

Existentialist Philosophy in Krapp's Last Tape

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ABSTRACT

Krapp's Last Tape is an important play of Samuel Beckett reflecting Existentialist Philosophy in the most authentic way. The play follows the tradition of Absurd theatre having without proper beginning, middle and end. The past and the present have been juxtaposed to emphasize the theme of existentialism in the play. The life of Krapp, the protagonist, is fully absurd devoid of meaning and existence. He goes back to his past again and again and searching for his existence and authentication in life. It is his choice to survive in the world. Thus, the play encompasses all associated themes of existentialism like choice, authentication, absurdum, bad faith, etc.

Key Words: *Existentialism, Authentication, choice, absurdum, nothingness.*

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Krapp's Last Tape is a one act play in English by Samuel Beckett. It consists of the cast of a man written for northern Irish outer Patrick Magee. The original notebook manuscript of *Krapp's Last Tape* is titled 'Magee Monologue. Donald Davis says that *Krapp's Last Tape* is the 'outrageous title of an outrageous play'.

Krapp's Last Tape develops Beckett's notion of the relationship between the present and the past that inhibit consciousness. Beckett work invariably includes stories that evoke a sense of the past and employs physical objects that function as relics of a previous time. The physical device of the tape recorder allows Beckett to return to the images of the solitary figure. The separate voice of the younger Krapp's combined with

the presence of the older figure that listens and completes the paradigm. The text spoken by the recorded voice also becomes the principal physical object, the hero possesses, the tangible relic of the past as part of the collection of tapes. The tapes are both text and object, they have an immediacy and authenticity that Beckett's other relics of the past do not have, but their physical separation from Krapp and his enigmatic response to them demonstrates the gap between the past and the present. The gap is both spatial and psychological. In *Krapp's Last Tape* Beckett uses images of space and character to examine problems in the perception of time.

The scenic image in *Krapp's Last Tape* appears to be simple. There is a table with two drawers, a tape-recorder and boxes holding reels of magnetic tape and a microphone are placed on the table. There is a white light above the desk but the extremities of the stage are in darkness. The interior dimensions of the room that Krapp inhabits are indistinct.

Here Beckett establishes a special tension between light and darkness. This black and white imagery continues throughout the whole play. The alternation of light and darkness is noticed at twenty-seven points in the play. Beckett explains to Martin that 'death is standing behind krapp' and unconsciously he's looking for it.'

The schematic opposition of light and darkness provides the dominant scenic element of this play. It indicates the principal antithesis operating in krapp's consciousness. The voice of the younger krapp remarks on the installation of the light thirty years earlier:

Good to be back in my den, in my old rags ... The new light above my table is a great improvement. With all this darkness round me. I feel less alone. (Pause.) in a way. (Pause) I have to get up and move about in it, then back her to... (Hesitates).... me. (Pause) krapp.

In Beckett's plays the lighted space is not only a physical location but also an area in which the character can imagine him or herself. The darkness offers the character the opportunity to move away from this self-image and lose self-consciousness. Beckett says, "Krapp senses the presence of a benevolent death behind him in the darkness."

In this way, Beckett juxtaposes past and present. The past itself has no authentic presence. It exists only as residue worn objects and equally worn stories, diminished in their use and repetition.

The play projects a sense of time as a series of endings. The tapes themselves are ending, and the three sections of the tape, Krapp plays enact endings. In this way, the concept of time in the play strongly supports the existential theme of nihilism and nothingness.

There is only one person on the stage but a number of characters are mentioned throughout the play. Krapp is a young man who has decided to retreat from life and do nothing. He has been described as a world weary anti-hero, a failed writer and seedy solipsist, a clear proto type for the later Krapp. Krapp is the next in line of succession to Beckett's old, decaying men, fashioned after Pozzo, Hamm and Dan Rooney.

Krapp lives alone. He seems to have moved a step ahead of these characters in his renouncement of human bondage at every stage of his life. But this step is illusory. He voluntarily withdraws into solitariness. His rejection of life is an attempt to escape the boredom of living by opting out of existence with his fellow beings and by exiting himself to a life of loneliness preferring his listen to. Having rejected life in his early years, his options are closed as he is near seventy. In his self-imposed state of loneliness, he attempts to recall and recapture his past moments of intense experiences and live in his memories. The courage which he has displayed initially to move into emotional insulation gives way to a pathetic harking back to past experiences as he lacks to courage to dare the basic solitariness of his existence.

Beckett shows the division of voices within the same speaker. It manifests the antithesis that marks each of Beckett's heroes; the impulsion to continue speech and, thus, existence; the desire for silence, and therefore, death. Beckett uses this division in *Krapp's Last Tape* which allows the old man to listen to the words of the younger at will.

It is also a biographical play, revealing three phases of Krapp's life. Though the play opens on man, we are witness to three Krapps - Krapp in his near thirties, Krapp in his near forties and Krapp in his near seventies. The play covers roughly a span of forty years knit together by the one unchanging self Krapp. Krapp at 29, 39 and 69 follow the same pattern of renouncing love and life at moments of intensity. Krapp at 29 gives up Bianca rationalizing that it was all pointless and meaningless to get involved:

At that time, I think I was still living on and . . . awareness of it turning out to be a hopeless business.

However, Krapp pays a rich tribute to Bianca's eyes, "very warm. I suddenly saw them again, (Pause.) incomparable."

Krapp at 39 bid farewell to love during the memorable moments with the girl who comes closer to him. The boat scene reveals the best moments of his life, moments of ecstasy, gratification and fulfillment. Krapp at 69 lingers over his past moments of calm telluric bliss:

I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us gently up and down and from side to side.

Krapp seems to have lived with the tension between a passionate life and the basic solitariness of man. Krapp fears this "engulfment" into another person and voluntarily seeks isolation in an effort to preserve his identity. In this sense he exists in acute tension in the separation of his mind from the body. Krapp thus displays a dichotomy where antithesis exists between complete loss of being by absorption into the other person and complete aloneness. Krapp has to make the choice of either turning into his world of inner consciousness or accepting the everyday life and its dreary routine. Krapp, when confronted with the state of aloneness reverts to his past existence of involvement and lives in memories.

Krapp at his mother's dying moments reminds one of the characters of *The Stranger*, a novel which illustrates Camus' *Vision of the Absurd* looks at life with no hope or illusion. Friedman writing sums up the plight of modern man:

"The death of God means the awareness of a basic crisis in modern history." It is the absence of an image of meaningful existence.

It is in this universe, divested of illusion and lights, that man feels an alien, a stranger. Krapp has no meaningful contact with anyone or anything. Krapp's awareness of aloneness is reflected in his thoughts soon after the brown rollers went down, signifying his mother's death. "Moments her moments, my moments... The dog's moments." At one point of time, Krapp, his mother and his dog each one of them is enclosed within separate streams of their respective consciousness, that reinforces the fact of solitariness.

Krapp's desire to reject life is totally mocked at. He has failed both in his attempt to sustain himself alone and to sustain with the other. None of his aspirations could be fulfilled and yet being born, he has no alternative but to desire, to seek after an illusory goal, to keep going till darkness closes in upon him. Krapp cuts a sorry figure in his return to life after his courageous renunciation of it. Thus, Krapp's thought about life is associated with the existential philosophy.

Krapp fails to come to terms with boredom and suffering. He switches from one to the other, concordant with the switching on and off his tape-recorded "The understanding and the fire" that he speaks to testify to his recognition of the mockery of all human aspirations and his consequent anger and protest in defiance of such frustration. He is the first of the Beckettian rebels to brave suffering by a spirited withdrawal from the world of unauthentic living. To the extent he recognizes the authenticity of existence, and turns away from it. But he has no reserve strength to sustain him in his state of aloneness. His inveterate habit to return to his tape recorder to listen to his past is the proof of his inability to remain immune to the world outside of himself. He continues recording for future references so that he could retain the outside world within himself and recourse to it when his voluntary isolation and loneliness become unendurable. He

keeps chewing the cud of the bygone past as he lacks the will to preserve in the painful tenor of a lonely existence. Krapp's initial challenging response to the absurdity of existence gives way to a cowardly retreat into his world of reminiscence.

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