

Is Beckett's Island Dystopia(n) or not?

Abstract: The literary genre of dystopia remains popular in the English-speaking world, particularly in young adult fiction. The word "dystopia" is a nineteenth century English neologism formed upon the logic of Thomas More's *utopia*. Dystopia denotes a physical "bad place", and a metaphysical "negative space". In *Malone Dies* the novel's final scene is happening on an island or "islet", as Beckett wrote. What unfolds is a scene of horror, a slaughter committed by guardian Lemuel. The islet thus becomes Böcklin's "Isle of the Dead" (bad place), and Lemuel the boatman Charon who ferried souls to the underworld in Greek mythology. *Endgame* is set in a post-apocalyptic world, and everything is happening in a kind of bunker-shelter. Outside there is, probably, nothing. Or, maybe, only Death, as Hamm says. Are they situated on an island or not? Are Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell the last survivors of an atomic war? A kind of Robinsons, lost on an island in the middle of a desert planet, like the lost boys in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*? Beckett wrote some other works that can be considered dystopian, but in my paper I will focus on the two mentioned above, and try to analyze characters in those hostile landscapes, and their useless efforts to avoid the inevitable – the end.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, island, utopia, dystopia, *Malone Dies*, *Endgame*, robinsonade, post-apocalypse, death.

Beckett and dystopia

The literary genre of dystopia remains popular in the English-speaking world, particularly in young adult fiction. The word "dystopia" is a nineteenth century English neologism formed on the logic of Thomas More's *utopia*. So, dystopia is generally understood as an inverse utopia. "While utopia is too good to be real, dystopia is too bad to be real"¹. Dystopia denotes a physical "bad place", and a metaphysical "negative space". "Categories for negative space arose from reflection and reading around the concept of the Absurd, and the point of contact between the two fields lies in the shared concern with *humanity*"². Absurdity in Beckett's work is one of the main characteristics of his writing.

¹ David Gutierrez Cordero, *The Lost Ones: Samuel Beckett's Tale of Utopia* (Valladolid: Facultad de Filosofía Y Letras, 2015), 11.

² Eleanor Bryce, "Dystopia in the plays of Samuel Beckett: Purgatory in Play", ENS de Lyon, 9.5.2019, 4.

"Both dystopian paradigms and the philosophical ideas of the Absurd deal with the manipulation of an individual, either by real or metaphysical means, stripping down the protective layers created by contemporary society and ideology in order to shine a cruelly honest light on what sort of creature is revealed. On stage, when a text is animated for performance, both physical and linguistic *topoi* have a concrete presence"³.

We must not forget that Beckett's dramatic⁴ work was from the beginning considered as theatre of the absurd, together with the works of Adamov and Ionesco. Since this definition of Martin Esslin in his essay "The Theatre of the Absurd", Beckett has been situated in the tradition of his playwright predecessors – Jarry, Appolinaire, Artaud, Futurists and Dadaists. We tend to count the Futurists and Dadaists among the creators of the avant-garde art and literature, who have completely deviated from aesthetic and poetic forms of expression of the former artists. Among other things, they produced and performed stage performances that could hardly fit into the tradition of European drama. Dadaist "Cabaret Voltaire" was for months during 1916 a real laboratory of stage performances, and performance is the right word to describe their efforts to change everything that was known before them as art. Why Esslin omitted to mention them, we do not know as it is hardly possible that he was not familiar with their work. Parodic and satirical influences on Beckett's prose writing are also important. From Rabelais and Swift, to Joyce and Kafka, the list of authors that he admired is long.

The negation is required to reapply the term dystopia to some of the plays of Samuel Beckett. Apart from *Endgame*, we can apply the term also to *Happy Days*, *Play*, *Act Without Words I*, *Act Without Words II*, and others. We may also mention some of Beckett's prose works such as *The Lost Ones*, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Lessness*, and *Fizzles*. There are two main sub-genres of dystopia: the "anti-utopia" refers more specifically to a constructed negative place which is therefore usually a society; conversely an apocalyptic dystopia describes a destroyed place with little to no formal structure. Thus, we have to make distinction between anti-utopias and dystopias. "Anti-utopias are reactions to specific utopias, while dystopias are reactions to popular utopian ideals of the average person. The utopian is primary, like the artist; the dystopian is secondary, like the art critic"⁵.

Endgame can be considered as apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic drama, a subgenre of science fiction, science fantasy or horror in which the Earth's technological civilization is collapsing or has collapsed. Post-apocalyptic stories often take place in a non-technological future world or a world where only scattered elements of society and technology remain, and that is the case with Hamm and Clov in their shelter. Their dystopia in *Endgame* is played on a micro plan, in their micro world, but even in that microcosm

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Now when we know all his opus, we know that Absurd is immanent to every Beckett's work, not only theatre plays.

⁵ Chad Walsh, *From Utopia to Nightmare* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1962), 177.

we have the relation of master and servant, which means subordination, we have family relations between Hamm and his parents Nagg and Nell, no matter how rudimentary they are. They all have memories of the past life, somewhere in better times. They are all conscious of the fact that there is no future for them, that there is no possible escape, because there is no place to escape. Or there is only one way of escape – to die. That is what happens with Nell. So, is she the only one rescued? The fact that she lives and dies in the dustbin, legless, is certainly another – dark and ironic – metaphor of humanity that was coined by Beckett. Are we all condemned (or damned) to end this way? Dystopian literature “differs from science fiction in the specificity of its attention to social and political critique”⁶. As a writer, Beckett was certainly censorious of the state of humanity, being always aware of the misery that surrounds us. Painting with dark colours his heroes and their surroundings was his way of struggling against numerous injustices, atrocities and political hypocrisy. *Endgame* is an example of post-apocalyptic dystopian drama: everything that is happening is bad, the place where they are is bad, and there cannot be much empathy for Beckett’s characters, as they are also bad.

The scriptural story of Noah and his Ark describes the end of the corrupted original civilization and its replacement with a remade world. Noah is assigned the task to build the Ark and save the life forms so as to re-establish a new post-flood world. This Biblical story is one of the oldest of the genre. Beckett, as an erudite man, knew perfectly well this and other Biblical stories. The choice of Hamm’s name cannot be just a coincidence, since one of Noah’s sons’ name was Ham! As the Biblical Ham was one of the creators of the new human race, Beckett’s Hamm symbolises the end of it. From one cataclysm (the Flood) to another (nuclear war?), the circle is closed. The end of a game for all human beings. And of course the last book of the *New Testament*, St. John the Divine’s *Book of Revelation* (from which the word apocalypse originated, meaning a “revelation of secrets”) is filled with prophecies of destruction, as well as luminous visions of the Judgement Day. This final story of the Bible was written on the island of Patmos, in the Cave of the Apocalypse! From the Ark through the cave and, finally, in the shelter-bunker. This is the story of humanity.

Mary Shelley’s novel, *The Last Man* (1826), is often considered the first work of modern apocalyptic fiction. The book tells of a future world that has been ravaged by a plague. Also Herbert George Wells wrote several novels that have a post-apocalyptic theme. *The Time Machine* (1895) has the main protagonist traveling to the future after civilization has collapsed and humanity has split in two distinct species, the elfin Eloi and the brutal cannibals Morlocks. Later in the story, the time traveller moves forward to a dying Earth beneath a swollen red sun. In Edward Morgan Forster’s novelette *The Machine Stops* (1909), humanity has been forced underground due to inhospitable conditions on Earth’s surface, and is entirely dependent on “the machine”, a god-like mechanical entity which has supplanted almost all free will by providing for humankind’s

⁶ M. Keith Booker, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), 19.

every whim. The machine deteriorates and eventually stops, ending the lives of all dependent upon it, though one of the dying alludes to a group of humans dwelling on the surface who will carry the torch of humanity into the future. We should not forget at this point that the first science-fiction drama in the history of literature, a theatre play of Serbian writer Dragutin Ilić, *A Million Years After*, was written in 1889! This work is also dystopian, describing the post-apocalyptic world in the far future, where humans are almost exterminated, and new race of dehumanized creatures, immortals, are ruling the Earth. Of course, Karel Čapek's science fiction play from 1920 *R.U.R.* (*R.U.R.* stands for *Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti* – Rossum's Universal Robots), introduces the word "robot" to languages other than Slavic (since this word is found in every Slavic language as *robota* or *rabota*, meaning labour, and *rabotnik* or *robotnik*, a laborer) and to science fiction as a whole, becoming the most influential theatre play in this genre. We will mention also one film, Fritz Lang's master-piece, *Metropolis*, from 1927, black and white and silent expressionist work, which stands even today as an extraordinary example of dystopian dehumanized world of future.

Those are only few examples of this subgenre; there are many more. It has proliferated after the Second World War and the real experience of atomic bombs thrown on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That experience was certainly one of the horrible souvenirs that Beckett had from the Second World War, together with the one of the concentration camps that influenced his post-war writing.

The "anti-utopia" is another sub-genre of dystopia. It "refers more specifically to a constructed negative place which is therefore usually a society"⁷. Dystopian literature is by nature speculative: if it does not describe a fictional dramatization of a current situation, it anticipates one in the future. Such is the situation in *Endgame*, but also in some other famous anti-utopian works: Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*.

"Dystopias are often seen as "cautionary tales", but the best dystopias are not didactic creeds, and the best dystopias do not draw their power from whatever political/societal point they might be making; the best dystopias speak to the deeper meanings of what it is to be one small part of a teeming civilization... and of what it is to be human"⁸.

In Catholic purgatory, which occupies Beckett's poetical, philosophical and theological visions from his early works, we cannot quite agree who is in charge of the punishments which are carried out in the space – opinions vary whether these are angels or demons.

"In a Beckettian purgatory, this problem does not occur, since the sacred space, the space of the controlling power, is conspicuously empty. However, the presence of a perceiving entity

⁷ Bryce, "Dystopia...", 2.

⁸ John Joseph Adams, "Dystopian-fiction-an-introduction" (<http://www.tor.com/blogs/2011/04/dystopian-fiction-an-introduction> [accessed 9 May 2019]).

and the pervading feeling of being observed, and the mysterious power which maintains the dystopian situation, are key elements in the paradigm⁹.

He chose the state of purgatorial punishment rather than the one in Hell. "But this is my punishment, my crime is my punishment, that's what they judge me for [...]"¹⁰. And of course, no Paradise was allowed to his heroes. Beckettian purgatory, then, consists of a desolate or utterly indistinct physical setting in which the central characters are forcibly immobilized and dissociated from the entirety of their bodies, following the Cartesian dualism of body and mind. Instead of a Big Brother, his heroes are controlled by mysterious personas like Gaber, Youdi and Godot, guarded by guardians like Lemuel, observed by anonymous observers (voyeurs?), interrogated by mysterious interrogators, informed by messengers what they have to do, or more often what they cannot or are not allowed to do. "Beckett's world is intrinsically bad due to the encumbrance of existing in a state of constant division between the world of the mind and the world of the senses"¹¹. Physically incapable of doing anything else, the key characters pour out a narrative monologue in increasingly intense forms of logorrhoea, under pressure from an extra-sensory power, from another, or both. Logorrhoea was present from the beginning of Beckett's stagecraft and prose fiction works, "In terms of a Beckettian dystopia, logorrhoea stands at one end of an extreme treatment of the linguistic topos, with silence evidently providing the counterweight"¹².

Also, it is evident that both utopian or dystopian literary works are often connected with the topos of the island. Is it Plato's Atlantis, first mythical utopian place of human's ideal – Paradise on Earth, where people are living in harmony in a perfectly arranged world – or Thomas More's *Utopia*, Francis Bacon's *Bensalem*, Aldous Huxley's *Pala?* Examples of utopian places, they all symbolize the Paradise Lost, the Garden of Eden, from where first humans were expelled; Čapek's island, where the Rosum's factory of robots is situated, Golding's unnamed tropical island, Beckett's Dulkey island, are examples of anti-utopian places. Northrop Frye refers to islands as "points of epiphany"¹³, and this is certainly the case for utopian examples of the island motif. From Homer's *Odyssey* to William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, or Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, islands – inhabited or desert, civilized or wild – have captured human imagination. Malone "making his inventory continues the metaphor of isolation"^{14, 15}, although his island is only an isolated room.

⁹ Bryce, "Dystopia...", 8.

¹⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*. *Malone Dies*. *The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1976), 372.

¹¹ Jonathan Moore, *Between the Idea and the Reality Falls the Shadow: Varieties of Modernist Dystopia* (Towson: Towson University, 2014), 53.

¹² Bryce, "Dystopia...", 9.

¹³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 122.

¹⁴ An allusion to Robinson Crusoe's inventories of goods that survived the shipwreck that will later save his life on his desert island.

¹⁵ C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski (eds), *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 130.

Beckett never tried to look upon the utopian place, which is, by definition¹⁶, a good place (to live), or place that humans are dreaming of, as an imaginary place similar to Paradise Lost. His literary world is rather dystopian, consisting of various negatively evaluated places – asylum, hospital, desert land, mud, darkness, bunker, an almost empty room for his lonely hero, garbage landfill, garbage can – for his humans disposed in those bad and ugly places, vicious and ugly themselves, and with no possibility to escape. No exit for them, no hope. “The idea of bucolic splendour in a utopian paradise is satirized by authors aware of the true state of human nature in dystopian narratives positing a nightmare in place of a dreamscape”¹⁷. So, instead of More’s *Utopia*, Tommaso Campanella’s *The City of the Sun*, Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, Plato’s *The Republic* and Timaeus or Huxley’s *Island*, we have one of the most significant literary opuses, the one of Samuel Beckett. Filled with those “bad places” and with his anti-heroes, Beckett’s work is very similar to those of other “heavy” writers, such as Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Hermann Broch, Daniil Kharmis, Witold Gombrowicz, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Ivo Andrić.

Beckett’s islands

For someone born on an island, even if it is a big one, as Ireland is, being conscious of the fact that your world is surrounded by enormous ocean waters must play an important role in everyday life. The impact of limited area, limited by the sea from every side, was probably one of the main reasons why Beckett chose to flee from his native land. Those geographical limits have influenced the collective consciousness of Irish people too. Maybe that is why Beckett “preferred France at war to Ireland at peace”¹⁸. Irish conservatism, devoted Catholicism and above all censorship in this country when Beckett was a young man, helped him to make his decision and to turn into a refugee from his native land. But a strange kind of refugee, neither political nor economic. Instead, he chose a sort of cultural exile, living in one of the world’s cultural metropolises, Paris. Finally, he decided on French as a language of his creation. All those facts made him a unique writer in the history of world literature.

Notably, the Unnamable says: “The island, I’m on the island. I’ve never left the island. God help me”¹⁹. This sounds like a nightmare of Unnamable/Beckett: to be still there, in Ireland! Another geographical absurd is that Beckett Island really exists! It is situated in Ontario, Canada. A small one, but there it is! Not named after our writer, but never mind. The Beckett Island. Beckettiana. A strange country. Finally, Beckett lived in Paris, in the region which is called Île-de-France (The Island of France), because of its geographical disposition. Although it is situated in the middle of France, it is surrounded

¹⁶ *Ou-topia* means “no place” and *eu-topia* “good place”.

¹⁷ Moore, *Between...*, 2.

¹⁸ Alison O’Malley-Younger, and John Strachan, *Ireland at War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 8.

¹⁹ Beckett, *Unnamable*, 364.

by the rivers of Oise, Marne and Seine, and they form a kind of an inland's island, in the centre of which there is Paris.

"The island. A last effort. The islet. The shore facing the open sea is jagged with creeks. One could live there, perhaps happy, if life was a possible thing, but nobody lives there. The deep water comes washing into its heart, between high walls of rock. One day nothing will remain of it but two islands, separated by a gulf, narrow at first, then wider and wider as the centuries slip by, two islands, two reefs. It is difficult to speak of man, under such condition. [...] You know, on the island there are Druid remains"²⁰.

This is the island of the final scene in *Malone Dies*, the second part of Beckett's *Trilogy* of novels. Lady Pedal is leading a group of patients from the House of St. John of God, an asylum that is situated in Stillorgan, a Dublin suburb, which is near Beckett's Foxrock home, to that island on a kind of picnic, in a small boat. The same asylum is Watt's final destination in part III of the novel. In room 166 of that asylum Malone finishes his days, writing about this island picnic, writing about the death of the others while he himself is dying. This asylum is housing the docile rather than the criminally insane. The inmates outing with Lady Pedal take the route from Sillorgan to Dalkey Island, a desert island where nobody lives but sea seals and wild goats. The island for which the nearby village of Dalkey is named lies about 16 kilometres south of Dublin. An important site of pilgrimage for centuries, it has been known as "St Begnet's Isle" since records began.

Four inmates are introduced: "The youth then, the Saxon, the thin one and the giant"²¹. The outing continues to its finale, guardian Lemuel's²² gratuitous slaying of Maurice and Ernest, sailors. Lady Pedal fainted at the sight of the late sailors, "which caused her to fall [...] She must have broken something in her fall, her hip perhaps [...]"²³. She was left alone on the island, probably moribund. Lemuel with four huddled inmates drift out to the sea, while Malone's narrative dissipates, as his pencil dwindles, he dies too. The scene of a drifting boat in the offing has some similarities with the "Ithaca" chapter of *Ulysses*. The island of Dalkey really existed, and it was a perfect choice for the end. Lunatics and psychopath, exalting Lady, desert land, ruins, sea, death by slaughter, all this is not far from dystopian novels. Absurdity of this scene is total and scaring.

Beckett might partly find his inspiration for this scene in the famous painting of the Swiss Symbolist artist Arnold Böcklin, *Isle of the Dead*. All versions of *Isle of the Dead* depict a desolate and rocky islet seen across an expanse of dark water. A small rowboat is just arriving at a water gate and seawall on shore. An oarsman manoeuvres the boat from the stern. In the bow, facing the gate, there is a standing figure clad entirely in white.

²⁰ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, 288.

²¹ *Ibid.* 286.

²² Lemuel is the name of a Biblical king mentioned in Proverbs 31:1 and 4, but whose identity remains uncertain.

²³ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, 289.

Just behind the figure, there is a white, festooned object commonly interpreted as a coffin. The tiny islet is dominated by a dense grove of tall, dark cypress trees – associated by long-standing tradition with cemeteries and mourning – which is closely hemmed in by precipitous cliffs. Furthering the funerary theme are what appear to be sepulchral portals and windows on the rock faces. “That the boaters are arriving at, and not departing from, the island is an assumption. The oarsman is positioned to row away from the shore, but in some versions the ripples of the boat’s wake suggest that they are moving forward”²⁴. Many observers have interpreted the oarsman as representing the boatman Charon who ferried souls to the underworld in Greek mythology. The water would then be either the River Styx or the River Acheron and his white-clad passenger a recently deceased soul transiting to the afterlife. Beckett’s island is also, like Böcklin’s, becoming the place of death. Drifting boat on the sea is leading the survivors nowhere or, probably, to another death.

This island scene is the big finale of a long Malone/Macmann’s storytelling, which never comes to its supposed end and conclusion, but can only be finished by the narrator’s death. “Where now? Who now? When now?”, questions that narrators of *The Three Novels* pose to themselves will never be answered. “Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that”²⁵. This is not the story of life, this is the story of death, as Malone dies writing his stories. A dying writer. His storytelling is extracted from history, geography, past and future, family, friends, nation and religion. Similarly to Molloy, he is alone in his room, but happy to have one. Unnamable will finish his life in a jar. Closed in an asylum, for just being old and alone in this world? In his world there is only void that strikes us. Beckett is, in his manner, writing his anti-utopian story of the bad and ugly world that surrounds us. “The dying Malone, whose time finally runs out, is the ultimate romantic artist; and his exercise book, the final collapse of art into time”²⁶. But, “what is missing in Malone and what is essential to many of his romantic predecessors is a belief that form and time are compatible [...] for Malone form and time are completely at odds”²⁷. He is searching for a kind of formlessness, and his final aim is the separation of body and mind (by death). He is expressing his devotion to “darkness, to nothingness, to earnestness”²⁸, in this life, and hopes that it will be all over with the “Murphys, Merciers, Molloys, Morans and Malones, unless it goes on beyond the grave”²⁹. And that is a scary idea! “Unless it goes on beyond the grave!”

²⁴ Hubert Locher, “Arnold Böcklin: Die Toteninsel. Traumbild des 19. Jahrhunderts”, in: *Kunsthistorische Arbeitsblätter* [“Arnold Böcklin: The Isle of the Dead; Dream Image of the 19th Century”, in: *Art History Worksheets*], Zeitschrift für Studium und Hochschulkontakt; Issue 7/8, 2004, p. 71.

²⁵ Beckett, *Unnamable*, 293.

²⁶ H. Porter Abbott, “The Harpooned Notebook: Malone Dies and the Conventions of Intercalated Narrative”, *Samuel Beckett. Humanistic Perspectives*, (eds. M. Beja, S.E. Gontarski, P. Astier), Ohio State University Press, 1983, 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁸ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, 195.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 237.

In his strange dystopian world, Malone is always in the state of mind between hallucinations, reveries and memories. "And my night is not the sky's. Naturally black is black the whole world over. But how is it my little space is not visited by the luminaries I sometimes see shining afar and how is it the moon where Cain toils bowed beneath his burden never sheds its light on my face?"³⁰. Those abstruse words are immanent to Beckett's writing. Where is Malone situated? With such descriptions is he alive, on this Earth, or somewhere else? And where else? There where Cain is? Where Dante put him, in Hell? So, if Malone is looking at the same moon as Cain, is he also placed there? And for what sins? Is being alive a punishment by definition, as it is repeated many times in Beckett?

"The idea of punishment came to his mind, addicted it is true to that chimera and probably impressed by the posture of the body and the fingers clenched as though in torment. And without knowing exactly what his sin was he felt full well that living was not a sufficient atonement for it or that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on, as if there could be anything but life, for the living"³¹.

Or is everything only Malone's imagination? "And in the skull is it the vacuum? I ask. And if I close my eyes, close them really, as others cannot, but as I can, for there are limits to my impotence, then sometimes my bed is caught up into the air and tossed like a straw by the swirling eddies, and I in it"³². A spaceship bed! It is difficult to draw the line between the reality and reverie in Beckett's work.

Dystopian is Beckett's next work that we are dealing with, the theatre piece *Endgame*, which was originally written in 1957 in French as *Fin de partie*. Beckett himself described this piece "the one-act horror". Two men, a master and a servant, Hamm and Clov, reside in some sort of a shelter or a bunker. They live in a post-apocalyptic world, as perhaps the only survivors of an unspecified cataclysm. But there cannot be much doubt what kind of catastrophe – a nuclear war. Beckett's writing is perhaps conditioned by the twentieth-century visions of Hiroshima, an apocalypse which was only localized, but has remained alive in our collective consciousness.

"Events like Hiroshima could also be seen as haunting warnings for what might one day happen with more catastrophic totality. Yet, the twentieth century clearly provided mankind with an alternative interpretation of the End. The image of the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima has firmly established itself as the most common representation of apocalypse, or Armageddon"³³.

A very possible one, ever since. Many of Beckett's post-war plays including *Endgame* and *Happy Days* are clearly set in a post-apocalyptic world, where the only human survivors are the onstage characters.

³⁰ Ibid., 221.

³¹ Ibid., 240.

³² Ibid., 221.

³³ Richard Banks, *A Feeble Apocalypse: Samuel Beckett and The Sense of an Ending*, 2015 (<https://medium.com/@rbanksy/a-feeble-apocalypse-samuel-beckett-and-the-sense-of-an-ending-part-1-5-c8fce539383c> [access on 26 July 2019]).

"The earth uninhabited and the landscape of ruins with the last remaining human beings barely alive are suggested in many of Beckett's works. Our post-holocaust world is filled with repeated disasters such as wars, conflicts, and natural disasters, so that we endlessly feel a sense of apocalypse. Beckett's sense of men and women living in worsening conditions towards the unseen ending is the global anxiety shared in the late twentieth to the twenty-first century"³⁴.

When Tanaka writes those lines, being the part of the only nation that suffered the disastrous effects of nuclear bombs, she can only imagine what kind of influence this event had on Beckett. But with such descriptions of our Earth that we find in *Endgame*, *Godot*, *Happy Days*, with such descriptions of the state of humanity we find in *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, *How It Is*, there cannot be much doubt about it. "Beckett's imagination of dead victims ruined and suffering in some traumatic event (which he never clarifies) reminds us, the audience and the readers, of those who suffered and died in apocalyptic disasters"³⁵.

When Clov, the only one who can move, since Hamm is sitting immobilized in his wheelchair, is looking out the windows with his telescope, he can see only sea, no land, no sails, no gulls, nothing. That is a clear suggestion that their shelter is on a kind of a small island or even a cliff.

Hamm: Nature has forgotten us.

Clov: There's no more nature.

Hamm: No more nature! You exaggerate³⁶.

Hamm: Old wall. Beyond is... the other hell³⁷.

Clov: (*He gets up on ladder, turns the telescope on the without*) Let's see. (*He looks, moving the telescope.*) Zero... (*he looks*)...zero...(*he looks*)...and zero.

Hamm: Nothing stirs. All is-

Clov: Zer-

Hamm: Look at the sea.

Clov: It's the same.

Hamm: Look at the ocean³⁸.

Hamm: No gulls?

Clov (*looking*): Gulls!

Hamm: And the horizon? Nothing on the horizon?

Clov: What in God's name could there be on the horizon?

Hamm: The waves, how are the waves?

Clov: The waves? Lead.

Hamm: And the sun?

³⁴ Mariko Hori Tanaka, "The global trauma of the nuclear age in Beckett's post-war plays", in: *Samuel Beckett and trauma*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 173.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958), 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

Clov (*looking*): Zero.

Hamm: But it should be sinking. Look again.

Clov (*looking*): Damn the sun.

Hamm: Is it night already then?

Clov: No.

Hamm: Then what is it?

Clov (*looking*): Gray"³⁹.

These descriptions of the external world are very precise. There can be no doubt that there is nobody outside, "no more nature" as Clov suggests. That everybody and everything is dead. And that two of them together with Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, are all that is left of humanity. In such conditions even the appearance of a flea or a rat is perceived as a big event.

"Clov: (*anguished, scratching himself*): I have a flea!

Hamm: A flea! Are there still fleas?

Clov: On me there's one.

Hamm: (*very perturbed*): But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God!"⁴⁰

What an ironical and parodic tone in Hamm's declaration: "But humanity might start from there all over again!" Darwin would certainly love it. So the flea must be destroyed. But even so there is hope. Maybe? At least in Hamm's consciousness. "Hamm: That here we're down in a hole. But beyond the hills? Eh? Perhaps it's still green. Eh? Flora⁴¹! Pomona⁴²! (*Ecstatically*.) Ceres⁴³!"⁴⁴ It sounds like Hamm's delirium. And that gives him the idea of probable salvation.

"Hamm: (*with ardour*): Let's go from here, the two of us! South! You can make a raft and the currents will carry us away, far away, to other... mammals!

Clov: God forbid!

Hamm: Alone, I'll embark alone! Get working on that raft immediately. Tomorrow I'll be gone forever.

Clov: (*hastening towards door*): I'll start straight away.

Hamm: Wait! (*Clov halts*.) Will there be sharks, do you think?

Clov: Sharks? I don't know. If there are there will be"⁴⁵.

³⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁴¹ The word "flora" comes from the Latin name of Flora, the goddess of plants, flowers, and fertility in Roman mythology. <http://www.mythindex.com/roman-mythology/F/Flora.html> (Access on 30.1.2020).

⁴² Pomona in the Roman mythology is the goddess of fruits, who presided over their ripening and in-gathering, and was generally represented bearing fruits in her lap or in a basket. <https://www.definitions.net/definition/Pomona> (Access on 30.1.2020).

⁴³ In ancient Roman religion, Ceres was a goddess of agriculture, grain crops, fertility and motherly relationships. Room, Adrian, *Who's Who in Classical Mythology*, p. 89–90. NTC Publishing 1990. (Access on 30.1.2020).

⁴⁴ Beckett, *Endgame*, 26.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 24.

This is the definitive proof that the only escape from their shelter is by the sea, and that they might need a raft. But, of course, they will not move from their scull-like-space, they are not able to move, like most of Beckett's characters: Molloy, Malone, Unnamable, Vladimir, Estragon; or even if they were able at the beginning, like Belacqua or Murphy, they will not be at the end. Invalids, cripples, lunatics, lost ones, or just mentally incapable for any physical action. They are only good in storytelling. But none of their stories comes to an end. It is either because they change the topic or just because they die.

Hamm's oblique comments about the environment – beyond the hollow wall in their hole is the "other hell" – suggest an allusion to Dante's *Inferno*, another work that used images of circularity. Similarly to Dante's infernal images that emphasize the eternal misery of its inhabitants, Beckett's characters are stuck in eternally static routines. Beckett also makes use of repetitions to underscore the cyclical stasis in *Endgame*. The play systematically repeats minute movements, from how many knocks Hamm makes on a wall and how many Nagg makes on Nell's ashbin to how many steps Clov takes. All those repetitions are modelling the play they are playing, which could be only defined by the term of the chess game – stalemate position. Their efforts are useless, as they are stuck in that hole of life. The last players in the world. Or not? Near the end of the play, Clov spotted something:

"Clov (dismayed): Looks like a small boy!

Hamm (*sarcastic*): A small... boy!

Clov: I'll go and see.

(He gets down, drops the telescope, goes towards door, turns.)

I'll take the gaff.

(He looks for the gaff, sees it, picks it up, hastens towards door.)

Hamm: No!

(Clov halts.)

Clov: No? A potential procreator?

Hamm: If he exists he'll die there or he'll come here. And if he doesn't...

(pause.)"⁴⁶

We must notice that theirs is a very strange behaviour. As in the case of the flea and the rat, their only instinct is to kill and destroy everything that remains alive! Even the boy, if he is not only part of Clov's imagination. A small boy! Then, if we continue this way, we must ask ourselves about the identities of Hamm and Clov. Are they not those who are responsible for this unnamed catastrophe? Is Hamm an old crazy dictator who had pushed the button of the missile control and caused the destruction of humanity? Why are they so afraid of others? And why they do not want a recreation of the human race? A small boy is, for them, only "the potential procreator", which means danger for them.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 52–53.

They act opposite to the Biblical Noah, whose mission was to save the living world. Their mission is to destroy it! There is no answer to those questions, since Beckett never offers us one. We can only imagine possible answers to his riddles.

In a parallel way, we can ask ourselves who Malone is. What did he do in his previous life? Why is he ending his days closed in a room, alone, with no visible employees? Perhaps the answer can be found in the following passage:

"How many have I killed, hitting them on the head or setting fire to them? Off-hand I can only think of four, all unknowns, I never knew anyone. A sudden wish, I have a sudden wish to see, as sometimes in the old days, something, anything, no matter what, something I could not have imagined. There was the old butler too, in London I think, there's London again. I cut his throat with his razor, that makes five". (italics P.T⁴⁷)

A serial killer or just another psychopath, like Lemuel is? Or both? Is his imprisonment a punishment for his crimes? Or this is just another riddle that Beckett poses to us? His manner of mocking us, his readers? His way of playing jokes on us, interpreters of his work? To lead us astray? Or Malone is just another bad character in the gallery of Beckett's anti-heroes? In his own private little Hell/Purgatory, where Beckett placed most of his characters. Because they do not deserve better, or just because there is no better world in this Beckettian way of describing ours – a dystopian one. A miserable place for vicious people. *"Then a little hell after my own heart, not too cruel, with few nice damned to foist my groans on, something sighing off and on and the distant gleams of pity's fires bidding their hour to promote us to ashes"* (italics P. T⁴⁸). Beckett ironizes everything in parodic and satirical way.

To conclude, I would like to emphasise there is no doubt that Beckett's island is dystopian, that Beckett's land, not only in those two works mentioned, *Malone Dies* and *Endgame*, is the place of misery, illness, hopelessness, void, nothingness, disability, and immobility. It is almost an eternal purgatory where life is a punishment for being born into this world, for being given birth into a death. Or as Pozzo says: *"They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more"*⁴⁹. But in this purgatory, one can also find humour, be it black, ironical, satirical, or parodic. Irish wit or French wittiness, it does not matter. A bitter laugh.

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⁴⁷ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, 237.

⁴⁸ Beckett, *Unnamable*, 308.

⁴⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), 73.

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