

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1969**



**Samuel Beckett**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1969 was awarded to Samuel Beckett "*for his writing, which - in new forms for the novel and drama - in the destitution of modern man acquires its elevation*".**

Mix a powerful imagination with a logic in absurdum, and the result will be either a paradox or an Irishman. If it is an Irishman, you will get the paradox into the bargain. Even the Nobel Prize in Literature is sometimes divided. Paradoxically, this has happened in 1969, a single award being addressed to one man, two languages and a third nation, itself divided.

Samuel Beckett was born near Dublin in 1906. As a renowned author he entered the world almost half a century later in Paris when, in the space of three years, five works were published that immediately brought him into the centre of interest: the novel *Molloy* in 1951; its sequel, *Malone Meurt*, in the same year; the play, *En Attendant Godot* in 1952; and in the following year the two novels, *L'Innommable*, which concluded the cycle about *Molloy* and *Malone*, and *Watt*

These dates simply record a sudden appearance. The five works were not new at the time of publication, nor were they written in the order in which they appeared. They had their background in the current situation as well as in Beckett's previous development. The true nat

re of *Murphy*, a novel from 1938, and the studies of Joyce (1929) and Proust (1931), which illuminate his own initial position, is perhaps most clearly seen in the light of Beckett's subsequent production. For while he has pioneered new modes of expression in fiction and on the stage, Beckett is also allied to tradition, being closely linked not only to Joyce and Proust but to Kafka as well, and the dramatic works from his debut have a heritage from French works of the 1890s and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*.

In several respects, the novel *Watt* marks a change of phase in this remarkable output. Written in 1942-44 in the South of France - whence Beckett fled from the Nazis, having lived for a long time in Paris - it was to be his last work in English for many years; he made his name in French and did not return to his native tongue for about fifteen years. The world around had also changed when Beckett came to write again after *Watt*. All the other works which made his name were written in the period 1945-49. The Second World War is their foundation; it was after this that his authorship achieved maturity and a message. But these works are not about the war itself, about life at the front, or in the French resistance movement (in which Beckett took an active part), but about what happened afterwards, when peace came and the curtain was rent from the unholy to reveal the terrifying spectacle of the lengths to which man can go in inhuman degradation - whether ordered or driven by himself - and how much of such degradation man can survive. In this sense the degradation of humanity is a recurrent theme in Beckett's writing and to this extent, his philosophy, simply accentuated by elements of the grotesque and of tragic farce, can be described as a negativism that cannot desist from descending to the depths. To the depths it must go because it is only there that pessimistic thought and poetry can work their miracles. What does one get when a negative is printed? A positive, a clarification, with black proving to be the light of day, the parts in deepest

shade those which reflect the light source. Its name is fellow-feeling, charity. There are precedents besides the accumulation of abominations in Greek tragedy which led Aristotle to the doctrine of catharsis, purification through horror. Mankind has drawn more strength from Schopenhauer's bitter well than from Schelling's beatific springs, has been more blessed by Pascal's agonized doubt than by Leibniz's blind rational trust in the best of all possible worlds has reaped - in the field of Irish literature, which has also fed Beckett's writing - a much leaner harvest from the whitewashed clerical pastoral of Oliver Goldsmith than from Dean Swift's vehement denigration of all humankind.

Part of the essence of Beckett's outlook is to be found here - in the difference between an easily-acquired pessimism that rests content with untroubled scepticism, and a pessimism that is dearly bought and which penetrates to mankind's utter destitution. The former commences and concludes with the concept that nothing is really of any value, the latter is based on exactly the opposite outlook. For what is worthless cannot be degraded. The perception of human degradation - which we have witnessed, perhaps, to a greater extent than any previous generation - is not possible if human values are denied. But the experience becomes all the more painful as the recognition of human dignity deepens. This is the source of inner cleansing, the life force nevertheless, in Beckett's pessimism. It houses a love of mankind that grows in understanding as it plumbs further into the depths of abhorrence, a despair that has to reach the utmost bounds of suffering to discover that compassion has no bounds. From that position, in the realms of annihilation, rises the writing of Samuel Beckett like a miserere from all mankind, its muffled minor key sounding liberation to the oppressed, and comfort to those in need.

This seems to be stated most clearly in the two masterpieces, *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days*, each of which, in a way, is a development of a biblical text. In the case of *Godot* we have, 'Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?' The two tramps are confronted with the meaninglessness of existence at its most brutal. It may be a human figure; no laws are as cruel as those of creation and man's peculiar status in creation comes from being the only creature to apply these laws with deliberately evil intent. But if we

conceive of a providence - a source even of the immeasurable suffering inflicted by, and on, mankind - what sort of almighty is it that we - like the tramps - are to meet somewhere, some day? Beckett's answer consists of the title of the play. By the end of the performance, as at the end of our own, we know nothing about this *Godot*. At the final curtain we have no intimation of the force whose progress we have witnessed. But we do know one thing, of which all the horror of this experience cannot deprive us: namely, our waiting. This is man's metaphysical predicament of perpetual, uncertain expectation, captured with true poetic simplicity: *En attendant Godot, Waiting for Godot*.

The text for *Happy Days* - "a voice crying in the wilderness" - is more concerned with the predicament of man on earth, of our relationships with one another. In his exposition Beckett has much to say about our capacity for entertaining untroubled illusions in a wilderness void of hope. But this is not the theme. The action simply concerns how isolation, how the sand rises higher and higher until the individual is completely buried in loneliness. Out of the suffocating silence, however, there still rises the head, the voice crying in the wilderness, man's indomitable need to seek out his fellow men right to the end, speak to his peers and find in companionship his solace.

L'Académie Suédoise regrette que Samuel Beckett ne soit pas parmi nous aujourd'hui. Cependant il a choisi pour le représenter l'homme qui le premier a découvert l'importance de l'oeuvre maintenant récompensée, son editeur a Paris, M. Jérôme Lindon, et je vous prie, cher Monsieur, de vouloir bien recevoir de la main de Sa Majesté le Roi le Prix Nobel de littérature, décerné par l'Académie à Samuel Beckett.

***For more details please visit:***

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