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#### A FEW REFLECTIONS ON *HAPPY DAYS* BY SAMUEL BECKETT

In *Happy Days* Samuel Beckett has extremely detailed stage directions. The language in the dialogue, however, is simple, no surprises are revealed, no poetic or complicated sentences are used, on the surface nothing important is said at all. But the audience, or the reader, does not get all the information through the actions and the talk on the stage, most of it one has to read between the lines and interpret oneself, much more so than in many other plays. Below, you will find some of my interpretations and reflections.

The story is simple. There are only two actors, Winnie and Willie, a middle-aged, probably married couple. In the first act Winnie is buried up to her waist in a mound and can only move the upper part of her body: in the second act she is imbedded up to her neck and can no longer move even her head. Willie lives in a hole in the mound, but seems to be mostly outside. Winnie cannot move but she can talk, and Willie can move but hardly talk. Their life is ruled by a bell that rings when it is time to wake up and to go to sleep. All Willie does the whole day is read a newspaper, and Winnie tries to keep her spirits up, in the first act by chatting, singing and taking care of her body from waist upwards, like brushing her teeth, combing her hair, filing her nails, etc., in the second act by chatting and singing. The end does not mark any significant change, it hints that everything will go on in the same way until they die.

Thus, their lives are totally unfree, and, it would seem, rather meaningless. The mound can symbolize all the musts, duties, and inhibitions that restrict us, bury us deeper and deeper with the years and make it more and more impossible for us to break out of our little world. But both of them have a choice: Winnie has a pistol that she takes up and

looks at while she can still move - but she does not use it. And Willie can move - why does he not leave?

The answer, I think, is that the alternative is not any better. Willie would not get a better life anywhere else, and here he at least has Winnie. Winnie fills her life with what seems to be trivialities, but they are deadly important to her, since they are her whole life. She says yo herself several times that she is doing all she can do, she is making the best of the situation.

And are we not all filling our lives with meaningless actions and things? If we seriously consider our life, how much in it is really important? Of course, that depends on the individual. What is important to one person is totally unimportant to another. And this is the heart of the matter: what seems like trivialities to us are extremely important to Winnie. We may think "her life is totally meaningless, she might as well kill herself". But she does not want to die, she does not want to shrivel up and wither away: she has a pleasure in the memories of the past (unless they hurt) and wants to enjoy the present as much as she can. The slightest detail makes the whole day a happy day, as when she learns something new or when Willie talks to her, which he does not do every day. To us, it is ridiculous or even pathetic when she says: "Poor Willie, no zest for anything, no interest in life" (2244). But I think it is better to have interests in life, no matter how commonplace, than to have none at all.

I mentioned at the beginning that the stage directions are very thorough. In many other plays, as has also been done, it is possible to change the setting and the properties and set up the play with only the dialogue left from the original. Here, however, that would not work, since all elements are woven together and depend upon each other. The different objects in Winnie's handbag, for example, all reflect and give something significant away. A few examples: the mirror - as long as you can see yourself, you exist. The toothbrush, the comb, the lipstick, the nail file - as long

as you are interested in how you look, all hopes are not gone. The pistol - see above.

The directions for the actions are equally important. Winnie is supposed to smile when she speaks about the old days or the old style, but then she stops smiling - to show that it hurts too much to think about the time when she could still move and walk around. The bell should start ringing as soon as she closes her eyes in the daytime, when she is not supposed to, and stop ringing when she opens them again, to show that her life is totally controlled by others than herself, etc.

That this play really depicts our whole life is shown by a little detail. Winnie talks twice about another couple. She cannot remember their name exactly, but they are called Shower or Cooker (2253, 2258). Shower makes one immediately think of water, and the name Cooker can give associations to fire (cook over an open fire). The mound, of course, is earth, and the rest of the stage is air - here we have all the four elements. In astrology, earth stands for an unwillingness to move or change, and air stands for talking and communication, and both factors are present in Winnie's and Willie's life. But there is not much fire and water - fire stands for initiative and action, and water for emotions - so Beckett lets other people contribute with that. This may be consciously or unconsciously done, but it makes the circle closed - here is our life in a nutshell. Whether we like it or consider it meaningful or not, is only up to ourselves to decide.

LITERATURE: Samuel Beckett: Happy Days, p. 2243-2261 in *The Norton anthology of English literature*, 6th ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1993.