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Modern Drama Final Essay

The Woman in *Copenhagen* and *Happy Days*

*Copenhagen*¹, Michael Frayn's realist drama about Heisenberg's mysterious visit to Niels Bohr in 1941, is unarguably very different from Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*², an absurdist play about a woman who is covered up to her waist in dirt. The main character in *Happy Days*, Winnie, refuses to lose her positive outlook on both the future and the past, despite her unusual condition. Her only companion is Willie, a man of few words, who makes Winnie's day just by being around (or on very happy days, by speaking or letting her see him). Although *Copenhagen* focuses on the historical event of Heisenberg's visit to Niels Bohr in 1941, it also showcases some of Niels' relationship with his wife, Margrethe. Margrethe is not a scientist; she is the dutiful wife of a scientific genius. She sacrifices much of her own freedom for the sake of Bohr's career and companionship. If Margrethe is a normal woman, how absurd is Winnie?

Although Margrethe and Winnie are clearly very different women, by closely examining and comparing their characters and roles in their respective plays, it is possible to uncover a number of striking similarities. Both are domestic figures, and extremely forgiving of their neglectful male companions. Frayn and Beckett both use the female characters to explore themes of domesticity, seeing and being seen, memory, uncertainty, and silence.

Margrethe plays a dual role as the non-scientific and domestic figure in *Copenhagen*. Bohr and Heisenberg keep their language simple for her, and in return she waits on them and nurses the victims of their relentless scientific interrogation. She has the role as a domestic caretaker – looking after the children, quarreling scientists, and helping her husband with his research by typing up all of his papers. Winnie doesn't live in a house or have a family, but she still feels responsible for looking after Willie.

1 Frayn, Michael. *Copenhagen* (United States: Anchor Books, 1998).

2 Beckett, Samuel. *Happy Days* (New York: Grove Press, 1961).

She reminds him “Slip on your drawers, dear, before you get singed” (Becket, p. 14) and not to crawl in his hole headfirst so he doesn't get stuck (Beckett, p. 25).

Margrethe's domesticity is comical at times, because it feels out of place amidst some of the more scientific and political dialogue between Heisenberg and Bohr. In the heat of one of Heisenberg and Bohr's discussions, Margrethe interrupts but is ignored:

Heisenberg ... I shatter the objective universe around you – and all you can say is that there's an error in in the formulation!

Bohr There is!

Margrethe Tea, anyone? Cake?

Heisenberg Listen, in my paper what we're trying to locate is not a free electron off on its travels through a cloud chamber, but an electron when it's at home, moving around inside an atom...” (Frayn p. 68).

While this provides some comic relief to the intense argument the two men are having, it borders on absurd. As she tries to fulfill the role of dutiful wife, she is ignored (not unlike Winnie). Soon after, Margrethe is compared to the nucleus of an atom and Bohr is the free electron floating around. Margrethe is stationary as her husband wanders about – she is constrained, just as Winnie is constrained in her mound of earth.

Winnie performs a number of tasks that are also humorous, though many of her tasks center around personal vanity. She pulls out a mirror and puts on her lipstick (Beckett p. 14) and she obsesses about brushing her hair as though it is her duty (Beckett p. 22). She makes the effort to dress up and fulfill a feminine role, though she has no where to go, and no one to notice her efforts. Margrethe tries to fulfill her feminine role by being the hostess, offering tea and cake to the laboring scientists, but her efforts also go unnoticed. With Margrethe in mind, is it so unreasonable that Winnie obsesses about brushing her hair and putting on her make-up despite Willie's disinterest? She does what she thinks she

has to do, whether Willie appreciates it or not.

One of the major differences between Margrethe and Winnie's relationships with their husbands is obviously communication. Winnie and Willie almost never talk to each other; Winnie talks and he listens because he “never [has] any opinion about anything” (Beckett, p. 52). In Copenhagen, Heisenberg tells Bohr and Margrethe that he's “always envied” the way they “manage to talk about everything” because his wife is too busy “with the children and so on” to talk to him about his problems (Frayn, p. 29). The Bohrs' ability to communicate with each other well doesn't save them from some of the same problems that Willie and Winnie have.

Both Margrethe and Winnie are extremely forgiving when their male counterparts are neglectful. Bohr leaves Margrethe at home with a one-week-old new born to go hiking with one of his new assistants – twice, once when their son Ernest is born and again when their son Christian is born (Frayn, p. 57). Bohr isn't even sure which sons Margrethe is talking about, because he is consumed with his own work and it seems to be her duty to take care of the children. Margrethe doesn't show any bitterness towards her husband for leaving her at home – even when he gives her the opportunity to speak out against his temporary abandonment, she says she didn't mind “at all” (Frayn p. 57). It is part of the distant past, and she forgives him.

Margrethe voluntarily types up all of Bohr's scientific papers as part of her duty as a scientist's wife. Her role as his typist is so well established that it is the subject of a few jokes. Although she types the papers willingly, she does concede that Bohr once reduced her to tears by making her type and retype a paper as he was drafting a paper on complementarity (Frayn, p. 70). Bohr has no recollection of his wife's emotional state while working on the paper – Heisenberg is the one that brings it up, and Margrethe affirms that she remembers. Still, she shows very little frustration with her husband. She remembers his cruelty, but she also forgives him.

Winnie is similar, though her situation is unrealistic. Winnie often tries to strike up a

conversation with Willie, but he rarely ever responds. She comforts herself by saying that it is enough just for her to know that he is around, even if he doesn't hear her. She tells him that she doesn't even need him to listen to her, “just to know that in theory you can hear me even though in fact you don't is all I need, just to feel you there within earshot” (Beckett, p. 27). Even though Winnie's request seems ridiculous because most people expect more out of a companion, Willie does stay with her, which is all she needs. Winnie's request that Willie just stay around seems like a reasonable one when we consider that Bohr, a historical figure, was away hiking with a student while his wife was at home with a one week old child.

Even more notable than the woman's capacity to forgive is her ability to justify and defend her husband's shortcomings. Margrethe tells her husband, “Two sons arriving on top of each other would be rather a lot for any man to put up with” (Frayn, p. 57). She clears him of any responsibility for taking care of their newborn son because he is too busy taking care of his new assistant (the so-called second “son”). She is even “pleased that [he] had an excuse to get away” (Frayn, p. 57).

Likewise, Winnie thinks that she is asking too much of Willie to expect him to reply to her. She repeatedly asks him for some kind of sign that he can see or hear her—even just as simple as raising a finger, “just the little finger” (Beckett, p. 37). When he doesn't reply, she is sometimes flustered but usually critical of her own expectations for a reply, as in this passage:

“One does not appear to be asking a great deal, indeed at times it would seem hardly possible – (*voice breaks, falls to a murmur*) – to ask less – of a fellow-creature – to put it mildly – whereas actually – when you think about it – look into your heart – see the other – what he needs – peace – to be left in peace – then perhaps the moon – all this time – asking for the moon” (Beckett, p. 29).

Winnie's right – it doesn't seem that she could ask for much less, yet she is not angry at Willie for

ignoring her request. Although Winnie's situation is very different from Margrethe's, both women don't reproach their men for ignoring their emotional needs, and even defend the men's actions.

Winnie is absurdly happy for her condition – despite being immobile and up to her waist (or neck) in dirt, she is thankful for what she has. She doesn't expect Willie to do anything for her, so even the smallest, simplest gestures make her happy. For example, when she is trying to figure out if the hairs on her head should be referred to as “it” or “them”:

“Winnie ... The hair on your head, Willie, what would you say of the
hair on your head, them or it?

Long pause.

Willie It.

Winnie (*turning back front, joyful*). Oh you are going to talk to me
today, this is going to be a happy day!” (Beckett, p 23).

At first glance it seems absurd that a single word should make Winnie so happy. She is thrilled to have Willie's attention even for just a moment, because he usually seems to ignore her and just do his own things, like read the newspaper.

Bohr does not appear to be a bad or abusive husband to Margrethe, but his family life is clearly less important than his physics. Much of the time they spend together is devoted to Bohr writing his papers. Like Willie, Bohr is absorbed in his own affairs – his attention to Margrethe is limited. He doesn't remember making her cry or which children were born when. Winnie's elation over Willie's reply about the hair is less absurd when we consider how much attention Bohr seems to give to Margrethe.

In addition to showing the gender-relationship issues, Frayn and Beckett also use the female characters in *Copenhagen* and *Happy Days* to explore themes of seeing and being seen, memory, uncertainty, and silence. The female characters are central to the exploration of time and memory in

each play, and their roles in both plays function in similar ways in relation to these themes.

Both plays explore how it is difficult for people to see what is right in front of them, or how difficult it is for them to see themselves. In *Happy Days*, Winnie explains that a Mr. and Mrs. Shower once saw her stuck in the earth, and wondered “What does it mean?” (Beckett, p. 43). Mrs. Shower retorts by asking Mr. Shower what *he* means standing on two feet. Does the fact that Winnie is up to her waist in dirt mean anything? Winnie struggles to see herself at the beginning of Act Two. She is trying to see the person that Willie “so admired” but she can barely see more than the end of her nose, because she is covered up to her neck in earth (Beckett, p. 52). Winnie can't see herself as Willie sees her, because it is impossible for her to know what he sees in her.

In *Copenhagen*, the quest for meaning is at the core of the play. The characters are looking at each other, and looking at events in their lives trying to figure out what they mean. But they struggle – they can't find meaning, just as Mr. Shower can't find meaning by looking at Winnie. Heisenberg looks at Margrethe and Bohr, but he doesn't understand what they mean. Margrethe and the other characters are also unable to see themselves. At the end of the play, when the three characters re-visit Heisenberg's arrival at the Bohr residence in 1941, Margrethe says, “I watch the two smiles in the room, one awkward and ingratiating, the other rapidly fading from incautious warmth to bare politeness. There's also a third smile in the room, I know, unchangingly courteous, I hope, and unchangingly guarded” (Frayn, p. 87). Margrethe can't see herself even though she is not physically constrained like Winnie; she can't tell how the others perceive her. The entire play is almost over, the characters are dead, yet they are still stuck on the same event that they started discussing in the beginning – much like Winnie is stuck in her mound of dirt.

The uncertainty of memory is a crucial theme in *Copenhagen*, because the characters are trying to remember what happened during Heisenberg's 1941 visit to Bohr. None of the characters can remember the events clearly. Margrethe often contests Bohr and Heisenberg's memories of their lives

together. The two men have a nostalgia for the days when they worked on the theories of quantum mechanics together, but Margrethe dispels their nostalgia by reminding them, “Every single one of them you did when you were apart” (Frayn, p. 61). Margrethe's comment helps the men remember how bitterly they fought over Schroedinger's theories and how Heisenberg published his uncertainty paper while Bohr was away (Frayn, p. 63-7). Clearly, the two men do not have the perfect relationship they thought they did before it was ruined by World War II. Margrethe's part is small, but important. She casts doubt on the men's memories by reminding them of the emotional turmoil that went with their work together.

Winnie also struggles with the uncertainty of memory on a smaller scale. She can't remember if she's brushed her hair (Beckett, p. 22) or if the names of the only people that come to visit her are Shower or Cooker (Beckett, p. 41). The details of one of the unusual events in her life (the visit from the Showers) are unclear, just as the details of Heisenberg's visit to Copenhagen are unclear to himself and the Bohrs. Winnie is also unsure of the details of intimate moments of her life – she recalls her first kiss, but can't remember if it was with a “Mr. Johnson, or Johnston” (Beckett, p. 39). She remembers that the kiss was in a toolshed, although she “cannot conceive” whose toolshed it was (Beckett p. 39). What she remembers about the kiss is emotional – the factual details have faded over time.

Although Margrethe remembers details about her husband's relationship with Heisenberg, much of what she remembers is emotional and the facts remain unclear. It is like Winnie says: “Yes, something seems to have occurred, something has seemed to occur, and nothing has occurred, nothing at all” (Beckett, p. 39). Both of the women can remember their emotional reactions to events in their lives, but not many details about those events.

Although Margrethe seems certain that she remembers things, some of her later lines in the play show that her emotions are getting in the way of her memory. She claims that Heisenberg and her husband are trying to “make everything seem heroically abstract and logical. And when [they] tell the

story, yes, it all falls in to place, it all has a beginning and a middle and an end” (Frayn, p. 73).

However, Margrethe's memories of the events are “confusion and rage and jealousy and tears and no one knowing what things mean or which way they're going to go” (Frayn, p. 73). Margrethe provides the emotional depth to uncertainty – she shows how our own feelings get in the way of how we remember things.

Margrethe's commentary in the play is emotional. Though she provides some of the content – by providing details about the Bohrs' family life and Bohr's relationship with Heisenberg – many of her lines are emotional or personal in nature. Her presence makes the conflict between Bohr and Heisenberg personal, as she finally explodes that “everything *is* personal!” (Frayn, p. 73). She thinks that Heisenberg returned to Copenhagen in 1941 to “show [himself] off” to the Bohrs (Frayn, p. 74). She says that when Heisenberg first came to Copenhagen “he was a humble assistant lecturer from a humiliated nation, grateful to have a job” but when he returns years later, he is “the leading scientist in a nation that's conquered most of Europe” (Frayn, p. 74). Though Margrethe brings up some excellent points, she is only recalling how *she* felt about Heisenberg's visit. Why Heisenberg thinks he came to visit is still unclear. Margrethe is too emotionally involved to remember the details of the event objectively.

Frayn and Beckett both use their female characters to confront the issue of silence and to show the uncertainty associated with silence. The silence in *Happy Days* creates tension and uncertainty in Winnie and Willie's personal relationship, while silence in *Copenhagen* is used to show uncertainty and awkwardness in human relationships. In both plays, the woman is the character who confronts the silence.

In *Happy Days*, Winnie does most of the talking and Willie rarely responds. Willie's silence creates the drama in their relationship – when he does speak, Winnie declares that it is a happy day. As I described earlier in this paper, Winnie just needs to know Willie is there. His silence, through cruel

and unusual, also creates happiness – because when he actually breaks his silence, it makes Winnie's day. When he does not speak for a long period of time, Winnie despairs. For example, in Act Two, when she has not heard from him in a while she says:

“I sometimes find your attitude a little strange, Willie, all this time, it is not like you to be wantonly cruel ... I do hope nothing is amiss. ... Is all well, dear? ... God grant he did not go in head foremost! ... You're not stuck, Willie? ... You're not jammed, Willie? ... Perhaps he is crying out for help all this time and I do not hear him!” (Beckett, p. 55-6).

Willie's silence makes Winnie worry that he has died or gone away. His silence creates an uncertainty for Winnie, because she cannot even look to see if he is still there or not.

In *Copenhagen*, Margrethe speaks when the scientists are lost for words. She creates drama by vocalizing the word “silence.” In Act One, Heisenberg trails off mid-sentence when talking about how many different “sums” you can get by adding people (Frayn, p. 29). When he stops talking, Margrethe comments, “Silence. What's he thinking about now? His life? Or ours?” (Frayn, p. 29). Instead of just letting the characters feel the awkwardness of the silence, she makes it explicit and forces them to confront the uncertainty of Heisenberg's thoughts.

At the end of Act Two, Margrethe uses silence in a different way. Heisenberg is describing walking through the destroyed German countryside, his “ruined and dishonored homeland” (Frayn, p. 93). Bohr tries to comfort Heisenberg, but then there is silence, which Margrethe describes as “the silence we always in the end return to” (Frayn, p. 93). Heisenberg claims he knows what the Bohrs are thinking about, dispelling the uncertainty. The silence shows the difficulty that people have when communicating emotionally. Margrethe and Bohr do not know how to comfort Heisenberg, because they feel sympathy for him yet resent him for working on the Nazi nuclear program. Margrethe dramatizes the silence by speaking, like Winnie dramatizes Willie's silence by asking him to talk. Frayn

and Beckett use their female characters to illustrate the theme of silence in similar ways, as they do with a number of other themes.

On the surface, there are few similarities between Frayn's *Copenhagen* and Beckett's *Happy Days* aside from minimalism in cast and setting. However, the plays do have some similar themes – the relationship of husband and wife, uncertainty, silence, time, seeing and being seen. The female characters are also different – one is a historical figure and the wife of a famous scientist, and the other is a fictional, absurd character stuck up to her waist in dirt. Though both characters seem to have little in common, the playwrights use them in similar ways to illustrate common themes. The characters are especially similar in their interactions with their husbands. Margrethe tolerates Bohr's absence from their home life while Winnie tolerates Willie's silence. By looking at Margrethe, we can better understand the motivations for Winnie's actions. Although her character is abstract, Winnie's reactions to her surroundings may not be as absurd as they seem.