



**THE IMPACT OF THE ABSENT CHARACTER IN  
BECKETT'S EMBERS AND O'NEILL'S  
STRANGE INTERLUDE**

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**THE IMPACT OF THE ABSENT CHARACTER IN BECKETT'S EMBERS AND  
O'NELL'S STRANGE INTERLUDE**

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## THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that, in my opinion, the thesis submitted by Mohammed Muhsin OMAR titled "THE IMPACT OF THE ABSENT CHARACTER IN BECKETT'S EMBERS AND O'NEILL'S STRANGE INTERLUDE" is fully adequate in scope and in quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Science.

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This thesis is accepted by the examining committee with a unanimous vote in the Department of English Language and literature as a Master of Science thesis. June 4, 2021

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The degree of Master of Science by the thesis submitted is approved by the Administrative Board of the Institute of Graduate Programs, Karabuk University.

Prof. Dr. Hasan SOLMAZ .....  
Director of the Institute of Graduate Programs

## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own work, and all information included has been obtained and expounded in accordance with the academic rules and ethical policy specified by the institute. Besides, I declare that all the statements, results, materials not original to this thesis have been cited and referenced literally.

Without being bound by a particular time, I accept all moral and legal consequences of any detection contrary to the aforementioned statement.

**Name Surname: Mohammed OMAR**

**Signature :**

## **FOREWORD**

First and foremost, I praise and thank Allah for His greatness and for bestowing courage and strength upon me for me to complete this thesis.

I would like to communicate my extraordinary thanks of appreciation to my supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Tavgah Ghulam Saeed gave me the golden opportunity to do this wonderful project, which also helped me do a lot of research, and I came to know about so many things.

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## Abstract

In theatres, comics, films, or television, an unseen character or a silent character is a character who is mentioned but is not directly identified by the viewer. This character significantly progresses the plot's action, whose absence amplifies the impact on the narrative. The definition would not extend to fiction, which is a non-visual form in which all characters are unseen by the viewer. The way an absent character is portrayed varies according to the medium. In visual media, such as films, stages, or televisions, an unidentified character can be sometimes shown by body parts or an offstage accent, but this character is always deemed unseen as long as the identity is never seen. Therefore, the present study represents an attempt to highlight the role of the absent character in modern drama, especially in the works of Samuel Beckett and Eugene O'Neill. The study is divided into three chapters. The emphasis is on the role of the absent character in different eras and how the technique was employed by various playwrights. In O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* and Beckett's *Embers*, absent characters take on an agency within the drama and directly interact with physically represented onstage characters. Besides, this study explores how the role of the absent character has developed during ages and how it is manifested in O'Neill and Beckett's aforementioned plays. Further, this study discusses the role of absent characters in Beckett's *Embers* and shows Beckett's experience with broadcasting, particularly radio, and the significant contribution to the development of radio plays and acoustic arts.

**Keywords:** Absent character, Hallucination, Rebellion, Loneliness, Imitation, Consolation, Imagination

## ÖZ

Tiyatroda, çizgi romanda, filmde veya televizyonda, görünmeyen bir karakter veya sessiz bir karakter, izleyiciye doğrudan tanıtılmayan ancak olay örgüsünün “tema”sını önemli ölçüde ilerleten ve yokluğu anlatı üzerindeki etkisini artıran bir karakterdir. Tanım; tüm karakterlerin izleyici tarafından görülmediği, görsel olmayan bir biçim olan kurguyu kapsamaz. Olmayan bir karakterin tasvir edilme şekli ortama göre değişir. Film, sahne veya televizyon gibi görsel medyada, kimliği belirlenemeyen bir kişi bazen kısmen vücut parçaları veya sahne dışı bir vurgulama ile gösterilebilir, ancak şahsiyeti herhangi bir şekilde görülmediği sürece her zaman görünmez olarak kabul edilir. Bu tez, özellikle Samuel Beckett ve Eugene O’Neil’in eserlerinde, “modern drama”da “eksik karakter”in rolünü vurgulama girişimini gösterir. Çalışma üç bölüme ayrılmıştır. araştırma, farklı dönemlerde eksik karakterin rolüne ve tekniğin çeşitli oyun yazarları tarafından nasıl kullanıldığına odaklanmaktadır. O’Neill’in “*Strange Interlude*” ve Beckett’in “*Embers*” filmlerinde, eksik karakterler drama içinde bir aksiyon alır ve sahnede fiziksel olarak temsil edilen karakterlerle doğrudan etkileşime girer. Bu tez, eksik karakterin rolünün çağlar boyunca nasıl geliştiğini ve O’Neill ve Beckett’in söz konusu oyunlarında nasıl ortaya çıktığını incelemektedir. çalışmada, O’Neil’in “*Strange Interlude*” ve Beckett’in “*Embers*” undaki eksik karakterin rolüne odaklanıyor, esas olarak Beckett’in “*Embers*”ındaki “eksik karakterlerin” rolünün ve Beckett’in yayıncılık deneyiminin ve hepsinden önemlisi, radyonun; radyo oyunları ve akustik sanatın gelişiminde nasıl önemli bir rol oynadığının tartışılmasına ayrılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Eksik karakter, Halüsinasyon, İsyan, Yalnızlık, Taklit, Teselli, Hayal Gücü.



## ARCHIVE RECORD INFORMATION

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## ARŞİV KAYIT BİLGİLERİ

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## ABBREVIATIONS

**Etc.** : Ve benzeri gibi

**ed.** : Baskı

**Ed. by** : Editör

**p./pp.** : Sayfa/sayfalar

**Vol.** : Sayı

**Vs.** : Karşı

## **SUBJECT OF THE RESEARCH**

The sole aim behind introducing such a study is to stress the role of the absent character in theatre and prove that such a role, although unseen by the audience, but has a significant part in the events of a certain work.

## **PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH**

The reason behind the study is to show how the absent characters are employed by playwrights and how this role is important to the events of the literary works that employ them. The importance of the study is that it focuses on the role of absent characters in O'Neill and Beckett's plays, and such a subject has not been discussed before in these plays. So the thesis gains importance from the fact that it is the first study to discuss such a subject in the aforementioned plays.

## **METHOD OF THE RESEARCH**

The thesis is a thematic one; it means that the study depends on the contexts of the two plays to reach its aim. The research assists the reader to understand how the absent characters have been playing a significant role in theatre, especially in *Strange Interlude* and *Embers*.

## **HYPOTHESIS OF THE RESEARCH / RESEARCH PROBLEM**

The number of absent characters can be observed in the works of O'Neill and Beckett, especially in their *Strange Interlude* and *Embers*. Both playwrights use this technique to maintain the main idea of their works.

## **SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS / DIFFICULTIES**

The limitation of the current study is that it focuses only on two playwrights who are Beckett and O'Neill. Also, the scope of the study focuses only on two plays, which are Beckett's *Embers* and O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*. The study does not depend on a certain theoretical framework; it only traces the characters that do not appear on the

stage in the above-mentioned plays and how these characters still impact the events in spite of their absence from the stage.

# Chapter One

## Introduction

### 1.1 The Absent Character

The relationship between absence and presence in theatre is complex and intertwined. For Ekisten (2004), a work of art always indicates absence in that it offers a representation or an image rather than the thing itself (p.27). Obviously, this is true in theatre, but at the same time, theatre is fundamentally about existence. However, an empty stage is a space that originates its potential for meaning and force from the probability of live figures involved in actual actions there. Some critics argue that theatre is concerned with the dialectical relationship between presence and absence. For some critics, theatre indicates the absence of the presence and presence of the absence (Fuchs, 1985). In this regard, Kierkegaard (1989) presents an image that depicts well the relationship between the two by introducing a portrait describing the tomb of Napoleon bordered by two trees. When looking at the painting, one starts to grasp the shape of Napoleon himself in the vacant space between the two trees (p. 19). Thus, Napoleon's image is present and absent in the painting.

The interplay of presence and absence could lengthen to any number of definite features of scenery, props, speech, locale, and so forth. However, there is an important point that must be referred to: absent characters are universal in drama, the practical restrictions surrounding the stage space, time covered, audience attention, and the number of actors. Within a play, presence and absence often alternate as characters enter and leave the stage. These going and comings permit different groups of characters on stage and strongly contribute to a play's rhythm. Thus, most of the characters are present and absent at different times of a play. It is unusual to expect a certain character to stay on stage all the time of the play or even to stay totally absent from the stage. Obviously, omnipresent characters have an influential impact on a play; one may consider Hamm in Beckett's *End Game* or Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. However, entirely absent

characters are far more recurrent in the Western dramatic works from Creusa in Euripides's *Medea* to *Godot* in *Waiting for Godot*.

Particularly, absence in dramatic works is a phenomenon that happens when the audience is expecting the appearance of a certain character, but they find the stage empty. An investigation of characters who are substantially invisible or absent in a number of dramatic works demonstrates that the matter of each characters' absence is strictly related to those characters' occupation of space (Carlson, 2016, p. 1). In theatre, absent characters are those characters who are present within the event and the action of the play, but they are visually absent to the audience. However, the audience is made intensely conscious of the character and her or his absence via the use of sound, gesture, and dialogue. Absent characters take on an agency within the play and interact directly with physically characterized onstage characters.

Drama, as a term refers to an "action," that is why it seems paradoxical for a character to be absent from the stage during the time of the performance. It is abnormal to consider an absent character as a dramatic character when he or she performs no visible actions in front of the audience. Yet, the absent character is designated via the physical gestures and the dialogue of the actors on stage to take actions out of the sight of the audience. Historically, absent characters were mostly the gods in ancient Greek drama; these unseen characters (gods) cursed and blessed the onstage characters and manipulated their destinies. However, in early modern drama, the unseen hand of destiny superseding the plot of the play, namely, the unseen characters usually take one of two forms, the absent character that performs unseen and yet inside the fictional stage space and the outside characters that perform in the fictional space outside the onstage set (Ibid). These characters, who are in both cases unseen to the audience members by literal disembodiment or by virtue of offstage location, are in modern drama demonstrative of social groups and marginalized individuals rather than conceptual concepts like deity and fate. What permits these characters to

interrelate directly with the characters onstage is their specificity as representatives of people rather than thoughts.

Space is essential for the manifestations of absence to fully inspect how unseen characters that are introduced in a dramatic work helps distinguish the unlike types of the theatrical space. More specifically, the dramatic space is essentially the place in which unseen characters exist; these characters are not substantially perceptible to the audience on the stage space, nor they are physically embodied within the theatre space (Issacharoff, 1889). The dramatic space could be divided into two main categories: the mimetic space and the diegetic space. The first category refers to the dramatic space made seen to the audience within the stage space, whereas the second category refers to the space defined to exist within the world of the drama, but it is never aurally or visually signified to the audience instead of being simply labelled by the number of mimetic characters onstage (Ibid).

Typically, absence takes place in the conceived or diegetic space; therefore, space is not characterized onstage but is invented by the audience to occur only outside of the space signified on the stage. For instance, in Lorca's *La Casa De Bernarda Alba*, the characters recurrently refer to a lover whose name is known to all of them, Pepe el Romano, who comes and goes by the windows in the open-air. Although this character is apparently just outside the house, and in any situation, his attendance is vastly significant to the play's narrative and directly impacts the suicide of an onstage character. However, Pepe or the actor playing Pepe is never seen on the stage space. Pepe is very real for the audience and is engaged in the world of the play, yet he is never seen and is never heard inside the room represented onstage. In the investigation of unseen characters arbitrated through the diegetic space, it is vital to remember that the word "diegesis" refers to accurately "a narration or narrative account" (Gruber, 2010, p. 81). As the diegetic space is completely fictional, it is shaped not in a substantial space but rather inside the heads of the audience's members through the intervention of expressive discourse given by the characters onstage.



In modern theatre, absent characters are differentiated from old-style copies of absence mainly because the characters who are given power are not kings or gods, but rather those figures are characteristically considered powerless. In addition, the modern theatre is famed for challenging historical and societal norms growing out of the lack of confidence and devastation in the Western culture following World War I in Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. In this regard, the playwright depicted modern gods as helpless to affect mortals and are indeed mistreated by the mortal world. Consequently, women are more likely to be the absent modern powers who are voiceless, infirm, and elderly in society. The modern theatre then welcomes the contradiction in absent characters more than any preceding age of theatre by applying them to give a figurative platform to the marginalized and silenced people in the society.

## **1.2 Absent Character: Historical Perspective**

In Greek theatre, playwrights are attracted to the audience's traditional beliefs as they integrated them into their dramatic works. The Greek culture had its own mythology regarding the creation of the beginning of time and the universe. Those myths determined a link between the seen and the unseen. They were related to gods and goddesses who were connected with the components of nature suggested by their names. For instance, the name of Gaia, her husband, and her child are associated with nature. The goddess Gaia's name literally means earth, and Uranus means the sky; Uranus and Gaia were the parents of the Greek goddesses and gods (Simone, 200).

In Greek theatre, there was a tendency to put the blame onto unseen deities and reject one's own responsibility (Hartigan, 1995). In *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles, Oedipus asks the audience not to blame him for what happened because the events are fated. However, Sophocles tries to depict a moral landscape through the character of Oedipus, but this landscape is troubled with "shame and guilt" (Klaassen, 2000, p. 328). Though Oedipus unconsciously challenges the taboos and laws of Thebes, he is ashamed of

killing Laius, his offstage father, without forgetting the incestuous relationship with Jocasta, his mother. In ancient Greek traditions, the term Hubris means overweening pride or insolence. Oedipus's two hubristic assumptions are the identification of his identity, and thus, he could overcome his destiny. In addition, Oedipus's shame is unknown and metaphorically absent or unseen. Oedipus keeps wandering and realizes his human limitation before the gods. Consequently, Oedipus is honoured by the king of Athens, Theseus, who offers Oedipus a refuge, but the latter decides to punish himself due to his deeds. Throughout the whole play, the gods act as unseen or absent characters that have a crucial effect on Oedipus' moral growth.

Terence and Plautus, in their Roman comedies, feature significant female characters who stay out of sight. In Plautus's *The Pot of Gold* (*Aulularia*), the play begins with an impetuous lover who rapes a girl that never appears on the stage; however, the girl's voice is heard when the girl cries with labour pains (Plautus, 1965). The prelude of the play is presented by a household god who names the girl Phadria, who is Euclio's daughter. With God's support, Lyconides, the rapist-lover, succeeds in marrying Phadria despite Euclio's refusal.

In Plautus' *Casina*, both Euthynicus, Casina's lover, and Casina herself are absent characters. The speaker of the prologue, Euthynicus, tells the audience that somebody who has a significant role in the play will never appear onstage. He informs the audience not to expect his arrival. Plautus's play is an adaptation of Diphilus's *Kleroumenoi*, a Greek play. In the original version of the play, namely the Greek play, Euthynicus appear onstage, who are the main characters in the play and perform on the stage more than any other character. Hence, the two lovers get married at the end of the play. There is another point worth to be mentioned; Plautus's attraction to invisibility helped him experience the creative challenge of turning the main characters in the Greek play into absent characters in his adaptation (Gruber, pp. 134-135).

Terence's *Andria* (166 BC) deals with a romantic relationship between Glycerium and Pamphilus. The latter promises Glycerium that he will marry her; however, Pamphilus's father refuses this marriage and arranges for his son to marry another woman (Ibid). Glycerium, Pamphilus's lover, and her sister, Chrysius, are central characters in the play. However, the two sisters are absent all the time of the play, and they never appear on the stage. The two young women live in Athena, but they come originally from Andros. Events involving Glycerium's early life, her discovery of her identity, and her love affair with Pamphilus are all missing and take place offstage (Ibid, p. 139). Because Glycerium's physical appearance is totally absent and her identity is conveyed only as the cry of anguish heard from behind the curtain, her absence, which is experienced in conjunction with her rapid outbreak into speech, turns to be metonymic of her whole presence. It is a concussive and radical gesture that is entirely reliant on the imagination; no actor appears on stage, where neither a female nor a male could take the full burden of depression that appears on Glycerium (Ibid,p. 144). In Roman plays, the absence of women characters from the stage mirrors the society's subjugation of females, thus denoting the absence of their economic and political identities (Ibid, p.140).

*The Quem Quaeritis* was performed in the Middle Ages. The play was performed to the Mass as a part of the service introducing a short dialogue between an angel and the three Marys at Christ's tomb. The angel informs everybody that Christ is not there, and he will not appear. This dramatic work offers a good example of a play in which the central character is unseen. Jesus's absence is indeed the point of the trope. This play was enacted by the priests to evoke in the Mass the importance of the presence of worshipers though the worshipped is absent, which was very popular among the mass at the time when the play was first performed. For doing so, there was no suitable way than the employment of the unseen or absent character as a dramatic device (Byrd, 1998).

In the Middle Ages, there was a tendency in drama, especially in England, to stage the invisible, particularly in biblical stories or mystery

plays in general, such as the story of *Judgment Day* and the story of *Adam and Eve*. The divine angels were portrayed as having gilt hair, swords waved like fire, and scarlet robes to take Adam and Eve from heaven into the wilderness. Satan, or the devil in general, was displayed with a hairy body, horns, a hideous mask, a long forked tail, and a bright red beard (Vaughmn, 1902, pp. 92-93). In the morality plays, concepts like the Flesh, the World, Mercy, Mankind, Peace, Justice, Death, and Old Age were personified (Ibid, p. 5). Consequently, the unseen powers burst out throughout the performance of a play and directly on stage to increase the impact of those plays on the audience.

Shakespeare employed the concept of absent characters dynamically. He presented powers belonging to the unseen realm as well. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* exposes his greatest talent as "a Renaissance conjurer ", who has the ability to make or call forth a contact through language with those bodies, spirits, things, and voices that are absent (Greenblatt, 2002, p. 3). The protagonist of the play, *Hamlet*, is puzzled by the message from his dead father that appears as a ghost coming from the realm of death and narrates a crime with no witnesses. He represents an embodiment of human consciousness troubled by the mystery of the invisible and the unknown. The ghost or the apparition is an instigator of a hidden psychological disorder caused by the pressure of the urgency and uncertainty of taking action. It narrates a crime that occurs offstage. However, the unseen crime determines the sequence of the action onstage. Moreover, Hamlet's father is an absent character that haunts the protagonist's memory even before the arrival of the Ghost.

In his *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare presents another absent character. In the play, the will of Portia's father is the source of the lottery plan. He manages the destiny of his daughter's suitors, whereby the will obliges the suitors to undergo a test that involves selecting among three chests. Portia is his representative; she appears as Wealth in front of those who pursue Fortune, but she appears as a poor maiden compared with Bassanio, who is her humble lover. The chests scenes serve as allegorical

breaks, which demonstrate the conflict between fortune and virtue that is combined with the entire form of the play. In the trial scene, Portia helps Antonio, who represents virtue, against Shylock, who represents greed. As was mentioned above, the whole play is centred around a will of an absent character who never appears on the stage. In another important example, in Restoration drama, John Dryden wrote his *All for Love* (1677), which was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Dryden kept a significant character like Octavius Caesar absent to put more emphasis on the characters of Antony and Cleopatra.

In modern theatre, the absent father was broadly used. For instance, Paul Rosefeldt featured this technique in the decline of faith in religions. For a modernist playwright, the world should regulate the breakdown of a God-adjusted cosmos that was hierarchal and ordered. Even the quest for sense became useless, and nature, God, and the very universe itself seem to disappear, where only an unaccommodated human existing in a scrapyard of worthless collectables is left. The reality that used to be stranded in religious absolute was broken down into a sequence of disjointed illusions (Rosefeldt, 1996).

Absent characters were utilized by significant playwrights: Anton Chekhov, August Strindberg, and Henrik Ibsen. For instance, in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), the main character in the play is Nora, whose father is another important character in the play. However, there is no reference to her mother. Nora is imprisoned in memories from her childhood, and she remembers herself moving from one parental home to another; she remembers being treated like a doll. When her husband is in a bad economic state, Nora forges her father's signature to get a loan. Her trials to take her father's positions indicate both his haunting presence in her life and his absence in her life.

In the English theatre, Bernard Shaw recurrently used absent characters in dramatic works. This technique could be one of the tactics that the Irish dramatist derived from Ibsen (Bitonti, 1992, 229). In his play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), Shaw employed it to support the main theme in

the play, namely prostitution as an economic necessity (Ibid, p. 230). Kitty Warren refers to a number of absent women who never appear on stage just to justify the profession of prostitution. Kitty's sister, Liz, also works as a prostitute. However, Kitty's half-sister was poisoned due to her work in a white lead factory. Liz, who never appears on the stage, has the greatest impact on Kitty's career. In her early life, Liz convinced Kitty to work as a prostitute. Liz used to work in a brothel house, and she learned the benefits of prostitution and encouraged Kitty to join her. When she reappeared in Kitty's life, it turns out that Liz had given up the brothel life, and she turned to be a respectful woman. This is in a straight contrast with Kitty, who stays in the profession not only because of money but also because she also enjoys it. For some scholars, Shaw gives Liz more integrity by setting her character as absent (Ibid, p. 230).

The priest, Eli Hawkins in *The Devil's Disciple* (1897), is an absent character, although he takes an important role in the play. Hawkins tells Mrs. Dudgeon not to marry her lover, Peter and marries her lover's brother, Timothy, because the latter is a man of God, unlike his brother. Dudgeon's house becomes a dull place, lacking the warmth of love. Even her son, Richard, detests her. Richard, in the play, gives promises to the devil to be his follower. He thinks the Devil is his natural friend and master. He secretly prays to the devil, and the devil comforts him. Richard believes that the devil saves him from having his spirit broken. He promises the devil with his soul, and he would stand with him against those who hate him. Although the character of Eli Hawkins is absent, it adds a psychological dimension to Mrs. Dudgeon's character. The tough domineering mother firmly follows Eli Hawkins's instructions, permitting them to kill her happiness.

In these Shavian plays, absent characters illuminate psychological, economic, and social forces, prevailing the absent characters' choices. Shaw's plays mirror a developing awareness of those forces. Barzun noted that the modern technique of looking at the world led to the idea that women and men are moved by nonconscious forces; they are governed by dialectic,

economic, and material determinism. Generally speaking, they are governed by the traditions of their societies and "by the unconscious, collective or individual; or by the environment" (Barzun, 1989, pp. 135-136).

In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), Vladimir's and Estragon's openness to view indicates their weakness that is contrasting to the absent Godot's potency. Vladimir leaves the scene two times in the first act, while Estragon never leaves the stage. Estragon is always linked with bodily pain. From the first scene of the play, the audience is aware that Estragon is recurrently beaten by strangers; however, these events never appear on the stage, but the audience received information about them. The absence of Godot gives the play a religious background, and this gives Godot god-like supremacy that is outside the material embodiment. Some critics like William Gruber note that Estragon and Vladimir's situation portrays that of Eve and Adam in the Garden after they ate the forbidden fruit (Rosefeldt, 1996, pp. 1-2). Similar to the true relationship between Adam and Eve with the God of the Old Testament, the foundation of Estragon's and Vladimir's relationship with Godot needs a complete inequality between what may and may not be made visible.

The American drama in the twentieth century was under the influence of classical playwrights. It was also under the impact of some European dramatists, like Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg. Similarly, the American playwrights were also eager to employ absent characters in their dramatic works. The American dramatists not only used this technique but also made this technique essential in their plays at the beginning of the twentieth century. It became hard to find a play without expecting to find an absent character in it.

Susan Glaspell in *Trifles* (1916) used absent central characters, namely John Wright and his wife named Minnie. Minnie was arrested for killing her husband, who is strangled with a rope. The country attorney, Lewis Hale, a neighbouring farmer, and the Sheriff visit the Wrights' house to examine the crime scene. The group is accompanied by Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale Peters, who are Minnie's friends. The two ladies know that

Minnie has been treated badly by her dead husband. However, the three men do not care about what the women say; they come to the household to search for evidence. They discover that Minnie's pet bird was brutally killed by Mrs. Wright, and they believe that it was a motive for the wife to kill her husband. The play sheds light on marginalized women in society. The unseen Minnie Wright was considered a symbol for those women who are rendered unseen in a society run for and by men. Therefore, the whole play is centred on absent events and characters who are absent all the time of the play.

In *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) by Clifford Odets, the protagonist of the play, Lefty, is absent throughout the whole action of the play. His absence is employed as a reason for the play's onstage action. More specifically, the events of the play are mostly based on a real taxi-drivers attack incident that took place in 1934. The associates of a taxi-drivers union meet to decide to hold an attack. The absence of Lefty, who is their chairman, obliges them to wait. While waiting for him, the group members present vignettes depicting the conditions that have brought them to this meeting. Their writings shed light on the political and socio-economical conditions of the 1930s. The play concludes with news of Lefty's murder, thus urging the union to make a strike.

In his *All My Sons* (1947), Arthur Miller presents a crucial absent character, namely Larry, who is the Kellers' son. He is the victim of his father's crime since Steve and Joe have sold a damaged cylinder head to the Air Force in the American army. This causes death to a number of American pilots. Because of his father's deed, Larry feels ashamed and decides to commit suicide. As a reminder of Larry, Miller employs a broken apple tree to represent Larry: Larry's broken tree works as a reminder of his absence in the Kellers' house. For Larry's father, the apple tree stands in the house to remind him of his crime against his nation, his fellow countrymen, and his son.

In *Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950) by William Inge, Sheba, that is the offstage dog, denotes the emotional and the physical sterilities of a married



couple, namely Lola and Doc Delaney. Doc declines a promising profession in medicine to marry Lola. The couple expects a baby; Lola is pregnant before their marriage. After that, Lola loses her child and understands that she is unable to have children anymore. Since then, the middle-aged couple has been trapped in a loveless marriage. Lola channels the loss of her baby into mournful calls for her lost dog, Sheba. As was mentioned above, the title of the play refers to the couple's missing dog. In this regard, Lola wishes for the dog's reappearance throughout the play, and every day she stands in front of the door calling, "Come back, little Sheba". However, at the end of the play, she accepts reality and gives up the wish of Sheba's return.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), Edward Albee presents a middle-aged couple, namely George and Martha, and their imaginary child. Albee establishes an imaginary world to which the main characters resort when they may not face the sterilities of their world. The play examines the difficulties of marriage and concludes with George and Martha exorcise the fantasy child, realizing that remaining to live with this specific illusion is devastating to both of them. Although the character of the child is absent, it occupies the imagination of the audience.

In *True West* (1980), Sam Shepard introduces the absent desert-dwelling father, who is personified in the interaction and the language of his antithetical sons: Lee, who was a pretty and drifter burglar, and Austin, who was a screenwriter. The two brothers are reunited in the house of their mother in southern California, and the brothers cooperate to write a screenplay about the West. The brothers are strained to the desert, in which the father leads an unusual life. Although they inhabit a physical space that goes to their mother, who performs onstage at the conclusion of the play, they mentally live on land that belongs to the absent father.

David Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992) is a two-character play in which Mamet conveys the conflict between a college professor, whose name is John, and his female student named Carol. The play has its absent characters who are fundamental to that struggle: Carol's group, the tenure committee, and

John's wife. Carol, urged by her group, files an official complaint, accusing her professor of sexual harassment. Carol's group urges John to remove a number of books from the syllabus of his own book. Carol proposes to withdraw the complaint only if John accepts the group's demand that he declines. During most events of the play, John's wife calls him many times; however, the character of John's wife stays absent during the time of the play.

In earlier and recent times, the absent characters were depicted as belonging to a realm that either parallels or counterbalances the onstage world. The latter is often a materialistic sphere whose inhabitants are stuck in an infinite chase for fulfilling material needs that leave a restricted space for contemplation, creativity, and spiritual elevation. Therefore, the characters on the stage react against their cruel realities by approaching the absent characters.

### **1.3 Eugene O'Neill's Writings**

When O'Neill was asked about how one can be a playwright, he replied, "*one would take some canvas and wood and nails and things. Start to build himself a stage, a theatre, learn about it, light it, and after doing that, he or she will possibly know how to write a play*" (Winther, 1962, p. 5). O'Neill's words remind us that what he must say, his idea of life and the feelings he desires to provoke in his audience should be examined in the light of his craft. It is probable that the first of this criticism has been said about his apparent refusal to the romantic ideals. O'Neill hated the false endings, the false ideals, and the false dreams (ibid). He considers that these beliefs are hateful diseases that have devoured the centre of life, annihilating the only hope of salvation that is plausible for man. The artistic mind does not necessarily pursue the rules of cold rationality, and O'Neill's tension between his rejection of the romantic dream and his often succumbing to his seductive proposal is nothing but typical. A character in his entire work is supposed to be described as genuinely realistic in the way that Bazarov, Pelle, or Sister Carrie might be called realists (ibid). It is possible that the

elegance of the main characters from O'Neill's play relates to the fact that they are too sophisticated to be solely one thing to participate in the past currents of life. Besides, suffering gives them a characteristic that encourages faith in nature in a way where the reader will never have greater comprehension and compassion.

A study of the characters that appear in O'Neill's dramas exposes a few remarkable features that several have in common. One is fascinated by the bravery and determination with which they tackle the adverse conditions of the environment they exist in. They were also committed to giving meanings and significance to life in defiance of a world that is subjective and unconcerned with human aspirations. No matter who the character may be or what his position or occupation in the social order is, O'Neill's favourite character is the one who has dreamy eyes. In other words, the characters that he depicted in his plays normally live in two worlds: one of passionate and unfulfilled desire, and the other is the outward world of the physical reality (Coolidge, 1966). The first universe is the one that the dreamer desires for all his holed-up energy. He will surrender to such a universe. His experience has dealt him, for there is nothing in the life that is, for the present time, similar to the legit truth of his fantasy.

The main characters of O'Neill are romantic dreamers and are ill-equipped to deal with a poetically violent setting. Such males and females float down the sea of life, striving relentlessly and entering the happier shore of their dreams amid the present. They pose one of life's odd mysteries, in that their vision represents all the wonderful and positive, and they are killed only because of that. As is valid with the great main characters in all tragedies, they are killed by their ideals, particularly Shakespeare's. This poetic romantic-eyed character of O'Neill play exhibits a peculiar characteristic of absurdity that a naive audience might consider a false ideal image, but a deeper inspection shows that there is something of an everlasting ideologue that is a true characteristic of human existence as the rational qualities that are more easily viewed (Winther, 1961, p. 9)

C.H. Whiteman (1931) presented a clarification of the characters' language in O'Neill's dramas. For Whiteman, "*O'Neill has undoubtedly a considerable gift for language; he loved the flavour of words, and uses with fine effect speech of the soil or has the tang of the sea in it*" (p. 556). His inclination to interlude his pages with foul language has in some places insulted, and even his adoring fans have not always considered it convenient to defend its use. "*It seems clear that O'Neill is using coarse, profane language as an artist to recreate the actual speech of his rough characters; one feels that such a language could be properly indicated with a less generous supply of profanity*" (Ibid). Whiteman also referred to the grimness of O'Neill's tragedies, and the attitude towards his language misconstrues his characters. Whiteman illustrated that O'Neill's plays are mostly unpleasant, wrought out of the pain and agony of life, and his heroes are mostly people with primitive misfits and instincts, suffering from economic inhibitions, diseases, and soul-destroying powers (Whiteman, 1931, p. 555).

If the existence of O'Neill's protagonists is proof of their creative unfitness, they go to dignified mortality in company with the most tormented souls who have motivated humanity's affection and compassion like Antony, Hamlet, Macbeth and a dozen of others in drama, novels, and poetry. It is the very reality that they are oppressed by soul-destructive forces that they cannot comprehend, and that makes them the symbol of the heroic plight of man towards an unfriendly world that brings them subjectivity. This also evokes heroic empathy and helps us think more profoundly than we have ever known before about what it means to be a human. O'Neill's works are a strong rebellion against the traditional romantic paradigm with its unrealistic expectations and ideals and its propensity to ignore that man is the result of his animistic nature in the first and basic context. However, because O'Neill is an artist and is not a pure essayist who creates a theory, his sympathies are with the very idealist from which his catastrophe emerges.

O'Neill's range is wide, and his impact is broader than his revolt toward the sentimental orthodoxy suggests. The main rivers of modern

thoughts move simply and rapidly through the plains brooding over by their restless spirits. With a fervent passion, O'Neill accepts the source of his hate as well as the substance of affection. Ugliness and Beauty stimulate his mind; it is the things he builds his fantasies about. There is the Reformer's optimism in his mind and the artist's strength to give that narrative a scope.

Through O'Neill, the modern world's revolt toward the traditional paradigm has received a powerful explanation. The spectrum of his speech is not restricted to this one-note, but it grows to encompass the entire phenomenon of the effort by the modern man to free oneself from the fetters of extinct rituals. To do so, a lot of Western thinking has become a statement first and an assertion second. The examination of modern-day art and literature highlights the popularity of this topic of the resistance movement. More specifically, the voice of modern literature has been a voice of splendid and vitriolic defiance of conversational standards and dogmas, including authors like Butler, Hardy, Gorky, Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Anatole in France and Anderson and Dreiser in America. O'Neill is a part of that culture, and he is assertive in his rejection. His rebellion is sharp as well as angry, but it is no more necessary to analyze its meaning than to assert the principles of daily existence (Winther, 1961, p. 14).

Another aspect of this sense of dissent is reflected in the vigorous rejection of the Puritan ethic. The Puritan vision, like that of a sentimental dreamer, is a threat to O'Neill on the path to decent living. Puritanism is shameful to him because it underlines the importance of self-abnegation and criticizes as a distinct force of evil as it stands for a doctrine of suppression. O'Neill abjures the concept of "you shall not" as it is a benevolent evil that threatens the only thing that is necessary for existence, and that is happiness (Coolidge, 1966, p. 44). Further, puritanism prohibits, inhabits, opposes, prevents, and rejects fear, discrimination, narrowness, hostility, rebellion, individuality, and beggar's mentality at the door of creation. In this regard, existence is not to be enjoyed in the finest meaning by the hands of the beggar. The best offerings are for all who claim the right to life, grace, pleasure, and happiness, but puritanism kills all such things.

Puritanism has invaded the Western world, attaching itself like a lethal virus to the flesh of humanity. It made a man terrified of himself. Besides, it gave him the illusion that there is wisdom to deprive himself of the true joy and elegance that might happen at unusual moments in his battle towards an unsociable world. There is an old Jew in O'Neill's *Lazarus Laughed* who demonstrates the ideology of Puritan as he waves his fist at the believers of Lazarus. Pleasure, love, and joy are aspects to be despised and resented by the Puritans. They moved the spirits of life from its roots, and it is again this egregious offence that O'Neill focuses his wrath on. It does not indicate that O'Neill develops a theory and writes a play to explain its significance in the ways of Ibsen and Galsworthy; his main concern resides in the drama of life, not in the instruction of a social ideology, but in the production of his tragic concept that examines the social system (Winther, 1961, p. 47). In this regard, he practices the usual tradition of all great writers, for it is only by posing man against the context of his physiological and natural history the drama acquires a significant or universal meaning. O'Neill is not moralizing, but his works are of considerable moral value.

O'Neill explores a certain process of our society, that is, a phase of our culture that seems clearly formed and displayed in terms of a limited iconoclastic norm. It is also certain that he describes this characteristic as toxic or even devastating in our society. It must also be evident to some degree that Puritanism is one aspect of the romantic notion. It is a retreat from the reality of life through the ego-denial and flagellation doorways.

The transformation from this focus into theology is quickly rendered as just another way of escaping from existence. When describing his works, O'Neill's approach towards the hierarchical type of secular Christianity has often inspired opponents as one of utmost importance. No writer deeply engaged in understanding contemporary life should resist contemplating the specific dimension of it. The Church has always claimed to have a remedy to the evidently unavoidable issue of man, and there have been undoubtedly times in the history of humanity when a very real answer has been given. O'Neill has not overlooked the question of contemporary Christianity, but

his works offer enough proof that he was involved in the impact of Christian ideology on the affairs of his protagonists even from the very first moment. This is anticipated from a playwright who lets the content of the man of his craft battle the dark, indefinable and unpredictable powers of existence (ibid.). The protagonists who are certainly depicted as Christians in O'Neill's plays are generally less noble than those who are not so identified.

God, as a deity, is a term that always appears on the tongue of the protagonists of O'Neill, but as other characters talk to Him, it is not with respect or affection but with hate and resentment. Therefore, such characters have lost their confidence in a virtuous lord of the world or some sort of dictator. God stays only as a signifier of faith that is either empty or starving to death. However, since the terminology of any faith always lingers like a ghost to haunt the human spirit after the actual belief itself no longer exists, in O'Neill's plays, females and males use God as an iconic example for the unnamed forces of wickedness. In his *Desire Under the Elms*, like many other plays by O'Neill, the idea is that the universe is godless, yet because the drama needs to use the indirect form, O'Neill also lets it seem that there is a malignant power that dominates the planet.

The *Web* is the very first play by O'Neill, which tells a prostitute's tale in her attempts to protect her convict boyfriend from the hands of justice. She will not succeed, and the result is sad. The crucial thing to remember is that O'Neill was obsessed with the question of justice or, in a wider context, with the idea of human nature in his first theatrical venture. It offers the framework for his first piece, good and evil in war, right and wrong in relation to society, and thus is seen from a subjective perspective. Such a topic was to develop and flourish into huge portions in O'Neill's recent work, thereby resulting in *Strange Interlude*. With a talent unsurpassed in contemporary drama, O'Neill was able to generalize his theme to such a degree that no matter how amazing his specific topic might seem at first sight, a deeper examination of the topic still shows that the individual is actually common, and the characters moving in the dark disaster on the

stage play their roles against the context of the whole (Coolidge, 1961, p.150)

O'Neill's considerable success as a playwright depends greatly on the fact that he has had something to say about a contemporary social structure that deserves to be mentioned (ibid). His method and methodology were admirable way of understanding the conflicts arising out of the conditions of the modern age. The value of O'Neill as a moral theorist rests in the way he discusses the psychological dimensions of the contemporary social structure. He refers to the insatiable culture's illness. He not only emphasizes the fact that employees are abused to increase profit but also shows how they are stripped of the sense of harmony and psychological health-being that comes by doing something that seems crucial and essential in our contemporary machine-made world (Winther, 1961, p.198).

For some critics, O'Neill is a pessimist writer. For instance, Carl Van (1890) stated, "*O'Neill's view of life, it is now clear, is of something which unaccountably frustrates the individual spirit. The fault may lie in life itself, or it may lie in the insufficiency of given individuals*" (p.106). As a playwright, O'Neill did not attempt who they are but proceeds to create dumb, wretched characters who end up being better than perfect (ibid.). In the traditional term, O'Neill is not a pessimist; he is not concerned with the ultimate destiny of man, nor is he distressed by the prospect that man and all his works inevitably vanish into the void of space, a frozen and lost shrine to the vagaries of the creative process. In this world, in which he must live and protect himself if life is to have a meaning, his pessimism is men. Therefore, his pessimism was embedded in an individual rather than Christ or the universe. For other commentators, O'Neill is a pessimist who enjoys life, and affection is so strong that he cannot stay stubborn and unmoved by his current loss, thus preventing his future joy (Winther, 1962, p.216). He enjoys life well enough to criticize anyone who would confront his truth and make the best of it. His protagonists carry this representation of his theory of living. Anything else they might be told, they do not twitch. Among



everything else, they are courageous and demanding; it is this attribute that brings hope to the worst disaster of O'Neill (Ibid).

As for comedy, O'Neill's works are not in their strongest way free of the comedic element. So O'Neill's works are never carefree or lost humour that cheerfully and enthusiastically shun the sorrows and disasters of life. His primary focus as he introduces humour is to deepen the dramatic mood. It is the tragic cynical sort of humour that is "the moral child of the grave scene in Hamlet" (Winther, 1961, p. 236). Hence, the atmosphere of O'Neill's play becomes loud and anxious. It is forced humour that is similar to sadness, as it emerges from an acute understanding of the surreal absurdity of all things. For him, tragedy was the main form, but the comic element was not missing in his works, nor is the form and methodology of humour outside the limits of its skill. The evidence of this is *Oh, Wilderness!* Whereby the setting of the play shifts in a soft satirical atmosphere. The protagonists in this play are not too intricate; their life situations are not too difficult to make a satisfying and successful solution.

The last significant issue regarding O'Neill's works to be stated is that the title selected for his works is clearly symbolic, and in addition to this sign, irony exists. The mixture of language and irony in the titles shows the severe logical essence of O'Neill's imagination, for his irony is not scornful of man's misfortune, but it is cynical and compassionate (Winther, 1961, p. 270). His bitterness stems from his compassion for man's misery, and bitterness follows his knowledge that man submits to deprivation in the midst of wealth. Thus, lots of deprivation will be recognized to extend to both the mind and the body. There is an abundance of future redemption in O'Neill's play that is withheld from that entire struggle in his fictional universe, and the firewall may be ripped down if the man had the strength and intelligence to realize that his oppression is self-imposed.

His early one-act plays demonstrate, based on their themes, that O'Neill often found his writing to be intense and symbolic. The system, which falls first in the order of composition, symbolizes the network of life from which man escapes only through freedom from existence itself. In

*Beyond the Horizon*, that is a term that indicates the longed-for paradise the man pursues endlessly, but he is eternally prohibited from achieving by the rules of nature. There is a mixture of sympathy and cynicism in this description that is constantly extended to the subject matter of the drama. In *Emperor Jones*, the same ironic touch is intensified; something is so absurd about the connection of the elite with the name of Jones. As the play progresses and the spectral manifestations of Jones' memory emerge before him, where each is seeking the remainder of his self-acquired noble rank, the absurd shifts of compassion and empathy and horror are watching the emperor's disintegration into the fear-stricken image of a helpless Negro escaping from imagined horror into the jaws of death.

#### **1.4 The World of Samuel Beckett**

The brutality of the French drama in the postwar years derives in part from physical explicitness with which the symbol of antihuman has been portrayed. Samuel Beckett is one of those who have been fascinated by the precarious world of *Grenzsituation*, that moment of dramatic equilibrium when the maximal statement of the antihuman is still balanced by the evidence of its human informant. After the performance of *Waiting for Godot* in 1953 and again after that of *End Game* in 1957, critics were convinced that Beckett contrived an absolute negation of human existence, that is, a drama situated beyond extinction. It took more time and other plays to draw the attention of the critics from the surface of these stagnant waters to the life of their microorganisms (Alan, 1990, p. 88).

It was merely a matter of insight. That life was discernible from the beginning, even upon the barren flatlands of *Godot*, variously described as a platter (in the original) and aboard. Upon this apocalyptic tableland of emptiness and desolation (a road in the country with a tree), there is a person, a Chaplinesque tramp- the parody of man as a clotheshorse, with a bowler hat and outlandish shoes: upon this mockery of the landscape is the mockery of a man (ibid). However, in man, there is an inherent distinction, a significance which mockery does not dispel as effortlessly as it dispels the significance of the landscape. The tramp is Estragon, the tarragon of the

French recipes. He is joined by another tramp, with a Slavic name, Vladimir. These two will be witnesses to the ineffectuality of common sense.

Samuel Beckett's name very often characterizes the absurd theatre. Beckett is absurd, but he is not absurd in the contemporary interpretation of ridicule, which worth nothing but an earlier denotation of "out of harmony" (Hugh, 1968, p. 9). Beckett's theory is ridiculous as it shows, like existentialism, that is a feeling of philosophical frustration at the irony (lack of harmony) of the human experience (Ibid). Beckett's irony goes to that of the existentialists who introduced their ideas, albeit ludicrous, in "*fully coherent and logically designed thought*" (ibid.). Dramatic absurdists have one step further by seeking to accomplish unity between the basic premise of absurdity and the form in which it is conveyed (ibid.). Beckett sets on stage a rugged tree and a low mound around which the absurd play of Didi, Gogo, Pozzo, and Lucky takes place.

Beckett does not present plays that assume to know the answers. In this regard, the literary historian Hugh Kenner explains, "*we are not like dogs excited by the scent of invisible meat, to snap after some item of information which the author grasps very well and is holding just behind the curtains*" (Kenner, 1961, p. 11). An art that does not claim to know the answers became a phenomenon in itself at the moment. Richard Coe terms it as an "art of failure" (Coe, 1964, p. 23). However, if the art is an attempt to recreate the world, it is doomed to fail because the world is full of failure. Words themselves are the key component in the art of failure: they create an unbreakable language barrier that prevents us from understanding who we are, what we are, forever (Coe, 196, p.11). Coe outlines the themes which contributed to the spread of Beckett's art based on his opinion:

The discontinuity of personality, the failure of love and friendship, the failure of communication, the necessary solitude of the artist, the belief that suffering is the one force powerful enough to establish, even the teeth of time, the identity of self (p. 18)

Further, Jan Bruck (1981) adds:

Although Beckett recognizes the protective function of consciousness and voluntary memory, he regards the loss of involuntary memory and the concurrent atrophy of experience, which has rendered the story a useless instrument of communication, as the sign of a fundamental inability of the modern artist to communicate, as the virtual end of the communication (p. 168).

When one reads what critics normally write about Beckett, they might strike by the negatively, weighed down actuality. One may also find that there are critics who look beyond the negative aspect, albeit including it and see at least a glimmer of something positive in Beckett's work. Jack MacGowran, an actor who worked on many of Beckett's productions and for whom Beckett wrote *Eh Joe*, says that Beckett "writes about human distress, not human despair" (Toscan, 1986, p. 215). MacGowran also notes that Didi and Gogo, despite the seeming uselessness of their existence, are "interdependent; one needs the other" (ibid). The director Herbert Blau suggests, "*as for the despair that is "the objective content" of Beckett's plays, he has given the best answer to that: If it were all dark, everything would be easy, but there is light, too*" (ibid). "*He also argues that in each of Beckett's plays, there is a strong sense of something forming, flowering into shape, something never perceived till this moment or only just becoming attainable*" (ibid).

Therefore, little consensus exists concerning Beckett's works. Scholars frequently duplicate Beckettian absurdity with its inherent contradictions in their own discussions of Beckett. "Beckett's plays are nourished on fundamental tensions—words wrung from silence, words belied by gestures, gestured wrested from inertia, darkness invaded by light, hope betrayed by habit, passion eroded by compassion, mind divorced from feeling, mismatched couples straining to parts" (Cohn, 1983, p. 12). Thus, if we accept that we live amid absurdity and contradiction, Beckett's work is a realistic recreation of our world. Yet some say that in Beckett's drama, "objects, motivations, exposition, and even explanation, the paraphernalia of the realistic theatre, have been cancelled and omitted" (Gordon, 1990, p. 13). What remains is immense—we are tempted to say infinite—the landscape of potentiality. The modern drama critic Andrew Kennedy

concurr, noting that Beckett is “the leading non-realistic Western writer of the second half of the twentieth century” (Kennedy, 1989, p.1).

The contradictions concerning whether Beckett is or is not really can, to an extent, be resolved by considering the words of realist and realistic in context. Gordon (1990, p. 13) believes that Beckett does not belong to the realistic dramatic movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Ibid). His stages do not resemble the drawing rooms of Ibsen, Chekov, or Shaw. In addition, his character’s dialogues do not echo Pinero or Galsworthy. In the literary jargon, Beckett is not a realist, neither does Beckett’s drama resemble the nonrealistic, the dream plays of expressionism’s predecessor, Steinberg, or the brash spectacle of Artaud (Ibid). In this respect, Beckett does not represent a product of non-realistic movements of surrealism/expressionism or the avant-garde drama of the first half of the twentieth century. Further, Beckett avoids the world of abstractions, the world of dreams, a world of a physical fact, for a tersely literal world of death, life, isolation, that the world we all inhabit. In this view, Samuel Beckett is a realist who deprives his characters of the facade, exposes what kind of creatures they are, leaving them to deal with what has left: a world of minds and a physical fact with little basis in such a world (Ibid).

Beckermann argues that the audience often sees themselves as the characters in Beckett’s play *"the audience listen to themselves on recorders; men read newspapers instead of listening to their own wives' nonsense Characters not being listened to or heard on Beckett's stages pull at the people's experience of daily life"* (Beckermann, 1986, p. 151). Torrance states, *"If Beckett's stage is a world of fluttering dreams, yet this world is doubtless and occupy our daily life without coming to know it"* (Beckermann, 1986, p. 95). However, if Samuel Beckett’s plays clearly reveal people, why do some critics write that not all people find an opportunity of identifying themselves in Beckett’s play or living through their tragedy? (Gordon, 1990, p.15) It is possible that one is able to relate to the characters in Beckett's play, but often he or she is unable because he/she does not realize enough and know enough about their own life (ibid).

Whatever the assumptions one might draw about the truth of Beckett's plays, it seems obvious that one "*repay repeated and careful reading*" (Barnard, 1970, xi) because, in some ways, Beckett's plays are "*related to the old problems of eternity and time of human suffering, and the nature and the purpose of the real self within*" (Ibid). "*Beckett is not offering one [a response to the question of the nature of the real self], what he provides is the questions*" he "*widens our consciousness*" (Ibid).

While supposing Beckett's uniqueness, some scholars have examined Beckett through the philosophic impacts they consider manifested in his plays. The very nature of philosophy presumes correctly that, in some sense, his works discuss the nature of existence. Homan, in his investigation of Beckett's aesthetics, briefly discusses the influence of existentialism on Beckett, including other writers like Vico, Descartes, Geulincx, Bishop Berkeley, Malebranche, and Schopenhauer (Homan, 1984, p. 11).

In most of Beckett's plays, the reader can observe the use of repetition. This repetition invokes a sense of intimacy and circularity, a cycle that appropriately resonances with the natural world, and an intimacy with time, born of an ongoing pattern of behaviour, a sense of "duration." In *Waiting for Godot*, for example, Beckett first startled audiences by breaking tradition, apparently abandoning the unity of time and substituting it with a place outside time, that a place of unchanging repetition, in which one day becomes indistinguishable in memory from the next and how much time passes remains unknown. By dispensing with such a tradition, drama became more mimetic. Thus, there is no climax, no plot, no falling action, no beginning, and no end; all events are the same in Beckett's play (Gordon, 1990, p.37).

Contradiction is another feature that one may notice in Beckett's plays. It is argued that in Beckett's drama, the contradictions operate in two levels: verbal and situational. The situational contradiction indicates the inconsistencies that are consciously ignored or not realized by the characters, but they are clearly obvious to the audience. For example, in *Waiting For Godot*, Gogo and Didi both recoil from the world outside

themselves. Even though this is verbally evident, often Beckett's stage instructions cue behaviour from the actors that specifically aim at relating this polarity to the audience. In act one, when Lucky falls, Gogo and Didi are taught to "*turn towards him, half wishing half fearing to go to his assistance*" (Beckett, 1954, p. 15). Also, Gogo and Didi leave at night. However, no one from the audience sees the actual parting, but the audience sees their reunion at the opening of the two acts. The contradiction involves the fact that they desire to reunite after the boring day they have spent in the first Act (Gordon, 1990, p. 45).

Moving from the situational to the verbal contradictions, contradictions (again) is not certainly recognized by the characters of Beckett's plays, but they are often obvious to the audience. The situational contradictions 'acted' by Gogo and Didi through the stage directions Act I are again stressed in Act II verbally. Gogo and Didi want to help Lucky and Pozzo when they fall, but they hold back not only because of fear but basic ignorance as to why and how to help. Gogo fears being kicked again by Lucky, thinking that it is their chance to beat him up in return. Didi desires a reward for helping Pozzo, but then he contradicts himself through a speech that shows their humanity: "*It is not every day that we are needed*" (Beckett, 1954, p. 51). They should help Lucky and Pozzo to "*represent worthily the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us*" (Ibid). Another situational contradiction is verbally echoed through much of *Waiting for Godot*, where Gogo and Didi separate at times only to go back to the same bleak spot. Verbally, this forms like suggestions that the two men must part, combined with questions like why they remain together.

The last point to be mentioned here is related to Beckett's plays in silence. The characters in Beckett's plays are repetitive and within those contradictory repetitions. These contradictions and repetitions represent the dilemma of the human identity. The Beckettian character wishes to be united with the external world, but it can not because "*to do so means to annihilate the self; they turn then to silence only to discover that within silence lies the same pit of annihilation*" (Gordon, 1990, p. 99). "*The loss of*

*the ability to relate with others signals the end of identity, the end of an absurdity of existence, the encroachment of the dark, of death, of silence”* (ibid). In *Endgame*, Hamm wails, *"It's finished ....There'll be no more speech”*. In *Krapp Last Tape*, the silence is only broken by the recordings of Krapp’s own voice.



## Chapter Two

### Unseen Characters in O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*

Rudolph Stamm (1967) explains the struggle between O'Neill and the theatrical form. Stamm maintains that the absent character is among the techniques in the increased naturalism that English playwrights advanced and shaped most of his plays (p. 274). Stamm did not actually refer to the definite practices of this technique in the works of O'Neill, but he mentions that this particular technique served in most of O'Neill's plays (Ibid). The technique is not a new component in the plays of the English dramatist; it actually can be traced to the stage in O'Neill's career when he decided to adopt naturalism. This element prevailed in most of O'Neill's early writings. Byrd states, "if the use of the absent character had surfaced only for few times in his writings, it would be very likely to dismiss this technique as a part of his experiential style" (2000, p.20). "The use of the unseen characters is repeated in his plays, from the very initial drafts to his concluding masterworks" (Ibid). One of O'Neill's plays in which he vividly uses this technique is *Strange Interlude* (1928).

*Strange Interlude* is a naturalistic tragedy, which was written between 1926 and 1927. The play was first produced in New York on January 30, 1928. The Pulitzer Prize for the year was given to O'Neill for this play. *Strange Interlude* has two parts, consisting of nine acts and covering twenty-five years, and explores the history of Nina Leeds and the three men in her life. Sam Evans is bumbling and innocent who is grateful that she married him. Dr. Edmund Darrell prides himself on his cool scientific detachment till Nina destroys his independence by pulling him into an orbit around himself. Charles Marsden is a family friend, a genteel novelist, and a 'poor devil' who spent his life attempting not to find out which sex he belongs to. The play is somewhat outdated, yet it had impressive achievement; the play shows how O'Neill was interested in involving new variations of the modified monologue, particularly a familiar scenic unit (Tiusanen, 1968, 206).

Professor Leeds enters the scene and starts talking with Marsden about Nina. He tells him that she will be here “*Nina has totally changed, you will see*” (O’Neil, p. 13). Through the conversation between Leeds and Marsden, the audience is introduced to the character of Nina. Although she has not appeared on the stage yet, the main information about her is presented by her father and Charlie Marsden. Leeds tells Marsden that she dreams about Gordon all the time “*she is not herself, she is a sick girl*” (Ibid, p. 14). Leeds tells the audience about Nina’s reaction when she heard Gordon’s news. When they were informed about Gordon’s death, Nina’s face becomes like “grey putty”, and her father says she has been dreaming about Gordon for many months, and “*look of hate has grown on her face towards me since she received the news of Gordon’s death*” (Ibid). Leeds tells Charlie (and the audience) that after the death of Gordon, Nina has gone the opposite extreme; she started to see everybody like a fool, and she has lost all discrimination or wish to discriminate. Charlie tells Leeds that he found the place where Gordon’s plane fell, and he tells her father that Nina herself has been searching for Gordon’s body. Leeds and Marsden continue to talk about Gordon, and based on their speech, the audience begins to know that Leeds never loved Gordon. He says he blames Gordon for Nina’s attitude towards him. Marsden says, “*Charlie, It isn’t Gordon, it is his ghost, memory, you could call it, plaguing my daughter, whose impact I have come to dread, it is awful how she changed*” (Ibid, p. 20). Leeds assumes that Nina hates him because of Gordon. Milkey (1959) argues that the first act of *Strange Interlude* shows that professor Leeds is the cause of Nina’s bitterness by his interference in her life, “*to Nina he is God the father, and far from being a divine God, he is just her male parent*” (p. 6).

Leeds starts to narrate the unseen meeting between him and Gordon. The unheard conversation between Gordon and Nina’s father explains the reasons that encouraged Nina to hate her father. Leeds explains that Nina has a reason for hating him, but he thinks he acted for the best of her. It appeared that just after Gordon and Nina decided to get married, Nina’s father tells Gordon that the latter marriage of Nina would be unfair to her. He also tells him that if he really loves Nina, he must not marry her, and

then he asks him to keep this conversation secret. Leeds thought that Gordon might be killed in the flying service, and he is likely to leave Nina alone, maybe with a child with no resources. Leeds tells Gordon, “*in fairness to my daughter, you have to wait until you come back and begin to institute your position in the world*” (Ibid). Up to this moment of the play, Nina and Gordon are totally absent from the stage, but the audiences, as well as the readers of *Strange Interlude*, have known the story of the two characters from Leeds and Marsden’s perspectives. The impression has been made that Nina and Gordon are the most significant characters in O’Neill’s play. Nina thinks that her father has destroyed her happiness; she thinks that he was waiting for Gordon’s death, and he was overjoyed when he heard the news of Gordon’s death. Based on this unseen meeting between the onstage character, Leeds, and the absent character, Gordon, as Winther argues, belong to very different backgrounds. Leeds is a well-educated man who calculates every detail in his life and who leaves no chance to coincidence. However, his view towards life has trapped his daughter, Nina, in false ideals, which later lead to her tragic actions. Gordon, on the other side, is the contrast of Leeds, who enjoys the moment without thinking of the consequences (Ibid).

Byrd suggests that the important function of Gordon Shaw, as an absent character, is

his capacity to intensify empathy between Nina, the onstage character, and audience members. When an onstage character is haunted by an absent character, dead or living, the present figure is relating not to a real person but to the contents of his imagination (p. 24).

The members of the audience, especially those who use their fantasy to imagine the absent character, are “*trapped in the same psychological activity*” (Ibid). The onstage characters, with the audience, imagine the absent characters with them, feel their pain, and thus enter the life of the play more deeply.

Certainly, imagination is the main word that helps the reader understand why Eugene O’Neill would favour absent or offstage characters

instead of the seen ones. O'Neill is the successor of a dramaturgical custom in which "*the absent character is a long-lasting if the abandoned device*" (p. 25). O'Neill believes that drama exposes the minor to bring the great, depicts the incomplete to propose the complete. Because he/she is aroused by the smallest means—frequently the words of the actors who are on the stage, the absent character involves the audience members in the imagination that is at the core of the drama. In *Strange Interlude*, the words of the characters on the stage evoke the imagination of the audience about Gordon Shaw.

*Strange Interlude* depicts the life of Ninaas, a lustful and possessive woman. "*She is a fascinating monster embodying all that is both purest and blackest in woman's soul*" (O'Neil, p. 108)

As a child, she is disciplined and protected by her father, Professor Leeds:

Little Nina has never been permitted to touch something. She used to lie on his lap snorkelling toward him, sleeping in the dark outside the curtains cosy In his arms in front of the fireplace, visions like sparks growing to die in the freezing levs, safe-drifting to sleep Daddy's kid. You're not.?(p. 80)

Later In life, Nina falls in love with Gordon, who is an aviator, but her stern. Puritanical father does not permit her to marry this man. Her lover is killed in the war, and Nina feels she must leave home and do some charitable work that will help pay for this man's death. Nina serves as a nurse in a hospital taking care of crippled soldiers and becomes "rebel and promiscuous". When Nina returns home, she finds that her father is dead, but she lacks any feelings for his death.

Eventually, Nina marries, but it is to a man who does not love her. After her marriage, Nina is told that she must not have children, for there is a history of insanity in her husband's family. Nina, however, has a son by her lover and lets her husband believe that it is his child.

As the years' pass, Nina's son grows older. He is now a man and has found his own love and becomes engaged. Nina desperately struggles to win

the love of her son and to keep him with her, but he departs with his young love, and he becomes a rebel and possesses the same spirit of youth Nina once had.

Each situation in the life of Nina Leeds is symbolized by a man she needs or tries to possess to fulfil her own life. Clark (1946) argues:

into the life of Nina are woven elements from the lives of many men: of Charles Mars den, the mother-ridden, of Gordon (an Ideal and a romantic memory); of her husband, Sam; of her lover, Edmund Darrell; and finally of Gordon, her. For Nina, no one of these men is enough (p. 113).

Nina tries desperately to find completion in these men, but Gordon was the only man who could have satisfied her emotional needs. Her son is the only other man who could have recaptured Gordon's love, but he leaves Nina, too. "*Each of these men fulfils only in part the functions Gordon Shaw might have satisfied completely - that is her tragedy*" (Quinn, 1936, p. 253)

Nina fails in her quest for happiness and finds it impossible to believe in God. She broods about her loss of youth and love; she is constantly obsessed by the memory of Gordon. Her life has been tragic, for it has been a life of emotional suffering and fulfilment, and a life of sin, "*Nina's battle cry is one of O'Neill's own favourites - 'Life is a lie'*". Cargill (1961) argues:

As in *Strange Interlude*, O'Neill resolutely attacks a subject dear to psychoanalysts, that is of frustration, he, O'Neill extracts tragedy from it; for the protagonist, Nina, who lost her lover in the war and will remain a woman unfulfilled in her deepest needs and impulses all her life, is still al-ways a subject, a spirit, a free human soul; and frustration is like a plague, a profound unparalleled soul (p. 361).

The conflict of good and evil is the struggle of Anna Christie, Ephraim Cabot, and Nina Leeds. They are human beings "*facing life, fighting against the eternal odds, not conquering but perhaps being conquered*" (Gelb, 1962, p. 355). For Anna, her life of prostitution will always be a part of her; she must live with it. Ephraim's life of lust and loneliness continues. Nina's life of frustration and sin must go on. Their struggle to dominate life, even though it is unsuccessful, continues. Besides, their struggle to obtain a part of life beyond their reach always remains a hope.

In O'Neill's play, there is the extensive use of various dramatic tools that provoke the audience to imagine an absent character. Among these tools are asides, masks, soliloquy, and monologue. The term 'mask' enables the audience to rebound the psychic arena of personal emotion that "*run deep down the character*" (Tiusanen, p. 216). O'Neill use of masks is not simply to disclose the internal conflicts immersed within the personal consciousness but also to "*illustrate the disputes between the multilayered configuration of subconscious and conscious*" (Ibid). The character's inner thoughts are divulged to the audience through asides and soliloquy. In addition, to disclose the characters' conscious mind and the language of the subconscious immersed within the character's psyche, these theatrical tools bring an offstage character into the scene through imagination. One of the most prevailing techniques in *Strange Interlude* is an interior monologue. The main characters in the play indulge themselves in a sort of desire which sates three major drives, first, "*to obtain what they desire*", second, "*to look rational in the want of their needs, whatever unfair they are*", and third "*to give an illustration about those who remain unseen on the stage*" (O'Neil, p. 218). The most vivid example of this technique can be seen in Charlie's subconscious mind, which has allowed him to attain a leeway through Nina every time he imagines his offstage mother.

O'Neill's dramas, as Byrd argues, dramatize how characters might be hunted by the previous versions of themselves; it is possible that the most vivid version of this can be found in *Strange Interlude* (p. 24). Marsden yearns so strongly for Nina's younger self when she is engaged to Gordon Shaw, and the latter becomes a character in the play. Nina suffers in the same way, as does Marsden. The memories "*fabricated by these literary figures, as they recurrent their previous lives are occupied by a range of unseen characters*" (Ibid). Incomplete or failed relations with these absent characters intensify the seen characters' yearning for the previous years of their life. The "*futility and pain of their longings could have been diluted if O'Neill presented some flashbacks in which the seen characters emerged on the stage with loved ones and important acquaintances*" (Ibid).

Eugene O'Neill's ambitious *Strange Interlude* expressionistically utilizes absence to juxtapose the inner workings of the human mind ironically with the outward and often duplicitous manifestations of that mind. This results in a rather long and unwieldy work. As the structure of the play is tightly interwoven with the content, not only is the play about absence, but it utilizes absence to make a point about the content. *Strange Interlude* attempts to depict the potential depth of the psychological fixation that can possess an individual who fails to adequately accommodate an absence, namely death. Nina Leeds's chosen method of accommodating a dead beau in an effort to clone a replacement for the missing lover is contingent upon the willing participation of others, and her associates are more than disposed to play along with her overt charade to fulfil their own desires.

*Strange Interlude* is perhaps one of the most curious and heavy plays among O'Neill's works. Not only is it lengthy, but it is also quite tedious. In one sense, it is a wonderful defence of expressionism, as the extremely stylized structure functions in the service of hyper-realism. It foregrounds the disparity between thoughts and actions by incessantly alternating between what a character is thinking and doing. This alternation highlights the gap that exists between socially acceptable behaviour and personal impulses and motivation. Indeed, one of the absences of *Strange Interlude* is truth, and only it is not absent for the audience. The ironic structure of the play reveals the truth of the characters' thoughts while preserving the realistic gap that exists between actions and the apparent motivations that give rise to them. The audience sees the world from a vivisected perspective as the players interact without the benefit of knowing what each other are really thinking and why they do what they do. We must, voyeuristically and almost guiltily, see the world of the drama as perpetually duplicitous, and, as the play progresses, it becomes accustomed to the relative absence of truth in the actions of the players. To quote Charlie Marsden, "*we must all be crooks where happiness is concerned*" (p. 67).

However, structurally, we are presented with a framework of alternating displacement as the thoughts of a character ceaselessly and structurally dislodge the actions. The design of the play is almost a metaphor for the process that the audience observes. The thoughts of a character literally and physically displace the actions of the character on the stage, as the thoughts of individual take precedence over the actions of the person in the unedited privacy of the mind.

More specifically, actions are depicted as the duplicitous by-products of thoughts through the flickering interplay of presence and absence. The structure of the play physically assures that thoughts and actions are never in concordance, and, indeed, the character's actions, at least those that we see, seldom if ever are motivated by what they claim. Naturally, then in one instance where Nina Leeds does state her true thoughts— when her actions match what she is thinking-Charlie Marsden reacts with shocked disbelief "*Oh, come now, Nina! You've been reading books. Those don't sound like your thoughts*" (p. 74).

The narrative of the play is where absence is most obvious in *Strange Interlude*, for the kernel event around which the plot revolves is the death of Gordon, where the First World War combats the aviator, Gordon Shaw. His absence affects the lives of all of the principles as a result of their association with Nina; her attempts to accommodate his absence essentially drive the narrative.

Nina's postmortem submission to his memory first takes a decidedly carnal turn. Edmund Darrell, who is a scientist at the hospital where Nina is employed as a nurse, succinctly interprets her behaviour:

More and more, Nina has been giving way to a dark yearning for martyrdom. Gordon moved away without-well; let's just assume she got married. The war had destroyed him. And, by claiming to love them, she started to hate herself and to try to kill herself and at the same time giving happiness to the separate war victims. And any encounter of this nature has made her more prey than ever before to a guilty conscience and more eager to punish herself! (p. 87).



As she describes it, "*I have given my cool, clean body to men with hot hands and greedy eyes*", but "*Count them all as one, and that one a ghost of nothing*" (96). This drive to engage in sexual relations with wounded veterans, in an attempt to accommodate Gordon's physical absence, paradoxically results in guilt, as she perceives herself to be cheating him. Appropriately, it is only a dream about Gordon that ends her promiscuity:

Until one night, not long ago, I had a dream of Gordon plunging down from the sky into the fire, and he stared at me with such sad burning eyes, and all my poor maimed men, too, seemed to gaze out of his eyes with a burning agony, and I ended up screaming, my own eyes burning. And then I saw what a fool I had been—a fool who was guilty (p. 95)

This confession to Charlie verifies Darrell's diagnosis of her condition that "*That species of dead is so invulnerably alive! Even a doctor couldn't kill one*" (p. 90).

The situation also bears a striking resemblance to other aspects of Nina's life throughout the play; Nina's liaisons with the wounded veterans are an attempt to somehow replace Gordon. Likewise, her confession to Charlie also reveals this subconscious proclivity with regard to her father's absence, for whom Charlie sometimes becomes a replacement:

I wanted to sprint back home and 'fess up, confess to you how horrible I was, and be disciplined! Oh, I must be forgiven by Charlie, out of pity for me, so that I can forgive myself! And now, dead father, you are the only one (p. 94).

When her father punishes her by demanding "*in a matter-of-fact tone that is mockingly like her father's*" (p. 96) that she marries Sam Evans, she sleepily respond, "*Thank you, Father. You've been so kind. You've let me off too easily*" (p. 96).

Her words are more prescient than she knows. They all do let her off too easily, for Sam, Charlie, and Darrell each plays a role in perpetuating her fixation with the dead Gordon. Each in his own way willingly supports Nina's quests to fill voids by becoming the substitutes she chooses to replace absences. They do so for selfish reasons, and despite the psychological toll,

such a behaviour exacts from Nina in the long run. She indirectly recognizes how their individual self-interest plays into her schemes:

The three of my men! In me, I sense their impulses come together! To build one beautiful, full male desire that I consume. And am whole, and am whole. They are dissolving in me, and their lives are my lives. And I'm pregnant with three of them! Well, husband! Godfather! Lover! Dad! And for the fourth man! The little one! Little Gordon! Little Gordon! Well, he's also mine! ( pp. 168-169)

As was stated above, Charlie plays the part of a surrogate father when Nina needs him in that role, alternating between a father figure and an uncle who more closely resembles a maiden aunt. However, what he really wants is to possess her to be her husband and to play whatever role she requests that ensures that he will remain useful to her and, at the very least, nearby. His efforts eventually pay off, for he and Nina finally converge in a quasi-incestuous parody of marriage that is "*beyond desire*". To quote Marsden (p. 222), a marriage that Nina muses upon in Act Seven: "*dear Charlie, what a perfect lover he would make for one's old age*" (p. 180). Yet she still confuses Charlie, willingly or unconsciously, with his various incarnations (not to mention confusing Gordon Shaw with her son, his namesake, as O'Neill underscores her obsession with a full circle closure right down to the aeroplane): "*Gordon is dead, Father. I've just had a cable. What I mean is, he flew away to another life--my son, Gordon, Charlie. So we're alone again- -just as we used to be*" (p. 221).

Sam, as has been stated above, is Nina's punishment for her early promiscuity. However, Sam as a progenitor initially plays into her scheme of accommodation by providing her with a fetus that will, as he believes, grow to be like Gordon. The child is deemed to be a suitable replacement for Gordon because she convinces herself that it really is not Sam's child, as she tells Darrell of the aborted fetus:

God, Ned, I enjoyed it more than I ever loved everything, including Gordon, in my lifetime! It seems at times that Gordon must have been his true parent that Gordon must have come to me in a dream when I was sleeping next to Sam! (p.126)

After the abortion to eliminate the possibility of passing on Sam's genetic heritage of insanity, naturally enough, she seeks to replace it with a healthy child. Hence, Darrell, chosen to be the sperm donor, willingly enters into her accommodation schemes. He rationalizes his participation, acknowledging the contradictory nature of his actions, but curiously, for a scientist with a psychological bent, ignores or misses the effects his actions will have on her psyche:

Am I right to advise this.. . yes, it is clearly the rational thing to do . . .  
but this advice betrays my friend!. . no, it saves him!. . it saves his wife  
and if a third party should know a little happiness is he any poorer, am I  
the less his friend because I saved him? (p.129)

This child is the last of Nina's accommodations to be discussed and the most twisted manifestation of her preoccupation with Gordon Shaw. Nina at once attempts to recreate a living Gordon through the agency of her son, but at the same time, she believes that the dead Gordon supernaturally shared parentage with the living. As stated above, the child is conceived by Darrell, raised by Evans, nurtured by Charlie, and is named after the deceased aviator. While this obsession is Nina's, young Gordon's three fathers exhibit symptoms of Nina's illness as surely as if they were infected. Evans admired Gordon and considers him as the ideal role model for his son: "*I want him to justify the name of Gordon and be a bigger star than Gordon ever was*" (p.156). In addition, although Darrell always sarcastically invokes the name of the dead Gordon "*Oh, come on, Sam! Surely no one could ever touch Gordon in anything*" (p.190), he even rightly observes that at least psychologically from Nina's perspective, his parentage was merely incidental in light of her fixation, just as Sam's parentage was psychologically suspect about their aborted first child:

I'm fairly confident that Gordon is not my son if the genuinely deep heart of the reality is understood! For you, I was just a body. You used the first Gordon to come back to life again. I've never been more to you than a substitution for your deceased boyfriend! Gordon is actually the son of Gordon! (p. 200)

By the play's end, the name of Gordon has become a confused sort of mantra that reflects both the staying power of the preoccupation and the

illogical nature of attempting to fuse the illusory with the real. The following exchange, specifically Nina's response to Evans, is a linguistic muddle that reflects the internal confusion associated with concurrently honouring both a dead and a living Gordon. Young Gordon has just won the race in Act Eight:

EVANS: He was triumphant! It's been near, by Heaven! The biggest competition ever in rowing history! He is the greatest oarsman ever created by Heaven. (Hugging Nina and licking her frantically) Are you not satisfied, Nina? The Gordon of ours! The best ever of all! NINA: (torturedly—incoherently attempting to push out a last desperate protest) No! -Not like yours! —M In e!- —and Gordon's, too! Gordon is owned by Gordon! He was a Gordon of mine! —mine is his Gordon! EVANS: (soothingly, humouring her, loving her again) Of course, he's yours, darling, and Gordon Shaw's dead ringer, too! The flesh of Gordon! The spirit of Gordon! (p. 207)

The theme of love and passion links *Strange Interlude* to Othello, Antony, and Cleopatra. As a woman of a strong sexual passion, Nina, in many ways, recalls Cleopatra. Cleopatra has the ability to transform "*the triple pillar of the world ...into a strumpet's fool*", and Nina is capable of holding Ned Darrell, namely the doctor who might have been "the world's greatest neurologist" in the bondage of love. In fact, *Strange Interlude* can be seen beginning after the death of Antony or starting from the fifth act of Antony and Cleopatra. Shakespeare's fifth act deals with Cleopatra's approach to life and death after Antony's death, while O'Neill's play is concerned with Nina's attitude to life and death after Gordon's death. She is contrasting with Cleopatra since Cleopatra chooses life-in-death, while Nina takes the opposite that is death-in-life.

The theme of the living dead haunting the dead living dominates the whole play. Gordon, who is physically dead, is alive all the time and is powerful in his influence over the living people. Nina, though physically alive, is overburdened by her death wish and is virtually dead in many ways. The dead Gordon's presence, like the ghost in *Hamlet*, dominates throughout the play. Before Nina makes her first appearance on the stage, Professor

Leeds tells Marsden that Nina is haunted by Gordon's ghost. In the second act, Darrell tells Marsden that Nina always belongs to Gordon. When telling Darrell about her aborted child, Nina again reveals her late lover's continuous presence.

Nina is a depiction of a character who is haunted by a ghost and in cherishing a sick person longing for death. In *Strange Interlude*, the longing for death is a recurring phenomenon; Nina's death wish after Gordon's death is obvious. When the news comes, she completely breaks down, thus turning into a changed and lost individual with a face lacking youthful beauty. From that traumatic point on, everything is dead for her, and she is virtually a dead person. She is callous and unable to feel sorry for her father's death. If Hamlet is "too much in the sun," Nina is too much in the shadow of the lover. Besides, Nina holds her father guilty for Gordon's death and the failure of the consummation of their love. When love is impossible with the death of the lover, life becomes death. All the living men to Nina are dead. Even before his physical death, Professor Leeds is already dead in Nina's mind. "I'm sorry, Dad, I'm sorry. You know, for me, you were dead for a long time. When Gordon died, all the men died" (p.509).

Without Gordon, life is empty and meaningless. It is "a long drawn out lie with a sniffling sigh at the end!" (p.522). Her strongest wish to die comes in the middle of the play when she sees death as the reunion with God the Mother and the achievement of the final peace.

In the birth-pain of God the Woman, we might have pictured life as being produced. And we would realize that we, Her son, inherited suffering, and we would know that the pulse of our lives beats out of Her great heart, torn with the anguish of love and life. And we will feel that death meant the reconciliation with Her, the return to Her substance, the blood of Her blood, the peace of Her peace again! (p. 524).

O'Neill's theme of death as peace revealed in this speech will run through the other three tragedies\*. Like Hamlet's definition of death as "a consummation devoutly to be wished," death in O'Neill will be peace devoutly cherished, but it is seldom achieved. In Nina's conversation with

Sam's mother, O'Neill again emphasizes the theme when Mrs. Evans, when answering Nina's question whether she has found peace, says, "*There's peace in the green fields of Eden, they say! You got to die to find out!*" (p. 544)

This soliloquy of Nina's can also be seen as an answer to the problem troubling Hamlet in his "to be or not to be" soliloquy. Interestingly, both soliloquies fall in the centre of the plays. Willing to trade life for death and fight for sleep, Hamlet is at the same time tortured by the nature of the dream in sleep, which is the possible pain of the unknown world. Nina considers death as a reunion with God and the achievement of divine peace. While both characters nourish the death wish, Nina's is stronger in that she sees death as more beautiful and comforting than Hamlet does. Nobody is certain about the dream after the final sleep. While Hamlet is more bothered by the uncertainty, Nina is more resigned to death. What makes Nina's life more pathetic is that Hamlet fulfils his death wish in the end, whereas Nina is not allowed to die in a moment of glory with a glimpse of felicity. She is condemned to "*rot in peace*".

Apart from the revelation of a strong death wish, this passage also expresses O'Neill's theme of love as death, which will be carried through in the other three tragedies, and which is also a striking theme in Shakespeare's four tragedies, especially in *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. For both playwrights, love results in death, and death is the natural consequence of love. For Shakespeare, death of this kind is glorious and triumphant, whereas, for O'Neill, the whole thing moves in a miserable cycle, thereby reducing the human life to empty sufferings. From Nina's point of view, it is a "*trifling misery of death-born-of-birth*" (p.523) to which God is indifferent.

Marsden functions to intensify the theme of love as death. For him, love and a sexual relationship with Nina are only possible when both are dead and are buried in the same tomb. He says to Nina: "I would be happy if our union were merely to put our ashes in the same tomb, our urn side by side and touch each other" (p.629).

In the last act, Marsden again identifies love with death. He is picking some flowers for Nina when he runs into young Gordon and his girlfriend. He says: "Flowers have the ability to soothe sadness, truly. It was the finding that contributed to their general usage at funerals and marriages, I guess!" (p. 670).

Weddings and funerals are one thing. The ritual of marriage is identified with the ritual of burying the dead. Love is only achievable in death, and sexual passion can be only consummated when the lovers are buried in the same tomb. Any attempt at life and happiness will prove to be futile. When Gordon is brought down in flames, the only way for Nina to achieve love is to become ashes, too. Similarly, Juliet has to die to be reunited with Romeo; Desdemona's wedding sheets will be her shroud, and Othello has to kill himself to achieve love with Desdemona again. Further, Antony will rush to his death as a bridegroom rushing to his marriage bed, and the elaborate ritual Cleopatra performs at her death suggests the dazzling glory of marriage. For both playwrights, love means death. However, while Shakespeare's characters can put their wishes into action, most of O'Neill's characters cannot; Nina is one of those who wish to die, but she cannot die.

Nina's inability to fulfil her death wish results from her compulsion to seek a second chance for life. She is unable to remain in the same house with her father and is unable to follow Gordon's suit like Cleopatra. Nina chooses to sacrifice herself in another way. From that traumatic moment on, Nina longs to recapture the past and to lose herself through love relationships with other men. With Gordon's death, life in this world is meaningless to Nina. However, in a desperate attempt to make use of it, she tries to find meaning in life instead of death. She says to her father:

I'm expected to compensate! It is my utter responsibility! There's a dead Gordon! What use does my life have for me or for anybody? Still, I have to make sense of it by throwing it up! I have to learn to give myself, do you understand, give and give before I can render the gift of myself without scruple, without doubt, without joy but in his happiness for a man's happiness! When I have achieved this, I will discover

myself, and I will know how to start living my own life again! (O'Neill b, p.500)

In the belief that she must pay for not giving her body to the man she loves, she attempts to make use of the meaningless life to sacrifice herself until she can find meaning in life again. Like Cleopatra, Nina also finds life meaningless after her lover's death. However, unlike the magnificent queen, Nina does not have the courage to put an end to her life. She chooses to live under the delusion that she may start life again. However, her death-in-life experience will prove to be a failure.

In punishing herself and in her morbid longing for martyrdom, Nina tries to make love to Gordon through his fellow war victims. Instead of any self-fulfilment, this experience only brings her more sense of guilt. In another attempt to make life meaningful through love, Nina gets involved in love relationships with three male figures: Sam Evans, her husband; Ned Darrell, her lover; and Charles Marsden, her father's substitute.

Finally, Evan's death and young Gordon's departure serve to exorcise Nina the torment of Gordon Shaw. She reflects upon what these losses have taught her:

It was a disappointment when I had a baby, wasn't it? He did not supply me with satisfaction. The sons are their dads at all stages. They pass through the mother again in order to become their parent. Many of the Sons of the Father became losers! When they didn't die for us, they flew to other lives, and they couldn't remain with us; they couldn't keep us happy. (p.221)

But though the torment has passed, the demon- Nina's method of accommodating absence- is as rooted as ever. As the above passage reveals, she still sees young Gordon as the legatee of her former lover, and she still conflates her father and Charlie soon to be her husband: "*Thank you, Father--have I been wicked?--you're so good--dear old Charlie*" (p.222). At her statement, Charlie first "*winc[es] with pain*" ( p.222), resenting the notion that she perceives him as both her "*father and the Charlie of those days*" (p.222) long past, but soon acquiescently accepts his role as merely the cost of associating with her, a price that he has long paid since her father's death. Marsden realizes the truth of Mary Tyrone's well-known



epigram "*The past is the present . . . It's the future, too*" (p.87). Nina keeps each of the principles focused upon the past as a result of her fixation with Gordon Shaw. Realizing that she can never go back, so to speak, and be with her lost love, she attempts to recreate him, and in this way, the past encroaches upon the present.

## Chapter Three

### Absent Characters in Beckett's *Embers*

In 1955, the BBC, intrigued by the international attention given to the Paris production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, invited the author to write a radio play. Beckett was hesitant, but he wrote to his friend, namely Nancy Cunard “*Never thought about radio play technique but in the dead of the t'other night got a nice gruesome idea full of cartwheels and dragging of feet and puffing and panting which may or may not lead to something*” (Lake, 1984). It led to *All That Fall*, and four other plays were written specifically for the radio medium during the next twenty years: *Embers*, *Words and Music*, *Cascando*, and *Rough for Radio II*. It also led to a translation of Robert Pinget's *Manivelle* into what the BBC described as a “conversation piece for radio” (Fletcher, 1985). It is significant that Beckett's considerable reluctance to allow works written for one medium to be adapted to another probably has been more often and more casually relaxed for radio than for any other medium, including the stage. It is possible because, as Enoch Brater pointed out (Brate, 1986, p.5), there is a sense in which all Beckett's readers are listeners—a sup- a position made explicit in the staging of *Ohio Impromptu*. Once hooked, Beckett approached the challenge presented by radio with considerable enthusiasm, with an astute and innovative clarity about the unique characteristics and possibilities of the medium, and without condescension. Each of the radio plays a landmark in pioneering the development of acoustic art. The experiments in radio also exerted a continuing influence on his writing for other media, making them a significant, not incidentally, part of his work. In this regard, the distinguished critic and former Head of Radio Drama at the BBC, Martin Esslin, noticed:

Samuel Beckett's work for broadcasting is a highly significant part of his oeuvre and far less fully discussed in the mounting literature on Beckett than his other output, far less readily available, also, in

performance, which alone can bring out its full flavour. But beyond that, Beckett's experience with broadcasting, and above all radio, has played a significant and little-known part in his development as an artist (Esslin, 1982, p.125).

According to Saeed (2009), Beckett made *Ember* as a radio play to establish a connection with his audiences. This type of connection was aimed to make the audience overcome the physicality of the traditional stage play and make them enter the mind of the main character (p.2). Hence, the listener is given an entrance into Henry's mind and memories. Marjorie Perloff describes the play as a "*one man's world. The interplay between Henry and other characters takes place in Henry's mind*" ( Saeed, 2009).

As usual, the narrator, who is nearly completely losing his mind due to the mental faculties, is having troubles remembering trifles, has thoughts of scattered memories, worries about his absent father called uselessly and is taking a stroll along the shore wondering if he remembered another argument. A pile of insignificant issues was mentioned before, and he is worried about another shingle and his well-being.

Henry recalls trying to compose a story about a fellow called Bolton only to find himself unable to finish it because his neighbour had entered in bathing shorts. The fact that he was shouted at as a child to come outdoors in the mud, helping to guide the lambs, and refuses to acknowledge his father's anger as the significant events of his youth Down. Although her ghost has been resurrected from the dead, he responds with a muffled voice to Ada, who shouts faintly and has taken a side in the ensuing conversation. Ada gives him the impression of being fearful of sitting on cold stones. The horse clopping in the distance troubles ahead, which he might not be able to hear, provides such an impression. Although she did sometimes find him amusing as he laughed, the effect his smile has on her is that of him grossing her out is another story entirely. It's obvious that he has taken a lot of injuries.

Beckett, who is the deviser of austere entertainments, does not have the entertainer's instinct, which is probably to say, he does not have the

entertainer's ego. Our approval is not the nutriment his gift craves, and there are times when it has accumulated its powers, waiting for a hint. He has been responsive; therefore, he should write a play for radio suggested by the BBC or a script for a film suggested by Barney Rosset of the Grove Press. Not all his work by any means has been written for such incentives. The best of it, so far as one knows, has been self-originated. But suggestions, not commissions, since he will not regard an arrangement as binding until he has, in fact, been able to execute the work. Suggestions, then, have led him into adventures with several media he would likely not otherwise have explored. Since the suggestion has specified a medium, not a subject, he has allowed the novel medium to generate its fit subject, thus achieving with varying success but never without intense interests a symbiosis between the theme of the work and the kind of experience the audience is having.

Thus in a radio play, there is nothing to see, an elementary fact which not all radio dramatists are willing to accept. Much radio drama fights this limitation, looking for ways to offer us mental pictures. Instead of that, Beckett made a play about a blind man and toyed with the odd fact that auditory, the unheard, unspoken, are exclusively non-existent in drama.

In his next radio play, *Embers*, Beckett tried to achieve something less entrancing but more unified by enclosing the elements of the 'plot' in a deranged man's skull, among numerous other elements.

The reason *Embers* failed entails a problem that has beset Beckett's work since *Endgame*. He has been preoccupied since then with illusion--one pauses to remark that *Happy Days* is the exception--preoccupied with solipsism, lonely people haunted by interior voices, and peopling (How It Is ) that may be the illusions of solitude. The convention for this illusory plane of reality tends to be something that interferes with intelligibility in performance if not in the script. Thus, it is specified that the voices in the play shall be toneless, and the tempo is rapid throughout. It is also specified that the sole voice we hear in *Eh Joe* shall be "low, distinct, remote, little colour". The voice in *Cascando* is described as 'low, panting' and later as

'weaker'. Since these voices convey virtually all the information we receive, it is evident that the effort of piecing together what we glean from a monologue is greatly compounded by an effort to make out what the words are and by any subtraction from the script's eloquence of what the actor can do with intonation. Such matters call for a delicacy of the producer's judgment that has not always been exercised and also represents, on some occasions, a downright miscalculation on the author's part. Beckett has pared each work down to a set of minimal clues, which give the additional impediments to reception and are likely to leave the audience more irritated than moved.

*Embers* depend more than *All That Fall* on the fact that there is nothing to see. It seems that the protagonist sees only shingle and sea but spends his time conjuring with sounds and voices in his head to ward off aloneness. However, when Henry appears for the first time to the audience, he hears a sound that he thinks belongs to his dead father:

An old man, blind and foolish. (Pause.) My father, back from the dead, to be with one. (Pause.) As if he hadn't died. (Pause.) No, simply back from the dead to be with me, in this strange place. (Pause.) Can he hear me? (Pause.) Yes, he must hear me. (Pause. ) To answer me? (Pause.) No, he doesn't answer me. (Pause.) Just to be with me. (Pause.) That sound you hear is the sea. (Pause. Louder.) I say that sound you hear is the sea; we are sitting on the strand. (Pause.) I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the sound of the sea, that if you didn't see what it was, you wouldn't know what it was. (Pause) (p. 95).

After *Endgame*, the threat is always aloneness. "That sound you hear is the sea,' he tells us. 'I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the sound of the sea, that if you didn't see what it was, you wouldn't know what it was" (p.164). It is indeed the sea, but we are to learn that he always hears the sea whether he is near it or not and has the habit of talking, of drowning its persistent murmur. He is obsessed with the sea because his father drowned in it. He and Ada made love beside it, too. His father's

presence now keeps him company; once, he was garrulous but now is unspeaking, and Ada keeps him company, too though she speaks. She speaks when he calls her and seems more bleakly real than his other thoughts, though her movements, unlike his, make no sound. Is she 'there'? We hear her voice, but only after Henry has called on it, and other things we hear -horses' hooves, for instance--come and go as Henry bids. He calls up and banishes sounds that are a constant in his mental life, and her voice would seem to be something he has called up. So, she is unreal but is more real than his now-silent father or his horses' hooves, and paradoxically is less real than the story he tells himself.

When hers was a live voice, he loathed it:

Ada, too, conversation with her, that was something, that's what the hell will be like, small chat to the babbling of Lethe about the good old days when we wished we were dead. (Pause.) Price of margarine fifty years ago. (Pause.) And now (p.95).

He loathed Ada then. He loathed their child. He hated his father, who also hated him. (“*A washout, that's all you are, a washout!*” were the last words he heard his father speaks in life). His father had long bouts of silent depression and was last seen sitting unmoving on a rock as if one with the stillness of the great sea he died in. There had been a family upheaval; it was suicide, surely.

Henry and Ada mention their baby, and the play immediately shifts to memories when she played a few incorrect notes on the piano and how the piano teacher shouted at her. The time she is a child on the way to becoming a riding instructor is seen when she was in an event BDP and tried to ride a horse, but she suffered and shouted to high heavens. Even saw when she was attempting to ride a horse as a riding instructor threw a "voice-like" Shove in Ada. As the young pianist is ready gets set to try to get on the large (crescendo shouting here), it illustrates the child in training. Afterwards, she gets horse abuse to mimic large hooves. It is obvious that Henry would do it

one more time for her; he will stroll to the sea and back, proving that he is so decrepit that he has to get help getting there. He moves a short distance before losing his train of thought and being overwhelmed by another flashback, with himself as a kid by the constant roar of the ocean, and Ada as a baby crying, Don't! Never mind! He tried to drown her, did he not? or taking some kind of risk with the sea? Did she take her own life because the listener can see that Ada has now turned into some pale shade of her former self?

Keep from becoming conscious about what he is doing, and the text sounds like incantations; he is speaking out loud to try to stifle it. In the face of it, it corresponds to the sound of the waves, so she wonders if he's in the water if what he needs is to block out the sound of the sea. Though the motif of Addie and her misery is revisited several times throughout the text, 'it' often seems to stand for something horrific, with reference to his father, who is often depicted as violent, becoming a part of Beckett's methodology to imply a sinister portent of things to come about the father's childhood. All the various scenarios and plot points out to his father's behaviour about the oceanic incident being incorrect.

These facts come filtering through Henry's solipsism, and all pale beside the story he tells himself, into which his frozen feelings flow. It is about Bolton, 'an old man in great trouble', and his great trouble goes unspecified. He is waiting in front of his fire on a winter night ('snow everywhere, bitter cold, white world'), and the man he has sent for Dr Holloway. The narrative runs on, urgent in its sensate immediacy:

Outside all still, not a sound, dog's chain maybe or a bough groaning if you stood there listening long enough, white world, Holloway with his little black bag, not a sound, bitter cold, full moon small and white, the crooked trail of Holloway's goloshes. Vega in the Lyre very green. (Pause.) Vega in the Lyre very green (p. 3).

*"Old men, great trouble, white world, not a sound"* sums up the first phase of the story. Henry breaks off to express his own plight in a world full of ineluctable sounds:

Stories, stories, years and years of stories, till the need came on me, for someone, to be with me, anyone, a stranger, to talk to, imagine he hears me, years of that, and then, now, for someone who. Knew me, in the old days, anyone, to be with me, imagine he hears me, what I am, now (ibid).

He resumes, projecting his story out of this need. Bolton ('grand old figure') had called Holloway ('fine old chap') 'in the cold and dark, an old friend, urgent need, bring the bag'. And now Bolton will only look into Holloway's eyes, saying, 'Please! PLEASE!'

Henry has his bleak chat with Ada. Her voice (imagined) tells him (low, remote) what he no doubt has thought of and thought of, the last hour of his father, how she saw his father sitting still by the sea on that rock. She tells him (in his head) why his father (in his head) does not answer him anymore:

I suppose you have worn him out. (Pause.) You wore him out a living, and now you are wearing him out dead. (Pause.) The time comes when one cannot speak to you anymore. (Pause.) The time will come when no one will speak to you at all, not even complete strangers. (Pause.) You will be quite alone with your voice. There will be no other voice in the world but yours. (Pause.) Do you hear me?

Henry remembers what he had been accustomed to blank out; that is the story of how Ada went back to look for his father and saw no one, and after a while gave up and took the tram home (his father was drowning then, or newly drowned). The whole bleak story is of missed opportunities, of absences and avoidances and non-communications, and he reverts to his story of Bolton and Holloway, that richer reality under his control. In addition, the richer reality brings the bleak reality to apotheosis: Bolton begs for what Holloway cannot give, what no one can give him since he cannot receive it, that is communion. He says 'Please!' and 'Please!' and 'Please, Holloway!' but will not, cannot say what it is he pleads for. Carrying over a candle, he looks at Holloway full in the face. He 'won't ask again, just the look', and Holloway, recoiling from that look, covers his face. 'Not a sound, white world, bitter cold, ghastly scene, old men, great trouble, no good.'



The whole play has occurred inside the mind of the main character Henry. None of the characters was actually physically present with Henry. They were only a reflection of his nostalgia for the past. One of the interesting unseen characters was the sound of the sea which dominated the whole play. It acted as an unseen agent that control indicates the flow of Henry's memories. In addition, Beckett could describe in vivid detail the particulars of the landscape surrounding his boyhood home in Foxrock. Henry's seaside mutterings in *Embers*:

That sound you hear is the sea. [Pause. Louder.] I say that sound you hear is the sea. We are sitting on the strand. [Pause.] I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the sound of the sea, that if you didn't see what it was, you wouldn't know what it was. [Pause].  
(p.2)

Whatever else it may be (a passage that illuminates Henry's attempt to have a conversation with his dead father), this piece of monologue near the very beginning of the play sets the scene for the audience and is clearly a production instruction for the soundscape. For Henry, such a choice does not exist. Where his voice ends, the sound of the sea takes over, distorted but inescapable. The auditory antagonism between voice and sea constitutes the chief element of tension in *Embers*.

Since all voices in the play are evocations, apart from Henry's own, only the sea is irrefutably present with Henry. All pauses are filled with the sound of the sea, and we hear Henry's footsteps crunching on the shingle. There is no silence. Indeed the play ends on a contradiction: "Not a sound" says Henry, but we still hear the sea, although Ada seems to have discovered silence beneath the waves: "*Ada: Underneath all is as quiet as the grave. Not a sound. All day all night, not a sound*" (p.6).

"*Sea . . . audible throughout what follows whenever pause indicated*". (20). Of all Beckett's plays, *Embers* is the most saturated with sound. The frequent pauses (more than two hundred are called for in the text) give the sea the dignity of dramatic persona. It is as important as the words, or more: Henry, spinning his verbal web to ward off the sound, is a born loser.

The background sound ("Sound . . . Establish. Then fade and hold under") has been considered an extinct device in the development of radio art, and the background waves are one of the most over-exploited types. However, the sound of the sea in *Embers* is not the conventional radio cliché. It is neither a means of establishing an atmosphere nor an aural short-cut to reality:

*HENRY.* That sound you hear is the sea. (Pause. Louder.) I say that sound you hear is the sea; we are sitting on the strand. (Pause.) I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the sound of the sea, that if you didn't see what it was, you wouldn't know what it was (p. 18).

To Henry, the sea is the open grave of his father, trying to devour him, too. Nonetheless, he himself is buried alive, drowned in the sounds of his brain. His mind is like Murphy's, which "excluded nothing that it did not itself contain". Death would make no real difference, nor is suicide an alternative to him: such deliberate escape would presuppose some degree of "presence" in life.

The only sound in the play that is not caused by Henry's mind is the ever-present sound of the sea, which the stage directions list as "*audible throughout what follows whenever pause indicated*" (p. 93). There is no true silence in *Embers*, for the sound of the waves lapping on the rocks persists in the background, always threatening to overtake the sounds that Henry controls. The sound of the sea behaves much like its actual physical counterpart. Just as the sea has the power to flood over land and obliterate everything under its waves, the sound of the sea hovers quietly behind the play and is always present and threatening to flood Henry's carefully controlled auditory world. Henry's aversion of the sound is the reason for his constant talking, and his words become the futile attempt to block the noise from his consciousness: "*Today it's calm, but I often hear it above in the house and walking the roads and start talking, oh just loud enough to drown it, nobody notices*" (p. 94). Just as his story is a defence against allowing access to his hidden thoughts, his spoken words are a shield against the sound of the sea that torments him.

What makes the sea a character that remains absent is the existence of two types of sounds in the play. The two types of sounds that are represented by the duality of the harsh sound effects and the soothing sea are vastly different in their implications. The natural, realistic sound of the sea comes to represent the death that took Henry's father and will eventually take him, while the artificially produced sounds of hooves, drips, cries, and wails represent living things that Henry associates with Ada and his daughter Addie. These sounds are harsh and seek to shock Henry and the audience out of any sense of comfort. While the sound of the sea possesses a slow seductive cadence, the contrast of the severe amplification of sound effects distracts the audience from the progression of the play. Henry is jarred from his memories at these moments of amplification, but he cannot regain his control because the sea fills in the silence as soon as the sounds cease:

With the meaning or plot of Henry's story relatively insignificant, it is the sound that evokes his torment. [...] Henry is caught between such contrasting elements as the hard, staccato phrases that the play aligns with life forces (the "hammering away" representing Addie's conception, for example) and the softly rocking rhythm of much of his speech, which suggests the sea and death (Jesson, p. 57).

By contrasting natural and artificial sounds and placing Henry at the intersection of their effects, Beckett overwhelmingly privileges sound and its various manifestations as the most important element of the play more than the plot and the dialogue. The conflation of the sea and death produces an omnipresent threatening entity in Henry's mind, and his words are his attempt to block this dangerous presence. However, when the sounds conjured by his words overtake him, and he is forced to cut them off, he is left alone once more with the sound of the sea.

The play is built on the main issue, which is the feeling of loss that Henry suffers from. Since the whole play is happening inside his head, no one ever sure that Henry is really talking to someone rather than himself. In the first monologue, it can be noticed that Henry suffers from the loss of his father, which has given him excessive depression, thus resulting in his

alienation. To overcome his alienation, Henry created an altered image of his father. Henry's father drowned in the sea, but nobody was found; therefore, Henry believes that it is a lie, and his father is alive somewhere. Regardless of what Henry believes, his father is considered an absent and an unseen character. Henry's father does not speak nor react in any way throughout the whole play. The only thing that identifies his existence is Henry's illusions. Henry talks to his absent father, saying:

We never found your body, you know, that held up probate an unconscionable time. They said there was nothing to prove you hadn't run away from us all and alive and well under a false name in the Argentine, for example, that grieved mother greatly (ibid. p, 2).

Another way in which Beckett created an unseen character is when he made Henry imitate the voice of the dead father (presumably dead). Henry suffers from great pain due to losing his father. By imitating the voice of his father, Henry recreated his lost object of desire. This sort of imitation is shown through the play's actions illustrations: [Pause. Imitating father's voice.] 'Are you coming for a dip?' 'No.' 'Come on, come on.' 'No.' (p. 3).

To get rid of the pain of the loss of his father, Henry considered suicide a solution. He believes that his father is the representation of a brave man. In line with the desire for imitation, the sound of the father Henry mimics was real, while other voices were a mere illusion in his psyche. The replica of the absent father that Henry created is only self-consolation for the accumulated failure. He feels the stillness of life just like the stillness of his absent father's posture. Henry says, "*I never forgot his posture. And yet it was a common one. You used to have it sometimes. Perhaps just the stillness, as if he had been turned to stone. I could never make it out*" (p,6 ). Besides, the replication of the image of the absent father also means to recreate the lost love of the parent. Yet, Henry never got the consolation that he seeks because the voice of the father will always be going to be echoed in his head saying "washout".

Since Henry is unable to reconnect with his father, so the only consolation is to retreat to his illusions. By creating and telling stories,

Henry tries to alter the reality of his alienation. There is no one to heal his pain. By creating a character like Bolton, Henry is trying self-treatment. Henry's reverence for Bolton is a genius way that Beckett used to reveal the unconscious of his protagonist. From the first look, Bolton gives a great resemble Henry. Bolton is an old man that holds great pain within. The only consolation that he seeks was from his doctor, named Hollywood. The consolation that Henry wanted was instant relief from the pain (merciful death). The absence of the parents and the wife has made the life Henry unbearable. The story of Bolton is not only a mean for consolation; it is also a symbol. Although the story is incomplete, it reveals the desire Henry to end his alienation and miserable situation. Beckett shows the deep desire, Henry. This is also the reason that Henry mimics absent people that is also shown when Henry is sitting on the same strand that his father was lost. Henry says:

I say that sound you hear is the sea; we are sitting on the strand.  
[Pause.] I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the  
sound of the sea, that if you didn't see what it was, you wouldn't know  
what it was. [Pause.] (p.1)

It can also be noticed that the sea acts as an absent agent that gives a bit of consolation to Henry. The sea draws Henry to reality by its waves sound. It is also the only entity that provides Henry with senses of contact with his absent father. In addition, the sea shows itself as the only character that accompanies Henry in his alienation. Every time Henry surrenders himself to the sea, he seeks reality out of his illusions. According to Saeed (2009),

As for Beckett, the sea takes more than a physical dimension. It, in a way, becomes a setting that constantly reminds us of the unchanging succession of moments in the external universe, and in part because this monotony is given an audible dimension (p.4).

Another absent character that Henry brings out of his memory is his ex-wife named Ada. It is worth noting that the only escape from alienation which Henry uses is to recall absent people from his past memory. None of the characters that he converses with is actually really present; only the

sound of the sea is physically present. The other sound is a mere illusion. By recalling the memory of his wife to be an active companion in a conversation, Henry is trying to find an escape from the grotesque isolation of not being answered by his father. Since the sound of the sea is real, Henry tries to mix the voice of his wife to make a semi-real existence of a conversation.

Henry: Are you going to sit down beside me?

Ada: Yes. (No sound as she sits) Like that? (pause) Or do you prefer that? (pause) You don't care. (pause) Chilly enough, I imagine; I hope you put on your jaegers. (pause) Did you put on your jaegers, Henry?.....

Henry: You wish me to laugh?

Ada: You laughed so charmingly once. I think that's what first attracted me to you. (Pause. He tries to laugh, fails). (p.5)

What makes Ada an unreal and absent character is that her voice blocks the sound of the sea. Through their conversation, Henry loses contact with Ada. Through the loss of contact and the blocking of the sound of the sea, it can be noticed that Ada is just a phantom of his imagination. Yet, what makes Ada an important creation is Henry's need to recall the feeling of being a normal husband, a father, and a lover.

Throughout his sessions of illusions, Henry does not only create happy memories but also brings the reason that he thinks made his life miserable. He recalls the memory of his daughter playing the piano, thereby bringing her to the audience as a present character although she is a solemn imagination.

Music master: (Italian accent) Santa Cecilia! (Pause)

Addie: Will I play my piece now, please?

Music master: (Violently) Fa!

Addie: (Tearfully) What?

Music master: (Violently) Eff! Eff!

Addie: (Tearfully) Where?

Music master: (Violently) Qua! ( He thumps note) Fa!

Music master: (Italian accent) Santa Cecilia! (Pause)

Addie: Will I play my piece now, please?

Music master: (Violently) Fa!

Addie: (Tearfully) What?

Music master: (Violently) Eff! Eff!

Addie: (Tearfully) Where?

Music master: (Violently) Qua! ( He thumps note) Fa! (ibid)

Through this sequence of conversation role switching, Beckett is confusing the listeners of whether this conversation is real or an illusion. It can be noticed that the choice of this specific memory to recall a character is not a random phenomenon. Beckett here is trying to show how Henry's life is a failure, just like Addie's inability to hit the right music notes. Henry's life is without any systematic order. Earlier, Ada had simply said to her husband, "You are silent today. What are you thinking off?" thus suggesting that she had not heard her daughter's misses. However, it is not clear whether she did not hear them because one cannot eavesdrop on another person's thoughts or because she herself is an evocation so that Henry, while thinking of his daughter, necessarily excludes his wife.

According to Saeed (2009), Henry lacks any colour in his life; she states:

Addie lacks the creative touch in playing the notes, so is Henry, who totally lacks any creativity to colour his life. Instead, he sinks into his hallucinations and fancies. Consequently, Addie can be seen as a duplication of Henry, both experience the same disappointment and confusion (p.5).

Again, the sound of the sea is blocked by the voice of Addie. This indication of blocking is a reference that reality is blocked by the imagination. The physical world that is represented by the character of the sea is pushed by the sound of the piano.

The sound of the sea and the characters that Henry recalls from his memory exchange the role in front of the audience. The character of Ada reappeared when Henry was having a serious moment of disappointment because of his daughter's failure. This sort of failure, as was mentioned before, Henry related it to himself. The phantom of Ada scolded Henry to the moment that she simply left him alone.

It is worth noting that what makes Ada an unseen character is that the conversation that she had with Henry happened a long time ago, probably when they were in their twenties. Yet, in the play, Ada seems to take place at present. In addition, Ada does not move like an active character; she stays absent and keeps herself behind the words of Henry. In the play, she does make "[n]o sound as she sits." Also, beforehand she was aware of "the least feather of smoke on the horizon", but now "she cannot see the beach where Henry is sitting ('is there anyone about?') without his words to describe it".

In an interview in 1975 with Roger Blin, he states, "Beckett absolutely didn't want me to try to do *Embers* for the theatre because, when you listen, you don't know if Ada exists or not, [or] whether she only exists in the imagination of the character Henry" (p. 310).

When Ada left the scene, Henry lost his confront and consolation. There is one argument that emphasizes the fact that Ada is both a memory and a part of imagination. This is due to the incident when she requests that Henry should ask for help from Holloway. This action clarifies that Ada considered Henry as an imaginary character which in place intensifies the idea that Ada here is being imagined, not remembered. "Is this rubbish a help to you, Henry? ... No? Then I think I'll be getting back?" (p.7). When Ada left, Henry felt the void closing in. So to get himself out of the dark, he instantly jumped to his stories.

Bolton and Holloway are both unreal and not existing characters. They both represent the ever conflicted death and life. To have a stable



companion when all the absent people that Henry creates, Henry tends not to finish any of his stories. Instead, he prefers to keep them circling in his head. Henry says:

I used not to need anyone, just to myself, stories, there was a great one about an old fellow called Bolton, I never finished it, I never finished any of them, I never finished anything, everything always went on forever. (p. 2)

It is worth noting that Bolton is the unreal personification of Henry. Bolton was derived out of Henry's suffering. Through him, the audience can feel and have an insight into the unconscious suffering, One critic called Bolton's actions in *Embers* the epitome of the pain of human existence (Saeed, 2009). The role of Holloway is the ender of the suffering; however, it is not clearly stated whether the end of suffering is with death or with a certain cure that Holloway could provide. The hint that Beckett dropped to make the audience conclude that Bolton (HENRY) was looking for an end to his life was Bolton's sense of meaninglessness. In the last monologue, it can be noticed that the unreal and present character breaks the role of a mere story to touch the meaninglessness of reality. *Words. [Pause.] Saturday nothing. Sunday nothing all day. [Pause.] Nothing, all day nothing. [Pause.] All day all night, nothing. [Pause.] Not a sound* (p.8).

It is also sometimes suggested that Bolton and Holloway represent the two sides of Henry's nature. In other words, the two men are mutually dependent and yet irreconcilable, which might hint at Henry's life of inaction, who is paralyzed between opposing forces. Such an interpretation takes Bolton, imprisoned in his room, gazing from the window, to represent the mind. He needs help from Holloway, who comes ready to minister the physical ills, with his black bag containing "a shot." However, he cannot leave until Bolton releases him, and Bolton at first merely stares at him with "the old blue eye." Holloway does not respond to Bolton's pain when it finally comes, but he is mesmerized by the stare: "covers his face". The situation remains unresolved: "old men, great trouble, no good".

Meaninglessness pushed Henry to seek suicide. In addition, the unseen people whom he creates do seem to give him the consolation that he seeks. It also should be noted that no certain reason was ever highlighted by Beckett. Thus, there are various reasons for the creation or recalling absent characters. Henry starts first by finding consolation with the sound of the sea. The sound of the waves is a personification of the movement of time and the flow of memories. Then, he recalled his father, whereby the idea of the father brought a central conflict with Henry. Also, he recalled ADDIE and Ada; both are the entity of failure-love relationship. At the end of the play, Henry creates Holloway and Bolton. Thus, Beckett brings through Henry many reasons for the recall or the creation of characters, whether physically present or a memory. According to Saeed (2009),

It may be his loss of the wife and daughter. It may be the loss of his father and the fear of following the father's suicidal steps. Above all, it may be the loss of his mind's creativity which drives him mad (p.7)

Through the play, Beckett shows the importance of the unseen characters for his protagonist. According to Becket, the protagonist in *Ember* is based on self-contradictions. It can be noticed that at some moments, Henry plays the role of the father and the husband. Yet, he also contradicts the sympathy of that role by being not able to forgive his absent father. In creating absent people, Henry shows skills in initiating conversations with them, but he never reaches a decisive end with them. According to Saeed (2009), “*what is meant by "Embers", the weakening inspiration of one's mind when one faces so many blows and disappointments in his life*” (p.7).

Toward the end of the play, all the characters that Henry had created left the scene. The audience is left with only Henry looking and listening to the only physical sound, which is the sea. The only reality that the play indicates is the fixation on Henry's life. What is left at the wind are only the echoes of Henry's absent people, namely the echoes of his wife, daughter, and his father.

It is Henry's inability to move on that creates the chains of imaginative and unreal characters. His mind is locked within a specific chain of thoughts that range from his father to his daughter and wife, then back to his father again. The unfinished stories are also an indication of the fixed and obsessed mind of the protagonist.

However, the play does not have a central idea; it does not develop to construct a real story. Therefore, the audiences are only facing the protagonist's projections of his pains and the phantoms of his past. This sort of plays leaves the audience in a maze of confusion.

Thus, *Embers* is a skilful representation of the modern man. Beckett has skillfully made his protagonist the archetypical lost and confused modern human. Henry is a prisoner of his own mind and is alienated from the world by his imaginations and memories. Just like the lost modern man, he fails to find meaning in the hopeless world.

## Conclusion

The current study is an attempt to identify the influence of the absent characters in Beckett's *Embers* and O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*. Theatre is concerned with the dialectical relationship between presence and absence; theatre indicates the absence of the presence and the presence of the absence. Absent characters are universal in drama: the practical restrictions surrounding the stage space, time covered audience attention, and the number of actors. Absence in dramatic works is a phenomenon that happens when the audience is expecting the appearance of a certain character, but they find the stage empty.

In theatre, absent characters are those characters who are present within the event and the action of the play, but they are visually absent to the audience. The absent character is designated via the physical gestures and the dialogue of the actors on stage to take actions out of the sight of the audience. Unseen characters usually take one of two forms: the absent character that performs unseen and yet inside the fictional stage space, and the outside characters that perform in the fictional space outside the onstage set.

The most popular playwrights who employed the technique of the absent character are Eugene O'Neill and Samuel Beckett. In *Strange Interlude*, O'Neill gives his unseen character, Gordon, the capacity to intensify empathy between Nina, the onstage character, and the audience members. When an onstage character is haunted by an absent character, dead or living, the present figure is related not to the real person but to the contents of his imagination.

The plays of O'Neill handle the human agony and the situations throughout the life of the individual that would make the person what it is. O'Neill introduces so many situations and gives a variety of reasons and opportunities related to the lives of his character to give the inner mind problems which characters might suffer from. Sam and Nina, at the end of

*Strange Interlude*, blame themselves and punish each other for things over which they have no control. They try to adapt to each other with little thought for the distress that they face, but they realize that they are unfair towards each other; this self-blame does not result from anything else. This is wrong for Sam because he is prepared to provide the child Nina that she longs for, and yet she finishes it prematurely without the biology of her father's approval. Sam is afterwards only a victim of duplications, unlike Nina, who is victimized and is misled the whole time. To get rid of her better half, Nina uses her manipulative and dominant ways with the aid of her love Darrell. However, Darrell does not adapt and reassures her that she will not interfere with the lives of others again.

The lives and surroundings of *Strange Interlude* are rhizomatic, and the characters are difficult to grasp and divide their thoughts. This play is portrayed as an extremely intricate and convoluted story. Although man strives to be consistent and integrated into his life, the external forces push him to destruction and occasionally to insanity. The scattered self of the man is accountable for internal and external causes. This divided self also leads us to a rhizomatic maze. The ego is becoming rhizomatic in itself. It is a never-ending, limitless process.

Imagination is the main word that helps the reader understand why Eugene O'Neill would favour absent or offstage characters instead of the seen ones. There are extensive usages of various dramatic tools that provoke the audience to imagine an absent character. Among these tools are Asides, masks, soliloquy, and monologue. O'Neill's dramas dramatize how characters might be hunted by the previous versions of themselves; the most probable vivid version of this can be found in *Strange Interlude*. Eugene O'Neill's ambitious *Strange Interlude* expressionistically utilizes absence to juxtapose the inner workings of the human mind ironically with the outward and often duplicitous manifestations of that mind.

On the other hand, Samuel Beckett's work for broadcasting is a major part of his oeuvre, but it is much less well-known in the growing literature

on Beckett than his other works. Therefore, it is much less readily accessible in action, which is the only way to truly appreciate it. Beckett made *Ember* a radio play to establish a connection with his audiences. This type of connection was aimed to make the audience overcome the physicality of the traditional stage play and make them enter the mind of the main character.

There are several causes that pushed Henry to sink into a confusing world, including probably the loss of his daughter, wife, his father and the dread of the suicide steps of the father. Overall, the loss of the inventiveness of his intellect may lead him to become insane. Therefore, a fundamental issue may be posed: what causes did Beckett intend to be behind the hallucination of Henry?

Beckett, of course, sought to build a figure full of paradoxes. At the same time, the dear husband and dad Henry is a nasty son who refuses to pardon the leaving action of his dad. Henry is a competent narrator, yet he can not quietly conclude his narrative. That is what 'members' represent, particularly the deteriorating mentality inspired by the countless sticks and deceptions in one's life as though Henry's mind had constructed around his memories a cocoon shelter. This was done by Henry throughout the performance, putting his thoughts in the one area where he felt comfortable. It is here where his father allegedly committed suicide, and he and his wife first made love. It is the sea sound that dominates that appears to absorb his individuality. This is shown metaphorically by the fact that the sound of the water is the final thing we hear in the play.

Henry's little image of the groundless water, which reaches none but plunging into misery, is left to his listener. The only fact is tomorrow is going to be the same as today for Henry. He will again talk to Ada and Addie tomorrow, which might be simply acoustically reflected by daddy. *Embers* might be considered to be a drama of awareness. The entire play deals with Henry's memories and building what previously his world was. Henry swings back and forth from his father's memories to his wife and

children and visualizes a preoccupied mind, and is stuck in a certain sequence of ideas. As for his unsuccessful tale, it reflects Henry's incapacity to carry on his life.

When looking into *Embers* thoroughly, it can be seen that the play does not establish a well-built tale; rather, it dramatizes the actor's unsuccessful attempts to embody his mind's shadow. His lack of this drives him to build a fiction that reflects his own perplexity. Again, Beckett is portraying a figure imprisoned inside the boundaries and despair of life. Henry might stand for a contemporary man who cannot understand or explain what is really going on around him. He might be the artist who loses his creative feel and is unable to complete a Masterwork. However, it represents all mankind who needs salvation and deliverance, but rather it continues to rotate into an empty ring.

Beckett introduces his protagonist, who is nearly completely losing his mind due to his mental faculties. He also has trouble remembering trifles, has thoughts scattered memories, and worries about his absent father. In a radio play, there is nothing to see, where not all radio dramatists are willing to accept. Much radio drama fights this limitation, looking for ways to offer us mental pictures.

Beckett introduces one character, and the whole play occurred inside the mind of this character. In other words, none of the characters was actually physically present with Henry. They were only a reflection of his nostalgia for the past. One of the interesting unseen characters was the sound of the sea which dominated the whole play. It acted as an unseen agent that indicates the flow of Henry's memories.

The mental processes of all the main characters reveal a sick pattern that disturbs their regular thinking and limits them to what may be considered zones of reflection. All the main characters have an uncommon area of reflection that travels around an individual, mood, or desire without any distinct change or growth in the reflective character of the overall play.

These ideas are repeated with an overwhelming persistence that presupposes a mechanical framework to allow easy readers to guess. This implies a sense of stagnation in thoughts, which have an adverse and non-cathartic influence on reading ideas, senses, and imagination on these thinking patterns.

The play is built on the main issue, which is the feeling of loss that Henry suffers from. Since the whole play is happening inside his head, no one is ever sure that Henry is really talking to someone rather than himself. In the first monologue, it can be noticed that Henry suffers from the loss of his father, which has given him excessive depression, thereby leading to his alienation. The two absent characters (Ada and Henry's father) in Beckett's play help Henry escape from his alienation, and thus although they are absent, they have a significant influence on the events of the play.



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## **RESUME**

MOHAMMED MUHSIN OMAR OMAR was born in Iraq in 1992. He moved to Duhok in order to pursue his high school studies there. He finished his primary education in Duhok in 2014. He started to study at the University of Duhok - College of Basic Education- Department of English Language. He wrote a BA thesis entitled A Semantic Study of Arabic Proper Names, which was part of the requirements to obtain a BA. He has been awarded the degree of BA. in English Language with the grade of Good. in English in 2018. He has taught English as a volunteer in Erbil High School for a year, and he has attended several conferences on English Language and Literature. In 2019, he started his post-graduate studies at Karabük University.

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