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Happy Days Sinking Into Immanence: Samuel Beckett and The Second Sex

By Susan Hennessy¹

Abstract

Dysfunctional, fragmented, and restricted bodies are a cornerstone of Samuel Beckett's stage, a place where characters and actors alike find themselves forced to express the inexpressible, with notoriously diminished resources. Historically, existentialist readings of the Beckett canon have offered an insight into works which seem to raise essential questions regarding what it means to be when normative metanarratives have ceased to govern and "realist" escapism is denied. When it comes to discussions of phenomenological existentialism and its proponents, however, the works of Simone de Beauvoir often seem to be eschewed, or assimilated into those of the more famous Jean-Paul Sartre. This essay argues that if we revisit Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* we can gain fresh insight into Beckett's construction of his female characters (who, like Beauvoir, tend to be overlooked), and a new existentialist reading of parts of his *oeuvre* can begin to emerge. Beauvoir, as well as being a figurehead of feminist theory, was a phenomenologist in her own right, and by using *Happy Days* as a case study her theories can be applied to Beckett just as readily as those of her male existentialist counterparts. This essay argues that in *Happy Days*, we are presented with a protagonist, Winnie, who does much to illustrate the limitations placed on the female body, which in this case is enclosed literally within the earth, and figuratively in its own immanence. I propose that Winnie presides "happily" over reduced but familiar circumstances which see her rendered captive not only by the demands of a relentless and punishing text, but also by a "cultural script" that would fix her to the spot. In her attempts to transcend herself as object, Winnie actually makes of herself her own "other", and demonstrates what it means, for her, to "become" a woman.

Key Words: Beauvoir; Beckett; Phenomenology

It is no secret that the writings of the male French existentialists have long been used in an attempt to decode the enigmatic works of Samuel Beckett, a writer whose name, and face, have become synonymous with Martin Esslin's trademark reduction of existential philosophy to a "Theatre of the Absurd". Albert Camus' specter can be sensed throughout Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Esslin, 2001 [1961]), and Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenology is reduced, in early Beckett scholarship, to existentialism, the tangible, once-popular face of French, post-war philosophy, in order to pair it off neatly with Beckett's works, which also seem to speak of a despairing humanity, searching for answers in the face of the void. More recently, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology has been used to add "Beckett and the Body" to writings on "Beckett and [add almost any word here]". One French philosopher, however, would

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appear to be conspicuous in *her* absence from Beckett studies and, moreover, her absence from wider discussions of the existential phenomenology which she played a key role in developing, and that is Simone de Beauvoir, whose contribution to gender studies is most succinctly summarised by the newspaper headline that announced her death in April 1986: “Women, you owe her everything!” (Appignanesi, 2005). “Beckett and Beauvoir” is uncharted territory then; in fact, the only thing that currently links the two is their sharing of a biographer in Deirdre Bair, their contemporaneous residency in Paris, and Beauvoir’s refusal to publish the second half of Beckett’s short story “Suite” (which later became *The End*) in *Les Temps modernes* (see Knowlson, 1997, p. 406, for details).

As well as being a figurehead of feminist theory, Beauvoir was a phenomenologist in her own right, and her theories can be applied to Beckett just as readily as those of her male existentialist counterparts. Margaret A. Simons explains, however, that Beauvoir’s work has long been “overshadowed” by that of her lifelong partner, Sartre, and that “by the mid-1950s, when Beauvoir was beginning her memoirs, the sexist assumption that she was merely Sartre’s philosophical disciple was deeply embedded in the scholarly literature” (2004, p. 2). Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* in 1949, not long before Beckett had his first successes as a writer, and this work secured her place in the history of twentieth-century feminism (if not European phenomenology more broadly) as what Elizabeth Grosz would define an “egalitarian” feminist; one who assesses “the reproductive imperative as a major defining feature of femininity” (1994, p. 15).² For the egalitarian feminist, the female body is that which limits a woman’s freedom and capacity for equality, whilst providing her with a unique viewpoint on the world and a means of accessing knowledge about the processes of life.³ Beckett’s bodies are the focus of much recent scholarly research,⁴ and yet the female body is still most widely read in contemporary critiques through male theorists such as Merleau-Ponty,⁵ whilst Beauvoir, who offers phenomenological insights born of an intimate knowledge of the female experience, is ignored. Two works of the 1990s placed the spotlight on Beckett’s female characters, Linda Ben-Zvi’s *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (1992), and Mary Bryden’s *Women in Samuel Beckett’s Prose and Drama* (1993), although Bryden’s is not so much a sustained study of gender as it is a commentary (shaped by Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*) on what she sees as the gradual dissolution of binarized gender identities in Beckett’s work, and neither work makes so much as a fleeting reference to Beauvoir. Over the course of this essay, I will focus quite specifically on phenomenological modes of being unique to Beckett’s women; particularly as the aforementioned male existentialists have a tendency to write about the human experience from their own (male) perspectives and, broadly speaking, the history of Beckett criticism is divided into waves that are directed by philosophical movements dominated by men.⁶ I will demonstrate

² Beauvoir is considered a second wave (post-suffrage) feminist.

³ Grosz provides a succinct summary of “categories” of feminism (“Egalitarian Feminism”, “Social Constructionism” and “Sexual Difference”) in *Volatile Bodies*, pp. 15-19.

⁴ Ulrika Maude’s *Beckett, Technology and the Body*, and Anna McMullan’s *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett’s Drama* for instance.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty’s theories are the focus of both of the above works.

⁶ From the “first wave” existentialist/humanist studies of Theodor W. Adorno, David Hesla, Lance St. John Butler et. al., through the “second wave” deconstructions of the prose carried out by, amongst others, Leslie Hill, Thomas Trezise and Steven Connor in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to the “empirical” work of the “third wave” of Beckett scholars (the current interest in the Beckett archives or the “grey canon”, the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project) male literary theorists, and philosophies written by men (Camus, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Jacques Derrida included), have dominated the field.

here that if we revisit Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, we can gain fresh insight into Beckett's female characters, and a new "gendered" phenomenological reading of his *oeuvre* can begin to emerge as something more than a mere footnote to "Beckett Studies."

In February 2014, Susannah Clapp began a review of Natalie Abrahami's *Young Vic* production of a much-celebrated work of the Beckett canon as follows:

You would have to go a long way to find a more intensely feminist play than *Happy Days*, which was first staged in 1961. It makes a woman the centre of a play that talks of the human condition. You can, it suggests, have a handbag and still speak for everyone (2014, p. 41).

Whilst Clapp's rather bold proclamation is one that is shared by those Beckett scholars who would agree that the great man himself condescended to allow a woman a potentially-philosophical voice once or twice, it seems, to me, rather more than an overexertion to begin speaking in terms that would hail *Happy Days* as a feminist play and thereby Beckett as a feminist writer. Beckett's earliest prose depictions of man and woman, in particular, conform to Cartesian dualist perspectives which see the male occupying the luxurious sphere of the mind, whilst the female appears monstrously, slavishly, assimilated by biological functions. Bryden devotes a lengthy chapter of her work "Space Invaders: Women of the Early Fiction", to Beckett's unique brand of sexism, and Ben-Zvi's review of the Beckett female contains such tellingly-titled articles as Susan Brienza's "Clods, Whores, and Bitches: Mysogyny in Beckett's Early Fiction." It is well documented, by his early prose works and criticism of these, that Beckett held, at least at one time, some decidedly problematic views about women; in his earliest short prose *Assumption* (1929), for instance, a male artist, creative and cerebral, is hounded to his death by the bodily advances of a woman who he cannot, as prey, resist; we are left in no doubt when it comes to the author's "fury against the enormous impertinence of women, their noisy intrusive curious enthusiasm, like the spontaneous expression of admiration bursting from American hearts before Michelangelo's tomb in Santa Croce" (Beckett, 1995, p. 5). Beckett's "first phase" of writing is characterised by its recourse to gendered stereotypes and a carnal eroticism that is embodied by the female, who plagues the male with relentless advances; *Murphy's* Celia, for instance, is a prostitute who seems to perpetually scupper Murphy's attempted escape into some solipsistic, psychical realm, bringing him into contact with lived existence and corporeal desire against his "intellectual" wishes, and the narrator of *First Love* tells of his "union" with prostitute Lulu, whose sexuality disturbs his solitary bench dwelling and culminates in her bodily hijacking of him ("man is . . . at the mercy of an erection") through a pregnancy ("she kept plaguing me with *our* child, exhibiting her belly and breasts and saying it was due any moment") that ultimately leads to his desertion of her (Beckett, 2000, pp. 70, 84).

It is true that *Happy Days* strikes one as being of particular interest and significance when it comes to a study of Beckett's women, as it is a play that presents us with a focal point in the shape of Winnie, a woman of about fifty who stands out in a body of work where the female protagonist has been, up until her birth, something of a rarity. It could also be proposed that whilst in his early work Beckett reserves rationality for his male characters, in creating the contemplative Winnie he begins to redress the balance. I will argue, however, that, whilst Winnie may be somewhat privileged in her position in the *oeuvre* of a playwright/author who began his literary endeavours with a decidedly problematic approach to feminine portraiture, she does not speak as some unfettered representative of a universal humanity; she is a woman of her own situation and

character, and these are informed and moulded by her specificity and adherence to the cultural script. Added to this, if we consider Winnie as a product of her time, a married woman who is mired in immanence and objectivity (limitations placed on the female body from the outside), who narrates from an historical and cultural context that are uniquely her own, we can regard her plight anew, and employ those landmark feminist theories that betoken her entrance to the world stage alongside contemporary feminist phenomenology.

Cultural Bodies of Immanence

As *Happy Days* opens, the spectator is greeted with a stage picture that is arguably as alien and uncompromising now as it was at its unveiling over fifty years ago. Winnie is literally, and figuratively, centre stage for the duration of this two act performance and, when she is first seen, she is embedded “*up to above her waist in exact centre*” of a mound of scorched grass, with a “*Maximum of simplicity and symmetry*” (Beckett, 2006, p. 138). There is much in this first tableau alone that echoes Beauvoir’s description of “Woman” as, historically, “bound to her body” (1997, p. 97): Winnie’s body is encased in an earthly womb-tomb, tying Woman to the very land which, amongst early tillers of the soil, was considered her mystical domain. If Woman then, as egalitarian feminism suggests, is tied down or burdened by the reproductive cycle, we might render Winnie’s entrapment *from the waist down* as particularly significant, her reproductive organs acting, metaphorically, as the lead weights that fetter her to the “earth mother” and exclude her from society. It could also be suggested that the enclosure of Winnie’s lower body offers her a form of protection, or is a defensive structure: in her passivity, which is juxtaposed to the male’s self-fulfilling activity, the female is, according to Beauvoir, “the victim of the species” (p. 52). Iris Marion Young, who writes of the embodied female experience, often referring to Beauvoir as she does so, reminds us that Woman lives not only the ongoing threat of being objectified by the male gaze, but also the threat of her body space being invaded, with rape being the most extreme example of such “spatial and bodily invasion” (2005, p. 45), and more subtle, daily invasions shaping her very body-consciousness. Young proposes that as a defensive measure against these invasions, women “tend to project an existential barrier closed around them” as a means of distancing the potentially-invasive other, adding that: “The woman lives her space as confined and closed around her, at least in part as projecting some small area in which she can exist as a free subject” (p. 45). Winnie, then, strikes one as something of a visual representation of Young’s confined woman, as well as Beauvoir’s conception of the female body as “a thing sunk deeply in its own immanence”, limited to the processes of life rather than knowing the freedom of spirit, forbidden the animating transcendence afforded to the male, and offering forth, for his taking, his possession and consumption, the “the inert and passive qualities of an object” (p. 189). Where man’s existence has been a projection, a striving towards creation and domination of the world and nature, Woman’s has historically been associated with stasis, with reliance upon, or enslavement to, nature, and with maintenance of a closed space, a retreat that man may return to in between bouts of exploration and endeavour. Winnie exists, on the one hand, as a subjective being, as a *human* being, but her mode of being Woman means that her existence, her body, is fated to remain closed in on itself, to become more object than subject, more immanence than transcendence.

The enclosure in immanence that marks the life of Beauvoir’s Woman and reduces her possibilities in the wider world, leads to her creation of a private world or personal sphere of material items over which she can assert her sovereignty, and into which she can project her

personality. Whilst man, for Beauvoir, is only superficially interested in his immediate surroundings (having outside projects through which he can change the face of the world), Woman, shackled to her conjugal duties in the home, must make of her domestic prison a realm in order to survive it. Winnie's day begins in the same manner that all of her days begin, with the piercing ringing of a bell that dictates when she may sleep and when she must wake, followed by immediate recourse to her infamous, "*capacious black bag*" (Beckett, 2006, p. 138) containing the objects which sculpt her identity, and populate her realm. From her bag, Winnie produces toothpaste and brush, mirror, spectacles, medicine, lipstick, "*a small ornate brimless hat with crumpled feather*" (p. 142), a magnifying glass, a comb, a music box, a nail file, and the auspicious revolver "Brownie", all of which could be seen as extensions of, or objects with which one can enhance/modify, the human body. The contents of Winnie's bag allow her, despite her insurmountable incapacity, to find accomplishment, or happiness, in the material extension of her body, and her belongings are shut up, as are her prospects, "within the circle of herself" (Beauvoir, 1997, p. 467). As Beauvoir's Woman, like Winnie, cannot identify herself with what she *does*, in any tangible sense, she must seek self-realisation in what she *has*, and it is in this sense that such props can be elevated to a seemingly irrational level of importance, in life as on the stage.

During Act One the stage business is focused on Winnie's mastery and manipulation of her objects, and each of these helps to foreground Winnie's bodily existence. Grosz writes (with reference to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology), that the body "is defined by its relations with objects and in turn defines these objects as such – it is 'sense-bestowing' and 'form-giving,' providing a structure, organization, and ground within which objects are to be situated and against which the body-subject is positioned" (1994, p. 87). The actor's body, amidst its set and properties, succinctly demonstrates corporeality as focal point, perspective, and conscious being's sole means of engagement with a world. The body, for Merleau-Ponty, is "a central or organizing perspective" (Grosz, 1994, p. 90), just as it is for Sartre an "instrumental center [*sic*] of instrumental complexes" (Sartre, 2009, p. 350). However, Grosz raises a crucial point when she notes that, "while Merleau-Ponty provides a number of crucial insights about the forms and structure of human embodiment, he nevertheless excludes or cannot explain those specific corporeal experiences undergone by women" (1994, p. 108). In order for us to empathise with Winnie, we must understand her as more than the universal body of physiology; she is a female, *situated* body, a body inscribed and manifested by her entire existential experience. As Beauvoir writes, engendering the theories of Sartre, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, a woman's body is one of the essential elements of her being-in-the-world; however, "that body is not enough to define her as woman; there is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of a society" (1997, p. 69). We must look, then, to Winnie's activities, her objects, her micro-society, her *entire bodily situation*, if we are to understand the wider implications of her immanent confinement; as Grosz writes: "The body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural; *the* cultural product" (1994, p. 23). Winnie's interactions with objects and with her one conscious, or semi-conscious, companion, Willie, do much to convince us that her body is the consummate cultural product of her time.

A Doll of Flesh

Like any good housewife of her era Winnie polishes, wipes, and brushes (lenses, eyes, and teeth) repetitively and ritualistically, perhaps by way of sharpening her senses and thereby her perception, but also as a means of controlling and arresting the flow of time within her sphere.

Beauvoir writes that in her cleaning and her preserving “The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present” (1997, p. 470). As the cornerstone of her “housework”, Winnie’s personal grooming rituals seek to maintain rather than to create anew, and she inspects her newly brushed teeth as though they are impersonal objects, only to assert that, orally, the prognosis is “no better, no worse” than it has been previously (Beckett, 2006, p. 139). Winnie’s body is part and parcel of her home and possessions, and in the absence of conventional bricks and mortar, she cleans, renovates and organises it according to codes of custom. Winnie fights against physical deterioration by denaturing herself, and her belongings, with what little means she has at her disposal, and each prop is a symbol of her entire, gendered, cultural circumstance; it is surely something more than coincidence that this female protagonist has in an incredibly limited arsenal, a lipstick and mirror. Beauvoir famously states that: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1997, p. 295). Gender, for Beauvoir, is socially constructed, a learnt behaviour, unlike *sex*, which is biologically predestined. For Winnie, femininity is something that is worked at with tools that sculpt and order the flesh, and she uses her stereotypically-feminine props as a means of perpetually reestablishing her womanhood: her gendered identity. As Young would have it, Woman, used to being viewed as object and possession, becomes distanced from her body: “She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds and decorates it” (2005, p. 44). An extreme example of today’s Woman augmenting nature and objectifying/molding her own body, and thereby gender would be cosmetic surgery, the insertion of silicon into the breasts, or the freezing of the face with Botox. Winnie captures “fleeting joys” (Beckett, 2006, p. 141) as she petrifies her physiology and becomes a woman in a less invasive and more familiar way; already adorned with bodice and pearls, she takes pride in painting her lips and donning her hat, even in her virtual isolation. Beauvoir observes that women’s fashions “are often devoted to cutting off the feminine body from activity” (1997, p. 190) by prescribing restrictive corsets and impractical embellishments which contain the wearer and make of nature an artifice. Society requires Woman, in her inconvenient attire, to *become the fixed ideal* of her gender, a “doll of flesh” (Beauvoir, 1997, p. 546), unless she wishes to stand out as nonconformist or anarchist, and there is something of the animated doll about Winnie, as she transfigures nature, whilst quite literally cut off from activity, to make of herself man’s idol.

The Winnie of Act Two is “*embedded up to neck, hat on head*” (Beckett, 2006, p. 160), and what little bodily autonomy she had in Act One, where she enjoyed a precarious freedom through manipulation of/identification with objects, has been all but eradicated. A now completely immobilised Winnie must labour on to the end of the play with only her face and voice as vehicles of expression and, as she does so, she utters a telling fragment of a story concerning a little girl, Mildred, who has “been given a big waxen dolly” (p. 163). Beauvoir writes at length about the symbolic significance of the doll as an object in which the little girl can incarnate herself. The boy, Beauvoir suggests, finds an alter ego, an “other” in the penis, enabling him to “boldly assume an attitude of subjectivity” (1997, p. 306) and take pride in this symbol of transcendence and power. The girl on the other hand, lacking this “natural plaything” gives her whole person to a foreign object, sets her whole “self” up as “other”, and identifies with the doll, “an inert given object” (p. 306). Winnie creates and projects multiple objectified images of her femininity, as she conjures and presents images of Mildred and her waxwork double from within her own psyche like Russian doll miniatures of herself. Winnie’s premature burial could even be viewed, again, as a protective measure, preventing her, as it does, from experiencing the potential invasion of her lower body that Mildred is subjected to when, as Winnie tells it, a mouse runs up her bare thigh, causing her

to scream, and drop her passive playmate (p. 165). If Mildred could be taken for Winnie's infant self (either literally or, perhaps, in the shape of her own child), an innocent subjected to the invasion of her body by the aggressive forces of nature (menstruation and sexual initiation amongst these), then her doll, with her "Pearly necklace" and her "China blue eyes that open and shut" (just as Winnie's seemingly automated eyes open and shut, and her smile, devoid of genuine, lived emotion, snaps on and off in mechanical accordance with the stage directions), could be said to be Winnie's ideal, incorruptible image (p. 163).

Winnie, it seems, objectifies herself in order to conform to abstract ideals. Ultimately, however, Winnie's objectification, her "otherness", is brought about as a direct result of her constant subjection to the look of the other or, more specifically, the *male*, patriarchal gaze of society, the occasional gaze of her disinterested husband and the ubiquitous gaze of god (whom Winnie frequently pays tribute to in Act One), the upholder of male supremacy. Winnie is also a mouthpiece for Beckett, a male writer, and she moves and speaks as a marionette who animates *his* preconceived notions of femininity. Bryden claims that "Where [Beckett's] women are referred to in terms of objects, it is generally from their own mouths" (1993, p. 107). Whilst the above description of Winnie as self-made doll would seem to be in accordance with Bryden's claim, I would argue that the objectification of women in Beckett's drama is rather more complex than she will admit. If Woman does objectify herself it is by way of adherence to *man*-made values and societal norms that have already objectified her, and which would have her do the same, lest she find herself unhappily cast out of the culture. Winnie may be given use of a mind that would drift, gossamer-like, "into the blue" (Beckett, 2006, p. 152) but Beckett is unambiguous regarding her vital, womanly, statistics in his description of her as "*well-preserved, blonde for preference, plump*" with "*arms and shoulders bare*" and wearing a "*low bodice*" revealing a "*big bosom*" (p. 138) which is referred to throughout. In a revelatory section of her barely-broken sixty-minute monologue, Winnie recalls being approached, in her shallow grave, by a Mr. Shower or Cooker, who declared upon witnessing Winnie's waist-high interment: "Can't have been a bad bosom . . . in its day" (p. 165). Winnie, like the women of Beckett's early prose, is still predominantly a biological, sexual creature, and she is assessed by Shower/Cooker accordingly. Young writes that:

In our culture that focuses to the extreme on breasts, a woman . . . often feels herself judged and evaluated according to the size and contours of her breasts, and indeed she often is (2005, p. 76).

Winnie, in her immanent fixity, cannot choose but to be inspected in this impersonal fashion by Shower/Cooker, a representative of patriarchal society, and when her breasts are buried, their "disappearance" has a profound effect on her sense of self, their loss being noted, where so many, more obvious, losses are not (p. 161). For Shower/Cooker Winnie is little more than the possibility of sexual relations; he asks why Willie has not dug her out (a question we might all ask) as, to his mind, she is no use to her husband with her lower body buried (p. 157). Woman, in Winnie's day, is "best used" as man's counterpart, man's servant, and perhaps Willie has not dug her out of her hole because it is he who has placed her there. Winnie and Willie are not equals; as Shower/Cooker neatly summarises it, the couple are not two sexed beings of the same species, man and woman, they are one subjective, autonomous being, and one object, designed for that subject's use: they are, "man and – wife" (p. 157). If Winnie sees herself as object then, it is because she does not have access to the same mode of being as her husband, a man, a *human*; she has had to resort to

renouncing her own transcendence and assuming an inert passivity, so that she may, through him, gain a place in society and ensure her own happiness.

The Happiness Script

Beauvoir speaks of the married couple as the, “original *Mitsein*, a basic combination” adding that, “as such it always appears as a permanent or temporary element in a large collectivity” (1997, pp. 67-68). Marriage, then, is an institution approved and endorsed by society, and one which makes certain promises to both participants in the union. We may marry, for instance, in the belief that doing so will make us happy, and Sara Ahmed, in her recent work *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), writes about how happiness can be used to justify forms of social oppression, marriage sometimes being one of these. Ahmed, who takes impetus from *The Second Sex*, writes of how Beauvoir, “shows so well how happiness translates its wish into a politics, a wishful politics, a politics that demands others live according to a wish” (2010, p. 2). Winnie lives according to the wish that Willie will look at or respond to her once in a while and, in doing so, justify her existence; so much as one word from Willie, can lead Winnie to declare: “Oh you are going to talk to me today, this is going to be a happy day!” (p. 146). Small acknowledgements from a seldom seen husband delight Winnie and allow her to assume the role of happy, devoted wife more completely. Winnie remains cheerful, according to Shari Benstock, so that she might play out her role in the “cultural script” and “she survives as most wives and housewives survive – by not questioning the givens of their existence but focusing on daily necessities, coping hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute” (1992, p. 174). Ahmed makes reference not only to Beauvoir’s philosophy but also to Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* which was written in 1963, just two years after *Happy Days*, and could almost be said to narrate Winnie’s plight, when Ahmed writes that:

The happy housewife is a fantasy figure that erases the signs of labor under the sign of happiness. The claim that women are happy and that this happiness is behind the work they do functions to justify gendered forms of labor, not as a product of nature, law, or duty, but as an expression of a collective wish and desire (2010, p. 50).

The ideal of the “happy housewife” could even be said to be making a return according to Ahmed, as new generation of bloggers instruct each other on how to assume this identity via the internet. Ahmed writes: “Such blogs typically include recipes, tips on doing housework, thoughts on mothering, as well as belief statements that register the happy housewife as an important social role and duty that must be defended, as if the speech act (‘I am a happy housewife’) is itself a rebellion against a social orthodoxy” (pp. 52-53). In Winnie, of course, we see no such signs of rebellion; hers is a submission to the cultural, gendered script of fifty years ago that dangles happiness like a carrot in front of her nose, the pursuit of which will lead her to conformity. Ahmed writes that “gendered scripts” can be thought of as “‘happiness scripts’ providing a set of instructions for what women and men must do in order to be happy” (p. 59) and that, in such scripts, happiness comes to those who are deemed to be “good” in the eyes of society.

Winnie is rooted to the spot not just literally but figuratively, as she is ensnared in the cultural, gendered script that has promised her happiness in the shape of marriage, that primary happiness indicator (Ahmed, 2010, p. 6), as well as being driven into the ground by the torrent of

words and directions foisted upon her in the shape of a theatrical script, written by a man who works from the gender narratives handed down to him from less molecular times. Beauvoir writes of how marriage so often “fails to assure woman the promised happiness” as it “mutilates her” and “dooms her to repetition and routine” (1997, p. 496). Woman is man’s commodity, his anchorage to immanence; through her he is assured the maintenance and progression of his tribe, the guardianship of the objects and status symbols that he has amassed and, in return, he assimilates her otherness into the order of his oneness, so that she may, vicariously, enjoy a position in the bosom of civility. Woman pays a high price for her most respected role in society, namely that of wife, as Beauvoir reminds us: “It has been said that Marriage diminishes man, which is often true; but it almost always annihilates woman” (p. 496). Beauvoir herself, whilst not married to Sartre, suffered professionally from her lifelong partnership with him, as her work, her achievements, her contributions to the field of existential phenomenology are so often assimilated into, overshadowed and “subsumed” (Simons, 2004, p. 2) by, those of her “more famous”, but above all *male*, partner.

Shari Benstock suggests that Winnie might rewrite the patriarchal script that would see her subsumed by her husband, if we consider the possibility that “Willie exists because Winnie claims he exists; he exists because she directs her words to him” (1992, p. 179). We do see and hear Willie occasionally ourselves, however, he is not solely narration, and I would argue that he fulfills the role of the absent male who rarely appears in the domestic sphere but is nonetheless its constant centre of reference. The presence of the male in Winnie’s realm is an absent presence, more narrated than actualised, but all-consuming; Winnie refers to Willie constantly, and describes his movements and actions, and he only appears, “pops up”, now and then, to assert his freedom and authority. Benstock raises an important point when she writes that: “In a reversal of traditional roles, it is woman here who asks the overwhelming philosophic questions, but she poses them in traditionally ‘female’ terms, in the language of the domestic” (p. 176). Winnie’s potential transcendence is always mired in the immanent, in the Shower and the Cooker, the child and the marriage, whereas Willie brings to the stage evidence of his transcendent contact with the outside world and world affairs in the shape of a newspaper, from which he reads the headlines to her (Beckett, 2006, p. 142). Willie is the authority in the marriage, and he educates his grounded, goodly wife, just as Beauvoir’s provider feels superior upon returning home to his woman after a day of work with his equals and betters: “He relates the events of the day, explains how right he has been in arguments with opponents, happy to find in his wife a double who bolsters his self-confidence; he comments on the papers and political news, he willingly reads aloud to her so that even her contact with culture may not be independent” (1997, p. 483). Benstock further argues that gender roles are transformed in this play, as what would, traditionally, be “Winnie’s position of waiting, attending, crawling at the margins of the central, imbedded truth is transferred to Willie” (1992, p. 180). Willie is not “hanging” on Winnie’s words, however, he has become immune to them; Winnie repeatedly pleads for his attention, which he very rarely gives to her, and makes excuses for her “poor dear Willie” (Beckett, 2006, p. 139), authorising his neglect of her. Willie listens and speaks to Winnie as and when he condescends to, and Winnie seeks his constant reassurance and approval, gratefully receiving what titbits he throws at her, and using them as fuel to prolong her journey alongside him. Winnie hangs on to her marriage, to the script, protesting her happiness, whether through habit, a sense of duty or true desire, and she asks her husband if he does the same, as she senses that gravity is losing its once unquestionable power on them both: “Don’t you have to cling on sometimes, Willie?” (p. 152). Whether Winnie’s marriage has failed to deliver or not, each day will be a “happy day” for her, lest she should find herself devoid of place and purpose; the tragedy is that Winnie’s place and purpose is, ultimately, her annihilation.

For Winnie, spokesperson for her era, to become a woman is to forgo autonomous transcendence and to become fully absorbed into the cultural script: to be assimilated into the earth, into immanence, into her husband, and to be annihilated. Young writes that, whilst we are subjective beings by our very nature, there is a “tension between transcendence and immanence” which informs femininity: “While feminine bodily existence is a transcendence and openness to the world, it is an *ambiguous transcendence*, a transcendence that is at the same time laden with immanence” (2005, p. 36). As we have seen, Winnie’s transcendence is “*overlaid* with immanence” (Young, 2005, p. 36) as her conjugal responsibilities consume her freedom. Ultimately, Winnie is smothered, as immanence envelops and absorbs her entirely. Perhaps Willie seeks to end his anchorage to this immanence, to the situation created by his wife, as “vagabond” husbands and children according to Beauvoir (1997, p. 475) do, when, at the close of the play he “*emerges completely*” (Beckett, 2006, p. 166) and we realise that he, unlike Winnie, has been free to leave his hole all along. Up until this point, we have only seen parts of Willie’s body, the back of his head as he read the newspaper, or a functional arm, but as the “action” draws to a close he reveals himself, albeit with some difficulty; he, too, has been firmly embedded in his designated, gendered cultural role. Even at this, the bitter end, Winnie is unsure whether Willie is reaching towards her out of affection, or for some other, more pressing reason. Whilst she hopes that her husband is finally going to join her in the nest that she has made, Winnie must ask: “Is it me you’re after, Willie . . . or is it something else?” (p. 167). When Willie climbs out from behind his mound it becomes clear that he, unlike Winnie, is free to end his suffering on his own terms; whether he is reaching towards his wife to kiss her, or reaching towards a more definitive ending to joint sufferings, namely the auspicious revolver which has remained in Winnie’s sight throughout Act Two, is unclear, but we are left with no doubt that a woman has been made one with the earth, rendered entirely immobile and powerless, her uncertain fate to be decided, after the final curtain, by her male keeper.

Whilst Bryden recognises the “essentialist and often deeply misogynistic construction of Woman” (1993, p. 7) in Beckett’s early prose, she seeks to gradually erode the existential issue of gender in his works, and even suggests that gender studies serve to reinforce “the iron mould of patriarchy” (p. 119), promoting “molarity” (rigidly structured and fixed ideals/essences/poles) in our identification of female stereotypes. I would argue, however, that Bryden avoids a study of Beckett’s women where she claims to be launching one, (perhaps in an attempt to cleanse the writer of his early misogyny), by suggesting that a Deleuzian neutralisation of gender polarities can be read in the evolution of his work, particularly where he turns his attention to writing for the theatre. Bryden understandably examines Beckett’s female characters according to the phases of his work that they occupy: early prose, where female biology is depicted much more aggressively and women are portrayed as corporeal succubi, and then later drama and prose where men and women appear to have been released from a preoccupation with carnal urges, sometimes by virtue of age and decrepitude, or by a detachment from concrete reality Bryden devotes a chapter to “The Mother”, that Beckettian archetype *par excellence*, but her primary concern is with arguing that Beckett is engaged in a progressive “experimentation in the area of gender molecularity” (p. 118). Characters, male and female, *all* “evolve” in a certain sense, throughout the Beckett canon, as identities become ethereal and fluid, and boundaries between presence and absence, subjectivity and objectivity, self and other, blur. All characters, however (unless otherwise stated, as in late stage work *Quad*), *are* given a sex by Beckett, and gender is essential to understanding something about the fragments of consciousness that he presents to us. Even if the male/female dichotomy

ceases to align so readily with that of the mind/body as we approach Beckett's later works,⁷ simply too much of the female stereotype/archetype remains, right up until the end, for me to admit of a "gender molecularity" anywhere in the canon. Winnie, in particular, is so rooted to her sociohistorical situation that it is remarkable that she has not been analysed as exemplary of Beauvoir's Woman prior to this work.

I do not wish to reinforce gender molarities in my reading of Beckett's *Happy Days* but, rather, recognise that sexual difference is integral to an understanding of the characters therein, as: "Man and woman are irreducible the one to the other: they cannot be substituted the one for the other, not because of a quantity . . . but because of a difference in being and existing, that is to say a qualitative difference" (Irigaray, 2008, p. 75). Bryden, in her seeming eradication of gender in her analysis of Beckett's work, flattens the surface rather too eagerly, perhaps by way of attempting to liberate the writer from his earlier misogyny by liberating his later characters from their gendered identities. Deleuze writes that: "It is . . . indispensable for women to conduct a molar politics", however he adds that, "it is dangerous to confine oneself to such a [molar] subject, which does not function without drying up a spring or stopping a flow" (2013, 321). A middle way is needed then, between declaiming gender stereotypes too readily and trying to prove gender indeterminacy in Beckett's work, and this essay has attempted to encapsulate something that could be used as a springboard towards much more detailed work on gender in Beckett and, indeed, on Beauvoir as a phenomenologist who has much to offer to Beckett scholarship. In a phenomenological study of Beckett's *oeuvre*, like the thesis that this paper is extracted from (Hennessy, 2015), it seems to me that to omit a consideration of the ways in which gender, a lens through which our position in the world is viewed, shapes the human experience would be to tell only half of the already untellable story, and to attempt to swerve issues of gender amounts to yet another assimilation of Woman by man.

⁷ *Rockaby* was written in 1980, when Beckett was in his seventies, and features "W", his last female stage protagonist. W has much in common with the female protagonist of prose work *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981), an isolated old woman, who approaches death and fixates on mortality as she ventures out of her cabin only to make pilgrimages to a nearby tomb. These decaying women, shrivelled, androgynous carcasses of the fleshly, sexually-aggressive females of Beckett's early prose writing, have their male counterparts in the white-haired male protagonists of late theatre works *That Time* and *Ohio Impromptu*, as well as 1980 novel *Company*.

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