

Winnie:

a Lonely Fighter against Nothingness

WINNIE:

UNE LUTTEUSE SOLITAIRE CONTRE LE NEANT

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Abstract: In his play *Happy Days*, Samuel Beckett portrays against a wilderness of modern world an optimistic woman—Winnie, who has strong nerves and fights against overwhelming nothingness in various forms on her own. Arguing that she is a lonely fighter against nothingness, this essay is dedicated to Winnie and focuses itself on answering following questions: Since the world in *Happy Days* is surrounded and incessantly eroded by nothingness, what forms are they in and how do they work.; as an extremely deprived person, why could Winnie be called nothingness-fighter and in what ways does she succeed in struggling along.

Key words: Winnie, nothingness, fighter, fighting means, identity

Résumé: Dans le théâtre *Oh les beaux jours*, Samuel Beckett a campé une femme dynamique et optimiste luttant contre le monde moderne désert— Winnie. Douée d'un courage exceptionnel, elle lutte seul contre le néant irrésistible sous de diverses formes. L'essai présent analyse le personnage de Winnie et répond aux questions suivantes. Puisque le monde dans la pièce est entouré et dévoré par le néant, le néant apparaît sous quelle forme ? quel est son rôle ? Puisque privée de tout, pourquoi elle peut encore être considérée comme « lutteuse contre le néant » ? comment survit-elle difficilement dans l'interstice d'avec le néant ?

Mots-Clés: Winnie, néant, lutteuse, moyen de lutte, statut

1. INTRODUCTION

Samuel Beckett's avant- garde and profound plays make him one of the most accomplished and influential playwrights of the 20th century and one of the founders of the Theatre of the Absurd. Many researches have been done on *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's theatrical masterpiece while some of his other works are left far from being fully-researched, among which his *Happy Days* is. Thereby this essay is dedicated to this two-act play finished in 1961, and its heroine in particular. *Happy Days* is a play about nothingness, alienation and loneliness. In *Happy Days*, Beckett tenders to us a wilderness scorched by the sun, reminding us of T.S.Eliot's *Wasteland*, where lives Winnie, a woman in her fifties, "well preserved and blonde for preference", deprived of mobility and change, buried to her waist in act 1, only able to use her hands and crane her neck and buried to her neck in act 2, only

able to move her mouth, eyes and face. Her image of slowly sinking the earth is among Beckett's most powerful ones. Her only human interaction is with her dull, indifferent and self- absorbed husband, Willie, who crawls on the ground a few feet away, at times reading out loud from a yellowing newspaper the same two, three items again and again and most of the time turns a deaf ear to Winnie. Focusing on Winnie, this essay falls into two parts: In the first part the forms of nothingness are divided into three categories; the second part analyzes why I regard Winnie as a nothingness-fighter and her stay against the horror of it.

2. NOTHINGNESS IN VARIOUS FORMS

In a completely deprived situation, Winnie is incessantly surrounded and invaded by nothingness, which is ever-present and appears in various forms: the mound, sexual impossibility, loneliness and alienation.

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2.1 The Mound

She is half-buried in the mound, which symbolizes mechanical civilization. The mound traps her inescapably and reduces her in a death-in-life state. Here mound is a symbol for nothingness, which could constrain modern people to be physically motionless and eventually psychologically paralyzed. But on the other hand, the mound, where Winnie is rooted, has become part of her identity, an evidence for who and where she is: "Yes, the feeling more and more that if I were not held – in this way, I would simply float up into the blue. And that perhaps some day the earth will yield and let me go, the pull is so great, yes, crack all round me and let me out. Don't you ever have that feeling, Willie, of being sucked up? Don't you have to cling on sometimes, Willie?" Therefore, though standing for nothingness, the mound is as well the force for Winnie to go on; otherwise she would fly anywhere and lose her way like gossamer.

2.2 Sexual Impossibility

Nothingness appears in the form of sexual impossibility as well. According to D.H.Lawrence, human sexuality was a symbol of Life Force(张伯香 2005), therefore, the absence of it naturally would lead to sterility and nothingness. In *Happy Days*, Winnie exists without a vagina or womb throughout the first act and without breasts in the second act, thus deliberately denied any possibility of experiencing the erotic that Lawrence describes with such relish (J.Thomas 1998: 623-34). To use Lawrence's words, Winnie suffers from "the agony of her own female forlornness". According to Beckett's description, no physical contact between Winnie and Willie is possible. Willie's impotence is implied in his explanation of hog—"castrated male swine"—his longest independent utterance. Obviously, here is a world without sexuality, or Life Force, a wasteland surrounded by nothingness.

2.3 Loneliness and Alienation

Happy Days addresses the full range of separateness and otherness which undermine accord in intimate relationships. Within the scaffolding of failure in speech, the physical impediments and emotional ruptures reveal the subjects as subverted, segregated, and grotesque selves (M.Catanzaro 1995: 31-51). Consequently, desperate loneliness and alienation suffocate Winnie like nightmares. In *Happy Days*, quite obviously, most of the time Winnie plays the dual role as actor and spectator because she only has one company, Willie, who is behind her until his appearance at the end of the play, seen briefly as he reads his newspaper, puts on and off his boater, covers his head, holds up his fingers, sings his song and most of the time sleeps. Altogether he says only fifty-two words in act 1--many mere ejaculations--and only one "Win" in act 2. Faced with his wife's repeated pitiful appeal for attention, he just

cruelly turns a deaf ear. It's due to her husband's deliberate and obvious rejection even to be her listener that there exists almost no communication between them at the most basic or superficial level, let alone spiritual communication. Though the alienation between modern people has been a bit exaggerated by Beckett, who can deny that it's not the lifelike reflection of the modern world?

From some sentences like "The sunshade you gave me...that day ...that day...the lake...the reeds..." and "Reminds me of the day you came whining for my hand. I worship you, Winnie, be mine.", we can infer that at the beginning of their relationship, they may be devoted to each other, especially on the part of the husband, but later "I worship you Winnie be mine and then nothing from that day forth only titbids from Reynolds' News." Willie "never had any opinion about anything" and just remains cruelly absent, showing no mercy and care for Winnie when she screams in association of a mouse. Maybe because of loss of attraction at the first sight, maybe because of lack of spiritual communication, the couple remains two isolated beings, denying each other in their life.

3. WINNIE—FIGHTER AGAINST NOTHINGNESS

As S.E. Gontarski comments, Winnie retains optimism in the face of her post-nuclear calamity that evokes the sort of bitter irony and pathos that make the role one of the great female leads in the theatre. Despite of her deprivation, she just sustains her personal dignity and self-worth, "laughing wild amid severest woe". My interpretation that Winnie is a lonely fighter against nothingness is based on her attitude towards life and her means to struggle along.

3.1 Winnie's Attitude towards Life

As an ardent lover of life, Winnie always knows how to "laugh wild amid severest woe". She always busies herself by doing make up—brushing her teeth, filing her nails, looking at mirror, combing her hair, fixing her hat and applying lipstick. She still pays attention to her figure, being afraid of putting on weight: "The earth is very tight today, can it be I have put on flesh, I trust not." Were she a woman who was defeated by the overwhelming nothingness, how could she possess interest in her own appearance in such a depopulated wilderness?

In such a stifling wilderness, Willie, whose reason and wisdom have been eroded away by the ever-present nothingness, is reduced to an animal—he crawls on fours, relishes his excretions, rubs cream on his bare bottom and only makes some short and mechanical answers. To his contrary, Winnie, the lonely fighter against nothingness, still keeps her normal and elegant

living habit: "She turns modestly aside and back to her right to spit out behind mound." The track of human civilization still can be perceived from her, though she is in the wilderness being accompanied by an animal-like husband. Of course, sometimes civilization means constraint to some extent. "The bell. It hurts me like a knife. A gouge. One cannot ignore it. How often...I say how often I have said, Ignore it, Winnie, ignore the bell, pay no heed, just sleep and wake, sleep and wake, as you please, open and close eyes, as you please, or in the way you find most hopeful. Open and close the eyes, Winnie, open and close, always that. But no. Not now. No, no." In my opinion, here bell stands for some social regularity. Despite of the fact that it brings discomfort to Winnie's life, "hurts her like a knife", she insists on abiding by them because she considers herself to be a civilized person, rejecting to be swallowed by nothingness and reduced to be a barbarous animal. Though the worth of doing so remains controversial, her courage and personal dignity are still praiseworthy.

3.2 Means against Nothingness

As a fighter, Winnie is equipped with some arms, among which, there are Willie, some non-verbal activities and language. With their help, she succeeds in expelling the horror of nothingness.

3.2.1 Willie

As her only company-Willie should draw our first attention. Though in Beckett's description, Willie is also cast in a familiar role: stereotypic husband, hiding behind his daily paper, grunting when spoken to, responding only when prodded (L. Ben-Zvi 1986), Willie's role as her only company and husband in the play determines his significance in Winnie's self-identification. Just as Bishop Berkeley argues, "To be is to be perceived", human beings have the psychological requirement to be noticed by others. In *Happy Days*, Winnie's need for attention is quite obvious and from her remarks like "So that I may say at all times, even when you do not answer and perhaps hear nothing, something of this is being heard, I am not merely talking to myself, that is in the wilderness, a thing I could never bear to do ..." and "[. . .] just to know that in theory you can hear me even though in fact you don't is all I need, just to feel you there within earshot and conceivably on the qui vive is all I ask," we can figure out that though she is clearly aware that her husband would never play qualifiedly and willingly the role of spectator, the feeling or illusion of being perceived is all she wants. Consequently, Willie, an important force for her to go on serves the means by which she can ensure her own identity and existence.

3.2.2 Non-verbal Activities

In *Happy Days*, Winnie, half-buried and immobilized can only have command over her hands, neck and mouth in act 1 and mouth only in act 2. According to

some psychologists, by nature human beings have the tendency to get something in control. Take Winnie for example, in such an extremely deprived situation, she has the psychological requirement to control something as means to change herself from such a passive position to an anyhow active one. Since the only objects she can command are her hands and mouth, she is used to exhausting them to gain psychological comfort and fight against the paralyzing force of nothingness. Fortunately she has a black shopping bag, which can offer her controllable objects. In her bags, there are many items—comb, brush, toothpaste, toothbrush, mirror, medicine, glasses, hat, music box, gun—are not only possessions, they are means of filling time (L. Ben-Zvi 1986). In the play, Winnie just keeps her repeated rummaging in the bag, taking items out and in and primping. With those activities, she makes full advantage of one of her mobile parts-hands. By doing so, she gets triumph in overcoming nothingness, consciously refusing to be unconscious.

3.2.3 Language

Language plays an extremely important role in Winnie's life. On her part, she unquestionably equates her talking with survival. Gilbert, Inger notes that "Since the only 'other' in the world of *Happy Days* is language, Winnie anthropomorphizes it to such an extent that she expects language to be able to meet all her needs. Language becomes desire and must establish her identity and relationship with the world."

From the play, we can notice that Winnie has the habit of reciting fragments of classics, among which there are Milton's *Paradise Lost*, source for "Hail, holy light" and "Oh fleeting joys, oh, something lasting woe", Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*, source for "...beechen green" and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, sources for "Woe, woe is me . . ." and "Ensign crimson . . . Pale flag". Reciting those classics serves an important means by which Winnie sustains her civilized aspect. Those gorgeous fruits of human civilization would incessantly remind Winnie that she is an educated and noble human being rather than unconscious animal lacking in reason.

Another significant category of her language is her memory of her romance in youth. She always thinks aloud her first ball, first kiss, Willie's proposal and their wedding ceremony. Repeated in her mind and mouth, those romantic scenes are pacifiers, which could temporarily enable her to forget her "female forlornness", loneliness and deprivation.

She is as well used to employing many encouraging words to give herself positive psychological hints(though in some critics' opinion they are irony), like "Another heavenly day", "The day is now well advanced", "This will have been a happy day" and "That's what I always say, it will have been a happy day, after all, another happy day". By saying those words, she gives herself courage to go on. At times she loses courage, but not for long she insists that her days are

“happy days” and restores her normal mood.

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis holds that language can mould human beings' mind. In *Happy Days*, Winnie just uses language as arms to arm her mind. Gilbert, Inger notes that “Language can never lead Winnie anywhere and if her thoughts at times take her dangerously near the unnamable she says them out aloud so that they lose their power and simply become part of her domesticated and well-known world.” Of course, in such a deprived situation, fear and despair would attack Winnie and her defending way is to tell them out. When she fears that someday Willie would die or leave her, she says, “Whereas if you were to die-to speak in the old style-or go away and leave me. Not another word as long as I drew breath, nothing to break the silence of this place.”; when she feels quite hot and afraid of being melt by the sun, she says, “Shall I myself not melt perhaps in the end, or burn, oh, I do not mean necessarily burst into flames, no, little by little be chatted to a black cinder, all this-visible flesh.” By telling those fearful thoughts out, she could put herself at ease as if language really has such a magic power to hinder all those frightening things happen.

In *Happy Days*, we can also notice that Winnie in some situations talks to herself addressing her own name. There are many examples of this kind, like “Begin, Winnie. Begin your day, Winnie.”, “How often I have said, put on your hat now, Winnie, there is nothing else for it, take off your hat now, Winnie, like a good girl.”, “How often I have said, in evil hours, sing now, Winnie, sing your song...”, “Keep yourself nice, Winnie, that’s what I always say. Come what say, keep

yourself nice.”, “Saying to myself-Winnie-it will not be long now. Winnie-until the bell for sleep.” and “Sing, sing your song, Winnie. No? Then pray. Pray your prayer, Winnie.” Inger Gilbert comments that using the third person is another way for Winnie to remain in control of her thoughts by creating a linguistic distance between her and language. I disagree with his opinion. For my part, Winnie always does so because she wants to remind herself of who she is and her identity from time to time lest she would forget it in such a wasteland with only one company who is unwilling to call her name and talk with her. Ensuring her identity by repeating her own name, she could gather enough courage to go on.

4. CONCLUSION

Though surrounded and attacked by nothingness in various forms, Winnie is still able to “laugh wild amid severest woe.” Based on her words and deeds, we can come to the conclusion that she is a civilized and self-disciplinal person and the passage of her life is the process of self-identification. With the help of her various means, she gets triumph over nothingness and succeeds in refusing to be reduced to a barbarous animal lacking in reason and wisdom like Willie. Against the background of a desperate wilderness, such a valiant and optimistic figure is really inspiring and able to bring to the wasteland of modern world the hue of hope.

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