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In a World Characterized by
Transience and Doomed to Extinction
Some Old Women Still Need Love
—Mrs Rooney from Samuel Beckett's
All That Fall

ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the world of transience, deterioration and death characteristic of Boghill, the place of action of Samuel Beckett's short radio play—*All That Fall*. In a broadcast drama, existence is equivalent to being heard, the idea skilfully employed and commented upon by the playwright. The characters actually heard in the play are in most cases elderly or quite old and even the two young ones appear in the context of death. Numerous off-the-air individuals are dead, sterile or suffering from different illnesses. The two main characters' situation is not different—Mr Rooney is blind, and his wife, Maddy, complains of many ailments. She is a woman in her seventies, overweight and having different kinds of health problems and thus, several times in the course of the play she expresses a wish to die. At the same time, however, in encounters with men on her way to the station she speaks in a manner characterized by numerous sexual innuendos. Furthermore, she expresses a strong yearning for love and hopes her unloving husband would show her some warm feelings. Thus she becomes a convincing illustration of Georges Bataille's argument: "Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death" (11).

ABSTRACT

“Love is the demand to be loved.”
(Sartre 343)

Beckett's first radio play, *All That Fall*, was written in English in 1956 and presented on BBC Radio Three on January 13, 1957. The piece came into being at the invitation of the BBC which

prompted Beckett to think for the first time about the technique required for a medium of which sound and silence are the sole components. And it was probably through thinking about sound in general, as distinct from voice in particular, that he had the idea for a play in which sound effects would play a vital role. “Never thought of a radio play technique,” he wrote to Nancy Cunard, “but in the dead of t’other night got a nice gruesome idea full of cartwheels and dragging feet and puffing and panting which may or may not lead to something.” (Knowlson 385)¹

Even though unwilling to do so, Beckett would occasionally make a comment on his writing or even indicate some details. Such was the case, for instance, with *Not I*:

“I knew that woman in Ireland,” Beckett said, “I knew who she was—not ‘she’ specifically, one single woman, but there were so many of those old crones, stumbling down the lanes, in the ditches, beside the hedges—rows. Ireland is full of them. And I heard ‘her’ saying what I wrote in *Not I*. I actually heard it.” (Bair 622–23)

Despite the fact that the above remarks concern another play and another heroine, they fit Mrs Rooney perfectly well.

Having created the play, Beckett was absolutely certain that it was meant for the radio only: “*All That Fall* is specifically a radio play, or rather a radio text, for voices, not bodies. I have already refused to have it ‘staged’ and I cannot think of it in such terms. . . . to ‘act’ it is to kill it” (qtd. in Frost 191 and Zilliacus²).

In radio drama, existence is equivalent to sound—everything that ceases to produce sound becomes nonexistent. Beckett exploits the power of the voice and other sound effects to evoke a transitory presence in

¹ Linda Ben-Zvi notices that Beckett, interested in numerology, “is fond of building his compositions on triads, and in *All That Fall* he adds to the natural, human, and mechanical sounds the sound of music: Schubert’s *Death and the Maiden*” (“Samuel Beckett’s Media Plays” 27).

² The frontispiece quotation for Zilliacus’s *Beckett and the Art of Broadcasting*.

a temporal universe. The purely aural medium depends more radically than the stage on temporal dimension. The artist manipulates our attention, giving or withholding perceived phenomena moment by moment, stressing the fact that whatever is silent disappears. Kenner has noted that in this play all the “movements in space are translated by the aural medium into time, where sounds extend themselves and die” (169). He adds: “Thus the mode in which the play itself exists, as a series of auditory effects in time, sustains its theme of transience” (170). The fading of the sound symbolically represents the fading of existence, the change of being into non-being. This notion, even though undoubtedly true, is contradicted by what, at times, is happening in the play as, for instance, when Mrs Rooney says: “Do not imagine, because I am silent, that I am not present, and alive to all that is going on. . . . Do not flatter yourselves for one moment, because I hold aloof, that my sufferings have ceased” (Beckett, *All That Fall* 25). In this speech she objects to the notion of being nonexistent while silent, but also expresses the idea of living as suffering, consistently reappearing in Beckett’s canon. Even if her statement is taken into account, when mute, she, in fact, does not really exist for the listeners. Her constant movement from being heard/alive to being silent/dead evokes the notion that she is only partly alive, the idea expressed *verbatim* by her in several places in the play, as, for instance, when she says: “Don’t mind me. Don’t take any notice of me. I do not exist. The fact is well known” (48).

The ambiguity of the terms “dead” and “alive” may be discussed in reference to the young and old characters (also those only mentioned by others and not actually heard) as well as to Carl Jung’s lecture Beckett attended in October 1935 (Knowlson 170) and wrote about in a letter to his friend, Thomas McGreevy (Beckett, *Letters* 282). The playwright discussed the personal and intellectual influence the lecture had on him in a conversation he had with Charles Juliet in 1968:

I have always sensed that there was within me an assassinated being. Assassinated before my birth. I needed to find this assassinated person again. And try to give him new life. I once attended a lecture by Jung in which he spoke about one of his patients, a very young girl. After the lecture, as everyone was leaving, Jung stood by silently. And then, as if speaking to himself, astonished by the discovery that he was making, he added: In the most fundamental way, she had never really been born. (qtd. in McDonald 55)

Rónán McDonald writes:

In the early 1960s, Beckett spoke to Lawrence Harvey about a general feeling of “being absent” or “existence by proxy.” Along with this

contingent or displaced experience goes the intuition of “a presence, embryonic, undeveloped, of a self that might have been but never got born, an *être manqué* [an absent being].” Given the preoccupation with absent presence in *All That Fall*, with characters who are not quite “there,” together with the associated theme of sterility and child death, these remarks are particularly illuminating. Harvey goes on to offer a reading of *All That Fall* in the light of his conversation with Beckett as “a parable about this abortive being.” (55)

A direct reference to Jung’s lecture can be found in *All That Fall* where Mrs Rooney mentions going to a lecture given by “a new mind doctor,” hoping “he might shed a little light on [her] lifelong preoccupation with horses’ buttocks” and directly quotes the words of Jung which were of such a great importance for Beckett: “The trouble with her was she had never really been born!” She also says: “it was something he said, and the way he said it, that have haunted me ever since” (35–36). Jung’s sentence haunts not only Mrs Rooney but also Beckett who makes yet another reference to the lecture in *Footfalls* where May says: “A little later, when as though she had never been, it never been, she began to walk” (242). It might be said that most of Beckett’s characters are similar to the girl from Jung’s lecture. Just like all people, they live to die finally, yet differently from average people, they are fully aware of this fact.

Let us now concentrate on the idea of transience, the theme of the play adequately expressed by the qualities of the medium used. Beckett’s whole *oeuvre* is characterized by a consistency of the vision of human existence, many aspects of which are described in his essay written in 1931. It may be argued that “Proust” is to a lesser extent a critical analysis of the French writer’s masterpiece, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, than an excuse on Beckett’s part to present his opinions concerning “the double headed monster of damnation and salvation—Time” (11), “Time cancer” and its attributes, “Habit and Memory” (18) which are the instruments people employ to lessen the “suffering of being” (19), the punishment for the “eternal . . . sin of having been born” (67).³ In his analysis of Proust’s novel, Beckett does not include many quotations from it, yet the ones he does are of great importance not only for the novel and Beckett’s discussion of it, but also for the playwright’s ideas concerning human existence and the role eroticism plays in it. For instance, Beckett quotes the following passage of the novel:

³ Knowlson mentions that the phrase “original . . . sin of having been born” (Beckett, “Proust” 67) may owe something to Calderón’s sentence in *Life Is a Dream* (604): “For man’s greatest crime is to have been born” (Calderón), which was later, as Libera argues, propagated by Schopenhauer in his *The World as Will and Representation* (29). This might well be the case as Beckett was familiar both with the drama and the philosopher’s ideas.

How have we the courage to wish to live, how can we make a movement to preserve ourselves from death, in a world where love is provoked by a lie and consists solely in the need of having our sufferings appeased by whatever being has made us suffer? (54)

The sentence written by Proust sheds light not only on the Frenchman's novel but also on the whole output of Beckett. Furthermore, it makes the ideas concerning eroticism as voiced by Georges Bataille especially useful in analyzing the great Irishman's output. In the introduction to his book, the critic argues:

If a precise definition were called for, the starting-point would certainly have to be sexual reproductive activity, of which eroticism is a special form. . . . Erotic, unlike simple sexual activity, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction and the desire for children. . . . Reproduction implies the existence of *discontinuous* beings. . . . We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is. . . . In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation. . . . The most violent thing of all for us is death which jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being. We blench at the thought that the separate individuality within us must be suddenly snuffed out. . . . The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity. Dissolution—this expression corresponds with *dissolute life*, the familiar phrase linked with erotic activity. (11–17)

Before moving to the discussion of Maddy Rooney and her attitude pertaining to questions concerning life, love, death and eroticism, as the term is understood by Bataille, it seems justified to pay some attention to the other characters in the play, young and old, both those who are actually present in the soundscape of this radio play and those only mentioned, because all of them greatly contribute to the overall aura of these issues in the drama.

The vision presented by the play is dominated by images of people slowly yet inevitably approaching death, the stress being put on the suffering intrinsically, as it seems, connected with the process. Mr Slocum's mother is "fairly comfortable" as they "manage to keep her out of pain" (17); Mr Barrell's father is dead and "didn't live long to enjoy his ease" after having retired from his post of the station-master (21); Jerry's

“poor father” has been “taken away” so that he is all by himself now (28); Mrs Tully’s “poor husband is in constant pain and beats her unmercifully” (33) and the previous incumbent has died and been replaced by Hardy (38). Mr Rooney, blind and ill, twice tells Jerry to come for him on Monday, adding, on both occasions, the same sentence: “if I am still alive” (28, 39). On being asked by Maddy whether he is not well, he answers:

Well! Did you ever know me well? The day you met me I should have been in bed. The day you proposed to me the doctors gave me up. You knew that, did you not? The night you married me they came for me with an ambulance. You have not forgotten that, I suppose? [*Pause.*] No, I cannot be said to be well. But I am no worse. Indeed I am better than I was. The loss of my sight was a great fillip. If I could go deaf and dumb I think I might pant on to be a hundred. Or have I done so? [*Pause.*] Am I a hundred, Maddy? (31–32)

In this respect, Mrs Rooney does not seem to be any better than the others. When she finally gets to the station, the following conversation takes place:

MR BARRELL: . . . Well, Mrs Rooney, it’s nice to see you up and about again. You were laid up there a long time.
 MRS ROONEY: Not long enough, Mr Barrell. [*Pause.*] Would I were still in bed, Mr Barrell. [*Pause.*] Would I were lying stretched in my comfortable bed, Mr Barrell, just wasting slowly, painlessly away, keeping up my strength with arrowroot and calves-foot jelly, till in the end you wouldn’t see me under the blankets any more than a board. [*Pause.*] Oh no coughing or spitting or bleeding or vomiting, just drifting gently into the higher life, and remembering, remembering . . . [*The voice breaks.*] . . . all the silly unhappiness . . . as though . . . it had never happened . . . (20–21)

Her situation, like that of all the other grown up or, rather, elderly people in the play is a slow (and often painful) movement towards death, a point which she makes during a conversation with Mr Slocum. On being asked by him if she is going in his direction, she answers: “I am, Mr Slocum, we all are” (17). To some extent, at least, there should be nothing extraordinary in this statement—all people’s end, after all, is death. Yet, in the context of the play, this assertion stops being that obvious. Firstly, not a single grown-up character seems to be enjoying their lives. Secondly, whereas the natural rhythm presupposes the continuation of the species by the next generation, this does not seem to be the case in the world they inhabit. And, finally, procreation and continuation of the species does not seem

desirable, a point made in the drama by Mr Tyler, who curses, among others, “the wet Saturday afternoon of [his] conception” (15).

The only two representatives of the younger generation actually heard during this radio play are Jerry, whose father is dead, and Dolly, a small girl standing on the station platform and warned by her mother to be careful: “Give me your hand and hold me tight, one can be sucked under” by the coming train (25). Even in the case of these two small children, then, the idea of death is discernible. There are also some children’s cries heard (which gives them essential presence in this radio play). Mrs Rooney states they are “The Lynch twins jeering at [them]” and, fearing that they will pelt them with mud again, Mr Rooney threatens them off with his stick (31). Steward argues it is worthwhile to study “‘A lynch-pin’ of misopedia in Beckett’s works, which runs from the murderous misopedia of ‘The Expelled’ back to *Watt* and on to the equally murderous *All That Fall*” (79). He goes on to discuss *Watt* and “the grotesquely extended Lynch family”:

The 28 souls of the family from the 85-year-old patriarch to the four-year-old twins, Pat and Larry, are a catalogue of suffering. Determined to reach their collective 1,000 years, they breed regardless of the inevitable consequences; pain and death. . . . Slaves to the will-to-live, the Lynches produce slaves of the will-to-live, imprisoned within inevitable suffering and, unfortunately for the Lynches’ dreams, inevitable death as a phenomenon of life. (83)

Taking into account Beckett’s vision of human existence, persistent in his whole *oeuvre* and specified in the presentation of the Lynch family in “The Expelled,” as well as the way the twins treat the Rooneys, it is not surprising that Dan’s next speech is a kind of confession:

Did you ever wish to kill a child? [*Pause.*] Nip some young doom in the bud. [*Pause.*] Many a time, in winter, on the back road home, I nearly attacked the boy. [*Pause.*] Poor Jerry! [*Pause.*] What restrained me then? [*Pause.*] Not fear of man. [*Pause.*] (31)

Steward rightly contends that “the replacement of ‘bloom’ by ‘doom’ strongly suggests that it is in blooming that one is doomed, that life itself is the disaster that one should wish to avoid” (84). The thought of killing a child, as Dan himself acknowledges, has haunted him for some time and it seems almost certain that on this very day he has made his dream come true. There are quite a few hints in the play indicating that he is responsible for the death of the boy on the railway track. When Mrs Rooney asks him what has happened, he dismisses her, saying “I have never known anything to happen.” When she insists on getting an answer, he changes the

subject, speaking “*Violently*” (30–31). Later, at the end of the play, when Jerry brings the ball⁴ to him, he denies it belongs to him and, on Jerry’s insisting that Mr Barrell said it did, he takes it saying: “It is a thing I carry about with me.” As Maddy asks for further explanation he, again, repeats his answer, this time, however, “*Violently*.” Mrs Rooney persists in trying to get a concrete answer, despite her husband’s attempts to make her give it up. Then Jerry says the sentence: “It was a little child, Ma’am,” followed by Mr Rooney’s “*groan*,” as the stage directions indicate. It is only then that we learn the details of the accident: “JERRY: It was a little child fell out of the carriage, Ma’am. [*Pause*.] On the line, Ma’am. [*Pause*.] Under the wheels, Ma’am” (38–39). Mr Rooney’s reaction is clearly indicative that he was lying when he said he did not know what had happened, and both his not wanting to discuss the event and his reaction to Jerry’s report make it nearly certain that he is responsible for the child’s death.

Mrs Rooney is contrasted with the misopediast her husband is. Yet, even though she is so interested in what has happened, she does not react to the information concerning the tragic death of the boy. Katharine Worth states that “despite her histrionics and grotesqueries” she is “a *mater dolorosa*” (237). On several occasions in the play, she expresses her deep grief connected with the premature death of her daughter: “Minnie! Little Minnie!” (14, 16). She lost her child a long time ago and she has remained childless. Furthermore, were Minnie alive, as Mrs Rooney notices, she would not be able to procreate: “In her forties now she’d be, I don’t know, fifty, girding her lovely little loins, getting ready for the change . . .” (16). Despairing over the death of her only offspring, she does not seem even to notice the fact that her family will not continue in the future. In this respect, she differs from Mr Tyler, who, on being asked how his daughter is, answers: “Fair, fair. They removed everything, you know, the whole . . . er . . . bag of tricks. Now I am grandchildless” (14). It is not certain, though, whether he is really worried about the end of his family line or, whether, not knowing how to speak about the ailment and operation of his daughter, he adds the second sentence simply to make the situation clear. In this atmosphere characterized by deterioration, suffering and sterility, the only reference made to possible procreation comes in a sentence uttered by Dan, referring, however, not to the world surrounding him, but to that of fiction: “I think Effie is going to commit adultery with the Major” (29).

Being the main heroine of the drama, Maddy Rooney is paid most attention to and, furthermore, presented in a way underlying the ambiguity

⁴ It is not quite certain what the object really is, as Mrs Rooney, after having inspected it, says: “It looks like a kind of ball. And yet it is not a ball” (38).

of her character as she may be perceived as a mixture of contradictions (sometimes real and, at other times, ostensible). She is, as specified in the stage directions, a “*lady in her seventies*” (11), who mentions her “once female shape” (22) and now refers to herself saying: “Oh I am just a hysterical old hag I know, destroyed with sorrow and pining and gentility and churchgoing and fat and rheumatism and childlessness” (14). Her life is intrinsically bound with suffering: “It is suicide to be abroad. But what is it to be at home, Mr Tyler, what is it to be at home? A lingering dissolution” (15). Wherever she is, she is reminded of death approaching. There is so much suffering in her life that, twice in the course of the play, she expresses a death wish:

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How can I go on? I can't. Oh let me just flop down flat on the road like a big fat jelly out of a bowl and never move again! A great big slop thick with grit and dust and flies, they would have to scoop me up with a shovel (14)

and “What's wrong with me, never tranquil, seething out of my dirty old pelt, out of my skull, oh to be in atoms, in atoms” (17). Furthermore, she seems to envy the hen run over by Mr Slocum's car:

Oh, mother, you have squashed her, drive on, drive on! [*The car accelerates. Pause.*] What a death! One minute picking happy at the dung, on the road, in the sun, with now and then a dust bath, and then—bang!—all her troubles over. [*Pause.*] All the laying and hatching. [*Pause.*] Just one great squawk and then . . . peace. [*Pause.*] They would have slit her weasand in any case. (19)

There are several intriguing details in this description. Firstly, while talking about the hen, Maddy uses the pronoun “she.” Secondly, speaking about it she refers to the bird as if it were similar to her—“all the troubles over.” Thirdly, she speaks about “laying and hatching,” thus making a reference to procreation. Fourthly, she states that death is unavoidable. And, finally, fifthly, the impossibility of life continuing, of persistent death and unavoidable deterioration is not restricted to people but it also applies to animals and inanimate objects: the dead hen will not hatch any more, hinnies cannot procreate, despite it being June, there are rotten leaves in the ditch (36), Mr Tyler's bicycle has a flat tyre and causes continual problems (15) and Mr Slocum's car will not start and then he is “crucifying his gearbox” (18, 20).

While Mrs Rooney's body prepares for death and even eagerly awaits it, her soul is still dominated by desires. Even though in her seventies, she often makes references to sex, which may be noticed in her

numerous encounters with men. She first meets Jerry, who has problems with a hinny which does not want to move. On seeing that, Maddy says: "Give her a good welt on the rump. [*Sound of a welt. Pause.*] Harder! [*Sound of a welt. Pause.*] If someone were to do that for me I should not dally" (13). Her remark makes a parallel between the unwillingness of the horse to travel and her own problems with walking. Simultaneously, it evokes the idea of women getting a slap on the bottom as a sign of primitive flirtation. The sexual undertones of this scene are discussed at length by Steward who concedes: "the pseudo-sadistic beating of the animal is also present, from which arguably Maddy gains some sort of excitement, possibly of a sexual nature" (26). The next man she meets on her way to the station is Mr Tyler, who is wobbling on his bicycle. When he suggests he might lay his hand lightly on her shoulder and asks her for permission to do so, she answers: "No, Mr Rooney, Mr Tyler I mean, I am tired of light old hands on my shoulders and other senseless places, sick and tired of them" (15). When she soon afterwards breaks down recalling her daughter and he tries to calm her down, "*exploding,*" she says: "Will you get along with you, Mr Rooney, Mr Tyler I mean, will you get along with you now and cease molesting me?" (16), using a word which is often used in connection with sexual harassment. Later, however, she suggests: "Oh cursed corset. If I could let it out, without indecent exposure. Mr Tyler! Mr Tyler! Come back and unlace me behind the hedge! [*She laughs wildly, ceases.*]" (17). Her reaction clearly indicates that she is fully aware of the indecency of her suggestion. Then, when she spots Mr Slocum, she says: "Well if it is not my old admirer the Clerk of the Course, in his limousine" (17). It seems doubtful whether he has ever been her admirer. Furthermore, such a remark coming out of the lips of a seventy-year-old woman is rather ridiculous. Besides, slightly earlier, when Mr Slocum has problems with getting out of the car and argues "I'm as stiff as yourself," she says: "Stiff! Well I like that. And me heaving all over back and front. [*To herself.*] The old reprobate!" (18). As he is helping her to get into the car, pushing her from behind, she says: "Oh! . . . Lower! . . . Don't be afraid! . . . We're past the age when . . . There! . . . Now! . . . Get your shoulder under it . . . Oh! . . . [*Giggles.*] Oh glory! . . . Up! . . . Up! . . . Ah! . . . I'm in!" (18).

Commenting on this scene, Katharine Worth concedes:

"Destroyed" she may be but her sexuality is still vital, as the wicked little episode with Mr Slocum suggests: she never fails to pick up a bawdy double entendre, and she enjoys a good giggle when he heaves her up into his car by following (with seemingly enthusiasm) her unabashed instruction "Get your shoulder under it." (237)

Maddy's sexual vitality may be for her a way of compensating herself for her husband's inability or unwillingness (or both) to show any tender feelings towards her. It is clearly visible in the scenes presenting them that she is yearning for his love. To show him her love she has decided to undertake the exhausting trip to the station so as to demonstrate her love for him in this way on his birthday. As the delayed train arrives at last and Maddy meets Dan, the following exchange ensues:

MRS ROONEY: Kiss me.

MR ROONEY: Kiss you? In public? On the platform? Before the boy? Have you taken leave of your senses?

MRS ROONEY: Jerry wouldn't mind. Would you, Jerry?

JERRY: No, Ma'am. . . .

MR ROONEY: Why are you here? You did not notify me.

MRS ROONEY: I wanted to give you a surprise. For your birthday.

MR ROONEY: My birthday?

MRS ROONEY: Don't you remember? I wished you your happy returns in the bathroom.

MR ROONEY: I did not hear you.

MRS ROONEY: But I gave you a tie! You have it on!

[*Pause.*]

MR ROONEY: How old am I now?

MRS ROONEY: Now never mind about that. Come.

MR ROONEY: Why did you not cancel the boy? Now we shall have to give him a penny.

MRS ROONEY: [*Miserably.*] I forgot! I had such a time getting here! Such horrid people! [*Pause. Pleading.*] Be nice to me, Dan, be nice to me today. (28–29)

Mr Rooney, however, does not intend to be nice—he scolds her several times for not having called Jerry off and calculates precisely how much money they have lost because of this. The quarrel culminates when he says: “[*Violently.*] Two hundred pounds of unhealthy fat! What possessed you to come out at all? Let go of me!” (31). The scene shows explicitly well that the feelings of the spouses differ—she wants to show him her love and expects the same from him while he wants to be left alone. We do not know whether they have ever been happy together. In the dialogue quoted above, when asked by Maddy if he does not feel well, Dan's answer clearly indicates that she was the active person in their relationship. What is also evident, however, is that she has always yearned for love and that she is greatly disappointed by what she is getting now, and most probably used to get in the past:

Love, that is all I asked, a little love, daily, twice daily, fifty years of twice daily love like a Paris butcher's regular, what normal woman wants affection? A peck on the jaw at morning, near ear, and another at evening, peck, peck till you grow whiskers on you. (14)

As the play approaches its end, and they are close to their home, Maddy asks Dan: "Put your arm round me. [*Pause.*] Be nice to me! [*Pause. Gratefully.*] Ah, Dan!" (37). Maybe, after all, they are happy together. Such an interpretation can be supported by the next plea of Maddy which is satisfied by Dan again: "Hold me tighter, Dan. [*Pause.*] Oh yes!" (38).

Two more aspects of the play seem to deserve some attention, namely the music which forms its frame and the title of the piece. At the beginning of the play and also at its end, on their journey home from the station, Mr and Mrs Rooney pass a house where an "old woman," living all alone, is playing a record to which Mrs Rooney comments: "All day the same record" and Mr Rooney specifies it is *Death and the Maiden* (37). Beckett chose Schubert's piece because it was his favourite, but also, which is more important, because he knew of no other "music so heavily imbued with such sorrow" (qtd. in Bair 477). Mary Bryden discusses the chosen music in the following way:

On the face of it, there is a feasible connection to be made between the title of the song and the image of an old woman living all alone, particularly since the directions indicate that the "music dies." Yet even the analogic journey is interrupted by ambiguity, since the maiden of Schubert's song is still young when Death comes to claim her. This old woman, on the other hand, has had the leisure to play the music over and over again. She is not so much dying as reliving (and thus suspending) the experience of proximate death. (37)

The choice of this concrete piece of music may have also been caused by a poem written by German poet Matthias Claudius and translated into English by P. Jurgenson:

THE MAIDEN: Oh! leave me! Prithee, leave me! thou grisly man of bone!

For life is sweet, is pleasant.

Go! leave me now alone!

Go! leave me now alone!

DEATH: Give me thy hand, oh! maiden fair to see,

For I'm a friend, hath ne'er distress'd thee.

Take courage now, and very soon

Within mine arms shalt softly rest thee! (Claudius)

Discussing the play, Paul Davies argues:

The nature of the tragedy is that the body fears and prepares for death, the soul desires and prepares for life. This is concealed in the message of Death to the maiden, and in the mythographic message which that poem itself carries from Beckett's play over to the listener. (156)

Steward argues that a new perspective on the use of Schubert's music may be provided by Gregory of Nyssa, as quoted by Dollimore:

The bodily procreation of children . . . is more an embarking upon death than upon life. . . . Corruption has its beginning in birth and those who refrain from procreation through virginity themselves bring about a cancellation of death by preventing it from advancing further because of them. . . . they keep death from going forward. . . . Virginity is stronger than death. . . . The unceasing succession of destruction and dying . . . is interrupted. Death, you see, was never able while human birth was going on in marriage. (qtd. in Steward 2–3)⁵

The childless Mr and Mrs Rooney go on living and suffering, occasionally falling down to rise (or be raised) again. In this context, the title of the play is indicative, a point noticed by Knowlson:

In spite of the apparent comic texture of the play, human misery and suffering emerge as so overwhelming that, when Psalm 145, verse 14 is quoted—"The Lord upholdeth all that fall, and raiseth up all those that be bowed down"—it is greeted by the lame, seventy-year-old Maddy Rooney and her blind husband, Dan, with wild laughter at its bitter irony. (38)

They do not react to the subject of the sermon mentioned by them slightly earlier, "How to be Happy though Married" (38), even though it also has some relevance to their situation. Zilliacus, among other critics, concedes: "The incidents in the play serve as a stave for a threnody on the theme of decay and meaningless death" (32). Steward presents a different reading, arguing

The wish to fall, never to rise again, is consistently expressed throughout the play. . . . Maddy and Dan's world is so arranged that the final fall is not an option. The Lord, if one must be posited, insists on holding them up. . . . there is the annoyingly stubborn presence of the continuation of

⁵ Jonathan Dollimore. *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*. Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1998. 46.

meaningless life, of precisely *not* falling. . . . [and] While *this* generation pants on, the hope might remain that the suffering can end through an end of regeneration (137–38).

Mrs Rooney, just like Winnie from *Happy Days*, is, as Graver concedes, one of “gritty and flamboyant survivors, [who] are continually seen as comic in their rhetorical extravagance” (146). Ruby Cohn voices a similar opinion:

she endures volubly as she trudges, stumbles, climbs in and out, up and down, in sunshine and in rain. Neither coming to nor going from the train station does she fall. Invisible on the air waves, she makes an epic journey that is conveyed through sound effects, but the dialogue surrounds her with death. Even her name, Maddy Dunne Rooney, puns on a mad old woman who is done for and ruined. (165)

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Mrs Rooney’s behaviour may be described by two quotes. The first one comes from Georges Bataille’s book: “Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death” (11). The second one is taken from Beckett’s “Proust” essay: “A being scattered in space and time is no longer a woman but a series of events on which we can throw no light” (58), and, to be precise, comes from Proust’s novel.

Billie Whitelaw thus comments on the work with Beckett on *All That Fall*:

Apart from letting me hear a certain *tone* that he required, which from long practice I was able to pick up very quickly from him, he invariably said one particular thing, usually in passing, that gave me the key to the part. This time he said that Maddie Rooney was “bursting with abortive explosiveness.” Suddenly I saw this image of a Michelin tyre of a creature blowing up in front of me. That’s how I played her—huffing and puffing, dragging her feet, shod with ill-fitting shoes, walking and weaving her way to the station, before she exploded out of her stays. (234)

In the course of the play, Mrs Rooney does not explode. As this radio drama ends, the stage directions read: “*Silence. JERRY runs off. His steps die away. Tempest of wind and rain. It abates. They move on. Dragging steps, etc. They halt. Tempest of wind and rain*” (39). Amid the tempest of wind and rain, the entropy of the surrounding world and the suffering of all the people around and also of her own, Mrs Rooney does not fall, she lovingly accompanies her unloving husband and continues living on despite the death which awaits her at the end of the journey.


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