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ENGL 300

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April 8, 2019

An Aristotelian Evaluation of Beckett’s *All That Fall*

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, prescribes the best uses of many facets of tragedy, valuing certain plot structures, time frames, and subject matters over others. In the two millenia that intervened between Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Samuel Beckett’s short play *All That Fall*, conceptions of drama changed significantly. Partly because of these changes, Aristotle would harshly critique many aspects of Beckett’s play, most notably the plot. Fundamentally, Aristotle views plot as far more important that character, for without plot there could not be tragedy. While this is true, Beckett develops the plot sparingly. Many interactions develop character far more than plot, as opposed to Aristotle’s view that action should not be “with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions.” For instance, the very first scene of *All That Fall* depicts the protagonist, Mrs. Rooney, in conversation with the carter Christy. Christy asks Mrs. Rooney if she would like some stydung, which Mrs. Rooney refuses. This interaction has no relevance to the plot of the play after this, and does not produce a causal relationship to any later event in the play. It does, however, reveal much about the intricacies of Mrs. Rooney’s frame of mind. Mrs. Rooney asks, rather oddly, whether Christy “finds anything bizarre about [her] way of speaking” (Beckett 13), then verges into despondence as she wishes to “flop down flat on the road like a big fat jelly out of a bowl and never move again” (Beckett 14). Mrs. Rooney displays an utter lack of enthusiasm to be with her husband again, pointing to a distant marriage at best. This focus on character makes possible a remarkable ambiguity in Mrs. Rooney’s relationship with her husband: she launches into a hysterical fit upon hearing that her husband might have been killed in a possible train accident, talking of “anxiety for our loved ones” (Beckett 27). It is thus unclear whether Mrs. Rooney merely acts dismayed due to the presence of bystanders, in contrast with her apathetic episode, where she was alone. However, it is also possible that she was truly horrorstruck at the prospect of losing her husband, despite any problems they may have had. The amount of time spent developing the character is vastly more than the amount spent introducing the plot, exposing a fundamental disagreement with Aristotle.

One other key point of divergence is over the structure of the plot. Aristotle decrees that tragedies must imitate actions that are “complete and whole,” yet Beckett obeys neither. The plot of *All That Fall* is that Mrs. Rooney goes to the station, finds her husband, and begins to come home, when a messenger tells her why the train was late. That she is only beginning her trek homeward violates the “complete” condition, as this action never terminates. Worse, the plot is also not quite whole. Aristotle elaborates that to be “whole,” the following must hold:

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.

As noted earlier, the opening scene does not truly function as a beginning of a plot in that nothing “naturally is or comes to be” on account of Mrs. Rooney’s refusal of stydung. Further, the end of the plot logically follows nothing “by necessity”, as it is indeed a complete surprise and accident. The events of the middle do occasionally follow previous events and are followed by future events, but on the whole, Aristotle would likely judge Beckett’s plot to be “haphazard” and thus to be not “well constructed.”

The stature of the characters in *All That Fall* produces an ambiguity in Aristotle’s philosophy. While Aristotle insists that “Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are above the common level,” Beckett subverts this in the aggressively commonness of his characters. An old lady, a carter, a retired bill-broker, a porter, a clerk, a blind man, and a small boy are all characters in *All That Fall* with commonplace occupations. The one remaining character is that of a station manager, and even though he has some standing above the common, he is by no means a particularly important character. Yet, these same characters obey Aristotle’s observation that it is not necessary to write only about well-known subjects, for “even subjects that are known only to a few … give pleasure to all.” In fact, it is perhaps precisely their commonness that allows these characters to give pleasure to “all,” as the English audience would see themselves represented in the characters and become invested in them more easily.

One further ambiguity comes in Aristotle’s view of the suitability of Mrs. Rooney as a character. Aristotle insists that a character must foremost “be good,” and that secondly that the character must also have “propriety.” By “good,” Aristotle means the “moral purpose” motivating the actions. Mrs. Rooney appears to be motivated by the conventionally well-regarded desire for love. She states she wants “a little love, daily, twice daily, fifty years of twice daily love like a Paris horse-butcher’s regular” (Beckett 14). This laudable purpose would score her points on Aristotle’s scorecard, but whether her actions display propriety is never fully resolved. In marked contrast to her earlier declaration of purpose, Mrs. Rooney has moments of possible sexual licentiousness. She asks Mr. Tyler, after he has left earshot, to “unlace [her] behind the hedge” (Beckett 17), then somewhat flirtatiously instructs Mr. Slocum to “help [her] from the rear” (Beckett 18) to get into his car. It is not entirely certain that she is trying to seduce these men, as nothing at all came of these moments, but it does cast doubt on her motivations as a whole, possibly costing her not only propriety but also goodness, and thereby making her an unworthy character in Aristotle’s estimation.

Beckett obeys the three Aristotelian unities throughout *All That Fall*: unity of time, unity of plot, and unity of place*.* All events in the story appear in one continuous scene, as Mrs. Rooney labors to reach her husband’s train in the span of an hour or less, producing the first two unities.He meets the requirements for unity of place as well, but still is able to incorporate spatially and temporally distant events through various forms of messengers. As Mrs. Rooney walks down the road to meet her husband at the train station, she receives uniformly morbid news from passers-by. After Mrs. Rooney inquires about Mr. Tyler’s daughter, he responds that “they removed everything, you know, the whole … er … bag of tricks. Now I am grandchildless” (Beckett 14). The starkly nihilistic atmosphere in this way is augmented by an event many miles away and a time in the past, all without violating the unity of place. The last line of the play is itself delivered by a boy taking on the role of a literal messenger, who, over Mr. Rooney’s objections, tells Mrs. Rooney that her husband’s train was delayed because “a little child fell out of the carriage, Ma’am. [*Pause*] On to the rails, Ma’am. [*Pause*] Under the wheels, Ma’am” (Beckett 39). Here, Beckett gives the messenger the privilege of delivering the final, and most important, revelation of the play, which forces the events of the play to be re-evaluated. In light of this tragic event, that Mrs. Rooney complains about her pot roast burning due to the train delay becomes trivial and self-centered.

The event that makes *All That Fall* a tragedy is the one which arouses the most fear and pity. Aristotle declares that “Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes Place” (Aristotle). As noted, Beckett shuns the “spectacular” exposition of horror in favor of the pivotal revelation of the cause of the delay of the train by messenger, to his credit in Aristotle’s eyes. Further, Beckett springs the tragedy entirely by surprise. Aristotle writes that fear and pity are “best produced when the events come on us by surprise,” and indeed there is no foreshadowing or clues that such a calamity took place, augmenting the shock and dismay. That Beckett writes a play that thrills “even without the aid of the eye” is in fact necessary owing to the format of the play, which was broadcast over radio. Much as Mrs. Rooney hears the news of the death of the child, so too do the audience, as this play of messengers acts itself as a messenger. However, Aristotle admires much less the particular form of the tragic events, which occur without cause between entities with no prior knowledge of the other. Aristotle prefers that “the tragic incident occurs between those who are near or dear to one another.” Beckett does not conform to this expectation, and as such Aristotle would predict that feelings of fear and pity be less excited in the audience.

Aristotle’s prediction of the emotional effect of tragic events implicitly assumes that tragic events must happen between humans (“between those *who* are near and dear to one another”), but Beckett’s lack of obvious causal relationships points to a interaction between larger concepts. *All That Fall* can be read as an interaction between industrialization and capitalism and the youth of Britain. It is no accident that the train, a potent symbol of industrial progress, literally crushes a child beneath its wheels. Also crucial is that this death was inadvertent, much as the “invisible hand” of progress acts without obvious purpose, regardless of casualties. That it is inadvertent points out another quality of this “invisible hand”: it cannot be fought against directly, as the systems of industrialization and capitalism extend far beyond one train or its crew. Therefore, there cannot be any “justice” for this tragedy. The play must, and does, end immediately after this revelation, as no meaningful mitigation of this horrible situation is possible. This symbolic opposition means the central tragic moment of the story does not literally obey Aristotle’s preference for such events, but it is still a powerful moment amplified by social and cultural context. Beckett thus complicates Aristotle’s basic assumptions about tragic events and demonstrates the power of a conflict where the agents are larger systems, rather than individuals.

Works Cited

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