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# "That Flesh-locked Sea of Silence": Language, Gender, and Sexuality in Beckett's Short Fiction

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**“That Flesh-locked Sea of Silence”: Language, Gender, and Sexuality in Beckett’s  
Short Fiction**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in  
Literature and Philosophy

By  
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Under the mentorship of Joe Pellegrino

**ABSTRACT**

This paper asserts the interconnectedness of language, gender, and sexuality in the short prose of Samuel Beckett. “Assumption,” “First Love,” and “Enough,” are used as specific examples of Beckett’s fiction, selected because they assist in understanding Beckett’s participation in, and inversion of, the hegemonic privileging of the masculine. This interpretation focuses on the use of gendered language, verbalization as a sexual expression, and the manipulation of the “male” and “female” voice. The analysis is both informed by, and seeks to nuance, the linguistic criticism established by second-wave French feminists Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous.

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“That Flesh-locked Sea of Silence”: Language, Gender, and Sexuality in Beckett’s  
Short Fiction

Feminist literary critics are no strangers to the works of Samuel Beckett. While the women in his novels and drama have been exhaustively analyzed and even scathingly criticized by feminist critics, his short stories have not yielded many fruitful feminist interpretations. In these more compact works, Beckett skillfully constructs and deconstructs gender and sexuality through his meticulously minimalist language. Not only is communication—both spoken and written—used to construct gender, but the narration and dialogue are, themselves, gendered and sexual expressions. Within the Western canon (and within the works of Beckett, claim many traditionally feminist critics), the images of maleness and masculine language have been privileged; through this process women have been silenced, and, many will argue, without words female characters are without sexuality, identity, or agency. However, an understanding of the connections between sexuality and self-expression, gender and the construction of the self, and agency and self-determination within Beckett’s works demonstrates that he and his female characters are not so easily pigeonholed.

“Assumption” (1929), “First Love” (1946), and “Enough” (1965) three of Beckett’s short stories, illustrate the link between language, sex, gender, and the relationship of the “masculine” voice to the “feminine” voice throughout Beckett’s career. “Assumption” was Beckett’s first published short story. “First Love” is representative of Beckett’s mid-career work in fiction. And “Enough” was included in Beckett’s final volume of short stories. All three works share the presence of a “masculine” voice with an indifferent, detached tone, an essential component of

Beckett's style. Comparisons between these examples reveal the evolution of Beckett's presentations of women, his stylistic descent into near-silence, and his abiding interest in the interpenetration of vocalization, silence, sexuality, and gender. The mature Beckett presents a woman almost unrecognizable as such to an earlier manifestation of his writing self. These three stories will demonstrate that the "female" voice, and the female characters who employ it in Beckett, is not monolithic or, necessarily, victim to misogyny—despite the claims of many critics. Rather, the nexus of gender, sexuality, speech and silence constantly shifts throughout his career, and women move from silent to subversive, from pets to predators.

In understanding this complex relationship between gender, desire, and language, a particularly helpful theoretical model is the linguistic analysis pioneered by the second-wave French feminists, leaders of a movement that was gaining momentum as Beckett was in his last phase of writing. When this second wave of Feminism was born in France in the 1960s (a full decade before the movement was imported to the United States), one of the foremost concerns was discourse. While Foucauldian discourse analysis focused on power relationships as they are manifested in a particular text, Feminists extended this to address the power relationships between genders (and characters as representative of their genders).

Although previous activists and writers had succeeded in expanding both the rights of women and their presence in the public sphere, this new movement questioned the underpinnings of the victories of its predecessors:

some concessions have been made by those in power, but no new values have been established. Rarely have these measures been thought through

and affirmed by women themselves ... Has a worldwide erosion of the gains won in women's struggles occurred because of the failure to lay foundations different from those on which the world of men is constructed? ("An Ethics" 227)

This new generation asked not for an equal place at the table, but for a destruction of the table itself. Even if women were truly to achieve social and legal equality with men, they would be doing so by acquiescing to the defining of those social and legal gains according to patriarchal guidelines. In order to achieve the self-determination supposedly gained by those who preceded them (Suffragettes, the Blue Stockings Society, first-wave feminist critics, etc.), women still had to participate in the culture of patriarchy—the social, political, and economic systems which enforce the dominance of males and privileges those qualities attributed to masculinity.

For many theorists, the main conveyor of such prejudice is the privileging of the masculine and the male in and through literature. Three major writers of the movement, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous, each observe the inherent misogyny of current languages. Irigaray perhaps sums it up best: "The fact [is] that women's 'liberation' requires transforming ... culture and its operative agency, language. Without such an interpretation of a general grammar of culture, the feminine will never take place in history, except as a reservoir of matter and speculation" ("This Sex" 211). Western languages, these women argue, were established and shaped by men, and therefore perpetuate the hierarchy of gender and sex that has denigrated and belittled women and the feminine experience in nearly every Western civilization with a written language. These dominant linguistic systems are seen as inadequate for expressing the experience

of womanhood, and either leave women without a means of communicating verbally and authorially or force them to subscribe to the speech of men in order to join the conversation.

In “This Sex Which is Not One,” Irigaray speaks of the exclusion of women from philosophical discourse: “All the statements I make are thus either borrowed from a model that leaves my sex aside ... or else my utterances are unintelligible according to the code in force” (206-207). In this interview, she examines the dilemma of the female writer and speaker who must choose whether to assume the masculine mode of expression or be silenced. The irresolvable internal contradiction enveloped by this fact, she argues, is that for an analysis of the current systems of language to begin it must “pass through the master discourse: the one that prescribes ... the organization of language, the one that lays down the law to the others, including even the discourse held on the subject of these others: the discourse on discourses, philosophical discourse. In order to interrogate its stranglehold on history, its historical domination” (207). Thus, in order to join the public conversation surrounding the silenced female, the “boys’ club” of public discourse, a woman must submit her thoughts to the constricting, linear, exclusively rational, “phallo-logocentric,” attitudinal domain of the male.

The embargo on female speech does not just prohibit women from philosophical debate, but from practical experience within the economic and political systems. The use of a “dialect” which privileges the masculine in all aspects of society, such as the legal system, necessarily means that those systems will maintain and promote the dominance of males. In “Women on the Market,” Irigaray borrows from Marxism to discuss the commodification and subsequent exchange of the feminine object by the masculine

subject. She asserts that the language of the commoditized female is either dismissed or silenced in the system of exchange between men, or mimics (and therefore reinforces) the models and ideologies of the dominant masculine discourse (216). The exemption of women from the dominant system of communication “thus requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate, and that men be exempt from being used and circulated in economies” (213). The discourse itself, then, situates men as the core and women as the periphery. Thus men are the “Us” who impose the “Other” on women; all the margins are defined by the center.

Unlike the third-wave Feminism gaining social momentum today, which insists on a spectrum of gender and sexuality, French feminism of the late 1960s maintained and celebrated—as Irigaray entitled her essay on the subject—“An Ethics of Sexual Difference”: “I will never be in a man’s place, never will a man be in mine. Whatever identifications are possible, one will never exactly occupy the place of the other—they are irreducible to the other” (“An Ethics” 231). Distinction between the sexes is, as Irigaray observed, “one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age,” and is a topic of great interest to each of these three major theorists. While Cixous initially coined the term “bisexual” in reference to an androgynous third gender category, she later abandoned this preference “in favor of a ‘poetics of sexual difference.’” In fact, Cixous rejects the far-too-limiting title of “feminist,” because “where feminists demand equality, she deem[s] it necessary to affirm sexual difference” (Alphonso 254-5). Like Cixous, Kristeva (despite being considered a transformative power in second-generation feminism) criticizes the essentialist tendencies of the movement. She disagrees with

Irigaray, and anticipates Cixous' reconsideration of the binary constructions of sexual difference, claiming that "there are as many sexualities and 'maladies of the soul' as there are individuals" (Oliver 157). Her debt to Derrida here is obvious; all binary pairs eventually collapse in on themselves.

Known as a "psycholinguist," Julia Kristeva pioneered the process which combines the disciplines of linguistics and psychoanalysis: a method she called "semianalysis" (Oliver 154). This system distinguishes between symbolic and semiotic language, but does not pit them as an oppositional pair. Rather, "language" is a combinatory product of the interaction between these two. The semiotic is defined as "the body's drives observable through muscular contractions and the libidinal or sublimated cathexis that accompany vocalization" ("From One" 159). In less obtuse terms, these are the "rhythms and tones that are meaningful parts of language yet do not represent or signify something" (Oliver 154). They convey meaning, but they don't formally signify something. In the standard semiotic model, they bypass the signifier/signified juxtaposition. An example of such language would be the cry of a baby or the howl of a person in pain. The semiotic is instinctual, tied to the psychological id, and, according to Kristeva, the language of the maternal and feminine. Poetry, which relies more on the musical and aesthetic effects of language than prose, is, like all art, an incestuous return to the maternal body. However, rather than being a form reserved for women, it is "more dangerous for a woman to articulate the excluded or repressed maternal body in her work because as a woman within a patriarchal culture she is already marginalized" (Oliver 155).

The symbolic, which is bound by the laws of grammar and syntax, operates as a function of the ego, repressing and interpreting the impulses of the body into a socially acceptable expression of the mind. This form is designated by “this inevitable attribute of meaning, sign, and the signified object” (“From One” 159). Because this type of communication is the dominant language of “rational” discourse as it is defined by Western culture, it is attributed to the masculine and paternal. However, just as Kristeva recognizes countless sexes and genders, she observes countless types of discourse made up of varying degrees of “oscillation between the semiotic and symbolic” (Oliver 154). While poetic language is dominated by semiotic forms, scientific language seeks to minimize semiotic communication.

In her work, Kristeva not only dissects the types of gendered expression, but the discourse surrounding maternity. Even with the power to give life, mothers—and in particular *the* mother, the Virgin Mary—have been stripped of their sexuality and agency throughout the tradition of literature, which does not “present the mother as a primarily speaking being” (Oliver 156). As particularly female events, birthing and mothering are not privileged in and of themselves, although they are valorized by the male voices who speak *for* those who give birth and those who raise children. We need only think of the tropes of maternity, of the iconic status of Richard Nixon’s “My mother . . . was a saint,” to see the male “handling” of female creative and nurturing power.

Both Kristeva and Irigaray struggled with the inherent paradox of their theory: the only way to express and share their models for examining the repression of feminine language is to assume the masculine mode and system of writing and communicating. Because of this void, Cixous, in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” calls for *écriture féminine*,

literally “writing the female body.” In her extremely poetic style, the writer embodies the rejection of dominant masculine forms in favor of her more lyric and sensual form of theoretical writing. This type of writing, Cixous argues, is a feminine form of writing which allows for the expression of female sexuality and desire. While Kristeva associates rhythm and poetry with the feminine, Cixous categorizes writing as a feminine form of expression opposed to the masculine—and historically privileged—act of speaking (Alphonso 254). In this essay, Cixous not only calls for female writers to step forth and contribute to the literary world, but to reclaim their bodies through their writing: “Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it” (“Laugh” 259). Because of the inseparableness of body and writing, Cixous returns to the concept of sexual difference when she declares, “woman must write woman. And man, man. So only an oblique consideration will be found here of man; it’s up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity are at” (259).

In this same essay Cixous offers a withering critique of the privileging of phallic symbols and orders in literature: “Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogocentrism” (261). Literature and language, rife with the dominance of male writers and characters, masculine images and discourse, have long been used as weapons against women.

Another point on which all three of these theorists coincide is their criticism of the Freudian psychoanalytic model that had become amazingly popular, particularly in its application to literary works. Irigaray, who was both rejected and removed from teaching

positions due to her contradiction of Lacanian psychology, criticizes the concept that “the female” is not a sex in its own right, but rather an imperfect, phallus-lacking reflection of “the male.” This denigration of the lived experience of the female manifested itself culturally in the “talking cure,” which Freud had pioneered. According to Irigaray, the symptoms of “hysteria” are simply the attempts of females to express their sexual and linguistic experiences. These inscriptions are dismissed as inferior, derivative, and so emotionally unstable as to be “hysterical.” Authentic female articulation is dismissed as an impossibility by the male psychologist, and diagnosed as a mental disorder—a lack, gap, or lacuna (Hansen 203). Kristeva, a student of psychoanalysis, attributes the birth of the field to Freud, but seeks a “more accurate vision of women” (“Women’s Time” 189). Both she and Cixous examined Freud’s “castration complex,” determining that, rather than producing envy of the male and the desire for a penis in the female, the awareness of sexual difference creates a paranoia about genital mutilation on the part of men (“Women’s Time” and “Castration”). This fear extends into the rejection of female auto-eroticism, because such a desire, especially when embodied, makes a man superfluous in the sexual exchange.

## I

and what I shall assume you shall assume,  
 for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you  
 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Although Beckett worked hard to claim his own cultural space, removed from the shadow of one of his mentors, James Joyce (and thus bodied forth a complicated and satisfying resolution to what Freud termed the Oedipal Complex), he could not deny the value of estrangement and exile. As one of the Modernist expatriates, Beckett spent a great portion of his life living and travelling in France. Here, he abandoned English and embraced the French language, the original language of much of the theory of the Feminist movement. This linguistic shift on the part of Beckett sparked a fertile period of personal renaissance, leading to the publishing of his trilogy of novels and much of his revered drama (Ackerly 207-211). Although it is impossible to prove a reading of French Feminism on the part of Beckett—despite his moving to the birthplace of second-wave Feminism and embracing of its native *langue*—it is difficult to conceive of an author of Beckett's perceptive gifts not being impacted by the rising social, psychological, and linguistic movement which engulfed the cafés of Paris after World War II.

Rather, as an iconic figure with one foot in the Modernist canon and one foot on the banana peel of linguistic entropy, Beckett's literature was unquestionably familiar and influential to those establishing this new form of linguistic analysis. Cixous, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on Beckett's literary surrogate father (and rival), Joyce, nods to Beckett as one of the literary influences to her poetic style (Alphonso 253). Likewise, Kristeva dedicates a chapter in her book *Desire in Language* to the linguistic and psychological analysis of these two Irish authors. In this chapter, entitled "The Father,

Love, and Banishment,” she focuses on Beckett’s short fiction, providing a substantial gendered analysis of his short monologue *Not I*, and his short story or novella, “First Love.” To date, her work stands as a monument of Beckett criticism, and one of the only critical texts on “First Love.”

Samuel Beckett’s first published short story, “Assumption” (1929), directly links language, in this case the speech of the protagonist, to gender and sexuality. At its core, the episode is a text about talking. Tony Fincham asserts that Beckettian love is inherently scopophilic: “[Beckett’s] gaze is ‘the chief instrument of penetration’, [his] perspective is almost pathologically voyeuristic” (19). However, even in his first publication, it is clear that Beckett is instead moving away from the Joycean obsession with vision in favor of a conflation of the verbal and sexual. This fascination is taken to its most extreme in *Not I*, which features an abstract and disembodied voiced simply named Mouth. In “Assumption,” the mouth functions not only as an orifice to take in, but as a transmitter of the sexual expression of speech and experience of gender. The “penetrating instrument” is not the gaze, but the voice.

The story opens with the description of two male characters: “The buffoon in the loft swung steadily on his stick and the organist sat dreaming with his hands in his pockets” (3). The image of the buffoon’s swinging “stick” is distinctly phallic. Meanwhile, the organist (invoking both the musical profession and the man’s “organ”) is sitting with his hands in the front of his pants. These characters, although they are mentioned only in passing, immediately cast the dispute in a specifically male physical/sexual context. The argument itself presents an instance of male rivalry in which physical prowess is replaced by intellectual debate. This heated conversation is one of

“noisy violence,” a description which suggests that visceral violence has been replaced by verbal attack (3). Here is an instance of Kristeva’s symbolic discourse. Unlike dialogue which employs the semiotic, this intellectual debate minimalizes the language of bodily drives in favor of “displacement and condensation, metaphor and metonymy, rhetorical figures” (“From One” 161). The protagonist is pitched against his “fiercely oblivious combatant” (“Assumption” 4), and because of his intellectual superiority and “remarkable faculty” with symbolic language, he proves himself as the alpha male, establishing himself as the most manly through his speech (3).

The protagonist’s voice defines his masculinity, not just through his proficiency in the oral homosocial contest, but in its inherent quality. “He spoke little, and then almost huskily, with the low-voiced timidity of a man who shrinks from argument, [...] of the unhappy listener who will not face a clash with the vulgar, uncultivated, terribly clear and personal ideas of the unread intellegenzia. [sic]” (3). Variations of the phrase “of such a man” occur three times within the two sentences describing the nature of the protagonist’s speech. He is an illusionist, and his greatest trick is the façade of manliness he achieves by speaking like a certain type of male. For “[h]e indeed was not such a man, but his voice was of such a man” (3). By inscribing his protagonist with the ability to orally construct a gender for the sake of public appearance, Beckett suggests that gender itself is a performance.

If the voice of the protagonist is connected to his portrayal of masculinity, it is linked, by extension, to his sexual desire. Therefore, his descent into silence and reclusion is a metaphor for his abstinence from sexual activity. During this retreat into his own mind, the “flesh-locked sea of silence achieved a miserable consummation in

dribblets of sound” (5). Here, the illustration of quietude as something regulated by the carnal force strengthens the relationship between language and physicality.

“Consummation,” like the “absorption” and “assumption” which resurface continually through the text, is plural in its meanings. Invoking both orgasm and demise, this statement is the first instance of Freudian conflation of eros and thanatos, or the French concept sex as *la petite mort*, “the little death.” As the protagonist “consummates” his lust for the woman, he will be “consumed” by the sudden outburst of his own repressed desire.

This phrase marks the beginning of the protagonist’s descent into sexual abstinence as it is represented by silence:

The process was absurd, extravagantly absurd, like boiling an egg over a bonfire. But in his case it was not a willful extravagance; he felt compassion as well as fear; he dreaded lest his prisoner should escape, he longed that it might escape; it tore at his throat and he choked it back in dread and sorrow. Fear breeds fear: he began to have a horror of unexpected pain, of sleep, of anything that might remove the involuntary inhibition. He drugged himself that he might sleep heavily, silently; he scarcely left his room, scarcely spoke [...] By damming the stream of whispers he had raised the level of the flood, and he knew the day would come when it could no longer be denied. (5)

Here, the protagonist releases small amounts of sound to avoid “that wild rebellious surge that aspired violently towards realization in sound” (4). These small emissions prevent the shout that is symbolic of orgasm. The dread of involuntary release during sleep

suggests the possibility of unconscious ejaculation which accompanies sexual denial. The protagonist fears he will wake up screaming in the night, like waking up from a wet dream. The simultaneous fear and longing for sexual and verbal release increase as the protagonist's self-prescribed restraint heightens to complete abstinence from sound and pleasure. Like a pressure cooker, he must ease tension in small degrees to avoid an explosion. As the man completely blocks the release of his steam, he recognizes that *la petite mort* is unavoidable.

Once he assumes a total silence, his desire for both sexual and verbal release intensifies, but “[s]till he was silent, in silence listening for the first murmur of the torrent which must destroy him” (5). This description invokes the extended metaphor which runs throughout the work: speech, and therefore desire, is like a moving body of water. “Although both masculine and feminine desire is characterized by water, its nature is different. The constant “torrent” of words which makes up the speech of the woman reflects the plurality of her sexuality. According to Irigaray, “[h]er sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural*” (“This Sex” 260). Contrastingly, the sudden fatal outburst of sound from the man represents the singularity of male ejaculation.

There is only one female character introduced into the male narrative: “At this moment the Woman came to him...” (5). “Woman” is the only proper noun given to the unnamed female character. This reference to “the Woman” displays the man's perception of women as universally exchangeable. Rather than referring to her as “a woman,” setting her apart from other females, the choice of article and capitalization suggest that she is a representative of the entire essentialized sex. The narrator goes on to further this generalization: “It was the usual story, vulgarly told: admiration for his genius, sympathy

with his suffering, only a woman could understand...He clenched his hands in a fury against the enormous impertinence of women, their noisy intrusive curious enthusiasm” (5). Not only does this passage display his impatience and general narcissism, but the misogynistic assumption that all women have the same “story” and emotional inclinations. Within this system of linguistic oppression, the female is limited to appreciation and adoration of the masculine and an empathic capacity. The woman’s ability to “understand” is not a rational or logical understanding — reserved in the text for masculine discourse — but one moved by emotional empathy. His frustration is not with an individual female, but with that which is ascribed to the feminine.

This insertion of a figure who is marked immediately by her sex underlines the dichotomy of masculine and feminine which surrounds the work’s conflict. The existence of these opposing, gendered characters immediately establishes a binary system of genders. In their most important and telling aspect, their voices, the male protagonist and his female lover are polar opposites. While he possesses “the low-voiced timidity of a man who shrinks from an argument” (3), she is immediately marked by her “clear, steady voice” (5). Just as his verbal presence is a performance of gender, the woman’s speech is an illusion. Here she plays the role of the mimic, which Irigaray argues is the “one to which the female condition is assigned” (“This Sex” 208). By conforming to the mode of male speech she is able to get an audience with the man, rather than being dismissed from the male dialogue which favors the symbolic.

The male protagonist is portrayed by Beckett as an artist-figure: “Just as the creative artist must be partly illusionist, our whispering prestidigitator was partly artist” (4). If the whispering man is Michelangelo, the woman is not just the “bursting American

heart” which admires the artist, but she is the Sistine Chapel itself; she is the art object. The narrator describes the effect of the light on her physical appearance as one would a sculpture or painting: “the light on her cheekbones threw them back into a misty shadow. In daylight they were strange, almost repulsive, deriving a pitiless penetration from the rim of white showing naturally above the green-flecked pupil. Now as she leaned forward beneath the light, they were pools of obscurity” (6). As the light changes, not just her appearance, but her entire quality is altered, from piercing and direct to esoteric. The perception of the man determines the identity of his art object, rather than her inherent identity or active presence.

This illustration portrays the feminine as ambiguous, a common trait of many, if not all, of Beckett’s women. Irigaray comments on the characterization of the female as vague, ambiguous, or ultimately unknowable in “This Sex Which is Not One”: “She is indefinitely other in herself. This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious” (261). Her cheekbones and eyes are shrouded in “a misty shadow” and described as “pools of obscurity” (6). This description is perfectly aligned with the ideology that asserts that women are enigmatic by nature and associates femininity with images of mysticism. In this descriptive passage she is objectified as she is simplified into parts, rather than represented as a complete individual. Throughout her description, the only aspects which are presented as being possessed by her are “her lips” (the mouth which Beckett sees as the ultimate sexual orifice). The depiction of the rest of her countenance transitions into fractured disenfranchisement: “the low broad brow to the closed nostrils”; “The eyes”; “the cheekbones”; “the green-flecked pupil” (6). This same disembodiment is applied to the man as well, but only once he is dead: “the face that she

had overlaid with death” (7). This suggests that the woman is as inanimate to him as his own lifeless form will come to be.

Just as language and sex are inseparably linked in this piece, so are sex and death. If speaking is equivalent to engaging in sex, and the climax of sex is a “little death,” it holds true that language and death must also be intertwined. This affiliation is most overtly expressed after the first visit of the woman: “When at last she went away he felt that something had gone out of him, something he could not spare, but still less could grudge, something of the desire to live” (6). After the introduction and conversation that weakens his resolve to abstain from sex, the protagonist is allured by the thought of death. He is not just seduced by the woman and her voice, but by death itself. The scream/orgasm will eventually lead to the protagonist’s death, a fact which is embraced by him.

Although the highly metaphorical text is unclear about the extent of the relationship between the woman and the man, the couple does engage sexually almost immediately after the woman is so prettily objectified: “So each evening, in contemplation and absorption of this woman, he lost a part of his animality: so that the water rose, terrifying him [...] After a timeless parenthesis he found himself alone in his room, spent with ecstasy” (6). Again, sex and language are explicitly linked, for here the narrator describes whatever sexual acts have transpired in terms of punctuation which removes elements of meaning from the linear flow of a sentence. The “apogee” of the story corresponds with the man’s climax, the unbiddable, unstoppable, verbal explosion of the little death: “Then it happened. While the woman was contemplating the face that she had overlaid with death, she was swept aside by a great storm of sound, shaking the

very house with its prolonged, triumphant vehemence, climbing in a dizzy, bubbling scale until, dispersed, it fused into the breath of the forest and the throbbing cry of the sea” (7). All of the body’s desires are released in an ejaculation of sound which kills its progenitor and finalizes the unification of sex, death, and language. The honey of generation has betrayed the Logos/child/word, bodied forth into simultaneous life, death, and death-in-life.

This dissolution may be the “assumption” to which the title refers. The Feast of the Assumption, celebrated on August 15<sup>th</sup>, commemorates the bodily “assumption” of the Virgin Mary into Heaven (Ackerly 25-6). According to the *Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett*, “Whether the artist transcends the worldly to unite with the Idea [...] or whether the title refers to the arrogance of such a desire, may be the crux. The protagonist’s romantic agony (in all senses of that phrase) may simply be postcoital depression, and so travesty the belabored agonies of the would-be artist.” While Jesus ascends into Heaven, his earthly mother is taken in, or “assumed,” by divine forces. Jesus’ ascent is an act of his own agency, while the woman’s is a passive event. In this same way, the protagonist of Beckett’s piece actively participates in a “struggle for divinity”—artistically, sexually, and spiritually (4). His desire is to be “taken up bodily and pitched breathless against the peak of a sheer crag” (4), a description which invokes the definition of the title. But, as with all things Beckett, this desire is multifaceted. Does the man desire to give up his agency, to be tossed about and then penetrated by a force larger and greater than himself? Does he acquiesce to being “overlaid with death” (7), and in doing so, expel all volition? Or does he aspire to a form of kenosis, where his abnegation actually elevates him to a superhuman status? The intimations of all of these

interpretations (and more) are certainly here. During their meetings, he sits “in contemplation and absorption of this woman” (6). This depiction harkens not only to the “assumption” of Mary, but also to the traditional biblical image of her as a mother who assumed all sorrows unto herself and, when faced with that which cannot be reduced to language, “treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). His silence is a manifestation and mirror of the quietude associated with the human bearer of the Divine. Through his sexual engagement with the woman, the man is actively seeking divinity, all the while absorbing the woman, “assuming” her into his own spiritual and physical body.

The difference between ascent and assumption is a matter of agency. The man’s understanding of his own agency, however, is problematized even in the opening line of the text. While the narrator asserts that the denial of sound is “not a willful extravagance” but an “involuntary inhibition” (5), his interpretation is already contradicted and overridden. The text begins, “He could have shouted and could not” (3). This is Beckett’s initial presentation of the man, and the reader’s first encounter with him. He is immediately marked as a character with agency, especially over his voice, and correlatively, his sexual desires. And yet, if we press a bit harder on this opening statement, we see that his self-determination is far more nuanced than a mere binary opposition can represent. Yes, he could have shouted, so he is in control. But he could not shout, so he is not in control. Historically, critics have ignored this internal juxtaposition in favor of a more overt, gendered, binary relationship, that between the man and the woman. The woman, who has been “absorbed” and “assumed” by the man, obviously lacks any sense of agency over her language. Although she possesses “clear, steady

speech” (5), the language she communicates with has been roughly paraphrased by the narrative perception of the man. Rather than participating in dialogue or debate (perhaps like the men at the opening of the text), the woman is interpreted and translated into silence, and therefore robbed of her desire. Much like she is synecdochized in her physical description, her voice, the representation of her agency and sexuality, is divided from her body: “The voice droned on, wavered, stopped” (5). In this one sentence her speech is disembodied by the narrator, then weakened and silenced altogether.

## II

Are flowers the winter's choice?  
 Is love's bed always snow?  
 She seemed to hear my silent voice,  
 Not love's appeals to know.

John Clare, "First Love"

The first of Samuel Beckett's masterpieces written originally in French and later translated by the author himself (begrudgingly, at the insistence of his publisher) was "First Love." Much like his first short work of prose, the plot of "First Love" focuses on the coming together of a man and woman, opening with a description of exclusively male relationships and of the protagonist himself before his encounter with the woman. "First Love" begins with the death of the narrator's father, a traumatic and devastating break in the protagonist's personal patriarchy: "I associate, rightly or wrongly, my marriage with the death of my father, in time" (25). This man inherits no power and little material wealth from the death of his father; rather, he is left exiled, emasculated, and unstable both emotionally and psychologically. In order to rediscover his identity as a man and his place in a society which privileges this masculinity, the son assumes the traditionally dominant role of provider, husband, and father, engaging in a relationship with Lulu—a cruel sexual relationship which, despite its tenor, he deems "marriage." Although it lacks any sense of ceremony, legal recognition, or even the affection generally associated with such a union, the protagonist's naming of their affair in such a way places the event cleanly and unproblematically within the mainstream discourse of the patriarchal culture.

The dichotomy established by the speech in "First Love" parallels that seen in "Assumption." Just like the earlier short story, there are only two "speaking" characters: an unnamed male narrator/protagonist and his female lover, Lulu. Once again, the

conversation between the two characters is not a conversation between equals: “I replied no, I would like her to say something. I thought she would say she had nothing to say, it would have been like her...” (38). It is clear that the communication between the two characters takes place mostly on the part of the narrator. When Lulu does speak, the narrator longs for their conversation to cease, wishing for a descent into silence, like the protagonist of “Assumption”: “She could not always resist the temptation to speak to me...I had given up thinking of her, quite given up, but still I needed silence, to live my life” (42). And yet, Lulu’s voice is fundamentally repositioned by the narrator. Like the woman in “Assumption,” Lulu’s remarks are paraphrased by the male narrator, rather than being segregated by quotation marks or punctuation implying direct repetition (a stylistic exclusion characteristic of much of Beckett’s prose). Thus the reader never actually “hears” Lulu. Through this filtering of the female voice through the male narrative, Lulu’s voice is censored, altered, and silenced. As Kristeva observes in her analysis of the story, the narrator seeks a “mute partner” (“The Father” 152).

Not only does Lulu have a significantly smaller speaking role, but the lines she does speak are ambiguous, at least to the narrator: “[a]nd the way she kept saying, I don’t know, I can’t. I alone did not know and could not” (36). Lulu suffers from what Irigaray calls, “women’s powerlessness to speak coherently,” a judgment of female vocalicity that Irigaray attributes to the dominant patriarchal discourse (“This Sex” 207). Irigaray observes that the oppressive interpretive apparatus allows only three options for women who would seek to speak: silence, mimicry, or “nonsense.” Lulu is not a silent figure, nor does she talk “like a man” with a “clear, steady voice” like the woman in “Assumption” (5). Her feminine verbal expression (in Cixous’ sense) is misunderstood by the male, who

is accustomed to the singular, linear discourse which he has been bequeathed by the generations of men preceding him who, consciously or inadvertently, framed the socially and culturally acceptable models of verbal expression. So she, like so many before her, is dismissed as hysterical, incongruous, and nonsensical (especially by the followers of the Freudian psychoanalysis popularized at the time of the story's genesis).

The ambiguity surrounding Lulu is not limited to her dialogue. The language used to characterize her is shrouded in vagueness. Irigaray attributes this lack of definition to inherent (rather than imposed) characteristics of “the woman,” and what “the man” does when faced with something “other”: “‘She’ is indefinitely other in herself. This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious” (“This Sex” 261). The narrator expresses on multiple occasions his confusion and resentment with Lulu as a representative of her gender, often generalizing (as the protagonist in “Assumption” does) women as irrational, bewildering, and unindividual: “Shapeless, ageless, almost lifeless, it might have been anything or anyone, an old woman or a little girl... I saw her face a little clearer, it seemed normal to me, a face like millions of others... Such ambiguity I found difficult to bear, at that period” (38). As with the artist's perception of the woman in “Assumption,” the narrator's description of Lulu's physical appearance adds to her esoteric nature. He states that, “as to whether it was beautiful, the face, or could conceivably become beautiful, I confess I could form no opinion” (38). His depersonalization and deliberate distancing from Lulu—it is not *her* face, it is “*the* face”; it is not a bodily feature, it is “*it*”— makes this description all the more remarkable.

Although her attractiveness is unclear to the narrator, there is one aspect of her physical appearance that he is very specific about: her “crooked” eye (38). Each further

mention of this physical aberration which the narrator makes is specifically associated with Lulu disrobing and attempting to seduce the narrator. The first time the narrator sees her naked, instead of remarking on her body as a whole, the narrator focuses his attention on her “squint” (39). After she is rebuffed, Lulu (who by this point in the text is renamed/reclassified by the narrator as “Anna”) gathers the courage to attempt to seduce the narrator a second time, and in this instance, the narrator finds that “[t]he more naked she was, the more cross-eyed” (44). His focus on this minor physical variation from the norm, commented upon only when Lulu is physically exposed, and thus physically and emotionally vulnerable to the narrator, reflects the narrator’s repulsion at her feminine sexuality. And the state of her sight itself changes her ability to focus. She can see from multiple perspectives. Her vision, like her sexuality, is “always at least double, [it] goes even further: it is *plural*” (“This Sex” 260).

The distinction between the language of the narrator and Lulu lies not only in its quantity or conciseness, but in the division of semiotic and symbolic language. Lulu is limited mainly to semiotic language and is therefore misunderstood and dismissed by the male narrator. As she is presented by the narrator, she seems to be unable to fully express herself in the masculine language of the symbolic, hence her seemingly incomplete and vague dialogue. This man, on the other hand, privileges symbolic speech, even to the point of meaningless rambling. Neither character is able to overcome their limited half-language; therefore they are left unable to participate in meaningful conversation, to join in communion of language, or to form a human connection.

Within “First Love,” the narrator is disturbed and confused by the semiotic language which he presents as the speech of his lover. On the night of their first

rendezvous, she sings to him on the bench: “All she had done was sing, beneath her breath as to herself, and without the words fortunately, some old folk songs, and so disjointedly, skipping from one to another and finishing none, that even I found it strange” (30). On another occasion he asks her to sing to him, and she complies, singing a song about fruit trees to which he has forgotten the words. Once they are living together, he hears her singing voice finding its way through the kitchen to his room. The sounds of her voice are semiotic for the narrator; there are no words, or they have been long forgotten by him. The songs have lost their formal meaning, transformed and conflated into a bodily expulsion of sound. Her voice is out of tune, though “not unpleasant” (30). The narrator finds comfort in her non-structured, aimless vocalizing, which does not follow the rules of grammar or even the formally-dictated regulations of musical style. Yet he finds it unfamiliar and foreign: it is the mysterious and distinct feminine language, separate—and always subordinate—to his systematic and philosophic symbolic system of language.

While the songs carry a maternal overtone, and clearly have a nurturing effect on the narrator, he is far less tolerant of the “other sounds”: the sexual utterances of Lulu and her clientele. These “giggles and groans” are a perfect example of Kristeva’s definition of semiotic language: “the body’s drives observable through muscular contractions...that accompany vocalization” (“From One” 159). We might read this as a manifestation of the narrator’s envy of those who share her body, but in order for him to admit such an emotion, he would have to acknowledge that he actually desires Lulu, something which seems impossible to him. Rather, we can see this as a rejection of her sexual expression, the verbal manifestation of her bodily drives and physical needs. Finally, the narrator’s

“horror” (43) at these sounds is his rejection of the economic reality of their relationship: she is financially independent, so does not require him to be a “provider.” In fact, in the most obvious and yet most invidious inversion of “traditional” gender roles, her “work” in bed supports them both.

Perhaps the most shocking and powerful use of gendered language in the story is the narrator’s employment of the word “cunt.” The narrator uses this term twice in the short story. Each time he uses it, it has a different meaning. These dual definitions are nonetheless tied together, as they create a parallel between the female anatomy and the concept of the lesser. The first instance occurs as his natural reaction to the imposition of Lulu on his bench and in his life: “I considered kicking her in the cunt. You speak to people about stretching out and they immediately see a body at full length” (31). Yet, a full body is all that the narrator sees of Lulu, whose genitals he has immediately sought out. And when he finds them, his thoughts immediately turn to violence against them. He “considers” kicking her, and thus demonstrates one of the inevitable ends of privileging only “male” logic: violence. This hypothetical violence reflects the brutal sexual dominance of the masculine over the feminine physicality.

The second use of “cunt” occurs when the narrator attempts to justify his choices and actions to his readers: “I abandoned the bench, less I must confess on her account that on its, for the site no longer answered my requirements, modest though they were, now that the air was beginning to strike chill, and for other reasons better not wasted on cunts like you, ...” (33). In this breaking of the third wall he uses the word as an insult. The direct connection drawn between offensive exclamation and female anatomy clearly displays the cultural perception of the feminine as lesser. In calling readers “cunts,” the

narrator extends the hierarchy of male over female beyond the limits of the text. He asserts the power of the author over the passive, feminized audience.

Another factor in the construction and use of gendered language is the privileging of the phallus. The narrator coyly refers to male genitalia multiple times throughout the story, in one case asking if “it is with the heart one loves, is it not, or am I confusing it with something else?” (29). Later, he bemoans, “man is still today, at the age of twenty-five, at the mercy of an erection, physically too, from time to time, it’s the common lot, even I was not immune” (31). Within Western culture, according to many feminist critics, the symbolic rendering of the phallus manifests within a system of phallogocentrism, in which images of penetration and male genitalia are equated with domination and power. In her essay, “Language and Gender,” Kaplan asserts, “The phallus as a signifier has a central, crucial position in language, for if language embodies the patriarchal law of the culture, its basic meanings refer to the recurring process by which sexual difference and subjectivity are acquired” (62). This hegemonic construction of masculine images of dominance versus feminine images of submission or delicacy reinforces the structure of patriarchy. These symbols may be direct references to sexual organs, such as the “motions of one tugging at the oar” (28). Just as the image of a rising flood is used to represent the protagonist’s repressed sexuality in “Assumption,” water returns as a symbol for desire in “First Love.” The narrator imagines a pornographic scene based on an image of Jesus in the toilet. Here the invocation of a rigid, penetrating oar emphasizes its sexual dominance over the fluid, yielding water, a metaphor for female sexuality (28).

Other symbols are less literal. Flowers have often been regarded as a symbol of femininity or blossoming female sexuality, and the narrator demands Lulu’s sexual

surrender, just as he asks her to bring him a live hyacinth. However, once obtained, he neglects the plant, much like his indifferent attitude towards the couple's relationship. The plant wilts, rotting away like the narrator's interest. Yet the narrator refuses to have it removed or replaced, trapping himself and his dependent lover in a miserable coexistence. The plant, like the feminine sexuality, is captured by the male in an inescapable neglect.

In his Freudian reading of "First Love," Paul O'Mahoney interprets the image of Lulu waiting on the bench with her "hands buried in a muff" and the strong reaction of the narrator as an instance of the castration complex (98). Nuancing Freud's psychoanalytic stance, Cixous redefines the male reaction to female genitalia not as a fear of the gaping lack which marks the female condition, but a recognition and rejection of sexual difference ("Castration"). The sight of Lulu's "hands buried in a muff" brings the narrator to tears. When he strives to explain his emotional response to the winter accessory, he states, "[w]hen I found myself in tears for no apparent reason it meant I had caught sight of something unbeknownst" (36). The unfamiliar knowledge which has dawned on the narrator is the recognition of female autoeroticism. The display of female masturbation "unman[s]" the narrator (36), reducing him to bewildered tears. This phrase implies a crisis of masculinity, as the male is forced to recognize not only the existence of a female sexuality, but one which does not require the phallus to achieve sexual satisfaction. Irigaray defines this anxiety as the forced recognition of female sexuality, particularly self-pleasuring sexuality, shatters the patriarchal ideology of sex ("This Sex" 258).

“But the faces of the living, all grimace and flush, can they be described as objects?” (38). In the text, the answer is an unhesitant and resounding yes. The narrator (and the patriarchy in which he participates) reduces the feminine to a sub-human status. Women are seen as objects to be bought, owned, and exchanged like property. Within “First Love,” the use of symbols extends beyond metaphorical discourse into an objectification of Lulu as an individual: “And yet her image remains bound, for me, to that of the bench, not the bench by day, nor yet the bench by night, but the bench at evening, in such sort that to speak of the bench, as it appeared to me at evening, is to speak of her, for me” (31-32). The bench and the lovely landscape do not simply than capture the essence of Lulu symbolically and metaphysically; the woman is being reduced to a piece of furniture through the narrator’s psychological association. Lulu is not *like* the bench, she *is* the bench. They are interchangeable: both lack individual agency and have a specific use value to the narrator. Similarly, Lulu competes for a place in bed beside the narrator with a stewpan acting as a replacement chamber pot. This dish is a yonic symbol—an image representative of female genitalia. “Any old recipient” will do for the narrator, who “like[s] something in [his] hand when sleeping” (41). The container is a body which takes into itself, the same purpose Lulu serves to the narrator. The image of the narrator waking post-coitus with the unused stewpan under one arm and the used, naked woman under the other is symmetrical. Like the bench, the woman and the stewpan are interchangeable.

This same sense of interchangeability applies to the narrator’s treatment of Lulu’s name. In the portion of Key’s book *Male/Female Language* discusses naming and titles, Key equates the surname system with slavery. Just as slaves took on the names of their

masters, women assume their father's name until they are married, when their ownership is passed from male to male. The narrator has long forgotten Lulu's surname, an omission which renders her more anonymous, prescribing her with more "feminine" mystery. The narrator confesses that he is a man who "hate[s] to forget a proper name" (30). Her surname is the familial identity she received at birth from her father, therefore losing it "shatter[s] the monopolization of the proper name (and of what it signifies as appropriative power) by father-men" ("Women" 213). Because the family name has been lost, the trade between father and husband is incomplete at the time that the narrator and woman are "united" (29).

Her first name, Lulu, is unusual and exotic for a Dubliner. It sounds like a shortened pet name, a name which at once infantilizes and sexualizes the woman. In 1895, Frank Wedekind published a play by the same name, *Lulu*. The play enacts the multiple marriages and affairs of a sexually aggressive woman who eventually becomes a prostitute, leaving a trail of dead lovers in her wake until she is killed by Jack the Ripper. Beckett's Lulu certainly seems to be modelled after the main character of the German play, especially in profession. After he gets bored with her given name on a whim, the narrator fits the woman with the name Anna, one which is "not more like her but no matter" (Beckett 35). In doing so, the narrator moves Lulu from exotic, erotic, man-eater to an identity more congruous with Protestant, patriarchal tradition.

As material possessions, Irigaray argues, women are given quality through their exchange value to the dominant masculine force. "The economy...that is in place in our societies thus requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate, and that men be exempt from being used and

circulated in economies” (“Women” 213). The social system of patriarchy functions in harmony with the economic system of capitalism, in which women are treated as products and prohibited from any agency over the trade. One of the most explicit examples of this exchange is Lulu’s employment as a prostitute. This characterization is complex: her profession requires her to be repeatedly used as a sexual object, exchanging her body and desire for the cold currency of men. At the same time, her profession allows her to live independently of a father or husband, and Beckett offers no evidence of a pimp figure.

In a pivotal moment, Lulu tells the narrator that not only does she make her living by selling herself, but that “[w]e live by prostitution” (43). In many ways, she is correct. The homeless narrator has received food, lodging, and comfort for no charge except the “night of love” (42). In this simple, three-word statement, the ever indifferent Beckett allows for a fleeting instance of challenge to male dominance: we are all, masculine and feminine, subject to an oppressive social and economic system. Just as with the witnessing of autoeroticism symbolized by the muff, the narrator feels emasculated, rejecting her diagnosis. However, Lulu has not asserted dominance, conforming to the power struggle of patriarchy, but equality with narrator which has been denied to her at all other interactions in the text. This is an example Jeffers’ phenomenon of “queering,” which she observes in Beckett’s texts to be a moment of identity reversal on the part of usually well-programmed social victims (Jeffers 137). Both Lulu, who makes a living by selling her body, and the narrator, who has bought his room and board by providing company to Lulu, are stuck in the cruel exchange of patriarchal capitalism with no agency.

This subversion marks the beginning of the narrator's failure. Childbirth, the ability to generate life, is the one power which the narrator cannot deny Lulu, threatening the fragile, microcosmic patriarchy he has established in her house. Upon learning of Lulu's pregnancy, the narrator denies fatherhood, "summon[ing] up [his] remaining strength and [saying], Abort, abort" (44). In this final attempt, the narrator seeks to extend his male dominance to her sovereign female body. In the passage describing her childbirth, Lulu's name has been omitted, and she is only referred to with the occasional pronoun. Kristeva describes this event as the "censorship of the maternal body" ("The Father" 154). Lulu is not the only mother to be removed from the text. The narrator is obsessed with his dead father, yet never mentions anything about his own mother. Like the narrator's mother before her, Lulu has been completely deleted from the equation of her own childbirth.

While he is still in the dominant position of storyteller, able to alter, forget, and omit what he chooses, the event birth still ends the narrator's dominance over Lulu: "What finished me was the birth" (44). Most unsettling to the narrator are the cries of the baby, the ultimate catalyst in his decision to abandon Lulu. The cries and pre-language sounds of children contribute to our understanding, yet do not convey the specific meanings of organized grammar. They are the ultimate expression of the maternal and feminine. They reflect, unfiltered by the superego, the body's need and drives—in short, they are the prime example of the semiotic. Here, sound and language are at their most powerful: "there was no competing with those cries" (45). They drive him out of the house and back on the street to a life of homelessness. Here, he draws a connection between Lulu's songs and the baby's cries, both semiotic, feminine expressions whose

meanings escape him. One is the sexual desire of a woman and the other her power to generate new life—both are evidence of Lulu's refusal to submit to his symbolic order. The two sounds conflate and join the ghost of his dead father to haunt him as he recognizes his own inability to become the ideal embodiment of dominant masculinity.

## III

The grave; and the barren womb;  
 the earth that is not filled water;  
 and the fire that saith not, It is enough.  
 Proverbs 30:15-16

A text generated in one of Beckett's most experimental phases, the narrative style of "Enough" is presented in a highly-fractured, non-linear, stream of consciousness style. Perhaps the most ambiguous and controversial aspect of the short story is the sex of the narrator. Unlike "Assumption," in which the protagonist is referred to using the masculine pronoun "he," and "First Love," where the narrator refers frequently to his own male genitalia, "Enough" provides no immediate evidence of the narrator's gender. While some critics come down on one side of this debate or the other, many refuse to limit the sex of the narrator, referring—as the *Faber Companion* does—to the narrator as a "s/he" (178). Paul Stewart is more definitive, however, interpreting this ambiguity as an intentional, functional technique on the part of Beckett. In regards to the first mention of sexual activity, when the narrator is told to "lick his penis," Stewart writes,

The sex of the narrator is not known at this stage and so the heterosexuality or homosexuality of the act cannot be ascertained. However, given that this is a Beckett short story with a first-person narrator and given the nature of the vast majority of Beckett's prose, the *assumption* one makes is that this is an instance of homosexual sex. It may be, though, that a social predilection for the heteronormative will encourage the reader to quickly substitute male for female solely on the basis of the oral sex. Yet, the sex of the narrator continues as indeterminate, and the references to other sexual acts are similarly

nonspecific...It is only in the final sentence of the text that the sex of the narrator is given an apparently undeniable indicator: "Enough my old breasts feel his old hand"...Yet, when the story is read for the first time, the sex of the narrator and therefore the nature of the sex acts performed are formulated, challenged, and reformulated a number of times as the reader attempts to bring the sexual relation into one or the other of the designations in the dyad. (109)

So, the narrator *is* a female; but by withholding this information until the story's close, Beckett forces readers to analyze and interpret the sex, gender, and sexuality of the narrator without the signposts provided in Beckett's other short fiction.

The question of the narrator's sex and gender is not just a matter of defining the relationship as homo or heterosexual, however. As Stewart goes on to explain, the casting of the narrator as sexually ambiguous effects the reading of the story's hierarchical exchange:

Given that the narrator only desires what the man desires, and that the fellatio is not reciprocated, then the dynamics of the relation are those of the powerful and submissive. If the narrator is a woman, this lays Beckett once again open to the charge of misogyny...Instead of this, the story's suspension of certainty causes the reader to question the nature of the identifications that are made on the basis of sexual acts and whether male of female protagonists might be "appropriate" for those acts (109).

The relationship of the "powerful and submissive" is one which is expanded by the relationship of the narrator to the reader. In "First Love," the narrator's denigrating

statements to and about his readership (e.g., “and for other reasons better not wasted on cunts like you” p. 33) extend the hegemony of “male” over “female” to “storyteller” over “audience.” In this relationship, the narrator is dominant, active, and penetrating, while the reader is submissive, passive, and receptive. One produces; the other consumes. If the narrator of “Enough” dominates the audience—as established in “First Love”—and the narrator is a woman, then Beckett has given the position of privilege and power to the traditionally powerless. The dominator/male/narrator position is supplanted by the submissive/female/audience in this reversal of the culturally-promoted hierarchy.

Within “First Love,” Beckett offers no indication of whether the narrator’s presentation is being told aloud or written. In “Enough,” Beckett conflates the acts of speaking and writing. The narrator both speaks and writes, both within and without the text: “That gives the pen time to note. I don’t see it but I hear it there behind me. Such is the silence. When the pen stops I go on. Sometimes it refuses. When it refuses I go on. Too much silence is too much. Or it’s my voice too weak at times. The one that comes out of me. So much for the art and craft” (186). The work, then, rests on several inverted expectations. This obfuscation of the acts of writing and speaking, coupled with the blurring of the roles of the author and the characters created, leads one to see the gender of the narrator as itself an inversion.

Beckett’s portrayal of the female narrator as an authorial figure engages with the process of writing in a similar way as Cixous’ “critique of a symbolic economy that is driven by opposition and exclusions [which] led her to conclude that both writing and woman are excluded grounds for western metaphysics...that which has been erased through privileging of the (masculine/speech) one over the (feminine/writing) other”

(Alphonso 254). The female narrator's voice is "too weak" to participate in the spoken male discourse, hence her turn to writing—Cixous' marginalized form of expression—to fill the silence. Her voice, simultaneously verbal and written, is one which emanates from her physical body: "The one that comes out of me" (186). Her embodied writing/speaking demonstrates Cixous' description of what feminist writing can deliver: "By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her... Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" ("Laugh" 262). Here, writing, and the use of language in general, is an expression of physicality—of the body and its desires. Even as a male writer, Beckett has begun to stick his toes into the unfamiliar waters of *écriture féminine*, the writing of the female body.

But no matter how empowering Cixous' description of fully-realized female writing is, the narrator here limits her abilities, constrains her voice, and thus sets a false horizon for the reader's expectations. She admits that she does not possess the literary prowess of the writers of the predominately male literary canon. Instead, she is self-debilitating, almost audibly sighing, "So much for the art and the craft" (186). The narrator's self-conscious belittlement exposes her "anxiety of authorship"—in the terms of Gilbert and Gubar, the feminine version of the male's "anxiety of influence." The narrator addresses this paralysis, along with her painful memories of her time with the man, through distancing herself from her own story. It is not the "I" of the text, the first-person narrator herself, but "the pen" which completes the action of writing. The woman places her action of writing onto an inanimate object, and she then fulfills a passive role as a mere receptacle for the pen, even as she records her own past. This image is obviously sexualized as well as gendered. Since the days of Freud there has perhaps been

no greater phallic symbol than the pen (barring weapons or other implements of violence). So even as the narrator acts through writing/speaking, she mitigates her own agency by positioning herself as a vessel for the actions of the pen, a conduit for some actor outside herself. But, fortunately, she does not stop there. When the pen stops, she goes on. While we may read this as the frustration of an unsatisfied woman after sex (along with all the autoerotic overtones associated with Cixous' *écriture féminine*), it is nevertheless a woman who has "taken matters into her own hand," literally. This altering of the narrative to move the actor away from the female narrator occurs throughout the text. She corrects herself: "Whole minutes passed before they [their hands] clasped again. Before his clasped mine again" (187). At first the action of clasping is attributed to the hands,—a synecdoche like the fractured bodies of the woman and Lulu from "Assumption" and "First Love"—despite the old man's declaration that "anatomy is a whole" (188) But then she immediately shifts the ability to act/clasp away from any part of her own physicality, placing it entirely in the will of her male companion.

However, as with all things Beckett, the matter of the narrator's agency is a slippery one. One cannot forget that hers is the voice from which the reader receives the text. This automatically places her in a position of power over the man, whose voice, like those of women in the other texts, is delivered through the retelling of another. By casting the narrator of "Enough" as a woman, Beckett subverts an ancient history of the silent female object as a told by the vocalizations and writings of the male subject.

Additionally, while the woman's submission is certainly one prescribed by the cultural system of patriarchy, it is also a willing submission to the will of the man. The narrator actively seeks to give up her agency, just like the protagonist of "Assumption" desires to

move from active subject to passive object of transcendence by being “taken up bodily” (4).

The second paragraph proves that the woman is not genuinely “writing the female body,” as Cixous celebrated, but writing of it relative to a male body: “I did all he desired. I desired it too...When he told me to lick his penis I hastened to do so. I drew satisfaction from it. We must have had the same desires. The same needs and the same satisfactions” (186). Here, the woman’s needs and wants, sexual or otherwise, are replaced by the man’s. She has not, as so often in traditional literary treatment of women, been stripped of desire entirely, but “[w]hen he desired something so did I...When he didn’t desire anything neither did I. In this way I didn’t live without desires” (186). Like the woman in “Assumption,” her identity and sexuality have been subsumed into the man. When they sleep, they “turn over as one man when he manifests the desire” (191). And yet she is always, because she is woman, the other—distinct, separate, divided from the man by a shared pair of gloves because “[h]e did not like to feel against his skin the skin of another” (187). Even the grammar here signifies this obvious inversion.

The narrator is a very young girl when this relationship is established: six years old and “barely emerging from childhood” (187). As stated in the *Faber Companion*, “[l]ike *First Love*, the unnamed narrator outlines a life after the separation from a father figure, with whom s/he tramped the hills hand in hand and learned the constellations” (178). By casting the relationship as simultaneously filial and sexual, Beckett conflates the traditional roles of patriarchal culture: the dominion of a father over his daughter through her obedience and of the male over the female through sexual submission. In “First Love,” the narrator’s quest, through the sexual engagement of Lulu, is to reinstate a

patriarchal order by filling the void left by his father's death. The narrator is unable to dominate her in either role; he rejects Lulu's advances, but is eventually seduced by her anyway. He denies the consequences of his actions—his child with Lulu—and flees the role of father. However, the old man of "Enough" brings together the roles of parent and lover in his relationship to the submissive narrator.

This patriarchal system of gender roles is reinforced by the religious system of Christianity, which requires submission to a masculine-gendered God. In "Enough," the hierarchy of male over female—which Beckett has already complicated by expanding to narrator over audience—is even further extended to relate to the positioning of God, the ultimate father, over humanity, his collective children. About their conversations, the narrator says/writes, "he wished everything to be heard including the ejaculations and broken paternosters that he poured out to the flowers at his feet" (188). The old man in "Enough" is not only father and lover, but priest, one step closer to divine existence. The verbal "ejaculations" that are "poured out" are at once spiritual, sexual, lingual. The "paternoster" translates literally from the Latin into "Our Father," an utterance that the human (male) manifestation of the Divine himself claimed to be "the perfect prayer." Not only does this phrase continue the connection between language and sex which has, at this point, been well established by Beckett, but it links these expressions to the experiences of parenthood and divinity.

The female narrator is also depicted in a submissive stance, "bowed down" at the altar of the male body, however old and decaying. Here she "receive[s] his communications" (189). Beckett's word choice invokes that most crucial of Christian rituals: the physical absorption of the body of Christ. Her position as being acted upon

rather than acting is so close to the phrase, “receiving communion” that it is almost misread at first glance. A process which represents the taking of one body into another, communion mirrors the experience of sex (and calls to mind the sexualizing of the traditionally *ora*-torical term, “ejaculation”). The narrator, in her own version of communion, takes in the words and the sexual organ of the old man. As the female and the worshipper she submits and is cast as receptive orifice: mouth (oral sex), ear (auditory intake), or other “[m]ucus membrane” (187). The man, therefore, is the active, penetrating force. The time of their coming together, the first communion, is referred to by the narrator as “the night before the sacrum” (191). The old man’s “sacral ruins” are both his decrepit bone located at the pelvis and his body as the sacred site of maleness (189).

The woman describes her separation from the man as “the eve of [her] disgrace” (191). Eve refers not only to the day before the event, but to one of the most significant women in Christian tradition (second only, perhaps, to the Virgin Mary reincarnated by Beckett as the woman in “Assumption”). Eve, the first woman, is both the root of and a product of the Western perception of women as the imperfect, fallen, subordinate to men. Illustrating the division of the woman from the man as a “disgrace” connects her to this biblical woman. Like Eve, the narrator is fallen, expelled from her paradise with the man—who in this case is not the mortal companion who follows her into temptation, but the omnipotent divine being who commands her away from Eden, the earthly paradise.

This separation from pre-lapsarian harmony, and from the divinity itself, marks, for the narrator not the beginning of life on earth, but the end of what she considers her life. Without the man, who has absorbed, reflected, and been the source of her identity

and desire, she ceases to exist. It is the remembering of this trauma, of “[a]ll that goes before” that stops the narrator’s pen and weakens her voice (186). After bemoaning the loss of “[t]his notion of calm”—the paradise that was the shelter and sustenance she received from the presence of the man, rather than her environment—the narrator is overwhelmed by the reliving of the experience. Like the voice in “Assumption” which “droned on, wavered, stopped” (5), the narrator represses the memories once again. When her memories begin to have a tangible effect on her senses and she can “feel his old hands” on her “old breasts,” she utters the title of the work itself, “Enough,” and returns to the anonymity, sexlessness, and absence which is silence.

## IV

So the crude trumpet blasts of critical opinion blow loud  
and shrill, and we, humble readers that we are, bow our  
submissive heads.

Virginia Woolf, "An Essay in Criticism"

Among the most elusive and dynamic of his characters, the women in Beckett's texts have prompted many critics to seek an answer for the question posed by Karen Laughlin: "What of the women whose stories this tormenting Voice also tells?" (159). Traditionally, feminist readings of Samuel Beckett's works have placed them (and, in many cases, Beckett himself) in one of two categories: pro- or anti-female. More often than not, Beckett and his texts are broadly labeled as sexist—a judgement which undercuts the complexity of his poetry and prose and his careful constructing of language and gender. Stewart reads in these critics a "tone...of regret, as if the image one has of Beckett is undermined by the misogyny of his fictions; as if such hatred had no place in Beckett's thought, let alone a place in his works" (71). Susan Brienza exhibits this attitude in her evaluation of Beckett's early fiction:

A concentrated reading of the early fiction reveals a disturbing negative depiction of female characters: coupled with a pervasive disgust, cruel humor, and Swiftian revilement toward her physicality is the idea that woman as a clod of the earth impedes intellectual man. Obviously woman as body versus man as mind is not a contrast new to Western literature, but the overwhelming mean-spirited tone of Beckett's male narrators compel the female reader to reassess the early fiction. (91)

Opposite-minded critics, on the other hand, martyrize Beckett as an illuminator of the injustice of patriarchy. Stewart describes this alternative to “the charge of misogyny” as, “more kindly, the contention that Beckett reveals the unequal power relations between male and female” (109). However, as Derrida has shown with many generalized binary relationships, this polarized view of his corpus is over-simplified, and ultimately unsustainable. Stewart goes on to observe that “any attempt to deal with Beckett’s misogyny runs the risk of seeming to excuse that misogyny or, at the least, lessen its damaging impact” (71).

Rejecting these opposing models, Stewart reaches the same conclusion as this analysis: “I cannot say I regret the misogyny in Beckett’s fiction as it opens up another avenue of inquiry into the themes of sex, reproduction, and death... Here, the question is not whether or not Beckett... may have been a misogynist. The question is rather: does misogyny play a significant role in the works? And, if so, what is the nature of that significance?” (71). It is ineffective and fruitless to pigeonhole an author such as Beckett as “for” or “against” women, when even his portrayal of what constitutes sex and gender—with his frequent role reversals, sexual ambiguity, and depiction of gender as a performance—cannot so easily be dissected and divided.

The relationship that Beckett establishes throughout his texts—between language and sex, gender, and sexuality—is not just complex and irresolute within individual texts, but also one which evolved throughout his literary career. In his first short story, “Assumption,” “man” and “woman” are clearly defined classifications, although the man’s performance of masculinity and the woman’s mimicry of “male” speech suggest that gender is a performance, rather than an inherent fact. Later in his career, however,

Beckett presents a narrator whose sex and gender are left undefined until the final sentence of the story, forcing readers to question their own assumptions and impositions about the nature of both sexuality and gender.

Beckett's incarnations of the female body and female voice range throughout his texts from receptive sexual vessels to catalysts for action and agency. In "Assumption" and "First Love," the female characters rarely speak, and the dialogue they do provide is filtered through the perception of a male. However, in "Enough," the narrating voice is female, and she is not just speaking, but writing. And yet, in the same text, the woman is portrayed as entirely submissive to her male counterpart, while in "First Love," it is Lulu who seduces, supports, and finally refuses the man, claiming her own power through childbirth.

In Beckett's works, language is not just a vehicle for his illustrations of men, women, and sex, but an expression of gender and sexuality. This is perhaps exemplified best by his portrayal of speaking as "ejaculation." His language is gendered, divided—in Kristevan terms—into the semiotic and symbolic. And yet the male/mind – female/body divisions which Kristeva insists upon do not function well as categories for analysis in Beckett. Men ejaculate, and so body forth their inner texts. But women do so as well. And women particularize their thoughts in language, as do the men. So the Cartesian dualism upon which Kristeva supports so much of her work is, in effect, blurred to the point of indistinction in Beckett. He further complicates such sharp gendered divisions by including other intellectual constructs in the hegemonic binary. In "Assumption," Beckett extends the connection of language to sex to include the relationship of both of these to death and spirituality. In "First Love," this variegation is extended to the privileging of

the patriarchal role of the father—a connection which is strengthened through the aggregation of sex, death, love, fatherhood, and religious worship in “Enough.”

In analyzing these stories, which cover a large spectrum of Beckett’s professional phases and styles, a more longitudinal understanding of his treatment of women and their voices is achieved. The swirling relationship of gender, sex, and language—already complicated at the beginning of his career—is one which became increasingly more complex and expansive as Beckett and his texts matured to their full, entropic intricacy.

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