

# Samuel Beckett's Drama and Beyond

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If critics have long considered Samuel Beckett as a central figure in twentieth-century literature, his influence upon the nature of dramatic innovation has remained difficult to pinpoint. It is all the more important to address this paradox in its British and Irish contexts, given Beckett's recent transformation into an Irish cultural icon, and given the recent wave of British productions aiming at making his plays accessible to mainstream audiences by giving them a clearly-established meaning.

In this seminar, we will discuss Beckett's drama and developments beyond Beckett, charting the development of non-naturalistic trends in texts written for theatre, radio and television. We will begin by considering the influences shaping Beckett's rejection of realism, paying particular attention to his response to the period known as the Irish Revival, and we then address the degree to which qualities commonly associated with the idea of 'the Beckettian' are echoed in a range of British and Irish plays from the late 1960s to the present.

Our seminar programme will be divided into two parts. In the first four seminars, we will examine a wide range of dramatic texts written by Beckett, from absurdist plays such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* to short dramatic texts whose status as plays is open to question. *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* were heralded as groundbreaking plays in the 1950s, and Beckett's desolate landscapes responded to the anxieties of the post-war period, as their presentation of man's relentless search for meaning in a meaningless universe echoed contemporaneous philosophical concerns. In plays of the 1960s and 1970s, Beckett moved away from an absurdist aesthetic and experimented with the boundaries of dramatic expression, showing a particular fascination with the possibilities of the voice and of dramatic monologue. His investigation of the modalities of perception and meaning had a determining influence on subsequent developments in Irish and British drama, and playwrights such as Harold Pinter, Sarah Kane and Marina Carr, for instance, have acknowledged Beckett as their forefather. The second half of the module will lead us to address the motives underlying this interest in Beckett. Looking at plays by Tom Murphy, Harold Pinter, Sarah Kane, Marina Carr, Frank McGuinness, Thomas McDonagh, Brian Friel and Conor McPherson, and re-reading a selection of texts by Beckett alongside these plays, we will discuss these playwrights' representations of linguistic, sensory and cognitive breakdowns, elements which evoke the transformative effect that Beckett had on dramatic form, and we will consider the motives shaping their engagement with a non-naturalistic aesthetic.

No previous experience of studying drama is required. All plays by Beckett may be found in his *Complete Dramatic Works* (Faber). Some of the plays and essays listed below will be available as handouts from my birdcage or in seminars, and the primary reading list in the second half of the term may be modified to accommodate new directions and suggestions, depending on how our discussions develop. Critical essays and suggestions for secondary reading will accompany seminars as appropriate, and a detailed bibliography will be distributed at the beginning of term.

## Seminar programme

**Week 1:** No seminar

### **Week 2: Beckett and the Irish Revival**

Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1955)

W.B. Yeats, *Purgatory* (1939)

Lady Augusta Gregory, *The Workhouse Ward* (1908) (handout)

J.M. Synge, *The Well of the Saints* (1905) (handout)

Beckett, "Recent Irish Poetry" (1934) (from Beckett's *Disjecta* – handout)

Beckett, ... *but the clouds...* (1977)

W.B. Yeats, "The Tower" (handout)

**Week 3: history and oblivion 1**

Theodor Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*" (1958) (handout)

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (1958); *Happy Days* (1961); *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958); *Catastrophe* (1982)

**Week 4: sound and motion**

Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall* (1957); *Embers* (1959); *Rough for Radio I* (1961); *Words and Music* (1962); *Cascando* (1962); *Breath* (1969); *Quad* (1982)

**Week 5: voice and dramatic monologue 1**

Samuel Beckett, *Play* (1964); *Not I* (1972); *Eh Joe* (1966); *That Time* (1976); *A Piece of Monologue* (1979); *Ohio Impromptu* (1981)

Gilles Deleuze, "The Exhausted" (handout)

**Week 6:** Reading week – no seminar

**Week 7: voice and dramatic monologue 2**

Harold Pinter, *Landscape* (1968); *Silence* (1969); *Monologue* (1973); *Family Voices* (1981)

Sarah Kane, *Crave* (1998)

[Beckett, *Play*; *Words and Music*; *Cascando*]

**Week 8: memory and storytelling**

Tom Murphy, *Bailegangaire* (1985)

Martin McDonagh, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996)

[Beckett, *Endgame*]

**Week 9: landscapes of the mind**

Marina Carr, *Portia Coughlan* (1996)

Conor McPherson, *Port Authority* (2001)

[Beckett, *That Time*; *Footfalls*; *A Piece of Monologue*]

**Week 10: history and oblivion 2**

Brian Friel, *The Freedom of the City* (1973)

Frank McGuinness, *Carthaginians* (1988)

[Beckett, *Rough for Theatre I*]

**Useful starting points:**

**Viewing/listening:**

The *Beckett on Film* DVD, the filmed drama productions and the CD boxset of Beckett's radio plays (all available from the audiovisual room in the Main Library) will be useful for seminar preparation.

**Recent books directly relevant to this particular configuration of Beckett:**

Maude, Ulrika. *Beckett, Technology, and the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.

Morin, Emilie. *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Roche, Anthony. *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness*. Revised ed.

- Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Tonning, Erik. *Samuel Beckett's Abstract Drama: Works for Stage and Screen 1962-1985*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Watt, Stephen. *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.

**Useful starting points on Beckett:**

- Ackerley, Chris, and S.E. Gontarski. *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to his Works, Life, and Thought*. New York: Grove Press, 2004.
- Beckett, Samuel. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*. Ed. Martha Fehsenfeld and Lois Overbeck. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Cohn, Ruby. *A Beckett Canon*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Herren, Graley. *Samuel Beckett's Plays on Film and Television*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury, 1996.
- Pattie, David. *The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Pilling, John, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Zilliacus, Clas. *Beckett and Broadcasting: A Study of the Works of Samuel Beckett for and in Radio and Television*. Abo: Abo Akademi, 1976.

**General studies of Irish drama:**

- Greene, Nicholas. *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Morash, Christopher. *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Murray, Christopher. *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: A Mirror up to Nation*. Manchester; New York: Manchester UP, 1997.
- Richards, Shaun. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.
- Worth, Katharine. *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett*. London: Athlone Press, 1978.

**Other relevant sources on 20<sup>th</sup>-century drama:**

- Bentley, Eric, ed. *The Theory of the Modern Stage: an Introduction to Modern Theatre and Drama*. Revised ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2008.
- Counsell, Colin. *Signs of Performance: an Introduction to Twentieth-Century Theatre*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Penguin, 1991.
- Kahn, Douglas, and Gregory Whitehead, eds. *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio and the Avant-Garde*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992.
- Ubersfeld, Anne. *Reading Theatre*. Trans. Frank Collins. Ed. Paul Perron and Patrick Debbèche. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.