

Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable

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Few works of contemporary literature are so universally acclaimed as central to our understanding of the human experience as Nobel Prize winner Samuel Beckett's famous trilogy. Molloy, the first of these masterpieces, appeared in French in 1951. It was followed seven months later by Malone Dies and two years later by The Unnamable. All three have been rendered into English by the author.

Samuel Beckett's brilliance as a dramatist--as the creator of *Waiting for Godot*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and that despairing pas de deux *Endgame*--has tended to overshadow his gifts as a novelist. Yet he's unmistakably one of the great fiction writers of our century. As a young man he took dictation (literally) from James Joyce, and absorbed everything that myopic maestro had to offer when it came to Anglo-Irish prosody. Still, Beckett's instincts would ultimately steer him away from Joyce's delirious play with high and low diction, toward a more concentrated, even compulsive style. His earlier novels, like *Murphy* or *Watt*, give us a taste of what was to come. But Beckett truly hit his stride with a trilogy of early-1950s masterpieces: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*. Here he dispenses with all the customary props of contemporary fiction--including exposition, plot, and increasingly, paragraphs--and turns his attention to consciousness itself. Nobody has ever evoked the pain of existence, or the steady slide toward nonexistence, with such poetic, garrulous accuracy. And once you've attuned yourself to the epistemological vaudeville of Beckett's prose, he turns out to be the funniest writer on the planet--ever.

None of the three entries in the trilogy is exactly amenable to summary. It's fair to say, though, that *Molloy* is the easiest to read, with at least a bare-bones narrative and an abundance of comical set pieces. In one famous episode, the narrator spends page after page figuring out how to vary the sucking stones he carries in his pockets:

<blockquote> And while I gazed thus at my stones, revolving interminable martingales all equally defective, and crushing handfuls of sand, so that the sand ran through my fingers and fell back on the strand, yes, while thus I lulled my mind and part of my body, one day suddenly it dawned on the former, dimly, that I might perhaps achieve my purpose without increasing the number of my pockets, or reducing the number of my stones, but simply by sacrificing the principle of trim. The meaning of this illumination, which suddenly began to sing within me, like a verse of Isaiah, or of Jeremiah, I did not penetrate at once, and notably the word trim, which I had never met with, in this sense, long remained obscure. </blockquote>

This nutty ratiocination goes on for much, much longer, until the narrator loses patience and throws the stones away. And that's a fair encapsulation of Beckett's philosophy: he argues for the essential pointlessness of life--the solitary, wretched splendor of human existence--but does so in a comic rather than a tragic register, which ends up softening or even overpowering the bleakness of his initial premise. So *Malone Dies* opens with a typically morbid mood-lifter ("I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of it all") and then makes endless comedic hay out of Malone's failure to keel over. And by the time we hit *The Unnamable*, we're forced to wonder whether the narrator actually exists: "I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on." Happily, Beckett worried these same questions and hypotheses to the end of his career, with increasingly minimalistic gusto. But he never topped the intensity or linguistic brilliance of this mind-bending three-part invention. -- James Marcus Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin in 1906 and died in 1989. A playwright and novelist, he studied and taught in Paris and eventually settled there permanently. He wrote primarily in French, frequently translating his works into English himself. His novels include *Watt*; the trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone*

Dies, and *The Unnamable*: How It Is; and *The Lost Ones*. In his theater of the absurd, Beckett combined poignant humor with an overwhelming sense of anguish and loss. Best known among his dramas are *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, which have been performed throughout the world. Beckett was awarded the 1969 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Other Books

Beckett and Musicality, Discussion concerning the 'musicality' of Samuel Beckett's writing now constitutes a familiar critical trope in Beckett Studies, one that continues to be informed by the still-emerging evidence of Beckett's engagement with music throughout his personal and literary life, and by the ongoing interest of musicians in Beckett's work. In Beckett's drama and prose writings, the relationship with music plays out in implicit and explicit ways. Several of his works incorporate canonical music by composers such as Schubert and Beethoven. Other works integrate music as a compositional element, in dialogue or tension with text and image, while others adopt rhythm, repetition and pause to the extent that the texts themselves appear to be 'scored'. But what, precisely, does it mean to say that a piece of prose or writing for theatre, radio or screen, is 'musical'? The essays included in this book explore a number of ways in which Beckett's writings engage with and are engaged by musicality, discussing familiar and less familiar works by Beckett in detail. Ranging from the scholarly to the personal in their respective modes of response, and informed by approaches from performance and musicology, literary studies, philosophy, musical composition and creative practice, these essays provide a critical examination of the ways we might comprehend musicality as a definitive and often overlooked attribute throughout Beckett's work.

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ . *Three Novels* : *Molloy* , *Malone Dies* , *The Unnamable* (New York: Grove, 1991). --
Three Plays: *Ohio Impromptu*, *Catastrophe*, *What Where* (New York: Grove Press, 1984). --
Trilogy: *Molloy* , *Malone Dies* , *The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1994)."