

# From Winnie Back to Prometheus:

## on the Similarities and Differences between *Happy Days* and *Prometheus Bound*

### DE WINNIE BACK A PROMETHEUS:

#### SIMILITUDES ET DIFFERENCES ENTRE *HAPPY DAYS* ET *PROMETHEUS BOUND*

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**Abstract:** *Happy Days* is a typical absurdist drama written by Samuel Beckett. It is extreme in its use of symbols, comedic in its tone, and devastating in its implications. Structurally, it has much in common with *Prometheus Bound*, one of the oldest Greek tragedies written by Aeschylus. However, *Happy Days* is still considered Beckett's extreme exploration on how much the theatre can do without and still be a theatre. This essay focuses on the similarities and differences between *Happy Days* and *Prometheus Bound*, and aims at finding the unique artistic feature of *Happy Days*.

**Key words:** *Happy Days*, *Prometheus Bound*, similarities, differences

**Résumé:** *Happy Days* de Samuel Beckett est une pièce absurde par excellence, dans laquelle l'utilisation des procédés symbolistes et la création de l'effet comique sont très réussies. De plus, cette pièce revêt une portée profonde. Sur le plan de la structure, il existe beaucoup de similitudes entre elle et *Prometheus Bound* d'Aeschylus adapté d'après la mythologie grecque. Cependant, *Happy Days* est une tentative hardie de Beckett dans l'essai de théâtre. L'article présente essentiellement les similitudes et les différences entre ces deux grandes œuvres afin de découvrir les caractéristiques artistiques et le charme de *Happy Days*.

**Mots-Clés:** *Happy Days*, *Prometheus Bound*, similitudes, différences

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Samuel Beckett is unquestionably the leader of the absurdist writers. His first play written in English—*Happy Days*—had won the Obie Award (1961-1962), and considered Beckett's extreme exploration on how much the theatre can do without and still be a theatre. The question it elucidated is still being discussed over dozens of years. However, it shares many similarities with *Prometheus Bound*, one of the oldest Greek tragedies written by Aeschylus. Where do the similarities lay? Why it is still considered to be Beckett's extreme exploration on how much the theatre can do without and still be a theatre? Discussions will be made later, and the answer is in the analysis.

### 2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Theatre of absurd is an antirealist movement emerged to dominate the theatre in the ensuing cold war era. The name theatre of absurd applies to a grouping of plays that share certain common structures and styles and are tied together by a common philosophical thread: the theory of the absurd as formulated by French essayist and playwright Albert Camus (1930-1960). Camus likened the human condition to that of the mythological Corinthian king Sisyphus, who, because of his cruelty, was condemned forever to roll a stone up a hill in Hades only to have it roll down again upon reaching the top. Camus saw the modern individual as similarly engaged in an eternally futile task: the absurdity of searching for some meaning or purpose or order in human life. To Camus, the immutable irrationality of the universe is what

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**makes its task absurd.**

The plays that constitute the theatre of the absurd are obsessed with the futility of all action and the pointlessness of all direction. These themes are developed theatrically through a deliberate and self-conscious flaunting of the “absurd”—in the sense of the ridiculous. The unquestioned leader of the absurdist writers is Irish poet, playwright, and novelist, Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). Been considered the foremost explorer of human futility in Western literature, Beckett eschews realism, romanticism, and rationalism to create works that are relentlessly unenlightening, that are in deed committed to a final obscurity. “Art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear, and does not make clear,” argues Beckett in one of his earliest works, and his theatre is based on the thesis that man is and will remain ignorant regarding all matters of importance. Most of his masterworks were produced after World War II which includes: the novels *Molloy*, *Moran Dies*, and *The Unnamable* and the plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*.

*Happy Days*, which was first produced in American (1961), is an appropriate model of absurdist drama and of the stylized theatre in general. It is extreme in its use of symbols, comedic in its tone, and devastating in its implications. *Happy Days* is also an easy play to visualize, and it demonstrates to the reader the impact and tone of a theatre dedicated to delving into the irrationalities of human existence.

### 3. SIMILARITIES

It is an axiom of theatre that most playwriting is in fact rewriting—rewriting aimed principally at organizing and reorganizing the play’s staged actions and events. In fact, structurally, *Happy Days* has much in common with *Prometheus Bound*, one of the oldest Greek tragedies written by Aeschylus. The first similarity lays in the setting, for in both works the dramatic hero is imprisoned, center stage, for the play’s duration. The setting for *Happy Days* is a small mound, covered with “scorched grass” and bathed in “blazing light.” Behind the mound is “unbroken plain and sky receding to meet in far distance,” a setting the author describes as having “maximum of simplicity and symmetry”. In the exact center of the mound, embedded up to above her waist, is Winnie, the central character of the play. And in *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus is “nailed to the high craggy rocks in fetters unbreakable of adamantine chain” at the “Scythian country”, an “untrodden desolation” at the “world’s limit”.

As a consequence of the first similarity, here comes the second, in both plays the hero uses verbal rhetoric in an effort to surmount the physical oppression of the setting and situation. In *Happy Days* the heroine Winnie

keeps on talking and talking all through the play in order to kill time. And this even becomes the essential element which prevents the audience from getting out. In *Prometheus Bound*, the hero also uses words as the most effective weapon to express himself, and fight against Zeus.

The third similarity is that both Winnie and Prometheus surge with unflagging positivism and self-theatricalizing bravado that stand in sharp contrast to the bleakness of their stylized environments. Both characters repudiate despair with an astonishing energy that at once inspires and verges on the ridiculous.

However, do the similarities we mentioned above mean Beckett simply imitated Aeschylus’s great work? The answer is no.

### 4. DIFFERENCES

John Simon once commented, “Beckett, the old fox, is becoming more and more acrobatic—or is it Aeschylean? He is steadfastly exploring how much the theatre can do without and still be theatre. He has already written a near-monodrama for actor and tape recorder, as well as a brief act without words; in *Happy Days*, as in Aeschylus’s *Suppliants*, we are reduced once again to two characters, one of whom does almost all the speaking. And the protagonist is, like Aeschylus’s Prometheus, immobilized. For Beckett’s unfortunate heroine who stands for the human condition, stands for it buried up to her waist during act one; in act two, life has inhumed her up to her chin, and only her head is still distinguishable from the landscape. The image is striking, both visually and symbolically, but it does rather cramp one’s dramatic style. Of course, it is very much part of Beckett’s scheme to inhibit dramatic, i.e., human action, but the maneuver is extremely dangerous. Beckett the acrobat has hung on to his dramatic thread first by his feet, then by one hand, next by his teeth, and now he proceeds to take out his dentures in midair. Needless to say, he is performing without a net.” (Cohen, 2000) Obviously, an imitation will never gain such a comment. Then, what makes *Happy Days* more and more acrobatic? What elements distinguish *Happy Days* from *Prometheus Bound*, and make it extremely dangerous? Answers can be found in many aspects. Now we’ll make a further analysis on it.

#### 4.1 The first element where great differences lie is the speech.

Prometheus is silent during the first scene of the play, but we find out all we need to know, not only about the reason for his plight but also about the tone of the argument that surrounds it. For Zeus is

portrayed as a monster-god, inimical not only to the virtue of Prometheus but also to humankind, for whom Prometheus has made this sacrifice. There is much already in this scene to remind us of two figure from the Judeo-Christian tradition: the exiled demigod Lucifer, who induced Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of knowledge, and the crucified Jesus Christ, who sacrificed his life on behalf of humanity and who, at least for a critical moment, believed himself abandoned by God the Father. Is Winnie abandoned by God too? In the first scene, Winnie was imbedded up to above waist in the mound of scorched earth, bathed in blazing light. These may provoke thoughts of nuclear blasts, of holocaust and miraculous survival. Then, the bell rings, and "WINNIE: (gazing at zenith) Another heavenly day." This may reminds the audience the moment of Christ's presumed forsakenness. However, all these are just the audiences' imagination and guessing. All through the first act Winnie keeps talking, but the reason why or by whom she was half buried isn't told. Why she doesn't come out? Why her husband doesn't dig her out? How can they manage to live like that? Unlike the Aeschylean word, *Happy Days* attempts no explanations: the cause of Winnie's particular entrapment is nowhere even hinted at, much less explained and analyzed. Her situation must simply be viewed as an inexplicable phenomenon in an absurd world, although we may be sure that it is an analogy of humanity's permanent condition. From this we can see Beckett uses the lasting speech as a form to show how boring the everyday life of Winnie is; on the other hand, Aeschylus uses speech as a tool to tell the audience information necessary.

In Prometheus' opening speech in the play, he is revealed as a poet. When Might sarcastically tells him to "play the insolent," Prometheus got the first opportunity to speak for himself, and so does the speech go:

Prometheus: Bright light, swift-winged winds,  
Springs of the rivers, numberless laughter  
of the sea's waves, earth, mother of all,  
and the all-seeing  
circle of the sun: I call upon you to see what I, a God,  
suffer  
at the hands of Gods—  
see with what kind of torture  
worn down I shall wrestle ten thousand years of  
time....  
You see me a wretched God in chains,  
the enemy of Zeus, hated of all  
the Gods that enter Zeus's palace hall,  
because of my excessive love for Man.(Cohen,2000)  
Here Aeschylus produces a dramaturgical weapon

that has since been wielded to great effect by generations of playwrights: the emotional power of poetry. In the course of *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus wins by his words what he loses by his chains as he pleads his cause before an audience composed of the very group on whose behalf he is being made to suffer. On the other hand, unlike her Aeschylean prototype, Winnie is never achieves the heights of godlike denunciation; rather, her actions consist of mundane behaviors borrowed from the realistic stage—rummaging in her bag, brushing her teeth, polishing her spectacles—and her speech is largely inconsequential small talk directed either to her self or to Willie, who sleeps behind the mound out of sight of the audience.

#### 4.2 The second element can't be avoid mentioning is the way the playwrights present the story

As we know, even the same story, if told in different ways will be totally different. If Beckett was invited to write *Prometheus Bound*, I believe the play will turn out to be totally different. And will Winnie become a hero under the pen of Aeschylus? Anyhow, there is no such play as "*Winnie Bound*". Aeschylus arranged *Prometheus Bound* in a linear way. It is therefore reasonable and logical. The reason why Prometheus is bound is stated clear at the very beginning of the play by Might, a demon in the service of Zeus, and Hephaestus, Zeus's blacksmith through their argument about the propriety of Prometheus' punishment as they seek to execute it. Then, a series of visitors comes with different purposes. First is a winged chorus which remains with Prometheus until the very end of the play, sympathizing with him and offering counsel, hearing his woes and serving as a sounding board for his plans. Apart from the chorus, Prometheus has three single visitors in his rocky exile, all of whom Aeschylus uses to point up the differences between his hero and the common run of humanity. The first, Oceanus, father to the chorus, is brought on primarily so that his advice can be rejected. The next visitor is Io, a mortal woman who, having unintentionally attracted the lust of Zeus and forced to wander eternally through the world pursued by the savage gadfly. Io's transcontinental punishment, so vividly contrasted to Prometheus' immobility, serves both to increase the audience's antipathy toward Zeus and to further ennoble the patiently suffering hero on the rock. And the last visitor is Zeus' personal messenger, the "lackey of the gods," Hermes, whose mission is to demand from Prometheus the secret he has earlier hinted to the chorus. Finally, the play was concluded with the same dramatic ingredient with which Prometheus was introduced: poetic magnificence. The chorus is won over by him, so are the audiences. The play is

**rather attractive with exposition, conflict, climax, and denouement.**

In contrast with Aeschylus, Beckett does not arrange his play in a usual way. He focuses on merely Winnie's speech and maximums the function of it. What's more, the speech is circular, dull and contains little information. As a result, the four dramatic elements in the play proper are lost. Circular and monotonous, the day's events are so confounded that we can have little recollection of them: Winnie's perplexity extends to whether she did or didn't comb her hair, whether she should or shouldn't comb it, and whether hair is a singular or plural noun. On one level, her chatter is simply a satire on domestic conversation. On another level, it is a commentary on the persistence—and futility—of human attempts to communicate. Richard Gilman once said, "*Happy Days* is Beckett's furthest move so far in the direction of absolute stillness, of a kind of motionless dance in which the internal agitation and its shaping control are described through language primarily and through the spaces between words....(one of Beckett's chief supports, as well as one of his main themes, is the tension produced by the struggle between speech and silence and by the struggle between speech and silence and by the double thrust of words towards truth and lies).... From it arises a sense of life apprehended in its utmost degree of noncontingency and existential self-containment, with all its cross-purposes, vagaries, agonies and waste, its oscillation between hope and despair, affirmation and denial—a new enunciation of Beckett's special vision."(Cohen, 2000) This comment on Beckett's dramaturgy reveals that *Happy Days* is built of words that circle their subject without coming to grips with them and physical actions that prove pointless and wearying. Beckett's dialogue, punctuated by the famous "pauses" that have become his dramatic signature, continually reminds us of the silence that we attempt to surmount by conversation but that ultimately must prevail over the dialogue of all living things: each of Winnie's statements, feeble in content as it may be, is a little victory over nothingness.

If we say *Prometheus Bound* presented us a story of fighting for knowledge and freedom, then *Happy Days* presented us a state of everyday life. The things the playwright intended to say is something inner and deeper.

3. Another element which distinguishes *Happy Days* from *Prometheus Bound* is the purpose of the playwrights.

"It is not enough to demand from the theatre mere perceptions, mere images of reality. The theatre must arouse our desire to perceive, it must organize the fun of changing reality. Our audience must not only hear how the chained Prometheus is freed; it must also school itself in a desire to free him." (Bertolt Brecht) In *Prometheus Bound*, the chorus expresses the final public judgment of the play—that traitors must be hated,

that treachery must not be borne. In using the chorus to pronounce this final judgment, Aeschylus draws the audience further into the world of his play: it is the audience, finally, who will remain with Prometheus at the play's conclusion and who will have made the final moral decision concerning Prometheus' plight. Prometheus who brought knowledge to mortals now brings to us—the audience—the awareness of our responsibility for that knowledge. We cannot turn back and pretend ignorance: we are the masters of our fate, and we must bear the consequences of our actions. Aeschylus transforms us, the audience, into heroes along with Prometheus, making us reckon with both his suffering and his exaltation. On the other hand, Beckett does not intend to tell people anything, instead, he raises questions. After watching the play, the audience will find there many questions remain unexplained. In fact, in the theatre of the absurd, and in stylized theatre in general, the elucidation of meaningful questions—not the discovery of practical solutions—is what marks an author's genius and accomplishment. The problem addressed in *Happy Days*—the inevitability of aging and death, the inscrutability of human affection, the obscurity of human motives, and the necessity for arbitrary commitment and action in a universe without final meaning—are inherent conditions of life; they can be diagnosed and epitomized with symbols, but they cannot be remedied. Beckett posits lucid metaphors, intriguing patterns, and evocative images, yet he does not proffer moral codes or even helpful advice. *Happy Days* stimulates but does not explain; it fascinates but does not presume to lead us out of the dark.

## 5. CONCLUSION

**Generally speaking, Prometheus is a presentational play, linear in structure, that probes deeply into a single theme—freedom of thought—and makes use of poetry, staging, and performance to create the Greek tragic hero. The rhetorical heroics of Prometheus are not merely devices to entertain the audience or to display Aeschylus' verbal skills; they are employed to illustrate the transcendent human spirit. The dramaturgy therefore serves the theme of the play; it is the vehicle that delivers the author's points. On the other hand, Happy Days is a play composed of circular monologues, and unsure memories. Beckett and the rest of the absurdists are intent upon portraying humankind as eternally and feebly groping in a darkness that can never be penetrated by the superficial light of human understanding. Reversing the symbolism of Prometheus—who in bringing light brought the hope of knowledge, understanding, joy, and victory over life's mysteries—Beckett suggests that light makes only the inconsequential luminous, thus trivializing the human experience and making**

**human beings oblivious to the greatest grace: total obscurity. However, Beckett is not a prophet of despair; he is simply a reporter of the ineffable and inexplicable. He may not lead us out of the dark, but he will hold our hands while we stumble about.**

From Prometheus to Winnie, we can see the change of human concern. From the first discovery of fire, human civilization was formed and developed more and more rapidly. The highly developed science technology brought to us abundant materials. When people are celebrating their success over nature, the two world wars came, turning the paradise built on science technology into a hell. A hellish world that affords “no exit” and in which human activity is as meaningless as Sisyphus’ torment seems perfectly credible during such desperate times. Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism and

Albert Camus’s philosophy of the absurd were forged largely during period. As God is dead, people without faith began to think seriously more than ever the questions bothered human-beings for thousands of years. What are we? What do we live for? What’s the significance of life? “To be or not to be?” the old struggle Shakespeare presented through prince Hamlet about five hundred years ago, and here by Winnie (with a revolver). Beckett provides no answers to these questions, and neither should critical analysis. It is left for the audience to think even a hundred years after the play. Last year is the 100th anniversary of Beckett’s birth, and isn’t it because the question the great playwright elucidated is so deeply rooted in every human-being’s heart that we are still wondering about it?

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