

“The Lord Upholdeth No One”: Irony in the Use of Christian Imagery in Samuel Beckett’s Radio Play *All That Fall*

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Abstract - Samuel Beckett’s works stand at the cutting edge of international literary experimentation. His plays employ a complex mode of metaphors and brings together a variety of symbols. This paper attempts to analyze the ramifications of the religious symbols, especially, Christian signification in *All That Fall* (1956). This radio play analyses the deflation of the myth of salvation and abounds in Christian imagery. Irony in the use of Christian imagery in *All That Fall* is the central theme of this article.

Keywords- Metaphor, religious signification, deflation, myth, bible, imagery.

INTRODUCTION

The high degree of philosophical integrity of Samuel Beckett’s works has particular academic appeal; while it’s elliptical concentration-coupled with ambiguity and the avoidance of any definable statement leaves his plays open to any number of readings. Combining progressive thematic abstraction with increasingly simplified images, its hallmarks are consistency and a uniquely uncompromising search for ways of defining the essential human situation. His works are at once allusive and highly innovative in approach theme and form. Beckett's reputation as a master of modern literature is established beyond doubt and widely recognized.

His works portray the collapse of the metaphysical assurances that have sustained western thought- the Belief in an entity called God ,in the unity of the world ,in the comprehensibility of experience, the

communicability of reality through language, the idea of 'man' and the corresponding notion of his destination and historical purpose. "Although he has been confused with the philosophically existential, he has moved ever closer to the essential"(Cohn, *Back* 13). Norman Mailer rightly says that Beckett's works "brings our despair to the surface, nourishes it with air and therefore alters it"(qtd. in Boyle 17).

The major themes and convictions of Samuel Beckett's works rarely appear on the surface, they lie hidden away behind the smoke screen of parody and symbols which are apparently disconnected. He clothes and animates his characters with a symbolism that is bitter, violent, harsh and personal. They not only express his vision of the world, but also truly represent man himself, constituting his spiritual portrait as well as his history. The symbolism is of persecution, terror, suffering and mockery. These are represented by a few external images, a few stage properties and the physical makeup of the characters.

The characters seem to be always at an extreme edge of their existence, but not one achieves an ending. The setting or lighting specified for the plays: typically late evenings, dim halftones, and a neutral state of non darkness all these reflect how the characters are neither able to accept a religious stance or acknowledge atheism. They do not seem to believe in god, and at the same time revile him for not existing and curse him for the misery he has fastened upon them. They appear from the outset to have only scorn for the traditional belief in God, yet on the other hand they are entranced by the baroque convulsions of the speculations of religious theory.

Beckett seems to have lost his religious faith early in life. In a rare interview given to Tom F. Driver from the union theological seminary in New York, he states: "I have no religious feeling. Once I had a religious emotion. It was at my first communion.... Irish Catholicism is not attractive, but it is deeper. When you pass a church on an Irish bus, all the hands flurry in the sign of the cross. One day the dogs of Ireland will do that too and perhaps also the pigs" (qtd. in Doherty 15). He remained a man without belief till the end of his life. In 1956, Harold Hobson asked Beckett, why, as a non believer he has included so many religious

references. Beckett replied “I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them.... It is the shape that matters” (qtd. in Cohn, *Back* 153).

One cannot fail to notice the rich religious resonances in the plays of Beckett. Often the symbols are explicit, the writings being packed with direct biblical quotations and theological terms. Zeifman points out: “...often they are implicit, gaining in weight of religious reference by means of context and juxtaposition, echo and reverberation” (85). He works out a relationship between divine cruelty and human suffering and many of his characters are portrayed as emblematic biblical sufferers. The textual richness of his works can be attributed to the skillfully woven pattern of implicit religious imagery.

IRONY IN THE USE OF CHRISTIAN IMAGERY

All That Fall was Beckett's first radio play commissioned for the BBC Third Programme, broadcast in 1957. The play shows Beckett's concern with the vehicle of sound for drama and his attempt to orchestrate noises and voices into a poetic whole. It is a comparatively minor work and may have been deliberately conceived as a corrective to some of the more misguided interpretations of *Waiting for Godot*. The title of the play which gives a picture of unhappy humanity comes from the Bible: "The Lord upholdeth all that fall and raiseth up all those that be bowed down"(Psalms 145.14). This play is far more visual than Beckett's stage plays and contains a great deal of movement .Thomas Barbour suggests that "it is better adapted to the needs of experimental cinema than to the radio" (Pronko 49). He exploits the genre of radio drama to make a metaphysical implication. Beckett himself describes the play as "a text written to come out of the dark"(Cohn, *Back* 159).

The play uses ‘falling’ as a metaphor for the human condition which has previously been staged as ‘waiting’ in *Waiting for Godot* and ‘ending’ in *Endgame*. He plants his third biblical seed in the milieu of suburban Ireland. *All That Fall* uses the biblical theme as a source of mockery and comments negatively on the chance for salvation: that a chance is becoming more and more unlikely. This destruction of the myth of

'salvation' proceeds explicitly at the centre of this play. The characters reveal the human predicament. All is running down and Mrs. Rooney is the centre from which we discover the extent of the decay. Tired of moving, tired of her body, tired of her life, her one wish is for dissolution: "...what's wrong with me, what's wrong with me, never tranquil, seething out of my dirty old pelt, out of my skull, oh to be in atoms, in atoms! (Frenziedly) ATOMS! (Silence. Cooing. Faintly) Jesus! (Pause) Jesus!"(Beckett 13). According to Francis Doherty, the play is "a vehicle for a pessimistic presentation in a jocoserious manner of a view of life"(106). The play deals with the obsessive theme of death, the arbitrary and intolerable fact of death. The whole play is "a litany of death"(Coe 101). It is this fact of death which, for the characters implies a relentless indictment, an unremitting hatred of that 'God' of whom the preacher speaks.

The title of the play is revealed as a sinister and mocking irony. The lord claims to uphold all that fall, yet the child fell out of the train and the lord upheld her not. After Maddy has spoken the text, she and Dan join in wild laughter. The psalm 145. 14 is used to give the play structure and to bring into question God's existence and benevolence. As Maddy Rooney makes her way to the station to meet her husband, the possibility of falling is brought repeatedly to our attention. First she is overtaken by Christy who walks in front of his cart rather than ride on top of it because he is afraid he might fall, then by Mr. Tyler who rides a bicycle and asks if he might steady himself by putting one hand on her shoulder, and finally by Mr. Slocum who in helping Maddy into his car nearly causes her to fall to the ground. No one does fall however until the end of the play when we are told that a child has tumbled under the wheels of the train. The question that rises is how a benevolent God could have allowed such a thing to happen. The news that it was a child who died intensifies the bitter irony of the biblical verse that gives the play its title. The play is not only notable in its confident annexation of a fresh medium but also because of the social milieu: protestant middle-class commuters. The play pictures the decay of the Irish protestant Middle Class worn out by ailment and age and living/existing on memories. The moribund Irish Protestantism is aptly described by Mrs. Rooney as a "lingering dissolution"(Beckett 11).

Maddy is named after Mary Magdalene in the Bible, a woman of loose morals. Maddy is pictured as being indomitably carnal at the age of 70. She invites Mr. Tyler to unlace her “behind the hedge” (13). Later there is a passage describing Maddy Rooney’s actions as she enters Mr. Slocum’s car.

MR. SLOCUM:

(Coolly). May I then offer you a seat, madam?

MRS. ROONEY:

(With exaggerated enthusiasm). Oh that would be heavenly, Mr. Slocum, just simply heavenly.

(Dubiously). But would I ever get in... (Sound of door opening and Mrs. Rooney trying to get in.)...

(Efforts of Mrs. Rooney.)...I’ll never do it.... (14)

While Maddy is “heaving all back and front,” “dry” Mr. Slocum, “whose name puns upon his potency” (Cohn, *Just* 161) tries his best, “I’m coming Mrs. Rooney, I’m coming, give me time, I’m as stiff as yourself,” and the consummation of their efforts is described by Maddy in deliciously ambiguous terms. Her entrance into the car is ecstatic with sexual suggestion: “...oh! ... (Giggles.) Oh glory!...Up!Up!...Ah!...I’m in... (15). On another level, Maddy’s entering Mr. Slocum’s car to travel along the road evokes the act of entering heaven. She finds the entry arduous; the struggle is clearly an ascent (“Up! Up!”). She comments ambiguously “Oh glory!” and wonders if she will be able to get in. But the hope of salvation is deflated by the deliberately mocking manner in which Maddy’s ascent into Mr. Slocum’s car is presented. The ascent is ridiculed and vulgarized by being assimilated with the act of sexual intercourse. “The dream of Paradise is thus exploded in outrageous burlesque” (Zeifman 90). Salvation seems to be doubtful but death and destruction are certain: “You will get down, Mrs. Rooney, you’ll get down. We may not get you up, but I warrant you we’ll get you down (Beckett 14).

On their homeward journey Maddy informs her husband of the text for Sunday's sermon -a text that they greet with wild laughter. As Alvarez comments, the wild laughter seems to be at "the consolations of religion"(124) The Rooneys had lost their only daughter Minnie many years before and the memory of their bereavement makes them both unhappy. The second part of the play increases the concern about the delayed train and we come to recognize that something has happened which Dan wishes to keep from his wife. We are given to guess that the blind embittered old man has killed the child by pushing it out of the train. To take revenge on God for fallacious promises and for taking Minnie from them, it is implied; Mr. Rooney pushed another person's child to a premature death on the line he felt himself this fateful birthday to be travelling once too often. Earlier in his anger at the lynch twins, jeering at them, he asks Maddy, "Did you ever wish to kill a child? (Pause.)Nip some young doom in the bud....?" (Beckett 31). Speaking of another child who acts as his daily guide to and from the train, he confides to his wife, "Many a time at night, in winter, on the black road home, I nearly attacked the boy. (Pause.) Poor Jerry! (Pause.) What restrained me then? (Pause.) Not fear of man. (Pause.)..." (31).The final news of the child's death comments mordantly upon the biblical prophecy:" Little children will take care of them"(Isaiah 11.6).

The lord as in *Endgame* is conspicuous by his absence and the biblical theme is a source of mockery .Christy has no head for heights; he walks beside his hinny and his cart of dung. This is a reference to Christ's entry into Jerusalem on his hinny:

As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem; they came to Bethphage at the Mount of Olives. There, Jesus sent two of the disciples on ahead with instructions [...]. So the disciples went and did what Jesus had told them to do; they brought the donkey and the colt, threw their cloaks over them, and Jesus got on. (Matthew 21.1-7)

Mr. Slocum "crucifies" his gearbox. Tommy receives no thanks for 'a Christian act,' Miss Fitt fears for a mother's 'fresh sole' rather than her soul. On the homeward journey, the Rooneys hear no Lamb of God but a lamb bleating for suck.

An examination of the dialogue in the play throws light on the patterns of religious paradigm in the play. Throughout the play references are made to "Jesus", "God", "our maker" and "Christ." When Mr. Slocum stops to offer Maddy a lift, he enquires: "Are you going in my direction?" to which Maddy replies "I am Mr. Slocum, we all are"(Beckett 13). The road on which they travel-the road that leads to the train station at Boghill- is metaphorically symbolic of the road of life that leads to death and possibly salvation. This same road has existed throughout eternity. The play gives the idea that "salvation is a deceit, not a going 'home' to a 'higher life'[...] all that man can expect is 'silly unhappiness' "(Fletcher, *Beckett* 85).

Mr. Tyler's daughter is sterile leaving him grandchild less. Tyler himself "...was merely cursing...god and man and the wet Saturday afternoon of my conception" (Beckett 11). Now another wet Saturday afternoon is upon them with its abhorred potential for occasioning other misconceptions, subsequently liable to be similarly cursed by their unfortunate benefactors. All these give the impression of a cruel and malevolent god, as opposed to the lord in the preacher's sermon for Sunday.

The text for Sunday is greeted with bitter laughter by Maddy and Dan because they are bowed down and in perpetual danger of falling. This leitmotif, the notion of being bent ironically referred to in the preacher's text is picked up elsewhere. Maddy is told by Mr. Slocum: "You are bent all double" (Beckett 13). Miss. Fitt has informed Maddy that she looks "so bowed and bent" (20) and Maddy tells her blind husband that he is "bowed down over the ditch" (7).

Suffering, anguish, solitude, physical decrepitude and decay are stressed. Mrs. Rooney walks in pain, can scarcely climb the stairs at the rail road station. Mr. Rooney cannot walk and talk at the same time, he is blind and his heart is ailing. Christy has a sick wife and daughter, Mr. Tyler's daughter has had an Irish

rhetorical version of a pan hysterectomy. A hen is run over before our ears, the Rooneys' daughter Minnie is dead, Maddy recalls the sinking of the Lusitania and Titanic, Mrs. Tully's husband beats her mercilessly, Maddy tells Dan of attending a lecture about a dying girl, Dan wants to continue their reading of Effie Brist, whose heroine dies young. The news of the death of the child ends the play. All the characters seem to be lost. They can find no absolute to hang on to and must simply get along as best as they can.

Mr. Slocum runs over a hen and squashes it. The hen is the visible analogue of accidental but sudden death. Sympathetic enquiries by Mrs. Rooney turn out to be perfunctory and not pursued; the stupidity of Mr. Slocum's driving kills a hen, but that death is seen as a blessed release. People are kept going or people keep themselves going, Mrs. Rooney is consoled at the thought that at least for one of God's creatures, 'all the laying and the hatching' are at an end. But for those that remain, the sole prospect held out is of "a lingering dissolution" (11) "wasting slowly, painlessly away" (18).

All That Fall is a dramatic poem compounded into a radio play, moving in its comic and ragged pathos in a twist of irony to a shattering conclusion. The death instinct seems to win, as though the force of life were too fragile and uncertain to withstand the overwhelming pull towards death.

In this play Beckett speaks of life as the original sin for which there is no atonement, but without any protective theologizing. Comedy shot through with sadness at decline and fall makes the play one of Beckett's most satisfying dramatic statements. In the words of Fletcher(1975), this play "presents the hearer with a problem not easily resolved-one perhaps more painful to sustain than the blank state of two men waiting at a roadside for a savior unable to keep his appointment"("Beckett" 88). The play hints at two cynical possibilities: either there is no God, in which case, disappointment and suffering are simply inescapable facts of life; or God exists and is inexplicably cruel to his creatures.

CONCLUSION

To conclude from the ample use of religious symbols that the author is trying to give any message of religious consolation, would be to misjudge its actual significance. The Christian motifs are used by Beckett to run home the idea that life has no transcendental meaning and he employs a great variety of arguments to reach his objective.

In this play, the characters are haunted by insecurity and their situation is hopeless. The consoling lie that “The Lord upholdeth all that fall and raiseth up all those that be bowed down” (39) is too good a joke for them to refrain from laughter even in the midst of their privations.

One may find it difficult to accept Beckett’s novel ideas on account of their radical negation of conventional values. But the bold, dramatic form he has developed seems particularly suited to expressing modern man’s fundamental drama: his undefined sense of guilt, his feeling of hopelessness and anguish resulting from a loss of identity and purpose. They give us, in the form of a play, an evidence of the author’s intimate experience and lead readers to perceive Beckett’s art as an expression of his personal vision on the essential philosophical question about the place of human being in the world.

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