

# Rethinking Modernism: A Critical Evaluation of Modern Psyche with reference to Beckettian Journey in the Novel *Watt*

**David Paul**

School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai

**G Alan**

School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai

## Abstract

Beckettian style, techniques, content, language, and themes are exceptional in all his works of art. Beckett's idiosyncrasies are primarily established through his characters and themes. His works of art address the chaos, absurdity, fragmentation, and all other tenets of Modernism. Through the characters in the novel *Watt*, the exceptional Beckettian journey is traced out, along with an evaluation of the Modern psyche. Modern psychology is of epistemology, ontology and relevance. Modern characters are tragic and lamenting. The article tries to give several perspectives on the novel, with an emphasis on the Beckettian Journey, which is presented in connection to the characters' journeys in his work. The introduction juxtaposes rethinking modernism as a theory and the era itself. The article illuminates whether the various Beckettian journeys depicted in the novel, the journeys of the characters, are reflections of Beckett's real-life journey and exclusively the psyche of those modern characters.

**Keywords:** *Modernism, Beckettian, Modern Literature, Psyche, Modern characterization*

## 1. Introduction

In this Postmodern era, Modernism is seldom explored. In fact, Postmodernism is a departure from Modernism. Hence, the comprehension of modernism, as well as its major writers and literary high priests, is essential. According to Malpas and Wake,

The complicated relationship of the 'post' to the 'modern', therefore, is one of critical rethinking, leading either to a continuation and often intensification (of irony, parody, self-reflexivity) or a rejection (of ahistoricity, barriers against the popular). This cultural and artistic relationship, however, is itself based upon another broader one that is social and political in nature, and has its roots in a series of earlier German thinkers whose work was revisited (and reinterpreted) by French poststructuralist theorists: the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche; the articulator of political revolution, Karl Marx; and the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (118).

M.H. Abrams remarks, "The term modernism is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts, and styles of literature and other arts in the early decades of the twentieth century, but especially after the World War I (1914-18)" (176).

According to Peter Barry, Modernism is an "earthquake" in the arts that brought down much of the structure of pre-twentieth-century practice in literature, music, architecture, and painting. In Music, Melody & harmony were rejected, Perspective and direct pictorial representation were put aside in painting, traditional forms and materials like wood were rejected in architecture, and in Literature, traditional realism was excluded.

Modern authors who are exclusive figures of the modern literary canon include Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and William Faulkner.

They emphasized impressionism and subjectivity, which is how we see rather than what we see. There is blurring the differences between the genres, the novels become poetic and lyrical whereas Poem prose-like. Along with an inclination towards discontinuous narrative, an inclination towards 'reflexivity', so that issues are raised by novels, poems, and plays regarding their role, nature, and status. There was a prominence to fragmentation, the fragmented modernist poetry creates its own internal "logic" of emotion, image, sound, symbol, and mood.

The modernists frame their works of art to register a deep nostalgia for the previous era. For example, *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot – "...mixing Memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain." – Eliot brings in the brokenness and Isolation of modern life, ultimately suggesting that death is a necessary stage to rebirth and renewal, the poem goes a long way to remedy the problem it identifies in modern society. It kind of urges the readers to keep alive the memories that the poem is mourning about failing to forget.

Perhaps, Habib refers to T. S. Eliot to be the most important modernist critic, who was said to be fostered by his “own re-evaluation of literary tradition”, “reacting against the Romantics”, for example, and “highlighting the virtues of the metaphysical poets, a dynamic notion of tradition as always in the process of change”. And Eliot’s criticism was a part of the manifesto of literary modernism.

Childs remarked,

Modernist writers therefore struggles, in Ezra Pound’s brief phase, to ‘make it new’, to modify if not overturn existing modes and subjects of representation, partly by pushing them towards the abstract or the introspective, and to express the new sensibilities of their time: in a compressed, condensed, complex literature of the city, of industry and technology, war, machinery and speed, mass markets and communication, of internationalism, the new woman, the aesthete, the nihilist, and the flaneur. (Childs 3-4)

the wider influence of jazz, art, music, romance, machinery and the sheer frenzy of economic, cultural, and social change, from market forces to machines, is increasingly felt in the depictions of modernism (Childs 05)

Modernism challenged realism in terms of four primarily significant things as Linearity, Character portrayal, self-referentiality, and narrative technique. Beckett is a unique modernist writer. He captures the very essence of the era in his style, characters, and plot. Apart from his phenomenal plays such as *Waiting for Godot*, his novels include, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, *How It Is*, *Malone Dies*, *Mercier and Camier*, *Molloy*, *Murphy*, *The Unnamable*, and *Watt*.

In his novel, *How it is*, the narrator is in solitude until he finds a partner. Then He is on a Journey with Pim reminiscing about a woman and her parents. Being abandoned by Pim, he returns to his solitude. The Beckettian Journeys identified here is his solitude, abandoned life, temporal joy, and darkness as he is in mud-dark.

Beckett’s *Malone Dies* depicts the intellectual dilemma of a compulsive thinker who waits for death. Beckett demonstrates the agony and despair of a man who is waiting for death to happen.

*Mercier and Camier* is the journey of a couple. The journey is endless, capturing the uncertainty and depression of the post-war scenario. It is a continuation of the vagabond protagonists like Murphy and Watt.

In the novel, *Molloy*, an aimless and carefree journey is portrayed. The protagonist, Molloy is a gentle soul. He wanders about the rural countryside getting small smooth pebbles. He keeps them in his pocket for just such an express purpose.

Beckett’s *The Unnamable* is about a person who has questions about existence. In fact, the novel begins with “Where now? Who now? When now?” and ends with “I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” He is on an inward journey searching for self, the meaning of existence.

The journey of Beckett’s characters is a reflection of his journey in the modern era. *Watt*, being the second published novel of Beckett, was the commencement of Samuel Beckett’s post-war literary career. The fruit of hiding from the Nazis in a small French town in the Vaucluse mountains is the novel, *Watt* in December 1944. It also chiefly inspired *Waiting for Godot*. Watt is the protagonist of the novel. Watt’s journey is the typical Beckettian journey on which the paper elaborates.

Also, the psyche of the modern characters is examined through the characters in the novel. The psyche of those characters in the Beckettian journey are analyzed. Modern psychology emphasizes “objectivity”; “a methodological imperative” as the path to truth; “a belief in ahistorical, decontextualized, and universal psychological objects”; empiricism and positivism as the foundations of knowledge creation; and individual rationality as the epistemic authority on the objective world. (Barnes, 1452)

## 2. Beckettian Journey in *Watt* and the Psyche of Modern Characters

The novel, *Watt* comprises four parts with a non-linear plot. Watt may be derived from the Interrogative term “what” as the existence of the character is an interrogation. An existential crisis is an important tenet of modernism and it’s found in the novel. This is a reflection of Beckett whose faced an existential crisis as he was hiding. Also, the people of the modern era largely faced an existential crisis at the end of World War I.

The Beckettian journey in the novel is of the characters, especially Watt’s. Watt’s journey doesn’t have a beginning. He works in the household of Mr. Knott, a double pun of not and knot. He becomes the secluded owner’s servant (Part 1). Mr. Knott also signifies Beckettian journey as Beckett himself is in seclusion. Thus, the primary Journey detected in the novel is an Alienated Journey.

The protagonist, Watt struggles to make his life meaningful at Mr. Knott’s house (Part 2). Watt seeks the meanings (“What?”) of the people and objects he comes across. He never triumphs in meeting his employer Knott, who does “not” appear in the novel. Hence, the meaningless journey of the character is presented. The protagonist of Beckett’s novel *Murphy* also represents a Meaningless Journey. There is no stable, inert, and prearranged position and Truth in Murphy’s life. His love relation with Miss Counihan doesn’t turn out well. His relation with Counihan or Celia or with any other people, everything is meaningless. There is meaninglessness in Murphy’s every action similar to Watt.

And the protagonist Watt encounters and experiences profound anxiety as the piano-tuning Galls, father and son, and a strangely language-resistant pot arrives.

The Tuesday scowls, the Wednesday growls, the Thursday curses, the Friday howls, the Saturday snores, the Sunday yawns, the Monday morns, the Monday morns. The whacks, the moans, the cracks, the groans, the welts, the squeaks, the belts, the shrieks, the pricks, the prayers, the kicks, the tears, the skelps, and the yelps. (Beckett, 37)

In part three, the narrator, Sam narrates that Watt is in confinement. His language muddled almost beyond understanding, while the narrative deviates on fantastical angles like the story of Ernest Louit's account, to a board at Beckett's old university, Trinity College, Dublin, of a research expedition in the West of Ireland.

Sam narrates,

“Watt seldom left his mansion and I seldom left mine”

The reference to mansions seems to be ironic. As Murphy does, Watt seems to have ended up in a Lunatic asylum as well. It is the rational residence for all Beckett protagonists to end up since they are undoubtedly suffering from advanced mental illness and inability to cope with everyday experience or any human communication.

Finally, Watt arrives at the railway station. Walking through to the ticket office, he enquires to buy a ticket. He is choiceless of where he wants to go. When interrogated, he replies “‘to the end of the line’. ‘Which end?’ Mr. Nolan asks, ‘the round end of the square end?’ The nearer end, Watt decides”. He waits there till the next morning when Mr. Nixon arrives and opens the waiting room with great force. He doesn't know that Watt was lying behind the door. He is severely injured. But He rises and is taken to the institution mentioned in part 3.

So, Watt might have been extremely concussed, possibly suffered brain damage and this is the precursor to him going, or being taken, to the institution. As per the novel's fragmented plot and non-linearity, he is taken to the institution he has already reached in part 3. The last part leaves Watt altogether and gives us a last little outburst of Beckettian combinative obsessivity. Thus, Beckett portrays the chaotic journey in parts three and four.

The novel ends with a sequence of additions. The reason behind not incorporating to the text "only fatigue and disgust" but which should however be "carefully studied". These take the arrangement of concepts and fragments envisioned for the novel but cast off. A perfect instance of a fragmented and ignorant journey.

The Psyche of the character, Watt who is involved in alienated, meaningless, chaotic, anxious, fragmented, and ignorant journeys is a modern character. Modern Psychology is connected more with the scientific study of the human mind. Freud's Modern psychology aided in understanding the psyche of modern man with resulted in the findings such as alienation, depression and so on. For example, Beckett's Watt as a modern novel, the protagonist is engulfed by Suicidal thoughts; In Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Stanley goes through alienation. Psyche of a modern character is different from the postmodern character. Example: James Joyce's *Ulysses* leads a Mundane life. The Latinized name of Odysseus is Ulysses. Homer's original Character is a mighty conqueror but Joyce's character is contrary. So, this character is a parody. The psyche of Modern characters are formed as tragic and lamenting.

A philosopher and physician named, Gottfried Büttner, is a well-trained personality in psychology. He proposes a piercing investigation of the work's narrative form and a substantial understanding of Watt's journey. His study discloses that in *Watt*, Beckett pursued to reveal the veiled experience of a soul in torment under the trauma of birth and death, and even under a tribulation of rebirth. It's a kind of soul-wandering, a transformation of the spirit has consequently been made apparent for the reader in the form of Watt in Beckett's novel.

Büttner's work is well-versed not only by his far-reaching literary interests but by his twenty years of intellectual friendship with Beckett. In Büttner's view, Watt becomes a sort of modern-day Pilgrim's Progress, the protagonist named Christian, leaves the City of Destruction and journeys to a place called the Celestial City. He encounters hurdles of roadblocks and fearsome creatures along the way. The main character represents the spiritual nature of man, which dies (Part One), lives for a while in the "other world" (Parts Two and Three), and is then born again, reincarnated (Part Four).

### 3. Conclusion

Watt's journey, without beginning or end, motivation, or any other explanation, is a typical Beckettian journey toward failure, and chaos. Beckett is usually called Beckett the absurd dramatist, Beckett the mystic, and so on. Beckett is unique to such an extent.

Through the Beckettian journey captured in this novel, the psyche of the modern characters are alienated, meaningless, chaotic, anxious, ignorant and fragmented.

The journey of the characters in Beckett's works of art reflects his journey in reality. The Beckettian Journey detected in the novel *Watt* resonates in all of his work. Beckett and his characters encounter different journeys altogether and what they learn is not explained. However, they reflect the modern era.

### Works Cited

Abrams, M.H. (1957). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Armstrong, T. (2005). *Modernism: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ayers, D. (2004). *Modernism: A Short Introduction*. New Jersey: Blackwell.

Barry, P. (1995). *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Beasley, R. (2007). *Theorists of Modernist Poetry: T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound*. London: Routledge.

Beckett, S. (1953). *Watt*. London: Faber and Faber.

Copyrights @Kalahari Journals

Vol. 7 (Special Issue, Jan.-Feb. 2022)

International Journal of Mechanical Engineering

- Beckett, S. (1961). *Murphy*. New York: Grove Press.
- Beckett, S. (1951). *Malone Dies*. New York: Grove Press.
- Beckett, S. (1970). *Mercier and Camier*. New York: Grove Press.
- Beckett, S. (1951). *Molloy*. New York: Grove Press.
- Beckett, S. (1953). *The Unnamable*. Penryn: Atlantic Press, 1953.
- Bhardwaj, K. (2019). *Postmodern Literary Theory*. Gosaba: Sonali.
- Bloom, H. (Ed). (1987). *Modern Critical View*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Chandra, J. and K.S. Anthony Samy. (2010). *Classical to Contemporary Literary Theory*, New Delhi: Atlantic.
- Childs, P. (2000). *Modernism*. London: Routledge.
- Culler, J. (2011). *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Dukore, B.F. (Ed). (1982) . *Macmillan Modern Dramatists*. Macmillan Press, 1982.
- Esslin, M. (1960). The Theatre of Absurd. *The Tulane Drama Review*. Vol-4, No-4 May, Pp. 3-15.
- Habib, M.A.R. (2011). *Literary Criticism: from Plato to the Present, An Introduction*. New York: Wiley Blackwell.
- Habib, M.A.R. (2008). *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory: A History*. New York: Wiley Blackwell.
- Malik, R.S. and Jagdish Batra. (2014). *A New Approach to Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Delhi: Atlantic.