



Research Article

Existential Nihilism as a Solid Conception in Samuel Beckett's *Not I*

Hussein Talib Al-Janabi

Department of English, Al- Hilla University, Iraq

Hussein Yasir

Department of Chemical Engineering, Al-Muthanna University, Iraq

Abstract:

The recondite and polemical play *Not I* is an illustrious expression of Samuel Beckett's unique philosophical perspective, which maximizes ideas of existentialism, absurdism, and radical scepticism. This article addresses how Beckett's play unwinds the core themes of existential nihilism. To this end, the article delves into the philosophical traditions that influence existentialist thought. On one hand, the article argues that Beckett's anonymous, disembodied character "Mouth" is a striking representation of radical ontological isolation and the ultimate futility of human existence. On the other hand, the article explores Beckett's subtle portrayals of existential nihilism, a concept characterized by a rejection of universal meaning, which both aligns with and diverges from the fundamental principles of existentialist thought. The play imbues a sense of absurdity in the human condition through the Mouth's frantic, decentralized outpouring of fragmentary memoirs and disoriented impressions. As such, it robustly defies conventional notions of identity, consciousness, and the autonomous self. By setting existential nihilism as the theoretical frame of this article, the researcher endeavors to firmly situate Beckett's innovative theatrical techniques within the broader existentialist tradition, revealing how his formal innovations mirror the metaphysical precariousness articulated in seminal existentialist writings.

Keywords: Existential Nihilism, *Not I*, Absurdism, Samuel Beckett, Human Condition

1. Introduction

Not I is a one-act play that concentrates on the character "Mouth," who conveys an extensive monologue about her existence. The aforementioned play deals with themes of alienation, identity, and the quest for self-expression. The narrative develops through the Mouth's fragmented memories, which highlight her sense of solitude from her own life experiences. The play begins with Mouth depicting her early life in a dark, almost surreal manner, focusing on feelings of isolation and the shattered nature of her existence. The silence and darkness she describes embodies her existential despair. Her speech becomes progressively unsettled as she retells events from her past—a reflection of her urgent need for connection and her inner disturbances. Eventually, *Not I* explores the

complexities of the human condition, demanding the nature of existence and the challenge of true self-awareness. The play's structure and incoherent narrative style represent the arduousness associated with identifying truth and dissociating identity.

Existential nihilism is a philosophy that claims that existence lacks inherent meaning or purpose. The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, a 19th-century German philosopher, is largely based on the notion that "God is dead" and that human existence lacks inherent concern in the absence of divine order (Nietzsche, 2001). French existentialist Albert Camus and other advocates of this view argue that human life is basically aimless and absurd, counseling that we have to make our own meaning in a meaningless world (Camus, 1955).

Beckett's *Not I* holds a significant ideas in the 20th-century philosophy of absurdist and existentialist literature due to its conservative gestures. The play efficiently embraces the essence notions of existential nihilism, tackling the absurdity of human existence throughout the drastic formal examination and the portrayal of dissociated and fragmented ideas.

Based on Brater's examination of *Not I*, the character "Mouth" speaks a frantic and unconnected monologue that reflects a deep existential isolation, a prominent notion in Beckett's pessimistic philosophy (Brater, 1974). Beckett's innovative theoretical techniques, inventive staging, and dramatic tactics increase the feeling of existential isolation and the integral futility of human efforts. These innovative techniques also examine conventional notions about identity, consciousness, and control.

This article examines the pertinent relationship between Beckett's play *Not I* and the existentialist traditional philosophy. It shows how Beckett's depiction of existential nihilism aligns with and diverges from the integral philosophical conceptions put forward by influential philosophers such as Sartre and Camus (Critchley, 2004; Esslin, 2004). To this end, the article closely reads the play's distinctive worldview, concentrating on its profound implications for ontology and ethics.

The article will also examine how this worldview arouses our perspectives of human selfhood, responsibility, and the capacity to highlight authentic choices in an aloof world. Furthermore, this article demonstrates how *Not I* involves fundamental questions regarding human existence by deeply examining the play's structural and thematic elements. The interpretation entails providing a thorough understanding of the philosophical aspects that reflect Beckett's work, gesturing to embrace an understanding insight into the portrayal of the absurd that shapes the essence of this influential theatrical text.

2. Literature Review

The philosophical notion of existential nihilism, and its embodiment in Samuel Beckett's dramatic oeuvre, have been the subject of controversy of the wider literary scholarly analysis. Martin Esslin's significant book, *Theatre of the Absurd*, is a critical examination in the study of Beckett and existentialism. In this book, Esslin situates Beckett's idea within the broader framework of Absurdist ideas, highlighting the inherent lack of meaning in human existence (Esslin, 2004).

Many critics have extensively demonstrated the core existential perspectives of Beckett's oeuvre in this context, leading to controversy. Simon Critchley's book, *Very Little... Almost Nothing*, brings a close demonstration of how Beckett's writing style engages with the basic ideas of existentialist thought, specifically Sartre's notion of radical freedom and Camus's notion of the absurd (Critchley, 2004). Critchley asserts that Beckett's minimalist aesthetics and his portrayal of the dissociate and fragmented self-embodiment an "ethics of limitation" that engages with the void and meaninglessness at the core of human existence (Critchley, 2004).

Brater's examination of Beckett's *Not I* focuses on how the play's fragmented and unconnected structure, coupled with the absence of conventional character development, allows the author to closely examine the limits of language and the elusive notion of identity. He closely read how Beckett's formal techniques, such as the isolated and bodiless mouth, as well as the character's rapid and unconnected monologue, force the readers to notice the disconnection between voice and body inherent in the human condition (Brater, 1974).

According to notable Beckett scholar Robbie Cohen, the play's rejection of conventional narrative and reliance on fragmented language reflect the main character's unconnected sense of identity (Cohen, 1973). These analyses highlight Beckett's innovative use of language and theater as tools to examine the existential dilemma of human existence, as well as the lack of language in accurately capturing self-consciousness. Critical Perspectives on *Not I* highlight Beckett's use of the play's fragmented structure and the absence of conventional character development to address existential nihilism regarding the human condition and identity.

In consequence, this article closely examines the profound philosophical implications of Beckett's dark depiction of the individual, as well as the ways in which the play challenges traditional notions of a coherent, independent entity.

3. Approach and Methodology

The article employs a multifaceted analytical approach to clarify the relevant relation between existential nihilism and Beckett's *Not I*. The textual analysis, on the one hand, meticulously examines Beckett's unorthodox use of language style, with a gesture concentration on the fragmented and unconnected speech of the character "Mouth" and the ways in which these ideas shaped themes of existential nihilism.

On the other hand, the article embarks on a theatrical analysis of the minimal stage directions to determine how these themes have developed the protagonist's portrayal of solitude and despair. Ultimately, the article provides philosophical contexts by evaluating the play within the framework of existentialist thought, scrutinizing the effect of the prominent philosophers such as Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus on themes of identity, self-awareness, and meaning. Thus, the purpose of the aforementioned textual analysis is to deeply uncover the profound existential and analytical indications embodied in the play's minimalistic aesthetic.

The article also accentuates the relevance between Beckett's *Not I* and the core notions of existential nihilism and integrates it into the broader notion of traditional existential thought. Over and above, it extends a comprehensive elaboration of the reflective lack of the human condition through philosophical exegesis, performance-based interpretation, and a profound textual analysis.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Samuel Beckett's 1972 play *Not I* is an extensive study of existential nihilism, or the notion that existence lacks intrinsic meaning or purpose. Beckett's ongoing exploration of the core conceptions of subjective experience, as stated by the fragmented and dissociated monologue of the key figure, "Mouth," maximizes the depth of nothingness that establishes the human condition. Yet the realization of meaninglessness begins with the Mouth's assertion:

Out...into this world...this world...tiny little thing . . . before its time . . . in a god for- . . . what? . . . girl? . . . yes . . . tiny little girl . . . into this . . . out into this . . . before her time . . . godforsaken hole called . . . called . . . no matter . . . parents unknown . . . unheard of . . . he having vanished . . . thin air . . . no sooner buttoned up his breeches . . . she similarly . . . eight months later . . . almost to the tick . . . so no love . . . spared that . . . no love such as normally vented on the . . . speechless infant . . . in the home . . . no . . . nor indeed for that matter any of any kind . . . no love of any kind . . . at any subsequent stage . . . (Beckett, 1984, p. 216)

The play's formal experimentation with language and its subversion of conventional dramatic structures evokes a profound sense of existential dread. The nihilistic belief that the self is nothing more than an illusion—a construct that reflects the emptiness of existence—aligns with Beckett's engagement with the frenetic stream of consciousness depicted by Mouth, which is characterized by an endless deferral of self-identification. This depiction suggests that the self is not merely at odds with emptiness, but deeply entangled with it, its fragmented identity illustrating the futility of attempting to establish a stable sense of self in an indifferent world. The philosophical work of Martin Heidegger, whose concept of "being-toward-death" forms the core of the play's depiction of the ego, repeatedly evokes the pervasive sense of existential nihilism in *Not I*. According to Heidegger, the realization of one's limits is an inevitable aspect of human existence, one that ultimately undermines any notion of a solid or coherent identity.

The Mouth's struggle continues as she sits:

Scream again... [Screams again.] . . .then listen again... [Silence.] . . .no...spared that...all silent as the grave... no part- . . . what? . . . the buzzing? .t. yes . . . all silent but for the buzzing...so-called...no par of her moving...that she could feel . . . just the eyelids . . . presumably . . . on and off . . . shut out the light . . . reflex they call it . . . no feeling of any kind . . . but the lids . . . even best of times . . . who feels them? . . . opening . . . shutting . . . all that moisture . . . but the brain still . . . still sufficiently . . . oh very much so! (Beckett, 1984, p. 218)

The Mouth's desperate attempt to prove her existence, which is relentlessly failed due to linguistic limitations, reflects Heidegger's conception of the self as a fragile and fragmented phenomenon. Heidegger confirms this idea in *Being and Time* by stating that "the essence of Dasein lies in its existence" (Heidegger, 1962), thereby emphasizing the fragility and fluidity of identity. He also claims that "Dasein is a being that must be understood in terms of its potentiality for being," and Heidegger emphasizes the inherent dilemma of the self and the difficulty of establishing a coherent identity. In an experience where words cannot fully convey the complexity of Mouth's experience, these difficulties reveal her struggle to define her identity. The play's refusal to provide a clear narrative or

solution reflects Heidegger's argument that the irreducibility and irreconcilability of meaning define the human condition.

In addition, the silent and invisible figure of the listener serves to underscore the essential point of existential nihilism. As an anonymous character in Mouth's fragmented monologue, the listener functions as an omnipresent Other, challenging the heroine's attempts to deny the self and objectify her lived experience. Jean-Paul Sartre links this dynamic to his examination of the fundamental elements and tensions between objectivity and subjectivity that affect the human condition. Sartre says that "hell is other people," emphasizing the possibility of alienation and distortion of one's self-perception as a result of the gaze of others (Sartre, 1946).

He also examines this tension by arguing that "man is condemned to freedom," confirming the concern for freedom and responsibility that escorts the improvement of one's identity in a world that seeks to constantly define us (Sartre, 1946). Mouth's frantic efforts to assert her identity amidst the oppressive expanse of external judgment resonate deeply with the conflict between being defined by others and striving to realize her true self. Mouth's desire for independence, as well as the inescapable reality of an outside gaze's observation and evaluation, complicates her.

Words were coming . . . imagine! . . . words were coming . . . a voice she did not recognize . . . at first . . . so long since it had sounded . . . then finally had to admit . . . could be none other . . . than her own . . . certain vowel sounds . . . she had never heard . . . elsewhere . . . so that people would stare . . . the rare occasions . . . once or twice a year . . . always winter some strange reason . . . stare at her uncom- prehending . . . and now this stream . . . steady stream . . . she who had never . . . on the contrary . . . practically speechless . . . all her days . . . how she survived ! (Beckett, 1984, p. 219).

The innovative use of language in *Not I* confirms the play's representation of existential nihilism. Mouth's stuttering, interrupted monologue reflects the nihilistic certainty that language cannot capture the unspeakable complexities of human existence, as well as the collapse of language as a reliable means of conveying subjective experience. The play demonstrates the incapability of language to certainly represent the true core of the self (Albright, 2003), suggesting a profound alienation from the essential elements for developing a coherent and well-established sense of identity. Frantic outbursts of fragmented speech, accentuated by the mouth's falling back into silence, represent the play's core existential nihilism.

This linguistic fragmentation conveys the idea of the self as an ambiguous and unstable construct that evades final representation. Beckett's formal experimentation with language is a means of dramatizing the nihilistic crisis of the ego and the inherent limitations of human communication. The ultimate exegesis of Beckett's adaptation of minimalist aesthetics to trigger existential pain and his ruin of conventional dramatic structures provide a valuable framework for examining the play's overarching sense of nihilism. *Not I* dramatizes the existential struggle to reconcile subjective experience with the other's objective gaze. Ultimately, this struggle is defined by an overarching sense of meaninglessness and futility (Critchley, 2004).

This interpretation enhances our perception of the play's representation of existential nihilism by pining *Not I* in the wider context of existential thought and blending a various of critical

perspectives. The play increasingly challenges language and obstructs conventional dramatic structures, subverting itself into a profound meditation on the absurdity of human existence and the dissociation of the ego.

The play's formal experiments with language, which reject attempts to provide a clear narrative or resolution, represent the supposed existential belief that life is inherently devoid of meaning or purpose. Beckett encourages us to confront the most intrinsic fears of human existence and the abyss of nothingness that lies at the core of human life. The very first lines of the play are maybe the most poignant representation of this self-absorption, as the mouth states, "... what?"... sure... a person... in the dark... with hands... gesturing... despairing... despairing." (Beckett, 1984). Any secure notion of identity or subjectivity is immediately represented by the very first words, which are marked by hesitation and uncertainty. The Mouth's incapacity to articulate the most fundamental aspects of its own existence implies a profound existential crisis, a radical reconsideration of the self that serves as the bedrock of Beckett's nihilistic vision. The Mouth further elaborates on this subject by noting that "... all... silent... all... this... this... this... thing..." (Beckett, 1984). Once more, it underscores the indeterminate and fragmented nature of identity.

The Mouth's repetitive denials of its personhood become more apparent as the monologue progresses. The Mouth unequivocally rejects any notion of autonomous selfhood, describing its experience as a series of negations and declaring.

Imagine! . . . no idea what she's saying! . . . and can't stop . . . no stopping it . . . she who but a moment before . . . but a moment! . . . could not make a sound . . . no sound of any kind . . . now can't stop . . . imagine! . . . can't stop the stream . . . and the whole brain begging . . . something begging in the brain . . . begging the mouth to stop . . . pause a moment . . . if only for a moment . . . and no response . . . as if it hadn't heard . . . or couldn't . . . couldn't pause a second . . . (Beckett, 1984, p. 219)

Beckett has thereby undermined the fundamental philosophical postulate of the rational, unified subject, thereby reducing the self to a mere linguistic construct devoid of any essential essence.

This existential nihilism is further exacerbated by the play's formal and aesthetic qualities. The audience is disoriented, and any conventional theatrical expectations are undermined by the sparse, fragmented dialogue, disorienting stage directions, and claustrophobic lighting.

Beckett's deprivation of the audience of the reassuring structures of plot, character, and dialogue compels us to confront the absence at the core of human experience, as noted by literary critic Laurence Graver (Graver, 1979). Beckett's philosophical commitment to uncovering the fundamental absurdity and meaninglessness of the human condition is exemplified by this radical formal experimentation.

Beckett's play *Not I* can be interpreted as a theatrical representation of Sartre's concept of radical freedom and the existential sorrow of human existence. Similar to Sartre's assertion that individuals are "condemned to be free," the Mouth in *Not I* is abruptly inserted into a universe that lacks any preexisting essence or significance. It is compelled to confront the formidable responsibility of establishing its own identity by an apathetic cosmos.

Mouth vigorously denies any notion of individuality or control, embodying the existential notion of “bad faith.” This notion refers to the tendency of individuals to ignore their freedom and responsibility by holding onto rigid, fundamental beliefs about themselves. Mouth demonstrates how individuals often adopt to deceive themselves to escape the anxiety of freedom, thus limiting themselves to foreordained identities by denying their individuality. This denial of agency not only draws attention to her inner conflict but also serves as a poignant critique of the ways in which individuals can protect themselves from the existential aftermaths of their decisions:

New every morning . . . back in the field . . . April morning . . . face in the grass . . . nothing but the larks . . . pick it up there . . . get on with it from there . . . another few- . . . what? . . . not that? . . . nothing to do with that? . . . nothing she could tell? . . . all right . . . nothing she could tell . . . try something else . . . think of something else . . . oh long after . . . sudden flash . . . not that either . . . all right . . . something else again . . . so on . . . hit on it in the end . . . think everything keep on long enough . . . then forgiven . . . back in the-...what?.. not that either?..nothing to do with that either? . . . nothing she could think? . . . all right . . . nothing she could tell . . . nothing she could think . . . nothing she-...what?..who?..no!..she!.. (Beckett, 1984, p. 222)

By exploring the principles of existentialist nihilism, Beckett's play *Not I* becomes a powerful and thought-provoking theatrical reflection on the profound void that lies within the core of human existence. By removing conventional elements of dramatic portrayal, the play exposes the audience to the profound lack of meaning in its subject matter, compelling them to confront the void that exists at the core of our existence. The anguish of a self trapped in a universe devoid of meaning, frantically clinging to the illusion of a coherent identity, is encapsulated by the tormented cries of the Mouth, "... no!... she!... not... not!..." (Beckett, 1984).

5. Conclusion

At its core, Beckett's polemical play *Not I* is a significant and influential work that delves into the philosophical concept of existentialist nihilism. The play challenges conventional dramatic representation by employing the fragmented monologue of the disembodied character "Mouth," exposing the audience to the profound sense of meaninglessness at the core of human existence. The constant denials of selfhood and agency by the Mouth reflect the existentialist concept of absolute freedom, where individuals are condemned to create their own identity in a reality that lacks fundamental significance.

Beckett's formal experimentation intensifies this feeling of existential torment, compelling the audience to confront the absence of meaning at the core of human existence. Ultimately, this article has demonstrated the ideology of existential nihilism as an entrenched notion in *Not I* through profound theatrical reflection on the depths of individual existence. Beckett's play forces the audience to confront the daunting task of creating their own identity in a cosmos devoid of significance by breaking down the idea of a self that is independent and consistent. The work stands as a haunting exploration of the radical freedom and anguish that define the human condition, embodying existentialist nihilism.

References

[1] Albright, D. (2003). *Beckett and aesthetics*. Cambridge University Press.

- [2] Beckett, S. (1984). *Collected shorter plays*. Grove Press.
- [3] Brater, E. (1974). "The 'I' in Beckett's Not I". *Twentieth Century Literature*, 20(3), 189-200.
- [4] Camus, A. (1955). *The myth of Sisyphus and other essays*. (J. O'Brien, trans.). Vintage Books.
- [5] Cohn, R. (1973). *Back to Beckett*. Princeton University Press.
- [6] Critchley, S. (2004). *Very little... almost nothing: Death, philosophy, literature*. Routledge.
- [7] Esslin, M. (2004). *The theatre of the absurd*. Vintage.
- [8] Graver, L. (1979). *Samuel Beckett: The critical heritage*. Routledge.
- [9] Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, trans.). Harper & Row.
- [10] Nietzsche, F. (2001). *The gay science* (J. Nauckhoff, trans.). Cambridge UP.
- [11] Sartre, J. P. (1956). *Being and nothingness* (H.E. Barnes, trans.). Washington Square Press.