'Nothing is More Real than Nothing':
Nothingness as an Achievement in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*,
*Endgame* and *Happy Days*.

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Malta
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Arts (Honours)

April 2013
Statement of Authenticity

I declare that this dissertation is original and entirely my own work. Works consulted during my dissertation have been indicated in the List of Works Cited.

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Acknowledgements

I am truly indebted and grateful to my tutor, Dr. James Corby, for his invaluable guidance and support throughout my dissertation.
Abstract

Upon watching, or reading, Samuel Beckett’s plays, one could easily notice that the plays are reduced to the bare minimum, both in terms of staging and language. What is also particularly interesting is the fact that this sense of reductionism is also reflected in the action of the plays, because, as will be discussed in this dissertation, (N)othing happens. The three plays which are analysed in this dissertation, Waiting for Godot (1952), Endgame (1957) and Happy Days (1961), were all published and performed after the Second World War. Although there is no direct link with the Second World War in Beckett's plays, one could sense the consequences of its destruction reflected in the Nothingness in Beckett's plays. What is more, this Nothingness which prevails Beckett's three plays might also mirror the incredulity towards certain narratives, such as those of redemption. What one is presented with, then, is bare human experience, isolated from any delusive grand narrative. In the Introduction, we will analyse the claims made by the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, on narratives, particularly those related to religion. Nietzsche's claims will then be linked with Lyotard's argument on the incredulity towards grand narratives in a postmodern world, in order to set the context. In Chapter I, we will then see the means and ways by which the characters in the three plays go on to persist in the struggle of meaninglessness. Moreover, in the Chapter II, we examine how the meaninglessness which characterises the postmodern world is reflected in language's failure to capture that which is intended to be signified. Language becomes devoid of meaning, and as a result, Beckett resorts to silence as a superior conveyor of the situation which the characters are in. In the Chapter III, the sense of Nothingness in Beckett's three plays will be discussed. We will explore how the Nothingness in Beckett's plays is far from simply being nihilistic, and how ultimately, it is Beckett's achievement. Finally, the Conclusion sets out to view Beckett's Nothingness as a reflection of the bare human condition, with all the deceitful narratives of redemption stripped away. By stripping away all grand narratives, Beckett turns the Nothing into something through his interest in the ordinary. What one is thus provided with by encountering Beckett's plays is a sense of the way human life actually is, an affirmation of the foundations of
human life.
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"...nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express'"

- Samuel Beckett in *Three Dialogues*

In Samuel Beckett's three plays, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days*, one is often left with the impression that nothing quite happens. The characters in these three plays are almost physically immobile in the sense that they can make nothing happen. In *Endgame*, Hamm is not only blind, but also confined to a chair due to paralysis. Similarly, Winnie, in *Happy Days*, is buried up to her waist in a heap of earth, which restricts her movement as the heap levels up to her neck by the end of the play. In *Waiting for Godot*, although the main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are not physically paralysed, they also make
nothing happen, as they endlessly wait for the arrival of Godot. If one is to view the Nothingness which happens from such an angle, one is able to associate it with the lack of action in the play. Furthermore, the sense of Nothingness in Beckett's three plays is also reflected in the bare stage. The country road in *Waiting for Godot*, apart from the characters, features nothing else but a tree. In *Endgame*, we are told that the room which the characters inhabit has 'bare interior'.1 *Endgame* 's 'bare interior' is similar to the bare exterior in *Happy Days*, where nothing but a parasol, a bag and a mound surround Winnie. One could thus begin to see that the plays which this dissertation analyses are governed by a sense of Nothingness. In this dissertation, the actual Nothingness will be examined, by studying how the characters in the plays react to it, and how it features in the language in the plays. However, before elaborating further on the sense of Nothingness in Beckett's plays, it might be worth explaining the context in which the plays were written, for a better and deeper understanding of the plays in relation to Nothingness.

The three plays which this dissertation will focus on were written

after the Second World War. Although Beckett's literary works are not usually directly linked with his personal experiences, the sense of Nothingness in the three plays might mirror the unprecedented post-war repercussions which were experienced by most Europeans, including Beckett himself. Accordingly, Rónán McDonald claims that although references to the Second World War are not so direct in Beckett, 'there is every sign that it deeply scoured his imagination', and that 'his later work […] are crafted by a mind which had experienced the war first hand and indeed who had lost a number of friends in it.'² McDonald goes on to argue that the Second World War left Beckett appalled by its atrocities, such as the death camps in Auschwitz. Andrew K. Kennedy indeed believes that the Second World War 'must have deepened Beckett's awareness of suffering and of fearful uncertainty, as well as of the instability of language – to some extent a shared experience among survivors of the war.'³ One could thus argue that Beckett had a first hand experience of the deterioration of the world around him. As a result, Beckett's three plays

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depict 'a world that had run its course – a 'corpsed' world'. Kennedy even goes as far as to claim that Beckett's work 'gains some of its power 'to claw' from the dark experiences of the war years'. In order to capture an authentic post-war feeling in his plays, Beckett strives 'for an art of disassembly [and] disintegration'. For Beckett, it becomes hard to portray a life in which 'the capacity to absorb or represent the external world dissolves' due to the world's devastating experiences, such as the war. Consequently, Beckett's three plays present to the audience that which cannot quite be presented, a form of Nothingness which overshadows the lives of the characters. Yet, in doing so, Beckett succeeds in capturing the very experience of how a human life is able to fare under the worst imaginable conditions. However, one might still wonder what the Nothingness in Beckett's plays actually is. Contrary to what some critics prefer to believe, in this dissertation I will argue that the Nothingness in Beckett's plays is far from being a nihilistic approach to life. Rather, we will see how this Nothingness may be viewed as an achievement, and perhaps we could even go further and argue that it is the very Beauty of

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4 Ibid., p. 9.
5 Ibid.
6 McDonald, p. 15.
Beckett's work. Hence, the Nothingness and the meaninglessness of a world which no longer coheres in Beckett may be viewed as a reaction against nihilism. Furthermore, one could also argue that nihilism for Beckett lies in *grand narratives*, which, according to the French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard, are 'philosophies of history that attempt to organize all events and social projects around a projected goal, and give meaning and legitimation to these events and projects according to that goal.'\(^7\) What seems to be implied in Beckett's three plays is that grand narratives, sometimes conceal and ignore atrocities, such as the death camps in Auschwitz. What Beckett attempts to do then is strip away the nihilistic tendencies of grand narratives, be it religious or political, in order to capture the ordinary: the very essence of human life.

The stripping away of grand narratives in Beckett's work may be traced back to the claims of the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche claims that the grand narrative of Christianity acts as a solution to nihilism for those who practice and follow it as a religion, as it provides them with values by which they are able to live. Nietzsche believed that

nihilism was a serious problem for modernity. According to Nietzsche, nihilism occurs 'when all the highest values previously posited become devalued'.

Nietzsche believed that the devaluation of values was afflicting modernity, particularly on both social and individual levels. In his theory on nihilism, Nietzsche analyses three main ways in which the values of modernity become devalued. One of the three types of nihilism which might be linked with the main issue of Nothingness is Nietzsche's notion of religious nihilism.

For Nietzsche, religious nihilism has its roots in 'the nihilistic impulse in human culture, which has unfolded through history and resulted in the ailments of European modernity'. As a result of this 'nihilistic impulse' individuals turn to religion in order to follow a set of values based on the religion of Christianity, in order to allow them to endure the Nothingness of life by offering the illusion of redemption. However, for Nietzsche, problems arise as the values of Christianity devalue themselves, and thus 'foreclos[e] the possibility of fully life-affirmative valuation.' Rather, what Christianity does is attribute its highest valuation to the world beyond human experience. In The Will to Power, Nietzsche claims that the highest values, such as Christianity's highest value, may be analysed according to three principles: aim, unity, and truth. According to Nietzsche, these three main principles provide a meaningless life with the possibility

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8 Ibid., p. 31.
9 Woodward., p. 31.
10 Ibid., p. 32.
of redemption. However, these principles as such 'refer to things that cannot be found in our experience of the world.'\textsuperscript{11} Consequently, Nietzsche believes that the highest values based on these three principles are mere constructs of human imagination which 'are projected onto the world in order to give it value, but that place the source of value outside the world.'\textsuperscript{12}

The first of the three principles sets a goal for an individual, for example that of being morally correct in ones actions and behaviour. Secondly, unity implies a supreme organisation of all earthly events. According to Nietzsche, individuals believe themselves to be part of this all encompassing unity which 'suffices to give man a deep feeling of standing in the context of, and being dependent on, some whole that is infinitely superior to him, and he sees himself as a mode of the deity.'\textsuperscript{13} Lastly, the notion of truth appears to provide life with meaning by suggesting the existence of a real and transcendental world. It is a world which individuals look up to as 'the source of value and meaning, which justifies the existence of the "merely apparent" world.'\textsuperscript{14} For Nietzsche, these principles of religious nihilism are linked with the notion of God. Thus, according to Nietzsche, the highest values attributed to God give meaning to a life which would otherwise be threatened by a sense of Nothingness, and, in doing so, act as a means to preserve life by 'protecting against suicide', and, according to Nietzsche, 'they preserve a sick, impoverished form of life that is incapable of healthful life-affirmation.'\textsuperscript{15} The incapability of a firm life-affirmation is mainly due to the fact that the three principles of religious nihilism negate the life of human experience by associating the highest values with a life beyond. As a result, the world of human experience is viewed as a world of mere 'instrumental value of constituting a bridge to the "true world".'\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 33.  
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{13} Woodward, p. 33.  
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid..  
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 34.
Lyotard, analyses the treatment of grand narratives in the postmodern world, which, for Lyotard, refers to the societies of post-industrial countries after after World War II. For Lyotard, the postmodern world has developed a sense of 'incredulity toward meta-narratives', or grand narratives, such as the narratives of redemption, which Nietzsche analyses in a religious context. In fact, in *The Post-Modern Condition*, Lyotard expounds on 'the Christian narrative of redemption of original sin'. However, Lyotard takes Nietzsche's analysis of the Christian grand narrative a few steps further, by analysing other grand narratives, such as Karl Marx's grand narrative of emancipation from capitalist exploitation. Accordingly, in *Nihilism in Postmodernity*, Ashley Woodward maintains that Lyotard argues that the modern society of which Nietzsche talks about secularises the Christian narrative of redemption but 'retain[s] its overall form by positing a basic lack or division that will be healed or resolved at a future time.' From an eschatological perspective, Woodward believes that 'we can see Lyotard's concept of the metanarrative as a modernist form of [Nietzsche's] religious nihilism, where belief in a 'true world' is transposed to a belief in a future utopia.' Furthermore, Woodward maintains that Lyotard might be highlighting the similarities between God and meta-narratives, as '[b]oth categories collect and attempt to explain a wide field of phenomena with respect to a transcendent source of value; where for Nietzsche the name "God" signifies the metaphysical idea of a "true world" beyond the world of appearance, the meta narratives of modernity posit a future legitimation for current events.'

Moreover, in *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard maintains that the post-industrial societies of post-modernity have developed a sense of impossibility towards the legitimation of meta-narratives.

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18 Ibid., p. 123.
19 Woodward, p. 124.
20 Ibid., p. 124.
21 Ibid., p. 125.
Instead, meta-narratives in post-modernity become 'delegitimised'. Certain events of the twentieth century, such as the atrocities of Auschwitz, interfere with the functionality of meta-narratives and thus render them delegitimate. In order to explain his point on delegitimation, Lyotard postulates that the grand narrative 'All that is real is rational, all that is rational is real', is rejected by the event of Auschwitz, as although Auschwitz is real, it surely is not rational. Accordingly, Woodward points out that:

Metanarratives such as Hegelianism and Marxism attempt to make sense of history as constituted by events that all contribute towards a future good, but Lyotard insists that events such as the Holocaust cannot be incorporated into such a narrative: any attempt to redeem this event in a philosophy of history ignores the monstrous injustice of the event itself.  

Furthermore, on a similar note to Nietzsche, Lyotard claims that meta-narratives delegitimise themselves. Another case in point of a narrative which delegitimises itself is speculative narrative, which is best exemplified by the narratives of science. In his examination of the speculative narrative, Lyotard 'points to a gulf between the narrative that legitimates knowledge and the statements of knowledge itself'. This gulf is best exemplified by scientific narrative. For Lyotard, narrative knowledge is fundamentally different from scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge, in order for it to be legitimised, needs to be conveyed via a non-scientific language. Lyotard thus goes on to believe that the non-scientific language(narrative knowledge) used might in fact be ideologically based, and consequently, does not bear the actual scientific knowledge. Such a process of conveying scientific knowledge through non-scientific narratives renders science devoid of knowledge. Rather, '[w]hat we have here, according to Lyotard, is a delegitimation of knowledge

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22 Ibid.
23 Woodward, p. 126.
driven by the need for legitimation itself.\textsuperscript{24} To go back to Nietzsche, Lyotard maintains that 'this is exactly what Nietzsche is doing, though with a different terminology, when he shows that "European nihilism" resulted from the truth requirement of science being turned back against itself.'\textsuperscript{25} According to Lyotard, what one ultimately gets in a postmodern society is knowledge based merely on its function, such as the Christian narrative functioning by providing the illusion of redemption, rather than a search for truths or a 'healthful life-affirmation'.\textsuperscript{26}

Hence, if we go back to Nietzsche, we may deduce that nihilism is associated with the emptiness upon which the narratives, such as those of redemption, are founded. What one encounters in reading Beckett's texts is thus an 'incredulity toward metanarratives' through the stripping-away of all grand narratives, such as those of redemption, which are essentially nihilistic.\textsuperscript{27} For Beckett, the consoling narratives of redemption cannot incorporate the stark horror of the Second World War and its aftermath because, as we have seen, 'any attempt to redeem [them] in a philosophy of history ignores the monstrous injustice of the [War] itself.'\textsuperscript{28} What Beckett resorts to instead is a presentation of what it actually means to be human, an interest in the mundane and the ordinary 'without the rose-tinted spectacles of any narrative of redemption'.\textsuperscript{29} As a result, the characters in Beckett's three plays find themselves enduring the meaninglessness of life. However, this meaninglessness of life is an achievement in Beckett, and, as Simon Critchley rightly argues, it is a 'response to nihilism and its crisis of meaning', by achieving the ordinary.\textsuperscript{30} One may also conclude that the Nothingness in Beckett is not nihilistic. Rather, Nothingness refers to the absence

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 33.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 125.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Simon Critchley, \textit{Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature}, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 32.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p. 32.
\end{itemize}
of the grand narratives which are themselves nihilistic.

In conclusion, this dissertation will focus on the presence of Nothingness in Beckett's three plays in the absence of postmodern meta-narratives. However, the Nothingness in Beckett's plays will not be perceived as nihilistic, but rather, as a reaction against nihilism. In Chapter I, we see how the characters in the three plays struggle to find meaning in a life where the grand narratives of redemption have been stripped away. We also see how the characters create their own means of coping with the meaninglessness, primarily by finding ways of occupying their time. Moreover, Chapter II analyses Beckett's achievement of Nothingness through his incorporation of silence in his plays, and through a rejection of language as a means of conveying meaning and intention. The final chapter, Chapter III, takes the Nothingness achieved through silence and the rejection of language further to the point of analysing it as an achievement, and the Beauty of Beckett's oeuvres.
1. The Self in the Face of Uncertainty and Nothingness

According to Bennett Simon, in the twentieth century, the notion of the self 'is in terrible trouble'. Simon argues that the kind of self that one finds in the twentieth century is different from that which is found in earlier eras, such as the Classical or the Romantic, as in the twentieth century, 'the self is disintegrated, deconstructed, shadowed, fragmented, submerged, unstable, and scarcely able to tell a coherent story'. The twentieth century witnessed the tragedy of two world wars, which left individuals feeling foreign in their own homes. Such estrangement of the self meant that the human subject had to endure the struggle of establishing a sense of self in a deteriorating world. In this chapter, we will see how the characters in Beckett's three plays cope with the aftermath of the atrocities of the war. We will analyse how the characters deal with the meaninglessness which arises from Beckett's exclusion of any deceitful narratives of redemption. What the audience or readers of the plays are left with then is an exploration of the experience of the self against the Nothingness which is residual once the narratives of redemption are stripped away from life. Thus, in this chapter we will witness the characters in a world where, as Martin Esslin claims, 'the certitudes and unshakable assumptions of former ages [are] swept away'.

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32 Ibid.

1.1 The Struggle for Meaning in a Meaningless World

Some of the characters in Beckett's plays are confronted with the predicaments of the twentieth century, a world which is governed by a sense of meaninglessness due to the absence of narratives of redemption. Esslin points out that uncertainty dominates Beckett's play, Waiting for Godot. The two tramps in the play, Vladimir and Estragon, wait for the arrival of a man named Godot. However, there is uncertainty revolving around the identity of Godot and his arrival to meet Vladimir and Estragon. According to Andrew K. Kennedy, the waiting of Vladimir and Estragon is a 'combination of expectations and let-downs' and 'of uncertainty', and such uncertainty is confirmed by the Boy in the play, who informs Vladimir and Estragon, in both Act I and Act II, that Godot has postponed his arrival to the following day. 34 It may be argued that due to such uncertainty, Vladimir and Estragon cannot assure themselves that their boredom will ever be redeemed. Such an argument may be linked with the notion of narratives of redemption. In a sense, the arrival of Godot is Vladimir's and Estragon's grand narrative; they wait for Godot because their knowledge of the possibility of his arrival, which would redeem them from their boredom, seems to motivate them to persist in their waiting. However, as in the grand narratives of the postmodern world, Godot's arrival seems beguiling, and their redemption thus seems less probable. Nonetheless, their perseverance in waiting for Godot's arrival provides them with a definition for their existential standpoint. As they wait for Godot, they are provided with a narrative to live by, even though it is implied through the play, particularly by the fact that Godot's arrival is postponed, that such narrative will never redeem their existence. Due to this sense of unlikelihood of redemption, we are

reminded of the deceitful nature of grand narratives. Yet, what is particularly interesting is that Vladimir and Estragon remain waiting for the arrival of Godot.

Although faced with uncertainty in a purposeless world, the tramps continue being hopeful. It may be argued that Vladimir and Estragon's hopeful approach towards Godot's arrival is evident in the fact that at the end of the two scene, although they claim they will leave, they do not actually leave. Moreover, as we shall see, hope is also suggested in their determination to find ways with which they could occupy their time, even though their means turn out to be rather trivial. Similarly, Winnie, in Beckett's *Happy Days*, endures life's meaningless in an optimistic way. According to Esslin, 'Winnie's cheerfulness in the face of death and nothingness is an expression of man's courage [...] and thus the play provides a kind of catharsis'. The play even starts on a positive note as Winnie claims that it is '[a]nother heavenly day'. In the light of Esslin's claim that Winnie expresses an individual's courage, Winnie is thus persistent in her will to endure her deteriorating condition of being buried in a mound, which, by Act II, is leveled up to her neck, and immobilizes her almost completely. There is also a kind of uncertainty revolving around why Winnie is buried in a mound. The readers and the audience are only left to imagine the possible causes for Winnie's situation which exacerbates by the end of the play. Moreover, Winnie is dependent on the other character in the play, her husband Willie. Winnie feels that her sense of self would crumble down as she claims that she would be unable to endure the loneliness if Willie were to die, as she would then have no one to dialogue with. Thus, Winnie's main principle is to eradicate the sense of loneliness, and that way, she is able to achieve her sense of self. Willie, on the other hand, is reticent and indifferent towards Winnie. He only responds to Winnie when he is annoyed enough by her. However, his presence is comforting enough for Winnie, and it provides her with the will to go on.

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35 Esslin, p. 82.
in the face the barrenness of her condition in the mound, where death is forever approaching. Esslin argues that Winnie's declining situation in the heap of earth 'clearly says something about our gradual approach, with every day that passes, to death and the grave'. Moreover, according to Kennedy, Winnie's world holds her prisoner, and 'presses against her and tortures her'. Winnie herself senses that her the mound imprisons her as she claims that 'the earth is very tight today'. Yet, Winnie hopes that 'some day the earth will yield and let [her] go'. Kennedy claims that Winnie has no control over the world which surrounds her, a decaying world in which 'nothing grows'. Yet, although confronted by a sense of purposelessness and decay, Winnie still believes that she has 'so much to be thankful for...no pain', as Willie's presence completes her sense of self in a barren world.

Moreover, in Beckett's play, *Endgame*, the characters also undergo the predicament of the twentieth century, in a seemingly desolate land, where all grand narratives of redemption begin to crumble down to an ultimate sense of meaninglessness. All is sterile, as Clov claims that 'there's no more nature'. The two main characters in the play share an antagonist relationship. Hamm cannot quite exert control upon himself as he is immobilised by being blind and crippled. Consequently, Hamm exercises authority over Clov. As a result, their relationship is built upon tension, as Clov claims that he would die happily if he could kill Hamm. Moreover, Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, are, like Winnie and Hamm, immobilised in dustbins. Hamm also exerts his power over his parents by treating them bitterly, calling his Nagg a 'scoundrel' for bringing him to

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38 Kennedy, p. 80.
41 Kennedy, p. 80.
life, and silencing Nell when he thinks she is talking too much.\footnote{Ibid., p. 31.} According to Rónán McDonald, the play explores 'a subversive and shocking refusal of the values of life [and] the family'.\footnote{Rónán McDonald, *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 51.} Thus, there seems to be a devaluation of the values prescribed by certain narratives, and in that sense, the characters face the Nothingness of ordinary life. The relationships between the characters are fragmented.

Johnathan Boulter claims that the characters are 'trapped in what appears to be an endlessly repeating end stage' where 'nothing thrives except irritation, unhappiness, and crucially nostalgia for an irretrievable past'.\footnote{Jonathan Boulter, *Beckett: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), p. 41.} The world which the characters inhabit is almost post-apocalyptic in its barrenness. As a result, the characters struggle to reconstruct meaning in their lives in order to define their sense of self in the face of this absurd world. Furthermore, Boulter argues that Endgame is a play dominated by a desire to retrieve a lost past. As Boulter argues, Hamm revisits his past in his monologue, which consists of a story in which Hamm helped a man and his child. This seems to be the only episode in which Hamm behaved ethically. Moreover, Boulter also claims that Hamm lives in despair due to his regrets for behaving unethically throughout most of his lifetime. This is portrayed by Hamm's lament, as he reflects back on '[a]ll those [he] might have helped'.\footnote{Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2009), p. 41.} Boulter also maintains that in regretting past actions, one is able to allocate a value to that lost past. In doing so, Hamm reconstructs meaning in a meaningless world, as he revives a memory of when he committed good deeds with the poor man and his child. Boulter believes that 'the recognition of loss of meaning [of a past] becomes meaningful in itself, and may in part be what the play is about'.\footnote{Ibid., p. 44.} By
having Hamm look back to his unethical lost past, Beckett analyses how the self 'deals with what we may call the residue of meaning, the traces of loss that can never be eradicated or negated.'\textsuperscript{49} Moreover, the retelling of the past helps Hamm ascertain his existence amongst his barren surroundings. Boulter believes Hamm's retelling of his story in his monologue 'is[...] a nostalgic return to potency', in that it consoles Hamm that his actions were once ethical and fruitful.\textsuperscript{50} However, the past also brings about a feeling of self-disgust in Hamm, as is exemplified by his refusal, in the past, to provide Mother Pegg with light for her lamp.

### 1.2 Enduring Meaninglessness by Occupying Time

Faced with the stark meaninglessness of the world around them, some of the characters are troubled with the feeling of needing to occupy time in order to fight against ennui. For example, in \textit{Waiting for Godot}, the tramps need to occupy their time as they wait for Godot. In \textit{Endgame}, all the characters are paralysed, which is more burdensome for them, as it limits their ways of passing time. Similarly, in \textit{Happy Days}, Winnie's immobilised state also limits her actions, causing her to babble away the encroaching tedium. Anders claims that a sense of tedious passivity emerged in the twentieth century as individuals who were active had little to no control over the activity which they carried out, particularly in the field of employment. Anders goes on to argue that since the activities which individuals carry out have lost most of their autonomy, activity 'itself has become a form of passivity, and even where action is deadly strenuous or actually deadly, it has assumed the character of futile action or inaction.'\textsuperscript{51} Anders maintains that Beckett's play deals with 'man who continues

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 47.

\textsuperscript{51} Günther Anders, 'Being without time: on Beckett's play waiting for godot', in \textit{Samuel Beckett: A Collection of
existing because he happens to exist'. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait in hope for the arrival of Godot, even though Godot's arrival is uncertain. However, whilst waiting, the tramps are confronted with the desire to fill up their time. Consequently, waiting becomes 'both more playful and more desperate'. In order to pass time, they argue with each other, and indulge in 'games of self-distraction', such as fiddling with boots, chewing on a radish, and acting out the roles of two other characters in the play, Lucky and Pozzo. Such games pass their time, as Estragon claims that '[they] always find something [...] to give [them] the impression that [they] exist.'

Similarly, Winnie, in *Happy Days*, also feels that in the face of nothingness and imminent death, she needs to occupy her time in order to break the tedium which would otherwise overcome her. According to Kennedy, it is 'Winnie's struggle to pass the time'. However, unlike Vladimir and Estragon, Winnie has a limited range of possibilities to occupy her time with, as she is partially buried in earth. In her immobilised state, Winnie finds herself indulging in distractions. In Act I, Winnie focuses her attention on ordinary objects. She is fascinated by her toothbrush. In his analysis on how Winnie occupies her time, Kennedy compares her to an archeologist, as she attempts to figure out the writing on the toothbrush. Such a comparison shows how Winnie's focus on the writing of the toothbrush turns the ordinary toothbrush 'into an instrument of (parodic) illumination'. Furthermore, in *Endgame*, Hamm's immobility also causes him to struggle to find the means to occupy time in the meaninglessness which surrounds him. The play opens with the

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52 Anders, p. 143.
53 Kennedy, p. 30.
54 Ibid.
56 Kennedy, p. 76.
57 Ibid., p. 78.
idea of an ending, as Clov exclaims that it is 'nearly finished'. Kennedy links 'ending' to the sense of waiting which the tramps endure in Waiting for Godot. Additionally, Kennedy believes that Hamm's immobile state signifies the idea of 'ending'. Hamm occupies the time he has left exploring the barren chamber he lives in, as he orders Clov to move him around in his wheelchair. Hamm seems to acquire energy from ordering Clov around, by demanding, for example: 'Get me ready, I'm going to bed'. Moreover, he finds satisfaction in information on a decaying universe which Clov acquires through his telescope, and his recount of his story in his monologue.

1.3 Life as Repetition

Moreover, as we shall see, one of the main ways in which the characters survive the meaningless tedium which ails them is through a repetition of certain actions. In his essay 'Self-Objectification and Preservation in Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape', Jon Erickson discusses the idea of repetition in Beckett. He introduces his argument by claiming that an audience needs to remember how a play develops 'and how it was materialised on stage.' In order for theatrical signs to be imprinted in the mind of the audience, they must be repeated. For the dramatis personae this implies that 'their representation of human behaviour is repetitive.' Erickson maintains that in a play, 'repetition not only defines 'character' but demonstrates change in character as well, through the modification of repeated behaviour'. He goes on to argue that identity stems from one's type of

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59 Ibid., p. 7.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
repetition. Moreover, Erickson claims that all forms of repetition 'represent attempts at survival, or
endurance, whether physical or psychic.' In *Waiting for Godot*, a play in two acts, repetition is
evident in the behaviour of the characters. In the play, Estragon removes and fiddles with his boot
repeatedly. Additionally, in both Act I and Act II, the tramps discuss the possibility of committing
suicide. Repetition is also present in the structure of the play. The arrival of the appearance of the
master-slave relationship of Pozzo and Lucky in Act I is essentially a repetition of their appearance
in Act II, even though Pozzo goes blind and Lucky becomes dumb. The appearance of the Boy is
also repetitive in its nature, as the message the Boy conveys is identical in Act I and Act II. What is
more, Act I and Act II end in the same way:

**ACT 1:**
Estragon Well, shall we go?
Vladimir Yes, let's go.'

**ACT II:**
Vladimir Well? Shall we go?
Estragon Yes, let's go.'

However, one crucial form of repetition lies in the fact that Estragon and Vladimir continually
remind themselves that they are waiting for Godot. Remembering that they are waiting for
something seems to provide them with enough motivation to go on waiting. The idea of waiting for
Godot guides them in recovering their sense of self, as it assigns to them a duty, that of waiting for
the arrival of Godot.

Furthermore, in *Happy Days*, Winnie's life seems to be founded on repetition. In Act I,
Winnie is woken up by the sound of a bell, and she thus commences her day. Likewise, in Act II,
Winnie, with the mound now leveled up to her neck, is again woken up by the same sound of a bell.

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63 Ibid.
It seems that Winnie's commencement of her days is repeatedly dominated by the sound of a bell. Once awoken by the bell, Winnie proceeds with her daily rituals, which consist of starting the day with a prayer and grooming herself. Winnie, by distracting herself by her daily rituals, manages to endure the meaninglessness of the world around her, as the rituals help 'to structure Winnie's empty hours'.

Furthermore, Boulter claims that Endgame is a play which is also 'grounded on the logic of repetition'. Boulter maintains that the characters repeatedly refer back to old stories and jokes. Clov is troubled by a sense of repetition, as he himself states '[a]ll life long' he has had to deal with 'the same question, the same answers'. Yet, Clov continually fails to abandon Hamm, and thus finds himself back under Hamm's orders, in his monotonous role of Hamm's servant. However, for Hamm, going back to the past through his story of how he helped the poor old man and his child, is also an option to revisit a time where he acted justly. This seems to provide Hamm with an altruistic side to his own self. Similarly, Nag and Nell recollect memories of their joyful youth, a time when 'the world offered possibility and experience'.

Although in the play Hamm looks forward to an ending of his condition, he still claims that ‘[he] hesitates...to end’. Thus, although Hamm claims that he longs for an end to his condition, at the same time, he clings to its cyclical nature. Perhaps repetition provides Hamm with the comfort of knowing what to expect in a world dominated by uncertainty.

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64 Kennedy, p. 79.
65 Boulter, p. 48.
67 Mcdonald, p. 47.
68 Samuel Beckett, Endgame (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 6
1.4 Fear of Loneliness in the face of Nothingness

Some of the characters in Beckett's plays seemingly require the presence of an other, a sense of communality, for them to survive the nothingness. The presence of the other helps the characters fill their tedious days. Moreover, with the presence of the other, the characters are able to affirm their sense of self, as the other provides them with a response which marks the acknowledgment of their existence amid a world of emptiness and uncertainty. In *Happy Days*, Winnie relies on her husband's awareness of her. However, Willie is not cooperative, as he scarcely ever answers back to Winnie, and when he does, he is abrupt and rather boorish in his way of doing so. Nonetheless, Winnie is still reliant on his presence. However, she wishes she were to be independent enough to 'bear to be alone' and to 'prattle away with no soul to hear'. Yet, Winnie continues with her chatter which fills up the void that would otherwise ail her. Furthermore, in *Endgame*, Hamm and Clov also share a relationship which, although antagonistic, helps them fight away the sense of loneliness. It is a love-hate relationship which they share, 'veering from tenderness to sadism', as is evident from the start of the play, and is maintained through the conflictual tension between them.

Clov Why do you keep me?
Hamm There's no one else.
Clov There's nowhere else. (*Pause.*)
Hamm You're leaving me all the same.
Clov I'm trying.
Hamm You don't love me.
Clov No.
Hamm You loved me once.

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70 Kennedy, p. 54.
Clov  Once!
Hamm  I've made you suffer too much. (*Pause.*) Haven't I?
Clov  It's not that.
Hamm  I haven't made you suffer too much?
Clov  Yes!
Hamm  *(relieved)* Ah, you gave me a fright! (*Pause. Coldly*) Forgive me.\(^{71}\)

Although their relationship is highly conflictual, Clov does not seem to be able to ever leave Hamm. Clov sometimes threatens to leave, yet he is never able to actually do so. Similarly, Hamm sometimes does in fact ask Clov to leave, however, he quickly asks him to remain with him before Clov departs. It seems that both Hamm and Clov cannot bear to go through the world's emptiness alone. Hamm exclaims that if one is 'on earth, there's no cure for that!'.\(^{72}\) Such an exclamation paired with Hamm's reluctance to leave Clov may signify that the incurable disease which surrounds them is much more bearable with the presence of Clov. Similarly, in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon 'are bound together in a relationship of dependency, affection, repulsion and anger; they know fully well that they are not happy together.'\(^{73}\) In fact, Estragon claims that 'There are times when [he] wonder[s] if it wouldn't be better for [them] to part'.\(^{74}\) However, like Clov and Hamm in *Endgame*, Vladimir and Estragon are unable to leave each other. Boulter claims that Estragon and Vladimir do not separate because 'each needs the other to confirm his existence, however miserable, however habitual'.\(^{75}\) Moreover, Boulter believes that Vladimir and Estragon are bond together through their mutual activity of waiting for Godot. According to Anders, '[t]he best way to overcome the doldrums [of waiting] is through the activation of their being together, through

\(^{72}\) Ibid., p. 33.
\(^{73}\) Boulter, p. 31.
\(^{75}\) Boulter, p. 32.
their ever renewed taking advantage of the chance that it is at least as a pair that they have to bear their senseless existence. Their relationship 'facilitates endurance of the pointless existence'.

In conclusion, one of the ways which the characters are able to persist, and thus endure life's meaninglessness, is through the presence of the other. Additionally, most of the characters in Beckett's three plays need to occupy their time in order to be able to endure the predicament of the twentieth century. Sometimes the characters even find themselves repeating certain behaviours in order to confirm, even though slenderly, their sense of self in a world where nothing is certain.

76 Anders, p. 147.
77 Ibid.
2. Beckett's Theatre of the 'Unword'

More and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at things (or the
Nothingness) behind it.

Beckett in a letter to Axel Kaun, 1937

In the first chapter we see how the characters in Samuel Beckett's three plays struggle to establish a sense of self in a world where meaning has been lost. In this chapter, we will see how the continuation of the struggle in a world without meaning is reflected in the communication between the characters, as language becomes insufficient to convey meaning. As Niklaus Gessner notes, we see how language becomes inadequate in Beckett's plays in its communication of meaning by 'modes of disintegration of language [...] [which] range from simple

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misunderstandings and double entendres to monologues (as signs of inability to communicate), clichés, repetitions of synonyms [and] inability to find the right words'. Thus, the loss of meaning is also experienced in the system of language itself. Through the portrayal of how language fails to construct and convey meaning, Beckett may in fact be devaluing the system of language itself. Beckett's critique of language seems to emerge from his depiction of the lack of an absolute of meaning in the plays. As a consequence, language tends to become private, devoid of any structure of reference in a meaningless world. Moreover, according to Martin Esslin, the 'devaluation and criticism of language are the [...] prevailing trends in contemporary philosophy'. Accordingly, the post-structuralist philosopher, Jacques Derrida, criticises the Western metaphysical notion of thought, logocentrism, which denotes 'a centre of meaning' of a structure, whereby the phenomenon of speech takes precedence over writing, in order to retain presence. However, Derrida does not believe that writing is superior to speech. Rather, Derrida believes that both writing and speech are systems of difference, through which signs become possible. However,

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the concept or object which is signified by a sign is never present when 
signified. Consequently, the system of signs is in a constant deferral of 
meaning, as it cannot capture completely that which it signifies. Hence, 

language is unable to fix an absolute, *transcendental signified*. 

Additionally, according to Derrida, meaning may only be achieved through 
the difference between signs. Thus, meaning is not inherently present 
within a linguistic sign. As a result, language becomes 'the universal 
problematic'\(^{82}\). Language's failure to capture the central, transcendental 
signified is exemplified by Beckett in his characters' inability ' to maintain 
 […] meaningful speech'.\(^{83}\) Thereupon, Beckett incorporates a degree of 
silence in his plays, 'to which language relegates the function of expressing 
the unsaid'.\(^{84}\) According to Khaled Besbes, Beckett's silence encourages 
the reader, or audience, to respond to his plays 'in order to fill in the gaps 
left by the characters and to predict what they might otherwise have said'.\(^{85}\)

Similar to Derrida's claim that language is unable to capture meaning, 
Besbes believes that 'meaning is not immanent in [Beckett's] texts'. As a


\(^{84}\) Ibid., p. 139.

\(^{85}\) Ibid.
result, Beckett's plays are characterised by a certain *undecidability*, as the Other (Beckett's reader or audience), is invited to encounter the silence in Beckett's plays, and since the audience or the readers may respond differently to the plays, the meaning of the silence remains *undecidable*.

2.1 Beckett's Theatre as a Protest Against Language

According to Jonathan Boulter, Beckett perceives language as an insufficient means of achieving Beauty. What Boutler might be suggesting by *Beauty* is Beckett's ability to capture the experience of what it means, fundamentally, to be human, devoid of any grand narratives. Once the experience of human life is captured, what Beckett presents is human life without meaning. In Beckett's ability to portray life in its bareness, without meaning, one might argue that his Beauty is represented in his achievement of the meaningless. Since language is not able to achieve such Beauty, Boulter notes that Beckett resorts to what he himself referred
to as the 'literature of the unword.' By 'literature of the unword' Beckett implies that '[h]is aim [...] is to find a means of decomposing and moving beyond language, to shatter language into a kind of erasure of itself.' The term erasure which Boulter uses may be related to Martin Heidegger's notion of sous-rature, which is then employed by Derrida himself in his works. What is suggested by sous-rature in Derrida's texts is that language, although necessary, is an insufficient to capture that which it refers to. As a result, Derrida, puts a signifier sous-rature, or under erasure, in order to show that the word is inadequate in capturing that which it represents. Similarly, in his plays, Beckett places language under erasure by using it, paradoxically, to convey its inadequacy in capturing that which it signifies. As Boulter notes, Beckett refers to his project of using language against language as '[a]n assault against words in the name of beauty.'

In Happy Days, the main protagonist, Winnie, uses language as a means of survival. Language enables Winnie to bear the tedium which she faces in a barren world. However, although language provides Winnie a

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87 Ibid., p. 20-21
88 Ibid., p. 20.
means to occupy her time, language fails to proceed with its main function, that of communication. Although Winnie attempts to converse with her husband, Willie, on several occasions in the play, Winnie suffers communication breakdown due to Willie's refusal to communicate with Winnie. As a result, Winnie resorts to monologue. According to Gessner, Beckett's use of monologue is a way of expressing the futility of language. Winnie is aware of the language's inadequacy in conveying meaning, as she admits that '[w]ords fail'.\textsuperscript{89} In Act II, when Winnie is buried up to her neck in the mound, language's failure to capture that which it represents is portrayed in language's failure to capture Winnie's arms and breasts. Winnie declares that there is 'no truth in' all that one is able to say.\textsuperscript{90} Such a statement is proven in Winnie's attempt to arrest her arms and breasts through language. However, Winnie's arms and breasts are essentially absent from her world, since she is covered up to her neck. Hence, no matter how hard she tries, language fails to capture that which Winnie refers to.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., p. 38.
In *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, language has no direct reference to the actions carried out by the characters, which renders language essentially empty. In *Endgame*, Clov tells Hamm that he will make an exist, however, Clov does not move till the very end of the play, and one is left uncertain about whether he does actually leave. Similarly, at the end of the two acts in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon agree on leaving, however, they do not move. The fact that the actions of Vladimir, Estragon and Clov do not correspond to what they say suggests that language does not secure a direct transposition of intention into action. Thus, what Beckett may be implying here is that language has no relation to the intention of an individual. Moreover, in *Waiting for Godot* a parody of language is at play, particularly in the lack of coherence in the conversations between Vladimir and Estragon. An example of the lack of coherence which dominates their conversations includes the instance which shows that both Vladimir and Estragon are unable to decode a question:

Estragon I asked you a question

Vladimir Ah.

Estragon Did you reply?

Vladimir How's the carrot?
Estragon  It's a carrot.
Vladimir  So much the better, so much the better.\textsuperscript{91}

Rather than answering Estragon's question, Vladimir asks him another question. Additionally, although Estragon replies to Vladimir's question, his response might be considered as inadequate, since it does not provide Vladimir with the information about the state of the carrot. Consequently, Vladimir and Estragon experience what might be referred to as communication breakdown due to language's flexibility in avoiding a question. Beckett thus shows how chaotic language can actually become. Confusion then ensues as language becomes devoid of meaning and intelligibility. Moreover, Besbes notes Vladimir and Estragon's struggle 'to find the appropriate words' with which to describe the trace on Lucky's neck:\textsuperscript{92}

Estragon  Oh I say!
Vladimir  A running sore!
Estragon  It's the rope.
Vladimir  It's the rubbing.

\textsuperscript{92} Besbes, p. 140.
Estragon  It's inevitable.
Vladimi  It's the knot.
Estragon  It's the chafing.93

According to Besbes, 'the tramps' inability to [...] define the trace on [Lucky's] neck show[s] that when thought about the real world is unclear, words also become unclear'.94 Such a statement may imply that the confusion in the real world is likely to cause unclear thoughts, which, in turn, contribute to the production of inadequate signifiers. This would suggest that, in a world where life has lost its meaningful bearings, individuals struggle in the midst of uncertainty and language becomes unable to correlate to any concrete referent.

Furthermore, Lucky's speech in Act I in Waiting for Godot may be considered as one of Beckett's direct 'assault against words'.95 At face value, Lucky's speech may easily be condemned as incomprehensible, chaotic nonsense. Lucky's speech is fragmented, as seemingly unrelated discourses are put together in his speech without any central signified binding them together. Additionally, near the end of Lucky's speech, the syntax deteriorates into 'repeated little phrases and isolated lyrical words'.96

94 Besbes, p. 140.
95 Boulter, p. 20.
Lucky [...] I resume but not so fast I resume the skull fading fading fading and concurrently simultaneously what is more for reasons unknown in spite of the tennis on on the beard the flames the tears the stones so blue so calm alas alas [...] 97

Although at face value Lucky's speech may be perceived as an unintelligible tirade, one is able to approach Lucky's speech from a different angle if one reads it in relation to the context of Beckett's plays, which features 'cosmic run-down, the loss of human sense of the divine, and the breakdown of language itself'. 98 The world which Beckett's characters inhabit has lost its groundings, where 'rational theology and the consolations of philosophy [...] have been ground down and emptied.', 99

Moreover, not only may Lucky's speech be considered as a consequence of a world in which meaningful and concrete values have been lost, but also as a reflection of the very state of this barren world, where the metaphysical stability wanes considerably. According to Anselm Atkins, in Lucky's speech, the existence of God, the originary absolute of mankind, is 'hypothetical, a mere postulate', as the term 'Given' in Lucky's speech seems to suggest that God's existence is conditional. 100 Such an implication suggests a disruption in the stasis of Western metaphysics through the annihilation of the presence of a transcendental signified. Moreover, according to Jonathan Culler, Derrida maintains that Western philosophy 'has been a “metaphysics of presence” ' which has attempted to conclude 'what is fundamental and has been treated as a centering, grounding force of principle.', 101

This philosophical attempt to establish a centre is referred to as 'logocentrism' by Derrida. In Of Grammatology, Derrida postulates that in the Old Testament, the

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98 Kennedy, p. 40.
99 Kennedy, p. 42.
Greek term for 'word', *logos*, denotes the ability to originate, and thus bring into presence. In effect, logocentrism favours the notion of phonocentrism, whereby the spoken word is perceived as underwriting the presence of signs. However, through his notion of *différance*, Derrida argues that language is not able to capture the full presence of a sign. In order to support his argument, Derrida claims that speech is unable to distinguish the 'a' from the 'e' sound in both *différance* and *différence*. Furthermore, the verb *différer* in French can mean both to differ and to defer. According to Derrida, differing and deferring are characteristic of the system of signifiers. A signifier is only able to emerge out of the difference between various signifiers. Additionally, Derrida suggests that a signifier 'enforce[s] an endless postponement of 'presence’’, since it can never actually capture its referent.\(^{102}\) Instead, Derrida maintains that the presence of a signifier is perpetually deferred. In its fragmentation and disorder, Lucky's speech, in its questioning of the existence or presence transcendental signified, God, may be seen as parodying the Western phonocentric philosophy which Derrida criticises. Accordingly, Jeffrey Nealon claims Lucky's speech 'is directed against all the grand Narratives of Western metaphysics, which ground themselves in discourse claiming to be: referential and self-validating (“quaquaquaqua”); ahistorical (“outside time”); metaphysical or mystical (“for reasons unknown”); teleological and revelatory (“time will tell”): and bulwarks against radical skeptism (“calm which even through intermittent is better than nothing”).\(^ {103}\)

Ultimately, Nealon believes that Lucky's speech is in fact a 'liberation set against the metaphysical tyranny of limitations on thought imposed by limitations on language.'\(^ {104}\) Furthermore, Kennedy suggests that Lucky 'has to be forcibly silenced' by the other characters in the play. One might argue that the other characters call a halt to Lucky's speech out of the fear of a disruption of the narrative upon which they base their existence.

\(^{102}\) Selden, Brooker and Widdowson, p. 165.


\(^{104}\) Ibid.
2.2 Silence as a Means 'to get at things (or the Nothingness) behind it'

One might argue that Lucky's speech is a way for Beckett to 'escape the burden of language, as everything appears subject to decay, and we witness the tragedy and death of language itself.' However, as James Eliopulos notes, Martin Esslin claims that this is not to say that Beckett's 'rejection of language as the main vehicle of the dramatic is [...] a total rejection of all meaning'. Rather, Beckett does not rely heavily on language in order to 'endeavour to penetrate to deeper layers of reality'. Beckett takes up such a task, as language seems too simplistic a system to 'express the multiple, complex and multi-dimensional aspects of reality.' As a consequence, in his three plays, Beckett provides silence with a voice in an attempt to express 'the reality, or Nothingness, of existence'. At the same time, according to Eliopulos, in rejecting language, Beckett is also implying that in a world fundamentally based on nothingness, 'where there is no certainty, there can be no definite meaning'. As a result, one may note that two main points of argumentation emerge from Beckett's attempt to capture and communicate the Nothingness of reality. Primarily, in doing so, Beckett engages in a paradox, as in an attempt to communicate the Nothingness, then Beckett desires to communicate that which cannot be communicated. Secondly, Eliopulos's claim that there can be no definite meaning in a world governed by uncertainty may be linked with the Other's encounter with Beckett's three plays, which may be viewed as amenable to

106 Eliopulos, p. 56.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
110 Eliopulos, p. 57.
Derrida's notions of undecidability andunreadability of a text which I will elaborate on further in this chapter, in relation to Beckett.

In *Happy Days*, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, the dissolution of language is replaced by long instances of silence and pauses. In *Happy Days*, silence seems to be Winnie's greatest fear. No matter how hard she attempts to cover it with language, silence keeps coming back at her. Willie contributes to this silence which Winnie fears, and as a result, Winnie resorts to monologue. One might argue that the instances of silence in *Happy Days* are generally short. Nonetheless, these silences come across as significant, particularly as a means of underlining Winnie's struggle in a meaningless world. Moreover, in *Endgame*, the silent pauses are considerably frequent. Almost after every line uttered by the characters, silence follows:

Hamm  Dig my nails into the cracks and drag myself forward with my fingers. 
*Pause.*
It will be the end and there I'll be, wondering what can have brought it on and wondering what can have...*(he hesitates)*...why it was so long coming. *(Pause.)* There I'll be, in the old shelter, alone against the silence and...*(he hesitates)*...the stillness. If I can hold my peace, and sit quiet, it will be all over with sound, and motion, all over and done with. *(Pause.)* I'll have called my father and I'll have called my...*(he hesitates)*...my son. And even twice, or three times, in case they shouldn't have heard me, the first time, or the second. *(Pause.)*
The frequent pauses in *Endgame* may imply the very void which the characters experience in a postmodern world. Like in *Happy Days*, the silence might also highlight the predicament the characters have to face in a life without meaning. However, rather than described, the characters' predicament is felt by the readers or audience, as it is beyond expression. Furthermore, in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon, like Winnie in *Happy Days*, converse in order to veil the sense of silence which would otherwise ail them. In Act II, the silence in *Waiting for Godot* arises, paradoxically, through the 'dead voices'.¹¹¹ There is undecidability residing in the phrase 'dead voices'. One is not able to easily discern whether Beckett refers to the voices of the dead, or to

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actual dead voices, in which case would be another way of expressing the term 'silence'. What gives rise to such undecidability is the fact that although Vladimir and Estragon attempt to describe the 'dead voices', the script of the play marks silence as an intermediate between one statement and another:

Estragon  Like leaves.

Silence.

Vladimir  They all speak at once.

Estragon  Each one to itself.

Silence.

Vladimir  Rather they whisper.

Estragon  They rustle.

Vladimir  They murmur.

Estragon  They rustle.

Silence. 112

Although Vladimir and Estragon claim that the voices they hear 'murmur' and 'rustle', the script of the play suggests that all that can actually be heard is, in effect, silence. One may thus argue that, due to the undecidability revolving around the voices in the play, the voices are both dead, and at the same time, belong to the dead. In this case, the voices become absent and present simultaneously. Consequently, a binary opposition emerges from the absence and presence of the 'dead voices'. Thus, the phrase 'dead voices' is an undecidable, as it cannot be classified under either polarity.

112 Ibid.
This notion of undecidability emerges mainly from Beckett's reductionism to the extent of silence. The silence in Beckett's three plays invites the reader or audience, as the Other, to respond to that silence in a unique and individual way. There is undecidability at play because the Other is provided with the responsibility of responding to the silence. Since readers or the individuals in an audience may respond to the silence differently, the very core of the meaning of Beckett's silence remains undecidable. Thus, the meaning of the silence oscillates between the various encounters which the readers or audience has with that silence. It is through these non-linguistic techniques of silence that Beckett achieves the full richness of experience of Nothingness. Accordingly, Kathryn White argues that Beckett 'illustrates throughout his drama that language is not essential in defining meaning'. However, this is not to say that Beckett rejects language completely. Rather, Beckett uses 'language to compliment his use of non-linguist techniques and not as a primary mode of expression.' Furthermore, White maintains that a writer, such as Beckett, who attempts to communicate meaning without stating it 'has undoubtedly grasped the power of the 'non-word' '. Having proposed such an argument, White claims that Beckett 'sets up the implied meaning and permits the audience to draw its own conclusions'. By this technique, 'drama becomes open to various interpretations'. One may thus argue that the multiple pauses in Endgame invite the reader or audience to engage with, and actively respond to, the implied meaning of the play. Since Beckett does not choose to establish a definite meaning in his three plays, it may be noted that there is an element of Derrida's concept of unreadability in Beckett's plays. The notion of unreadability does not refer to the impossibility of responding to a text. On the contrary, unreadability upholds the

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113 White, p. 110.
114 White, p. 110.
115 Ibid., p. 111.
116 Ibid.
117 White, p. 111.
belief that 'the demand [of] reading cannot stop, that reading can begin again' in the future.\textsuperscript{118} Thus, unreadability and readability are simultaneous. However, one is not to mistake Derrida's notion of unreadability with the belief that all interpretations are valid. Rather, unreadability depends on the undecidability which emerges from an element of 'free-play' in a text, which, in Beckett's case, is silence.\textsuperscript{119} In this case, 'free-play' refers to the instability which creates the inability to determine an absolute meaning of a text. In \textit{Waiting for Godot}, the 'dead voices' may be perceived as 'free-play', as one cannot ascertain whether 'dead-voices' refer to silence, or to the voices of the dead.

Moreover, White believes that Beckett's non-linguist technique of silence 'ensures that his work remains ambiguous while simultaneously engaging'.\textsuperscript{120} Additionally, White postulates that Beckett's 'linguistic decay' is what 'perhaps facilitates artistic progression'.\textsuperscript{121} Such a statement may be perceived as paradoxical, since Beckett's creative force emerges from his attempt to communicate, through silence and the bareness of language, that which he cannot communicate. The paradox thus establishes itself through Beckett's minimalism with which he 'aims to do more and more with less and less'.\textsuperscript{122} Through his reduced form of language and silence, Beckett is able to reach and convey the very foundations of the predicament in a life where meaning has been lost. What is more, Beckett is also able to get at the Nothingness which dominates the life of his characters.

In conclusion, Beckett's creative force lies in his reduced form of language and silence. Through such form of language, Beckett engages in the paradox of using language, and at the same time, debunk its notion. Through this paradox, Beckett shows how language is in fact unable to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[119] Vincent B. Leitch, \textit{American Literary Criticism Since the 1930s} (Taylor and Francis e-library), p. 244.
\item[120] White, p. 112.
\item[121] Ibid.
\item[122] Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
grasp the very reality which surrounds the characters in his three plays. As a result, Beckett then resorts to the non-linguistic technique of silence. Through silence, Beckett is able to move closer to the Nothingness of the postmodern world. In doing so, Beckett engages in what might be referred to as a 'double paradox', as he attempts to communicate that which cannot be communicated (the Nothingness), through the incommunicatable (silence). At the same time, Beckett's silence invites the Other to countersign the plays. This implies that the reader and the audience as the Other are able to respond to the plays individually. Through this counter-signatory element, Beckett's plays become open to future repeatability. Being open to future repeatability refers to the possibility of being placed into various contexts, out of which various responses and meanings are able to emerge. The fact that Beckett's plays invite the Other to actively respond to them and repeat them in different contexts renders the plays *iterable*. Thus, through the devaluation of language and the undecidability of silence, Beckett invites the Other to respond to his plays individually, making his plays amenable to iterability due to the possibility of their own repetition, which emerges from the countersignature of the Other.
3. Nothingness as Beauty

In the second chapter we analysed Samuel Beckett's protest against the efficiency of language to convey meaning in his three plays. We also saw how Beckett resorts to silence in a rejection of language as a means of capturing the true Nothingness of existence. In this chapter, we will be narrowing down our subject of analysis to the Nothingness itself, rather than on how Beckett manages to capture and present it to the audience or reader, as that was done in the second chapter. By focusing on the actual Nothingness in Beckett's three plays, we will see how it is reflected in the state of the characters in the three plays. In doing so, one is then able to perceive the very essence of what it means to exist as a human being.

However this does not imply that Beckett is being nihilistic by incorporating the Nothingness in the lives of his characters. Rather, we will see how Beckett's ultimate aim is to strip away from his characters all the grand narratives of the postmodern world which would otherwise
suffocate them with 'overfull' meaning which then instigates confusion and uncertainty.\textsuperscript{123} By moving away from these grand narratives, one might be able to argue that Beckett 'is after an analysis of the fundamentals, the core [...] of what maps out human experience'.\textsuperscript{124} Thus, although one might initially conceive Beckett as nihilistic for depicting, as we shall see, the dissolution of the subject in his plays, what Beckett might actually be doing is analysing how human life fares under situations of crisis in a post-war world. According to the contemporary philosopher, Simon Critchley, in his literary works, Beckett 'de-creates' the postmodern grand narratives by 'stripping away [...] the resorts of fable' which then results in 'an approach to meaninglessness as an achievement of the ordinary without the rose-tinted glasses of redemption'.\textsuperscript{125} Hence, it may be argued that in his depiction of the dissolution of the subject, Beckett is being realistic, devoid of any false narratives of redemption blind us from seeing the very experience of human life. What is more is that, although in this chapter we will witness the subjects in the three plays experiencing the struggle of establishing a sense of identity in the postwar world which tends to decentre the subject, we will also witness and reinforce the idea of the human will's capacity to persist amid the disintegration of its world.


\textsuperscript{125} Critchley p. 211.
3.1 The Reality of the Human Condition

In the introduction I argue that Beckett is rather realistic in his depiction of the characters in the plays experiencing the postmodern torment of the self in the face of Nothingness. What is meant here by the term 'realistic' is Critchley's claim that in his literary works, Beckett documents the ordinary life of his characters 'without the rose-tinted glasses of redemption'.\textsuperscript{126} To this notion, Critchley adds the idea of Beckett being true to 'the finiteness of the finite and the limitedness of the human condition.' This finiteness of the human condition is particularly evident in Beckett's portrayal of the inevitable bodily decay which some of the characters experience in the three plays. Accordingly, Kathryn White claims that the physical decay of the characters is 'Beckett’s representation of the reality of the human condition'.\textsuperscript{127} In \textit{Waiting for Godot}, even though the main protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, are not physically afflicted by any ailment, the sense of bodily decay is depicted by the entrance of Pozzo and Lucky in Act II. In Act II, Pozzo, Lucky's master, becomes blind, and Lucky becomes dumb. As a result, Pozzo's role in Act I as Lucky's powerful and oppressive master is reduced to a blind and dependent man by Act II. What might be important to note here is that in Act I, a tree on stage is bare, with no leaves. However, by Act II, the tree on stage has leaves. This change in the tree might imply that time passes between Act I and Act II. Bearing in mind the change in the tree in conjunction with the the bodily deterioration of Pozzo and Lucky, one might able to argue that Beckett is underlining the effects which time has on the human body. The effects of time on the human body is also highlighted by Winnie's immobile condition in the mound in \textit{Happy Days}. In Act I, Winnie is buried in the heap of earth only up to her waist. By

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{127} Kathryn White, \textit{Beckett and Decay} (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), p. 9.
Act II, Winnie is buried up to her neck. Winnie's deteriorating condition in the mound might serve as a reminder that the human being has to ultimately face death. Furthermore, the theme of the dissolution of the human subject becomes increasingly claustrophobic, as one moves from the external world of *Waiting for Godot* to the dark and enclosed world of *Endgame*. In *Endgame*, Hamm is blind, and, similar to Winnie in *Happy Days*, he is confined to his chair due to paralysis. Additionally, the idea of the human being eventually coming face to face with death also resonates throughout *Endgame*, as the opening line suggests:

*Clov* Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished [...]\(^{128}\)

What the 'it' might refer to here is the harsh life which the characters find themselves enduring after the Second World War. Moreover, the other characters in *Endgame* are also plagued by other sorts of afflictions. Clov is unable to sit down, and Nagg and Nell, Hamm's parents, are restricted to a life in dustbins. According to Jonathan Boulter, Beckett seems to imply through his works that 'the body is always a liability, something that will inevitably fail'.\(^{129}\) Thus, Beckett does not cover up the reality of the human condition, and seems to suggest that '[t]here is no explanation for our condition and indeed no redemption from it'.\(^{130}\)

This depiction of the human individual as subject to corporeal deterioration might also be connected to the difficulty of establishing a sense of identity in a world which has lost its foundations. Boulter claims that what is reflected in Beckett's literary works is the idea that the subject suffers disintegration in establishing an identity 'due to the control which historical, ideological and political discourses have on our lives, 'insofar as the idea of a singular self is an

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\(^{130}\) White, p. 13.
Furthermore, Boulter maintains that in his essay, 'Proust', Beckett recognises the dissolution of the subject in the postmodern world, as Beckett himself claims that the 'individual is a succession of individuals', rather than a unified One. Accordingly, as Boulter notes, Beckett goes on to argue in the essay that '[t]he subject has died – and perhaps many times – along the way.' In this sense, it may be argued that Beckett's treatment of the subject is that of a disintegrated self.

However, as is maintained by Boulter and White, Beckett is not completely devoid of any appeal to the individual's capabilities, particularly the ability to endure the meaninglessness and uncertainty which govern the postmodern society. As we have seen in Chapter I, in Waiting for Godot, Vladimir and Estragon find their own means and ways of passing time in order to wait for the arrival for Godot, even though no assurance of his actual arrival is provided. Similarly, in Happy Days, Winnie occupies her time with trivial matters. However, it allows her to go on. Moreover, as is noted by White, in Endgame, 'despite the obvious physical handicaps, the determination to continue is very much apparent, and Hamm immediately acknowledges this point as he states [...]'. Accordingly, White highlights the fact that J. Knowlson claims that ‘it is often forgotten that Beckett’s work is as much about persisting and continuing as it is about ending’. Furthermore, White argues that it is not exactly clear as to why the characters in Beckett continue persevering in a meaninglessness world. White also postulates that the characters' manner of perseverance in a meaninglessness world is absurd since 'they are surviving in a world that is disintegrating.' However, Knowlson notes that 'suicide represented for [Beckett] an

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131 Boulter, pp. 15-16.
132 Ibid., p. 16.
133 Ibid.
134 White, p. 12.
136 White, p. 44.
137 Ibid.
unacceptable kind of surrender.\textsuperscript{138} Thus, perhaps what Beckett might actually be highlighting here is the individual's endurance in a postmodern world which is gravitating towards disintegration, particularly due to the post-war repercussions. In a sense, one can argue that Beckett does not simply view the human subject as disintegrated and inevitably subject to decay due to the physical extinction; as Beckett also seems to champion the characters' ability to endure the struggle of uncertainty, fragmentation, and Nothingness.

3.2 Nothingness as an Achievement

In the first part of this chapter we see how Beckett is ultimately concerned about the full reality of the human experience in the postmodern world. Beckett presents the human experience to his readers through a sense of meaninglessness in his denunciation of narratives of redemption. Consequently, certain Beckettian criticism upholds the view that any philosophical interpretation which is applied to Beckett's works is left trailing behind the actual essence of the works. This apparent inability of philosophical interpretations to determine any 'correct' reading of Beckett's texts might be due to the seemingly nihilistic Nothingness which resonates throughout Beckett's works. However, in the remainder of this chapter, we will analyse how Beckett's Nothingness is far from being nihilistic. Rather, we shall see the Nothingness present in Beckett's plays as meaningful in its ultimate denunciation of all beguiling and false narratives of redemption. Moreover, we will also see how Beckett's juxtaposition of his characters and Nothingness is an achievement of Beauty in its ability to capture the very fundamentals of human experience.

In an interview, the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, claimed that he is unable to\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
countersign a text by Beckett, as he feels that any reading would not be 'honest' enough due to the text's unreadability.\footnote{Jacques Derrida, \textit{Acts of Literature}, ed. by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 61.} Derrida postulates that what might be of importance in Beckett's texts is 'the remainder which remains when the thematics [of the texts] is exhausted'.\footnote{Ibid.} Accordingly, as regards to Derrida's claim of the unreadability of Beckett's texts, Critchley argues that the remainder 'is both revealed through reading and resists reading'.\footnote{Critchley, p. 170.} Similarly, the cultural critic, Theodor W. Adorno rejects the idea of reading Beckett in line with any philosophical perspectives. Rather, in his essay \textit{Trying to Understand Endgame}, what Adorno sets out to argue is the claim that Beckett refuses to ascribe any meaning to his texts. In fact, the idea of meaning is itself ridiculed in \textit{Endgame} by Clov's sardonic laugh at the possibility of meaning something:

\begin{verbatim}
Hamm  What's happening?
Clov  Something is taking its course.
(Pause.)
Hamm  Clov!
Clov  (impatiently) What is it?
HAMM  We're not beginning to... to... mean something?
Clov  Mean something! You and I, mean something!
(Brief laugh.)
Ah that's a good one!\footnote{Samuel Beckett, \textit{Endgame} (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 22.}
\end{verbatim}

Furthermore, Beckett himself 'shrugs his shoulders at the possibility of philosophy today, at theory in general.'\footnote{Critchley, p. 175.} As Critchley notes, due to this denunciation of meaning, Adorno suggests that in the case of \textit{Endgame}, 'meaning nothing becomes the only meaning'.\footnote{Ibid., p. 175.} However, one is not to
approach Beckett's refusal of meaning as nihilistic. Rather, the rejection of meaning here implies a means of getting to the bare essentials of human life, of returning 'to the condition of particular objects, to their materiality, their extraordinary ordinariness', untainted by any grand narratives.\(^\text{145}\) Moreover, Adorno claims that in reaching the very core of human experience, Beckett depicts the dissolution of the individual, and 'the dissociation of the unity of consciousness into disparate elements, into non-identity'.\(^\text{146}\) Despite this portrayal of the dissolution of the individual, one needs to bear in mind the subject's ability to endure a fragmented and meaningless world which is portrayed in Beckett's works. Moreover, Adorno maintains that Beckett's meaninglessness is only due to 'a meaning which cannot be rendered directly in tangible form, and a means to express the absence of meaning.'\(^\text{147}\) What Adorno might be insinuating here is that Beckett, through his works, affirms the meaninglessness and Nothingness behind the all-too-meaningful narratives of redemption. In so doing, Beckett captures the fundamentals of life devoid of any grand narratives. Critchley postulates that if one traces down Adorno's logic, one comes to conclude that it is now a matter of 'establishing the meaning of meaninglessness, making a meaning out of the refusal of meaning that the work performs without that refusal of meaning becoming a meaning.'\(^\text{148}\) On the contrary to certain criticism which recognises Beckett's oeuvres as plainly nihilist, reaching the conclusion of needing to determine a meaning of meaninglessness precisely suggests that there is no complete rejection of meaning. Rather, what Critchley suggests is that Beckett's 'meaninglessness is a task, an achievement, the achievement of the ordinary or the everyday', in its pure form.\(^\text{149}\) In the postmodern world, '[w]hat passes for the ordinary is cluttered with illusory narratives of redemption that conceal the very extraordinariness of the ordinary and the nature of its decay.'\(^\text{150}\) Such a claim

\(^{145}\) Critchley, p. 149.
\(^{146}\) Ibid., p. 175.
\(^{147}\) Ibid., p. 177.
\(^{148}\) Ibid.
\(^{150}\) Ibid., p. 211.
brings me back to argue that Beckett presents the ordinary and bare human experience in an attempt to expose the core of human life through the use of 'meaninglessness as an achievement of the ordinary without the rose-tinted glasses of redemption'.

In conclusion, in Beckett's texts, one is provided with the actuality of what it really means to be human. Hence, the physical deterioration of the characters presents nothing more than what a human is fundamentally, or what the human being will become. However, as Critchley himself notes, Beckett juxtaposes the human will and endurance to go on in a fragmented world with the dissolution of the human subject, and although '[t]his is very little...almost nothing [...] perhaps [it is] just human'. In this sense, Beckett achieves Beauty through the portrayal and examination of the bare human life which lies hidden behind the grand narratives which delude the individual into believing in some form of redemption. What is more is that, perhaps the Beauty here is precisely the portrayal of the ordinary human life which is beyond philosophical interpretation, and which is so often perceived as purely nihilistic Nothingness. However, rather than being nihilistic, what this meaningless Nothingness might refer to is the Beauty of the presentation of human life, devoid of any narratives of redemption, and in this light, meaninglessness becomes an achievement in Beckett's oeuvres.

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151 Critchley, p. 211.
152 Ibid., p. 212.
Conclusion

In this dissertation, we have seen a reflection of one of the aspects of post-industrial society in the West: the collapse of meaning through a disbelief towards grand narratives. As is pointed out in the introduction, grand narratives are no longer able to encapsulate the actual experience of certain events because in attempting to redeem them, one leaves out the atrocities of these events, such as the death camps in Auschwitz. As a result, the human individual needs to find other means and ways of surviving a world which is stripped of its grand narratives which normally serve as something which one could live by. Perhaps what one might resort to, once devoid of any grand narrative, is the affirmation of life as it is. Moreover, I believe that what we find in Beckett’s three oeuvres is quite on a par with what we find in Nietzsche’s claim that grand narratives, such as that of Religion, are innately nihilistic.

In claiming that grand narratives are essentially nihilistic themselves, what one gets in Beckett is a theatre of reductionism, where the experience of human existence is the prime focus. In Beckett, one witnesses human life devoid of the nihilistic grand narratives of redemption which are all too meaningful, yet ultimately founded on an nihilistic illusion of redemption. Having removed these all too meaningful grand narratives, what one is left with in Beckett is a sense of meaninglessness. As was discussed in Chapter I, the characters in the three plays struggle to establish themselves in a world where meaninglessness casts a shadow over their lives. Thus, one gets to imagine what it is like to endure the post-war dissolution of meaning and certainty. Moreover, in Chapter II, meaning is not even able to be captured by language, and as a result, what one encounters in Beckett is a sense of the Nothingness which emerges once all the nihilistic grand narratives of redemption are stripped away from human life. In Chapter III, meaninglessness is
associated with the Nothingness present in Beckett's plays, and perhaps it would be worthwhile explaining why they are linked in this chapter.

As is argued by Simon Critchley, 'the world is overfull with meaning and we suffocate under the combined weight of the various narratives of redemption—whether they are religious, socio-economic, political, aesthetic or philosophical.' However, what one experiences with Beckett is completely different from the world which Critchley mentions. In Beckett, the suffocating meanings of the narratives of redemption are omitted from human experience, and what one gets is a lack of meaning and a fascination with the ordinary: the actuality of what it means to be a human individual in a world which is not fancily coloured by the beguiling narratives of redemption. What one is left with then in Beckett is a sense of Nothingness in the sense that human experience is analysed in isolation, and not in relation to that innately nihilistic 'something' which is deceivingly provided by narratives of redemption as that which overcomes nihilism, since, as is explained by Nietzsche and presented by Beckett, these narratives of redemption are nihilistic themselves. Beckett is thus interested in analysing the human life devoid of the nihilism which lies behind the narratives of redemption.

Due to this collapse of the meaning in Beckett's three plays, we see the characters enduring their lives in meaninglessness which is founded upon the Nothingness which one is left with once all narratives of redemption are ejected from all areas of life. The Nothingness is felt by the audience or readers of Beckett, as it is manifested in the ennui and sense of boredom which is experienced by Vladimir and Estragon in Waiting for Godot, or by Winnie's claim in Happy Days that words will one day fail to capture meaning, or by Clov's 'zero' 'point of meaning', that

Nothingness which 'threatens our interpretive security'. The Nothingness in Beckett's three plays is also felt by the audience and readers in the very impossibility of establishing an absolute meaning of Beckett's plays. Furthermore, if one is to return to the Introduction's epigraph of Beckett's claim that 'there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire, together with the obligation to express', one might conclude that Beckett feels a great sense of obligation to express this 'nothing' which is spoken about. In doing so, the 'nothing' is paradoxically turned into something, 'something to be explored as a theme, as a reality'. What Beckett thus presents his audience with is the Beauty of the ordinary life which is very often hidden behind grand narratives which conceal it in exchange for that which is essentially nihilistic. What is more, Beckett's Beauty also lies in his urge to grasp the reality which lies behind individuals, such as how the human corpse is subject to eventual decay. Hence, with Beckett, one is provided with a sense of how things are through an analysis of the ordinary, and his achievement in grasping and depicting the actual Nothingness which lies behind human experience. In conclusion, with Beckett, Nothingness becomes an achievement once it is juxtaposed with the beguiling and false narratives of redemption. Thus, it may be argued that Beckett's Beauty lies in his achievement of Nothingness, which he accomplishes through his analysis of actual, ordinary human experience. In doing so, Beckett retains his claim that '[n]othing is more real than nothing', as opposed to what the deceitful and misleading narratives of redemption have to offer.

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155 Boulter, p. 11.

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