

## *Mechanical Sustenance: Food, Power, and Decay in Beckett's Dramatic Universe*

Priyam Biswas

**Abstract:** *In Beckett's plays, food has lost its agency as nourishment and has become a symbol of decay, stagnation and deterioration. Characters do not eat out of hunger; they eat out of habit, compulsion, or boredom. Food also works as an instrument of control, domination and subjugation, as in Pozzo's control over Lucky and Hamm's control over Clov, Nagg and Nell. This article examines the transformation of food in the dramatic universe of Samuel Beckett, arguing that it undergoes a radical devaluation from a life-sustaining necessity to a marker of decay, repetition, and power. Acts of eating are detached from hunger and instead function as compulsive, mechanical gestures that sustain the illusion of activity within an otherwise stagnant existence. The study demonstrates how food operates as an instrument of domination within hierarchical relationships—most notably between Pozzo and Lucky, and Hamm and Clov—where control over sustenance reinforces structures of dependency and subjugation. Tracing a trajectory from external deprivation to internalized compulsion, the article reveals how nourishment becomes progressively emptied of meaning, culminating in self-destructive habit. Ultimately, Beckett's use of food exposes a profound existential crisis in which survival is reduced to mere endurance.*

**Keywords:** Beckett, food, decay, domination, habit, compulsion

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The world of Beckett's plays is that of decay, stagnation, deterioration, and futile repetition. Trapped within an eternal condition of physical and psychological worsening, his characters display a persistent erosion of normative human vitality. Their actions are largely vain, ritualistic, and compulsive, stripped of purpose and reduced to mechanical and stale gestures that no longer have any meaning. Human tendencies, in Beckett's

dramatic universe, survive only as a habit. Food and other consumables reinforce this bleak idea. Conventionally aligned with nourishment, rejuvenation, and the affirmation of life, food in Beckett's plays succumbs to a radical degradation of function and value. Rather than providing sustenance, food becomes, at best, a mere device of repetition, or at worst, a means of domination or control. Eating is not motivated by hunger; instead, it happens out of habit, boredom, or the agonizing need to pass time in hollow existence.

Moreover, the control over food indicates unbalanced power dynamics among characters. Those who control access to food have authority over others, transforming food into a mechanism of subjugation. Beckett exposes the transformation of biological necessity into the imbalance of power, where survival becomes dependent upon submission. Food ceases to affirm life and instead contributes as a tool of systematic degradation of human life.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon's eating/ asking for something to eat repeats in both the acts, reinforcing the play's repetitive nature. In Act I, he asks Vladimir for a carrot; Vladimir initially offers him a turnip and, after a long search, finally produces a carrot. During this exchange, Estragon forgets what he had originally intended to ask Vladimir, signalling the erosion of memory and purpose.

ESTRAGON: Give me a carrot. (Vladimir rummages in his pockets, takes out a turnip and gives it to Estragon who takes a bite out of it. Angrily.)

It's a turnip!

VLADIMIR: Oh pardon! I could have sworn it was a carrot. (He rummages again in his pockets, finds nothing but turnips.) All that's turnips. (He rummages.) You must have eaten the last. (He rummages.) Wait, I have it. (He brings out a carrot and gives it to Estragon.) There, dear fellow. (Estragon wipes the carrot on his sleeve and begins to eat it.) Make it last, that's the end of them.

ESTRAGON: (chewing). I asked you a question.

...

ESTRAGON: I've forgotten. (Beckett, 16-17)

Estragon's failure to get what he immediately wants portrays the image of the decaying world the characters live in. Food is scarce and unsatisfactory: Vladimir possesses only a single carrot but a lot of turnips, which Estragon does not want. Desire, scarcity, and frustration collapse into the decay and insufficiency that define their existence.

In Act II, when the characters return to the same spot to wait for Godot once again, Vladimir gives him a radish:

VLADIMIR: Would you like a radish?

ESTRAGON: Is that all there is?

VLADIMIR: There are radishes and turnips.

ESTRAGON: Are there no carrots?

VLADIMIR: No. Anyway you overdo it with your carrots.

ESTRAGON: Then give me a radish. (Beckett, 64)

Chetana Adatiya argues, "This reflects the effects of malnutrition, leading to their forgetfulness [and it] mirrors the characters' diminishing optimism and occurrence of despair" (Adatiya 23). But the lack of nutrition or hunger in Beckett, is also devolved into something apathetic, as Alys Moody points out, "Hunger in Beckett is rarely a craving. It is much more likely to imply a lack of food that is greeted with indifference, or a lack of taste or appetite that produces an apathy towards nourishment" (Moody 57). Ruby Cohn says, "Night after night, they keep their appointment, and they wait. While they wait, they repeat the activities that add up to a life" (Cohn 132). Gogo's request for a carrot or a radish does not advance the plot; Rather than seeking nourishment, they engage in the mechanical act of eating as a habit, to subvert boredom, or for the agonising necessity of passing time.

In *Endgame*, food functions merely as a means of endurance, as nothing remains that can either please the palate or properly nourish the body. Nagg asks for his pap – a cheap, staple food made from ground maize meal—but learns that there is no pap left. Instead, he is given a "Spratt's Medium," a dog biscuit: hard, tasteless, and pointedly inhuman.

NAGG: Me pap!

HAMM: Give him his pap.

CLOV: There's no more pap.

HAMM: [To NAGG.] Do you hear that? There's no more pap. You'll never get any more pap.

NAGG: I want me pap!

HAMM: Give him a biscuit.

...

NAGG: [Plaintively.] What is it?

CLOV: Spratt's medium.

NAGG: [As before.] It's hard! I can't! (Beckett, 9-10)

The characters are "inhabiting a world of gradual depletion, in which there are no more sugar plums, no more pap, and no more pain killers" (Moody 55-56), surviving only in memory. Nutrition is the least of their worries as their bodies themselves are as an existential prison. What remains is bland, tasteless and hardly even considered as food appropriate for human consumption. The characters no longer have what they desire, and what they do have fails to give them any satisfaction.

In *Krapp's Last Tape*, Krapp's obsessive consumption of bananas functions as another twisted form of nourishment. The banana, although not rare, unlike the other two plays, is repeatedly eaten by Krapp despite its predictable and harmful consequences. So the banana stops being a source of pleasure or sustenance and becomes a compulsion. Krapp eats not out of hunger but out of habit, using the act to distract himself from silence and memory. The resulting physical discomfort underscores the futility of the action: even the most

basic bodily gratification turns against the body. As in Beckett's other plays, food here does not sustain life or offer satisfaction; it merely enforces repetition, decay, and the mechanical persistence of existence.

Asymmetrical power relations are also portrayed through food—between those who possess it and those who do not. Pozzo eats lavishly, consuming chicken 'voraciously' and drinking wine from the bottle and smoking his pipe, while the remnants of his meal are discarded as bones intended for Lucky, though Estragon ultimately claims them.

ESTRAGON (timidly): Please Sir...

POZZO: What is it, my good man?

ESTRAGON:Er... you've finished with the... er... you don't need the... er...bones, Sir?

...

POZZO:...in theory the bones go to the carrier. He is therefore the one to ask. (Beckett, 23-24)

This exchange exposes the master-slave dynamic at the heart of their relationship. Pozzo's role as master depends not on his own need for food but on Lucky's dependence on what Pozzo discards. Pozzo does not need the bones; he needs Lucky to need them. Power is thus sustained through controlled deprivation rather than direct coercion. Beckett deliberately allows Estragon to seize them, showing how scarcity pits the powerless against one another. Similarly, in *Endgame*, Hamm occupies the position of authority. At the beginning of the play, he threatens Clov by saying that he will give him nothing more to eat. Although Hamm is entirely dependent on Clov to carry out his wishes, he nevertheless asserts dominance by using the threats of deprivation as a means of control. Although sharing in the general suffering of a dying world and repeatedly expressing the desire for it to end, Hamm continues to exercise power over Clov, Nagg, and Nell. Access to food is strictly mediated by his command: Nagg receives a biscuit only when Hamm orders it. Hamm further exploits food as leverage by using sugar plums as bait to secure Nagg's attention and compliance. Authority operates not through nourishment but through the calculated distribution and withholding of sustenance.

Apart from Pozzo, food functions solely as a means of endurance. To quote Cohn, "living becomes probing", and that activities like eating or laughing are reduced to "mere shards". The act of eating is one of these shards: isolated fragments of action of a once whole life. Gogo's carrot offers no pleasure; as he remarks, "Funny, the more you eat the worse it gets," to which Vladimir replies, "With me it's just the opposite ... I get used to the muck as I go along." Food provides no psychological satisfaction and serves only to sustain bare survival in a stale and depleted world. While in *Endgame*, Hamm repeatedly asks Clov for a painkiller throughout the play, which is not food but a consumable nonetheless. A painkiller does not cure or resolve the body's underlying condition; it merely numbs sensation and enables endurance, postpones collapse without fixing it. In a decaying world where no genuine remedy exists, this limited relief is the best Hamm can hope for. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, Krapp's compulsive consumption of bananas is in stark contrast to the younger self preserved on the older tapes. The younger Krapp explicitly states that bananas are harmful to him. The older Krapp, however, listens to this warning with indifference and proceeds to eat bananas without any regard. This indifference is crucial. It is not ignorance or desire, but out of habit without consideration. What was once

recognised as damaging is now repeated without resistance, suggesting a deepened erosion of agency. The banana thus becomes a symbol of decline: knowledge survives, but it no longer exerts any power over action. Krapp's choice of eating bananas is totally mechanical, devoid of reason. Krapp extends the pattern seen in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Like the carrot, the radish, or the painkiller, the banana offers neither pleasure nor remedy. It merely sustains repetition. Krapp does not learn, improve, or change; he persists despite knowing better. The split between past awareness and present compulsion confirms that in Beckett's world, time does not lead to wisdom but to the exhaustion of will. Quinn argues that objects in Beckett are not stable symbols but exist as components of an absurdity defined by exhaustion and diminished usefulness. Food, in this context, is not merely a prop but an object whose traditional function, nourishment, is methodically emptied out. The carrot, the biscuit, and the banana are but an empty shell of what they once used to signify or provide. Now, they are not meaningful in themselves; rather, they embody the failure of objects to support human life in any meaningful way. The uncomfortable shoes, the swapping of hats, the looking through the windows with a telescope, the stuffed toy dog; these all function at the same level as the food items in these plays: degraded objects whose main purposes are gone, and they remain, ironically, as mere 'props' of the staged world of Beckett.

In all cases, this mere endurance proves futile and meaningless in a world that is continuously getting worse. Godot will most likely never arrive, and the painkillers Hamm repeatedly asks for have already been exhausted, and Krapp's aspiring younger self is already lost to the linear progression of time. *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* food follows a clear trajectory of gradual thematic intensification. In *Waiting for Godot*, it functions as a repetitive motif to pass the time; in *Endgame*, it is reduced to minimal sustenance within an enclosed system; and in *Krapp's Last Tape*, it becomes internalized as a compulsive habit. This progression injects the external scarcity within the human body and mind, which then evolves into internalized decay. On the other hand, power relations evolve from visible hierarchies (Pozzo/Lucky) to more subtle forms of control (Hamm/Clov), and finally to self-inflicted compulsion (Krapp). Food, therefore, is not a static prop but a dynamic motif of how survival, power, and control deteriorate across Beckett's dramatic universe, where all that remains is waiting: Gogo and Didi's indefinite wait for Godot, Hamm's slow, deliberate wait for his own death, while Krapp waits as he is unable to change anything from his past and nothing is going to happen now.

Food in Beckett does not merely reflect decay; it becomes proof that meaning itself has been lost from the world, and life has deteriorated to the most basic form of survival. What Beckett poignantly exposes through this degradation is that food is not merely a bleak necessity of existence but a fundamental restructuring of what it means to live. When the act of eating no longer signifies satiety, pleasure, or renewal, human survival is exposed as a mechanical persistence without purpose. Beckett strips nourishment down to bare continuation, revealing a world where there is "Nothing to be done" and "nowhere else" to go. A world in which living and not dying are synonymous. Food, stripped of its symbolic and biological function, becomes

the clearest indicator that life has been emptied of purpose, leaving only the bare, inescapable fact of continuation. Waiting, enduring, and repeating thus replace progress, fulfilment, and agency—not as temporary conditions, but as the final state of human existence.

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