



***READING AND WRITING SKILLS FOR STUDENTS OF  
LITERATURE IN ENGLISH: POSTWAR; POSTMODERN;  
POSTCOLONIAL***

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## 5.2. Samuel Beckett, *Breath* (1969)

### Reading Skills

I

1. How long is the play (time)?
2. How is it structured?
3. Draw a diagram of the play, timing each action represented.
4. What does “vagitus” mean?

II

1. What is the play about?
2. Does the play strike you as too brief? Can you think of any particular reasons for its brevity?
3. Why is the stage “littered with miscellaneous rubbish”? What might it represent?
4. Why is there a “faint light” at the opening and what might it represent?
5. What might the “faint brief cry” in section two represent? And the “inspiration and slow increase of light”? Why is this followed by “silence”?
6. How could the “expiration and slow decrease of light” of the third section be understood? Why is there a second “cry”? And how could the final “silence” be understood?
7. Why does Beckett indicate that the rubbish should be “scattered and lying”?
8. Why does Beckett find it “[i]mportant that two cries be identical, switching on and off strictly synchronized light and breath”?
9. Why is an “[a]mplified recording” being used for the breath?
10. What are the implications of not using a “bright” light?
11. In what ways is Beckett disrupting traditional dramatic shape? What is the effect of such a strategy?
12. What are the implications behind the absence of character and language?
13. Reflect on the symbolic function of the stage picture. What effect does it have?
14. Which major 19thc-theatrical tradition is the playwright challenging?
15. To what extent is Beckett—writing from Paris, and therefore with a different, more *avantgarde* background—pushing the boundaries of the established theatrical traditions of the time? What are Beckett’s own influences?
16. Beckett wrote *Breath* “in response to Kenneth Tynan’s request for a contribution to his review *Oh! Calcutta!*”. Find out information on Kenneth Tynan and on the type of spectacle *Oh! Calcutta!* was. In this light, and after a consideration of the two plays, what is the significance of *Breath*? Does this add a humorous/ironic element to the play?
17. Read about Beckett and situate the play in his theatrical production.

18. Watch Damien Hirst's filmed production of the play (in *Beckett on Film*, 2001) and discuss it in terms of its use of structure, character, dialogue and stage picture. What is the production's overall effect?

### Writing Skills

1. Beckett's plays "are regarded as the proper artistic expression of a world bereft of transcendent hope, without God, morality, value or even the solace of a stable selfhood". (Rónán McDonald, *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. p. 2).

*Breath* "has been read as though it is the final despairing summary of Beckett's position on the human condition". (David Pattie, *The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. p. 41).

In the light of the above statements, and putting them together with your own readings about Beckett, write an essay analysing the semiotic construction of *Breath*.

2. "Beckett comes closest to being the laureate of twentieth-century desolation". (Rónán McDonald, *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. p. 2). Could the above quote be applied to *Breath*?
3. "On a universal scale, civilization is reduced to debris, while material circumstances are irrelevant to the human condition. Birth and death are the defining facts of existence, diminishing the variables of individual experience to insignificance". (Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. p. 431). Discuss in relation to *Breath*.
4. Write an essay on the ways in which *Breath* transgresses the naturalistic tradition.
5. Discuss the ways in which Beckett can be considered to be a bridge between modernism and postmodernism.