

## Study of Deviation in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*

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### Abstract

This study was conducted to examine the relationship between deviations and thematic concerns in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*. Statistics about some specific phrases were collected and analyzed. Examples were analyzed in detail to demonstrate the deviations and their significance to the themes of this play. Both quantitative deviations and qualitative deviations, including semantic, syntactic and graphological deviations were found. It is suggested that those deviations are of great artistic significance in developing themes and characters. The author stylistically deviates from linguistic norms to achieve aesthetic and thematic wholeness.

**Key words:** Quantitative deviation; Qualitative deviation; *Happy Days*; Thematic concerns

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

*Happy Days* is a play of two acts written by Samuel Beckett. The two characters, Willie and Winnie, are a couple who are in a very absurd situation. The leading character of *Happy Days*, Winnie, a woman in her 50s, is buried waist-deep in a mound of scorched earth. She is being progressively swallowed and sucked down by the mound of earth. It is known that she has not always been buried in this way, but how she came to be trapped so has never been explained. She is painfully aware of

her physical situation, but not of its absurdity. It is her unawareness that makes her absurd. After many rituals, Winnie sees Willie crawling toward her in a fashionable outfit. She smiles at Willie, who looks at her, and she stops smiling. They continue looking at each other through a long pause. And the play ends with this long pause.

Samuel Beckett is considered to be one of the key writers in "Theatre of the Absurd", which referring to 20th century works that depict the absurdity of modern human creation, often with implicit reference to humanity's loss or lack of religious, philosophical or cultural roots. In *Happy Days*, Beckett pursues his relentless search for the meaning of existence, the process of dying, and each to the universe, to time past and time present. Broadly speaking, the play deals with the subject of despair and the will to survive in spite of that despair, in the face of an uncomprehending and indeed incomprehensible world.

Linguistic deviation is a language phenomenon against normal way of use or conventional language practice, which can be derived from the deviations in sound, words, grammar and etc. Leech argues that anyone who wishes to investigate the significance and value of a work of art must concentrate on the element of interest and surprise, rather than on the automatic pattern. Such deviations from linguistic or other socially accepted norms have been given the special name of foregrounding. The foregrounded figure is the linguistic deviation, and the background is the language. Good writers can create new language which is different from the conventional use and daily life words, which gives the readers surprise and unexpected effect.

This essay will include both quantitative and qualitative deviation. And semantic, syntactic and graphological deviation will be discussed. The main objective of this study is to analyze the artistic significance of these linguistic deviations in developing themes and characters. And the author argues that, for the author to achieve aesthetic and thematic wholeness, he stylistically deviates from linguistic norms.

## 2. QUANTITATIVE DEVIATION

Quantitative deviation refers to deviation from some expected frequency. In Act 2 of this play, pauses break up nearly every line of Winnie's, and increase as the act wears on. In the script of a play, the dramatist's stage directions to the actors should be concerned with the movements, manner of speech, and emotions of actors on stage. While most of the stage directions in Act 2 are about pauses and descriptions of Winnie's smile. The following table shows the statistics of those abnormally-frequent used stage directions:

**Table 1**  
Statistics of abnormally-frequent used stage directions

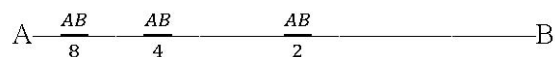
Pause	Long pause	Smile	Smile broader	Smile off
273	19	10	9	8

There are about 2700 words in Act 2, which consists of one excruciating long monologue from Winnie and one conversation between Winnie and Willie. The results of the calculation would be as following: Winnie pauses 292 times in Act 2. In average, she does one pause in every 9 words, in which 19 times are long pauses. Altogether there are 27 stage directions about her smile. So in average, Winnie finishes one cycle of the smile (smile, smile broader, and smile off) in every 100 words. This cycle of smile also indicates Winnie's dynamic emotional change from being happy, joyful to sad. In a word, the unexpected frequency of pause and smile is against convention.

Those quantitative deviations are of great significance to help the dramatist demonstrate his thematic concerns. On one hand, the numerous stage directions emphasize the stasis in Winnie's life with her literal paralysis below the waist, and the stage directions mark the ways she keeps herself busy with rituals. Those long pauses symbolize stasis. Winnie's rituals emphasize repetition, and then the final long pause suggests a return to an eternal silence. On the other hand, the frequent use of pause and long pause is actually an imitation of the process of death. In Beckett's paradoxical view of death, death is a process that one is always in but never approaches. Some critics read these pauses and delays as Beckett's appropriation of a famous paradox of the Greek philosopher Zeno. Zeno stated that if an arrow in flight kept making up half the distance to its destination, it would never reach its endpoint; thus it paradoxically is seemingly not moving while in motion. If we view this play through this lens, then Winnie and Willie are creeping toward death ever more slowly, and the increasing pauses reflect this asymptotic approach. The following table can help to understand the similarity of Zeno's paradox and Beckett's view of death. Suppose one at point A wants to catch a stationary bus at point B. Before he can get there, he must get halfway there. Before he can get halfway there, he must get a quarter of the way there. Before traveling a fourth, he must travel one-eighth; before an eighth, one-sixteenth; and so on. So this dichotomy could go on and on and on, and the final result

is that the dividing point is infinitely close to A, which means that this person is so infinitely close to the starting point that he barely moves at all.

**Table 2**  
Zeno's paradox



The resulting sequence can be represented as:  $\{ \dots, \frac{1}{2}, \frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{8}, 1 \}$ . Now according to Beckett's view, we can compare the distance to the stationary bus to a life journey. Everyone is in this journey. And those infinite fractional numbers can be understood as those frequent pauses. Therefore, the whole life journey also becomes infinite. One is always in the process of death but he can never approach. Death as an event is presented as desired but ultimately impossible, whereas dying as a process is shown to be our only sure reality. As the play nears the end, its silences and pauses increase, lending the impression that Winnie's and Willie's lives are dragging on ever more slowly toward a death they will never reach.

Winnie smiles, smiles broader and smiles off frequently even in her monologue. Here the unusual frequency is aimed to show the absurdity of the character, more specifically, the absurdity of modern human creation, often with implicit reference to humanity's loss or lack of religious, philosophical or cultural roots. Winnie is one of the characters in the theatre of the absurd present bizarre characters in bizarre situations, who also act in a bizarre way.

As suggested above, the quantitative deviations of the stage directions are of great artistic significance of in developing themes and characters.

## 3. QUALITATIVE DEVIATION

Qualitative deviation refers to the deviation from language codes, or language rules and conventions. More specifically, deviation from phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, graphological norm in terms of linguistic levels. Deviations from those levels and their relations to the thematic concerns in *Happy Days* are analyzed in the following.

### 3.1 Semantic Deviation

Semantic oddity is one kind of semantic deviations. Semantic oddity means semantic bizarreness of expression. Here is an example. In Act 1, after much difficulty, Winnie finally reads: "Fully guaranteed genuine pure hog's setae". And in Act 2, she continues: "Hog's setae. What is hog exactly? What exactly is a hog, Willie, do you know, I can't remember. What is a hog, Willie, please!" "Setae" is the plural form of "seta", or known as bristle. "Setae" refers to a number of different bristle or hair-like structures on living organisms and it is derived from the Latin word. Compared with "bristle", "Seta" is old-fashioned and not commonly used any more. "Hog"

means castrating the male pig, while despite the fact that “hog” is a more common word than “setae”, Winnie does not know the meaning of “hog”. It is odd that Winnie knows what “setae” are, but does not know what a hog means. It seems she is more comfortable with older forms of language. She prefers the word “setae” because of its old style, as Winnie says in the following:

That is what I find wonderful, that not a day goes, to speak in the old style, without some addition to one’s knowledge however trifling, the addition I mean, provided one takes the pain.

She prefers the word “setae” to “hog” because she cherishes the memory of old days. Winnie often remarks that certain words are “empty” to her, and thinks about the day when words must “fail”. Language is empty to her because it signifies nothing in her current world, only things from a past life Winnie cannot access; just as a hog is foreign to her and thus an empty word. So to some extent, it also shows the failure and emptiness of language. The following dialogue between Winnie and Willie is another example:

Winnie: I shall simply brush and comb them later on, purely and simply, I have the whole. Them? Or it? Brush and comb it? What would you say, Willie, speaking of your hair, them or it?  
Willie: It.

This dialogue confirms the essential loneliness of the play. When Willie says that the hair is an “it” rather than “them”, it implies the dominance of solitude over union, that the hairs are inevitably singular. The only reason Winnie temporarily believes hair is “them” is because she spoke of both her hair and her teeth together in the same sentence (“brush and comb them”), so the plurality of hair was a linguistic illusion.

### 3.2 Syntactic Deviation

Winnie says the same words twice in this play: “Oh this is a happy day! This will have been another happy day!”. Usually we would say “Oh this is a happy day! This will be another happy day!” But here Beckett employs the future perfect tense rather than simple future tense. The future perfect means that something will happen in the past of some future point. In a sense, this grammatical certainty, since it will have happened in the past, never really arrives, since it will have happened in the future, in a temporal no-man’s-land. No matter how one looks at it, the statement indicates that Winnie is suspended between past and present. She is fatigued by the stasis around her, by the act of holding up a parasol without moving herself, and indeed change does come when the parasol catches fire. But, as Winnie points out, this is also an illusion; the parasol will be returned to normal tomorrow, such that even major change can be erased in the ritualistic, repetitive world she inhabits, unless something exists in the present.

The following is a paragraph describing Winnie’s look: “About fifty, well preserved, blond for preference, plump, arms and shoulders bare, low bodice, big bosom, pearl.

Necklet”. Here elliptical sentences are used so that we can get a picture of Winnie immediately. Beckett even makes one word, “necklet” a single sentence. The description is also characterized by an economy with words, sentence pattern and a focus on surface description, which is one of the characteristics of minimalism. The description is just stripped down to its most fundamental features. This kind of description seeks to remove any sign of personal expressivity. The aim is to allow the readers or the audience to experience it more intensely without any distractions.

This play is full of descriptions for Winnie’s daily rituals. The following paragraph consists of elliptical and run-on sentences, which describes a serial of Winnie’s rituals:

Look for spectacles, take up spectacles, starts polishing spectacles, breathing on lenses, polishes, polishes, polishes, stops polishing, raises face to sky, pause, head back level, resumes polishing, stops polishing, cranes back to her right and down. Stops polishing, lays down spectacles. Looks for toothbrush, takes up toothbrush, examines handle of brush, examines handle, reads, look closer, takes handkerchief from bodice, shakes out handkerchief, starts wiping handle of brush, stops wiping, fixed lost gaze, brokenly, head down, resumes wiping, stops wiping, head up, calmed, wipes eyes, folds handkerchief, puts it back in bodice, examine handle of brush, reads.

This paragraph is neither coherent nor cohesive. It’s not the stream of consciousness; it’s just a lifelike description of Winnie’s rituals by using the plainest sentences. Run-on and elliptical sentences are more appropriate to show every day’s ritualistic quality than long and complete ones. Rituals, such as Winnie’s brushing her teeth and cleaning her lenses, dominate the play’s constrained but frequent actions. She performs the routines to fill up the empty hours of the long days, but the completion of each ritual also depletes her, causing her sadness. She notes that holding up her parasol is fatiguing, but if she were in motion it wouldn’t be. Moreover, nothing is really changed at all after the rituals are performed, and the entire day takes on the appearance of one large ritual. Winnie remarks that her burnt parasol will return to new the next day, and she acknowledges that the climate around her is always the same and will stay that way. If there are changes, they are so small as to be virtually static. The implication is that the characters live in an unchanging, static state. Each day contains the actions and reactions of the day before, until each event takes on an almost ritualistic quality.

### 3.3 Graphological Deviation

#### 3.3.1 Dash

In the following example, Winnie fails to finish the whole sentence. A dash is used instead:

Winnie: My hair! Did I brush and comb my hair? I may have done. Normally I do. There is so little one can do. One does it all. All one can. This is only human. Human nature, Human weakness, Natural weakness... I shall simply brush and comb them later on... I have the whole —

To compensate for the loneliness, Winnie uses rituals to fill the day, but even these fail. She says there is “so little one can do” and “I have the whole——”. Her pause and interruption is indicative of the ways Beckett says more through silence than words could. Winnie has the whole day, month, year, lifetime, eternity—it does not matter, life is an endless repetition of rituals for Winnie that cannot being to fill the empty day.

Her inability to say the final word in the sentence proves her fear of her unknowable destination. So she lives in the ritualistic present, a static world where she cannot put her hat on or take it off, with little connection to the past or future. Her memory is failing and her anticipation of the future is restricted to the next ritual.

### 3.3.2 Ellipsis

Ellipsis, also known as suspension point, is a mark or series of marks that usually indicate an intentional omission of a word in the original text. An ellipsis can also be used to indicate a pause in speech, an unfinished thought. Beckett employs ellipsis a lot in this play, and the following are two typical examples:

Winnie: Loss of spirits...lack of keenness...want of appetite... infants...children...adults...

Winnie: Ah well, natural laws, natural laws, I suppose it's like everything else; it all depends on the creature you happen to be. All I can say is for my part is that for me they are not what were when I was young and... foolish and...beautiful...possibly... lovely...in a way...to look at.

In Beckett's view, human being is a creature paying for a sin he did not commit or was unaware of committing. God, the villain, either does not show up for his promised appointment, or what is worse, he does not exist, and man is left alone in a meaningless universe, attempting to find the reason for it all. Winnie laughs at the ant, thinking it is one of God's “little jokes”, She also cannot

avoid some moments of lucidity in which she asks certain embarrassing and unanswerable questions: What is human being? Who am I? Those ellipsis dots demonstrate Winnie's uncertainty. So the significance of the ellipsis dots here is: Winnie tries to search for the self and explore the mystery of human-identification, but all she gets are just some fragments.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the quantitative and qualitative deviations in *Happy Days* are artistically motivated. Those deviations are of great significance to demonstrate Beckett's recondite thematic concerns. Those deviations can help readers and audience understand better Beckett's purpose of writing *Happy Days*: to show us the absurdity of modern human being, the failure of language, the mystery of human-identification, and the paradoxical process of dying. It is true that they do not meet the standards of norms or conventions in linguistic level, but they have already become the essential part of the play.

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