

... but the cloud...
An Interdisciplinary Online Seminar Examining Grey Pluralities in Samuel Beckett

Grey is flexible, malleable; it can be pushed and pulled in different directions, worked and reworked into new, unanticipated materiality and meaning. Grey is not fixed: it both reflects and absorbs light, and it extends the spectrum between black and white, between the extremes of all other colors. Grey has the capacity to move its viewer beyond the materiality of paint. [...] Grey is the color that best describes this perspective on the twentieth century, the metals in which it is built, the factories in which it is produced, the cities in which it is lived. (Guerin, 2018, 7-8)

Samuel Beckett's novels, short stories, plays, poems, and essays showcase embodiments of multiple greys. The textiles, the natural elements (sky, clouds, rocks, mounds), the landscape/cityscape, cramped interiors, and pared-back stages in Beckett often operate in shades of grey. Thinking with Frances Guerin, Beckett's embodiments of grey mirror each other and showcase mutable and immutable pluralities of identity, consciousness, temporality, perception of the natural landscape, and so on. For instance, Molloy perceives a rock as grey as himself: 'I was perched higher than the road's highest point and flattened what is more against a rock the same colour as myself, that is grey' (Beckett, 2015, 7). His self-perception makes one wonder. Does Molloy perceive himself similar to the rock he finds in the shadow - 'unstable fugitive thing' (Ibid)? Does Molloy find rock as an object of self-care that can aid him 'engrave the landmarks on his memory' (Ibid)? We invite you to explore and examine these plural embodiments of grey in Beckett's works. The first seminar of the series focuses on grey clouds.

White, wispy, grey, grimaced, formed but fluid, and freighted with moisture and meaning; tempering the temper of hot temperatures, the clouds, in Beckett, sometimes drench the characters in torrential rain and at other times evoke tumultuous emotions in the minds of Beckettian characters. Beckett's clouds manifest muddled meanings, disoriented dialogues, unnerved understandings of one's own identity, and perplexing pain. Sometimes, they simply mirror a flatness of feeling. *Murphy* begins with the sun shining 'on the nothing new' (Beckett, 2009, 3) but ends on a 'sunless day' (Beckett, 2009, 172), after the eponymous protagonist's struggles and life are 'swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit' (Beckett, 2009, 171). Clouds appear on the night sky as silent spectators, viewing Murphy's struggle for self-care in the garret of the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat. Drifting away from the Dublin sky, the clouds reach an unnamed place in *Molloy*, where the dense skies of the cold winter witness Molloy's quest for his mother. The buoyant clouds, sometimes inky other times white and flaky, keep drifting until they transform themselves from the amorphous gaseous form to the phonemes on the lips of W in *...but the clouds...* Here, clouds prevent W from appearing to M, while his voice, in the background, continues with an avowal of being confined in his 'little sanctum', imploring W to meet him. Clouds do not just form diaphanous ethereal backgrounds in Beckett; they are emblematic of the grey zones of censorship, nuances of identity, and memories of past life. His works remain germane to present debates, since the compelling stress on defining one's identities (political, sexual, medical, etc.) continues to grip the social, professional, and clinical worlds we inhabit.

As Nina Berkhout describes, clouds are 'the philosophers of the sky, representing the tenuous, ever-changing nature of life. They embody the unknowable and the unattainable, carrying different meanings and emotions – from enchantment to turmoil – for each observer' (Berkhout, 2021). However, clouds are not only symbols of amorphousness and shift. Clouds are painters of shadows who use their flimsy bodies to block the sunlight and create shades of darkness. As they move, streaks of sunlight pierce through their feathery fragmented shapes.

In metaphor and meteorology alike, they cast shadows on the sky, on our modes of self-perception, intervening in affect and mood. Meteorologically, their presence and power struggle with the sun impacts temperatures, effectuating precipitation in various forms. Metaphorically, literary and psychological clouds bespeak an individual's battle with their circumstances and seemingly invincible realities.

This online seminar on clouds will engage in a sustained dialogue with the participants on the material and semiotic elements of 'natural'—ecological, normative, or perverse—grey forms, shaping the four sequential but interlocking themes of clouds, cold, shadows, and transitions. As organisers of the seminar series, we would like to invite early career researchers, experienced Beckett scholars, and doctoral scholars to submit a 200-word abstract on the theme of clouds for the first seminar by July 31st, 2024. We will notify the presenters about their selection by 8th August for an event on September 20th.

The following are the topics we are looking for (but are not limited to):

- Academic papers on psychoanalytic interpretations of the representation of clouds; representations of clouds in literature influenced by or adapting Beckett;
- Readings of grey temporality;
- Analysis of relationships between cloud forms (e.g., fluid, stratified, amorphous) and forms of identity in Beckett;
- Ecocritical readings of clouds; grey zones of clinical suffering; grey matter and neurological perspectives; grey textures and fabrics in Beckett; grey precipitations;
- Examinations of the grey zones of sleep, wakefulness, insomnia, hypnagogia, dreams, etc.;
- Creative interpretations of grey in Beckett, or more broadly (such as paintings, zines, comics, poetry, performance, etc.) These must be suitable for online presentation.
- Book reviews of recent monographs in Beckett Studies.

References

Beckett, Samuel. *Murphy*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2009. Print.

—. *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. London: Everyman's Library, 2015. Print.

—. *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2006. Print.

Berkhout, Nina. "The Art of Clouds." *National Gallery of Canada*. 26 Aug. 2021. Web. Accessed on 27 Apr. 2024. <https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/your-collection/the-art-of-clouds>

Guerin, France. *The Truth is Always Grey*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. Print.