



Spring 2003

Sexuality and Its Significance in Malone Dies

Barbara Ashwood '03
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev>

Recommended Citation

Ashwood '03, Barbara (2003) "Sexuality and Its Significance in Malone Dies,"
Undergraduate Review: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol15/iss1/3>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Sexuality and Its Significance in *Malone Dies*

Barbara Ashwood

In his novel *Malone Dies*, Samuel Beckett constantly emphasizes sexuality through the narratives of Malone, an elderly man confined to his deathbed. Rather than portraying sex as an idyllic and sensual experience, however, Beckett's use of sexuality within *Malone Dies* is blatantly unsentimental. By rejecting romanticized visions of sexuality and replacing them with incestuous, violent, disturbing, and overwhelmingly realistic sexual depictions, Beckett reveals the perversions and inadequacies of the human condition. Specifically, through his use of sexual realism, Beckett illustrates the feminine desperation, masculine domination, familial dysfunction, and loneliness that occur within people's lives.

The hopelessness of females and the abusive authority of men are first revealed through the sexuality of the Lambert family. Introduced by Malone as "the man, the woman and two children, a boy and a girl," the Lambert family initially appears as normal and nuclear, socially structured to foster and nurture the members within it (199). However, the sexuality within the family rejects traditional familial roles and reveals the dark and sinister aspects of human life. Mr. Lambert, married to his young cousin, is described as being "feared and in a position to do as he pleased," possessing a sense of dominance that is most apparent in the realm of sexuality (200). As he describes, "even his young wife had abandoned all hope of bring-

ing him to heel, by means of her cunt, that trump card of young wives. For she knew what he would do to her if she did not open it to him” (200). For “at the least show of rebellion” by Mrs. Lambert, Mr. Lambert “would run to the wash-house and come back with the beetle and beat her until she came round to a better way of thinking” (200). The sexual relations between Mr. and Mrs. Lambert lack any affection or tenderness, and demonstrate instead the domineering, violent, and cold nature of Mr. Lambert.

In addition to abusing and raping his wife, Mr. Lambert also incestuously desires his daughter. “[T]he father would have gladly slept with his daughter,” Malone explains, “the time was long past and gone when he would have gladly slept with his sister [. . .] Incest then was in the air” (215-216). By replacing the idealistic image of a loving husband and father with a sexually abusive one, Beckett reveals familial cruelty and dysfunction while simultaneously exposing a fetid, but all too realistic component of the human condition.

In response to the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse inflicted upon her by her husband, Mrs. Lambert immerses herself in her domestic duties. Described as “the only member of the household who had no desire to sleep with anybody,” Mrs. Lambert is indifferent to both her husband’s sexual advances towards their daughter and her own emotional needs. Subsequently, Mrs. Lambert spiritually dies, a condition that is most apparent within her realm of domestic drudgery. As Malone expresses:

The bosom—no, what matters is the head and then the

hands it calls to its help before all else, that clasp, wring, then sadly resume their labour, lifting the old inert objects and changing their position, bringing them closer and moving them further apart. But this pantomime and these ejaculations were not intended for any living person. (202)

Interestingly, Mrs. Lambert's encounters with household objects are described in sexual terms, suggesting that the sexualization of objects replaces her own lost sexuality. In times of trouble, Mrs. Lambert "cling[s] with her fingers to the worn table" and "grasps" chains, allowing her fingers to "[stray] along the sinuous links" (202). However, the manner in which Mrs. Lambert responds to the objects is an impotently sexual one, mirroring her own desperation, lonely frigidity, and emotional death. "Her mind was a press of formless questions," Malone recalls, "mingling and crumbling limply away" (217). Mrs. Lambert is trapped in her own domestic hell, unable to escape her husband's abuse or the day-to-day monotony of housework. Because of her dismal situation and her apathy towards her daughter's predicament, Mrs. Lambert fails to function as both a spiritual being to herself and a mother to her daughter, illustrating yet another inadequacy of human existence.

In addition to using sexuality to reveal the shortcomings and failures of humans, Beckett routinely utilizes sexual parody and cynicism in his works to describe the agony of existence, a method that is apparent within *Malone Dies*. In her article, "Defeated Sexuality in the Plays and Novels of Samuel Beckett," Kristin Morrison suggests that Beckett's use of distorted sexual depictions within

many of his earlier dramas serve as “significant metaphors for the misery of human life itself.” If life provides nothing but misery, as Beckett implies, the solution to human pain lies in ending the possibility of life through sexual disability, abortion, and sterility. As Morrison says:

Birth—and the sexuality that leads to it—is the great enemy [. . .] death *before* life provides the only effective deliverance from pain [. . .] the metaphor that best expresses this pain and its futility is grotesque, impaired sexuality with its occasional unhappy result of damaging birth [. . .] The only real solution is “panhysterectomy,” forestalling the cry, defeating sexuality altogether by removing beforehand those reproductive organs which one embarrassed character has called “the whole . . . er . . . bag of tricks.” And if that fails, then “abort, abort.” (18, 32)

By portraying sex as the catalyst of human misery and embracing death as the only release from life’s pain, Beckett undoubtedly de-romanticizes sexuality, using it not only as an exposition of human inadequacies, but also as a harshly critical depiction of life.

If “frustrated copulation” is Beckett’s way of representing the human condition, then the love scene between Macmann and Moll in *Malone Dies* exemplifies human failure (Morrison, 22). The scene, described by one critic as a “hideous parody of love,” is an acutely detailed and dismayingly realistic encounter that lacks any romantic elements (Hassan, 160). Idyllic notions of sensuality are

replaced with the image of two elderly and impotent individuals struggling to fornicate. “For given their age and scant experience of carnal love, it was only natural they should not succeed, at the first shot, in giving each other the impression they were made for each other,” Malone begins, immediately dismissing traditional romantic notions. The description of the act itself is equally cynical, with Macmann “trying to bundle his sex into his partner’s like a pillow into a pillow-slip” and the couple “summoning to their aid all the resources of the skin, mucous and the imagination in striking from their dry and feeble clips” not an earth shattering climax, but instead “a kind of sombre gratification” (260). While rather comical, the sexual language that Beckett uses to describe the intimate relations between Moll and Macmann is devoid of emotion. By failing to incorporate any sign of affection in the couple’s love scene, Beckett portrays sex as an awkward and pathetic occurrence that mocks and ridicules notions of love and romance. Through humorous yet emotionless sexuality, Beckett reveals a sense of listlessness and isolation, both very disturbing deficiencies of the human experience.

The humor that Beckett uses in many of his works not only parodies human sexuality, but also mocks the sexually-based comedic form of jest. Subsequently, Beckett’s humor proves to be even darker, critically reflecting the human condition while simultaneously ridiculing the ways in which humans reveal their own weaknesses. In *The Literature of Silence*, Ihab Hassan analyzes Beckett’s exploitation of jest, saying:

The jest, as comedy often requires, calls attention to the car-

nal nature of man; and it transposes moral into physical concerns. In the end however, it stresses the absurd isolation of all human concerns. Because Beckett's humor is reductive and sadistic, it tends to focus on scatological rather than erotic functions [. . .] Copulation, therefore, thrives but feebly, usually among cripples or octogenarians, as further proof of the mind's disgust with life. (135)

Though jest mocks aspects of the human condition, it at least acknowledges moral and social concerns. Beckett's comedy, however, is "the satire of a man who tries to bear his own company," evoking ideas of solitude, isolation, nothingness, and contempt (135). Both jest and Beckett's comedic style utilize sexuality to ridicule human nature; however, unlike jest, the sexual humor within Beckett's works is overwhelmingly negative. Traditional jest uses sex to reveal humanity's flaws, but ultimately suggests that there are redeemable qualities within the human experience. Conversely, the sexuality within Beckett's comedy mirrors the misery and wretchedness of each character's life, ignoring humans' collective concerns and instead suggesting a segregated, lonely, and vacuous existence.

Despite Beckett's use of sex to illustrate human shortcomings and despondency, the scene in which Malone voyeuristically watches his neighbors copulate is a rather bittersweet one, departing from Beckett's typical employment of coldly negative and unemotional sexuality. Though many of Malone's observations are ignorant ones based on severe loneliness, there is a certain tenderness and warmth within his description of the couple's sex. "It is all very pretty and strange,"

Malone remarks while watching his neighbors, suggesting that the couple's relations may indeed have positive qualities absent in the rest of his sexual stories. Even the language Malone uses to describe the act is uncharacteristically beautiful: "But the night must be warm," Malone says, "for all of a sudden the curtain lifts on a flare of tender colour, pale blush and white of flesh, then pink that must come from a garment and gold too that I haven't time to understand" (238). When Malone finally figures out that the couple is having sex, he describes it as "loving each other," linking affection to sexual activity. As the neighbors' copulation comes to an end, Malone expresses longing for their experience, saying, "Back and forth, back and forth, that must be wonderful [. . .] Enough, enough, goodbye" (238). The warmth that exists within this particular sexual description provides a sense of optimism for human life that is lacking throughout the novel. However, Malone's initial inability to understand what his neighbors are doing—hypothesizing that the couple is rubbing against each other to create friction in an attempt to keep warm—presents the reader with both the pleasant and painful realization that while happiness within the human condition is possible, it is not likely.

The sexual realism in *Malone Dies* ultimately forces the reader to break away from romanticized images that have a tendency to mask and gloss over social problems. Though Beckett's use of sexuality is undoubtedly cynical, it brings human inadequacies to the forefront, allowing for a greater awareness of dysfunctions and problems within the human condition. By not embracing idyllic sexual facades and instead utilizing sexuality that exposes flaws and imperfections, Beckett man-

ages to reveal what it is to be human.

Works Cited

Beckett, Samuel. Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable. New York: Grove Press, 1958.

Hassan, Ihab. The Literature of Silence. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1967.

Morrison, Kristin. "Defeated Sexuality in the Plays and Novels of Samuel Beckett."

Comparative Drama 14 (1980): 18-34.