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Original Paper

Krapp and His Relations

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Abstract

Krapp Last Tape is one-act play written in 1958, translated by Samuel Beckett and his friend Pierre Leyris as La Dernier bande. The first production took place in London at the Royal Court Theatre in 1958.It was directed by Donald McWhinnie and Patrick Magee played the role of Krapp. Like other Beckettians, Krapp in a physical sense, is an outsider, cut from the world of social activity. He is alone in his den fumbling through the tapes made thirty years before for his human relations. Krapp's Last tape recounts the inescapable reality of human suffering and the persistent efforts made by Man to circumvent his pain through living in his past. The main topic addressed in this paper is Krapp and his human relationships.

Keywords

Beckett, the Beckettians, relationship, love, loneliness

1. Introduction

Krapp's Last Tape was originally called "Magee Monologue" which was written for the Irish actor Patrick Magee, one of Beckett's favorite actors. "Beckett had heard Magee read extracts from Beckett's *From an Abandoned Work* (written about 1945-5) on the BBC's Third Programme in December 1957"(McDonald, 2006, p. 59). The play starts a tape recorder featuring the voice of Krapp at the age of 39 and the listener, Krapp, at the age of 69, with cracked voice and laborious walk. Krapp shuffles, eats bananas, drinks backstage, but above all listens and comments on his tapes of thirty years ago. The stage direction decree that Krapp should have the clothes and the look of white face purple nose of a senile clown.

Krapp is next in the line of succession to Beckett's old, decaying men, fashioned after Pozzo, Hamm and Dan Rooney. In his den he reminds us of Hamm in his claustrophobic interior, reveling in his suffering and misery. Krapp is a clownish old shell, whose visual and auditory faculties are on the

decline. Myopic and hard of hearing, he seems to fulfill Dan Ronney's desire to go insensate", to go deaf and dumb so that I might pant on to be a hundred." (Beckett, 1986, p. 192)

Krapp lives alone and has dispensed with human company a long time back. Unlike his predecessors, he seems to have no need for a menial or a companion to lord over and vent his anger upon. In this respect, he seems to have moved a step ahead of them in his renouncement of human bondage at every stage of his life. However, this step ahead is rather illusory. His voluntary withdrawal into solitariness and his rejection of life at its moments of intensity are attempts to escape the boredom of living by opting out of existence with his fellow beings and by exiling himself to a life of loneliness, preferring his tape-recorder to women company to speak and listen to. Homan thinks that "Krapp both wants and doesn't want to hear the tapes. The inner journey is painful, and his fixation with words, his incompetence in handling the machine, and the frequent trips backstage are evidence of his 'avoidance reactions' as the psychologists would say" (Beckett, 1984, p. 98).

Krapp shares with Pozzo, Hamm and Dan their grotesque vision of life, centering on the absence of a meaningful existence and of the basic solitariness of Man in an arbitrary and unpredictable universe. Houppermans states that "Krapp's artistic failure and his falling apart and falling sway from women he loved account for the play's melancholic tone, as Krapp embracing his reels and recorder, continues his circular wandering in time and space, coming back finally to the amniotic waters of refuge and lust"(Houppermans, p. 373). In his self-imposed state of loneliness, he attempts to recall and recapture his past moments of intense experiences and live in his memories. The courage which he had displayed initially to move into emotional insulation gives way to a pathetic harking back to past experiences as he lacks the courage to dare the basic solitariness of his existence. From a courageous exile, he steps backward to dwell in bygone experiences, though he continues to have the awareness of the inauthenticity of such experiences. He is thus a failed exile whose awareness of the fundamental separateness of Man does not sustain him to stay away from a second absorption in existence by savoring the past moments of intensity.

2. Krapp and His Girls

Krapp's Last Tape is a biographical play in which he revels three phases of Krapp's life. Though the play opens on one man, we are witness to three Krapps-Krapp in his near thirties, Krapp in his near forties and Krapp in his near seventies. The play covers roughly a span of forty years, seen as a sequence of fragmented selves, knit together by the one unchanging self Krapp. Since his early years, when Krapp was twenty-nine, he had harbored none of the illusory feelings about love and life. Krapp at 29, Krapp at 39, and Krapp at 69 follow the same pattern of renouncing love and life at moments of intensity. Every time he had the chance to admit a woman in his life, he has deliberately withheld love and thereby withheld himself. The young Krapp at twenty-nine gives up Bianca, rationalizing later that it was all pointless and meaningless to get involved. "At that time, I think I was still living on and off

with Bianca in Kedar Street. Well out of that, Jesus, yes! Hopeless business" (Beckett, 1986, p.218). One of the remarkable things recurrent in his relationships with the opposite sex has been his appreciation of the girls despite his later rejection of them. Krapp pays rich tribute to Bianca's eyes: "very warm. I suddenly saw them again. (Pause) Incomparable." (Beckett, 1986, p. 218) However he is aware concurrently of the "flagging pursuit of happiness" and gives up the girl. Later he sneers at what he calls his youth and thanks to God that it's over…what remains of all that misery? A girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway-station platform? (Beckett, 1986, p. 218)

So does Krapp at thirty-nine bid farewell to love during the memorable moments with the girl he comes closest to in his life. The boat scene, reminiscent in all its richness and intensity of sensuous details reveals the best moments of his life, moments of ecstasy, gratification and fulfillment. Krpp's savoring these moments by constant replay of this particular tape is illustrative of his appreciation of a life involvement. Krapp at sixty-nine lingers over his past moments of calm telluric bliss.

I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all, moved, and moved us gently up and down, and from side to side (Beckett, 1986, p. 223).

But this moment of intensity happens after Krapp had bid farewell to love. Earlier they had agreed mutually to part. She offered no protest on his decision that "it was hopeless and no good going on"(Beckett, 1986, p. 221). Paradoxically enough, the intensity of their togetherness reaches its climax only after the decision had been taken. Krapp seems to have lived with the tension between a life of passionate involvement and the basic solitariness of Man. His detachment in the midst of an active association with his girl accounts for the experience of calm bliss after they had decided to break. For that time, at least, Krapp shows himself to be a true exile with his rejection of life of involvement in preference to a life of solitariness.

Krapp fears this "engulfment" or absorption into another person and so voluntarily seeks isolation in an effort to preserve his identity. He is in this sense a Cartesian in the separation of his mind from the body, for Beckett following Descartes and Proust felt that the alien world begins with one's body so that the conscious personality is necessarily split. Proust taught him "one lies all one's life…above all to that stranger whose contempt would cause one most pain; oneself" (Beckett, 1965, p. 64). Krapp thus displays a schizophrenic dichotomy where an antithesis between "complete loss of being by absorption into the other person (engulfment) and complete aloneness (isolation)" (Laing, 1965, p. 44). Krapp has to make the choice of either turning into his world of inner consciousness or accepting the everyday life and its dreary routine. He attempts to take refuge within himself to register his protest against the emptiness and meaninglessness of existence. He shows a great desire to withdraw from the outside world of emotional bondage and remain in state of exile, but he fails in his attempt to withdraw totally from the external world. His very fear of "engulfment" and breaking off relation at intense and crucial points shows his awareness of his inability to maintain a state of exile in the midst of activity. Ackerley

and Gontarski state that "the play as Samuel Beckett shaped it became a study of failure more universal than personal sexual inadequacy. Krapp struggled against the cacophony of human character, a beaten man who now curses his younger selves for abandon love, but he never acquires the self-awareness that might afford tragic dimension."(Acckerley & Gontarski, 2004, p. 302) Turning away from life in a physical sense in escapism and an attempt to live in his own past. Krapp, when confronted with the state of aloneness reverts to his pa st existence of involvement and lives in memories.

3. Krapp and His Mother

But if Krapp does not remain steadfast in exile, neither can he get fully involved in life with its illusions. The problematic situation is best seen as he recalls his mother's dying day. He remembers sitting outside on the bench by the weir, looking at her window," wishing she were gone," (Beckett, 1986, p. 219) a wish prompted by compassion rather than dislike for his mother. Krapp at his mother's dying moments reminds one of Camus' Meursault in *The Stranger*, a novel illustrative of Camus' vision of The Absurd. Meursault is unable to show any emotion or cry at his mother's funeral. The very next day, he goes with his girlfriend Maria to spend the night, though when Maria asks him if he will marry her, he replies in the negative. The following day, after his senseless murder of an Arab who had no enmity towards him Meursault is accused of having harbored devilish instincts that were earlier evident in his silence at his mother's funeral. Meursault's statement which explained his sudden compulsion to commit the outrageous murder could be applied to Krapp to clear him of the charge of misogyny. Meursault says," It was just the same sort of heat as at my mother's funeral, and I had the same disagreeable sensations-especially in my forehead where all the veins deemed to be bursting through the skin I couldn't stand it any longer," (Camus, 1958, pp. 75-76) Meursault did not weep at his mother's funeral, not because he was feelingless or hard-hearted, but because he seems one with her in his indifference to life. Like her, he expects nothing from life except for a few physical sensations that are biological. If he says "No" to Maria, it is because he expects nothing out of marriage. To him everything is leveled to a commonness of nothing and he makes little demand on life.

Krapp can have no meaningful contact with anyone or anything. His awareness of aloneness is reflected in his thoughts soon after the brown rollers went down, signifying his mother's death "Moments. Her moments, my moments…the dog's moment." (Beckett, 1986, p. 220) At one point of time, Krapp, his mother and his dog, each one of them is enclosed within separate streams of their respective consciousness that reinforces the fact of solitariness. Krapp, left to himself experiences spiritual gloom and indigence, in the year following his mother's death, "until that memorable night in March, at the end the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, and when I suddenly saw the whole thing. The vision at last." (Beckett, 1986, p. 220) From his constant on and off playing of the tape, it could be understood that this vision was "the dark I have always struggled to keep under"(Beckett,1986, p. 220) and which in reality is his most (Krapp switches off his recorder at this

point)-clear perception of life without any illusion. Playing the tape, a little further on, Krapp recalls "the dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire." (Beckett, 1986, p. 220) that enabled him to cut himself off from life and love. It is soon after this insight into his "dark" that he suggests to the girl in the jetty that it was hopeless and no good going on. In this context McDonald thinks that Krapp looks like an artist who must explore the darkness within him, rather than seek artistic material in the outside world. Perhaps his vision prompted him to turn his back on his romantic attachment, rejection love and companionship to pursue solitary life of the artist a vocation which for him would require immersion in the self,in the dark he had strived to keep under." (McDolnld, 2006, p. 61) The calmness described in their moving and motionlessness is reflective of the quietness of the storm within Krapp. To him, life is no longer one intense moment to another; but it is a series of events to sustain an illusion of living, while making a mockery of one's aspirations, desires and expectations. His youthful aspirations and resolutions have all been given up. Krapp at thirty-nine comments on Krapp at twenty-nine:

> Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (Brief laugh in which Krapp Joins.) And the resolutions! (Brief laugh in which Krapp Joins.) To Drink less in particular. (Brief laugh of Krapp alone.) Statistics. Seventeen hundred hours out of the preceding eight thousand odd, consumed on licensed premises alone. More than 20 per cent, say 40 per cent of his waking life. (Pause) Plans for a less…(hesitates)… engrossing sexual life. (Beckett, 1986, p. 218)

4. Krapp and Krapp

Krapp at sixty-nine continues to drink and is as addicted to banana by the dozen, though they are "fatal things for a man with his condition" (Samuel Beckett, 1986, p. 217) His sexual life also continues though with much diminished vigor than before. So his zest for writing ended in failure. "The disappointing sales of Beckett's early publications, such as *Murphy*, spring to mind here." (The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett, 2004, p. 61) At thirty-nine he had decided to embark on opus …magnum (Samuel Beckett, 1986, p. 217) and at sixty-nine he cynically remarks: "Seventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating, libraries beyond the seas. Getting known. (Pause.) One pound six and something, eight I have little doubt."(Beckett, 1986, p. 222) The fire of thirty-nine has never reached consummation. In his twilight period, he contemplates the frustration of his ambitions, the anticipated fulfillment of which gave him the hope and illusion to go on. "Both Krapps can scorn the youthful aspirations and resolutions of their younger self, knowing just how futile they will prove to be. Only Krapp the elder laughs at the wish to drink less, presumably because

middle-aged Krapp has not quite given up this resolution himself and is still trying to cut down on alcohol." (The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett, 2004, p. 60) All his old habits continue, including that of jotting down on the back of an envelope before starting on his recording. Frustrated and mocked by desire, which is an inescapable concomitant of being born into the world, Krapp remains a lonely, old man, physically depleted and drained in his enthusiasm for life.

> [Krapp switches off, broods, looks at his watch, gets up,
> goes back stage into darkness. Ten seconds. Pop of cork.
> Second cork. Ten seconds. Third cork. Ten seconds. Brief
> bust of quavering song.]
> Now the day is over,
> Night is drawing ingh-igh,
> Shadows-(Samuel Beckett, 1986, p. 219)

Krapp awaits "darkness" to close up in upon him, to make him feel less alone. There is nothing more to say "not a squeak". As he decides to lie propped up in the dark, he allows his mind to wander to his boyish days:

> Be again in the dingle on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly,
> the red-berried (Pause.) Be again on Croghan on a
> Sunday morning, in the daze, with the bitch, stop and
> Listen to the bells. (Pause.) And so on. (Pause.) Be again,
> be again. (Pause.) All that old misery. (Pause.) Once wasn't
> enough for you. (Pause.) Lie down across her.
> (Samuel Beckett, 1986, p. 223)

And with this Krapp once again plays the tape that had recorded those brilliant moments with the girl in the punt. This time he plays the tape to its end and ironically enough the tape concludes with young Krapp's brave assertion that he would no longer harbor any desire in the wake of his awareness of its unattainability. "Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. *Not with fire in me now*. (My italics) No, I wouldn't want them back." (Samuel Beckett, 1986, p. 223)

Krapp's desire to reject life totally is totally mocked at. He had failed both in his attempt to sustain himself alone and to sustain with the other. None of his aspirations could be fulfilled and yet being born, he has no alternative but to desire and to seek after an illusory goal till darkness closes in upon. Old Krapp wants to go back to his boyhood days, Christmas Eve and Sunday morning, days of joy and excitement, after having bid farewell to love and life shows the impossibility of stopping the game of life. Krapp does not have Hamm's conviction and his authoritarian prescription "Me—to play". Krapp cut a sorry figure in his return to life after his courageous renunciation of it. He continues to record at sixty- nine, and if his earlier pronouncements are to be given due weight, his recording "these old P. M.

s" as he calls them, "though gruesome…are a help before embarking on a new …retrospect." (Samuel Beckett, 1986, p. 218) are meant for a future Krapp, possibly a decade hence.

5. Conclusion

Krapp's last tape is not his swan song or his farewell message as is often suggested. But it is to be the last tape for the future Krapp, just as Krapp's tape at thirty-nine was the last tape for the present Krapp and the earliest one at twenty-nine, the last for Krapp at thirty-nine. His systematic numbering of the spools and his noting in his ledger subject-wise bear testimony to his continuing desire to sustain himself" against the day when my work will be done and perhaps no place left in my memory, warm or cold for miracle that …(hesitates)… for the fire that set it alight." (Samuel Beckett, 1986, p. 220) That fire or vision which comes to him never reaches consummation for he fears to face it. Krapp fails to come to terms with boredom and suffering. He switches from one to the other, concordant with the switching on and off his tape recorder. "The understanding and fire" that he speaks of testifies to his recognition of mockery of all human aspirations and his consequent anger and protest in defiance of such frustration. He is one of Beckettian characters who brave suffering by a spirited withdrawal from the world of unauthentic living. To the extent he recognizes the inauthenticity of existence and turns away from it, Krapp is a potential exile. But he has no reserve strength to sustain him in his state of aloneness. His inveterate habit to return to his tape-recorder to listen to his past is a proof of his inability to remain immune to the world outside himself. He continues recording for future references so that he could retain the outside world within himself and recourse to it when his voluntary isolation and loneliness become unendurable. He keeps chewing the cud of the bygone past as he lacks the will to persevere in the painful tenor of a lonely existence. Krapp's initial challenging response to the absurdity of existence gives way to a cowardly retreat into the world of reminiscence.

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