

An Analysis of Lif-Conditions in Samuel Beckett's Happy Days and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Similarities and Differences

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Abstract

The Second World War caused long-term destruction to human life in the countries involved. As a result, life at that time was severely affected by many economic, educational, and social factors that exceeded the physical disability and psychological trauma. Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a situation of human disability in terms of diverse conditions of life. This paper studies the similarities and differences between human life conditions during the Second World War and the pandemic time of COVID-19. This paper relies on Beckett's Happy Day to reflect the living conditions caused by the Second World War. Parallely, references to international reports and articles about COVID-19 are made to depict the life conditions created since the spread of the virus. Hence, this study tries to answer the hypothetical question of how similar human life during the COVID-19 pandemic time is to that depicted by Samuel Beckett represents in his play Happy Days. This paper is restricted to the psychological consequences of pandemics. However, as plague literature resurrects, relationships between pandemics and human living conditions are invited to the table of academia. Other pandemics in different times in history, other types of consequences, and diverse literary works are highly recommended to be the subject matter of researchers worldwide.

1. The Consequences of the Second World War

Wars bring nothing but destruction. Almost every aspect of life reflects the kinds of destruction caused by wars. The Second World War severely destroyed human life physically and psychologically, creating new normativity for life (Claire, 2012). It decimated landscapes, killed tens of millions of people, and left many more unable to work, needing long-term healthcare and help to rebuild their lives (Blamires, 1986). "Among the consequences of war, the impact on the mental health of the civilian population is one of the most significant. Studies of the general population show a definite increase in the incidence and prevalence of mental disorders" (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006, p. 1). Such negative consequences of the Second World War are precisely depicted in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*. With no minimum responsibilities, people are found in miserable living conditions. Beckett points to that in Act One: "Embedded up to above her waist in the exact centre of the mound, WINNIE" (Beckett, 2012, p. 135). The consequences of the war left people in strange, illogical circumstances. "At the opening of the play, Winnie's extraordinary situation first attracts attention due to its being strange" (Tan, 2007, p. 51).

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The lack of communication and repetition of verbal and physical human behaviour and psychological trauma stand for the strange sequences of the war. They are depicted in the play in the shapes of disabilities. People nowadays are not responsible for the unknown, contested reasons behind the COVID-19 pandemic. They have to adapt new lifestyle methods to overcome and put an end to this plague. Scientists are working on an active vaccination to restrict the virus, whereas people, in general, are rushing, in vain, away from infection by following all preventive and precautionary measures possible. These serious endeavours are still hopeless with the new waves of virus spread and its new mutation versions. Therefore, the inevitable consequence of such a pandemic time is the shape of desperate, suspended life where humans have a disability and psychological trauma. “[A]s Immanuel Wallerstein has noted we have arrived ‘in the true realm of uncertainty’, as Immanuel Wallerstein has noted (Ang, 2006, p. 136). Hence, a clear relationship is found when comparing human life’s conditions caused by the Second World War reflected in *Happy Days* and the current pandemic time of COVID-19 reported by international health organizations and relevant journals. Both pandemics “created a topsy-turvy world” (Spinelli, Lionetti, Pastore, & Fasolo, 2020, p. 7). In both periods, profound and severe catastrophes have attacked people’s lives on individual and societal levels, causing them to suffer physically and psychologically (Ammar, et al., 2020).

2. The Human Life in *Happy Days*

Physically, the Second World War turned people into disabled individuals. Anybody who has lived through or read about the war is acquainted with its reasons and results. After the war, people are left in appalling conditions to suffer from the destitution of all levels of education, economy, relationships, and psychology. As a post-war play written by the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett and first published in 1961, *Happy Days* rhetorically represented the war sequences (Blamires, 1986). They are not responsible for this new catastrophe. However, they have to survive it, each in a his\her way. Their endeavours are hopeless as they cannot activate a simple communication line between each other. They can move but so disabled in communicating. The only two characters of *Happy Days*, namely Willie and Winnie, choose their ways to survive that hopeless life. Although physically very close to each other, they are healthy enough to move; they are wittingly depicted as entirely disabled to reach a simple way of healthy communication. Winnie is begging for a little missed love: “I beseech you, Willie, just yes or no, can you hear me, just yes or nothing” (p. 143).

Moreover, this lack of communication among people seems to have exceeded the physical level. For instance, Winnie represented her disability and psychological problem in different methods. One method is she used the help of repeated utterances: “help”, “help me”, and “help” (Beckett, 2012, pp. 144, 197, 211). She is pretty hopeless because she “cannot know whether [her] repeated acts will continue forever, achieving nothing into infinity” (MyTutor, 2021, p. 2). “Ostensibly, the repetition is part of an approach which involves (as Beckett’s narrator puts it) saying ‘any old thing, to pass the time.’” (Rabinovitz, 1990, p. 31). However, in the process of haphazardly passing the time, Winnie keeps repeating trivial incoherent utterances as a simple representation of a complicated psychological trauma:

Another of those old things – [turns towards bag] – just can’t be cured – [rummages in bag] – cannot be cured – [brings out small mirror, turns back front] – ah yes – [inspects teeth in mirror] – poor dear Willie – [testing upper front teeth with thumb, indistinctly] – good Lord! – [pulling back upper lip to inspect gums, do.] – good God! – [pulling back corner of mouth, mouth open, do.] – ah well – [other corner, do.] – no worse – [abandons inspection, normal speech] – no better, no worse – [lays down mirror] – no change – [wipes fingers on grass] – no pain – [looks for toothbrush] – hardly any – (Beckett, 2012, p. 136).

Another method is when she has to ruminate her past through her spacious bag of old useless objects: “[folds handkerchief] – ah well – [puts handkerchief back in bodice]” (p. 137). Winnie tries all the time to reveal the disability situation she is living in. She is lost to the extent that she cannot complete her incoherent words and phrases about the deep psychological crisis: “pure ...what? – [pause] – what? – [lays down brush] – ah yes –” (Beckett, 2012, p. 136). Winnie’s objects in her bag are no more than connections with the corrupted but now desirable past. “She has the resources of a multitude of objects at her disposal in combination with a sense of time that encompasses the idea of a past in which these objects played meaningful roles” (Tan, 2007, p. 52). Beckett perhaps uses Winnie’s objects found in her spacious bag to show that material things are used in vain to add meaning to people’s meaningless lives. From another perspective, these objects can stand for raw material to create a way out when used. Has Winnie used any of her entities to improve her situation? The answer is a big NO. She has not even thought of using the revolver where all possibilities are open, hinting at the psychological disorder she suffers from, leading to suicide. In other words, Beckett refers to the inevitable way of change to improve life circumstances because “words fail” to change the reality of despair and absurdity (Beckett, 2012, p. 143). With their lousy need for healthy relationships and a community atmosphere, everyone keeps wondering: “Ah yes, if only I could bear to be alone, I mean prattle away with not a soul to hear” (p. 141). Thus, people are pushed towards deep psychological problems, afraid of loneliness (Brown, 2011). Therefore, boring time with a bland, ugly friend is now valuable. The company with a garrulous, mean relative is now a valuable symbol of good family ties, just as Winnie states: “Golden you called it, that day when the last guest was gone” (Beckett, 2012). The dull irresponsible, selfish, womanizer “poor Willie” husband has become so lovely whose opinion is so worthy that utterances like “just yes or no” and “just yes or nothing” will be enough to make up a conversation in the time when “words fail” (p. 143).

Due to psychological problems, Winnie is begging for a little missed love: “I beseech you, Willie, just yes or no, can you hear me, just yes or nothing” (p. 143). She is keen to know about her husband’s feelings towards her: “Was I lovable once, Willie? [Pause.] Was I ever lovable? [Pause.] Do not misunderstand my question; I am not asking you if you loved me; we know all about that; I am asking you if you found me lovable” (p. 143). With further despair, Winnie turns to a more straightforward favour from her husband. It was her demand from her desperate life only to avoid loneliness:

Don't go off on me again now dear will you please, I may need you. [Pause.] No hurry, no hurry, just don't curl up on me again. [Turns back front, lays down parasol, examines palms together, wipes them on grass.] Perhaps a shade off colour just the same. [Turns to bag, rummages in it, brings out revolver, holds it up, kisses it rapidly, puts it back, rummages, brings out almost empty bottle of red medicine, turns back front, looks for spectacles, puts them on, reads label.] Loss of spirits ... lack of keenness ... want of appetite ... infants ... children ... adults ... six level ... tablespoonfuls daily – [head up, smile] – the old style! – [smile off, head down, reads] – daily ... before and after ... meals ... instantaneous ... [looks closer] ... improvement (p. 138).

In accordance, Willie, the second character in the play, represents the negativity of people’s lives. Willie is that character living on the marginal bay of life; quite indifferent, relatively weak, and “poor”– according to his wife’s opinion- to face life difficulties, but rather urbanity escaping towards reading (p. 136). He does not react at all, neither towards his beloved people suffering- his buried wife nor towards himself-melting by the sun rays-; Willie instead “turns

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the page” and “sleeps forever” (p. 139). Hence, Willie chooses silence as a passive reaction to resist the present disability of life. He is pretty convinced that there is no way out of the hopeless life he is found in. “His silence is his answer to the question: What is the alternative?” (p. 141).

Psychological traumas inset people in a vicious circle of nonsense life. *Happy Days*, “with the finishing point the same as the starting point”, centralizes around the concepts of existentialism, absurd, and meaninglessness of life. Beckett uses repetition to point at this concept which led “to irrational and illogical speech and the ultimate conclusion—silence” (Nixon & Feldman, 2011, p. 16). People are so much incapable of adding a positive contribution to their life. They cannot overcome their difficult time or use this time to invest in valuable achievements. The maximum they can do is to search for their identity and existence in this timeless time. However, what makes things even worse is the timelessness of the catastrophe; times of difficulties have no date in *Happy Days*. In other words, as the play has no time reference, with Willie’s unchronological context, the individual’s preparation for times of difficulties should always be activated. Hence, individualism erupts through: nothing can benefit one but himself; his power, resources, resistance, and awareness.

Otherwise, people are turned into meaningless dummies, as they are “still trapped in a frozen time since they are not aware of the time of the day” (Tan, 2007, p. 55). Accordingly, “related to this kind of time scheme, Beckett, in his “Schiller Theatre direction notebook”, writes that Winnie’s time experience is an “incomprehensible transport from one inextricable present to the next, that past, unremembered, those to come, inconceivable” (Tan, 2007, p. 55). What makes it worse for people’s unawareness of time is that they reach a level in their talent to total neglect. They want to forget it because it is the same and will not bring any change or good. Winnie said to herself in *Happy Days*:

The bell. (Pause.) It hurts like a knife. (Pause.) A gauge. (Pause) One cannot ignore it. (Pause.) How often ... (Pause) ... I say how often I have said, Ignore it, Winnie, ignore the bell, pay no heed, just sleep and wake, sleep and wake, as you please, open and close the eyes, as you please, or in the way, you find most helpful (Beckett, 2012, p. 157).

This denial of time realization stems from fear of self-existence (McGrath , 2019). In other words, Beckett emphasizes the concept of existentialism through the technique of repetition as a means of “destroying the systems of chronology and causality; and creating internal relationships that emphasize pattern if not order” (Cousineau, 2001, p. 4). When “Winnie passes the time with words”, she is trying to find some freedom in any way out of the vicious circle she is imprisoned in (Brown L. , 2011). By doing so, Winnie represents human nature who tries to “make their way through any moment in time, in body, in the soul” (Majeed H. Jasim, 2007). Beckett wants his audience to recognize how “man’s dehumanized role in the modern, industrial landscape” is defined in the bitter reality and led to severe psychological inner conflict. As a result, “in this way, [Beckett] picks apart that which makes his characters ‘human’, turning them into animals, and finally, into machines devoid of recognizable characteristics” (Swanson, 2011, p. 47). Hence, psychological problems become the inevitable end for humans indulged in such circumstances.

3. The Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic brought similar conditions to human life, like those in *Happy Days*, despite the difference in nature and context. Although first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic is still active so far. With more than 3.11 million deaths, it is considered by The World Health Organization one of the deadliest pandemics in history (Zoumpourlis, Goulielmaki, Rizos,

Baliou, & Spandidos, 2020). In addition to the high deaths, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused millions of people to be locked down. Accordingly, it has pushed people into a vicious circle of disability in terms of both physical and psychological domains of life (Q&A on coronaviruses (COVID-19), 2020). A deep analysis of people's lives during this pandemic draws a linking line back to *Happy Days* produced in the wake of the Second World War. Similar to the aftermath days of the war, COVID-19 creates a bleak and frustrating time for people worldwide regarding economic, education, society, and personal affairs. In tandem, the pandemic has created a restricted environment as well. Gradually, borders of freedom are narrowed down to unhealthy extents, which end with "Quarantine [having] a huge impact and can cause considerable psychological strain" (Mazza, et al., 2020). In another recent study, results assert that 49.1% of people during the pandemic face "ten times higher than the national anxiety rate in 2019" (Dunlop, et al., 2020). This paper will discuss mainly the psychological trauma caused by the lockdown of COVID-19, referring to international organizations' reports and some relative articles written on the sequences of COVID-19.

During this global plague, people are still living in the shock of an uncertain future. People's calls for actions against poverty, squalid housing, better education, and better healthcare conditions since the virus came up in 2019 run in a vicious daily repeated circle which recalls similar circumstances that prevailed in *Happy Days* in particular, and in after the Second World War aftermath, in general. Ketchell (2020) asserts:

Finally, the panel explores what lessons this unique period in history can offer us today, as governments look to rebuild after the coronavirus pandemic. After years of retreat, states are stepping in on an unprecedented scale to offer rescue packages. Could we be witnessing the rebirth of the welfare state? (Ketchell, 2020, p. 2).

The answer to Ketchell comes satirically under the title of 'online'. Online virtual lifestyle can be the only apparent difference between people's lives in the two periods. People during COVID-19 have unlimited alternatives to disability; online life. They can move; online, make relations and celebrations; online, and learn, work and have medical treatment; online. The online virtual life fertilized within COVID-19 stands for the life of disability and the absurd of post-war life. In other words, in both times, people live a life of absurdity and disability; once when they have nothing to do, another when they cannot do anything real. Hence, people in the two periods of time corroborate real loneliness, hopelessness, and joblessness and extend to psychological crises because of "absurd and tragic emptiness" stemming from the repetition of the same meaningless daily routine.

In conclusion, Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* is resurrected to be staged on the twenty-first-century real-life theatre again (Tan, 2007, p. 21). In this theatre, characters follow Beckett's characters' footprints to survive. As TAN (2007) elaborates:

Beckett's characters desperately struggle for finding meaning for themselves. They are born into an irrational world. They live out their lives waiting for an explanation that never comes, and even the existence of this explanation might be only a product of their imagination. Beckett's drama is based on his perception of the human condition, that is, being born and mostly living in pain, suffering ordeals, a short rough, and unpleasant existence (p. 21).

In other words, this quotation can be interpreted as a clue about the resemblance of pandemic aspects, sequences, and human suffering regardless of time and place. Artlessly pandemics kill hope, forming the air of people's dynamic present and future life. Accordingly, psychological disorders like depression emerge because no life can survive without hope. "Health-Related

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behaviours, health literacy, depression and health-related quality of life are all endangered by COVID-19” (Dunlop, et al., 2020). The pandemic impacts students' education, social life, and mental health (Chaturvedi, Vishwakarma, & Singh, 2021). As a result, psychological health problems have emerged from all hurt aspects of life (Zhang, Wang, Rauch, & Wei, 2020). Rates of depression are higher among older people (Nguyen, et al., 2020). Gender choice seems to have a special significance both in literature and science. Beckett's choice of his main character to be a female appears to have a scientific origin! According to Mazza et al (2020), “mental distress was highest among women, those experiencing loneliness or low social support and those whose usual everyday life is most affected” (Mazza, et al., 2020, p. 3). “WINNIE, a woman of about fifty, is wittingly selected. WILLIE a man of about sixty,” asserts Beckett's witty choice of his characters' age (Beckett, 2012, p. 134). Besides, education is part of these affected aspects. With the backward influence on learning systems during COVID-19, literacy and language are equally influenced (Iyengar, Mabrouk, Jain, Enkatesan, & Vaishya, 2020). Hence, Winnie's incoherent utterances reflect, in a way, the weak educational domain hurt by the Second World War.

Another of those old things – [turns towards bag] – just can't be cured – [rummages in bag] – cannot be cured – [brings out small mirror, turns back front] – ah yes – [inspects teeth in mirror] – poor dear Willie – [testing upper front teeth with thumb, indistinctly] – good Lord! – [pulling back upper lip to inspect gums, do.] – good God! – [pulling back corner of mouth, mouth open, do.] – ah well – [other corner, do.] – no worse – [abandons inspection, normal speech] – no better, no worse – [lays down mirror] – no change – [wipes fingers on grass] – no pain – [looks for toothbrush] – hardly any – [takes up toothbrush] – great thing that – (Beckett, 2012, p. 136).

A Comparison and Contrast of the Consequences of the Two Pandemics

In terms of social life, pandemic times results in social relationship, lack of communication and overall disability of life itself (McCormack, 2021). Anxiety, depression, financial worry, lack of social support, and loneliness are the significant consequences of COVID-19 due to the stay-at-home obligation (Tull et al., 2020). In accordance, through the technique of repetition, concepts of futility, meaninglessness, and the hopelessness of life existentialism during his *Happy Days* were represented. Repetition per se was enough to explain how people are running through a vicious circle of meaningless life, evident in Beckett's “repetition in speech, stage actions, and the overall structure of the play” (Boxall, 2000, p. 36). Hence, Beckett's narration style “highlights meaningless life through repetition, a concept associated with Absurdist and its rejection of rational processes”, precisely as people under quarantine repeat the same absurd of life every day (MyTutor, 2021, p. 2). Beckett's repetition is “the motor of fecund resistance to familiar understanding that makes his work matter” (Tarnopolsky, 2014). Further, Beckett's repetition is considered a musical role that adds rhythm to the rhythmless society in which his characters survive (McGrath J. , 2019). It is true that “pandemics have enforced numerous restrictions on daily living including social distancing, isolation, and home confinement” (Ammar, et al., 2020, p. 1). According to Ammar et al. (2020), “findings revealed psychosocial strain during the enforced COVID-19 home confinement. Large decreases ($p < 0.001$) in the amount of social activity through family (-58%), friends/neighbours (-44.9%), or entertainment (-46.7%) were triggered by the enforced confinement” (p. 14). Naturally, “perhaps on the stage the reality behind the words may be revealed by the action which often contradicts that literal meaning” (Rabinovitz R., 1990, p. 1). Distinctly, Beckett's reality is overwhelmed in his literature. His narration fits in reality profoundly and accurately. Social distancing people nowadays tend to be similar to what Winnie has with her husband; present but of no actual existence, near but cannot be reached. According to Simmons (2020),

individuals during pandemics turned to an autistic state due to isolation and social distancing. One has to move according to the minimum power available (Simmons, 2020).

4. Conclusion

This paper has argued how the pandemic influenced people's lives differently. The Second World War affected people regarding identity, social communication and psychological status. Disastrous consequences of the war led to psychological problems reflected in people's language, disability, lack of communication, and identity loss. Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced people in related aspects of life. Everything has been strange since COVID-19 appeared. Food is continental because it should follow doctors, experts, and 'trusted friends' prescriptions. Education and work are encountered online now, and individuals have become the only ones responsible for any attained virtual progress. Because unsocial life prevailed, the etiquette of eating, meetings, dressing, and all other social activities was drawn to their minimum.

Holidays and plans of leisure and entertainment are all homemade. Precisely as in *Happy Days*, where "the strangeness of the world [is] presented on the stage" (Existentialism and Samuel Beckett's *Two Plays: Endgame and Happy Days*, p. 54). Hence, if "*Happy Days* is created to arouse the audience and encourage them to face the human condition in a space which eludes any inessential elements of decoration purpose", what is COVID-19 arousing in us today? (p. 54). According to Beckett's *Happy Days*, "man's needs and desires are all reduced" to the minimum during quarantine.

The only difference between the two pandemics is that Beckett's characters escape from meaningless life to the daily repetition of trivial actions, which are real. However, in the recent happy days during COVID-19, people run from the real world of isolation to the trivial virtual world, which adds more alienation to their alienated, meaningless life. "The absurdity of the human condition and the absurdity results mainly from the failure of communication" (2007, p. 22). This lack of communication is replaced by virtual communication on social media now. However, as Beckett's characters are constantly reminded through his bell's alarm of reality, people are reminded through news 'bubbles' on their mobile phones or through the coughs of their family members in one of the isolated rooms at home (p. 22). Due to the lack of communication, "the corruption of language" formulates dialogues of people's conversations similar to Beckett's characters. People are not communicating well and are deprived of participation in social meetings and celebrations due to the quarantine conditions, which reduced their linguistic level to the minimum. It is common to hear adults talking like kids, native speakers talking like foreigners, and rigorously respected figures using street gangs idioms (p. 22). As this paper is restricted to discussing the psychological consequences of people's lives during pandemics, other consequences can be the aim of a cohort of studies. Economic, political and educational consequences are suggested to be scrutinized by academia. Overall, Pandemic literature has another daylight to rise

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