

TRADITION OF BIRTHDAY CEREMONIES AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE UNIFIED SUBJECT: SAMUEL BECKETT'S KRAPP'S LAST TAPE*

DOĞUM GÜNÜ KUTLAMA GELENEĞİ VE BÜTÜNCÜL ÖZNEİN DÖNÜŞÜMÜ: SAMUEL BECKETT'İN KRAPP'IN SON BANDI*

Abstract

In this study how the traditional understanding of identity is transformed to the idea of fragmentary self is going to be analyzed through Samuel Beckett's play Krapp's Last Tape. Thus, the terms tradition and transformation are used to refer to the ideas on subjectivity. The analyses of human identity have been the subject of philosophy, psychology, and sociology as well as literature. The interaction between these fields is inevitable when the subject matter is human identity. In the field of theatre the changes in the considerations on the human subject reveals itself in direct relationship with the studies in the above mentioned fields of study. In recent theatre we come across with identities that are reflected as multiple and fragmented and they are far beyond identities that are considered as pre-determined, limited and complete. The studies on meta-drama, theatricality and performativity form the basis on such a reflection of fragmented human subject in theatre. The typical Beckettian character, Krapp is considered as revealing the process of this fragmentation. The play, through taking birthday ceremony as a starting point, reveals the complex network in the construction of human subject. Therefore, the use of language and the relationship between what is said and what is done are going to be analyzed in the play.

Key Words: Samuel Beckett, tradition, transformation, subject.

Özet

Bu çalışmada geleneksel anlamda kimlik anlayışının nasıl parçalanmış öz anlayışına dönüştüğü, Samuel Beckett'in Krapp'ın Son Bandı adlı oyunu vasıtasıyla, incelenecektir. Dolayısıyla gelenek ve dönüşüm kelimeleri özne ile ilgili fikirlere referans verilerek kullanılmaktadır. İnsan kimliği konusundaki araştırmalar edebiyat alanının çalışma konusu olduğu kadar felsefe, psikoloji ve sosyoloji alanında da yer almıştır. Bu alanlar arasındaki etkileşim, söz konusu insan kimliği olduğunda, kaçınılmazdır. Tiyatro alanında özne ile ilgili düşünceler kendisini yukarıda belirtilen çalışma alanlarıyla doğrudan bir ilişki içinde gösterir. Günümüzde tiyatro alanında yansıtılan kimlikler daha önceden belirlenmiş, sınırları çizilmiş ve bütüncül olmaktan öte çoğulcu ve parçalanmış şekilde karşımıza çıkar. Metadrama, teatrallik ve edimsellik ile yapılan son çalışmalar tiyatrodaki böylesi parçalanmış özne yansımasının temelini oluştururlar. Tipik bir Beckett karakteri olan Krapp bu parçalanmışlık sürecini açığa çıkaran bir karakter olarak düşünülmektedir. Oyun, doğum günü kutlamalarını temel alarak, özne yapılanmasındaki karmaşık ağı gözler önüne sermektedir. Bu nedenle oyundaki dil kullanımı ile söylenen ve yapılan şeyler arasındaki ilişki incelenecektir. Bu incelemede temel alınan odak noktası parçalar halinde bulunan öz ve bunun dile nasıl yansıtıldığını ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Samuel Beckett, gelenek, dönüşüm, özne

INTRODUCTION

When the general theme of tradition and transformation is applied to literary studies, it is obvious that there will be a wide range of analyses investigating the change of any literary or theoretical tradition through the effect of a particular impulse. However, this is not the scope of the current study to cover theoretical background for the change in the human understanding. Rather, this change from tradition to transformation is going to be reflected in Beckett's text that exemplifies the transformed idea of human identity while covering a traditional concept as birthday ceremony. In literary pieces, the understanding and image of human has been interpreted in a versatile way throughout the history of literature. Samuel Beckett, who is considered as one of the masters in the depiction of human condition, has a threshold position in the consideration of man and his life. His works have a significant role in the transformation of the perception of mankind. His theatre works reveal man as isolated, alienated, and helpless but what is original with his canon is the depiction of the fragmentation of the human subject. Beckett's play, *Krapp's Last Tape*, is considered as one of the best plays ever written disclosing this fragmentation. In this play Beckett uses tradition against itself and by cutting the ritual of birthday into pieces he underlines the fragmentation of the human subject. The tradition of birthday ceremony is represented as being transformed into something else that discloses itself as fragmented human memory. Thus, in the play not only the concept of birthday ceremony as traditionally constructed is subverted but also the idea of self that has been taken to be as unified is changed through the use of metadramatic strategies. Beckett's strategy of transforming the birthday ceremony tradition reveals itself also by his use of repetitions and fragmentation both linguistically and theatrically. Therefore, in this paper, how Beckett uses the tradition of birthday ritual as a means to reflect the transformation of man as a fragmented subject is going to be investigated. Thus, the play discloses how Beckett uses traditions against themselves, that is, he takes a traditional concept, which is birthday ceremony, so as to form a skeleton to his play but the play does not meet the requirements of a traditional birthday ceremony.

In Beckettian drama there are ceremonies and/or rituals within the plays which cannot be thought of as full events with particular beginnings, developments and endings. Richard Hornby, who has written a detailed analysis on metadrama, classifies Beckett's plays as plays with quasi-rituals (61). This refers to the fact that Beckett does not portray ritualistic events that have specific aims or functions as means to reach these specific aims. Rather than simply being rituals, they are events that are ritualized. That is why the plays are categorized as quasi-ritualistic. As Burkman declares, Beckett's plays continuously show the ways in which habit, "as it fails to deaden, takes on ritual aspect; and ritual in these dramas moves always toward the meanings that linger in the mythical fragments that abound – and even toward the creation of new myths" (13). In Beckett's texts the use of myth and ritual not only subvert the idea of reality but also underline the fragmentary quality of what is taken to be real.

Beckett's process of ritualization is the result of the fact that these events are taken to be vehicles in characters' striving to live. The characters' business with daily events have long lost their significance and meaning as a result of the absurdity of life. However, man is doomed to struggle with this meaninglessness and to try to seek a solution (despite premonitory failure). During their struggle with life, ritualized events become means for Beckett's characters. Thus, ritual is re-defined in Beckett's drama and as stated by Burkman, ritual is "an obsessive repetitive activity" in Beckett's canon (14). When viewed from this perspective, rituals in his plays are the signs of what the play wants to put into question. In Beckett's plays rituals are taken to be symbolic procedures which are systems of object and act symbols that share a common psychological base (Burkman, 14).

In addition to this, in Beckett's plays characters are generally trying to manage their journeys in life by using their created rituals. One of the strategies that these characters use in forming these rituals is an insistence on repeating their habits. As Burkman states, "[t]he slight changes in the enactment of these habits turn them into ritual" and by means of these habits the characters are trying to create a link between past and present (14). *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) reflects such an operation of ritual and ritualization. Not only does the play take

birthday ceremony as a subject matter but it also exposes the repetitive activities of Krapp. That is why this play provides so much data about the operation of ritual and its function in Beckettian drama. Krapp, who is 69 years old, is celebrating his birthday, “the awful occasion” in Beckett’s words. The way he celebrates his birthday is extraordinary: he listens to tape recordings of his previous birthday ceremonies.

FINDINGS AND COMMENTS

The ritualistic characteristic of the play shows itself not only through the birthday ceremony within the play but also by means of the repetitive actions (mimics and gestures) of the character. Before Krapp starts to utter his first words, the stage directions require him to perform a chain of non-verbal actions on stage. These actions are defined as a pantomime within the play. When the meaninglessness and aimlessness of these actions are considered, it is possible to consider them as the reflection of ritualized events born out of Krapp’s habits. The repetitiveness of these actions emphasizes Krapp’s dissatisfaction in doing them and his failure in attaching a meaning to these actions. There is neither connection nor causal relationship between his actions. Krapp begins his performance like this:

[He] remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh, looks at his watch, fumbles in his pockets, takes out an envelope, puts it back, fumbles, takes out a small bunch of keys, raises to his eyes, chooses a key, gets up and moves to and front of table. He stoops, unlocks first drawer, peers into it, feels about inside it, takes out a reel of tape, peers at it, puts it back, lock drawer, unlocks second drawer, peers into it, feels about inside it, takes out a large banana, peers at it, locks drawer, puts keys in his pocket. He turns, advances to edge of stage, halts, strokes banana, peels it, drops skin at his feet, puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him. (Beckett, 216)

Krapp’s pantomime does not end here; however, in general the above actions form the basis of his repetitive ritualized actions in the play. In addition to these actions, the acts of staring blankly front, peering at the boxes

and the ledger, loading spools on the machine, rubbing his hands, brooding, and going backstage into darkness are other ritualistic and repetitive behaviors. It is obvious that these actions have neither a specific cause nor a definitive end. As stated by Jeffers, “we see that these interruptions and repetitions cause one Krapp to displace another Krapp in an endless series of unsystematic production of difference” (Beckett, 76). Thus the actions are parts of a larger scale chain of actions. This practice of repetition destroys the idea of hierarchy and origin. Among these meaningless repetitive actions, one cannot talk of a primary or supreme action that dominates the others. Krapp’s repetitive actions neither affect something nor cause any other thing to happen. In other words, as Jeffers indicates, the “infinite regress in repetition is one in which the skill to discern a causal relationship is lost or put into question” (73). The regress which is born out of the aimlessness of the actions prevents the integration of any cause-effect relationship between the actions.

Krapp, as a man who is aware of the impossibility of knowing or mastering oneself, inevitably displays repetitive actions since “repetition dissolves and disperses the identity. It is the hopelessness of being ever further removed from the possibility of a true knowing of one’s own identity that troubles Krapp” (Jeffers, 73). He narrates the past into the present and wishes to repeat himself or keep the repetitions going. With the help of his recordings, he celebrates the glory of repetition throughout his birthday ceremonies. As a result of this, the idea of a Krapp with a definite and full identity is subverted, “Krapp in the play is nothing more than an effect created by endless displacement in which the identity of Krapp is an ‘empty slot, a place without an occupant’” (Jeffers, 78). In the play, the repetitiveness is not limited to the actions of Krapp at 69. The recorded voice of Krapp who is 39 years old says: “Have just eaten I regret to say three bananas and only refrained from the fourth” (Beckett, 217). Therefore, we understand that the repeated actions on the 69th birthday ceremony were also the repetitions of earlier birthdays, and this foreshadows that they will be repeated on future birthdays. Therefore, the name Krapp refers to a man who is the sum of his repeated past and future actions. For Laughlin

this infinite cycle of repetition “suggests that the ‘truth’, of the characters’ lives, or indeed of anyone’s life, can never be fully known or spoken” (206). Laughlin elaborates that the postmodern quality of Krapp’s Last Tape is the result of its “destabilizing of time and history” through the repetitive use of Krapp’s previous birthday recordings (207).

The tape, which is used to listen to the recorded voice of the younger Krapp, functions as much as Krapp on the stage. Beckett’s idea of presenting both the character and his tape-recording simultaneously throughout the whole play is innovative technique that refers to the playfulness of the play itself, and thus metadramatic. It also represents the death of the idea of a unified self through co-existence of various speeches of the character who is on the stage. Tape recordings are just as important and central as the character of Krapp himself is. They are not used as mere props or as secondary elements in the play. This not only subverts the necessity of the existence of a human character on stage in theatrical terms but also questions the idea of a full and single subjecthood. The audience sees Krapp at 69 but hears Krapp at 39. Actually, in the speeches uttered by the voice on the tape, the stage directions are not only for Krapp at 39 but they also show the actions of Krapp at 69 because of their repetitiveness. The stage directions and script for the first speech of the tape are as follows:

Tape: [Strong voice, rather pompous, clearly Krapp’s at a much earlier time.] Thirty-nine today, sound as a – [Settling himself more comfortably he knocks one of the boxes off the table, curses, switches off, sweeps boxes and ledger violently to the ground, winds the tape back to beginning, switches on, resumes posture.] Thirty-nine today sound as a bell, apart from my old weakness, and intellectually I have now every reason to suspect at the ... [hesitates] ... crest of the wave – or thereabouts. Celebrated the awful occasion, as in recent years, quietly at the Winehouse. Not a soul. Sat before the fire with closed eyes, separating the grain from the husks. Jotted down a few notes, on the back of an envelope. Good to be back in my den, in my old rags. Have just eaten I regret to say three bananas and only with difficulty refrained from a

fourth. Fatal things for a man with my condition. [Vehemently.] Cut’em out! [Pause.] The new light above my table is a great improvement. With all this darkness round me I feel less alone. [Pause.] In away. [Pause.] I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to ... [hesitates] ... me. [Pause.] Krapp. (Beckett, 217)

The recording does not end here and Krapp at 39 goes on together, with the actions of Krapp at 69:

Tape: I close my eyes and try to imagine them. [Pause. KRAPP closes his eyes briefly.] Extraordinary silence this evening, I strain my ears and do not hear a sound. Old Miss McGlome always sings at this hour. But not tonight. Songs of her girlhood, she says. Hard to think of her as a girl. Wonderful woman though. Connaught, I fancy. [Pause.] Shall I sing when I am her age, if I ever am? No. [Pause.] Did I sing as a boy? No. [Pause.] Did I ever sing? No. [Pause.] Just been listening to an old year, passages at random. I did not check in the book, but it must be at least ten or twelve years ago. (Beckett, 218)

The fragmentariness of Krapp is reflected textually within the stage directions. The first stage direction shows us that Krapp at 69 repeats what Krapp at 39 has done before: closes his eyes. Thus, although the speech belongs to the recording the stage directions are written for Krapp at 69. Moreover, the recording informs us that Krapp at 39 has also listened the recording of an earlier (ten or twelve years ago) birthday ceremony. Therefore, while listening the recording of Krapp at 39 the audience is led to think of another Krapp who is 29 or 27 years old. As Krapp says:

Tape: At that time I think I was still living on and off with Bianca in Kedar Street. Well out of that, Jesus yes! Hopeless business. [Pause.] Not much about her, apart from a tribute to her eyes. Very warm. I suddenly saw them again. [Pause.] Incomparable! [Pause.] Ah well ... [Pause.] These old P.M.s are gruesome, but I often find them – [KRAPP switches off, broods, switches on.] – a help before embarking on a new ... [hesitates] ... retrospect. Hard to

believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! [Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins.] And the resolutions! [Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins.] To drink less, in particular. [Brief laugh of KRAPP alone.] (Beckett, 219)

Therefore, the first presentation of the voice from the tape reveals much information about the play's rejection of an idea of a unified self. The above speech of Krapp at 39 has a design which gathers more than one Krapp together and thus emphasizes the plurality of the self. The play presents a character who listens to and comments on his previous selves. At the beginning of the play Beckett informs us that the play takes place at "[a] late evening in the future" (Beckett, 215). Krapp that the audience sees on the stage is 69 years old and he listens the voice of Krapp who is 39 years old. Therefore, the audience is exposed to the idea of the simultaneous existence of multiple Krapps (future Krapp at 69, past Krapps at 39-29 or 27 and present Krapp of an unknown of age). Thus, no one knows how old the present time Krapp is. "[T]he Krapp that we see or hear on stage is never the 'essential' Krapp – Krapp never stops 'krapping' – and so, Krapp is a holding slot" (Jeffers, 8). The indefiniteness of the present Krapp can be taken as exemplification of the rejection of Cartesian self who is considered to be able to exist as a result of thinking. The concept of self in Cartesian sense is considered to have the possibility of being known and made definite through rationality. As indicated by Jeffers,

Krapp is taken out of his traditional role as a person who seeks to record the past and recoup [sic.] lost experience so that he can profitably gain a sense of self or identity; instead, Krapp is displaced so that we can read the play more for what it gives us – not a singular individual – but rather multiple Krapps which are sometimes corporeal, yet are more often incorporeal. (8)

In addition to this innovative presentation of multiple selves, the play questions the very possibility of the idea of the "self". Krapp at 69 says, "Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago" (Beckett, 222). He says of himself at 39, 'I took myself', as if Krapp at 39 is an illusion, as if Krapp at 39 is just a product and fabrication of Krapp at 69. This definition also discloses and underlines self-fictionalization. Krapp at 39 is defined as a fiction

created by Krapp at 69 and this proposes that Krapp at 69 will be the fiction of an older Krapp. This fictionalization process will go on as Krapp states, "And so on. [Pause.] Be again, be again. [Pause.] All that old misery. [Pause.] Once wasn't enough for you" (Beckett, 223).

The play can thus be accepted as the revelation of the inevitability of self fictionalization through the use of a metadramatic presentation of different selves. The concept of the self as fictional leads us to investigate the relationship between language and self. The self as a fictionalized linguistic construct is reflected through the ledger of his tape recordings that Krapp keeps. The ledger contains a written record of all of the recordings that Krapp has made previously. In other words, it contains the written form of younger Krapps that shows the way to reach. The subject is fragmented just as language itself is. This fragmentary quality of the subject is revealed by two forms in the play: first by the fragmented use of language and secondly by the fragmented presentation of Krapp: that is by the interruptions of the tape recordings. These interruptions stand for the rejections of the view that considers human subject as a full and unified being.

The idea of a human as a construct created within language is reinforced when Krapp at 39 talks about his mother:

Tape: - back on the year that is gone, with what I hope is perhaps a glint of the old eye to come, there is of course the house on the canal where mother lay a dying, in the late autumn, after her long viduity. [KRAPP gives a start] and the – [KRAPP switches off, winds back tape a little, bends his ear closer to machine, switches on] – a dying, after her long viduity, and the – [KRAPP switches off, raises his head, stares blankly before him. His lips move in the syllables of 'viduity'. No sound. He gets up, goes backstage into darkness, comes back with an enormous dictionary, lays it on table, sits down and looks up the word.]

Krapp: [Reading from dictionary.] State – or condition – of being – or remaining – a widow - or widower. [Looks up. Puzzled.] Being – or remaining? (Beckett, 219)

Krapp at 39 uses the word 'viduity' when he defines his mother and Krapp at 69 looks up a dictionary and reads the meaning of the word. The

only thing that is known about Krapp's mother is her viduity and the meaning of the word explains whole self of Krapp's mother. Her condition and self is nothing other than what is defined in the dictionary. There is nothing left of his mother except for the definition in the dictionary.

Krapp's Last Tape, makes the reader re-think about the question of identity. It destabilizes the idea of unitary subject hood. The fragmentary construction of the meaning throughout the play mirrors the fragmentary conception of the subject. As a result of the interruptions of several Krapps, the play is far from following a meaningful design. The questions of who Krapp really is and what qualities he has remain unanswered. The reactions of Krapp at 69 to the tape seem to provide answers to these questions but "we cannot make these connections into a blueprint that will allow us to interpret Krapp" (Jeffers, 65). Through the interruptions and repetitions, a unified meaning escapes. Therefore, any reference for the identity of Krapp cannot help mingling with the references created by multiple Krapps throughout the whole play (i.e. by the tape and the real Krapp on the stage).

Krapp can be defined as any possible reference that can be made for him. Maybe that is why Krapp says, "[w]ith all this darkness round me I feel less alone" (Beckett, 217). When thought of as an opposition to lightness, darkness brings for the idea of possibility. In the light everything is seen, but darkness creates a space for possibilities. Possibilities produce the idea of multiplicity and this is what makes Krapp feel less alone. Darkness, for him, provides a space for the co-existence of multiple Krapps. In other words, darkness prevents the adherence of any definite and explicit identity to Krapp. This is why Krapp is less alone, he is with all of the possible Krapps within this darkness.

CONCLUSION

The use of the concept of ritual in literature generally aims at displaying the act of fulfilling

NOTES

*Presented without some additions within this article at 5th International Conference,

a traditional function. That is why, tradition and ritual are inter-related in their cause, that is; to create a particular meaning and construct that meaning among people's minds. Both tradition and ritual have a chronological and causal nature. As opposed to these traditional handling of rituals, the concept of ritualization (for which Beckett is famous) shows itself within the modern period. The act of ritualization can be understood as utilizing rituals so as to subvert the initial intended meanings through these rituals. Thus, the social and psychological constructs through these rituals are transformed from its traditional understanding and made open to discussion and interpretation of the people who are exposed to them.

In Krapp's Last Tape, Beckett exemplifies this change of tradition to transformation. The play explores the idea of the self as fiction through the representation of Krapp as the combination of various Krapps, whether on tape or at his various ages. The multiplicity of the self, reflected through tape recordings, is accompanied by the multiplicity of the birthday ceremonies. Thus, the ideas of stability and presence are subverted through the play. The need behind the act of ritual, which functions as compensation for Krapp, is disclosed as inevitable for the human being, who is fragmented. Moreover, Krapp's dependence on tape recordings in celebrating his birthday also underlines the role of memory and its inevitable place in the self-identification. Krapp cannot free himself from his previous tape recordings since it justifies his self-realization. This idea underlines the understanding of multiplicity and fragmentariness of the self. Moreover, the inconsistent and random relationship between the words and actions of the character discloses an ambigious Krapp on the stage. That is why, Beckett reflects many Krapps through juxtaposing complex structures within one character seen on the stage and this representation is among the most influential in disclosing the multiple forms within the idea of human subject.

University of Belgrade, English Language and Literature Studies: Tradition and Transformation (ELLSTAT) 23-24 October 2015.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beckett, Samuel. (2006). *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber.

Burkman, Katherine H. (ed.) (1987). *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett*. London: Associated UP. Inc.

Hornby, Richard. (1986). *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*. New Jersey: Associated UP.

Jeffers, Jennifer M. (1998) “A Place Without an Occupant”: Krapp’s Rhizome Identity”. Jennifer M. Jeffers (ed.) *Samuel Beckett: A Casebook*. New York: Garland Publishing.

Laughlin, Karen L. (2012) “Dreaming of [...] Love’: Beckett’s Theatre and the Making of the (Post)Modern Subject”. n. d. Web. November 2012.