

LECTURE NOTES | LESSON PLAN

Samuel Beckett *Murphy*

Page references are to the Grove Press edition.

Freewriting prompts:

- Starving artist stereotypes?
- Can a narrative talk about how it is narrating?
- Freedom and Desire...

Background:

- Samuel Beckett (13 April 1906 – 22 December 1989)
- The text is an intentionally 'bizarre' combination of minimalist complexity, pessimism, and humour
- Beckett studies French, Italian, and English at Trinity College Dublin from 1923-27 (note history of 1922 in Modernism and Joyce in particular – in what ways is *Murphy* a post-*Ulysses* response to *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*?).
- Beckett went to Paris to teach English and met Joyce in 1928. He also began translating the Parisian Surrealists at this time, largely under the influence of Andre Bréton and his overtly Communist vision of Surrealism.
- He went back to Trinity College Dublin in 1930 and left in 1931 with a distaste for Irish academia of the period. He then traveled in Europe and never spent much time in Ireland again.
- After his father's death (heart attack) in 1933 (and the death of Peggy Sinclair of TB), Beckett entered psychotherapy for 2 years in London to treat panic attacks. He had therapy from Wilfred Bion in the Tavistock Clinic and read broadly in psychoanalysis at this time, and in 1936 toured Germany.
- In 1937, he returned to Dublin, wrote bitterly critical descriptions of Irish parochialism, and he became involved in a libel action against Oliver Gogarty (Writer satirized by Joyce). Gogarty lost, but the public proceedings involved Beckett admitting he was neither Jew, Christian, nor Atheist (public outcry and embarrassment to his family), and he was cast as a decadent Parisian. After leaving Ireland after appearing as a witness, he rarely visited again.
- On January 6th, 1938, he was stabbed by a pimp and nearly died, though he later forgave his attacker and did not press charges. This

- led to his remaining in Paris during WWII and eventually entering the Resistance. His cell was captured due to an informant Catholic Priest (Nazi collaborator), but Beckett escaped and spent the rest of the war in hiding and writing his novel *Watt*.
- In 1945, on a visit to Ireland, he had a revelation in his dead mother's bedroom (dramatized in his 1958 play *Kanpp's Last Tape*). The revelation relates to his father-figure, James Joyce → Joyce had gone as far as one could in *adding* to the descriptions to understand the world, so Beckett would decide to *subtract* from the descriptions instead.
 - Three distinct periods emerge in Beckett due to these factors:
 - Pre-1945 – *Murphy* and *More Pricks than Kicks*
 - 1945-62 – *Waiting for Godot*
 - 1963-1989 – *How It Is* (novel) and *Not I* (play)
 - After *Murphy*, he wrote almost exclusively in French (in order to write without style), except for a few radio plays and articles. He translated his works into English himself.

Timeline:

- *Murphy* was begun in August 1935 and finished in its first draft in June 1936.
- The novel was rejected by dozens of publishers (Beckett kept a list) before it was finally accepted in 1938 by Routledge on the recommendation of Jack Butler Yeats (painter and brother to the poet William Butler Yeats).
- Routledge's 'star' editor for literary works at this time was Herbert Read, who had been a key influence on the 1936 London Surrealist Exhibition and the creation of English language surrealism. He went on to publish several works by English surrealists after 1936, and *Murphy* would certainly have been seen as a part of this group, both for style and by association (Beckett's work as translator before being displaced by David Gascoyne, who published his *Short Survey of Surrealism* in 1935).

Period:

- 1934 – Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*
- 1935 – George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*
- 1936 – London International Surrealist Exhibition
- 1937 – Durrell's "Asylum in the Snow" and "Zero"
- 1938 – Durrell's *The Black Book*

Themes:

- In contrast to Beckett's later works, *Murphy* contains overt political satire:
 - Miss Counihan parallels Cathleen ni Houlihan (and when she's described as an Irish girl who is anthropoidal, it means she *resembles* a human being)
 - At the post office, site of the 1916 Easter Uprising, Mr. Neary assaults the buttocks of the statue of Cuchulainn (kuxulun) – an Irish mythological hero from the Ulster Cycle (also in Scottish and Manx literature). The image of Cú Chulainn is used by both Irish nationalists and Ulster unionists. Irish nationalists see him as the most important Celtic Irish hero. A bronze sculpture of the dying Cú Chulainn by Oliver Sheppard stands in the Dublin General Post Office (GPO) in commemoration of the Easter Rising of 1916. Unionists see him as an Ulsterman defending the province from enemies to the south. He is also depicted in murals in nationalist parts of the city and many nationalist areas of Northern Ireland.
 - Colm Tóibín says, Beckett once asked a friend to go to the GPO and “measure the height of the ground to Cúchulainn's arse,” as Neary wished to “engage with the arse of the statue of Cúchulainn, the ancient Irish hero, patron saint of pure ignorance and crass violence, by banging his head against it.” (“Colm Tóibín on Beckett's Irish Actors.” *London Review of Books* 29.7 (5 April 2007): n.pag).
- Murphy as Christ (Su/on in the Virgin): 2 (top), 17, 23, 24
- Psychoanalysis, structure of the psyche, and desire:
 - Pp. 8-9, 108-9, 251, *58-9
- Recursive reading practices:
 - 162 & 234 (vs. 119)
 - 26 & 121
 - 96-7 & 247 → variety and passivity for range (agency)
 - Section 6 → 2, 7, 9, 107, 87, 93
- Limits of language:
 - 2 – last line of the page
 - 62 – end of page
 - 139 – champagne and language's puns vs. meanings
- Allusions to Joyce: pp. 131, 101, & 87

- Allusions to Eliot: pp. 281-2 (impersonality), & ending (all out vs. It's time)
- Agency:
 - 96-7, vs. 247, 26-7, 121, *113, 245-6, & 262
 - 112 vs. 108-9 (non-ego and stasis as the only form of Agency and non-agency)
- Descartes' Cogito Ergo Sum and Nietzsche's rebuttal
 - 107-9, 40, 275
 - 37-41 – 'doing' displaces 'being'