.

'What finished me was the birth': *First Love* (1946)

In this section, the work I have selected is one more of Samuel Beckett's four postwar novellas, *First Love*. It is the most conventional of the four in terms of plot and characters, although it cannot be considered conventional at all. Many of the issues with which this BA Thesis is concerned, such as the relationship between father and son and the relationships between women and men, find a reflection in a short novel where the novelty lies in the disruptive presence of the unborn child.

While he visits the grave of his father, the protagonist talks about his death and (what he calls) his own marriage as if they were two related events. He informs us that he has met Lulu (or Anna) on a bench. When she admits him into her lodgings and they start living together, he discovers that she is a prostitute. As the novel progresses, the woman gets pregnant and, when she is going to give birth to her son, the nameless protagonist decides to leave her.

Some critics have argued that this story can be considered as a kind of semi-autobiographical work. Be that as it may, and though the novel is apparently talking about the love between a man and a woman, it is the solipsism of the male protagonist

that comes to the fore in the story. The first insight we get of this comes with the character's presentation of the image of a graveyard from a positive point of view, pun included:

Personally I have no bone to pick with graveyards, I take the air there willingly, perhaps more willingly than elsewhere, when take the air I must. The smell of corpses, distinctly perceptible [...], I do not find unpleasant [...]. My sandwich, my banana, taste sweeter when I'm sitting on a tomb, and when the times come to piss again, as it so often does, I have my pick (9-10)

He talks about death as if it was undistinguishable from life, as when he carefully notes down the dates of his father's birth and death and uses them to calculate his own age at the time of his own 'marriage'. This link between his marriage (and hence the birth of his son) and the death of his father—an association between birth and death that we also see in *Waiting for Godot*: "they give birth astride of a grave" (89)—provides the background to the rest of the story.

The woman figure in the story performs, in a way, the role of a mother who, in this particular case, provides our main character with a place to live. The relationship that the couple has is not a common one. They live in the same house, but they do not share a room. He organizes the room in which he lives by removing all the furniture and putting it against the door in order to make it impossible for the woman to gain access to it. This room is presented as the representation of the womb and, therefore, it symbolizes the character's need to return to a sheltered place where he feels protected. We saw a similar image in our discussion of *The Expelled*, when we found the protagonist lying in fetal position in the 'big black box' that was his cab.

The child character in this novel is one who is not yet born. On hearing about the woman's pregnancy, the reaction of our unnamed protagonist is not very positive: he urges the woman to have an abortion:

One day she had the impudence to announce she was with child, and four or five months gone into the bargain, by me of all people! She offered me a side view of her belly. She even undressed, no doubt to prove she wasn't hiding a cushion under her skirt, [...]. Perhaps it's just wind I said, by way of consolation. [...]. Look she said,

stooping over her breasts, the haloes are darkening already. I summoned up my remaining strength and said, Abort, abort, and they'll blush like new. (28)

This desire, or even need, of her having an abortion can be caused by two fears. One is the fear caused by the possibility of becoming a father; and the other is the fear of becoming the father of a child who can be the son of another man. Our character can cope with the woman's prostitution when it is a non-reproductive sexual act. When a new life is begotten, the protagonist abandons both mother and child.

I have interpreted the abandoning that the male character performs as a rejection and hatred of the woman because she is going to become a mother. The source of this rejection is the child that has not been born yet. As I have explained in the opening chapter of this BA Thesis, the character's misogyny comes to the fore because of the same character's misopedia. Misogynous remarks are pretty obvious in the passage I have just quoted: 'she had the imprudence to announce', 'to prove she wasn't hiding a cushion under her skirt'. His misopedia becomes evident when she is in labor and her cries and/or those of the child start to resound:

I began playing with the cries, a little in the same way as I had played with the song, on, back, on, back, if that may be called playing. As long as I kept walking I didn't hear them, because of the footsteps. But as soon as I halted I heard them again, a little fainter each time, admittedly, but what does it matter, faint or loud, cry is cry, all that matters is that it should cease. (30)

To sum up, we can argue that the male character's rejection of his own child leads to his rejection of the woman. He cannot cope with the newborn because of the link he establishes between birth and death, and also because of the loss of protection and attention that the child's birth entails for the adult. The solution for both these worries is abortion.

'I would drown all newborn babies': *Eleutheria* (1946)

First Love is not the only example of these unwanted children in Samuel Beckett's works. In his little-known play *Eleutheria*, written in 1947 (soon after the completion of

the four novellas), a Dr. Piouk takes the misogyny and misopedia of the unnamed character of *First Love* one step further so that it becomes misanthropy. I will use the links between this posthumous play and the works we have discussed so far to close this study of the child character in Samuel Beckett's works.

To solve what another character in the play calls 'the problem of humanity', Dr. Piouk takes no middle road and announces a programme of sorts with which it would all be over and done within a couple of years:

I would ban reproduction. I would perfect the condom and other devices and bring them into general use. I would establish teams of abortionists, controlled by the State. I would apply the death penalty to any woman guilty of giving birth. I would drown all newborn babies. I would militate in favour of homosexuality, and would myself set the example. And to speed things up, I would encourage recourse to euthanasia by all possible means, although I would not make it obligatory. (44-45)

The link with *First Love* is pretty obvious, both works coinciding in their open appeal to abortion as a means of improving the condition of those already on earth. The appeal to the slaughtering of children is equally reminiscent of that other novella, *The Expelled*. Homosexuality has also made an appearance in *The Calmative*, in the only encounter the unnamed character has, apart from the emotive meeting with a child. But there are equally strong links, even if less obvious, with another work among those in our chosen set. The squad of abortionists in *Eleutheria* would be aiming at the disappearance of the human race; as it is, the situation depicted in *Endgame*. There, the four characters on stage come across to the reader/spectator as the last survivors of the human species. And there is nothing they intend to do to change that situation: Hamm and Clov recoil from any prospective procreative act that might occur; thus, the flea, the rat, and the approaching child are rejected as possible agents in the starting of life on earth all over again. Since I have already quoted this third scene in the second chapter of this Thesis, let me quote from the first two here:

CLOV (anguished, scratching himself): I have a flea!

HAMM: A flea! Are there still fleas? [...] (*Very perturbed*): But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God!

CLOV: I'll go and get the powder. (*Exit Clov*) (27)

CLOV: There's a rat in the kitchen!

HAMM: A rat! Are there still rats?

CLOV: In the kitchen there's one.

HAMM: And you haven't exterminated him? [...] You'll finish him later. Let us pray to God. (37)

But Dr. Piouk resembles Hamm in another way that, yet again, makes *Eleutheria* take its place next to the three works we discussed in the first place. While all this destruction of humanity is conveniently designed and put into practice, Piouk has different designs for himself: he wants a child, “*primo*, to entertain me in my leisure hours, [...]; *secundo*, so that he can receive the torch from my hands, when they are no longer strong enough to carry it.” (45). He needs his own Clov, we could add.

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This last quotation perfectly illustrates the paradoxical attitude that Beckett's characters adopt towards the child. Children are loathed for representing life's continuities and are kept for that same reason. But then, they are blamed for...existence? “It's not my fault, sir” (49) protests the child in *Waiting for Godot*; “It wasn't my fault, Papa” (99), protests Michel, a child on stage in *Eleutheria*, certainly anticipating the better-known quote from the other play.

Michel claims that he doesn't like school, he doesn't like playing, he just likes lying in bed, “before I go to sleep” (116). It doesn't take long to realise that the adult Michel will very much resemble the solipsistic protagonist of *First Love*, thus closing the circle around these two works.

Conclusions

This BA Thesis has shown that the child character plays a more relevant role in Samuel Beckett's works—be they prose or drama—than has so far been attached to it. The links between these figures and the procreative aspect of sexuality are established in these works in ways that encourage us to read the prevalent dislike of children on the part of Beckett's adult characters in relation with their misogyny. Whereas that misogyny has been discussed widely in the critical literature on Beckett, what Paul Stewart rightly calls the 'misopedia' of Beckett's characters has received scant critical attention. With the intention of filling that gap, if only partially, I have chosen eight texts from Beckett's middle period where the presence of children is manifested in very different ways. Far from being the simple and transparent personality that we take children to be, Beckett's infants are complex figures that are loaded with meaning, and that contribute to the depiction of the Beckettian landscape in ways that we could not have imagined.

Given that complexity, I have put the focus on the search for points in common between Beckett's works so as to provide a more comprehensive view of this infantile universe. That explains my having grouped and classified the eight works into three different chapters with a heading that hints at a common 'topic' they all share—at the risk of leaving out other relevant details that are then analyzed in the ensuing discussions of the texts.

The first of these headings is "Children from the Unexplored", which points to the presence of children that appear out of nowhere only to become, at some point in the work, the key element of the story. We can say that, in a way, they give sense to the story and to what the main characters do and say. The child—or children, for the possibility that they are two different boys remains there—appearing on stage in *Waiting for Godot* provides the two bums with a brief encounter with the reality offstage. Similarly, the young boy in *The Calmative* puts the dead protagonist briefly in touch with humanity, though his greater knowledge about the harsh realities of life anticipates the gloominess of the last two encounters with a child in this set of works. The two children that feature in *Endgame*, none of them appearing on stage, embody the terrifying bleakness of life better than any of the miserable existences of the four adults on stage. Coming from the unknown (or perhaps the too-well known), all these children

give their respective stories a sense of the circularity of history and the prolongation of the endless suffering of the adult characters that this entails.

“Reliving the Pain” puts the focus on texts where the paternal issues come to the fore. This capacity for continuing life and creating new life that children have is the main reason for the rejection they suffer, and it is a new type of the sense of circularity that we have seen in the previous set of works. The prolongation of suffering that the children symbolize is, this time, resented by their own parents, or by the bitter offspring of those same parents, as is the case with the adult protagonist of *The Expelled*. In my analysis of *The End*, I have opened up the scope to make brief incursions into other works by the same writer (*Mercier and Camier, Company*), incursions which illustrate how widespread this view of parenthood is in Beckett’s oeuvre.

“Unwanted Births” does not feature an actual child as a character. In *First Love*, the text I have chosen to illustrate this topic, it is the unborn child that becomes the protagonist in the climax of the story. Unsurprisingly, the unborn child is rejected by his father, but he also becomes the pivot for the rejection of the female figure. The child’s birth forebodes the loss of the attention that the male character now receives from the woman, but it also announces the undesired prolongation of existence. Abortion is contemplated as the only solution for these worries; the solution rejected, all the male adult character can do is leave. This chapter closes with an analysis of Beckett’s play *Eleutheria*, approached initially for its coincidences with *First Love* in appealing for abortion to end ‘the problem of humanity’; *Eleutheria*, however, has many other things in common with the other texts discussed in this Thesis. With them, I have closed this study.

The figure of the child in Beckett’s works, as we have seen, can adopt many different forms and can have many different meanings that separate them from the innocence and transparency that we might want to attach to them. The Beckett works we have selected for analysis in this BA Thesis are not the only ones in which the figure of the child appears. There are many others that could have been included in this study and that should be taken into account for future and further studies.

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